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Anonymity.

An Essay in Three Parts. III.

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In the two previous parts to this essay, we looked a little at the history of anonymous writing in general, and then at some interesting cases of anonymous writing about art. One of the questions that we asked was: Is it imaginable that collective anonymity could serve as the basis of a revival of critical writing? Collective anonymity was certainly a feature of both art making and critical practice in the 1960s and 1970s—and some managed to do both.



Continued from Part II

Brian O'Doherty, who is perhaps best known for a series of essays published in Artforum in the early 1980s under the title «Inside the White Cube», worked under a series of anonymous monikers over the course of his career. One of his alibis, Patrick Ireland, was created during the troubles in Northern Ireland as a kind of political allegory. O'Doherty held a public funeral for him in 2008. The others have been partially forgotten, never having obtained enough substantial reality to need to be killed off, or are held in reserve, perhaps to reappear later. For example, between 1971 and 1973, when he was editor of Art in America, Brian O'Doherty published a series of critical pieces under the pseudonym of Mary Josephson. The name contains the whole holy family, but O'Doherty was explicit in his desire to write as a woman, which to him also meant the possibility of thinking as a woman, or at least, expressing what he took to be long repressed feminine thoughts. Mary Josephson is soon to come again. Thomas Fischer is republishing the collected criticism of Mary Josephson under the title *A Mental Masquerade* later this year. As he points out, in the beginning of the 1970s, Mary Josephson was the «only fictive female art critic» in practice. But how can Fischer be so sure? In the early 1970s, critical publications were awash with fake names, imaginary critics, ghost-written letters, and texts penned by secret committees. Anonymity was again, for the first time in decades, a common feature of art writing, and this was a state of affairs that O'Doherty had done his best to help create. For example, in 1972, O'Doherty, then editor of Art in America, asked three completely unknown undergraduate students to start writing contributions. They would go on to found the zine Art-Rite, which would publish covers by Vito Acconci and Ed Ruscha. The editors often wrote anonymously, in a style both contentious and lite, that would go on to influence a decade of fun, irreverent and inconsequential criticism. This post is not about Art-Rite, and it's not about Mary Josephson, but about another publication some years earlier.

In 1967, Brian O'Doherty edited an experimental magazine called Aspen, putting issues 5 and 6 together into a single white box containing a series of 18 works including pamphlets, vinyl records, some geometric pieces of cardboard, and a reel of film. O'Doherty worked for a year on the project, and as he recently told the Brooklyn Rail, «The idea was to establish a network of provisional relationships that could be read in endless combinations, depending on the reader, listener, looker.»[1] For O'Doherty, this was perhaps his *magnum opus*, of much greater significance than «Inside the White Cube». Included in the box was a short text by the German theorist Sigmund Bode, who was O'Doherty's invention, plus other essays and prose pieces. There is fiction by William Burroughs (who also wrote under the pen name of William Lee) and Samuel Beckett (who wrote a jeremiad called *Recent Irish Poetry* under the pen name of Andrew Belis). There is an essay on «The Aesthetics of Silence» by Susan Sontag, music by John Cage, and the first serial work of Sol LeWitt. It's pretty clear that there's a pattern here—a refusal of a certain notion of authorship and creativity.

Often overlooked, but of great consequence, in the box is a small white pamphlet—the first publication of an essay by Roland Barthes that would go on to be perhaps the most cited, if not the most read, of Barthes' works—*The Death of the Author*. O'Doherty told the Rail: «Barthes was in Philadelphia at that time and he came to New York to talk about the project. He got it immediately. My notion that art, writing etc., was produced by a kind of anti-self that had nothing to do with whoever ‹me› was an excellent preparation for our conversation. He said ‹I think I may have something for you.› *When The Death of the Author* arrived, I knew it was revolutionary.» (This genesis of Barthes' essay had been long forgotten. Even the lexical sleuths of October magazine described it as «the first publication of Roland Barthes' essay in English», suggesting that they did not realize it was published in English before it was published in French.) The entire project was dedicated to Stephane Mallarmé, who

O’Doherty saw as a kind of patron saint for those who wish to be creative without claiming to be original. The box was a machine of conceptual art, dedicated to the attempt to kill off the notions of originality, interpretation and ownership, vested in the figure of the author.

There are some things you can say about Barthes’ essay without reading it (call this a sequel, the death of the reader): It’s well known. It’s short. Its title is a pun (on *Le Morte d'Arthur*) and it makes the argument that referring to the intentions and biography of an author is unnecessary, because texts are independent of authors. Barthes was not the first to make such a claim. Already in 1946, Wimsatt and Beardsley, two members of an academic movement usually known as New Criticism, published a book called *The Intentional Fallacy* that taught the close reading of texts, without reference to the intentions or the biography of authors. But the claims of New Criticism were methodological rather than political, and they wrote in the metaphors of jurisprudence, rather than metaphysics. They argued that the intentions of an author were a kind of «evidence» that was inadmissible in critical discussions.

Barthes went further. He argued that the meaning of the text was produced anew within the reader each time it was read: «The unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination.» There are oddities about this attempted assassination. Issuing a prohibition on interpreting a text with reference to the author (or rather, as Barthes calls them, the «scriptor») as an authority seems itself a kind of arbitrary limit of its own. If the reader can do what they wish, why *shouldn’t* they speculate about the intentions of an author, imaginary or otherwise, composing the text? This is, after all, one of the first ways to terminate the «suspension of disbelief» that is part of classical fiction. Forbidding us to speculate about authors is an attempt to reinsert the fourth wall, the hermetically closed nature of writing, after modernist authors had done so much to show the presence of the hand in their prose. Also, this death-of-the-author thing is an idea that we attribute to a specific person, Roland Barthes. His opening quote, from the Balzac novella *Sarrassine*, about a man who unwittingly falls in love with a transvestite castrato, holds out a lure for precisely the kind of biographical game that the death of the author seems to forbid. But perhaps that is to misread him. He does not say we are not allowed to ask: «What did the author mean?» All he says is that the question, even if it can be answered, means relatively little. What really matters, whether you are in the musical arms of a castrato or not, is the question: «What do you want?» Perhaps ironically, O’Doherty recalls that Barthes was never paid for his contribution.

Perhaps Barthes’ claim also came too early, because, well, people did still compose all the texts back then. Killing off authors was an easy sophistry, because everyone knew they still existed. Now, the situation is a little more ambiguous. Barthes (we make the intentional inference, the rules be damned) was fascinated by cybernetics. His work is laced with references to early computer science, to Claude Shannon, to codes, to systems of communication. He writes about theology, speech, fashion and photography in terms of cybernetics. Rereading him now, he seems to be anticipating something. Even *Sarrassine* can be read in this light: is the story about homosexuality, or about systems of emulation?

Later, posthumously, too late, Barthes resurrected the author, in a manner of speaking. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, he declared: «As institution, the author is dead: his civil status, his biographical person have disappeared; dispossessed, they no longer exercise over his work the formidable paternity whose account literary history, teaching, and public opinion had the responsibility of establishing and renewing; but in the text, in a way, I desire the author: I need his figure (27).» But this time, the author of the text, the figure who can claim «paternity» over prose, is no longer imposed by the state, but rather imagined by the reader, a kind of meta-fiction. In his desire for the author, Barthes also mischievously steers the debate into a region that developed at the same time as New Criticism, and couldn’t have been less compatible with it—Freudian theory. But he leaves it ambiguous whose perversions are being

analyzed. Is it the imaginary author's motives that are being subjected to analysis, or does the text expose the reader? Is it possible for an author to be a pervert, an author who does not exist? Barthes would go on to write an autobiography, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, thereby technically becoming both his own father and a work of fiction. Five year later, he, too, died—run down by a laundry van with a detergent manufacturer's logo on its side.

Barthes describes the reader's wish for the author as if it is a kind of nostalgia. As a protest text, «The Death of the Author» had railed against the monopoly and capital that authorship implied. But authorship—like capital—can proceed like a ghost ship, a kind of Flying Dutchman with no captain at the rudder. Trading algorithms, contracts, optical fiber links together perform the work of capital reproduction that steers the economies of entire states. And in the face of this technical sublime, the petty chicanery of authorship seems suddenly something to be missed. For readers to *phantasize* about authors is a belated possibility, but it betrays a cognitive dissonance within which no serious interpretation can be articulated. Perhaps a better possibility is for authors to become like the machines that have displaced them—to quantify, to emulate, to automate and to overproduce.

Meanwhile, the feedback loops that the cyberneticians had first described continued to proliferate and tighten. Products like *Quill*, by the US firm Narrative Science, or *Wordsmith*, from the company Automated Insights, evolved out of a semi-automated struggle between firms like Google to identify machine-generated content designed to game their search engines, and the Search Engine Optimization (SEO) firms that were paid to create it. Rather than being designed to fool humans into thinking that they were humans (the notorious Turing test), these were algorithms that attempted to fool other algorithms into thinking they were human. Now, they are capable of hoodwinking inattentive humans—customer service emails, corporate compliance, product reviews, even sports journalism, all generated by souped-up chatbots.

The hysterical demand for an end to anything connected with authority can—so say shrinks—be understood as an attempt to find out where authority actually is, an attempt to get power to *show itself*. Some of the gratuitously transgressive artworks of the 1970s can therefore be understood as a declaration of faith in the immortality of power, and a perplexity at its absence, rather than a protest against its constraints. This is an image of power that imagines power more real than its bearers, those vested in it. In such a world picture, power can be seized, divided up, reconstituted, but is ultimately indestructible. Those who dedicated themselves to the eternal struggle against power may be both distressed and gratified to hear that authority has no need of authors, nor even scriptors. The simple animated Youtube videos that the child near you is watching, the license agreement that you consented to when you installed your last software, the product reviews that you read on Amazon, are all generated by algorithms. They have no authors at all.

[1] Accessible online at https://brooklynrail.org/2007/6/art/doughtery

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