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## Chapter 1

# The Aesthetic Object



# 1. A Break in Transmission: Art, Appropriation and Accumulation

*The world now becomes the warehouse of jetsam where the uncanny fishes for its scarecrows.*

GIORGIO AGAMBEN<sup>1</sup>

In Woody Allen's 1980 film *Stardust Memories*, a director is sitting in front of a live audience answering questions about his latest film. One audience member asks if a particular scene in his latest movie is an homage to the original version of *Frankenstein*. The director replies: "An homage? No, we just stole it outright." For a brief moment, this joke becomes a sly admission allowing us to glimpse the logic of appropriation in terms of aesthetic or intertextual poaching. For indeed, what separates an homage from a burglary, other than a stated intention by the artist? And who is to judge the consequences of one over the other?

In this article we would like to briefly contextualize the link between appropriation and the notion of private property (via ownership and authorship), before arguing that this link has been dissolved in the cultural logic of contemporary aesthetic production. Our motivation is itself linked to a desire to escape the categories of original and copy which, despite celebrated claims to the contrary, continue to privilege the quasi-sacral realm of artistic production – including music – while simultaneously greasing the wheels of the market.

Appropriation implies a form of violence, a taking or annexing of something to oneself with or without the sanction of the law. The dictionary definition also implies motivation, namely "To make, or select as, appropriate or suitable to," or "To make proper, to fashion suitably." Appropriation thus unfolds according to the logic of suitability, utility or relevance, and therefore smuggles in a number of notions related to aesthetic justification and indeed, to continue the equation made above, rationalizing robbery.

Here we would like to introduce a loose chronological genealogy for this wider process, beginning with allusion and moving through appropriation to sampling.

- 1) *allusion* is best defined in poetics and philosophies of language, in which it has had a place for over 2500 years. Whether in terms of direct nomination, turn of phrase, rhythm, form, theme or media, the new piece of work refers, either explicitly or more covertly, to one or several previous works or traditions. Allusion is just one technique among others, however; it is not a principle or necessary condition of all composition, but rather a *possibility* of linkage.
  
- 2) *appropriation* can be understood as providing an emblematically modernist slant to allusion. With appropriation, one steals, and steals explicitly – but also unapologetically, as if the evidence of this theft was essential to the appreciation of the work. This means that the audience and makers of modernist work share a tradition, a bundle of techniques, elements, and forms that have recognizable, definite, and nameable points of origin. It is these origins that are transgressed by the modernist work of art. Appropriation ruptures with the tradition in order to make you think again about tradition. Appropriation thereby makes the relation of a work to others in the tradition evident, in order to reopen the question about the very meaning, status and limits of the tradition itself. This is also to say that appropriation becomes a *principle* integral to modernist aesthetic production. To take a very famous example from modern art: Pablo Picasso at one stage returns to Velásquez's *Las Meninas*, which he submits to all sorts of painterly distortions and refigurations.
  
- 3) *sampling* is an emblematically postmodernist form of production. Whereas both allusion and appropriation are still tied, relatively directly, to the work of genius, to a work which transforms and individualizes elements that come from elsewhere, sampling makes an individual anonymity the very condition for all work. Sampling takes place by means of multiples–without–proper–names. There is no central tradition; there are no specific works that everyone has to have understood; there are no names that retain any absolute centrality. No religion, culture, nation, *ethnos*, etc. can totally dominate cultural production. There are no materials that guarantee that a particular work is, say, jewelry – which can now be made out of literally anything. Many works are composed totally of samples that have been taken as is, slowed down or speeded up, inverted or distorted beyond recognition. Sampling not only recomposes different elements, but different *ways* of recomposing elements: it is a very complex and labile procedure. In a way, sampling totally erases the distinctions between original and copy, artist and thief, the individual and the

series – in fact, it renders these distinctions secondary if not irrelevant. Sampling also presumes that there are no longer rigorous distinctions between, say, poetry, ceramics, painting, prose, design, etc. But it is therefore neither a simple *possibility* for production (as with allusion), nor a *principle* of production (as with appropriation); it is rather a *commonplace*, the universal and unexceptional basis for all production. (See chapter 5 for a more extensive discussion of such commonplaces.)

Thus, in the fields of cultural production (writing, craft, art, design), something very serious has happened, and is still happening. The value (both aesthetic and economic) of so-called "culture" has become uncertain; the places and people who produce and consume it are at once proliferating and disappearing; its future cannot be ensured. And it is the prevalence of sampling which has triggered this significant shift. Whereas both allusion and appropriation connect to the legacy of genius, incorporating elements that come from both beforehand and elsewhere, sampling threatens to dissolve all distinctions between the work and the environment from which it derives. Tradition no longer holds a central place, and there is no canon which the audience, reader or listener is assumed to be familiar with. Suddenly, every work of art is sucked into the vortex of the public domain. So while Stendhal could amiably claim to be borrowing an idea or anecdote from a friend or colleague, the nineteenth-century reader had no reason to doubt that the great author would return either the tale or the favour in good time. Nowadays we have the situation presented in *Seinfeld* where a successful businessman must buy stories from slacker *schlemiels* in order to fill-out his memoirs.

The one who appropriates does so for a reason. They perpetrate appropriation through an act of the will, for purposes more apparent than obscure. It is a dialogic response to a conversation which has usually been going on since before the artist was born. Allusion, appropriation and sampling have *always* been co-present in the field of cultural possibilities, so when we speak of a chronological basis, we are designating their relative (symbolic) dominance in the representative work of particular periods.<sup>2</sup> The capital-A Archive of visual art, literature or music has now splintered into a plethora of sub-archival signs and symptoms which are linked only by the idiosyncrasies of the critic and practitioner, reflecting the shattered genealogies which comprise our everyday relationship to the semiotic universe. The medium is no longer the message, but the media, plural.

In the following discussion we will rely largely on artists working with sound or music in order to illustrate the notion that appropriation is giving away to the logic of sampling, because – ironically enough – we believe that this wider aesthetic shift to be most visible in the music world, both on the fringes and the heart of the music industry.

## 1. Music is One Rotted Note

*Transmission is forgetting. This is the Epimethean structure: the experience of accumulated faults that are forgotten as such.*

BERNARD STIEGLER<sup>3</sup>

Consider the example of Bay Area turntablist DJ Shadow. His 1996 album *Entroducing* was hailed a masterpiece, and he himself was often referred to as a genius in the music press. The fact that he did not play one note only made the album more astonishing, given that he had sculpted a remarkably coherent symphony from the various archives of his collection: soul, funk, hip hop, heavy metal, alternative rock, sixties balladry, opera, etc. The mixing studio thus becomes a giant loom on which he has woven the musical threads of the last four decades. What is so remarkable about *Entroducing* is that once you have heard it, you find it almost impossible to believe that these heterogeneous elements came from an earlier source and completely different context. Pushing Derrida's logic of the supplement to its limit, DJ Shadow works from the palette of the past and recombines these sounds so that a subliminal one-bar keyboard refrain from Björk acts as the skeleton for a completely new composition. In contrast to allusion and appropriation, there is no feedback loop to the original Björk track; in fact, it took us at least twenty listens to recognize it. DJ Shadow's method and skill are such that he has hijacked the sample into his own aural *vision*, as if we could return to Björk's album and find the keyboard missing.

The dependence on metaphors of palette and loom already reveals something about the tradition in which DJ Shadow places himself. There is a swift double movement which takes away the notion of the auteur with one hand, while replacing it with the other. Indeed, allow us to appropriate earlier writings in the mode of breathless rock critic:

DJ Shadow has given us the greatest movie of the 1990s. The strange thing, however, is that it comes in the form of a compact disc, and is best experienced with the eyes closed (preferably wearing headphones) ... One of the first samples is a male voice claiming that "the music's coming through me," and there is no doubt that DJ Shadow (real name, Josh Davis) is something of a channeller ... He does not use a synthesizer, he is a synthesizer – a cultural node sifting through the detritus and dejecta of postmodern America and turning it into 'solid gold.' This is a 'meta' version of the Situationist strategy of *détournement* and *bricolage*, no less political for its aesthetic aspirations. It uses technology to valorize the organic, and in doing so enacts Heidegger's elusive point that "the essence of technology is nothing technological."<sup>4</sup>

We admit this passage relies on the familiar notion of the Death of the Author, replacing it with a vaguely Kant-meets-Deleuzian model of author-function or node-s(h)ifter. The very gesture of writing an homage to DJ Shadow, however, speaks of the modernist impulse to identify, locate and unpack genius. It is implicitly claimed that he is a master of his materials, thereby subscribing to a barnacled notion of authorship and, by extension, ownership. On the one hand, he is merely, to quote Marshall McLuhan, "the sex organs of the machine world," and on the other, he is the fetishistic point of coalescence, making patterns out of sampled sounds.

When a band covers a song, they are borrowing it in the mode of Stendhal: a form of *allusion*. When Beck references everything from Hot Chocolate to the Rolling Stones, he is *appropriating* them for his own dialogic project; keeping them in quotation marks. When DJ Shadow uses Morriconi, he is *sampling*, because the quotation marks are dissolved and their original context effaced.

For more examples of the latter, we could quickly refer off-stage, as it were, to a loose group of recomposers: artists such as Aphex Twin, Squarepusher, Mouse on Mars, Oval, Bisk, The Avalanches, Negativland, Prefuse 73, and other proponents of the relatively new "illbient," "laptop" and "glitch" genres. These names represent a small slice of the avant-garde of recombinant music (or, to follow Paul Mann, the "avant-garde effect"). Their experiments in sound: recording the magnified mating calls of termites and then looping them to the glitch beat of a damaged CD, for instance, or insane arrhythmic beats, seem to qualify as postmodernist aesthetic practice. They seem in sharp contrast to DJ Shadow's organic coherence. (How, for instance, are we to tell a genuine processing fault from a deliberate one on our glitch CDs? Are such distinctions at all valid anymore?)

To refer back to our genealogy, however, and in contrast to DJ Shadow, they themselves are revealed as the true modernists, in their teleological, marginal approach. These artists, or at least the critics who interpret them, see this kind of sampling as building bridges to an imagined future where the distinctions between sound and music would be far less rigorous (à la *musique concrète*).<sup>5</sup> It could be argued, then, that DJ Shadow's majestic recompositions are thus more faithfully postmodernist, in that they no longer play the linear game of pushing the envelope, or painfully straddling the bleeding edge. *Entroducing* illuminates the structure of the contemporary moment in its stagnant restlessness. *Déjà entendu*.

Postmodernity changes things again: there are no longer any ontological distinctions between matter, form, thought, etc. – there are just multiple processes, of no definite or particular value *in themselves*, and with no definite origin or direction. Hence the new priority accorded sampling, considered as inflection and



torsion of multiplicity. "Design" is the most prestigious name given to the varieties of sampling in the contemporary first world.

Negativland, however, came up against the legal limits of this statement when they sampled famous American radio disc-jockey Casey Casem talking off-air about the pompous irrelevance of U2, and worked it into a bastardized version of their single, "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For." The copyright saga which followed not only exposed the snivelling hypocrisy and humourlessness of Bono and the Boys, but also the persistent power of private property in aesthetic production.

The explosion of both authorized and anonymous remixes suggests that the tension between public domain music and the struggle to retain royalties once a commodity has been launched will reach breaking point very soon, if it has not done so already. The high-profile battles surrounding Napster only emphasize this painful break with received notions of authorship and archival activity. "Ripping," as it is currently called, unmasks the logic of sampling in its complete indifference to creative control or ownership. In fact, it exposes the so-called artist as the original appropriators, since they annex the flux of sound into their own (perhaps imagined?) territory for the sake of financial gain. (A point already enacted and critiqued by Duchamp.) The viral logic of the market, the industry and cultural communication itself undoes its own desire for profit through the dissolution of juridical boundaries. The dia-logic of appropriation becomes the multivalent illogic of sampling.<sup>6</sup>

Questions, however, as always, remain. When we download an MP3 of Metallica's *Master of Puppets*, for instance, and proclaim it to be artistic appropriation, how are we to be distinguished from Sherry Levine? Or what if we download the entire *Entroducing* album and then release it under our own name? As Borges said, regarding the man who reproduces a fragment of *Don Quixote*: "The text of Cervantes and that of Menard are verbally identical, but the second is almost infinitely richer."<sup>7</sup>

## 2. The Girl From Ipanema vs. The Woman From Iceland

*We are all obsessed with high fidelity, with the quality of musical 'reproduction.' At the consoles of our stereos, armed with our tuners, amplifiers and speakers, we mix, adjust settings, multiply tracks in pursuit of a flawless sound. Is this still music? Where is the high fidelity threshold beyond which music disappears as such? It does not disappear for lack of music, but because it has passed this limit point; it disappears into the perfection*

*of its materiality, into its own special effect. Beyond this point, there is neither judgement nor aesthetic pleasure. It is the ecstasy of musicality, and its end.*

JEAN BAUDRILLARD<sup>8</sup>

A kind of "negative appropriation" in fact leads to the recent explosion of unauthorized "backyard editing," which is not only limited to the realm of music. A quick search of the Internet will reveal various home versions of George Lucas' *The Phantom Menace*, in which hardcore fans, true to the original trilogy, delete the presence of the detested character Jar Jar Binks, who is commonly perceived as a woeful comic impostor (in which case, the same process should perhaps be used to eradicate the plague of Ewoks which infest *The Return of the Jedi*). Similarly, video stores in the American South have taken it upon themselves to censor the (barely steamy) scene between Leonardo di Caprio and Kate Winslet in *Titanic*; presumably in order to make the film even more palatable for God-fearing, sex-hating families. In these instances, copyright law seems under-prepared to deal with parties that merely excise certain sections of a film or album, rather than the usual threat of copying without authorization.<sup>9</sup>

The question then becomes inseparable from the artwork's vulnerability to manipulation, and sovereignty itself is at stake. An email from a friend, Adam Sebire, wrestles with the notions introduced by Baudrillard above, especially in relation to the current overlaps between analogue and digital technologies (in which, for instance, we hear the crackling sound of vinyl being sampled for compact disc, presumably to make it sound "warmer"). Sebire admits

I'm still troubled by an Astrud Gilberto CD I purchased last week for \$20, featuring a version of "Girl from Ipanema" with quite noticeable feedback on the recording ... maybe this is the music industry's answer to so-called Reality TV's deliberately wobbly camerawork and grainy pictures? Does anybody question the Reality claims of the Pentagon's ghostbuster-green night-vision pool footage from Afghanistan? No, it's grainy and wobbly; but there are still plenty of people who look at the fixed, tripod shots of the moon landing and find "evidence" (e.g. the USA flag that looks like it's fluttering in the wind) to proclaim that it was all staged in a NASA studio! So does the "Girl from Ipanema" suddenly become so much more real if we hear her dodgy mike technique sampled 44,100 times a second?

The question remains as valid as ever, more than half a century after Benjamin's epoch-making inquiry into the aura of reproduction itself.

Returning to Björk, however, we can see how her latest album, *Vespertine*, represents a new triumph of mutual appropriation, sampling and collaboration. Indeed, her official website thanks a programmer who emailed "a rhythmic movement of about 32 beats in the middle eighth of the first single, *Hidden Place*." This is a very different way of incorporating the work of other people than the traditional reliance on studio musicians or established samples, benefiting from a network of technological tinkerers, all of whom make a donation to the finished product (which, of course, is never really "finished" – one of the radical consequences of digital technologies).<sup>10</sup>

The fact that Björk collaborates with many different people, and indeed, that they may physically be on the other side of the planet, suggests that we are dealing with an emerging twenty-first century conception of expression and artistic practice, which may eventually even alter our received notions of subjectivity. For while it is impossible to deny that Björk's album is an intensely personal statement, neither can it be ignored that it is the fruit of interpersonal penetration of one form or another.

This album was not recorded in a studio, but in private and domestic spaces, mostly on her own laptop. Thus, she could programme a beat while in her kitchen in Iceland, and then lay down some vocals while in a friend's bathroom in Spain. It therefore becomes difficult to draw the line between Björk the "genius artist," who excels in expressing her internal world through music, and Björk the organizing principle, who idiosyncratically tethers together a galaxy of contributions all which speak of the context from which they have been lifted. On the one hand, she withdraws into the comfort of domesticity and familiarity, and on the other, she encourages global affiliations which challenge and expand her aural vision.

To listen to *Vespertine* is thus to enter an alien Björkscape, à la *Being John Malkovich* (for which she wrote the signature song). It is a portal to another subjectivity, which is not in fact an autonomous and isolated world, but a psyche which is a spliced continuum; whereby no one can confidently cite a beginning or end. For while she is constantly represented in the media as unique – an eccentric star – her work is a convincing statement for the benefits of opening oneself to impersonal effects. "Björk" is just as much the product of Chris Cunningham, Matmos or any number of other collaborators, as an island unto herself. And perhaps this is how we should think of collaboration. Not as the middle-point where two individuals meet, but rather the space in which individuals are reproduced and reconfigured (since the person doing the collaborating is the fluxing sum of previous collaborations).

### 3. Music Has the Right to Children

*To quote a text means to interrupt its context.*

WALTER BENJAMIN<sup>11</sup>

The legal crisis prompted by sampling actually responds to a deeper crisis surrounding the notion of cultural transmission, specifically the historical production and reception of art. Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben pinpoints this distressingly novel situation with Walter Benjamin, and his unfinished compendium made up exclusively of quotations. In *The Man Without Content*, Agamben reads this project as a symptom of the loss of tradition, meaning:

that the past has lost its transmissibility, and so long as no new way has been found to enter into a relation with it, it can only be the object of accumulation from now on. In this situation, then, man keeps his [sic] cultural heritage in its totality, and in fact the value of this heritage multiplies vertiginously. However, he loses the possibility of drawing from this heritage the criterion of his actions and his welfare and thus the only concrete place in which he is able, by asking about his origins and his destiny, to found the present as the relationship between past and future.<sup>12</sup>

According to Agamben, "the castle of culture has now become a museum," and art no longer possesses the power to transmit culture from generation to generation. The modern citizen finds himself wedged between, "on the one hand, a past that incessantly accumulates behind him and oppresses him with the multiplicity of its now-indecipherable contents, and on the other hand a future that does not yet possess and that does not throw any light on his struggle with the past."<sup>13</sup>

Such a situation has the advantage (or disadvantage, depending on your perspective) of automatically disqualifying any attempt to label a work of art as "dated," or even "retro." This label – whether figured negatively or positively – relies on a sense of linear history, or at least a concept of mutually legible fashion cycles. The great aesthetic whirlpool in which we currently find ourselves neither validates nor rejects any particular recent epoch. As the catwalk proves, the 1960s, 70s, 80s, and 90s all co-exist – some revivals lasting longer than the decade which inspired it – while designers claim their own randomly idiosyncratic whims to be the spirit of the times. To dismiss someone or something on the basis of "that's so five-minutes ago," is thus more a reflection of the psyche of the person who says it than a comment on the *Zeitgeist* as a (fragmented) whole.

Brian Massumi feels compelled to describe this status quo as "an entropic

trashbin of outworn modes that refuse to die,"<sup>14</sup> positing a will-to-accumulate within cultural garbage: the refusal of refuse, itself. Indeed, it would be an incredible challenge for a future sociologist or music critic to distinguish between, say, the Human League (as a quintessential 1980s New Romantic band), and Zoot Woman (a note-perfect pastiche of this genre, playing today). For while we have been through many cycles, evolutions and revolutions in the two decades separating these two bands – as well as several layers of irony and post-irony – any perceptible cultural "progress" is wiped clean by deadpan mimesis and appropriation.

As academics, we are only too familiar with the frustration of this incessant accumulation, and the frassic futility it seems to produce. After all, a frightening percentage of contemporary art and criticism is indistinguishable from the compulsive toilings of the dung beetle. Jacques Attali positively spins this situation as "composition," whereas Michel Maffesoli prefers the term "saturation." In *After the Orgy*, "exhaustion" is offered as a trope of paradoxical potentiality, citing all the divergent approaches of the artists mentioned above as meaningful (i.e., somehow not pointless) exercises in both de- and reconstructive bricolage.<sup>15</sup>

The anxiety of influence has given away to full-blown panic – to what DJ Greyboy calls "dealing with the Archive" – and few artists work outside the pressure of this accumulation. In fact, this pressure may itself be the very condition of the contemporary work, like a fast-forward cartoon of carbon into diamond. Production and appropriation have become confused to the point of fusion, as have design and art. There is no distinction between designer and artist outside the social context of production (which is relatively meaningless, if we look for immanent answers in the work of art itself).

Take the example of Michael Craig-Martin, whose work entitled *Oak Tree* consists of a glass half-full of water on a glass mantelpiece affixed to a wall. The artist claims that anybody can have this masterpiece in their house so long as they follow his guidelines. Although the so-called original can be found in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, other more or less identical versions can theoretically be found in houses around the world according to a principle not too far removed from that which made IKEA a giant global corporation. When interviewed on television, the artist was asked what he would do if someone assembled the same elements in the same way in order to show it in their own exhibition. "Well," he answered, smiling in acknowledgment of the niggling irony and latent logic of the art world. "That would of course be a fake."<sup>16</sup>

If sampling traces the horizon of Agamben's "mere accumulation," then its viral nature points to a potential breaking of the historical deadlock that we find ourselves in. Viruses, after all, don't exactly respect somatic or geographic borders.

In contrast to our opinion that *Entroducing* is our greatest movie, J.G. Ballard offers the Mona Lisa. He also believes that Gray's *Anatomy* is our finest novel. This Ebola-like transgeneric bleeding of aesthetic categories is, for some, the apocalyptic death-knell of Art and the simultaneous triumph of design.<sup>17</sup> (One need only glance at that Bible of aesthetic implosion, *Wallpaper\** Magazine, for evidence of this perspective.) For others, this moment represents a joyful clearing of the decks to make way for new definitions and alternative modes of production. (Of course, we hesitate to use the term expression.) Indeed, perhaps sampling has already given way to ripping, underscoring William Gibson's oft-quoted maxim, the street always finds its own use for things.

#### 4. The Stuff That Surrounds You

In keeping with the topic at hand, we feel it only appropriate to finish by appropriating somebody else. So we shall end this article by sampling J.G. Ballard's classic novel, *High Rise*:

Reluctantly, he knew that he despised his fellow residents for the way in which they fitted so willingly into their appointed slots in the apartment building, for their over-developed sense of responsibility, and lack of flamboyance. Above all, he looked down on them for their good taste. The building was a monument to good taste, to the well-designed kitchen, to sophisticated utensils and fabrics, to elegant and never ostentatious furnishings – in short, to that whole aesthetic sensibility which these well-educated professional people had inherited from all the schools of industrial design, all the award-winning schemes of interior decoration institutionalized by the last quarter of the twentieth century. Royal detested this orthodoxy of the intelligent. Visiting his neighbors' apartments, he would find himself physically repelled by the contours of an award-winning coffeepot, by the well-modulated color schemes, by the good taste and intelligence that, Midas-like, had transformed everything in these apartments into an ideal marriage of function and design. In a sense, these people were the vanguard of a well-to-do and well-educated proletariat of the future.<sup>18</sup>

