

Copying: A Primer

Bettina Funcke

Why copying?

We like to copy. Why do we like it so much? People, gestures, attitudes; friends, family, people we admire; language, thought, sentences, entire texts or journals, works of art, objects, images, scenes from films, stories, news, ads: copy it, rearrange it, own it. There is an ease to this, and it is a convenient way to produce. It is affirmation and inspiration; we connect and think intimately about what we copy. We select part or whole, via cut-and-paste and grab-and-drag, reorganizing through embodiment, contextualization, and timing. With this we find our own voice.

A long, slow history

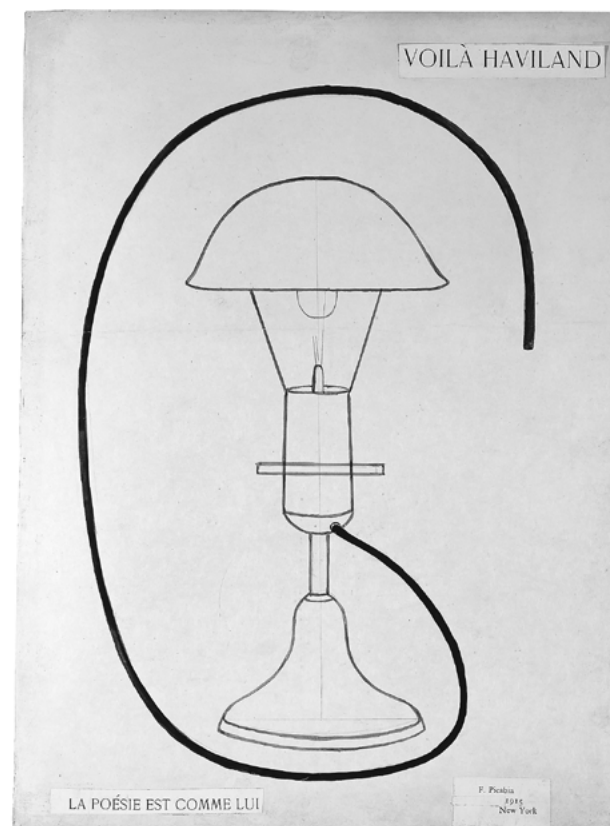
Until relatively recently copying was an intensive commitment, slow and laborious. In order to preserve and disseminate literary, philosophical, and religious information, medieval scribes and monks would reproduce text by hand. Gutenberg may have changed everything, but for a long while there were few printing presses in existence. Through the late 1700s, an office that might want to retain a copy of an outgoing letter was forced to do it by hand. With few technologies available, copies were handmade for centuries, and this went for text, painting, and sculpture. Copies of artworks were made either to learn from the masters or to provide select people or institutions with sought-after works for study or contemplation. Were there ever methods of reproducing knowledge without technology? It is said that some yogis received ancient wisdom through states of meditation and lucid dreaming.

How to copy in the 20th century

Over the last century mechanical, electronic and digital forms of reproduction catapulted the issue of copying—the fake, the simulation, the clone—to the core of culture. Throughout the 20th century, artists experimented with every newly available tool of reproduction, reflecting on the continuously changing ways to grant an image to the world, to replicate and build it. Duchamp's deployment of readymades responded to mass-produced goods and questioned what use our hands might now have, while Picabia's mechanical 'portraits' were copied and repurposed diagrams portraying the novelties of a newly-mechanized culture: car horns, telephones, cameras, gearshifts. Decades later, the tools of metaphor expanded and artists were able to use fields of culture to communicate, as David Shields suggests: 'Warhol's Marilyn Monroe silk screens and his *Double Elvis* work as metaphors because their images are so common in the culture that they can be used as shorthand, as other generations would have used, say, the sea.'

Meanwhile, Lichtenstein and Polke isolated media imagery and called attention to the processes of commercial printing. The generation of artists to follow stated up front that they were copying and intentionally 'unoriginal': sophisticated, willfully fraudulent provocations by Jeff Koons, for example, or the re-photography of Richard Prince. Copying had become a strategy of embellishment, a dandyish practice, with dashes of inauthenticity, falseness, and unoriginality thrown in. These playful investigations into a culture of replication demonstrate that imitation and copying do not eradicate authorship: rather, they place new demands on authors, who must take the new conditions into account when conceiving of a work of art. But why were virtually all of the most prominent practitioners male? Men, it is said, are genetically predisposed to reproduce.

Francis Picabia
La poésie est comme lui.
Voilà Haviland, 1915
ink, tempera, pencil,
and collage on board,
65,3 × 47,5 cm
Collection Kunsthaus
Zürich, Grafische
Sammlung; © 2016
Pictoright, Amsterdam



How not to copy in the 21st century

The experiments of the last century appear quaint. The early 21st century gives us a culture of digital liquidity where everything is ceaselessly duplicated, shared, and disseminated. Copying is the condition of culture now, the dominant feature, reaching all areas of life, grounded in the omnipresence of networks. The more important question is, *how not to copy?* Value has shifted toward the many ways to personalize, edit, and authenticate a work, or a life. Hito Steyerl argues that 'the thing formerly called real life has already become deeply imaged,' and image of course means copy. For Steyerl, the artist's task now lies in finding different forms of circulation, in reconsidering the 'relationship between image and life, what we used to call representation, and so-called reality.' Kenneth Goldsmith refers to Marjorie Perloff's notion of the 'unoriginal genius,' which orients the artist's task around mastery and dissemination of information: rather than creating information we must move it, manage it, distribute it. Similarly, Seth Price predicted in *Dispersion* that 'the task becomes one of packaging, producing, reframing, and distributing; a mode of production analogous not to the creation of material goods, but to the production of social contexts, using existing material.' The last century demonstrated that mastery lies in how we execute the copy: imperfectly, for example, as in a screen print. Now we see that the decision of how to format information *is* form.

The future: Copying / not copying

We occupy a strange historical moment, perched on the bridge linking an analog world to a digital one. In 'The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism' Jonathan Lethem describes this generational experience as '[being] born backward into an incoherent realm of texts, products, and images, the commercial and cultural environment with which we've both supplemented and blotted out our natural world.' For him, the most ambitious art tries to restore what's taken as 'real' to three whole dimensions, tries to reconstruct a univocally round world out of disparate streams of flat sights, in order to reimagine 'what human life might truly be like over there across the chasms of illusion, mediation, demographics, marketing, imago, and appearance.' How do we copy and not copy at the same time? Does this mean organic farming, 19th-century clothing, vegan diets, slow food, bicycles, yoga, and knitting?

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