
RESEARCH ESSAY

Hunting Vibes. The Multi-Layered Structure of Artistic Research in DJing

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In this essay am focusing on “defining”, in a non-traditional way, the idea of artistic research, starting from a “hunting game” metaphor which lays at the Indo-European etymological foundation of the words we use today to designate the process of research in various modern languages. But this way of understanding the process of artistic research leaves open the question about the “object” of artistic research. What is that which artists in general and DJs, in particular, “hunt” for? To answer this question, I will analyze the multi-layered structure of research in DJing, thought as a form of art born at the intersection of visual, musical and performative arts with technology. This analysis leads me to the idea of “vibe”, “vibration” or “affective resonance”, which was briefly mentioned in the history of philosophy by thinkers like Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Although the question of artistic research has been raised for quite some time now in the field of visual arts (Hannula 2009; Maharaj 2009; Andersson 2009), performative arts (Arlander 2008; Freeman 2010; Blain & Minors 2020) and music (Doğantan-Dack 2015; Impett 2017), not many studies tackled the problem of research in the contemporary artistic practices of DJing. The reason for this state of affairs lays in the ambiguous nature of DJing itself, which is viewed in the theory of arts as a form of postproduction rather than a creative process *per se* (Nicholas Bourriaud, 2006). Moreover, DJs sometimes tend to view themselves as hackers rather than artists (Flosstradamus, 2013), fact that makes it hard to theorize DJing as an artform.

As I will argue, this perspective springs from the fact that DJing, in its historical development, created a new concept of art, based on different forms of creativity and originality than other contemporary visual arts. This requires a multi-layered structure of research, that doesn't aim at producing an artwork or performance in the usual sense of the word. It is true that the intentions of a DJ are “productive”, but this happens, paradoxically, in a re-productive manner. Howbeit, this re-productivity shall not be viewed as postproduction, because it is rather an “hermeneutical” process that creates new and original “stuff” from pre-existing material, not, as the term “postproduction” suggests, just a retouching of the original material. In this sense, re-production is a form of productivity that transfigures available artworks to the point that the original material is no longer recognizable.

The reason why Nicholas Bourriaud and other theoreticians think of DJing as a form of postproduction is because they compare it to other (visual) artforms that really are post-productive. On the one hand, it is true that DJing was, in some parts of the Western Culture, a form of postproduction in the 80's and 90's, but this was never true globally and, most importantly, it isn't true for nowadays DJing. For example, the DJs that invented *Jamaican dub music* in the late '60s and early '70s did more than just retouching the original track. They created “ghost tracks” that intended to express “the spirit” of the original track, but rarely resembled the original (Bradley 2001, 327). Moreover, this transfiguration of the original material into something new is clearly present in the practices of present-day DJs who, when the laws of copyright made sampling illegal, didn't learn to play traditional instruments, but rather “spliced” the samples and distorted them so much that they could not be held responsible in court. This shows that DJs don't simply make collages from pre-existing material, they “hack” available material in ways that even the original artist himself cannot recognize. And yet, most of the theoreticians are sceptical in granting them the attributes of originality and authenticity.

Therefore, DJing forces us to rethink artistic research and other concepts central to our conception of art, such as originality and creativity. The aim of this essay is to foreshadow a multi-layered model of artistic research in DJing, based on which we could rethink the nature of contemporary art as a whole, along with the aim and means of artistic research in this field.

1. Rethinking creativity and originality

If we adopt a historical view on the subject, our concepts of creativity and originality are influenced by some events of the Western philosophical tradition that we take for granted. First of all, I am thinking of an “absolutist” view on creation and originality, that derives from Christian medieval thought and Ancient philosophical thinking. At a closer view, these notions are, strictly speaking, inapplicable to art in general, but we often use them to render criteria for our evaluations of artistic events and works. To exemplify this view, I will take into consideration Nicholas Bourriaud’s definition of these two concepts, that underlies the way in which he conceives DJing as a form of postproduction.

My argument is that, if we view DJing and other forms of contemporary art as lacking creativity and originality, the problem is not with those artforms *per se*, but with our unreflected assumptions about these notions. This absolutist view on creativity and originality also made it hard for the domain of “artistic research” to get established and be understood among artists in its early years. So, to be able to talk about artistic research in DJing, one needs to relax the criteria we put on originality and creativity for the following reasons.

First of all, maybe too often, creativity is defined as “making something out of nothing” (Bourriaud, 2006, 13). This is exactly the Christian definition of divine creation, transposed in the realm of human activities. Although the reasons for this influence are too complex to analyse in this context, it is worthy to say that no human artist ever created “something out of nothing”. The material is always available in advance and, in some sense, the artistic ideas also are. This is one of the reasons research is needed in art. If ideas were not pre-available, but creations of the human mind “out of nothing”, then research would be useless and the creation process would be purely at the will of the artist.

In fact, every form of creation is somewhat of a collage, a juxtaposition of heterogeneous (mental and physical) elements. These elements themselves need not be artistic ideas or materials in the traditional sense of the word. They could be emotional experiences, projections or representations of past events, like they could also be pre-existing artworks or artifacts that constitute “raw material” for new ones, just like stone is raw material for a sculpture. All of these get mixed up in the mind of the artist and form a configuration (gr. μορφή) that just resembles novelty and originality (in the absolutist sense).

For example, in the domain of EDM music, tracks are often conceived by their composers as “raw material” for live DJ performances (Farrugia & Swiss 2019, 47). They are not created as “stand-alone” artworks, intended to be simply listened to. They need to be adapted to a context, and that means mixed, re-mixed and altered by DJing techniques. In fact, in the hands of a DJ, every song becomes a track, *i.e.* every song becomes raw material for a live performance. From this standpoint, the criteria for “good music” is not intrinsic to the music, but in relation to a performance and its context. Thought this way, creativity is achieved through sampling and re-mixing the available material, not through *creatio ex nihilo*. Thus, DJing is a form of creativity, but not in an absolutist sense, but in a relational one.

Concerning the concept of originality, as conceived by Bourriaud it is a distant echo of the Ancient Greek philosophy of origin (ἀρχή). To be original means “being at the origin” (Bourriaud 2006, 13). Just like Greek philosophers, we sometimes think about the origin of things as the ground-zero of their existence, as something abstract in the etymological sense of the word. The origin cannot be affected or influenced by the things it originates, being completely free and independent of the context it generates. This is also the representation of the *genius* that Romantic philosophy imposed on modern thought. Schopenhauer’s conception of the free and lonely artist that creates only by manifesting his will is, on a closer look, confronted with the same aporias as the ancient concept of ἀρχή. The genius “creates” a world, although, being alone, he is out of the world. By manifesting his “subjectivity”, he is the most “objective” entity. He creates just for the sake of creation, being free from his social context and being uninterested in the consequences of his creation. These are exactly the aporias of the concept of One as ἀρχή in late Neoplatonic thinking, for example in Damascius’ *Problems and Solutions concerning the First Principles*.

Moreover, this conception of originality is, in many ways, closely tied to the notion of creativity we’ve already analysed. Beyond the origin, there is nothing, and, as a consequence, being at the origin means creating something that was never created before, *i.e.* “creating something out of nothing”. But one might argue that, thought this way, originality is never possible in art, because beyond the artist, there is an entire *Weltanschauung* and an entire cultural background that originates that piece of art. In order to understand

the kind of originality that DJs (as well as other groups of contemporary artists) claim, we need to relax the criteria we impose on this notion. Originality is not “being at the origin” of something and creating something out of nothing, but being *authentic in the way you alter pre-available material*.

In contrast with the former, the latter does not impose a break-up with tradition, but a continuation of the tradition in a new social and emotional context. Consequently, re-mixes of well-known tracks are not simple reiterations of the same idea. They establish a tradition, in which the vibe of the track is renewed for another generation of listeners. Conceived this way, re-mixing is closer to hermeneutics than to plagiarism. It creates new genres and ways of understanding music. Likewise, sampling is not plagiarism, but a kind of citation (Craig 2013). This is an aspect of DJing that contemporary lawyers, music labels and musicians are not fully aware of.

In this context, to be authentic means to know the artistic tradition you fit in, to interpret it from a contemporary standpoint, and to continue it in an innovative way. Authenticity means to find in this tradition something that was never expressed, but was always contained in. This is why DJs, although a group of artists that disrupted the traditional status quo of the music industry, often preserve their identity as artists by *invoking* the tradition they disrupted and making themselves a part of it (McLeod 1999).

Authenticity, in this sense, encompasses creativity and originality, but does not imply *absolute* creativity and originality. This is what DJs and other kinds of contemporary artists seek and is the kind of notions constituted by artistic research. Without research, one would not be able to understand the tradition, interpret it from a contemporary standpoint and continue it. Moreover, if one is to make research part of nowadays' artistic practices, one must adopt – consciously or unconsciously – this non-absolutist view on creativity and originality.

2. Research as hunting for the unexpressed elements of the artistic tradition

It has already been noticed for some time now that a better strategy for expressing the meaning of artistic research would be through analogy rather than through a precise definition (Hannula 2009). Building some metaphors for the process of artistic research could be more illuminating and intuitive, inasmuch as a definition will also set boundaries and restrictions incompatible with the openness of the concept we are dealing with. And this is a good strategy, since the entire history of philosophy failed to render an encompassing definition of art as such we can hardly hope to find one for artistic research instead.

But the task of finding a good metaphor is not an easy task either. The main problem here is to come up with a good analogy for the process of artistic research, an analogy that is neither arbitrary nor subjective. The reason for this is that a research domain in need of a coherent methodology and some standards of rigour cannot be based on arbitrary metaphors. Thus constructed, it would be a straw man. It would have shaky foundations but, most of all, it would be subject to objections from other research domains. But how can we find a metaphor that is not arbitrary and, at the same time, doesn't restrict the domain in the way a definition does?

As long as, in a sense, all human language is metaphorical, maybe we just need to listen to what the words in our modern languages are saying. As a matter of fact, language is older and often wiser than we as individuals are, and it can render us intuitions that surpass our cultural biases. That is why I will follow an etymological-pragmatist approach for finding a “definition” of artistic research that, at the same time, fits our cultural tradition and avoids our cultural biases and assumptions.

There are two main words used in English to denote the idea we are searching for: research and investigation. They both are of Latin origin and are found in other Romance languages as well – *e.g.* *recherche* (fr.), *ricerca* (it.)/*investigación* (sp.), *investigație* (rou.), *investigazione* (it.), *investigation* (fr.). But they also have an etymological meaning that, in both cases, point to the metaphorical experience of research as hunting, that is a commonplace in our cultural tradition, starting from Plato's Theaetetus (Plato 1901).

In the case of the first series of words, *recherche* (m.fr.), the word from which the English term is derived has its roots in the Latin verb *circare*. This meant to go around something or to circle something, more precisely, to *prowl*. It is used by Seneca in its *Epistulae* (Seneca 1920, 90, 19) to refer to the arts as the “thing” that puts society in motion and produces clamor. *Circare* is the movement of a hawk that circles its prey before he attacks, pinning it down with its gaze. In this context, *research* etymologically means to circle the “subject” over and over again, trying to pin it down, to get a sharp gaze at it, in a word to see it – both in the sense of vision and of understanding.

Then again, if we trace down to its Latin roots the word “investigation”, we will find another interesting hunting metaphor, because the Latin word *investigatio* meant, first of all, be on someone's tracks (lat. *vestigia*), to follow someone, to search for someone or something. The verb *investigare* is used by Cicero in *De*

Natura Deorum (Cicero 1933, II, 158) to refer to the sharp scent of hunting dogs that can trace the prey from afar. In this case, research means to follow the subject “step by step”, with diligence and patience, in a heuristic approach towards the idea. Researching something means finding the tracks that lead us to an idea, gathering clues and information to create a mental map of how to reach our artistic aim.

As we can see, research in the sense of investigation implies the notion of tradition, because the traces we follow are the traces of the past. Moreover, research in the sense of prowling implies the search for a “weak-spot”, a spot that tradition never considered and, as a consequence, never noticed. If research is to lead to novelty in art, it is exactly by pinning down those aspects of a subject, encompassed by tradition, but never really observed as “available potentialities”. This is what a DJ seeks when he samples or remixes an old “dusty” track and this is what a director seeks when he stages a contemporary representation of a traditional play.

This being said, we can notice that an intimate link can be drawn between the act of research in general and two metaphors of hunting that, when put together, create a complete picture on what research and authenticity means in the field of DJing and, maybe, other contemporary artistic practices. From this standpoint, research is the activity of gathering pieces of information in order to pin down unexpressed potentialities in the existing “artistic ideas”, thus creating new art from existing art, in an original and creative way.

3. Artistic ideas as vibes

This being said, we need to also review the notion of “artistic idea”, in order to differentiate it from the epistemological meaning of ideas. Luckily, this distinction has been made a long time ago in the history of philosophy. Schopenhauer, in *The World as Will and Representation* (Schopenhauer 1966, §49) states that the “object” that the artist searches for is an *idea*, opposed to the “object” of scientific activity, which is a concept. The main problem with ideas thus understood is that they are non-discursive. One cannot simply *define* or *describe* the object of art. Even in the case of what we call “conceptual” art, we are also dealing with some kind of idea, not a concept, as far as the artistic concept cannot, usually, be defined as strictly as a scientific one (*e. g.* an atom).

Another interesting thing about artistic ideas is that, as Schopenhauer states, “they represent an infinite multitude of things” (§49). In other words, an idea can be expressed in an infinite number of artworks, it can form a tradition of interpretations, contrary to concepts that are rigorously defined from the beginning. Artistic ideas need to be, as a DJ would say, “sampled” and “remixed”. So, in this sense, the *idea* doesn't refer, as we might think, to a *mental* entity, but also has an affective, emotional and cultural dimension. If it would be only a mental entity, it could be fully grasped by our rationality and put into a concept. Instead, the authentic artistic idea always evades rationality in some way. If it wouldn't, in Schopenhauer's terms, it would be an *allegory*, not an *idea*. So, in this sense, ideas are also suggested by the *affective resonance* of things, a vibration that crosses our entire being and makes us resonate to some artworks rather than others, based on our cultural, social and existential background. In short, the artistic idea is a *vibe*.

In order to understand the notion of *vibe*, we need to go back to Kant's *Critique of Judgment* and take another look at his idea of *sublime*, which produces an *Erschütterung* (Kant 2007, §27) of the human spirit or mind (ger. *Gemüt*). The aesthetical category of the sublime produces a “shaking” of our spirit at the moment of a non-sensible intuition of an *idea*. Just like a string of a guitar that vibrates a while after it is pinched, our mind (spirit) vibes along with the idea found in the artwork, without forming a proper concept. Here, at the intersection of perception and thinking, the aesthetical experience gets formed and the artistic message gets expressed. In this sense, the idea is not a notion that can be fully grasped by any of the faculties of the human conscience, but rather a vibrance that moves our spirit and gives way to thought and emotion at the same time.

This domain where thinking is not yet conceptual and perception is still a solid grasp of the sensitive, reality in its “flesh and bones” is where one will find “the roots of being” and “the impalpable source of sensations” that Cézanne searched for and that Maurice Merleau-Ponty thought about in his *Eye and Mind* (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). This vibrance is what an artist like Rothko searched for in his art and, also, what DJs search for at every performance. Without this “vibrance”, the public cannot be “moved” by a work of art or a performance. Moreover, this strange place is where all artists must descend in order to find the originality and creativity in the sense we just pointed out.

It is also worth noticing that, being beyond the distinction between thinking and sensitivity, when analysed by our mind, this original vibe of art has two components: an intellectual one – the “concept” or the “aboutness” of an artwork (Danto 1981, 81) – and an emotional one – what philosophers call “aesthetical experience”. In absence of this vibration that sets in motion the mind and the emotions conjunctively, art is dull and trivial.

As a consequence, we might say that this original vibe is that which should be sought by artistic research. It can be found in the vibrance of the colours that made Cézanne paint Mount Saint-Victoire over and over

again in search for the “roots of being”. It can be found in the affective resonance of the sound that makes a musician play the same track over and over again in search for a nuance of novelty. It can be found in the “atmosphere” that the performative artist seeks for his public. Artistic research is, in this sense, just hunting vibes in a specific domain of the arts, *i.e.* hunting the aspects of an idea that resonate to a specific historically determined public.

Depending on the domain one practices in, the tools that help in this hunt are different. Moreover, there are artistic domains that include a multi-layered research methodology and multiple tool sets, as is the case of DJing. But this does not change the fact that, no matter how much arts differ from each other, we can trace a unitary aim of this process, namely finding the proper vibe in order to create a certain type of aesthetical experience for the public and to express a certain artistic idea.

4. The multi-layered structure of research in DJing

Being a rather newly born synthetic artform that has its origins at the intersection between art and technology, DJing is one of the most dynamic art domains of the contemporary world. It gave birth to multiple musical genres, created a whole industry around it, and yet did not get much attention from art historians and theoreticians. But this might be an advantage, as long as from this untrodden ground we might get a new perspective on the structure of research that might apply to other existing or future artistic domains.

Another interesting fact about DJing is that it is hard to define as an artistic practice. Maybe the closest grasp is that it is a type of art that aims at developing a collective performance, with the public as the main actor and the DJ as somewhat of a stage director, also taking part in the performance. The main ambiguity here concerns the role of the DJ, that is, on the one hand, a part of the performance and, on the other, an observer. Even the way the DJ booth is built in most of the DJ clubs expresses that ambiguity. In DJing, the classical distinction between “artist” and “public” is ineffective.

This duality of the role the DJ plays in a party springs from the fact that, for the performance to reach its goal, a DJ must somehow catch the vibes of the people in the club and of the club itself, and then transform that into a vibe of his choosing. Thus, the public gets caught in some kind of feeling of unity that comes from music and dance, similar to that portrayed by the ancient accounts on the Dionysian rituals of late Antiquity. In this sense, DJing is a relational art that aims at bringing a heterogeneous crowd of people to the same affective disposition, to the same vibe.

In order to catch the vibe of the public and build upon it, the DJ needs to research his performance on different levels. The first level is almost a theoretical one. A good DJ “knows music”; he is somewhat of an historian of contemporary music. He needs to know all the new releases in his field and make a solid selection that could fit different setups and vibes; most of all, he must quickly recognize a track and find, in his mental repertoire, other tracks that fit well together with it.

But this is not enough, because the DJ is also a musical hacker that needs to build an original musical collage, often out of tracks composed by other artists. This is why, most of the time, one must shatter the internal logic of the track in order to rebuild it based on own views and needs. This is the editing work a DJs need to do, in order to get their tracks ready for a live set, and this kind of work varies in complexity depending on the track in question. The most basic is setting up cue-points that help you quickly navigate through the track and skip parts that don’t match the vibe you are trying to build. Then, there are the so-called mash-ups, edits and remixes, that imply a more brutal intrusion in the composition of the track, which varies from swapping instrumentals and vocals between two tracks to completely recomposing a track, keeping just a few elements from the original one.

A second layer of research in DJing takes place at the location of the performance, and aims at enabling a DJ to construct a coherent performance. This layer implies three stages: soundcheck, crowdcheck, vibecheck.

Firstly, the soundcheck can tell a DJ which kind of music *can* be played, depending on the sound system and other audio technology present at the location. Because club music is, generally, composed and generated digitally, it often requires a different type of sound equipment from the one a live concert requires. Moreover, there are sound systems build for specific genres of music, and they might not sound that well if the DJ wants to experiment with something else. Depending on the soundcheck, the DJ knows what kind of tracks he can play and what kind of performance he can, from a technical point of view, build.

The second element, the crowdcheck, enables a DJ to get familiar with the crowd in a specific location and feel its vibe by prowling the crowd. This gives him a sense about how to start his set and how to build the vibe, starting from the one provided by the crowd. This is what makes one somehow feel the direction in which the performance is to be constructed and the right time to start the performance.

This aspect is very important, because a DJ cannot come to the club with a biased idea about his set. Even if he plays in the same venue repeatedly, the vibe will probably be different each night. This is why he also

needs what one can call a “vibecheck”. The reason for this is that a DJ’s work is to constantly build new vibes from the selection of music he has at his disposal. And this is not about the music as such, but about the way and order in which that music gets played, the sound-effects applied and other things like that. Good music doesn’t make a good set, and this is why we should view the DJ not as a musician, but rather as a vibe hunter who has music as his hunting tool.

It should be said that the steps briefly mentioned here are often not consciously followed by DJs, but rather they become a *habitus*, a disposition or an attitude. This doesn’t mean research is excluded in those cases. It rather becomes a part of the DJ’s condition as an artist and becomes integrated into his behavior. Every layer of research is somewhat necessary in order to make a creative and original performance possible, but they do not necessarily grant it.

It is noteworthy to say that research, conceived in this way, is never an algorithm. It does not guarantee the achievement of certain results. Hunting can always end up with a “close miss” or following a “false track”. These are the risks that DJs and other contemporary artists expose themselves to by surpassing the absolutist conceptions of creativity and originality. In an absolutist view, the genius cannot “miss the target”. His works are brilliant just because creativity is written in his nature, and one cannot go against his nature, even if he wants it.

But, if we distance ourselves completely from this romantic view on creation and art, we notice that even the great artists of history, sometimes, miss the target. DJing is an art based almost exclusively on the relation that a DJ establishes with the public at a certain event. Even the best DJs miss the vibe of the crowd sometimes, and this thing does not make them less talented, but more experienced.

That being said, there are two conclusions we can draw from the research practices of DJs. First of all, research is not a simple process, but rather a multi-layered and hermeneutical one. It is based on gathering knowledge about one’s artistic tradition and hacking that tradition, remixing it, reinterpreting it in such a way that it says something new to the contemporary public. This leaves a lot a space open for “mistakes” and close misses. This is why, secondly, one must view the notion of research from an *apophatic* point of view. Most of the time, research doesn’t show a DJ the way in which he can achieve an artistic goal, but rather the multitude of ways in which he can miss it. It is about experience not gained through trial and error, but rather through hacking the flaws of our artistic tradition and the biases of the contemporary mind.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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