

A Response to Maggie MacAulay, Kendra Magnusson, Christopher Schiffmann, Jennifer Hamm, and Arlen Kasdorf

Andy Stewart
Furman University

In their article “From Souvenir to Social Movement: PostSecret, Art, and Politics,” Maggie MacAulay, Kendra Magnusson, Christopher Schiffmann, Jennifer Hamm, and Arlen Kasdorf explore and explain what they believe are the reasons that PostSecret is impotent as a catalyst for political and artistic upheaval. They argue that PostSecret “both resists and reproduces dominant discourses in writing, art, and culture”—including the divisions between artist and audience, high and low culture, and avant-garde and kitsch culture—and that this simultaneous containment and resistance of the status quo preempts the project’s ability to produce meaningful social change (91). Because PostSecret actually reaffirms the existing hierarchies that it attempts to deconstruct and creates a “culture of secrecy” and anonymity for its artists/producers, they claim, it exposes itself to “commercial co-optation that ultimately fails to challenge and subvert oppressive social structures” (98).

While the argument can be made that PostSecret fails to cultivate significant political activism, as MacAulay et al. suggest, this failure should not be attributed to the anonymity of the artists/producers that is intrinsic to the project’s infrastructure. Indeed, MacAulay et al. do not deny “the power of PostSecret to raise awareness,” acknowledging the thousands of dollars that it has helped raise in support of the National Suicide Prevention Hotline (97). However, they do openly question the viability of PostSecret as a successful and subversive social movement. They state that PostSecret “brings the promise of artistic and political change,” but that its “techniques of anonymity are what prevent it from fulfilling these larger goals” (98). Anonymity, they claim, “prevents audience intervention,” and this “becomes problematic in that the lack of intervention leaves both the audience and the artist disengaged from collective action” (92). Later, MacAulay et al. attempt to justify this assertion about the nature of anonymity by citing “other social justice movements such as civil rights, feminism, and LGBT, which required politicized identities to confront racism, sexism, and heterosexism” (97).

MacAulay et al.’s notion that anonymity “precludes public action,” however, is somewhat slippery (98). In *Masks, Transformations, and Paradox*, David Napier notes the power of anonymity as a tool for social transformation, stating, “[Masks] provide a medium of exploring formal boundaries and a means of investigating the problems that appearances pose in the experience of change” (xxiii). So while MacAulay et al., through their evocation of the civil rights, feminism, and LGBT movements, do prove that the success of a social movement may indeed rely upon “politicized identities,” they fail to mention movements that are successful due, in part, to activist anonymity.

In *Zapatistas: The Chiapas Revolt and What It Means for Radical Politics*, Mihalis Mentinis discusses the importance of anonymity to the Zapatista Army for National Liberation, an organi-

zation in the southeastern Mexican state of Chiapas that combats the oppression and exploitation of the area's indigenous population. Mentinis states that "secrecy is endemic to the indigenous conduct in the Chiapas," and that social conduct is therefore "surrounded by anxiety, suspicion, and fear of each other" (168–69). Accordingly, he believes, "people try to minimize [this fear and suspicion] by developing homogenous patterns of behavior . . . which hide individual expression that could reveal the hidden parts of one's self," and acknowledges that this fear has a tendency to "prevent transformative activity and keep things the way they are" (169). To Mentinis, this is why the Zapatistas' use of "pasamontañas"—a knit cap worn to cover the face and mask the identity of the wearer—is central to their success as a social movement. The anonymity provided by these masks is the means through which the Zapatistas are able to construct and perform transgressive and transformative social activity, "by hiding that part of the body most clearly connected to one's identity, by no longer existing as individuals" (170–71). "By transcending the individual identity," Mentinis argues, "they become a revolutionary collective force, a force more powerful than the individual entities. . . . It is now that they can challenge not only 'the bad government' but also their own 'secret'" (171–72).

The anonymity of the artists/contributors to PostSecret, therefore, may admittedly prevent audience intervention on an individual, case-by-case basis. However, the project's failure to inspire collective action lies not in the anonymity it provides, but in its lack of a sustainable, goal-oriented community to analyze, criticize, and act upon the injustices revealed by the secrets. MacAulay et al.'s use of the PostSecret Web site as evidence of the project's co-optation by mainstream media ignores that the site is the largest advertisement-free blog in the world, as stated at the bottom of its Web page, and is an effective means of freely distributing secrets for comment and criticism. And while Warren's traveling exhibition and lectures, like the PostSecret site, do indeed promote conversation about injustice and inequality, these conversations are geographically limited and difficult to maintain beyond the specific context of the exhibition or lecture. What seems to be required for success, then, is a permanent, structured coalition created towards discussion, analysis, and—ultimately—action.

Thus, PostSecret could reasonably be predicted to thrive as a social movement, despite—or perhaps because of—the anonymity that it provides to the artist/contributor, using Pierre Levy's notion of the "knowledge community." In *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, Henry Jenkins explains a Levian knowledge community as an online collective in which "people harness their individual expertise towards shared goals and objectives," because "no one knows everything, everyone knows something, [and] all knowledge resides in humanity" (26–27). Through these knowledge communities, he predicts, "new kinds of political power will emerge which will operate alongside and sometimes directly challenge the hegemony of the nation-state or the economic might of corporate capitalism." According to Jenkins, "[Levy] sees the sharing of knowledge around the world as the best way of breaking down divisions and suspicions that currently shape international relations" (29).

Problematically, the closest entity we have to a Levian knowledge community surrounding PostSecret is the PostSecret Community, which provides users with a listing of PostSecret events, news, FAQs, and—most importantly—a forum where they can discuss the weekly secrets. The comments, anecdotes, and interpretations found on the PostSecret Community forums exemplify Levy's notion that everyone is in possession of relevant, practical information that can be contributed to a society-wide conversation. However, where the PostSecret Community fails as a

knowledge community capable of challenging and breaking down social divisions is in its lack of a collectively defined set of goals and objectives. Rather than a true knowledge community, then, the PostSecret Community is a mere federation of peoples, able to recognize the various flaws in society but only demonstrating the potential to be mobilized towards cooperative action.

Therefore, the potential for PostSecret to become an effective social movement seems to lie in the establishment of a persistent, organized, goal-oriented knowledge community that can “question, critique, challenge, negate, subvert, undermine, unmask, undo, transgress, interrupt, overturn, dismantle, problematize, resist, exceed, [and] disrupt” (Ralph Shain, qtd. in MacAulay et al. 98). Furthermore, an individual could reasonably and profitably contribute to the cause of a knowledge community without revealing his or her identity to the community, or without having his or her identity realized by the community. Because an online knowledge community does not inherently undermine the establishment of personal anonymity—as Peter Steiner notes in his cartoon for the *New Yorker*, “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog” (61)—anonymity is in no way a barrier to social activism. Thus, PostSecret’s ability to fulfill its promise of facilitating political change relies not on individual identification or established identity, but rather on the establishment of collective intelligence in the pursuit of shared goals and objectives.

Works Cited

- Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York UP, 2006. Print.
- Levy, Pierre. *Collective Intelligence: Mankind’s Emerging World in Cyberspace*. Cambridge: Perseus, 1997. Print.
- MacAulay, Maggie, Kendra Magnusson, Christopher Schiffmann, Jennifer Hamm, and Arlen Kasdorf. “From Souvenir to Social Movement: PostSecret, Art, and Politics.” *Young Scholars in Writing: Undergraduate Research in Writing and Rhetoric* 6 (2009): 91–99. Print.
- Mentinis, Mihalīs. *Zapatistas: The Chiapas Revolt and What It Means for Radical Politics*. London: Pluto, 2006. Print.
- Napier, David. *Masks, Transformations, and Paradox*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1986. Print.
- Steiner, Peter. “On the Internet, Nobody Knows You’re a Dog.” Cartoon. *New Yorker* 5 July 1993: 61. Print.