

On Artists & Makers

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On the eve of New York's first Maker Faire, the Hall of Science at the historic fairgrounds of Flushing Meadows, Queens is waiting for an audience. Kids are cruising slowly on their bicycles, and an old dog trots off-leash next to a chain link fence, but there is little other activity on this hot September afternoon. Outside of the monolithic Hall of Science, a couple security guards lean against a gate, periodically adjusting their sunglasses to check on cars entering the fairgrounds. Two others sit in a golf cart labeled "Club Car". At first glance, there is little to betray the coming science-fair-on-steroids that is the Maker Faire, only rows of white tents and an expansive parking lot.

One clue to the Maker presence, though, is the cut of the young people outside of the Hall's main entrance: beards, shaved heads, striped shirts and ID tags - the particular look of people ready to get things done, but not without what appears to be a momentary soda break. A less subtle clue is the density of large vinyl signs proclaiming things like "MAKERS CHECK-IN" and "PEDESTRIAN ENTRANCE" in Make's trademark red and blue graphics. The five-year-old magazine has held festivals in San Francisco and Detroit (as well as Accra, Newcastle and various other locales) but this is the first iteration in New York, and as the former home of two World's Fairs, Flushing Meadows Park seems a perfect fit for the robot-minded optimism of Make and its Makers. Looming above the pseudo-bohemian youth and their beverages, two enormous rockets (an Atlas and Titan II, I discover) serve as reminders of the park's residual World's Fair-era futurism - glumly flightless even as planes from nearby Laguradia zoom above them.

The afternoon seems languid here, though it is even quieter across the park at the Queens Museum of Art. Walking by, I notice a few kids skateboarding in the emptied fountains below the omnipresent Unisphere, and not a soul entering or exiting the Museum... maybe it's closed. The subdued (but comparatively substantial) anticipation over at the Maker Faire is something the heads of the QMofA might want to take note of. Capturing the analog discontent of the online populous, Make has - in print, online and in person - united people of all ages through a common love of working with their hands. The aptly dubbed "World Maker Faire New York" may be just a fair, but tomorrow it will be the momentary home of a passionate group of individuals. Plus, looking around, I do have to acknowledge some really quite well crafted wooden gates in one of the tents.

With past Maker Faires bringing in more than 65,000 people, New York's has a lot to live up to. A quick look at the schedule brings up events titled "PairBurst Memory", "Reverse Geocaching" and "Use What You Have! The Accessible Playstation 3".¹ Ambitious and homegrown, such workshops embody the spirit of Make and point to what may be an important new direction for social and creative energy in general. The point here is not to make art (though plenty of objects here and on the website Instructables happily obfuscate that boundary) but to play. Some Maker projects are productive or helpful, and others - like the musical tesla coil or life-size game of Mouse Trap (yes, Mouse Trap!) - are simply not, but both breeds are driven by a desire to understand how the world works, not to create sale or academic value (harder than it sounds). The products on display at the Maker Faire are the festive variety, but you can believe that a Maker here will go home and put the same amount of care and effort into that wooden bench they've been installing on the porch - and *that*, according to the Maker thesis, is just as important.

1 Maker Faire. O'Reilly Media, 2010. <http://makerfaire.com/newyork/2010/schedule/>

There is a delightful anticipation at the coming of the Makers to New York. A seemingly revolutionary movement that has been building steam across the country, the Faire is arriving in the city with a powerful fanbase behind it, bringing to mind the lately forgotten status of New York as the Art Capital of the World. In the splintered and homogeneous world of late globalization, I don't really think it's fair to give that status to the ever more market-driven artistic population of NYC. But the coming of a new creative force to the city is reminiscent of the historic coming of Modernism to New York by way of the 1913 Armory Show, a display that inspired a generation of American artists and helped define that era's perception of art. Coming not from Europe, but from the garages of San Francisco, the Maker population is seemingly less avant-garde than the early Modernists. However, I propose that the repercussions of their actions could be just as great.

More than any art trend in recent memory, the Maker revolution has embodied the languages and technologies of its times. Spreading worldwide through websites and through small town meetings at "makerspaces", it is a revolution of lifestyles that has more in common with the Slow Food Movement and grassroots campaigns of new politics than it does with any traditionally artistic practice. Or, framed by New York Times writer Michael Kimmelman, culture today is "made and distributed in countless different ways, giving not just governments and institutions but nearly everyone with access to the Web the means to choose and shape his or her own culture, identity, tribal fidelities – and then spread this culture, via Youtube or whatever else, among allies (and enemies) everywhere, a democratizing process."² Makers are not artists, according to the current institutionalized definition, but that is a definition that has evolved thanks to radicals like Duchamp and Levine in addition to countless minute shifts accomplished by minor artists. Today, the avant-garde is seen as naïve and didactic, and it is those little actions that are producing the most provocative results. Perhaps with a truly communal experience of creative production, the intrinsic problem of authorship can finally be circumnavigated. A Maker creates her own work, but for the indirect benefit of the greater community. The Makers have incubated in this system, and their thesis comes not through a single work of mighty genius (as we are used to artists producing), but through a simple rethinking of the way we interact with the world – or as Make founding editor Mark Freuenfelder describes it: "making stuff."³

This new surge of making must inevitably come face to face with the classic practice of individual creativity (though we will see that perhaps that's point, art could be placing less importance on the individual): visual art. Art, and its beautifully limitless potential inclusions, has historically been made by and given importance through the touch of the hand. From Aztec stone carvings up through twelve foot Abstract paintings, artists (or artisans in the former - see, this is where it gets tricky!) have been known for their ability to imbue a certain ineffable specialness to material objects through their creative process. In the case of the Aztecs, we are talking about a near-spiritual quality given form through intricate detail work and rare materials like gold. But in recent Western art history, the artist's hand has long since lost its importance, as Cildo Meireles writes:

²Michael Kimmelman. D.I.Y. Culture. The New York Times. April 14.

³Mark Freuenfelder. Made by Hand: Finding Meaning in a Throwaway World. New York: Penguin, 2010. p. 20

“When Duchamp, defining his work theoretically, stated that his intention was among other things to free art from the sphere of the handmade, he couldn't have imagined the point we'd reach today. What from that early perspective could be easily discerned and effectively resisted now tends to be situated in a place more difficult to access and apprehend: the mind” (appropriation 51).

The notion that “the idea becomes the machine that makes the art”⁴ characterized much of Western art in the twentieth century, and after production was further made subservient to concept by new explorations in performance and appropriation, the Makers are regressing back to seemingly passe physicality. Despite an emphasis on labor and product, the Makers are noteworthy because of their perception and conceptual angle on things. Instead of contemplating the actions of the bohemian elite, we are examining the masses (I'll get back to the elitism a bit later), who are, in an unprecedented and very fashionable way, working with their hands.

If anyone in the last century has punted the definition of art further away from the handmade than Duchamp, it would have to be Joseph Beuys, whose ideas of social sculpture tended towards the outright Utopian. In his commendable 1973 essay *I am Searching for a Field Character*, Beuys writes with the kind of honest bravado that characterizes artist manifestos and makes you chuckle a little when you read things like: “EVERY HUMAN BEING IS AN ARTIST who - from his state of freedom - the position of freedom that he experiences at first hand - learns to determine the other positions in the TOTAL ARTWORK OF THE FUTURE SOCIAL ORDER.”⁵ But wait, this sounds familiar (read again, and ignore the caps). Beuys continues: “This most modern art discipline - Social Sculpture/Social Architecture - will only reach fruition when every living person becomes a creator, a sculptor or architect of the social organism.”⁶ The importance of expanding art away from its historically limiting media, was not - according to Beuys - that it was another example of avant-garde ingenuity, but that the art process itself was fundamentally made different: the only way art can be *for* everyone, is if it is made *by* everyone.

Now, there are plenty of people today, who would argue that art is, in fact, not for everyone, and that if it were, the whole system of cultural production would collapse. But we're interested in the tough questions here, so let's pretend that (and you had to have seen this coming by now) Damien Hirst's \$100 million diamond-encrusted skull is no more art than some Maker's hand-carved spoon. In fact, Hirst's skull is probably less valuable than the spoon in terms of social sculpture despite its incredible market weight, because its value is more difficult to pass on to others and it occupies fewer areas of human interest (e.g. science, craft, psychology, art, etc...)

Beuys was not the first to dream about a world of artists. Going back a little further we have Constant Nieuwenhuys, who in 1949 wrote “creation is above all the medium of knowledge, and therefore of freedom and revolution.”⁷ Nieuwenhuys' epochal creation was his New Babylon a world covered with ever-shifting architecture, offering its inhabitants a never ending playscape, where they are free to make and remake their surroundings. This utopian construct was relentlessly sketched out by Nieuwenhuys through drawings, maps, writing and intricate architectural models. Writer Catherine de Zegher describes Nieuwenhuys' “worldwide city of the future’ [as] a society of total automation, in which the need to work

4 Sol Lewitt. Paragraphs on Conceptual Art. Artforum 1967.

5 Joseph Beuys. *I am Searching for a Field Character*. 1973.

6 Ibid.

7 Constant Nieuwenhuys. *Our Own Desires Build the Revolution*. 1949.

is replaced by a nomadic life of creative play.”⁸ Easily pegged as a commie art scheme, New Babylon offered its citizens a limitless landscape of pleasure - actively avoiding labor - making it more like a visionary twist on the consumerist Utopia, albeit manifested through some truly sexy notions of architecture. The new Babylonians would effectively transcend the current standards of human nature, and become, as Nieuwenhuys cheekily dubbed them: *homo ludens*, who as de Zegher writes, “will not have to make art, for he can be creative in the practice of his daily life.”⁹

It seems obvious when you think about it that artists would want everyone else to be an artist: a more progressive population, a wealth of collaborators, plus an end to that whole artist-as-loner thing. But the kind of artist that “EVERY HUMAN BEING IS”, is not your garden-variety bearded painter. Going back to Duchamp’s shift of action to the mind, the Utopia of universal creativity that artists have been clamoring for has less to do with everyone actually laboring with their hands, than developing the kind of creative problem-solving skills that successful artists have, and applying those skills to the outside world. Make founding editor Mark Frauenfelder refers to the world as “a hackable platform”, and it is just this attitude that seems to be literalizing Beuy’s theories in a not entirely unprecedented way.

What’s new about the current popularity of making, is not that people are taking things into their own hands, but that they are reappropriating - and in some cases, abandoning¹⁰ - modern technology in favor of a new doctrine that ironically reaches a great audience through the Web. Particulars aside, the notion of DIY has been around for a long time. Coined either by 1950’s jazz players, 1960’s ravers, or the 1970’s punk scene (depending on who you ask), it seems necessary to point out that people were in fact building with their hands for the vast majority of their time on Earth. Necessity of course became passe, and DIY-ing grew to signify a revolutionary (and authentic) counter-culture by resisting the lure of consumerist programming. In his recent biography-cum-mantra *Made By Hand: Finding Meaning in a Throwaway World*, Frauenfelder rightly lays blame for this capitalist attitude at the feet of the infamous ad-man Edward Bernays. When Frauenfelder describes Bernay’s plans to “brainwash millions of people into becoming consumers”, he is setting up the idea that Makers and other hands-on types are “deprogramming themselves of [this] lifelong consumer brainwashing.”¹¹

Additional context is provided by George Mckay’s historical account of DIY and revolutionaries in 1990’s Britain, proves that the attitude of Makers is one resurgence of past counter-cultures. Mckay describes the DIY culture of post-punk English radicals as a “youth centered and directed cluster of interests and practices around green radicalism, direct action politics, new musical sounds and experiences.”¹² These DIY-ers were creating living spaces through squatting in abandoned locales, building their own instruments and performance venues, and notably spreading their beliefs through zines and self-printed materials. Around the same time in California, Frauenfelder was founding what would become one of the most powerful online voices of the next few decades with writer Carla Sinclair.¹³ Only it wasn’t a website in 1988; it was a zine. Stemming from underground culture and DIY attitudes, bOING bOING (later Boing Boing), helped establish the mood and aesthetic of the coming Maker movement. Incorporating kitschy

8 Catherine de Zegher. *The Activist Drawing: Retracing Situationist Architectures from Constant's New Babylon to Beyond*. New York: The Drawing Center, 2001.

9 Ibid.

10 See page 46 in *Made by Hand* on the Post Carbon Institute's Julian and Celine.

11 Mark Frauenfelder. *Made by Hand: Finding Meaning in a Throwaway World*. New York: Penguin, 2010. p. 25-30

12 Mckay, George. *DIY Culture: Party & Protest in Nineties Britain*. p. 2

13 <http://www.zinebook.com/interv/boing.html>

illustrations, quirky humor, and a solid grounding in emerging technology, the zine became the blog that would spread Maker news (among *many* other things) to millions. But the real declaration came in February 2005 with the first publication of non-zine mag Make, again administered in part by Frauenfelder (and his now wife Sinclair, who in a tiresomely predictable move became the project editor of Make's sister magazine Craft¹⁴).

With many DIY movements growing around the world in the eighties and nineties, it is the Maker movement that I find to have the greatest repercussions on artistic practice, although as McKay writes, the British variety too maintained “the rejection and embracing alike of technological innovation.”¹⁵ In both cases, individuals are alienated by technological progress and consumerism, but end up utilizing widely available tech (for Makers, the Internet and consumer gadgets) to further their goals. At first glance more politically active, the earlier DIYers also build their beliefs on the ideal of bottom-up creativity. In McKay's book *DIY Culture: Party and Protest in Nineties Britain*, he quotes one Laugh (a member of a horse and buggy type group in West Britain called the post-Twyford Dongas) as saying “we don't want to resist - that's negative, we want to create...”¹⁶

In either case, it seems commendable that these people are making things themselves, and their revolutionary mindsets certainly bring to mind the Utopian thinking of Beuys and Nieuwenhuys (we should add Robert Smithson in there too, for his anti-capitalist naturalism), but what of art? The unavoidable question is how to discuss the products of Makers. Certainly there is use value, historically something Western art has not had for a long time, though these days we have Marjetica Potrc creating art that carries water for the rural citizens of third-world nations... Art deals with thought and visual description, but the politicized results of Makers' actions have an “eccentric yet infectiously appealing aesthetic”¹⁷ readily seen on any page of Instructables or Make. A particular allure of jumbled wires, plywood frames, and other signs of a consumer world remade - the undeniable role Makers accept as they toy around in their leisure time. Again facilitated by the Web, Frauenfelder surely would not have had time to embark on his long list of household projects if not for the negation of office work allowed by his kingpin role in online stylemaking.

While confronting the differences between artists and Makers, it must be said that there are classes of Makers too. These range from the post-Web tinkerers like Frauenfelder (spending \$290 on hacking an espresso machine and \$970 on yard mulch), to the members of the vital but not yet mentioned Maker Faire: Africa, where people are using the same resourcefulness and soldering skills as the California breed, but with more practical concerns, more gravity, and more to gain from their results. With inventions in agriculture and electricity, the African Makers are, according to one of the Kenyan Faire's organizers Erik Hersman “about ingenuity driven by necessity. It's all about creating something that people can try to make a living off of.”¹⁸ This necessity is referenced by Frauenfelder in his book with a fond nostalgia; cultural memories of times when cars were maintained by their owners, food made by hand, and people, supposedly held a more authentic lifestyle. Despite their admirable task of understanding the world around them,

14The fact that Craft is not only helmed by a woman, but one who is married to the heroic Maker spokesman places Craft in a sub category of the art/craft dialectic that has artists opposing Makers, with Crafters (?) pushed into some sort of maternal knitting circle at the fringe of creative legitimacy.

15McKay, George. *DIY Culture: Party & Protest in Nineties Britain*. p. 2

16Ibid. p. 9

17Mark Frauenfelder. *Made by Hand: Finding Meaning in a Throwaway World*. New York: Penguin, 2010. p. 20

18Mandy De Waal. *Maker Faire Africa: Ingenuity for all to See*. The Daily Maverik. August 31 2010.

Makers want to retreat to that primitive time, amusing themselves with problems that still determine survival for much of the world's population.

In *Made by Hand*, Frauenfelder waxes nostalgic for the days of everyday repairs and non-disposable goods: "In those days... instead of being DIYers by choice, they did it out of necessity."¹⁹ These warm memories of fathers tinkering in their garages are again summoned by New York Times writer John Schwartz in a 2008 piece on the Bay Area Maker Faire: "Cars have become too complex to work on under a shade tree, and people have no idea what is inside their cellphones and cameras."²⁰ Maker Faire Africa, now in its second year, has taken the physical tinkering of the Maker philosophy and given it something that neither artists nor Makers really give to their creations: use value. Where most American makers enrich their homes with whimsical (or affluent) inventions, their African counterparts are building to catch up to the mechanized lifestyle already established across the sea. Their startlingly inventive creations are more personal versions of the technology that enabled the Western world throughout the last century. Hersman continues:

"A good example is the corn planter that was showcased at last year's Maker Fair Africa in Ghana. This gadget looks like a pole that is used when you walk through the fields. You push it into the ground periodically and it has a mechanism that works like a pill dispenser and plants your corn. Instead of having to lean over and push your thumb into the ground and plant corn that way, you can do it quicker and much more easily using this invention,"

We are now even further from the definition of art that we started out with. The work designed and shared at Maker Faire Africa can be easily described as industrial tools, and more difficultly as artwork. It certainly exposes the affluent playfulness of Western Makers, but bears little use in the discussion of artistic practice except to demonstrate the extreme of Maker creativity - practical mechanics.

Inventions that assist daily living can be – despite any importance gained through decoration – understood to lie at one end of the spectrum we apply to artistic practice. Even the most lovingly crafted wooden spoon will not carry the load of meaning contained in a successful artwork if it is not presented under the context of conversational intent. Which is to say, that the same spoon can be shown in a gallery and interpreted as art. As soon as it is taken home and put to use, it loses its communication value and begins to have more in common with commodity items around the house. The ineffable specialness we give to objects (and more recently performances, locations, or moments in time) will not be defined in this paper, but it seems likely that the Makers will have a hand in writing it within the coming years, and that perhaps the wooden spoon will gain a new role in our cultural conversation. Looking back, there have been many rebellions and alternate routes taken to evade the dominion of consumer culture, but especially in the face of overwhelming online experience it seems increasingly daring to build with one's hands.

¹⁹Mark Frauenfelder. *Made by Hand: Finding Meaning in a Throwaway World*. New York: Penguin, 2010. p. 25

²⁰Schwartz, John. This, From That. *The New York Times*. May 13 2008.

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