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Rtmark: Viral Activism and the Meaning of "Post-Identity"

Dennis W. Allen

One of the smaller ironies of the universe is that academics have substantially less free time than most people think that they do. Nonetheless, if, somewhere between the course preparation and the research and the interminable committee meetings and the apparently endless grading, you happen to experience something of a longeur, a moment or two in which time seems to weigh a bit heavily on your hands, let me suggest a project that might tide you over until the next set of papers arrives:

> Manufacture cards to be placed with sweatshop-produced apparel (in shoe boxes, shirt/pant pockets, etc.) in department stores. Cards can contain such phrases as "Handmade just for you by Juan, your Honduran friend. 3.5 cents of your purchase will go towards feeding my family. Thank you!"

Or, if that particular enterprise seems a bit too clandestine and furtive, perhaps you'd prefer a more social activity:

> Grab some spiffy blue vests and start straightening up the aisles at your local Wal-Mart (or other megastore). Aggressively help customers by pushing their carts for them, selecting products for them, and telling them the dangers of shopping without such assistance.

I can't take any credit for coming up with these particular ways to spend your leisure time, although, as will become apparent later, it would be all right if I did. Instead, they're examples of projects suggested by Rtmark, the anarcho-aesthetico-activist organization that funds and orchestrates acts of "creative subversion" (Rtmark, "New Projects").

Actually, you're probably already aware of Rtmark, if only because, in 1992, they subsidized a much-publicized project by the Barbie Liberation Organization in which the voice boxes of 300 Barbie dolls were switched with those of GI Joe dolls so that GI Joe said, "I love shopping," and Barbie said, "Dead men tell no lies" (a sentiment, by the way, that most of the single women and all of the gay men I know would agree with) ("Barbie Liberation"). The project is typical of many of Rtmark's activities, which combine humor with an implicit political point. In this instance, the project simultaneously functions as a critique of gender politics, as a political "intervention" into capitalism in the form of product sabotage, and, finally, as an attempt to call attention to the intersections between the ideology of the free market, consumer culture, and identity construction. In short, this particular liberation of Barbie is an example of culture jamming, a form of "semiological guerrilla warfare" which repositions or recontextualizes commercial or media images or products in order to denaturalize their meanings.[1]

Now, Rtmark is only the tip of the iceberg of a loosely configured network of culture jammers and anti-corporate anarcho-activists, ranging from San Francisco's Billboard Liberation Front, which, as its name suggests, alters billboards to reflect anti-corporate messages, to *Adbusters*, the Vancouver-based quarterly edited by Kalle Lasn that encourages what Lasn calls "meme warfare," to Whirlmart, a group that takes over megastores, pushing empty shopping carts through the aisles in a "reclamation" of the space of capitalism, to name only a few examples.[2] Because Rtmark orchestrates the funding for projects by a number of such organizations and because it is, arguably, one of the more visible loci of this subculture, I'd like to use it as a rather uneasy synecdoche for this aesthetico-anarcho-activist movement, diffuse in its organization and diverse in its aims, in order to examine some of the implications of this subculture. As I hope to show, Rtmark and the subculture that it represents exemplify the form political activism may have to take under postindustrial global capitalism. And this, in turn, will enable us to investigate one possibility for the meaning of a notion of "post-identity," since, as we shall see, Rtmark represents activism without the activist, activism after identity.

Rtmark

First of all, a bit of background. Rtmark began in 1992 with the purpose of funding acts of "creative subversion" with "activist or aesthetic aims," going online in 1997 to become more accessible to the public.[3] An anonymous collective, they argue that their difference from previous political movements derives from a shift in the object of activism from the government to corporate power, a shift that necessitates a rethinking of the entity being protested. As they note, "corporate power is different, essentially and perceptually, from the government power against which there is such a long and varied tradition of resistance. Corporate power is alien and faceless, a disembodied, unlocalized, inhuman force that continually thrusts itself upon us . . ." (Rtmark, "Sabotage and the New World Order" 3).

The projects that Rtmark funds are diffuse, in terms of both the particular manifestations of "corporate power" that they target and the means used, ranging from product sabotage to the creation of "rogue websites" for such entities as the World Trade Organization, Exxon, George W. Bush's presidential campaign, and McDonald's, which borrow heavily and parodically from the originals but substitute "truthful content." This diffuseness, Rtmark contends, is the most appropriate response to the nature of corporate power, which, unlike a government or a more clearly political entity, (say the National Rifle Association), has only a "multitude of seemingly dissociated aims and no position we can count on, or against which we can fight" ("Sabotage" 3). In response, Rtmark has decided to "model itself after corporations, i.e. not model itself at all, and define itself only by logos and slogans" (3). Thus, "like a corporation, [Rtmark] adapts and mutates as conditions necessitate, in service to its bottom line: opposition" (3).

Now there is, of course, also a long tradition of resistance to capitalist power, and more than one person, from Mother Jones to Fredric Jameson, has pointed out that the aims of the corporate world are only "seemingly" dissociated and that there is, finally, a position that one can fight against, which has historically been articulated as class antagonism or the exploitation of the worker. Rtmark, however, seems to have largely abandoned this perspective, retaining it only vestigially. Take, for example, the project about "our Honduran friend Juan" with which we began. Like a number of other Rtmark projects, this ostensibly focuses on the relations of production, on sweatshops in the Third World, specifically the clothing industry. But what is striking from an Old Left point of view is that the project does not attempt to organize the employees of Nike or Kathy Lee to demand better working conditions or higher salaries. Nor does it even try to induce American consumers to act in solidarity with such demands through, for example, a boycott of particular brands. Instead, the point of the project is primarily to educate the consumer. By stressing consumption rather than production and by conceiving the consumer less as an active political agent, who could boycott or picket (or even take up activism), than as a target of information, Rtmark thus radically reorients anti-capitalist or anti-corporate activism.

I will return to that point, but, for the moment, I want to look at additional differences between Rtmark's projects and other styles of activism. To begin with, it is sometimes difficult to see what good Rtmark's actions do. Many of the projects are completely impracticable ("Make and serve *real* hamburgers at McDonald's"); others, like the imitation shopping consultants, do not suggest a clear causal link to social change in the same way that we are used to thinking something like boycotts or picketing do (Rtmark, "New Projects"). Moreover, a complete survey of Rtmark's website suggests that, in terms of traditional politics, their aims seem incoherent. While one can identify particular projects that derive from familiar agendas such as eco-activism, third wave feminism, or the product safety movement, there seems to be little or no effort to unify these disparate aims into an overarching political vision.

One way to approach this latter point is to take seriously Rtmark's assertion that their goal is simply "Opposition to corporate power." After all, opposition is not really a coherent political agenda but simply . . . well, opposition. In a sense, then, it could be seen as remarkably similar to, and about as efficacious as, being 15 and sulking in the family room in your parents' basement as a response to the oppressiveness of "power." Yet, on some level we all know what Rtmark means by the very vague phrase "corporate power," a concept that shows the inadequacy of conceiving of postindustrial capitalism as only an issue of the exploitation of the worker by the capitalist. Instead, Rtmark's view is that such power is "viral," by which they mean to suggest both the way that it proceeds through a vast multiplicity of small actions and the fact that it "reacts to attack by mutation" ("Sabotage" 3). What Rtmark is talking about here is the remarkable breadth and resilience of capitalist activity: for example, the fact that it so easily co-opts and then aggressively markets youth and countercultural movements. Or that I only need to mention the word "Barbie" to suggest the way in which it serves as a potent force in the reproduction of cultural ideology and the constitution of the subject. Or that, as *Frontline* has recently shown, it so easily circumvents attempts at governmental control and regulation so that, for example, the rise of the SUV can be directly traced to an attempt by American automakers to evade the emissions standards instituted for automobiles in the late 1970s by redesigning and then aggressively marketing a form of light truck to which the standards did not apply ("SUVs: The Hidden History").

Moreover, this last example suggests how diffuse the effects of corporate activity are since the SUV raises issues about product safety (both for the drivers of SUVs, since the vehicles tend to roll over, and for other drivers, who are more likely to be killed in a collision with an SUV); about ecological concerns such as the environmental impact of our dependence on fossil fuels; and about the ideology inherent in the marketing, with its uneasy yet nonetheless successful alliance of appeals to a certain conception of rugged masculinity, a belief in the centrality of the family and, particularly, of children in American culture, and the familiar albeit phantasmatic understanding of American national identity as based on "pioneering the wilderness." To put it all another way, Enron, Martha Stewart, the tiny daily intrusions of telemarketing, Inclone, the marketing of big pants and glow sticks at Walmart . . . if you stand back a bit, it's difficult to see what specific ideological framework, not to mention what specific plan of action, *could* actually respond to corporate power in a comprehensive and concerted way.

In this context, then, "opposition" is really the only general rubric that makes any sense, just as Rtmark's emphasis on the dissemination of information, on media coverage of their projects, rewrites activism as a continual, diffuse form of resistance that mimics the media-savvy nature of corporate capitalism itself. As Rtmark admits, its aim is less to effect a radical change in our material conditions of existence than to enter the representational economy. Thus, their activities are conceived as "mainly pedagogical": "The value of Rtmark is, and always has been, not in any real pressure it can possibly [bring to] bear, but rather in its ability to quickly and cheaply attract widespread interest to important issues. Rtmark is thus essentially a public relations firm for anti-corporate activism, using sensationalist framing . . . 'sabotage,' . . . to attract mainstream press interest to projects that . . . illustrate the enormous abuses of corporate power against democracy and human life" ("Sabotage" 7).

Viral Activism and The Erasure of Identity

If Rtmark imitates the corporate structure that it attempts to sabotage, this is not only in terms of its emphasis on public relations and marketing spin. Just as it understands corporate power as "viral," Rtmark itself could be taken as a good example of what we might call "viral activism." As with the viral conception of the corporation, this suggests a style of activism that involves diffuse, multiple actions on a small scale, that evinces a certain adaptability to situations and circumstances, and that relies on the rapid dissemination of ideas and bits of information, particularly through contemporary communications technologies such as the Internet and text messaging (the sense in which the viral metaphor is most frequently invoked by culture jammers and anti-corporate activists themselves) (Dery 14; Pickerel 2; Lasn 132). Moreover, in the case of this sort of activism, the phrase is additionally apt because, typically, viruses rely primarily on the resources of the host cell in order to accomplish their purpose. Certainly, something like the Barbie Liberation project or the cards from Juan exemplify these principles. With minimal effort and the use of few resources beyond those provided by the targeted corporation (specifically, in both these instances, the commodity itself), the "viral activist" is able to redirect and reorient the meaning of the product. The same would be true of actions like a Whirlmart demonstration or impersonating a Walmart greeter, which use capitalist space and the consumer-oriented behaviors associated with it to self-reflexively reposition certain activities (i.e., shopping or "assisting" shoppers, respectively) in a way that defamiliarizes and directs critical attention to them, not to mention disrupting the normal functioning of the "host" store. I will return to this analogy, too, but I want to look first at the idea of the activist implied by Rtmark's political projects, since this will help to clarify how they differ from other sorts of activism and will also indicate what Rtmark can tell us about the meaning and uses of the phrase "post-identity."

For Rtmark represents a shift in our idea not only of activism but also of the activist, a shift that remarkably parallels the deconstruction of the self articulated in academic critiques of identity and identity politics during the past ten years. In a sense, Rtmark illustrates, in a variety of ways, the nature of activism after identity. To begin with, unlike much earlier activism, there is no central individual, no Cesar Chavez, who becomes nationally recognized as a leader or spokesman. Nor, given the nature of most of Rtmark's projects, is it plausible or even possible for someone like Julia Roberts or Tom Cruise to lend her or his celebrity cachet to Rtmark's activities.[4] Many of its projects, like the Barbie/GI Joe stunt or the cards from "your Honduran friend Juan," split the production of the project from the scene of its reception in a way that intentionally effaces the agent in order to focus on the political issue involved. By the same token, other projects, those that require direct action like the shopping consultants, are predicated on an anonymity that allows a simulation of (an other) identity (e.g., as a real employee of Walmart or McDonald's). In purely practical terms, it would be impossible for a celebrity like Julia Roberts to turn up as an ersatz greeter at your local Walmart simply because it would be impossible for her to discard her identity *as* Julia Roberts.

That anonymity is thus a central concept in Rtmark's style of activism is confirmed by the "corporate logo" above. It is, of course, directly represented by the comic, even campy, use of eyebars to conceal the "identities" of the figures in the logo, but it is also more subtly encoded in the initial choice of a computer-generated image rather than a photograph of actual people. This stress on obvious simulation (depicting avatars rather than people) is particularly apt since the anonymous activist serves Rtmark's purposes in a number of ways. To begin with, as Jen Liu notes in an article in the online *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest* ("Documenting the collapse of political and aesthetic practices into the singular field of media"), anonymity not only has practical advantages (in, say, avoiding legal retaliation) but is, itself, a marketing tool. Unlike the "pimpled and ill-dressed identities" picketing outside a corporate office, Liu notes, "anonymity gives [Rtmark] the sexy air of the secret agent," which translates, according to her, into "a slickly packaged subculture" (3). While Liu is certainly right, she nonetheless misses certain additional implications of Rtmark's effacement of personal identity. As we shall see, beyond the practical uses of Rtmark's reliance on anonymity or the way that it packages being an activist, anonymity also points, albeit indirectly, to an implicit shift in the nature of identity under postindustrial capitalism.

Let's take another look at those "rogue websites," which are designed to mimic the original sites so closely that they produce confusion. The strategy is to sufficiently infringe copyright and intellectual property laws that legal action ensues, which then allows Rtmark to issue press releases in order to bring public attention to the particular issue they are trying to highlight. Sometimes, however, the websites have unexpected consequences, as when SUNY—Plattsburgh wrote to www.gatt.org, a simulation of the World Trade Organization's website, to invite a WTO representative to speak. What the students got instead was a representative of the group that Rtmark had designated to operate the site, "The Yes Men," a "loosely knit organization of some three hundred imposters worldwide," who proceeded to feed the audience fast food and then give a detailed presentation on the ways in which the spread of global agribusiness was increasing starvation in the Third World (Yes Men, "Recycling Food").

Now, obviously, beyond the simple practical fact that assuming a false identity under such circumstances makes legal retaliation more difficult, The Yes Men here use imposture strategically. It is precisely the size and breadth of modern corporations and organizations like the WTO, of course, which make such projects possible. The ersatz "WTO representative" does not need to impersonate any particular WTO spokesperson—who, after all, would know who most, or any, of them are?—but merely to pose as *a representative* of the organization. And it is precisely because the imitation official speaks, not on behalf of him or herself but for the organization, that The Yes Men can achieve their strategic goal. Presenting "accurate information" about WTO practices in the guise of a WTO official is intended to force the audience to look more closely at WTO policies and to reflect on them critically (particularly if that information produces cognitive dissonance in listeners because it is not what they expect to hear from an official of the WTO). It is the act of imposture, then, that insures that the factual information reaches the audience in the first place, producing the necessary reaction and critical assessment, a process that is far less likely to happen if the individual presents herself directly as an activist opposed to the WTO. This is clearly demonstrated by an incident similar to, but more overtly ludic than, the one at SUNY—Plattsburg, in which an international law conference in Salzburg wrote to www.gatt.org to invite Mike Moore, the Director-General of the WTO, to speak and for whom The Yes Men offered one "Dr. Andreas Bilbauer" as a replacement. As the correspondence following the conference indicates, "Bilbauer's" speech, which purported to express "more clearly" some of the WTO's principles, including critiquing the Italian work ethic and advocating the selling of votes in American elections, left many members of the audience outraged and, even after the conference ended, there seems to have been continuing confusion over whether Bilbauer did or did not actually represent the WTO (The Yes Men, "The WTO Speaks").[5]

Now, the reason why imposture can have a strategic value in furthering such activist projects is, to put it in somewhat Rtmark-ian terms, because of the erosion of individual identity under the pressure of global capitalism. In part, Rtmark's attack on corporations as "inhuman forces" that pose a threat to "human life" can be seen as simply one of the last gasps of the Romantic response to the spread of capitalism, yet another example of the lament about the loss of the uniqueness of the individual in an increasingly depersonalized age, which animates so much of twentieth-century art, literature, and philosophy. This is the perspective that underlies Kalle Lasn's book *Culture Jam*, and, certainly, Rtmark's website contains statements and press releases that make this point, most notably the one that announced Rtmark's appearance on the Internet in March of 1997: "[Rtmark is] an attempt to give our thoughts and desires a vehicle to make themselves seen and felt in the often mechanical world around us" ("A System For Change" 4). Yet, significantly, Rtmark's later position papers and the nature of most of their projects themselves suggest that Rtmark's primary strategy is not to respond to the "inhuman force" of capitalism by insisting on the value and unique identity of the individual. Instead, as the creation of Dr. Andreas Bilbauer suggests, Rtmark recognizes that the best response to a faceless corporation is to use faceless activists, that the sheer insignificance of individual identity opens strategic possibilities for attacking the system itself. And it is here, I think, that the metaphor behind the concept of "viral activism" is additionally apt, especially if one considers the specific example of retroviruses, which incorporate themselves into, become part of, the DNA of the host cell. Very much in the manner of a retrovirus, the activist insinuates himself into the system by fooling the system into believing he is part of it and then changes the flow of information (the genetic code; the assertion that Italians are lazy) in a way that alters the system (the production of more viruses; critical reflection, political debate, media coverage, and, probably, increased security measures). In a sense, then, Rtmark could be seen as a sort of disease within the body of postindustrial capitalism.

I'll admit that this is not a very attractive analogy, and it is, after all, only an analogy. In any case, if we look at work in the past ten years in

Gender Studies, Cultural Studies, Queer Theory, and even materialist criticism, the standard way that the notion of identity implied by Rtmark's activism would be discussed would have little to do with viruses, activist or otherwise. Instead, I would now be expected to argue that the disintegration of traditional conceptions of identity allows the individual to endlessly refashion him or herself in a way that both resignifies the self and affects the system.[6] Thus the altered Barbies and GI Joes could be read as performances of gender identity that work, however slightly, to alter the cultural definitions of the genders themselves, and the creation of Dr. Bilbauer would be seen as "really" about a free play with the plasticity of identity that permits resistance to hegemonic forces. In this view, Rtmark activists are simply a highly visible example of the political power that postmodern identity allows all of us.

I'm not entirely sure that this is wrong, but I would like to resist the impulse to see Rtmark's implicit conception of identity in this way for several reasons. The most obvious is that it so closely approximates, if it does not in fact derive from, the conception of identity underlying postindustrial capitalism in which the individual is continually seduced by the insistence that she or he can endlessly refashion her or himself simply through patterns of consumption (Bordo 246-258). More saliently, Rtmark's projects do not really seem to be about celebrating the possibility of identity beyond identity categories. If they rely on literal impersonation and, even more tellingly, anonymity, then the emphasis would seem to fall not on reworking one's own identity or altering our taxonomy of identity categories but rather on the effacement of identity. If that eyebar logo did not have Rtmark's name on it, it could be taken as a critique of the loss of identity in the corporate boardroom, but the addition of Rtmark's name seems less to make the logo into a celebration of the anonymous activist than to gesture toward the complete irrelevance of identity. To put it another way, I would argue that Rtmark's activism is finally less about sexy "secret agents" than about a radically restricted idea of what an agent might be. In fact, it points to a whole new sense of what a term like "post-identity" might mean. To understand what that definition is, we will have to look at one more Rtmark project, an attack on copyright that they called *Deconstructing Beck*.

Post-Identity

Deconstructing Beck was a CD issued in 1998 by an Rtmark-funded organization entitled Illegal Art. The CD consisted of 13 songs that sampled, parodied, and altered Beck's music, most notably in a track that broke Beck's "Jackass" into 2500 pieces and then rearranged them.[7] Like the "rogue websites," the CD was intended to raise questions about definitions of intellectual property and about the fuzziness of the line between legal and illegal appropriation of cultural products in an era in which these products are endlessly adapted, re-presented, and recycled, not least by artists like Beck himself. In a sense, such a project was inevitable for Rtmark, if only because it enacted the pun that forms the organization's name, the transformation of corporate products (® and ™) into "art." This rationale was articulated in the press release announcing the event by Philo T. Farnsworth (the pseudonym of the anonymous Dartmouth student who was the spokesman for the organization): "Corporations invade our lives with product but forbid us to use it—in our art, or in any way they don't want. This just doesn't make sense" (Rtmark, "Rtmark Finds Bucks").[8]

A complete examination of copyright law and of the ideology underlying it is beyond the scope of this paper, particularly given the legal and philosophical complications ushered in by the advent of digital technologies. Nonetheless, we can make some provisional assertions. The concept of copyright arose at precisely the point that technology (the printing press) and nascent capitalism made the large-scale reproduction and distribution of intellectual products possible. Not entirely coincidentally, this was also the point at which modern notions of the bourgeois subject evolved out of capitalism. Thus, as Celia Lury points out, the conceptual foundation of copyright is the emergence of the modern notion of the author as an expressive and possessive individual, as both the creator of a unique product through the form of his or her expression and its owner (23-26).[9] So what, then, is Illegal Art protesting? Debora Halbert's scholarly analysis of recent developments in copyright law can help us to answer that question. Over the past 100 years, Halbert notes, the majority of copyrights have migrated out of the hands of creative individuals and have become the property of large corporations. Moreover, although copyright law was originally intended to strike a balance between private ownership of a work and the "public good," defined as public access to and use of the work, extensive lobbying and litigation by corporations such as Disney have led to a continual legislative and juridical expansion of copyright protection (142). Increasing restrictions of the notion of Fair Use, and the Supreme Court's January 2003 ruling upholding the constitutionality of the Sonny Bono Copyright Term Extension Act (1998), which extended copyright by another twenty years, are only two examples.[10]

One conclusion that Halbert draws from this is remarkably similar to the perspective taken by Illegal Art. The continual expansion of copyright, she argues, makes the exchange of familiar cultural symbols increasingly difficult for the average individual, particularly since such symbols tend to be the property of the corporations who own the mass media and who thus also maintain a virtual monopoly on the public circulation of cultural symbols to begin with. This is what "Farnsworth" means when he says that "corporations invade our lives with product but forbid us to use it" (Halbert 147-148). Moreover, Halbert argues that the concept of the "public good" has undergone a subtle juridical revision so that it is now increasingly understood in privatized terms, as the value of protecting profits in order to stimulate creative activity. "Public good" has come to mean "private protection" of the owner rather than free use by the public (145). The end result is a capitalization of copyright that creates differential access to cultural material. Rich artists, like P. Diddy, can afford to sample legally; most artists cannot. None of this has been lost on culture jammers and aesthetico-activists. In fact, the best summary of Halbert's analysis may very well be the explanation of the purpose of *Deconstructing Beck* that was offered by Steev Hise as webmaster of detritus.net, which agreed to direct market the CD on the Internet: "Copyright laws are too restrictive, and they're counterintuitive. These laws in their present form are there just to funnel money to corporations, not to protect artists. As artists we need to fight that" (Rtmark, "Rtmark Finds Bucks").

Thus, one possible interpretation of *Deconstructing Beck* is that it asserts the value of the unique individual against the "inhuman" corporation, of personal free expression rather than the corporate pursuit of profits. Certainly, this is how Milo Miles, the reviewer for Salon.com, understood the project when he noted that the point of its attack on copyright is "to allow any schlub in his basement with the proper equipment to cut, paste, and manipulate whatever sounds he needs into his dream. You listen to certain snatches of music so much, you own them with your interpretation, whether you can afford to legally sample them or not" (4). Yet what is striking here is that the individual assumed by "Farnsworth" or Hise or Miles is precisely not the self-coherent, creative identity assumed by copyright law. If Halbert's scholarly response to the problem is finally to argue that all works are really intertextual and that, in any case, the "author" is a fictional construct of copyright law itself (123-124; 148), both the activists and Miles seem to have unconsciously assimilated the perspective that underlies her arguments. For Miles, the artist/individual is now implicitly seen as a bricoleur whose "dream" is always already simply a recombination of the cultural products that have "invaded" his life and in which he has been immersed since birth. It is only in this Althusserian sense that ownership could be seen to derive from interpretation rather than creation since the expressive individual is now understood not as unique but as shaped by cultural forces and products that he can only disassemble and recombine. Another way to put this is that it only takes a moment or two of reflection on Miles' argument in terms of what it implies about ownership of, say, *The Great Gatsby* to realize how far it is in its assumptions from the older notion of authorial identity underlying copyright, not to mention the idea of the self-coherent Enlightenment subject on which that conception is grounded.

At this point it seems important to make clear that I am not unsympathetic to Rtmark/Illegal Art's interrogation of copyright or to the assumptions about identity underlying it. In fact, it is precisely their reworking of those assumptions that can point us toward a definition of what post-identity might be, a term I will now attempt, finally, to define. To begin that definition, I want to take the "post" in "post-identity" as having the same sense that it does in words like "poststructuralism," meaning something that both assumes and transcends the original entity (i.e., structuralism, identity). In this sense it would be opposed to "post" as it's used in such formulations as "postwar" or even "postfeminism," which assume that the original entity is finished or discarded so that the term "post" is intended to signal the entirely new entity that comes after this dividing line. "Post-Identity," I'm arguing, then, would not be "what we are after we discard the concept of identity" but rather how identity is conceived in an era in which the expansion of communications technologies, the growth of global capital, academic critiques of identity and identity politics, and the proliferation of simulation effects have increasingly rendered our earlier assumptions about the self-coherence and uniqueness of individual identity suspect.

At this point, it will hardly be surprising if I suggest that Rtmark and the subculture that it represents might help us to figure out what "post-identity" might be. First of all, as I've already indicated, Rtmark does not completely discard the concept of identity but rather uses it strategically, as in the case of Dr. Andreas Bilbauer, WTO spokesman (or, more subtly, in the instance of Juan, which invokes a fictional identity primarily to create a certain sentimental or sympathetic effect in the consumer). At the same time, as I've also suggested, Rtmark's stress on anonymity, on imposture, and on the individual as a sort of bricolage of contemporary culture suggests the irrelevance of individual identity. And, although Rtmark could be read as celebrating the plasticity of postmodern identity or the potential for self-fashioning as a political strategy, when you take their political interventions as a whole, those interpretations don't finally seem adequate explanations of the assumptions underlying Rtmark's anarcho-activism. To put it another way, I suspect that they see Madonna's endless permutations as somewhat beside the point.

Goodbye Norma Rae

Although Rtmark has not yet fully articulated this position, I think we need to see Rtmark's activism, and the definition of post-identity that it entails, not in terms of persons (who perform actions) but in terms of the acts themselves. It is the acts that constitute an "opposition" that must itself be rethought, seen not as a fixed state (of mind, of identity) but, like a corporation, as a "posthuman force." In this sense, Rtmark's activism reverses one of the central effects of Enlightenment humanism identified by Foucault, the implantation of identity, which is seen most clearly in the shift from thinking about sexuality as a series of actions available to anyone to a conception of sexual identity (heterosexual, homosexual) that defines the essence of the person (*History of Sexuality* 42-44). In the current era, then, Rtmark's activism reflects a re-exteriorization of this implantation, the abandonment or irrelevance of a sense of psychological or "personal" depth in favor of a focus on the project itself. Thus, Rtmark's projects are a series of actions that do not derive from or depend on the actor's individual identity (anyone can pretend to be a Walmart greeter or put cards in the pockets of clothing), and their importance as actions is not primarily as an expression of the "self." Moreover, since they are anonymous, the primary function of such actions is not to define the actor's identity (as an activist or as an eco-feminist or as . . .) but rather to effect a political goal or exert a certain political pressure. No matter how undertaking an Rtmark project may cause you to see yourself, that self-definition is, at best, a side effect that is only tangentially related to the point of the project.

As such, the concept of "viral activism" takes on an additional significance when we consider the activist. With typical prescience, Andrew Ross, meditating in 1990 on the conscious extension of viral metaphors from the AIDS crisis to the information security issues that arose from the introduction of the first computer "viruses" in the late 1980s, provides a useful discussion of the metaphor. Biological viruses, Ross notes, do not reflect a teleology or a purpose, although our inherent desire for significance leads us to describe viruses such as HIV almost invariably in anthropomorphic terms that imply a certain agency (4). By the same token, Ross argues, we should be "wary of attributing a teleology/intentionality to [computer] worms and viruses which can be ascribed only, and, in most instances, speculatively, to their authors" (3). To put it another way, the actual functioning of viruses, both biological and cybernetic, can thus be said to represent the dissemination of (genetic or computer-coded) information without an agent.[11] The logic of Rtmark, which stresses the act rather than the identity of the actor, suggests that "viral" is an entirely apt trope for an activism that focuses primarily on the replication of information, for an activism after identity.

Not surprisingly, then, if we return to Rtmark's implicit understanding of the direct target of its projects, which is almost always the consumer rather than a corporation itself, we can now see that the consumer is conceived in similar but inverted terms. If one of the strategies of other types of activism is to attempt to turn the spectators or audience into activists too, Rtmark largely abandons this approach. Instead, Rtmark's underlying assumptions about the consumer as the (pedagogical) focus of the activism radically alter and restrict earlier conceptions of that identity. In effect, if the activist is now seen as precisely active, as a series of actions, Rtmark implicitly (re)defines consumption as an essentially passive process. Whether we are speaking of goods themselves, or of corporate marketing strategies, or even of the "truthful content" disseminated by Rtmark, in this view the consumer is understood primarily as a recipient (of commodities, of ideas) produced by others. Even the merest glance back at Marx, who sees both buyer and seller as agents and as essentially equal during the act of commodity exchange before they are both effaced by the commodity fetish, suggests how radically Rtmark reworks the idea of consumption and how rigidly its projects implicitly divide and distribute the roles of actor and audience. Thus, in considering the impact of Rtmark's projects, even if we suppose that the consumer, now the recipient of new information, might implicitly be expected to act, to do something on the basis of that information, whether it be to decide not to buy the product or to write to his or her representative in Congress or to answer opinion polls in a different way, the exact vector of any such behavior, at least insofar as Rtmark imagines it, can only be, precisely, implicit. If a clear course of political action were outlined for the consumer, he or she would cease to be a consumer in the sense in which Rtmark understands the concept.[12]

This is, of course, because the individual identity of the consumer or of the audience for Rtmark's projects is also irrelevant. The point is not simply that he or she is implicitly conceived simply as a locus of cultural images and ideas, as a "schlub in the basement" if you will, but that, after identity, the radicalization of the unique individual is not really the point. As the very notion that identity is a sort of cultural bricolage suggests, the audience for Rtmark's projects is conceived primarily as a conduit for information, for new and more accurate ideas about corporate activities, and the goal is primarily to promote discussion. As Jen Liu puts it: "Everybody talks about [a project], bringing each piece to fruition" (4). The reason that this discussion can be considered "fruition" is that the real target of Rtmark's actions is always, finally, the corporations themselves. Thus, the point of any particular political action is to bring enough attention to bear on certain corporate activities that it forces a mutation in the corporation's behavior, ideally in a more benign direction. As Kalle Lasn puts it, the aim is to produce an alteration in the corporation's "genetic code" (Lasn 157-158; see also Pickerel 8). As such, the ultimate Rtmark project would seem to be the following: "Distribute devices . . . that let you turn any bicycle into a printing, street writing device that prints as you ride. This project needs investment to transform more bikes, and print and distribute plans" (Rtmark, "New Projects"). Endlessly adaptable, since the message can be easily changed, and requiring very little initial outlay and minimal effort on the part of the "activist," this idea is the perfect illustration of Rtmark's ethos. It is also the perfect illustration of an activism that does not rely on identity to accomplish its purposes. It does not matter who is riding the bikes, nor is it important who reads the messages, as long as someone does. The crucial thing is that the message is written.

Post-Identity Politics

Finally, then, we might ask what message there is for academics in Rtmark's post-identity activism itself, beyond providing them with possible diversions for their rare moments of spare time. In other words, what implications does Rtmark have for the critique of identity, always already a political question, which leads to the organization of conferences and special issues of journals on the very topic of post-identity? A complete answer to that question would take another essay if not several books, but, for now, I would like to focus on one possibility. If the critique of identity and identity politics has produced so much discussion in the past ten or fifteen years, this is not because the deconstruction of the idea of the humanist subject needed to be endlessly repeated. Instead, of course, the ongoing analysis of identity categories has stemmed from the recognition (often the lived recognition of those doing the analysis) that not all such categories have an equal share of social or political power. As I've already suggested, the general thrust of such work has been to stress the artificiality of the categories and then, often, to turn to the possibilities for manipulating the plasticity of postmodern identity in ways that resignify those categories and thus, ideally, begin to rectify social inequality.

While this strategy may very well have a certain political efficacy, just as insisting on the validity of identity categories in order to argue for civil rights in juridical and governmental contexts does, it is nonetheless true that the academic critique of identity is still hopelessly fixated on identity itself. What we might learn from Rtmark is an additional political approach, an approach that might genuinely be called a "post-identity politics," which would retain identity categories only to the extent that they still function as the basis for oppression, but which would move beyond them as a site for pursuing political action or creating social change. For change, Rtmark suggests, can come from the dissemination of information and the altering of public perceptions regardless of who the actors or the audience are. In any case, it might be time to turn our attention from analyses of the inadequacies of identity, and instead to address the specific social inequalities that are the underlying reason for those analyses in the first place. In short, what Rtmark implicitly tells us is that we need to focus on activism rather than on identity. Despite a lot of sulking in the ivory tower about the oppressiveness of power, that is something that I'm not sure we've quite yet realized.

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Notes

1. The now classic essay defining culture jamming is Mark Dery's "Culture Jamming: Hacking, Slashing and Sniping in the Empire of Signs." Originally published in 1993 as Pamphlet #25 in the Open Magazine Pamphlet Series, it has been extensively circulated on the Internet and is available at Dery's own website, *Mark Dery's Pyrotechnic Insanitarium.* Dery takes the phrase "semiological guerrilla warfare" from Umberto Eco. For an overview of culture jamming activities, see *Sniggle.net: The Culture Jammer's Encyclopedia.*

2. The website of the Billboard Liberation Front can be found at http://www.billboardliberation.com. Lasn defines a "meme" as a basic unit of cultural information such as an advertising slogan or an image. "Meme warfare" thus involves countering commercial images or ideas with a "metameme," a meme that both repositions a corporate meme and invokes a larger critique of corporate culture. One of the metamemes identified by Lasn is "True Cost," which calls attention to the ecological and human costs of a product beyond its sale price (Lasn 123-127). See also Wendi Pickerel, Helena Jorgensen, and Lance Bennett's interview with Lasn (1-2). In addition to the magazine, Adbusters also maintains a website, *Adbusters Culture Jammers Headquarters* (http://www.adbusters.org). The international online headquarters of Whirlmart can be found at http://www.breathingplanet.net/whirl. For the website of a sample chapter, that of Northeastern Pennsylvania, see: http://www.watermelonpunch.com/whirl.

3. Mark Dery and Kalle Lasn identify similar genealogies for the overall subculture, including: detournement, the resituation of aesthetic objects in new contexts, which Greil Marcus identified as one of the strategic practices of the Situationist International Movement; the "cut up" technique advocated by William Burroughs; the politicized pranks pulled by the Yippies (members of the "Youth International Party," most notably Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin) in the late 1960s, such as running Pigasus, a pig, for President of the United States and throwing dollar bills from the visitors' gallery at the New York Stock Exchange; and the punk movement of the 1970s (Dery 10; Lasn 100-105). For an investigation of the links between culture jamming and Burroughs' work, see Tietchen; for an account of Yippie activities, see Rubin's *Do It!*

4. Rtmark features "mutual funds," groupings of projects organized around certain themes, such as the Education Fund ("focusing on the corporatization of the educational system") or the Health Fund (focusing on the health care industry). While some of these funds do, in fact, feature "celebrity (activist) sponsors" who act as "managers," I suspect that the names of most of them, for example Rick Prelinger, would be unfamiliar to the general public.

5. In subsequent correspondence, "Bilbauer" made explicit that the aim of his speech was to uncover some of the implications of WTO policies: "At this conference we hoped to examine [the WTO] 'party line' through repackaging in a clearer and more carefully delineated fashion, for the sake of more lucid examination

and a greater awareness of 'issue extremes' for use in more politic descriptions—those intended for the consumption of larger blocs of the consuming public" (The Yes Men, "The WTO Speaks"). Given Dr. Bilbauer's prose style, one wonders how successful his attempt at clarity actually was.

6. The academic literature on this is so extensive that a complete list of citations would be longer than this essay itself. For a sample illustration of this line of argument, see Elizabeth Meese and Sandy Huss, "Staging the Erotic." In a similar but substantially more abstract argument, Todd Tietchen, approaching the issue from a Lacanian perspective, suggests that the resignifying practices of the culture jammer open the possibility for the individual's "return" to a subject position prior to the Symbolic Order (120-123).

7. The project derived its inspiration from one of the seminal events in the history of culture jamming, the collage band Negativland's release of a single in 1991 entitled "U2" that extensively sampled U2's "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For," with similar intentions and results. In fact, Dery credits Negativland with coining the phrase "culture jamming" (10). It is not entirely surprising that *Deconstructing Beck* was eventually re-released by Negativland's own label, Seeland, and that Negativland agreed to work with Rtmark and Illegal Art to put out an entire "Deconstructing" series (Rtmark, "Rtmark Announces New Partnership"). Negativland's website, which contains extensive resources on intellectual property issues, can be found at http://www.negativland.com.

8. The real Philo T. Farnsworth (1906-1971), the inventor of the cold cathode ray tube, is sometimes credited with being "The Father of Television."

9. See also Coombe (77). These analyses are based, of course, on Michel Foucault's classic essay, "What Is an Author?"

10. Lawrence Lessig, the Stanford law professor who argued the challenge to the CTEA before the Supreme Court in *Eldred v. Ashcroft*, provides a comprehensible summary of the issues involved in the case in "Copyright Law and Roasted Pig." One example of the erosion of Fair Use is the rise of technological and legal efforts to prevent copying or sharing of copyrighted material by the purchaser, a practice that has traditionally been considered legal under the Fair Use doctrine (Naughton).

11. Interestingly enough, one of the major debates in contemporary virology is whether viruses qualify as a form of "life" (Cann 1-3).

12. Although Kalle Lasn's *Culture Jam* seems designed precisely to convince its readers to become culture jammers, his interview with Pickerel et al. makes clear that the focus of Adbusters' logo campaigns and actions themselves is primarily to "break some people" out of their "media-consumer trances" and to provoke corporations rather than to create more activists (Pickerel 12-14).

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