

***CUTTING ACROSS MEDIA:
APPROPRIATION ART, INTERVENTIONIST COLLAGE,
AND COPYRIGHT LAW
BY KEMBREW MCLEOD & RUDOLF KUENZLI, EDITORS***

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**Reviewed by Rob Harle
(Leonardo, 2011)**

I really enjoyed this inspirational book. If there was ever a book that exemplified the immortal words of Dylan Thomas, "*Do not go gentle into that good night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light*", this is it. The "dying of the light" metaphorically is the stifling of creativity, the suppression of artistic production, and the control by fear of many aspects of human creative endeavour due to copyright law. These draconian copyright laws reached their zenith at the end of the 1980s early 1990s in the land of omnipotent litigation, the USA. As the authors state:

"With the copying in Pop Art, we saw the beginning of lawsuits based on the infringement of the private copyrights of commercial subjects that became the unwilling content of new works. Even then, such constraints on artistic freedom were still generally seen as absurd." (p. 119).

The book includes a variety of contributions including scholarly-critical essays; interviews with artists; letters from copyright attorneys; and a number of historically interesting essays from Dada through to the present. The emphasis throughout the book is on musical artistic practice, perhaps a little too much, though it is through musicians' "criminal" activities (sampling, mash-ups, re-mixing) that the copyright

laws and ensuing enforcement of these laws were ramped up. There are 24 contributors, a smattering of black & white images, and a couple of colour plates. These are followed by an excellent Bibliography, profiles of contributors, and an exceptionally good Index.

As many of the essays in *Cutting Across Media: Appropriation Art, Interventionist Collage, and Copyright Law* point out, copyright litigation has nothing to do with plagiarism or moral concerns, nor seldom with defamation issues, it is purely and solely an exercise in greed and corporate control. The stakes involved are in many cases huge. "Every license for Office plus Windows in Brazil â€“ a country in which 22 million people are starving means we have to export 60 sacks of soybeans" (p. 139). It is interesting to note that now, *Open Office*, an excellent suite of office applications is entirely free, comes in numerous languages and is largely a result of the Open Source movement that has minimum copyright protection as proscribed under the Creative Commons Attribution (non-commercial) License. As is this book incidentally!

Copyright law ensures that the creator of a whole (complete) work gets paid fairly for their efforts. Very few (if any) of this book's contributors, nor the artists they discuss, disagree with this function of copyright law. Nor do they want the abolition of copyright law *per se*. Instead they argue for the correct interpretation of Fair Use (under the law), some argue for the extension and expansion of the Fair Use clause. Further they point out that all art throughout history, to greater or lesser degrees, appropriates "bits" from past works. This is the most important argument throughout the book and has profound cultural, legal, and social implications. It is argued that most source owners and especially their legal representatives have no understanding of how modern art is created. These attorneys argue that there is no difference between counterfeiting entire works and "fragmentary and transformational appropriation within new works" (p. 122).

The editors of *Cutting Across Media*, Rudolf Kuenzli and Kembrew McLeod organised a conference at the University of Iowa in 2005 entitled *Collage as Cultural Practice*; many of the chapters in this book are a result of this conference. Collage is a kind of "catch all" term to describe any of the creative practices where "bits" are taken from existing works and woven into an entirely new work with different meaning and intention than the entire work from where the "bits" were appropriated. A simple example of this is the use of "cut-ups" – headlines from newspapers are placed in a new context, interwoven with other headlines that result in an entirely new work. These have been used by such luminaries, as the Surrealists, Bob Dylan, Andy Warhol, and David Bowie. It is interesting to note that Warhol gained copyright clearance for many of his works and the companies were only too happy to get free advertising?

I believe this is an important book, specifically because the issues discussed affect much of our future artistic creations; as mentioned this has profound social and cultural ramifications. As such, this book should be at minimum included as a recommended text in a variety of applicable tertiary education courses. The stakes are too high to ignore the erosion of artistic freedom brought about by ignorant and greed driven application of copyright law.

[Courtesy: Review first published in Leonardo Online Reviews October 2011]

Bio:

Rob Harle is a writer, artist and academic reviewer. Writing work includes poetry, short fiction stories, academic essays and reviews of scholarly books and papers. His work is published in journals, anthologies, online reviews, books and he has two volumes of his own poetry published – *Scratches & Deeper Wounds* (1996) and *Mechanisms of Desire* (2012). Recent poetry has been published in *Rupkatha Journal* (Kolkata), *Nimbin Good Times* (Nimbin), *Beyond The Rainbow* (Nimbin), *Poetic Connections Anthology* (2013), *Indo-Australian Anthology of Contemporary Poetry*

(2013) and Rhyme With Reason Anthology (2013), Asian Signature (2013), Building Bridges Poetry Anthology (2014). Voices across the Ocean Poetry Anthology 2014) His art practice currently involves digital-computer art both for the web and print. His giclée images have been exhibited widely. He is especially interested in promoting the inclusion of visual art in academic and scientific journals.

Formal studies include Comparative Religion, Philosophy, Architecture, Literature and Psychotherapy, his thesis concerned Freud's notion of the subconscious and its relationship with Surrealist poetry.

Rob's main concern is to explore and document the radical changes technology is bringing about. He has coined the term techno Metamorphosis to describe this.

He is currently a member of the: Leonardo Review Panel: Manuscript Reviewer for Leonardo Journal; Manuscript Reviewer for the Journal of Virtual World Research; Advising Editor for the Journal of Trans-technology Research; Advisory Editor for Phenomenal Literature (India); Member Editorial Board, Episteme Journal (Bharat College).

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