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The myth of originality

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The Myth of Originality

Andrew Wang

The other day, I looked back to those special days when I was a kid. I would sit in front of a blank sheet of paper with a colored pencil, and freak out. I was a very neurotic kid. Nothing I could put on the paper seemed right. No beauty could come out of my mind and through my hands. There were a lot of neuroticisms I had to overcome in order to appreciate and engage with art, and a big one was a notion of “originality” in my head which always stopped me from actually making art. To kid me, art was about bringing something from nothing, and to take inspiration was to cheat. Art was the pure expression of coming up with an image in the mind and then transmuting it perfectly onto the page. As I grew up, I learned how a lot of my favorite artists worked, and my childlike notion of “originality” started to feel only like a one-sided illusion, held in the viewer but never in the artist themselves. Whenever I would read the history of a piece of art, I would look for the “originality” and it would never come.

As I learned more about music, especially the vast ecosystem of influences that went into a piece of prestige hip-hop, art seemed to be a game of connecting different pieces together, like building Lego blocks. There was artistry and originality in connecting different influences, sounds, samples, and interpolations, but the songs I liked were pretty much never created from nothing. I would watch producer breakdowns on youtube for Kanye and saw that there were so many samples and interpolations that it felt like he was just gluing different pre-made pieces together. Obviously there is artistry in that, but it helped break my view that art was creating something out of nothing.

While reading about Picasso, I learned about how his work developing Cubism was some of the most ground-breaking artistic thought at the time. But it was also taking advantage of thousands of years of African artistic tradition of mask-making and putting it in a 2D medium, and bringing it over to people who had never seen it before. It seemed more like arbitrage than originality. An idea in one place can be common and undervalued, but when simply shifted over a thousand miles north it can become a hit. While it requires valid labor and creativity to bring it up, it doesn't align with my childlike opinion that creativity is originality, and originality is creating something

James Roberts
Adolescence (1-n)
Digital photography, 2018-2022



out of nothing. Studying Picasso taught me that sometimes good art feels like stealing, and doesn't feel like creation from the perspective of the artist. If I were a Parisian gallery visitor, Picasso's cubist work would be shockingly original. But to Picasso, it probably felt odd that he could make a career by xeroxing ideas from a hundred miles south of his native Spain.

I care about fashion a lot, and to be plugged into the fashion world is to see influence move around like syrup mixing into a drink. The more I could see the influences percolate through the different designers across the world, the less that originality seemed real. Take one of my favorite designer's, Jun Takahashi, piece in the UNDERCOVER spring 2020 runway. There is creativity and vision, and originality in the eyes of the viewer, but to the designer, it probably felt like a pastiche of different influences.

Jun Takahashi didn't invent the work jacket, didn't take the picture printed on the piece, but combined all of these elements to create this look.

I'm so happy I don't believe in creating something out of nothing anymore. The only artist who could do that might be God in genesis. Nowadays I see artistry and creativity as combination, modification, and the movement of ideas to new audiences. I can be part of a long chain of people who received an artistic canon, modified it, and passed it on. All the way from the simplest representational work on cave paintings, to Byzantine angels, to runways in Tokyo. But there are no people who create something out of nothing. It gives me hope that one day I can learn to create things, and I won't have to tackle the gargantuan task of trying to be God.