



Pass It On:
Connecting Contemporary
Do-It-Yourself Culture
Curated by AnneDorothee Boehme,
Lindsay Bosch, and Kevin Henry

March 1 - April 14, 2007



Of course you have noticed it, too:

DIY is everywhere.

Humans are enterprising beings and the impulse to go it alone, to re-interpret, and to play with, the practical instruction sets of others seems to have been deeply imprinted upon us. Do-It-Yourself has been an essential part of everyday life, in every culture, with unclear beginnings, but varied and specific motivations.

Its boundaries are hard to delineate: broadly defined, it is a design (and modification) process, or a call for political action, by the self-directed individual who is either the end user of the good he or she creates, or who has intimate knowledge of what might serve the end user best.

The term is also applied to people who engage, either single-handedly or with a group of like-minded collaborators, not in the production of tangible goods at all, but into altering communal and cultural practices and conventions, thereby initiating the (self-) education of others, and fostering networks of similarly concerned people. This is an open-ended, exploratory, use of skills - quite different from solving the usually predetermined problems of our ritually defined work routines. Doing-it-yourself leaves room for the unpredictability, the surprise, and the pride, that comes when someone, either for pastime or for occupation, creates new pathways and concepts; questions authority;

decides not to wait for opportunities being handed down by others, and sketches out his/her own utopia, free of peer supervision, and free to ignore any market-driven principles.

The proliferation of web-based communication over the last decade has greatly influenced many of the previously existing DIY communities; it has led to crossovers amongst them, and has spawned entirely new collaborations. The potential for self-initiative, combined with the ability to quickly share its outcome, permeates more aspects of our life than ever.

Throughout our daily work and leisure time we oscillate constantly between activities where we are experts, where we are lay people, and where we are passionate amateurs; and at times we find ourselves outside of any of those labels. We can assemble a furniture kit from Ikea, or engage in any number of craft activities that result in physi-

cal objects of home- or self-adornment, and the satisfaction of personal expression. We can invent and build tools and gadgets that recycle the detritus of consumer culture, either out of political choice or out of economic necessity.

DIY further lies at the base of social movements like squatting, or home schooling; it fuels medical or psychological self-help groups, and it has helped develop wikis, podcasts, blogs - all those innumerable websites that rely on an active core group of amateurs who volunteer their time reliably to input, edit, and comment on, information and other manifestations of intellectual and creative achievement.

Doing-it-ourselves reaches back to '70s punk music and the development of 'zine culture, to '60s back-to-the-land movement and feminist healthcare models, and to the popular home improvement programs of Europe and the US after WWII. In this country, early settlers and colonists were ultimately all DIYers, and myriad societies arose before the Civil War to encourage self-education and to foster mutual assistance and improvement. You can keep going back further as far as you want and still find traces of the DIY impulse.

At the present, when many of us feel politically voiceless, and hence withdraw from, but not really stem, the rising social and ecological costs of consumer culture, we thought it worthwhile to remind ourselves, and others, that it is individual initiative and ingenuity that matures into working models for collective action. Throughout history, Doing-It-Together has challenged the dominant political, educational, and economic, systems - with often drastic changes for the better as its consequence.

We've cast the net for this exhibition around individual and group DIY activities that generously share with others the know-how they have acquired as part of their own learning process, mainly by providing us with verbal and visual instruction sets. The work presented here is willing to give up distinctive authorship, competitiveness, and recognizable trademarks, for the sake of drawing new circles, of

creating new communities, institutions, and real-life or online networks on both a local and a global level. All this is an attempt to gain (back) individual control over essential aspects of our daily lives and to improve existing options. There are of course examples of DIY that are detrimental or at least not beneficial to society as a whole. They may serve solely an individual's purpose and lack any notion of "passing it on" - those may be investigated elsewhere and fall not within the parameters of our selection.

Contemporary DIY is an ever-exploding process, breaking traditional molds of how we learn and teach, how we get information and entertainment, and how we house, clothe, and feed ourselves. The examples we've chosen seem hard to contain within the confines of a gallery space; each one a persistent appeal to be taken with and disseminated, to be used and modified further. They cannot form a final and definitive statement on the intrinsic nature of DIY, but they do represent its vibrancy, its essence of humbleness, inventiveness, encouragement, and its joy in life. Hopefully they will stimulate the viewer's willingness to insert him/herself more actively and responsibly into a broader community, one where anybody can contribute to solving problems collectively, and they assist in bypassing the anonymity and passivity of consumer culture.

Many questions remain: are these activities able to connect, not only to past and similar explosions of ideas, but also presently to each other, and where do they fit within the wider discourse of art, art activism, political activism, and popular culture in general? What would happen if they were to combine forces and map out an even broader, and more binding, vision of where our society is headed? As we continue to move towards ecologic distress, and as it becomes clear that values most dear to many of us are not, and never will be, measurable in monetary terms, we hope to trace with this show a shift away from unlimited consumerism, and from the desire for goods that are headed for obsolescence from the very moment they were designed and fabricated. The social mandate can be re-assigned at any point in time: to humbler, more democratic, organizations; to increased collaboration between amateurs and experts, so that public dissent with existing shortcomings can be followed-up by more rapid change. DIY practitioners, who have long observed how social principles clash with social realities can formulate some of the most exciting visions of how culture, and products, can be generated, exchanged, and used, in a more mindful way. As the members of Temporary Services summed it up in one of our interviews: If you want to get something done, why wait? Who else is going to do it?

- AnneDorothee Boehme, curator

With gratitude

we acknowledge the generosity of the writers who have contributed essays to our exhibition catalog; those are saved as .pdf files on the jump drive. In a spirit of sharing their knowledge and expertise freely with others they are able to provide us with insights into highly varied aspects of DIY communities and concepts.

THE ESSAYISTS

Bruce Tharp (*Do It Thyself: Amish Tenets of Separation and Community*) describes how members of the Amish community rely mainly on themselves and their insular communities, and emphasize small-scale handwork over consumption as a more satisfying and more meaningful way of life. **Shannon Stratton** (*Getting Things Done: A Polemic on Needlecraft & Free-Time*) explores DIY crafting movements, specifically knitting, as an expression of slow activism and as a way to remove oneself from fast-paced consumer culture. **Carolyn Goldstein** (*DIY in the USA: A Short History*) outlines an overview over the development of DIY home improvement movements in the last 100 years. **Lindsay Bosch** (*Talking Amongst Ourselves*) describes new online communities as they have emerged over the past decade, either individual initiatives that gave rise to online communities or collective endeavors that greatly fuel individual DIY production. **Jon Cates** and **Jake Elliot** (*Hacking Open Together: New Media Art, Activism and Computer Counter Cultures*) describe the connection between hacking/new media and an art market that is driven by a constant need for cutting-edge and inventive works that can be easily commodified. **Scott Smith** (*Will DIY Eat Itself? How the DIY Ethic Is Impacting Consumer Life, and Where It May Be Headed*) explores the connections between the recent DIY activities and consumer culture and how traditional companies are responding to this upsurge in market opportunities; **Kevin Henry** (*The Anatomy of an Instruction Set*) looks at the power of instruction sets to disseminating crucial information and fomenting cultural change. **Terrance Hannum's** essay (*Sowing the Seed of Discontent: Some Pale Reflections on DIY in Music*) and **Brendan de Vallance's** quirky instruction set sum up the DIY aesthetic that is underlying Punk music.

THE INTERVIEWEES

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RESEARCH, DESIGN AND PRODUCTION

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