12 2017

Name and Impropriety

On Marco Deseriis' Improper Names

Gerald Raunig

In April 2002, when the eipcp was still in embryonic form, we organized our first conference in Vienna. We did not know exactly what its title, "transversal", meant, and we had yet to receive confirmation that the project would be funded by the European Union. Among the conference's invited guests were the artistic experts of identity correction and laughtivism, The Yes Men from New York. Even though some of us had been in contact with German communication guerrilla activists since the late 1990s, we did not know what to expect, and we certainly did not know who it was that the Yes Men in their email-communications presented as their European or Italian representative. When this person showed up at the conference, he introduced himself as Andy (the same name as all the Yes Men), but sometimes also as Marco. Besides this name confusion, everything went well – Andy/Marco did not use the frame of the conference for another hoax, but screened a hilarious film about their infiltrations of WTO conferences in Salzburg and Tampere based on their fake WTO website. In September 2000 The Yes Men had used an invitation to a conference of legal scholars in Salzburg to propose the sale of votes to the highest-bidding company and received astonishingly

positive feedback. In June 2001 they had presented their invention of a Management Leisure Suit, which would feature telepresence-technology enabling managers to give electric shocks to workers with the help of a meter-long inflatable golden phallus. The enthusiastic Finnish audience proved that as a WTO representative, you are not supposed to receive any response other than applause.

Upon getting to know Marco, I learned that The Yes Men where not his first experience in the realm of name games. Already in the mid-90s he had participated in the Italian Luther Blissett project. With a weird mix of practices like situationist drifts, surrealist "psychic attacks" against government buildings and a radio program with the name of Radio Blissett, they experimented with their multiple-use name implying that anyone could become Luther Blissett. The infinitude of Luthers could also communicate with each other, using the first person singular at the same time with the same name, Luther Blissett. And, in the early internet-years quite a lot of people used the opportunity to borrow the name for media pranks, artistic productions, best-selling novels, etc. Some twenty years later, Marco Deseriis' groundbreaking historical and theoretical analysis on condividual pseudonyms from the Luddites to Anonymous was published last year with the appropriate title Improper Names.

An improper name is first an inappropriate name, a name that is not qualified, that is in certain ways not fitting. Secondly it subverts the logic of authenticity and identity that is seemingly attached to any name. As Marco Deseriis writes: "An improper name is improper not only because it lacks manners or propriety of behavior [...] but because it fails to label and circumscribe a clearly defined domain" (3). Against the political technology of the proper name (20-24), improper names are "to provide anonymity", "failing to designate clearly identifiable referents", and "make it difficult for

authorities to track down specific individuals" (24). These aspects of covering one self's tracks, blurring the traces and changing identities are definitely quite helpful for people who suffer political repression. But disappearing from the framework of proper names is not only a defensive strategy, it is a productive critique of the media-spectacles, even more in socio-narcissistic times of social media. In machinic capitalism with its appropriation of affects, communication and sociality, name capital is at the core of capitalist valorization. So the improper name thirdly puts into question property and propriety in the sense of owning something through the evidence of a name. In this sense it also evades the implicit connection between property and individuality. Improper names are unappropriated names, names which cannot be appropriated, names which never become property of an individual, but traverse individuality, property and confined territory. And yet, this form of disconnection and deterritorialization does not necessarily lead to the complete depletion of the name, as for instance in the practices and the very concept of Neoism (just consisting of a prefix – neo - and a suffix – ism - without any content). The improper name can definitely be peculiar, specific and singular. It can have properties, being devoid of substance, never fixed to individuals, but rather going through them, in a dividual way. It can be "the same alias by organized collectives, affinity groups, and individual authors." (3)

When Marco Deseriis starts his tour de force through the centuries and decades searching for genealogical lines of the improper name he begins with a practice deeply rooted in the social unrests in England of the nineteenth century. Whether the name is historical or not, is not of significance, but a certain Ned Ludlam, stocking-frame knitter from a village near Leicester gave name to one of the most ghostly movements in the early times of industrial capitalism:

the Luddites. In quite different regions of England, around Nottinghamshire, Yorkshire and Manchester the Luddites started a practice of machine breaking that was also the ground for their popular identification as technophobic. Against this simplifying designation, Deseriis insists on the fact that most Luddites only wrecked specific machines understood to be main factors of driving down wages. But besides machine breaking the Luddites invented a practice of sending threatening letters to manufacturers always signed with the same name: Ned Ludd. Under this eponym a broader body of texts developed including ballads, chalkings, declarations and manifestos. Deseriis' interpretation of this rich historical and historiographical material around the texts and actions of Ned Ludd suggests that "the improper name enabled the articulation of social and productive forces that coexisted in time while de facto belonging to different temporalities" (32). Ned Ludd's letters and early sabotage practices were both resistance of the last guild masters and apprentices against the new form of industrial capitalism and a modern form of class struggle internal to the capitalist mode of production.

With a huge step in time, around 150 years after the Luddites, Deseriis' interest continues with two movements in the cultural field, right at the transition from Fordist to Postfordist capitalism: one in the film industry under the name of Allen Smithee, and one in the visual art field, concretely the practices of Mail Art under the name of Monty Cantsin and later Karen Eliot. Allan Smithee was a pseudonym, introduced by the Directors Guild of America in 1969, which allowed film directors to disown movies that were recut by a production company. Deseriis interprets this development not only as an individual problem of film directors and their intellectual property, but as their collective ability to extend control over the whole process of film production, and even

more as their becoming a minor author beyond the aesthetic and economic canons of film history. Whereas Alan Smithee is an effect of the crisis of the studio system and the culture industry around the turn from Fordism to Postfordism, a few years later and still around the same turn, Monty Cantsin tested the invention of the "open pop star" and the multiple-use name in the limited realms of visual arts and subculture. In the distributed and fragmented world of the Mail Art network, mail became a social space against the dominance of exchange value and helped affirming an ethics of radical inclusion with an ongoing exchange of letters, zines, tapes, and artworks through the postal system. For the author of *Improper Names*, the tendency of these early Postfordist practices (although especially the experience of Monty Cantsin was trapped in the narcissistic networks of Neoism) was to develop collective pseudonyms into multiple-use names, names "anyone can borrow", names "released in the public domain with virtually *no guidelines or instructions for use*" (97).

Finally, for an in-depth reading of a contemporary example of an improper name, Deseriis proposes the transductive practice of Anonymous from 2005 to 2011. He follows the developments from the early raids and pranks to an organized political movement, from the unruly, amoral practice of lulz to the spread of botnets as machinization of lulz, and on to the politicized moments along with the "Arab spring" and the occupy movement. The civil disobedience and hacktivist experience of Anonymous was always "between the power of mastering technology proper to hacking and the cooperative competences required by activism [...] while in the period from 2008 to 2010, the transductive relation between these two poles expresses itself as a tension between the ethical nature of hacktivism and the amoral character of the lulz, beginning in 2011, this tension transmutes into a tension between the embodied,

slow-paced, and democratic politics of social movements and the disembodied, fast-paced, and elitist politics of computer hacking." (198) When reading the informative chapter "From the Arab Uprisings to Occupy" (198-205) with highly interesting material about Anonymous' involvement in the revolts of 2011, one could say that this tension temporarily dissolves whenever social machines and technical machines merge in dense times of struggle.

In the preface to *Improper Names* Marco Deseriis also returns to a concept raised by the Italian Luther Blissetts of the 1990s: the *condividuo* is an invention stemming from the Italian everyday language word *condividere*, which means sharing. But in contrast to sharing, to the German word *teilen* or to the Spanish *compartir*, in the etymology of *con-dividere* we can find both: the division of the singularities, and the con- of an open multiplicity. Marco Deseriis describes the condividual in his experience of Radio Blissett in 1995: "Once on the air, the condividual came to life as a strange polyphonous being, a ventriloquist that could not help but speak in multiple tongues. [...] the distinctive timbre of each voice made clear that each Luther was a 'dividual' that contributed to the condividual in his or her own distinctive way." (1) The experience of the radio project featuring the many Luthers serves as a wonderful example for the emergence of condividuality in the context of improper names. Still, it might make sense to develop the concept of the condividual beyond its Italian invention: firstly, it might be good to see the dividual and dividuality not as a copy of the individual and individuality, which has "his or her own way" of contributing to a condividual that is formed by them on a secondary, broader or higher plane. I would rather insist on the co-subsistence of dividuality and condividuality, on the implicitly condividual qualities of dividual lines. Secondly – against the mentioning of this problem in a footnote – the text seems to

suggest that “dividuals” are distinctive humans (again: “his or her distinctive ways”). I doubt that it makes sense to reserve the concepts of dividuality and of condividuality for human actors. Precisely in the rich example of Radio Blissett it becomes clear that there is more at stake: the devices used to transmit the multiple sounds of the many Luthers, the sounds themselves resonating in the real space of the studio and then floating through the ether, the absent bodies of social machines involved in assembling the assemblages of enunciation, the many improper objects touched by the dissembling noise of the improper name.