

Anyone, Anywhere, Anytime

Jorinde Seijdel

Column – May 1, 2012

Reflecting upon Anonymous, the activist Internet movement that can be anyone and that has no leader or external management, the following question comes to mind: could autonomy and anonymity perhaps have something to do with each other, in thinking about new forms of critical art and culture? The term 'anonymous', from the Greek *anōnūmōs*, means 'nameless', 'unnamed' and also 'incognito' or 'unmarked'. The advent of the so-called autonomous subject in the modern age was specifically coupled with the naming of that subject and with a rational process of individualization. This 'calling by name' also literally resulted in a personality culture and a theory of authorship, not least within the arts, in which the identifying, the determining of a person's individuality is of great importance, and which has produced strict value structures. The social order and political administration that is attendant on this is based on people's uniqueness, on what makes them recognizable and identifiable. Distinctive identities cannot be ascertained from anonymous subjects, or at least not without difficulty: the anonymous subject, which is in fact a contradiction in terms, undermines the logic and culture of the autonomous subject, in that it does not let itself be controlled just like that. It's not for nothing that messages without a sender are almost always distrusted in our culture: the anonymous subject becomes the object of suspicion.

From the perspective of these modern ideological conceptions, anonymity and autonomy would thus appear to be mutually exclusive. One can immediately qualify this, however. For instance, you can assert that a condition and situation of anonymity in fact also implies a degree of autonomy in the sense of freedom and the room to move with respect to the dominant system. This autonomous anonymity or anonymous autonomy was found by a number of artists and activists in the 1990s, for instance, in the form of the 'multiple use name' Luther Blisset ('author' of the novel *Q*) and later Wu Ming, both of them explorations of new forms of authorship and identity, and spinoffs of the Italian counterculture's Autonomia movement.

Not being able to be identified because of a voluntary, self-chosen anonymity, an act of resistance, has its advantages and offers new operational perspectives. But in our society, anonymity can also stem from a directly or indirectly imposed status of not being heard or seen, as a result of not being identifiable according to the system, an exclusion and exceptionalness that actually attacks personal autonomy. Under laws made by others, the individual then cannot follow those laws – a bizarre condition of illegality.

At the same time, you can wonder what the unique identity of the subject still comprises, if anything, in an era when identities are more makeable, fluid and reproducible than ever, and can no longer be pinned down in time and space. The autonomy of the subject has long been beset by immaterial shadow presentations in the form of avatars, data bodies and online personas, new 'life forms' and subjectivities that never totally coincide with their original. On the Internet, anonymous cultures and anonymous information exchanges flourish, and autonomy arises from a game of (non-)identities and collective desires instead of from the manifestation of a singular absolute identity and its free will.

And then we are back to Anonymous, whereby unidentified persons agitate to protect the free exchange of information on the Internet, and who have become famous and infamous

for their DDoS attacks and Operation Avenge Assange. Anonymous sees itself as a spontaneous collective of people who serve a common goal, and in that sense is comparable with Occupy, which does not work with obvious leaders or representatives either, and likewise campaigns on behalf of and for everyone without unequivocally sanctioned principles. The interesting thing about these movements is that from this interplay of anonymity and autonomy a form of politics seems to be arising, a community that is taking shape, which comes close to what Jacques Rancière describes as a new distribution or reorganization of the sensory, that is to say, of the structuring of perception that determines what can be seen or not seen and said or not said in a society. This is not about the private interest of a specific group or the injustice done to it or to another, nor is it about finding a consensus. It's about the demand to be heard and accepted as a partner in the conversation. And so it is about a different group in society which speaks for the entire society because their actions concern everyone.

Rancière seems to be saying that those who are not perceived, and thus in fact are anonymous, can only achieve a form of autonomy out of precisely that condition. A stimulating proposition in every way. In the context of Anonymous, you can counter this by the fact that 25 'suspected members of Anonymous' were recently arrested by Interpol and that they thus actually are identifiable, and therefore traceable for the police. However, the movement does not have any membership structure; everyone can carry out activities in the name of Anonymous. The arrests are real, but the idea of the anonymity of a group that is not perceived, to use Rancière's term, is guaranteed.

Jorinde Seijdel is an independent writer, editor and lecturer on subjects concerning art and media in our changing society and the public sphere. She is editor-in-chief of *Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain* (formerly known as *Open. Cahier on Art & the Public Domain*). In 2010 she published *De waarde van de amateur* [The Value of the Amateur] (Fonds BKVB, Amsterdam), about the rise of the amateur in digital culture and the notion of amateurism in contemporary art and culture. Currently, she is theory tutor at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie and Head of the Studium Generale Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam. With Open!, she is a partner of the Dutch Art Institute MA Art Praxis in Arnhem.

Tags

Activism, Autonomy, Media Society

This text was downloaded on February 17, 2026 from
Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain
www.onlineopen.org/anyone-anywhere-anytime