



THE OPERATIONAL POLITICS OF “UNTITLED”: Naming Authority and Meaning Distribution in Modern and Contemporary Art

JIAQI LI ¹

jiaqi.li@my.cityu.edu.hk

¹City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

KEYWORDS

Untitled
Naming Authority
Titling Practices
Contemporary Art

ABSTRACT

“Untitled” is ubiquitous in modern and contemporary art, yet scholarship often treats it as a homogeneous category of openness or resistance. This article argues that “Untitled” is not an absence of naming but an operational strategy that redistributes naming authority. Through case studies of four artists, it identifies three interlocking mechanisms: semantic resistance, perceptual intensification, and institutional recoding. Within the third, it develops two concepts: deferred titling and naming authority transfer. “Untitled” thus redistributes rather than eliminates naming power, shifting authority from artists to institutions, markets, and audiences through distinct but related processes.

Received: 12/ 04 / 2026

Accepted: 25/ 05 / 2026

1. Introduction

Walk through the galleries of any major contemporary art museum, and one phrase appears with striking regularity on wall labels: “Untitled.” The works bearing this designation span decades, media, and movements, from Minimalist metal structures to Conceptual installations, from works addressing disease through candy spills to Neo-Expressionist canvases. The “Untitled” phenomenon will continue to evolve and develop within the art world, and this article aims to provide a systematic framework for understanding this phenomenon, from the perspective of naming authority, for the academic community. Scholarship predominantly treats “Untitled” as a signifier of openness, resistance, or postmodern irony, a category so broad that it obscures rather than illuminates the specific mechanisms at work in any given instance.

This article challenges that reading. The central argument advanced here is that “Untitled” functions not as the absence of naming but as an active operational strategy that redistributes naming authority. It operates through three interlocking mechanisms. Semantic resistance refuses narrative closure and interpretive specificity. Perceptual intensification redirects attention from language to material form and direct sensory engagement. Institutional recoding transforms the anti-institutional gesture into a recognisable marker of artistic seriousness and market value. Together, these mechanisms constitute what this article terms the operational politics of “Untitled”: naming is never neutral, never absent, and never entirely within any single agent’s control. The most straightforward illustration is that an artist who actively names their work “Untitled” and an artist who simply fails to name their work, with a gallery, museum, or posthumous attribution assigning “Untitled” later, are two fundamentally different situations.

Three questions structure the analysis. First, how does “Untitled” function as an operational naming tool rather than a naming absence? Second, what mechanisms does it employ to redistribute naming authority? Third, how do deferred titling and naming authority transfer explain the circulation of interpretive power among different parties in the art-world? These questions shift the analytical focus from what “Untitled” means to what it does operationally within art-world systems, following Bourdieu’s (1993) insight that the most consequential features of cultural production are often the least visible.

The empirical foundation is provided by four artists whose naming practices span different periods, movements, and institutional contexts. Judd represents parenthetical designation within the Minimalist tradition. Gonzalez-Torres represents strategic nominal suspension within participatory and politically engaged contemporary art. Basquiat represents market-driven displacement within Neo-Expressionism’s rapid rise to auction preeminence. Rego represents political displacement through curatorial and public discourse within figurative painting. This selection was made deliberately after careful consideration.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Titling History and Artist Motivations

In Western art history, pre-modern artworks were identified by subject matter, patron association, or location rather than by the kinds of specific designations now expected, and formal titles were uncommon. The emergence of the public museum in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, together with the growth of the auction market, transformed this situation. Museums required stable designations for cataloguing and display. Auction houses needed clear identifiers for insurance, provenance documentation, and competitive sales. Titling became a practical necessity for art-world circulation (Yeazell, 2015). Her research on picture titles also reveals that Western painting’s naming practices gradually shifted from institutional demands toward artist-centred impulses. For example, Turner’s titling decisions reveal a gradual process through which artists came to understand naming as part of their professional identity (Yeazell, 2009). And by the twentieth century, “Untitled” had emerged as a deliberate artistic strategy, rather than a mere absence of titling. Conceptual and even Minimalist artists began using “Untitled” to resist what they saw as the coercive naming practices of museums and galleries. The phrase became an affirmative statement. Cifarelli (2018) identifies this shift as a decisive turning point. “Untitled” entered the art world vocabulary as an intentional counter-practice, a refusal of institutional naming that nonetheless required institutional recognition to function.

Existing scholarship has identified several distinct motivations behind artists’ use of “Untitled.” The first concerns autonomy. Artists use “Untitled” to resist conventional naming practices that impose narrative or interpretive closure on their work, preserving interpretive plurality and protecting against reduction to a single reading (Cifarelli, 2018). The second motivation is resistance to commodification. In an art market that prizes identifiable, reproducible, and marketable works, “Untitled” embodies a refusal of easy categorisation, challenging the commodification of art through naming (Buchloh, 1990). The third motivation, articulated through Eco’s (1989) concept of the open work, centres on foregrounding visual experience. Titles carry linguistic information that may predetermine perception. By withholding the title, the artist redirects attention to the object itself, demanding direct phenomenological encounter rather than mediated understanding.

2.2 Institutional and Market Naming Practices

Institutions and markets operate under different imperatives from artists. Cataloguing standards require consistent identification even where no artist-designated title exists. Yeazell (2015) documents how posthumous and documentary titling by dealers, curators, and art historians constitutes a form of naming authority transfer that shapes art historical understanding, often without transparent acknowledgement of who exercised the naming function and when. *The Getty Categories for the Description of Works of Art* set mandatory requirements for populating title fields for database management, insurance, and scholarly reference (J. Paul Getty Trust, 2024). *The Nomenclature for Museum Cataloguing* website’s controlled vocabularies address this requirement through alternative designations, ensuring that works can be catalogued and retrieved even when the artist has withheld naming authority (Tharp, 2026).

The auction market provides particularly clear evidence of naming’s economic dimensions. Named works generally fetch higher prices, a finding confirmed across multiple studies (Radermecker, 2019; 2021). However, an artist’s reputation may also affect the auction performance of unnamed works. Oosterlinck and Radermecker (2019) demonstrate that title effects on valuation are moderated by recognition: the more famous the artist, the less the absence of a title affects price. The Art Basel and UBS (2024) market report verifies that naming patterns continue to influence market performance, with untitled works by established artists often commanding premiums associated with perceived conceptual seriousness.

2.3 Audience Reception

Empirical aesthetics has documented the mechanisms through which titles influence understanding and appreciation of visual art. Franklin et al. (1993) demonstrate how titles channel visual attention, directing focus toward particular elements of the composition. And the cognitive processing of paintings, guiding interpretation in ways that affect aesthetic judgment (Leder et al., 2006). Belke et al. (2010) extend this finding, showing that cognitive fluency operates as a high-level processing dynamic in art appreciation. Titles that facilitate easy processing may reduce depth of engagement, while titles that introduce complexity may enhance it. Millis (2001) argues that making meaning brings pleasure, while Russell (2003) finds that effort after meaning increases hedonic value. That is to say, audiences who must work to interpret ambiguous or untitled works often report deeper personal engagement than those who receive clear guidance from titles.

Artist reputation adds a further layer of complexity. The artist’s name influences aesthetic judgments independently of titling, indicating that when naming authority is withheld, other markers of authorship fill the interpretive gap in ways that may or may not be beneficial (Cleeremans et al., 2016).

2.4 Gaps in the Existing Literature

Scholars have tended to treat “Untitled” as a homogeneous category, grouping together practices that operate through fundamentally different mechanisms. Kim (2025) identifies this as a significant limitation: without a systematic framework for distinguishing how different “Untitled” practices function, analysis cannot adequately explain the specific dynamics at work in any given case. The processes through which naming authority circulates between artists, institutions, and audiences have

received insufficient attention, and the conceptual vocabulary available to capture these dynamics is underdeveloped.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework proposed in this article is jointly constituted by three-function analysis. Three-function analysis encompasses semantic resistance, perceptual intensification, and institutional recoding.

- 1) Semantic Resistance operates as an anti-interpretive mechanism. Its theoretical roots trace back to Danto's (1974) concept of the transfiguration of the commonplace. It establishes that art is constituted not by intrinsic properties alone but by context and intention. And Eco's (1989) theory of the open work further explains that the meaning of a work is constituted by the viewer's interpretive completion, produced through the encounter between work and audience rather than transmitted from creator to recipient. "Untitled" operationalises this principle at the level of naming. Through refusing semantic anchoring, the artist opens interpretive pathways and distributes meaning-making across the audience. Applied to titling, the artist's decision to withhold a title is itself an assertion of authorial control. Naming absence is achieved rather than given. Pirinen's (2020) comprehensive study of titling practices in visual art from 1960 to 2015 demonstrates how this theoretical framework translates into concrete naming strategies. By withholding linguistic cues, "Untitled" resists narrative closure and sustains interpretive plurality. The artist's refusal to name does not eliminate meaning but generates a surplus of possible meanings, that is, works can sustain multiple, even contradictory, readings without being permanently reduced to any single one. Chandler's (2017) semiotic framework is useful here. "Untitled" is useful here. The sign value of "Untitled" depends on its position within a recognisable art world discourse system, not on any intrinsic semantic content.
- 2) Perceptual Intensification redirects attention from narrative to form. By removing verbal mediation, "Untitled" demands direct sensory engagement with the visual object. Leder et al. (2006) demonstrate that title information predisposes interpretation in ways that may reduce direct visual engagement. And cognitive fluency, facilitated by clear titling, can shortcut sustained perceptual attention associated with experimental aesthetics (Belke et al., 2010). The absence of a title does not impoverish the viewer's encounter with the work but intensifies the demand for direct phenomenological engagement.
- 3) Institutional Recoding represents the central paradox of the framework. Bourdieu's (1993) field theory provides the sociological machinery for understanding naming as a form of symbolic power. Within the art field, the power to name works is unequally distributed. Museums, critics, auction houses, and collectors all possess naming authority of different kinds and at different stages of an artwork's life. In this context, "Untitled" can be read as an attempt to intervene in the distribution of symbolic capital through strategic refusal. The institutional critique tradition, traced by Buchloh (1990) and Haacke (2016), documents how artists have used naming practices to challenge institutional power structures. However, "Untitled" begins as an anti-institutional strategy but becomes institutionalised through its adoption and certification by the very systems it was designed to challenge. The phrase develops into a recognisable naming convention, a marker of artistic seriousness and engagement with modernist lineage. Galleries and auction houses market "Untitled" as a premium designation for established artists. The resistance mechanism is absorbed into the system it critiques, a dynamic familiar from the broader history of institutional critique.

Institutional Recoding introduces two core concepts. Firstly, deferred titling. It describes the temporary withholding of definitive naming while maintaining identifiability through alternative markers. Later-added dates, numbers, and parenthetical descriptors enable artworks to circulate within institutional systems without acquiring fixed semantic anchors.

Secondly, the naming authority transfer. It describes the movement of naming authority from the artist to other art world actors during circulation and reception. Its theoretical foundation combines Barthes's (1967) concept of the death of the author with Foucault's (1972) theory of the author function. Barthes raises the question: if authorial intention is decentred, what does the artist's decision not to name mean? Foucault provides a resolution. Authorship is not a property of individuals but a regulatory function within discourse. "Untitled" can be understood as an invitation for that function to be distributed across interpretive communities rather than retained by the

individual. Rego’s *Untitled: The Abortion Series* (1998) illustrates this process. This work was initially numbered by the artist but acquired its political descriptor through curatorial and public discourse rather than through artist designation (Rego, 1998; Tate, 2025). This case underscores that naming authority sometimes does not rest with the artist.

These two characteristics capture naming dynamics that existing scholarship has documented but not adequately theorised. The former is an operational means, enabling works to circulate within institutional systems without providing fixed semantic anchors. The latter is a process mechanism that explains how naming power flows from artists to other actors, such as curators, markets, and the public.

4. Methodology

The article employs a qualitative case study methodology, following established approaches to comparative and multiple case study analysis (Stake, 2013; Yin, 2018).

The article uses an inductive-deductive approach, cycling between theoretical framework and empirical evidence. The three-function framework was developed through engagement with the theoretical literature and then applied to the selected cases, with findings feeding back into refinement of the framework. Four artists were selected to represent diverse practices demonstrating nominal suspension and designatory displacement across different periods, movements, and market positions. Data is drawn from multiple source types: museum collection databases, including MoMA, the Guggenheim, and the Tate, which provided cataloguing language and metadata structures; auction records from major houses offered provenance documentation and evidence of naming evolution; artist statements, interviews, and exhibition catalogues provided evidence of stated intentions.

5. Case Study 1: Donald Judd

Donald Judd’s “Untitled” works exemplify a form of semantic resistance. Judd (1928-1994) was a central figure in American Minimalism, a movement that systematically rejected the gestural, expressive, and biographical characteristics of Abstract Expressionism. His naming practice was integral to this rejection. Expressive titles, in Judd’s view, imposed narrative and biographical readings incompatible with the object-focused, spatially present character of his work. Therefore, “Untitled” became the consistent designation across decades of production, applied to single works and numbered series (Judd Foundation, 2023). The consistency of this practice over time demonstrates deliberate strategy rather than arbitrary convention. Judd returned to “Untitled” across different periods, media, and formal configurations, suggesting a principled commitment to the naming refusal rather than an incidental choice.

The parenthetical designation in *Untitled (Stack)* (1967) exemplifies the mechanism of deferred titling. “Untitled” functions as a primary designation, signalling a refusal of narrative meaning. The parenthetical “Stack” provides functional identification. Parenthetical descriptors describe form and material, not meaning. Works can be identified, documented, and exhibited without being narrated. This hierarchical structure of naming information allows works to be catalogued in the institutional system while maintaining the autonomy of the object.

Similarly, the Minimalist context illuminates why this naming strategy proved so durable. Flavin, Andre, and Morris all employed “Untitled” practices with parenthetical descriptors, suggesting that this is a collective rather than merely individual response to the problem of naming in relation to object-based art (Minimalism Archive, 2024). Buchloh’s (1990) account of Minimalism as an institutional critique situates these naming practices within the movement’s broader political engagement with the power structures of the art world. The naming refusal aligned with the broader Minimalist rejection of expression, biography, and art-historical narrative in favour of direct object presence. Refusal to name was inseparable from refusal to express, narrate, and locate meaning anywhere other than in the object itself.

6. Case Study 2: Felix Gonzalez-Torres

For Gonzalez-Torres, his use of “Untitled” operates primarily within the perceptual intensification dimension. On the whole, he hoped that by weakening naming, he could foreground and invite viewers’ direct material contact and sensory engagement.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1957-1996) was a Cuban-American artist whose work engaged directly with disease, queer identity, and the politics of loss and memory. Ables (2019) notes that Gonzalez-Torres represents the paradigmatic case of “Untitled” as a strategic deployment rather than a naming absence. For example, *Untitled (Public Opinion)* (1991), *Untitled (L.A.)* (1991), and *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* (1991) constitute one of the most deliberate naming strategies in contemporary art through their systematic use of “Untitled.” Each work carries a parenthetical descriptor that provides contextual identification, while the “Untitled” designation preserves a sense of deliberate openness. The Gonzalez-Torres Foundation maintains strict guidelines for installation and titling, preserving the balance between openness and artistic control that defines the practice (Gonzalez-Torres, 2023).

The material practices that define Gonzalez-Torres’s work are inseparable from his naming strategy. The candy spills invite visitors to take and consume sweets, the physical mass of the installation diminishing as it is consumed and replenished. Paper stacks diminish as pages are taken, communicating loss and regeneration through material change. Billboard installations extend the work beyond museum walls into public space, reaching audiences outside institutional contexts (Dia Art Foundation, 2024). The participatory dimension of these works responds to Eco’s concept of the open work. The viewer completes the artwork through physical engagement. Visitor participation is not optional but structurally essential to the work’s meaning. The act of tasting or handling constitutes the meaning rather than supplementing it with verbal interpretation (Leder et al., 2006).

The political dimensions of Gonzalez-Torres’s practice are inseparable from his naming choices. *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* (1991) encodes intimate biography in material specification. The weight of the candy equals the healthy body weight of his partner Ross, who died of AIDS-related complications. The title’s refusal to name this meaning protects its intimacy while inviting engagement with the work’s physical reality. The parenthetical descriptor “Portrait of Ross in L.A.” is specific without being disclosive. It names the subject without explaining the material encoding, enabling those who know to recognise what they are taking while allowing others to encounter the work as a pure material event (Stallabrass, 1994). McCormick (2025) analyses how this strategy of simultaneous disclosure and concealment performs disidentification, that is, the work is identifiable as deeply personal without being reducible to its biographical context.

It is undeniable that during actual viewing and participation, audiences can genuinely experience the work without prior interference from its title, immersing themselves completely in it. However, the paradox lies in the fact that because each work is titled “Untitled,” the bracketed content becomes each unique work’s true identity marker. When readers encounter the bracketed content, the significance is stronger than what the artist originally intended. “Untitled” itself becomes ineffective information in discussion, because at this point, people do not refer to all works by Gonzalez-Torres, but rather to one specific piece among them. Now, “Public Opinion,” “L.A.,” and “Portrait of Ross in L.A.” become the real titles. The strategy and balance of using “Untitled” across different contexts deserve further reflection from the art world.

7. Case Study 3: Basquiat and Rego

The cases of Jean-Michel Basquiat and Rego embody the final function of the framework: institutional recoding. This is not to say their practices lack semantic resistance and perceptual intensification dimensions, but rather that the institutional recoding dimension plays a more illuminating role for scholarship in their cases.

7.1 Jean-Michel Basquiat

Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960-1988) rose rapidly from street art origins in New York to international gallery representation and achieved astonishing record-breaking auction prices. His *Untitled* (1982) was sold at Sotheby’s in May 2017 for \$110.5 million, setting a record for an American artist at the time (Sotheby’s, 2017). The scale of this transaction makes it an important case of naming authority

dynamics, because the auction catalogue necessarily engages with the problem of identifying and describing an untitled work. The case reveals how commercial imperatives complete the naming function that the artist declined to perform, and how that completion serves market rather than artistic purposes.

The auction catalogue supplements artist designation with year, visual descriptors, and provenance history. Sotheby’s did not adjust the title itself but distinguished the work through more detailed work information. For example: “signed, inscribed NYC and dated 82 on the reverse; acrylic, spray paint and oilstick on canvas; 72 1/8 by 68 1/8 in. 183.2 by 173 cm.” The Wikipedia article for this work still uses *Untitled* (1982) as the work’s title, yet the article’s title displays as “*Untitled* (1982 Basquiat skull painting).” The italicised “Untitled” remains the work’s title, whereas the non-italicised “1982 Basquiat skull painting” does not become part of the work’s title (Wikipedia, 2025, March 25). Similarly, another Basquiat work has both title and descriptive element in italics: *Untitled (Skull)* (1981) (Wikipedia, 2025, June 20). Whether parenthetical descriptors are included in an untitled work’s title is a specific decision made by different institutions in different circumstances. The year and detailed work information serve as de facto identifiers, anchoring the work in a specific moment of the artist’s career and enabling it to be distinguished from other untitled Basquiat works from the same period (Basquiat Foundation, 2025). Visual descriptors, including skull imagery, crown motifs, and gestural figure painting, become identifying features in catalogue entries and provenance records. These additions, absent from the artist’s designation, constitute a form of institutional naming that serves commercial rather than artistic purposes.

This case illustrates naming authority transfer in its most commercially visible form. The year and visual descriptors serve this identification function without contradicting the artist’s “Untitled” designation, providing market-level naming while respecting artist-level suspension. Bourdieu’s (1993) analysis of the art field’s symbolic economy clarifies this dynamic that naming authority is a form of symbolic capital that can be transferred, accumulated, and deployed by different agents at different stages of the work’s circulation. At the scale of a \$110.5 million market transaction, the work is reproduced, described, valued, and transmitted more than it is directly beheld by any individual viewer (Leder et al., 2006). Yet institutionally, this also produces another paradox, namely that Basquiat’s “Untitled,” intended as resistance to market commodification, has become one of the most valuable art market assets in the world. The anti-market gesture has been fully recoded as a premium market asset.

7.2 Paula Rego

Paula Rego (1935-2022) was a Portuguese-British figurative painter whose work is characterised by political engagement and narrative imagery. Her *Untitled: The Abortion Series* exemplifies a different pathway of naming authority transfer, driven by political and curatorial rather than commercial forces. The works were initially numbered *Untitled 1*, *Untitled 2* by the artist, reflecting a desire to withhold explicit political labelling from paintings created in direct response to the Portuguese abortion referendum. The numbering represents a form of nominal suspension. The works were identified but not named, circulating with identifiers that preserved the artist’s refusal of explicit political framing.

The political meaning of the series gradually emerged through exhibition, public debate, and curatorial discourse rather than through artist designation. Exhibition catalogues and critical reviews standardised the “Abortion Series” terminology, transforming the artist’s number into a political descriptor (Tate, 2025). The designation became dominant not through market pressure but through cultural and political engagement. As the referendum campaign unfolded, critics and curators recognised the works’ direct relevance to the political debate and named them accordingly. Renaming can shift audience interpretation in ways that alter the cultural value of a work. In Rego’s case, the renaming through public discourse expanded rather than restricted the work’s cultural resonance, attaching it to a specific political moment that the artist had engaged with but chosen not to name directly.

The naming authority transfer here is more complete than in the Basquiat case. Curators, critics, and the public added political meaning to Rego’s. In both cases, the artist’s designation was supplemented and partially overwritten by externally generated descriptors that completed the naming function, but the mechanism of displacement differed fundamentally. Rego’s works acquired political meaning through public discourse. Their identification became inseparable from the abortion rights debate to which they responded. The Tate’s acquisition and exhibition of the series provided institutional

validation for this reading, establishing “The Abortion Series” as the dominant identifier in scholarship and museum labels. Oosterlinck and Radermecker (2019) note that institutional naming, whether through museums or markets, shapes the art historical value of works in ways that extend beyond immediate commercial or cultural contexts.

7.3 Comparative Analysis

The comparison between Basquiat and Rego reveals that designatory displacement operates through distinct mechanisms depending on the institutional context. Commercial displacement is driven by auction market demands for identification, provenance, and catalogue consistency. The year and visual descriptors function as institutional naming tools that complete the identification process without contradicting the artist’s designation. Political displacement is driven by curatorial and public discourse that attaches meaning to works through circulation, exhibition, and critical response. The political descriptor functions as a cultural naming tool that expands rather than restricts interpretive access. Both mechanisms result in similar outcomes. The artist’s “Untitled” designation is supplemented by externally generated descriptors that complete the naming function, demonstrating that naming authority transfer operates through multiple pathways.

The framework is not a universal generalisation but an analytical tool that reveals the specific mechanisms operating in each case, while demonstrating the common paradox at their centre that naming refusal becomes naming asset through institutional recoding.

8. Discussion

8.1 Theoretical Contributions of the Three-Function Framework

This article argues that the three mechanisms do not operate in parallel but constitute a hierarchical meaning-production system. Semantic resistance is the first line of defence, refusing narrative closure. Perceptual intensification follows immediately, redirecting the viewer’s attention toward material presence. Institutional recoding then completes the final absorption, transforming the anti-institutional posture of the first two mechanisms into distributable symbolic capital. This hierarchical structure explains why “Untitled” works can be so generously rewarded by the market while maintaining surface resistance and selling for high prices because resistance itself has become a priced form of commodity.

The case studies reveal how this hierarchical structure operates concretely. Even for Gonzalez-Torres, his bracketed descriptors *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* (1991) perfectly demonstrate how the three mechanisms interlock. “Untitled” performs semantic resistance, refusing to reduce the work to a memorial. The bracketed descriptor anchors the work materially, demanding that viewers confront the physical existence of the candy pile. The work’s circulation through major museums and collections completes institutional recoding, making it part of the Conceptual Art canon (McCormick, 2025). The three mechanisms here do not operate independently but interdependently. In other words, without semantic resistance, the parenthetical descriptor would degenerate into an ordinary descriptive title. Without perceptual intensification, the work would collapse into pure conceptual play. Without institutional recoding, the work might have long vanished from art history.

Judd’s case further clarifies this hierarchical structure. As for Minimalism, “Untitled” was never pure negation. Judd himself explicitly refused to understand “Untitled” as “meaningless.” In his view, this naming was precisely an affirmative declaration that the work’s value resides in its physical construction rather than in externally imposed narrative frameworks (Judd Foundation, 2023). This stance reveals a key implication of the three-function framework. That is, semantic resistance does not eliminate meaning but redistributes the sources of meaning. Meaning is no longer unilaterally granted by the artist through the title but is progressively constructed by the viewer through perceptual encounter. Yet this redistribution precisely opens space for institutional recoding. When meaning is defined as requiring viewer participation to construct, museums, curators, and critics gain legitimate authority to intervene in the interpretive process.

8.2 *The Hidden Side of Naming Authority Transfer*

The concept of naming authority transfer reveals a hidden truth. An artist’s nominal suspension never leaves a vacuum. Power abhors a vacuum. When an artist relinquishes naming authority through “Untitled,” that authority does not disappear but is quickly seized by other actors. The Basquiat and Rego cases, respectively, demonstrate how commercial forces and curatorial discourse seize this authority. The common thread in both cases is that the artist loses control over the work’s final meaning.

This finding stands in sharp opposition to Barthes’s “death of the author.” In Barthes’s romantic imagination, the author’s departure opens the way for the democratisation of interpretation, and readers gain the freedom to produce meaning. Yet the naming authority transfer mechanism shows that the author’s departure precisely transfers interpretive power to the most institutionally powerful actors rather than to ordinary audiences. Can we negatively say that the so-called “open work” by Eco actually opens itself to capital and institutions instead of a democratic public? This is a paradox demanding serious engagement. Works that begin with the gesture of resisting naming ultimately get named by those actors whose naming practices are most systematised and least resistant.

Institutional recoding constitutes the sharpest paradox in the operational politics of “Untitled.” Buchloh (1990) identified this dynamic at the very beginning of Conceptual and Minimalist art. Once an anti-institutional gesture gains recognition, it immediately becomes a new style that the system can absorb.

Deepening the logic of institutional recoding can reveal that “Untitled” has become a specific form of symbolic capital in the contemporary art market. It conveys multiple signals to buyers. The artist’s conceptual seriousness, historical connection to the modernist critical tradition, and a “purity” declaration that the work was not created for market consumption. These signals are strongest in works by established artists. Oosterlinck and Radermecker (2019) demonstrate that the impact of titling on price is moderated by artist reputation. The higher the reputation, the smaller the negative effect of “Untitled,” even turning it into a positive premium. Art market logic here colludes perfectly with art historical discourse. This conclusion may be overly forceful, but sometimes critics and curators need “Untitled” works to demonstrate artists’ critical positions. Collectors need “Untitled” works to display their cultural capital. Auction houses need “Untitled” works to sustain the narrative of contemporary art as a critical practice. Every party converges here, jointly sustaining a cycle that converts resistance into capital.

This cycle also poses a new question for today’s artists. Can artists who use “Untitled” today still perform a critical function? “Untitled” has become so normalised in contemporary art that it now signals artistic seriousness as a cliché rather than a genuine pursuit of it (Kim, 2025). This is not a denial of contemporary artists’ possible motivations for using “Untitled.” Artists may still sincerely hope viewers confront works directly rather than through title mediation. Yet motivation does not determine effect. When “Untitled” becomes an anticipated convention, its critical power is pre-dissolved. Criticism completes its self-negation. Becoming habitualised copying of resistant postures rather than a genuine challenge to habitus. These discussions are not reasons against using “Untitled” but demand that this choice be conscious rather than habitual. Fisher’s (1984) appeal, over forty years ago, remains valid: naming practices deserve sustained analysis, and artists’ reflections on their naming choices are an essential part of that analysis.

8.3 *The Absence of Cross-Cultural Perspective*

The case studies concentrate on core institutions of the Western art world. This concentration is not accidental but reflects the geographical inequality of contemporary art discourse. Yet cross-cultural perspectives suggest “Untitled” might operate differently in other contexts. Maruyama and Ishizu (2025) find that titles produce different effects in Japanese poetry evaluation than in Western art contexts. Xhignesse (2021) on Aboriginal retitling reveals colonial dimensions of naming authority transfer. These findings suggest that naming politics might take different forms in Global South and Indigenous art contexts, which constitutes an important agenda for future research.

9. Conclusion

“Untitled” is never truly without a title. It is the most deceptive form of naming in the art world. A naming practice disguised as naming absence, authority exercise disguised as authority abandonment, and a resistant gesture that ultimately becomes the continuation of power.

The article’s contribution lies in proposing a systematic framework for analysing “Untitled” operational politics and offers conceptual tools for tracing how naming authority circulates. Despite this framework pointing to its own limitations, because it is grounded in the Western art world’s core cases and may not fully apply to marginalised contexts and non-Western art traditions. It focuses on works by artists who have already achieved canonical status. It may not fully reveal different dynamics in how emerging artists use “Untitled.” The analysis in this article relies on public archives and market records and, therefore, may not capture naming practices occurring in private transactions and oral agreements. These limitations point toward future research directions.

Finally, the political implications of “Untitled” extend beyond art history. In the broader context of contemporary cultural production, naming is never neutral. Foucault (1972) reminds us that the formation of discourse depends on conditions that make certain statements possible and others impossible. Naming authority is precisely such a condition. When artists choose “Untitled,” they are not exiting the game of meaning production but participating in it in a specific way. When museums, markets, critics, and audiences subsequently intervene in this naming practice, they are equally exercising power. This article’s framework is designed to make this exercise of power visible. Because only power that is seen can be questioned, challenged, and redistributed.

References

- Ables, K. (2019). Why are so many artworks untitled? *Artsy*. <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-artworks-untitled>.
- Art Basel & UBS. (2024). *The art market report 2024*. Art Basel. <https://theartmarket.artbasel.com/the-art-market-2024/welcome>.
- Barthes, R. (1967). The death of the author. In *Image-Music-Text* (pp. 142-148). Fontana Press.
- Belke, B., Leder, H., Strobach, T., & Carbon, C.-C. (2010). Cognitive fluency: High-level processing dynamics in art appreciation. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, 4(4), 214-222. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0019648>.
- Bourdieu, P. (1993). *The field of cultural production*. Columbia University Press.
- Bowman, M. (2023). Text-mining metadata: What titles tell us of the history of modern and contemporary art? *Cultural Analytics Journal*, 8(1). <https://doi.org/10.22148/001c.74602>.
- Buchloh, B. H. D. (1990). *Neo-avantgarde and culture industry: Essays on European and American art from 1955 to 1975*. MIT Press.
- Chandler, D. (2017). *Semiotics: The basics* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Cifarelli, G. (2011). *No words needed: The untitling of modern art* [Master's thesis, University of Southern California]. ProQuest.
- Cleeremans, A., Ginsburgh, V., Klein, O., & Noury, A. (2016). What's in a name? The effect of an artist's name on aesthetic judgments. *Arts and the Market*, 34(1), 126-139. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0276237415621197>.
- Danto, A. C. (1974). The transfiguration of the commonplace. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 33(2), 139-148. <https://doi.org/10.2307/429082>.
- Denman, T. (2022). Condition-contact-conversation. *Art Journal*, 81(2), 110-112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2022.2074751>.
- Dia Art Foundation. (2024). Felix Gonzalez-Torres exhibitions and projects. <https://www.diaart.org/exhibition/exhibitions-projects/felix-gonzalez-torres-exhibition>.
- Eco, U. (1989). *The open work*. Harvard University Press.
- Earle, W., & Zucker, S. (2024). Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Untitled (L.A.). *Smarthistory*. <https://smarthistory.org/felix-gonzalez-torres-untitled-la/>.
- Fisher, J. (1984). Entitling. *Critical Inquiry*, 11(2), 263-278. <https://doi.org/10.1086/448289>.
- Franklin, M. B., Becklen, R. C., & Doyle, C. L. (1993). The influence of titles on how paintings are seen. *Leonardo*, 26(2), 103-108. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1575894>.
- Foucault, M. (1972). *The archaeology of knowledge*. Pantheon Books.
- Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. (2023). *Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation archives*. <https://www.felixgonzalez-torresfoundation.org/foundation-activities/archives>.
- Guggenheim. (2025). Collection: Donald Judd. <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/artist/donald-judd>.
- Haacke, H. (2016). *Working conditions: The writings of Hans Haacke*. MIT Press.
- J. Paul Getty Trust. (2024). 3. Titles or names. In *Categories for the description of works of art*. <https://www.getty.edu/publications/categories-description-works-art/categories/object-architecture-group/3/>.
- Judd, D. (1967). *Untitled (Stack)* [Installation]. Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- Judd Foundation. (2023). *Donald Judd catalogue raisonné*. <https://www.juddfoundation.org>.
- Kim, S. (2025). The disappearance of titles: An art historical inquiry into the untitled as title. *Humanities Research*, 64, 7-35. <https://doi.org/10.35559/TJOH.64.1>.
- Leder, H., Carbon, C.-C., & Ripsas, A. (2006). Entitling art: Influence of title information on understanding and appreciation of paintings. *Acta Psychologica*, 121, 176-198. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2005.08.005>.
- Maruyama, S., & Ishizu, T. (2025). The effects of titles on the aesthetic evaluation of Japanese poetry. *Empirical Studies of the Arts*, 43(1), 707-720. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02762374241270472>.
- McCormick, M. (2025). Felix Gonzalez-Torres and disidentification. *Confluence Journal*. <https://confluence.gallatin.nyu.edu/sections/criticism/felix-gonzalez-torres-and-disidentification>.

- Millis, K. (2001). Making meaning brings pleasure: The influence of titles on aesthetic experiences. *Emotion*, 1(3), 320-329. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12934689/>.
- Minimalism Archive. (2024). *Naming practices in Minimalism*. <https://www.minimalism-archive.org>.
- MoMA. (2017). Donald Judd. Museum of Modern Art. <https://www.moma.org/artists/2948/donald-judd>.
- Oosterlinck, K., & Radermecker, A. (2019). "The Master of . . .": Creating names for art history and the art market. *Journal of Cultural Economics*, 43, 57-95. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10824-018-9329-1>.
- Pirinen, M. (2020). *Game of the name: Titles and titling of visual artworks in theoretical discussions from 1960 to 2015* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Jyväskylä]. <https://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-39-8369-7>.
- Radermecker, A. (2019). Artworks without names: An insight into the market for anonymous paintings. *Journal of Cultural Economics*, 43, 443-483. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10824-019-09344-5>.
- Radermecker, A. (2021). *Anonymous art at auction*. Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004460201>.
- Rego, P. (1998). *Untitled: The abortion series* [Pastel paintings].
- Russell, P. A. (2003). Effort after meaning and the hedonic value of paintings. *British Journal of Psychology*, 94(1), 99-110. <https://doi.org/10.1348/000712603762842138>.
- Sotheby's. (2017, May 18). *Basquiat reigns supreme at evening sale*. Sotheby's, New York. <https://www.sothebys.com/en/slideshows/basquiat-reigns-supreme-at-evening-sale>.
- Stake, R. E. (2013). *Multiple case study analysis*. Guilford Press.
- Stallabrass, J. (1994). Exhibitions: Reviews - Discrete images. *Art Monthly*, (181), 35.
- Tate. (2025). Paula Rego. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/paula-rego-1823>.
- Thamm, K. (2024). Demystifying metadata: A practical introduction for art researchers. *Navigating Art*. <https://www.navigating.art/articles-from-navigatingart/demystifying-metadata-a-practical-introduction-for-art-researchers>.
- Tharp, G. K. (2026). Nomenclature for museum cataloging. *Technical Services Quarterly*, 43(2), 206-207. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07317131.2026.2631830>.
- Wikipedia. (2025, June 20). *Untitled (Skull)*. In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved April 12, 2026, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Untitled_\(Skull\)#History](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Untitled_(Skull)#History).
- Wikipedia. (2026, March 25). *Untitled (1982 Basquiat skull painting)*. In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved April 12, 2026, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Untitled_\(1982_Basquiat_skull_painting\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Untitled_(1982_Basquiat_skull_painting)).
- Khignesse, M. (2021). Retitling, cultural appropriation, and Aboriginal title. *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 61(3), 317-333. <https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayab006>.
- Yeazell, R. B. (2009). Turner's titles. *Victorian Studies*, 51(3), 480-495.
- Yeazell, R. B. (2015). *Picture titles: How and why Western paintings acquired their names*. Princeton University Press.
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications* (Vol. 6). Sage.