

'Original Character'

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Some say it started with the release of Paula Smith's Star Trek fanfic "A Trekkie's Tale", in 1972. The satirical short story is centered around Lieutenant Mary Sue, half Vulcan, half human and 15-year old Starfleet officer, who quickly sparks Kirk's love interest and Spock's intellectual admiration. She saves the day by rescuing the crew from an android prison and guides the ship into safety winning her a Nobel Prize while the others lie in sick bay stricken by an alien disease. In the end she dies tragically from the same disease with all crew members mourning around her death bed. Ever since, "Mary Sue" has been a generally derogatory term in fandom communities to expose characters that are too-good-to-be-true or overwritten, that obviously only serve as a wish fulfilment and proxy of the story's (often female and teenage) author. With a misogynist subtext, Mary Sue's are generally scorned as bad writing and for a supposed illegitimate alteration of an established fictional universe.

In the past years the "Mary Sue" phenomenon seems to have spread rapidly, not only feeding the narratives of mainstream writing and cinema itself, but serving as a template for the production cultural communities online. A way to write, paint or meme oneself into existing franchises, novels, comics or video games via fan art or fiction. The amateurish and oftentimes poorly executed attempts to appropriate culture via reproducing it is at once a paradigm model of mediating the generic, and the individual as well as a poignant metaphor for living in general. They expand culture at the fringes of culture and its minor narratives and characters, altering DNAs, swapping genders creating meme mutants and alternate universes without ever hoping to become canonised.

The popularity and urgency of these identity projects lead to the ubiquitous use of memes like "Original Character (do not steal)". The expression tags a personal appropriation of an original artefact reflecting on the paradoxes of contemporary cultural production concerning originality, creativity and ownership. The struggle to mediate distinction and adaptation, desire and cynicism, the personal and the generic. It embodies a condition of total identification and alienation with the surroundings of prefab lifestyle choices, branding, culture, humanity and nature, both an agency with and against collective intelligence. Fandom appropriation designates a soft mimetic stalking of the estranged cultural reality you find yourself in. The original artefact becomes original by means of copying, and by projecting onto the familiar something that does not belong, while the adaptation reveals that the original was always askew and arbitrary in the first place. The idea would be to create eerie doubles of what already exists. Like the enhanced original in Borges' infamous "Pierre Menard" – born out of total empathy – a copy that is a singularity. A distinct alternate universe, the otherness in a shared canon. A perfect contingency of a generic template – like a painting, a pizza, a leaf.

(Baptist Ohrtmann)

The exhibition has been organized by Olga Pedan.