Secret/*Wish*, the problem of the object in relational aesthetics

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Abstract

Nicholas Bourriaud's (2002) relational aesthetics interprets art as social or political in nature, underemphasising aesthetic concerns such as the creation of objects as artworks. This article aims to problematise the relational model from a material point of view, based on a 'new aesthetics' which Jacques Rancière discusses as a mode of art-making which he titles 'inventory'. In order to do so, the article addresses a spectator-orientated artwork entitled *Secret*/*Wish*, conceived along with artist Paul Cooper, and installed at the University of Johannesburg in South Africa in 2011. In previous publications on the work I questioned its significance as relational and site-specific according to Bourriaud and Miwon Kwon's theories. I would like to further interrogate their ideas here by investigating *Secret*/*Wish* as rooted in the production of authored objects, despite its affinity with Bourriaud and Kwon's perspectives which denounce the art object as pivotal to artistic production.

Keywords: authorship, inventory, object, relational aesthetics, spectator, spectator-orientated art

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to interrogate a spectator-orientated artwork entitled *Secret/Wish* by employing Nicholas Bourriaud's (2002) theory of relational art. The article explores Bourriaud's theory critically by referring to Jacques Rancière's (2004, 2010)[1] interpretation of contemporary art and its place within the conventions of aesthetics (rooted in art history) and social life. Rancière (2004: 88–108) discusses the conventional schism between aesthetics and the social world, and argues that some contemporary art practices aim to embrace life as art, rather than set art apart

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from daily life.[2] As an instance of this interaction, Bourriaud's ideas on art as social event, rather than finished objects of fine art, are seen here as a point of departure in thinking about spectator-orientated artworks. Ostensibly the contemporary art practice of relational art aims to allow the spectator greater participation in the process of art production, and subverts the authorial autonomy of the artist as creator of precious objects and meaning. Instead of manufacturing masterpieces, the artist sets up events and situations which allow for the relationships between people in the interaction to become the artworks. Artists are thus facilitators rather than creators of artworks (Bourriaud 2002: 108–110). This notion has recently become rather pertinent in art practice as well as in writing about art. In two earlier issues of this journal, published in 2013, Miranda Young-Jahangeer (pp. 254–262) as well as Kris Rutten, An van Dienderen and Ronald Soetaert (pp. 459–473) refer to the social emphasis in contemporary art. Young-Jahangeer (pp. 255, 258) sees art as a way for people to engage with debate through human interaction, rather than for artworks to be limited in their reach by gallery or museum spaces. In the special issue themed around the social emphasis on art, Rutten et al. theorise this tendency as an ethnographic turn, which may broadly be seen to concur with Miwon Kwon (1997: 80) and Bourriaud's conception of artists as facilitators of social events, rather than creators. I have argued previously that this notion is problematic by focusing on the remaining authorial autonomy in the case of spectator-orientated artworks such as *Secret/Wish* and an earlier version of it titled the *Wishing Wall* (Cooper and Raubenheimer 2011; Raubenheimer 2011). I would like to extend the argument I previously made towards greater than authorship, to address the material objects of *Secret/Wish*.

When I refer to spectator-orientated artworks such as *Secret/Wish*, I mean to infer artworks which loosely fit with Bourriaud's notion of relational art, as something based in event or performance rather than object making, and which also focuses on the role of the spectator as author rather than the artist as author. Bourriaud's (2002: 113) definition of relational art refers to a set of practices which conceptually and practically focus on 'human relations and their social context', rather than on the private spaces of the conventions of art spectatorship, such as galleries or museums. According to Bourriaud (ibid: 110–111), contemporary artworks are not the outcome of labour, but the labour itself. He also views the image or representation as an act, rather than an object. Where the object is thus seen as more or less redundant in relational aesthetics, I would like to question its significance in spectator-orientated artworks.

I have previously written about the *Wishing Wall*, which was facilitated in collaboration with Paul Cooper in 2010 in Cape Town. The artwork was contextualised as a public performance for *Infecting the City*, part of the Spier Contemporary arts festival. It may be seen as the forerunner for *Secret/Wish* in many ways. It involved the spectating public to a large degree, also requiring them to write down wishes and display these in a public space, as *Secret/Wish* does. In my investigations of the

conceptual significance of the *Wishing Wall* I have theorised it as fundamentally questioning authorial autonomy, in that it rejected the artist as author (Cooper and Raubenheimer 2011; Raubenheimer 2011). Instead, the spectator was given the task of authorship, gaining a dubious access to the work. This is formulated by Bourriaud (2002: 108) in his relational aesthetics, and also by Kwon (1997: 80) in her discussions on site-specific installations. Both these authors argue that artworks which give the spectator greater agency in authorship than the artist has, serve to challenge the traditional model of the Cartesian subject position.

The Cartesian model is sometimes also referred to as the unified subject position in this article. It is formulated here as Immanuel Kant theorised it, placing the subject at the centre of aesthetic experience. The Cartesian model relies on objectification in order to achieve subjectification, and, as such, what is looked upon is mastered. As complicit in the act of looking, the spectator has to share the onerous implications of such a gaze with the author, because the author of the artwork has autonomy over its execution. The spectator is presented with a hermetically whole artwork which cannot be challenged, merely beheld. To escape this position's Modernist legacy, contemporary art employs many strategies, such as deconstruction in the avant-garde tradition, or, indeed in this case, allowing the spectator to play an active role in creating the artwork. The Cartesian position and its implications are discussed further in this article with reference to the theories of Theodor Adorno, Jean-Francois Lyotard and Laura Mulvey.

I argued in my discussions on the *Wishing Wall* (Cooper and Raubenheimer 2011; Raubenheimer 2011) that the relational model did not fully clarify authorship in artworks which seemed centred around the role of the spectator as more than a mere onlooker. Although I agree with Bourriaud and Kwon's basic formulations around these seemingly more interactive artworks, I am not convinced that authorial autonomy such as the Cartesian model enables is to be done away with. In fact, at times the 'new', more socially orientated artworks Bourriaud formulates as relational, may alienate the spectator more than involve him or her. I discuss this in greater detail below, with reference to the critique of Claire Bishop (2005, 2006).

Secret/*Wish* and the *Wishing Wall*

The material aspect of the artwork *Secret/Wish* consisted of pieces of paper, painted rocks, a mailbox and some coloured felt-tipped pens. These objects are not meaningless by-products of an event, as Bourriaud (2002: 10) implies, but were indeed arranged or contrived by the artists as authors to some extent before the spectators interacted with them. The relational theory of art production is not unsuitable or irrelevant here, but needs to be understood in conjunction with ideas that acknowledge the remaining vestiges of the Cartesian model in art production. These are objects imbued with the 'aura' of human interaction of both the artists and the spectators. The recorded wishes and secrets are particularly evocative of

Figure 1: *Secret*/*Wish* and the *Wishing Wall*

personal situations and intimate thoughts. This is not really the 'aura' of uniqueness, as Walter Benjamin (2004: 791–811) discusses it, but it approaches that uniqueness. For Benjamin, artworks as cultic objects have uniqueness in the temporal and spatial sense, and this endows them with value. It may be argued that he describes the Cartesian model in describing the cult value of unique artworks. It seems that the objects produced in *Secret/Wish* do display some aspects of this 'aura' of uniqueness, even though they were not the sole outcome of the artwork, and were created by spectators rather than artists. This 'aura' relates to their history; they are a record of events and may be related to the 'poetic potential' (Rancière 2010: 127) of objects, as discussed in the section on 'inventory'.

   Although I mention all the objects involved, those arranged before the commencement of the artwork and those produced during it, I focus mostly on the wishes and secrets produced in the process as significant objects. The artwork *Secret/Wish* consisted of two displays: one was set up outside the building of the Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture (FADA) at the University of Johannesburg; the second was a representation and continuation of the outdoor display, inside the FADA gallery, next to the foyer of the same building. The work was set up and developed for the duration of the exhibition from 9–24 May. As mentioned, the basic premise of the work was a continuation of the artwork entitled the *Wishing Wall*. For that installation, which was also a performance and an event, we asked passers-by on Adderley and Hout streets in the centre of Cape Town to write down their wishes on pieces of paper we provided. The wishes were then placed on a large wall, right on the street, with coloured tape. That project grew into a mammoth wall of fluttering wishes. Spectators arrived in droves to make wishes, but also to come and read wishes. The power of the artwork lay in giving a voice to people's personal thoughts, and represented a fragment of the 'state of mind' of the Capetonian public.

Figure 2: Detail from *Secret/Wish* and the *Wishing Wall*

In *Secret/Wish* we wanted to explore the notion of secrets along with wishes. We had a third site, a stone wall just outside the FADA building, where passers-by (mostly students, since we were on campus) could fold up their secrets, and place them into nooks and crannies between the stones. This wall was hardly used, however, and people seemed to prefer placing their wishes and secrets on the more public walls. Spectators could place their wishes on the outside wall for the duration of the first week of the exhibition, or on an allocated wall inside the gallery. This wall had a found mailbox fitted to it, and spectators were invited to place their wishes in it. Paul and I took wishes from there and placed them on the wall around the mailbox during the course of the exhibition – in effect publishing them. White stones were placed on the floor in front of the wall, along with blank sheets of paper, and coloured felt-tipped pens scattered in-between. This was the raw material spectators could use to make their wishes materialise. Although much of the creative agency in *Secret/Wish* resided with the spectators, we found that the majority of wishes were recorded whenever Paul and I, as the artists, were at the sites, along with student volunteers, encouraging spectators to take part in the project. As with the Cape Town *Wishing Wall*, we had to explain the project to people, who seemed confused about its capacity as a public artwork. In fact, many spectators questioned the purpose of both artworks – were they political manifestos or protests? This was discussed as a central problem in interpreting the work as relational in previous articles (Cooper and Raubenheimer 2011; Raubenheimer 2011).

The avant-garde, and critical approaches to art making: why contemporary art departs from aesthetics and the Cartesian subject position

At the crux of spectators' reaction to both artworks is the problem of contemporary art's relationship with the field of aesthetics. Rancière (2004: 14) writes about how

aesthetics has been discredited for its problematic notions based on the writings of Kant and later the Modernist ideas of thinkers such as Clement Greenberg (in Elkins 2005). This stance is centred on the spectator as unified subject, who is able to assert intellectual mastery over all he encounters visually. The position is inextricable from many problematic side-effects (Coole and Frost 2010: 7–15). As the subject asserts himself he has to exercise power over what he regards. These problems are formulated critically in theories of the gaze, as Jacques Lacan (1978) and feminist writers such as Laura Mulvey (1999) discuss it. The power of looking translates into the formulation of a subject which regards the world solely from a Modernist, masculine and Western perspective. This perspective actively excludes the viewpoint of 'others' such as women or people outside of the Western cultural context, resulting in the objectification of what or who is gazed upon. In this process the spectator has no choice but to conform to or partake in the gaze of the author, situating him or herself within this problematic position. The object as passive recipient of the gaze is a cornerstone of this mechanism of looking.

Rancière (2004: 88–106) focuses on the culture critical approaches of two particular sets of thinkers towards this problem: the first group is the Frankfurt School. Their approach to this problem hinges on the object as commodity fetish, and they aim for art to subvert the unified subject, who falsely sees the world as resolved and mastered. Theorists like Adorno (1970) feel that this relationship to the world is one of dominance, and this is played out in the commercial realm of mass consumption or the social world. For Adorno and Horkheimer (2003: 31–41), Kantian aesthetics and the Enlightenment itself have culminated in the 'aesthetics' of consumer culture, which functions through the illusion of freedom and the construction of desire. Part of this dynamic is played out by the object, fetishised for mass consumption. To critique the object as commodity fetish, art must be separate from life and must remain so to refrain from becoming as affirmative as the mass media. Art's very function, then, is to critique, to point out the contradictions within consumer culture, the dialectical nature of its utopian (Cartesian) portrayal of the world, and the dialectic of the Enlightenment. This is a basic critical or deconstructionist approach adopted in much of contemporary art, and may be compared with other critical approaches such as those of the feminists.

Second, Rancière (2004: 88–106) refers to Lyotard and his conception of art as avant-garde in that it challenges aesthetics even further, through the shock of the 'now', the moment that transpires as dissensus. For Lyotard there is the heterogeneity of the commercial visual realm, such as the mass media, and art has to challenge this by asserting its autonomy, its removal from daily life and social politics.

This re-affirms Adorno's feelings about art as an index of the problematic nature of modern society. Both Adorno and Lyotard's ideas may be seen to understand art as having a critical function in society. Although they view art as completely separate from politics in the social realm of life, they see it as the register of these politics, reflecting the ruptured nature of reality beneath the gloss of consumption.

For them, art has to be critical or polemical, and, paradoxically, must remove itself from society in order to effectively serve society. It has to inspire a change in the spectator's thinking, or an awareness of the power structures at play in society's institutions. Does art fulfil this function? Rancière (2010: 151) questions whether a work of art is able to mobilise anyone into reacting against the institutions of power in society. For him the answer is undecided, and I would agree.

Relational aesthetics, life becomes aesthetics

If art cannot fulfil a social function by claiming its independence from life and society, as the critical approaches above would dictate, then there are ways in which it may embrace life. One such alternative strategy is represented by relational aesthetics. This theory sees art as mending the disintegrating social fabric of contemporary consumerist society, rather than critiquing it. If the Cartesian model for understanding art embodied the implicit power relationships in the Modern world, it is addressed by the relational model in a shift away from the autonomous author and art object. In the context of relational art, artists set up social situations that result in interactions between people who would not normally interact. Bourriaud (2002: 30–32) sees the artist as playing a social role, and Rancière (2010: 147) explains this further as the artist becoming the creator of community bonds. Examples of such artworks include Braco Dimitrijevic's *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 meetings with strangers. These artworks were made in the 1970s, and Bourriaud (2002: 32) uses them to explain that art no longer resides in the creation of objects for contemplation, but rather in creating new social interactions. Rancière (2010: 121) notes that unlike the critical art practices advocated by Adorno and Lyotard, contemporary art embraces aspects of the aesthetic conception of the visual world through aesthetics of collective life, as Schiller (in Rancière 2010: 115–116) writes about it.

One may thus understand *Secret/Wish*, one the one hand, by using the relational model. It aimed to set up a situation between spectators, the artwork and the artists. The event or performance of writing down wishes and secrets, and placing them in the mailbox in the gallery or outside on the wall itself, was the aim of the artwork. The published wishes and secrets elicited further social interaction between strangers, and people could read and interact with the wishes of other spectators for the three week duration of the display. The artwork also allowed the authorial role of the artists to become less important than the creative decisions made by spectators – the content of the work was largely up to them. It is also true that the creation of an art object(s) was not the focus of this work.

On the other hand, relational art as a theory has its flaws, as previously mentioned. In the case of *Secret/Wish* the artists may have had less agency, but contrived

much of how the artwork materialised in providing raw materials with a specific appearance, in initiating the artwork, and in keeping the wishes and secrets to use at a later date. They exercised authorial agency which may seem less noticeable, but remains nonetheless. Given this fact, many thinkers problematise the gratuitous social reinterpretation of art, and maintain that art has to remain distinct from life in some way, so as to retain its usefulness as art (Gaiger 2009; Gerz 2004: 652; Roberts 2004). In other words, the role of the artist and the art object may be necessary for the artwork to function.

Materiality, the object in *Secret*/*Wish* and Rancière's aesthetics of inventory

Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (2010: 27) assert that society is simultaneously materially real and constructed. Material reality is culturally mediated, but it is not only cultural. Bourriaud focuses on the purely cultural aspect of art making, on relations between people, as an answer to the problem of the unified subject. Bourriaud's theory is effective to a degree, but neglects the material aspect of art making (among other things, such as authorship, which is also problematic). Rather than see the material world as part of the Cartesian model – as passive recipient of the artist's expression – material, or the art object, can be seen as central to a new aesthetics. This conception of the object focuses on it as more than passive matter – as a pivotal anchor in a shared aesthetic experience between participants, hinged on the historical potential of the object.

With this summary in mind, one may consider *Secret/Wish*, and its particular set of problems as they appeared for the duration of the artwork's creation and exhibition. First, the installation and performance were not always legible to spectators as art, perhaps due to their own role in authoring the piece. Second, what is the significance of the actual material produced in the process of creating the artwork? I refer to the illegibility of the artwork as it arose in conversations with spectators during the various stages of creating *Secret/Wish* and, indeed, also the *Wishing Wall*. The most commonly asked question relating to both artworks had to do with the nature of it: What was it? Spectators wanted to know whether the artworks were social protests, and would be documented and presented to government or figures of authority. They also seemed puzzled by its appearance, which resembled a notice board rather than a conventional artwork. It had to be explained to participants that these were artworks, and that participation was free.

This aspect is an effect that is relevant to many spectator-orientated artworks, be they relational or site specific. Claire Bishop (2005, 2006) writes insightfully that such artworks are often conceived of as liberating for spectators, breaking the aesthetic conventions of the unified subject and the autonomous artist. This is ostensibly done by allowing the spectator to take on the role of artist, and the effect is that the legitimacy of the art object is also called into question. In other words, art is

not exclusively created by all-knowing and talented artists, to be revered as objects of value in museums and galleries. Instead, it is created by the spectator in an alternative context such as a public space, demolishing the power relationship between the artist and spectator. However, as Bishop (2005: 128–131) points out, only a very educated spectator would be aware of this, and such a spectator would need to have a specific understanding of what the unified subject position is in the first place. Chris Jencks (in Coole and Frost 2010: 26) argues that claiming something as 'constructed' often re-centres the human subject as the source of agency in an unintended manner. John Roberts (2004: 563) argues in similar vein that when artworks engage with social structures (such as the public forum of a notice board), the danger is that their legibility as artworks disappears. How can the social function of art be achieved if it is completely subsumed into the social realm? Instead of feeling emancipated, the spectator may be confused and overwhelmed by an artwork that seems unlike art, and, as such, the work has not achieved its aim of emancipating the spectator from his subservience to the artist's gaze and the material artwork. In fact, the artist's autonomy has been even further cemented through the spectator's confusion, and the need for the artists' explanation. I have also mentioned that the objects used and produced in spectator-orientated artworks are often regarded as incidental, but they may have a more significant role to play.

One way to think of the objects produced in *Secret/Wish* relies on what Rancière (2004: 55) describes as one of the strategies employed in contemporary art, namely 'inventory'. Rancière argues that objects from daily life (from the realm of mass production) that fall out of use may become assimilated into the aesthetic world as artworks. (Bourriaud, on the other hand, argues that the artwork should construe itself as having a social 'use', thus creating useful situations rather than objects.) As such, Rancière (2004: 47–54) summarises 'inventory' as one possible relationship between life and autonomous art – life becoming art. As objects fall out of the cycle of use and consumption and become redundant to their original function, they become aesthetic objects with historicity; they are witness to events, times, ideas and so forth. Their existence is a record of social history. Perhaps the wishes and secrets recorded in 2011 should be regarded in a comparable manner. They do not qualify as objects of art in the way that traditional aesthetics would formulate; as autonomous objects for contemplation (although they clearly bear some marks of authorship). Rather, they serve as a history of the 'world in common' (Schiller in Rancière 2010: 115–116), documenting a shared aesthetic experience. They bear the marks of each interaction between spectators, the artwork and the artists, and the nature of the paper, pens and tape used takes on an aesthetic quality in the value that spectatorship affords it, when spectators return to the site to read the wishes and secrets accumulated over time.

Rancière identifies four different modes of art interacting with social life. Although inventory is the mode I find most applicable to *Secret/Wish*, all four of his concepts of contemporary art seem relevant in understanding the artwork. The first is play, which relates to play as a positive activity free from meaning and purpose, without

didactic function and with no objective to achieve or depict. It also relates to the use of 'playful' elements in contemporary art – elements that come from the mass media or the world of social forms, and are not removed from the 'frivolity' of mass consumerism. One could say that the walls in *Secret/Wish* are a playful rendition of the community notice board; they mimic its appearance and dynamics, but serve no such purpose. Rancière (2010: 144) argues that work such as this seems similar to the avant-garde, discussed above, but that it is not, because it plays on itself. Such work not only parodies the mass media, as well as the world of consumerism and the commodity fetish, but also parodies its own critical stance. The wishes posted in *Secret/Wish* may reveal social problems if participants choose to write such things on them, but they go no further than that in addressing those social problems – something which puzzled spectators. Interestingly, this is one of the aspects which differentiate the artwork as such, rather than it being a public protest exercise.

The second form which Rancière identifies is inventory. This is the collector's modus operandi, and reinterprets the role of the contemporary artist as collector or *bricoleur*. Art, in this sense, has a function that is community orientated through the use of objects that represent a shared history, or, in the case of *Secret/Wish*, a shared aesthetic experience.

Figure 3: Detail from *Secret/Wish* and *Wishing Wall*

The third form is that of encounter or invitation. This corresponds to the model of relational aesthetics. The artist contrives encounters between spectators and him or herself and the artwork, focusing more on the social interactions that result, than on creating objects.

The last mode of contemporary art, identified by Rancière, is what he terms mystery. Instead of art withdrawing itself from the heterogeneity of the social world, it embraces this heterogeneity in the objects of daily life. The artist creates an aesthetics of daily life by drawing connections between objects that bear no useful connection. In other words, the artist establishes new relationships and narratives between seemingly arbitrary objects, through establishing connections between their shared histories in the realm of the social world of daily life. Along with the notion of artworks as inventories of life's objects, it is this aspect of contemporary art which, to my thinking, may help contextualise the dynamics of an artwork such as *Secret/Wish*, and the objects produced in its creation. By curating or facilitating a wall full of secrets and wishes, we set up unpredictable relationships between these seemingly innocuous and disconnected thoughts.

If relational art sees the artist as social facilitator, creating new community bonds, then the models which Rancière identifies supplement the functions of the relational artist as one who has greater aesthetic agency, but does not fall prey to the Cartesian model. As explained from the outset, the artist cannot realistically deny all of his or her claims to authorial autonomy when involved in a performance such as *Secret/Wish*. The material aspects of the work also remain.

Material objects and history

I would like to elaborate on how Rancière contextualises the notion of inventory as artistic practice, as it relates to *Secret/Wish*. He argues that within this model one may see art according to the formulation of the Romantic poetics. In short, he states that Romanticism is not about sacralising art and the artist, but about a multiplication of temporalities. That means that art or aesthetic life does not exist as a linear narrative of historical progress, but as possibilities that may become relevant and dormant at different times. Jean Baudrillard (2009: 41–46) writes about antiques as objects that are neither diachronic nor synchronic, but anachronistic. He attributes the power of those objects to their historicity, which is always removed from the present moment. As such, the artworks (and objects) of the past can become raw material and can be reinterpreted to create new formations: this works as things are 're-viewed, re-framed, re-read [and] re-made' (Rancière 2010: 125). Museums are spaces where multiple temporalities exist together, and this reflects the permeability of the boundaries of art itself. As such, whether or not something is an artwork, is a potential state. Artefacts of the past may be interpreted as artworks in contemporary terms, and so forth. In my interpretation it is this potential for something to be seen as art that allows the contemporary artist to draw on the world of useful objects to

'find' artworks. An old mailbox found in a pawn shop may become an artwork now that it is no longer useful as a mailbox, because of its material existence, colour, shape and appearance.

   In planning *Secret/Wish*, Paul found an old mailbox with the number 419 painted on it. The number evokes the so-called 419 fraud schemes that are often perpetrated via email. Many of these schemes require an advance payment from the victim, in order to make some or other financial profit. Ironically, *Secret/Wish* and the *Wishing Wall* were both often met with the suspicion that we wanted participants to pay for their participation, and as I mentioned we had to make clear that participation was free of charge. It seemed that the artwork resembled a sales exercise to some spectators, which is another interesting instance of spectators struggling to interpret the artwork, because it resembled a situation from daily life rather than an artwork in a gallery. It seems that the artist and the aesthetic appearance of the artwork were required in order to affirm it as an artwork rather than something else. The mailbox is also an interesting object in itself, with a particular identity and history. In a sense this mirrors the bits of paper with wishes and secrets in the artwork. Each piece of paper became visually distinct and interesting because of the different papers and pens used, because these were indicators of their interaction and history with the individual people who created them. Rancière (2010: 127) describes this as the

Figure 4: Detail from *Secret/Wish*

'poetic potential' of any object of use, which may be taken from its useful context and viewed as an interesting object because of its historicity.

To further explain how this may work, Rancière refers to Balzac's novel *La peau de chagrin*. In the novel the hero finds himself in a curiosity shop. Here he finds old furniture next to household goods and artworks, mingling to create an 'endless poem' (ibid: 125). Rancière notes that each of the objects described in the shop is like a fossil, bearing the traces of history on its body. This history is one of the objects and the people who used or owned them. In this manner any object can become one of poetic possibility, functioning as a 'hieroglyph' or cipher of history. Rancière summarises by saying that if commodification means that autonomous art is dead, then the end of every commodity is to become art (ibid: 126). The important thing is that when objects of daily life appear as art, they do so for disinterested (aesthetic) pleasure, and thus need not fulfil any political agenda or didactic function. They need not critique the realm of their origin, but exist as objects that may be appreciated free (playfully) from such onerous concerns. In the case of *Secret/Wish* it was thus important that the artwork served no party-political or protest agenda. Such interaction between art and life creates the new aesthetics mentioned at the beginning of this article. Rancière takes the argument even further, saying that the poet (or, in my interpretation, artist) is not only an archaeologist, unearthing history in the world of objects, but he also delves into the subconscious of society in doing this. As such, society's secrets are brought to light, and intimate fantasies and clandestine activities may be revealed beneath the banality of daily life, as *Secret/Wish* indeed proved.

Conclusion

While the strategy of undermining the Cartesian model and its aesthetics makes sense in contemporary art, the object cannot be thrown out with the bath water, as authorship is with the subject in relational aesthetics. The object remains a pivotal part of what makes an event an artwork. Using the theory of 'inventory' as Rancière (2004: 47–54) formulates it, helps interpret the object as simultaneously subversive and affirmative of both the Cartesian subject and the quotidian concept of objects as socially useful. Rancière refers to Bourriaud's relational aesthetics as one strategy in undermining the Cartesian model and in addressing the inherent Modernist power relationships at play within the model by undermining the notion of authorial autonomy. Relational aesthetics subverts the importance of the art object by foregrounding the relations set up between people in situations of 'conviviality' rather than objects made by artists for contemplation (Bourriaud 2002: 30–31). Rancière (2004: 47–54) however suggests another option which I apply above to supplement the shortcomings of Bourriaud's model. In the quest to establish some agency for the spectator, relational art often alienates that same spectator, overwhelming him or her with a task he or she did not volunteer for. It also neglects the art object which is produced in such artworks, such as the wishes and secrets in *Secret/Wish*. To understand the importance

of these spare objects, a theory is required which recognises these objects, as well as aspects of authorial autonomy which must remain in order for relational artworks to function as artworks and not lapse into a purely social phenomenon. Rancière's interpretation of objects which transgress the boundaries between quotidian life and art is helpful in interrogating such spectator-orientated artworks.

Notes

1   In this article reference is made to these two seemingly irreconcilable realms. Rancière (2004) discusses them as the heteronomous world of quotidian life and the visual culture that surrounds it on the one hand. This is sometimes referred to as 'life', or as the social or quotidian world in this article. On the other hand, Rancière discusses the autonomous world of aesthetics or art, which distances itself from the contradictions and irreconcilable variety of visual expression found in the quotidian world. He argues that Kantian aesthetics sees the two as polar opposites, but that contemporary art should aim to address this division.

2   References for this section are as follows: Jacques Rancière (2004) in his discussion on contemporary art practices, Miwon Kwon (1997: 80) on the notion of the author as facilitator rather than creator, and Paul Cooper and Landi Raubenheimer (2011), as well as Raubenheimer (2011), which are recent publications around the *Wishing Wall*. The latter is an artwork produced by Paul Cooper and myself in 2010, which is comparable to *Secret/Wish*, and which laid the foundations for the argument explored here.

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