

All the copies in the world

There have always been copies making claims on the original. But in the last half-century an explosion in means, methods and techniques has both widened its terrain – from Nike trainers and clone towns to copy-left and sampling cultures – and made the copy's presence all-pervasive, as **Marcus Boon** illustrates in his luminous manifesto for the future of the copy

In Praise of Copying by Marcus Boon
(Harvard University Press)

"Information wants to be free", Stewart Brand famously stated sometime during the prehistory of computerisation, formalising the slogan in his 1987 *The Media Lab: Inventing the Future at MIT*, and immediately continuing with a lesser known tail-end to the quote, that "information also wants to be expensive, that tension will not go away."

The cultural writer Marcus Boon agrees with the first part of Brand's gnomic formulation that 'information wants to be free.' However, he would beg to differ about the second half: that 'information also wants to be expensive' and has written *In Praise of Copying*, an extended meditation in book form, which expands, remakes and rethinks the conditions of information and its freedom. Or at least the paradoxical tensions explicit in Brand's aphoristic quote are part of Boon's project, though the explosion in available information is only one aspect of a wider emergence, the ever broadening means and agencies through which reproducing, sharing and copying, have been and are leading towards a wider and wider culture and cultures of copying. Since industrialisation, the arrival of the mass production of things; physical objects, followed by the capacity to record and reproduce in different media the intangible; sound (the gramophone), vision – moving and still, (film celluloid and photography's chemical imprint) has been available, the terrain of the singular, the unique, the authentic, the genuine, and the original, has been increasingly ambiguous, gradually ceding space to the domains of the copy.

For industrialisation's first hundred years this was, relatively, a slow-burn technological wave, but in the last fifty, the pace has been accelerating by the decade, with the electronic expansion of technology and capacity to copy, a pdf, a jpg, an i-tune or a ... the literally billions of bits available almost instantaneously on the web, or through slower post industrial reproduction, the universe of the copy has become universalised. The 'fabled gift economy of the internet', as Boon describes the web, is arguably the key development, transforming how the copy is experienced in the early twenty first century. But changes of a similar kind have been

happening for a while. Walter Benjamin's well-known essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, on the disappearance of 'aura' with the coming of recording technology, was only one attempt to frame the effects of capacity to change the singular into the multiple. In the present context, with robotics, nanotechnology and synthetic biology all likely to increasingly come into play in the next few years, what began as a relatively modest 'copy and paste' culture will, if it isn't already, become all-consuming.

Boon, who has written extensively and interestingly on contemporary music, and is presently an associate professor of literature in Toronto, published *In Praise of Copying* in 2010. The book emerged out of Boon's thinking about how all-pervasive imitation is in contemporary culture, and how confused people are about the status of the copy in this culture. Mimesis is a touchstone of sorts; an open secret with copying everywhere, while taboo-like, the ubiquity of copying is not discussed, drawing out contradictory, conflicting emotions. On the one hand, copying is seen as transgressive, subject to laws and for those who transgress, potentially, as a case for lawsuits and courts, the copier stealing from the original, and/or its owner. On the other hand the copy's very ubiquity, in downloads or theme-resorts, in films, music, and dvd's, to pharmaceuticals and nanotech, copying is not just an accepted part of today's culture, but omni-dominant. This culture of the copy is a contested landscape, with Intellectual Property (IP) copyright and the development and control of brands carefully policed worldwide, with the Apple-Samsung 2012 lawsuit tussle for hundreds of millions of dollars only one example, or think also of counter-energies; different strategies to use information more freely and outside the remit of such legal controls. Possibly the best known in the West is Wikipedia, although this terrain quickly expands within a continuum beginning with the likes of Creative Commons or Copy-Left to embrace Wikileaks, Anonymous, and all sorts of post-millennial cyber-hacker tribes.

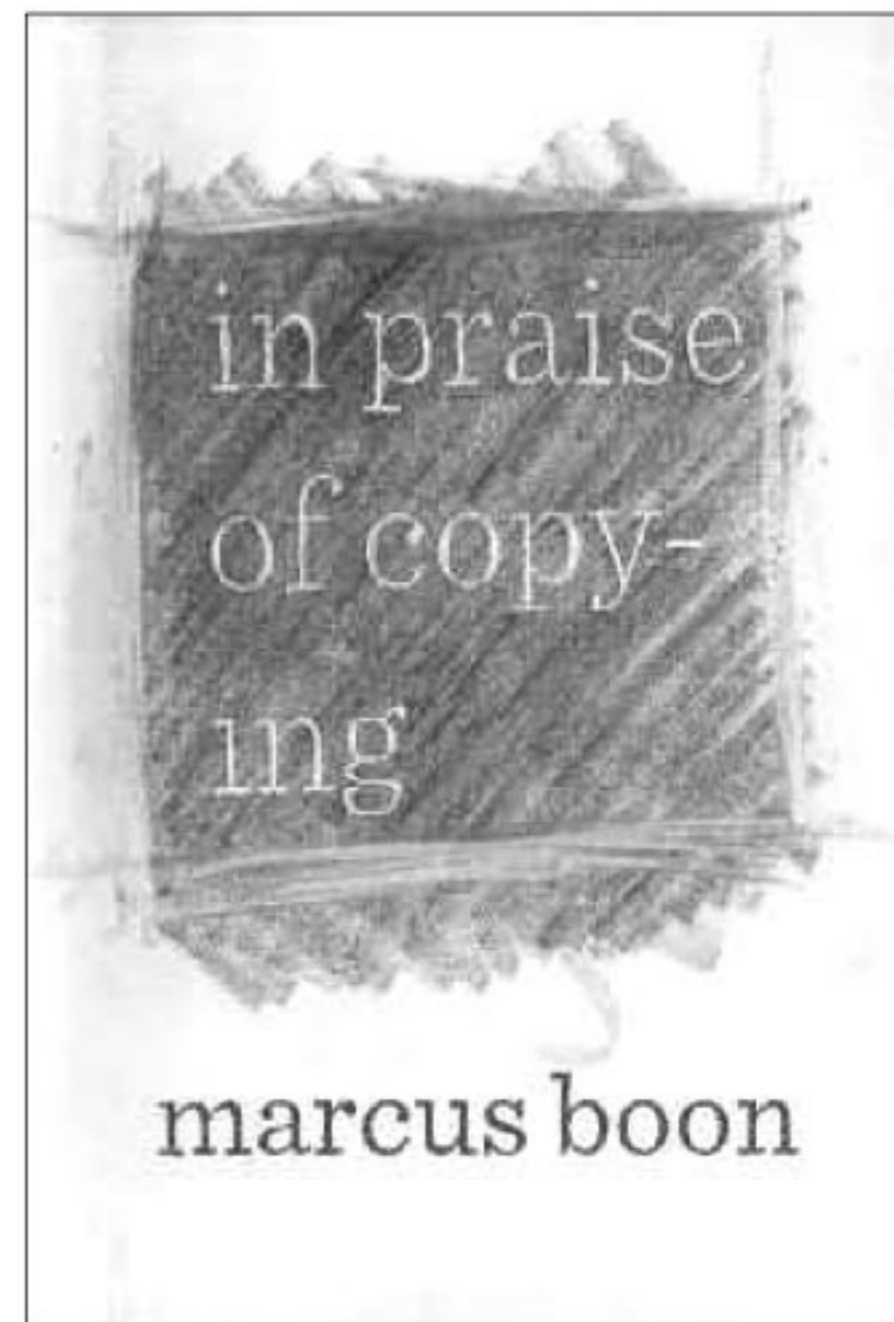
Close to the surface of *In Praise of Copying* is a question. What if amidst this ubiquity, Boon asks, copying

might be seen in a different light, one where duality is dissolved, enabling people to accept, relax and live with cultures of copying? By acknowledging the mimetic as part of culture, and part of us, the traditional apprehension of the copy as inferior to, taken, stolen or less than the original dissolves. It is on this boundary line of our understanding of copying, expressed well in Brand's tension at information's value, that threads through the whole book, and by its close arrives at such a differing relation to copying, that, for those of optimistic disposition, the possibility of a different future for copying and for information feels almost within reach.

The sources and heroes for Boon's possible futures are found in the present; in the dynamic and anarchic sub-cultures of the world, from the remaining traditional societies and the street vendor markets in every world city, to the waves of music, and now, digital folk cultures located, more likely than not, in the urban sprawl and 'planet of slums' of the developed and developing world. For Boon these industrial folk cultures, while generally engaged with the prevailing modes of commodity, are also living examples of 'autre-mondrialisation' or Other Globalisation, also where the processes of copying expresses a refusal or indifference to the logic of the globalised market place, to property, ownership and copyright. Not only this but it's in these industrial folk cultures that Boon identifies relationships to copying, to property and ownership that make up a practice, a way of co-creating community. The free use of copies is part of a greater desire, that of abundance, of everything being available, freely and abundantly, a dream which has, primarily through technological means, developed a momentum and force to rival and contest the mainstream 'free marketplace.'

This is playfully subversive 'faith in fakes' territory, and it isn't surprising that Boon's background is within the recent avant-underground tradition, encompassing, Duchamp, Dada, William Burroughs, Brian Eno, and the ambient world. Boon once ran a great, now disappeared, music website 'hungryghost', for hip hop and sampling cultures, all sharing an aesthetic partially built on critiquing originality, identity and property. Boon may be an academic, but he wears his alt.culture credentials on his sleeve, and the many passionate electronic music references makes it difficult not to connect the evolution of sound recording, from technical studio wizardry with small slices of sound, to the repetition and beat of the drum, electronic or otherwise, to Boon's specific fascination with copying. If it is refreshing to read a book with one leg grounded in the one-time outer counter-culture, there is also a less known, conscious familiarity and knowledge of Buddhist philosophy – so at odds with the orthodoxies of the academy.

It is Boon's Buddhist practice which is at the heart of the book, and *In Praise of Copying* is a meditation as



much as an investigation into the nature/s of the copy, and a metaphysical exploration into Buddhism's belief in the absence of essence or core forms found in the phenomenal world. While academic, and highly conscious of its need for credibility within the arena of contemporary theory, Boon's appeal to sunyata, or emptiness as the basis of his alternative to Plato's ideal world of forms, and its implicit dualism, perennially manifest in the split between appearance and the real, the imitative shadow-world to that of the Platonic world of essences. A brave step, given the Buddhist point of view remains terra incognita across the academy, whether mainstream Western or the avant-garde critical world of theory.

If you feel persuaded by Boon's appeal to Buddhist no origin and emptiness, then you'll be able to accept that a copy may be liberated from its dual relation. It also turns other arguments inside out. Clusters within the sixties avant-art communities from Andy Warhol and his multiple Campbell soup tins, to Fluxus and William Burroughs arrived at a similar space; where the copy's existence depended on the making of the original, though also vice versa; no copy, no original. To this metaphysics of no mind other aspects of the Buddhist perspective integrated; samsara, illusion, and the infinite, yet essenceless, multiplicity of worlds symbolised