


Eduardo Navas* e Monica Tavares**

Conversation between Monica Tavares and Eduardo Navas.


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Entrevistas

Eduardo Navas

 0000-0003-2762-7770

Monica Tavares

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This text is the result of a conversation between Monica Tavares and Eduardo Navas about the act of remixing. It is a reflection on the subjects discussed in the articles delivered by the students (Ana Elisa Carramaschi, Gabriela Previdello, Jair Molina, Lali Krotoszynski, Leonardo Lima, Maurício Trentin, Priscila Guerra e Rodrigo Campos) of the course “Principles of Data Analysis and Remix” taught in March 2015 in the Postgraduate Program in Visual Arts at USP (PPGAV-USP), under responsibility of Professors Dr. Monica Tavares and Dr. Eduardo Navas. The course introduced basic principles of data visualization and their relation to the principles of remixing. An emphasis was placed on analyzing information, while also developing strong design skills. The relation between image and text was explored, which means that students learned how to analyze content and form while understanding their similarities and differences.

palavras-chave:remix; artes visuais;
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Este texto é o resultado de uma conversa sobre o ato de remixagem entre Monica Tavares e Eduardo Navas. Trata-se de uma reflexão sobre os assuntos discutidos nos artigos entregues pelos alunos (Ana Elisa Carramaschi, Gabriela Previdello, Jair Molina, Lali Krotoszynski, Leonardo Lima, Maurício Trentin, Priscila Guerra e Rodrigo Campos) do curso “Princípios de análise de dados e remix”, ministrado em março de 2015 no Programa de Pós-Graduação em Artes Visuais da USP (PPGAV-USP), sob responsabilidade dos Professores Dra. Monica Tavares e Dr. Eduardo Navas. O curso introduziu princípios básicos de visualização de dados e sua relação com os fundamentos da remixagem. Com foco na análise de informações, a disciplina também pretendia fornecer recursos para o desenvolvimento de habilidades em design. Explorando a relação entre imagem e texto, os estudantes aprenderam a analisar conteúdo e forma a partir do entendimento de suas semelhanças e diferenças.

*The Pennsylvania State
University, United States.** Universidade de
São Paulo [USP], Brazil.DOI: 10.11606/issn.2178-0447.
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Mônica Tavares: Communication plays an increasingly major role in every sphere of daily life; it reverberates as a persuasive determinant of consumption processes. Considering that the saturation of information makes possible a more exhausting game of exchanges and recoding between production and reception, in a more comprehensive context, is it possible to consider that the concept of remix is inserted as the *leitmotiv* of contemporary capitalism or as a kind of metaconsumption?

Eduardo Navas: The question on what remix could stand for during a specific cultural period is actually defined by the very context in which remix is performed. Remix as a proper concept did not function in the past as it currently does. This has to do with how the recycling of ideas and the forms in and through which those ideas are manifested are reshaped and redefined by emerging technology, and how this process is continuously normalized. One thing that remix studies has made evident from many different points of view is that people have been reinterpreting and reintroducing ideas and their material and immaterial manifestations into the world since culture developed as a space in which to share history, knowledge and values that, through their ongoing reinterpretation, come to reshape societies, thus enabling them to move in diverging ways¹.

What I have noted and strive to prove in my own research is that remix as an actual concept does not come into use until the 1980s². Remix as a proper concept is linked to a specific time of material production mostly defined by the rise of computing. The first samplers were in essence specialized machines that could be programmed to take sound bites from pre-existing compositions that could in turn be used to create new compositions. This possibility was later extended to visual culture with the introduction of Photoshop, at which point the basic principles of visual collage, which went back to the early half of the twentieth century, became available to anyone who had access to computer software.

Remix itself is an idea that was popularly linked to sound manipulation in the studio by disco DJs, particularly in NYC. Its precedents, as it is well known, come from versioning in Jamaica. And, in this sense, remix as a cultural trope is part of a specific period of production, but one whose principles are unlikely to go away or be diminished in terms of its cultural and economic importance, mostly because much of what people do around the world is defined by remix principles. In this sense, it is not so much a kind of metaconsumption or a *leitmotiv*, but an ever-changing cultural node, which enables diverse collectives to evaluate, produce, and consume all types of forms in contemporary culture.

1. For remix as a field of study cf. NAVAS, Eduardo *et al.* (org.). **The Routledge companion to remix studies**. New York: Routledge, 2014.

2. Cf. NAVAS, Eduardo. Remix[ing] sampling. *In:* NAVAS, Eduardo. **Remix theory: the aesthetics of sampling**. New York: Springer, 2012. p. 33-62.

Remix makes evident that nothing is original, but unique to a moment of production. A form that is presented as an object or product is a unique instantiation—a specific manifestation of an idea or set of ideas which keep flowing and will be combined – remixed – yet again with other forms and ideas as people become exposed to things being produced by others in their communities and societies. In this sense, remix is always meta. It is meta-everything, meta-production, meta-consumption as well as meta-criticism.

Mônica Tavares: On the other hand, if remix is considered a creative procedure at the base of contemporary society, do you believe that remix has changed the ways people express themselves? Since the creative subject is increasingly more operative and every time less reflexive, and since such a subject is in a moment of communication enchantment, do you foresee the possibility of a creativity crisis in art and design?

Eduardo Navas: I do think that there is an ongoing lag decrease between production, assimilation and eventual reproduction. This does change the way we reflect on things, and, in turn, it redefines how we may approach critical thinking and analysis. This actually has been a constant concern in my research, as I find that keeping up with technological change is one of the things that humans have struggled to do since efficiency emerged as an integral element directly linked with tools and machines.

My evaluation is that technological efficiency is exposing many of the elements that, in the past, were not apparent, in part because we functioned with a greater lag in communication, production and consumption. Our growing technological efficiency, in turn, has shaped and continues to reshape our perception of intellectual and technological change³. I do not know if there is less reflexivity today than in past, in part because our concept of reflection is also likely different in many ways. The way we think of God or a higher being, for instance, has arguably changed in part due to the ongoing relation of religion and science, to give just one example.

What I do think is becoming evident with the exponential growth of exchange among production/consumption/reproduction is that the ability to reflect on things with ample time has always been performed by those who are privileged to perform such act. Consequently, there has been a major shift in education (and I think this is global at this point), in which technological innovation is seen as the answer to all economic and cultural questions, especially when one is striving to have a stable reality. The result is that many people seeking stability and success in their lives become focused on technological adeptness as the

3. Cf. NAVAS, Eduardo. Culture and remix: a theory of cultural sublation. In: NAVAS, Eduardo *et al.* (org.). **The Routledge companion to remix studies**. New York: Routledge, 2014. p. 116-131.

answer to all their problems, and this implies that, similarly to other well-paid and well-trained professionals in the past, people who became part of emerging labor forces may have little time for in-depth reflection about long-term questions that affect people's lives.

If there is a crisis for art and design's role in culture and society it may consist in the reality that in-depth reflection can only happen when a person has the time to think for long periods of time, and for this to take place, one must be in an autonomous position that can afford to take some distance from the daily grind that most people experience in the general workforce; or have an infrastructure that allows a person to catch up as needed with constant technological innovation. Only the elite have this type of infrastructure, and, in this sense, people who come to specialize in Information Technology (IT) or Internet Security, for example, are for the most part well paid workers who, one could argue, are the equivalent of mechanics or union industrial workers in previous generations prior to computing; who are very good at technical and applied labor, but will likely never have long periods of time to reflect on the ethical and moral implications of things that they perform day in and day out.

A concern may be that the current trend is pushing people to engage with innovation without an investment on critical thinking. In effect, technological innovation is now embedded on every level of research, even in fields that in the past were not so concerned with the latest technological innovation. Digital humanities, for example, are a way for individuals in the liberal arts and related fields to crossover to innovation while functioning as intellectual developers. This enables humanists to become competent with the pervasive drive for innovation in terms of computational development in their research. The crucial difference for digital humanists is that they are using digital tools to develop new critical approaches. The concept of cultural analytics, for example, implies that those who do such research are invested in understanding the implications of data interpretation in the world, as opposed to the term data analytics, which implies a deliberate commercial investment in planning for increasing profit for the commercial sector, often disregarding potential cultural conflicts in relation, for instance, to privacy when sharing data across social media.

To go back to your question, the crisis you allude to has always been with us and is likely to remain with art and design; the delineations of productions I describe above continue to redefine cultures around the world. The one thing that may be different in our times is that a possible lack of reflection or critical awareness in general may very well be less apparent to those who don't acquire the knowledge or the

capacity to understand how cultural tensions play out. In other words, one has to have the capacity and education to be able to notice the transparency of the process of cultural development, and likely, this may not be accessible to people who are trained to do practical jobs, as well as those who continue to struggle just to meet their basic needs in order to get through life.

The positive aspect of our current context is that now we have the ability to understand how all of this happens, and those who are critically engaged in real social change can try to do something about it, with the very tools being used to push for constant innovation often based on speculations on a future technology market. Remix can be implemented as a critical tool in order to make this complex process apparent to everyone, regardless of their social position. Remix, when implemented in art and design, could also be an educational tool in a sense that can encourage others to engage critically in ways that they did not expect previously based on their daily roles in culture and society.

Mônica Tavares: How can remix establish, effectively, a potential information catalogue in which the operations of displacement of forms and meanings develop mostly between the singularity of the sign and its effective combinatorial capacity to reframe things?

Eduardo Navas: Remix can be used as a tool for critical thinking or as a tool for the optimization of mass consumption. Let us first consider the first option. Principles that are now part of remix have actually been deployed in prior historical periods, particularly in late modernism and postmodernism. Well-known examples from the early part of the twentieth century at this point include collage, photomontage and randomized methods as practiced by the Cubists, Dadaists, futurists and to some degree surrealists, who in turn were, so to speak, remixed by Neo-Dadaists, Pop artists, and Conceptualists, among others, in the second half of the twentieth century. One thing that the increase in technological innovation has made evident, as previously discussed, is that technical adeptness will mean little if there is no substantial understanding of how to use technology to produce material likely to attain strong cultural connotations. Films such as the *Star Wars* franchise, as popular as they are (at least the first three), were open enough in their storytelling that people could project their own experiences onto the characters and futuristic technology (which actually is contextualized to be from the past — *a long time ago...*, as is explained at the beginning of each film episode).

From this standpoint, remix does nothing new except reframe or make more apparent the importance of critical thinking. At the same time, it must be noted that remix, as a basic action, does not privilege criticism but is rather open for any use. Remix itself became popular and gained cultural recognition because of its commercial success, initially with disco remixes for the nightclub. It was when the remixing that took place in the recording studio in the form of post-production by DJs showed great potential for capital gain that it became popularized and was a founding element for other music genres such as hip-hop, and the eventual evolution of disco into house music and techno. All of these musical subgenres were not part of the mainstream for a long time, and, in a way, except for hip-hop, they still are not, but there is money to be made in all of them, and that is why remix was able to thrive. So, remix can be used by anyone for any purpose, it can be a tool for critical reflection, or be a major element in the production of goods for massive production. To consider remix to be critical by default would be delusional.

When remix is used reflexively, that is, with a critical consciousness, it effectively exposes the singularity of the sign and its effective combinatorial capacity, but the challenge remains that this aspect of remix is not as lucrative as the oppositional way in which it is used in the commercial sector. This is the challenge that remains open for investigation and debate.

Mônica Tavares: Do you accept that remix can be understood as a language-based process that supports itself on a combinatorial basis which provides methods, strategies and steps for the planning of an artistic proposal?

Eduardo Navas: I think remix does function in relation to a language-based process. I have considered this to some length in the past and is certainly something that is becoming more important to consider by anyone who is invested in remix studies. The relationship between oral language, the written word and remixing has already been noticed by many individuals who write about the subject, including David Gunkel, who in large part defines his own investigation by looking at writing as the foundation of remixing⁴. Martin Irvine is another researcher who performs a direct analysis of remix in terms of semiosis⁵, and you have also applied principles of intertextuality to remix in order to expose the essential principles of recombination for the realization of creative works⁶.

Mônica Tavares: What would you say about the possibility of thinking about the concept of remix not from an aesthetics of appearance or

4. Cf. GUNKEL, David.

Of Remixology: ethics and aesthetics after remix. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016. p. 33-58.

5. Cf. IRVINE, Martin. Remix and the dialogic engine of culture. *In:* NAVAS, Eduardo *et al.* [org.]. **The Routledge companion to remix studies.** New York: Routledge, 2014. p. 15-42.

6. Cf. TAVARES, Monica. Digital poetics and remix culture. *In:* NAVAS, Eduardo *et al.* [org.]. **The Routledge companion to remix studies.** New York: Routledge, 2014. p. 192-203.

ARS as a formal perceptible pattern of assembly, but rather as a linguistic
 ano 17 procedure in which one can either leave or not explicit marks of such
 n. 35 processes in one's artistic production?

Eduardo Navas: This question implies the possibility to detach or play down how subjectivity may play a role in the production of a work. In a way, this question refers to a left-over preoccupation explored in conceptual art, which is to detach the artist from the work so that critical distance could develop. The idea was for the artist to become a type of objective compiler of elements that, when put together, would show a specific contention for the viewer to reflect upon, one that would expose not necessarily the artist's point of view on a subject being framed for reflection, but the viewer's. This model is based in part on a scientific model, which can be understood in terms of a structural process of analysis: for the scientist, the apparent role is to discover in order to better understand, and for the artist (at least the one invested in social criticism), it is to expose for others to reflect.

For the conceptual artist, and all other artists who may try to claim critical distance from the work they produce with this type of methodology, it is dishonest not to admit that they are interested in exposing particular elements on a subject and that their choices are made to open up a space for discussion according to their vision of the world. In this sense, I think that one must be careful in how a work is presented as an objective body of work. The very initial question is biased with a specific interest—that of finding a contradiction in the subject. This is not a bad thing, but rather the opposite—which is how opinions are developed and it is the very foundation of a critical point of view; but it can be detrimental when the individual doing the research or producing work thinks that they are neutral or “objective” in the process in which they are invested. We can argue that the scientist and the artist should not be compared, but the problem is that art, particularly conceptual art and its many reconfigurations since the 1970s, has implemented scientific or parallel structural methods to develop work, and this is what I understand is implied in your question.

I now go back to your question to state that one should be sensitive to leaving marks of the process in order to show how one's own interest — one's own bias — can actually lead to a fair evaluation or reflection on issues that are of concern to society and culture and thereby open the debate for others to weigh in according to the factual information that is presented — which, in order to withstand scrutiny, must be verifiable, or reliable. One could say that one's initial interest in something is the foundation of one's point of view that will play out in the material presented for others to evaluate. It is how fair a person is

in showing the process that leads to the presentation, it being scientific or artistic, that will show the fairness in one's actions and encourage others to reflect on the issues raised based on the interests that led to the results of the research or the production of a work of art.

Mônica Tavares: We live in a society in which the authority of the facts removes the authority of the ideas and rules, because a supposed truth is at the base of what is seen. Do you admit that remix may empower that kind of process due to the fact that it ensures the infinite recombination of messages, and, consequently, the non-reliability of information?

Eduardo Navas: Remix is powerful because it can appropriate anything and, based on how well the new form (remix) is produced, it can have even greater agency than the sources used for the remix. A remix cannot function without information or source material; and it ultimately needs the factual reliability of such information as its backbone, even when it is misrepresented as a remix. Plagiarism is arguably the most basic form of misinformation in that it misrepresents the material without a fair account for the sources when the maker decides to claim that s/he made the work, period. There are different levels of production that allow one to stop referencing works directly, the intertextual process of creation is perhaps our most important mean for producing new works without citing an endless list of things we have been exposed to and that, in turn, informs the work. But the issue about plagiarism, as I made this a specific example here, is that it shows work that was uniquely arranged by a particular individual or collective as someone else's without referencing the source — this is stealing. The problem with plagiarism is that there has been no intertextual transformation, meaning that the work has not been changed enough to become a different and unique instantiation of prior contributions by other individuals. In the case of plagiarism, this means that information that is part of the creative process is not made available. Appropriation, on the other hand, is a type of open-plagiarism in which the appropriator deliberately exposes the act of taking an object as produced by someone else in order to present it in a different context to open it up for new potential meaning. At this point we can note how the fact that certain information behind the work is foundational for our assessment of such production.

The non-reliability of information comes about not from remix itself, but from the breakdown of the infrastructure that makes the process of recycling ideas and material possible. We are currently starting to notice this breakdown in the rise of fake-news, in which facts are eventually acknowledged

ARS to dismantle the fallacy; yet, people, even when told that things they have
ano 17 read are not true (factual), are still willing to believe what they read because
n. 35 such non-factual information may likely support a worldview they believe
in. In effect, it appears that we are entering a time that is currently called a
period of post-truth, particularly in the United States.

Mônica Tavares: How does the remixing process affect or interfere in the notion of the archive, when it is considered something that can be rebuilt *ad infinitum* and that is available on the net to present and represent art in contemporaneity?

Eduardo Navas: Remix makes evident, in terms of the archive, that there is no limit for recombining something. This may be seen with optimism or pessimism. Remix makes evident that the archive is rather unstable and that it consists of interpretations by particular contributors to such collection. Remix in the digital age exposes the redefinition that institutions face for the near future, which is that the archive is always trying to increase its collection, but it is paradoxically only an archive when it excludes things based on selectivity. To this effect, the archive must always remain incomplete.

Another issue is that the categorization of data is becoming evermore complex, and the archive itself is also being redefined to be considered more than a mere collection that may be stored in a specific place to function more like an action or verb — an algorithm that allows users to access information or data from anywhere. From this stance, Google, in effect, treats the entire Internet as an archive — one that is extremely unstable, as things that are uploaded may also be taken down at any time. And its constant drive is to categorize and recategorize what is available online. Things are uploaded and taken down, new websites are created while others become obsolete. It may be possible to take immediate notice of this in the future, but for now there is still some lag between taking a record of what is on the Internet and what is not, and likely there are things that are not recorded by Google and other search engines. Remix in art practice can play a critical and constructive role in showing this process by pointing to specific moments that may enable us to reflect on the ongoing flow of information.

Mônica Tavares: When we consider that remix plays a foundational role in the creation of the database to be used for modeling systems of organization of information, to what extent have such systems expanded the propagation of knowledge related to making art contemporary? And how can remix contribute to the exploration of non-linear artistic systems in which the organizational goal is potentiality?

Eduardo Navas: The relation of remix and the database is actually foundational for new things to emerge. The database has been with us since we developed language; that is, if we consider our memory a type of bank of information ready for access according to our needs for communication. From this point of view, we can think of memory as a paradigm, or a database which we constantly tap into and choose words to create sentences; this, as we know, is a syntagmatic exercise that, in turn, allows us to share ideas, feelings, disagreements, in short, to communicate with others.

The computer database, on paradigmatic terms, is not useful unless the information it holds is combined in different forms in order to create something and communicate ideas; in other words, the content in the database needs to be reorganized in some form to create meaning that can potentially lead to knowledge. Prior to the concept of remix becoming popular during the last two decades of the 20th century, nobody thought of the recombination of memories or ideas as remixing, but, once the concept of remix became used in relation to the rise of computing, the term became a metonym for the creative process.

The word does two things. First, it implies that whatever is called a remix, or is considered to be a result of remixing, or is developed based on the principles of remix, is not original according to how the concept of originality had previously been considered something absolutely new; and two, it makes transparent that meaning is created by way of recombining elements that can be considered unique because they may well be very different from the originating sources. Now, this is taking place in works that are deliberately composed to be seen as remixes, meaning that the viewer is expected to recognize the elements that compose the work being evaluated. Principles of remix are used less directly in intertextual works that function through cultural citations. All arts and media have the ability to function intertextually, which means that ideas and aesthetic references may appear to shape the way a work is composed, but one does not see a material element of a previous existing work by way of sampling.

Remix as a contemporary practice is defined by non-linearity and, in this sense, it also exposes the necessity to understand the importance of the paradigm or database as a resource for constant recombination of things to come up with new forms and ideas relevant to the times in which one lives and produces. Remix became prevalent once computing technology made possible the random access to information based on search; from this stance, remix is part of the postmodern and is now an integral part of network culture. The potential of remix, paradoxically, lies in its limitation as a parasitic practice that can only be most effective when the remixer is

ARS able to make the most of pre-existing material in order to create new forms
 ano 17 that previously were not possible without recombination of pre-existing
 n. 35 material. This may sound tautological, but it is the most powerful aspect
 of remix, in that new things are created based on what we already know.
 Remix exposes the fact that we can learn and experience something new
 based on what is already well familiar by making it uniquely different.

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Eduardo Navas teaches on the principles of cultural analytics and digital humanities at The Pennsylvania State University, researching the creative and political role of recyclability and remix in art, media and culture. He has lectured across the US and internationally and has published three books on remix studies.

Monica Tavares is graduated in Architecture from Federal University of Bahia (1982). She has Master Degree in Multimedia from State University of Campinas (1995) and Ph.D. in Arts from University of São Paulo (2001). She has experience in Visual Arts, Design and Visual Communication, focusing on Digital Media Studies. She works on the following subjects: relations between creation and reception, aesthetics, semiotics and intertextuality.

