

Taking Down the Names of the Anonymous Movement

By Michael Eddy

"Anonym"

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The first question one asks is: where is the show? The guard directs me around the corner to a set of exterior stairs that bring me to a rather side-entrance-looking door above the museum restaurant; a self-effacing gesture seemingly designed to skirt the vast, canonical spaces of the museum to which it is attached- the next question that arises (and lingers) is the extent to which this act is tongue-in-cheek.

As the title of the group show suggests, the curator as well as the "eleven (significant but anonymous) international artists" are all anonymous¹. With its dark purple walls, broad drapery curbing outside light, and manifold corners isolating objects from each other, even the exhibition's layout is designed to downplay itself. One must seek out titles and dates in a handout- that is, if one's dependence on 'metadata' is insufferable². These manoeuvres are intended to intensify the attentiveness of viewers to the objects themselves in the show. The cult of the name is identified as a barrier to perceptual engagement with artworks: our desire for captions, titles, dates; anything extraneous to the 'thing itself' is accused of operating under the logic of the celebrity-obsessed art market. While it is certainly dubious whether an artwork can exist without its context, the premise that is set up offers the objects a quite awkward position in which to be approached. One could argue that from the art's necessity to remain anonymous, either a parallel world must be constructed where the authorless pieces would differ from those that an artist might make unaffected by their own 'text'; or certain ways of making art (perhaps certain artists entirely) cannot be included in the anonymous show. The pieces we see in an Anonymous show exist in the position between being 'here' (which they obviously are) and being zombie objects, vessels whose appearance seeks only to be obscure enough from an artist's portfolio to be unidentifiable. However, despite our idealism concerning the value of autonomy and sincerity in art, anonymous art is a challenge to notions of what is 'authentic' rather than to what is 'inauthentic'. The dare made to "judge a work

primarily by criteria immanent to the work" by Max Hollein (the Schirn's well-known director) in his preface is thus another instance of affect³.

I think the exhibition succeeds where it displays its affect (which is detectable in most pieces), allowing us in on the 'joke'; for instance, one of the first pieces along the dark corridor is a sculpture ("I am beginning to understand what peace might be", 2006) with about the dimensions of a kitchen table on its side. Shaped like a slice of toast, brightly coloured and with several extensions (including a now-familiar crystal motif protruding from the top and an arm that sporadically lets one drop of water fall quietly to a puddle on the floor), it has the surface and flavour of the many contemporary sculpture/design hybrids that one might see in recent art magazines, referencing a whole genre but playfully begging to be read formalistically.

Later, the incorporation of elements in one of the alcoves tells us something of what can happen to objects 'unto themselves': a glossy black blob lit dramatically on a rotating musical stand and the accompanying wind-up ritual (complete with white-gloved museum attendant) is complemented by two nearby drawings whose motif, symmetry and delicacy recall religious or alchemical scenes ("ill-bent melody: from the winter room within the palace of swords, reversed", 2006). The removal of names in this case seems to be a call for the things to take on lives of their own, the flipside of their impenetrable surfaces, so that the fetish associated with superfluous data is replaced by the depth we project into the objects. However, unless we are to believe that these are the secret stash representing a well-known artist's dark side, or alternatively the products of an unknown occultist, then we must face up to the possibility that these are threads meant to lead us down an alley of affect. What is offered by the pieces on display is the dangerous temptation to believe in them.

At the end of the show is the wall text "Notes Towards a Manifesto on Anonymity", which formulates a program for an "Anonymous movement". While it is declared that 'anyone who claims authorship of the Anonymous Art Movement is not the author', there is an emphasis on empowering the artists involved in anonymous shows, paying them well and limiting the number of participants. However, a few statements make a clear distinction between the Anonymous Movement and absolute non-participation in professional art pleasantries, including an undetermined 'expiration date' of namelessness, after which one presumes that the authors may reveal their identities; and the option to list an Anonymous show on one's cv.

As the text also states, the show does accept the context of the museum as a strategy to infiltrate the centre of the art world as opposed to its periphery. The risk I see here

is the conflation of the mechanism of the art market, which is elsewhere the stated target of the anonymous curator⁴, with the purview of museums, which I would argue has a different agenda. This exhibition assumes the posture that all there is to artworks is the thing before us, we are given no hand to hold, and therefore that every viewer is left on an equal footing. In terms of museums and public institutions, I am unsure how this situation functions- on the one hand it converts credibility of the name (which is certainly significant in those cases where museums and the art market come into close contact) into focussed, purified attention; but on the other hand the ability for viewers to distinguish objects made in entirely disparate contexts, to place in time and, in short, to educate themselves, becomes extremely limited. I wonder if removing con-text might disguise the potential differences in/around objects that may appear similar; how do object types battle against a globalist flattening of difference? This risk isn't totally eliminated by the information that the pieces were made specifically for the show, as it assumes that the identities of the artists are unimportant- a contentious position if we refer to the hard-won influence feminist practices have had on contemporary art.

The will to inform is, of course, not absent from the Anonymous exhibition: there are names, alliances and associations that cannot be kept secret (and perhaps do not want to be). For example, the identities of the catalogue writers and designers as well as those of the exhibition architects are revealed; whether this is indeed a case of differing operations of names according to differing fields (as the curator argues⁵) or a way of legitimizing the nameless is a tense distinction. The attention that a famous writer or curator's name gives to an exhibition (Hans Ulrich Obrist being today's example par excellence) has an almost incalculable value, but it certainly has an effect on the way the viewers approach the exhibition.

That is, if they choose to pay attention to the catalogue; there are other means of communicating authorship, as I was to discover when a friend let slip the identity of one of the artists in the show (I have to make the claim that I had already suspected as much). It became clear at that moment that a number of very delicate agreements had to be made if the aura of these objects with all their immanence was to be maintained (again, if actually desired): to avoid trying to guess who made what; to avoid seeking out the work's contextual information; and to avoid suspicions of irony. The more I think about it the less interested I am in remaining complicit with the purity of perception called for in the rhetoric around the show. The point is made,

and the experiment is a worthy one, perhaps even worthy enough to be repeated (as the manifesto calls for); however, there is no autonomous work of art to be presented. I suppose there is only one thing left to say: Tobias Rehberger.

Footnotes:

1) "Names are metadata. They upload objects with additional information." Stefan Heidenreich "N.N., Untitled: The Law of the Proper Name in the Art World" in the exhibition catalogue "Anonym: In the Future No One Will be Famous" (Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt and Snoeck Verlagsgesellschaft, mbH, Cologne, 2006), p. 26.

2) Max Hollein, from the preface to the exhibition catalogue, p. 8.

3) Ibid.

4) "I wanted to make a point about the art market alone." -Anonymous curator, from "Urgently Anonymous", an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist in the exhibition catalogue, p. 18.

5) "We don't have that situation in the writing world just yet - a scenario, let's say, where a young writer's second novel goes up for auction for a million based on the speculations of a few poised agents." Anonymous, in "Urgently Anonymous", p. 18.