



MASHUP AT THE VANCOUVER ART GALLERY: “IN REVIEW” [ONTO]RIFFOLOGICALLY

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ABSTRACT: [onto]Riffology, a “plug in and play” method of inquiry that *riffs* across technological platforms and with all manner of material, finds easy resonance in mashup and remix. We turn our riffological sights to the Vancouver Art Gallery, which hosted [MashUp](#) from February 20th through June 12th, 2016. Creative and combinatorial, *mashup* is identifiable in popular discourse as fundamentally humanist and epistemological in nature; however, as an interdisciplinary, *ontological* practise of repurposing and reconstituting, acts of *mashup* also exist in geological activity, far outside of humanity, and here we apply ontological focus through riffological measures. We are interested not in seeing merely what is being exhibited, but deterritorializing what is being curated. Our emergent senses of new materialisms inform our riffology here as we ceaselessly (re)encounter the exhibition; experienced as a *riff arcade* of dream like experience that one mayn’t exit; like the arcades of Benjamin’s mammoth project of 1927 to 1940.

KEYWORDS: [onto]Riffology, riffology, riff, MashUp, mash up, Vancouver Art Gallery



Figure 1. MashUp: The birth of modern culture, Richard Wainwright, image, 2016¹

“When the first German railway line was about to be constructed in Bavaria, the medical faculty at Erlangen published an expert opinion...: the rapid movement would cause ... cerebral disorders (the mere sight of a train rushing by could already do this), and it was therefore necessary, at the least, to build a wooden barrier five feet high on both sides of the track.”²

MashUp. Move Through the Exhibition; Riff with its Sites, Displays, Exhibits; Repeat

By various means we revisit (repeatedly) our initial browsing of *MashUp*, held at Vancouver Art Gallery, applying ontological focus through riffological measures. Our intention is to welcome readers perusing this “review” of experiences across and beyond the exhibition itself. This sponsored event.

A companion document riffs with this one, and further elucidates our process. Whereas this document is tightly framed and loosely riffed, that one is hardly framed and highly riffed. Movement through both suggests that of a window-shopping [flâneur](#) browsing within the arcade – in this case a riff arcade. The footnotes detail more and more. Both contain links to various viewables that may be perused by left clicking on words in blue font, while various pictorial representations nestle within the documents. Riff layers upon layers; in every perusal we are drawn back into more creative interaction with the material. We invite you to browse through the second document by receiving its web address from us personally: (richardw@uvic.ca, stevenss@uvic.ca).

We riff on MashUp in anticipation of art educators and arts-based researchers resonating with pedagogical approaches to entanglements of decentered human experience, and curiosities that shift query from phenomena's meanings to questioning what events are doing. We are interested not in seeing merely what is being exhibited, but deterritorializing what is being curated.

MashUp at the Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, BC

First floor³

The digital age: Hacking, remix and the archive in the age of post-production

Second floor⁴

Late 20th century: Splicing, sampling and the street in the age of appropriation

Third floor⁵

The post-war: Cut, copy and the quotation in the age of mass media

Fourth floor⁶

Early 20th century: Collage, montage and readymade at the birth of modern culture

“We riff on MashUp in anticipation of art educators and arts-based researchers resonating with pedagogical approaches to entanglements of decentered human experience, and curiosities that shift query from phenomena’s meanings to questioning what events are doing.”

A Way to Talk Around the Problem:⁷ Riff, Mashup and New Materialism

“Riff.” What is riffing? Riff becomes information passage; passing and sharing that which passes our eyes, that which is shared unseen. Riff is creating a document like this with countless, *endless* links to more and more available information; and each perusal of such a document is experienced as completely individual and unique from any other. It is tangential, it is *method* facilitating inquiries, and it is one that we have theoretically conceptualized as [onto]Riffology,⁸ whereby we consider what it is to riff with what we read, view and interact (technologies, sites, each other, art and art’s affect), while seeking opportunities to tap experiential forms bearing a promiscuous spirit of sampling. As [onto]Riffers we don’t simply watch as we plug in; we play.⁹

[onto]Riffology finds easy resonance in mashup and remix, and here we turn both of our riffological sights to the Vancouver Art Gallery, which hosted [MashUp](#)¹⁰ from February 20th through June 12th, 2016. Creative and combinatorial, *mashup* is identifiable in popular discourse as fundamentally humanist and epistemological in nature. As an interdisciplinary, *ontological* practise of repurposing and reconstituting, acts of *mashup* also exist in geological activity, far outside of humanity. Elements remix, materials fold: rock and water reconstitute into sand and mud, oceans and rivers converge into hybrid space. These processes happen with and without human engagement. When recording artist [DJ Spooky](#)¹¹ ([1st floor](#))¹² remixes the sounds of melting ice in the Arctic, we begin to acknowledge in such artistry how generally limited is a solely humanist perspective on matter. As we mediate epistemological matters alongside explorations into the ontological and posthuman, we are inspired by new materialism; “cultural theory for the 21st century” as discussed by Dolphijn & [van der Tuin](#).^{13 14}

MashUp is an exhibition chronicling historical and artistic events touted as the “birth of modern culture.”¹⁵ Our emergent sensibilities in new materialism discourage narratives of cultural genesis and “newness,” as suggested in such analogies invoking acts of “nativity.” “Cultural birth” does, however, suggest creative “passages” such as [conception](#)¹⁶ and [gestation](#),¹⁷ as we explore inspirations to mashup; *MashUp*, conditions of their ontologies, and relationships with which to riff.

Melt the Statues in the Park:¹⁸ MashUp, Unceded Dirt and Arcades

An art exhibition is being held. We regard not only the gallery's building artefact at 750 Hornby Street, Vancouver, British Columbia for all that it has once been (including a courthouse), and will one day become ([abandoned to its fate](#)¹⁹); while acknowledging the indigeneity of unceded dirt on which its physical form rests. The building, and all the material contents it houses, is in deep relationship not only with its history and physical space, but also with sundry vendors trafficking their wares in the art gallery's proximity through various forms of "sponsorship" and "partnership" with businesses and foundations: a restaurant and bar chain called the *Keg*, the *Royal Bank of Canada* (both its name and [logo](#)²⁰ resonant of British colonialism in Indigenous territories), and *DL Piper*, a global law firm enforcing claims to [intellectual property](#)²¹ and copyright, among others. Herein lays a tenuous relational balance that exists in materiality of commerce that helps fund displays but mustn't overstep consumers' willingness to be shilled.

Such divers merchants and venues of commercialization in close proximity to the Vancouver Art Gallery, and each other, bring to mind Walter Benjamin's extensive study of 19th century Paris [arcades](#);²² enclosed passages constructed of iron and glass within which shop fronts were situated, and precursor to the urban shopping mall. *The Arcades Project*²³ proves not only a compelling examination of cultural theory, but its source materials—hundreds upon hundreds of pages of handwritten notes on multiple topics (that were only posthumously collated into book form)—chronicle its subject in scattershot ways similar to riff.

[The Arcades Project](#)²⁴ ²⁵ becomes a theoretical underscore upon which we peruse and hyperlink the experience of visiting the Vancouver Art Gallery and the *MashUp* exhibition. We are drawn to descriptions of the *flâneur* (as idler strolling through the arcade), the *collector* (hawking his merchandise), and the *prostitute* who lingers at the fringe of the physical cityscape and its society, discouraged from loitering in the arcade lest she likewise sell her wares in heavily commodified space. At once subject in her humanity, yet self-objectifying in her occupation and her purchase, she is banished from the same space where her male counterpart is encouraged to consume. An epistemological humanist perspective concerns, even possibly condemns itself with identity politics, with building meanings and understandings out of the human relationships. As *riffers* and new materialists we suggest that although this perspective of knowledge is useful, particularly as commentary to its historical times, we gravitate to broader contemporary understandings whereby knowledge and being become "indistinguishable... [an]

ethico-onto-epistemology” (as Karen Barad discusses in Dolphijn & van der Tuin).²⁶ We are interested in the gallery (and galleries of yore) as composites of wood, stone and dust, the relationships to the body, the complex material systems upon which the agential is but a part, and one through which agents—both human and non-human—participate in the margins, in places that are unseen and that are never *elected* to appear in the official maps of the city. This is where our interests are drawn as we seek to engage the museum, its exhibits, agential “forces” and all the ways they interact even politically.

There’s the Progress²⁷...: Appropriation, Remix, and Aura

In a work demonstrating the irrepressibility of creativity (regardless of subject, content, and practice), while celebrating appropriative practices, poet [Kenneth Goldsmith](#)^{28 29} queries the differences between collage and appropriation. Referencing Pablo Picasso and Marcel Duchamp’s considerable artistic influences, [Goldsmith](#)³⁰ likens the two artists to candle and mirror, respectively: a warm appealing glow of visually compelling collage, and a “cool reflectivity” borne of the industrially produced “[appropriated](#)”³¹ object.³² As “readymades,” Duchamp ([1st floor](#))³³ hindered selected objects’ performance of intended functions merely by altering their position and [locality](#),³⁴ while works by Picasso, such as [A Still Life and Chair Caning](#),³⁵ compelled visual interest by bringing objects and ideas into close proximity through mixed media constructions in ways and to degrees neither previously witnessed.

Artistic approaches such as Duchamp’s, Picasso’s, and DJ Spooky’s are all representative of mashup amongst hundreds more “found images, objects, sounds and words [pressed] into art production.”³⁶ [Remix](#),³⁷ like mashup, challenges notions of copyrighted works’ appropriation, materializing authorship within contexts of hybridity and (re)combinatoriality. The rapid adoption of “collage, montage, sampling and the cut-up” are all practised in creativity’s pursuit “where the New Aesthetic seeks to harmonise [the now-everyday crossover](#) of the digital and the actual.”³⁸ According to Benjamin,³⁹ the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction bears an *aura* as breath or wind that diminishes in the act of reproducing. The work becomes contemporaneous as we embrace non-mechanical reproduction *vis-à-vis* what is now digital reproduction.

Weights and Pulleys:⁴⁰ Walter Benjamin, Pangs, and the Virtual Flâneur

[Goldsmith](#)^{41 42} declares Walter Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project* a “literary roadmap of appropriation”: “...A great book to bounce around in, flitting from page to

page, like window-shopping, pausing briefly to admire a display that catches your eye without feeling the need to go into the store.”⁴³

Attribution becomes blurry, difficult, and contentious in an age of mashup and remix as appropriation is still considered ignoble, and alleged infringement may be aggressively pursued by any aggrieved party and its legal counsel. In many ways, an art gallery exhibition such as *MashUp* – in its showcase of mashup, is constrained by a spectre of litigious threat that might caution any relaxation of attribution if mashup sensibilities of the co-construction of artistry were to be fully embraced.

Building Towered Foresight:⁴⁴ Gestation, MashUp, and Exhibitors

As doctoral students from communities outlying the primary, physical location of the *Mashup* exhibition, once hosted at the edifice of the Vancouver gallery and now long since dismantled, we continue to access its exhibits at an amalgam of sites, including YouTube, various web links and a catalogue available for purchase in the gift store: the compendium companion work, [MashUp: The birth of modern culture](#).⁴⁵

Once entered, the entire space is dedicated to *MashUp*. It could hardly be otherwise, for to maintain any segregated portion of the gallery for the exhibition of standard fare, say, [Emily Carr](#) paintings,⁴⁶ would be anathema to mashup [aesthetic](#).⁴⁷ Throughout all four storeys, the exhibition impresses as a massive undertaking by any metric. In the gallery [entryway](#),⁴⁸ bold [slogans](#)⁴⁹ stand staircases high, and stretch across the entire floor. Spanning an entire wall are images of [Logorama](#)⁵⁰ ([1st floor](#)),⁵¹ an award winning film that challenges proprietary notions of logos’ use by featuring thousands of them.

Countless exhibits within the gallery showcase mashup, montage, sampling, collage, remix and (mis)appropriation. (Re)photographic works by photographer [Richard Prince](#)⁵² ([2nd floor](#))⁵³ are exhibited. French film director Jean-Luc Godard’s 1965 work, [Pierrot le Fou](#)⁵⁴ ([3rd floor](#)),⁵⁵ which applied numerous features of the pop art movement, is shown in one of several small viewing theatres. Elsewhere, a video plays which highlights American director Quentin Tarantino’s ([2nd floor](#))⁵⁶ reliance on [homage](#)⁵⁷ in his filmmaking; an approach also alleged to be blatant appropriation. Vidding – as fan (“vidder”) produced music video creation, is also on display, including such offerings as “[multifandom](#)⁵⁸ space vid, Bironic’s [Starships](#).”⁵⁹

Throughout the gallery, videos loop examples of the cinematic remixer’s craft: Joseph Cornell’s 1936 collage film, a curiously composed ode to film actress [Rose](#)

[Hobart](#)⁶⁰ ([4th floor](#)),⁶¹ and filmmaker and Canadian National Film Board (NFB) employee [Arthur Lipsett](#)⁶² ([3rd floor](#))⁶³ who created an oeuvre comprised of sound clips and found images from NFB archives.

The culture of the 1980's [drag ball](#)⁶⁴ ([2nd floor](#))⁶⁵ is featured as a subgenre of entertainment created by New York inhabitants who were male, African American, and gay, and who “seized available cultural artifacts and objects to create an organic composite culture.”⁶⁶

Hip hop, electronic and dub ([3rd floor](#))⁶⁷ tracks are available for listening. [Dub's](#)⁶⁸ Jamaican roots, and pioneering use of multitrack technology are showcased as an approach whereby “any song could become countless other songs through dub's playful recastings.”⁶⁹

[Machinimas](#)⁷⁰ genre's “misappropriated” use ([1st floor](#))⁷¹ of [video game equipment](#)⁷² to create movies, exemplifies the [Situationist](#)⁷³ conception of [détournement](#)⁷⁴ that is elsewhere featured ([2nd floor](#)).⁷⁵

The Internet archives many of these films and artistic works, continuing the experience of the gallery's exhibition long after the physical incarnation has been disassembled. It really was an informative and inspiring display; highly influential. We were thrilled to attend and witness it all. It still reverberates in and around us.

Feathers, Iron...:⁷⁶ Crowning, Commodification, and Appropriation

Goldsmith likens navigating the Web (as we, similarly, liken rifiers) to the virtual flâneur “hypertexting from one place to another... casually surfing from one place to another; how we've learned to manage and harvest information, not feeling the need to read the Web linearly, and so forth.”⁷⁷

In riffing on *MashUp*, we find ourselves less enthralled with notions of birth, and “cultural birth,” preferring instead a visual metaphor of “plugging in”; and “riffing” to do so. We also contest implied dualities between man and machine, modern and non-modern culture, and separations that imply any superior human agency, as we acknowledge progression in the relationships between technology and human entities in both mediated and unmediated shared spaces.

Humanistically museological legacies of “exhibition” as representational, positivist, and epistemic in their historicity are contemplated alongside new materialist curation as performative, embodied, and ontologically focussed. For example, by

engaging the ontological, an exhibit by [Brian Jungen](#)^{78 79} ([2nd floor](#)) plugs into relationship with the unceded aboriginal dirt [under the building](#).⁸⁰ How do entrances and exits relate to a physical structure's surroundings, and reflect a continuous sense of inside, outside, reversals; an exoskeleton that is reminiscent of the architecture of Frank Gehry ([3rd floor](#))?⁸¹

“The human and non-human co-occupy this space as remix, mashup, and exhibitional performance. Engagement is redirected from officially suggested discourse to a non-representational “riff” that doesn't ask what the exhibit means, but rather what does this curation—this *MashUp*—do?”

Similarly, *The Keg Restaurant and Bar*, as “Presenting Sponsor,” litters its banners and logos in the gallery's materials; the contradictions between the *MashUp* curation's presentation and participation in matters of appropriation, contrasting the protection of intellectual property provided for clients by sponsor DLA Piper. Prostitute, flaneur, collector. We relate Wonder Woman's inclusion in the exhibit to pop culture's “embrace of commodity culture”⁸² to the dress code for waitresses at the sponsoring [Keg Restaurant and Bar](#).⁸³ Why not? Flaneur, prostitute, collector.

The human and non-human co-occupy this space as remix, mashup, and exhibitional performance. Engagement is redirected from officially suggested discourse to a non-representational “riff” that doesn't ask what the exhibit means, but rather what does this curation—this *MashUp*—do? Museums can be sites of

radical encounters, contentious maps can overlay official programs, and ontological foci may hasten pedagogical collision. Throughout, we riff (with) these encounters, finding inspiration and precursor in Benjamin's monumental *Arcades Project* of which Goldsmith writes:

It is (...) made up of refuse and detritus, writing history by paying attention to the margins and the peripheries rather than the center: bits of newspaper articles, arcane passages of forgotten histories, ephemeral sensations, weather conditions, political tracts, advertisements, literary quips, stray verse, accounts of dreams, descriptions of architecture, arcane theories of knowledge, and hundreds of other offbeat topics.⁸⁴

This is the stuff of [onto]Riffology and new materialism's cultural sensibilities that bring onto-epistemological readings to the creative, "the uncreative,"⁸⁵ the material, the arcade, the art gallery, mashup, and MashUp "in review."

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NOTES

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- ⁴ "Late 20th Century. Splicing, Sampling and the Street in the Age of Appropriation."
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