Remix It Yourself.
A Do It Yourself Ethic

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Abstract

Within the transformation of the spectators' role, the crucial passage is from a view of art as object to one of art as relationships network, or simply as network. It is in fact this very passage that creates the conditions for the users to intervene, personally or collectively, over the creation of an artistic product. This point is crucial in many authors attempting to reconstruct the history of the liberation of the users from the, mainly modernist, condition of passive fruitors of cultural objects. What these excursus are lacking is another history, that of *do it yourself* meant not as an artistic, hence elitist, practice, but as a mass phenomenon. In this frame of reference, it is easy to notice how from the Fifties the desire to regain possession of a more direct relationship with things spreads, a desire that leads the Western workers to perform a series of activities without the help of professional workers and – mainly – without specific knowledge.

The attitude towards *do it yourself* is nowadays transformed into that of *remix it yourself*. The imperative of contemporary age is in fact to revise personally the huge amount of sources one is able to access, using the available tools.

The paper will try to address questions such as: is there any sense in making, as many do, a clear distinction between the activity of the amateurs and that of the professionals? What interests lie behind the continuous enhancement of the "creative existences" made possible by the spread of new technologies?

If it is true that thanks to the Internet the movement of information is no longer mediated (or, to better say it, new typologies of mediation have emerged) therefore one has to conclude that the distance between the producer and the user of the information, the two entities resulting from the modernist split, finally meet on the same side of the interconnected media galaxy. The transformation of the spectator into active subject is paralleled by the passage of art from object to a network of relationships, or simply as a network. It is this very passage that creates the conditions for users to intervene, personally or collectively, in the creation of an artistic product. This point is crucial to the work of Tatiana Bazzichelli, who identifies a *leitmotif* running through Cubist and Dadaist collage, Duchamp's ready-mades, the Fluxus movement, mail art, the punk attitude, Neoism, Plagairism and, extending to the 1990s, «when the net dynamics establishes itself on a mass level through computers and Internet» (Bazzichelli, 2008: 27). Of course, many of these moments are noted by other authors when discussing the liberation of users from a condition of passive consumption of cultural objects. In my opinion, what is lacking is a history that accounts for the *Do It Yourself* ethic as a mass phenomenon, rather than as an artistic, and hence elitist, practice. This ethic clearly emerges in the

1950s, in response to the progressive massification, specialization and automation of the production of *goods*. As the desire to regain possession of a more direct relationship with things spreads, Western workers are led to perform a series of activities (usually inside and around their homes) without the aid of professionals, and often without any specialist knowledge. Thanks to cinema in particular, the collective imaginary is pervaded with the image of the middle-class American male painting his garden fence on the weekend. Even if this precise act did not take place nearly as often in reality, it is probably quite easy for most of us to recall an object built by our parents or grandparents. In my personal experience, I recall that my father and mother found a happy meeting of their natures (one rational, the other artistic) by building and creatively painting wooden furniture, which then furnished the bedrooms in which my brothers and I spent our childhoods. I also recall treasuring the toys built by my grandfather (in particular a beautiful bow) more than those bought at a shop (at least until the first video game entered our house, an event symbolically matched with the death of that very grandfather); nor can I forget the tradition, popular in Naples, of making one's own *presepe*, a sort of papier-mâché set representing the birth of Jesus.

The Concept of the 'Bricoleur'

Obviously, the aim of this paper is not to provide a reconstruction of the DIY ethic. What I want to emphasize is the rooting of the newly emerging DIY ethic within (at least in the West) an earlier determination to make things using materials that are readily available (admittedly, these are not hard to find in an era of abundance) and knowhow, which is also easily accessible prior to the Internet era, as in the proliferation of DIY manuals. Thus, a history that discusses only the avant-garde or anti-avant-garde practices of *Do It Yourself* seems to me profoundly one-sided. We need to remind ourselves that this phenomenon extended, at one time, to a great number of individuals in Western society. The tendency to undertake domestic repairs, build objects of the most varied nature, to construct models and prototypes, as well as all the activities included within the generic word 'hobby', has been extensively studied by philosophers, and by theorists within the discipline of Cultural Studies. In particular, it is worth mentioning Claude Lévi-Strauss's reflections upon the concept of the '*bricoleur*'. First, it is important to note that although the French anthropologist identifies this attitude in non-Western societies (Lévi-Strauss relates the *bricolage* to the mythical thinking: it is in fact the method by which primitive organized their myths, their worldview, their language, their society and – ultimately – their thinking and its rules), his reflections seem to me to regard amateurs in general. They are precious precisely because they trace the distance between the specialized practices of the engineer (a metaphor of the industrial universe) and the way of thinking and working, halfway between concrete and abstract, of the '*bricoleur*'. In Lévi-Strauss's view, '*bricoleur*' are those who work with their hands, using different tools than those used by professionals: «The '*bricoleur*' is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks; but, unlike the engineer, he does not subordinate each of them to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project. His universe

of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do with 'whatever is at hand', that is to say with a set of tools and materials which is always finite and is also heterogeneous because what it contains bears no relation to the current project, or indeed to any particular project, but is the contingent result of all the occasions there have been to renew or enrich the stock or to maintain it with the remains of previous constructions or destructions» (Lévi-Strauss, 1966: 17). The set of the 'bricoleur's' means is «specialized up to a point, sufficiently for the 'bricoleur' not to need the equipment and knowledge of all trades and professions, but not enough for each of them to have only one definite and determinate use. They each represent a set of actual and possible relations; they are 'operators' but they can be used for any operations of the same type» (Lévi-Strauss, 1966: 18).

'Bricoleurs' act mainly as collectors, before acting they take stock of their tools and imagine how they might use them – as Lévi-Strauss (1966: 18) writes: «He interrogates all the heterogeneous objects of which his treasury is composed to discover what each of them could signify». The most characteristic feature, however, is the rearrangement of pre-existing elements, the leftovers of other works, rather than attempting to create something from nothing. In a similar way, the amateurs of the digital age conduct their own acts of "*bricolage*" by assembling the "already seen": that which has already been openly transmitted and displayed in the media universe. They constantly reuse, reassemble and re-transmit messages (signs) that are already present, thereby establishing new uses, senses and trajectories yet – and this is the aspect I wish to highlight – the acts of the '*bricoleur*' serve the ends of a system of massification, such as the present one, in which signs are repeated whether or not they have a meaningful referent. The contemporary '*bricoleur*' takes part of the flow and participates in its unceasing progression. From this point of view, *bricolage* is representative of the modes of production of the schizophrenic, who is «the universal producer» (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004). For Deleuze and Guattari (who refer explicitly to Lévi-Strauss's concept in *Anti-Oedipus*), the binary logic of the «desiring-machine» is always: «... a flow-producing machine, and another machine connected to it that interrupts or draws off part of this flow ... the first machine is in turn connected to another whose flow it interrupts or partially drains off, the binary series is linear in every direction. Desire constantly couples continuous flows and partial objects that are by nature fragmentary and fragmented. Desire causes the current to flow, itself flows in turn, and breaks the flows» (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004: 5-6).

The subject becomes the *desiring machine*, acquiring a *human consistence* only as productive process; in the very moment it cuts into that flow, it becomes the source of another flow and the agent of its dissemination.

From 'Bricoluer' to Remixer

Although it is essential to connect contemporary amateur practices of recombination to the '*bricoleur*' of the previous century, it is equally necessary to attend to the specificity of the present age. In this direction moves Lev Manovich with the concept of «aesthetics of hybridity» that, according to him, dominates the contemporary design

universe (Manovich, 2008). Manovich reasons that, compared to the early 1990s software today tends towards a generalized compatibility between files generated by different programs. As it becomes easier to 'import' and 'export' material between different forms of software, similar techniques and strategies are required, regardless of the specific nature of the project, or the medium of the final output. In conclusion, hybridity is the aesthetic form of that which Manovich terms the present «software age», in which «the compatibility between graphic design, illustration, animation, video editing, 3D modelling and animation, and visual effects software plays the key role in shaping visual and spatial form» (Manovich, 2008: 175).

Two considerations must follow. Firstly, that the rapid shift over the last decades from one dominant aesthetic form to another has concomitantly decreased the part that humans have to play in triggering such changes. In fact, recent aesthetic transformations have not formed in response to social, political or cultural turmoil, let alone as the out-pourings of "a lonesome genius". Rather, they have been predominantly imposed by the evolution of technology and media. It is pointless to insist that men and women continue to underlie technological development for, rather than inaugurating aesthetic transformations, humans are increasingly bound to follow the transformations brought by technological blocks – entities that, under some conditions, tend to become autonomous.

The second consideration arises from the fact that technology has given many people the opportunity to create, modify or hybridize media objects. The question then becomes: How are individuals using this power? Or, what are they giving life to? The answer appears a simple one: they give life to remixes. In fact, remix is an evolutionary duty, arising from every human's innate need to personally transform the materials available to them. If true, this might explain why the practice of remix is more necessary to the contemporary age than ever before: humans have never had so many materials *in their hands*. If culture has always evolved through variation, selection and repetition, we are inhabiting a remix culture *par exellence,* especially if one considers the simplicity and speed of computerized cut and paste routines, or the intuitiveness of the editing process within Photoshop or After Effects. As a result, contemporary individuals have no other option but to operate upon pre-existing materials. One must conclude, then, that the *Do It Yourself* attitude has morphed into that of *Remix It Yourself*. The imperative is to personally revise and recombine the vast amount of accessible sources, using whatever tools and knowhow are available. The 'bricoleur' has become the remixer.

Amateur and Professional in the Light of Remix

Having clarified this point, we can ask: Does it make sense to retain the distinction between amateur and professional activities, as many wish to do, or is it more appropriate to consider these activities as different expressions of the sociocultural and socioeconomic dynamics triggered by the evolution of media? Manovich believes it is inappropriate to assume qualitative differences between professional and amateur remix practices (which he, like Henry Jenkins, defines as 'vernacular'). In fact, he writes, both are «equally affected by the same software technologies» (Manovich, 2008: 247). The

difference is merely quantitative: «A person simply copying parts of a message into the new email she is writing, and the largest media and consumer company recycling designs of other companies are doing the same thing – they practice remixability» (Manovich, 2008: 248). I am in full agreement with this argument: after all, one of the main features of remix aesthetics is the loss of any distinction between producer and consumer, for they both hybridize the sources they access.

Oliver Laric, a Turkish artist, creates art that is emblematic of the aesthetic short circuit between professional and domestic practices. Many of Laric's works are the result of assembling fragments of amateur videos sourced from YouTube or other file-sharing platforms. For example, *5050* (2007), is an edited remix of 50 home videos of people rapping songs by the famous rap artist 50 Cent. A particularly popular mash-up is the more recent *Touch My Body - Green Screen Version* (2008). This work is a webpage consisting of a collection of video remixes of Mariah Carey's song of the same name. These remixes, taken from disparate corners of the world, are all based on the cinematographic technique termed chroma key (but also 'green screen' or 'blue screen') which place the American pop star in front of a background of heterogeneous and often puzzling moving images. By playing all the webpage's videos simultaneously – a temptation I could not resist – one gains a very effective representation of the aesthetic redundancy that characterizes contemporary culture, as well as of the dissonance of the everyday media landscape. *Touch My Body* is also an excellent proof of how, in contemporary aesthetic expressions, it is impossible to distinguish between the contributions of "professionals" and "amateurs". In the example of *Touch My Body*, who is the amateur? Is it the producers of the videos used by Laric: people using techniques and tools that ten years ago would have been the envy of Hollywood producers? Or is it Laric himself, who gives life to his art using the same modalities of millions (perhaps billions) of domestic home video producers?

A perfect picture of the of progressive blurring of any distinction between producer and consumer is provided by Californian artist Natalie Bookchin's video installation *Mass Ornament* (2009). The title of the work explicitly recalls the text in which Siegfried Kracauer associates the synchronized acts typical of the dances of the first decades of the twentieth century with the mechanized gestures of the processes of industrial production. Bookchin's premise is that, if these dances exhibited features of Fordism and Taylorism, the domestic dance performances so popular on YouTube embody the spirit of post-Fordism, a socioeconomic context in which the 'masses' are no longer chained to the production line, but are tied instead to digital communication tools. Thus, Bookchin creates a video constructed of horizontal strips of YouTube clips of amateur dancers attempting to emulate professional dancers such as Beyonce. Again, we might ask who is the amateur and who is the professional?

This question is unanswerable if one retains the traditional concepts of professional and amateur.

If the renunciation of originality is widely accepted, it is nevertheless common to find the "personalized" acts of revision and remix described as creative acts. It is easy

to see why creativity is so emphasized: the wish to affirm one's own personality and to show the world one's own creative spirit is the bait that triggers the trap of the concatenated global media spectacle. The same motive underlies the purchase of tools and software that offer the promise of 'digital creativity': hence Sony's, Phillips' or Adobe's ceaseless call to creativity. After all, as NigelThrift observes, for corporate managers, «creativity becomes a value *in itself*» (Thrift, 2005: 133), a quality that managers must learn how to cope with if they are to survive in a world where commercial advantage is always temporary, and usually very brief.

Practices of Everyday Life

Less understandable is the frequent praise of the creative lives made possible by the birth of the digital. In recent years, rather than the liberation of creative energies, what has taken place is the expropriation of the spare time of increasingly larger proportions of the population. We move ever further away from the Marxist ideal of overcoming the dichotomy between work and free time – if this overcoming has taken place at all, it has been in the direction of including free time within work time. The effect of the creativity myth has been to add a new kind of mostly unpaid work to the daily lives of individuals who, for example, publish and index pictures on social networks, or who review products, or otherwise nurture the success of enterprises based on crowdsourcing (Howe, 2008). Rather than focusing on the expropriation of free time by the so-called 'creative industries' (Lovink & Rossiter, 2007), however, I would like to focus further on reasons for questioning the concept of creativity.

One must be wary of drawing a distinction between creating something new and revising pre-existing materials. This distinction clearly fails to shed any light on contemporary practices, as it credits with the mark of creativity only the activity of the *creator ex nihilo*. One must begin with the premise that the form of creativity involved in contemporary practices is fundamentally different from the Romantic and modernist injunction to *make it new*.

Utilizing de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Manovich states that tactical creativity can be defined as that which «expects to have to work on things in order to make them its own, or to make them "habitable"» (Manovich, 2008: 276). Contemporary remixes, in addition to being released from the hard distinction between *facere* and *creare*, occupy a position peculiar to this point in history: prior to any act of their own, they are already within an endless flow of data, an aesthetic flow fuelled by the logic underlying digital technology and that increasingly encompasses contemporary existence. Human beings however are not destined to be simply immersed in digital technologies, they have to commit to this dimension, in order for their movements to widen its borders. Hearing the siren's song, calling us to shape "reality" according to our own particular taste, we are not only acting as a «tenant in the aesthetic orbit» (Baudrillard, 1996: 5), we are also re-creating, feeding and encouraging that very aesthetic flow. In conclusion, if the nature of this flow leads to action in the form of data manipulation, the choice is no longer between action and passive contemplation: if

they are still possible, any choice or free will takes place upstream, at the point of choosing between digital inclusion or exclusion. Once digitally included, no form of resistance is even thinkable: one becomes a part of the flow, and lives among the elements it is made of. For this reason, I am sceptical of the claim that remixers are forced into action by some *internal creative drive*: their acts are in fact driven by the flow in which they are immersed.

Remix as Evolutionary Duty

Remix is not a choice, it involves all domains of human action and it is also a constitutive element of history, indeed both biological and social evolution takes place by means of minor variations, and then through repetition. To put the point another way, evolution requires us to mix the elements of culture according to our needs – as Anthony Giddens might state: *one uses the past to build the future* (Giddens, 1994: 64). Also, it could be assumed that, for humans, reality exists at the moment that we give shape to it and before that moment it is not recognizable because it is too complex or chaotic. This becomes ever more true for those streams of digital data, those endless connections among nodes in the Net, those constant *movement* among interfaces and databases that are simply beyond human understanding. In order to relate to this reality, it needs to be given a shape.

Individuals are forced to think in terms of post-production and remix, if they are to be able to face the everyday overload of digital information. The materials are so many that they simply beg to be remixed and hybridized. In addition, the massive spreading of post-production tools allows sampling of sources and overlapping options unthinkable up to a few years ago. If everything is so *handy*, so extemporaneous, and so amusing, why not remix it?

To use Manovich's terminology, it is the software that *takes command*: one is "creative" because digital tools allow (force) one to be so; one remixes because the sheer volume of cultural materials makes mere observation impossible; one assembles layered images because the Photoshop interface demands it; one publishes on a blog because the software underlying the blogosphere makes this such a pleasant and rapid process. In conclusion, we remix because it is our evolutionary duty to do so. Even the most *pur et dur* subjects will not be able to avoid the action of all the subtle memes they will encounter: and one of the most virulent of these memes, that of creativity itself, will sooner or later force us all to be creative. The alternative is to live as a hermit in the desert, free from the action of the global media. Even in this case, it is difficult to resist the temptation to turn the empty Coke can, left by an adventurous tourist, into a useful and colourful tool of some kind. Is this not a remix as well? ✍

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