2 Practice: Curiosity to Fluency in the Career of Hiro Murai

On the southern fringe of Hollywood, a few blocks east of Paramount Studios, rests a modest cinderblock live/work loft complex. The building replicates itself a few times in a mile-or-so radius, presumably constructed by the same developer like so many video game landscape components, as this area attempts to refashion itself into the "Hollywood Media District." This particular cinderblock building houses, among other anonymous tenants, the office of a group of young directors, editors, and digital effects artists who cross-pollinate onto each other's music videos, films, and commercials, a loose collective since their days in college. The director standing in the doorway of the loft on a bright afternoon in March 2011 is Hiro Murai, a twenty-nine-year-old cinematographer turned director who has been working professionally since slightly before he graduated from USC, only a few miles south.

Like his fellow millennials, Murai's age means his experiences bridge the gap between pre-Internet ascendance and digital nativism—the first third of his life did not benefit from cell phones, broadband Internet, or music via MP3, but the second half of it has. His use of digital production tools has tracked with almost his entire experience in creative expression, but he is also able to understand and articulate how recent shifts in technology,

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decentralized creative hierarchies, and social networking have impacted his output, as well as his life more broadly.

In the five years he has been directing, Murai has made videos for a collection of indie and hip-hop artists nestled on the hipper end of the pop spectrum: Earl Sweatshirt, The Shins, St. Vincent, David Guetta, Scissor Sisters, Bloc Party, Raphael Saadiq, Usher, Lupe Fiasco, and B.O.B., the last of which (for the single "Airplanes") received four VMA nominations in 2010, including Video of the Year.[1] Like most of Murai's other music videos, "Airplanes" was largely produced in this space.

A loft area above the living room was where the digital magic happened: four computer workstations were installed in the open area along with a black leather couch. Each station had two flat-screen monitors side by side, and at least one of them had big prosumer speakers and a subwoofer. And that was about it. The setup was in large part a maturation of the way Murai and his college friends had been working together for the past decade: sharing equipment and skills, sharing modest work quarters, and sharing in each other's development along a continuous path from teenage DIY tinkerers to young creative professionals.

The Home/Early Creative Practice: Models of Curiosity, Private versus Professional Creativity, and Cultural Capital

Murai's path began in Japan, where he was born in 1983. His father was a songwriter-composer turned music publisher whom Murai consciously viewed as having diverged from the traditional office career culture of Tokyo: "He definitely took a weird turn in college, which I sort of modeled myself after," Murai said. The model for creative ventures and exploration of a strong interest was established when Murai's father "borrowed

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money from his dad and started a record store, because he just wanted to be around music, I guess." Murai characterized his father as, without guiding his children into any specific disciplines, "always a pusher for the arts, almost to a fault." Family vacations were opportunities for exposure—not just to cultural events and museums but to food and other curiosities meant to foster a global perspective and inquisitiveness. "He always had his own taste in things," Murai said, describing his father's passionate unspecificity toward broadening his children's horizons. "I didn't always eat up everything he gave me, but at the same time he showed us enough variety of things that some things stuck and some things didn't."

Murai's mother, a housewife, had a similar reserved enthusiasm and quietly abiding desire for her children's creative curiosity. Murai began drawing and painting while in elementary school, provided with sketchbooks early on by his parents when he showed an interest. "So that was kind of the norm, always. I just had a sketchbook at all times. I was the most comfortable when I had my head buried in a sketchbook." Throughout his life, Murai has become aware that his mother's support, unlike his father's career-based model of personal creative fulfillment, spoke to a private talent that hadn't been fully developed. "I've slowly discovered that she's a really good artist, like a drawer and painter, but she hides that stuff," he said. "Because I think she knew I really liked painting and drawing, so I guess she was encouraging me and not, like, flaunting her own skills." Murai's parents provided two models for creative expression that have remained potent in his own life: public, professional pursuit as well as private, sporadic self-practice.[2]

Private self-fulfillment dominated Murai's early mode of artistic practice, an affinity he repeatedly termed "obsessiveness," an

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innate motivation absolutely apart from a structured, externally driven activity. "I never thought of it as a long-term goal or a skill that I was fostering. I think this is really common for kids that like to draw," he said. "A lot of times there will be a toy or a car or something that you really like or want, but obviously it's out of your hands, so you just end up drawing it over and over and over again." Murai explained that this process held from elementary age to high school as his content shifted from boxy robots to *Simpsons* characters to Pontiac Firebirds, and his skill as an artist grew naturally, unconscious and inseparable from the raw desire just to be drawing, rather than necessarily improving. "Obviously the more you draw, the better it gets, but it was also just this obsessive impulse. It's like, 'Oh, I'm thinking about this thing again,' and so naturally it goes on paper. And obviously as you do more of it, the better it gets."

When his family moved to Los Angeles when he was nine, Murai exploited this early aptitude in place of being able to speak the language of his new classmates. "When I moved here and I couldn't speak the language very well, it was a constant in my life that I could fall back on a little bit. I feel like I got more reserved when I moved out here, just naturally, but I still had the routine of just doodling and drawing," he explained. Early on he established a pattern for socializing via his abiding interest: "Whenever you draw something cool, kids in your class like it and want to talk to you. It was a weird roundabout way of communicating with people."

At the same time that he kept his sketchpad always in reach, as production technologies crept out of his dad's music studio and into the family's home, Murai's parents provided the same wide-ranging access and encouragement. Significantly, although Murai's parents had a higher-than-average engagement with the arts that they shared with their children, their fluency with

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prosumer video technologies, professional-grade products available to the average consumer, seems to have been about average. Murai became the family's AV geek[3]—as he explained, "I just figured it out, I guess. My parents are not very tech savvy. In that way it was like every time they got a video camera it was, 'All right, give it to Hiro, he'll figure it out.'" Murai described how his family's vacation videos are, to this day, broken up by his impromptu stop-motion animations of oranges peeling themselves in the backseat of the family car.

These comprehensible technologies arrived in Murai's life at a time when drawing and painting were still self-motivated, gentle obsessions and carried equal weight with his earliest loves as explorable activities pursued on the behalf of innate curiosity. "I never really thought of it as learning when I was doing it on my own; it was really more of that impulse thing," he said, which carried him equally to the drawing pad and the viewfinder. The same pleasurable lack of purpose marked Murai's response to the more formal artistic learning he was provided in art instruction in school. "I liked art classes also, not because they taught you stuff but because you got to play with more toys. Having assignments and guidelines and that kind of stuff," he said, placing the emphasis of importance on having fun and exploration, with a secondary value placed on structure, explanation, and meaningfulness.

Early School/Identifying as a Creative Practitioner: Transitioning from Learning to Search to Searching to Learn, from Hanging Out to Messing Around

Just as peer-group currencies had provided the earliest external meaning to Murai's drawing routine—when his hobby provided him a way to communicate with classmates after he moved to the

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United States—the complex socialization routines of high school were the site of the next deepening in his lifelong creative engagement. “I was becoming a bit of a movie geek. I was watching two, three movies a day, and going to see the opening of every bad movie in Westwood, no matter what. And I think that it was the experience of going to a movie theater with a bunch of friends, I wasn’t a party kid or anything, so that was social time for me,” that motivated his increased, as he put it, “messing around with cameras.” The shared pursuit of movie fandom provided a context of connection for Murai and his friends, while his previous identity as an active artist, which he carried over into this new interest, set him apart within this new group. Though they were all, by Murai’s account, voraciously consuming movies (“I liked watching classics, but I also liked watching horrible blockbusters too”) and building a literacy of viewership, Murai became the sole active “filmmaker” in the presence of his fellow film geeks.

His role as a filmmaker, however, dovetailed with the larger group activities of searching out and learning about film, as the collaborative needs of filmmaking—particularly the need for a cast—provided an opportunity for Murai and his peers to embody their fandom. “I was the only one of my friends actually making movies, but I was always roping my friends into acting in them,” he said, explaining that his early cinematic efforts in late middle school and early high school were largely re-creations of movies popular within the group, “whatever nerdy stuff *we* were into” (italics mine). Murai spent his free time learning to make movies starring his friends that were influenced by the movies that he and his friends sought out in their free time. “I almost felt like I was doing an imitation of making movies,” he said. “‘I wanna re-create this shot from this John Wu movie,’ things that I gravitated toward. For whatever reason, you just start mimicking it”—an instinctual process of motivated curiosity that Murai

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had already mastered in his days of drawing robots, *Simpsons* characters, and sports cars.

While creating media that aped their favorite media became a new way for Murai and his friends to hang out and mess around, in the days before YouTube, the product of Murai's efforts became an additional site of socialization, both within and outside the group. "Whenever I made bad movies in high school, I would take over the screening room and just drag in anyone I could at recess or lunchtime," he said. "A big part of being at the movies for me was watching how these films were affecting the crowd around me, my friends particularly. And, like, to me it was all about crowd reaction and kind of being able to guide the experience, so it was super important that when it was done I get to have that experience showing it to my friends." As noted by Buckingham and his coauthors[4] and Lange and Ito,[5] as well as by the music sociologist Lucy Green,[6] "sense of audience" is a crucial motivator in the transition from private to public creative practice—a motivator to create work in the first place, as well as to stick to the process of fine-tuning one's craft. An audience, particularly of one's peers, also promises feedback, even of the most rudimentary sort. For an informal learner of Murai's stripe, watching his high school friends and classmates react to his recreations of action films was both reward and assessment—not to mention a much more extended, active response than he'd been able to elicit with single drawings or paintings.

Adolescence/Solidifying the Creative Self: The Repeated Process of Learning to Learn, Near Peers, and Grit

In contrast to these robust extracurricular efforts, Murai also took part in a video production course offered at his high school. The class met once a week but did not provide cameras or editing

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equipment, which in Murai's case presented no major setback; his parents had given him an editing system for a previous birthday, and he had been saving regularly for and purchasing cameras on his own by the time he took the course. Like his earlier art classes, the video class provided a modicum of structure in an otherwise self-guided, unrestrained informal tutelage: "For me it was more of an incentive to do something. It was just a weekly class and you had assignments, 'Do a short film that ends with someone giving someone else flowers,' really loose exercises, and you could do anything," Murai said. "I liked the lack of structure because what made it so exciting for me was the amorphousness of moviemaking. So that experience was just super great; it really was just incentive to do something rather than being an enforced guideline."

This sentiment is a repetition of what Murai found valuable about his earlier drawing and painting classes: though he may not have been able to express it at the time, what was most useful at this early stage of his creative development was the ability to take unfettered part in a process. It is important to be clear that highlighting the value Murai got from this "formal" class is not an argument against assessment, standards, and guidelines. Rather, it focuses on the importance of allowing learners to experience process; Murai derived the greatest meaningfulness from being given guidelines to wander within, to undertake a process largely of his own creation and responsibility. While this class largely lacked "serious" assessment, Murai's dedication to his hobby meant that he sought out opportunities for assessment from peers and enjoyed the film classroom for the particular advantages it had to offer his patchwork education. Importantly, he experienced process without the concern of needing to meet a certain threshold of sanctioned,

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adult-imposed achievement, which in the first years of making the camera an extension of himself may have created exactly the sort of deep trust in himself to problem-solve and self-assess that he still relies on to this day.

Beyond Murai's age-peer social group, with whom he learned to search, and his film director heroes, whom he sought out to learn, and his myriad formal and informal opportunities of learning to learn, Murai's early cinematic life had an additional motivating factor: the presence and influence of what I term *near peers*, fellow young filmmakers who were just a few years beyond Murai in age and ability. Peers, as defined by Ito et al., "are the group of people to whom youth look to develop their sense of self, reputation, and status,"[7] and I would like to use *near peers* to distinguish between absolute peers—those who feel familiar and safe for socialization, comparison, and colearning activities—and peers who, while still within the social or networked orbit of learners, by the very nature of their more advanced status inherently motivate the learner to further fluency.

Murai identified two students at his high school who impressed him and whom, largely unbeknownst to them, he looked up to as role models: Ace Norton, who would give Murai his first professional job only a few years after high school and remains one of his close colleagues and competitors for music video commissions; and Dave Green, who at the time of this writing is in production for his first studio feature film. As Murai recalled, he was acquainted but not friends with them in high school, "because they were both a grade or two ahead of me. I knew Dave's stuff really well because he was the resident movie guy. I remember thinking, 'Oh, I'm gonna take him down.' I really liked the stuff he was making," in one breath in awe and in tangible competition—and connection with them.

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In contrast to his Hollywood filmmaker heroes, who provided examples of *what* to make, Norton and Green provided a template for how to *be* a filmmaker. They demonstrated that Murai was on the right path and had everything he needed: "We were all working with the same resources. It's not like they had better equipment or better software" that separated their capabilities from Murai's aspirations. "We were all just using the same bad cameras with the same cheap editing software. And I think Dave's stuff especially, a lot of his stuff was parodies of big blockbuster movies," already on a seamless peer continuum with Murai's own work, "but it was done really well, and so for me, I would watch his stuff and think, 'Oh, you can do that.' It's not about resources; you can get creative and be smart about it," he said. "Because they're people your age, almost, and because you're using the same equipment, you think, 'Oh, I could do that.'" The older boys were Murai's role models for geeking out, providing implicit assurance within his own orbit that his instinctual process was a good one and would likely bring him to their level of competence.

It is this grit—this long-term engagement with messing around and geeking out, with searching to learn and learning to learn—that Murai, now an accomplished director, still identifies as the common link among his creative peers. "The film kids that I know have always been film geeks and tech geeks," Murai said. "We've always wanted to make these films that we watched and admired growing up, by any means necessary. Whether that meant putting filters on in Final Cut or After Effects, or buying cheap lens attachments for your soccer mom camcorder, we were always looking for ways to make it look like we wanted it to look."

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Most significantly, though Murai can be forced to admit that he's become a more advanced filmmaker since high school, he feels his practice is fundamentally the same. "I haven't really changed anything about the way I do it. I think I do it better now, and I'm more confident," he said, allowing that he's more technically adept and more efficient at expressing himself with the tools of film. But the process of *being* a self-recognized filmmaker has depended more on the fact that he is doing it than whether he is a different filmmaker than he was before. "There was never a point when I'm like, 'Okay, now I'm for real, now I'm legit.' You just kind of keep doing it and every once in awhile realize, 'Oh, people like the thing I'm making.' There was never a clear divider point." Though the intervening years have occasionally challenged Murai in the disparity between his personal relationship to creativity and the relationship to it that he was being taught, he still creates on a continuum with his eight-year-old and sixteen-year-old selves, drawing and making movies because it interests him, because it interests his friends, and because it is a pursuit that he still hasn't found the end of.

Late Adolescence and College/Problematizing the Creative Self: Practice versus Production, Communities of Practice, and Professionalization versus Personal Practice

True to form, Murai's artistically inclined upper-middle-class parents were broadly supportive when he decided to attend film school at USC. As he recalled, while he still saw filmmaking as "this way to escape from real-life responsibility," his parents subtly guided his obsession toward the notion of a profession. "They would say, 'You know, you should think about film school,' or 'you should think about doing this for a living,'" he said. "Or

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at least like, 'You should follow through with this and see what happens.'" The distinction between private and professional pursuit would be the mark that college left on Murai's life as a filmmaker and a distinction that I contend digital life blurs and heightens more than ever.

When Murai matriculated at USC in 2002, he encountered twin shocks to his conception of himself as a creative artist: a great deal more structure than he had been used to, and fellow students who had all been the "resident movie guy" before arriving at college. Both facts challenged Murai's preference for working mostly in happy isolation, pulling in others only when he needed or wanted. USC, like many undergraduate film production programs, focused on traditional production hierarchy, assigning students to work in groups, with each student rotating through each craft role—director, cinematographer, production designer, sound recordist, editor, and so on. While Murai chafed against the siloing of these different disciplines, he also found that his instincts against such compartmentalization guided him toward students who had similar habits and backgrounds. "I realized we were doing the exact same thing," he said of what had occupied his fellow USC film geeks in high school, "illegally downloading software and trying to figure it out, messing around with different things." As his group of collaborators at USC gradually drifted together, they found themselves creating together within the bounds of the school's system, as well as continuing extracurricular projects in the way they had been used to doing before arriving at college. "It's like, 'Oh, we get to have the DIY mentality, but we get to do it with a group of people who are all capable of thinking independently.' So it's like a power in numbers even though, structurally, you're basically doing the same thing."

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Murai and his peers implicitly trusted the process they had self-developed from their motivated curiosities, and extended the practice of learning to learn further into their young adulthood. And once it was clear that peers could help rather than hinder that instinctual process (“I think we all definitely learned from each other. And all of us had different strengths as well. We all had done everything, and we all could do everything; it’s just that when we crewed up, some of us were better at some things”), the notion of collaborative work was implemented into the larger process of self-teaching and creating. Murai ultimately reflected on this discomfort as an important maturation: “I think that was also a good transition point from being a one-man army to learning how to collaborate with people, and finding people who were like-minded.” It is significant that Murai began college before streaming technology and social networking took hold; it is likely this initial sense of displacement at finding peers would not have been so acute had his adolescence included a wider sense of audience or the opportunity to define his community more broadly than what was available to him geographically.

While Murai was easily able to absorb peer collaboration into his process in his first two years of college—after all, he had not been a socially isolated kid; he’d just been a filmmaker among film geeks, rather than one filmmaker geek among many—the quandary posed by USC’s emphasis on training students to pursue “professional,” big-budget, studio-style careers proved a larger stumbling block, particularly by the end of his sophomore and junior years. According to Murai, “There was a period where I felt like I needed to format what I was doing into something that fit” the stratified production process or traditional career orientation being imparted by his department. “That always

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gave me anxiety, though," he said, preferring instead "the idea that you can just follow through with an impulse. So if you have an idea, even if it's really stupid, if it's just you and the camera, you can do it and see what happens. There's no pressure if it doesn't work out," he said. "There isn't such a thing as a mistake." Murai felt he was being asked to realign his process into the context of future success—to extend his production timeline past the impulsive and immersive and to move from a process of exploration and experimentation to a dialectic of achievement or failure.

As with Murai's earlier ambivalence about formal assessment, focusing on his (fairly normal) late collegiate anxiety isn't meant as an argument against professional training programs. However, it is important to think through the implications of Murai's concerns; he was lucky enough to have an abiding passion, and one in which he was confident in his own abilities. Yet the question of where to derive meaning knocked him off balance. Was he supposed to value the process or the monetization of the end result? Could he continue to value making mistakes, or would mistakes cost him his future livelihood? Most important, why did there seem to be an inherent polarization between private pursuit and public career?

Murai admits that this nervous period "was a natural process. You have to transition from it being your personal hobby to it being a job somehow, and it's not going to be a pretty process regardless of how it happens." However, this was a kid who had blithely carried himself along a creative continuum from preadolescence to young adulthood but was suddenly at a loss. What had changed—or what would need to change, in only the space of a year—for Murai to go from suddenly stricken student to paid professional?

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Early Adulthood and Early Professionalization: Apprenticeship Learning

Having learned to learn anything he needed to know creatively, Murai was running into a domain of knowledge that he had never pursued and for which he had no peer models: how to create a career. Where Dave Green had provided an everyday example for how to be a high school filmmaker and Murai's director heroes set a distant goal to be theoretically attained, there was a large gap in between—and the gap was precisely where his university was telling Murai he should jump. "We all had our own personal filmmaking heroes," Murai said. "But in a more, like, romanticized, truncated, you know—like a legend format rather than a tactile real person."

Reenter Ace Norton, Murai's other high school role model, who had also attended USC but dropped out while Murai was a sophomore. At twenty-three, Norton had made enough short animations for local buzz bands that he'd attracted the attention of a music video and commercial production company, which signed him. "Even though he was only a year older than us," Murai said, "he'd been out in the battlefields, and we also related with him on all the things that kind of bummed us out about film school." When Norton and his producer needed cheap animators for a low-budget music video for an indie artist, a mutual friend of Norton and Murai put out the call.

"We did our very first job with Ace when we were juniors in college," Murai said, "a video for The Faint which was 90 percent stop-motion and a three-day DIY-fest in this weird artist loft. Which was great, you know, because it felt so refreshing, because it felt exactly like how we used to do things." The craft hierarchy promoted by USC, which kept students from taking

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part in shared job functions at the same time,[8] was replaced by an impromptu knowledge community where each crew member brought a different skill and taught a different skill to the others. As Murai recalled, "I wasn't an animator at the time, but because we were working with a skeleton crew and it was stop-motion, everybody was animating something. I was doing, like, moving these little figurines and taking one shot at a time, and it really felt like—it didn't feel like a job at the time, it didn't have a structure that I was so afraid of."

Much of what Yasmin Kafai posits about apprenticeship learning illuminates the peer relationships at work on Norton's set—her "user/newcomer/oldtimer" structure was activated as a diverse grouping of young artists from the same generation worked furiously alongside one another.[9] "Unlike formal schooling, in documented studies of apprenticeships explicit instruction almost never happens. … Rather than engaging in 'how to,' oldtimers and newcomers … jointly participate in a common task. The way in which labor is divided in an apprenticeship may vary based on the participants' skill levels. … However, they work together toward the same goal."[10]

Murai's only hazy awareness that the fun he was having was, in fact, a job indicates that his work with Norton provided the link Murai needed to conceptualize how to exploit the process he knew for professional ends, rather than replacing it for another process, as his college studies had indicated he should. Elisabeth Soep's definition of "converged literacy,"[11] developed over the course of her work with youth radio producers, helps clarify Murai's earlier anxiety and its evaporation in the Norton-led community of practice. Converged literacy entails three nesting skill sets: first, the ability to *make and understand* "boundary-crossing and convention breaking texts," a skill Murai and his

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peers had been mastering for years; second, the ability to *draw and leverage* "public interest in the stories they want to tell," an attendant skill that was rudimentarily achieved in Murai's high school screening rooms and other peer communities, a skill that YouTube would radically alter in the year after Murai's first job with Norton; and third, the ability to *claim and exercise* "their right to use media to promote justice, variously defined." In Murai's case, his formal instruction heightened the premium on making a living via his creative practice but did nothing to empower his ability to do so; though Soep writes in a social justice context, not only the ability to claim "point of voice"[12] but also the right to declare a long-term pursuit a "valuable" activity and even a livelihood is a worthy application of her construct. Murai's time at USC, until his informal extracurricular work with Ace Norton, had provided him only two-thirds a fluency in digital professionalization, and he had taken on the apprehension of a traveler with only a partial translation dictionary.

"When I started working with Ace, it became a lot more tangible," Murai said of his early career. Murai and his classmates would continue working for and with Norton through and after their graduation from USC a year and a half later. "It was five people running around, just shooting whatever they can, coming up with ideas on the spot. I was shooting, Steve [Drypolcher] was shooting, BDL [Brandon Driscoll-Luttinger] was editing. We all lived a block away from each other, so everything was in-house, we got to see everything step-by-step," a setup not remarkably different from the one perpetuated in the rooms below Murai's current patio. Indeed, Murai and his former classmates co-own the business they run out of the loft, which grew naturally out of their time working for Norton, which had in turn grown naturally out of their previous individual pursuits.

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As this report promotes the process of learning to search, searching to learn, and learning to learn as a model for creative expression and work in the digital era, it is critical that the skills of seeking out and creating apprenticeship learning experiences and communities of practice be considered vital parts of a professional skill set. As Andrew Ross has noted, many decentralizing industries are being remodeled in the traditional image of the creative industries: "the eponymous struggling artist, whose long-abiding vulnerability to occupational neglect is now magically transformed, under the new order of creativity, into a model of enterprising, risk-tolerant pluck."[13] Murai's early tremors traced the void of information where the studio system once stood, a lack that was a precursor to the continued disintegration of big media and what steady employment structure still exists. Through luck, reputation, and ability, Murai was able to make a straight transition from school to work, but if he hadn't, no particularly robust training system would have been available to him. His most likely work would have been freelance, without benefits, without a union or other trade group to back him or guarantee fair pay for almost certain overtime work, often without pay at all, most likely tangentially related to his chosen discipline (being a PA as opposed to a cinematographer), and certainly without mentorship. It is one thing to acknowledge that this is a growing reality for young people entering many industries, with or without college degrees. It is another thing, in the age of networked publics and interest-based social groups, not to teach young people how to exploit informal apprenticeship opportunities and communities of practice. Providing access to near peers, navigating roughly the same patch of swiftly changing employment currents, helps young people conceive of employment and networking in the same frameworks of motivated curiosity and learning to learn

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that they have so studiously but pleasurably applied to their informal self-identities, and helps place them as newcomers in a holistic network of old-timers and current users.

Adulthood and Career Fluency: The Continued Importance of Learning to Learn, the Return to Private Creative Practice, and Freedom versus Resources

The advances made in digital production technologies in the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first have been crucial to the early success of Murai and his peers. The reason his knowledge was on equal footing with his near peer Norton's is the same as the reason both were able to embark on professional careers before even finishing college: there was no significant difference between the equipment they used as amateurs and professionals (if there was any difference at all), and they needed only a limited amount of technical refinement to make professional-quality work. "The industry itself has adapted this lo-fi, not-multi-million-dollar equipment," Murai said. "There's definitely a gap that's shrinking between the backyard movie kids, who we are, and the helicopter-shots-of-Mariah-Carey-running-down-the-beach guys." Murai laughed, possibly because a world where any pop single big enough was an occasion for helicopters and cranes seems so far away now. This is part of why Murai and his colleagues—young, dyed-in-the-wool alternative, and most importantly digital and flexible—are advancing so quickly.

"Technology widens the vocabulary of filmmakers," he said. "Because more things are available to us—you can get better-looking images, you have more finesse of the visual vocabulary—it's branching out in different directions. I've seen a lot

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of videos that are low budget but are still very nuanced and cinematic, things that wouldn't have been able to be done with just a camcorder ten years ago."

Although more is possible now than ever, these days Murai doesn't tinker with his digital skill set as much as he used to; his small-business-cum-knowledge community is doing well enough that someone is always around who knows the newest software or technique and can either specialize in that work or quickly explain it to the others. Assured of his filmic vocabulary and grammar, Murai instead works to hone his expression. "There's a limitation to how much you can refine mechanics, and also mechanics without intent is boring. So I think it may be just maturity, but at a certain point I think I should focus on how all these different things work together, rather than trying to make the shiniest thing," he said, obliquely referencing his bygone days as a tech geek. Yet the language of learning to learn is still present; the process of deepening his fluency still remains his chief motivation, rather than whatever external assignment he is actually fulfilling. "I feel like I'm doing something and learning something new every time. And I think that for me that's super important. If I do something and I know that I can do it, then it's no longer for me, because it's for the job or the client. Because if I'm not getting anything new out of it, then it doesn't have any purpose for me, doesn't have any excitement for me."

Murai's lifelong habitation of the border between personal and public creativity has served him well as his career matures. Careers that grow out of geeking out and messing around have the same sort of blurry boundaries as independent contracting work: "Especially with freelancing, it's so difficult to know when you're not in work mode, because it's so close to something you do in your off time anyway. But you can't live healthy if you're on work mode twenty-four hours a day," he said. "I've learned

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even in the past two years how to regulate my life so I can be a functioning human being and make work that I really can be proud of." As opposed to the rhythms of the "three-day DIY-fests" of his early jobs, Murai said, "The trade-off is that you get smarter about the way you do things. It doesn't have to be an end-of-the-world experience every time you do something." This sense of fighting off fatigue is a repeated theme among other young music video directors I have talked to, who all begin to reassess what their career is asking of them after only two to five years of artistic recognition and relative financial stability—one more thing they have taught themselves rather quickly.

For Murai, a return to "meaningless" private art making has been a way to cycle back to what he cares about most: learning and indulging his interests outside the needs and compromises of employment and professionalization. "That's how I ended up getting back into painting and drawing more, just because I kind of missed having a very private thing," he said. "I have drawing pads just laid out on the floor of my bedroom right now, and I sit on the floor stomach-down. … I feel like a child, just art supplies sprawled everywhere. But there's something about that experience that's just very calming for me, just reminds me of everything that I liked about doing that stuff when I was a kid." As digital technology and networked publics help us expand the definition of what can be considered a "valuable pursuit" worthy of attempting to make a career, and as technology and interest networks make these pursuits available to a growing number of people, many more of us will likely experience Murai's confusion at where his personal and private creativity separates, and the need to help learners define these separate practices will become more important. "I think it's hard for a lot of people. It was hard for me when I started doing moviemaking as a job, because there are just so many external pressures. It becomes

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something you try to retain that personal aspect of as much as possible. But it can be heartbreaking if you approach it like a personal project and the time comes that it's just out of your hands. It's terrible," he said.

The ambivalence toward structure and authority displayed by the likes of Spike Jonze in the nineties has become part of the creative DNA of Murai's contemporaries—both as producers and as consumers. But where Jonze still needed the distribution capabilities of the major broadcasters and film studios, millennials "only" have to untie the trick of making a living. "It's almost like you'd rather have the freedom than the money, because you'll always figure out some way to do it, on the creative end," Murai said, sounding so utterly un-Hollywood it was hard to believe we were a stone's throw from a major studio. "A lot of people who've been through the regime change are like, 'Man, we're so screwed, we can't do this with this money.' And it's like, well, no, if we shoot in our backyard, and use work lights from Home Depot, we can do it."

That Murai's language of possibility is still anchored in the DIY, even as he operates at the mid- to high end of music video budgets, matters. Murai operates not just within film and music but within a culture that is increasingly user driven and self-tailored. This is why, when asked about music video no longer having a place on MTV, he told me, "I like it. I never liked the weird, untouchable lore of music. I like it being more personal and approachable, you know? With the Internet, there's a lot more ways that people can find music or their own pockets of music. They don't necessarily have to watch *TRL*. A lot of music videos and bands that I like would never be on MTV; you'd have to watch MTV7 or something." This was more than the blithe blush of youth talking—it is the ethos of an era.

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