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An inquiry into Fan Practices as related to Speculative Fiction realised through a Contemporary Visual Art Practice

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Introduction

This paper outlines a Higher Degree by Research project commenced at the beginning of 2015. The proposed practice-led research project centres on the intersection of pop-culture fandom and visual art practice. In particular, the research will examine how the sensibilities and motivations of the devoted fan might mesh with the poetic, communicative and critical functions of contemporary visual art. In using established pop-culture franchises as starting points for creating what are ostensibly 'original' works of art, the project will attempt to address two interrelated questions. Firstly, how might the creative practices of contemporary fandom be translated into strategies applicable to studio-based visual art practice? And secondly, what are the ramifications of using tropes of fandom within an art practice that communicates to audiences who may not share the same rabid enthusiasm for the source material?

While the term 'fan' may have once referred to a passive consumer of popular media, contemporary fans of speculative fiction are increasingly involved in the creation and development of shared fictional universes. By engaging in activities such as cosplay ('the practice of constructing costumes...inspired by fictional characters and embodying those characters in real-world spaces such as fan conventions' (Scott 2015)), replica prop-building and the writing of fan fiction, devoted fans commemorate and extend on the various imaginary worlds they inhabit.

The notion of popular culture as the catalyst for creative production is also deeply entrenched in the visual arts. While the criteria and expectations that a work of visual art is subjected to are very different from those at work in fandom, questions of authorship, originality, innovation, authenticity and one's relationship to the canon feature as prominently in fan studies as they do in art theory. As a visual artist who identifies strongly with various strands of pop culture fandom, I hope to use this research project to examine these two distinct (yet related) spheres of creative endeavour. Using a practice-led research methodology I plan to adapt the interpretive strategies of contemporary fandom into my studio-based visual art practice. The

resulting research artefacts will draw not only on the imaginary milieus of speculative fiction but also the practices of the associated fan communities.

My previous explorations of fandom through visual art practice have centred on a diversity of fictional universes, including the worlds of Warner Brothers cartoons, *Star Wars* and H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos. Although seemingly disparate in nature, these imagined worlds are all characterised by markedly different physical laws and cosmological models to the one we live in. I propose that a fictional world whose ontology is fundamentally different from our own can create a fertile space for formal and conceptual invention within works of art. In particular, the notion that an intangible fictional world might be the impetus for highly physical sculptural objects and environments has proved to have a great deal of generative potential in a number of past projects.



Figure 1 Roy Ananda, *Concussion device*, 2005, timber, cardboard, gouache, model train, straps

In the exhibition *A is for Anvil* (held at West Space, Melbourne in 2006), I extrapolated on a range of tropes from the world of cartoons and attempted to give them some semblance of physical reality through the practice of sculpture – in a sense, playing the part of a fan so obsessed with a fictional franchise that he

attempts to will it into existence. For example, in the work *Concussion device* (2005), the fanciful cartoon conceit of stars circling one's head following head trauma was articulated via a model train set and an apparently wearable timber exoskeleton.



Figure 2 Roy Ananda, *Slow crawl into infinity*, 2014, timber, plywood, fixings

More recently, *Slow crawl into infinity* (held at the Anne and Gordon Samstag Museum of Art in 2014) recreated the iconic scrolling prologue to *Star Wars* as a tangible object of plywood and pine. The work was envisioned as a kind of monument to fandom that might read either as a wholesome labour of love or the result of an unhealthy and obsessive fervour.

The heightened sense of physicality in both of these works was an important foil to the imaginary origins of the motifs they dealt with and I anticipate that this tension between make-believe and making-do will continue to permeate my research artefacts. In the interests of extending my practice and generating new knowledge, my research artefacts will draw on pop-culture sources other than those referred to above, thus attempting to avoid the 'valorising of what has [already] been achieved' that Estelle Barrett has pointed to as a possible pitfall of the practice-led research exegesis (Barrett 2006, p. 1). That said, I anticipate that various imagined worlds of speculative fiction will loom large in the investigation.

Literature review

Over the last hundred years, visual artists have extensively borrowed from popular culture, frequently with an overt sense of irony or with the intention of making socio-political commentary. Contemporary artists' engagement with mass media continues to range from the critical to the celebratory. This is seemingly distinct from the creative output of burgeoning fan communities whose relationship to such pop-culture sources tends to be far more unequivocal. The fervour of these 'viewer-producers' (Stein and Busse 2009 p. 192-207) could be seen as analogous to the 'enthusiasm of practice' described by Brad Haseman as the central characteristic of practice-led creative research (Haseman 2006, p. 98-106). In researching pop-culture fandom as impetus for the creation of 'original' works of art, a number of precedents need to be considered. Some of these precedents are drawn from the context of contemporary art while others are situated at the intersection of fan culture and academia.

While popular perceptions of hard-core fans of speculative fiction dwell on their supposed social ineptitude, inability to deal with reality, pedantry and know-it-all-ism, contemporary scholars of fan practices tend to champion the more admirable human qualities associated with fandom. Such qualities include community building, generosity, creativity, playfulness, freedom of thought and intelligent speculation around weighty scientific and philosophical ideas. This celebratory attitude seems to have dominated fan scholarship since the publication of three seminal texts during the early nineties, (Jenkins 1992, Lewis 1992 and Bacon-Smith 1992) although this laudatory tone has not been without its critics (Lunenfeld 2014, p. 76-78).

In particular, Henry Jenkins (currently a Provost Professor at the University of Southern California) has led the field in scholarly research into fan creativity. However, Jenkins and his contemporaries have tended to focus on fan-produced texts (such as fanzines and fan fiction) rather than on material objects. Amongst the more recent wave of fan scholars, there has been growing interest in the phenomenon of object-oriented fandom (an aspect of fandom that is much more resonant with my art practice and research interests). In 2014, on-line journal *Transformative Works and Cultures* dedicated a special issue to this topic, surveying fan collections, paratextual video-game 'feelies' and replica prop-building. Matt Hills describes such practices as a form of 'ontological bridging', in which objects serve to give the imagined worlds of speculative fiction a level of physical reality and presence in the 'real' world (Hills 2014).

While many object-based fan practices described by Hills and others tend to be largely mimetic in nature, there are legions of active fans who use their pop-culture fixations to express a more idiosyncratic and personal vision. In a 2009 journal entry posted in the on-line community dreamwidth.org, the user known as obsession_inc

coined the terms 'affirmational fandom' and 'transformational fandom'. These terms have since been incorporated into the lexicon of more academic fan studies. Where affirmational fandom affirms and re-states established content from any given fictional canon, transformational fandom takes many more liberties with its source material, thereby fore-fronting the fan's own authorship. Thus, spending months making a meticulously observed and faithfully crafted Darth Vader costume might be considered an act of affirmational fandom whilst writing a piece of fan fiction in which Spock and Captain Kirk are romantically entangled would generally be considered an act of transformational fandom. This categorisation of fan practices provides a useful lens through which to critically examine fan works and my own studio research artefacts in terms of originality, innovation and their relationship to fictional canons.

As useful as this simple taxonomy may be in classifying fan activity, the distinction between what might commonly be understood as 'fan art' and contemporary art made in response to similar pop-culture franchises remains difficult to define. In writing about the copyright/intellectual property aspects of fan creativity (with a particular focus of the written word), legal scholar Rebecca Tushnet has defined fan fiction as 'any kind of written creativity that is based on an identifiable segment of popular culture, such as a television show, and is not produced as "professional" writing' (Tushnet 1996, p. 651). It should be noted however, that within the participatory cultures that develop around speculative fiction, the demarcation between 'amateur' and 'professional' is increasingly blurred. This is perhaps best exemplified by the career trajectory of Russell T. Davies, whose transition from *Dr Who* fan to its principal creative force is well documented (Hadas and Shifman 2012). It is at this ill-defined boundary between 'amateur' fan art and 'professional' art practice that I anticipate much of my research will take place.

Artefact review

The following artefacts exemplify the rigorous integration of various pop-culture mythologies into visual art practice. In selecting these works for discussion, I have deliberately chosen works that span a range of media (including sculpture, installation, photography, drawing, video and interactive media) as a way of highlighting the variety of interpretive strategies used by contemporary artists working in response to popular culture.

A notable recent project dealing with the intersection of fandom and contemporary art was *Love to Love You* (2013 – 2014) at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. Curated by Martha Joseph and framed by the quote 'fandom is less like being in love than like being in love with love' (Joseph 2014), the exhibition focussed largely on fandom as related to sports, music and celebrity culture. Of the seven participating artists, most resonant with my research interests is the work of Mark Bennett, whose meticulous, hand-drawn works on vellum map a range of

fictional domestic spaces, derived from TV sitcoms and classic and cult cinema. By engaging with what media scholar Bob Rehak has termed 'blueprint culture', Bennett evokes the fannish desire for fictional places to attain some degree of tangible reality (Rehak 2015). Rehak uses the term 'blueprint culture' to refer to fans' propensity to create detailed schematics of fictional objects. He identifies the publication of Franz Joseph's blueprints of the Starship Enterprise as a turning point in speculative fiction fandom, a moment at which the imaginary world itself was afforded as much attention as the stories that take place within it.

This bittersweet pairing of the real and the imagined is equally present in R   di Martino's haunting series of photographs *No more stars*, taken in the Tunisian desert and documenting the extant sets from George Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977). As well as being the product of a geographical pilgrimage of the sort fans often make to pop-culturally significant sites, di Martino's 'archive of mnemonic fragments' prompted concerned Star Wars enthusiasts to undertake extensive restoration work on the decaying sets (Barikin 2014).

Drawing on the same fictional canon, Ricky Swallow's *Model for a sunken monument* represents an important antecedent to my proposed research in its conflation of pop-culture fandom with the world-building practices of speculative fiction. Despite its appropriation of an iconic motif from a well-known story, the nature of the world that this object notionally hails from is ambiguous. Does the work point to an alternative history of the *Star Wars* universe in which the evil Galactic Empire was triumphant? Or is it a cultural artefact from future Earth in which the mythology of *Star Wars* is as theologically dominant as Abrahamic religions are today (Davidsen 2013)?

At this point I will turn my attention to works that use strategies of immersion and heightened physicality to extrapolate on the fictions of film, literature and video games. Immersion is central to Paul Pfeiffer's *Dutch Interior*, in which the artist recreates an interior from the 1979 film *The Amityville Horror* in miniature. This diorama is then recessed behind a screen onto which a live feed from the diorama is projected (viewable by gallery visitors through a peephole). In addition to drawing on horror film sources, Pfeiffer's work also deals with the spectacle and fan culture associated with professional sports and thereby touching on other areas of fandom that are beyond the scope of my project and outside of my specific research interests.

Mike Nelson's drastic architectural intervention name-checks weird fiction author H.P. Lovecraft and explicitly plays on the Lovecraftian trope of extra-dimensional creatures ravaging to scratch, claw and gouge their way into our reality. This 'vision of a horror-movie aftermath' (Mansell 2009, p. 259-264) was achieved through Nelson's

laborious and single-handed savaging of the gallery space with a hatchet. In making such a violently physical translation of Lovecraft's at times esoteric fiction, Nelson's work resonates with Bob Rehak's research into the object practices of horror fandom and in particular his notion of the 'object/text ecosystem' which is characterised by 'bristling networks of authorship, appropriation and translation whose nodes include the production of new and original content' (Rehak 2013, p. 34).

Mary Flanagan's [*giantJoystick*] wittily embodies Matt Hills' notion of ontological bridging by making us identify with the video game protagonists that are bound up in the work. In this work, a nine-foot-high, fully functional joystick controls an old school Atari console. Requiring at least two people to operate it effectively, this work demands a level of physicality and indeed athleticism not dissimilar to that evidenced by such iconic video game characters as Super Mario, Sonic the Hedgehog or the pugilists of *Mortal Kombat*. Game scholar John Sharp has compared the work to a Fluxus event score in that it asks the viewer/participant to 'playfully engage with the world in an unexpected, open-ended way' (Sharp 2015, p. 90-92). Across her broader practice, Flanagan uses the formats and conventions of games 'as a means of generating critical, interpretive play' (Sharp 2015, p. 90-92). In tying together aspects of play, humour and overstated physicality, Flanagan exemplifies some of the key qualities I hope to invest in my own research artefacts.

In considering these and other pop-culture inspired artworks, a number of distinct strategies for making work are apparent. These include: mimesis; transposition between states (for example, the transposition from moving image to static object); immersion in fictional worlds in ways that are peculiar to spatial and new media practices; and the bridging of 'real' and 'imagined' worlds through the use of physical spaces and objects. I anticipate that these and other strategies will be used to generate my research artefacts. A range of possible studio-based strategies are discussed in the latter part of the research design section of the paper which follows.

Research design: methodologies

Given that the research questions centre on the strategies of studio practice, I intend to use a practice-led research methodology to drive the project. The methodological approach that underpins my research holds that useful strategies for art-making are most effectively arrived at through reflexive, studio-based engagement. An autoethnographic approach will also be incorporated into the project as a way of positioning me as a researcher in relation to the various fan cultures that I will draw on. This is sympathetic to the position taken by many scholars of fan studies who identify themselves as 'aca-fans'. This portmanteau of 'academic' and 'fan' signals the vested interest in the areas they study and critique. By identifying as aca-fans, scholars declare their bias and eschew the position of the purely objective outsider. Given that my research will entail an examination of my own motivations for

inhabiting the imaginary worlds of speculative fiction, an autoethnographic approach will allow this more subjective voice to be expressed within the context of academic writing.

My theoretical approach will be informed by current conversations in fan studies around issues of authorship, authenticity, originality, intellectual property and the tension between canonicity. This tension between faithfulness to and deviance from the fictional canon is a contentious issue in fandom and is equally problematic for visual artists making work in response to someone else's imaginative creations. In cleaving too closely to the canon, one is left with little room for creativity and authorship. In straying too far from it, one loses the all-important sense of continuity that is so prized by many fans of speculative fiction (Wallis 2012). The distinction between affirmational and transformational fandom that was previously discussed will be useful in differentiating between fan practices and in signalling the emphasis of my research artefacts.

Research design: methods

My methods will include the studio-based disciplines of sculpture, installation and drawing. While my specific strategies for generating work will be determined in response to studio-based research and theoretical readings, I anticipate that a key focus will be an investigation into how the idiosyncrasies of the obsessive fan might record themselves in resulting artefacts. Making processes that emphasise accumulation, immersion, physical labour and an explicitly 'hand-made' aesthetic will be considered as possible analogues of devotional fandom. While this persona of the fervent fan is central to the research, in developing new works in response to contemporary fandom it may prove just as important to attempt to inhabit the headspace of the casual fan, the non-fan, the self-hating fan or even the anti-fan.

Conclusion

The proposed research will consider the relationship between the creativity of pop-culture fan communities and contemporary visual art practice. It will employ a practice-led methodology whereby strategies derived from fandom are integrated into reflexive studio-based research. I anticipate that my research artefacts and exegesis will exist as both a critique of fandom and a celebration of childlike enthusiasm surviving well into adulthood.

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