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Daniel McKewen
Paper Empire

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PROJECTS

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There's battle lines being drawn, nobody's right if
everybody's wrong - Buffalo Springfield, 'For What
It's Worth'

The car is on fire, and there's no driver at the wheel,
and the sewers are all muddied with a thousand
lonely suicides, and a dark wind blows. The
government is corrupt and we're on so many drugs
with the radio on and the curtains drawn. We're
trapped in the belly of this horrible machine, and
the machine is bleeding to death." - Godspeed You
Black Emperor, 'Dead Flag Blues' (F#A#∞)

Daniel McKewen
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Late Capitalism is too loose a term. Are we even
in Late Capitalism? Will it ever end? Does the 'late'
just infer the centuries of oppression we're looking
forward to, before the world all ends? Where did
Capitalism start? With imperialism? Or with
industrialisation? In Rome? Doesn't the shared
economy just exacerbate aspects of Capitalism? Is
technology causing a further engendering of
structural discrepancies or is Capitalism what is
driving technology? Both? We don't even know!

Daniel McKewen's practice, while humorous at
times, highlights these Sisyphean moments, stuck
in loops, uncertain about where or when to end,
or where or when to begin. McKewen examines an
over-saturation of visual cues, film tropes, sound
hooks, isolating them, and twisting them into
stripped-back, creepy montages.

Paper Empire examines the different ways in which our economies, and our social, cultural and political systems become so over-empowered (or under-empowered) that we no longer have agency within them - as communities, but as people as well. Our anxieties^{©TM1} overwhelm us in a field where everything is ever-expansive (Twitter) and shrinking at the same time (our bedrooms). Our sense of our selves is lost through economic [and other] systems that have taken power from the State - the community - and hence, the citizen, to enact our communal and individual moral obligations.

More pointedly, this exhibition addresses a futility that we all feel, and one that can only be made light of in the face of it all. Sardonic and dank. It's ungraspable, in the way that *Twin Peaks* is ungraspable, or the horrors folding out across the world are ungraspable, but there's an energy that summons humorousness at the impotence of the systems around us.

The artist's thinking around the exhibition came from an urge to determine what went wrong with the Global Financial Crisis, and has ended up approaching pop culture, money, identity (national and personal), and senses of identity within those three. In this exhibition, he looks at the cyclical nature of capitalism - crisis∞non-crisis where the non-crisis could be described as a coma of stasis.

The smooth and sinister video work, 'Promissory Estoppel' sees what one could assume is money, stripped of its face, its identity and ties to nationhood, falling through empty space. As the video progresses, the money starts burning. Here, McKewen's anxieties about power and the economy are laid bare. It's poetic, it's macabre, it's anxiety-inducing, really.

¹Thanks Zuck.

The video takes its name from the legal concept of the Promissory Estoppel, which describes that a promise may be held to account in the court of Law. It's intended to hold the promisor to account, and is indoctrinated in the United States legal system, albeit to different degrees in different prefectures.

As an example, when applied to Australia, we could think about the Financial Services Royal Commission. What was promised (contractually, here), was not fulfilled. But moreover, the promise for a livelihood beyond banks - which is what their advertising denotes using visual media - is not at all considered. We're now seeing the immaterial (and very material) effects of an incentive led in India by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in which he incentivised new currency to rid black trade. Now, we're seeing the costs on farmer's and industrial worker's livelihoods, and the incentive has since continued to strangle the economy. But where are the people in all of this? Bureaucracy wins again. Dear Centrelink, answer the goddamn phone! We look at institutions as bodies of people, not as people themselves.

The fact that the notes are stripped of any identity further testifies to the fact that people—states (!) become stripped of their wellbeing in the face of neoliberal capitalism. While a material object, physical money has an enormous strength in talking about a country's history (or not talking to a country's history) and what stories they want to tell. When thinking through national economies and global capital, money is just as illusory as identity. Is bitcoin really any different to the system in which it operates? Is it really that different to physical cash?





Daniel McKewen
Full Faith and Credit, 2018
2-channel synchronized HD video installation
with sound infinite loop

Kuznets curve (2018) travels through walls. Modelled on a Gulfstream G650, an aeroplane used by the world's elite, is painted gold - sans windows and doors, maybe even trapped in mid-air. This private jet is worth a cool \$60m, with billionaires clawing at their chance to own one. The process in which they undertake a sort of 'bidding', which is referred to as 'flipping'. Flipping involves selling the contract of a piece of property (an object) to make a profit. People are so desperate for the prestige associated with the plane, that they undertake this practice to be top of their game.

While it may seem that the aircraft is crashing through the gallery wall, it could also be cruising through. It could be stunted - it's ambiguous, but its shininess is, like the 'flippers flipping', competing for prestige. Flippers gonna flip. The symbolism in the work is again wry, but let it sit. Think of America - the WTC, Trump Tower, a golden toilet to lay your ass bare.

Full Faith and Credit (2018) is a nuanced, two-channel video work that depicts two sets of images, alternating between a macro view of a crisp/crumpled dollar bill, and a ball of fire/blood.

For the soundtrack, there's the artist's signature dark, broody instrumentalism, but he also hired two voice actors with middle American accents to speak diatribes that have been altered from Lionel Shiver's 2016 book, *The Mandibles: A Family, 2029-2047*. Taking influence from the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, the plot envisions the dystopian aftermath of a future economic collapse. In the book, countries including Russia and China create a new world reserve currency, the Bancor, which draws upon economist John Maynard Keynes' utopian, and later discounted idea for

the economy. The rest of the world collude with this new supranational currency to overthrow the greenback. In response, the United States closes its borders, this time to emigration, cancels its own debts, and seizes all citizen's gold to pay its debts. Together, the characters quip over which point in history marked the starting point of the collapse.

While the novel itself speaks a kind of US paranoid nationalism (of course Putin is the enemy), the reimagination of its monologues in the context of this work create a overwhelming paranoia and suspicion of the financial systems that we inhabit. When combined with balls of fire and blood, and images of money, the work becomes a brutal message that you can't pinpoint – and that's the point. It's also worth noting that the artist – a precarious profession in itself – commissioned other precarious workers (freelancers on Fiverr) for the work.

This exhibition is a part of Bus Projects' program, *With Compliments*, which invites artists to share the space with artist that have had an impact on the way that they think about art. McKewen has chosen to exhibit alongside Tracey Moffatt and editor Gary Hillberg's *DOOMED* (2007), and *REVOLUTION* (2008), and Paul Pfeiffer's *Desiderata* (2004).

Both artists' works are a nice contrast with McKewen's works, in that they employ similar notions of over-saturation, yet talk to different disseminations of schizoid abundance.

Moffatt's works employ video-montage to cut scenes of different themes into the overall filmic presentation. Such themes include Artist, Love, Mother, and here – Doomed and Revolution. Each video reconstructs

narratives into an oeuvre that can't be pinpointed due to the different eras and different contexts from which they're pulled, but they all talk to the ways in which culture can be represented and the overwhelming nature of these representations. Both *DOOMED* and *REVOLUTION* tie in to concepts within Paper Empire, that speak to a want for revolution, yet being doomed to futility.

Pfeiffer's *Desiderata* is a series (here presented in one video) that shows the facile reactions to pertinent moments within the game show, *The Price Is Right*. The video removes any extraneous (yet vital) information, including the host and the prizes, focusing on the body language of the contestants. As a genre, game-shows posit to their audiences that there is some sort of promise to a better future, but each actor (contestant) feels either bound by chance, or trapped by the whims of the aforementioned extraneous information. It's an absurd situation, displayed on a laptop style screen, similar to the ways in which we increasingly encounter the world around us, our bodies – and slowly, our brains – removed.

Together, the works presented in the spaces form an anxious visual cacophony, with McKewen's almost feeling like a respite. In a conversation with the artist, he states that he was heavily influenced by the concept of 'perpetual war for perpetual peace'. *Paper Empire* reflects this fascination in the entropic hopelessness of eternal return.

Eternal return
Sarah Werkmeister

Daniel McKewen is a Brisbane-based visual artist whose practice investigates the intersections of contemporary art, popular culture, and the entertainment and financial industries. Working across a broad range of media, his work appropriates elements from screen culture in order to examine and critique how institutional structures operate culturally, socially, and politically. His works explore how our subjective and inter-subjective interactions with mass media can allow us to ‘make sense’ of our own social experiences.

Sarah Werkmeister is a freelance writer, editor, researcher, broadcaster and curator based in Melbourne. She has worked for L’Internationale Online, Shepparton Art Museum, Next Wave, and the Emerging Writers Festival, lectured at the Victorian College of the Arts (University of Melbourne), and tutored at BoVA CAIA (Griffith University). From 2008-2012 she co-directed Brisbane-based artist-run-initiative, The Wandering Room, and worked in community radio for over fifteen years. She is currently undertaking a Master of Art Curatorship at the University of Melbourne and works for Yirramboi Festival and Public Art Melbourne. Her research interest is in the representation of nationhood in government art collections, and social urgency in both the museum and in the public realm.

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