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Chris Howlett - *Flashbacks*

4-7/8 Balmoral Room Brisbane Town Hall & 16/9-3/10 Metro Arts Galleries

In *Flashbacks*, his recent two-part exhibition at the Town Hall and Metro Arts, the energetic Chris Howlett attempted to portray the *zeitgeist* of our manipulated digital social reality and the ambiguous social identities it engenders. The subtext in this ambitious exercise was an exploration of the impact of this world on art, especially in its current post-avant-garde phase. To these ends he produced around a dozen video installations and projections that screened interactive game modes, sound works, *Sims* scenarios and other digital goodies.

Today's generation of artists have been struggling to sustain a radical cultural practice (and its attendant moral authority) during a period in which the scene was largely sold out to neo-liberal and corporate agendas in the stock market boom era. One way to remain radical is suggested by artists like Cory Archangel and Olaf Breuning who 'constructively abuse' new technologies, and *Flashbacks* plays a similar tune. This was especially so when Howlett dealt with *Sims* material. *Sims* programs allow consumers to set up second life scenarios in simulational worlds with their own avatars, families, and even entire suburbs, if that's your thing. One can also hack into these programs - a process known as 'modding' - and alter the programs to generate new adventures not envisaged by the original designers.

Howlett uses modding as a form of cultural resistance and these 'mods' explore controversial political and sexual issues that have provoked diametrically opposed moral reactions. In *Michael Jackson 4 Ways* (2009) he produced Jackson clones that performed various actions like pulling weights, sleeping, having a bath, or arguing. 'Jacko the Wacko' is perfect for this stratagem as he was known to have modded his own face many times, but this pop celebrity was chosen because of the intense contradictions that existed between his talent and his private life. This generated considerable public controversy, and while watching the Jackson clones functioning in the domestic sphere one could listen to audio recordings of comedians like Chris Rock who lambasted Jackson as well as others who staunchly defended him. These extreme responses to Jackson's association with pedophilia draws the viewer into an understanding of the uncertain status of truth and falsehood, for we don't ultimately know what happened, and cannot therefore entirely trust in our moral judgments about this case.

The investigation into moral dilemmas is developed in *The Long Con* (2009) a DVD that showed a Brisbane anti-war demonstration after the 2003 Iraq invasion. Such events are ideal opportunities for people to vent their spleens but it can be difficult to determine right from wrong. In one scene, a bystander shouts at a demonstrator "Who's going to save you?" thus articulating his belief that the Iraq invasion was instigated to protect

democracies from Muslim fanatics. Whereas those on the opposing side saw the US invasion as a flagrant grab for Iraq's natural resources and enhanced geo-political power. The artist adds a further layer of moral complexity by interspersing the demonstration footage with graphic images of suicide bombers (post-explosion) that he secured on the net. The grisly remains of the 'martyrs' brings home the message that one person's terrorist is another's freedom fighter. In such cases, one may reflect upon the instability of truth and the role the media plays in influencing our capacity to 'know' this truth. Artists are also implicated in this process for they are trapped in the same ethical *aporias* as everyone else given that art has now apparently relinquished its autonomy from mass cultural life.

The problematic relation between truth and fiction in a digital game playing, virtual social reality is the focus of *Bushstalkers* (2009). In this installation, the viewer comes to a podium with two consoles that are linked to a double channel video projection. The consoles control a military shooter game where one searches through a forest for the enemy, except that the guns can't be fired. This leaves the user wandering aimlessly about in the woods while listening (on headphones) to the testimony of US soldiers who have returned from Iraq. They speak about being trained to see killing as a game, but admit to the moral contradictions that confront them when they return to the USA where murder is immoral (and illegal). This case of moral exceptionalism and the confusion it generates is grist for the mill in Howlett's examination of ethical tergiversations. The matter is further complicated when one learns that some of the soldier's testimony was fictitious - welcome to the problematic world of digital simulations where you what you see (or hear) is not what you get.

In the exhibition essay Mark Webb argues that digital technologies can both extend our social connectedness and enforce narcissistic isolation. He adds that Howlett's work helps us 'to critically and creatively consider how reality and simulated environments' reconfigure our ideas about the nature of identity. This is certainly true but Howlett needed to offer a more coherent orientation guide to help viewers make sense of the role-playing narcissists, confession addicts and power hounds that populate his digital worlds. This directional insufficiency may be due to the fact that he is as confused as the rest of us, but at least his unfaltering engagement with intractable ethical dilemmas reminds us to remain vigilant in such fluid times.