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THERE IS SOMETHING ALMOST COUNTERINTUITIVE ABOUT TRYING TO REVIEW A PERFORMANCE LIKE REMIXTHEBOOK BY MARK AMERIKA. FOR A START, IT PRESUMES THAT YOU, THE READER, THE AUDIENCE, IS OUTSIDE OF THE WORK, ABLE TO VIEW IT FROM SOME IMPOSSIBLE PLACE WHERE YOU ARE NOT THE WORK BUT A MERE OBSERVER OF THE WORK.

For, of course, you don’t merely read the work, as if it is just there, taking up space until you turn your attention to it. You inhabit the work or it inhabits you, it almost doesn’t matter which because either way it is a symbiotic relationship—an interrelationship—which is the ground of all remixology—and so what you do is you play along, trying to keep up, feeling sometimes like a jazz musician learning to improvise over Coltrane changes.

“"I didn’t know you had to learn to play…I thought you had to play to play.”
Ornette Coleman via Mark Amerika

remixthebook (and its accompanying and equally important online portal of the same name, of which I will write later) is too lyrical, too poetic, too inclusive and at times too joyous to really be described as a manifesto. In a sense that’s what it is because it makes manifest Amerika’s thinking about the places, practices and (yes) politics of art, creativity and the artist medium in networked digital culture. But it also enacts (performs) Amerika’s practice by doing what it says. That is, rather than being an extended didactic panel that describes (de-scribes, un-writes) his artistic practices, it is inscribed by the practices of which he writes. It is an extended theoretical, creative work whose subject matter is the work itself.

Drawing on the writings of whoever seems to suit his needs at any given time, Amerika is a “postproduction medium” who demonstrates in remixthebook his “aesthetic fitness” and understands

“"what it means to be an artist-medium
one who transforms into an instrument
that acts on what ever ground is available”

“Sometimes you have to play a long time to be able to play like yourself.”
Miles Davis via Mark Amerika.

remixthebook is the product of more than 20 years of experimentation and play by Amerika in the fields of literature, online publishing, network art, video and academic scholarship. It is marked by the same generosity of spirit and collaborative compulsion that is discernible in so much of his work. Despite some misgivings about whether the writing of such a work takes away from “an economy of motion…that wastes no time-movement” necessary to be an artist

“(I ask this because sometimes writing out an artist poetics itself feels like wasted motion as it takes away from the primary bursts of
creativity immersed in its own potential”

Amerika is also conscious that his work also constitutes an intervention into an ongoing debate (here as elsewhere) about the status of creative, practice-based research. In the foreword he notes:

“[M]y hope is that the remixthebook project will indicate to emerging artists and scholars, particularly those engaged in advanced forms of digitally processed, practice-based research, an alternative model of multimedia writing they can invest themselves in as part of a professional course of action.”

He repeated this at a workshop that we both attended in December, 2011 at the Centre for Creative Arts at LaTrobe University hosted by Norie Neumark and Maria Miranda arguing that it is up to established artists (particularly those already securely tenured to universities) to lead the way in experimenting with creative scholarship, running the risks for our younger colleagues by stepping outside of the (sometimes arbitrary) line that demarcates acceptable ‘outputs’ from unacceptable ‘outputs’ in the audit-culture crazed bureaucracies that our universities have become.

“To be clear
it’s not an attempt to overacademicize one’s practice
or to generate extra brownie points
for some abstract reporting system
that supposedly benefits the workaholic professor
Hardly”

That remixthebook is more than a book of/about remix, in its currently hollowed out, piracy/plagiarism-obsessed media guise, is clear from the source material it finds everywhere. Alfred North Whitehead rubs up against Kathy Acker while Ginsberg looks on asking, “Yes, but can you make it come?” William S Burroughs cuts it up on the dancefloor to the sounds of Vilém Flusser’s The Gesture of Writing (out now). Bruce Lee mimes Nam June Paik’s Experimental Television while insisting that “the most productive, creative person is a person who has NO CHARACTER.”

It’s easy to see why Amerika aligns himself with Paik’s assertion that “[t]he culture that’s going to survive in the future is the culture that you can carry around in your head.” His head is so full of such riotous energy that it must be a fun place to be.

“our ultimate aim as postproduction mediums
is to see the mind at work
to see the mind in the work”

Visit www.remixthebook.com and you can see the results of Amerika’s willingness to collaborate in the form of remixes made from both the book and audio-visual material of the artist reading from the book. Along with co-curator and artist Rick Silva, Amerika has invited over 25 international artists, poets and critical theorists, all of them interdisciplinary in their own practice-based research, to sample from remixthebook
and manipulate the selected source material through their own artistic and theoretical filters. Yoshi Sodeoka’s An Artist Yapping about Some Art Stuff X4 features a Rushmore of Amerikas, sped up and slowed down for comedic effect. Performance artist Michelle Ellesworth takes America’s ideas to her local supermarket to see if she can apply them to grocery selection and food preparation in Food Remix. Maria Miranda and Norie Neumark form The Art of Walking from Agnès Varda’s Vagabond, their own online project Museum of Rumour and Mark America’s Sentences on Remixology 1.0. Darren Tofts’ And we shall play a game of chess (also performed by Tofts and America at Ctrl-Z Writing in the Age of New Media, Fremantle Arts Centre in November, 2011, see review page 25) plays off the dialogic nature of America’s writing to imagine a chess match played between Marcel Duchamp and one of America’s alters, Professor VJ.

As well as the remixes, remixthebook.com hosts a series of guest blogged responses from an army of well-known artists and writers and a gift, for anyone interested in either learning about or teaching remixology, in the form of online course notes. While one might, in others perhaps, dismiss these gestures as the artistic equivalent of a “free set of steak knives with every purchase,” one senses that America, the artist and the person, is more interested in getting his audience/collaborators to play along with him, to form an ensemble with the kind of creative verve one associates with jazz or blues. I’ll see your riff and I’ll raise you a new melody. Which is not the same as saying that he thinks we need to give it all away for free (unless you understand that it is “free” as in “free speech,” not as in “free beer”). How art gets made and where the next pay cheque/meal/experience is coming from in the “world of turbocharged technocapitalism” is never that far from his (or any other artist’s) mind. But what Mark America’s words and deeds make clear is that it isn’t going to get made alone, unconnected, in some lonely studio, standing still.

"Find a way to make art while simultaneously innovating your practice while simultaneously spiritualizing your practice while simultaneously marketing your practice while simultaneously enflaming your practice"

Mark Ameika, remixthebook, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2011. The companion website for the books resides at www.remixthebook.com

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