

# The Artistic Multitude<sup>i</sup>

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In 1550, Vasari's *The Lives of the Artists*, the first art encyclopedia of its kind, was published. Though it began as a commission intended to show-off the emerging schools of art at the time, a reflection of the cultural powers of the Medici regime, and penned with the help of several other authors, its collaborative model was read as a series of homages to the individual masters, and Vasari was subsequently dubbed the forefather of a biographical reading of art, depending upon the artist's identity for an understanding of their work. There are several reasons why the singular artist has been glorified and his or her assistants, partners or discourse in the making of their work dismissed: the art market relies on a hierarchy of attribution – the single signature being most valuable; it is easier to research and insert a singular author into a teleological history; and the all-too-common story of the tragic artist's life makes for a more interesting reading of his works. While it might be useful to know a little about the artist whose work we are viewing, it is generally accepted that a biography is subjective and socially constructed. Moreover, it is constantly reconstructed. For example, how does it change the way you view Van Gogh's work knowing he accidentally cut his ear during an epileptic fit rather than during a bout of depression?

Twentieth century theorists such as Barthes and Foucault, challenged the notion of the author as a fixed and monolithic originator of meanings with their literary criticism: "Death of the Author" (1967) and "What is an Author?" (1969) proposed that a work of art's purpose and existence depends equally on its reader or viewer; however, a viable authorial alternative, equating authors with readers, remains to be formulated.<sup>ii</sup> The biography's legacy is such that we are overwhelmed with monographs and retrospectives – a history of individual artists, rather than a history of art. Contemporary artists are increasingly working collaboratively, not only to channel resources, such as funding and publicity, but also to challenge concepts of authorship, artistic identity, the art market or as part of a broader political agenda.

This article looks at three artistic practices working under the guise of pseudonyms and/or collective identities. For the purpose of this work I am considering the anonymity of the pseudonym as representative of a potentially infinite number of authors, and therefore another form of collective authorship. Through the works of Bob and Roberta Smith, the Guerrilla Girls and Spartacus Chetwynd I will show that there are authorial alternatives to Barthes' assertion that "The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (142). By virtue of being a collective it appears easy to deconstruct the notion of the single author, but in truth we are confronted with many conceptual and logistical problems. Hence I will analyze collective practices to address questions such as - what are the challenges in maintaining equal recognition and freedom of speech within the collective; how do we control the intangible alter ego, or tendencies towards collective branding; and how successfully do each of these practices work towards maintaining collective identities, while defying established models of authorship?

British artist Patrick Brill began using pseudonyms in New York in the late 1980s. He entered his work under several different names to various galleries and found that Bob was the most successful. His older sister's name is Roberta. His, or "their," work often involves collaboration, performance and encourages participation, not just that which is fictional between the pseudonyms of Bob and Roberta, but also with their audience. Bob and Roberta Smith are now represented by Hales Gallery in London. The artist's work cannot be reduced to one genre. It often takes the shape of music, and even cooking. Humor is also central to their subversive practice but more often, bright signs and slogans painted informally on scraps of wood, referencing the languages of folk and punk, form the basis of Bob and Roberta Smith's more political artistic protests (fig. 1).

In 1997 Bob and Roberta Smith exhibited at the Chisenhale Gallery, London. Their show "Don't Hate Sculpt," consisted of six fictional characters responsible for diverse works such as concrete vegetables and orange environments. The show also comprised a large pile of raw materials for every visitor to create their own artwork out of. The latter was presumably commissioned and simultaneously authored by Bob and Roberta, as much as the other four fictional artists and the audience. He says: "I live in a world of constant contradictions and my work is correspondingly

confused. It is a pile of confused rubbish in the Chisenhale [gallery] and the notion of me, or anybody else, making sense of it is sufficiently open that I don't think it's too patronizing" ("Everything.")<sup>iii</sup>

Bob and Roberta Smith took a similar show to Japan, where the audience was invited to create the works of art for the show. Because the artist could not be there in person, the show was organized and presented anonymously: as a result, Smith says that

there are now two people who are the Japanese Bob & Roberta Smith. They took the show up to Hiroshima and I wasn't even present. It's like *Dr. Who*, anybody can be the Bob or Roberta, and if I died, it could all carry on. The idea is the persuasive thing and not the particular hand of the artist. It's a way of being all inclusive but at the same time locating it within the idea of a personality in time ("Everything.")

Bob and Roberta Smith are not even necessary for their work to exist; it is simultaneously authored by everyone and no one.

A more explicit and textual example of how Bob and Roberta Smith offers an authorial alternative to Barthes' "Death" includes SPEAK BOB, an interactive feature on the official Bob and Roberta Smith website ("Bob and Roberta Smith.") This facility invites all visitors to the site to create their own sentences out of Bob and Roberta Smith's personally created language, that may look and sound like nonsense. The given alphabet is a series of visual characters that make a sound when visitors click on them with a computer mouse. Once the visitor has assembled the 'words' in any given permutation available, they have appropriated and spoken on behalf of, and with, Bob and Roberta Smith, evoking Barthes' "multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture" (144). By liberating themselves from the centralized position of authorship, Bob and Roberta Smith create a space in which the viewer or reader can assume the role of author. In his multi-media installations and collaborations within his own fictitious and 'real' communities, Patrick Brill has created a myth that surrounds himself and his work. He criticizes the commercialism of the art world and the dependence upon celebrity by rejecting the autonomous figure of the artist. Through fictional characters and collaboration Patrick Brill's artwork becomes neither dependent upon nor excludes the viewer.

Bob and Roberta Smith's work has now been exhibited at The Baltic, Tate Britain and is part of the British Council's permanent collection, distributed worldwide. But as he gains notoriety and his work increases in monetary value, the duo-pseudonym becomes synonymous with Brill the man and forms a singular branding. Hence we might be tempted to ask, what purpose does the pseudonym continue to serve, and does it really offer us an alternative construction of authorship ?

The Guerrilla Girls is an American feminist collective consisting of an unknown number of members who remain largely anonymous, even today. The only distinctions between the members are their pseudonyms, all of which are names of dead female artists such as Frida Kahlo, Georgia O'Keeffe, Eva Hesse, Lee Krasner and Alice Neel. They formed in the 1980s as a response to the diminution of interest in 'active' feminism; the growth of academic and theoretical feminism; and a general frustration with the underrepresentation or exclusion of women and artists of color from exhibitions, collections and funding.

One of their earliest works was a series of posters embarrassing the Museum Of Modern Art in New York, which included only 13 female artists out of 169 in their 1984 International Survey of Painting and Sculpture exhibition. Since then, the group has continued to protest against inequality in the art world through billboards and posters, and more recently they have criticized the film and music industry, such as their satirical *Birth of Feminism* movie poster (2001) (fig. 2). As the collective became internationally recognized, their posters grew larger in size; they no longer have to work under-ground. In 2005 they were commissioned by the Venice Biennale and now receive an American government grant for their newsletter "Hot Flashes," designed to "monitor sexism and racism in the art world" ("Guerrilla Girls.")<sup>iv</sup> The Guerrilla Girls also give international talks and workshops to disseminate their message. Whenever they appear in public, the group retains their anonymity by wearing gorilla masks.

In choosing to use mass-manufactured publicity materials and print they dispense with the more traditional “hand of the author,” and thereby reject the notions of uniqueness or individual genius. In 1989 the group was asked to design a billboard by the New York Public Art Fund (PAF). They produced another poster criticizing women’s representation in the museum (*Do Women have to be Naked to get into the Met. Museum?*) It featured a gorilla-headed recreation of Ingres’ famous *Odalisque* holding a phallic accessory. Beside her the following statistics are cited: “Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female.” The PAF rejected the poster and so the Guerrilla Girls ran the poster on the sides of NYC buses instead. The group’s use of humor, simple language and digestible statistics via public means, such as the Internet, billboards, full-page spreads in magazines and letter-writing campaigns help their message to extend beyond the art world.

Anonymity undermines the idea of artist whose genius cannot be celebrated without an identity and thereby refutes the idea of the superstar. Anonymity also means that anyone could potentially be a “Guerrilla Girl.” Ana Mendieta, a member of the group, explains: “We’re a large, powerful anonymous group and that means that we could be anyone, anywhere like Leo Castelli’s proctologist, Mary Boone’s plastic surgeon, or Carl Andre’s next girlfriend” (“Guerrilla Girls.”) For example, any one of us today, a reader of their artwork, might also be an authorized Guerrilla Girl.

But anonymity is also problematic. As Whitney Chadwick points out: “Anonymity provided the cover that enabled the Girls to circumvent the art world’s obsession with individual personalities and, where necessary, protect their own careers from vengeful curators” (Guerrilla Girls 9). So, one could also interpret the Guerrilla Girls’ decision to remain anonymous as the product of fear or an unwillingness to take responsibility.

Moreover, the task of managing an anonymous, growing body of artists so as to provide equality of opportunity is problematic. The alter ego of the group – the public face of the Guerrilla Girls, which is disseminated among the wider, non-member community – has the potential to become irretrievably larger than that of the collective, and no longer truly represent its members. Indeed, in the past, some of the Guerrilla Girls’ work has been appropriated by other artists, and the collective has had to publicly disassociate themselves from it. Most significantly, in 2003, at the peak of their career, some members of the original group formed two smaller collectives, after internal disputes over creative control; Guerrilla Girls on Tour and Guerrilla Girls Broadband. After a public lawsuit for copyrights over the brand-name “Guerrilla Girls,” several names of the original members were unfortunately revealed, raising issues of authorship, attribution and inequality the Guerrilla Girls had originally protested against. It should be argued, though, that it need not matter how many factions of the Guerrilla Girls exist, or in what medium they communicate, so long as they continue to disseminate their message. As Imelda Whelehan puts it: “I would not wish to suggest that a single unifying feminist discourse is either possible or desirable, but rather that feminists can thrive upon such a diversity of approaches, moving towards a celebration of heterogeneity” (146).

Lali Chetwynd was born in 1973. On her thirty-third birthday, amid growing success as a performance artist, she changed her name by deed poll to Spartacus. Her work unites popular culture with classical literature by means of humorous and ad-hoc adaptations, such as her puppet reenactment of Dante’s *Inferno* and a sympathetic musical tribute to the fictitious Jabba the Hut of *Star Wars*. As Spartacus’ performances have grown from shambolic fancy-dress parties to elaborate institutional artworks, she has retained her loyal band of friends and family, who continue to play alongside her, forming a type of troupe. In this sense, Spartacus Chetwynd, the artist, has become a brand or umbrella under which different people perform or partake, a circus rather than a singular artist.

She has been nominated for the Turner Prize for her 2011 exhibition “Odd Man Out” at the Sadie Coles Gallery, London (fig. 3). Revolving around ideas of democracy and the right to vote, or disincentives to vote, Chetwynd stationed voting booths at the start of the exhibition that led the visitor through to different performances divided by giant photocopy barriers. How viewers voted determined their route and ultimate experience of “Odd Man Out.” Giving the audience the power to select and control their experience of the artwork within an explicitly political context, invites them to consider the work as a form of demonstration against artist’s dictatorships, like Barthes’ “Author-God” (146) and maybe even the power of the curator and critic, or commercial gallery, in our

reception of art's quality and value. However, much like real politics, the public does not always end up with what they thought they were voting for. The politician, or in this case, the artist, intentionally or not, provides the ultimate, and predetermined outcome – a rehearsed performance, ready-made costume or scripted response – even if it is masked by an apparent freedom of choice.

The most intriguing experience of “Odd Man Out” was that of a puppet re-enactment of the story of Jesus and Barabbas. Gathering to watch the scheduled performance, the audience unwittingly resembles the same crowd that Pontius Pilate once asked to decide which man, Jesus or Barabbas, should be freed or crucified. Encouraged to participate, the audience calls out: “Crucify him! Crucify him.” Quoting the loaded scripture, participants of “Odd Man Out” are symbolically implicated in the death of Christ. It is worth noting that Christ could be perceived as the West's ultimate tragic-hero and we may attribute much of our empathy for and interest in the suffering, artist-genius to this first story of the man-made, antonymous God. The New Testament might be considered a series of biographies, the belief of and in its protagonist led by a series of authors, from the Apostles to the various leaders of the Church. It is significant then that Spartacus' work calls for His death, much like Barthes' author, and could therefore be seen as another means of defying authorial dictatorship. The viewer, encouraged by the chaotic, amateur reenactment, becomes rowdy, amused and almost forms the original, historic rabble the state must appease. In this bizarre turn of events, it is the public, or viewer, that gains control over the politician or artist-performer, here seen under the guise of Pontius Pilate.

The politics of Spartacus' pseudonym must also be addressed as complimentary to her artistic practice. Spartacus, the name, references both political and popular culture. It refers to a person; the famous rebel who headed the slave uprising against the Romans, which ultimately failed; the associated historical event; and Stanley Kubrick's 1959 film, especially the famous scene where each of the slaves (and actors) claim to be Spartacus. We cannot extract the name Spartacus from its various associations or adaptations. Spartacus is therefore a historically loaded pseudonym, a legacy to which Chetwynd and her practice can be cumulatively added. It is an astute choice by any artist wishing to redefine their role as author because its reference and purpose – liberty gained by collective responsibility – are one and the same. Spartacus, the name, makes us think of anonymity, protection and capitalist rebellion. It therefore becomes an umbrella under which the artist can practice with renewed liberation and an experimental approach that simultaneously encompasses its viewer.

This article is not designed to provide answers to the problems of authorship and genius within the visual arts, and is actually part of a larger set of ideas in progress. Indeed, there are several other case studies to be analyzed – for example, Bidoun, a New York text-based collective preoccupied with the discourse of Middle Eastern cultures ([www.bidoun.org](http://www.bidoun.org)). Nonetheless I have tried to offer an introductory survey to a small selection of creative practices that defy traditional notions of authorship; where the artists might “live on,” alongside their viewers, and even reincarnate themselves in the works of others by means of reference and collective expansion. Whether it be a fictitious partnership, an anonymous group of masked avenging women or a chameleon artist, we have seen that pseudonymous or collective authorship can defy the inhibiting and unreliable biography when reading a work of art and, through practice, inherently criticizes the singular, genius artist – either because the individual is obscured, unattainable or one and the same as the reader.



*Fig 1. Bob and Roberta Smith, "Art Makes Children Powerful"*

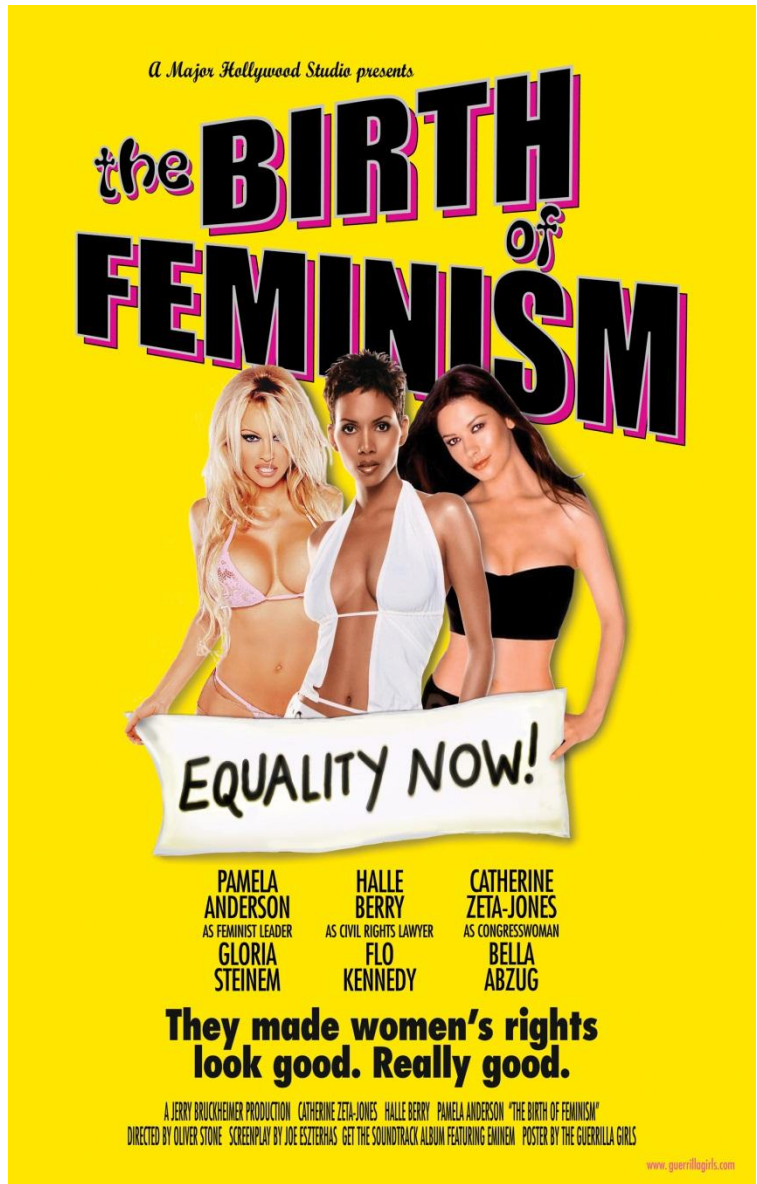


Fig 2. The Guerrilla Girls, "Birth of Feminism"



*Fig 3. Spartacus Chetwynd, "Odd Man Out"*

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<sup>i</sup> This article was originally presented as a paper at the 7<sup>th</sup> Association of Adaptation Studies Conference, "Visible and Invisible Authorships," University of York, UK, 29-30 September 2012.

<sup>ii</sup> "Death of the Author" was first presented at a seminar in 1967 and published in English in the United States in the Autumn-Winter 1967 number of *Aspen* magazine (vol. 5-6) and then in French as 'L'mort du L'auteur' in *Mantéla* V, 1968. "What is an Author?" was originally given as a talk at the Société Française de Philosophie, and first published in the *Bulletin de la Société Française de Philosophie*, no.63, Paris, 1969.

<sup>iii</sup> More information on projects authored by Bob and Roberta Smith and the artist's practice can be viewed at their official website: <http://bobandrobertasmith.zxq.net/>.

<sup>iv</sup> More information on projects authored by the Guerrilla Girls and their practice can be found on their official website ([www.guerrilla-girls.com](http://www.guerrilla-girls.com).)