



“Hernan Bas’ ‘Fag Limbo’ and the Tactics of Reframing Societal Texts.”
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Hernan Bas' "Fag Limbo" and the Tactics of Reframing Societal Texts

Robert Hobbs

My work (art) stems from understanding a new style of boy that lives in the androgynous room of "fag limbo," a space where everyone is worthy of suspicion. Most heterosexual boys I know exemplify this new class of boys; it is a clique that flirts with the sort of "model" behavior typical of what is considered to be a bit sissy. They are the *nouveau sissy*, and word is finally getting out about them. This new brand of boy has the space to move at his own volition, back and forth and in and out of "fag limbo."

Hernan Bas, "Hernan's Merit and the Nouveau Sissies," statement for exhibition at Fredric Snitzer Gallery, Miami, 2001

The colorful term, "slash," refers to the convention of employing a stroke or "slash" to signify a same-sex relationship between two characters (Kirk / Spock or K / S) and specifies a genre of fan stories positing homoerotic affairs between series protagonists. Slash originated as a genre of fan writing within *Star Trek* fandom in the early 1970s.

Henry Jenkins, "Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture," 1992

When I look through these [male-oriented fashion / lifestyle] magazines, I still find myself willfully misinterpreting certain images: seeking those images with "potential." The difference between my hunt and that of someone 20 years ago is that the depictions of men

today are inherently more sexually charged. The settings I place them in are clichés of “fag limbo”: the sort of locations and scenarios (boys clubs, boarding schools, etc.) looking at which a gay youth, 20 years ago, would’ve made subject to his own fantasies. I’m misinterpreting these already sexualized images of men and putting them into a setting, which has even more potential for misinterpretation.

Hernan Bas, “Hernan’s Merit and the Nouveau Sissies,” statement for exhibition at Fredric Snitzer Gallery, Miami, 2001

That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender’s performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality.

Judith Butler, “Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity,” 1990

Both critic Roland Barthes’ prediction in 1967 that “the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author”¹ and subsequent reader-response criticism, which has used his stirring observation as support for its critical platform, have played crucial roles in undermining the once assumed autonomy of works of art. Instead of considering the work of art as whole and complete, a self-reflexive

distillation of its time with its own rules for approaching it, both Barthes’ essay and reader-response specialists have undermined its holistic character, making it permeable not only to the worldviews for which it was created, but also to other perspectives that might differ substantially from its assumptions and conclusions. Their combined approach takes into consideration the individual and sometimes-idiosyncratic reader, as well as the dynamics of groups of responders. In focusing on reception rather than creation and a work’s consequent place in the world rather than its innovations, these critics have destabilized art’s once widely touted ability to determine how it is to be understood: its capacity, in other words, to orient viewers to specific ideological points of view.

Freed from old-fashioned ideas regarding the hegemony of the artist and the preeminence of the work of art, readers and viewers in recent decades have been open to choosing between meanings that they view as consistent with the artist’s intentions and positing resistive readings that demarcate their own and others’ points of view. Artists have also become increasingly sympathetic to these critical attitudes and the remarkable range of meanings viewers can inscribe in works of art. Consequently, they have partially relinquished the concept of aristocratic creator-based interpretations while embracing a new democratic openness regarding observers’ roles in responding to the art, and even, figuratively speaking, remaking it. In doing so, they have helped to validate the idea that art is perpetually open to new perspectives, which have the ability to change substantially the ways it is regarded. Working with this paradigm shift, artists have reconstrued the process of creativity to make it far less dependent

on inspired gems distilled from their mythologized private colloquies with their muses, and more in line with critical readings of ongoing social practices.

As evidenced by the second of his two statements, which are included in the collection of epigraphs framing this essay, Hernan Bas' act of imagining different "potentials" for the metrosexuals populating men's fashion magazines, might appear to be far too whimsical to be considered in relation to this sea change in critical thinking. But his tactic in fact attests to this reader- or viewer-centered approach's far-reaching effects, since it demonstrates how creativity can stem from the processes of rereading, reframing, and finding new and compelling spaces in the interstices of established social and cultural artifacts where new and thought-provoking possibilities can develop. Bas' free-associating therefore supports this understanding of creation as an ongoing process of entertaining new possibilities for images. But it is important to note that these aesthetic strategies have already been evident to greater or lesser degrees in many works of art that anticipate by decades and even centuries reception theory's emphases. We can, for example, look back to the Renaissance and consider how Michelangelo imagined new possibilities for the then recently discovered Hellenistic Belvedere torso, or contemplate how Delacroix counseled himself repeatedly in his journal to dwell on the need to reflect on the work of Dante, Shakespeare, and Michelangelo, and to find in them responsive ideas for his new art. After the development of reception or reader-response theory in the 1960s and its widespread acceptance in subsequent decades, we can point, as indicated earlier, to artists responding to its ideas and can include

among them the neo-pop and neo-conceptual artist Richard Prince, who created one important group of works by excising the Marlboro cigarette logo and ad copy from that company's resonant photographs of cowboys.

The difference between Prince's approach and Bas' lies in their differing views of the role pictorial evidence assumes in the final work of art. The differences must be gauged in terms of degree, not kind, since the two artists view their popular culture sources as singularly important for the development of their work, both in its generative stage and also in the completed work when one looks at it and recognizes that these mass-media sources in turn interrupt and provoke the art. Prince's images are replete with stirring presences and absences as discomfiting and as evocative as Robert Smithson's *Site / Nonsite* sculptures of the late 1960s. Like Smithson, Prince relies on the work of art and the changes it has effected on its mass-media sources to catalyze viewers' thoughts about it. In this art, however, the completed work ultimately assumes a dominant role over its sources even though it encourages viewers to think about its deletions and transformations.

Because it is more open-ended than Prince's art, Bas' work is more readily placed at the behest of readers than Prince's pieces, and Bas' readers consequently include a varied audience, comprising even artists like him who prefer to draw their own conclusions about the images before them. Instead of relying on the category of art to direct the epistemological project of assessing the type of knowledge his images are capable of revealing—that is, emphasizing their primarily

symbolic status as Prince does—Bas foregrounds his art’s mass-media origins and at the same time makes his use of this material more open. He does this in several ways. First he creates works that look



like illustrations for stories, and he often references such well-known sources as Boy Scout manuals (cf. *Reclined* and *Hot Boy*, both 2001), “Hardy Boys” mysteries (cf. *Mystery of the Hollow Oak* and *Untitled (Tree House)*, both 2001), stories of saints (cf. *The Immaculate*



Lactation of Saint Bernard, 2007), and Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*—an obvious gay pun as evidenced by *The Loveliest Song* (2003)—with which viewers are invited to interact as if they



were participating in a hypertext novel or more simply the type of “choose your own adventure” story, which the artist relished as a child. Then, Bas plays with art’s continued residual ontology in a post-conceptual art world by referencing it in terms of ghosts as well as other aspects of contemporary Goth culture continuing to haunt it (cf. *Ocean’s Symphony (Dirge for the Fiji Mermaid)*, 2007). In some of his work, he incorporates aspects of the spiritual in his installations in terms of collections of closed jars purporting to encase ghosts,



which he purchased on eBay, and a rich panoply of painstakingly collected Victorian mourning objects, including hair jewelry, which metonymically refer to lost loved ones. These references to suspect beliefs and actual dead individuals encourage viewers to be both skeptical and sympathetic as they oscillate between the incredible farce of merchandized bottles of liquid purporting to incarcerate ghosts and the melancholic aura with which the dour Victorian mourning paraphernalia is suffused. This intermixing of aesthetic strategies and materials catalyzes a series of radically different yet still-linked responses, depending on whether one reads the work as illustrative of concepts external to it, or so open-ended that the viewer has the option of completing the work by regarding it as a parody of Gothic romances, or as a serious reenactment of romantic-era nostalgia for lost loved ones. Thus, Bas joins aspects of popular and serious culture into amalgams that demand alternately to be read as parodies and as invocations, travesties of art and testaments to it.

Bas’ seemingly innocent act of imagining gay content in sexually ambiguous, contemporary fashion plates is part of his twinned, ongoing process of seeking to discover the language of covert gay activity in a formerly rigid heterosexual world while assaying the mysterious ways visual cultural artifacts both resemble art and differ from it. This ongoing approach can be more clearly understood by citing his use of the “Hardy Boys” young adult detective stories for his series of works included in “It’s Super Natural,” which was shown in 2002 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in North Miami. Bas explains:

For my latest series, I've delved into the ambiguous relationship of the Hardy Boys. "The Hardy Boys" authored by Franklin W. Dixon, is a half-century-old young adult book series marketed as the male equivalent to the "Nancy Drew Mysteries" for girls. The simple premise is that of two boys solving mysteries together. For a young gay reader their relationship is as suspicious as the plots they attempt to unravel. The very terms: suspicion, mystery, clues, secrets, etc., are closely tied to any gay youth's experience. It describes the need to cover it up (one's sexuality). To keep it cloaked to solve these mysteries, to express the charm of ambiguous sexuality, I've decided my steady partner is going to be a mystery.²

He references his own "steady partner" in *Twin Locket Mystery* (2001), which also echoes the type of titles used for the "Hardy Boys" series.



"Hardy Boys" stories were first published in 1927 by Edward Stratemeyer, CEO of his namesake syndicate, who conceived the concept for this series the year before and employed various ghostwriters, beginning with Leslie McFarlane, to write under the pen name of *Franklin W. Dixon*. As Bas' statement about the "Hardy Boys" series indicates, he wished to use these beloved American stories about the teenage brothers Frank and Joe Hardy as a means for looking at the ways homosocial relationships can

begin to assume homosexual overtones. His efforts in this regard begin to seem less idiosyncratic than they might at first appear when he questions both the very different physical characteristics of the two Hardy Boys and their casual and close interactions, which are customarily regarded as above suspicion since they are joined in the stories by a fraternal bond. In addition to querying the sexual orientation of the Hardy Boys—a pun on the word "hardy," referring to gay intrepidity is no doubt intended—Bas employs the genre of mystery stories as a metaphor for the struggles that emerging gays and bisexuals experienced as they tried to envision a life for themselves in a prejudiced heterosexual world. Rather than transposing this situation totally to the realm of art, Bas partially undermines the art component by keeping his work adamantly illustrative so that it refers to offstage narratives that viewers are invited to complete. In this way he manages to keep the popular culture source, the Hardy Boys mystery, at the forefront of his work, making it and the homosocial-homosexual riddle the focus and subject of his art as well as a potential modus operandi for viewers responding to it.

In Bas' work, art serves as a forum for symbolic expression and also a means for looking at extra-artistic concerns. Instead of segregating popular culture from serious works of art by proclaiming separate sets of conventions for viewing each category as some literary scholars advocate,³ Bas' spectatorship assumes a highly sophisticated reorientation toward the two consistent with visual studies methods, which I believe can best be understood as a redirection of Barthes' separate readerly and writerly categories.

In the introduction to his book “S / Z,” consisting of his course notes on Balzac’s novella “Sarrasine,” Barthes differentiates between mass-media culture and serious art in terms of the different protocols—labeled “readerly” and “writerly,” respectively—that each imposes on its readers.⁴ The readerly (pop culture) approach, which anticipates readers’ knowledge of well-known formulas, encourages immediate understanding and casual investment in a given work since its conventions—and here one might think of those appearing in best sellers, romances, and mysteries—are well understood. With readerly prose, such protocols only need to be confirmed as readers readily pursue the various ensembles of incidentals that differentiate one narrative from another. With writerly prose, however, one’s approach is substantially different since the means for coming to terms with it are not established and must be discovered, or even invented. Readers are thereby made aware of the fact that the new form is part of the work’s content and any difficulties experienced in comprehending it may be a means for dramatizing the complex issues with which it is concerned. Over the years the new perspectives offered by visual and cultural studies have had the net effect of conflating Barthes’ categories so that aspects of ephemeral pop culture (readerly materials) are being studied in terms of such writerly (traditional scholarly) practices as rigorously attentive rereading and analysis, comparative studies of similar materials, and efforts to provide comprehensive pictures of a given work’s place in the various social, historical, and philosophical discourses in which it can be inscribed. All of this can result in elaborate interpretations of popular culture sources and their imbrications in competing worldviews that can both reinforce and undermine them. The fact that this emphasis on

studying ephemera as seriously as one would major works of art is still in its infancy in the field of art history, can be gauged by the fact that rigorous art historical analyses of the mass-media imagery crucial to pop art are only now being undertaken.⁵

In an effort to address this oversight in analyses of Bas’ work, this essay will now look at both the extraordinarily complex and seemingly modest sources that this artist enjoys repositioning in his works of art.

In his first exhibited works from the late 1990s, Bas relied on the diet drink Slim-Fast, both in its liquid and powdered form, to make metonymic drawings. The use of Slim-Fast instantly connected his works with this product’s widely extolled powers for maintaining the sleek profiles of androgynous young adolescents—a major focus of his work. Although his pieces employing Slim-Fast have been associated with Felix Gonzalez-Torres’ carefully circumscribed installations of cellophane-wrapped candies,⁶ particularly when Bas spills strawberry-flavored Slim-Fast powder—connoting a gay-pink connection⁷—on the floor, they also call to mind Ed Ruscha’s early drawings made with a variety of food substances and other unorthodox materials such as fruit and vegetable juices, axle grease, gunpowder, and rose petals. In his Slim-Fast pieces, Bas characterizes his idealized gay subjects as sensitive dandified types reminiscent of Elizabeth Peyton’s epebes, as well as sexual stereotypes, extending Kara Walker’s silhouettes of racist stereotypes in the area of homosexual subject matter. But, despite these recent art historical references, his minimal images parody the oxymoronic meaning of this product’s name. In addition,



the strong smell of the strawberry Slim-Fast powder precludes this popular culture reference from ever being totally aestheticized since it remains a teaser and a barrier to art's traditional colonizing power.

Similar to the "Slim Fast" series and Bas' fantasies about fashion images, inscribing gay subject matter into popular culture products is a key characteristic of the slash literature innovated by dedicated fans of popular television series. Because this combination is also found in Bas' Boy Scout images and "Hardy Boys" story illustrations, the coincidences between sexual orientation and mass-media imagery warrant further investigation, particularly when one recognizes that an understanding of the goals of slash literature can provide a basis for substantiating and comprehending some of the positive benefits that Bas' work provides. As noted in the above epigraph on slash fiction, this homoerotically oriented literature was initiated more than two-and-a-half decades ago by "Star Trek" fans. Although one might be surprised to learn that the earliest slash narratives that redefined Captain Kirk and Dr. Spock's friendship as gay were written by heterosexual women, the development of this genre can readily be understood and appreciated if one views it as a thoroughgoing critique of traditional masculinity, which prescribed physical and mental isolation as well as leadership in terms of domination. This critique reframes conventional modes of masculinity by viewing interactions between men non-hierarchically in terms of intimacy and free exchange.⁸ One might conclude that slash writers have in fact transposed the homosocial types of interaction found in the genres of science fiction and adventure stories into romances, which noted literary scholar Janice Radway characterizes as

"exercises in the imaginative transformation of masculinity to conform with female standards" of intimacy and nurturance.⁹ Because slash fiction writers are clearly aware that they are breaking copyright laws when they use figures from "Star Trek" and other such series as subjects for their own stories, they have established the protective shield of an underground, interpersonal network for gratuitously sharing their work with other fans instead of selling their stories.¹⁰ These writers recognize that the slash aesthetic involves maintaining a carefully poised balance between remaining true enough to a given series' prototypes and storyline so that their ensuing stories maintain some standard of credibility while at the same time redirecting their fictive accounts to distinctly new ends. One of the ways slash writers have creditably redirected popular television series into private fantasies, is by reading far more into such gestures as touching and making eye contact than the original scripts intended.

Just as slash writers regard their source material as permeable to their radical rewritings, so Bas also finds his source materials open to his reinterpretations rather than closed and autonomous. And just as slash writers create works that carefully negotiate the countering force of the original series with their ideas for spin-offs from this material, so Bas' art is balanced between its sources and his own embellishments of them. While the original slash writers, according to sociologist Henry Jenkins, worked to project "female sexual fantasies, desires, and experiences onto the male bodies of the series characters,"¹¹ gay and lesbian slash writers since the early 1990s have increasingly embraced the slash genre while redirecting it to suit

their own perspectives and needs. The net result is the projection of alternative gender roles that noted feminist writer John Stoltenberg has extolled in terms of

mutuality, reciprocity, fairness, deep communion and affection, total body integrity for both partners, and equal capacity for choice-making and decision-making [that] are merged with robust physical pleasure, intense sensation, and brimming-over with expressiveness.¹²

In sync with slash writers' commendable goals to reframe and redefine aspects of contemporary culture, Bas works to confront in his art the largely passive activities of media spectatorship and to challenge the efforts of bureaucratically orchestrated commercial art forms to control people's reactions. Both slash writers and Bas are able to undertake this worthwhile mission by empathizing with the characters, thereby discovering new perspectives and orders of being within their confines.

The theorist who first comprehended how readers might redirect and reframe the way bureaucratically formulated material is read and viewed, is the French Jesuit scholar Michel de Certeau, who attested in "The Practice of Everyday Life" that consumers can subvert the power of the grand spectacle that television networks, producers of programs, and magazine publishers try to impose. In order to understand the power struggles joining and separating these producers and their audiences or consumers, de Certeau

theorized the dialectically engaged concepts of *strategies*, which consist of the programs and products produced by institutions and ensconced power, and *tactics*, which refer to the active use or re-use of mass cultural representations. Strategies are hegemonic and organizational. In the art world they can be regarded in terms of the cultural industry: the bureaucratization, rationalization, and commodification that members of the Frankfurt School studied beginning in the 1930s. In contrast to strategies, tactics are personal, makeshift re-workings of them. Strategies are developed through polls, focus groups, and case studies to define their consumers, as well as through advertising and PR campaigns to ensure homogenized and monolithic responses. Despite strategies' concerted efforts to anticipate and manage the utilization of their cultural representations, consumers' tactics can redirect such established images or signs by enacting a series of ruptures and breaks that often are unseen since they occur on the level of individual use and during the activities of daily life. An eminently viable and potentially far-ranging approach at the level of daily life, de Certeau's tactics reverse the determinative operations of Michel Foucault's theories pertaining to the capillary actions implicit in positive productions of power, which function in the same way as the rule of law by being consensual throughout a given society, and equally incumbent on all its members. Instead of Foucault's implicit cooperation, which is catalyzed and held in check by the needs of members of a given society to participate fully in an established power structure, de Certeau envisages myriad infractions that empower consumers as individuals and undermine the hegemony of strategies. Both slash culture's homoerotic bent and Bas' gay-

oriented free-associations about fashion images and Hardy Boys stories, offer the opportunity to see how tactics can forestall and redirect the juggernauts that strategies are intended to constitute. At the level of consumption, the concept of tactics circumscribes consumers' ability to ward off conditioned Pavlovian responses and instead reconfigure mass-produced materials as media for conducting their own oppositional culture work.¹³

Both slash fiction and Bas' work point up the artificiality of traditional gender roles, which post-structuralist philosopher and feminist Judith Butler regards as mere "performative[s],"¹⁴ occasions of playacting on a societal scale. In "Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity" Butler addresses the concerns of mainstream feminists, lesbian feminists, gays, and people in general who feel constricted by socially mandated gender roles, which she groups under the rubrics of a "fabrication," a "fantasy" presenting "only the true effects of a discourse," an "act," and a "social temporality."¹⁵ She explicates one of the major points that Bas' work indirectly accomplishes—the artificiality of traditional gender roles—when she presents drag queens' performances as the fiction that is capable of revealing the truth about gender by analyzing its truth claims in terms of stylized codes inscribed on the body and ratified by society. She explains this phenomenon succinctly in the following manner:

In the place of the law of heterosexual coherence, we see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a [drag] performance which avows their distinctness

and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity. ...¹⁶

Continuing in this vein, she points out that drag as "gender parody" reveals "a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization: parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalize or essentialize gender identities."¹⁷ In other words, by multiplying the possible roles gendered bodies might assume, drag undermines the concept of a monolithic, bi-polar world comprised of normative males and females.

Butler's emphasis on the effectiveness of artifice in denaturalizing societal absolutes pertaining to male-female gender differentiation, parallels Hernan Bas' efforts to develop a viable perspective on his sexual orientation in a mostly heterosexual world. If heterosexuality occupies the position most people regard as natural, Bas has concluded there is great merit in cultivating the unnatural, outrageously artificial, precious, dandified, outré, and forbidden. But, even after he has made this decision to counter the traditional society-dominated view of naturalized heterosexuality and deviant homosexuality, there remains the problem of how to deal with such a thoroughgoing rejection of the everyday world where it continues to be preponderant, and to make a meaningful art that not only reaches out to the converted but also provides opportunities for heterosexuals to rethink homosocial-homosexual linkages.

Bas resolved this dilemma by looking at the precedents established by

19th-century dandies in general, and the French symbolist novelist J. K. Huysmans' novel "Against Nature" (or "Against the Grain") in particular. In the wake of the French Revolution and the rise and fall of Napoleon, French romantic artists, longing for the grandeur of earlier times, countered the 1830s lackluster reign of the Citizen-King Louis-Philippe, by developing a self-selected aristocracy of the senses termed "art-for-art's sake." This attitude that emphasized art at the expense of life was also referred to as "decadent" since its adherents proclaimed that art must be free from all moral and social concerns. In the carefully constructed hothouse world of art-for-art's sake, which was in many respects a reaction to bourgeois society, the dandy, with his refined aesthetic sensibilities and subtle changes of fashion, held court. A full 50 years after this revolution in manners and taste was initiated, Huysmans, the decadent esthete, published "Against Nature," the grand summation treatise for dandies.

This book has had a tremendous impact on Bas, who admitted to reading it as many 15 times¹⁸ and who has found 20th- and 21st-century low-brow equivalents for a number of the *recherché* exploits undertaken by Huysmans' hero, Des Esseintes—the last inbred descendent of an ancient French family and a recluse from the everyday world. Like Bas, his distant epigone, Des Esseintes is fond of rewriting late 19th-century French semiotic constructions by finding spaces within these circumscribed views for new aesthetic transportations. These new aesthetic approaches move away, for example, from the then-customary view of flowers classed according to social categories and read as elaborate signs for conveying romantic feelings to the innovative act of assembling a collection of

natural flowers that look blatantly artificial. Even though Bas' overall approach toward rewriting social documents by finding spaces within them that he can populate with his own fantasies shares affinities with visual studies, reader-response theories, and slash fiction, it also acts in accord with Des Esseintes' musings about art. According to Huysmans, Des Esseintes

wanted, in short, a work of art both for what it was in itself and for what it allowed him to bestow on it; he wanted to go along with it and onto it, as if supported by a friend or carried by a vehicle, into a sphere where sublimated sensations would arouse within him an unexpected commotion, the causes of which he would strive patiently and even vainly to analyze.¹⁹

If one changes the Huysmans' text to read "popular culture artifact" instead of "work of art" and consider "sublimated sensations" as an encoded phrase for homoerotic longings, we come close to Bas' perspective. Another example from Huysmans' book should suffice to indicate the importance of rereading texts with concentrated attention in order to find keys for unlocking them, a strategy that was important for both Des Esseintes and Bas. Huysmans notes:

The book of Edmond de Goncourt's was one of Des Esseintes' favourites, for the dream-inducing suggestiveness he wanted abounded in this work,

where beneath the printed line lurked another invisible only to the soul, indicated by an epithet that opened up vast vistas of passion, by a reticence that hinted at spiritual infinities no ordinary idiom could compass.²⁰

Considered in the light of Bas' work, this passage could be considered a succinct method for coaxing the imagination to rethink aspects of popular culture so that they can become viable artistic subjects. Instead of removing himself from life as Des Esseintes did, Bas finds that the process of imaginative projection, or reading into popular culture artifacts, is a viable method that provides him with the means for returning to the world while remaining distinct from it, as he transforms his orientation to it by discerning new and provocative viewpoints.

In undertaking this process, Bas does not move entirely away from an art-for-art's sake ethos epitomized by Des Esseintes' exceeding preciosity. The following segment from Huysmans' novel could be taken as a manifesto for art-for-art's sake and seen also as inspiration for Bas' different, yet similar, lowbrow-highbrow brand of aestheticism:

Spellbound by Flaubert's wonderful prose, he [Des Esseintes] listened in breatheless awe to the terrifying duet, shuddering from head to foot when the chimera pronounced the solemn and magical sentence:

"I seek new perfumes, larger blossoms, pleasures still untasted."

Ah! it was to him that this voice, as mysterious as an incantation, was addressed; it was to him that it spoke of the feverish desire for the unknown, the unsatisfied longing for an ideal, the craving to escape from the horrible realities of life, to cross the frontiers of thought, to grope after a certainty, albeit without finding one, in the misty upper regions of art!²¹

In concert with these aspirations, Des Esseintes' love of skillfully wrought artistic intricacies enabled him to collect ecclesiastical art even though "he still regarded the Christian religion as a superb legend, a magnificent imposture" and fantasized about "the mad rites of magical ceremonies, black masses, and witches' Sabbaths."²²

This same decadent love of artifice, as well as the romance and splendor of the Catholic Church—including its art and its saints' legends (cf. *The Immaculate Lactation of Saint Bernard*, 2007), in addition to its opposite, the darker realms of Mephistopheles and Hell—can be found in Bas' work, even though it reframes these attitudes and realms in terms of his own contemporary world, as evidenced by his self-portrait that appears in *Mephistopheles at 17 (in His Weed Garden)* (2007). Referring to his exhibition at



Miami's Moore Space, which he entitled "Soap-Operatic" as a way of joining low-brow and high-brow productions, Bas explains that his own decorated giant tortoise shell, resembling the one elaborately decorated with real and artificial jewels appearing in "Against Nature," is:

The martyr for the Age of Decadence—it died for the cause. The whole nature of dandyism is that the unnatural was more beautiful than the natural—something that was directly the result of the fact that homosexuality was unnatural per se. So you worship the artificial and make it even cooler and more glamorous—like that plastic orchid is hotter than the real one.²³

In "Against Nature" Des Esseintes makes extraordinary efforts to pursue an aestheticized life. He has his pet tortoise's shell gilded so that it "blazed as brightly as any sun, throwing out its rays over the carpet [in his dining room, so that its shrill]...tints turned pale and weak."²⁴ He later "cut[s] himself off from contemporary life...[and] find[s] a few pictures [by the French Symbolists Gustave Moreau and Odilon Redon] of subtle, exquisite refinement, steeped in an atmosphere of ancient fantasy, wrapped in an aura of antique corruption, divorced from modern times and modern society."²⁵ Still later he embraces the perfumer's art and attempts to "decipher its complex language that was as subtle as any human tongue, yet wonderfully concise under its apparent vagueness and ambiguity."²⁶ Similar to Des Esseintes, Bas, as has already been noted, decorates a

tortoise's shell, but he chooses to use it as the centerpiece for *The Aesthete's Toy* (2004), a mixed media installation with a black-and-white DVD projection, which presents the artist embracing himself while standing in the corner of a bare room. Coming late to the appreciation of the work of Moreau and Redon, Bas has been particularly intrigued by the intensity of these painters' flowers, which have inspired such works as *The Blue Line* (2005-2006). In addition, he condenses the many refinements of the perfumer's art that enables Des Esseintes to paint landscapes of pungent and evocative odors by the simple stratagem of using artificial strawberry Slim-Fast with its highly artificial smell that only vaguely resembles its namesake fruit.



In 2002, Bas, similar to Des Esseintes, began courting the dark side of life when he created an installation for the Museum of Contemporary Art in North Miami that was so shrouded in darkness that visitors needed to use the flashlights the museum provided in order to see his images of the Hardy Boys and the clubhouse emblazoned with the words *No Girls Allowed*. While this tactic, which rhymes with the subject matter of boys using flashlights in *On Jagged Shores* (2002), is definitely theatrical, it encouraged viewers to investigate physically the content of mystery pervading the exhibition and thereby perceive the type of embodied reality and ongoing mysteries that adolescents dwelling in Bas' "fag limbo" encounter on a daily basis.

The relatively benign darkness of this exhibition was intensified later that year when Bas presented photographs of young men decorated with ominous pentagrams and sinister red paint resembling blood in the one-person exhibition “First Comes the Blood, then Come the Boys” for his exhibition at the Frederic Snitzer Gallery in Miami. The mood was aestheticized and even etheralized two years later when New York’s Daniel Reich Gallery presented the solo show of Bas’ work, entitled “Sometimes with One I Love,” which included the image of the famous 19th-century lovers of Lyons—a fated couple who made a sacred pact to die together by firing simultaneously at one another with elegant pistols linked with pink ribbons. This work’s emphasis on love and melancholia builds on the theme of Bas’ earlier



Twin Locket Mystery (2001). The same year Bas created “Soap-Operatic,” which has already been discussed, followed by one of his darkest exhibitions to date, benignly titled “In the Low Light” for the Victoria Miro Gallery, London. The press release for this exhibition

underscores the Des Esseintes-like reversal of light and darkness that characterizes this exhibition:

For this series, Bas has worked with the idea that concepts of hell are very personal. Here, Bas takes as a point of reference the charged cultural climate of 1960s San Francisco, where a church was founded for which “hell” actually meant “heaven.” To the members of the Church of Satan, hell consisted of absolute freedom and permitted a sense of abandon heaven would not allow. Hell was

considered a place for artists and outcasts, a place to frolic, indulge and love whomever one wished, and offered a refuge from a perceived “purity” of heaven.²⁷



The import of this exhibition can be ascertained by the mysterious painting *The Merger* (2005) in which two young men, partially submerged in water, are surrounded by a nocturnal landscape punctuated by a jarring background of abstract expressionist-like forms that one would assume are signs for intense feeling, so that the clichéd ideas of heaven and hell are conjoined in this dramatic and raucous work.

This fascination with darkness, death, and hell places Bas and his work squarely in the subculture known as Goth, Dark Wave, and Doom and Gloom that has claimed several generations of artists, including several members of the Young British Artists (YBA) such as Damien Hirst, the Chapman brothers, and Tracey Emin, as well as such younger Americans as Sue de Beer, André Ethier, Daniel Hesidence, Aïda Rulova, and Banks Violette, among others. The Goth sensibility, according to cultural and dance historian Tricia Henry Young, who has written cogently on both Punk and its Goth offshoot,²⁸ needs to be looked at in terms of a long development that goes back to the 18th-century Gothic Revival style. The Gothic Revival style was catalyzed by a general crisis that occurred when people began recognizing the limitations of Enlightenment rationality and started to intuit the heart’s strange, persuasive mode of reasoning. It

was aided and abetted by incipient German nationalists who exalted their Visigothic ancestors, who more than a millennium earlier had helped to topple the Roman Empire, and used them to support their glorification of the Black Forest's mysteries. In its late 20th- and early 21st-century dance club incarnation, Goth culture celebrates vampires, finds beauty in rotting corpses, regards pale and wan looks as worthy of emulation, and in general opts for a Vincent Price-like theatrical morbidity with its own peculiar and delightful frisson of terror.

Taken as a serious social critique, Goth culture recognizes death as the ultimate experience and regards one's comprehension of it as a necessary way of understanding how to lead a meaningful life. In this respect Damien Hirst's often-espoused quest to use his art as a way to comprehend death is fully in accord with German phenomenologist Martin Heidegger's theories of *Dasein* (*Being*), which can never really be appreciated until one has faced the very real probability of one's eventual demise. Coming after a time when the widely-cited French critic Jean Baudrillard had often talked about reality as only a representation or model of itself and consequently not actual, and had concluded in addition that death was only a simulation, recent overlapping generations of Goth artists (cited above) have felt a compelling need to understand death's absolute finality in as authentic terms as possible. Viewed in terms of this quest for ultimate experiences that is a key factor of Goth culture, Bas' contribution to this sensibility includes providing a gay perspective on it that ranges from the adolescent morbidity (cf. *The Secret of the Grave*, 2001) that can attend the reckoning stage of "fag



limbo," to the elegant ruminations of fin de siècle aesthetes (*Reading Wilde [Haunted by Boise]*, 2001).



In conclusion, when one surveys Hernan Bas' work over the past decade, one is forced to recognize the fact that innovative work often comes from unexpected corners and appears in small formats that may not at first seem at all revolutionary. Certainly an artist who paints and sculpts with strawberry-flavored Slim-Fast, focuses on the differences between sissies and fags in his work, aestheticizes death, invokes the cult of 19th-century dandies, and yet incorporates in his art an understanding of the ways popular culture and high art can interact while remaining open to ongoing responses, has to be considered innovative. As this essay has set out to demonstrate, Bas' multidimensional approach exhibits distinct similarities to both slash fiction and Huysmans' symbolist masterwork "Against Nature." Being small, often awkward, murky, and highly illustrative, Bas' art plays with the stylistic challenges facing adolescences—its main subject—and provides us with images that not only portray their dilemmas but also stylistically enact them. In this way viewers are invited to empathize with both adolescents' crises and the dilemmas these works pose, and are also encouraged to imagine new possibilities for the narrative fissures these works embody and provoke.

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- 1 Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author." *Aspen: The Magazine in a Box*, No. 5 and 6 (1967): 6.
- 2 Hernan Bas, Artist Statement, "It's Super Natural," Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami, March 15 – June 30, 2002.
- 3 See Peter J. Rabinowitz's excellent, traditional argument for viewing works in terms of specific genre rules in his essay "The Turn of the Glass Key: Popular Fiction as Reading Strategy," *Critical Inquiry* 11, No. 3 (March, 1985): 418-431.
- 4 Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974).
- 5 Cf. Michael Lobel, *Image Duplicator: Roy Lichtenstein and the Emergence of Pop Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002) and Robert Hobbs, *John Wesley: "Searching for Bumstead"* (New York: Frederick Freiser, 2007).
- 6 Elisa Turner, "The Hardy Boys Meet the Sea Nymphs," *Art News* 105, No. 1 (January 2006), p. 112.
- 7 This assessment is based on an overall understanding of Bas' work coupled with his later remark in his statement for the exhibition at Fredric Snitzer Gallery entitled "Hernan and the Nouveau Sissies" (July 6 - August 10, 2001): "Lately I've been trying to place myself there [at the age of becoming aware of being gay] again, imagining myself at that 'tender age' when 'sissy' hadn't yet been replaced by fag, and despite my own misgivings everything was starting to look a shade pink."
- 8 The best source on this phenomenon is Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992).
- 9 Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).
- 10 For this reason, they prefer copying their slash novels on pink or blue paper so that additional copies would appear blank.
- 11 Jenkins, p. 191.
- 12 John Stoltenberg, "Refusing to Be a Man" *Essays on Sex and Justice* (Portland: Breitenbush Books, 1989), p. 112.

- 13 Although I was delighted to read Henry Jenkins' analysis of de Certeau's importance for the cultural work that fans and artists undertake when their tactics redirect strategies to meet new ends, I am unable to accept both de Certeau's and Jenkins' preference for the word "poaching" because it characterizes the tactical process of reframing bureaucratic strategies as basically an illegitimate one. Poachers traditionally are people who hunt game on properties under others' jurisdictions and consequently are considered thieves. Slash writers and Bas are legitimate consumers, even if they choose to redirect this activity to new directions that strategists were not able to anticipate.
- Jenkins is careful to point out that consumers' activities should not be portrayed as misreading since "the term 'misreading' is necessarily evaluative and preserves the traditional hierarchy bestowing privileged status to authorial meanings over readers' meanings. A conception of 'misreading' also implies that there are proper strategies of reading." Jenkins, p. 33.
- 14 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999, rpt. 1990), p. 180.
- 15 Butler, pp. 174, 178, and 179.
- 16 Butler, p. 175.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Elisa Turner, "The Hardy Boys Meet the Sea Nymphs," *Art News* 105, No. 1 (January 2006), p. 113.
- 19 J. K. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, trans. Robert Baldick (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1959), p. 180.
- 20 Huysmans, p. 183.
- 21 Huysmans, p. 114.
- 22 Huysmans, pp. 87 and 91.
- 23 Omar Sommeryns, "The Miami Art World is Vapid Like a Soap Opera: Its Star Artist, Herman Bas, is Not," www.ignoremagazine.com (July 2004), no longer accessible.
- 24 Huysmans, p. 54.

- 25 Huysmans, p. 97.
- 26 Huysmans, p. 120.
- 27 Press Release for "In the Low Light," Victoria Miro Gallery, London, 2005.
- 28 Tricia Henry Young, "Dancing on Bela Lugosi's Grave: The Politics and Aesthetics of Gothic Club Dancing," *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 17, No. 1 (Summer, 1999): 75-97.