



*SEX  
ART  
AND  
THE  
DOW  
JONES*

# COMPULSION LOOP

Chris Bennie | Marnie Edmiston | Madeleine Stack

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*Compulsion Loop* is a group weekender exhibition featuring new installation, video and text based works by artists Chris Bennie, Madeleine Stack and Marnie Edmiston. The works in this exhibition consider the relationship between desire and disaster, the increasingly blurry line between public and private and western society's insatiable drive for bigger, better and faster gratification.

This exhibition evolved through a consideration of current western society and the driving forces behind our actions and behaviours. The exhibition title *Compulsion Loop* is a recently coined term by the gaming industry to describe the intentionally addictive and repetitive model of pursuing goals for rewards. This term seemed an apt one to apply to Western society's perpetual desire for 'progress' and consumption in order to reap the perceived rewards such advances bring. The featured works each bring to focus the current state of affairs and critique aspects including the seduction of the spectacle, surveillance and easy living lifestyle.

One of the claims of postmodern visual culture is that areas such as advertising have attached an infinite amount of meanings to commodities and generated a saturation of images resulting in cultural banality and meaninglessness.<sup>1</sup> Expanding on the impact of this, Debord stated in 1967 that those living in societies where modern production dominates find themselves with an 'immense accumulation of spectacles. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation.'<sup>2</sup> Such spectacles via the representation of past events, reproduction and re-purposing of existing images in a deliberate manner are all tools employed by Bennie, Edmiston and Stack in their featured works. There is familiarity in the imagery they have chosen, which both mimics and comments on broader issues within visual culture and society. There is an underlying sense of humour in the works in that they comment on current society while knowingly employing the strategies they are critiquing from secret surveillance footage to glossy imagery. They also employ for the most part a lo-fi and playful approach in the process of making. A shift in positioning and perspective from the viewer both when physically looking and conceptually considering these pieces is required. Conceptually, the artists have positioned their re-contextualised imagery of scenarios such as a helicopter, cityscape and disaster footage that is often flicked past or easily forgotten as a moment of significance. The works also all have two or more sides or components that viewers cannot witness simultaneously, prompting interaction.

Chris Bennie's works *Sex Art and the Dow Jones* (2014) and *Seven Days in the Art World* (2014) show respectively a theoretical text on top of the aftereffects of an earthquake on a highway in Japan in 1995, and an artist monograph over the sinking of the Maltase tanker Erica in France in 1999. They are part of a new series of work by Bennie titled *Unknown Quantity*, named after the exhibition catalogue of the same name written by French Philosopher Paul Virilio, with the images of disasters sourced from the publication. Virilio<sup>3</sup> proposes that to create or discover a scientific, industrial or other invention is to also create and discover the accident or catastrophe such an invention has the capacity for generating. Bennie is particularly interested in the publication *Unknown Quantity's* proposition that "disasters have a qualitative relation to technology: the bigger and faster the plane for example, the more devastating the plane crash."<sup>4</sup>

Bennie's decision to source the images of natural and man-made disasters from *Unknown Quantity* references the depiction of the disaster in visual culture and the perpetuation of the reproduction and re-purposing of these images. He intentionally draws attention to the fact the images are reproductions through the inclusion of the page fold, book shadow and lack of overt modification and manipulation of the images. Through making the process of reproduction explicit, Bennie states that viewers gain greater insight to the notion of the representation of tragedy. Further, 'It's as if these images amplify the metaphorical potential of images to act as symbols - all the while acknowledging a very loose relationship to real tragedy.'<sup>5</sup> With these familiar images of disasters juxtaposed with the covers of other publications, there is the implication of new meanings from which viewers can draw their own connections. Removed from the horrific moment that it captures, the image becomes a surreal spectacle in the form of a large suspended banner that viewers cannot overlook. These aspects in Bennie's work expand on ideas around the uncomfortable relationship between desire and disaster and the communication of this in contemporary visual culture.

Marnie Edmiston's text 'Blasting off into white oblivion' in her installation *Smooth, easy, inoffensive* (2014), suggests a state of no return that can be read as total bliss or fear - the 'white light' at death - referencing both the individual and society's collective journey and ultimate demise. Edmiston is passionate about the preservation of the natural environment and wishes to draw attention to cause and effect of actions, while allowing viewers to draw their own conclusions. Accompanying her text is a slow motion video of vehicles

entering tunnels in various unidentified locations, thus obstructing the view of their destination. Edmiston is interested in the idea put forward in Jonathan Crary's publication, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, which suggests, that despite the increase in levels of stimulation found in our everyday environments, our mental capacity is actually diminishing.<sup>6</sup> Crary describes this experience as the 'uninterrupted harshness of monotonous stimulation' resulting in our capacity to respond becoming 'frozen or neutralised.'<sup>7</sup>

This idea of increased stimulation and saturation as generating mental 'sludge' and cultural banality provides a framework in which to view Edmiston's artworks. The text takes on the appearance of an advertising slogan on a shopfront window but with no product to sell and the video resembles a television program but with no ending, resolution or easy gratification. Commenting on the impact of easy living, the text calls us to action with a sense of immediacy, while the video slows us down into a meditative state of viewing repetitious actions.

Madeleine Stack shot her two-channel video *NSA* during her recent visit to New York. The television screens are placed back to back so that the viewer can only watch one screen at time. On one side is Stack's video of a NYPD (New York Police Department) helicopter looping around the neighbourhood across one patch of sky with the ambient drone of the helicopter playing. The other is the artist filming her reflection with an iPhone, obscuring her face to viewers through the act of looking at herself on her screen. This video is interrupted with recordings from NYC Drive, a 24/7 TV channel showing footage captured from CCTV cameras positioned through the streets of New York City. There is a sharp contrast expressed through the convergence of footage. One shows Stack knowingly filming and then publishing her image, the other is of people who are either unaware they are being filmed or aware but still unable to control how the footage of themselves is used. This video highlights the commodification of surveillance footage from its role in crime prevention and prosecution into entertainment, as well as the further erosion of boundaries between public and private spaces and actions. Stack explains that she is also interested in 'exploring contemporary aspects of self-promotion and instant gratification.'<sup>8</sup> She gives the example of obtaining a self-esteem boost via the posting of a selfie on social media, which is equally applicable to any image or statement about the self on chat rooms, blogs, websites, text message or email whereby there is the potential for the individual to receive an instant response and gratification.

The pursuit for pleasure and fulfilment takes on new meanings, potentiality and ramifications in the context of current technology and society. The works in *Compulsion Loop* all provide a critique of current western society through teasing out the tensions in relationships between desire and disaster and the erosion of public and private experiences.

1. Hand, Martin. 2012. 'Images and Information in Cultures of Consumption' In *The Handbook of Visual Culture*, edited by Ian Heywood and Barry Sandywell, 519-520, London, New York: Berg.
2. Debord, Guy. 1994. *Society of the spectacle*. New York: Zone books.
3. Virilio, Paul, 2002. *Unknown Quantity*. United Kingdom: Thames & Hudson Ltd.
4. Interview with the artist Chris Bennie August 24, 2014
5. Interview with the artist Chris Bennie October 1, 2014
6. Crary, Jonathan. 2014. *24/7 Late capitalism and the ends of sleep*. 33-34, London, New York: Verso.
7. op. cit. 34.
8. Interview with the artist Madeleine Stack July 28, 2014

## Sarah Barron

Compulsion Loop | Curated by Sarah Barron | 10 - 12 October 2014.

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Image: Chris Bennie *Sex, Art and the Dow Jones*, PVC Banner, 2014.

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