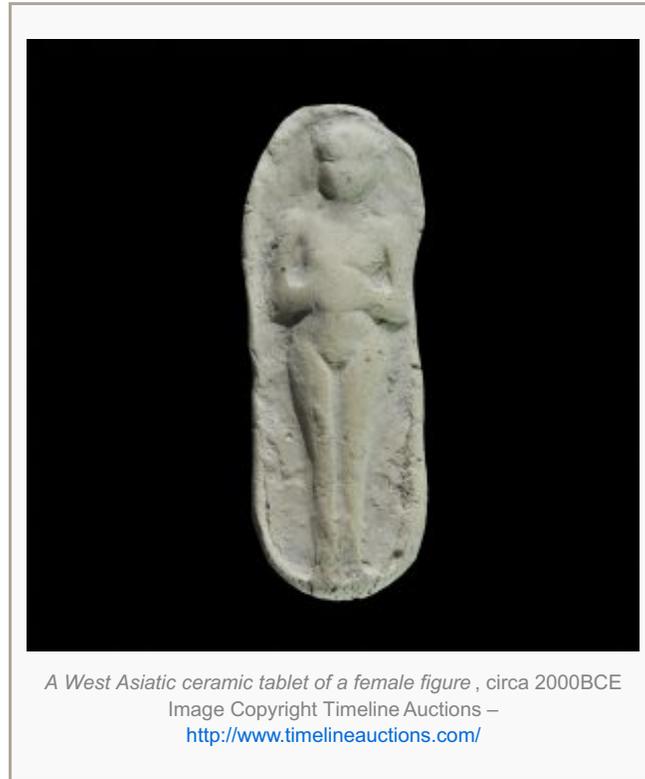


Anonymous: The Void in Visual Culture

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'If not a name, a noun. If not a noun, nothing.'

Anonymity presents us with a void in visual culture, an awkward gap for sensible scholars to avoid. The tendency of art historians to overlook anonymous artworks became apparent to me only after completing my first two theses, both of which dealt with named artists and well-established biographies. My recent work regarding the history of Egyptian tentmaker applique (Khayamiya) is intrinsically anonymous. Few of the early tentmaker's names are known, and prior to the 1980s, not one object can be attributed to a named tentmaker. Moving between such different subject matter highlighted the convenience of artist's names, the inherent priorities of attribution, and the subsequent influence of these forces on art history as a discipline.

From the perspective of undergraduate students, anonymous artworks are marginalised in favour of establishing a network of names that they will carry into their careers. Yet in fields like design, photography, decorative arts, ceramics, numismatics, textiles, fashion, indigenous and most forms of ancient art, postgraduate art historians (such as curators, dealers, educators and collectors) are much more likely to engage with anonymous objects than named artists. 'Whodunnit' drives research further than the earnest 'what is it?' or the *Antiques Roadshow* climax 'what is it worth?'

Art history does not need biographies; it wants them. The identity of the artist is the first thing pre-emptively answered by wall texts in galleries. This methodological preference for establishing biography has indelibly shaped art history. As Avinoam Shalem of Columbia University noted:

“Questions about identities of patrons and artisans, including even the role of artifacts in supporting and reinforcing such identities – in short, the politics of visual cultures – seem to have dominated scholarly investigations in the field of art history. “Art comes before gold and gems, the author before everything,” claims a twelfth century inscription... now in the British Museum.” (Shalem, 2016)

This situation is logical if we begin our discipline from the initial publication of Vasari’s *Vite* (or *The Lives of the Great Painters, Sculptors and Architects*) in 1550. This was a series of accolades for named individuals, living and dead. It can be read as a book of biographies in which artworks and artistic achievements are highlighted and compared. Vasari’s methodology was based on Catholic hagiographies, or the biographies of saints in which their miracles were highlighted. Because there are no unknown saints, there was no allowance in Vasari’s methodology for the anonymous painter, sculptor or architect. Vasari’s project was the rejection of the possibility of anonymity for his esteemed peers. They have since become household names.

Despite regular re-formation within art history and the repeated re-invention of art itself, as well as Roland Barthes’ ‘Death of the Author’ and subsequent critiques of identities, the assumption that biographic attribution is possible is a remarkably persistent foundation for our research. This is particularly evident when reviewing annual blockbuster exhibition lists in *The Art Newspaper*, or any list of journal articles, conference proceedings, or library shelves. Due to this, Grayson Perry’s 2011 collaboration with the British Museum, the *Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman*, aspired to reveal “the resonance between the works of anonymous craftsmen in the era of the celebrity artist.”

Carl von Clausewitz wrote about the ‘centre of gravity’ (*schwerpunkt*) in his influential text *On War (Vom Kriege)*. He defined this as “The hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends”, which others (such as Michael Howard and Peter Paret) have called ‘the source of strength’. Clausewitz’s theory proposes that if an attack targets the ‘centre of gravity’, the effect would “emanate the furthest” (Echevarria 2003).

This edition of *Fusion* proposes that biographic attribution (what might be called ‘nymnity’) is the centre of gravity for visual culture. The anonymous artist – bearing the impossibility of attribution – possesses a unique agency to perform this critique. It highlights the discrete priorities of curatorial values and offers a means of stress-testing our methodologies. It breaks our questions, so we might reassess what we’re trying to ask. The anonymous object is art history’s means of dividing by zero.

On the Anonymous Object

The semantic distinction between a ‘Museum’ and a ‘Gallery’ remains contested. In the spirit of that debate, let’s add a new point of difference: Museums can represent anonymous objects, but galleries find them awkward. They upset the desirable continuity of coherent relationships between exhibited artworks, and they reveal the limitations of the apparently omnipotent curator. In this respect anonymous artworks are literally perverse – they exhibit an “obstinate desire to behave in a way that is unreasonable or unacceptable” (Oxford 2016).

In a gallery, an anonymous object is a dilemma. Galleries serve the mythic celebration of individual makers. They need named objects, either by signatures or attributions. In a gallery, the absence of an artist’s name is problematic because it looks like an important and obvious detail was omitted, overlooked, ignored or left unanswered. If they cannot name a maker, it will be substituted with a cultural identity, or failing that, the subject matter. If those cannot be identified, then the thing may fail to meet the definition of ‘art’. As suggested by Melinda Bowker, this formula may be summarised as ‘If not a name, a noun. If not a noun, nothing.’

From a gallery’s perspective an anonymous object serves as an expression of ‘material culture’ more familiar to sociology, anthropology or ethnography rather than art history. These affinities are also why museums don’t need named makers to situate their interpretation of objects. Museums seek to engage audiences with broader issues beyond art – issues of identity, scholarship, and open-ended humanistic themes centred on or through objects (galleries can do this too of course, but they also serve an almost mythic function of elevation reliant on

individuation). In a museum, we can imagine ourselves cast in the role of the person making, using, or valuing the object. The gallery gives that role to someone else.

Curators can bypass the dilemma of anonymity. We don't need artists names if the exhibition rationale is thematic or non-linear, guided by materials, emotions, subject matter, political frameworks, or shared languages. Rationales defined by historical periods or geography can opt in or out of naming their artists without drawing attention to the conspicuous absence of names.

In the 1930s, Carl Einstein wrote a series of manuscripts reviewing art history without using any names, focussing instead on what Maria Stavrinaki called "supra-individual visual and social laws". She compares his attempts with the earlier work of Heinrich Wölfflin, as an attempt to see history over a very long duration (*longue durée* or *die lange Zeit*) like geology – which must, by merciless necessity, exclude the comparably miniscule contributions of individuals. Einstein saw the distinction between *art* and *art history* as "the shift from fetishistic objects to their anonymous producers" (Stavrinaki 2016). His proposed morphology bypassed the influences of gender, nationalism, racism, and the emergent fascism of his decade. Einstein sought to see people through their relationships with artworks, as a manifestation of their need for 'fictions' that could shape their past, present and future.

Indigenous Australian art also provides another model for anonymity, in which the names of the deceased are deliberately avoided as a mark of respect for the individual – sometimes replaced by a temporary epithet in lieu of a name. This practice coincidentally sits within Carl Einstein's *long duree* view of art history.

Historians of African art such as Susan Mullin Vogel have addressed anonymity within their field, noting different priorities of art historians and cultural custodians toward attribution (Vogel 1999). Ruth Sacks expands this discourse through this edition of *Fusion* regarding the colonial and postcolonial curatorship of Congolese artifacts.

William Boyd ventured that 99% of photographs we encounter in daily life are anonymous. Relative to photographic production as an industry, attributed photographs are a rarity. They appear 'normal' within art history only because gallery exhibitions and monographs are usually centred upon the oeuvre of named photographers (Boyd 2004).

Textile, especially carpet, and philatelic histories are marginalised fields within art history. This is partly because their attributions resemble the index of an atlas, rather than a roll-call of graduates from art schools. Locations are a museum's equivalent of a gallery's name.

Interpretative approaches focusing on the 'biographies' of objects – through assessments of their materiality and arguments for their 'agency' – have become increasingly popular in the field of cultural studies.¹ Design exhibitions based on 'unknown inventors' seek to highlight humour and innovation, paying homage to the invisibility of solved problems. The *Street Chairs of Cairo* (2015) photographic series by David Puig and Manar Moursi is a cheerful example of this recent trend. Shifting focus from the tangible to the intangible, Lucy Elvis and Gino Querini from Gallery 126 in Galway, Ireland, situate and examine the legacy of unacknowledged labour underpinning their artist-run exhibition and studio space.

Material analysis also bypasses any need to attribute an object to specific individuals. For example, it is possible to examine the minerals in pigments to ascertain their region of origin and date (Hradil 2015). Subsequently, you may not expect conservators to be influenced by the anonymity of the objects they conserve. This is a sophisticated field within art history, overlapping with chemistry, spectrography and archaeology (Caple 2006).

There is an obscure word within historical studies that seems sadly under-utilised by art historians. Prosopography is the study of a group of unknown individuals via their known shared characteristics. (Incidentally, the related word prosopagnosia is 'the inability to make sense of faces'.) Archaeology embraces this approach, yet art historians who deal with non-ancient fields generally seem to be unfamiliar with it. There are no books titled 'The Prosopography of Art History', even though references to artworks as the basis of prosopographical enquiry – such as coins, manuscripts, glass and ceramics – do pop up in journals of archaeology, history, material anthropology and

sociology.

The methodologies of prosopographic research could be engaged by art historians across a variety of more recent fields, even those populated by known artists. Yet this would require statistical analysis and the use of mathematical investigations currently more familiar to archaeologists. It remains to be seen where prosopography could lead critiques of contemporary art.

Encountering Anonymity

Enigma

The anonymous 14th-century book *The Unknowing Cloud* argues for the centrality of 'unknowing' in contemplative Christian prayer. When reviewing this editorial, David Gilbey cited this increasingly well-known text as an example of the esoteric mysticism enabled by the anonymous artwork and author. He noted the selfless 'purity of intention' for those who create works without recourse to personal gain, generously presented 'without the clutter of a name'.

As a researcher, however, one's first introductions to anonymity are hopefully brief. This is the optimistic mystery stage – the enigma – in which anonymity is a provocation, not an insurmountable challenge. Gradual familiarity yields hypotheses, implications, comparisons, and perhaps – if all goes well – an attribution. (This might be called the Taylor Swift problem, for as she sang on the 2015 album *1989*, "I've got a blank space baby, where I'll write your name.")

However, some subjects elude attribution. As the renowned Persian poet Rumi invited us;

"Study me as much as you like, you will not know me, for I differ in a hundred ways from what you see me to be. Put yourself behind my eyes and see me as I see myself, for I have chosen to dwell in a place you cannot see."

The next stage is the lingering extension of the enigma. This is where the oblivious subject of investigation toys with the researcher, testing their determination, unyielding under interrogation. The anonymous object slowly pupates into an embarrassment, like the disowned films of Alan Smithee (1968-2000), hidden in a dark corner of the archive, never to be spoken of again. [2](#)

Alias

Of course, it may be that anonymity was the *objective* of this mysterious object. This is where anonymity brandishes its familiarity as a mask, a foil, an obvious non de plume. It plays the art world for *misere*, just as the Australian poets James McAuley and Harold Stewart played the critic Max Harris in 1944, with the collected works of the late Ern Malley (similar to a prank performed by C.S. Lewis on T.S. Elliot in 1926) (Mallonee 2013). A conspicuous pseudonym or alias calls attention to the fact that we don't know who made it, such as Marcel Duchamp's use of 'R. Mutt' on *Fountain* (1917), as well as his alter-ego Rose Selavy. Barry Humphries, amongst many other satirists, draws upon alter-egos because these characters can do things their artist cannot.

For journalists, filmmakers, writers, artists, performers and curators facing overt persecution, preserving anonymity may be a matter of life and death. The value and risks of unnamed attribution, in which a source is known but protected by anonymity, are more familiar to journalists than art historians (Duffy 2014). However, as Charlotte Banks writes for this edition, anonymity can provide an invisible shield for contemporary artists. Her survey of the Syrian video artists working internationally and within Syria during the current Civil War directly applies anonymity as a protection of her sources, as well as the artists' attempt to protect themselves from real physical danger.

The protective preference for anonymity appears more distinctive to writers rather than artists (Jongenelen 2007). However, one conspicuous form of vernacular visual culture bucks this trend. The anonymity of street artists originates in fear of retribution by law enforcement. The most abrasive form of 'street art' (or lowest common denomination of graffiti) is the tag, which is simply an alias written in semi-illegible graffiti. Like the typographic designers of the psychedelic movement, whose visual encryption was legible only to a familiar audience, the obscurity of these highly visible messages can be read as an ironic application of anonymity – "I've written my name on this thing, but you still don't who did it". This is anonymity as a raised middle finger.

Robin Cunningham is known more widely by the alias 'Banksy'. Banksy is a brand, not a person. The name has become a superficial point of comparison for almost any street artist using an alias (Trofimov 2014). Yet there is nothing anonymous about Banksy's work. His style is readily identifiable and it is documented extensively on his own website to prevent forgeries. Like the graphic designer Paul Rand (formerly Peretz Rosenbaum), Cunningham's pseudonym ostensibly began as a form of camouflage, and has evolved into a persona. He is essentially a celebrity who avoids public appearances.

Although anonymous objects are shunned by galleries, there is one place where anonymity regularly makes a public appearance: Anonymous is a patron on the donor's board in the foyer. The patron labelled 'anonymous' also discretely includes any person depositing small sums of cash to a donation box on behalf of the institution. Sarah Flew recently reviewed the social implications and individual motivations of anonymous philanthropy in 19th century London (Flew 2015). Though named donors may earn prestige for their generosity, anonymous patrons earned their "warm glow" privately, as 'service without seeking recognition' (in Latin, *Prodesse Quam Conspici*). Flew notes the observation of Charles Lutwidge Dodson (a.k.a. Lewis Carroll) "that public announcement was different from common knowledge." Flew noted that aliases, usually in the form of initials, have since discretely revealed the identities of many philanthropists.

Curiously, humility of donation has been perceived as virtuous for a very long time. One of the '40 Negative Confessions' listed by the *Book of the Dead* (chapter 125 – also known as the 42 Laws of Maat) is "I have not caused my name to appear for honours." (Budge 1911)

Erasure

On that ancient Egyptian note, let us consider anonymity as erasure. Mereruka's tomb in Saqqara is amongst the best-preserved tombs of the Old Kingdom. Hundreds of human subjects are depicted within it, yet one was carefully and consistently obliterated. This 'anonymized' figure was a member of Mereruka's counsel, likely a bodyguard, implicated in the assassination of the Pharaoh Teti (whom Mereruka served as vizier) (Kanawati 2003). The systematic destruction of his portrait was a punishment – he was banished from memory, and evicted from a place in the ancient Egyptian afterlife. The systematic posthumous defacement of portrayals of the monotheistic reformist pharaoh Akhenaton are a better known example of imposed anonymity in ancient Egypt. This punishment for political dissent was shared in the 20th century by authoritarian regimes.

The ongoing work of Naguib Kanawati, Alexandra Woods and many others has sought to "dispel the convention that ancient Egyptian artists worked as anonymous members of workshops and showed no individual creativity in their work" (Kanawati and Woods 2009). Their names may not be preserved, but we can become very familiar with the *disjecta membra* of anonymous artisans (their scattered remnants, or broken fragments from a shattered whole). Codicologists studying manuscripts, for example, have identified original texts from pages separated across several collections. From these we may glean enough information to identify a writer's hand, which may differ once again from the author of the text. Even adze marks may, hypothetically, be attributed to a specific 'hand'. (Vogel 1999)

In this edition of *Fusion*, Christopher Orchard contributes his story of an ancestor, a 19th-century member of the Royal Academy, whose belief that an artwork should be recognised by the distinctive marks of the artist's hand and individual vision was manifested by his refusal to photograph or sign his work. It is now challenging to locate

anything by that artist.

Despite the recognition of hands, can anonymity be imposed upon more recent artists? Robert Rauschenburg's erasure of a de Kooning drawing in 1953 comes to mind, but this work engages with the *opposite* of anonymity. Indeed anonymity can be imposed if the agency of the artist is sufficiently compromised by their social and professional context.

As noted by Lisa Selby:

"Botanical illustration was thought to be a 'polite' and informal hobby for early Victorian women with time on their hands... However after Charles Darwin's The Origin of Species was published in 1859, the Victorian public became fascinated with natural history and botany and several women began emerging as prominent botanical illustrators. In reaction the male establishment reimagined and redefined botany as a 'serious' science rather than a female pastime and with this, female works were often published anonymously to avoid any link with a woman's name to their commercial ventures. Women became the botany communities 'invisible technicians', carrying out scientific work behind closed doors, receiving no credit for highly technical drawings." (Selby, 2014)

The one thing popularly known about Anonymous is that she was a woman. Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) has been extensively cited for this observation – "I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman." Fred Shapiro's research into well-known but unattributed or misattributed quotations has revealed extensive authorship by women, particularly as script and screenwriters (Shapiro 2011). The artist Mariam Schapiro also extensively engaged with the themes of anonymous women and craftspeople. Amelia Peck, the Metropolitan Museum's curator of decorative arts, developed a poignant overview of anonymous works by women, which I encourage my students to view and discuss in class (Peck 2011). These resonate with the work of Susan Wood in this edition of *Fusion*. Wood situates anonymous and almost-anonymous Modernist embroideries, in some cases known only through reproductions on slides, as a case study of these omitted, overlooked or forgotten histories of Australian art.

Contrary to the purpose of a memorial, some of these people are anonymous simply because they have been forgotten. The promise to be remembered is the most overt objective of any memorial, hence the exhortation "lest we forget".

Spencer Finch's installation 'Trying to remember the colour of the sky on that September morning' (2014) fills a vast underground wall in the 9/11 Memorial Museum in New York. It consists of hundreds of sheets of paper painted shades of blue, their purpose explained by the title. Forged from the recycled steel of the twin towers is a translated quote from Virgil's *The Aeneid* (circa 29 – 19 BCE): "[If my poem has any power,] No day shall erase you from the memory of time."

Unfortunately, the original subjects of Virgil's address – two soldiers about to ambush and massacre a sleeping camp – hold more in common with the terrorists than the majority of people killed during 9/11. The selection of this sombre quote was been derided as "shockingly inappropriate" (or possibly a "productive irony") by the Classics specialist Helen Morales (Dunlap 2014). Caroline Alexander has argued that Rudyard Kipling's First World War commemoration "Their name liveth forevermore", adapted from Ecclesiasticus chapter 44, would "reflect the same pledge of determined remembrance" as Finch's "disastrous" choice of quotation.

Epithets

Forgetting an artists' name is a handicap. It can be overcome by attribution or bypassing the issue altogether. This is where we find epithets, sometimes called 'notnames'. Within American colonial art, the term 'Limner' encompasses

many anonymous 'folk artists', primarily portraitists, who practiced a shared style using simplified flat forms. One prominent example is the Freake-Gibbs Limner, who worked near Boston in 1670-1674, whose title is based on the families he or she portrayed. A well-known Australian epithet would be the Port Jackson Painter, coined by Bernard Smith in 1960 regarding several collections of natural history watercolours dated to the late 18th century. These are now attributed as probably Henry Brewer (c.1743 – 1796) or possibly Francis Fowkes (fl. 1788-1800) (Gall 2011). The Amasis Painter, a creator of Greek vases during the Attic period (mid-6th century), provides one example of the epithets through which we can discuss the artists' workshops of the classical world (Getty 1987). An epithet from another language can be mistaken for an attribution – *Sha'ir Majhul*, for example, is Arabic for 'unknown poet'.

Epithets are based on the most solid fact known about an artist in lieu of their name. In the cases above, it was their patrons or location. It can also be a date, such as the 'Master of 1302', or a distinctive feature of their work (like the "Master of the Embroidered Foliage"), or a commissioned subject ("Master of the Gardens of Love"), or a persistent secondary hand (such as the "Chief Associate of the Bedford Master").

Those arbitrary nominations were noted from a well-known anonymous source: Wikipedia's current list of more than one hundred and fifty 'anonymous masters'. This list currently has a strong bias towards Renaissance artists, likely due to an initial list assembled by Susie Nash, a historian of the Northern Renaissance, in 2008. New research on the neglected 'minor arts' of the Renaissance, which are almost defined by their preponderance of anonymous objects, seeks to dispel the systemic bias towards named artists (Silver 2006). One hopes that this informal list will be revised to include the abundance of 'anonymous masters' attributed through the canons once called 'Islamic art', noting the speculative identities of calligraphers, textile designers, architects and metalsmiths. In this vast field, 'who was it made for?' usefully replaces 'who made it?' as courtly patrons substituted artist's names for those of the person they served.

Epithets create a curious reversal in which the artist becomes defined by their thing, rather than the thing being known as the work of that artist. Imagine if we spoke of the Sistine Chapel Muralist, the Photographer of the Decisive Moment, or the Master of the Florescent Bulb. The familiar becomes arcane when stripped of common names.

Art historians write about the remembered because it is the path of least resistance. Our objectives tend to be the renewal of memory and the realisation of new knowledge. We rarely call attention to or publish our defeats. Even though anonymity is not an admission of defeat, it can resemble one.

Conclusion

Art history's infrastructure reinforces known names. These are easier to teach, research, exhibit, collect and discuss. Browsing through a shelf of texts on art history reveals this tendency to favour the familiar. To that end we constantly bring new names into the fold – most often from the 'emerging' end of the living spectrum, rather than the 'emerging' end of the archival researcher. A graduate of art history completes their studies in the confidence that they can readily recall names (and images) by style, genre and period. They are inducted by introductions and biased by the biographic. They know little of that nameless thing lurking in the basement.

Anonymous objects are perverse because they reject the possibility of biographic analysis. Yet art history is much more than names and attributions. Without them we ask different questions. Issues of influence, implied context, provenance, aesthetic variations regarding quality and style, valuations, ideological agendas, and technical assessments are still open for discussion.

Seeking the names that have been forgotten is one of many actions underpinning art history. Acknowledging the influence and limitations of anonymity helps us to understand the origins, objectives and legacy of our discipline.

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1. For examples, consider the papers presented at the conference *The Biography of Objects* (Cologne, 24-25





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2. Alan Smithee is a pseudonym used by members of the Directors Guild of America if they wished to disown a project. It was coined in 1968 for use on the film *Death of a Gunfighter*, following a dispute between the



actors Richard Widmark, Don Siegel and their director Robert Totten.

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