

## **CHAPTER ONE: CONTENT**

### ***TO BE A FINDER AND SENDER OF SIGNALS***

This project aims to engage the strategic concealment of appropriation strategies within a responsive cross-media based art practice. The purpose of the project is to investigate the use and effect of appropriative strategies on my own studio practice through the production of a body of work across a range of media manifesting as a series of installed gallery environments.

This investigation is motivated in part, by an ongoing interest in the systems that enable the distribution, control, flow and ownership of ideas and imagery in media saturated environments. These systems are: methods and forms of media transmission and reception such as television, radio, internet, and distributed media such as films and music; and the resulting protocols or rules that sit alongside these transmission forms such as copyright, authorship, ownership and remuneration.

The project suggests the occurrence of an appropriation of the act of appropriation itself, a loop in space and time or, as Jan Verwoert describes it, an ‘Apropos Appropriation’<sup>1</sup> The practice is engaged with capturing, observing, altering and re-transmitting the glimmers of this occurrence back into the system as a method and key conceptual premise. This is considered in the light of works by Banks Violette, Takeshi Murata and Ondrej Brody & Kristofer Paetau, all of whom operate from a position of a subliminal appropriative urge or logic in their work, and adds

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<sup>1</sup> Verwoert, J 2006, ‘Apropos Appropriation: why stealing images feels different today.’ Tate.org.uk, viewed 1 January 2011. <<http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/triennial/essay-apropos.shtm>>

another discursive node to that system by synthesising new work exploring these concerns.

My work with media phenomena occurs through a post-production practice<sup>2</sup> that seeks to collapse the hierarchical preference of forms and techniques that occurs through technological innovation to seek a non-linearity that considers the 'match' of a particular strategy to a given creative scenario against a value scale not determined by trends and technologies. To this end, the practice borrows aesthetic tropes from across the manifold of time in an attempt to momentarily collapse the past, present and future and to manifest this collapse in the experience of the work.

Often in my work, this attempt to ground the oppositional dialectic that arises between media and non-media practices results in a re-invigoration, or re-investment of energy through a banal or seemingly superfluous fragment from the media landscape. It is usually the case that multiple fragments such as this are activated in one work.

By absorbing, reflecting and re-presenting reconfigurations, aggregates, mutants and hybrids of cultural forms and transmitting these back via a regular stream of exhibitivemodes into the stream from which they came, I am seeking a ripple effect, even if minute, to occur. This research is motivated by questioning and reflecting my own medial state in a way that addresses both the idiosyncratic state of myself as author and the autonomy of the resultant work to reflect larger observations on contemporary cultural phenomena. It articulates a studio language designed to straddle the gulf between these two dynamics. The connective tissue between these

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<sup>2</sup> Bourriaud, N 2002, *Post Production*, Lukas & Sternberg, New York. pp 19-21.

two poles is explored in the submitted work.

Touchstones for my engagement with this subject matter are cultural forms that deal playfully with the immense size of something as nebulous as a 'media landscape' including remixes<sup>3</sup>, mash-ups<sup>4</sup>, x shreds<sup>5</sup> and culture jams<sup>6</sup>. In a similar way, new cultural sub-genres, especially in contemporary music production, operate as a type of petri dish from which to formulate observations on the mutation of contemporary popular culture, our collective medial state. The immense expansion of readily accessible production and publishing tools, especially in modern music, creates an evolving fluid matrix of genres such as digital hardcore, breakcore, stoner doom etc. This modular, inventive approach to categorising and describing new forms, initiated more often than not by the authors themselves of these new mutants, points to the nebulous nature of the language of medial states.

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<sup>3</sup> Generally speaking, remix culture can be defined as the global activity consisting of the creative and efficient exchange of information made possible by digital technologies that is supported by the practice of cut/copy and paste. The concept of Remix often referenced in popular culture derives from the model of music remixes which were produced around the late 1960s and early 1970s in New York City, an activity with roots in Jamaica's music. Today, Remix (the activity of taking samples from pre-existing materials to combine them into new forms according to personal taste) has been extended to other areas of culture, including the visual arts; it plays a vital role in mass communication, especially on the Internet.

<sup>4</sup> A mash-up (also mash up and mash-up) is a song or composition created by blending two or more pre-recorded songs, usually by overlaying the vocal track of one song seamlessly over the instrumental track of another. To the extent that such works are 'transformative' of original content, they may find protection from copyright claims under the "fair use" doctrine of copyright law

<sup>5</sup> 'Shreds' are a relatively new form of mash-up involving the overdubbing of a music video clip with new music and lyrics that attempt to sync to the mouth movements of the singer/s for comedic effect. This can be seen as an extension of the over-dubbing dynamic prevalent in machinima.

<sup>6</sup> Culture jamming is a tactic used by many consumer social movements to disrupt or subvert mainstream cultural institutions, including corporate advertising. Culture jamming is often seen as a form of subvertising. Many culture jams are simply aimed at exposing questionable political assumptions behind commercial culture so that people can momentarily consider the branded environment in which they live. Culture jams re-figure logos, fashion statements, and product images to challenge the idea of "what's cool," along with assumptions about the personal freedoms of consumption

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The project seeks to extend these often novel, humorous and irony-laden forms via the imposition of a synthetic and transmissive studio art practice that considers the mortality of these things, their exhumation and Frankensteinian re-configuration, and accounts for the pathos and melancholy of fleeting cultural forms and their effects. The intent of this transmissive idea is not reactionary or defensive; it is not a battle to ward off the crushing potential of the mass media. Rather, it seeks to be a responsive, contemplative synthesis enacted amidst a frenetic evolution of outside factors.

This project grows out of the above concerns coupled with my own intuitive and accumulative fascination with new and old media including machines, computing devices, printed material and transmitted electronic media forms, in conjunction with meta-structures such as logos, fads, fashions and sub-cultures. In short, I work out things about myself and the world through manipulating the pervasive stuff of our time and use it to reflect key ideas and dynamics of the consumption of technology, trends and networks.

The romance of both the discarded and the found looms large and as capital drives global cultural production cycles to ever dizzying heights, mining the recent technological past and seeking understanding from it takes on various layers of importance and pertinence. There is an element of the outsider, the boffin, the tinkerer, in my approach to this project, where I pick up traces of our increased medial nature and cast these fragments aloft, back into the stream of cultural commodity. Artaud defines the characteristic mood of my approach in *No More Masterpieces*<sup>7</sup> when he states -

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<sup>7</sup> Artaud, A 1958, *No More Masterpieces*, The theatre and its double, transl. Caroline Richards. Grove Weidenfield, New York, p.77.

*One reason for the asphyxiating atmosphere in which we live without possible escape or recourse...is this respect for what has already been written...as if all expression were not finally exhausted and had not reached the point where things must fall apart if they are to begin again.*<sup>8</sup>

Artaud's statement is pertinent as it eloquently defines the hope/futility duality that I find myself oscillating between through this practice and it is in this cyclic, iterative and potentially entropic frame within which the submitted work sits. It seeks to be an enigmatic and allegorical expression of these ideas. In Owens' re-consideration of the allegorical impulse he states, 'Allegorical imagery is appropriated imagery; the allegorist does not invent images but confiscates them. He lays claim to the culturally significant, poses as its interpreter'<sup>9</sup>.

Jan Verwoert, in his 2007 essay, *Apropos Appropriation*, summarizes Owens' concerns stating that he frames 'speaking a dead language' as a characteristic embedded in appropriation, or rather speaking a language that testifies to the death or dying of its historical meaning, as the language of allegory<sup>10</sup>. Owens summarises Walter Benjamin's view that "from the will to preserve the traces of something that was dead, or about to die, emerged allegory"<sup>11</sup>

This urge to appropriate is at the core of contemporary cultural production, as Australian re-mix artists Soda Jerk state, 'mixers are the sex organs of the sample'.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Artaud, A 1958, *No More Masterpieces*, The theatre and its double, transl. Caroline Richards. Grove Weidenfield, New York, p.77.

<sup>9</sup> Owens J, 1980, 'The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism', *October*, no. 12, pp.67 – 86.

<sup>10</sup> Verwoert, J 2006, 'Apropos Appropriation: why stealing images feels different today.' *Tate.org.uk*, viewed 1 January 2011. <<http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/triennial/essay-apropos.shtm>>

<sup>11</sup> Owens J, 1980, 'The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism', *October*, no. 12, pp.67 – 86.

<sup>12</sup> Harley, R 2009, 'Cultural Modulation and The Zero Originality Clause of Remix Culture in Australian

***FEAR OF OBSOLESCENCE IS FEAR OF DEATH***

Working with obsolete media is somewhere between archeology and autopsy, and by interrogating these cycles, imposing them on one another, witnessing their operation in proximity to one another, and testing them in multiple scenarios, the works become a vehicle for transmission of a looping signal, into a linear system. The research output seeks to recapitulate the experiential residues of personal encounters with mediated signals, contain them within new cultural statements and re-transmit them into the passing flow of time.

System feedback, in various forms as a model informs the thinking of this project. A feedback system makes its own input via its output, infinitely. There is an element of this iterative processing of an image, object, sound or idea that sits at the core of the practice. The work seeks to be meaningful through the proposition and execution of these ideas.

The project is rooted in a mark-making practice and a sound-making practice, evolving from painting and instrumental performance into a practice that runs the gamut of a path between and around those points. I take and use formal cues from conceptual art, pop, institutional critique, the situationists and surrealism. These formal cues, and their appropriation and deployment in the works, engage with the over-arching dialogues surrounding post-modernism and some of its key proponents in the last century.

These embody ideas about the de-commodification of the artwork, the re-contextualization of the

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Contemporary Art', Fibreculture, no.15, viewed 1st January 2011, <[http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue15/issue15\\_harley.html](http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue15/issue15_harley.html)>.

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found and everyday, the allure of celebrity, the society of spectacle and the pluralist media-based practices of the Fluxus and Pop artists, and the re-consideration of conceptual art practice through the YBA phenomena of the 90s. Of particular interest to this investigation is the capability of the strategies, hallmarks, and tropes of these genres of art practice to cut through traditionalist notions of virtuosity and the resulting 'grand narrative shifts' in the art historical lineage usually ascribed to difference in technique or methodology to one's predecessors.

In much the same way that DJ culture, generally argued to be the birth of remix culture, involves 'digging' - the art of rummaging, finding and re-contextualizing records from the available strata of the history of recorded sound - I rummage through and mix varying conceptual and historical cues in the production of my work.

I conjure these 'isms' and view them as strategies, or filters to project into the works. The focus follows my idiosyncratic, daily movement through a series of interactions and observations with electronic media and, more broadly, mediated existence. Ideas arise initially from observation, interest, enquiry and use. The analogy of signal flow<sup>13</sup> and its importance to the dynamics of my thinking is important to state here as it informs my approach to making. Signal flow is the movement of data through a circuit or network, and links to the modularity of electronic equipment. Quite simply, the 'plugging in' of objects, ideas and imagery to one another alters the signals being emanated by each unit, be it through the combination of objects, images and sounds in an installation environment or the combination of instruments, effects and results in a live environment.

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<sup>13</sup> Signal flow is the movement of data through a circuit. Audio signal flow is the path an audio signal takes from source to output.

Once this signal flow is applied, the focus of individual pieces can reflect themes, or sub-genres within a larger framework, for example, one work may focus specifically on the nature of electrical wire and its use to link together and connect individual buildings to a grid, while another may focus on the compression artifacts within a series of digital images halted mid-download. The practice seeks out glimmers of the complex and nebulous relational space between humans, technology and the equation of the two.

Intuition plays a significant role in the selection of elements used in making the art works in conjunction with other occurrences: acquisitions, discoveries, current obsessions. These factors gestate for varying periods of time until a kind of subliminal taxonomy<sup>14</sup> for the articulation of artworks occurs. Often this process happens over a long period of gathering, ordering and processing groups of images or objects from the medial stream I occupy.

The practice extends from an innate appreciation of the Burroughsian approach to making, simply that –

*when you experiment with cut ups over a period of time you find that some of the cut-ups and rearranged texts seem to refer to future events... suggesting that when you cut into the present the future leaks out.*<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Judd, C 2010, *SHOTGUN exhibition catalogue*, 18 September – 17 October 2010, CAST Gallery, Hobart, Tas  
<sup>15</sup> From a lecture given by William S Burroughs at the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at Naropa Institute, April 20, 1976. Viewed 2 Feb 2011. <<http://hadto.net/category/writing/dreamachine>>

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The practice straddles a position between observatory and oppositional and is parasitic of a system of largely western referential media systems and technologies. It is grounded in the consumptive and productive strata of mass media, but is being filtered via a necessarily limited perspective defined by my own particular interests and observations, and my movement as a human being through the world. Synthesis is the key goal of the practice – to take in a broad range of elements and synthesize new experiences.

The studio works largely take the form of installation environments, often consisting of found and/or made objects and imagery produced in a variety of ways from varying sources, both electronic and real world. Often the works comprise a projection element, or other screen technology such as monitors or LCD screens, and often a sound element is also present. The practice produces both site-specific and situational works, and also less contingent series of works more connected to the studio than any responsive site-based concerns. The multi-medial skip-trailing is enacted as a deliberate approach to avoid rigid formal and visual specificities, and to focus on the conceptual consistency of this tangential approach.

I record, find, sort, cut, arrange, align and present from a necessarily experiential archive: that of my own presence and movement through the world. I seek to cut across a massive and daunting wave of popular cultural flows and in some ways to offset through re-use the effect of some of this material. Vannevar Bush,<sup>16</sup> widely acknowledged as one of the forefathers of the information age, describes my approach well when he discusses the relationship between the historian and

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<sup>16</sup> Vannevar Bush (1890-1974) is the pivotal figure in hypertext research. His conception of the Memex introduced, for the first time, the idea of an easily accessible, individually configurable storehouse of knowledge. Douglas Engelbart and Ted Nelson were directly inspired by his work, and, in particular, his ground-breaking article, "As We May Think."

the trailblazer -

*The historian, with a vast chronological account of a people, parallels it with a skip trail which stops only at the salient items, and can follow at any time contemporary trails which lead him all over civilization at a particular epoch. There is a new profession of trailblazers, those who find delight in the task of establishing useful trails through the enormous mass of the common record. The inheritance from the master becomes, not only his additions to the world's record, but for his disciples the entire scaffolding by which they were erected.*<sup>17</sup>

In more specific dialogues surrounding appropriation, Umberto Eco states that rather than disrupting any ideas of ownership and authorship, that viewers, aware of the rupture in appropriated or quotational works, are aware of their nature as a repetition. According to Eco, what is of interest to the viewer is the way the new work reconfigures the old<sup>18</sup>. Lev Manovich in turn, proposes that we are in an era of the 're-mix'<sup>19</sup> which he defines as a systematic re-working of a source and uses this term to discuss the method of appropriation currently prevalent as opposed to quotation or sampling. Both writers seem overly concerned with predicting the effects of these practices on makers, users and the media itself and suggest a sort of end game or dead end has been reached. Manovich envisions this within a linear idea of progress with remix being an evolution beyond quotation and sampling, but fails to propose what comes after.<sup>20</sup>

Through this project I seek to find a less linear/hierarchical and binary/oppositional model for the

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<sup>17</sup> Vannevar, B 1945, 'As We May Think', *The Atlantic Monthly*, July, pp. 101-108.

<sup>18</sup> Eco, U 1994, 'Interpreting Serials', *The Limits of Interpretation*, University of Indiana Press, Bloomington, pp. 87-89.

<sup>19</sup> Manovich, L 2007, What comes after remix?, *Remix Theory*, viewed 1st January 2011. <<http://remixtheory.net/?p=169>>

<sup>20</sup> Manovich, L 2007, What comes after remix?, *Remix Theory*, viewed 1st January 2011. <<http://remixtheory.net/?p=169>>

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use of these strategies that is more grounded in the subjective, idiosyncratic views and concerns of the individual practitioner.

The research proposition is that through a reflexive, situation-specific approach to the elements active within an appropriation-oriented studio based practice, one can avoid the singular time-based trap of fetishising new technologies in the creation of work that in some ways serves to illuminate and critically examine that very impulse.

On a more local level, much has been written about the detached, sample oriented focus of appropriation in Australian media-based artwork of the 1990's with Australian writer Paul Taylor discussing the 'second degree' realm that occurs within the contemporary artists 'wryly sophisticated quotation from the past that detaches itself from its cultural history and inspires a pleasure in its dislocation, an adoption of *bricolage* or surreptitious quotation as a basic structure'.<sup>21</sup> Taylor discusses the eroticism of the second degree, the pleasurable space between and interplay of source and reference.

These observations were made at a time when Australia was arguably much more isolated from international contemporary art dialogues and practices than it is at present resulting in a more distanced view, or an 'othering' of major media structures. Massive changes have occurred since the 90s in terms of the access to and integration of Australian arts practitioners in a global art system suggesting a breakdown of the isolated and distanced view taken by artists exploring appropriation strategies. In the light of this change how does one, now, personalise these

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<sup>21</sup> Taylor, P 1984, 'Australia "new wave" and the "second degree"', in P Taylor (ed.), *Anything Goes: Art in Australia 1970-1980*. Art & Text, Melbourne.

fragmentary, recombinant reflections? How is my appropriation based practice different from that of my pre-predecessors? Is it enough to presume that individuality alone will hold true to the eloquence of a particular appropriation-based artwork, or do other elements need to be more consciously introduced?

The project extends the more recent and current dialogue surrounding appropriative strategies, specifically in the work of Australian contemporary artists covered in the writings Paul Taylor, Sean Lowry and Brogan Bunt who posit a shift from direct, strategic appropriation strategies to a more ubiquitous and subliminal presence of these strategies in contemporary art production. Taking into consideration the presence of a parallel dialogue surrounding the more expansive and formless definitive term of 'mediality'<sup>22</sup> this seems to suggest the ability of a subliminal appropriative urge to synthesise new and meaningful cultural artefacts. This mutation of Taylor's 'detached second degree realm'<sup>23</sup> into a more internal or innate manifestation of the appropriative urge runs parallel to technological advancement and network ubiquity affirmed here by Dan Angelloro -

*'What was once conceived as a tactical assault on commodity culture has for many, become a commonplace way of consuming culture. While most visual remix artists continue to ask themselves "why remix?", online remix culture seems to have deleted that question with a simple "why not".'*<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> A term recently revived in discussions circling media arts, "mediality" is generally used to refer to an expanded conception of media that accounts for the individual and personal lived encounter of media structures.

<sup>23</sup> Taylor, P 1984, 'Australia "new wave" and the "second degree"', in P Taylor (ed.), *Anything Goes: Art in Australia 1970-1980*. Art & Text, Melbourne.

<sup>24</sup> Angelloro, D 2006, 'Thoughtware: contemporary online remix culture', in *SynCity: Remixing three generations of sample culture*. Exhibition DVD catalogue, d/Lux/Editions, Sydney. pp.18-25.

I am aware that a kind of secondary self-portraiture mode occurs through the reading of the work, and this occurs quite simply through the dynamics of interpreting a system and reflecting it. A skew is always applied by the reflector, and there is no system without noise, and so this personal or biographical slant often present in the work is an element I am aware of but not consciously focused on. As French philosopher Michel Serres states in *Le Parasite*, ‘There are channels and thus there must be noise.’<sup>25</sup> I believe this ruse of self-portraiture in my work allows an audience in-road that can result in postulations about the larger state of hyper-mediated modern existence.

The exhibition component of this investigation evidences a chronological exploration of the concerns of the project, while also consciously acknowledging the re-iteration or re-presentation of these once responsive works into a now past, evidential exhibition. This looping aspect serves to further illustrate the internal, iterative logic of the project. The cumulative effect of the exhibition outcome submerges the audience into an experience of referential excess, an overload that suggests either a resignation into that excess or a potential untangling of an idiosyncratic authorial system.

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<sup>25</sup> Serres, M 1982, *The Parasite*. Lawrence Schehr, trans. John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, p. 79.