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## Brandon is a Network Not a Name: Fictocriticism & the Cyberfeminist Art of Shu Lea Cheang

Zach Pearl, University of Waterloo; OCAD University, Canada, [znpearl@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:znpearl@uwaterloo.ca)

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The cyberfeminist art practice of Shu Lea Cheang evinces a particular relation of generative complicity with the art object, what Canadian cultural theorist Jeanne Randolph referred to as ‘the amenable object’ (1982). Randolph, who pioneered ‘ficto-criticism’—a method of writing that intentionally blurs theory, poetics and narrative—wrote of the amenable object as an incomplete creation whose ‘ambiguous elements’ allow the viewer to make ‘subjective interventions’ in the work. Likewise, Cheang’s participatory installations and non-linear online narratives operate as amenable object-texts, requiring the user to not only navigate but contribute to them through acts of critical play and improvisation. Across Cheang’s oeuvre is also a nomadic politics of border-crossing that resonates as loudly with Donna Haraway’s cyborg as it does with the experimental feminist writing that became associated with fictocriticism. In this paper, I examine correlations between fictocritical approaches and formal tactics in Cheang’s studio practice to consider them as interrelated cyberfeminist strategies of resistance and dissent; ones that arose in counterpoint to the proliferation of deterministic, technocapitalist narratives. In particular, I look at how the fragmentation, partiality and double-voicing seen in many fictocritical texts were echoed in the user-experience of Cheang’s *Brandon* (1998), a sprawling network that posited the queer body as a collective series of actions. I conclude by looking at how these same techniques recall methods from Dadaism and Surrealism in the early 20th century and reflect on the recurrent role of indeterminacy in art and literature more generally to stem the entropy of binary paradigms.

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## I. Amenable Texts: Fictocritical Writing & Cyberfeminism Art

Another characteristic that can only be subjectively known is the capacity to sustain a response that is unsettling or thrilling. It is the absence of a solution, the absence of a resolution that is significant. The viewer realizes that there is no interpretation that will validate retreat into quiescence, no reassurance. Instead, there is an uneasy recognition of the artist's insistence he or she can contribute to the store of potential public realities.

— Jeanne Randolph, 'The Amenable Object'  
in *Psychoanalysis and Synchronized Swimming*, 1990, pp. 34–35.

The studio practice of media artist Shu Lea Cheang (b. 1954) is best described as the making of uncertainty. Beyond consistently choosing to engage the emerging technology of the day, whether it be digital video in the 1980s, net art in the 90s, or more recent forays into facial recognition and augmented reality, the constant in Cheang's oeuvre has been a carefully crafted absence of a resolution to her largely narrative-driven works. Using networked models for production and participation, often in conjunction with networked technologies, Cheang's artworks achieve a tactical indeterminacy in which the scope and structure are ever-changing, depending on use and context. In that process, Cheang's creations call into question the fixity that has defined so much of the Western art historical canon in favour of *amenability*, or a tendency towards critical acts of play. In this paper, I examine those tactics of indeterminacy embedded in several of Cheang's more famous works, including her ground-breaking piece, *Brandon* (1998), through the lens of Jeanne Randolph's theoretical writing on 'the amenable object' and her subsequent experiments to make this critically playful theory of art interpretation manifest in art writing, a process she later coined 'ficto-criticism' (Randolph, 2020; Flavell, 2009). Specifically, I seek to show how the reflexive technicity at work in fictocriticism aligns with the cyberfeminist politics of Cheang's practice in both crafting amenable objects and transgressing binarisms of subject/object, physical/virtual, fact/fiction, in the interest of institutional and cultural critique.

Discussing Cheang's work in the context of amenability and dismantling binary oppositions means adopting a staunchly postmodern and distributed understanding of identity, one not far from the 'divided subject' central to Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, in which the self is not only governed but ultimately defined by oscillating forces and contradiction (Dor, 2013: 129). As a racialized, queer woman and self-declared 'cyber-nomad' (Rich, 2015) Cheang's work and personal life are conceptually linked and stratified by their geographic and aesthetic flux. In the early 2000s, Cheang left the U.S., just as she was rocketing to the top of the New York art scene (ibid.),

choosing instead to live without a permanent address or fixed studio space for seven years, criss-crossing the Eurozone as a ‘floating digital agent’ (ibid.) before eventually settling in Paris (Ng, 2019). Much like the tentacular narratives of her art, Cheang attempted to situate herself not in any one place but decidedly between borders and subject positions, effectively embodying the ‘wildly indeterminate, gender-blurred’ posthuman characters of her films (Rich). Cheang has also gone on record about the metaphysical harms of binary oppositions. That, in her words, they operate as ‘non-confined prisons’ for the regulation of bodies (Ng). Her primary concern as an artist seems then to be the invention of border-crossing interfaces that allow for the blurring of identities and representational resistance:

To obscure and revoke the omnipresent surveillance of queer bodies, we need to remodel, morph, and transpass [sic] all gender binaries. There is no ‘passing’; rather, gender and racial identities in constant flux to avoid confinement. (Cheang qtd. in Blas, 2019)

The nomadic bio-politics of ‘transpassing,’ and the brief assemblages of bodies and identities produced along the way, recall that mercurial figure of Donna J. Haraway’s cyborg, whose bodily sensations are always in flux, based in ‘partiality’ and ‘a matter of fiction and lived experience’ to evade the technoscientific logic of our times (1991: 149–151). By her own admission, Cheang’s approach to developing the narrative aspects of her film work is similarly ‘parallel, non-linear’ to its subject matter and installations are ‘multi-stream’ by design (Ho, 2012), often utilizing fragments of research material to interrupt and/or augment her own narrative. *Fresh Kill* (1994), for instance, is an ostensibly dystopic, science fiction film about an over-polluted world in which contaminated fish cause people to vanish. However, the setting is clearly personal and hybrid for Cheang, drawing on the very real eco-political disasters facing residents of Staten Island in her then-home New York City as well as drawing from events on Orchard Island—a largely Indigenous-inhabited territory used as a nuclear waste-dumping ground in her native Taiwan. The day-to-day life of the characters in the film is also told through the perspective of a queer family enduring the loss of their only child, and subsequent questions of reproduction and futurity are jointly interrogated through a gender and race-sensitive lens that adroitly embodies the entangled subjectivity of Haraway’s cyborg and the anti-technoscientific logic it mythologizes.

Cheang’s work has also been qualified numerous times as ‘cyberfeminist,’ (Abrams, 2019; Ugelvig, 2019; Voon, 2017; Walsh, 2017), a philosophy that Canadian media artist Nancy Patterson eloquently described as ‘reconstructing feminist politics through theory and practice with a focus on the implications of new technology...’ (2000: 74).

Looming large in Cheang's cyberfeminist lexicon have been the trappings of video surveillance; through spatialized abstractions of circuits and feeds, she has repeatedly framed issues of race, class, and capitalism as embedded factors in the use of networked video. In *The Airwaves Project* (1991), for example, television monitors hang suspended from the ceiling over a levelled gravel ground, joined by an elastic cord that when pulled 'breaks' that circuit, replacing silent images of garbage scows on the monitors with video playback of chanting protesters. While the piece is implicitly about the continual shipment of waste from rich Western countries to Third World nations, the circuit-breaking gesture required to activate the piece transforms the average gallery-goer into a temporary co-creator of the image—one suddenly complicit in the asymmetrical flows of global economics. The conceptual tension that arises from wanting to activate the work through participation yet not wanting to acknowledge one's unwitting participation in a technological system of economic disparity is precisely the kind of self-reflexive reckoning that cyberfeminist discourses seek to evince.

Writing in *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium. FemaleMan\_Meets\_OncoMouse: Feminism and Technoscience* (1997) Haraway describes this parallax view as becoming cognizant of the 'artifactual,' or recognizing those 'ethnospecific, naturalizing discourse[s] that continu[e] to justify 'social' orders in terms of 'natural' legitimations' (108). Revealing artifactual discourse depends, counterintuitively, on creating an even more fictional counternarrative that cannot be so easily 'read' or naturalized into the social order. And this approach is arguably no better demonstrated than in the obscure but richly indeterminate practice of fictocriticism, which aims to 'deform the expectations of the reader' in its hybridity (van Herk, 2021).

Originating in Canada in the late 1980s and then quickly taking hold in Australian academia (Gibbs, 1997; Flavell, 2004) fictocriticism is a particular practice of critical writing that, by virtue of its elision between subjective and objective voices, deliberately blurs the line between what can be considered as 'art' or 'literature' versus literary critical commentary (King, 1994). As a result, fictocritical texts incite doubt in their reading by actively drawing attention to their own gaps—their own technicity—ergo the assemblage of various registers and voices that amplify their differences in a cybernetic, feedback-driven fashion (Kerr, 1996; Porush, 1985). Much like the cyber-nomadism exhibited in Cheang's artworks, fictocritical texts are also written to be decidedly partial experiences, and to avoid the entropic trappings of genres, or the violence of naming, more generally. Duly, there is no agreed upon 'canon' of fictocriticism. But several notable writers from Canada and Australia have either declared their work as fictocritical or have been labelled as such in scholarship. Pioneers in Canada include Jeanne Randolph (see *Psychoanalysis and Synchronized*

*Swimming* [1991] and *Symbolization and Its Discontents* [1997]) and Aritha van Herk (*Places Far from Ellesmere* [1990] & *A Frozen Tongue* [1992]), whose essays are diaristic and choreographic in their multivocality. There is also the dense and polysemous work of Nicole Brossard (see *Picture Theory* [1982] & *Mauve Desert* [1987]) whose self-branded *fiction théorique* often houses narratives within narratives to explore the imbrication of fact and fiction. Moreover, Daphne Marlatt's *Ana Historic* (1988) interweaves archival data and autobiographical poetry to reimagine the politics of femininity in colonial British Columbia:

Ana/Ina  
whose story is this?

(the difference of a single letter)  
(the sharing of a not)

she keeps insisting herself on the telling  
because she was telling me right from the  
beginning stories out of a life are stories,  
true, true stories and real at once—this is  
not a roman/ce, it doesn't deal with heroes (73)

Gail Scott's painterly essays on femininity also deserve mention as fictocritical in treatment, especially for the ways they seem to shift location and even subject position from line to line in a rhetorically variegated gesture:

It's April again. On the radio they're saying a chunk of Antarctica, the size of P.E.I., is collapsing into icebergs. A CBC journalist chirps about the advantages of global warming—for gardeners. Much extended growing seasons. Of course the bugs will get a foothold. Bug oils advised. Feeling weird, I turn off. If dread seems part of who we are, maybe to recount is to launch reasoned if defensive resistance. Camped up with lipstick. Like women during war. (1981: 15)

Meanwhile, in Australia, Marion Campbell's *Lines of Flight* (1985) arguably paved the way for fictocriticism in that country, with its 'psychological[ly] insight[ful] poetic and painterly language, time layered with memory and even stories within the story' (Moore, 1986). Gail Jones' *The House of Breathing* (1992) is a stunning collection of geo-political 'auto-fictions,' and the work of Australian fictocritical scholars Anna Gibbs and Heather Kerr have made invaluable contributions to the notion of 'writing as research.'

Notably, fictocriticism has been described on more than one occasion in terms of technology and even as cybernetic in its prosthetic qualities:

The [fictocritical] text is regarded as ‘a device or armature within particular conducts of life and practices of the self’ (King, 1993: 15); and here we seem to encounter the critic as cyborg (Haraway but also, perhaps Porush). [...] Like the cyborg’s oxymoronic fleshly metal (for example) this kind of writing ‘is not decisively any one thing’ (King: 20). (Kerr, 1996)

Because fictocritical texts purposely elide subjective and objective perspectives, mixing anecdote and autobiography with essay and critique, they, like the cyborg body, form a patchwork of identities and desires. And because many fictocritical texts make use of fragments, interludes and collage-like citational writing, this patchwork is quite evident on the page; gaps between voices as well as literal gaps between words are foregrounded as meaningful aspects of the reading experience. As Gibbs has noted, intentionally jeopardizing the continuity of the reading experience in the fictocritical text is crucial to also jeopardizing the patriarchal and colonial systems that maintain the status quo. In allowing ‘numerous voices [to speak] in unison, at other times in counterpoint, and at others still against each other, in deliberate discord’ the notion of universal truth becomes impossible, and affect comes to matter again in the production of knowledge (Gibbs, 2005).

Consequently, I proffer an intrinsic overlap exists between the aims of the fictocritical writer and those of the cyberfeminist artist. Though it would be an overreach to claim that every fictocritical text is also a work of cyberfeminism and vice versa, when creating either the fictocritical text or the cyberfeminist object-text, the task at hand is essentially the same—the making of a *cybertext* (Aarseth, 1997) as opposed to a ‘plain’ text that cannot be altered dynamically. The notion of a cybertext, regardless of specific physical form, implies that the given document, whether digital media installation or codex-bound book, can be *operated in and of itself* like a machine, possessing affordances and articulated parts that generate multiple outcomes and, in doing so, draw attention to their own construction. Aarseth famously uses the example of the self-referential *I Ching* (indexically based on permutations of a hexagram) to demonstrate how printed and bound matter can be programmed like a machine. But, here, I argue that the generative aspects of cybertext have less to do with unconventional structure than conventions surrounding the perception and consumption of a particular text.

This stance is largely informed by Randolph’s essay, ‘The Amenable Object,’ first published in 1982 and reprinted in 1991, in which she draws on her background in psychoanalysis to explore fundamental questions about the role of subjectivity in writing

art criticism. In it, she suggests that artworks are unique in their status as amenable objects; meant to be ‘pliant’ in their multiple potential readings and, therefore, nearly exclusive in their ability to incite or inhabit a certain mode of *adult play* in the viewer, returning us to a less logical mode of ‘primary process’ (Freud qtd. in Randolph, 1991: 22–24). This notion of adult play provides a segue into a discussion of D.W. Winnicott’s psychoanalytic theories of object–relations, specifically the ‘transitional object,’ wherein infants attach to a particular object that ‘serv[es] the child in the attempt to become a body and self distinct from the mother’s body and self’ (Winnicott qtd. in Randolph, 1991: 27). Because the transitional object is perceivable and manipulable by the child but not of the child, ‘the transitional object is neither inner nor outer, but partakes of both,’ initiating the child to the child–world paradigm (Randolph, 1991: 27). Randolph adeptly observes a similar dynamic at work in the contemporary art gallery, where the intended function of culturally designated space is to incite in the adult viewer a propensity to never arrive at a conclusion and exist in ‘perpetual plasticity’—a playful modality (1991: 32).

Crucially, Winnicott’s transitional object presumes that there can be no sense of worldbuilding or identity construction without this non–binary and liminal talisman to bridge the internal and external perceptions of self qua the body. One can surmise then, at the core of the amenable object theory is a refusal to abide by binary models and reserve a hybrid space of interpretation—a refusal to take sides. I believe Randolph’s motivation to write ficto–criticism was directly informed by this desire to exceed the cultural baggage of linguistically taking sides in what was then an overly theorized field by foregoing explicit labels of the ‘art’ versus the ‘experience’; neither of which can be extricated from the fluctuating sociocultural conditions that grant its meaning. This sentiment is concisely captured in Randolph’s first–ever (attempt at a) fictocritical text, ‘Stan Denniston: Reminders’ (1983), an essay that accompanied an exhibition of photographs by the eponymous artist at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, B.C.:

Wednesday, April 18<sup>th</sup>, 3:15 pm, along North Peters Street:

*The REMINDERS do not mark where the Unconscious flows beneath the current of appearances. I was standing at the top of the stairs on the levee, eating peach ice cream. The sky was turquoise. Looking along the Mississippi eastward, I saw a white balloon tremble upwards, limn in the air a longhand ‘i,’ which it had not time to dot, and quiver to the ground. The REMINDERS might be moments of parapraxis when the Unconscious sees only enough of the landscape to seize the symbol in it. Maybe every REMINDER harbours a symbol for exactly the same thing that has been symbolized in all the other REMINDERS. The viewer will have to choose between discovering those symbols through reason or through intuition. (1991: 96)*

Not only does Randolph mix anecdote and personal imagery in this passage with literal details of the artworks, but she also makes an ultimatum to the reader/viewer: Choose a rational, conditioned literacy—one that suppresses the subjective capacities of the work in favour of ‘objective’ interpretation—or adopt an amenable mode of literacy that treats connections between images and spaces between words as equally important reading material. In either case, there is no ‘right’ way to read it, and this forms the base of the critical gesture. Essays like ‘Joanne Tod’ (1986), in which no literal painting is discussed despite being an exhibition essay for a new collection of paintings by Tod, or ‘Theory as Praxis’ (2003), in which Randolph admits to an imaginary auditorium audience that ‘the images may or may not... correspond to what the hell I’m talking about,’ (28) the most radical dimension of cyberfeminist theory is enacted, which is to put one’s own authority in doubt (Barnett, 2013). In thinking about the text as another technology subject to critique, Randolph foregrounds how ‘the absence of a resolution [becomes] significant’ in our relationship to that technology (Wills, 2008: 15), when the possibility of malfunction, accidents and mutations hold meanings in themselves. Whether a slippery microphone on one’s lapel or a malfunctioning slide projector (Randolph, 2003: 32–33), writing fictocritically reflects the dubious and somewhat antagonistic capacity in which we engage communication technologies, underlining their infidelity as well as the inevitable entanglement of the ‘I’ with its given interface.

## II. *Brandon*: A Fictocritical Network

In 1998, Cheang would debut her most famous work, *Brandon*; a sprawling Web-based narrative that sought to highlight the very real violence that can erupt from a name when tied to binary conceptions of gender identity. For years, Cheang had been researching the story of Brandon Teena, a young transgender man from Lincoln, Nebraska, who was brutally raped and murdered in 1993 in the small town of Humboldt, after being outed at a New Year’s Eve party. Cheang kept multiple notebooks collating ‘hundreds of newspaper clippings, citations, notes, and other documentation’ on the case as well as trans literature and history from the 1800s onward (Kennedy, 2021: 3). The sheer amount of data she had amassed in combination with the protracted four-year coordination of the piece as a commission by the Guggenheim Museum in New York afforded Cheang time to develop the project into a massive online architecture with the help of multiple other artists and programmers. Though Brandon Teena’s story served as the touchstone, *Brandon* was an extrapolation on gender identity construction more broadly, reflecting the fluidity of trans identity through the recombinant properties of digital networks. The site consisted of five distinct interfaces ‘accessible by a myriad of entries and exits’ (Kotlarczyk, 2015: 686), ‘over 82 webpages’ and ‘approximately



65,000 lines of code' (Engel et al. qtd. in Kennedy 2). Notably, navigating the website was also designed as a collaborative experience. 'Multiple hidden hyperlinks' and the 'use [of] mixup programs to randomize content so that that the webpages appear different every time they load,' meant that new permutations of the website took shape in real-time as indexes of users and their participation (Kennedy 2).

This randomization was perhaps most evident in the 'Bigdoll' interface—the first that users encountered—which allowed them to repopulate a five-by-five grid of imagery that combined newspaper headlines, pierced body parts, anatomical illustrations, and sex toys, amongst other signifiers. Again, we find the notion of the patchwork cyborg body front and central here, but this time infused with an additional layer of meaning as a public, socially, and electronically negotiated *body* of fact and fiction in the form of interlacing research documentation and graphic design. Technologies of surveillance, historical and contemporary, also loomed large in later interfaces 'Panopticon' and 'Theatrum Anatomicum.' The former recreated Jeremy Bentham's (in)famous prison design in an online environment of twelve pixel-confined 'chambers' while the latter served as a video portal to live performances that occurred in parallel to the Guggenheim installation, the first of which was held at De Waag Society for Old and New Media in Amsterdam, housing the 17th-century medical amphitheater that inspired Cheang's initial concept for the interface. By including inverse models of spectacularizing and policing bodies in the *Brandon* narrative, Cheang effectively articulated 'the historical collusion of medicalization, criminalization, and technology in reinforcing gender and sexual norms,' (Kennedy, 2021: 11) and how this collusion only culminates in the porousness of online spaces.

After a period of primarily making feature films, the literal and figurative 'boundary-crossing' of Teena's story and its violent consequences fuelled Cheang's already building interest to work virtually (Ho, 2012), but in way that was countercultural at the time. In the late 1990s, many artists and theorists regarded the Web as the first step to realizing William Gibson's immersive 'cyberspace,' and that the increasing presence of virtual reality would liberate society from the 'meatspace' of the body. However, after reading Julian Dibbell's 'A Rape in Cyberspace' published in *The Village Voice* the same month as Teena's murder, Cheang was inspired to illustrate the opposite: that the co-existence of physical and virtual reality only complicates the navigation of the other, especially for already marginalized individuals (Kennedy, 2021: 6). This attitude was also deeply informed by a residency at the Banff New Media Institute in Alberta, Canada, where Cheang met theorist Jennifer González and resonated with her view that 'it is not possible to set aside processes of identification... like [those that] race or gender instigate simply because a digital representation may or may not have a 'real world' referent' (González

qtd. in Kennedy, 2021: 9). Thus, the body and the politics of aesthetics that govern it inevitably persist beyond dichotomies of physical or virtual interaction.

As I previously alluded, to make this idea palpable Cheang insisted that *Brandon* would also have physical counterparts where it could be navigated collectively (Ho, 2012). The Guggenheim obliged, and the finalized installation consisted of three different views of the website projected in a triptych-like fashion on one of the gallery walls. In front were small waist-high kiosks where users could explore and alter the projected pages in real-time, clicking and hovering to reveal new content. The installation at the Guggenheim lasted for one year, while other more temporary installations were created to house related performances and interventions, including a live virtual forum that linked scholars on transgender politics at the Guggenheim with those at the medical amphitheater in De Waag via webchat as an act of ‘textual surgical operation’ on the ‘construction of technosocial bodies’ (Cheang qtd. in Kennedy, 2021: 13). A series of virtual court hearings that symbolically re-tried several cases of sexual violence against known transgender individuals took place nearly a year later and were also accessible through the ‘Theatrum Anatomicum’ interface. In each instance, the effort to bridge physical and virtual realities expressed a fundamental rejection of binary oppositions of online versus ‘real’ life as well as the refute of Cartesian mind/body divisions foundational to the perpetuation of technoscientific narratives. Creating a virtual work that stretched the conventions of virtuality beyond literal technology was paramount to *Brandon*’s cyberfeminist message.

This tarrying of physical and virtual realities is also key to seeing *Brandon* as an exemplar of Randolph’s amenable object, which pivots precariously on the ‘partak[ing] of both,’ (Randolph, 1991: 31). Beyond being interactive and narrative, over the course of its yearlong exhibition the interactions of Guggenheim gallery-goers and free-roaming digital agents involved in the mixed-reality performances enacted a transitional space that existed between categories of physical installation and online artwork, activism and academic research. This ambiguity of scope and form echoes Randolph’s ‘final characteristic’ of the amenable object in her essay, which is that it proceeds continually ‘incomplete’ and subject to ‘the viewer’s impulse to *play* with the illusion that has been created’ (34) [my italics]. The sense of play that Randolph alludes to is not absent-minded but inquiry-based qua negotiating the boundaries of the given object-text and improvising within the limitations of its design. Clearly, Cheang intended for *Brandon* to be played with and tested through its generative interfaces. But by expanding the project into different physical and cultural spaces, it was also continually remade, shifting in focus and function in an autopoietic fashion. Gradually, *Brandon* became too unwieldy to classify as an art object on display in a museum. Was it an online

narrative or a series of networked performances? Was it really art anymore, or was it tactical media? The amenability of the piece also made it near impossible to experience in completion. Commenting on that in an interview with *Rhizome*, Cheang was frank when she affirmed that ‘no one (including myself) can claim to have viewed the entirety of this work’ (qtd. in Ho, 2012). But rather than diminish its significance, the absence of a totalizing view only underscored the importance of subjective intervention and exploration to apprehend the value of the work.

Arguably, the point of engaging the *Brandon* narrative is never to arrive at one. Instead, the amenability of its various points for interaction made possible through its operation as a digital, networked medium is the story. Cheang’s narrative strategy is quite McLuhanian in this way (coincidentally, a theorist that Randolph often invoked in her own writing). But her tactics can also be considered fictocritical for the same reasons. In repeatedly drawing attention to the properties of the medium as they sculpt the narrative over the specifics of that narrative, *Brandon* touches on the metagraphic essence of fictocriticism, which is to perform ‘a meta-discourse in which the strategies of the telling are part of the point of the tale’ (Gibbs, 1997). In fact, Cheang sought to animate within the user an awareness that the same technologies they were using to experience her indeterminate artwork were complicated by their origins in and reliance upon the interests of tech entrepreneurs and global corporations who directly benefited from the deterministic status quo (Kennedy, 2021: 5). This also suggests that, while no less important to the work as a whole, Brandon Teena’s story functions as part of a parallel narrative that advances in concert with a more basic but normalized one about power and mediation; neither narrative being resolvable. Cheang seems to have positioned the piece in the same ‘doubtful category’ of fictocriticism, where the construction of the text is ‘double-voiced’ to articulate its ‘contradictory trajectories’ (Kerr, 1996: 95).

It is worth noting that as a Web-based artwork *Brandon* is also literally made of text; written in HTML, Java and JavaScript. Unlike other media, even in the case of other modern forms of digital art making, working in code emphasizes the act of writing as a mode of building and offers a more dynamic, material understanding of writing in the practical sense. Additionally, the technological nature of language and its dubious dimensions become more apparent in coding, as the writing process that structures the interface has no conceptual connection to the content it eventually displays: the arbitrariness of signs is evident and amenable (to some degree). In this regard, the making of *Brandon* was closer to the textual construction of a ‘traditional’ work of fictocriticism than one might think. However, there is also the obvious difference that the documents comprising *Brandon* are electronically networked, and not just figuratively so through reference and citation.

What then is gained by seeing *Brandon*, or any other of Cheang's work, as fictocritical as opposed to cyberfeminist or simply as networked art? Amenability perhaps, in its formulation of play and worldbuilding. But, as Randolph argues, amenability is ideally a quality of any intriguing art object. And, as I have shown, amenability is indicative of cyberfeminist discourse as well. So, what other concepts within fictocritical discourse offer more to the analysis of Cheang's piece than cyberfeminism or art theory can alone?

Elsewhere, I have written of practicing fictocriticism in online environments as a kind of 'ghost writing the self,' in which the ostensible goal of self-representation is replaced by an effort to write the self-as-other in a gesture of critical empathy (2019). I do not seek to further this theory here except to suggest that *Brandon* posed a revolutionary gesture of identity construction in a manner that encouraged its users to participate in a collective exploration of identity apart from their own. It is important to consider that the piece was exhibited at a time when trans identity was far more closeted than today, and much of the public had limited vocabulary to speak about transgender people let alone empathize with the circumstances of their marginal subject position. In designing the *Brandon* narrative as an interactive and generative experience, Cheang created conditions for people to engage with the complex politics of trans identity in a self-directed and amenable manner that forewent a distinct narrator, avoided binary depictions of bodies, and allowed for self-reflexive exploration of gender signifiers via remix and randomization. But more significantly, the networked status of *Brandon* forced its users to consider the presence of various others in the text—other users, bodies, interests—in the active composition of that narrative space. The shifting appearance of webpages by other anonymous 'agents' in the gallery setting and the extension of the site into hybrid physical-virtual events added to the sense that *Brandon* was a web document of 'haunted writing,' replete with numerous voices and histories that collectively were 'making difference' over different time spaces (Gibbs, 2005). Accordingly, theorizing *Brandon* as a fictocritical network presumes that it was not only an amenable object-text, open to play and subjective intervention by its users, but that the critical capacity of the text in fact hinged on the indeterminacy of its usership as well—the degree to which it was haunted.

### III. Dada & Surrealism as Fictocritical Antecedents

Though the networked media in which *Brandon* was realized was cutting edge for its time, the fictocritical tactics employed in its making were not unprecedented. In fact, much of the art produced in Western Europe and the United States in the early 20th century was also made in response to an increasingly technoscientific and deterministic culture that was advancing under Modernity and against the devastating backdrop

of the Great War. Paradoxically, many of the values espoused by Modernity such as normativity, rationality and universal truth came to be contested in the graphic and figurative abstraction of early Modernist art. One need only to think of the compressed and fragmented bodies in Picasso's cubist portraiture circa 1910<sup>1</sup> or the violent distortion of the body in Umberto Boccioni's (in)famous *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (1913) as visual testaments to how industrialization and geopolitical conflict were fracturing the psyche of the European citizen in ways that ran counter to the aims of Modern philosophy. In particular, artists who identified with the movements of Dadaism and Surrealism sought to counteract homogenizing narratives of truth and progress promoted by modernist governments and cultural institutions with pieces that explored non-linearity, indeterminacy and the layering of many references and voices to chaotic effect. These movements are generally grouped under the theoretical banner of the Avant Garde: a contested term whose roots lie in writing that circulated in the years prior to the French Revolution in which 'the idea of the interdependence of art and society, but also the doctrine of art as an instrument for social change and reform' was stressed (Poggioli, 1971: 9). Much like fictocritical texts, Avant Garde artworks are heterogenous in style, but a recurring theme amongst them is the paradoxical alienation of increasing participation in modern society (103), a trait that could also be qualified as falling within the same doubtful category of interpretation as fictocriticism.

It is important to contextualize this doubtful tendency as emerging during a time of unprecedented international conflict. The physical horrors of World War I along with the dubious ways in which mainstream media became more entangled with political propaganda led many young artists to become disenfranchised with modernist ideals. In Paul Virilio's insightful *War and Cinema* (1984) he writes:

Since the battlefield has always been a field of perception, the war machine appear[ed] to the military commander as an instrument of representation, comparable to the painter's palette and brush. [...] Similarly, the pilot's hand automatically trip[ped] the camera shutter with the same gesture that release[d] his weapon. *For men at war, the function of the weapon [was] the function of the eye.* (20)

Avant Garde artists attempted to evade the deathly certainty of the technological perspective by removing passive components of the aesthetic experience and intentionally moving away from the concentration on craft toward a more ephemeral and conceptual mode of making.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Portrait of Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler* and *Woman with Jar of Mustard*, both from 1910, as prime examples of how Picasso was actively foregoing empirical methods of proportion and perspective.

This was mostly clearly seen in the ‘anti-art’ Dada movement, which sought to ‘annihilate’ the preciousness of the art object by attributing the same cultural currency to ideas and actions (Stokstad and Cothren, 2011: 1037). More so than in other art movements, the interpretation of Dadaist artworks pivoted on an understanding of play (Prager, 2013: 242). Art historian Susan Laxton elucidates that Dada, as well as surrealism, pivot on the ‘ludic compromise of boundaries’ (2019: 13) in a gesture of *flou*, the French pejorative to describe a blurry photograph (2019: 34). Much like the amenability of fictocritical texts, the flou of Dadaist works necessitated agile and improvisational thinking to discern meaning amidst their ‘blurring distinctions’ (Ibid.) Marcel Duchamp, the most famous artist associated with Dada, was exemplary in this regard. His readymade sculptures, like the infamous upended urinal, *Fountain* (1917), or the lesser known but no less provocative *Door* (1927), a literal door from Duchamp’s Paris apartment, slightly ajar, transplanted into the gallery, juxtaposed lexicons of the quotidian with the transcendental, collapsing previously sacred boundaries of personal and cultural space. Duchamp’s intentional blurring of mass-manufacturing processes with artistic production only served to highlight their increasing overlap in the consumerist sphere (Pelcher, 2019). And this pointedly recalls the self-reflexive motivations for Cheang to execute *Brandon* as a website, where the medium was equally open source and home to counterculture as it was economically driven and corporately governed.

The auto-critical sentiment of Dada was particularly vibrant in the Berlin scene as well in the years surrounding World War I. Kurt Schwitters’ *Merzbilder* or ‘trash pictures’ were two- and three-dimensional works of collaged urban detritus like train tickets, beer labels and coupons that he would draw and paint over until they resembled cubist interiors of shifting planes. This was a radical gesture at the time for the way Schwitters, like Duchamp, erased the distance between popular material culture and fine art making. In *Merzbild 5B (Picture-Red-Heart-Church)* (1919), postage stamps and trapezoidal fragments of newspaper emerge from colour fields of ochre and burnt umber, sometimes foregrounded sometimes bisected by angular swatches of greenish blue. The overall effect is one of an abstract information space that seems stuck between perspective and flatness, concealing as much as it portends to reveal and therefore remaining decidedly indeterminate.

Schwitters’ contemporary Hannah Höch also used collage to collapse distance between concepts but in a much more directly political fashion. Her photomontage *Cut with the Dada Kitchen Knife through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany* (1919) is populated by androgynous portraits of Dada artists, including herself, cutting apart, interrupting, and recombining the faces of German politicians in a sharp critique of the establishment. The visual hybridity of body parts melding with machines and typography, as well as the mixing of men’s and women’s bodies illustrates a desire

to challenge the hegemony with indeterminate forms and identities in a manner reminiscent of Cheang's recombinant bodies. Also notable is the inclusion of characters and scenes that seemingly have no role in the symbolic violence of the piece: a man's balding head emerging from a girl's body in a tutu to kiss another, a body in the centre juggling his own head while dancing spryly on top of a larger one. These are amenable features that require the viewer to intervene and instill those elements with their own subjectivity and meaning to integrate them into the larger narrative of the piece. Despite the aggressive polemic of the image, there is a real sense of play embedded in its aesthetic and a celebration of the body-as-material through an improvisational exploration of form. Because Höch considered herself part of the evolving women's movement in Germany (Stokstad & Cothren, 2011: 1039) it is tempting to see these amenable bodies as precursors to the feminist partiality of Haraway's cyborg and the networked, reprogrammable bodies in the cyberfeminist art of Cheang.

Meanwhile, as Dada grew enclaves across Western Europe, another group of artists were inspired to bring ideas of automatism and the unconscious into the creative process. Published in 1924, André Breton's 'Manifesto of Surrealism' envisioned society as essentially somnambulant—in a 'walking state' (1969: 11)—in which an overreliance on rationality had come to preclude 'any kind of search for truth which is not in conformance with accepted practices' (10). His call for a return to subjectivity and instinctual self-discovery emboldened young artists like Max Ernst and Salvador Dalí to embrace the visual language of dreams and forbidden desires as another viable means of liberation from the 'rational, orderly, and oppressive forces of the conscious mind' that dominated the post-war period (Stokstad & Cothren, 2011: 1056). Though Dalí's biomorphic imagery dominates the aesthetic of Surrealism in the popular imaginary, the paintings and drawings of Joan Miró are arguably a purer example of the Surrealist ideology in their psychological plasticity (Riese Hubert, 1964: 52). Miro sought to replicate the freedom of a child's imagination in his work, gradually developing 'mindless' doodling into full-scale compositions on canvas. The results were often stark and graphic arrangements absent of gravity where inverting organic shapes and crude suggestions of bodies floated among merging colour fields. Writing on Miró's artist book *Constellations* (1959), an idiosyncratic cosmology of sorts, the Surrealist scholar Renée Riese Hubert noted the power of the indeterminacy in the interpretation of those paintings:

Time cannot serve as a means of orientation, and the cardinal points or other geographical or astronomical conventions are equally useless. The sun and moon refuse to remain solitary, a red glow and black rays do not preclude one another, and all objects are free to choose their own proportions. In this world of dream and fantasy where destiny is absent, everything becomes possible. (1964: 53–54)

For Hubert, the image of multiple red suns spouting black rays was hopeful rather than troubling precisely because it seemed to have no basis in logical time and therefore no conclusion or prescribed limitations. At the same time, several of the *Constellations* can be seen as macabre in appearance given their temporal context was the aftermath of World War II. In *Chiffres et constellations amoureux d'une femme (Ciphers and Constellations in Love with a Woman)*, Plate XIX, we see a morphing and gelatinous creature drawn in thin black lines. Its limbs are irregular and overlapping: a long black fin-like appendage kicks out from the side while another arm shoots out from the back with only the slightest suggestion of fingers. The whole silhouette is oddly squat and triangular. A large green eye with a black and red iris seems to float menacingly in the centre until one looks closer to see it is the more developed of two eyes set vertically within a semi-circular head. Is this a body in the process of formation (or fornication)? An expression of the psyche? Or is this visual amorphousness indicative of something more dubious: the monstrous creations of war, aggregating bodies of the fallen? The indeterminacy of the bodies Miró depicts is simultaneously delicate in its child-like simplicity yet also grotesque in its flux and hybridity. Given their proximity to World War II, one cannot help but feel these works have been touched by the radioactive effects of the atom bomb. As such and like a fictocritical text, Miró's work has a 'hauntedness' about it. Through the visual language of myriad suns and moons and physically impossible conjunctions of body parts, the purported narrative of constellations—heavenly, astrological bodies—is used as a device or armature for the articulation of narratives about earthlier bodies, the circumstances of which complicate the telling of the tale and draw attention to the conditions of the book's creation.

In the cases of both Dada and Surrealism, the indeterminacy of boundaries, bodies and media served as tactical expressions of amenability against monolithic narratives of truth and certainty that had that failed so many on a material level. The promise of factory work drew people into cities under the guise of a utopian narrative about industrialization while at the same time the automated technologies that made those factories possible also spurred innovations in war machinery and surveillance capabilities. Writing of Breton, who was considered a bridging figure between Dada and Surrealism (Prager, 2013), Walter Benjamin commented, '...Breton declared his intention of breaking with a praxis that presents the public with the literary precipitate of a certain form of existence while withholding that existence itself' (1979: 226). Accordingly, the art that Breton made and the artists he inspired sought to create work that held within its reading the complications and contradictions that constitute experiential reality as opposed to a symbolic conception of reality. The better part of a century later, a similar pattern was repeating in the vestal years of the World Wide



Web leading up to the dot com boom and the eventual conflation of Internet usage with e-commerce. Although nowhere near as viscerally violent, the technological landscape that gave rise to the transgressive practices of cyberfeminism and fictocriticism was equally contradictory in its utopian promises of liberating users from their bodies while attempting to do so through interfaces and systems designed according to binary logic. As Foucault prophesized in *Discipline and Punish* (1977) the reach of the law would only, and ironically, increasingly be felt ‘at a distance, in the proper way, according to strict rules, and with a much ‘higher’ aim’ (11). For this reason, it is striking to consider that Dada and Surrealist art, while originating from a time before the existence of digital networks, might be theoretical predecessors to cyberfeminist and fictocritical texts for the ways in which they refuse to render bodies and identities according to conventional representations. Furthermore, it may be fruitful to consider that these movements of art and literature are emergent and epistemic in the Foucauldian sense of that word. That is to suggest that their emergence points back to a common tension in the body politic, and that like symptoms of a chronic disease—in this the case, the binary logic of a technoscientific narrative—an essential quality of indeterminacy joins these artistic and literary movements as instruments of irritation to the status quo and a resistance to interpretation and categorization.

#### IV. Fictocritical Futures

In 2019, Cheang was invited to make new work for the Taiwanese pavilion in the 58<sup>th</sup> international Venice Biennale. Her submission,  $3 \times 3 \times 6$ , was a multi-faceted four-room installation that continued the intellectual trajectory of *Brandon* in even more interactive and participatory terms, though the nature of participating in  $3 \times 3 \times 6$  was tacit and not exactly consensual. Whereas *Brandon* was a fictocritical network distinctly navigated in organized segments of content on a two-dimensional surface, the interface for  $3 \times 3 \times 6$  was spatialized and seamless. Referencing the panopticon and medieval prison architecture as well as the broader yet insipid surveillance facilitated through social media and big data (Blas, 2019), the installation joined modern and ancient technologies of subjugation. The largest room hosted a tower of ten outward facing projectors that displayed different scenes of a ten-part video narrative where actors portrayed different historical figures who were known ‘sex offenders’, including the likes of Giacomo Casanova and Michel Foucault (Simpson, 2019). Meanwhile, cameras embedded in the tower used 3D scanning and facial recognition software to catalogue and remix gallery-goers as they made their way through the space. The smallest room, deemed ‘The Cube’, held a tilted transparent box (ostensibly the opposite of the proverbial black box) containing all the devices used to run the installation, thus giving

viewers insight into the underlying process. Facial data collected from viewers were then integrated into the video narratives so that characters in the scenes became virtual assemblages of the physical bodies that observed them. It was intended as a totalizing inversion of Bentham's model, wherein passively viewing the work actively contributed to its growth and evolution through a 'reverse peephole' effect (Scott, 2015). To watch you must also *be watched*.

Again, Cheang presents us with the ethical and conceptual aporia of mediation simply by engaging with the artwork. But this time, unlike the concrete gesture of the cord pull in *The Airwaves Project*, there is no trigger, no dividing line between action and inaction or viewership and usership. In  $3 \times 3 \times 6$ , to look alone is to participate, and to keep watching is to be complicit in one's own commodification. On the surface, any utopianism that lingered in *Brandon* regarding the potential of the Web for transpassing gender norms is notably absent here, and identity has become an aggregate product of technology rather than the other way around. If Cheang's practice is fictocritical, as I have argued, then what about the narrative of  $3 \times 3 \times 6$  is amenable and open to intervention? What about it serves to challenge the technoscientific ethos?

I began my discussion of Cheang's work in the context of amenability with a passage from Randolph's essay in which she reminds us that a large part of the uneasiness we feel when engaging an amenable text is the slow realization that we are contributing to a possible future in its reading and negotiation— 'to the store of potential public realities' (1991: 35). In addition to moments of subjective intervention in an amenable text there is also the possibility for speculation. In the case of  $3 \times 3 \times 6$ , Cheang asks us to contribute to a collective act of speculation on the future of surveillance by becoming complicit in that surveillance system; forcing us to partake in both subject positions of the commodity and the consumer, neither more important to the nature of the speculation than the other. Most importantly, one can no longer consider themselves distinct from the possible futures they contribute to, even those of the dystopian variety, since the relation is ultimately revealed as circular. This is the concept of *negative feedback*.

Though the cyberfeminist theory that I have applied to Cheang's work so far grew out of the more meta-minded philosophy of second-order cybernetics in the 1970s, it was in Norbert Wiener's eponymous treatise *Cybernetics* (1948) where the necessity of the feedback loop to cybernetic systems was first outlined. Counterintuitively, key to sustaining the loop is the notion of negative feedback; forces which antagonize or destabilize the organism and thus keep it from slowing down—a process known as *entropy*. Too much positive feedback and the organism returns to utter stasis, i.e., death. But negative feedback in fact only instigates further changes; life as it were. It is with respect to negative feedback that the circularity of Cheang's interfaces hold the

greatest potential to affect change, because they may antagonize viewers just enough to inspire them to take their subjective interventions outside the gallery, into other digital spaces or even to the streets in acts of non-violent but no less transgressive border-crossing.

The same potentiality can be argued to be inherent to any amenable text, since it is the circular, self-reflexive mode of engagement necessary to apprehend its double-voiced narrative and contradictory trajectories that leads to critical reflection on the terms of the medium and speculation of alternatives. Whether speaking of fictocritical writing or of cyberfeminist, Dadaist or Surrealist art, the shared amenability and indeterminacy of those texts and object-texts are tactics to instigate negative feedback within the rigid and oppositional conventions of their given media environments. Binary oppositions and deterministic thinking are revealed as static-inducing positive forms of feedback that will slowly self-indulge and lead to entropy. Whereas the perplexing and paradoxical features of amenable texts work (or seek at least) to stoke the embers of a more heterogenous and haunted version of the body politic that proceeds according to the systematic making of difference. A final reflection on *Brandon* then might be that it still exists today as a part of the Web without really being online. The Guggenheim restored the piece in 2017, but it only exists as a launchable Applet from the museum's website, not actually directly accessible through any major browser. When I first learned of this, I was somewhat disappointed, because I felt that its reinstatement as a fully distributed web document was essential to maintaining its nomadic politics. However, seen fictocritically, it is perhaps even more appropriate and radical for the *Brandon* network to live slightly outside the mainstream Web but situated within it as a parallel narrative. Because in existing as such, categorically in between spaces of artistic and social networks, private and public interests, the *Brandon* narrative adapts and grows to challenge the verity of these oppositions as well.

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## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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