

I'M NOBODY! HOW ARE YOU?

MARCO GIORDANO



I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you – Nobody – too?
Then there's a pair of us!
Don't tell! they'd advertise – you know!

How dreary – to be – Somebody!
How public – like a Frog –
To tell one's name – the livelong June –
To an admiring Bog!

Emily Dickinson



PUBLIC LIKE A FROG

Pepe the Frog has died on May the 6th, 2017.

Laid to rest in an open casket, his *Boy's Club* friends gather round to mourn. In a sort of post-mortem baptism, Brett, Andy and Landwolf pour out an alcoholic liquid which splashes onto his amphibian face. In the following and last cartoon bubble, they sadly remember their expired bud while drinking the remaining whiskey from a flask.

A good boy who became bad by hanging out with the wrong crowds (Nationalists, Alt-Right members, Nazi's, Trump supporters), Pepe The Frog was born as a comic character and grew to become a meme.[1]

His creator, Matt Furie, was forced to commit a parricide in the public square as to put an end to Pepe's pain, stuck in the quicksand of an ethical bog from which he could not escape. The frog's failure could lead us firstly to reflect on the power of the images—that are capable of acting as humans. Secondly, we are lead to reflect upon the responsibility and the consequential weight of being a public figure.

THEY'D ADVERTISE - YOU KNOW

Being a public persona is often hard, and entails a constant control of self-display. We act as editors of ourselves, struggling with social media in a perpetual attempt to build up the perfect representation and fulfil the social expectations of an indeterminate audience. We are caught in a crossfire, as Claire Bishop noticed in *Out of Body* (2016): "we are perpetually surveilled and we perpetually self-perform for this gaze."

This show-off is part of the vaster field of public performativity. According to Jean-François Lyotard (*The Post-modern Condition*, 1984), performativity is a mode of legitimization and a demonstration of power that marks capitalism (arguably amplified by neoliberalism). It is inextricably connected to efficiency and with measurable results. In our high-performance society, subjectivity must also be proficient, fitting within the western canon of good behaviour.

This is why we sometimes feel the need to distance ourselves and impersonate a "nobody," the same nobody presented by Emily Dickinson in her poem *I'm Nobody! Who are you?*[2] At first glance, the poetry may seem express a dichotomy between two entities: a private and selfless nobody and a loud and egotistical somebody. But the first stanza is a story of two nobodies who want to protect their identities. These two nobodies mistrust the crowded somebody, a lust and bright public sphere wherein the risk is to end up like Pepe: when the "nobody Pepe" was virally transformed in a "somebody-in-chief," his identity was mangled, stretched, shifted and then banished from the users' community.

HOW DREARY TO BE SOMEBODY

I'm Nobody! How are you? by Marco Giordano lies between and plays with the boundaries of nobody and somebody, private and public—two spheres that today are evermore gloomy.

Embracing a performative action far from auto-proclamation and closer to vulnerability and self-exposure, Giordano crosses Glasgow with a car while broadcasting a poem written by him. A megaphone installed on the car's roof emits the voices of poets Michael Pedersen and Iona Lee as they read the text. The poem is also printed on flyers which Giordano hands out to pedestrians he encounters on the ride. Recalling the tools and the imaginary associated with propaganda, the artist puts forward the proposal of a countermovement: an "anti-propaganda," where the vulnerability behind being in the public is unveiled, and where there is nobody left to persuade. The *polis*—not only in physical space but also in the public realm of a political community, according to Hannah Arendt—is the platform upon which the action is carried out: an open space free from the regularization and exclusivity of many indoor art spaces. Driving across the city, Giordano seeks to reach his public so as to invert the classic itinerary of the artistic pilgrimage that sees the public moves towards the art event.

The noise emitted may be associated with the croaking of the frog, and as such, with the necessity of being loud in order to affirm our presence.

THERE IS A PAIR OF US

The theme of noise is also present in the poem written by Giordano. It is a text that feeds off and pushes forward Dickinson's considerations and idioms. The subject of the poem calls upon "more attention, more exposure, more judgement." He expresses the need to be publicized and, most of all, liked. Soon it is introduced an internal addressee, a "you" with which the narrative voice starts to breathe and dance.

The first shared action symbolizes the most spontaneous transformation process acted out by humans, from the external to the internal and vice versa. "I" and "you" breathe the same air, inhaling the oxygen exhaled by the other, in a reciprocal biological penetration.

The latter is a communion between two monads that need to stick together in order to find energy. They start a natural and sensual dance of afflatus: "show me your tongue, inflate me, absorb me, our own light, our own moment, inside ourselves, inside me inside you, us." This movement pulsates and grows until it breaks down, propagating throughout the environment as if the two subjects were sound waves—part of everything, part of nothing.

In this case, the self-performance is not subjected to the Bishopian public gaze, neither to the optimisation and productivity of the show-off as depicted by Lyotard. The two nobodies, together, are bodies (flesh, breath, humors) that compose a more-than-somebody. A realm of being far from the general rules and substantially aimless, where virtuality is kept out, the social choreography is mutated in a *pas de deux*, and Pepe could come back to croak again.

[1] Pepe The Frog is an anthropomorphic frog with a humanoid body. He is the main character of the comic *Boy's Club* (2005) by Matt Furie and from 2015 became an internet meme popular on 4chan and Tumblr for his sad, smug and angry faces. During the 2016 United States presidential election, the meme was connected to Donald Trump's campaign.

[2] The first line has become one of the most popular of quotes and is often cited as the title of the poem, but in reality none of Emily Dickinson's poems are titled. It was written in 1861 and first published in *Poems, Series 2* (1891).

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