

Am I that Name?: Exhibition Abstract

Proposed by:

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Project Type:

Traveling Exhibition

Focus Areas:

Contemporary Art · Sound and Performance · LGBTQ+ Studies · Public Humanities · Social History · Interdisciplinary Practice

Proposal Summary: *Am I that Name?* is a traveling, interdisciplinary exhibition that considers naming as both an intimate act and a social technology—one through which gender, sexuality, race, and belonging are assigned, policed, and, at times, re-authored through contemporary art, immersive sound, and live activation.

Exhibition Description

Am I that Name? approaches “the name” as a site of power and vulnerability: a word that can confer recognition, enforce legibility, or produce erasure. Working across sculpture, wall-based works, photography, projection, and immersive sound, the exhibition asks how identity is carried in language and how bodies move through the consequences of what they are called. Rather than advancing a single thesis, the project unfolds as a sequence of encounters—material, sonic, and embodied—that invite sustained attention to ambiguity and contradiction. The exhibition positions naming not as a neutral descriptor, but as an infrastructure: a set of cultural, institutional, and interpersonal practices that shape who becomes intelligible, who is misread, and who is rendered absent.

The installation is conceived as modular and spatially responsive, designed to adapt to varied venues—including compact galleries, teaching museums, and storefront spaces—without diluting its conceptual rigor. The exhibition’s physical language privileges proximity and duration. Visitors encounter works that do not resolve quickly, but instead accrue meaning through repetition, hesitation, and return. Throughout, “the name” operates as both content and method: the exhibition makes visible how language organizes social life while also insisting that lived experience exceeds the terms offered to contain it.

A multi-channel sound work by sculptor and installation artist Richard Zimmerman anchors the environment and functions as a soundscape for the collection. Five soundtracks are distributed across five speakers (using five iPods and two amplifiers) to build an enveloping composition that guides movement, registers proximity, and reshapes the room’s emotional temperature. Projection and object-based elements operate in dialogue with this sound structure, producing a

field of attention that shifts as viewers enter, pause, and pass. In this way, the exhibition is experienced not only as a set of objects but as a lived atmosphere—one that subtly recalibrates perception.

Exhibition Themes and Conceptual Framework

Am I that Name? engages several interrelated themes: naming as governance; identity as a negotiated and contested process; the relationship between language and bodily autonomy; the conditions under which recognition becomes coercion; and the aesthetic and ethical stakes of ambiguity. The project understands naming as a social technology—one that can be intimate and affirming, but also regulatory and extractive. Names do not simply reflect reality; they participate in producing it, often in alignment with institutional demands for classification and control.

The exhibition foregrounds the tension between self-authorship and external assignment. Across its components, it asks: What is at stake when a name is demanded? When does visibility become vulnerability? How does language travel—across families, bureaucracies, communities, and states—and what forms of harm or care does it carry? These questions are not treated abstractly. They are felt through the exhibition's material and temporal strategies: sound that creates drift and pressure; projections that mark passage; objects that hold stillness; and images that complicate any stable claim to a singular identity.

Importantly, *Am I that Name?* refuses the false comfort of categorical closure. It holds space for contradiction—for the simultaneous desire to be known and the desire to remain unclaimed; for the relief of recognition and the violence of forced legibility. By making room for unresolvable complexity, the exhibition offers a counter-model to contemporary pressures—cultural and political—to simplify identity into administrable terms.

Intended Audience and Public Engagement

The intended audience for *Am I that Name?* is broad and intentionally inclusive, encompassing museum-going publics, students, educators, scholars, artists, and community members engaged with contemporary art, LGBTQ+ studies, performance studies, sound studies, and social history. While the project engages with scholarly discourse, it is designed to be accessible without becoming reductive—inviting visitors into a shared inquiry rather than instructing them on what to conclude.

Live activation is integral to the exhibition's public-facing methodology. A brief, intimate, approximately 20-minute dance composition by a local artist extends the exhibition's inquiry into embodied knowledge, foregrounding gender and queerness as lived experience rather than static categories. These performance moments function as punctuations within the run of the exhibition, inviting audiences into proximity, risk, and shared presence while remaining feasible to tour through adaptable production requirements. For touring venues, the performance component can be realized through a locally commissioned choreographer/performer (or small ensemble), allowing each site to engage regional performance communities while maintaining a consistent conceptual framework across iterations.

Public programming may include artist talks, facilitated conversations on language and belonging, workshops with students and educators, and partnerships with local LGBTQ+ organizations and campus resource centers. Because naming practices are deeply shaped by place, by local histories of migration, policing, kinship, and policy, the exhibition's programming is designed to be context-responsive, enabling each venue to build resonance between the project's central questions and the specific communities it serves.

Cultural and Scholarly Significance

The cultural and scholarly significance of *Am I that Name?* lies in its insistence that naming is never merely semantic. In a contemporary landscape marked by intensified efforts to regulate language and bodily autonomy—particularly around gender, sexuality, and race—the exhibition offers a mode of engagement rooted in care, nuance, and lived complexity. It contributes to urgent public conversations about how identity is recognized, constrained, and contested, while also expanding how such questions can be held within the museum as an experiential, ethical space.

Rather than positioning art as illustration for social debate, *Am I that Name?* asserts artistic practice as knowledge production: a means of thinking through what cannot be cleanly resolved in policy language, institutional forms, or binary frameworks. By working across sound, projection, objecthood, and performance, the exhibition makes legible how language is felt—how it lands on the body, structures movement, and shapes the texture of public life. The project's interdisciplinary approach supports teaching and research across multiple fields while offering general audiences an entry point grounded in sensation, attention, and encounter.

Curatorial Viewpoint and Methodology

The curatorial approach of *Am I that Name?* is grounded in research, relational ethics, and formal precision. The exhibition's structure privileges listening—both literally, through the multi-channel sound environment, and conceptually, through the way works stage the complexity of gender. Visitors are not positioned as passive recipients of a message; they are asked to notice how they move through the exhibition and how recognition operates as a felt experience.

The project's methodology is collaborative and scalable. The sound work by Richard Zimmerman is not treated as an accessory but as a core component of the exhibition's meaning-making, shaping the conditions under which other works are encountered. The performance activation is likewise conceived not as an add-on, but as a public method: a way of bringing the exhibition's inquiry into shared time, emphasizing that identity is not only represented but lived, negotiated, and performed in relation to others.

This approach aligns with contemporary curatorial debates about care, accessibility, and ethical engagement—especially for projects dealing with identity and vulnerability. The exhibition's design aims to hold intensity without spectacle, creating conditions for audiences to remain present with complexity rather than rushing toward certainty.

Timeliness and National Relevance

The timeliness of *Am I that Name?* is underscored by escalating cultural and political contests over language, classification, and rights—contests that disproportionately impact LGBTQ+ communities and intersect with racialized regimes of belonging. Across the United States, naming has become a visible pressure point: in schools and libraries, in medical systems, in identification documents, and in the everyday negotiations of public life. The exhibition responds to this moment not by offering a slogan, but by creating a nuanced, embodied space where visitors can apprehend how power moves through terms that often appear ordinary.

By centering ambiguity as an ethical and aesthetic stance, *Am I that Name?* offers a timely intervention into polarized discourse. It proposes that complexity is not indecision, but a necessary condition for care—especially when the stakes of being named (or refused) are material.

Why the Exhibition Should Travel

As a traveling exhibition, *Am I that Name?* gains depth through re-siting. Naming practices and their consequences manifest differently across regions, shaped by local histories, community infrastructures, and policy environments. Touring allows the exhibition to hold a stable conceptual proposition—who gets to name whom is never merely semantic, but structural—while inviting each venue to activate the work in dialogue with its own context.

The project is designed with touring viability in mind. Its modular installation can scale to varied footprints, including compact galleries and storefront spaces, while maintaining a cohesive experiential arc. The technical requirements of the sound work—five speakers, five playback devices (iPods), and two amplifiers—are straightforward and replicable across institutions. Projection components and object-based works are similarly adaptable, supported by a clear installation plan and technical rider. The performance activation can be realized through local collaboration at each venue, reducing travel costs while increasing community investment and contextual specificity.

Because the exhibition's core inquiry connects language to lived consequence, it is well suited to university museums, teaching galleries, and regional contemporary art institutions that prioritize public humanities and interdisciplinary engagement. Touring also extends the project's educational reach, enabling sustained programming and curriculum integration across multiple sites.

Exhibition Catalogue

A fully illustrated exhibition catalogue is proposed as an integral component of *Am I that Name?*, extending the project's impact beyond its physical presentation and serving as a scholarly and pedagogical resource. The publication would be designed for academic use while remaining accessible to general readers through clear prose, thoughtful design, and robust documentation.

Proposed contents include:

- A lead curatorial essay situating the exhibition's central questions around naming, legibility, and power.
- A commissioned essay from a scholar in LGBTQ+ studies and/or gender theory addressing naming, autonomy, and the politics of recognition.
- A commissioned essay from a scholar in race and social history examining naming as a technology of belonging and exclusion across U.S. contexts.
- A text focused on sound and embodiment (sound studies/performance studies), analyzing the exhibition's multi-channel sound environment and live activation as a curatorial method.
- Artist statements and visual documentation, including installation views and production notes, supporting future teaching and research use.

Curator Qualifications and Project Viability

Shelby Head is the originating artist and organizer of *Am I that Name?*, developing the project as an interdisciplinary exhibition framework that integrates object-based practice, sound collaboration, and live activation. The exhibition's viability is strengthened by its scalable design, clear technical requirements, and adaptable public methodology, making it feasible for a range of institutional contexts.

The project is well positioned for partnerships with venues committed to contemporary art and public scholarship, including university museums, regional art centers, and institutions engaged with LGBTQ+ cultural production. A key pillar of the project's viability is its support from the Tulsa Artist Fellowship, which provided substantial funding for the creation of *Am I that Name?*, alongside support from the Oklahoma Visual Arts Council and the Connecticut Artist Fellowship Grant. TAF's ongoing commitment to alumni-led projects that connect place-based research to national conversations is possible. Support also may include foundations and public funders aligned with contemporary art, interdisciplinary humanities, and LGBTQ+ community engagement (including, where applicable, regional arts councils and national arts/humanities funding programs), as well as institutional co-presenters and campus partners supporting programming and publication.

Conclusion

Am I that Name? is an exhibition shaped by the premise that naming is never neutral: it is a practice through which intimacy, recognition, coercion, and erasure move. By staging a sequence of encounters across sculpture, photography, projection, immersive sound, and live performance, the project offers audiences a rigorous yet accessible space to consider how identity is carried in language—and what it costs to become legible. Designed to travel, the exhibition can be re-sited

to reflect local contexts while sustaining its central proposition: that the question of who gets to name whom is structural, consequential, and urgently of our present moment.