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Interview With David Shields
Author, “Reality Hunger: A Manifesto”
For Release, Monday, March 22, 2010

- A: Copyright is undergoing some serious scrutiny right now, that we live in a completely digitized, electronic, Web-based world, and the old rules simply no longer apply. That from the beginning of time, artists have plundered each other’s work for inspiration and source material. And given how variegated and constant the source material is now, we simply have to change how we think about copyright.
- Q: How does the book begin to address that? It’s a manifesto, so that has a political ring to it. I would imagine it’s got a – you have a political approach to the subject. But the book itself tries to address this in an oblique way. Tell us how.
- A: Yeah, that’s a good word – oblique. The book is not overtly a 200 page book about copyright, per se. It’s sort of smuggled in, inside the text. Overtly, the book is an argument for the excitement of literary work and arts in general that blur generic categories. I’m particularly interested in announcing the death of the novel, and saying that writers need to come – that we need to obliterate generic distinctions, that we need to define new forms that are congruent with the 21st century. The mainstream novel’s no longer getting it done.
- Q: I wonder whether that obliteration of genre, what you mean by the generic there, in that sense, genre. Not generic as in sort of without label or –
- A: Yeah.
- Q: – without distinction. In the obliteration of genre, we’re seeing that happen inadvertently, aren’t we? So-called nonfiction, it turns out, is fiction is one example.
- A: Sure. I mean, I’m – in a way I want literature to catch up with the other arts. The visual art has been compressing forms and mixing and matching media for a very long time. Hip-hop, obviously, for the last 30 years has been appropriating and mixing and matching quite effectively. And it’s almost as if literature is strangely hidebound and determined to endlessly replay the 19th century novel.
- Q: Is that because the individual author, he or she, sits usually in an office, sometimes in a library alcove, alone, and that solitary endeavor makes him or her think, this is



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all mine, it should be all mine. I can't take from someone else. Whereas a musician, clearly, is going to have 100 tunes in his head as he begins to think of what performance he's going (inaudible).

A: It's not a bad suggestion. I mean, I'm trying to think of why the visual arts and the musical arts tend to lead the way, and why literature brings things up from the rear. I think you might be on to something, that why a visual artist is more prepared to steal and appropriate stuff than a writer. Perhaps because – perhaps it's a class thing, too, that writers, for a very long time, for many centuries, tended to be upper middle class, probably less so with musicians and visual artists, perhaps.

But if I could, I would like to talk about how I use – how I smuggle in the argument about appropriation, because –

Q: Please do because –

A: It's not –

Q: – it's fascinating.

A: Yeah, it's not the overt argument of the book in the sense that the overt argument, the sort of – the overland route is me saying, OK, look, I want to argue for the excitement of work that blurs boundaries. No more conventional memoir, no more conventional novel. The work that captures what it feels like to be alive now is work that resists generic categorization.

But the way I do that is that a huge number of the passages in a 618 section book are actually ripped from other people. And some people say well, why are you doing that? And for me the very specific reason I'm doing that is that in exactly the same way I want readers to be confused about genre, I want them to be confused about the provenance of these quotations. That is to say, I want the reader to experience on a visceral level through confusion about who the speaker is. I want them to experience on a visceral level what I'm talking about theoretically. So that I want to sort of practice what I preach so that the very – the reader's very experience of confusion on a page by page basis is an exact mirror of what I want new work to try to accomplish.

Q: Right, because the book and the author seem to be a single source.

A: Precisely.



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Q: And yet what you've done is to bring in multiple sources.

A: Precisely.

Q: I can say open sources.

A: Exactly. So that the book is, in fact, a demonstration of open source texting. And so that's really exciting to me that – And I really stumbled into it. I didn't start out with some great political, cultural, social, legal agenda. On the contrary, I just sort of gathered all these quotes for, actually, a graduate course that I was teaching. And year by year, the quotes coalesced into a kind of book manuscript. And at first I was wary of how can I claim this as my text or a text, and then I realized that it's – the appropriation of text, the variegated material is the perfect metaphor for the very argument I'm trying to make.

And basically, art has always been theft, you know. Two thirds of Shakespeare's *Henry VI* is taken from Plutarch. Montaigne was ripping off Latin authors right and left. James Joyce said, I'm quite content to go down to posterity as a scissors and paste man. Artists have always plundered each other. Art is theft, as Picasso said. And I think the age that we live in now, both a post post-modern world in which we're terribly self-conscious about the creation of art and a completely digitized world in which everything is available to us at the click of a mouse, it's just it would utterly hamstring the future of art if we think about copyright the way that we have been until now.

Q: And yet you encountered just such a hamstringing experience yourself –

A: I did.

Q: – if I understand correctly. So in this post post-modern world, it's inevitable that the lawyers become involved.

A: Precisely, and I argued – I think what you're alluding to, of course, is that I argued loud and hard with my publisher – a very distinguished publisher at Knopf, a division of Random House. I argued loud and hard with them that it was crucial to me, for the reasons I've just cited, to have no citations. There's a really beautiful quality in which the reader isn't sure, is this Sonny Rollins, is it Nietzsche, is it Shields, is it some weird amalgam of all these people? To me, it's a very exciting psychic and philosophical space. I argued that over and over and over again, that I had to practice what I preach, but as you –



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Q: You lost the argument.

A: I lost the argument. The lawyer says, you can talk until you're blue in the face, but we're not publishing that book. The relatively happy compromise I wound up with is in the back of the book, I have about nine pages of citations. They're extremely cryptic, they're extremely brief. I preface it by saying, for God's sakes, don't read these citations. Stop. Read no further. Here's a box cutters to cut out the pages. And many of these citations are a bit of a wild goose chase in which I say, sorry, couldn't quite find that quote. Somebody told me I'd find it here, it wasn't there.

And so I'm OK with it. For a very long time I was almost inconsolable about the citations. It seemed to violate the argument of the book, but welcome to the Thunderdome. I mean, that we live in a highly litigious society, and I feel like I pushed the argument forward a bit.

Q: Well, that actually exemplifies what's going on today, right, at this program. So it's called the Collision of Ideas and the billing is, it's a conversation, not a confrontation. You've had both. You've had a conversation with yourself, perhaps, and with some of the faithful readers. You also had a confrontation with your editors and your lawyers – or their lawyers – and yet you're sitting here, you don't look like you've been hurt too badly, and you've come up with something that's challenging us, making us think. It's provoking us. Is that what you're getting out of today?

A: Yeah, so far. I mean, I've listened to a few hours of conversation and – Yeah, I mean, I think it's debate. I mean, I think it's a serious debate, and I think it's important to dig in hard. And I argued hard for it and we carved out a decent compromise, and I think you're right. It's a conversation, but there are some very, very serious stakes, both obviously financial and legal, and to me crucially artistic. And it's definitely a conversation, but it's a conversation with extraordinarily high stakes, and I want it to be civil, but I also want to argue the case passionately.

Q: Last question, because you have to get back and the program is about to begin. Why high stakes? I mean, copyright, in the past, you know – in comparison to war and pestilence and famine, hardly seemed to matter all that much, and yet today the stakes around copyright seem to be at a level with, you know, world peace.

A: Right, well, obviously I'm speaking a little melodramatically, that if this book hadn't been published or if it's published with citations, the world still spins, obviously, but I guess for me it's something – I mean art really matters to me. I



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think that we live through art to an extraordinary degree. It's a definably human activity. And I think if – and a defining aspect of art is artists feeding off of each other, the ecstasy of influence rather than the anxiety of influence.

And so to me, as a practicing writer, as a writer who feeds off of other writers, it's very important to me that the issue be not framed by lawyers but by artists, and so I'm doing all I can to ensure the future of art that is really vital and not become a kind of adjunct to the kind of game of sort of legal chicken, and that really scares me.

END OF RECORDING