

Research

The *Wishing Wall*: Authorship and the question of artistic autonomy in spectator-orientated artwork

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its criticality. John Roberts argues that if this does not take place, the artwork runs the risk of being subsumed into the realm of social production, and it ceases to be art.

Abstract

The Wishing Wall is a spectator-orientated artwork that was staged by Landi Raubenheimer and Paul Cooper in February 2010, as part of the 'Infecting the City' performance art festival. The purpose of this article is to investigate the artwork in terms of authorship. The artwork consisted of an installation in Adderley Street in Cape Town, and as a public artwork involved spectators as voluntary participants in its creation. The question of authorship which arises, is to what extent the artists' role is authorial, and to what extent the participants play this role. Nicholas Bourriaud's theory of relational aesthetics is used as a point of departure from which to understand the relational aspects of the wall in which the author's autonomy is subverted. Miwon Kwon's writings on site-specific art are also referred to, as she contextualises the facilitating roles she envisions artists playing in such artworks. In a sense the notion of the artist as romantic genius is brought into question by artworks that displace and reinterpret the role of the artist as author, while at the same time this distinction remains necessary for the artwork to maintain

Introduction

In February 2010, Cape Town was host to the performance art festival titled 'Infecting the City'. This event, under the umbrella of the Spier Contemporary Arts Festival, was curated by Brett Bailey, with the theme HUMAN RITE. It presented site-specific and public performance works in the inner city of Cape Town from Saturday, 13 February to Saturday, 20 February. The purpose of this article is to investigate the problem of authorship encountered in the *Wishing Wall* (1), an interactive public artwork by Johannesburg-based artists, Landi Raubenheimer and Paul Cooper, which was constructed at the festival. The artwork is hereafter referred to as the Wall. The Wall consisted of a large wall space on the corner of Adderley and Hout Streets in Cape Town's inner city. The project was installed for a week, during which time passers-by were invited to write wishes on pieces of paper and place them on the Wall in locations they selected. This resulted in a collage-like installation consisting of paper provided by the artists, some material contributed by spectators on a voluntary basis, and different kinds of adhesive tape to attach the wishes to the surface of the Wall itself. The growth of



1 Section of the *Wishing Wall* installation before being dismantled. February 2010. Photograph by the author.

this 'notice board' of sorts was documented several times a day by the artists, who invited spectators to take part in the project. The artists' involvement in the authoring of the content of the Wall, however, was minor indeed. Various audio interviews were also conducted around the space, orientated around people explaining their wishes in more detail or even commenting on the installation itself. These recordings were not made public as part of the Wall, and may be used in future exhibitions that interrogate the Wall or even in subsequent projects of a similar nature.

This article oscillates between discussing the events that constituted the Wall, and reflecting on these events with reference to the point of authorship, referring to authorship in the context of relational aesthetics, as outlined by Nicholas Bourriaud (2002), as well as Miwon Kwon's (1997, 80:85–110) understanding of authorship as she theorises it around what she terms 'site-specific' art. Both of these approaches to authorship favour the subversion of the artist as creator of meaning in an autonomous manner, in favour of collaborative authorship which bases itself on the world of social practice and industry.¹ Although the intention of this article is not to interpret the Wall as either purely relational or site-specific, both approaches seem applicable (to a large extent) to the work (explained in greater detail below). I argue that art's autonomy is essential to its function, however, and should not be completely subverted in favour of affording the artwork a purely social function – especially in the case of a spectator-orientated artwork such as the Wall. Collaborative artworks require authorial roles to simultaneously remain autonomous (or intentional) and give way to collaboration, which is an inherent paradox that such public artwork faces. Artistic intention is seen as integral to ensuring that the artwork remains an artwork rather than a social practice, within the context of Bourriaud and Kwon's explorations of authorship (Pakes 2004:3).

The discussion of relational aesthetics allows for further exploration of notions of authorship, where spectators fulfil an active role and the artist fulfils a less autonomous role, resulting in artwork that is process orientated rather than an autonomous art object, since spectators are not necessarily expected to have 'artistic' or aesthetic skills. Autonomy in this sense refers to the Modernist

notion of art, as put forth in the 20th century by authors such as Clement Greenberg and Peter Bürger (in Shaw 2009:25–47) (Gaiger 2009:52–54). It may even be regarded as having its roots in the thinking of Kant around aesthetics during the Enlightenment² (Elkins 2005:37–82). In short, this Modernist view of art sees it as distinct from social concerns, art for art's sake, and in this context the artist appears in the capacity of the autonomous author, responsible for every aspect of the creative process and product (Gombrich in Irvin 2005:126). Relational aesthetics challenge this in affording the spectator an authorial role, thus demystifying the notion of the author as the one with autonomous creativity and vision. In short, authorship is then collaborative, rather than autonomous. Kwon (1997:80) sees the site-specific artist as someone who fulfils multiple roles that borrow from social institutions (ethnographer, social worker, technician, consultant, facilitator and so forth). This allows the author to interact with different 'sites' of art-making, but necessitates the authorial role becoming less a role of autonomous art-making than one which borrows from different disciplines, and sees the artist as a collaborator, at most. Kwon identifies specifically discursive site-specific work in which she maintains that the 'site' is a discourse itself, such as ethnography, that the artist may interact with. Kwon's interpretations of site are discussed in more detail at a later stage, as her understanding of the discursive site is also what allows her to understand the different roles of the artist as author. The Wall is site-specific in that the work appeared only in one site, and it was transient in its relationship to this site. On the other hand, one could also argue that the site here functions like Kwon's discursive site in the collaborative approach the artwork had to authorship.

Bourriaud and Kwon's ideas are thus used as points of departure for investigating the problem of authorship in the Wall, but this aspect is also discussed critically, as there are limitations to how their versions of authorship explain the role of spectator-orientated artworks (such as the Wall) in the larger context of their reception. When authorship becomes less autonomous and the artist borrows roles from the realm of social practice, the artwork loses some of its artistic autonomy, as I have mentioned. In order to negotiate this without the artwork being subsumed into the world of

social practice and ceasing to be an artwork, I argue that the artist's intention is integral to framing the artwork as such. This process of intentionality is manifest in various aspects of the course of action followed in constructing the Wall, the most notable of which is the directing of the content by providing a framing question to spectators, and the conclusion of the artwork by removing the wishes from the Wall at the end of the festival.

There are important criticisms to the views of collaborative authorship that Bourriaud and Kwon have. The criticisms offered by Claire Bishop (2005), Jason Gaiger (2009:49) and John Roberts (2004:18) are used in my argument to indicate that some measure of artistic autonomy is required to frame the artwork as such, and that all authorial autonomy should not be subverted by collaborative spectators as authors. Bourriaud's conception of authorship is questioned here with reference to Bishop's (2005:128–131) discussion on installation art. She understands relational art as installation art in itself, asserting that the autonomous author – and indeed the subject – cannot be challenged as it is in relational art by decentering the subject, or by involving the spectator directly and disrupting the autonomy of authorship.³ Her argument, which I maintain in the case of the Wall, is that one can only challenge the unified subject position from a position of being a unified subject. In other words, such work only challenges authorship for spectators who understand the notion of autonomous authorship and artworks, as well as the unified subject position as formulated in Enlightenment thinking in aesthetics by philosophers like Kant. Thus, the artwork that sets out to involve the spectator, and to challenge autonomous, Modernist notions of gallery and museum art, may alienate the spectator even further if s/he is not a gallery-going spectator.

Kwon's notion of art and the artist borrowing from social institutional roles is interrogated extensively by Gaiger (2009:49), who argues that the autonomy of authorship is needed in order for art to maintain its critical function (which is paradoxically also its social function, or its function towards society). The critical function referred to here corresponds to art's function as distinct from society and able to reflect a semblance of how the fractured subject can be unified by highlighting the lack of unification in contemporary life, as

theorised by the Frankfurt School (Adorno 1970; Bürger 1984:50–51). This corresponds with the Modernist view of art as distinct from the social world, and able to reflect the disjunctive nature of the social world, or the 'culture industry'. Roberts (2004:18) argues that the collective artwork challenges the division of labour imposed on contemporary society, in that the labour force of industry and related fields such as the ones Kwon mentions (ethnography, party politics and social work, for instance) now become available and work alongside the field of what was (in the Modernist conception) exclusive and autonomous art, subject to a market system that favoured the wealthy and alienated the labouring classes. Roberts uses the work of the Werkbund, the Bauhaus, Rodchenko's *Metfak* faculty at the VKhUTEMAS and early Soviet Productivism in 1920s Russia as cases in point, where critical art practice and critical social practice coincide. He cautions, however, against art becoming subsumed into social practice. When art sacrifices all autonomy and is subsumed into social life it becomes merely social, and indistinguishable from that which is not art, such as party politics. In other words, there is no point in the artist losing all authorial autonomy – in such a case the artwork dissolves. The above criticisms serve to reinforce my belief that spectator-orientated artwork should foreground its aesthetic rather than its social capacity, in maintaining aspects of authorial autonomy.

The problem of authorship

The *Wishing Wall's* central premise addresses authorship in that it allows spectators to control the content and structure as well as parts of the process of creating the artwork. The problematic position of authorship arises, however, in the proposed function of this artwork and the spectators' understanding of its function within the context of collective authorship. When artworks such as the Wall enter into the world of social practice, such as the airing of social concerns on a format that resembles a notice board for the community, they run the risk of becoming confusing to the spectator in terms of their commitment to remain distinct from the social world as an artwork. As such, an artwork (as it is understood here) may not have a party-political agenda or even such a purpose (for instance, to

protest), while a notice board must have such a social purpose. The *Wishing Wall* thus finds itself between being an artwork and something akin to social practice, such as a community notice board.

The theme of the 'Infecting the City' festival, HUMAN RITE, was based on the notion that contemporary South Africa and its surrounds are fraught with political tensions. The country's segregationist past and recent past, with xenophobic attacks in 2008, are marked with instances of human rights violations. As such, the theme of the festival was devised to posit the idea of ritual or performance as a means to help bring about social healing in terms of the damage done by these painful events. This relates closely to the problematic of autonomy in authorship and art in the Wall. The project oscillated in emphasis between remaining an autonomous artwork (which implies that the artists determined its function through their intention of creating an artwork), or a social project in which the spectators collectively aired their opinions, and which gave rise to many spectators wanting the project to further a party-political agenda, such as presenting the wishes as grievances to local government bodies. The extent to which the Wall engaged with social agendas (such as party politics or community needs in terms of municipal services) was determined by the artists – one of the aspects of artistic autonomy that was essential to the contextualisation of the piece. This does not mean that the artists curbed or disregarded the views of the community, in failing to pursue a party-political agenda for the artwork. To my mind, the success of the project hinges on the tension between the artwork having social emphasis in its authorship and aesthetic emphasis in its contextualisation.

The idea for the Wall stemmed from an earlier project in which both artists were involved, where they encountered a community notice board. In 2007 they were doing research for a series of public artworks commissioned by the Johannesburg Development Agency through the Trinity Session in Johannesburg. They were visiting Yeoville, a multicultural and somewhat derelict suburb of Johannesburg, when they encountered a very interesting wall just off Rocky Street. The wall served as an informal and impromptu notice board for the community, having spontaneously sprung up and remained there for what appeared to be quite some time.

On this wall people had posted advertisements, pleas, exclamations, proclamations and the like, offering and looking for anything from accommodation to illicit pleasures. What was striking was the enormity of this notice board, the layering of information, and the fact that it was not edited or censored by any parties outside of the immediate community. It was an informal and impressive form of public expression. One could perhaps posit the Rocky Street notice board as a comparison with the *Wishing Wall* in attempting to understand the notion of collective and autonomous authorship in spectator-orientated artworks. The notice board is clearly not an artwork and the context is the important difference between these two installations. The Wall was presented on the streets of Cape Town in the context of the 'Infecting the City' festival, while the Rocky Street notice board only appeared within the context of the community it serves, there were no 'artists', even though one could argue that each contributor to the board took on an authorial role. This form of collective authorship was not mediated or facilitated by the intentionalism associated with autonomous art-making. Gaiger (2009:49) writes – with reference to Kwon's discussion of site-specific authorship – that the artist is required to provide a unifying meaning to otherwise unconnected events and objects. Anna Pakes (2004:3) refers to Arthur Danto's ontology of art, where he emphasises that artworks are more than mere things due to their purpose as artworks, thus they are not just objects, because they are endowed with the intention of being artworks. Jochen Gerz (2004:650) is a site-specific artist who has produced art for many international sites. He asserts that the notion of the artist, as autonomous creative figure with his own unique vision, is questionable in contemporary art. Pakes also warns against this Modernist view of art as alienating to the spectator, and feels that (and I think in the case of the Wall) artistic intention is not hierarchically dominant to collective authorship, but serves to contextualise the artwork. Intention is not seen a tool towards constructing autonomous meaning out of the Wall. The creation of meaning is negotiated between the parties involved in the process and shifts in its orientation to favour, at different times, the input of the artists, the spectators and even the work itself. Gerz adds that the role of the artist is rather that of a transcriber or

translator of meaning, and argues that the artist does not have control over the meanings that emerge from an artwork, though the artist does secure their emergence and continuity.

Relational aesthetics and collaborative authorship

In itself, the Wall is a multi-dimensional project that may be theorised as drawing on many different disciplines and schools of thought around art, that actively seek out spectator participation. With regard to spectator-orientated art, Bourriaud (2002) posits that art is no longer (especially since the 1990s) based around an object that is created and displayed, but it is rather based on the invention of models of sociability. He discusses the concept of conviviality, and the artist setting up relationships between spectators by staging an event or a performance (Bourriaud 2002:32). To my mind, this means that the artwork performs a social function before performing an aesthetic function. The artwork necessitates social interactions rather than aesthetic experiences. It also means that an autonomous art object is not necessarily the result of the performance or the interactions it sparks. Bourriaud (2002:30–32) refers to examples of various artists producing such work in the 1970s. Braco Dimitrijevic produced the *Casual Passer-by* series, which placed the name of an anonymous passer-by on an advertising poster or next to the bust of a celebrity. Stephen Willats mapped relationships between people in an apartment block, and Sophie Calle documented her meetings with strangers. These artworks have in common the new relationships that are set up between those who encounter the artworks: people who would not necessarily have cause to interact in other social settings are coerced to do so in the context of the artworks, rather than to contemplate the artworks themselves as they would in a gallery context. One may here recall the discussion of art for its own sake earlier in this article, which is an understanding of art which relational aesthetics seems to challenge in its social emphasis. The relational artwork is not an instance of art for its own sake, but rather for the sake of interaction between people.

According to Bourriaud (2002:35), an ambiguity exists between usable goods and contemporary artworks. Usable goods one may

understand to be objects within the realm of social practice, as Roberts (2004:18) explains it, referred to at an earlier stage. These objects have a use-value and are traded or utilised in social life. Bourriaud (2002:35) feels that art is no longer made for contemplation, but to be enacted or used by the spectator in a similar manner to objects that are produced to be usable goods. He brands this application of art 'operative realism', which refers to art taking part in social practices usually thought to be outside the realm of art, such as the service industries or party politics. Rirkit Tiravanija produced a work which allowed spectators to share a meal with him, for instance (this work is referred to again with reference to Bishop's criticism of relational artworks). Artists, as such, may provide 'menial services' to spectators. Bourriaud's theory may be useful in understanding the functioning of the Wall, as well as thinking about the problematic of its function in terms of authorship and its autonomy. How much of the function of the Wall relates to 'use' and how much of its function can be seen as aesthetic?

In a critique of the relational model of working with spectatorship, Claire Bishop (2006:194) refers to Roland Barthes' (1967) statements about the death of the author, arguing that it has not led to the emancipation of the 'reader', but to the befuddlement of the 'viewer'. When an artwork relies heavily on spectator participation it runs the risk of becoming self-referential, to the extent of being unintelligible to the spectator. This could be a side-effect of affording an unwitting spectator so much responsibility without providing him/her with the implicit knowledge around the politics of public art and the art world in general. Gerz (2004:652) warns that public art should not be about 'artworld critique'. Furthermore, Stephen Wright (2004:535–537) argues that relational art sometimes falls into the trap of providing 'services' to spectators who never required these 'services' in the first place – in fact, this situation does not emancipate the spectator as an author, but reinforces the hierarchy between the artist (as holder of symbolic capital) and the participant (the labourer, in this case). Ultimately, the artist remains in control of concluding the artwork and representing/framing it as art. It was telling that participants in the Wall project regularly questioned its party-political use. While spectators may have understood the Wall

to have a social function and to work as social critique, the artists contextualised the work as aesthetic in its critique, in their capacity as artists facilitating the creation of the artwork.

Bishop (2005:128–131) makes an interesting argument that encapsulates this problematic, saying that while installation art (which in her interpretation includes relational art) aims to engage the spectator rather than present objects for his contemplation, it is flawed to an extent. She contends that installation and other forms of spectator-orientated art aim to do two things: (1) to activate the subject in addressing the spectator in a direct manner, and (2) to decentre or challenge the position of the subject. This means the artwork leads the spectator to question his relationship to the world and his understanding of the artwork. It may in turn lead the spectator to rethink his prejudices and construct new relationships to other spectators. This process is the deconstruction of the Cartesian subject of Kantian aesthetics, one that is unified in his understanding of the world and himself in a coherent humanist sense.⁴

The problem which installation art encounters, however, is that one can only be aware of one's own decentred position by approaching it from a unified subject position. In short, if one applies Bishop's ideas to the Wall, the 'meaning' of its relational mode of interacting with the spectator is only accessible to those who understand what relational art is. One needs to understand contemporary art to understand the Wall. Bishop (2005:117–120, 2006:149–153) further argues that when artworks such as relational performances by Rirkit Tiravanija take place in gallery spaces, they encounter spectators who are prepared to meet with the artistic practices of questioning and disrupting the subject; i.e. they are 'educated' spectators. Bishop refers specifically to Tiravanija's work *Untitled (Still)*, presented in 1992 at 303 Gallery in New York. In this performance the artist moved the contents of the gallery office and storeroom into the exhibition space. This included the gallery director, who had to work while on display. In the storeroom the artist set up a kitchen of sorts, where spectators were invited to eat curry with the artist, which he cooked for them. A convivial relationship was set up between the spectators and the artist in their sharing of a meal. This is 'operative realism' as Bourriaud describes it – the artist provides a

service mimicking a socio-professional industry. This calls into question the autonomy of the artwork as well as the artist, and involves the spectator as creator of meaning in the act of relating to the artwork and artist. The idea of such artworks, however, is that the spectator is aware of how this work challenges the conventions of spectatorship in a gallery. It should lead the spectator to rethink his position not only in relation to art but also in society, and possibly to carry a new critical perspective into his own life (Bishop 2005:113). In the Wall project the collage-like nature of the installation could have led spectators and participants to construct their own readings of the meaning of the work, but readings that are not coherent or unproblematic. In order to do so, however, it required participants who were aware of the discourse with which they were engaging. The spectators encountered on the streets of Cape Town did not necessarily expect to find an artwork on their daily commute through the city. The festival was publicised, but still many participants had not heard about the Wall before its appearance. Thus they were not gallery visitors expecting to be challenged by artworks. As a result some spectators ran the risk of 'befuddlement', expecting the Wall to have a political agenda and purpose, rather than an aesthetic one.

Site-specificity and authorship

Kwon's (1997:85–110) argument is useful in exploring the notion of authorship in cases such as the Wall, where artists are commissioned to create a public artwork in a site assigned to them by the commissioning bodies. She pointedly argues around site-specific art, that in its conception it aims to challenge the institutional authority of the museum space, and the status of the artist as producer of meaning. Her argument can be fruitfully applied to work such as the Wall, which to my mind displays aspects of site-specific artworks in the discursive definition she affords it. She identifies three paradigms of site-specificity (Kwon 2002:11–24): the first is the existential or phenomenological site. Kwon argues that in this challenging capacity the work itself and the artist as author become less autonomous, and the site (a seemingly arbitrary aspect of it) becomes as important as the work. This is illustrated in well-known site-specific artworks like Richard Serra's

Tilted arc (1981) in Federal Plaza in New York, which cannot be moved – it has become part of the built environment. Serra famously asserted that to move this work would be to destroy it. Secondly, Kwon discusses site-specificity which is concerned with the wider institutional framework of how an artwork is displayed. The third paradigm she identifies as the field of discourse, in which she asserts that site-specific art practices seek a more intense engagement with the world outside of art institutions, in an attempt to interface more with the social world in addressing social issues, or to place art within the larger framework of other forms of cultural work. The *Wishing Wall* interfaces with social practice in appearing as a public notice board, and it clearly reaches beyond art's institutional practices in orientating itself towards the spectator and displacing artistic autonomy.

Kwon (1970:80) makes another argument which problematises the notion of such displacements of authorship. When an artist is commissioned to create an artwork of a performance nature in a specific site authorship becomes problematic, since the artist is usually expected to be present, and in a sense becomes part of the commissioned artwork instead of being unimportant to the artwork. In the case of the Wall, the artists were part of the artwork in mediating participants' interactions with the installation, and the expectation was created (in media generated around the project) that spectators and participants could expect to find the artists at the Wall, as its 'creators'. In a sense this reverses the very ideals of site-specific work (or relational artwork, which aims to upset the autonomy of art), and the author becomes paradoxically important to the creation of the artwork, instead of being displaced. This means that instead of challenging the role of the autonomous artist this role is reinforced, and the artwork loses some of its critical impetus. In terms of the Wall it appeared at the time of running the project that the artists were integral to the project in terms of their presence at the site. The role and importance of the artists became ambiguous, as they were positioned both as integral and as unimportant to the creation of the artwork. Gaiger (2009:46) argues that the emphasis in contemporary art is toward site-specificity, and this indicates a turn towards collaborative authorship, away from autonomous art. He finds this problematic,

arguing that art may lose quite a lot of its oppositional power in becoming subsumed into the world of social practice. Gaiger also argues that Kwon is mistaken in her conception of the discursive site. He feels that art fulfils a critical role in society not because of its 'site-specific' character, but rather because what she sees as linked to site is the result of art having a more collaborative approach.

As the Wall developed, the artists considered what their involvement needed to be with the project as a whole in terms of authorship. Even though the initial stages of authorship were in the hands of the spectators, the artists could have 'curated' the Wall, altered its appearance, or rearranged material on it after the spectators had interacted with it. Some material could have been removed, or could have been arranged in sections according to emerging themes. Although the artists had planned to have only minor curatorial or authorial input in the work, editing the Wall seemed quite possible at the outset of the project. As it unfolded, it appeared that the Wall belonged less to the artists than it did to the public or spectators. Most participants seemed adamant about selecting their own locations to place their wishes, and this became integral 'authorial marks' which function as evidence of each spectator's interaction with the Wall. It thus seemed inappropriate to interfere with these decisions on the part of the spectators. Rearranging material on the Wall would also have detracted from the collage-like qualities that were emerging in the installation. The collage-like appearance of the Wall became important, as it might point to the critical function of the artwork. Adorno (1970:154–156) discusses collage as a medium that represents the world as disjointed and unresolved, rather than unified and visually coherent. He argues that such a view of the world allows the artwork to point to the nature of contemporary society itself as unresolved and disjointed, and as such it performs a critical function. The Wall is a collection of thoughts from diverse contributors, presenting wishes that are only unified in terms of content by the fact that they are wishes. These are fragments hanging together for a transient moment (i.e. of the installation of the project). This is very different from a stable art object in a gallery, such as a Rothko painting.

While authorship seemed problematic at the time of the installation being constructed,



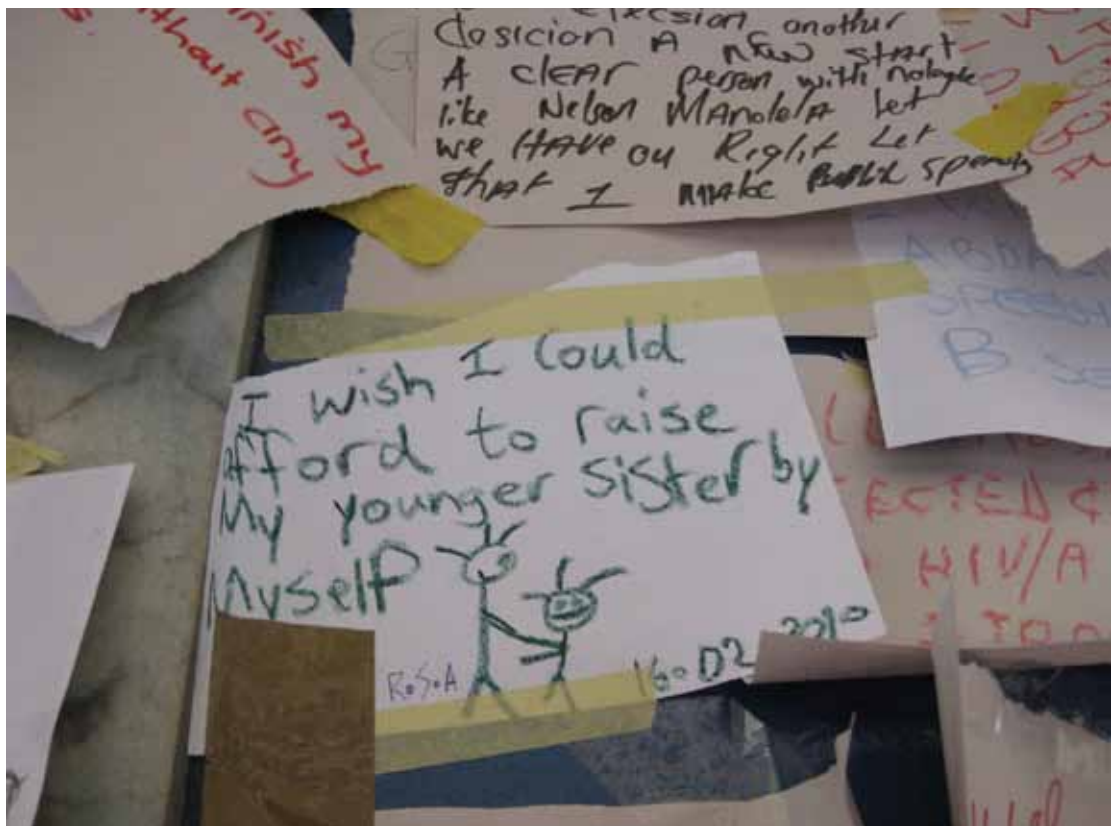
2 Wall collage.

the artists made a conscious decision not to edit or 'curate' it. As such, the installation became a completely public forum, and the wishes evolved to become proclamations of belief, political statements and even life stories, as participants used the forum to their own ends. The artists were merely involved in providing information and materials, and eventually decided to make no aesthetic input other than that, although they were instrumental in providing and sustaining

the context of the festival which framed the work as art, rather than as a notice board. To my mind, this relates to intentionalism (as discussed earlier). Without the intent to 'make art', the Wall would become a notice board, like the one in Rocky Street. Kwon (1997:102–106) discusses the role of artists as facilitators of art creation, mimicking service and management industries in the role they play in this regard. Bourriaud (2002:32–39) argues similarly that artists may fulfil roles

that are not strictly aesthetic, but rather social in nature. For Bourriaud it seems that social interaction is more important than the aesthetic appearance of the outcome of that interaction. As mentioned before, he seems to think that art can draw on socio-professional models as pre-existing forms to structure such interactions, and that the interactions are enough in themselves as an outcome, since the emphasis of such artworks is not aesthetic, but rather social. Such socio-professional models could refer to the entertainment or hospitality industries – or, in fact, any industry. Bourriaud (2002:35–36) refers to artists such as Mark Dion (Kwon also discusses him in a book devoted to his work), Peter Fend and Nick van der Steeg, and also what he calls parodies of businesses, such as Ingold Airlines and Premiata Ditta. These artists mimic what is happening in the real field of production of goods and services, and set up ambiguity between the usability of their work and its aesthetic function (Bourriaud 2002:35–39). This means that the artworks resemble social practice yet retain some functions of an

artwork, such as being located within a gallery context. Bourriaud refers to Felix Gonzalez-Torres' work *Piles of sweets to be taken away by visitors* (1990), which consisted of sweets heaped onto a large pile. Visitors to the installation were encouraged to take a sweet with them, thus 'removing' the installation, but if they took all of the sweets there would be no installation left. This implies that every spectator had to make a decision regarding the work: it would have been an aesthetic decision, since it would affect how the work remained represented in the gallery. In a comparable manner, the spectators and participants in the Wall installation had an important role in creating its aesthetic appearance, but could also determine its physical content. This placed authorial responsibility on the viewers, who in turn displayed authorial behaviours such as making specific aesthetic decisions. Individual participants' handwriting became an authenticating feature of the installation, just as in Gonzalez-Torres' work the removal of each sweet would leave the (absent) mark of one's interaction with the artwork. One



3 Handwriting on the Wall.

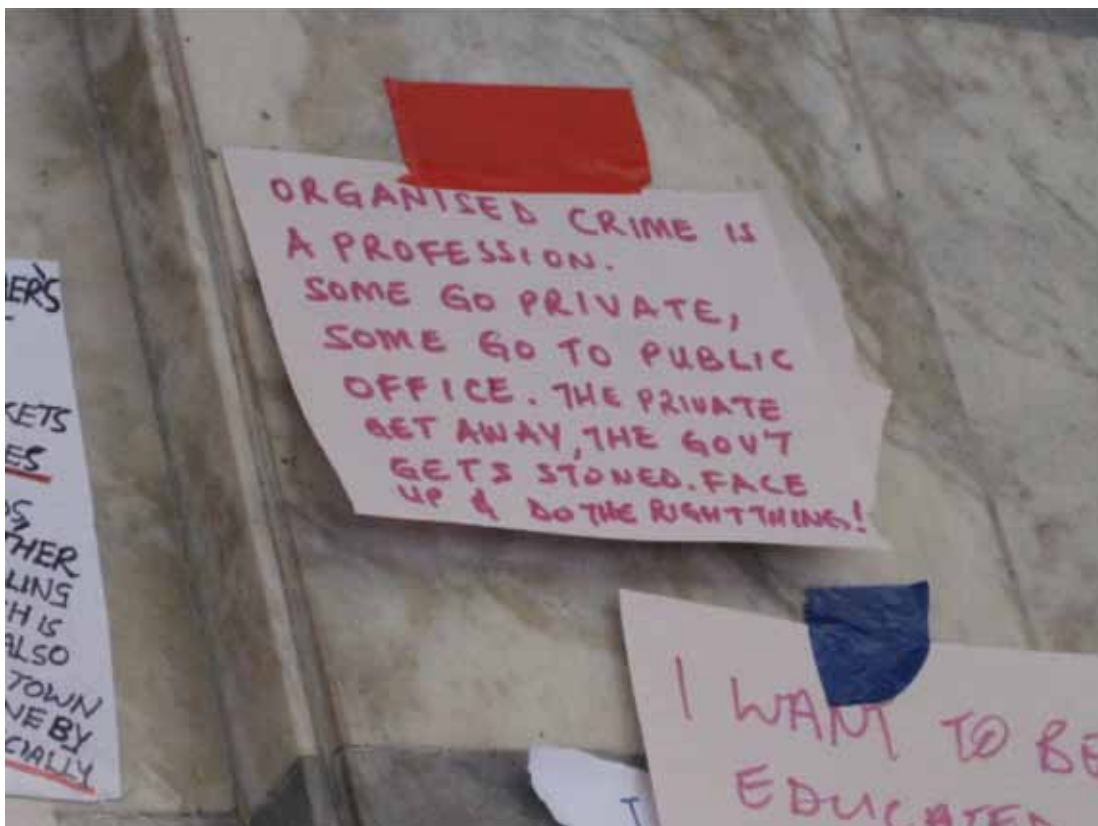
could think of handwriting as replacing the mark made by the artist, or of being the mark of the artist or author. Since the Wall was not censored, the responsibility also fell to the participants to decide what it would depict, and often participants commented on each other's wishes or even chose to obscure previous wishes by placing their own on top of those. As mentioned before, the placement of wishes was a further authenticating feature of spectators' involvement. It is ironic to note that even though the artists were no longer making aesthetic decisions, spectators were put in a position to make these decisions, thus their actions began to resemble those of autonomous authors. The Wall did not, then, become a purely socially functional space, but was an aesthetic installation.

Reading the Wall, spectatorship and authorship

Many people visited the Wall for the main purpose of reading other people's wishes, rather than posting their own. Wishes and

posts were very layered and intertwined, and impromptu conversations arose between posts. Comments protesting against the government were answered by comments praising the government. Lewd proclamations of love were answered by religious statements. An overwhelming theme of unemployment became clear, with numbers of people requesting employment. Another theme that emerged was political dissatisfaction. Many wishes were made for the effective government of Cape Town, and for municipalities to address community needs such as housing. Wishes were made for future happiness, love and prosperity.

The act of reading the Wall could be regarded as an indication of the ambiguity of the function of the project and the installation. Bourriaud and Kwon regard the artist as collaborator, rather than autonomous author of the artwork. The spectator also takes a collaborative role in such artworks, but in the case of the Wall the spectators were not all collaborators, and many interacted with the Wall in a manner similar to that which occurs



4 Political wishes.

between an artwork and a spectator in a gallery space. This implies a sense of distance from the work, and also an aesthetic interaction with the work. For instance, many spectators read the wishes on the Wall but were hesitant to touch it, almost as if it were an object of value in itself. This may be likened to the ambiguity Bourriaud refers to, between the artwork's use value and its aesthetic function.

What is perhaps the most telling aspect of the Wall in terms of authorship is the dismantling of it. This decision runs parallel to the artists' intentional framing of the Wall as an artwork. As such, the artists made the decision to conclude the work (as stipulated by their contract with the festival organisers). Although there was some concern about removing the artwork from its public installation space, it was agreed to take all the wishes down and package them to use in an exhibition in Gauteng. A strange disjunction arose out of this termination of the artwork, where those interacting with the work at this stage were not the public or spectators, but the artists. Instead of creating an artwork they were dismantling one. Each wish was taken down individually, severed from the Wall with a knife, before being packaged and taken back to Johannesburg.

As a spectator-orientated artwork, the *Wishing Wall* required spectators to interact in the form of posting wishes on a wall in Cape Town. During the week in which the Wall was in operation, the artists involved surrendered their capacity as authors to the spectators, i.e. the public on the street. What spectators chose to write and where they placed that message on the surface of the wall was not determined by the authors. Thus, the autonomy of the artists' authorship was surrendered in favour of a collaborative authorship. This collaboration was discussed here in terms of Bourriaud's 'operative realism', which means artists borrow from social practices such as the entertainment industry or service industries, to produce artworks that interface with and mimic aspects of those industries. The Wall mimicked the public notice board, and also other forums where the public express their opinions (such as blogs). In this capacity, producing an art object is seen as secondary to creating a process where people interact and where menial services are offered to spectators. Kwon's (1997, 2002) understanding of the artist as facilitator of art is also important, as she views discourse as the site of an artwork, locating the artist in the role of facilitator – one with skills such as criticality, which



5 Themes on the Wall, spectators reading.

may be utilised or commissioned in order to produce public art. Her own discussion of authorship sees as problematic, however, the fact that although the site-specific artwork may challenge the position of the autonomous artist, as the site becomes more important than the artwork, at times the artist is seen as paradoxically integral to creating the work.

The *Wishing Wall* is an instance where such tension did arise. I argue that the Wall would become merely a notice board if it were not framed as an artwork. So, although many forms of spectator-orientated art seek to challenge the autonomy of art, that autonomy is needed for art to distinguish itself from the world of social practice and the production of goods (Gaiger 2009). Artistic autonomy is seen as not just the autonomy of the artwork, in the sense of the Modernist conception of art for its own sake, it is also seen as the autonomy of the artist being in control of every aspect of creating the artwork. In the case of the Wall there was tension between surrendering artistic autonomy to the spectators constructing the Wall, and the artists making key decisions and maintaining the context of the Wall as an artwork. These key aspects of contextualising the Wall as an artwork included the setting of the arts festival, which created media awareness around various artworks (including the Wall) being constructed, installed and performed in the city at the time. The artists also had a visible daily presence at the Wall, and continually directed the content produced by spectators in asking them to specifically make wishes. The artists were also in control of the duration of the project, and concluded it by removing the wishes themselves in a ritualistic manner. This process seems essential, as it concludes and finalises the artwork, by the artists. It is evidence of their ultimate authorship of the work, but this authorship is also collaborative. The argument put forth in this study is thus that spectator-orientated artworks may follow a collaborative approach to authorship, but that the context of autonomous artwork should not be disregarded in order for the work to have a critical function. If the artwork cannot extricate itself from the world of social practice, its critical function becomes a socially critical function and it becomes merely an artistic example of social critique.

Notes

- 1 Social practice is here contextualised as John Roberts (2009:18) explains it and is taken to refer to the service and entertainment industries. It is the world of commerce and the culture industry as Adorno sees it.
- 2 Elkins sees this as one of many views of Modernity. In *Master narratives and their discontents* he discusses Modernity as it could possibly be seen as having its ontology in the 18th century. He lists Michael Fried, T.J. Clark and Robert Rosenblum as theorists who variously trace the roots of Modernity to 18th-century painting. Clement Greenberg is also discussed as a theorist who sees Modernity in this manner, although not perhaps limited to the 18th century in artistic practice, if in philosophical thought. According to Elkins, Greenberg sees Kant as the first Modernist in terms of the concept of self-critique.
- 3 The decentering of the subject relates to the view of the autonomous artist and the spectator as viewer of this work, as theorised by Kant. This is referred to earlier on in the article, with reference to the notion of autonomous art. Cf. Panofsky's notion of reception theory, which formulates three parties as generators of meaning in art: the author, the spectator and the artwork itself as object. The autonomous artist and the unified subject position of the spectator fit in with the autonomous art object in this context.
- 4 This corresponds to the fractured view of meaning Adorno (1970:154–156) discusses in relation to collage. The latter also challenges the unified subject position of the spectator by presenting him with an artwork in which the meaning is not clear and unified, but is rather fractured and problematic.

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