

# the fan club

Why enthusiasm, not  
scholarship, motivates artists  
*by Julian Hoerber*

The painting *Conceptual Art* (1987) by Jim Shaw reads: 'HE DREW THE DIRTIEST THING HE COULD THINK OF.' It is a doppelgänger of the early text works John Baldessari made in the late 1960s. The layout and font are the same, but the message is strange. Baldessari's works are politely sarcastic aphorisms about art and art-making – 'THIS PAINTING CONTAINS ALL THE INFORMATION NEEDED BY THE ART STUDENT. TOLD SIMPLY AND EXPERTLY BY A SUCCESSFUL, PRACTICING PAINTER AND TEACHER. EVERY PHASE OF DRAWING AND PAINTING IS FULLY COVERED' or 'GENERALLY SPEAKING, PAINTINGS WITH LIGHT COLORS SELL MORE QUICKLY THAN PAINTINGS WITH DARK COLORS.' Shaw's painting, by contrast, aches with sweaty-palmed teenage urges. Baldessari's civilized tone is swapped for a direct embrace of the lower drives that motivate much art-making. Shaw's work isn't a critique of Baldessari; it's an unfettering of the desire to do something wrong that's implicit in the elder artist's works.

Shaw, whose first New York survey exhibition, 'The End is Here', opens this month at the New Museum, reliably ferments perversity in other cultural material. An unlikely version of a Cindy Sherman, *Untitled (In NYC I Saw Some Paintings...)* (1996) or a bestial version of a Robert Rauschenberg such as his *I Dreamed I Slept with the Devil* (1988), which are loaded with the spooky machinations of his subconscious, are par for the course. In the work *Melting Comic* (1967–68), made when Shaw was 16, he drew the pages of a *Hawkman* comic that, frame by frame, began to liquify, suggesting that an imagination doesn't distinguish between a picture and a thing – they both exist in the mind as images to be transmogrified. If Shaw hadn't grown up to be a famous artist, his dream-like productions could have been classified as something else: fan fiction.

For most people, the stereotypical idea of fan fiction is either E.L. James's *50 Shades of Grey* (2011) – a book that originated as a smutty re-imagining of Stephenie Meyer's 'Twilight' series (2005–08) – or an episode of *Star Trek* (1966–ongoing) in which Spock and Kirk end up screwing. It's usually thought of as a debased form of art made by know-nothings and outsiders: a form that's slightly embarrassing. But the same could be said of the low pop-culture material Shaw was rummaging through in the 1980s and '90s, at the height of appropriation art, to make projects such as *My Mirage* (1986–91), his visual *Bildungsroman* about the life of the fictional character Billy, rendered in an encyclopaedic array of pop-cultural and art-historical styles. Though it shares some qualities with appropriation, fan fiction is different because, as the word 'fan' implies, there's room to be excited about the material that's being borrowed. Capital 'A' Appropriation is a critical practice: it looks for a chink in the armour of other art forms and tries to use that weakness to rebuke or disrupt them. By contrast, fan fiction embraces the original material. The kinking-up of characters is an example of how fan-authors can play with a text as if it were their own, gleaning what they like in it while nurturing that which is latent.

In his classic volume *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), French scholar Michel de Certeau equates reading with stealing from the rich. He says, 'Readers are travellers; they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write, despoiling the wealth of Egypt to enjoy it themselves.' De Certeau rejected the idea that readers are empty vessels waiting to be filled with 'correct' meanings by an author, and thought they were able to take their own meaning from a text.<sup>1</sup> Working with De Certeau's premise, theorist



Previous page  
Sean Landers  
*On the Wall Above*, 2001,  
oil on linen, 2.3 × 1.7 m

1  
Backdrop design by  
Ray Johnson for  
a photoshoot in *Harper's Bazaar*,  
February, 1957

2  
Sarah Crowner  
*C*, 2014, acrylic on canvas,  
sewn, 2 × 1.5 m

3  
Jim Shaw  
*Melting Comic*, 1967–68,  
pen on paper, 28 × 21 cm

Courtesy  
previous page: the artist and  
Petzel, New York; photograph: Oren Slor •  
1 photograph: Julian Hoeber •  
2 the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York;  
photograph: Jean Vong •  
3 the artist, Simon Lee Gallery, London,  
Metro Pictures, New York,  
and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles



Many contemporary artists are fans of art history. They sort through it and pluck out the funky bits; they imagine new possibilities through idiosyncratic readings.

Henry Jenkins, in his book *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (1992), a foundational work in the study of fan fiction, argues that fans participate in culture by injecting texts with sloppy interpretations, fugitive meanings and mis-readings.<sup>2</sup> Like Shaw, many contemporary artists are fans of art history. They sort through it and pluck out the funky bits; they imagine new possibilities through idiosyncratic readings.

Sarah Crowner, who is mostly known as a painter, tinkers with images that she collects and arranges, one against another, and rolls around in her imagination to make something new. For an exhibition this year at Casey Kaplan Gallery in New York, she took a 1957 fashion spread from *Harper's Bazaar* that used backdrops by Ray Johnson and extracted, fragmented and stretched them to produce paintings that are proxies for Johnson's graphics. Installed in a gallery, the works become a stage for viewers to drift through like the models in a magazine, allowing them to do in real space what was impossible in a picture. The paintings aren't critiques of Johnson or *Harper's Bazaar*: they're the unauthorized creation of an alternate reality. They're what their sources could have become, given different circumstances.

Where Crowner 'poaches', Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno's project *No Ghost Just a Shell* (1999–2002) asked permission. At first glance, this collection of pop-cultural interpretations looks more like fan fiction than Crowner's work. Their project entailed the purchase of the copyright of Ann Lee, a minor Japanese manga character, for the purpose of liberating her. Previously doomed to a terminal narrative arc, she's allowed to continue to live in the creations of various other artists that Huyghe and Parreno enlist to produce works with her. However, the project is not governed by the artists' love of Ann Lee. Instead it's invested in the power of law.

It's curious that Huyghe and Parreno would legally purchase Ann Lee's copyright, since they operate in an art world where uncensored borrowing is de rigueur. Maybe it's because, like much fan fiction, the narratives produced for *No Ghost...* aren't criticism or parody, and the use of Ann Lee without copyright might not be defensible as fair use. But, while the legal construction of her freedom

2



3



*Dripping paint is synonymous with Jackson Pollock but it's also a shared idea, available to everyone.*

gives conceptual depth to the project and makes her officially 'open source'<sup>3</sup>, you have to wonder what the project might have been if they had just *stolen* her. The acquiescence to bureaucracy in the work reinforces copyright laws, whereas the politics of fan fiction are built on a belief that there's a natural right to cultural participation. In this mode of thinking, Ann Lee was always free: Huyghe and Parreno just had to believe it.

Let's say an artist's method is always open-source.<sup>4</sup> The theorist Benjamin Bratton suggests as much when he points to Jackson Pollock's drip technique, borrowed from the relatively unknown painter Janet Sobel, to show the difference between originating something and making an impact with it. Dripping paint is synonymous with Pollock but it's also a shared idea, available to everyone. It's hard not to think that Pollock's success with the drip was partly because he was already in a position to capitalize on it. After all, Pollock saw Sobel's work while with Clement Greenberg, in a show at The Art of This Century, Peggy Guggenheim's New York gallery. Greenberg later admitted Sobel's work was the first example of all-over painting he'd seen.<sup>5</sup> It's not totally clear why Sobel faded from visibility, but one can assume her virtual-outsider status and the fact that she was a homemaker in the 1940s didn't help her cause in the male-dominated world of abstract expressionism. So, while there's something to be said for an absolute right to appropriation, having the chance to be heard or seen matters too. Part of what De Certeau and Jenkins were both getting at was who gets to dictate meaning. Drip painting is open-source, but not all versions of it are equal. It isn't the same thing for Pollock, who was, by then, already being embraced by the New York critical apparatus, to steal drips from the barely known Sobel as it is for thousands of up-and-comers to steal drips from the now-canonical Pollock. De Certeau's idea of poaching doesn't work if we think about a landowner stealing just a teensy bit from a peasant. It also doesn't work if we think of a famous artist stealing from an unknown.

Part of what was revolutionary in works by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso and a slew of others in the early 20th century was bringing imagery pilfered from African, Oceanic and pre-Columbian art into the centre of European painting. Picasso's images weren't *sui generis*, but they laid claim to that status by pretending the artists they riffed on weren't artists at all. The inability to fully acknowledge those origins makes it





1  
Janet Sobel  
Untitled, c.1945, oil on  
masonite, 46 x 35 cm

2  
Jennifer West  
Regressive Squirty Sauce Film  
(16mm film leader squirted  
and dripped with chocolate sauce, ketchup,  
mayonnaise & apple juice),  
2007, video still transferred from  
16 mm film

3  
Dianna Molzan  
Untitled, 2014, oil on canvas  
with carabiners,  
99 x 71 x 6 cm

4  
Thomas Houseago  
Untitled, 2000, plaster, jute, iron  
rebar, 190 x 110 x 75 cm

Courtesy

- 1 Gary Snyder Fine Art, New York •  
2 the artist, Lisa Cooley, New York, Vilma Gold,  
London, and Marc Foxx, Los Angeles •  
3 the artist and kaufmann repetto, Milan  
and New York • 4 the artist,  
Hauser & Wirth, London, Xavier Hufkens,  
Brussels, and Gagosian Gallery, Paris



more larceny than poaching. The continuing revival of modernist-style figuration by artists such as Aaron Curry, Anton Henning, Thomas Houseago and Christoph Ruckhäberle, to name only a few, owes a lot to non-European art but, in terms of criticism, that debt is usually paid to the Europeans, such as Picasso, who persistently hold the imagination.

The history of how non-European forms were taken by the West and used to represent a fetishized irrationality and authenticity is, by now, well-established. That giant history lurks in any art which mines early-20th-century 'primitivism' for its formal and expressive possibilities. As Boris Groys has observed, the sacral power of African and Oceanic art objects is still redacted, even if unconsciously, in third-generation references to European modernism. There's an inadvertent participation in a problematic kind of cultural appropriation in work that builds on the painterly and emotive styles of *Die Brücke*, fauvism or early cubism. One of the problems of ignoring well-established interpretations in favour of your own readings is the carry-over of unintended embedded meanings. The De Certeau/Jenkins model of creative interpretation of history has its pitfalls, too.

Sean Landers's use of forms from Picasso as material in his own paintings avoids this problem through critical distance. Instead of macho Oedipal struggles, Landers works in an ironic version of the romantic tradition,

paying homage with clear self-doubt: it's more jokes than pathos. In his grandest 'Picasso' work, the gag is writ large, literally: he re-arranges totally convincing Picasso-esque forms so that they spell out the word *Genius* (2001).

Landers performs the hallmarks of the authentic artist with a wink, using tricks and signs for sincerity.<sup>6</sup> Where artists such as Ruckhäberle et al. seem to have gone full method actor in their approach, Landers's version of Picasso is playing him in a comedy sketch. His postmodern retort to genius is a shoulder-shrug at its real possibility. On the surface, it's somewhat 'critical' because of its Duchampian style, but its challenge to Picasso is a chuckle-inducing and delicate snark. These other artists – Houseago in particular, because of a sincere investment in coaxing drama and feeling from this tradition – present a tougher problem for the usual historical narrative.

Working in a sculptural idiom that's a blend of Picasso and Henry Moore cranked to architectural scale, Houseago's interviews and Instagram posts suggest he believes in a historical continuity of great sculpture in which he plans to be the latest installment.<sup>7</sup> He's an art history fan par excellence; his knowledge of the history of sculpture is tremendous. Rather than kill the father, Houseago has gone into the family business. His sculptures are modernism grown



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from heirloom seeds. The earnestness of Houseago's attachment to 'the heroic sculptor' idea is radical because it ignores progress in favour of a belief that there's more to squeeze out of that moment in history. Viewing his work as modernism seen through the lens of De Certeau shows what's both contemporary and perverse in it. Houseago has a playful love of the complex formal and emotional possibilities in all of that history and the desire to create unauthorized narratives from it. It's a full investment in the idea of greatness with none of the self-conscious tempering of Landers, and plenty of creative misreading of modernist imperative to produce 'The New'. Houseago has been accused of an apolitical, nostalgic aesthetic,<sup>8</sup> and it's partly justified, but his ignoring of the idea of progress is also a rejection of modernism's imperative to break new ground. His pursuit of heroic art by making fan-fiction versions of art history is, in its own way, the weirdest rejection of a Greenbergian teleology.

Admittedly, works of art that owe a lot to the past risk veering towards what is called in business-sociology jargon – an appropriate language for describing much of today's art world – 'mimetic isomorphism'. That is, the copying of a competitor's product for profit with minimal creative labour, and without exactly understanding why it's being done. There's no doubt a robust market will produce artists who cynically make art that looks like Art in order to appeal to what David Geers calls, 'the collecting class, largely unexposed to the critique of modernism'.<sup>9</sup> However, sorting out what is and isn't made in good faith is a fool's errand and besides the point: assholes can make good art, too. Instead, the question has to be: does a work offer up new interpretations? Does it tend to unfinished business? Does it develop erotic attachments where we've never seen them before? In order to be interesting, art working like fan fiction has to be – for lack of a better phrase – kinda fucked-up.

There is a tendency in contemporary culture to dig into the past to re-imagine a new present. There's no undiscovered country left for art. Very little remains of the old avant-gardist strategy of pulling stuff from the margins into the centre to produce the shock of the new. Instead, we have to dig up lost relics that our present culture can shed new light on. So-called research-based practices tend to unearth obscure or forgotten source material, while fan fiction often engages authoritative texts. Both share the prospect of revising the past. The obvious difference, though, is that fan fiction seems unserious and a bit cornball. We expect artists' enthusiasms to be cloaked in academic gravitas, their subjects examined with intense rigour, but clearly a lot of what gets called 'research' by artists is indiscernible from geeking out. Part of what De Certeau explains is that canonized scholarly readings often dictate fixed meanings. Being a fan or an artist, and not an academic, allows room to be productively wrong in ways that offer greater surprise than if they were correct.

A range of artists working now – including Justin Beal, Pam Lins, Erin Shirreff and Jennifer West – operate as both fans and revisionists. West's practice is exemplary in conflating fandom with research. Like the *nouvelle vague* directors' use of their Hollywood predecessors' ideas to develop a new aesthetic, West's cinephilic research into the history of structuralist and hand-made films has allowed her to put new energy into the old experiments. West revitalizes strategies of artists such as Len Lye and Tony Conrad – a declared hero of hers – by injecting them with a feminist ethos and documenting her own life. She turns the movie remake into something more like a Fluxus instruction work by restaging actions and by placing her go-go-boot-wearing self in male video artists' shoes.

Dianna Molzan makes a partial use of the fan model by reimagining gestures of traumatic pathos in the works of action painters like Otto Muehl or Shozo Shimamoto as follies and ornaments. Holes cut in paintings, often seen as metaphorical fleshy wounds,<sup>10</sup> become fishnets or cowl necks in Molzan's versions. She laughs off the seriousness of canonical interpretation while liberating an old method from its prescribed uses in a move that is totally imaginative.

In a review of the MoMA exhibition 'The Forever Now', in which Molzan was included, artist David Salle argues that the plastic arts have always relied on building on the past

through combination and modification.<sup>11</sup> He's right. Even in the 1920s, Heinrich Wölfflin knew that pictures relied more on other pictures than on reality, but something has shifted. The expanded field of art now has a history deep enough to dig into. A memory is increasingly outsourced to electronic devices, everything becomes an image a text the moment it occurs. What's proposed by Shaw's work – that in one's mind a thing and a picture are interchangeable – becomes ubiquitous. Rather than the politically blank recombination of forms seen in pastiche, or the negating critique of appropriation, current art has the opportunity to imagine a more interesting, complex version of its own past by misreading it. ♦♦

- 1 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1984, pp. 166–176
- 2 Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, Routledge, New York, 1992, pp. 52–54
- 3 Philip Nobel, 'Sign of the Times', *Artforum*, January 2000
- 4 Benjamin H. Bratton, 'Mind the Pollocks: (Notes on) Art & Software', August 2009, <http://ow.ly/R3fYT>
- 5 Pepe Karmel, *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles, and Reviews*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1999, p. 164
- 6 Matt Saunders, 'To Everyone's Chagrin', *Texte Zur Kunst*, Issue 71, September 2008
- 7 Jori Finkel, 'Sculptor Thomas Houseago's Shape-Shifting World', *Los Angeles Times*, 2 January 2011
- 8 David Geers, 'Neo-Modern', *OCTOBER*, vol. 139, Winter 2012
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Jonathan Griffin, 'Dianna Molzan', *Kaleidoscope*, Issue 17, Winter 2012/13
- 11 David Salle, 'Structure Rising: David Salle on "The Forever Now" at MoMA', *ArtNews*, 23 February 2015

*Julian Hoeber is an artist and writer living in Los Angeles, USA. His solo exhibition at Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco, USA, will open in November 2015. Together with curator Alison M. Gingeras, he conceived the exhibition design for 'The Avant-Garde Won't Give Up: CoBrA and Its Legacy' at Blum (t) Poe, New York, USA (9 September – 17 October 2015), and Blum (t) Poe, Los Angeles (5 November – 23 December 2015).*

Erin Shirreff  
Relief (no. 1), 2015, archival  
pigment print with fold,  
1.8 x 1 m

Courtesy  
the artist and  
Sikkema Jenkins & Co.,  
New York