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Steal Like an Artist

By Austin Kleon



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5 min read

**Every great
artist is a thief
because
creativity
doesn't happen
in a vacuum.**

The struggle is real.

People assume originality is what defines greatness, that innovation can only be brilliant if it's something no one has seen before. However, people trying to create something brand new and wildly imaginative always fail, because nothing is original.

**“Draw the art you want to see,
start the business you want to
run, play the music you
want to hear, write the
books you want to
read, build the
products you want
to use — do the
work you want to
see done.”**

- Austin Kleon



All innovation is the product of the creators' influences, taking from what's already been created and bringing it to another level. Creativity is like genetics. For example, a child is a mix of his or her parents DNA. He or she isn't new or original, but their specific output is completely unique. This means creative work begins when you find the right influences to steal from and build upon.

The Beatles, for example, started as a cover band and only began writing their own music after mastering their heroes' work.



Who are your heroes?

An ideal way to deeply dive into your influences is to create an innovation family tree. **Specifically, find an innovator or creator who you admire, immerse yourself into their world, look at their work, the way they live or lived; what were their strategies and what made them tick?** Build on that knowledge by digging into your hero's influences. Who did they admire and aspire to be? Repeat the process and, the more your tree branches out, the more ideas, motivation, and strategies you'll have at your disposal. Consider yourself the latest branch on the tree.

Plagiarizing or copying? What's the difference?

Obviously plagiarism is wrong, but copying is a great way to learn. Great artists copy each others' paintings to learn specific techniques, and skills, and you can do the same in business.



Real Life Example

Conan O'Brien was inspired by David Letterman, but couldn't quite copy him accurately. His differences from Letterman are actually what made him stand out as a performer. He leaned into those "weaknesses" and even built upon them to find his own comedic style. **Looking further back, David Letterman emulated Johnny Carson, who emulated Jack Benny.**

Getting Out of Your Head

Innovation takes a great deal of mental energy, and creativity doesn't come when you're pushing it, which is why Kleon is passionate about a number of hobbies and interests outside of his art and writing career.

When you hit a creative block and attempt to power through, you'll wind up frustrated and your work will suffer, making you more frustrated. Instead, procrastinate, **allow your mind to wander while doing back-up projects or housework, creating space for ideas and innovation.**



Recognition and Celebrity Status

Gunning to become the next Steve Jobs will become an issue. Being an innovator should be about doing a job you love, creating something you're passionate about, and being driven to change the world - not the fame and recognition that may come with it.

For creators, obscurity can benefit your career by giving you a chance to learn, make mistakes, and develop yourself through experimentation. When you're well-known, you'll be scrutinized and under pressure to create consistently great work all the time.



Sharing is Caring

Share your work with others - it's the best way to find collaboration, passionate early-adopters, and with the internet, it's never been easier. However, when sharing, always demonstrate your passion. When people are invited into an authentic experience, they'll feel more connected to you and come back wanting more.

Carefully Design Your Environment

Kleon has two desks - one with digital tools, computers, drawing tablets, etc. - and the other with only pencils, paper and more traditional art supplies. He argues that using your hands can make you more creative because the possibilities are endless, while software has a set of limitations. In addition, surround yourself with things that inspire you. Visit or move to another country or city to get inspired by new perspectives.



Dealing With Criticism



Every artist or innovator will have naysayers, but engaging with your critics too much can become a waste of time and can be a drain on creative resources. Replying to mean-spirited emails takes up mental and physical energy, keeping you away from your work. Focus on the praise and use the hurt and anger as a motivator, not allowing it to affect the work.

Real Life Example

The author reads his hate mail in the morning when he's feeling uninspired and uses the anger as motivation to work.

He also encourages innovators to offer praise to others in the community, because the more praise you give others, the more you'll receive. Create a praise file, and when you're feeling down pull it out and read it for a nice lift.

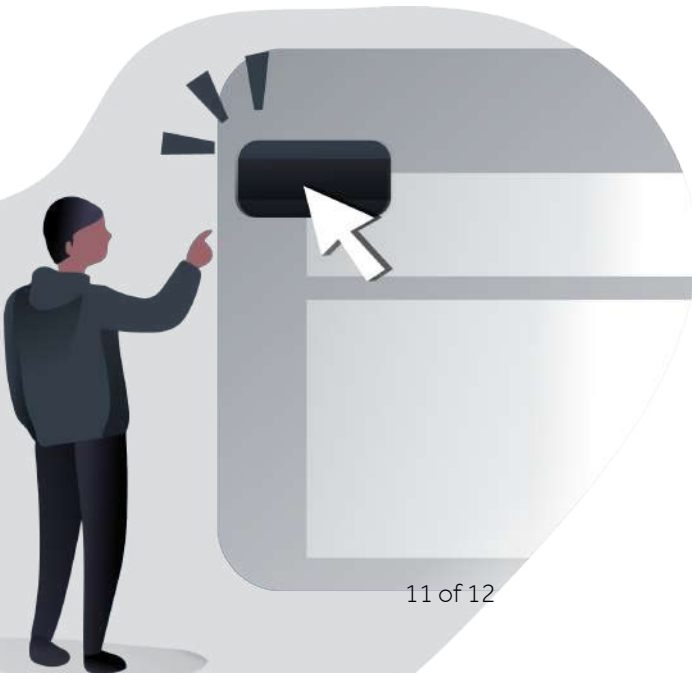
Ethical Theft

Artists and innovators need to steal efficiently to keep their creative juices flowing,

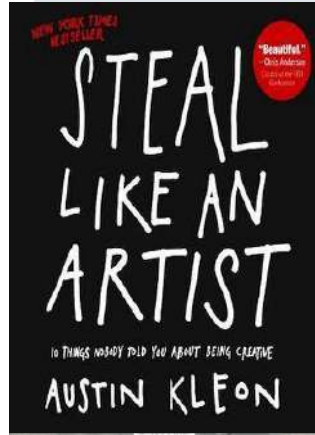
Ultimately these influences will inspire new work which will in turn inspire others in the future.

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