

ALSO BY DAVID SHIELDS

The Thing About Life Is That One Day You'll Be Dead

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Dead Languages: A Novel

Heroes: A Novel

reality hunger

A MANIFESTO

David Shields



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The person who loses the presidential election is the person who seems most fictional. In 2000, Gore simply was Mr. Knightley from *Emma*. So, too, in 2004, Kerry—Lord Bertram from *Mansfield Park*. During the 2008 presidential election, reality hunger in the face of nonstop propoganda resulted in regime change. Obama won because of his seeming commitment to reality, the common sense of his positions. Obama came off as completely real, playing basketball and texting people on his BlackBerry and tearing up over his grandmother's death. Both Hillary and McCain campaigned with all the logic of a Successories poster: they appeared to believe they could will their presidency into being simply by desiring it; no matter how behind they were by every real-world metric, they could still win by wishing it so.

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Facts now seem important.

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Facts have gravitas.

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The illusion of facts will suffice.

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In our hunger for all things true, we make the facts irrelevant.

analogy

j
hip-hop

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Genius borrows nobly.

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Good poets borrow; great poets steal.

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Art is theft.

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Why is hip-hop stagnant right now, why is rock dead, why is the conventional novel moribund? Because they're ignoring the culture around them, where new, more exciting forms of narration and presentation and representation are being found (or rediscovered).

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American R & B was enormously popular in Jamaica in the 1950s, but none of the local musicians could play it authenti-

cally. The music culture was based around DJs playing records at public dances; huge public-address systems were set up for these dances. DJs started acting more and more as taste editors, gaining reputations for the distinct type of record each of them would play. After a while, the act of playing the records also became an opportunity for style and artistic expression. They still used only one record player, but they developed special techniques of switching records in a split second to keep the music going seamlessly. The Jamaican music industry started producing its own recordings, and they, too, were utilized by these sound-system men who would make recordings specifically for their own dances and wouldn't let anyone else have the record. Even when Jamaican musicians were available to play these public dances, the audience preferred the manipulation and combination of prerecorded material.

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Sampling, the technique of taking a section of existing, recorded sound and placing it within an "original" composition, is a new way of doing something that's been done for a long time: creating with found objects. The rotation gets thick. The constraints get thin. The mix breaks free of the old associations. New contexts form from old. The script gets flipped.

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In the 1960s, dub reggae—artists recording new parts over preexisting music, often adding new vocals and heavy tape echo—evolved straight out of the sound-system DJ movement, which was always eager to incorporate any new advancement in technology. A decade later, King Tubby and Lee "Scratch" Perry began deconstructing recorded music. Using

extremely primitive, predigital hardware, they created what they called versions. In 1962, Jamaica was granted its full independence from Britain, and more Jamaicans started coming to the United States. It was only natural that these immigrants would gravitate toward the ready-made black communities in America, especially New York City. Newly arriving Jamaicans brought with them the idea of the sound-system DJ; filtered through an African American perspective, the music moved in a different direction than it had in Jamaica. In many ways, hip-hop was born out of the Jamaican idea of turning record-playing into an art form.

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From when I first met King Tubby and see him work, I knew there was a man with a great deal of potential. He could make music outta the mistakes people bring him, like every spoil is a style to King Tubby. He would drop out the bits where a man sing a wrong note and bring up another instrument or drop out everything for pure bass and drum riddim; then he'd bring back in the singing. You would never know there was a mistake there because he drop in and out of tracks like that's what he was always intending to do. He do it all live, too. He don't build it up bit by bit, him jus' leggo the tape and do his thing. You watch him, it like watching a conductor or a maestro at work. And of course every time it would be different. He always want to surprise people—I think he even want to surprise himself sometimes—and if he mix the same tune a dozen times, you will have twelve different version.

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In the early 1970s, many technologies became much more widely available to the general public, including the portable

PA system, the multichannel mixer, and the magnet-drive turntable made by the Technics company.

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You don't need a band to do this stuff. You steal somebody else's beats, then—with just turntables and your own mouth—you mix and scratch the shit up to the level your own head is at.

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Lil Wayne, Nine Inch Nails, Radiohead are hugely popular artists who recently circumvented the music business establishment by giving their music directly to their audience for free on the web. The middle man has been cut out; listeners get a behind-the-scenes peek at work in progress. Lil Wayne can put out whatever he pleases, whenever he pleases, and the music fan gets access to far more material than a standard album release would provide. For all three of these acts, sales went up after they had first given away some, if not all, of the new release. Their fans rewarded them for creating this intimate link.

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In 2008, Damien Hirst, the richest visual artist in the world, sold his work "directly" to buyers through a Sotheby's auction rather than through the time-honored method of galleries; it was the largest such sale ever: 287 lots, \$200 million.

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What's appropriation art?

It's when you steal but make a point of stealing, because by changing the context you change the connotation.

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Reality-based art hijacks its material and doesn't apologize.

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My taste for quotation, which I have always kept—why reproach me for it? People, in life, quote what pleases them. Therefore, in our work, we have the right to quote what pleases us.

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Elaine Sturtevant, an American artist born in 1930 in Lakewood, OH, has achieved recognition for works that consist entirely of copies of other artists' works—Beuys, Warhol, Stella, Gonzalez-Torres, etc. In each case, her decision to start copying an artist happened well before the artist achieved wide recognition. Nearly all of the artists she has chosen to copy are now considered major artists.

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Looking for songs to sample and melodies to use—picking through the cultural scrap heap for something that appealed to me—I went through the *Billboard* R & B charts and the Top 40 charts from the late 1940s until the present. With the aid of the search function on iTunes, I was able to hear a twenty-second section of just about any song I wanted to hear. It was fascinating to watch popular music morph and mutate year by year, especially on the R & B charts (black music has always been quicker to incorporate new songs and technologies). It was like watching stop-animation film footage, seeing this object (the main style of the time) grow and shrink like a plant, rise and fall, swell and collapse: swing music slimming down and splicing into gospel and making rhythm and blues,

rhythm and blues slowing down into soul, soul hardening into funk, funk growing into disco, and disco collapsing under its own sheen as hip-hop hid in the underground. It wasn't until after I'd gone through the whole set of charts and reviewed my notes that I realized there was a trend in the songs I chose to sample. The number of songs I picked remained consistent through the 1950s and '60s, but by the end of the '70s it dropped off. I'd picked only a few songs from the '80s and none from the '90s. Why do the songs of the late '70s and afterward hold very little appeal for me? Somewhere along the way, as recording technology got better and better each year, the music lost something; it became too perfect, too complete. Which is why so many artists have turned to using samples and other preexisting sources in various forms: in this rush of technological innovation, we've lost something along the way and are going back to try to find it, but we don't know what that thing is. Eating genetically altered, neon-orange bananas, we aren't getting what we need, and we know something is missing. We're clinging to anything that seems "real" or organic or authentic. We want rougher sounds, rougher images, raw footage, uncensored by high technology and the powers that be.

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Rappers got the name MC (master of ceremonies) because they began as hosts at public dances, and as the form evolved, they began to take more and more liberties in what they said between and over the records. Emceeing evolved into a channel for artistic expression—the voice of the host or the voice of the editor fusing with the selected program. The materials of art now include bigger clumps of cultural sediment. Everything in the history of media is fair game: artists painting pictures

over road maps, placing photos within comic book landscapes, Kanye West splicing together his own song "Gold Digger" with Ray Charles's "I Got a Woman." It's exciting to deface things that we live among, whether what's defaced is an Otis Redding record or a brick wall.

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The birth of jazz: musicians made new use of what was available—marching-band instruments left over from the Spanish-American War. Jazz also made use of different forms of music, from ragtime to blues and impressionistic classical music. Later, jazz ran improvisatory riffs on show-tune standards. Or think of a cover version: a composition that already exists is revised by another artist. The original composition still exists, and the new one dances on top of the old one, like an editor writing notes in the margins. Hip-hop and dance DJs take snatches of different songs that already exist in the culture and stitch them together to suit their own needs and moods. The folk tradition in action: finding new uses for things by selecting the parts that move you and discarding the rest.

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Facebook and MySpace are crude personal essay machines. On everyone's Facebook page is a questionnaire, on which each person is asked to list personal info—everything from age to sexual status. A MySpace user can choose a sound track for his page, post pictures of himself, post downloads, and redesign the graphics however he wishes. Many people update their pages constantly and provide running commentary on their lives in the blog function that comes with a site. Millions of little advertisements for the self. I learn more about my

younger brothers from reading their Facebook pages than I ever have from actual conversation with them. They write detailed accounts of their personalities and take everything very seriously (as many do) in a sincere attempt to communicate with others but also to control the presentation of their "image." Every page is a bent version of reality—too unsophisticated to be art but too self-conscious to be mere reportage. In this new landscape, everyone gets a channel. It seems to be the ultimate destiny of every medium to be dragged down to the lowest common denominator, which is at once democratic, liberating, exhilarating, bland, deafening, and confusing. User-made content is the new folk art. If an eighteen-year-old girl in Delaware can't be in a Hollywood movie, she takes pictures of herself dressed how she imagines a movie star would dress and posts them on her MySpace page. If the members of a Missoula bar band can never be on MTV, they borrow their boss's camcorder, make their own video, and post it on YouTube. Reality-based art by necessity. Me Media. Blogs, wikis, social-networking sites, podcasts, vlogs, message boards, email groups, iMovie, Twitter, Flickr: more than a third of adult American internet users have created original content and posted it on the web. And it gets more sophisticated every day: chain email gives way to the blog, which gives way to the vlog, which gives way to the webisode. The massively popular video games *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* not only turn once static content into an interactive experience, but the newer versions have extra functions to let the players actually create new music with the building blocks the game provides. YouPorn, a free YouTube-like site on which users post their homemade porn, has become one of the most popular porn sites. Karaoke is another example of how reality-based art is winning at a grassroots level, among nonexperts. Karaoke is a generic version of

live hip-hop. Little skill or equipment is needed to allow people to perform, but no matter how bad or ill-advised the karaoke singer is, he or she is using existing material for means of self-expression, and the audience accepts the fact that there is no band and the music is recorded. The song already exists in the culture and is known to all involved. What is also known is that the music itself has been rerecorded and is a bastardized version of the original backing track. Everyone knows there is nothing original going on, but somehow the whole thing becomes original in its dizzying amateurism. What happens in karaoke is a disposable variation on something iconic in the culture, such as a big '80s hit like "Billie Jean." It's reality-based art nearly devoid of art. The only self-expression is the uniqueness of the particular rendition that the karaoke singer performs. And within the space of the original hit, anything goes: squealing, shouting, changing lyrics, wishing friends happy birthday—whatever the singer chooses to do with his three minutes of spotlight. For some it's just a gag, but others take it very seriously. There's a communal feeling between audience and singer, because they're interchangeable.

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From age thirteen to twenty-four I was in a four-piece rock band (same model as the Beatles through Nirvana). I came to Seattle at eighteen, playing that form of music, but at some point I felt there was nothing else—nothing more—to be done with the standard rock format. The band broke up, and I had a year to float around artistically. The fusion of hip-hop techniques and rock 'n' roll seemed to be much more exciting. When I came out with the new sound, many of my old friends in rock bands thought I was selling out. It was a tough jump to make. Many musicians said if I was using loops of other

recordings, I was unoriginal or untalented or hiding behind technology. There was definitely a line in the sand, and when I crossed it, there was no returning to traditional rock.

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Language is a city, to the building of which every human being has brought a stone, yet each of us is no more to be credited with the grand result than the acaleph which adds a cell to the coral reef that is the basis of the continent.

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Just as the letters of our language are metaphors for specific sounds, and words are metaphors for specific ideas, shards of the culture itself now form a kind of language that most everyone knows how to speak. Artists don't have to spell things out; it's much faster to go straight to the existing material—film footage, library research, wet newspapers, vinyl records, etc. It's the artist's job to mix (edit) the fragments together and, if needed, generate original fragments to fill in the gaps. For example, when Danger Mouse's *The Grey Album* was released in 2004, listeners heard the Beatles chopped up and re-presented underneath the contemporary rapper Jay-Z's vocals. The album simultaneously reflected back to the Beatles, to Jay-Z's 2003 *The Black Album* (from which the vocals were taken), and to the artistic tastes of the professional DJ who made the new piece of art. The songs work as songs, but they also work as history lessons. Another layer was added by the fact that it's illegal to use the Beatles for sampling. Capitol Records went to court to silence the album, but it was already too far out into the culture to be stopped. Beyond the use of old media to make a new project, there was the added benefit of a "plotline" on top of the music (underground art vs. corporate empire). This combination led to record-setting free downloads.

collage work

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The DJ known as Girl Talk is taking sampling to its inevitable extreme. He runs Lil Wayne over Nirvana, Elton John over The Notorious B.I.G. Sometimes the juxtaposition is fantastic; usually it's not. The novelty wears thin very quickly. Anyone can throw together two random things and call it collage art. When musical artists began using existing recordings as a medium of creative expression, they created a new subclass of musicians. An artist making use of samples, while going by a variety of names, is, essentially, a creative editor, presenting selections by other artists in a new context and adding notes of his own.

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A literary equivalent would be along the lines of "creative translation" such as Ezra Pound's *Homage to Sextus Propertius*, in which Pound picked through the elegies of Propertius, translated them, cut them up, and reassembled them in a fashion he deemed entertaining and relevant. Examples from other forms: *Thelonius Monk Plays Duke Ellington*, in which Monk takes great liberties with Ellington's songbook. Lichtenstein's appropriation of comic book art. Picasso's use of newsprint, among other media, in, say, *Composition with Fruit, Guitar, and Glass.* *Paul's Boutique:* The Beastie Boys, Dust Brothers, and Mario Caldato, Jr., sample from more than 100 sources, including Led Zeppelin, the Beatles, James Brown, and Sly & the Family Stone. Steve Reich's "Different Trains," which incorporates audio recordings about train travel by Holocaust survivors and a Pullman porter. Musique concrète—for instance, John Cage's "Imaginary Landscape No. 4," written for 12 radios, each played by 2 people (one to tune the channel and one to control volume and timbre). A conductor controls the tempo; the audience hears whatever is on the radio in

that city on that day. Russian composer Sofia Gubaidulina's "Offertium," which mutates themes from Bach's "Musical Offering" until they're beyond recognition. In "Three Variations on the Canon in D Major by Johann Pachelbel," Brian Eno bends and twists Pachelbel. The nineteenth-century Christian hymn "Nearer, My God, to Thee" was "put together" by Eliza Flower, whose sister, Sarah Flower Adams, had written the lyrics in the form of a poem. Eliza set Sarah's poem to the music of Lowell Mason's "Bethany." Over the years, it's been set to other tunes as well. Eliza Flower never gets credit for writing the song, credit going only to Adams for the lyrics and Mason for the music, although it was Flower who "edited" the two together.

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In hip-hop, the mimetic function has been eclipsed to a large extent by manipulation of the original (the "real thing"): theft without apology—conscious, self-conscious, conspicuous appropriation.

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Graffiti artists use the stuff of everyday life as their canvas—walls, dumpsters, buses. A stylized representation is placed on an everyday object. In visual art, as in other media, artists take unfiltered pieces of their surroundings and use them for their own means.

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In that slot called data, the reality is sliced in—the junk-shop find, thrift-store clothes, the snippet of James Brown, the stolen paragraph from Proust, and so on.

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In hip-hop, realness is something to have and express but not question. Realness is sacred. Realness is taboo. Realness refers to a life defined by violence, drugs, cutthroat capitalism—a life not unfamiliar to superstar rappers like The Game (who has been shot five times) and 50 Cent (nine times) when their crews shoot at each other. "I got you stuck off the realness," Prodigy of Mobb Deep raps in the song "Shook Ones Pt. II," probably the most widely quoted use of the term. "We be the infamous / you heard of us / official Queensbridge murderers." It's Mobb Deep's realness that makes you a "shook one"; it's Prodigy's realness that got you stuck. This leads to the term's larger meaning, the meaning Cormega takes, for example, in titling his debut album *The Realness*. There's no title track to explain the term. It's posted at the front of the album like an emblem representing all that follows. The same for Group Home's song "The Realness," in which DJ Premier samples "Shook Ones Pt. II" to isolate the words "the realness" and "comes equipped." Melachi ends his verse by saying he "comes equipped with that Brainsick shit," referring to the guest rappers from the Brainsick Mob, but that's all we know about these terms. There's no definition of realness, only a declaration that they're equipped with it. In the spoken-word introduction to his song "Look in My Eyes," Obie Trice says, "Every man determines his definition of realness, what's real to him." Realness is not reality, something that can be defined or identified. Reality is what is imposed on you; realness is what you impose back. Reality is something you could question; realness is beyond all doubt.

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Cultural and commercial languages invade us 24/7. That slogan I just heard on the TV commercial: I can't get it out of my

head. That melody from the theme song to that syndicated sitcom that arrives at seven every night: we're colonized by this stuff. It invades our lives and our lexicon. This might be of no consequence to the average media consumer, but it spells trouble for the artist. There is now a slogan, a melody, a raw building block of art living in his brain that he doesn't own and can't use.

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The evolution of copyright law has effectively stunted the development of sampling, thereby protecting the creative property of artists but obstructing the natural evolution of human creativity, which has always possessed cannibalistic tendencies. With copyright laws making the sampling of popular music virtually impossible, a new technique has evolved in which recordings are made that mimic the recordings that the artists would like to sample. These mimic recordings—not nearly as satisfying as sampling the original record—are then sampled and looped in the same way that the original would have been. We don't want a mimic of a piece of music, though; we want the actual piece of music presented through a new lens. Replication isn't reproduction. The copy transcends the original. The original is nothing but a collection of previous cultural movements. (All of culture is an appropriation game.)

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People are always talking about originality, but what do they mean? As soon as we are born, the world begins to work upon us, and this goes on to the end. What can we call our own except energy, strength, and will? If I could give an account of all that I owe to great predecessors and contemporaries, there would be but a small balance in my favor.

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A great man quotes bravely and will not draw on his invention when his memory serves him with a word as good. What he quotes, he fills with his own voice and humor, and the whole cyclopedia of his table talk is presently believed to be his own. ✓

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Mixtapes are used—as they've traditionally been used—to advertise and promote a new record, but they're also becoming a forum for illegal music: music that has uncleared samples and thus can't be released through proper channels. Much more than a collection of songs, mixtapes have a host who introduces the programs and talks in between songs as if the listener were at a live show. A DJ selects the music and mixes many different songs together into new pieces. Many times the singers from the selected songs will customize the song and add new twists unique to that particular mixtape. The new vocals are often extremely self-reflexive, mentioning the mixtape itself and how it was made. In the majority of mixtapes I've heard, the original songs are re-presented in unique new ways, but record labels then bust their own promotional operatives. Which is similar, in a sense, to the situation regarding file sharing: the companies complaining about downloading (e.g., Sony) are the same companies making the machines that do the downloading. Instead of prosecuting people who have an interest in their product, these companies could try to figure out how to use this consumer interest to their advantage. Mass-media producers are wasting their time trying to hold the dam together, but it broke several years ago. The technology to duplicate, copy, and sample mass-produced media isn't going away. What do we do with "outlaw" works of art? If I'm burning copies of *Titanic* and selling them as sup- ✓

posedly real copies of the movie, that seems illegal, but if I use elements of *Titanic* in a *Tarnation*-style film, that doesn't seem wrong to me. I think it should be a question of intent. However, both cases are wrong in the eyes of the law.

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Chris Moukarbel, who was sued by Paramount Pictures over a twelve-minute video based on a bootleg Oliver Stone film script about 9/11, had another video in a New York gallery exhibition that sought to marry politics and art. This one was created from film shot in the process of making the video that led to the lawsuit. Paramount filed suit in United States District Court in Washington, saying that Mr. Moukarbel's original video, *World Trade Center 2006*, infringed on the copyright of the screenplay for Mr. Stone's \$60 million film *World Trade Center*. "I'm interested in memorial and the way Hollywood represents historical events," Mr. Moukarbel said in an interview a month before the Paramount movie was released. "Through their access and budget, they're able to affect a lot of people's ideas about an event and also affect policy. I was deliberately using their script and preempting their release to make a statement about power."

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The progress of artistic growth in many media is being hindered, like those poor pine trees in alpine zones able to grow only a few weeks each year. For writers and artists who came of age amid mountains and mountains of cultural artifacts and debris: all of this is part of their lives, but much of it is off-limits for artistic expression because someone "owns" it.

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Shepard Fairey, borrowing liberally from traditions of urban art and the propaganda poster, took an image off Google and transformed it into a major icon of the 2008 campaign. The image (Obama, atop the word *HOPE*, looking skyward and awash in red, white, and blue) condensed the feeling of the Obama campaign into a single visual statement. It wasn't until after the election that the Associated Press realized that it owned the copyright to one of the photos from which Fairey worked. Mannie Garcia, the photographer who took the photo, had no idea it was his work until it was pointed out to him. He later claimed that it was he who actually owned the copyright. This didn't stop the Associated Press from demanding a large sum of money in "damages" for the now famous photo, which—until very recently—it didn't know it had and in fact may not own the copyright to. In 2009, backed by Stanford University's Fair Use Project, Fairey countersued the AP. When Fairey later acknowledged that he had lied about which image he'd used as the basis for his poster, Fairey's attorneys withdrew from the case. Lawrence Lessig, the director of the Edmond J. Safra Foundation Center for Ethics at Harvard, who had been advising Fairey but not representing him, said that the significant issue in fair-use cases is whether the image has been transformed from the original; if it has been "fundamentally transformed," he said, it is protected by copyright law.

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Most of the passages in this book are taken from other sources. Nearly every passage I've clipped I've also revised, at least a little—for the sake of compression, consistency, or whim. You mix and scratch the shit up to the level your own head is at . . .

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You'll notice that he doesn't assert ownership over his ideas. He's in some kind of Artaudian condition where all the ideas are unoriginated and unsourced; that's how he can claim anybody else's ideas as his own. Really all he wants to do is acquire everyone's inner life.

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Stolen property is the soul. Take them out of this book, for instance—you might as well take the book along with them; one cold eternal winter would reign in every page of it. Restore them to the writer: he steps forth like a bridegroom.

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He dedicated his scruples and his sleepless nights to repeating an already extant book in an alien tongue.

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The recombinant (the bootleg, the remix, the mash-up) has become the characteristic pivot at the turn of our two centuries. We live at a peculiar juncture, one in which the CD (an object) and the recombinant (a process) still, however briefly, coexist. There seems little doubt, though, as to the direction things are going. The recombinant is manifest in forms as diverse as Alan Moore's graphic novel *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, machinima generated with game engines (*Quake*, *Halo*, *World of Warcraft*), Dean Scream remixes, genre-warping fan fiction from the universes of *Star Trek* or *Buffy*, the JarJar-less *Phantom Edit*, brand-hybrid athletic shoes, and Japanese collectibles rescued from anonymity by custom paint jobs. We seldom legislate new technologies into

being. They emerge, and we plunge with them into whatever vortices of changes they generate. We legislate after the fact, in a perpetual game of catch-up, as best we can, while our new technologies redefine us—as surely and perhaps as terribly as we've been redefined by television.

This book contains hundreds of quotations that go unacknowledged in the body of the text. I'm trying to regain a freedom that writers from Montaigne to Burroughs took for granted and that we have lost. Your uncertainty about whose words you've just read is not a bug but a feature.

A major focus of *Reality Hunger* is appropriation and plagiarism and what these terms mean. I can hardly treat the topic deeply without engaging in it. That would be like writing a book about lying and not being permitted to lie in it. Or writing a book about destroying capitalism but being told it can't be published because it might harm the publishing industry.

However, Random House lawyers determined that it was necessary for me to provide a complete list of citations; the list follows (except, of course, for any sources I couldn't find or forgot along the way).

If you would like to restore this book to the form in which I intended it to be read, simply grab a sharp pair of scissors or a razor blade or box cutter and remove pages 207–221 by cutting along the dotted line.

Who owns the words? Who owns the music and the rest of our culture? We do—all of us—though not all of us know it yet. Reality cannot be copyrighted.

Stop; don't read any farther.