Theses on Making in the Digital Age

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"Ernstfall, es ist schon längst so weit, Ernstfall, Normalzustand seit langer Zeit." Fehlfarben

0. In our world, the maker is the true believer. We want to be self-made, and to make ourselves over. It is no exaggeration to claim that the maker-as-individual is a key figure of today's neoliberal ontotheology. Forget about the fact that you're following some basic instructions, just read the fucking manual and bend reality to your will.

1. The philosophy of making emerges at a time when the theoretical project of '68 transitions from the work of negation ('unmaking') to embrace a vitalist position. Our goal now is to move beyond the conventional teardown. Instead, we prefer the positive contribution of the many. Small is the new big, as the advertisement for the Dutch Triodos Bank says. The System may be rotten, but it no longer needs to be taken apart. Stop those pathetic punk gestures. It's sufficient to build new things, show me yours! We want to know how to make history from a thousand small steps. This is crowdsourcing of the general will. Tell us how to improve the world. We passionately try to create Events and make a difference - even if we don't know how. Meanwhile, we attend spectacles for entertainment. Making is a pragmatist resolution for the crisis in rhetoric. It is no longer cool to disagree. In this post-ideological era, it is no longer sufficient to have an idea. Who cares about your argument, your anger, we want your vision!

2. It is tempting to reduce the cult of making to the so-called reality of working with our hands. But the subversive aspect of manual work is overrated. Let's stop placing it contrast with the lazy anti-sports attitude of brainpower. Richard Sennett's The Craftman embodies the aspiration for quality, the attempt to overcome primitive contradictions. Sennett emphasizes the aimless and useless goal of the craftman who represents the desire to do something well, for its own sake. But he warns also: "the reality on the ground is that people who aspire to be good craftsmen are depressed, ignored or misunderstood." Craftsmen suffer from mistreatment. Before we start to celebrate the making of things, this is something to keep in mind.

3. Despite the apparent significance of the maker, this figure is still an outsider position within the academic context. There is a strong interest in supporting creative practitioners, but we should acknowledge the confusion around this emphasis institutionally. Professional recognition and practice-based qualifications are still relatively unsettled, while scholarly output remains mainly calculated by articles, books and citations. This is also expressed at the level of funding that either supports the problematic space of art-science collaborations, or budgets that are geared toward those projects that generate recognizable outcomes for intellectual markets. This is precisely why alternative perspectives and critical dialogue is required on the status of the maker at this moment, if only to keep in check an inadequate audit culture for experimental research.

4. The maker is always plural. We all know that we never make things alone, however, our experiences are not easily reconciled with current institutional models that rely so heavily on individual achievements. There is a real sense that collaboration remains a problem for these contexts and settings. Let's not forget, moreover, that collective processes of making things are often full of conflicts, miscommunications and difficult compromises. What infrastructures are needed for the makers? Certainly, anonymous offers a new model of some kind of collaboration, but we need to be very cautious about the sustainability of such formations. We feel a constant pressure to invent and discover new tools to support collaboration effectively.

5. Maker culture clearly goes hand in hand with the promotion of the positive theory of things as formulated by Actor-Network-Theory and its spiritual leader Bruno Latour. Putting aside his weary anti-leftist provocations, however, Latour's way of thinking actually struggles to explain how historical change occurs. In the rush toward endorsing the acritical attitude, we are told that entities are fully defined by their relations, and that's just the way things are! Recognize nonhuman agencies seems like a noble endeavor, especially if this might open up avenues for other ways of acting - for instance, what Ian Bogost calls carpentry for philosophical artifacts - but what about the enigma of the creative critical thing? Where is the difference that makes a difference? Or to put this question another way, how can certain disastrous realities now be unmade?

6. Things fall apart. Is it possible that stuff stops being productive? This is a difficult and urgent concern for the vitalist position. We are constantly told that there are more resources to be found, appropriated or re-used. Like capital, making never stops, it is irreducible, however, is there a moment when all this waste is simply remains too toxic for the makers, too unproductive for life?

7. To stop making things is part of doing politics, but this strategy no longer works. Striking is definitely not popular. There are indeed complex questions of agency here. We have moved from the strike to the occupation. People regularly stop making things due to unemployment. In this way, let's acknowledge that affirmative maker culture is situated within a project-led and precarious economy.

8. The critique of things may or may not be justified, but this should not be mixed up with the urge to do stuff. The critique of society doesn't have to materialize itself in material objects (not even in software). Beyond the tired dialectics of real and virtual there is eternal demand for beauty. Nothing is real but design. We cannot discuss 'things' outside of their shape (Flusser). The perfect object in capitalism is the prototype: the pornography of concept design. The commodity fetish is more true than true, and the not yet realized laboratory version is more real than the desired purchase. This is the pure thing.

9. We are missing a critical theory of the prototype. There is an obvious risk that maker culture is ultimately reducible to a slow fabrication movement, or a kind of home science kit ala MAKE Magazine. This is the general intellect as a lifestyle choice. Should pure tinkering just be celebrated as such, or should it be positioned within a clear socio-political agenda? This is important since the prototype implies a question of scale distinct from the autonomous tweaking of technology. The prototype offers a model or ideal type for many, it exists in between the workshop and factory.

10. We cannot reduce making to the moment of creation. What is the distinction the prototypical and the protocological? There are crucial questions of universality that face the maker, but these scenes constantly withdraw from the circuits of global capital. The prototype, however, is never a first form, but always the next stage. Let's imagine a movement from demo-design to prototypes to protocols. These should be taken as the new conditions of possibility after the creative industries.