

The model of free software for innovation in the visual arts.

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Free software is defined by the Free Software Foundation as four freedoms [1] :

- \* *The freedom to run the program, for any purpose.*
- \* *The freedom to study how the program works, and adapt it to your needs. Access to the source code is a precondition for this.*
- \* *The freedom to redistribute copies so you can help your neighbor.*
- \* *The freedom to improve the program, and release your improvements to the public, so that the whole community benefits. Access to the source code is a precondition for this.*

What follows is a loose and imaginative interpretation of these freedoms as they might apply to the visual arts and innovation.

**Freedom 0**

*\* The freedom to run the program, for any purpose.*

Here the "any purpose" is important and the source of disagreement between proponents of the freedoms applied to cultural creation and to software. This discussion came to the fore in a recent meeting in Madrid [2] in the discussion that was held, chaired by Alberto Moral, around the application of licensing models from free software. One developer accused initiatives like creative commons, which assert rights of authorship, as undermining the work of the free software movement in the last 20 years by retaining control over the use of their work, the equivalent of "running the program".

The majority of artists wish to control the context in which their work is shown and to assert their authorship, principally for economic reasons but also for ethical ones - respecting the integrity of an artwork. For the most vocal of the programmers (apparently maintainer of the ghostscript library and close collaborator of stallman), and other programmers agreed, this creates a perhaps unbridgeable divide between the spheres of software and art creation.

Even Natxo Rodriguez, who has been one of the most interesting investigators and propagators of the free model applied to culture and was present at the meeting, found no way to bridge the gap between the programmer's relentlessly technical or utilitarian approach and the recognition of non-utilitarian artistic production.

## Freedom 1

\* *The freedom to study how the program works, and adapt it to your needs.*

Many people point out that Google is the programmer's best friend but this would be useless without the conscious effort that developers and users put into documentation - both in the code and in the form of howtos. Documentation is an absolutely essential part of working with free software and fundamental to maintaining and extending the community.

The culture of documentatiòn is also very important in the world of contemporary art - both as an end of its own (see Boltanski's installations, On Kawara's dates, Antoni Muntadas' database or Ignasi Aballi's accumulations), a means to becoming known and to justify grants or apply for prizes. The better one document's the more success you will have.

Faced with the immaterial nature of much contemporary art documentation also becomes both the communication and the object. Performances, land art and other practises rely on documentation for their existence and circulation as well as providing objects for sale.

Projects like the series of "Consultas" at the Centre d'Art Santa Monica, Barcelona [3] explicitly recognises the importance of collections of documentation as being fundamental in the process of artistic creation and divulgation.

By having access to a wide variety of documentation an artist, creator or citizen fertilises their mind, builds bridges, evolves their own work. This has been a constant in art practise since time immemorial and is perhaps, actually, the point where free software culture and contemporary art most intersect both actually and potentially.

*"Los artistas que resuelven dar esta libertad a sus receptores parten de admitir el ejercicio común a muchas personas autodidactas, que "aprenden mirando, copiando y luego haciendo pequeños cambios en lo que otros han hecho antes ", una actitud que retoma prácticas artísticas en las que se promueve la autonomía del que mira y amplía su lugar desde receptor hacia el de potencial productor, donde se busca desmitificar la noción de autor como "genio" o la ficción del individuo; se propone la idea de la obra como "aporte que se nutre de una tradición" sin que eso implique desvalorizar ese aporte, se promueve la apropiación de lo percibido por el "receptor", su comentario, mejora o revisión cooperativa, compartiendo una porción de la "autor"idad sobre el devenir de la obra." Lila Pagola [4]*

## Freedom 2

*\* The freedom to redistribute copies so you can help your neighbor.*

The most obvious application here is to the freedom to redistribute copies of artworks, a position absolutely opposed to current copyright laws. In the current digital society such a position is increasingly archaic and inapplicable. As media conglomerates employ armies of lawyers and engineers to try to prevent the redistribution of cultural production an increasing number of artists are using licenses like Creative Commons Share-Alike which explicitly permit the redistribution of their work.

A lot of work has already been done on the more technical legal issues of this area and the reader may consult the excellent collection of texts in the repository united by Natxo Rodriguez [5] so there is no need to cover the issue in depth here. I would like to concentrate on the second element "so you can help your neighbour".

The barriers that do remain in the use of free software are of a purely intellectual nature - the capacity to understand and work with code, for there is no doubt that more is demanded of the user. For this reason it is so important that events, workshops and gatherings - like the Piksel festival in Bergen, Makeart in Poitiers, the workshops organised by Hangar in Barcelona or the Hackmeetings - are organised that permit the circulation of knowledge and learning. [6]

These gatherings are just one of the aspects of the community based nature of free-software. Labs like Hangar, Kernel Panic or RAM in Barcelona or CRAS in Paris are also important meeting points and places where work can get done and collaborations extended. [7]

Movements have always existed in art, being especially visible in the 20th century where communities of artists organised themselves into movements like Surrealism, Dadaism or Fluxus with the idea of a common project - beyond the actual physical creation - a common journey of discovery. While discussions and divisions were rife in all these movements they nonetheless had an enormous effect on the directions of artistic creation - we advance more rapidly if we are able to support each other, if we have a common goal and the sense that we are working together in this adventure.

And it is here that we touch on ethics and aesthetics. Where the sense of community, of "helping others", spreads out from the purely artistic into an alternative vision of society, a sense of social responsibility and involvement - as much about HOW you do things, rather than WHAT.

How do we think about the creation of beauty in the midst of an ecological disaster ? When the difference between the rich and the poor is ever more abysmal ? Can we find a work or action beautiful that accentuates this difference, that contributes to the

disaster ? Is a work made with free software more beautiful than one made with proprietary software ? The decision to work with free software is also an ethical decision, the expression of a desire to live in a world organised in a different way, where the artificial barriers that benefit only a few are eliminated.

Art, even though obliquely, by its capacity to generate new forms of thought, is a contribution to the community. It is like the thought in the mind of society, its capacity to generate newness and otherness.

### Freedom 3

*\* The freedom to improve the program, and release your improvements to the public, so that the whole community benefits. Access to the source code is a precondition for this.*

Many coders never actually meet face to face but develop intense collaborations through mailing lists, IRC chat, CVS, Sourceforge.net and other internet tools. Communities are built virtually and information circulates at high speeds.

This use of online tools has become widespread amongst visual artists - from blogs to Youtube to Myspace to Flickr and tools like Gallery for Postnuke. The Saatchi gallery has recently gained attention by giving free space for artists to show and sell their work in their online gallery [8] while w3art works as a generalist portal to contemporary art in the Spanish state. [9]

There are many other such initiatives in the internet but one has the sense that they do not go beyond the mere showing of production. The use of the medium for exchange and the creation of community is rarer. A good example of this is the network of production centres of Catalonia [10], an initiative springing from the centres in order to coordinate and optimise their resources and make them more accessible to artists. Community is created and tangible benefits spring from them.

By public we also mean the accessibility of the work. Software can be free but if it is badly designed, obscure or simply irrelevant it will not contribute to the community. An example would be LIVES [11], a software made for and by one man and that will never have any wider impact - although the programmer's contributions to mailing lists, software libraries or other debates employing the knowledge gained may do.

Of course, when a programmer incorporates code from another program into her own, or modifies ("improves") an existing program the result must be ready to enjoy the same fate. This is one of the basic rules of free software, that the license used for the result of your work must be the same as that of the elements used in it. This ensures that work cannot legally be included in proprietary projects and pushes other projects to become free in their turn.

Applied literally to art the freedom "to improve the program" would suggest appropriationism or the modification of already existing works. As mentioned above art has always incorporated previous works and since Marcel Duchamp recontextualisation and appropriationism has been an important strand in art, clearly provoking an important rethinking of its very nature, especially acute in this age of digital reproduction. Currently Eva and Franco Mattes [12] are restaging famous performances in Second Life, recycling ideas into new forms.

## Conclusion

*Humans are social creatures, and our greatest achievements have been collaborative efforts, often vast ones - especially in the realm of knowledge and the mind. That most of us assume creativity as necessarily individual, private and subject to the creative inputs of others only under commercial conditions, is a symptom of the conversion from knowledge and art - whether closely guarded secrets or widely published - to "intellectual property". Rishab Aiyer Ghosh [13]*

The concept of intellectual property is relatively recent. Art in primitive societies is explicitly communal both in function and transmission. It has sprung out of the idea of the artist as original creator but also from the necessity of earning a living as a creator. The roots, therefore, are perhaps laudible. However, in practise, this system is only of use to a tiny amount of creators - all of whom have access to an immense amount of other works of arts. It is as if they feed from the accumulated history of art but for their own benefit - ignoring the rule of releasing your work under the same license as the elements included.

The reality for the vast majority of artists is that their income stems from work that derives from their creations rather than the creation itself - teaching, lecturing, mounting or organising exhibitions, publishing. The fact is that society pays for the transmission of their knowledge and rarely, or much less, for the actual works.

A few thoughts then on how the insights gained from free software, and the reasons for its capacity of innovation, applied to visual arts. We can say that innovation occurs when in the presence of intense flows of knowledge, where artists are also teachers and agitators and society is equipped with laws that permit the free circulation of this information. Art in primitive societies is notoriously uninnovative, reproducing shared communal patterns. Innovation also has something to do with individuality and trusting intuitions. As Howard Bloom points out in "The Western Canon", a canonic work must have something strange about, a voice never heard before and I feel that is a good definition of what we look for in art in general.

So, while we call for commons and the effective, equitable and rapid circulation of information referring to visual arts we are also looking for that individual voice which is perhaps the very essence of innovation but that can only difficultly emerge and be sustained without community and access to a solid cultural infrastructure built from the past centuries.



## Notes

[1] <http://www.fsf.org/licensing/essays/free-sw.html>

[2] [http://www.elpais.com/articulo/tecnologia/movimiento/software/libre/exporta/ideas/alla/ordenadores/elpeputec/20070517elpcbtec\\_1/Tes](http://www.elpais.com/articulo/tecnologia/movimiento/software/libre/exporta/ideas/alla/ordenadores/elpeputec/20070517elpcbtec_1/Tes)

[3] <http://www.centredartsantamonica.net/>

[4] <http://revista.escaner.cl/node/382>

[5] see his excellent repository, in collaboration with Lila Pagola  
<http://nomade.liminar.com.ar/wakka.php?wakka=CopyLeft&v=1as4>

[6] <http://piksel.no>  
<http://makeart.goto10.org/>  
<http://www.hangar.org/activitats>  
<http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hackmeeting>

[7] <http://www.craslab.org/>  
<http://www.hangar.org/wikis/lab/doku.php>

[8] <http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/yourgallery/>  
<http://www.artnewsblog.com/2007/11/saatchi-gallery-online.htm>

[9] <http://w3art.es/>

[10] <http://xarxaprod.cat>

[11] <http://lives.sourceforge.net/> - check out the forums.

[12] <http://www.0100101110101101.org/home/performances/>

[13] "Code : Collaborative Ownership and the Digital Economy."  
ed. Rishab Aiyer Ghosh . MIT Press 2005.