CREATIVE STRATAGEM
Upping the Maker's Pace

BY *Liby Hays*
ILLUSTRATION + DESIGN
Liby Hays

Detailed below are a host of creative strategies I picked up over the course of my RISD education. I came upon them through the process of making things, collaborating with others, or reverse-engineering the things others have made.

The approach to artmaking detailed here requires little technical prowess. Many of the examples revolve around scraps, secretions, memes or other transient artifacts which take no skill to produce. These techniques will not afford the lushest or most 'resolved' artworks. It would be more accurate to say that these are practical, conceptual and/or managerial strategies by which artistic labor can be circumvented, and time conserved.

I know that overwork can be enobilizing, as RISD's hyper-competitive work culture attests. But perhaps with a bit of cleverness, we can reach a judicious medium between laziness and grueling labor. We can produce great art, with plenty of time left for other hobbies and self-preservative functions.

1. Icon Mods

Entities derive authority by implementing a consistent design language, but who sets the standard?
Lately I have been intrigued by the lack of standardization in the way the sickle handle is drawn in different iterations of the Communist Party's hammer and sickle logo.

In this case, the icon maintains its power and legibility despite these inconsistencies.

Graffitoes and burgeoning pop artists often modify an existing logo, to subversive ends. (Admittedly, this move feels far from fresh, and often amounts to unsolicited publicity for the brand in question.)

I have defaulted to this technique on multiple occasions, in the interest of time. Once in design class, we had an in-class assignment to produce a piece of conceptual art in under an hour. I went around taping a lozenge-shaped piece of paper to the decal on the back of everyone's laptops, so as to revoke the bitemark of original sin (and its epistemological, sexual, and consumerist ramifications).

Instantly created, instantly metabolized. I had ~50 minutes to spare for a walk around campus.

2. Commissions

Commissions and work-tradeoffs are a great time conservation strategy, as untold hours of trial and error are folded into another person's technical expertise. It's just important to maintain transparency throughout every step of the process.

For example: I have a working relationship with a once-classmate who produces high-quality, custom-embroidered plush keychains.
The first plush I commissioned from her was a wounded rabbit's foot, based on an online 'Judy Hopps Foot Surgery' game.

I was more than satisfied with the final product, which she got to me, bizarrely, in under two days and for under ten dollars.

I ordered another commission from her in the fall of the next year. I wanted a keychain based on the 'Non-Player Character' (NPC) meme popular at the time.
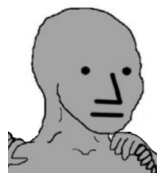
She asked me if it was okay if she used a pre-extant template and I said it was fine, without looking over her design. The result was this neotenic plush:

In this instance, I wished I had screened every step of the process. I felt the 'Chibi-fication' and addition of ears made it too difficult to recognize this as the Non-player Character... perhaps this is the NPC in a flashback episode, or his infant son...

3. Vampirism

The previous example portrays collaboration in a (mostly) positive light, from the perspective of the initiator, but the dynamic can easily become warped.
For example: people often portray the relationship between artists and their assistants as feudal in character. The exploitative artist or studio will supposedly reap not only labor but ideas from its trainees without attributing proper credit. It's said that older animators benefit 'vampiristically' from the 'youthful vigor' of the new animators they employ to draw their intermediate frames (The older animator draws out key parts of an action, and the younger animator fills in the extra drawings in between them).

I haven't witnessed this type of vampirism firsthand, but I did once see a group project in which two freshmen collaborated with a grad student in her late-thirties on a performance piece. The piece dealt with the sanctions of their Christian upbringing and involved elaborately staged baptismal rites and hundreds of laser-cut crosses suspended from the cross-beams and groveling on the floor and enacting a host of other repentant actions, spanning almost half an hour.

The grad student stood to the side. Her contribution was bringing in these Fig Newtons:

We associate bibles with vampire-slayers, not vampires—yet this woman, in her unassuming way, was also contributing to the vampirism issue. She had not put herself on the line in the same way the freshman had, yet everyone in the group received the same grade.

4. Surface Treatment

This strategy relates to finishing work, which can be more of an emotional issue than anything else.

You might be familiar with the paradox about the contours of a map—because you can always draw a coastline at a higher resolution (using a longer and longer line to weave about coves and inlets) every coastline is technically infinite in length. Surface area increases with convolution and resolution...one thinks also of the bumps on the walls of intestines, waffle-cut french fries, and the ruffled collars of the 16th-17th century Northern European well-to-do. (Or one of the chief advantage of modernist furnishings: fewer decorative facets allow for speedier dusting...)

The infinite coastline problem applies to finishing artworks as well. Like the meticulous cartographer, one can always continue adding detail. Slavish processes of surface refinement can continue on indefinitely until you hit a deadline...And this lack of finality can produce jarring psychological effects.

For instance: in the encroachment of the deadline hour, the work may appear in the creator's eyes (now finely attuned to correcting minute flaws) as a collection of tangencies, scritchinesses, cliched stylizations, compositional oversights, muddied colors, and disproportionate forms. Best to accept this as a transient perception, and wait until later to reflect on the piece.

5. Loss-2-Gain

When making something, in my experience, the main things you're subject to lose are time, money, heat, frames, and resolution. But if you take these factors into account initially, the loss can be reconfigured as a positive, and negative feedback can be re-incorporated into the work. For example, in a class on projection-mapping video, a classmate created this setup in which a time-lapse video of rotting apples was digitally projected onto a pile of vanilla ice cream scoops, which were themselves melting from the heat of the light beam.
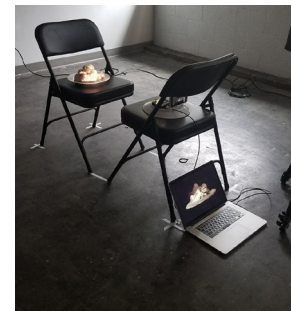
The piece was at once taking advantage of the loss of heat by the projector beam (by utilizing it to melt the ice cream) the loss of intermediary frames (within the time-lapse movie) and the loss of resolution in downloading the video (insomuch as detail is rendered illegible when projected onto milkfat).

6. Bonus Pun

One of the nicest things about 3-D models it that the geometry/basic form of the model is separate from its surface texture, allowing for 'reskinning.' (For instance, a fly-by-night game developer might repurpose a desert racing level as a candy world, by attaching a different set of painted textures to the same 3-D primitives.) I asked a boy I knew in high school to send me the file of a 3-D scene he made of worms in dirt, so I could borrow the same shader (the combination of algorithms used to calculate how light behaves on a surface, simulating shininess, matteness, transparency etc.) on a model of internal organs. A few years later I used the worms themselves in a paper bag charm I designed to 3-D print.
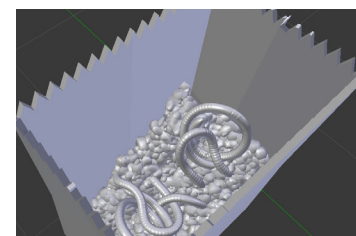
I guess you could say I was, uhm... 'taking the bait...' (nooooooo....)

7. Demarcations

In my glass-blowing class we learned a fun, folksy trick to determine the focal length of a lens you've ground and polished by hand. You wet the lens thoroughly and prop it against a wall. Then you close one eye and hold a lit candle next to the other, and back up slowly until you hit the point at which the reflection of the candle in the slick lens flips upside-down. At this point, you spit directly onto the floor. The distance between your spit puddle and the lens is its approximate focal length (at which it produces the sharpest image).

It reminded me of the charm of spit-gluing, or licking your finger and holding it up to figure out which direction the wind is blowing from.

LIBY HAYS B/RISD '19 fosters artistic sympathies.