

Artist Statement The Name Game

“Are we to count them like votes? And is the correctness of names the voice of the majority? Are we to say of whichever sort there are most, those are the true ones?”
—Plato, *Cratylus*

The act of naming is fundamental to human existence. An individual *inherits* a name, is *given* a name, and *makes* a name for herself. An object or idea must be named, if only for the sake of reference. Naming ceremonies, such as the christening of ships, and renaming ceremonies, as when a bride takes her groom’s surname, are important rituals. We are constantly labelling, organizing, and sorting our surroundings. Nearly as old as the practice of naming are the questions surrounding the names we’ve assigned: What *is* in a name?

What do things that share a name have in common? What makes a chair a chair? What properties of the thing exist in the name? Or is the name a purely conceptual tag, linking the object to a heritage of thought and connotation? These are queries that have grown up around the practice of naming, and there are no convenient answers, especially with regards to the names given to individuals.

One site of naming that is readily accessible and increasingly revealing is the act of naming computer files. Every file in a computer system must have a name for the computer to refer to. Computers, of course, have no sense of connotation and do not rely on figurative associations to remember and coordinate names. To them, a complex serial number is just as easy to work with as a name like “John” or “Mary.” However, computers also have little use for most of the things we want them to store for us.

Images in a family photo album may be captioned, described, but are generally not formally named. Images in a computer system must be named, and they are named not so they “make sense” to the computer, but so they “make sense” to us. Image files are named according to a specific situation and need, but are then often made available to the public at large and open to usage in myriad ways. At this point, the accuracy and appropriateness of the name comes into question. When the image is removed from its initial context and usage, it becomes an interesting set of pixels attached to a word. The interaction between the visual data and the conceptual term is a playground of meaning, trace of a cognitive path, site of linguistic deconstruction.

This is the space in which The Name Game operates. By collecting thousands of images from global public computer networks, we can examine those that share a name to find interesting congruencies, conflicts, and connotations. In this way we gain a deeper understanding of the names we assign, the words we use.

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April 2004
Buffalo, NY