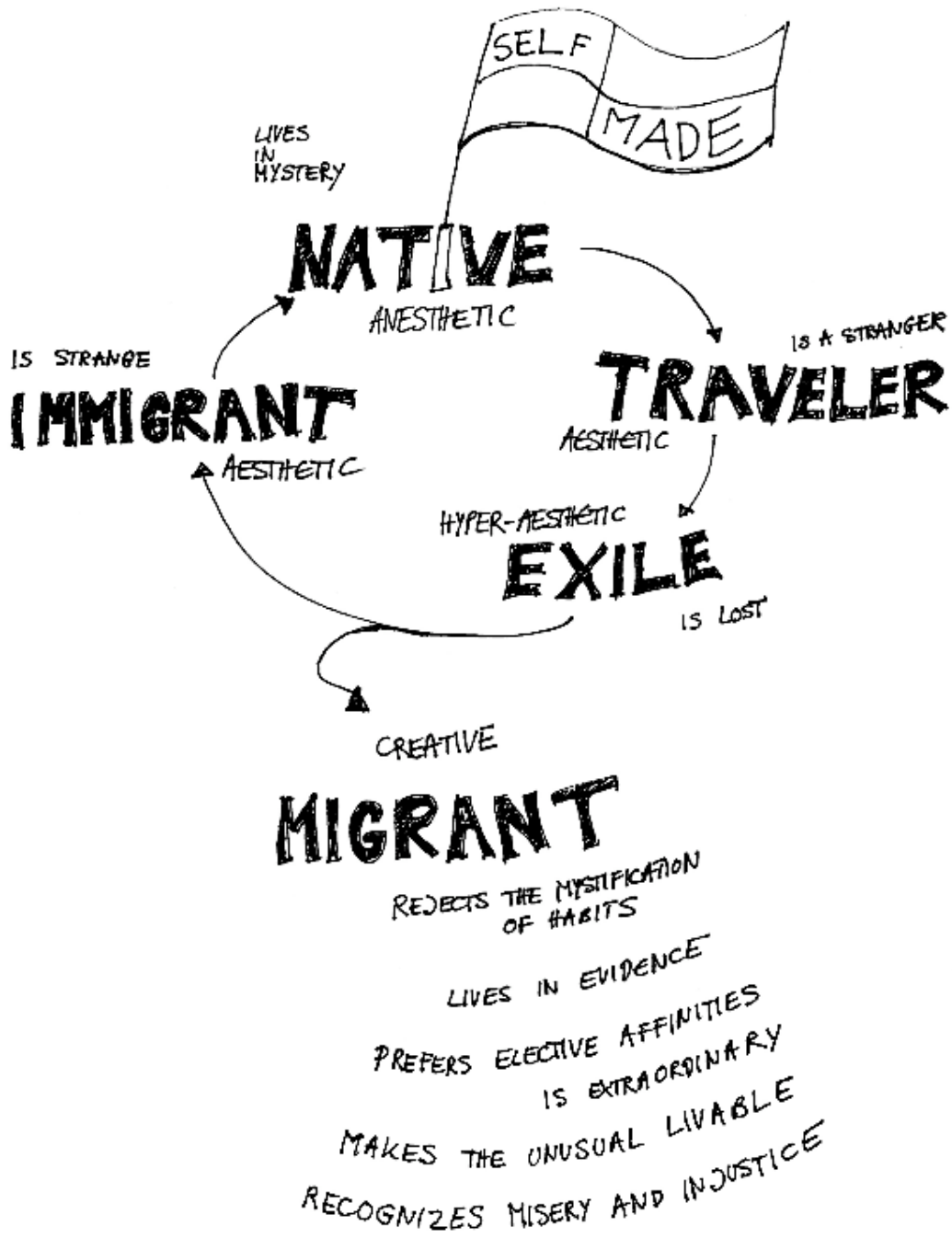


Reading some of Vilém Flusser's thoughts on creativity in North America in 2009 - self-made, do-it-yourself and doing-it-together

Three Short Pieces by Adelheid Mers



A. Self-made

In “Exile and Creativity” (1984)¹, Flusser maps out potentially consecutive circumstances that shape immersion in and responses to nationality. With each stage, a state of perceptivity is connected. First up is a native, any native, who embraces life within given frames. A native is anesthetic, lives under a protective blanket of familiar myths, relatively blind to circumstance. As a traveler - someone who expects to return home - the native may become a stranger who encounters other natives and has occasion to sample the unusual. Travelers are aesthetic; they vividly perceive their temporary environments. Is the traveler barred from return, the exile comes to the fore. The exile is lost. An exile is hyper-aesthetic, overwhelmed by too many unfamiliar data in a state of homelessness. As the exile mobilizes to make sense, the migrant may materialize, sustaining a shifting balance of environmental perception and personal stability. This is the condition that most favors creativity. This migrant - never ceasing to be strange - poses a challenge to the natives by reminding them of the contingency of their truths, and by witnessing realities that may counter circulating rhetorics.

At the outset of the essay and as a backdrop for this discussion of creativity as both necessitated and enabled by having to make sense of what is foreign, Flusser requests the reader to keep in mind “the Christian story of man's expulsion from Paradise and his entrance into the world, the Jewish mystic's story of the exile of divine spirit in the world, and the existentialist story of man as a stranger in the world.”² This backdrop suggests that a notion he only briefly touches on may be posited as the existential premise for creativity: more than “the freedom to change oneself and others”³, but the onus to make oneself.

In 2008, an arts policy platform⁴ was published by the Obama National Arts Policy Committee, a body of initially almost 100 and later of 33 members. Along with

¹ Vilém Flusser, “Exile and Creativity”(1984), in: Ströhl, Andreas, ed.; *Writings*, University of Minnesota Press, 2002

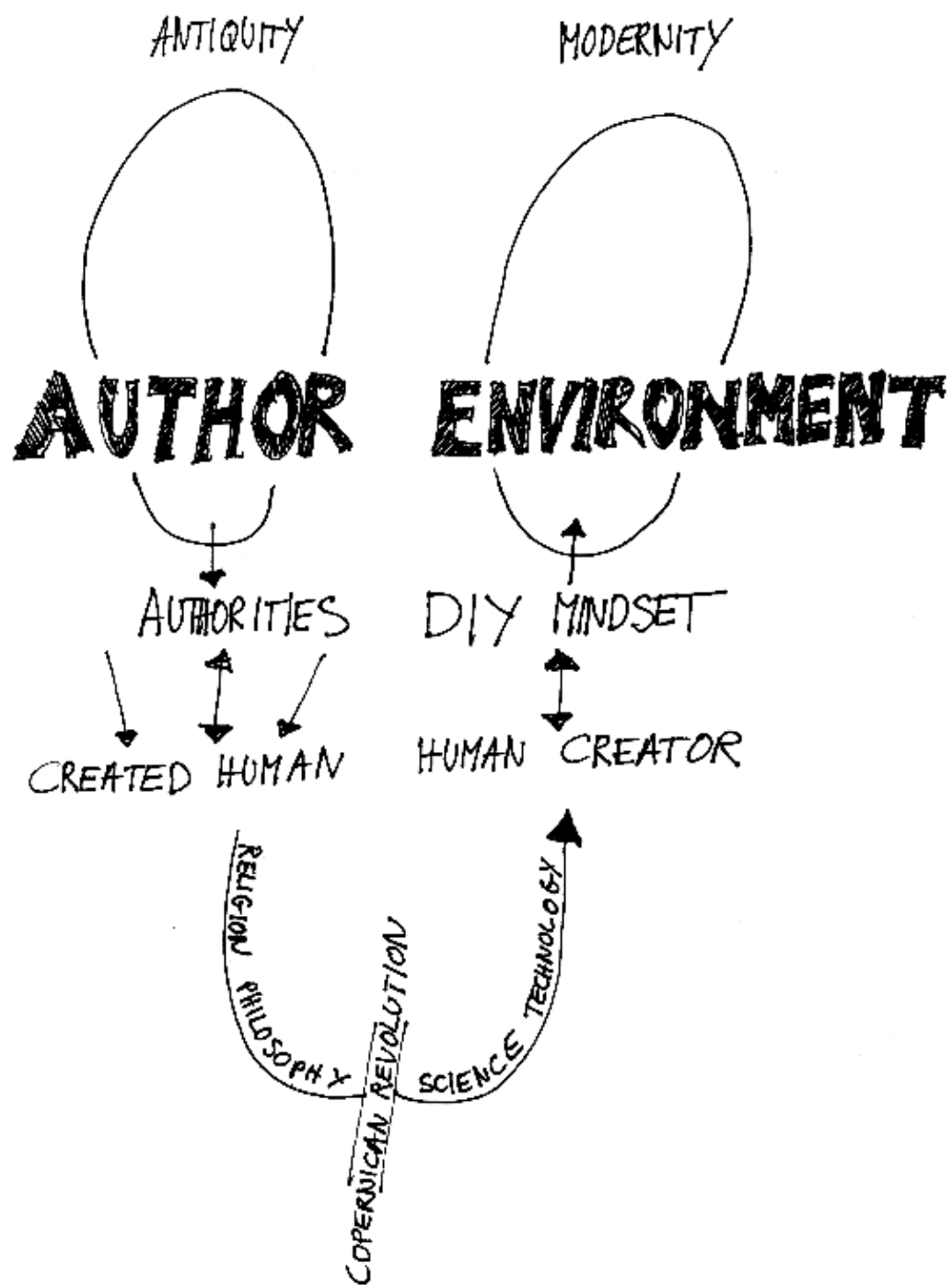
² *ibid* p. 104

³ *ibid* p. p.108

⁴ www.artsactionfund.org/pdf/artsvote/ObamaStatement3b.pdf, accessed 2/1/09

four other statements that address arts education, funding, health care and taxation, it includes the headings “Promote Cultural Diplomacy” and “Attract Foreign Talent”. The policy platform is appended with a statement by novelist Michael Chabon, an Obama National Arts Policy Committee member: “Art increases the sense of our common humanity. The imagination of the artist is, therefore, a profoundly moral imagination: the easier it is for you to imagine walking in someone else’s shoes, the more difficult it then becomes to do that person harm. If you want to make a torturer, first kill his imagination. If you want to create a nation that will stand by and allow torture to be practiced in its name, then go ahead and kill its imagination, too. You could start by cutting school funding for art, music, creative writing and the performing arts.” The common humanity Chabon evokes may well be rooted in the capacity to witness that Flusser sees as a central contribution the exile makes to a host society.

Titled “Barack Obama: A Champion for the Arts”, the policy platform is prefaced by an unattributed, 3 sentence statement that starts grandiose and ends with valuation by popular success. “Our nation’s creativity has filled the world’s libraries, museums, recital halls, movie houses, and marketplaces with works of genius. *The arts embody the American spirit of self-definition* (my italics). As the author of two best-selling books – *Dreams from My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope* – Barack Obama uniquely appreciates the role and value of creative expression.” The central sentence, though, echoes the subtext Flusser evokes in *Exile and Creativity* - the onus to make oneself. This is here claimed as something that founds the American experience. Can the vulnerability of a migrant that Flusser claims as strength and that the arts - according to Chabon - safeguard and also rely on also turn into a cult of the migrant that founds a new, anesthetic nationality, particularly when conditions for creativity are neglected? If so, acknowledgment of and support for real creativity brought into play by the migrant, the witness, the artist, can be construed by some as a direct challenge to the mythical creativity at the core of a key US narrative.



B. Do-it-yourself

“Nach der Post-moderne?” (After the Post-modern?), was published in “Nachgeschichte” (Posthistory)⁵ in the second section of the book, “Eine korrigierte Geschichtsschreibung” (A corrected historiography). Writing in 1991, Flusser claims that we “are just beginning to become cognizant of what ‘modern’ means.”⁶ The essay completes two consecutive movements. Allowing as an initial premise the notion that we are indeed emerging out of the postmodern, as the title indicates, it opens with a discussion of fractures in existing belief systems that arise in the 15th century⁷ and only later join forces to create the new modes of thought and action - science and technology - that define modernity. Flusser then seeks to detect fractures in current, potentially post-modern belief systems, which are characterized by unhappiness with the existing uses of science and technology - including a feeling of emptiness in regard to science and a loss of meaning through over-saturation with media - that might foreshadow the emergence of what it is that follows the postmodern.

The second move seeks to define anthropologies (in the theological sense of the term, determining the relation of humankind to the divine) and opens with the description of a medieval structure, Roman in origin, that conceives of an “author (the creator, the founder, the unmoved mover), and this author nominated (called) authorities, through whose mediation he contained and ordered (systematized) all of creation. The ‘human’ creature had to stay connected with the author through authorities to avoid losing itself (getting lost).⁸” Rooted in Flusser’s reinterpretation of the Copernican Revolution as “an explosion of spatial and temporal dimensions”⁹, a modern anthropology is then

⁵ Vilém Flusser, “Nach der Post-moderne?” (1991), pp 303 - 325, in: Flusser, Vilém; *Nachgeschichte - eine korrigierte Geschichtsschreibung*. Frankfurt am Main, 1997; all translations from German in this text by A.M.

⁶ “Demnach erleben wir nicht das Ende der Neuzeit, sondern wir beginnen überhaupt erst, uns dessen bewußt zu werden, was <<modern>> bedeutet.” (ibid p 315)

⁷ Those fractures are exemplified by Nicolaus of Cusa’s (1401-64) questioning the authority of the church by claiming that “divine knowledge is only quantitatively different from human knowledge” (ibid p 304), and Henry the Seafarer’s (1394-1460) “challenge to a traditional worldview” (ibid p 305) by demanding empirical verification of assumptions about the nature of the world.

⁸ “Es gab einen Autor (den Schöpfer, den Gründer, den unbewegten Bewegten), und dieser Autor ernannte (berief) Autoritäten, durch deren Vermittlung hindurch er die Schöpfung zusammenhielt und in Ordnung brachte (systematisierte). Das Geschöpf <<Mensch> mußte durch Autoritäten hindurch mit dem Autor in Verbindung bleiben, wenn es sich nicht verlieren (verloren gehen) wollte.” (ibid p 311)

⁹ “Mit anderen Worten, die kopernikaische Revolution ist nicht so sehr eine Veränderung der Stellenwerte von Erde, Sonne und anderen Himmelskörpern, sondern vielmehr eine Explosion der zeitlichen und

juxtaposed. “The fundamental anthropological experience was no longer the immeasurability of the author, but the immeasurability of the human environment.”¹⁰ Initially enthusiastically experienced as an opportunity to discover measure in nature instead of having to measure up, the shift has now fully asserted itself as a move into a rootlessness unearthed by the realization of having not found, but indeed imposed measure. The essay’s second move has proven the title question (After the Post-modern?) to be moot. In a nutshell, to be modern means to have migrated from the role of the created accountable to an author to that of a creator accountable to the environment. It means to be creative. Do-it-yourself. DIY. And thus, “[a]fterpostmodern means regrettably-still-Modern.”¹¹

There are two streams of DIY movements out there. The older one is an upshot of the myth of the self-made man alluded to under A above. An entire industry caters to the handy man, who is presented with expert advice in many TV shows, with opportunities to share or show off, for example in the “Did-it-myself” section¹² on home improvement sites like doityourself.com¹³, and with goods to purchase in the ubiquitous oversized home improvement warehouses. In his exhaustively researched paper “Do-It-Yourself: Constructing, Repairing and Maintaining Domestic Masculinity”, Steven M. Gelber¹⁴ traces the development of this movement from the 1870s to today, revealing it’s many affirmative functions that reach from giving the suburban organization man room for unsupervised, non-competitive activity to providing the comfort of working with known variables that are rooted in traditions of craftsmanship, noting that “fixed values of this sort are a tremendous consolation in a world where the most fundamental concepts are subject to change without notice.”¹⁵ This is not in any way the domain of modern man the author, as another quote asserts: “Any fool can write a book but it takes a man to

räumlichen Dimensionen, und darin besteht das gemeinsame aller Anthropologien der Neuzeit.” (ibid p. 313)

¹⁰ *Das anthropologische Grunderlebnis war nicht mehr das der Unermesslichkeit des Autors, sondern das der Unermesslichkeit der menschlichen Umwelt. (ibid p. 314)*

¹¹ *“Nachpostmoderne heißt leider-noch-immer-Moderne.” (ibid p. 316)*

¹² *<http://www.doityourself.com/did-it-myself>, accessed 2/14 2009*

¹³ *<http://www.doityourself.com/>, accessed 2/14 2009*

¹⁴ *Steven M. Gelber, “Do-It-Yourself: Constructing, Repairing and Maintaining Domestic Masculinity”, American Quarterly 49.1 (1997) 66-112*

¹⁵ *ibid, p. 153, quoting Julian Starr, Jr., Fifty Things to Make for the Home (New York, 1941), 3-5.*

dovetail a door."¹⁶

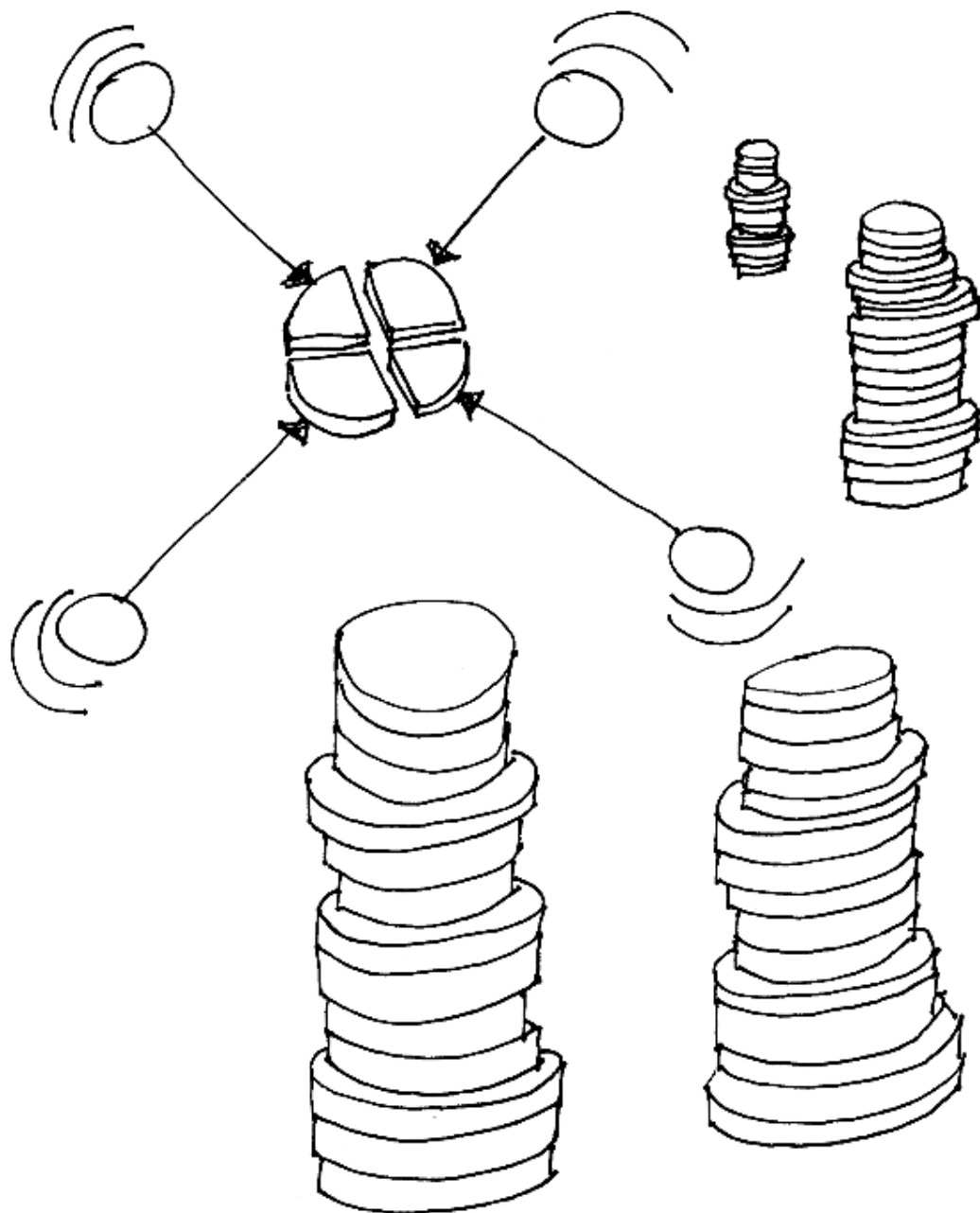
The other, much more recent movement that also uses DIY as a signifier is not quite about writing books, but still significantly different from its older cousin. It unequivocally returns expertise to the makers who churn out instruction sets, sharing findings generated largely by self-described amateurs. One representative of this is Make Magazine¹⁷, since February 2005 both in print and on line. It describes itself as “[t]he first magazine devoted entirely to DIY technology projects, MAKE Magazine unites, inspires and informs a growing community of resourceful people who undertake amazing projects in their backyards, basements, and garages.”¹⁸ As in the older DIY movement, a suburban setting complete with home ownership is implied in this mission statement, evoking a continuity with the affirmative version of DIY that one might not expect to be appropriate to the current, edgier proponents. But more importantly, “MAKE Magazine brings the do-it-yourself mindset to all the technology in your life. [...] We celebrate your right to tweak, hack, and bend any technology to your own will.”¹⁹ The website offers a blog, selections of projects, a community forum, a store, videos and podcasts. Posts reach from instructions on how to make heart shaped cupcakes to workshops on building wind power generators. Hobby and small-scale entrepreneurship, art, craft and technology interests, gadget hacking and expressions of social consciousness peacefully coexist, no hierarchies appear to be in place. A mode of taking stock of what is available seems to permeate the whole, and instead of offering solace for the strained individual, a cheerful and rather optimistic spirit of doing-it-together is prevalent. Are we seeing the human maker becoming comfortable with technology, filling it with meaning, and more importantly, embracing the challenge to respond, responsibly and without regret, to any man-made system, be it a muffin, a gadget or global warming? Are we becoming truly modern through DIY?

¹⁶ *ibid*, p. 73, quoting Charles F. Lummis, a writer, civic reformer, and romantic primitivist, from Eileen Boris, "Dreams of Brotherhood and Beauty": The Social Ideas of the Arts and Crafts Movement," in "The Art that is Life," *The Arts and Crafts Movement in America, 1875-1920*, ed. Wendy Kaplan (New York, 1987)

¹⁷ <http://makezine.com/>

¹⁸ <http://makezine.com/magazine/>

¹⁹ <http://makezine.com/about/>



C. doing-it-together

Flusser envisioned a consolidated whole in “Ins Universum der Technischen Bilder” (Into the Universe of Technical Images), published in German in 1985. “Humans are not creators, but players with antecedent information.”²⁰ This is the “telematic society as the cosmic super brain.”²¹ Here, the shift from the human as product of a sole creator to the human as co-operating player needs an intermediate step, that of the removal of the notion of individual, human authorship. “The myth of the author presupposes that the pertinent messages are “originals”, created by “great men” who conducted “inner dialogues”. The mythical author creates in solitude. The myth of the author (and of the original) distorts the fact that the fabrication of information is a dialogue. And this fact can no longer be denied where copies are concerned.”²² Dialogic production allows for fragmentation and partial contributions. “When writing without a substrate the objective is no longer to create complete, “perfect” information (works), but to lead ones own creativity on a long leash, in dialog with others. The goal is no longer to make something, but to create a free space for the gesture of creativity itself.”²³ Liberated from attributions of ownership, the creative gesture has playful, erotic and spiritual dimensions. Flusser invites the reader to use the material he offers: “These Utopian thoughts were carried along in the excitement of play. Thus, they hope to be received in the same ludic spirit, to be handed off again in modified form by the receiver.”²⁴ Play with images, doing-it-together, may lead the super brain to produce “[a]n uninterrupted cerebral orgasm: that is

²⁰ Chapter 11. “Spielen” (Playing), p.98, in Flusser, Vilém, *Ins Universum der Technischen Bilder, European Photography, Göttingen, (1985) 6th edition 1999*

“Menschen sind nicht Schöpfer, sondern Spieler mit vorangegangenen Informationen”

²¹ *ibid*, p. 99, “Die telematische Gesellschaft als Kosmisches Übergehirn.”

²² *ibid*, Chapter 12. “Schaffen” (Creating), p.107, “Der Mythos des Autors setzt voraus, daß es bei den entscheidenden Botschaften um “Originale” geht, die von “großen Männern” dank “inneren” Dialogen hergestellt wurden. Der mythische Autor schafft in der Einsamkeit. Der Mythos des Autors (und des Originals) verzerrt die Tatsache, daß Informationserzeugung ein Dialog ist. Und diese Tatsache ist eben bei kopierbaren Botschaften nicht mehr zu leugnen.”

²³ Flusser, Vilém, *Medienkultur, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997*

p.65 “Beim unterlagenlosen Schreiben geht es nicht mehr darum, in sich geschlossene, ‘perfekte’ Informationen (Werke) herzustellen, sondern darum, seine eigene Kreativität im Zwiegespräch mit anderen am langen Zügel zu führen. Das Ziel ist nicht mehr, irgend etwas herzustellen, sondern der Geste des Herstellens selbst freien Raum zu schaffen.”

²⁴ “Schaffen”, p.113, in Flusser, Vilém, *Ins Universum der Technischen Bilder, European Photography, Göttingen, (1985) 6th edition 1999*

“Diese utopischen Überlegungen sind selbst vom Rausch des Spiels mitgerissen worden. Sie hoffen daher, in dem gleichen spielerischen Geist empfangen und vom Empfänger verändert weitergegeben zu werden.”

the form by which images will direct the telematic society.”²⁵ The virtual reaches into the real as its organizing principle. Pleasure is then transcended by solemnity. The ‘other program’²⁶, a term Flusser coined to emphasize a state in which ownership has been relinquished, is also a prayer. “Dialogically synthesized telematic images are the “media” from one human to another through which I see the face of the other. And through this face, I see God once more.”²⁷ The expectation of radically diminishing needs for human labor supports the vision above.

The GNU manifesto²⁸ was initially published by then - MIT Artificial Intelligence Laboratory programmer Richard Stallman in March 1985 and has been updated a few times since. It is a living document. He states that “GNU, which stands for Gnu's Not Unix, is the name for the complete Unix-compatible software system which I am writing so that I can give it away free to everyone who can use it.” Framed at the dawn of the Creative Industries era we find ourselves in, Stallman presents his strong conviction that software, which he compares to the air we breathe, needs to be free (“solidarity with other users”) as well as freely co-created. (“The fundamental act of friendship among programmers is the sharing of programs.”) In this way, the highest quality software can be produced to create the maximum benefit for society. He addresses questions of licensing (“a person who enforces a copyright is harming society as a whole both materially and spiritually”) and pay for creative labor (“introduce a software tax”), and proposes solutions to the need to make a living (“sell teaching and hand-holding services”). The GNU Public License²⁹ is in wide use today. Under the term ‘copyleft’, “software is copyrighted, but instead of using those rights to restrict users like proprietary software does, we use them to ensure that every user has freedom.”³⁰ Stallman’s achievements in the realm of software squarely match Flusser’s proposals for the creation of ‘other programs’. Like Flusser, he also envisions a future leisure society: “In the long

²⁵ *ibid*, Chapter 15. “Herrschen” (Ruling), p.141, “Ein ununterbrochener zerebraler Orgasmus: das ist die Form, in der die Bilder die telematische Gesellschaft steuern werden.”

²⁶ “Celebrating”, in : Ströhl, Andreas, ed.; *Writings*, University of Minnesota Press, 2002 (chapter 18 of “*Ins Universum der Technischen Bilder*”)

²⁷ *ibid*, p. 171

²⁸ <http://www.gnu.org/gnu/manifesto.html>

²⁹ <http://www.gnu.org/licenses/gpl.html>

³⁰ *Ibid*

run, making programs free is a step toward the post-scarcity world, where nobody will have to work very hard just to make a living. People will be free to devote themselves to activities that are fun, such as programming, after spending the necessary ten hours a week on required tasks such as legislation, family counseling, robot repair and asteroid prospecting.”³¹

Stevan Harnad welcomes a diminished proprietorship in academia in exchange for greater productivity, but is concerned about the quality of prepublication dialogue in the on-line continuum. In “Scholarly Skywriting and the Prepublication Continuum of Scientific Inquiry”³², he foresees that “[s]cholarly inquiry in this new medium will proceed much more quickly, interactively, and globally; and it is likely to become a lot more participatory, though perhaps also more depersonalized, with ideas propagating and permuting on the net in directions over which their originators would be unable (and indeed perhaps unwilling) to claim proprietorship. An individual's compensation for the diminished proprietorship, however, would be the possibility of much greater intellectual productivity in one lifetime, and this is perhaps scholarly skywriting's greatest reward.”³³ Academia is looking for accelerated productivity “at the speed of thought”³⁴ without relinquishing authority, and to that end Harnad proposes “to have a vertical (peer expertise) and a horizontal (temporal-archival) dimension of quality control.”³⁵

Released under the creative commons license “Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 2.5 Netherlands”³⁶, the “MyCreativity Reader”³⁷ is subtitled ‘a critique of creative industries’. The main thrust of the contributions is to model the organization of creative work, potentially in web-supported peer networks that are housed neither within academic institutions perceived as oppressive, nor operate fully autonomously and thus wanting for funds. This quest is framed in the context of neo-

³¹ <http://www.gnu.org/gnu/manifesto.html>

³² Harnad, S. (1990) *Scholarly Skywriting and the Prepublication Continuum of Scientific Inquiry*. *Psychological Science* 1: 342 - 343 (reprinted in *Current Contents* 45: 9-13, November 11 1991). <http://users.ecs.soton.ac.uk/harnad/Papers/Harnad/harnad90.skywriting.html>, accessed December 26, 08 (no pagination)

³³ *Ibid*

³⁴ *Ibid*

³⁵ *Ibid*

³⁶ <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/nl/deed.en>

³⁷ Geert Lovink and Ned Rossiter, Eds.; *MyCreativity Reader: A Critique of Creative Industries*. Institute of Network Cultures, Amsterdam 2007, <http://networkcultures.org/wpmu/portal/publications/inc-readers/mycreativity/> (download pdf)

liberal appropriations of creative work (both IT and arts/humanities/social sciences related) as precarious entrepreneurship that plays into the global recombination of resources in the post-industrial corporate quest for cheap, value added products. Andrew Ross sums it up: “The truth of the matter is we are living through the formative stages of a mode of production marked by a quasi-convergence of the academy and the knowledge corporation.”³⁸ The leisure society has not come to pass, and without that foundation, the vision has to remain fractured. If not protected by the appropriate license, other programs may become proprietary again, and while humans may have assumed the role of creators, the ability to create ex nihilo was indeed not part of the deal.

³⁸ *ibid*, “Organic Intellectual Work”, Interview with Andrew Ross, Geert Lovink and Andrew Ross, p. 235