

Another Future: Hayden Fowler's Alternative Nature

Andrew Frost

Kids born in the 1960s and 1970s always knew the end was nigh. We were the bomb generation. Mushroom clouds hung over the cities of our nightmares. Buttons were pressed, missiles flew. We imagined the aftermath. Ruined cities, the Statue of Liberty rising from the glassy sand, a few lucky survivors living inside domed cities while outside, in the sun-blasted wastelands, gangs of marauders drove around on motorbikes looking for fuel. When the Cold War ended all those anxiety dreams evaporated and resonant Hollywood fantasies of post-apocalyptic survival were suddenly nostalgic period pieces.

Portraits by John Tsiavis
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The artist Hayden Fowler, forty years old, who was born in New Zealand and now lives in Sydney, recently made a revealing comment on a Facebook thread. I was looking for recommendations for science fiction books for children and Fowler suggested Robert C O'Brien's novel *Z for Zacharia*. Posthumously published in 1974 a year after O'Brien's death, the novel tells the story of Anne Burden who has somehow managed to survive nuclear and chemical war by living in a remote valley. Due to the valley's almost hermetic microclimate it's perhaps the last green place on Earth. The story itself is all about trust and betrayal and, typical for the dystopic vibe of the early 1970s, the novel ends in an uncertain escape for Anne into an irradiated wilderness that might also spell her doom.

The recommendation seemed apt for Fowler. *Z for Zacharia* in many ways encapsulates his interests and fascinations; the sci-fi inflected narratives of his videos and performances, the pathos of the animals he uses as actors, and the studied classicism of his photographic prints. Nature is in peril. But there is hope. Maybe. When I go to visit him at his home/studio the book comes up in conversation. "It was interesting you asked about sci-fi books the other day because *Z for Zacharia* was quite an influential book that I read as a child and that really relates to my work quite strongly," he says.

Fowler's apartment sits atop some shops in Sydney's inner west in a space that had once been a sweatshop, but is now artfully converted into a three-bedroom apartment, its kitchen decorated with op-shop prints of Vladimir Tretchikoff's *The Chinese Girl* aka *The Green Lady* (1950) and an array of framed, generic still lifes, seascapes and mountain scenes. Fowler shows me around his studio space and I recognise props and pieces of sets from old works — separating his bedroom from the studio are walls used in *Second Nature* (2008) but which are now serving as doors. They give the room the feel of a spaceship, albeit one that has been overrun with plants. Dominating the room, however, is the still-standing set for his most recent video *New World Order* (2013), a V-shaped slice of fake nature that looks like a zoo exhibit or a natural history museum display. As we regard its formidable presence, I ask Fowler if he works alone. "I got a scenic painter in for a few days and he did some finishing touches for me," he says. "But usually I do it all myself." The video is fifteen minutes long and shows a group of forlorn looking chickens that walk about the twisted roots of the jungle trees. When they open their beaks to squawk electronic noises come out. The video image wipes and pans over the set revealing new angles and details, suggesting the video is a remote observation. But who is watching?

New World Order is a major work in a career marked by projects that are both ambitious and meticulously realised. "That work was six months from the start of building the set to the finish of filming," says Fowler. "This is the first time I've had a studio at home where I could work on a piece for that period of time. It's really great. The last couple of video works I've had to do a lot of postproduction fixing things — this time

I had the chance to take my time and get everything right in set rather than during editing and post-production."

Although Fowler had been making videos, installations and doing performances for a number of years, it was videos such as *White Cock* and *White Australia* (both 2005) that really caught people's attention. The works were based around the use of animals and small-scale sets. In the first piece, a white rooster stands atop a perch against a cushioned background, the image wiping up and down, the rooster emitting what sounds like Morse code. In *White Australia*, white mice dart in and out of tubes in a green-tiled space, their movements seeming to alter a sine wave on the soundtrack.

I wonder if the relationship between man and nature had always been an interest to Fowler. "Yes, definitely," he says. "Probably from second year of undergraduate study I've been working on the idea of nature and culture. I think the specific ideas and themes jump around between works but there there's the same discourse. For the latest work, *New World Order*, it was a futuristic landscape. I was thinking of the landscape as post-apocalyptic, a post-human forest, where a whole new nature was evolving. A lot of the reason for exploring that is being really interested in the idea of an autonomous nature and a nature without human influence; an idea of discovery that doesn't really exist anymore, the idea of being able to go somewhere and discover a new nature, to find things that hadn't been seen before." So what is the attraction? What draws him to the theme? "Throughout my life this has been my experience — dislocation and discontent with the lack of possibilities that we're born into," Fowler says after a moment of thought. "We're born into a domesticated and civilised stricture and there are so few options to get out of that, or to be autonomous within the world. A lot of my work is based around this idea of our relationship with the natural world and the desire to be able to experience it in a free way. But it's equally about acting metaphorically and questioning our freedom."

Fowler's video *Goat Odyssey* (2006) was a project on a much bigger scale. The video is a series of connected vignettes: goats move around inside a set with neo-classical features, their bodies adorned with gold ropes and tassels. The animals interact as an exhaust fan rotates in the background. The effect is mesmerising. "In *Goat Odyssey* there are these white goats seen in a vacuum-sealed environment," he says. "The camera just goes endlessly around and the goats are clean and elaborately dressed, but they're just walking in circles. There is a sense of repetition and boredom and a lack of opportunity for anything else. I was using the goats as metaphors for us."

In *Goat Odyssey*, the action of the animals has an acutely emotional resonance for the viewer. And it is something that Fowler has experimented with in many of his works. While some of the videos have the feel of science fiction, and are curious for that reason, there's an emotional punch that is both fascinating but disturbing. For this viewer at least, Fowler's two-screen video *Hunger* (2007) is an emotionally

gut-wrenching experience. White lambs jostle and fight to get to milk dripping teats mounted in a black faux marble wall. The right hand screen depicts milk dripping on to the floor. The world conjured by the video is unrelentingly harsh and makes the viewer feel helpless watching it. “I guess it was pretty bleak in that way,” says Fowler. “I’m always interested in people’s reaction to it and so it’s interesting you say that. It was about the idea of the machine and living off of a machine. I am pushing it to extremes but it’s a metaphor for how we live as well.”

Although Fowler and I were born ten years apart, we share the bomb generation’s cultural memory of an always-immanent apocalypse. For a brief ten-year period from the end of the Cold War in 1989, the world was free to imagine a different kind of future. In many ways the popular imagination of that decade returned to a set of ideas and concepts that weren’t just pre-Cold War, they were pre twentieth century as well, but dressed up in the latest technological finery. Since the mid-1700s, Western culture had attempted to reconcile perception and reason and in the visual arts the concept of the sublime arose as a somewhat confusing idea about man’s relationship to nature, but which essentially recognised that there were forces bigger than us which in turn reminded us of our own mortality. In the 1990s the virtual world now stood in for nature and the technological sublime became an idea about technologies

of perception in movies, games and the web, new modes of seeing that were harbingers of a radical new future. There are dozens of examples of that trend, but the sci-fi movie *The Matrix* (1999) was probably the most conspicuous. Of course, that period was short lived because — post 9/11 and the ‘war on terror’ — we suddenly realised there would be no virtual world if the real world ceased to exist. Instead of the drama of a Hollywood movie like *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) in which the world is destroyed in a rapid succession of special effects, the world is slowly being boiled by climate change. The spectre of apocalypse has returned to haunt us and the question of the relationship between culture and nature has only become more acute. “From when I was young to now, so many things are different,” says Fowler. “I guess that’s because the idea of climate change plays a part in my work as another sense of apocalypse, and change, and the drying up of future possibilities where everything is becoming less rich and more the same.” This sense of crisis in conceptions of nature has changed the understanding of the relationship between humans and animals, but at the same time, Fowler is working at a metaphorical level, so how does he conceive of a narrative within his work? When terms like ‘post-apocalyptic’ are used it evokes a cultural understanding of a potential future place and time where these things are happening. “I think the way each project approaches the ideas is done from a new and different angle,” he says. “I imagine my work









as jumping around so that each work becomes a study of one possibility, so there's always a frustration and sense of doom. For me there's a lot of hope and excitement in that, although not necessarily for humanity, but for the world in general, in time and history and what will come next. In terms of narrative, each new work is an insight into a new possibility."

The science fictional trope of post-apocalyptic survival that runs through Fowler's videos, from *White Australia* and *Goat Odyssey to New World Order*, is an idea he has experimented with in performance installation pieces. The 2011 exhibition 'Awfully Wonderful' brought together a number of Australian artists who engage with a variety of sci-fi ideas and themes, and Fowler's *Anthropocene* (2011) saw the artist inhabit a stage-like set that again suggested a zoo enclosure or museum display. This time however, Fowler lived in a spherical cave on an island of green grass that was marooned in the centre of Performance Space's huge atrium. Living off canned foods and wearing a fur, and accompanied by a family of white rats, Fowler was a survivor of our uncertain future. The work was deliberately evocative of the post apocalyptic trope of survival, it was at once futuristic but it also had a deep-grained connection in the trope of apocalypse in Western culture. It seemed that he had set out to create an environment to evoke these ideas. "All my works are a fragment of some kind of bigger narrative. Part of the way I do that is to condense all these histories together. There are elements in there of the Palaeolithic and elements of the post apocalyptic, futuristic, and everything in between and seeing human history as one, mashing it up and seeing it as one thing. Building the sets comes first and is the most important element in the work. I do it a little bit subconsciously — that particular set was highly planned and built based on circles and spheres. It had an organic finish to it because it was hand built. Something happens when you put that level of geometry with some kind of natural, organic finish. It's a little bit sci-fi — and a little bit kitsch sci-fi too — I'm not exactly sure what happens — it's unsettling." The other big element of that work was that Fowler was being watched. School groups came to the show and clustered around the set. "My sets have an element of zoo exhibit in them and it really felt like it when I was in there. There were a lot of school groups, so there would be forty school kids clamouring around the edge and they would throw things at me to try to get me to react — and it was quite intense and you became this object."

Does Fowler think there's a same kind of relationship between audience and the work in other pieces that he's made? "I think the videos work quite differently than the performance installation," he says. "I think it's quite confronting for people to stare at another person. There are a few works where I've worked with people and that's why I find it so interesting working with animals because with animals you can create a totally different engagement with the audience. With all the video works that are using animals I've found that people will sit and watch a twenty minute

video all the way through and maybe watch it again. In *New World Order* the sense of the freedom of nature, a novelty of seeing something you've never seen before, a sense of boundlessness maybe, was what I was trying to engage with and to encourage the audience to focus on the work and be there, when they're 'in' the work, so other things start to happen, a questioning of whether it's real or not real. What are these animals? Why are they in this situation? It draws the audience in and asked questions. It unsettles them."

In Fowler's videos the animals are the subjects of the work. What are the ethical considerations when working with animals? "That's a tough one," he says. "I feel a responsibility for them. It is quite problematic. On a personal, emotional level I don't like having domestic animals around. I don't like feeling as though I am their 'keeper' and everything in their life depends on me. I don't like that level of responsibility. There have been different ways of working with animals. I've worked with animal trainers for a day but I find that doesn't work very well. I need to get to know the animal and have them on the set. Sometimes I borrow the animals for a few weeks and then return them. Often, as in the last work, I was buying the chickens at auction and then reselling them or giving them away. It's a funny one, buying chickens at auction. It's like a slave trade; their lives are totally up in the air. I take them back to the auction, and then they go back out into the world. I don't know how I feel about that." There might also be a question in people's minds about the agency of the animals within the work. "It's interesting that people don't raise that question very often. I think the reason they don't is based on purely aesthetic reasons. The animals look healthy and clean and the sets are smooth — and the way they move around the sets gives them the appearance of autonomy. I don't get them to do anything they wouldn't normally do. But at the same time I'm totally in control of them and in control of their destiny."

Ultimately it seems to me that Fowler's work is optimistic. Is it? After a long pause Fowler answers: "I think some of my works are optimistic. I think they are. Mostly. I think my works are mostly positive about the natural world and nature. But nature to me is energy and a process — it's not a thing. To me it doesn't matter if just about everything becomes extinct in the next several hundred years, which is quite possible, but there is going to be something left that will create a whole new world. I see humanity as a natural process anyway. I guess I'm looking at that optimistically and think that nature will continue and flourish, but I'm pessimistic about humanity in that we've enjoyed everything we have as if it were our birth right. Nature just happens. If everything becomes extinct, we have wild and feral cats and rats and some algae and insects and bacteria — all that will continue. Nature is still evolving. Unless we wipe out every last bacteria, life will continue, and it has a natural tendency to fill every niche and ecosystem. It'll happen again."

STURGEON



Hayden Fowler
New World Order 2013 (still)
High definition video, 15:17 min
Artbank collection, purchased 2013

