

Beautiful Eccentrics

**Pablo Helguera
The Persistence
of Eponymity**

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of Eponymity**

*When -esques become
the new -isms.*

The fact that the term “avant-garde” (which is colloquially used in the mainstream to refer to new art) is an old nineteenth-century French military term might be ironic, but it does describe, to an extent, the inherent bellicosity of early-twentieth-century artists in their goal of positioning themselves at the forefront of art practice. That irony aside, anyone who is relatively familiar with twentieth-century avant-garde

movements would agree that their various proponents were particularly invested in written language as the key tool to make their points—not just through the series of statements and proclamations written in their manifestos, but through the use of terms that would perfectly encapsulate their particular set of forward-looking aesthetic and revolutionary principles, often containing the end “ism.”

As we also know, the insistence on applying one set of incontrovertible principles to art became less and less appealing over the course of the twentieth century, as it was clear that no movement could last forever nor have any credible claim of absolute or permanent validity, until it reached the point where the use of “isms” started feeling like another, less desirable ism: dogmatism. This might be why post-1945 artists

generally recoiled at the idea that their respective practices would be grouped under any particular term (for example those artists associated with minimalism) and also the reason why any more recent attempts to group artists under a particular category from that point forward have been more cautious, less prescriptive, and generally limited to referring to a particular time and place or social network (“Images Generation,” “YBA,” etc.).

And today, after the extreme fragmentation and diversification of artistic practices and despite the use of a few fashionable trends (“zombie formalism,” etc.), we largely resort to simply speaking about artists not as part of a larger movement, but as singularities.

But the ultimate decay and inapplicability of “ism”-style terminology left art criticism with an adjective-deficiency

problem. Which is why it interesting to see how, to solve this problem, we often take a verbal desire path—that is, nothing formal, but instead in a somewhat oblique way we “eponymize” practices: this means that we often employ terms such as Warholian, Duchampian, Kahlo-esque, Picasso-esque, and so forth.

But what makes someone eponymic? Cyril Leslie Beeching, a British dictionary-maker

who in 1979 published a dictionary of eponyms, writes in his introduction that while science is a profession that produces a good deal of eponyms based on the fame of scientists (“wattage,” “Newtonian,” “galvanize” [from Galvani]), “the names of painters are rarely to be found in the dictionary, and musicians fare little better.” Beeching notes also that the sound of a name, even if the individual is very prominent in

their field, like Bach or Beethoven, can be hard to turn into an eponym (although not impossible, as Brazilian composer Heitor Villa-Lobos proved with his *Bachianas Brasileiras*). Beeching further explains that eponyms fall into three basic categories: those derived from mythological or fictional characters (e.g., “Sisyphean,” or Braggadocio, which comes from Braggadocchio, a character in Edmund Spenser’s

The Faerie Queene); those connected to a person or their works (“Shakespearean,” “Dickensian,” or “Plathian,” as in Sylvia Plath); and then words that actually are taken from a person, either historical or contemporary. In the field of education, where a methodology is often associated with one individual, we have many examples of eponyms (Freirean, Deweyan), as well as of those whose names became synonyms with learning methods,

like Montessori. Eponyms also abound in US politics: Trumpian, Reaganite, Thatcherite, McCarthyism, or Obamacare (while on the subject of politicians, “Gerrymandering” comes from Elbridge Gerry (1744–1814), vice-president of the US and one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence: while governor of Massachusetts in 1810 he came up with the idea of rearranging the electoral boundaries of

his state in favor of his party, which led to that eponymic and undemocratic strategy in US politics). A familiar eponymic tradition for baseball fans are “yogi-isms,” the unintentionally comical and philosophical phrases uttered by Yogi Berra^{*1}, such as “you can observe a lot by just watching,” “if the world was perfect, it wouldn’t be,” or “never answer an anonymous letter.”

Reading Beeching's dictionary one can learn additional things such as the fact that trapeze artist Jules Léotard gave his name to the "skin-tight garments he wore while performing" or that the name of the color fuchsia comes from the botanist Leonhard Fuchs (1501–66), who gave his name to a type of flowering shrub in South America (but while on the subject of botany, Beeching seemingly forgot that the reviled US

ambassador to Mexico in the 1820s, Joel Roberts Poinsett, brought the first *nochebuena* flower from Taxco into the US, which later became known as poinsettia). And, pertinent to today's debates around cancel culture, the term "boycott" in fact refers to Charles Cunningham Boycott (1832–97), an English land agent in Ireland against whom the Irish Land League organized a movement to shut him off from all commercial activities,

which led to the name of this eponymic practice (and which also serves as an example of how becoming an eponym is not always a good thing).

So going back to eponyms in art, it might be useful to create a brief classification of how art becomes eponymic and what art eponyms are good for (if at all).

In a few cases, an art technique can become directly associated with, or even named by, its author (e.g., daguerreotypes), which is closer to the traditional scientific use of eponyms. In other cases (and this is something that becomes common in art school) the adoption of a particular style or formal approach can receive that term (“Cindy-Shermanesque” or “Beuysian,” while an alternative for those names that are not eponym-friendly

is to use a phrase such as “pull a David Hammons”). Here it is important to note that, in contrast to theoretical considerations of “isms” and other self-identified movements or practices, this use of “-esque” or “ish” or “-ian” as eponymic identifiers is often done in a more coy fashion by writers, curators, or educators, with the understanding that this designation is not something that would have necessarily been approved by the

artist or person by whom the identifier is inspired. And yet, in some cases, these can become accepted terms in criticism. In theater there is the term “Pinteresque,” as related to the playwright Harold Pinter, described by the Oxford English Dictionary thus: “Resembling or characteristic of his plays. [...] Pinter’s plays are typically characterized by implications of threat and strong feeling produced through colloquial

language, apparent triviality, and long pauses.” The closest equivalent in the visual arts might be “Hopperesque.” And a third category involves social or market aspects that frame the practice but that are not directly connected to style or technique. We thus can speak, for example, of a “Warholian” attitude or party atmosphere.

The next question is whether there is a value in attaining eponymicity in art, which is something that would require longer research. What seems clear is that for an artist to attain eponymic status it means that their work has gained a level of ubiquity that means universal awareness, if not positive critical recognition (at least in the art world). And such ubiquity can result in a wide following that often inspires poor or amateur

imitations (see #daliesque or #picasso-esque on Instagram, or even #botero-esque, which at times verges on hateful fat-shaming), which can also be a turnoff for connoisseurs (who, in my experience, prefer to gravitate toward artists who do not generate this kind of copy-cat or amateur enthusiasm).

Among art-theory scholars there is a largely implicit consensus around terms that they can't stand because they are so ubiquitous in the art discourse and are employed so liberally that they have become empty clichés. The winner among those terms is, probably, "Borghesian"—which is liberally thrown around in curatorial essays and press releases to refer to labyrinths, or mirrors, or paradoxes, or maybe to a nuanced

reference that nobody understands but that supposedly is of some intellectual import (I, for one, would support a boycott of Borgesianism).

Thinking of people whom I respect for their exacting use of language and critical analysis in art history and theory, I reached out to Judith Rothenbeck (a leading contemporary art scholar and professor who teaches at UC Riverside) to get her take on

eponymy-mania. Regarding such terms, she said: “the one I deeply hate is ‘Deleuzian,’ but that is both eponym and discursive locative device.” She also mentioned that “Seussian” was atop her disliked-eponyms list, which in her view does a disservice to Dr. Seuss: “[the term] seems to mean sing-song and repetitive, whereas Seuss was actually rather brilliant in using limited vocabularies.”

Rothenbeck concludes:

“I don’t super-dislike eponyms but to find them popping up as stand-ins for relatively banal interpretive observations. Like: what is ‘duchampian’? Is it punning? Is it the substitution of linguistic meaning of a material object for an object’s material qualities? Is it nominalistic? Certainly, it’s what the Germans would call signaletic, lol.”

So eponyms in art serve, at best, as a shorthand form of communicating about art practice (which I confess to resorting to all the time while referring in informal conversation to different approaches and styles), but in the worst cases they can be lazy forms of language, verbal crutches and readymade portmanteaus used to throw around and sound smart when in fact one does not have much to say or is unable to say anything useful.

It is the practice of using big names to feel big.

Which is something about which I, back when I had just started art school in Chicago at eighteen, instinctively became aware (now that I think retrospectively). The Art Institute, like many other large US museums founded in the nineteenth century, bears in its façade a pompous frieze with the names of great (dead white male) art masters

inscribed onto it (ANDREA DEL SARTO – CORREGGIO – DVRER – MEMLING – DONATELLO, etc.), which ostensibly serves as the imposing calling card of the building as the sacred temple of art. I then thought it would be funny if I ever were to become “eponymic” myself, and thus made a drawing for a friend proposing a “Museo Helguerístico Nacional”.

Sadly, the Museo Helguerístico might never be built (nor the proposed works in its collection ever be painted). But regardless of the fact that many of us will not have the required artistic legacy for becoming an adjective not to have our names carved onto gigantic friezes on august institutions, one can at least hope to be spared the fate of ignominious eponymy like the one handed down to Mr. Boycott by posterity.

Footnotes & References

*1 <https://www.authenticmanhood.com/blog/20-great-yogi-berra-quotes>

Colophon

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Vlaanderen
verbeelding werkt