

Thou Shall Not Steal...*maybe just a little?*

There's nothing new under the sun. Sure. Turns out that that old adage is fairly accurate in that most of what is considered contemporary and innovative can either be located on a progressive continuum or identified as a clever reinterpretation of the past. Then there's that problematic can of worms called "appropriation."

As a studio instructor, my curricula includes a presentation on appropriation—the art of carrying someone else's baggage. The use of appropriation is mostly taken for granted, especially in those cultures with a history of colonization. It's curious to me that many artists, who still think that using any sort of technological aid in creating an original artwork is cheating (gasp), are completely unfazed when it comes to appropriating for their own work the cultural characteristics and artifacts of folks that they have zero personal experience of or relationship to. But let's not single out the creative class alone—just remember those get ups from Halloweens' past that allowed members of a dominant group to wear the identifying characteristics of another without sacrificing their own identity, privilege or standing.

The 20th century artist Pablo Picasso is widely quoted as having said that "good artists borrow, great artists steal." Solid advice, especially if you happened to be a twentieth century Western European, cis-gender, white male. Borrowing implies some degree of reciprocation and exchange. Whereas stealing lacks generosity and is absolute in its proprietorial assumption and taking. "*Whatever you thought was yours is mine now, so get over it.*" But what if you can't or don't want to get over it? Good luck...or get a good lawyer.

That's exactly what The Associated Press did in 2009 when it sued the street artist, Shepard Fairey for copyright infringement over his use of a photograph of Barack Obama taken by AP photographer, Mannie Garcia, to create his widely known "Hope" poster. However, most folks are not a humungous media giant and don't have an arsenal of lawyers on speed dial.

If you lack a direct connection to or haven't done the work—and by that I mean you haven't spent the time and developed meaningful relationships, educated yourself or acknowledged, invested in or given back to the communities you're sampling, then the legitimacy of your appropriation is in serious question. Imagine walking out of a store without paying for the item in

your pocket. Suddenly, alarms go off and you are whisked away to the back office by a security guard to await certain humiliation and possible arrest. Not a good look.

As a white artist I am aware of my use, personal location and attribution in respect to the culturally appropriated material in my practice and have broadened my creative lens through education and listening to the experiences of others. I don't creatively censor myself and I'm not perfect. But, I am aware. Overriding my own implicit biases is life-long work and demands of me my A Game—empathy, honesty and curiosity. It means not being satisfied by hitting that default button based on my privilege and the assumptions that diminish the agency of others.

Recognizing and relinquishing unearned privilege is long overdue in the arts and society at large. How should appropriation be viewed? As culturally sanctioned theft, creative license, a political response, an homage or all of the above? Intention counts.

555 Words

“Shepard Fairey and The A.P. Settle Legal Dispute” by Randy Kennedy, excerpted from the New York Times, January 12, 2011:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/13/arts/design/13fairey.html>