

GROWING WEEDS IN HYBRID CULTURE: CREATIVE PRACTICES OF AN IMMERSIVE ARTS COLLECTIVE

Project Description

I wish to take the statement, “It is not reality but the imaginary that we propose to grow again” (Kuzmanovic and Xin Wei 2002: 2) as the springboard for an investigation into the strategies¹ FoAM takes in pursuing a vision of creating contexts for alternate imaginaries. First a short description — necessarily schematic and incomplete — of FoAM is attempted. Then I briefly outline the interconnected theoretical themes I have chosen to make my focus: tropes, play, and public performance. These are briefly contextualized in relation to a general notion of “avant garde” art movements. In pursuing these interests I therefore situate my project within the anthropological literature on metaphor; ritual, performance, and art; and some strands of game and play theory. Then, some questions of methodology are addressed, including mention of anthropological research conducted in the context of computer-mediated communication, concluding that methodological questions are, in the final analysis, inseparable from theoretical and philosophical outlook.

Background and Aims

What FoAM is

FoAM consists of approximately five core members headquartered in Brussels, Belgium, also involving from time to time formal and informal associations within a wide, fluctuating network people, institutions, and groups who profess similar interests and aims, reaching throughout various parts of Europe, North and South America, Japan, and Australia. Funding for their activities comes from a variety of sources, including public and private institutions for the promotion of cultural and scientific interdisciplinary pursuits in Belgium, the Netherlands, the EU, and other bodies around the world.

Many members and associates of FoAM have academic backgrounds or connections, with formal (or partial) qualifications in fields as varied as astrophysics, computer science, mathematics, cultural studies, and social science. On the other hand, most of

¹ By using the term “strategy,” and in many other points of discussion to follow, I am inadvertently making reference to the long and well-worn debate oscillating between the supposed dualities of “structure” and “agency” in social life. I have little interest in tackling this debate here, especially since it has been discussed so comprehensively elsewhere (e.g. Bourdieu 1990). Suffice it to say that I fail to see a dichotomy, since both can be seen as accurate perspectives depending on the point of view taken.

them have also had long histories of involvement in such realms as electronic or experimental music, the techno or rave scene, alternative lifestyles and living arrangements (such as in warehouses), various forms of computer art and street performance, unusual types of social activism, and so forth. In a nutshell, the main focus of FoAM's interests and activities could perhaps be said to involve an idiosyncratic synthesis of art, science, technology, and mystical elements, harnessed, ultimately, for the purpose of social, cultural, and spiritual transformation.

FoAM's homepage describes the group as "an independent, distributed laboratory based on multidisciplinary models of cultural expression ... f0AM aims to become an 'edge-habitat,' working within partner organisations, toward a symbiosis of culture and science, technology and nature..." ("Foam Homepage" n.d.) The idea of the laboratory here includes the more conventional "think tank"-style workshops and research projects, but extends much further — to encompass, in particular, what are referred to as "public experiments" of various kinds. The notion of a lab reflects the ideal of continuous "becoming" which informs every aspect of FoAM's philosophy, in that they see "art as an ongoing participatory process, authors and audience as equal partners, [and] inspiration as research into the aesthetics of 'the potential'" ("Foam Homepage" n.d.). And it also incorporates an idea of focused or serious play, a context encouraging free-form experimentation which can nevertheless lead to potential offshoots for a variety of applications. Therefore,

Some of the development at FoAM is done in a studio setting, where we work on building prototypes, developing models and conducting user tests. This type of research is usually targeted towards construction of experimental public spaces (both physical and virtual), such as (site-specific) performances, installations, collaborative arenas ("labs"), festivals, workshops and forums. This type of development relies on professional staffing. The technical development work for a production is not research, but adaptation of technologies used to express artistic concepts. ("Foam Methodology" n.d.)

A laboratory, then, in which artistic practices are invoked for their potential to transform public life. As such, "art" and "aesthetics" take on radical implications. "Art of the future is growing out of the theatres and galleries. Artworks are not static objects that the audience has to admire from a distance, but continuously transforming responsive realities" ("Foam Communiqué for Active Translation and Transformation" n.d.). FoAM, therefore, shifts attention "from representation to performance. We make the move from maintaining representations of society to

performing socially, and gain more subtle ways of building and inhabiting settings for public activity” (Xin Wei and Kuzmanovic 2000). This requires a concomitant “shift in artists’ roles in the world, making them more choreographers of cultural processes, rather than creators of ‘original’ cultural artifacts” (“Foam Communiqué for Active Translation and Transformation” n.d.).

Tropes

FoAM may be seen to invoke a variety of tropes in their artistic practices, the description of these practices, and the description of themselves and their objectives. Characteristically, their projects pivot around a metaphoric theme. To take but a single example, FoAM’s Project txOom is presented in their manifestos through a florescence of “organic” tropes: “weedy wilderness,” “textures in bloom,” media environments as constituting “a rich loam for growing a worldwide wilderness” (Kuzmanovic and Xin Wei 2002; see also “txOom textures in bloom,” “FoAM Newsletter One,” Kuzmanovic and Gaffney 2003). While such themes can be seen merely as illustrative devices — which is the ordinary understanding of metaphor used in an everyday setting — I would like to suggest, with the backing of some anthropological concepts, that tropes can be far more than merely ornamental turns of speech: they can be efficacious conduits of the imaginary. My initial research interest, at the outset, would therefore be to produce a fine-grained, thick description of the play of tropes in FoAM’s creative activities, taking the literature on metaphor theory as the basis for an analytical perspective.

What has come to be known as “metaphor theory” has as its “immediate ancestor and close cognate, ‘symbolic anthropology’ (T. Turner 1991: 122). But an interest in and alertness to tropes can be traced through the foundational works of anthropology (Fernandez 1991:3-5). A perhaps more exclusive focus on metaphor can be seen to have emerged with the work in cognitive linguistics by Lakoff and Johnson (Fernandez 1991: 8-9), whose papers (Lakoff and Johnson 1980a, 1980b) have provided a point of departure for much subsequent debate.² I would like to set out with the working hypothesis that

² Many of these debates pivot around the concern that metaphors (and previously, symbols) come to be regarded as “minimal elements ... prior in both epistemological and ontological senses to the combinatorial structures in which they are incorporated in cultural discourse and social action” (T. Turner 1991: 122), and a concomitant desire to emphasise how “individual tropes such as metaphor can be shown to function in cultural constructions of meaning primarily as aspects of more complex, pragmatically oriented forms of discourse and activity” (ibid. 123). In other words, in reaction to the

metaphoric assertions [people] make about themselves or about others influence their behavior. Such assertions — you are a chicken, I am not a chicken, you are a hawk or a dove or a rat or a donkey — provide images in relation to which the organization of behavior can take place. We can call them organizing or performative metaphors. (Fernandez 1986a: 6-7)

Recalling my initial aim of exploring the strategies FoAM takes in order to grow alternate imaginaries, I continue to follow Fernandez when he suggests that metaphors can be invoked for “moving us, and their aptness lies in their power to change our moods, our sense of situation” (Fernandez 1986b: 52). He proceeds to outline the main features of “the mission of metaphor,” which include

(1) the providing of an identity for inchoate subjects; (2) the enabling of movement in these subjects; (3) the optimum positioning of these subjects in quality space; (4) the providing of a plan for ritual movement; (5) the filling of frames of social experience; (6) the enabling of the subject to “return to the whole”; (7) the freeing of the subject from a preoccupation with its parts. (Fernandez 1986b: 62)

It is my contention that FoAM can indeed be seen as strategically invoking metaphors for persuasion and performance, using them to enable movement, positioning in “quality space,” a “return to the whole,” and a “freeing of the subject.” Many such tropes, I believe, can be seen as putting forth a statement of the “transformation or transcendence of state” (Fernandez 1986b: 57), and this strategy is used consciously to facilitate — especially through their immersive participatory multimedia worlds — a kind of rite of passage into a “liminal” condition, in which participants “are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial” (Turner 1969: 95).

Performance | Play

One of the key contexts, I suggest, in which FoAM endeavours to invoke such metaphoric strategies lies in what they call “public experiments,” events involving elements of performance, carnival, festival, and ritual. Handelman (Handelman 1990:

proposition that “individual tropes or symbols constitute the fundamental units or elementary forms of culture,” and the idealist implications of this position (ibid. 123), most metaphor theorists are now insisting “upon the role of culture in the formation of metaphoric models with which various peoples reason” (Fernandez 1991: 9). While I am in full agreement with this trend, which essentially involves situating metaphor in context, the debate regarding structure and agency — of which this is a species — is not my central concern here, as mentioned above.

76-7) suggests that “public events are culturally constituted foci of information-processing. In these activities lie crucial junctures of events and the social orders that formulate them.” The idea is useful for my purposes since it offers a way to link an understanding of public event with that of metaphor, conceived as being invoked to move and persuade, to transform and transmute; that is, as a cognitive juncture point radically mediating (“processing”) certain kinds of information. While the public events staged by FoAM clearly don’t have the direct political impact which, for example, Abner Cohen (1993) observes in the Notting Hill carnival, it would be interesting to examine whether it could indeed be said of FoAM’s experiments, as of the Sinhalese exorcisms described by Kapferer (1997), that they “tamper and toy with the very premises of an ordered world” (Handelman 1990: 4-5). At any rate, in the most general sense, performance could be seen as providing a context, a “space” for the “movement of metaphor.” In relating the theme of tropes to that of performance, broadly understood, I am approaching a perspective which sees the play of tropes as involving far more than merely linguistic figures of speech; tropes may be expressed in tactile ways, through performance and play.³

The “dangerous” potential of play (and, I propose, of the play of tropes in certain situations) arises from this unstable liminality, “a medium that is intensively processual: fluid, shifting, vital, and replete with energy; yet without the capacity to stabilize itself” (Handelman 1990: 66), and is what leads Handelman to reformulate the meta-message proposed by Bateson, “this is play,” to be “this is uncertainty” (ibid. 71). Therefore play partakes of the danger of the liminal condition of transition, which is dangerous exactly because it deals with the taking apart of customary order (ibid. 65). On the other side, such a taking-apart can be therapeutic, and Bateson notes that “the resemblance between the process of therapy and the phenomenon of play is, in

³ In fact, if the “peculiarities of play” are “(a) that the messages or signals exchanged in play are in a certain sense untrue or not meant; and (b) that which is denoted by these signals is nonexistent” (Bateson 1972 [1954]: 183), then a correlation between play and metaphor can be found in the observation that both must involve metacommunication. Therefore it could be said that play is inherently metaphorical, and that metaphor is inherently playful. This could be one reason why metaphor, play, and performance are so often discussed in one theoretical *gestalt*. But the more fascinating dimension to this observation is that both metaphor and play can implode from their metacommunicative “as if” status. Bateson puts it this way: “...in the dim region where art, magic, and religion meet and overlap, human beings have evolved the “metaphor that is meant,” the flag which men will die to save, and the sacrament that is felt to be more than “an outward and visible sign, given unto us.” Here we can recognize an attempt to deny the difference between map and territory, and to get back to the absolute innocence of communication by means of pure mood-signs.” (ibid.)

fact, profound” (Bateson 1972 [1954]: 191). Therapy is understood here as “a framed interaction between two persons, in which the rules are implicit but subject to change” and are themselves therefore “part of the ongoing game,” which has the character of “an evolving system of interaction” (ibid. 192). An integral objective of FoAM, I think, is to bring about the kind of transformation which can be called “therapeutic,” a seeking to heal and make whole. This objective has been shared by other “avant garde” cultural movements.

Avant Garde

This term is only a label and those involved in FoAM has never described themselves as being “avant garde.” My use of it here is merely to signal a certain constellation of characteristics which FoAM may be seen as sharing with other, similar movements, contemporaneous or historical.⁴ These characteristics include, to cite one experimental music improviser’s “deliberately disjointed picture” (Arias 2002: 31) of the matter, a preoccupation with “crevices” — in other words, the gap, the seam, and all that is tangential; “file under futile,” or, a sense of futility which “favors an enjoyment of the music’s [or other artform’s] very precariousness and fallibility” (ibid.); “pleasure vs. bliss,” the idea that an artwork “provides pleasure if it meets expectations” (ibid.) but must provoke discomfort, unease, or shock if it aspires to a higher “blissfulness”; newness, surprise, and “serious fun” (ibid.); collaboration as “the joy of social interplay that lies beneath the pathological impulse among most experimental improvisers to play with as many people in as many situations as possible” (ibid.); play, which in the context of musical performance “implies a responsibly unimpeded engagement in a game in which the musicians do not merely display prepared ideas and techniques” (ibid. 32); and immersion: “Much experimental improvised music seeks immersion in sound, a state of sonic frenzy, usually as by-products of some kind

⁴ At the same time, I don’t want to elide the great heterogeneity of movements, ideas, practices that have been called “avant garde.” For example, for the “utopian strand within the inter-war avant-garde” (McNamara 1992:63), “the grid offered a paradigm of the security of mathematical measure, as it plotted order and coherence upon a chaotic residue. It also offered promise of a mechanism to bridge the tension between a system which, based on Baudrillard’s assessment, is blind to its own arbitrariness yet able to determine and implement a universal system founded ‘on the basis of rational finality (functionality)’” (ibid. 62-3). This is, in the terms outlined here, a quite different trope from FoAM’s metaphor of “weedy sociality.” And yet the goal of the interwar avant-garde in promoting a “‘new vision’ aimed to tackle the imposing challenge of overriding alienation and the binary divisions of our culture (of art and life, physical and intellectual labour, the spiritual and the utilitarian)” (ibid. 64) sounds very similar.

of excess — relentless repetition, intense silences, painful loudness, intense physical exertion” (ibid.). I would only add that these characteristics are typically brought together in an effort to break out of the Weberian rationalistic “iron cage” of capitalist industrial society, and an aspiration for a wider social, political and spiritual transformation — to embrace, in some form, the vision described in Morris Berman’s underground classic *The Reenchantment of the World*:

I know that in some relational sense, everything is alive; that noncognitive knowing, whether from dreams, art, the body, or outright insanity, is indeed knowing; that societies, like human beings, are organic, and the attempt to engineer either is destructive; and finally, that we are living on a dying planet, and that without some radical shift in our politics and consciousness, our children’s generation is probably going to witness the planet’s last days. (1984 [1981]: 271)

Significance and Innovation

While a great deal has been written about the politics, sociology, and aesthetics of avant-garde art movements, I have been able to locate very little ethnographically-based literature in the field, inspired by an anthropological perspective. Yet it is precisely an ethnographic approach that could yield considerable insights into the cultural and artistic practices of such movements, and in particular the whole dimension of their public activities. At the same time, I am proposing to explore what may not be a “new” paradigm of approaching anthropological field research, but one that has surely been under-explored: one that seeks first and foremost to “replace notions of participant observation in this context, with notions of creative observation, co-construction, and field creation” (Forte 2002).

Approach

Methodological questions can never be separated from theoretical or even philosophical ones; what may start as a question of methodology can quickly become an abstract theoretical debate, and vice versa. At least, so I believe is the case here, where an outline of some methodological questions involved in my proposed project will inevitably touch on matters of theoretical import. By their inclusion here, therefore, I don’t mean to exclude them from theoretical interrogation, but simply to indicate that, for the time being, I wish to bracket them aside as central questions and treat them as if they were methodological, that is, matters essentially of a technical and practical concern.

I should begin, then, by arguing that there is no way I can see, in practice, of marking a division between “researcher” and “researched,” and therefore no way I can claim to possess knowledge, insight, or a privileged understanding that is somehow “above” or “beyond” that of those who would consist of my “informants.” This may be so, in fact, in virtually any field situation (with appropriate provisos for the wide range of scenarios), and is a contention that touches on some fundamental questions regarding anthropology’s *raison d’être*.⁵ But it is especially so here, since many of those involved in the group I propose to research will have had similar cultural and especially academic backgrounds as I myself possess. For instance, they use the notion of fieldwork as a methodology in researching the success of their installations; they routinely cite anthropological and sociological theory in their manifestos to explain and elaborate their creative practices. In this context it would be absurd and artificial (and faintly comical, in a quixotic sense), to even pretend to a stark division between “fieldworker” and “informant.”

Nor, I argue, is this division in any way necessary. A recognition of the contrived, culturally constructed (and so, illusory) nature of such a division need not imply that one must abandon a defined approach, point of view, and theoretical research objective. It simply means that one recognise the impossibility of claiming an absolute legitimacy to one’s perspective, in exclusion to other possible points of view. Thus, I would still be “encompassing” the “object” of my fieldwork in a theoretical frame consisting of definable elements that could be subjected to various tests of “veracity” or cogency within that frame. But I would always be aware that this frame can itself be “encompassed” by other frames — in this case, the interpretive frameworks of precisely those whom I “frame.” In other words, I would maintain a privileged point of view, but within a spectrum of points of view which are thereby not “de-privileged.” In sum, while the notion of an objective, disinterested “ethnographer” confronting and scientifically decoding the statements and behaviour of unknowing “informants” may have a certain quixotic charm, I argue that it is, like all quixotic outlooks, a romantic and archaic illusion that is at best applicable to some circumstances but by no means

⁵ Such questions, of course, have been addressed exhaustively in the past, though it often appears with little practical consequence. As I have said, my concern with these questions is ostensibly methodological and I discuss them here only inasmuch as they touch on my approach to fieldwork, though naturally they are in their own right matters of great theoretical and philosophical concern for anthropology as a discipline.

all. As such I will be unable to adopt it in my own fieldwork, and will instead attempt to take an approach of the kind suggested by Max Forte.

Though Forte does not adopt a position as extreme as the one just mentioned, he does write that

where moving online is concerned, especially via the vehicle of Website development, I would argue that certain basic assumptions that have dominated our conceptions of fieldwork practice, relationships with informants, the building of rapport, issues of trust and ethics, are sometimes turned on their head or otherwise transformed in the process. (Forte 2002)

Although I don't believe networked, computer-mediated communication need be seen as the most important locus for this suggested transformation of basic assumptions, I do believe it undoubtedly plays a role, and in any case must be mentioned in the context of my own proposed fieldwork.⁶ Forte actually proposed to develop a web presence for the community with whom he did field research; in this process he was "not only creating sites, but also organizing sites in general. I was presenting my research, for the offline arena, whilst conducting research online" (ibid.). He argues that this process

not only permits the co-production of knowledge but also enables us to gain greater insights into the world-views of individuals and groups whose own cultural reproduction depends heavily on public recognition. The Internet thus acts as both tool and practice: as a site for theorizing and as a method of research. (ibid.)

I too have made use of the Internet as both "a site for theorizing and as a method of research" with FoAM. It has enabled me to undertake vital research preliminary to fieldwork and to share these thoughts through FoAM's TWiki (a kind of website like a

⁶ Debate regarding the impact and significance of "cyberspace" and "cultures of the internet" has been predictably polarised, but now seems to be levelling out into a more balanced appreciation and subtle understanding of the effects and consequences entailed in this technology. For example, Wilson and Peterson (2002: 462) note that while "the revolutionary claims made for the Internet and the communications media it supports have faded in recent years," and that "the rapid and fundamental transformations of society that some foresaw have not come to pass ... the social uses of the Internet, in the few years of its existence, have been astonishing and almost completely unanticipated." They conclude that "these new communicative practices and communities very properly demand the attention of anthropologists, not to invent completely new analytical approaches to virtual spaces, but to bring to bear our existing expertise on human communication and culture."

bulletin board, but far more fluid and flexible for collaborative projects⁷), where FoAM post regular updates on their projects, stories that often relate to those projects in elliptical ways, and a great quantity of other links, references, and peculiar tangents. This indeed greatly facilitates (though does not create) a methodology inclined to “creative observation, co-construction, and field-creation,” and makes difficult if not impossible any thoroughgoing division between an “observer” and an “observed,” since both are happening simultaneously, and influence one another in the process of observation and participation.

The Internet, therefore, has been my first “field site,” and will continue to play an important role in ethnographic research. Other, geographically-based fieldwork would take place in Brussels and those sites in Europe where FoAM happen to travel to create their public experiments. I would presumably be actively contributing to the creation of these social, spatial, and media worlds in whatever capacity I could during my stay. I reiterate that by participating and observing in such constant, face to face interaction over an extended period of time, a wealth of ethnographic data may be generated which would never otherwise be accessible (and, incidentally, would be impossible to reach online). It would provide the opportunity to observe in great detail the processes involved in FoAM’s creative activities. Such data will prove indispensable if I am to substantiate and develop the broad areas of enquiry outlined in the beginning sections of this proposal.

The results of this fieldwork will be communicated primarily in a PhD thesis. But further opportunities may arise, in the form of conferences, symposia, and the like, in which it would be appropriate to communicate such work-in-progress as may be relevant. Furthermore, portions of this work-in-progress may be made available online where this is deemed worthwhile.

⁷ “TWiki is a leading-edge, web-based collaboration platform targeting the corporate intranet world. TWiki fosters information flow within an organization; lets distributed teams work together seamlessly and productively; and eliminates the one-webmaster syndrome of outdated intranet content” (<http://TWiki.org/>).

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