Every man, an artist

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This text has a dual purpose. Or, to put in more academic terms, it has two theses:

(1) When defining digital art, technology is much less important than it would seem to be at first glance.

(2) As well as being an aesthetic model, collective creation means, above all, taking an ethical position in relation to the internet's role and the development and distribution of culture.

The two theses are interrelated, given that (2) is a good argument in favour of (1). And (1) also helps to explain (2): in contrast to the overly technological readings of some critics and analysts, the strong tendency of digital art and culture towards collective creation - which is, of course, compatible with other tendencies - is not imposed by the technology. Rather, it is the result of a more complex interaction, which also includes artists and the public as well as the business world. In this four-way game, technology always plays the least fundamental role, being more of a mediator for where the other three sides of the square want to go. Collective creation tends to deform this perfect square, giving a lot more weight to the «public» angle, thus avoiding both the «elite artist» and culture as a mere excuse to do business.

The defence of our first thesis (the relative unimportance of technology in the development of digital art) can be intuited through examples from the history of technology. Firstly, it shows that the creators and pro-moters of a technological system don't necessarily have to impose the end-use of the technology. In this sense, the history of the telephone is highly relevant: its inventor, Graham Bell, imagined his device as a kind of precursor to current e-learning. His business model presented the telephone as a system enabling users to receive conferences and classes in the comfort of their own homes: he even imagined people listening to concerts through their telephones. However, users appropriated it and used it for their own ends: interpersonal communication.

Going deeper into the space of cultural technology, it is significant to observe that even if an inventor is clear on the use, if his invention isn't backed by a set of cultural practices supporting its development, it may end up having a very different use to the intended one. In the 1920s, Lev Thermin, the inventor of the musical device that bears his name, had already imagined a digital culture that was not too different to the one that exists today. But his device ended up being put to much less lofty ends, to create special effects in series B films or as a weird filler in pop songs such as the Beach Boys' *Good Vibrations.*

In the end, a process of evolution is necessary in order to allow artists to realise that they can do more interesting things with these cultural technologies than what they had initially set out to do. A perfect example is the history of the synthesiser. Walter Carlos helped Robert Moog to develop a first prototype of a synthesizer that would be easier for musicians to use. We're talking about some-

one who was interested in experimental music and had worked with Stockhausen. However, when he began making music with this revolutionary device, it didn't even occur to him to create an equally revolutionary art, and instead he began playing (executing, in the most genuine sense of the term) music by Bach. It was only the passing of time that allowed musicians to realise that the synthesizer was much more than a piano that could make strange little noises.

Here we can see the importance of a cultural context that includes artists who are determined to do something within a specific set of aesthetic and ethical parameters, models and paradigms, and a technology that makes it possible to apply these to culture. You may well have a fabulous technology straight out of the laboratory; but without an environment that gives it meaning, its use will be very different. If it hadn't been for a group of artists who infused their own ethical and aesthetic principles into contemporary art, digital art and culture today would be more like the theremines making outer-space sounds in Ed Wood films and Walter Carlos's *Switched on Bach*. Without a doubt, one of the key art collectives was *Fluxus*.

Don't worry, I'm not going to go into the history of these artists. I'm not even going to list them. There are specialised texts that you can read - as I recommend you do - to learn about the collective. I just want to mention the basic principles that guided them, and had such an important influence on current digital culture.

A first key fluxian premise is to throw away the instruction manual and play with technology in different ways. A good example is Yasunao Tone. Fascinated by the idea that the digital reading of music, being a binary act, could allow reading errors to totally transform the music (in the analogue model errors are scaled, in the digital world there is a jump from 0 to 1), he didn't rest until he managed to make a CD player that could read completely scratched CDs in a thousand different ways.

The other vital premise is activism, the idea that art has a political function. And one of its functions is precisely to democratise art, until, as in Beuys famous *dictum,* every man is an artist. Which takes us, in a natural progression, to the idea of collective creation. Fluxus were already imagining performances, installations, concerts, etc in which the work is created collectively, with audience participation as a key element. Without an audience, the work didn't really exist. And they were doing this a few decades before the internet made its appearance. So if a group of artists in the nineties set off to explore this way of understanding art, it's not just because digital technology makes collective creation easier. Rather, it was a case of the influence of *Fluxus* - sometimes directly, sometimes through double exposure - on a group of artists whose minds are already fitted out with the basic elements of activism.

In fact, tracing the history of digital activism reveals how technology, which initially had a more central role as a novelty, is loosing its strength as a binding element, and becoming simply a catalyst that offers few perspectives for aesthetic interpretations. Collectives such as Etoy (www.etoy.com) in the mid-nineties sought out a cyberpunk aesthetic and used activism more as an excuse to justify practical jokes resulting from playing with new technologies. This has nothing to do with positions taken by artists like Daniel García-Andújar (www.irational.org/TTTP/, which has been eliminating the technological games and techno-aesthetics in order to make works with a clearly social bent, where the only thing sought from technology is the functionality to make dialogue and social construction easier.

I'm not saying that Daniel's works don't have an aesthetic element. Quite the contrary: thanks to him the aesthetic of activism has matured, leaving behind the references historically associated with science-fiction, or *nerd* jokes, to increasingly embody the *Fluxus* spirit.

Alert readers may have noticed that we've left out one side of the square: the business world. It has a clear influence. Often it is positive, but just as often it can also be very negative. If we return to the history of technology, we encounter the case of video. Of three possible formats, VHS, Betamax and 2000, the eventual winner was the one that was clearly the most inferior of the three. In fact, the first to drop out in the heat of the battle was 2000, which, strangely enough, was the best of the three. The reason? A good lobby of multinationals.

A new culture is now being defined, the culture of the remix, in which creators construct their works from fragments of other art works, dismantling them and remodelling them to suit their purposes. It is a culture in the process of definition: the water is probably about knee-high now, and a sea of possibilities awaits us. However, the business side is very comfortable in the previous model, and it is terrified of the possibility of a new culture in which it doesn't know how to operate. Lawrence Lessig has expressed it using an excellent metaphor: for him, the record or film industries are like butchers specialised in catching any old beast and cutting it up to make the most of its meat. One day they see a race horse and, automatically, they think of the most profitable way to cut it up and use its meat, without realising that there are much better things to do with a race horse.

From here the importance of *Creative Commons* (www.creativecommons.org) and their quest for alternative licenses that make the remix culture possible. But above all, the importance of collective creation, this new way of understanding digital culture. Collective creation is obviously a new aesthetic paradigm for understanding artists' role in the world, but it is also an ethical paradigm that offers another way of understanding the role of artists in relation to society, and how information should circulate as freely as possible. Embodied in initiatives such as *Creative Commons* or *Platoniq*'s unconditional licence (www.platoniq.net), it also becomes a new economic paradigm, which suggest other ways in which artists can relate to their material, and obtain financial profit. But above all, collective creation is a cultural paradigm. We are proposing a remix culture: a new way of writing in which we don't just use words, but also images, sounds, drawings, videos, etc. The main obstacle is a large part of the business world, which continues to live in the world of intellectual property. We have to teach the butchers to become remixers, or to close their butcher shops for once and for all and let us make our own.