# On “EUROPE – Love it or leave it. Beware, niggers: LUTHER BLISSETT is around”

Florian Cramer (with one paragraph intertextually plagiarized from Julia Kristeva)

These two small flyers, reproduced here in their original A6 size, were anonymously mailed to me around 1996, at the height of the Luther Blissett Project’s activities. If I remember correctly, they were sent from the UK, but I didn’t keep the envelope. It’s impossible to tell whether they were a prank, a provocation, an experiment, or a genuine extreme-right political statement.

The Italian Luther Blissett Project operated unambiguously within the radical left. Its actors had collectively adopted the name of a Black soccer player in response to the racist abuse he received from fans during the season he played for A.C. Milan. Nevertheless, the Project had limited control over its politics, since Luther Blissett, like Karen Eliot and Monty Cantsin before him, was a name that anyone could adopt and use for any purpose.

In the late 1980s, Karen Eliot had been defined as

“a name that refers to an individual human being who can be anyone. The name is fixed, the people using it aren’t. The purpose of many different people using the same name is to create a situation for which no one in particular is responsible and to practically examine western philosophical notions of identity, individuality, originality, value and truth.”

This text was published in SMILE, a (predominantly Neoist) zine that anyone could publish. SMILE was defined, around the same time but in a different publication, as:

“a name chosen by Monty Cantsin to refer to an international magazine of multiple origins. The name is fixed, the type of magazines using it aren’t. The purpose of many different magazines using the same name is to experiment with a situation for which no one in particular is responsible.”

The creation of a “situation for which no one in particular is responsible” logically extended to the Luther Blissett Project, despite its unambiguous political position. These projects were radical experiments in giving up control and seeing whatever might happen, not only aesthetically, as in John Cage’s indeterministic musical scores and other aleatoric art practices, but also politically, socially, epistemologically, and ontologically.

While open-endedness and the removal of control were characteristic of experimental and countercultural movements such as international Fluxus, Mail Art, and post-punk DIY cultures (including their zines and cassette tape labels), I would argue that those experiments rarely reached existential levels. Their removal of control rarely transcended aesthetic experience and remained limited to the temporal and spatial confines of an individual piece or performance. Exceptions included George Maciunas’s Fluxus Island (1969) and various – sometimes dubious and traumatizing – commune experiments, such as the 1970 Monte Capanno commune of David Zack and his San Jose State College students. Their historical and spiritual predecessors include the Monte Verità commune in early 20th-century Switzerland, which was closely interconnected with the Zurich Dada movement, and the 19th-century Höllriegelskreuth commune, founded by the artist and life reformer Karl Wilhelm Diefenbach. Zack coined the multiple name “Monty Cantsin” in 1978. From the beginning, Monty Cantsin, SMILE, Karen Eliot, and Luther Blissett were simultaneously conceptual – with the multiple names functioning as linguistic scores or instruction codes – and existential experiments. (Although the existential aspect and physical adoption of the name were intentionally deemphasized in Karen Eliot and Luther Blissett to avoid identifying the names being with specific individuals.)

Giving up control of a situation or discourse on an aesthetic, epistemological, and ontological level ultimately means giving up control over its politics. However, this is not simply an anti-censorship, libertarian “anything goes” principle of giving room to any voice, ideology, or aesthetic. The latter was the laissez-faire “hippie” attitude in Mail Art since the early 1970s. On the contrary, even censorship and a “Festival of Censorship” were promoted within Neoism and in SMILE magazines signed Karen Eliot. The aim of creating “a situation for which no one in particular is responsible” did not negate power, but acknowledge it, always including the possibility of internal disruption and contradiction. In other words, the principle of a *situation for which no one in particular is responsible* always included the possibility of negating and canceling anything, including this principle itself. Rather than being a means of inclusion, Neoist multiple names boiled down to a means of exclusivity, since they demanded their bearers to embrace and live extreme contradictions. Neoism thus invited conflict into itself: “WE WANT WAR WITH YOU. JOIN US,” to quote a SMILE issue published by Monty Cantsin and Karen Eliot in 1986.

To illustrate the difference between laissez-faire and uncontrolled experimental situations with an example: antisemitic caricatures published in a Mail Art magazine because of its free speech ethos (such as in a 1975 issue of Anna Banana’s VILE; similar examples exist in 1980s punk zines) do not reflect the position of all contributors, and will not be part of their portfolios and cvs. However, they would have if everyone had participated as Karen Eliot.

From Cagean composition to Mail Art, the less radical (“hippie”) approach of laissez-faire, “indeterminacy” and “open participation” generally aligns with general systems theory and liberal philosophies of the open society (Popper) and spontaneous order (Hayek), even where these practices were ostensibly anarchist. A piece like *4’33”* remains safely framed in time and space. The poetics of such ‘open works’ (Eco) are self-stabilizing, governed by the invisible hand of self-organizing dynamics. In the terminology of general system theory, they strive toward “flow equilibrium.” In contrast, multiple identity projects are self-destabilizing and quite literally out of control.

This logic, however, is not simply one of transgression or freedom to saying or doing anything. Rather, it is one of transgression giving itself a law, such as that of acting under a shared multiple name. This contrasts with the pseudo-transgression found in typical “radical,” “countercultural,” and “avant-garde” movements. Seeing themselves as “subversive”, “revolutionary,” and “against the system,” these movements operate according to a principle of law dialectically mirrored in its transgression. They end up affirming “the system” negatively. In contrast, multiple name projects amount to a logic, epistemology, ontology and operating system of sustained, non-exclusive opposites.

Therefore, the racist flyers signed by Karen Eliot and Luther Blissett were always a potential, if not predictable outcome of the epistemological-existential experimenting with “identity, individuality, originality, value and truth.” From the beginning, these statements could be factored into the combinatorics of the “creation of a situation for which no one in particular is responsible.” The flyers may even have been created solely to make this point, similar to the Neoist postcard and audio cassette tape edition “PROPAGANDA” published by Monty Cantsin in West Berlin in 1986, which featured the swastika flag of the National Socialist Party of Germany on its cover. Alternatively, their purpose might have been simply transgression for transgression’s own sake, such as in the parallel subculture of Industrial Music, in which fascist imagery and ideas were routinely used – by some actors (such as Boyd Rice and Jean-Marc Vivenza), not even ironically.

Admittedly, viewing multiple name projects as radical, if not extremist, onto-epistemological experiments is my perspective and that of a few people with whom I collaborated closely in these projects. It is not shared by all participants, since Neoism, the Luther Blissett Project, and their various offshoots were characterized by conflicting agendas:

1. transgression as an end in itself – especially in early Canadian Neoism, but also in all other multiple name projects, and in many other subcultures, particularly from the 1960s to 1990s;
2. ‘mind game’ experimentation (to reuse a term by Neoist tENTATIVELY, a cONVENIENCE) with individuality, originality, value, and truth – especially in the Krononautic Society, the first U.S. American collective that joined Neoism, as well as in late-1980s Neoist offshoots such as PRAXIS, Dialectical Immaterialism and Western Cell Division, but also in all other multiple name projects;
3. ‘culture jamming’ agitprop – especially in the Luther Blissett Project, but also in all other multiple name projects.

Often, Neoism, Karen Eliot, and Luther Blissett were all three of these things at the same time.

In any case, bearing a multiple name implied personal, political, social and epistemological risks: the risk of being identified with Monty Cantsins, Karen Eliots and Luther Blissetts who might be ironic, non-ironic or just temporary hypothetical racists and fascists or – questioning “value and truth” – occultists, holocaust deniers, flat earthers, or takers of any other so-called “lunatic fringe” position, at least for the time of some highly speculative public action or other manifestation.

Many Western European left-wing agitprop political activists who affiliated with the Luther Blissett Project in the late 1990s were unaware of this aspect. Neither were they aware of the political-ideological-philosophical ambiguities, and sometimes abysses, of the larger countercultural context in which multiple name were, at least partly, situated, or to which they closely related. The full spectrum of these countercultures is documented in Ivan Stang’s 1988 book “High Weirdness by Mail” whose “inclusion of entries for white supremacist groups in the book caused his name to be mentioned by those groups as a possible target for retaliation,” according to Wikipedia’s article on the book. Other sources include the 1980s/1990s review zine “Factsheet Five,” the early 1990s book anthologies “Rapid Eye,” the “Pranks” issue #11 of RE/Search Publications (published in 1988 and a major inspiration for the Luther Blissett Project, whose list of contributors includes Boyd Rice), the 1987 anthology “Apocalypse Culture” that deliberately mixed libertarian, fascist and occultist texts, and the 1987 “U.S.A.” issue of Semiotext(e) with its, quote, “scores of personal and classified ads, each one with a box-number or address, to connect YOU with the edges of the USA – Anarchists, unidentified flying leftists, neo-pagans, secessionists, the lunatic fringe of survivalism, cults, foreign agents, mad bombers, ban-the-bombers, nudists, monarchists, children’s liberation, tax resisters, zero-workers [...].” All of these books had overlapping contributors.

With the Alt-Right, “QAnon,” “sovereign citizens” (in Germany: “Reichsbürger,” in the Netherlands: “autonomen / soevereinen”), esoteric Covid-19 deniers, flat earthers and Neoreactionary accelerationists of the 2010s and 2020s, some of these impulses ended up in the extreme right, eventually spilled over to Western Europe, and became mainstream under diverse extreme-right governments. Much of their source code is documented in the above books. Luther Blissett’s novel 1999 “Q” even became, against its own intentions, a blueprint for the QAnon mythology.

With their unpredictable dynamics, multiple name projects are long-term incompatible with controlled environments such as academia and curated art. In these settings, they would be considered irresponsible, akin to a chemist mixing random ingredients in a lab or a restaurant chef inviting all guests to bring their own ingredients and throw them into the communal pot. (Such a “potluck” was considered for an edition of the Berlin Open Source culture conference and festival Wizards of OS in 2004, but ultimately dismissed for safety reasons. These are also pressing issues in the newly institutionalized field of artistic research which needs to define artistic research ethics vis-a-vis existing “risky” practices in, among others, performance, participatory and bio art. Both examples illustrate why multiple name projects go beyond, and end up being incompatible to, Open Source culture and institutional artistic research.)

Only recently, contemporary art has taken similar risks with open and at least not fully controllable situations in highly institutional settings. Examples include ruangrupa’s documenta fifteen, with (among others) Taring Padi’s controversial agitprop banners painted by anonymous contributors during public participation sessions. From a Neoist perspective, the resulting issues, conflicts and scandals were not surprising; all the more so since this project was in the public spotlight, unlike Monty Cantsin, Karen Eliot, and Luther Blissett in the past.