Mute

ARTICLES

SELF-COMPRESSION: AN INTERVIEW WITH JESSE DARLING

By Tom Clark and Rózsa Farkas , 20 June 2012

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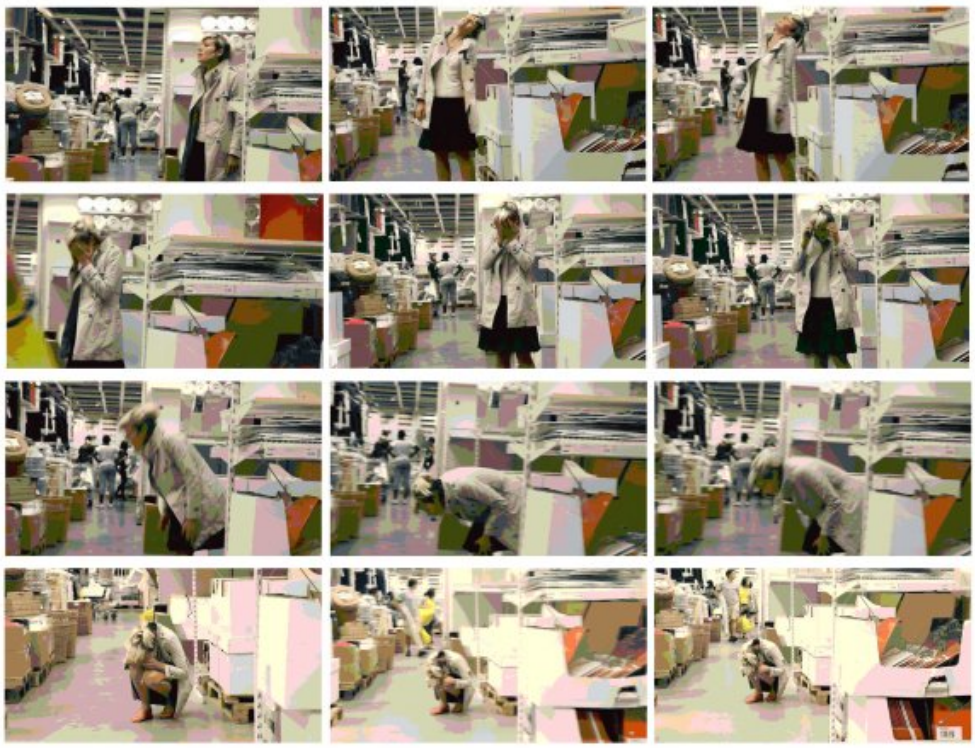

Image: Jesse Darling, iKea, 2012, single-channel video, LCD TV screen

Involving a conceptual engagment with technical environments, self-risking and cathartic performances, and a profound thinking around gender and subjectivity, Jesse Darling's art illuminates deep links between technology, power and experience

Jesse Darling is an artist and writer whose practice, while dispersed beyond that of conventional critical art, centres around a critique of the prosuming performative self produced by late capitalism. Her work steers away from a formalist appropriation of this discourse and instead explores, sometimes in a celebratory way, the mediative forms of this post-Fordist, IKEA-furnished, playbouring phase of user-generated capitalism. After her solo exhibition Stockholm Syndrome and Other System Failures (March 2012) at Arcadia_Missa, co-directors Tom Clark and Rózsa Farkas spoke to Darling to explore some unresolved questions raised by the show.

Tom Clark: How did you arrive at making art? Your practice, including your blog, and conversations around your practice, feel quite natural in a way that doesn't suggest the strictures of a conventional A-levels-to-foundation-to-art-school route.

Jesse Darling: I did do art at A-level: it was the only subject I came into school for, I suppose because it helped me survive. It legitimised the articulation of my otherness somehow, which is what art is good for in general. This was before the internet was a ubiquitous fact of life. I give thanks on bended knee that there wasn't anything like Tumblr or MySpace in my early teens, but I sometimes wonder how things might have been different if I'd been able to access the internet communities of self-identified weirdoes, autistics, queers and 'otherkin,' who contain and support one another through recognition of a shared sense of marginality, like the street communities I hung around in later on. I did have a virtual existence of some kind, or a secret life in which I could express my 'true existence', but this just meant cruising around the streets all night by myself looking for trouble. I had big issues with institutional learning, since I felt like the *real* education was all out there in the streets and in bodies – mine and other people's; plus, state school careers advice doesn't really understand 'artist' as a viable profession, and neither did my parents, so it just didn't count as something I could end up doing. This is as much a question of class values as anything else (one of the many elephants in the big white room of the art world).Later I (accidentally) ended up in Amsterdam's Rietveld Academie, this prestigious, cerebral institution, but they threw me out for failing to conform to any of the basic tenets of studentship. I was doing a lot of drugs by that time, living in squats, working in the sex industry. 'Making art' – as recognised by the academy – just felt impossibly removed, rarefied and arbitrary, a million miles away from all the stuff happening on the streets and in the world, which came at me with a kind of urgency and immediacy that I couldn't find in the classroom or the studio. I was like, where's the *real* work at? I went back to art school eventually (Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design) and it was quite productive, although I did notice that the academy has a peculiar relationship with lived experience. In other words, some people do it, then some people write about it, and some only ever read about it. I don't want to posit any kind of hierarchy of learning here, but when those people end up in a position to decide what is and isn't valuable or worthwhile, that can sometimes be problematic.

TC: You were involved with earlier permutations of what is described as 'net art', can you say a bit about this and what you feel characterises this particular moment of that history?

JD: I've always been into virtualism, but I'm not really into the term 'net art'. It's a bit cheesy and specific, and implies a false commonality in what I see as a diversity of practices. Having said that, I do think there are art communities, on and offline, who do share a common aesthetic, and whose practice inevitably ends up echoing some of the same themes. I will also say that what's now being described as net art seems to be (self-)defined by the employment and deployment of a common space and/or reference point for a generation: online platforms like Facebook and Google, Twitter and Tumblr, and to a lesser extent (often in combination with) the imaging software we use and live in. Hannah Black, who's an artist and theorist friend of mine, coined the term 'techno-povera', derived from 'arte povera', which I think defines it perfectly. If Arduino consoles and robots are the new marble and oil paint, then YouTube and Google are the new 'materials of the everyday'.

TC: Would you describe your practice as coming under this net art rubric?

JD: I think pretty much every artist who is practicing today is working in negotiation with the conditions of a changing time: virtualism, globalism, hypercapitalism, precarity. Artists in Africa and China are addressing different kinds of questions, for example, and it's good to remember that our experience (of the internet, etc.) is not universal; there's probably someone living next door to me who doesn't know what Photoshop does or what Tumblr is. For me personally, virtual spaces are a big part of what I'm thinking about, in as much as they provide a very live metaphor for the kinds of marginal and interior spaces I've known IRL. I'm not interested in making art about the internet, per se; but the internet is part of a matrix of conditions that shape my experience as a human in the world.

TC: You've said that you were mentored by early net artists but chose not to engage in coding or the network architecture, which was part of their practice, how come?

JD: I speak a little 'MySpace pidgin' html and I can read it pretty good. I don't code mostly because it feels very difficult, and I'm an immediatist. My practice has been shaped by what was available: the time, space and money I had to work with. It's for the same reason that I don't work with bronze or clay; I don't have a foundry, you know? It's also why my own body shows up so much in the work – it's a powerful technology I have at my disposal, for 'free'. I don't have to ask permission or rent out a space. If I started coding I'm sure I'd get into it – there's a great poetry in

it – but I don't want the complexity of the process to become the product (of my art). Art about technology often ends up making both art and technology look really dated and capricious within a year or two. Great big wow, great big innovation award at Arts Electronica or somewhere, and next year it's an app on everyone's smartphone and nobody gives a shit. Plus, this nerdist or generational elitism – we're-the-only-ones-who-know-how-to-use-this-stuff-ism – isn't interesting to me. I'm interested in the human condition, as it changes with the times, and/or abides despite everything.

TC: Do you think that this move in focus, to your articulation of a user's rather than just the author's experience, also has anything to do with parallel shifts from web 1.0, to the more user-centric web 2.0 environments?

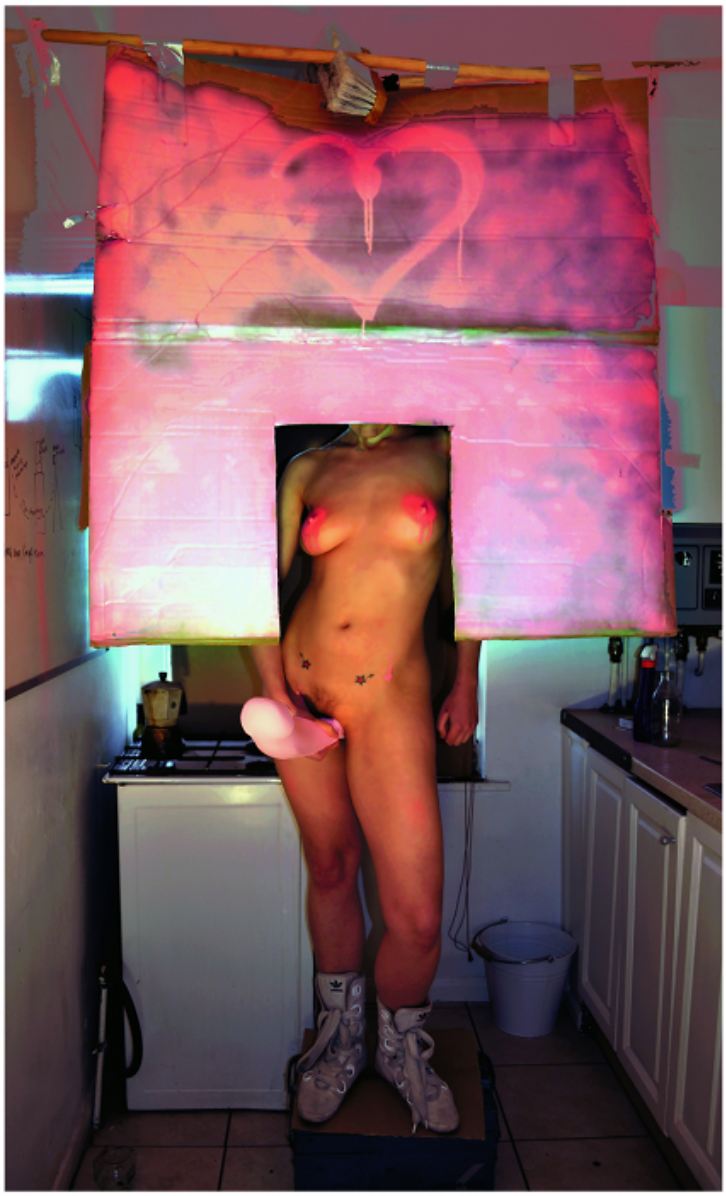

Image: Jesse Darling, *Photoshop 2: (Free Transform/ Difference|Exclusion/ Tolerance: 60)*, 2012, metallic C-type print

JD: Coding culture is pretty authorial. Even open source stuff has strict protocols that reinforce authorial culture. The author was supposed to have died in 1967, but keeps coming back, like a zombie, in variously striated forms, despite all the discourse; I suspect that this has to do with a deep historical relationship to goods and property, and it's gonna take more than the creative commons movement to change that. Web 2.0, meanwhile, *can't* be too authorial: as users, we're just making hay on someone else's land, the use of which is strictly prescribed and often policed. But as far as I'm concerned I've never known any other condition. I grew up in a city: there was no wilderness or free space anywhere. I wrote an essay for the *New Inquiry* in which I likened Web 2.0 to the suburban sprawl of strip malls and shopping centres that many of us spent time in growing up and often still inhabit. The fact that all public space was essentially privatised space, the fact that there wasn't anything to *do* or anywhere to *go,* didn't stop us from being curious, bored, rebellious teenagers, finding ways to express our nascent subjectivity and finding ways to subvert the use of that space much as the NEET kids do today, just by virtue of existing.

I used to hang around with a bunch of hackers in Amsterdam who ran a semi-squatted troglodyte computer club in the basement of the anarchist bookstore. They had really strong filter coffee and free internet, with a bunch of old boxes running Linux and Ubuntu. You wouldn't get far in that place if you didn't know how to navigate the bash shell. As far as they were concerned, the world was divided into Morlocks who could code, and Eloi, who couldn't. I had plenty of caffeine-fuelled arguments about the elitism of that. And although I loved the interiority of the shell and the intimacy of the command line, I liked the daylight better, and having sex, and arguing with cops on the street. The two concerns seemed incompatible so I picked my battles. Later, I did a residency with with art-prankster hacktivists monochrom in Vienna. There's a lot of serious coding and data-activism in that scene. Jacob Appelbaum was hanging around; I was doing stuff with the local cell of the Graffiti Research Lab. But since monochrom are basically absurdist situational performance artists, there was a lot of good stuff about hacking narrative, or hacking life – expanding, subverting what's encoded in culture – and I took a lot from that.

Rózsa Farkas: OK, so after your exhibition at Arcadia_Missa I wanted to think again about your IKEA work and, in light of what you've said so far about your practice, ask why you transformed the IKEA performance into a gif?

JD: During a residency at 319 Scholes in New York I started doing a lot of thinking about the body, about how it can be a weapon to hurl against the membrane of hermetic reality and consensual oppression. It's a kind of shamanic objective, cathartic embodiment for the greater good, channelling the sickness of society. I like this idea very much – that I should suffer for my art – and I'm committed to it, though probably not cut out for it. Anyway, I planned to go to IKEA and just start screaming until they came and took me away. We had all these contingency plans: What if they taze you? What if they put you in an ambulance? I spent two days preparing myself for a breakdown in the best way I know how – I didn't sleep, didn't eat, drank too much coffee, went into a really hideous drunk-sober-drunk cycle, took weird pills. But when the time came, I just couldn't do it. It felt too theatrical, and anyway, I didn't want to pull focus like that, and risk upsetting all those people shopping. My own failure, compounded by a genuine distress which many of us always feel in IKEA, just made me want to cry. But all my preparations made sure I was deep inside it, kneeling on the floor sobbing while people went past with their trolleys. That was the only authentic response. And in retrospect, I think, the right one: anger is so performative, and there are plenty of ways to codify violent behaviour in public places, but tears in the shopping centre are for children and crazies. It's very uncomfortable to see adults experiencing extreme distress in public. Ann Hirsch's *Just Some Girl Crying in a Corner*, in which she sat on the gallery floor and cried for an hour at an opening, works in a similar way. I should add that I dressed neatly and conservatively for the occasion: I wore a skirt and sandals, very gendered-bourgeois. In this sense, it was a performance: there was a costume, there was a stage. But in fact it was a kind of anti-performance. I wanted it to be real and it was.

But when I watched the footage, in beautiful, slick HD - it just looked like the worst, hammiest acting ever. Straight-up video is a really bad way to document performance, I think – or anything, really; and it got me thinking about other ways to show what had happened there. So I started thinking about animated gifs because they are embedded media; they cannot extricate themselves from their context, i.e. they belong in the ether, it's their natural habitat; just as me-the-body cannot extricate itself from late-capitalist conglomerates who aestheticise an ideology of the disposable and precarious. The form (of the animated gif) reflects the futility of action, since it's like this endless cycle of oops! LOL, oops! LOL etc., a really purgatorial immortal coil. Animated gif culture is down there at the bottom of the barrel, so you have to deal with that context, too: the form also ends up being a comment on the *absurdity* of the act in the face of certain failure. I started thinking about Brecht's idea of *gestus,* the moment of truth, as it were: a single gesture that encapsulates a whole paradigm. I started thinking about animated gifs as a parallel to *gestus,* and you don't think about Brecht without thinking of populist political theatre. Maybe it's a stretch to say that animated gifs are populist political theatre for the micro-modular age; and maybe it's not.

TC: Is the use of the gif's jumpy techno-povera sensibility a decision to use the technology to destabilise our easy relationship to the image of performance?

JD: I think I'm engaged in a struggle with mediation; the compulsion and futility of trying to capture the moment. I want to reflect this in the image. The process of encoding an image into gif format is a process of systematic decay and degradation, reflected in the end product; this makes transparent the difference between 'real life' and mediated life. This to me is also the closest thing I've found to something like 'the aura' in digital imaging; the transmissible

sense of a temporal process, by which we understand that a gesture has been performed; something like ‘the painter’s hand’. That there was once, at some point, a true moment, now gone forever and succeeded or replaced by this (decayed and muddied) representation, like a painting: it isn’t *supposed* to look like life. I’m afraid of all the high-definition high-DPI images on and offline, in advertising, in commerce, increasingly in art; they point to an inverted faith-reality in which the world appears decayed and muddied beside its representation, which – through relentless ubiquity and repetition in every area of our physical, virtual and psychological space – then starts to assume a hegemonic function. The animated gif, by virtue of its vileness and its limitations, stands in defiance of all that stuff. And yes, it also declares a contextual and historical alliance with the low-brow, the low-budget, the low-concept and low-culture aspects of internet culture, in a way that is comparable to street art IRL. My (aesthetic) values were incorrigibly influenced by street and squatter culture as a kid, so I also feel an affinity to all that is cheap and disgusting and immediate.

RF: Why then did the gif have to be displayed on a high-quality advertising monitor in the show?

JD: In the end, the piece became a video that went through several cycles of compression. This came about because I was trying to make the file small enough to parse it into a gif, and it wasn’t happening, so I ended up with something else. I started with the raw HD and made it into a basic movie file using Final Cut, but it was still too smooth – it looked more real than real life, which wasn’t representative – so I put the file through Quicktime and exported it as an .avi, which is a ‘lossy’, chunky codec; then Photoshop, etc. The whole process was like putting something through several rounds of Xerox. It just got noisier and messier with every compression. So I was getting into the idea of compression, in a poetic-anthropomorphic sense, to communicate what was happening to me in IKEA after two days of systematic self-abuse. I’d become a ‘lossy’ codec myself, 'I was losing it', glitched-out and full of interference. The advertising monitor I used to screen the video was partially as an analogue to the hermetic space of IKEA itself. Those things have no stereo out (for sound), because in advertising nobody can hear you scream; and then the monitor became the medium, because in trying to read my dirty little file it came up with all kinds of horizontal interference which completed the work, as though we were collaborating, my bad compression versus the machine.

Image: installation view, Stockholm Syndrome & Other System Failures, Jesse Darling, Arcadia_Missa, 2012

RF: Can you talk a bit more about why you honed in on IKEA and, in your eyes, the correlation between something like this and Facebook.

JD: IKEA and Facebook both propose a kind of space, an aesthetic which is also an ideology. The space of the IKEA catalogue is a virtual one, of course; like Facebook, a hygiene of form that would do away with inconsistency, spillover and decay. One thing I've been thinking about lately in my own work is how and why IKEA and Facebook have become such world-dominating psychospatial paradigms. And I think it's because they offer a very seductive paradigm of place-ness and order, which appeals to the psychological homelessness of a generation. We love this shit because it makes us feel like the contingency and terror of growing up in such precarious times can be controlled, or at least temporarily eluded; but of course the aesthetic imposes its own conditions, boxes us in, our

very selves compartmentalised into fill-in forms and space-saving storage solutions like shiny little horcruxes.[2] I think about it as a form of Stockholm Syndrome: when the captive learns to love the captor as a mechanism of survival.

TC: To follow on from this conflation of identity and the interface, and looking specifically at your work, *Image Macro* (2012), in which a fairly urgent element is the statement 'please let this be real', is this a critique, personal cry or what?

JD: It's both of those things: it's an incantation, a sort of secular prayer. A lot of our discourse and behaviour surrounding technology is starting to look like magical thinking or faith – which is more an affective notion than a religious notion at this point; having no choice but to believe in it, longing to trust it. The installation (*Image Macro,* 2012) is a feedback loop in which a camera gazes at a screen, which is fed back into a projector. The forms and patterns that appear projected are the result of the camera trying to figure out the right depth of focus, shuttling back and forth between the image on the screen and the dust on the screen's surface and coming up with this beautiful organic decay. It's a kind of animism, forcing the camera into negotiating the Gaze. 'Please let this be real' is a kind of post-ironic statement, in that by the time the subject(ivity) shows up it's nothing but a shadow on a projection. But it's there nonetheless (that's why it's a prayer; there's no proof of God's existence but we construe the smallest signs as something to work with). This is compounded by the embodied subjectivity of the viewer, the implied – and imparted – subjectivity of the camera, and the 'bodies' of the tripods holding the camera and projector, triffids engaged in doggy-style coitus. 'We are no longer a part of the drama of alienation; we live in the ecstasy of communication. And this ecstasy is obscene.' (Baudrillard)

TC: The idea of cyborg is being mentioned again recently, particularly within the discussion around the potential for using the web to transcend ordinarily fixed identity markers such as gender, is this something you could talk about?

JD: If this is so, I think it comes from a general shift in focus: from the machine and its processes to the user/subject and her processes, since we don't believe in sentient technology any more, only corporate apparatus and intuitive interfaces, and the power of the panopticon. There is something of the cyborg about the camwhore, reply girl, Tumblr femme – as Haraway puts it 'a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction [...] The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century.' It comes back to negotiating the Gaze, and forcing the body back into the frame as a statement of feminist subjectivity: if we could really negate our bodies and live in the cool matrix of post-gendered networketopia, then abortion rights wouldn't be an issue; transgender kids wouldn't be murdered in small towns. As women and queers we are not allowed to forget what it means to be a body in the world, and I think this is where the internet archetype of the contemporary cyborg comes from: the gazed-at, gazing back. Finally, we recognise that we don't only make the machines, as in modernity, but that they make us, too; and some of us are necessarily more aware of how we are being constructed in that. 'The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment.' (Donna Haraway)

RF: So is your use of social media celebratory or critical of it as a platform? Is it a medium in itself for you?

JD: It's both celebratory and critical, and it's neither. It's what's at hand. Certainly it is a platform, although it's one among many; and it's also a medium, because it has quite specific formal possibilities and limitations that we can all agree on, like paint or photography or anything. And like any other medium, there are artists who try to subvert it, and artists who just want to excel at it. In this case there's an argument to suggest that to excel it at it – deliberately and with a certain cynicism, matched only by the data overlords themselves – is an act of subversion *an sich*.

RF: Within your practice is this performance art? If so, then is everyone becoming a performance artist through their online avatars?

JD: It is a form of performance, of course. But everything's a form of performance, both on and offline. I wouldn't go so far as to describe social intercourse as performance art, but I do think that social media has set up this space in

which the Gaze (and by that I mean the curiously neutral gaze of the voyeur, but also the heterosexist normative capitalist-hegemonic gaze of *He-Who-Bestows-Or-Denies-Value*) has become ubiquitous and omnipresent, perpetuated by one's own friends and colleagues and compounded by the *pollice verso* of the Facebook 'Like'. The Gaze is something that women have always engaged in intimate struggle with; we work with it, or against it, or we work through it, but never are we free of it. Now we're effectively all gazing at each other, and the Big Other gazes through us. So in a sense we're all part of that negotiation now, which points to a condition in which a thing can't exist until it's captured and transmitted – pix or you didn't happen. And habitual users of social media are all fully aware of this as a basic condition, either knowingly or not; so we're all out there performing like crazy, either overtly and knowingly, or being performatively non-performative, playing ourselves, 'being the best we can be.' This evokes a different kind of performance, like 'high-performing dividends' and 'improved sexual performance', the stuff of spam mails and corporate webinars. Etymologically very similar; 100 percent Web 2.0.

TC: So lastly, contingency was a key factor in how you wanted to construct your exhibition at Arcadia_Missa, as well as making new works for it in this process. Why does this play such a large role in your working process?

JD: I think because I'm ambivalent about the notion of authorship (and what it means in a gendered historical context) and also because I'm uncomfortable with the rarefied space that art occupies, which is somehow removed from life. The white cube functions as a container, like the padded cell; within that space anything is permitted, which implies that immediately outside that space all permissions are withdrawn. This is not only vaguely paternalistic but it's a false dichotomy as well; the white cube isn't this big free-for-all, it's also an oppressive paradigm. So using contingency as a medium is almost political for me. But it's personal too, in that I get bored and sad when I feel like I'm fully in control of something; it's too little like life, or living (which is an experience of problem-solving, rolling with solutions, falling in and out of love with things and ideas and people). If I'm genuinely afraid of what might happen next, then I know I'm onto something, and if I'm proud of a finished work, the pride is about having overcome that fear. Our lives are very precarious at the best of times, and especially at this moment in history; this precarity is our basic condition, like swimming in a choppy sea. If you keep trying to fight it, you'll drown. So you need to learn to surf, which means learning to watch for and ride the contingent factors. Be afraid – but stay afloat.

Arcadia_Missa <info AT arcadiamissa.com> is an art group and publisher running Arcadia_Missa Gallery. It focuses on digital, experiential, collaborative and performative practices. Arcadia Missa was born out of a want, and need, to continue a collective and self-initiated means of learning post-university. Via self-education as public gallery programme, Arcadia_Missa hopes to counteract (micro)institutional teaching and by deliberately positioning itself as apprentice, attempting to stay in a liminal, exploratory space that can continually develop with all its participants.
Print and digital *How to Sleep Faster* publications are available from arcadiamissa.com as well as information about Arcadia_Missa's upcoming Open Office project.

Footnotes

Jesse Darling, 'Arcades, Mall Rats, and Tumblr Thugs', The New Inquiry, February 2012, http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/arcades-mallrats-t...

'"Horcrux" is a term from JK Rowling's Harry Potter meaning powerful object in which a Dark wizard or witch has hidden a fragment of his or her soul for the purpose of attaining immortality. Creating one Horcrux gives one the ability to resurrect oneself if the body is destroyed; the more horcruxes one creates, the closer one is to true immortality.' From http://harrypotter.wikia.com/wiki/Horcrux