

DIY

A time machine

“Do-It-Yourself” is a term and concept that has been (re-)invented several times throughout the 20th and 21st century, retroactively applied to the past, reinvented and redefined, and projected onto the future.

In its most conventional meaning, DIY has been a North American term for home improvement in use since the 1950s. It is a close cousin to the French “bricolage” both in its literal, quotidian sense (of “bricolage” hardware shops) and in its wider uses in culture.¹

The most literal meaning of DIY is that of a material practice done by a person without professional training, typically in makeshift (or even crude) ways. In more recent, broadened understandings of the term, DIY also refers to a poetics and aesthetics outside of, or even against, the mainstream of industrial-capitalist societies.

travel b[l]ack

“We was singing in the penitentiary you know
Singing away the years
One time we sung the same song for five years
Next thing I knew, I was home back in the projects”²

The song/track/poem *DIY Time Machine* by the Afrofuturist/punk/experimental musician and poet Moor Mother (Camae Ayewa) likely came out of the zine and workshop series “Do-It-Yourself Time Travel” of The Afrofuturist Affair/Black Quantum Futurism, an artist project consisting of herself and speculative science fiction writer and civil rights lawyer Rasheedah Phillips. The zine relates time travel to “Key Features of Time in African Cultural Traditions”, including notions of “cyclical” time and time only becoming “meaningful at the point of the event”, as opposed to its linear concept and quantitative measuring in Western culture. With cyclical time, time travel becomes an “everyday” activity that is naturally part of “Astrology and Tarot, Mirrors, Thought, Language, Dreams, Music”. Every workshop participant is asked to “[r]ecall a memory, then get inside of the memory to actually re-experience it”, to place “‘future’ thoughts, ‘past’ thoughts, and ‘present’ thoughts” in their imagination in order to “[t]ake one of the future thoughts that you have reversed and build up a memory of it” and leave a “message for my past self”.³

This is what seems to happen in the lyrics of *DIY Time Machine*. The idea of creating one’s own machine and science, outside of what is institutionally recognized, not only yields a poetic epistemology, but also poetic-activist means and tools: the complete lyrics of the song reflect on slavery and its continuation in warfare, inner-city ghettos, wars on drugs and the prison system, through a DIY time machine travel that weaves together different pasts and presents, ancestors and present-day people.

In the work of Black Quantum Futurism, time travel - in whatever forms and manifestations, including participatory *workshops* - becomes an artistic research method.

traveling further back & forth

Amy Spencer’s 2005 book “DIY: The Rise of Lo-Fi Culture” starts its long - retrofitted - history of DIYs with zines, i.e. typically photocopied or stencil-printed, non-professionally made, of highly personal micro publications. Their history begins in 1930 with the American science fiction zine “The Comet”, a DIY medium in many literal senses, including hand-drawn covers, typewritten text and inexpensive (low-quality) stencil press printing, but above all its idea of Science Fiction stories self-written by fans instead of professional writers (who, in that time, published their short stories in popular Science Fiction magazines).

However, zines were first described as a culture of their own in the late 1990s,⁴ and first identified with DIY

¹Such as the concepts of philosophical “bricolage” in (Lévi-Strauss) and (Derrida).

²Moor Mother, *DIY Time Machine*, *Fetish Bones*, 2016

³(Afrofuturist Affair).

⁴(Gunderloy)

in the punk movement of the late 1970s.⁵ The idea that everyone could be a musician by playing only three guitar chords, and anyone - no matter the skill level - could be a writer, graphic designer, printer, bookbinder and publisher by quickly typewriting, collaging, photocopying and stapling their zine, and any punk could be their own fashion designer,⁶ turned DIY from merely a poetics (in the literal sense of poetics as → “making”) into a poetics, aesthetics and politics.

Precursors existed in the 19th century Arts and Crafts movement - where William Morris not only opposed the industrial revolution in words, but also as a self-taught designer, constructor, typographer and printer -, and in 1960s/1970s counter-culture where activists and artists practiced DIY as social intervention; for example, in UK artist/musician/activist Stefan Szczelkun’s *Survival Chapbooks* that taught how to build one’s own shelter, grow one’s own food and generate one’s own energy, a DIY poetics that was straightforwardly continued by UK artists heath bunting and Kate Rich since the 1990s and today by the Chicago-based Temporary Services collective and its zine series *Self-Reliance Library*; or by the 1960s/70s video artist collective Raindance Corporation whose journal *Radical Software* covered DIY television broadcasting both on an artistic and technological equipment-building level.

While these phenomena mostly describe an alternative DIY culture next to that of home improvement and DIY superstores, at the same time, the alternative DIY got commodified as early as in the 1970s with the *Whole Earth Catalogue*, its concept of DIY as a lifestyle and product range, and its transition, already in the 1980s, in early electronic social media and the Internet economy,⁷ where today corporations like Facebook, Twitter and Google have perfected the idea of “user-generated content” (or self-made cultural production) as a source of revenue and even a → platform capitalism.

to 2016

On December 2, 2016, a fire broke out in “Ghost Ship”, a warehouse building collectively used and inhabited by artists and musicians in Oakland, California. It ended up killing 36 people. Both American news media and residents referred to the space as a “DIY space”. After the fire, *DIY spaces* throughout the USA were under scrutiny for their safety; extreme-right supporters of president Donald Trump on the anonymous web forum *4chan* compiled online lists of these spaces to have them reported and shut down.⁸

As opposed to the more established terms ‘artist-run space’ and ‘artists collective/initiative’, “DIY space” implies that there is no clear-cut separation between artists and non-artists; professionals and non-professionals; artists of all trades, musicians, community organizers, political activists, squatters, bohemians; artists and audience. “DIY culture” as a label has the same connotation, of cultural work that blurs those boundaries, and can no longer be firmly placed under the moniker “art”.

time capsule: 1979

The earliest connection between punk and DIY that I could find was made in the British music magazine *Sounds* in early 1981.⁹ A likely influence was the album *Do It Yourself* by the punk-influenced rock band Ian Dury & the Blockheads in mid-1979.¹⁰ The LP’s cover design used flowery wallpapers as its backdrop, likely in order to communicate that the songs were written at Dury’s home.

In punk and other countercultures before it, DIY being a poetics and aesthetics, and perhaps even more importantly, DIY is an ethos, namely of unalienated production and sharing. This ethos also describes internal contradictions of punk culture, since the Sex Pistols, for example, were an industry product and self-advertised “swindle” designed by their (Situationism-influenced) manager Malcolm McLaren and fashion

⁵(Sounds)

⁶(Westwood)

⁷(Diederichsen and Franke)

⁸<https://hyperallergic.com/355219/from-texas-to-dc-artists-and-diy-spaces-struggle-with-permits-and-trolls/> ; the archive of the online art magazine *Hyperallergic* includes more than ten articles on American DIY Spaces.

⁹“Karl had warped out the the DIY punk ethic”, *Sounds*, January 24th, 1981. A similar connection was made, for American punk, in the 1983 book *Hardcore California*: “when *Search & Destroy* dismantled itself he was out of a fainzine. So, in the DIY tradition of punk, he created *Damage* magazine” (Davis and Belsito, 173).

¹⁰(Dury).

designer Vivienne Westwood, and thus the structural struggle of any DIY movement against its incorporation into a (creative) industry.

In this ethos, the historical origins of DIY are romanticist, particularly the kind of romanticism that in the 19th century glorified folk culture and, in Arts and Crafts, self-making as resistance against capitalism and industrial commodification. This also clarifies the dangers of DIY as an ethos and politics that could just as well apply to movement like militant settlers, colonists and homesteaders, fascist “sovereign citizen movements” that claim to run their own micro states. Henry David Thoreau’s 1854 book “Walden; or, Life in the Woods” that inspired both anarchist-leaning artists like John Cage and Jonas Mekas,¹¹ as well as the “Unabomber” Ted Kaczynski who modeled his life in a cabin after the book, and whose letter-bombings of high-tech scientists could be interpreted as militant DIY.

The main difference between post-punk DIY and DIY from Arts and Crafts to 1970s counter-culture is aesthetic: while the latter strove for craft and beauty, punk-DIY is rather post-industrial than anti-industrial by collaging (like Dada) industrial products, disregarding crafts and skill, and embracing ugliness, crudeness and ostensive lack of skill.

forward to the early 1990s

The word “DIY” did not become commonly associated with punk culture until the emergence of the Riot Grrrl movement in the early 1990s at the US-American North West Coast. In Riot Grrrl, music and zine making were - arguably - for the first time equally represented, without zines mainly serving the purpose of covering music. In her book *The Archival Turn in Feminism - Outrage in Order*, Kate Eichhorn reconstructed how archiving became a vital part of the movement, too, and thus third pillar of DIY culture, and the initial struggles with coming to terms with archiving by protagonists who identified as “anti-institutional, DIY, fuck the institution”.¹² - DIY archiving projects, that often exist on the fringes or in violation of intellectual property regimes, also exist today in the Internet, with among others Ubuweb, Monoskop, Memory of the World, aaarg; Kenneth Goldsmith describes their poetics in his book *Duchamp Is My Lawyer*.¹³ These digital DIY archiving projects often apply principles of Free Software/Open Source to culture. Here, Eichhorn points out a discrepancy in cultural capital accumulated by mainstream Open Source software development and Riot Grrrl, despite both having started in the same decennium: “Riot Grrrl, which opted out of established publishing and recording venues to embrace a DIY approach marked by a parallel anti-economic mandate, did not necessarily benefit financially or in terms of cultural prestige from its decisions”.¹⁴

Conversely, histories of DIY that focus on the punk legacy, such as Amy Spencer’s, tend to omit hip hop - whose early music production technology of scratching records was born out of poverty and DIY improvisation. The white bias of DIY becomes even more problematic as soon as one doesn’t limit one’s perspective to Western, or industrialized countries. Does DIY, as a category, even make sense in geographical areas and cultures where DIY is not an exception - respectively something that needs to be defined -, but the basis of everyday life and therefore a meaningless attribute?

jump to 2021

The Indonesian artist collective ruangrupa has been characterized as being driven by “a strong DIY ethos”, born not only out of the necessity of creating one’s own structures in Post-dictatorship Indonesia, but also out of affinity and vicinity to “punk and street cultures”.¹⁵ Other Indonesia art collectives, such as Wok the Rock, do even more clearly identify with punk culture and political anarchism.¹⁶

Amy Spencer retrofits the self-publications of Dadaism, Situationism, Fluxus and Mail Art into her concept and aesthetics of DIY. In her book *The DIY movement in Art, Music and Publishing*, Sarah Lowndes extends

¹¹(Cage), (Mekas).

¹²(Eichhorn, 104)

¹³(Goldsmith)

¹⁴(Eichhorn, 120)

¹⁵(Teh), <https://www.afterall.org/article/who-cares-a-lot-ruangrupa-as-curatorship>

¹⁶Such as in Wok the Rock’s project *Trash Squad* that is “inspired by the debate about anti-capitalism discourse in punk communities in Indonesia”, <https://www.woktherock.net>

the notion of DIY culture even to include the contemporary art scenes of European cities such as Cologne and Glasgow. This arguably overstretchers the term as the scenes she covers mostly include professionally educated artists, as well as commercial and institutional parties such as galleries and art institutes. At the same time, it is difficult to differentiate “DIY” from “non-DIY” for an artisanal, non-industrial practice like contemporary gallery art, as one as one only looks at its modes of material production, and doesn’t consider factors such as education, funding, presentation and distribution.

A radical DIY practice would be then: self-taught, self-built, self-funded, in self-organized spaces using self-organized infrastructure, with self-organized communication and distribution, where the “self” can be an individual, a collective or a community.

Ultimately, this makes DIY a practice concerned with autonomy. “Autonomy”, when translated literally from Greek to English, means “self-governance”. In the context of artists’ DIY, autonomy thus describes a poetics instead of an aesthetics, and thus an entirely different concept of autonomy than that of aesthetic philosophy from Kant and Schiller to Adorno and Rancière. Rather than an idealist concept, autonomy becomes a material practice, or, even more precisely: autonomy is being actively created - and permanently negotiated - in and through the material practice of artists and community members. Or, to quote David Teh’s characterization of *ruangrupa*, something that is concerned with the “autonomy of artists, singular or plural, but not necessarily that of the artwork”.¹⁷

leap into a parallel universe

Between the two extremes of DIY as (a) counterculture and (b) home improvement superstores exists hacker and ‘maker’ culture as technological DIY. With the boom of maker spaces, “DIY” in this sense has become its own industry (where, as in the American gold rush, most profits are made by the equipment suppliers).

Hacker/maker culture has blurry boundaries to countercultural/artistic DIY on the one hand and to industries on the other hand. For example, the DIY instructions of the Raindance Corporation in the 1970s and of Temporary Services in the 2000s could just as well find their home in hacker and maker spaces. On the other hand, products originally developed in hacker and maker spaces often grow into industrial products and commercial spin-offs. Vice versa, smaller-scale parts of the Chinese electronics industries in the special economic zone of Shenzhen, where most of today’s consumer electronics are being manufactured, work in the manner of DIY makerspaces.¹⁸

This is where → Critical Making comes into play which, in some of its variants, can mean the reinsertion of a counter-cultural (and anti-capitalist) DIY ethos into maker culture.

a trip back to aesthetics

During our stops in different times, we had alternately characterized DIY as a poetics and aesthetics, or even - in some of its aspects - as a poetics instead of an aesthetics.

Although DIY literally refers to doing/making/poiesis, there is, perhaps paradoxically, also a strong DIY aesthetic, even to the degree that in order for something to be accepted as DIY, it must be recognizable as such: in punk fashion, a recycled piece of clothing or a badge, in DIY publishing, handwriting or collage combined with cheap printing processes and uneven hand-binding/stapling zine, recycled and repurposed furniture (which became fatal in the “Ghost Ship”) and industrial ruins in DIY spaces, to name only a few typical examples. They also explain the inclusion of Dada, Situationism, Fluxus and Mail Art into Amy Spencer’s history of DIY. Fluxus could even be retroactively called a DIY movement if one focuses on George Maciunas’ manifestos for a radically democratic “non-elite, non-parasitic” art, his early focus on cheaply sold, hand-made multiples and typewritten artists booklets as an alternative art economy, and his FluxHouse project that, in the words of Craig Saper, “functioned like a DIY development corporation, but

¹⁷(Teh).

¹⁸Luisa Mengoni, *From Shenzhen: Shanzhai and the Maker movement*, Victoria & Albert Museum Blog, 2015, <https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/international-initiatives/from-shenzhen-shanzhai-and-the-maker-movement>

with cooperative and social capitalist motivations”,¹⁹, consisting of two deteriorated, self-maintained houses in New York that were supposed to house a communist artist living community.

With DIY constituting a poetics of the non-expertly self-made and makeshift, aesthetic imperfection becomes its defining attribute.

The DIY aesthetic of imperfection however, still differs from older, more established aesthetics of imperfection:

- From the romanticist poetics and aesthetics of the fragment (such as in the early romanticism of Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis, and the later gothic romanticism of ruins), in that DIY culture does not understand imperfection as a reflection of a striving for the absolute, nor as an expression of autonomy in the sense of absence of rules of the artist.²⁰
- From the Japanese concept of Wabi Sabi - which finds beauty in what seems to be run down or worn -, because, according to the 20th century novelist and aesthetic theoretician Junichiro Tanizaki, traditional Japanese and Chinese aesthetics has a different concept of perfection: “As a general matter we find it hard to be really at home with things that shine and glitter. The Westerner uses silver and steel and nickel tableware, and polishes it to a fine brilliance, [...] we begin to enjoy it only when the luster has worn off, when it has begun to take on a dark, smoky patina. [...] When new it resembles aluminum and is not particularly attractive; only after long use brings some of the elegance of age is it at all acceptable. Then, as the surface darkens, the line of verse etched upon it gives a final touch of perfection”.²¹

Using the terminology of Clement Greenberg and Rosalind Krauss, DIY practices are simultaneously “medium-specific” and medium-unspecific, because they are always based on the practical engagement with a specific medium or material (such as: zines/publishing, fashion, music, or a specific technology such as computing in the case of hacker-cultural DIY), but without striving for mastery or perfection. This also differentiates DIY from amateur cultural and artisanal production which typically imitates professional role-models, striving for their level of perfection.²²

quantum travel to Cologne, 1920, and Berlin, 1982

If Dada and (post-)punk could, retroactively, be seen as two 20th century stops in between 19th century Arts and Crafts and 21st century DIY culture, then it might be interesting to look at a one term that was promoted at its fringes: the “dilettante”, or in its 1982 punk misspelling, “dilletante” (which means “dill aunt” in German):

¹⁹Craig S. Saper/dj readies, *Intimate Bureaucracies: A Manifesto*, Punctum Books, 2012, 2.

²⁰“Die romantische Dichtart ist noch im Werden; ja das ist ihr eigentliches Wesen, daß sie ewig nur werden, nie vollendet sein kann. Sie kann durch keine Theorie erschöpft werden, und nur eine divinatorische Kritik dürfte es wagen, ihr Ideal charakterisieren zu wollen. Sie allein ist unendlich, wie sie allein frei ist, und das als ihr erstes Gesetz anerkennt, daß die Willkür des Dichters kein Gesetz über sich leide.”, Friedrich Schlegel, Athenäums-Fragment 116, 1798.

²¹(Tanizaki, 10)

²²(Deren) described this dilemma and limitation of amateur culture as early as in 1959, taken amateur filmmaking as her example.

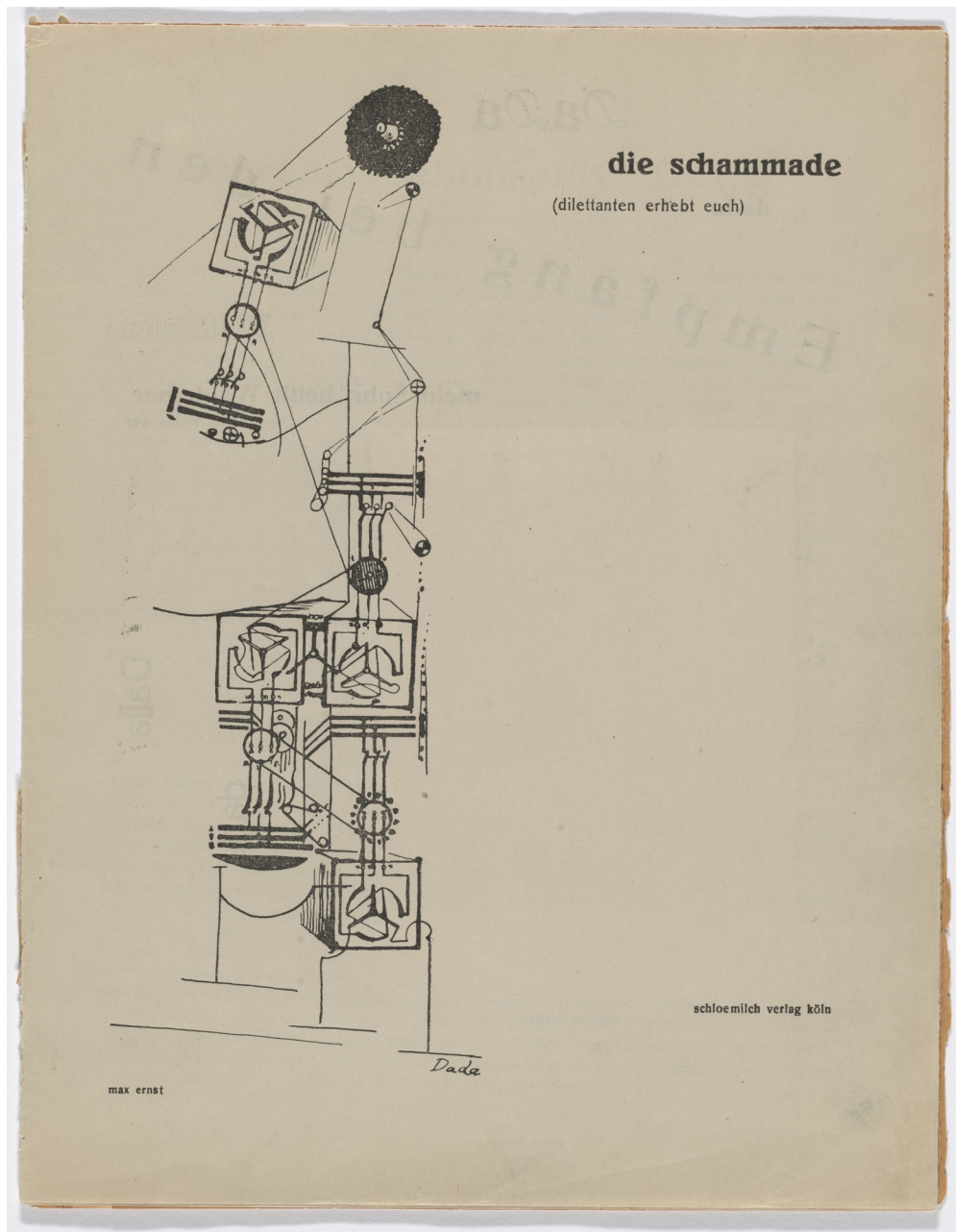
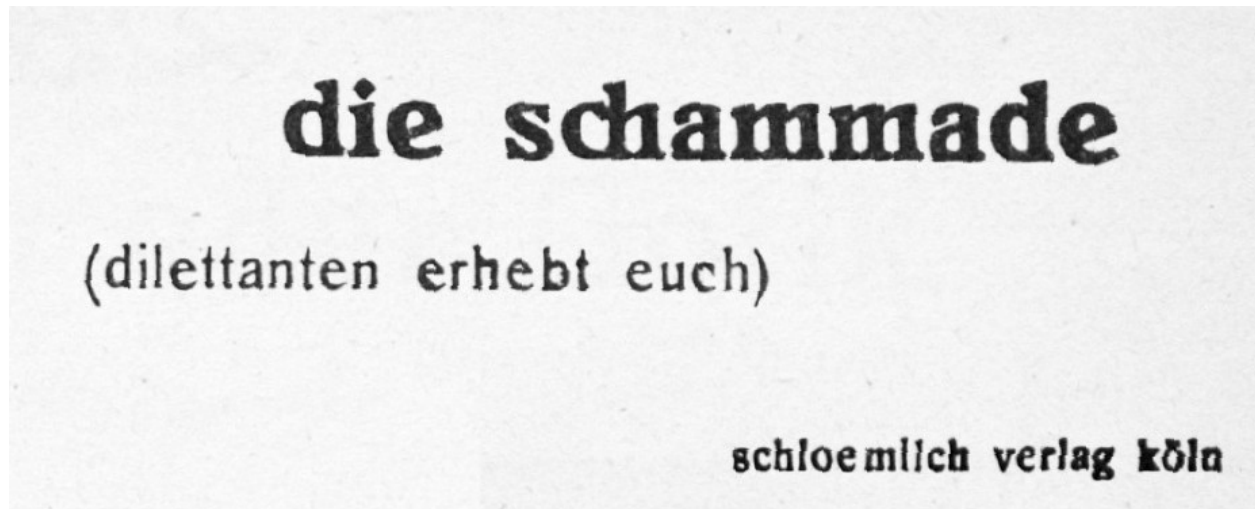


Figure 1: "Die Schammade: Dilettanten erhebt euch", magazine published by Max Ernst and Johannes Theodor Baargeld, 1920



“Geniale Dilletanten”, “Brilliant Dilettants/Dill Aunts”, was a coinage of the artist and member of the queer performance collective Die Tödliche Doris, Wolfgang Müller. It became a comprehensive moniker for the experimental parts of West-Berlin’s 1980s post-punk subculture.²³ Unlike in English, the German “dilettant” doesn’t have a neutral connotation, but means a simultaneously unskilled and inept person that botches every job given to them. If “amateur” merely signifies non-professional status, and “DIY” gives this status an ethical spin, “dilettant” is an insult that Dadaists and punks turned into their humorous badge of honor.

This implicitly addresses an inherent trap of DIY programs that follow the tradition of the Arts and Crafts movement. While Arts and Crafts began as a socialist movement of non-alienated economic production that sought to build its own classless communities, it ended up producing collectible luxury items for the wealthy few. Fluxus, whose self-published pamphlets and multiples are now fine art collector’s items, fell into the same trap.

back to the present

As an Arts and Crafts legacy, DIY culture is typically based on critiques of disembodied and alienated industrial or institutional production for which it envisions an autonomist alternative. This critique exists in Marxist, left-anarchist, religious/spiritual, conservative and extreme right-wing ideological forms. Neofascist organic farmers, for example, motorbike repair shops of outlaw biker gangs, religious cult communes and Alt-Right meme collectives are also practicing radical DIY. This renders political-ethical claims for DIY culture just as dubious as any political-ethical claim for subculture and any romantization of minorities purely on the grounds of their minority position.

“Dilletanten” poetics and aesthetics might be a more honest or charming alternative to DIY in this respect, since it does not make any moral or political claims.

I will open my Quantum Time Capsule on:

Dates(s):

Time(s):

Location(s):²⁴

²³(Müller, 1982), (Müller, 2014).

²⁴© The Afrofuturist Affair/Black Quantum Futurism, *Do-It-Yourself Time Travel (mini zine)*

Wolfgang Müller (Hg.)

Geniale Dilletanten

Blixa Bargeld , Alexander v. Borsig,
Tabea Blumenschein , Gudrun Gut,
Frieder Butzmann , Klaus Laufer,
Dagmar Dimitroff , Klaus Hoffmann,
Michael Jarick , D. Holland-Moritz ,
H.W. Marquardt , Mutfak , U. Ohlinger,
Thomas Schönball , MaLe ,
Nikolaus Utermöhlen u.v.a.

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Figure 2: "Geniale Dilletanten", book edited by Wolfgang Müller, 1920; the name of contributor Blixa Bargeld has been inspired by Dadaist Johannes Theodor Baargeld