

# CAKE INDUSTRIES

08:26am

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9 November 2019–  
23 February 2020



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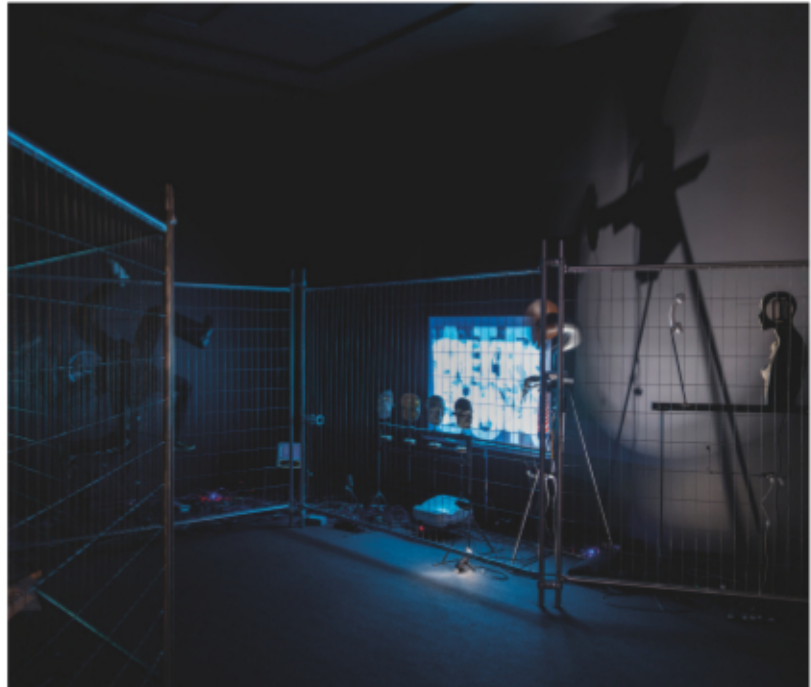
(Jesse Stevens  
& Dean Petersen)

## 08:26am

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#artgalbal  
#cake\_industries

Essay by Julie McLaren  
Curator, Art Gallery of Ballarat



It's a zombie apocalypse but the zombies are not consuming human flesh – they are consuming technology. Mindless scrolling through social media has become an all-consuming pastime for the masses and it is making us unhappier and more anxious than ever. 'Disconnectivity anxiety' is a relatively recent phrase which describes the feeling of discomfort that occurs when a heavy Internet user is unable to access the online world and has difficulty concentrating on meaningful activities. Technology has sunk its claws deep into our psyches, and experimental artist duo Jesse Stevens and Dean Petersen are fighting a battle against the pervasive hold it has over our lives.

They have worked together as Cake Industries since 2006 and their eclectic practice uses mechatronics, robotics, human anatomy reproduction, 3D printing, woodwork, metalwork and re-worked everyday objects to create anthropomorphic, autonomous sculptural artworks. They draw material from disparate sources including technology, theme parks, music and film to create hybrid human-object forms which are players in a surreal mechanical theatre. They build their mechatronic – a combination of 'mechanical' and

All images, installation view of:

### **Cake Industries**

Jesse Stevens & Dean Petersen

**08:26am**

2019

electromechanics, pneumatics, custom electronics, steel, resin, wood and found objects

Commissioned by Art Gallery of Ballarat and supported by the Victorian Government through Creative Victoria

'electronic' – sculptures by hand in their home studio near Scarsdale, around 25 km south-west of Ballarat.

Humour and the absurd are central to Cake Industries' practice. Major influences for them are artists, filmmakers and musicians who utilise dystopian fiction, deadpan surrealist humour and satirical social commentary in their work, including film directors Michel Gondry and Terry Gilliam and new-wave band Devo, whose name was drawn from the theory of 'de-evolution', the idea that humankind is regressing instead of advancing. Their German-based mentor, fellow kinetic sculptor Jim Whiting, continues to inspire Stevens and Petersen to create work which defies categorisation.

This exhibition includes a series of works created between 2015 and 2019. *Static #1* 2015, which incorporates a series of randomly lit globes, replicates static on an analogue television – prolonged viewing of the random visual noise generated by the work causes the viewer to see images emerging in the dots, a phenomenon known as 'pareidolia.' *Eye|Mouth|Eye* 2018 consists of a stack of vintage TVs showing the eyes and mouths of the artists. The work invites viewers to consider their own relationship with television, which the artists describe as 'an object of mass consumption and passive radiance.'

The main work *08:26am*, which was commissioned by the Art Gallery of Ballarat, is a complex installation in the form of a caged, mechanical zoo. A series of mechatronic sculptures come to life in a choreographed theatre of non-linear vignettes incorporating automated movement, sound, light and video. The work contains clichés from the corporate world to represent the dream-states, decision making and

emotional responses that make up the human psyche. A literal cage surrounding the work creates a sense of voyeurism into an imagined world and represents the psychological cage placed around us by our use of technology.

Cake Industries explain that the work is 'a comment on the technology controlling us, rather than us controlling the technology.' The artists are not critical of technology itself – they are huge fans of technology and their work would not exist without it. Instead *08:26am* criticises the way in which technology has become a practically unavoidable aspect of our existence through our use of smartphones, social media and the corporatisation of daily life.

Within the installation, the spinning heads of a series of 'yes men' are a nod to our unconscious compliance with technology, while a robotic arm performs the task of signing an endless pile of paperwork from the unavoidable minutiae of everyday life – insurance, tax, marriage, divorce, happiness, truth and bullshit. A tape deck merged with a vintage telephone handset acts as an echo-chamber, reflecting the human tendency to surround ourselves with people, places and topics which conform with our own preferences and tastes.

The unsettling drama of *08:26am* is heightened by the sound accompanying each element of the installation. The artists distort and manipulate their own voices using synthesisers and computer programs to create a series of characters which are recognisable to anybody in the workforce – disgruntled employees, frustrated colleagues and people-pleasers.

The commodification of emotions and the influence that religion continues to have on





modern society are represented by symbols from social media: a cross for religion, a dollar sign for money and a heart for love. Sex is represented by an eggplant which in current emoji language is associated with a penis. These symbols are a reminder of the constant ping-pong of social media, alarms and emails throughout the day and are overlaid with the sound of the terms of service of a social media platform being read by one of the artists unrecognisably distorted by synthesiser.

One of the more bizarre sources of sound is a series of anonymous text messages which one of the artists received in the lead-up to the exhibition. The ranting texts have been converted to voice using a late 1980s speech synthesiser, which is announced over a megaphone in the space:

*Just a thought, why don't I let the law society in on my hobby?  
Margaret Thatcher's government, piracy of the high seas, reply  
horseshit, couldn't be arsed.*

Darkness in the space intensifies the gripping anxiety created by technology. The artists explain that each component of 08:26am represents a different aspect of the hold that technology has on each of us:

*These are the lumping of other people's luggage onto us while we're trying to survive in the world. They're the mess that spreads from other people whilst we're trying to buy a train ticket, check social media, or read a news story online. The many methods that voices around us use to seep into our minds and affect our ability to be happy, or to focus, are numerous and multiplying. With so many voices and methods of contact around us, it continues to be a challenge to hold onto our true selves and to feel content or happy.*

Cake Industries may have won the battle against technology in 08:26am, but will they win the war? Maybe they need to work harder. Perhaps they should take the advice of their mysterious texter:

MAKE IT HAPPEN. ACT LIKE AN ASSOCIATE, NOT A BUM.

# ART GALLERY OF BALLARAT

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