



vocal thoughts

Anna Davis+Jason Gee
Chris Howlett
Daniel Johnston
Tellervo Kalleinen+Oliver Kochta-Kalleinen
Dani Marti
Kate Murphy

the balance against us

PETER MCKAY

Whereas an idea is an object of understanding—implying a certain clarity of comprehension—the term “thought” describes a mental response to sensory experience that can be of a more varied level of resolution. Some thoughts are more urgent than others of course, dominating our attention and agitating our emotions. We might call the more persistent of these unsettling preoccupations a vocal thought—one that will not stay quiet and let our mind be at ease. Following this line, *Vocal Thoughts* the exhibition presents a range of artists working with disquiet at both an individual and societal level, both as a subject, and even as a raw material. Bringing to the fore difficult feelings and exchanges that are largely left unspoken, unexamined, or sometimes engaged with a closed mind Anna Davis & Jason Gee, Chris Howlett, Daniel Johnston, Tellervo Kalleinen & Oliver Kochta-Kalleinen, Dani Marti, and Kate Murphy form intimate and informed perspectives on sensitive issues of mental health and wellbeing—complemented with insights into the medical, political and economic frameworks that have evolved to manage such troubles.

Voicing texts from self-help publications Anna Davis and Jason Gee's *Biohead Actualized* (2008), a digital incarnation of a vaudeville ventriloquist doll created from images of an original found on eBay, spouts a loop of delirious pontifications on the value of, and methods to attaining wealth, friends and an attractive personality. Something like an affluenza horror film, this creepy little character stares hard at his audience as he recites our familiar anxieties back to us *amplified*. The Biohead instructs us as follows.

“Begin now to observe yourself. You are full of fear and anxiety. You are despondent, doubtful and cynical, you have a confused neurotic mind. You have no ambition, no creative ideas, you are envious and covetous of the others prosperity. You have obstacles, delays, lack and limitation—wealth flows from you instead of to you. You are really being selfish. You'll never amount to anything, you haven't got a chance, you're all wrong. It's no use. It's not what you know—but who you know. What's the use, nobody cares. It's no use trying so hard. You're too old now. Things are getting worse and worse. Life is an endless grind. You just can't win. Pretty soon you'll be bankrupt. Watch out, you'll get the virus.”

When disembodied from their original context of various self-help programs such as new age personality audits and Erhard Seminars Training, the Biohead's ‘teachings’ are less personal development guidance than they are decidedly unhinged yearnings for endless success and domination. With this simple yet effective strategy Gee and Davis expose and ridicule an unhelpful self-help industry worth billions of dollars annually exposing its predatory jingoism used to cynically and ruthlessly exploit a commonly felt sense of inadequacy, insecurity and consumer envy.

Similarly, Kate Murphy considers the more esteemed discipline of in *The appointment* 2009, a single take monologue in which a late middle-aged male actor speaks directly to camera, playing the role of practicing psychologist realistically following a routine patient oriented therapy session. Like *Biohead Actualized*, *The appointment* could be read as a generalised portrait of the discipline, demonstrating a somewhat more robust operational methodology





though not without its own more subtle set of power dynamics. In this instance however, a more productive standpoint is found in literally assuming the place of the unheard patient, who is in fact the muted protagonist of the work. In leaving space between the therapist's gentle line of questioning, Murphy describes a patient that is plagued by indecision and self-doubt and in need of support, a strategy that invites the audience to recollect their own fragility, and in this way become conscious of the vulnerability of others. In an increasingly competitive world typified by rapid change, the search for opportunity and a sense of purpose becomes more fraught, but in concluding with a positive final statement in which the psychologist affirms "good, because there is a way around", Murphy seems ultimately to be optimistic—perhaps even suggesting that such stress, challenged and resolved with mindful assistance as may be required, is a customary feature of a life lived well and full.

More widely known as an independent musician, Daniel Johnston attained cult-status music profile after appearing on MTV in 1985 with masses of songs recorded in his basement using a portable cassette player, and has since enjoyed a loyal and sympathetic audience. Now in his late forties, as a teenager Johnston began to experience severe bouts of depression, countered with periods of extreme creative activity. He was eventually diagnosed as bipolar after entering art college, and has since relied on the assistance of friends, family and a delicate balance of prescription medication to remain in a safe and stable mental state. Johnston has led an extremely tumultuous life enduring years of frightful paranoid hallucinations before finally finding appropriate drug therapy, and his art has long been a means to communicating an interior experience that wasn't easily expressed to those around him by other means. Drawing his own versions of popular comics Casper the Friendly Ghost, The Hulk, Captain America and a host of characters of his own creation developed over twenty years ago while still in high school, Johnston's protagonists are continually entangled in a biblical good-vs-evil binary with eccentric slippages. His bold graphic style, intense colouration, inventive symbolism and evocative distortion together with speech bubbles such as "IT'S CRAZY TO DIE SO TRY

TO BE ALIVE!" present an honest and faithful insight into his unique struggle in resolving his mind with the outside world, as well as his persistent meditations on his ideals of love, truth and resilience.

Chris Howlett's machinima *Homesteads* (2009), employs The Sims, the highest selling PC-computer game of all time,¹ to run a life simulation in a McMansion wonderland coming to terms with some of the darker undercurrents of society. Snippets of audio from popular American talk shows Dr Phil and Oprah introduce increasingly shocking first-person accounts of families disintegrating because of disconnected parents, badly behaved children, kidnapping, rape and pedophilia. Much of this voice track consists of specific accounts in which advances in online technology have been used by predators prowling for lonely and vulnerable children to groom and worse. Accordingly each animated home falls quickly into disarray until its inhabitants lay asleep next to piles of stinking rubbish, only waking once they are surrounded in flames. A similar structure is made use of in *Homesteads I* (2009) in which Kevin Rudd and the Rudd family are apparently haunted by the moralising arguments he and others made regarding Bill Henson's infamous exhibition in May 2008 at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, and *Homesteads II* (2009) which features interviews with American soldiers questioning their government's motivations for war and methods of conflict in Iraq. The dystopia Howlett presents prompts a heightened awareness of the real world consequences that can follow actions in virtual or media spaces, calling into consideration the limits of leadership regarding the paradoxical the relationship between liberty and vulnerability, and asks more broadly to what extent is possible to minimise the influence of the worst aspects of human nature in a continuously evolving society.

Online space is further considered by Dani Marti's video portrait of a teenager filmed in Barcelona in 2004, titled *Andrea greeted with a pubescent smile* (2008). Refreshingly candid and honest, this work provides a remarkable documentary insight into the way in which the internet has become integral to many adolescent's pathway toward social and sexual maturity. Andrea explains the tangible sense of

intimacy and community she gains from chat rooms other web-based social media, though remains philosophical about the place of online technologies, asserting that they provide no substitute for, or short cut to, meaningful real-world relationships. Her enthusiasm for technology is balanced by examples of the occasional betrayal of trust from users that misrepresent their age in order to appeal to younger people, however it appears that this kind of experience has fortunately served to sharpen her general insights into the full spectrum of human nature, making her wary and wise while still maintaining her youthful zeal for life.

Marti's compelling *Time is the fire in which we burn* (2009), is part of a separate and ongoing body of interviews in which he gently engages an individual to recount their life's story after having sex with them to elicit an exceedingly open emotional state. In this substantial work John, a slightly needy one time methamphetamine addict and prostitute who is haunted by a recently ended romantic relationship, tells his excruciating tale of personal loss, loneliness and degradation. In employing this potentially controversial working method, Marti captures a singular display of character, self-scrutiny and humility from his subject. Ultimately an intertwined meditation on intimacy and strength of character, told from the perspective of the bedroom *Time is the fire in which we burn* reflects on our limited lifespan and proposes that as an ideal we should seek to fill our time with enduring happiness and comfort.

Tellervo Kalleinen and Oliver Kochta-Kalleinen's ongoing collaborative project *Complaints Choir* principally consists of the duo establishing community choirs across the globe for the purpose of publically performing the grievances submitted by locals set to original compositions. The initial Complaints Choir was formed in Birmingham in 2005, with Kalleinen and Kochta-Kalleinen initiating others in Helsinki, Hamburg-Wilhelmsburg, St. Petersburg, Chicago, Singapore, Copenhagen, and Tokyo, with more than sixty-five do-it-yourself versions established independently with the artists' endorsement. Presented as a multi-screen video installation, each

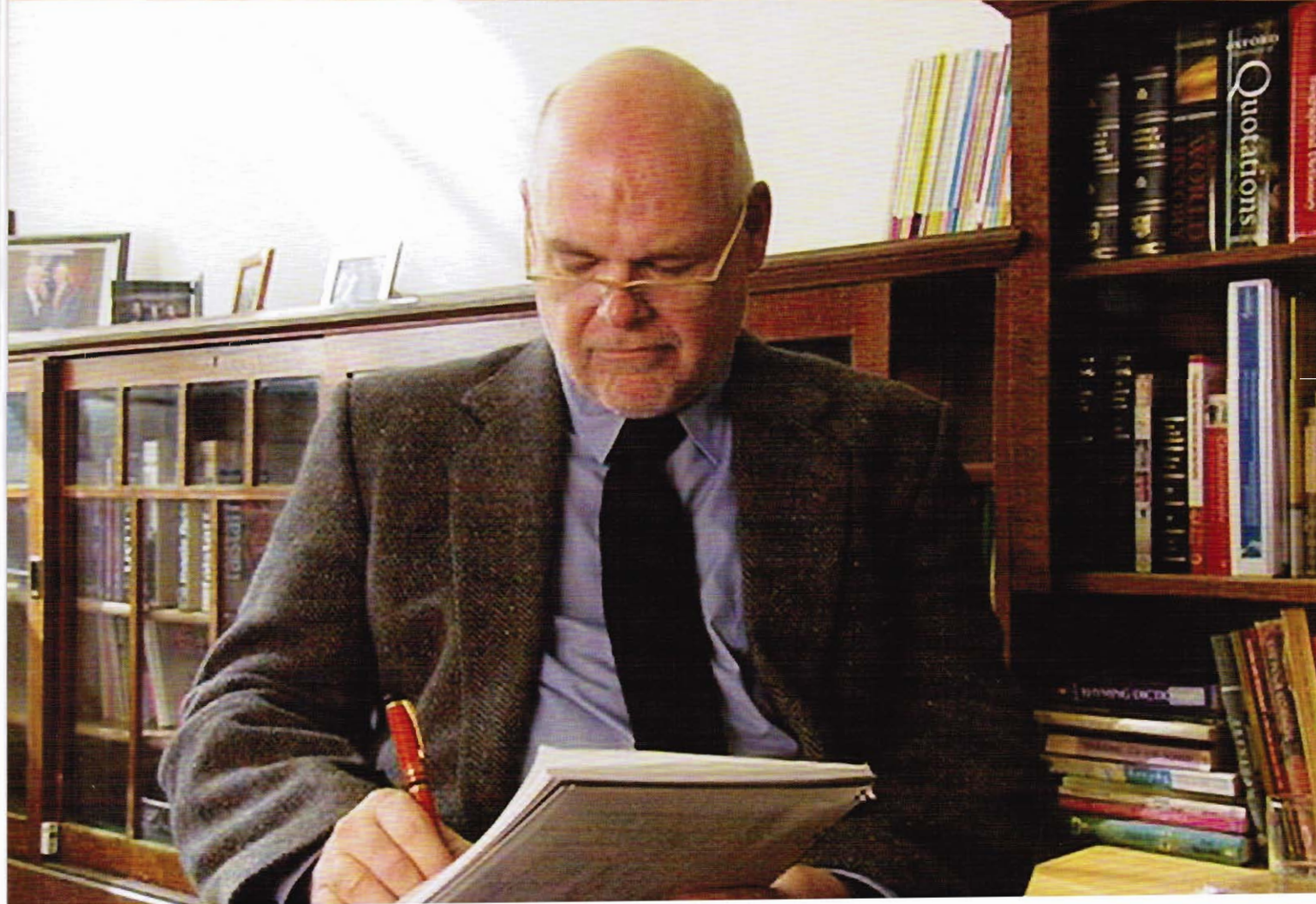
choral arrangement is an abundance of authentically felt contemporary life experience, which features some regional variation, though by-and-large describes a reasonably uniform dismay at the chasm between that which citizens are promised by corporations, government, family, friends and colleagues, and what each individual actually experiences. Prominent complaints include an erosion of manners, money and relationship problems, limited work opportunities, poor public planning and infrastructure, sneaky politicians and the degradation of the natural environment. Joined together in joyful song however, each recital delivers a cathartic uplift instead of the dark resignation one might anticipate. The collective spleen venting has a remarkable therapeutic effect, as potentially caustic disaffection and alienation gives way to a social alliance based on shared opposition to the status quo, and belief in principles of peace, equality and dignity.

By blurring the line between private or internal dialogue and public discussion *Vocal Thoughts* delivers a comparatively intensive audience experience, providing insights into the inner depths of citizens from a range of developed nations struggling for a certain harmony. This is something of immense value in a world that is arguably more concerned with shallow displays of wealth, public face and misplaced fixations on maintaining a 'positive outlook' at all times. In order to adequately express ourselves and foster our capacity to enjoy our own and others' existence—a fundamental requirement for a worthwhile life—we require such meaningful insights into the experience, belief and desire of those around us, near and far, so that we may relate, consol and consider the knowledge that we are all vulnerable, and consciously take time-out to quiet one's own mind when the pressures start tipping the balance against us.

Note

¹ Trey Walker, *The Sims overtakes Myst*, *GameSpot*, CNET Networks. http://www.gamespot.com/pc/strategy/simsvinlarge/news_2857556.html; retrieved 10 August 2010







Images:

Front cover: Kalleinen & Oliver Kochta-Kalleinen, *Complaints Choir* St. Petersburg, 2006

Photo courtesy the artists

Page 2: Chris Howlett, *Homesteads*, 2009

Photo courtesy the artist

Page 3: Anna Davis+Jason Gee, *Biohead Actualized*, 2008

Photo courtesy the artists

Page 4: Dani Marti, *Time is the fire in which we burn*, (video still detail), 2009

Photo courtesy the artist and BRENSPACE, Sydney

Page 5 top: Kalleinen & Oliver Kochta-Kalleinen, *Complaints Choir* St. Petersburg, 2006

Photo courtesy the artists

Page 5 bottom: Kate Murphy, *The appointment* (video still), 2009

Photo courtesy the artist and BRENSPACE, Sydney

Rear cover: Daniel Johnston, *Who is Captain Now*, 2009

Photo courtesy the artist

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Curator Peter McKay

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CONTEMPORARY ART CENTRE OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

14 PORTER STREET PARKSIDE SOUTH AUSTRALIA 5063 Tel +61 [08] 82 72 26 82 Fax +61 [08] 83 73 42 86

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