

**Underground Testing:
Name-Altering Practices as Probes in Electronic Music**

Giovanni Formilan
University of Edinburgh

and

David Stark
University of Warwick
and Columbia University

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Please address all correspondence to David Stark, Centre for Interdisciplinary Methodologies, University of Warwick, Social Science Bldg, Coventry CV4 7AL. Research for this paper was supported by a grant from the European Research Council no. 695256, BLINDSPOT project. For their comments, criticisms, and suggestions we are grateful to Jonathan Bach, Paul DiMaggio, Elena Esposito, Michael Guggenheim, Shamus Kahn, Celia Lury, Josh Whitford, and the participants at the Put to the Test Workshop (Warwick in London, December 2018). Our thanks also to the participants at the CODES Seminar (Center on Organizational Innovation, Columbia University) where we first presented this work.

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Giovanni Formilan and David Stark

ABSTRACT

Name-altering practices are common in many creative fields – pen names in literature, stage names in the performing arts, aliases in music. More than just reflecting artistic habits or responding to the need for distinctive brands, these practices can also serve as test devices to probe, validate, and guide the artists' active participation in a cultural movement. At the same time, they constitute a powerful probe to negotiate the boundaries of a subculture, especially when its features are threatened by appropriation from the mass-oriented culture. Drawing evidence from electronic music, a field where name-altering practices proliferate, we outline dynamics of pseudonymity, polyonymy, and anonymity that surround the use of aliases. We argue that name-altering practices are both a tool artists use to probe the creative environment and a device to recursively put one's creative participation to the test. In the context of creative subcultures, name-altering practices constitute a subtle but effective form of underground testing.

INTRODUCTION

Experiments are vital for science; tests are important for engineering and technology. Trials matter for the legal system but also for race cars, track stars, and new pharmaceuticals. Athletes try out for Olympic teams but so do aspirants for summer theatre. We try on clothes, and sometimes roles while online dating. This paper examines tests and probes in electronic music.

Most generally, artistic production can be considered as a matter of *Tttrial and Eror* (to borrow from the title of a 2002 EP by the German artist Apparat; Discogs 2018a). Even more to the point, musicians test themselves and their audiences, and probe artistic environments. On the one hand, artists' music and leadership role are put to the test. Not settled once and for all, their creative production and the ability to perform onstage are tested repeatedly in ongoing trials. On the other hand, as key participants in a subcultural community (Muggleton 2000; Muggleton and Weinzierl 2003; Redhead 1997; Thornton 1996), artists also put the boundaries of the electronic music community to the test – sometimes in open opposition to corporate-driven pop music and commercial EDM (electronic dance music).

Our subjects are artists who aspire to, or already make, an impact on electronic music. The key probe that we analyse is a set of name-altering practices, most notably the use of aliases by these artists. Electronic music artists are not unique in creating aliases (McCartney 2017; Milohnić 2017; Phillips and Kim 2009), but they are at an extreme in their use: of the more than 30 artists we interviewed, none had fewer than two aliases, many had three or more, and some techno artists have more than a dozen aliases.

Of course, the names under which artists record, release, and perform their music are only one instance among the several practices artists use to discover their role, reinforce their participation in the artistic community, and assess the evolving state of the subcultural scene (Hebdige 1979; Muggleton 2000; Redhead 1997; Thornton 1996). Practices pertaining to the domain of technology (e.g., forms of production, types of recording equipment, technologies for live performance; Hennion 1997, 2009; Prior 2008), of aesthetics (e.g., style and sound choices, modes of communication; Becker 1984; Born 2010), and of network relations (e.g., affiliations with recording companies, preference for small or large venues, industry engagement at different levels; Caves 2000; Prior 2018) play a decisive role as well. As we will see, however, name-altering practices provide the artists with a flexible probe they can use to test electronic music at multiple levels.

In electronic music, we outline three primary name-altering practices adopted by artists: *pseudonymity*, that is, the adoption of an alias, more or less divergent from the artist's given name; *polyonymy*, that is, the use of multiple aliases, over time or simultaneously, to release and perform music; and *anonymity*, which can take the form of resolute concealment behind an alias, or complete dismissal of names. It is worth noting that these name-altering practices are not mutually exclusive nor strictly sequential. For instance, anonymity can be pursued by combining pseudonymity with constant avoidance of public appearance. Or polyonymy can include not only music published under multiple pseudonyms, but also records released under an artist's given name. At the same time, the

adoption of an alias (pseudonymity) does not always precede anonymity, and the latter can appear at any moment in one's career.

Name-altering practices put the artist to the test. Elaborated further with examples below, we observe that the alias is a device that allows the exploration of one's role and potentiality, while keeping responsibility at a distance. Being connected to the artist but, at the same time, distinguished from her, the alias has a double character which fuels the testing dynamics. On the one hand, the alias has enough distance from the artist, making possible its observation from the outside, and its modification, updating, or even denial. On the other hand, the alias is an expressive and expressed part of the artist, and therefore the test outcome of its use can be projected back onto the artist.

In terms of self-exploration, the alias enables the artist to test aspects of artistic identity. In this frame, when we say that aliases can be used to put artistic identities to the test, it is less a test of character than of using a character as a test. As a character, an alias allows the artist to try out aspects of her creativity. In many such trials the relationship of artist to alias occurs within the context of a third – the audience. But it is important to understand that some tests do not simply present the alias or the music in a situation in which audiences (including critics) are meant to be the final judges. Instead, in some cases, rather than testing the artist's creative role, it is the audience that is put to the test. In this sense, name-altering practices do not only test the artist directly, but also probe the artistic community and its boundaries.

Like in most subcultures (Hebdige 1979), electronic music developed its cultural boundaries around rituals and tacit codes that set the dividing line between itself and mass consumer culture (Kühn 2015; Lange and Buerkner 2012; Schüßler and Sydow 2013; St John 2006; Till 2006). Rave parties during the late Eighties and early Nineties were quintessentially rituals that challenged the centrality of masculinity, authenticity, and meaningfulness of pop culture (from classical music to rock, Hennion 1997; from corporations to private properties) through the illegal occupation of public and private areas and the creation of temporary spaces centred around the body and the dancing experience (Garcia 2015; Gilbert and Pearson 1999). Even today, attendees to now-legal EDM festivals try to preserve the so-called PLUR ideology (peace, love, unity, respect) which characterised the early raving culture (Chen 2014).

In recent decades, electronic music has experienced an impressive growth, becoming a mass-consumption commodity that generates huge profits for its promoters (O'Malley Greenburg 2013; Rys 2016). In this situation, when the original traits of electronic music are jeopardised by threats of assimilation into the dominant culture (Marcuse 1964), rituals and codes become crucial in contention about the grounding values of the community. These dynamics are played out in the language of "underground". Far from having a clear definition, the notion of underground retains fluid and esoteric elements that make what is "underground" inaccessible to those not "in the know" (Muggleton 2000; Muggleton and Weinzierl 2003; Redhead 1997; Thornton 1996). References to underground abound in the current discourse on electronic music, yet the concept remains contested. The boundaries of what is underground and, in opposition, what is commercial (or "mainstream," in the scene's language) are not only continuously shifting over time, but they are also differently

interpreted by the field's participants. Perhaps the most emblematic example is that of Tiësto, an international superstar DJ that performs pop-oriented electronic music in very commercial venues, but who insists he remained an underground artist.

I feel like I am a commercial underground DJ because I never had that commercial appeal, have like top-10 hits. All my music is known in subcultures, it's known in colleges, or on dance festivals. Everyone knows Tiësto, but I had never like 20 hits like Beyonce had, for example. (Tiësto, interviewed on ABC-Nightline 2018)

The notion of underground is largely used in the scene to oppose the commercial, mass-oriented, corporate-driven music business, where the artist is consecrated as a popular icon, and her music often comes at a secondary position. In place of offering a sharp definition, we argue that the notion of underground is of analytic interest precisely because its meanings and the boundaries to which it refers are highly contested by the participants themselves. It is in such a context that name-altering practices can be seen as a form of "underground testing".

As we shall see, in opposing the commercial consumer culture that dilutes the significance of the "adversarial qualities" (Moore 2005:229) of electronic music, artists can use diverse name-altering practices to test the state-of-the-art of the subcultural scene, and initiate its re-negotiation. Whereas pop culture rewards clear-cut identities that can be branded and distributed more easily to a large audience, electronic music artists embrace polyonymy to oppose easy categorisation and commercialisation (Hofer 2006). Whereas pop culture values personality and faces, electronic music artists disappear into anonymity to restate the centrality of the sound and the dance experience (Hennion 2009). In both situations, the integrity of the audience's membership to the electronic music culture is put to the test. How far can an artist push genre experimentation before the audience gets upset? Do people value the music or do they look to the artist's stardom? Through name-altering practices, the artist can probe the boundaries of the community, and eventually contribute to its reshaping.

In his essay on the sociology of testing, Trevor Pinch (1993) highlights *performance* and *negotiation* as key aspects of testing. According to Pinch, these characteristics remain valid across various typologies of testing – and they apply even more deeply to name-altering practices in electronic music.

First, "Many tests are *performances* that can be witnessed by others" (Pinch 1993:26; italics in the original). Tests usually happen in public, where witnesses can validate the results of the test, the protocols used, and the overall quality. Tests do not happen in the realm of the private, but in the public sphere.

Name-altering practices are performances in many senses. They perform an indexical function in respect to the artist-audience relation, enabling – or impeding – reference, and thereby constituting the basis for communication. In addition, name-altering practices perform a semiotic function, in that a name can be used to convey a message or a specific position (for instance, the name of the Detroit-based DJ group Underground Resistance has

a clear political trait). Ultimately, the visible result of name-altering practices, the alias, is the one that actually performs – on stage and on records. On stage, the named character brings its own story, its own style, its own creative approach. On records, it defines the sound, the music, it performs a classificatory function.

Second, “the outcome of tests can be treated as a matter of politics and social negotiation” (Pinch 1993:33). The test, witnessed by others, is often a site of social negotiation. Both the technical specifics of the test and its results are not universal truths, but their reality is instead negotiated at the encountering among a variety of stakes and needs put forward by different groups.

Name-altering practices are also sites of negotiation, in a form that partially exceeds Pinch’s suggestion. On the one hand, the community-level result of a name-altering practice (for instance, the audience’s reaction to a new alias) is negotiated in many ways – in clubs, by critics on specialised magazines, in promoter-organiser relations. In some cases, when the anonymity of an artist need to be preserved absolutely, negotiation also happens at a legal level, with trademarked pseudonyms, manufactured documents, and anonymous booking (Pite 2015). On the other hand, when the boundaries of the electronic music culture need to be re-established, the process of social negotiation between “underground” and “mainstream” proceeds itself through testing. It is not uncommon, in electronic music forums and magazine, to find discussions speculating about the reasons that drove an artist to adopt a new alias. We encountered several situations where forum participants motivated the adoption of a new alias as an artist’s way to communicate his or her attachment to electronic music’s original roots – especially when the artist in question was currently connected to the mass consumer circuit. In some cases, the discussion about an artist’s name change becomes even more salient than the music released under that name.

From the perspective of the artist, a new alias is then a visible action that sets up a moment of re-negotiation of what it means to be an electronic music artist. The artist’s need for such a re-negotiation precedes the name-altering practice. Sent out to the scene, the alias demands feedback and prompts a debate that, ultimately, re-establish or re-defines her and her audience’s membership to the subcultural movement. While testing is always a site of negotiation, sometimes negotiation itself can become a site of testing – a moment where probes are sent out to collect information to proceed with the negotiation. Name-altering practices, as we will see, function as powerful probes and tests whenever the grounding cultural features of electronic music are put at risk.

We make no claim that our case is typical of aliases and testing in creative fields. But by displaying naming practices in such acute form, our case provides a distinctive laboratory to study dynamics that are important for the production of creativity as departure from established schemata: creative projects as the result of processes of testing, and creative projects as themselves tests to probe the audience, the community, the subcultural values. In this dynamic, name-altering practices therefore represents the visible surface of a more subtle, impalpable set of ongoing testing.

We build our argument drawing from more than 30 in-depth conversations we had with

electronic music artists, primarily in Berlin and New York¹. Beside conducting formal interviews, we also attended a number of festivals, club events, studio sessions, and rehearsals to extend our comprehension and knowledge of the electronic music culture. We augment our first-hand insights with interviews and commentaries that appeared on dedicated magazines on electronic music (among others, Resident Advisors, DJ TechTool, DJmag, xlr8r, Pitchfork, Discogs, Rolling Stone). And we benefitted also from historical and sociological accounts of electronic music, some of them largely considered the most authoritative sources of knowledge on the field (notably, Gilbert and Pearson 1999; Hesmondhalgh 1998; Nelson 2015; Pinch and Trocco 2009; Reynolds 1998; Thornton 1996).

To study the functioning of name-altering practices in electronic music, we pose three broad questions about the use of aliases. First, why do artists take on a different name (the alias) when they enter the electronic music scene? Second, how do artists cope with the dilemma of stylistic experimentation in a market that rewards consistent identities? Third, how do artists navigate the tension between the subcultural logic that values music and the economic logic that rewards visible personalities?

To address these questions, we structure the body of the paper in three empirical sections. In each section, we discuss the dynamics of aliases together with the evolution of electronic music scene. Purposefully, each section's title is posed as juxtaposition, in which a salient characteristic of the culture is addressed in parallel with a salient question confronting the artist at different moments in his or her career.

In the first section, we present the origins of electronic music as a subcultural phenomenon, and outline the nature of alias as a means for preserving anonymity while acquiring visibility. We claim that the alias is the individual counterpart of the field's collective challenge to the dominant culture, a tool to test the extent to which a previously unknown entity can raise its creative voice.

In the second part, we grapple with the multiplication of subgenres in electronic music and the corresponding multiplication of artists' aliases. We highlight how audience's expectations influence the adoption of new aliases, which not only allows artists to test their expressive freedom, but also to test aspects of electronic music culture. Such multiplication of aliases, however, can also become a source of tension, especially when popularity enters the picture. This puts the artist to a further test.

In the third section, we then discuss the commodification of electronic music in the recent years, and show how name-altering practices can serve as a viable way to respond to this change. We argue that artists that aim to return to electronic music as subcultural practice can step back into anonymity. In doing this, they push name-altering practices to the extreme (no-name alteration) in order to restate their "underground" attitude towards electronic music in opposition to the consumer culture. At the same time, they also ultimately test whether the reception of their music depends on the music itself or on the popularity already gained.

¹ We assigned pseudonyms to all the given names and the aliases of the artists quoted here.

Although the structure of the paper may suggest a temporal evolution, the phases discussed in the three sections should not be thought as temporarily consecutive moments in one's career, but rather as critical moments (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999; Guggenheim and Potthast 2011; Hutter and Stark 2015) that can variously happen throughout one's creative journey.

ELECTRONIC MUSIC RISES | CAN I BE AN ARTIST?

The Subcultural Milieu

Electronic music was born as a new form of approaching classical music through technology (Cross 1968; Nelson 2015). It did not, however, remain in the music academies but entered pop culture in 1974 when the Düsseldorf-based band Kraftwerk released *Autobahn*, the LP that introduced a general audience to the sound of synthesizers and drum machines. Recalling the noise of factories and machineries of the industrial era, it was not surprising that electronic music found a fertile environment in the Rust Belt of the United States. Techno music developed in Detroit, house music in Chicago (Reynolds 1998). From there, it re-crossed the Atlantic, to the UK where it shaped the Second Summer of Love during the Thatcher era (Gilbert and Pearson 1999); and to Berlin where it captured the dissatisfaction of the working class and the imagination of ethnic and sexual minorities to turn abandoned factories and warehouses into places for collective catharsis in the period of economic collapse in the 1990s following the fall of the Berlin Wall (Bader and Scharenberg 2010).

For many years, electronic music has been uniquely a subterranean scene. In Detroit and Chicago during the early Eighties, techno and house dancing nights were times and places devoted to the abandonment of social rules, roles, and expectations (Gilbert and Pearson 1999; Reynolds 1998). People were allowed to get rid of all the constraints imposed on them by social norms, and in doing this were supported by the industrial aesthetics of the location and the perceptual distortions induced by drugs (Sanders 2005). Black people in Chicago and working-class kids in Detroit could let the burden of social position outside the dancing space, and get lost in the sound texture. In the UK, in London but also – and especially – in remote locations in the countryside (Gilbert and Pearson 1999), the rave scene of the late Eighties and early Nineties was able to bring together the aesthetics of punk with the suburban minorities and relax the cultural clash existing among distinct – and in some cases opposite – factions (Hesmondhalgh 1997). Illegally gathered in open spaces and obscure rooms, people coming from social strata as diverse as soccer hooligans and gender minorities danced together at the same pulse. In Berlin, electronic music became the sound of the critical reunification. People from the East and the West merged in obscure warehouses and abandoned bunkers filled with fog-machine smoke and backlight stroboscope flashes.

As members of a movement living on the fringe of legality and dominant moralism, techno ravers needed ways to safeguard their privacy and legal identity. The Berliner Berghain/Panorama Bar club, one of the most iconic venues for techno music, has a no-photo policy still today. Talking with Will Coldwell from *The Guardian*, the

ethnomusicologist Luis-Manuel Garcia discussed privacy protection in terms of freedom of exploration.

Clubbers don't need to worry about there being a record of their time there, allowing you to explore your identity or adopt a different one altogether without fear of anyone taking you up on it on the outside. (Luis-Manuel Garcia, in Coldwell 2016)

The taboo associated with the Eighties' rave parties, and with the contemporary club culture, surely played a role in spreading practices of pseudonymity among the artists. "20 years ago, the term 'rave' was a drug-fuelled warehouse with sweat dripping from the ceilings" (Peros 2014). But name-altering practices were also related to political engagement, an attempt to refrain from the commercial branding of artists' faces and to categorically refuse the corporate world – like in the case of Detroit-based DJ groups Scan 7 and Underground Resistance, whose members cover their faces with black kerchiefs, caps and balaclavas (Pite 2015).

Pseudonymity: testing a role

However, more than just a way to comply with the aesthetics of a subculture and to engage politically, the peculiar anonymity offered by aliases also enabled aspiring artists to test the feasibility – and eventual limitations – of their active participation to the field.

An alias preserved the privacy of the DJ who had a 4-6am set on Sunday and then went to work as a bank teller on Monday. For the DJ who was a day-time janitor, on the other side, an alias provided a way to create a character that could escape an otherwise ordinary lifestyle. How could a person with a menial job, with an everyday life deeply grounded in the logic of the dominant society, surge to the role of charismatic leader that sets the beat for a large night-long dancing crowd?

I look for a DJ who doesn't just play what is popular, but takes risks with his music selection, takes the crowd on a musical journey and, most importantly, can read a room. Knowing how to pick up a room that's a little bit down or being able to bring the vibe down in such a way you don't lose the crowd and then being able to take them back on a musical journey is a key skill for me. (producer and DJ Erik Morillo, in Jenkins 2017)

"Read a room". "Don't lose the crowd". "Take them back". As Maxime put it during a conversation we had in Berlin, the DJ needs a "strong character" to take on the audience and bring it to a dancing experience. A "larger than life" character that, most times, requires a detachment from the artist's personal story. In an interview, the German producer Sebastian Kramer stressed this point.

If you know where they're born, which school they went to, what they like to eat for breakfast, and then you listen to the same thing... It doesn't have the same power anymore. (Sebastian Kramer, in Pite 2015)

Ideally, some names are naturally more suited to larger-than-life characters. Looking at the list of artists that received a nomination as Best Live Act between 2008 and 2016 from the authoritative electronic music community Resident Advisor we find the following aliases:

- Plastikman, Robotman, El Guitaro, Prins Tomas, Dr. Kevorkian, Jack Da Ripper clearly point to a character that, already in its semantic, overcomes the limits of ordinary people;
- Motor City Drum Ensemble, The Panamax Project, Hyperdrive Inc., Black Jazz Consortium, The Underground Crew, and Desert Stormers leverage collective identities to convey authority;
- Acid Test, Floating Points, Creative Violence, Shellshock, Perpetuous Dreamer, and Deep State, Barricade, Wrong Copy, False, Superlova, Graphite evoke technical, emotional, material, or stylistic properties, making suggestions to the audience in the attempt to signalling a role that embodies a take on music, a creative attitude;
- DJ Nobu, DJ Stingray, DJ Antal, DJ Hell, DJ Limiter put the “DJ” tag before the name, setting the artistic role at a good distance from menial or white-collar jobs;
- many artists adopt idiosyncratic terms as aliases: Barem, Loxodrome, Simitli, Ratcapa, Blawan, Boddika, Jabberjaw are pure sound that give up any semantic while preserving the indexical function.

Being a leader is far from elementary, though. Unsure of her ability to take on the responsibility of leading the dance floor, and live up to that expectation, the artist needs to confront the audience and explore the limits of her role. Developed internally, the alias is projected out in the electronic music scene, an exploratory probe on a discovery mission. Probing the boundaries of the scene, the alias captures feedback signals that inform its own value, music, style. The alias is then a proper test market, where “experimental launchings of new products are intended to expose problems that otherwise would be undetected until full-scale introductions are underway” (Silk and Urban 1978:171). By actively wandering in the scene, the pseudonymous alias functions as a device to determine the feasibility of the artist’s participation in the scene, and the boundaries of that participation.

The probe nature of an alias, however, is not limited to novices. A role, a creative voice, is not found once and forever. Instead, since the goals of individuals develop and evolve over time, one’s role as artist can be rediscovered.

In 2014 Aphex Twin, the most famous alias of UK producer Richard D. James, released his long-awaited sixth studio album, *Syro*. Before releasing it, however, James was unsure of whether people still wanted to hear his music. Just some time before, he had already released hours of unpublished material via the streaming platform SoundCloud using a generic username (most probably, user18081971 or user48736353001; Discogs 2018b). As reported by Rolling Stone (Blistein 2015), however, James ended up rediscovering his role as (still) contemporary producer when a later fundraising campaign to access an Aphex Twin’s iconic but rare record was very successful.

That was really touching, and really sweet... And I'm getting a bit older. It's like, "Okay. People out there really, really want stuff off me, so I can't deny it. Let's put it out." (Richard D. James, in Blistein 2015)

By adopting an alias, artists test their connection to the music, their audience, their artistic idea. As time goes by, like in the case of Richard D. James, the tests can be used either to confirm a previous state (for instance, when the artist's role was accepted), or to probe the scene in search for a new type of connection to the music, the audience, the artistic ideas.

While the alias seems similar to the "sign-equipment which large numbers of performers can call their own for a short period of time" to perform a role on stage (Goffman 1959:14), it should however be thought of more precisely as an assemblage of provisional elements that are meant to test a role.

In fact, aliases are easy to adopt and abandon. Benjamin, a Berlin-based artist who performed under several aliases during the early years of his career, told us that his aliases made it possible for him to say "I can be every time someone else". Often, aliases have a provisional and aspirational nature. In search for an answer to the question "Can I be an artist?", the alias serves as a device to send test signals to both the artist and the scene, to probe the artist's position and the audience, to test creative ideas and the values of the subculture.

Pseudonymity: probing the environment

While pseudonymity is primarily a practice for self-discovery, it sometimes also serves as a probe to sound out the creative environment. Since its inception, electronic music challenged the way society was organised around the private and the demarcation of individual differences – private (and oppositional) in terms of economic consumption (poor/rich), job specialisation (worker/manager), community membership (black/white, straight/gay), geographical provenance (East/West), gender (Female/Male).

Reflecting on the techno challenge to gender binarism, for instance, Gilbert and Pearson (1999) noticed that "techno's asexuality might be seen as a deliberate strategy, a pursuit of neuter *jouissance* which seeks not simply to regress to a moment before the regulating discourses of sexuality took hold of our beings, but to go beyond them into an imagined cyborg future, a place where the fluidity of cyberspace is the medium for non/identity and the robot exoskeleton is the site of a constructable, engineerable, alterable androgynous corporeality" (Gilbert and Pearson 1999; italics in the original).

In setting up this challenge, electronic music substituted the individual with the collective, the body with the dancing crowd (St John 2006). Resonating with this, artists did not simply adopt name-altering practices of pseudonymity to test themselves – in absolute terms and in respect to their cultural environment. Instead, the creation of an alias was also a way to confront the community members with the emptiness of dominant binary approach grounded on categorisation and branding of names, faces, and bodies.

An extreme case – one that reminds of novelists George Sand and George Eliot – is the one of artist Tatiana Alvarez. The American artist took on the name of Matt Muset (performing on stage under the alias Musikillz) to cheat the gender stereotypes she faced at the beginning of her career when promoters were only concerned with her physical appearance and wanted her to dress up seductively. Retrospectively, she sees this move as a social experiment of reinventing herself.

I thought, “I need to be a guy, I need to look like a guy, I need to be the opposite of anything that’s sexy”. So I put on guy clothes and cut my nails. I didn’t want to cut my hair, so I used a wig. I am the right size for a guy, other than having hips and boobs. So I taped down my boobs using a sports bra that was too tight: it has to hurt a bit because that’s what affects your posture. The only way to really breathe is to keep it shallow. (de Bertodano 2015)

Alvarez not only created a character to face the world of commercialisation, she also invented a female alter ego to represent her (him?) as an agent. The two characters sustained each other. “I did almost everything by email. Also, when you’re dressed like a guy your body feels different. It hurts, which put me in a bitchy mood, which totally helped” (de Bertodano 2015). After about one year, Alvarez decided the test was over and her point was made. She now performs as Tatiana Alvarez, also temporarily known in the past as Matt Muset – also known as Musikillz.

THE SCENE DEVELOPS | CAN I DO SOMETHING ELSE?

Proliferating subgenres

Grounded on machine-produced sounds, electronic music developed since the beginning as a genre-recombinant genre (Formilan and Boari 2018). While Chicago-house took influences from Black culture-rooted funk, soul and rhythm-and-blues, UK jungle received the legacy of fast-speed punk music and mixed it with Caribbean elements. The variety of sub-genres, or styles, in electronic music is today impressive (McLeod 2001). House music, for instance, has at least the following recognised subgenres: Acid house, Ambient house, Balearic beat, Chicago house, Bass House, Deep house, Future house, Tropical house, Diva house, Electro house, Big room house, Complextro, Fidget house, Dutch house, Jungle Terror, Moombahton, Moombahcore, French house, Funky house, Garage house, Ghetto house, Ghettotech, Hardbag, Hard house, Hard dance, Hard NRG, Hip house, Italo house, Jazz house, Kidandali, Kwaito, Latin house, Microhouse, Minimal house, New beat, Outsider house, Progressive house, Rara tech, Tech house, Tribal house, Trival, Witch house².

Inevitably, the diffusion of technology and the Internet have exacerbated the multiplication of subgenres and sub-subgenres (Born 2005). Technology is not the only driver of the emergence of new subgenres, of course, but nonetheless it supports the artists in the

² This list has been retrieved from Wikipedia on November 2nd, 2018. Its presence on the online encyclopedia is a sign of how these subgenres are well-established in the scene.

development and introduction of unexpected sonic properties that might eventually be codified into a new genre category (McLeod 2001).

The variety of subgenres is also directly influenced by the uneven nature of creative production. Unconsciously or purposefully, artists might end up producing music that does not fit into the artistic voice they originally conceived. On the artist side, this demands the inauguration of a new project, perhaps under a new alias. During our conversation in Berlin, Maxime clarified on this aspect.

Let's say I'm using an alias. And I'll make a pile of tracks. But I look and say: *this* is definitely not *that*. This can't go with that alias. It's not necessarily that I chose a different identity and then made those tracks. More like open to a different influence. With a new alias you can get freedom of expression to get out of the style prison. (Maxime)

As a response to sometimes unpredictable creative journeys, artists articulate their artistic voice around multiple aliases. From being pseudonymous during the origins of their career – either because of little visibility, or because of conscious concealment – artists often move to a “polyonymous” situation, where multiple aliases can appear sequentially or simultaneously in one’s career. As the genre becomes more and more fragmented into multiple subgenres, so the artists can develop multiple names to participate in diverse contexts.

Multiple subgenres, multiple aliases

Given the extensive use of aliases in the electronic music scene, one might wonder why in New York’s “contemporary music scene” aliases do not play a significant role. New York’s new music is grounded on continuous experimentation and recombination of genres, but its artists do not use aliases. In our view, the motivations that prompt New York’s contemporary music artists to use only one name for different subgenres, and the motivations that lead electronic music artists to use different aliases for different subgenres are the same: both are grounded on audience’s expectations.

Audiences attending a contemporary music concert have an expectation for discontinuity: they have no problem hearing a chamber choir composition from an artist at one concert, and the same musician banging on cans at the next one. Actually, they would be surprised – and perhaps disappointed – if a John Zorn performance did not surprise. Their expectation is to be surprised, and they appreciate musicians who violate established genre categories.

Similarly, people attending a club whose poster announces a “minimal techno” event hold clear expectations regarding the type of music they are going to hear. “Progressive techno” or “minimal house” would frustrate them. They expect that the music performed will conform to the announced genre, subgenre, even sub-subgenre category. Similarities and differences depend, at least partially, on the different origins and characteristics of the two scenes.

New York's new music scene is promoted and sustained by expert audiences, composers, and performers (many of them conservatory-trained). In some ways, it represents an intellectual elite whose preference for experimental sounds also constitute a political claim. The audience of electronic music, by contrast, originally comprised social minorities and marginalised individuals who found in this electronic sound not only a place for everyday political engagement (Riley, Griffin, and Morey 2010) but also a new source of in-group identification (Hesmondhalgh 2008). So entangled with such subgroup identity politics, the electronic music scene in Berlin was more likely to go hand to hand with the fragmentation of sub-subgenres. For example, according to DJ and producer Ekrem with whom we talked in Berlin, the electronic music scene in Berlin is composed by mutually exclusive micro-scenes each gathering a specific social group (e.g., male and female straight, queer movement, male gay, female gay, transgender, LGBTQIs, ethnic minorities). Lacking a political component which in other genres is conveyed via lyrics, iconic characters, or educated audiences (such as in rock, pop music, contemporary music), electronic music is appropriated by different stakeholders who fill it with their idiosyncratic socio-political features.

Audience's expectations, combined with the unpredictable dynamics of individual creativity, put electronic music artists in a tense situation. Artists tend to avoid being categorised ("I leave the category game to other people", as our informant Javon put it in New York), but they know that genre differentiation is the basis for the economic functioning of the scene – clubs announce genre-based events, targeting very specific audiences and promoting a well-defined aesthetics. At least momentarily, polyonymy can thus resolve this tension, enabling the artist to pursue new sound directions and maintain her presence in micro-scenes.

Polyonymy: testing one's freedom

The multiplicity of aliases can be read also in a different way. While it can be a tool to differentiate one's creative output and target different audiences, a new alias is also a way to test the extent to which the artist can experiment with different genres without violating the expectations of her audience. Developing a recognisable link to a specific music style, the alias can become a box that constrains the means of expression available to the artist. With a new alias, though, the artist makes room for stylistic exploration without irremediably eroding the sound of another alias – and the popularity it eventually gained. In order to avoid the audience's quick dismissals of new sounds, the artist might keep a new alias detached from his or her legal name. Talking about artists introducing new aliases, Sebastian Kramer pointed out: "That's why, at least at the beginning, they aren't saying, Hey! It's me again! I'm doing something different!" (Sebastian Kramer, in Pite 2015).

In addition to test one's freedom of expression, a new alias also presents the audience with a test, questioning not only the listeners, but the functioning of the electronic music industry as a whole. In 2017, the American producer Porter Robinson (previously known also as Ekowraith and Antigon Moore) released his latest work under the new alias Virtual Self. Accompanying the release, he also published a promotional message that questioned the current state of now-commercial electronic music, and put electronic music fans to an awareness test.

Finally — and this might be the goal that’s dearest to me — [*the introduction of the new alias Virtual Self*] is to push electronic music in a different direction. As electronic music essentially converged with pop in 2016 (for the second time in the last 10 years, the other time being 2011), I think it’s pushed a lot of artists away from risk-taking and passion projects. In the last two years, for most artists, all they really had to do was compromise their style by like 30% and add a safe, inoffensive tropical vocal to have a chance at having a hit — and I think for many, that temptation was too much.

In my opinion, electronic music is at its best and its healthiest when new, exciting, unexpected things are happening. This is a genre that thrives on novelty. And to be totally clear, I don’t think that Virtual Self, early 2000s trance, or digital abstract art are the solution or the future at all. But!! I DO think this style is something unexpected, and something I’m uniquely poised to make, because I love it. And that’s the precedent I want to set, or at least the approach I want to remind other artists of. (Porter Robinson, quoted in Rafter 2018)

Creating a new alias, or changing it, is then a way to get rid of the constraints posed by single-alias situations. As an enabling device, the adoption of polyonymous configurations makes it possible to further test the boundaries of one’s creative production. A tool for discovery, polyonymy is a way to try on different creative voices, and try out new genres and styles. At the same time, polyonymy is also a device to question the scene and prompt other artists to persevere with genre experimentation.

Additionally, multiple aliases guarantee the exploration of an artist’s attitude towards music making. Brian, a New York-based four-alias artist, thinks about his different aliases as different personalities that, together, ensure him a certain distance from branding and constraints to creativity imposed by the logic of commerce.

It's my way of pushing back against branding... Because I struggle to identify myself as one thing and not another. I don't see the point in forcing myself, so I have a bunch of things going on and if people connect the dots, that's fine. If they don't that's fine too. (Pearl 2017)

Adopting a polyonymous configuration, artists leverage multiple aliases to effectively surf the contradictions of most creative industries (Caves 2000). The creative logic allows for (and even supports) boundaryless exploration throughout a variety of subgenres. The economic logic requires specialisation, recognisability, and authorship. The cultural logic values subcultural attitude and the aesthetics of anonymity. The creation and use of multiple aliases is then the individual response to these contradictions. Through multiple aliases, artists can simultaneously guarantee recognisable specialisation, anonymous aesthetics, and creative exploration. Polyonymy ultimately puts to the test the freedom promoted by electronic music: “Can I do something else?”

Polyonymy: alias as prison

Unfortunately, no pro comes without a contra. Artists with multiple aliases that experience critical and commercial acclaim under multiple names can face a challenging condition. When equally successful, multiple aliases can indeed become multiple prisons. As Maxime put it, the alias “is the escape from one prison. But in that a step to be lost again in another prison”. This aspect can put the artist in a demanding situation. Our informant Benjamin expressed the intimate difficulties imposed by separated aliases. His daily routine is punctuated by moments where he has to die and wake up Faxxe (one of his aliases). “I just want to do my thing”, he said, stressing the difficulties of being trapped into more than one successful character.

Facing success under multiple aliases, the artist loses the freedom of experimentation that was gained through the introduction of a new alias. Further experimentation would require additional aliases but, as Benjamin (aka Ben-J, aka Faxxe) noticed, multiple aliases may require intense efforts to be managed. In fact, from being indexical tags that point to an artist’s music, the aliases become a quick tool to classify subgenres, imprisoning the artist into categorical boxes.

Every artist has their own identity and sound, which is always evolving. If music is always evolving, how can an artist’s sound be classified? An artist shouldn’t fit into a genre, for they should be their own genre. This means that instead of classifying an artist by current trends, we should classify them by their individual sounds and identity. It’s that indescribable feeling you get after hearing a track for the first time which causes you to say “this sounds like a Derek May tune” instead of “this sounds like a post modern, Detroit influenced, down beat, up tempo, old school remix.” (Peros 2014)

As an alias becomes the substitute for a subgenre, the alias itself turns into a prison for the artist. When pseudonymity loses its aura of mystery, and polyonymy further complicates the picture, the practice of naming can then undergo a dramatic path. Popularity turns into a burden, and poses an ultimate challenge to the artist – a final test that, in some cases, becomes a test for the whole electronic music culture: “Is it still a subcultural movement?”

THE GENRE GOES COMMERCIAL | IS IT ABOUT ME, OR ABOUT MY POPULARITY?

Still a subculture?

Over the last decade, electronic music has become very popular. Elements of both its aesthetic and sonic properties have been absorbed and popularised by pop culture and mass-oriented business. The number of summer music festivals that progressively included electronic music artists in their line-ups is uncountable, and more and more festivals have been born with a special focus on electronic music. In this circuit, DJs are now the new rock stars (O’Malley Greenburg 2012). Some of them earn million dollars a year, perform worldwide at venues that require the audience to pay three-digit covers, collaborate with

pop artists on Billboard-awarded tracks, and fly on private jets from one dance floor to another, even during the same night (Millington 2017).

More local and music-focused scenes are not impermeable to this growing trend. Yet, some artists are not all comfortable with this situation.

I was around with people from the first underground last year [*according to Benjamin, there are three levels of the underground scene, plus the mainstream scene*]. [...] It was horrible, really horrible. Staying awake, waiting for ages, not seeing the most important person of my life. So, this is the reason why I know – and I can say honestly – I never want to reach that area of success. Because it's nothing I want. (Benjamin)

As artists become more and more popular, they are increasingly confronted with mass-audience expectations of visibility, not only on stage but also, inevitably, online – a dimension many artists feel not contributing to making good music.

I spent a lot of time in my early years in the music industry dicking about with my website and stuff like that, because I felt it was important, whereas I would have been better served by just focusing on making music... (unknown artist, in Taylor 2014)

[*Before the Internet*] it's not like we were listening to our new records in our flat and saying, uh, can you imagine who this guy is? We didn't ask questions like that! I didn't know who Octave One was. It was Octave One! Then later on came the name Burden Brothers, and even then it's just a name. (Sebastian Kramer, in Pite 2015)

The demand for visibility, combined with the constraints imposed by a popular name, poses a very critical question to the artist: is the music acclaimed because of its own worth, or because of its creator's popularity? From the perspective of artistic production, this suspicion puts the artist to the test. While pseudonymity was a practice to discover herself, and polyonymy a way to increase the channels to express creativity, the artist has ended up imprisoned within acclaimed commodities – her branded aliases. Electronic music, from being the result of an effort to leverage the sonic properties of technology, has now turned into a product for mass consumption – a condition many artists might not aspire to (Scott 1990).

In addition to questioning the reception of one's creative production, the popularisation of electronic music also erodes the aesthetics and values of a culture that developed in opposition to pop culture and corporate-driven consumption, where the artist's image is not second to her music. In a subculture hinging on anti-ego ideology and the centrality of sound, the artist then faces an individual-community dilemma: *How can I fulfil my desire for recognition, authorship and distinctiveness, and at the same time abandon my ego to remain loyal to the "underground" culture?*

Together, these questions represent a difficult challenge. How can an artist have a name, and yet have her music speak in her name? How can she be recognisable, distinctive, and invisible at the same time? How can she avoid to sell-out, and still keep on selling her music?

Put to the test by commercial requirements and demanding audiences, the artist can denounce the situation – and address the challenge – by putting her relationship to the music and to the audience itself to the test.

Anonymity: testing the relationship to music

In order to remove ego but retain authorial connection to the music, artists can use anonymity as a mask (Pizzorno 2010; Sassatelli 2019) – a camouflage that either hides the physical traits of the artist, or that conceals her whole identity. This move goes back to the cultural origins of electronic music, when artists remained indistinct in the flashing darkness of abandoned warehouses, or almost invisible during rave parties in the middle of UK's nowhere.

On October 19th, 2017, the American artist DVS-1 – real name Zak Khutoretsky – presented his Wall of Sound show at the Warehouse Elementenstraat in Amsterdam. The show featured a giant sound system that occupied the whole stage, while DJs played their records from the opposite, dark end of the room. The sound was the protagonist.

“Mad Mike Banks said if you put your face in front of the music, you’re putting your ego in front of it. We don’t want anyone to be paying attention to our ego, we want everyone to be paying attention to the music and the experience. ‘We shouldn’t be on stage,’ he continues. ‘We’re not a band. We’re a vessel for music. Get us out of the way, get rid of all that extra clutter and fill it with speakers!’” (DVS-1, interviewed in McCallum 2018)

In order to resolve the tension between the centrality of a name and the centrality of a sound, artists keep their names (or their aliases), but physically disappear from the place where electronic music is consumed – the club. This is a case of masking where the corporeality of the artist is completely anonymised – the artist could have any face, any body, any temperament. Appearance is not a locus of attention anymore. While authorship remains preserved, it is the sound that now has to speak in the artist’s name.

Masking anonymity can take also a more radical form. Instead of anonymising her physical presence, the artist can hide completely behind an alias. In this case, anonymity is not limited to faces and bodies, but extends to the whole identity of the person who goes by the alias. The case of Traumprinz is illustrative in this respect. Officially known also as Prince of Denmark, Dr. Sun, DJ Metatron, Prime Minister of Doom, and DJ Healer, Traumprinz is a German producer; yet the artist who bears all these names remains a mystery for the music scene (Discogs 2019). A similar case, recalled by the magazine DJbroadcast, is that of Burial, a UK producer whose identity has been a matter of speculation for long time.

Back in 2008, *Untrue* – the second album from ambient dubstep producer, Burial – was nominated for the prestigious Mercury Music Prize. The press ran into a slight problem though: nobody knew anything about him. The Sun's then showbiz editor, Gordon Smart, began a campaign to “out” him, claiming the mystery “threatened one of the biggest nights of the showbiz calendar”. (Negligible, perhaps, compared with the threat to his column inches.) When Burial became the bookie's favourite to win, what else were the tabloid purveyors of anti-news to write about? The music? (Pite 2015)

The effects of commercial popularisation, however, are not always forestalled by a mask. In some cases, artists become famous for being anonymous, acclaimed by commercial audiences and booked by popular venues for their masks. While in the case of Daft Punk, Marshmello, or Deadmau5 this outcome was reasonably searched for purposefully, in other cases the choice to remain anonymous becomes the object of commercialisation. The mask, originally an expression of loyalty to electronic music as a subculture that puts the music before the person, remains forcedly attached to the artist.

Kramer admits it was incredibly frustrating having his persona dismissed as a marketing gimmick, but acknowledges that it became one regardless of his intentions...The mask remains an integral part of the performance, but it's no longer sacred. It's “still there but I couldn't say I'm the same person who invented it. Time changed... and changed me.” (Pite 2015)

Anonymity: testing the relationship to audience

Instead of anonymising the person's corporeality, and thereby testing the artist's relationship to the music in the first place, anonymity can target the alias itself. Music is released with no reference to authorship. Anonymity, in this most radical form, reduces the question about the artist-audience relationship to its core: *Can I have an audience without a name?*

As Aydin explained to us during a conversation on his experience in running record stores in Berlin, anonymous records always have a section in the store's boxes.

The Berlin-based act [*ItaloJohnson*] don't wear masks, for starters, and don't have any social media to connect with their fans. Maintaining an air of mystery at all times, they let their finely-tuned tracks speak for themselves... The only way to identify their records is by squinting at a little handstamp in colored ink, or the catalog number in the record's runout. The rest is meant to be sorted out the dancefloor. (Weiss 2017)

The technology of music publishing comes to the aid in the form of the *white label*. A white label is a vinyl record with a white label glued on top of it – and sometimes, like in the case of ItaloJohnson's records, a graphic stamp. In most cases, no one can know who is its creator by simply looking at the label. Its whiteness blinds authorship, allowing the creature to be visible by making its creator invisible. In some cases, however, small stamps retain a

feeble trace of authorship, one that only authorised personnel can interpret – “A stamp is a stamp and a stamp is cool. And for that, I would keep stamping every fucking record.” (DJ act ItaloJohnson, in Weiss 2017)

Anonymous records have a long tradition in electronic music. By removing any reference to authorship, anonymity also constitutes a practice with high testing properties. It tests whether the music is worthy in itself; it questions whether the artist can have an audience without having a name – and if he is comfortable with that; it probes if the participants in the electronic music scene honestly share its subcultural, “underground” values.

In this latter respect, complete anonymity also opens up room for the re-negotiation of the boundaries between the artist and the field (Prior 2008). It brings music back to the centre of the experience, shooing away the commercialisation of names and faces, and discouraging the participation of inattentive audience in the subculture. During our conversation in Berlin, Javier (aka Maxwell) compared the average fan base to assayers of junk food.

When you enter the commercial side, the audience grows so you feel what the audience is expecting and actually it becomes part of what you do. But you always try to ignore it or frame it in a way that allows you to be completely open. [...] It is very hard to ignore it completely the fact that so many people are there. But I think that it comes down on what type of fans you have. If you have an average fan base that they will expect something similar to the previous record. But it is like kind of junk food. (Javier)

Anonymous records are thus a way to probe the environment and reframe the audience “in a way that allows you to be completely open”. Through anonymity, the original experience of electronic music can be restored, and the boundaries of the subcultural scene re-negotiated between the artist and the audience. In this process, the unnamed alias allows the artist to discover again the extent to which his or her active participation in the field is still worthy, and if the state-of-the-art cultural scene deserves the effort. Embracing anonymity, the artist can establish a mediated negotiation (Born 2011) with the subcultural milieu. Sent out as a probe, the anonymous artist tests the various interests at stake in the subculture, and probes unexplored directions for artistic intervention.

Anonymity, variously embedded also in pseudonymous and polyonymous practices, is therefore a powerful tool to establish and sustain the adversarial qualities of electronic music culture. Invisible from the surface, anonymity is then the ultimate underground testing.

CONCLUSIONS

Tests come in different form. Nuclear tests, pharmaceutical and medical tests, pregnancy tests, stress tests, psychological tests are all situations where an assemblage of technical and social elements gather together in order to confirm expectations, assay previsions, or discovery the expected and the unexpected. Tests are sociological in many forms, in that they either directly involve or exert effects on the society – the social structures, the forms

of interaction, the construction of shared meaning. As Trevor Pinch (1993) outlined, tests are sites of negotiation where multiple stakeholders, with different goals and motivations, intervene to assess the validity of the test.

In this contribution, we explored name-altering practices (the creation, adoption, and dismissal of aliases) as tests and probes electronic music artists use to put themselves to the test, and the test the cultural scene they participate in. Articulating name-altering practices in three distinct but interconnected configurations – pseudonymity, polyonymy, and anonymity – we outlined the several moments when aliases serve as tests and probes in shaping one's role and one's audience in a cultural scene.

(Quasi-)leadership role in a subcultural movement is not taken once and for all. The possibilities, limits, and responsibilities of a role have to be repeatedly tested in order to define and refine its boundaries. Additionally, the music culture itself needs to be tested, especially whenever its distinctive features are threatened by pop culture's appropriation.

Underground cultures need forms of underground testing. And, in this respect, name-altering practices in the form of pseudonymity, polyonymy, and anonymity represent subtle configurations of testing, the sizeable dimension of a subterranean probe.

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