DIY

The term and concept "Do-It-Yourself" has been (re-)invented several times throughout the 20th and 21st century, retroactively applied to the past, and gained new meaning.

In its most conventional definition, DIY is a North American term for home improvement that has been in use since the 1950s.[1] Its close cousin is the French "bricolage" both in its literal, quotidian sense (of "bricolage" hardware shops) and in its wider application to culture.[2]

The most literal meaning of DIY is: a material practice done by someone without professional training, typically in makeshift or even crude ways.

Precursors to contemporary DIY culture existed in the 19th century Arts and Crafts movement and its self-built communities, in 1920s Berlin Dadaism with its slogan "Dilettantes - rise up against art!", in 1960s/1970s counter-culture experiments such as the *Survival Chapbooks* of UK artist/musician/activist Stefan Szczelkun that taught readers how to build one's own shelter, grow one's own food and generate one's own energy or the media activism of the Raindance Corporation artist collective that published DIY instruction manuals for building one's own radio and television broadcasting technology. This DIY poetics were continued by the UK artists heath bunting and Kate Rich in the 1990s and in the contemporary zine series *Self-Reliance Library* of the Chicago-based Temporary Services collective.

Alternative DIY culture became commodified as early as in the 1970s with the *Whole Earth Catalogue* that propagated DIY as a lifestyle and product range. In the 1980s, its focus shifted to home computing, early electronic social media and ultimately the Californian Internet economy.[3]

DIY since punk

In more recent understandings of term, DIY stands for an alternative poetics and aesthetics to industrial capitalism and its products, and for the convergence of what used to be called "alternative culture" and "self-organized arts".

Amy Spencer's 2005 book *DIY: The Rise of Lo-Fi Culture* tells a long - retrofitted - history of DIY that begins with zines, i.e. photocopied or cheaply printed, non-professionally made, personal micro publications. Although zines existed since the 1930s, they were not identified with DIY before the punk movement of the late 1970s, and not described as a culture of their own before the late 1990s.[4] The idea that everyone could be a musician by playing only three guitar chords, and that anyone - no matter the skill level

[1] (Hertz, 2020).
[2] Such as the concepts of philosophical "bricolage" by Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jacques Derrida.
[3] (Diederichsen and Franke, 2013), (Turner, 2010).
[4] (Gunderloy)

- could be a simultaneous writer, graphic designer, printer, bookbinder and publisher by typewriting, collaging, photocopying and stapling their zine, that every punk was their own fashion designer, turned DIY from merely a poetics (in the literal sense of *poiesis* as → "making") into a simultaneous poetics, aesthetics and politics.

As opposed to the more established terms 'artist-run space' and 'artists collective/initiative', contemporary "DIY spaces" (that exist particularly in the USA) imply no clear-cut separation between artists and non-artists, professionals and non-professionals, and include artists of all trades, musicians, community organizers, political activists, squatters, bohemians, artists and their audiences.

"DIY culture", in this contemporary meaning, has the same connotation of cultural work that can no longer be firmly placed under the moniker "art", at least not fine art. (Although, historically, many contemporary art careers grew out of DIY collectives. Examples include Gordon Matta Clark and the FOOD restaurant collective of the early 1970s and Sherry Levine and Jenny Holzer as members of New York's *Colab* collective in the late 1970s to mid-1980s.]

In punk and countercultures that preceded it, DIY thus constitutes a poetics, aesthetics and ethos of unalienated production and community; ultimately, of removing the difference between "production" and "consumption".

Between the two extremes of DIY as (a) counterculture and (b) home improvement stores exists the technological DIY of hacker and 'maker' culture (→ Critical Making). With the boom of fab labs and maker spacers, "DIY" in this particular sense has become its own industry (where, as in the American gold rush period, outfitters made most profit).

Aside from overlooking hacker culture, histories of DIY such as Amy Spencer's that focus on its punk legacy also tend to overlook hip hop whose early music production technology of scratching vinyl records was born out of poverty and DIY improvisation. The white bias of DIY culture becomes even more problematic as soon as one extends the perspective to non-Western and non-industrialized countries. The question is whether DIY even makes sense as a term or category in any culture where self-making and makeshift improvisation is not an exception but the default.

present

The Indonesian artist collective ruangrupa has been characterized as being driven by "a strong DIY ethos", born out of the necessity of creating one's own structures in post-dictatorship Indonesia and affinity and vicinity to "punk and street cultures".[5]

[5](Teh, 2012)

Subcultures and artist projects can converge in radical DIY practices that are: self-taught, self-built, self-funded, happening in self-organized spaces using self-built infrastructure, with self-organized communication and distribution. "Self" may refer to an individual, a collective or a community.

This makes DIY a phenomenon that is concerned with autonomy. "Autonomy", when translated literally from Greek to English, means "self-governance". In the context of artists' DIY, autonomy is a poetics, and hence a categorically different notion of autonomy than that of aesthetic philosophy from Kant and Schiller to Adorno and Rancière. Instead of an idealist concept, autonomy becomes a material practice. Or perhaps more precisely: in DIY culture, autonomy is being actively created - and permanently negotiated - in and through the material practice of its community members. Re-applied to art, this means, to quote David Teh's characterization of ruangrupa, to further "autonomy of artists, singular or plural, but not necessarily that of the artwork".[6]

Building upon an Arts and Crafts legacy, DIY culture is typically based on an explicit or implicit critique of disembodied and alienated industrial or institutional production for which it creates hands-on alternatives. This critique and practice can have Marxist, left-anarchist, religious-spiritual, green-ecologist, conservative, liberal, libertarian and extreme right-wing ideological underpinnings. Racist organic farmers, for example, neo-fascist squatters, Nazi rock bands, motorbike repair shops of outlaw biker clubs, religious cult communes and Alt-Right meme collectives are among those who practice and make up radical DIY culture. This renders political-ethical claims for DIY culture just as dubious as any other fundamental political-ethical claim for subculture, let alone any romantization of minorities on the pure grounds of their minority position.

References

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[6] (Teh, 2012).