Steal Like an Artist

by Austin Kleon · Language: SQ

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Overview

Steal Like an Artist by Austin Kleon is a practical guide for creatives, emphasizing that true originality is not about inventing something entirely new, but rather about embracing influence, collecting ideas, and remixing them in unique ways. Kleon argues that all creative work builds upon what came before, and aspiring artists should view themselves as collectors and curators of ideas, rather than striving for an impossible 'pure' originality. The book encourages readers to start creating immediately, without waiting for inspiration or a fully formed identity, and to learn by doing and by studying the work of others.

The book champions a hands-on, process-oriented approach to creativity. It advises artists to use their hands, pursue side projects, and share their work with the world. Kleon also stresses the importance of cultivating a healthy creative environment, both physically and mentally, by being nice to others, embracing routine, and understanding that limitations can foster creativity. Ultimately, 'Steal Like an Artist' demystifies the creative process, making it accessible and actionable for anyone looking to unlock their creative potential by leveraging existing knowledge and inspiration.

Key Takeaways

- Embrace the idea that nothing is truly original; all creative work builds upon what came before, so learn to 'steal' good ideas and transform them.
- Don't wait until you know exactly who you are or what your art will be; start making things now, and your identity will emerge through the process.
- Create the kind of work you wish existed in the world; be the audience for your own creations.
- Engage in physical work and use your hands, as this can stimulate different parts of your brain and lead to unexpected creative breakthroughs.
- Cultivate side projects and hobbies, as they often provide a low-pressure environment for experimentation and can feed into your main work.
- Share your work openly and consistently, as putting it out there helps you connect with others and receive valuable feedback.
- Establish a consistent routine and embrace boredom, as discipline and focused time are essential for deep creative work.

• Be nice to people and make connections, because the creative world is smaller than you think and collaboration is key.

Chapter Summaries

Steal Like an Artist

This foundational chapter introduces the concept that all creative work builds upon existing ideas. Kleon argues that nothing is truly original, and artists should embrace their influences, studying the work of others, dissecting it, and then transforming it into something new. He encourages readers to collect ideas, keep a 'swipe file,' and understand that 'good theft' involves learning from and reinterpreting the masters, rather than mere imitation. He emphasizes that an artist's unique perspective comes from their personal 'family tree' of influences.

Don't Wait Until You Know Who You Are to Get Started

Kleon advises against waiting for a moment of perfect self-knowledge or inspiration before beginning creative work. He posits that identity is discovered through the act of doing. Instead of agonizing over who you are, start making things, and your voice will emerge. He encourages readers to 'fake it till you make it' in the sense of acting like the artist they aspire to be, understanding that the process of creation itself shapes one's artistic identity and direction. The key is to simply begin.

Write the Book You Want to Read

This chapter encourages creators to make the art they wish existed in the world. If you can't find the kind of book, music, or art you love, then it's your job to create it. Kleon suggests that this personal motivation ensures passion and authenticity in the work, as you are filling a void in your own creative landscape. By making things for yourself first, you are more likely to produce something genuine that will resonate with others who share similar tastes and desires.

Use Your Hands

Kleon advocates for the importance of physical work and getting away from digital screens. He suggests that engaging with tangible materials—drawing in a sketchbook, painting, building, or writing on paper—activates different parts of the brain and can lead to unexpected breakthroughs. He encourages artists to maintain both digital and analog workspaces, emphasizing the value of physical tools and the tactile experience in the creative process, which can help in generating ideas and solving problems.

Side Projects and Hobbies Are Important

This chapter highlights the value of pursuing creative interests outside of one's main work. Side projects relieve pressure, provide an outlet for experimentation without commercial constraints, and can often lead to unexpected discoveries or even become the main work later on. Hobbies,

distinct from side projects, are purely for fun and help keep the artist sane, providing new perspectives and preventing burnout. Kleon encourages having multiple creative irons in the fire.

The Secret to Doing Good Work Is to Show Up Every Day and Keep Going

Kleon emphasizes the importance of consistency, routine, and perseverance over sporadic bursts of inspiration. He argues that creativity is a habit, not a magical event, and requires showing up daily to put in the effort, even when motivation is low or creative blocks occur. He distinguishes between being a 'noun' (an artist) and a 'verb' (doing art), stressing that the act of doing is what truly defines and sustains a creative practice. It's about building momentum through daily work.

Good Work Is Done When You Share It

This chapter discusses the necessity of sharing one's work with the world, even if it feels vulnerable. Kleon argues that art isn't truly complete until it's seen and engaged with by an audience. Sharing allows for feedback, connection with like-minded individuals, and the potential for new opportunities. He encourages artists to overcome the fear of judgment and utilize platforms like the internet to put their work out there, understanding that sharing is a vital part of the creative cycle.

When in Doubt, Tidy Up

Kleon offers a practical tip for overcoming creative blocks or feelings of overwhelm: organize your physical or digital workspace, your files, or your thoughts. The act of tidying up can clear mental clutter and create space for new ideas to emerge. He suggests that this seemingly mundane task is a form of active procrastination that can be surprisingly productive, helping to reset the mind and prepare it for creative work by getting one's 'house in order.'

Geography Is No Longer Our Master

This chapter explores the liberating aspect of the internet, which allows artists to connect with like-minded individuals and audiences regardless of physical location. Kleon challenges the traditional notion that one must move to a major creative hub to succeed, encouraging artists to build their own world online and find their 'tribe' from anywhere. He emphasizes that the internet enables the creation of a personal 'scene' and community, transcending geographical limitations and fostering collaboration.

Be Nice. (The World Is a Small Town.)

This final chapter emphasizes the importance of kindness, generosity, and building positive relationships within the creative community. Kleon advises artists to give credit where it's due, be supportive of others, and understand that the creative world is interconnected. He stresses that one's reputation matters, and being a good person—sending thank-you notes, being grateful, and avoiding negativity—is as crucial to long-term success as the quality of one's art. It's about fostering a positive ecosystem.

Themes

- Creative process
- Embracing influence
- Action over contemplation
- Sharing your work
- The power of limitations

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Steal Like an Artist about?

Steal Like an Artist is a non-fiction guide by Austin Kleon that encourages creatives to embrace influence, collect ideas, and remix them to create original work. It argues that all art builds on what came before and offers practical advice on how to start creating, share your work, and maintain a sustainable creative practice.

Is Steal Like an Artist worth reading?

Yes, it is widely considered worth reading, especially for aspiring artists, writers, designers, and anyone in a creative field. Its concise, actionable advice and inspiring tone make it a quick read that can shift one's perspective on creativity, encouraging immediate action and a more open approach to inspiration.

How does Steal Like an Artist end?

Spoiler: As a non-fiction guide, Steal Like an Artist doesn't have a narrative ending. It concludes with its tenth and final piece of advice, 'Creativity Is Subtraction,' which emphasizes the power of limitations in fostering innovation. The book leaves the reader with a sense of empowerment and practical tools for their creative journey.

Who should read Steal Like an Artist?

This book is ideal for artists, writers, musicians, designers, entrepreneurs, students, and anyone who feels stuck in their creative process or is looking for practical, encouraging advice on how to start and sustain creative work. It's particularly helpful for those who struggle with the concept of originality.

How long does it take to read Steal Like an Artist?

Steal Like an Artist is a very short, illustrated book, typically taking about 1.5 to 2.5 hours to read. Its concise chapters and engaging format make it a quick and accessible read, often finished in a single sitting.

Best Quotes

“Steal like an artist.”

Steal Like an Artist

This is the central thesis of the book, encouraging creators to draw inspiration from others' work, not by plagiarizing, but by studying, remixing, and transforming ideas into something new and personal.

“Nothing is original.”

Steal Like an Artist

Kleon argues that all creative work builds upon what came before. This line frees artists from the pressure of absolute originality, encouraging them to embrace influence and see their work as part of a larger continuum.

“Don't wait until you know who you are to start.”

Don't Wait Until You Know Who You Are To Start

This advice encourages aspiring creators to begin making things immediately, even if they haven't fully defined their style or identity. The act of creating is how one discovers their artistic self.

“Do good work and put it where people can see it.”

Do Good Work And Put It Where People Can See It

This is a fundamental call to action. It emphasizes both the quality of the creative output and the importance of sharing it with the world, rather than keeping it hidden, to foster connection and growth.

“Get a day job.”

Get A Day Job

Kleon advocates for having a stable source of income separate from creative pursuits. This reduces financial pressure on art, allowing creators to pursue their passions freely without the burden of making them profitable.

“Share your work.”

Share Your Work

This instruction highlights the importance of putting creative output out into the world. Sharing allows for feedback, connection with an audience, and the potential for new opportunities and

collaborations.

“The only way to find your voice is to use it.”

Don't Wait Until You Know Who You Are To Start

This emphasizes that an artist's unique style and perspective emerge through consistent practice and creation. It's not something found through introspection alone, but through active engagement with one's craft.

“Creativity is subtraction.”

Creativity Is Subtraction

Kleon suggests that limitations and constraints can actually foster creativity. By removing options or working within boundaries, artists are forced to be more inventive and resourceful with what they have.

“Use your hands.”

Use Your Hands

This encourages creators to engage in tactile, analog work, stepping away from screens. It promotes a different kind of thinking and problem-solving, often leading to unexpected discoveries and a deeper connection to the craft.

“Boredom is where great ideas are born.”

Boredom Is Where Great Ideas Are Born

Kleon argues that in our constantly connected world, allowing oneself to be bored creates mental space for new ideas to emerge. It's a call to embrace quiet moments for creative incubation.

“Geography is no longer our master.”

Geography Is No Longer Our Master

This refers to the power of the internet to connect artists and creators regardless of their physical location. It allows for the formation of virtual communities and the sharing of work globally.

“Build your own world.”

Build Your Own World

This encourages creators to curate their environment, influences, and community to support their creative practice. It's about actively shaping the conditions that foster inspiration and productivity.

“Keep your side projects going.”

Keep Your Side Projects Going

Kleon advises maintaining diverse creative interests outside of one's main work. These side projects can be sources of joy, experimentation, and unexpected breakthroughs that inform the primary creative path.

“Be nice. The world is a small town.”

Be Nice. (The World Is A Small Town.)

This emphasizes the importance of kindness and generosity in the creative community. Building positive relationships and being supportive of others can lead to unexpected opportunities and a stronger network.

“Write the book you want to read.”

Write The Book You Want To Read

This encourages creators to produce the kind of work they themselves would enjoy consuming. It's about creating from a place of genuine passion and filling a perceived void in the creative landscape.

“Copying is about reverse-engineering. Stealing is about research.”

Steal Like an Artist

Kleon distinguishes between merely replicating and deeply understanding. Copying helps learn mechanics, while "stealing" involves researching influences, dissecting them, and transforming them into something new.

Questions & Answers

What does Austin Kleon mean by "Steal Like an Artist"?

Kleon means that artists should embrace influence and draw inspiration from the work of others, not by plagiarizing, but by studying, dissecting, and transforming existing ideas. It's about understanding what makes great art, taking elements that resonate, and remixing them into something new and uniquely your own, rather than striving for absolute originality.

How does the book differentiate between "good theft" and "bad theft" in art?

Good theft, according to Kleon, involves studying, honoring, and transforming influences into something new. It's about research and understanding. Bad theft is plagiarism, which means copying directly without adding anything, claiming someone else's work as your own, or simply imitating without understanding the underlying principles or making it personal.

What is a "swipe file" and why does Austin Kleon recommend keeping one?

A swipe file is a collection of anything that inspires you: quotes, images, articles, ideas, or pieces of art. Kleon recommends it as a personal archive of inspiration. It serves as a resource for ideas, a way to understand your own tastes, and a starting point for new projects when you feel stuck or need a creative spark.

Why does Kleon advise artists to "Get a day job"?

Kleon suggests getting a day job to provide financial stability, which frees artists from the pressure of making their creative work profitable. This allows them to pursue their passions without the burden of commercial success, fostering genuine creativity and experimentation. It also provides structure, a routine, and often new perspectives or skills.

What is the significance of "sharing your work" in the context of this book?

Sharing your work is crucial for several reasons. It allows for feedback, helps you connect with an audience, and can lead to unexpected opportunities and collaborations. It also forces you to finish projects and present them, which is a vital part of the creative process, moving from private creation to public engagement.

How does an artist find their unique "voice" according to Austin Kleon?

Kleon argues that an artist finds their unique voice not through introspection or waiting, but through the act of doing and creating. By consistently making things, experimenting, and embracing influences, an artist gradually discovers what resonates with them and develops a distinct style and perspective that is authentically their own.

What does Austin Kleon mean by the phrase "Creativity is subtraction"?

"Creativity is subtraction" means that imposing limitations or constraints can actually foster greater creativity. By removing options, working with fewer resources, or setting specific boundaries, artists are forced to be more inventive and resourceful, leading to unique solutions and unexpected artistic breakthroughs.

Why does the author emphasize the importance of "using your hands"?

Kleon encourages "using your hands" to promote tactile, analog creation, moving away from constant screen time. This physical engagement with materials can stimulate different parts of the brain, lead to new discoveries, provide a break from digital distractions, and foster a deeper, more grounded connection to the creative process.

What role does boredom play in the creative process, according to Kleon?

Kleon posits that boredom is essential for creativity. In a world of constant stimulation, allowing oneself to be bored creates mental space for ideas to percolate and new connections to form. It's during these quiet, unstimulated moments that the mind can wander freely and generate original thoughts and insights.

How has the internet changed the landscape for artists, as described in the book?

The internet has fundamentally changed the landscape by making "geography no longer our master." It allows artists to connect with peers and audiences globally, share their work instantly, and build virtual communities. This democratizes access to information and inspiration, fostering a "scenius" where collective genius thrives online.

What advice does Kleon offer for building a supportive creative environment?

Kleon advises artists to "build your own world" by curating their environment, influences, and community. This means surrounding oneself with inspiring books, art, and people, and actively seeking out those who support and challenge their creative practice. It's about creating conditions conducive to consistent work and growth.

Why does Austin Kleon suggest keeping "side projects" alive?

Kleon recommends keeping side projects alive because they offer a space for experimentation, play, and joy without the pressure of commercial success. These projects can be sources of unexpected breakthroughs, new skills, and fresh perspectives that ultimately feed into and enrich one's main creative work, preventing burnout and fostering continuous learning.

What is the importance of being "nice" in the creative world, according to the book?

Kleon stresses the importance of being "nice" because "the world is a small town." Kindness, generosity, and building positive relationships within the creative community are crucial. Being supportive of others can lead to unexpected opportunities, collaborations, mentorship, and a stronger, more fulfilling professional network.

What should an aspiring artist do if they don't know where to start or what to create?

If an aspiring artist doesn't know where to start, Kleon advises them to "Don't wait until you know who you are to start." The key is to simply begin making things, copying what they love, and experimenting. The act of doing will reveal their interests, develop their skills, and help them discover their unique voice and direction over time.

Spoiler: What is the overarching message or main takeaway from "Steal Like an Artist"?

Spoiler: The overarching message is that creativity is not about absolute originality but about embracing influence, learning from others, and transforming ideas into something new. It encourages artists to start creating now, share their work, build a supportive environment, and

maintain a playful, curious approach to their craft, seeing themselves as part of a larger creative lineage.