HOW SAY YOU?
AN EXHIBITION UNDER FALSE PRETENCES

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> Ansorge managed to arouse the enthusiasm of the counsel for each side, and thus came the trial that a major contemporary jurisprudent described as 'the four-leaf clover on the meadow of litigation'. In those days, people still used lovely images, usually plucking them from nature.
>
> From 'The two souls' by Wolfgang Hildesheimer

The exhibition 'How Say You' is an experiment with the creative space provided by the institution of the court in contemporary society. To this end, a number of artists are invited to produce works whose authorship is under dispute. The law plays a critical role in granting these works seriousness. Outside the court, such acts constitute a postmodern parlour game, embodying the 'lightness of being' which follows the demise of the artist as hero. Inside the court, these invented artists provide exercise for the aura that surrounds the operations of the law in which legal formality outweighs subjective experience. It touches the silence demanded of courtroom visitors, or what Slavoj Zizek describes as: 'the shadowy double that always accompanies the public Law.' (Zizek 1994: 194)

Pseudonyms have played a curious role in modern culture, particularly literature. The Portuguese poet Ferdinand Pessoa published almost his entire oeuvre within different personae. The most coherent defence of such a practice is found in the Concluding Unscientific Postscript by Kierkegaard, which provides a final justification of the false names under which his works were published:

My pseudonymity or polynymity has not had a casual ground in my person ... but it has an essential ground in the character of the production, which for the sake of the lines ascribed to the authors and the psychologically varied distinctions of the individualities poetically required complete regardlessness in the direction of good and evil, or contrition and

high spirits, of despair and presumption, of suffering and exultation, etc., which is bounded only ideally by psychological consistency, and which real actual persons in the actual moral limitations of reality dare not permit themselves to indulge in, nor could wish to. (Kierkegaard 1941: 551)

The surprise in these lines is that Kierkegaard presents pseudonyms not as negative acts designed to protect the real author from the legal consequences of his or her texts, but instead as a liberation within the text from the self-conscious anxieties that beset exclusive ownership of a proper name. Proof of this method is his extraordinary output in the 1840s when he played tireless host to Constantin Constantinius (Repetition, 1843), Victor Eremita (Either-Or, 1843), Johannes de silentio (Fear and Trembling, 1843), Vigilius Haufniensis (The Concept of Dread, 1844), Johannes Climacus (Philosophical Fragments, 1844 and Concluding Unscientific Postscript, 1846), Nicolaus Notabene (Prefaces, 1844), Hilarius Bookbinder, William Afham, The Judge and Frater Taciturnus (Stages on Life's Way, 1845). These often naive voices provided Kierkegaard with unpredictable terrain from which to launch his offensive on Hegel's daunting philosophical system.

Closer to home, the Tasmanian poet Gwen Harwood was assisted early in her career by a variety of personae, including Francis Geyer, Walter Lehman, Timothy Kline and Miriam Stone. Her justifications for these masks vary. On one occasion they are screens to protect her private life. Another time they are strategic devices used to circumvent the publication quota in literary magazines, or to demonstrate the gender bias in editorial judgments.

Her most dramatic foray, under the guise of Walter Lehman, were two acrostic poems which the Bulletin published in 1961, then under the literary editorship of Donald Horne. Taking the first letters from each line, the two poems spelt out 'So long Bulletin' and then 'Fuck all editors'. Once spotted, the magazine recalled the issue, but not before the 'Tassie housewife' made the front page of her local newspaper.

But Harwood's use of false pretences has more complex legal implications than mere obscenity. Her literary masks were also responsible for many of her best works, such as 'Suburban Sonnets' by Miriam Stone. This strategy was successful enough to launch a few moot careers. As pointed out by Stephanie Trigg (1994), these early incarnations have been poorly treated in Harwood's subsequent publishing career. None of the initial ascriptions remain in her later collections. The affair seems largely dismissed as the product of a lively mind. Contrast this with the fictional biography of the eighteenth century Marbot, written by Wolfgang Hildesheimer (1983), whose deception provoked accusations of 'intellectual rape'.

Part of the 'How Say You' experiment is to explore the space in which it would be possible to represent one of Harwood's disenfranchised personae. At this point, art requires the intricate intelligence of a legal mind, capable

of designing a case which defends those who cannot defend themselves. Like Frankenstein's monster, the invented poet can accuse his creator: 'Why did you create me?' Beyond this melodramatic scenario, there are arguments within the deconstructive critique of authorship which ascribe authority to the proper name before psychological intentions of the poet.

While the time for Harwood's trial has elapsed, there is a potential case brewing in the ongoing saga of Ern Malley. As readers would be well aware, this figure emerged first as a Trojan horse to rout the literary credibility of Max Harris, editor of Angry Penguins (see Heywood 1993). The ironic turn which incorporated Ern Malley into the canon of Australian modernist poetry is not the latest word on this figure. James McAuley granted Max Harris copyright over the Ern Malley poems. With Max Harris' death earlier this year, this ownership is subject to question. What would happen, indeed, if a set of new Ern Malley poems were uncovered? If Ern Malley had actually existed, then this misappropriation would be a straight forward case. As a literary construction, though, what is to stop others pursuing a similar strategy. Those in possession of the poems would be justified in perceiving these later instalments as an attack on the coherence of Malley's oeuvre.

Alongside the exhibition at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in April 1996 will be a moot court which deals specifically with such an eventuality. In this case, the new Malley poems are more than just additions to the existing corpus, if accepted as legitimate they entail a radical revision of the entire episode. In these new poems, Malley reveals himself as a real person, who by some psychological quirk, on par with Kierkegaard's, could only express himself as a non-being. Having tired of postmodern games of authorship, the true challenge now comes from the authentic. Was the Ern Malley hoax itself a hoax?

Certain readers are no doubt asking themselves what the point of such an exercise is, other than a choreographed exercise in academic point-scoring. But it hardly stands alone in the wider cultural context. Hollywood currently displays an obsession with the pathos of non-beings. The melodramatic Frankenstein and the smarmy Casper demonstrate a popular fascination with those who've stepped out of the mortal coil. This fascination has its roots in the structuration of identity, which partitions being into an outside and inside: the inert devices such as proper name which carry the baggage of social identity and the ephemeral feelings that flow through lived experience. Despite the romance of an inner self, this exoskeleton is all that remains of a life. As Hegel is often quoted, 'The Spirit is a bone' (Hegel 1977).

This divide is made more apparent in an age where communication between individuals is carried out by technological devices. Towards the exotic end of the spectrum, Sandy Stone's (1995) recent work catalogues the way certain individuals have circumvented their legal identity through online

personae. With the emergence of 'home pages' on World Wide Web, this deposit is subject to more elaborate embroidery. Evidence of the mechanisation of identity produced by this form are the number of links being developed on the basis of proper name. There is, for instance, a 'Stephen King page' where those owning the name of this famous novelist might share their plight. Someone, somewhere, must have claimed once that identity is forged in struggle with its institutions.

The artists in the 'How Say You' exhibition struggle with their own institutions. The painter and art critic Robert Nelson inserts a strategic forgery into art history. The fictional artist Sandra Bridie interpolates herself into the careers of existing artists. Narrative painter Greg Creek portrays the legal world of Don Dunstan. Oil painter Lana H. Foil struggles with her living nemesis. Pop-up exponent Kate Reeves weaves a tale of courtroom artists. Peter Hill from his own Museum of Contemporary Ideas sets the stage for his art fair murders. Classic painter Stephen Bush works an ancient decoding machine into this canvases. These dead works are accompanied by a performance of Mata Hari's last days by Barbara Campbell.

In their endeavours, the artists are going beyond the self-fashioning displayed by avant-garde such as Cindy Sherman, Gilbert & George, Jeff Koons and Mike Parr. They are inviting the audience not to admire contortions of identity, but to participate in the ethical deliberation between real and false pretences. As How Say You tours Australia in 1996, it will hopefully provide a forum for law in the quest of identity.

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