

A Name of a Name  
Liz Kotz

“My name, it’s a name of a name.  
It’s not my name... Imagine, if you  
look in a telephone book, there must  
be ten thousand Jack Goldsteins.”

—Jack Goldstein (1985)<sup>1</sup>

134 | **The name is a paradox.** It is what seems most unique and personal—it names us, it calls us—and yet also what is most general and generic. We think of it as that which is most our own, yet it comes to us from outside and circulates without us. *It names us.*

Joining a given name and a surname, the “proper name” links the personal and the social, locating the individual life history within larger linguistic and kinship systems. In some theoretical models, the name stands for a much larger process of subjectivation, posing the indissoluble link between the creation of individual subjects and the subjection to a larger social and symbolic order. Yet a name is also powerful. In traditional cultures, proper names—such as the names of gods—may be the ultimate performatives. They carry magical power: to speak them aloud causes the person or deity to appear.

Yet this power cannot be grounded in any linguistic substrate or substance. Spelled out, the name becomes emptied and abstracted, a mere point of interface with a bureaucratic system: breaking a word down to its smallest parts effects a complete pulverization of meaning. Composed from a limited number of letters or phonemes that can be infinitely combined to create new words and utterances, words always exist on the boundary of meaning and non-meaning. Indexed alphabetically, the name de-individuates; it places the supposedly unique person in a vastly larger archive of names, statements, and discourses. A name is simply a node, a connection point among networks and discourses. On the Internet, a semi-random collection of materials from professional life, family history, legal records, news reports, and blog postings comprises a public identity that is indexed under our name.

Susan Siltan's *Who's in a Name?* began as an intervention into a project by the artist John Baldessari—*Your Name in Lights*, a dynamic, participatory public artwork that premiered at the 2011 Sydney Festival and was subsequently installed at the Museumplein in front of the new annex of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.

Resembling an old-fashioned movie marquee and inspired by Andy Warhol's 1968 statement that in the future, everyone will be world-famous for fifteen minutes, *Your Name in Lights* invited people to submit names to be illuminated on a large-scale outdoor LED display for a now-accelerated fifteen seconds of "fame."<sup>2</sup> According to publicity materials, the project "reflects the fixation with celebrity in contemporary culture" and was "inspired by traditional symbols of celebrity, such as neon lights on Broadway and the marquees of Hollywood cinemas."<sup>3</sup> Members of the public could register their own or other peoples' names online and then watch through a live stream on the website. The month-long project ran continuously for twenty-four hours, and simultaneously occupied two divergent forms of public space—the physical site of the outdoor plaza in Amsterdam and the "virtual" space of the online webcast.

Throughout his career, Baldessari has used common vernacular cultural forms like magazines, advertisements, and movie stills—what he terms "the language of the realm"—to address the present moment and, at least potentially, a general audience. In a public discussion of the project, he recalled asking, "Is it possible I could do a project that's not in the museum?" The artist argued that by working outside the physical structure of the museum, "you're not talking to the convinced, you're talking to the general public."<sup>4</sup> Baldessari was also intrigued by the challenge of working with the parameters of the city and the site, noting, "You're probably going to be forced to do something you'd never think about on your own."<sup>5</sup> And although the idea of a work of art completed by its viewer is one of the core historical strategies of Conceptual art, Baldessari emphasized how *Your Name in Lights* manifested this collaboration overtly and concretely: "You know people are involved because they participate...there's really a literal way you can judge how it's coming off."<sup>6</sup>

Intrigued by the strange permeability of Baldessari's project as a found structure, Siltan decided to introduce a found material—a collection of names of artists who had committed suicide, which she had come across a few years earlier on Wikipedia. She recalls how she selected a set of names fairly randomly from the Wikipedia archive, choosing "a few well known artists, such as Jack Goldstein and Francesca Woodman," but avoiding more recognizable names such as Diane Arbus, Mark Rothko, or Vincent Van Gogh. The roster she arrived at was international in scope and included historical and contemporary figures. "I wanted to mine the territory primarily of the less recognized," and the blurry boundaries between fame and anonymity, though, as Siltan notes, in the past year alone, major exhibitions have been presented of work by Goldstein and Woodman.<sup>7</sup>

Public, monumental, and yet completely ephemeral, Baldessari's flashing marquee highlights the ways that these strange bundles of letters—personal names—can stand in for so much more. Siltan put out a call to artist friends and colleagues asking them if they would be willing to participate and register a name

to go up in lights. Fifty-eight agreed and, including Silton's own participation, fifty-nine names were registered. She then assigned each participant one of the names of a suicid e. The resulting work, which emerges partly within the parameters of another work, generates an interlocking set of lists and language archives: the names of fifty-nine artists who have committed suicide, whose names would be illuminated within Baldessari's display; the names of fifty-nine other mostly Los Angeles-based artists who registered them; the collection of short biographies of both sets of artists that Silton commissioned from young art historians and critics; and lastly, the names and biographies of the authors who wrote these biographical texts. Thus the artists' names function, both literally and figuratively, as the join between different worlds and discourses, from the "name in lights" of the celebrity or brand name to the complicated life stories and bodies of work that those names come to stand for. While Baldessari's project was interactive in a large-scale and relatively anonymous way, Silton created a discursive system that required the participation of a more intimate sphere of friends and colleagues, as well as the writers who contributed biographies to the catalog. It is in every sense a collage of texts and voices, one that creates a kind of community of artists and writers that is both real and invented.

Silton's project interlaces the sadness and potential stigma of suicide—with its pain and loss and its personal and collective shame—with Baldessari's ambivalent and perhaps ironic re-staging of an outmoded form of honorific celebration, one that is inevitably emptied out by the very process of democratization. And of course, these aren't just the names of people who committed suicide but the names of artists, contemporary and historical, some well known but many virtually unknown, which places their deaths in relation to a whole series of narratives of artistic production, public reception and the writing of art history. These interlocking discourses define our places, assign value and importance, and provide frameworks for how others perceive us and even how we evaluate ourselves. And by weighting such public and professional discourses with a sense of tragedy and loss, Silton's project changes a format made for celebration into one of commemoration and reflection.

A live feed streamed the names in lights on a website twenty-four hours a day. Participants in Silton's project were instructed to forward to her the announcements they received about when their registered name would appear on the marquee. From that stream, Silton grabbed screenshots of all of the names of the artists in her project, which allowed this inherently ephemeral form to be recorded and, in effect, memorialized.

While a few artists requested to register specific names, most of the pairings were random. As Silton recalls, "I had a list of people who agreed to register names, and a compiled list of suicid es, and I went down the lists and assigned them without much consideration. It was interesting to see how this played out at the end. Some pairings are oddly compatible from the standpoint of practice or artistic concerns; others have no overlap whatsoever."<sup>8</sup> Across the pairings one can invent any number of links or relations between them; some pairs seem to fit, while others share only the tenuous link of being artists.

Silton's work has frequently played with forms of camouflage or ways of

hiding in plain sight—using pre-existing or familiar forms to make an intervention that is both visible and invisible, that registers as interference or something off-kilter. The stripes she has used on billboards and installations refer to a long line of modernist stripe painting and popular design motifs, as well as calling up long histories of striped garments as signs of outcast status. In a series of photographs of the brightly colored fumigation tents that wrap recently sold houses in Los Angeles, Silton in effect frames them as found artworks in the urban and suburban scene. In other projects, words or images are hidden within bold stripes like subliminal messages veiled by the abstract patterns that come to resemble bars or barriers. Thus situating a specific set of proper names within the much larger series of publicly submitted names in Baldessari's installation allows Silton to bring out conceptual and emotional registers that haunt the public art project and also to question implicitly the kinds of histories written through the listing of proper names.

For artists, names are freighted with many different narratives and possible meanings and consequences. They identify works and styles, they stand in for careers, they are prominently featured in advertisements. Personal names and their public production have become semi-interchangeable: “We’re doing a show of Richard Prince.” “We just bought a Sherman.” And in the sphere of aesthetic production, in which there are no neutral or external criteria for evaluation, the artist’s name functions as a guarantor of value—even as the nature of the relationship between the actual person, the public name, and the work that circulates under that name is perpetually indeterminate. This anxiety undergirds Silton’s project and causes its putative subject—artists who killed themselves—to make a strange kind of sense. Through the lists of names and the collection of accompanying bios that attempt to account for lives and careers, *Who’s in a Name?* foregrounds the complex role of language in generating our views and evaluations of others and even our senses of ourselves in the world and our own inner lives and feelings.

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*Who’s in a Name?* also reflects on the “star system” of the artworld and the increasingly spectacle-driven and celebrity-oriented art culture that models itself on the publicity mechanisms of the entertainment industry. Baldessari’s own project is already a wry reflection on this. In a public conversation, he noted the irony that museum openings have become “like a movie premiere,” complete with hundreds of people packed in and paparazzi photographing babes and celebrities—in contrast to the far more low-key and informal artworld into which he emerged in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>9</sup> Yet in *Your Name in Lights*, the name that matters most is Baldessari’s. The ostensible democratization of the marquee is only possible through its attribution to an already acclaimed figure.<sup>10</sup> And the original prediction of fifteen minutes of fame, after all, was published in the catalog for one of Warhol’s first museum exhibitions.

Silton reverses this emphasis on the authorial voice by dissolving the name’s singularity into a plethora of personal names and an accumulation of texts. Beginning as a series of names inserted into a public art project, Silton’s work ultimately manifests itself as a book. Having set up a structure, the result is a collection of images and texts: the screen shots of the deceased artists’ names, and the roughly

two-hundred-word biographies that briefly outline the lives and careers of the participants. These short texts comprise the bulk of the publication. Their collection together, one after another, foregrounds different densities of discourse, different levels of familiarity: people I know personally cross paths with others I know only by reputation and with others I've never heard of. While suicides of the famous become myth, the disabling depression and despair that often precede suicide far more often accompany lives of relative isolation and anonymity. For some of the artists profiled in this volume, little information is known—in some cases, not even the most basic data of years of birth and death.

The biography—or life-writing—is, of course, an utterly familiar form, one that we rely on all the time. However problematic, however inadequate, it serves a purpose—the quick introduction, the quick answer to our questions when we encounter unfamiliar names and others we can't quite place. It locates a name in a larger narrative. Structurally, however, bios are oddly contradictory: they condense lives and careers down to a series of bullet points, yet they then weave these into a narrative that creates a larger analysis or impression. In *Who's in a Name?*, Silton employs the bio as a found format, and provokes us to look at it more critically. What are we to make of all these texts, and of all these lives and careers? While following a general shared format, the bios manifest vagaries of genre, authorship, and narrative styles. If a short nugget of language like a person's name cannot stand-in for the complexity of a life or a career, it is not clear that a two-hundred-word narrative can say more. The name, after all, is like an empty placeholder for all the memories, knowledge, and associations we are supposed to bring to it. The bio, which aims to offer a condensed narrative of a life, gives more information and yet always says too little or too much or not the right things.

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Read one after another in alphabetical order, the 118 compiled biographies raise all sorts of pragmatic and philosophical issues. They foreground the writing of art history and art criticism in their most mundane and most instrumentalized forms, and make us aware of their circulation in discursive and institutional spaces that are as closely allied with public relations and press releases as with critical or scholarly writing. Most often, when we encounter them in books, catalogs, and publicity materials, the authors and sources for short biographical identifications are unacknowledged. They may have been written by the subjects themselves or culled and compiled from all sorts of found and existing information. And indeed, the texts compiled for Silton's project manifest an underlying tension around authorship. How can a text represent one person, while appearing in the voice of another? Whose narrative is this? Who controls this story?

The temporality of these texts is also slippery. For the dead, a life story usually does not change much—though our perspective on some figures, such as Ray Johnson or Unica Zürn, may indeed change greatly over time. For the living, the mundane details of artists' bios—the lists of shows and projects, awards won, honors received—quickly become outdated by the constant flow of life. For writers, the format raises an unending series of questions: What do we foreground, and in what order do we present information? What connections do we make between education, life history, and artistic production? How do we construct a compelling

narrative out of too much information, or too little? And for those reading these texts, what larger effects do they create? What do we make of the alternation between living and dead, the known and unknown? What kinds of responsibilities or demands do these texts pose for us?

It is perhaps no accident that the earliest known text in the philosophy of language in the Western tradition departs from an argument about proper names. Is there an inherent, true, or natural relationship between a name and the person or thing that it describes? In Plato's dialogue the *Cratylus* (c. 380 BC), proper names—the names given to people, or gods, or specific places—are treated as paradigmatic of all names of things, and of all words.<sup>11</sup> While the philosopher Hermogenes holds that “*nothing* but local or national convention determines which words are used to designate which objects,” Cratylus insists that names naturally belong to that which they name, grounded in etymology and the histories of words, and things must be called by their true names for language to function.<sup>12</sup> But how can a name have any inherent meaning if it also names someone else?

This problem is inherent to language, in which a coded, conventionalized, and highly abstracted set of signs refers to very particular and concrete people, places and things—while also designating completely different exemplars that are also called by those same names.<sup>13</sup> Even Socrates's own name, he protests, is a name used by others. Although various twentieth-century analytic philosophers insist that proper names are relatively “rigid designators” whose meanings do not change from one context to another, in the age of Google, almost all of us can find countless doppelgängers. And like brands, proper names trend with fashion and popular culture, as a new generation of Emmas, Isabellas, and Sophias return us to the days of Jane Austen.

The name of the artist or author, as we know, complicates this all considerably. The very historical project of Conceptual art emerged almost simultaneously with theorizations of “authorship” by writers like Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, who sought to dislodge the author's name from its seemingly authoritative position vis-à-vis a text. For Barthes, the author is no longer the originator of a text or the source of its significance: no pre-existing set of intentions or hidden meanings need govern our interpretation.<sup>14</sup> The author's life story, letters, memoirs, and strident self-theorizations are simply more texts—among a limitless series of possible texts—that we might bring to the reading or a work or text. But they have no priority or authority.

While Barthes idealistically proclaimed that this “death of the author” would make way for the “birth of the reader,” Foucault was perhaps more attuned to the complexity of what he termed the “author function”—a set of functions that are institutional, discursive, juridical, and commercial. Describing an “indifference to the name” as “one of the fundamental ethical principles of contemporary writing”—and by extension, of contemporary production in the visual arts, music, and other fields—he quickly acknowledges the practical difficulties of this principle and probes the deeply entangled relationship between unities like “author” and

“work.” He asks “how a work can be extracted from the millions of traces left by an individual after his death.”<sup>15</sup>

As Foucault insists, the author’s (or artist’s) name is not a proper name among others. It serves a specific set of functions and describes certain unities. Puzzling over “this paradoxical singularity of the name of an author,” he understands it as a series of operations: “Its presence is functional in that it serves as a means of classification. A name can group together a number of texts and this differentiates them from others. A name also establishes different forms of relationships among texts... [T]he fact that a number of texts were attached to a single name implies that relationships of homogeneity, filiation, reciprocal explanation, authentication, or of common utilization were established among them. Finally, the author’s name characterizes a particular manner of existence of discourse” that preserves some words and works and not others.<sup>16</sup>

These arguments and critical models have informed contemporary artistic practice (and art historical writing) for decades. Yet in recent decades their lessons have been almost entirely elided or effaced by the realities of the market and the publicity apparatus that increasingly structure not only artistic reception but also artmaking. Nowadays, to ostensibly elide authorship—e.g. by refusing to be photographed or by replacing the artists’ name with a collective or distributed structure—risks becoming a marketing technique, as classic gestures of anti-authorial and anti-aesthetic resistance become recirculated and recuperated. The stakes of this underlying crisis are among the questions posed by *Who’s in a Name?* For decades, critical and revisionist projects in history writing have tended toward one of two incompatible strategies: the recuperation of “lost” names (and the marginalized histories and social identities these may represent) and the choice to elide names altogether, in order to resist their gravitational pull and to reorganize our narratives around different spans of times or strata of data that do not mesh with the human lifespan or biographical account. Structurally speaking, Silton’s project operates through semi-random selection and accumulation, artistic strategies that we classically associate with depersonalization. Indeed, by placing known and unknown one after another in simple alphabetical order, it serves to jumble names and historical figures that usually would not inhabit the same discourses. By placing them all on the same level, it de-hierarchizes them—and yet makes us feel the utter strangeness of this gesture. It gives us a visceral sense of the odd historical moment we are living through, where a set of narratives and narrative techniques no longer seem adequate and yet continue to structure our lives.<sup>17</sup>

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## Endnotes

- 1 Chris Dercon, "An Interview with Jack Goldstein" (1985), *Jack Goldstein* (Frankfurt: Museum für Moderne Kunst, 2009), 173.
- 2 The quote seems to have been first published in 1968, in the catalog to Warhol's first European museum exhibition at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm. Yet its source remains ambiguous; according to recent recollections by the Swedish critic Olle Granath, who compiled the Warhol quotes and aphorisms included in the catalog, the famous line may actually have come from the exhibition's curator, Pontus Hulten. See Olle Granath, "With Andy Warhol," available online: <http://www.modernamuseet.se/en/Stockholm/Exhibitions/2008/Andy-Warhol---Other-Voices-Other-Rooms/With-Andy-Warhol-1968-text-01/Read-more-about-With-Andy-Warh/>.
- 3 Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, [http://www.smcs.nl/en/news/news-items/overview/stedelijk\\_museum\\_presents\\_work\\_by\\_john\\_baldessari\\_at\\_holland\\_festival\\_2011](http://www.smcs.nl/en/news/news-items/overview/stedelijk_museum_presents_work_by_john_baldessari_at_holland_festival_2011).
- 4 "John Baldessari and Caroline Baum in conversation," Sydney Opera House, January 9, 2011: <http://vimeo.com/22062064>.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Susan Silton, email to the author, August 24, 2012.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 "John Baldessari and Caroline Baum in conversation."
- 10 Any inherent irony or critical dimension of Baldessari's project was made more ambivalent by its public framing within the cult of celebrity, with repeated descriptions of Baldessari as "one of the greatest artists of the past fifty years" who has had "more than 200 solo shows." Baldessari's work, of course, has always entailed a deadpan and deliberately ambiguous relationship with the pop cultural materials he has assembled and repurposed since his days of trawling discount bins on Hollywood Boulevard for cheap castoff movie stills.
- 11 As the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy clarifies, the term "name" in classical Greek contains ambiguity similar to the English word "name," whose meaning can be quite specific or very general: "The plural noun *onomata* (singular *onoma*), translated 'names,' in fact varies between being (a) a general term for 'words,' (b) more narrowly, nouns, or perhaps nouns and adjectives, and (c) in certain contexts, proper names alone. In (a), the most generic use, it comes to designate language as such. Ultimately, for this reason, the *Cratylus* is Plato's dialogue about language, even if the elements of language on which it concentrates are in fact mainly nouns. Proper names are included among these nouns, and at times are treated as paradigmatic examples of them." David Sedley, "Plato's *Cratylus*," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2008 Edition), Edward N. Zalta, ed., <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-cratylus/>.
- 12 *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953).
- 13 Like many ancient Greeks, Plato believed writing was of divine origin, and had been invented in Egypt. But in a thread consistent throughout his writings, Plato expressed ambivalence toward representations—whether images, letters, or written signs—as inferior imitations of reality, a tension resting on an underlying and more ontological conflict between the fixity of such signs and the ever-changing nature of reality. As the art historian Johanna Drucker notes, Plato's text is torn between "analyzing language as a system of formal logic" based on arbitrary conventions—a view consonant with modern linguistics—and a hewing to a more idealistic or essentialist view in which the individual letters are understood as indivisible essential elements and words are understood as imbued with divine meaning (Johanna Drucker, *The Alphabetic Labyrinth* [London: Thames & Hudson, 1995], 60).
- 14 Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author" (1967), trans. Stephen Heath, *Image-Music-Text* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977).
- 15 Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" (1969), in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, Donald F. Bouchard, ed. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), 116, 119.
- 16 Foucault, 123. He proposes that we separate out the proper name—"which moves from the interior of a discourse to the real person outside who produced it—and the author's name, which "remains at the contours of texts": "The author's name is not a function of a man's civil status, nor is it fictional; it is situated in the breach, among the discontinuities, which gives rise to new groups of discourses and their singular mode of existence" (123).
- 17 As it was underway, Silton's project was continually reframed by events, particularly by the suicide of the Los Angeles-based artist Mike Kelley on January 31, 2012, and the intensely private and intensely public mourning that Kelley's death triggered. For many people I knew, it felt like the "end of an era" (to employ a ghastly cliché), either the end of the line for the Los Angeles mythology of *Helter Skelter*, bad boy art and the pathetic, or of the aesthetic and emotional collapse triggered by the monetization of artmaking and the studio-production system. Just as Baldessari's project may well have continuing iterations, so too may Silton's, as new names are added to the list.