

**The Parking Gallery: experimental practice and the artist-run initiative in South Africa.**

**Submission for De Arte**

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## Prologue

*6/12/14, The Parking Gallery, Johannesburg:*

*The King Kong building sits east of Johannesburg, just beyond the limits of the City's gentrified Maboneng precinct, in an area predominantly made up of small-scale industrial and manufacturing businesses. As 5 pm hits, the neighbourhood empties out quickly; opposite King Kong, a no-name mattress factory closes up shop, to the left, metalworkers down their tools – leaving behind a half-finished palisade fence and the smell of TIG welding. Up a narrow flight of stairs, on the first floor of the building, I find the VANSA premises. And after-hours on a Wednesday, the venue for the Parking Gallery. The space is vast and reverberant, its original factory life still evident in the goods hoist, wet room, screed floors, and heavy steel doors. A glassed off fishbowl – the ubiquitous domain of the floor manager – now houses the VANSA office workspace. In the first of two large rooms, thirty or so people stand around; smokers congregate near the window; two children paddle away at the VANSA boardroom/Ping-Pong table. The atmosphere is relaxed and convivial. On the counter of a small kitchenette there is boxed wine, quarts of Black Label, plastic cups, and a donation box with 'R5 – R50' scrawled on it. Tonight is Kurdish artist Ahmet Ögüt's 'We Won't Leave' – a satellite artistic intervention that forms part of the wider collaborative research project, Giving Contours to Shadows, in association with SAVVY Contemporary and Neuer Berliner Kunstverein (both Berlin). At 7pm, after a brief introduction by the Parking Gallery's Euridice Kala,<sup>1</sup> Ögüt presents his work to the small crowd, leading the way through a series of videos and projections in the second, darkened, room (figures 1-2). The works are presented on VANSA's motley collection of audio-visual equipment – two flat screen TVs, a projector and a sheet of Masonite, a portable DVD player, and an old Cathode Ray Tube monitor (figure 3). One film, Fahrenheit 451: Reprinted (2013), documents a project in which Finnish firefighters print and deliver copies of Ray Bradbury's classic novel Fahrenheit 451 (et al) to the public - a*

*reversal of the dystopian premise of the book, in which firefighters of the future seek out, and burn, any and all literature. Another video, Things We Count (2008), pans slowly across a dusty field of junked fighter-planes in Arizona's Sonoran Desert, while Kurdish and English voice-overs 'count' the planes in a confusingly haphazard way. Throughout the talk, Öğüt's is self-effacing and approachable, the presentation punctuated by questions from the audience. After the discussion, drinks are refilled, darts are played, and the evening continues sociably (figure 4-5). From outside, laughter and conversation carry down the street - the first floor of King Kong a conspicuous beacon of light in the quiet district of New Doornfontein.*

## **Introduction**

Within a recent South African context, there have been few spaces or arenas dedicated purely to experimentation and open-ended inquiry within artistic practice. The arts sector has been dominated (traditionally) by a coterie of commercial gallery spaces – a structure that has, in turn, effected a wider hegemonic influence over arts production, presentation, reception and critical discourse. This observation is supported by the 2010 Department of Arts and Culture report *An Assessment of the Visual Arts in South Africa* – which notes the ‘near complete absence of independent and artist run initiatives for the cultivation, presentation and promotion of innovation of the visual arts’ in South Africa (Gaylard 2010:1). Within such a stagnant framework, the processes of art making have remained largely confined to a conventional studio/gallery archetype, with the focus being on the creation of a saleable ‘end-product’ for display within a gallery space.<sup>2</sup>

This binary has, however, become increasingly problematic amidst the growing interest in social aesthetics within contemporary arts production. Broadly characterised by a critical and applied emphasis on the social aspects of art (social-interaction/social-interstice/social-

encounter), the expanded fields of the practice include (but are not limited to) relational art, littoral art, collaborative art and dialogical art. Within this paradigm audience participation and the creation of conditions for social interstice occupy primacy over that of making, wherein the art 'produced' takes on the form of a dialogue, an event, a workshop, a meeting, a game and so on; often appearing to be 'work-in-progress' rather than a completed object (Bishop 2004:53). In turn, the artistic requirements of 'exhibition space' shift radically where, counter to standardised showroom formats, the practice demands environments that are flexible, multi-functional, and better suited to the promotion of dialogue than the display of objects.

In response, a number of artists have taken it upon themselves to address the absence of experimental and/or laboratory 'space' by creating alternative platforms, not only for themselves, but also for a wider community of peers and practitioners. These artist-run initiatives (ARI's) are typically organised in non-traditional environments: disused shop-fronts, warehouse space, studios, or even the artists' own home. Some might approximate a white-cube, while others offer residencies, venues for screenings, discussions and so on. What is common to these self-organised initiatives is the capacity to circumvent the mediating pressures of wider institutional structures (and the traditional curator/gallery binary), thus retaining autonomy over their programming. In turn, they are able to produce and/or showcase work 'rarely encountered within either the publicly funded or commercial spheres of art' (Lind 2009:75).

While the phenomenon of the ARI is nothing new – the practice tracking back to (inter alia) Dada's Cabaret Voltaire of the early 1900s, to the vast number of collective organisations that flourished during the 1960s and 1970s including Franklin Furnace (New York), Zona (Florence) and Artpool (Budapest), to the so called 'Glasgow Miracle' of the 1990s) – the last

decade has seen an unprecedented rise of the 'artist-run space' globally (Detterer & Nannuci 2012). This accession has been particularly significant within a recent Pan-African context where artists have adopted a 'Do-It-Yourself' approach to 'filling the void'.<sup>3</sup> The recently launched (2014) PAN!C platform (the Pan African Network of Independent Contemporaneity), for example, evidences this trajectory – with a directory of over 30 independent and/or ARI's around Africa, the vast majority of which have emerged in the last five to ten years (including Raw Material Compant (Senegal), Beirut (Egypt), CCA (Lagos) and Picha Centre de Art (Lumbumbashi)) (PAN!C 2014:[sp]). Within a South African context, recently launched ARI's include Jonathan Garnham's Blank Projects (2005-2012), Carl Ascroft and Shane De Lange's Outlet (2007-2012),<sup>4</sup> Malose Malahlela and Rangoato Hlasane's Keleketla! (2008-), Matthew Blackman and Ed Young's YOUNGBLACKMAN (2009-2010), Kathryn Smith's serialworks (2009-),<sup>5</sup> Phillip Raiford Johnson and Anthea Buys' Cloak & Dagger (2010), Anthea Pokroy and Louise Ross' Assemblage (2010-), Murray Turpin's Kalashnikovv (2013-), and my own collaborative project with Lauren von Gogh, Sober & Lonely (2011-).

However, with the closure of a number of these projects, the feasibility of an alternative, non-commercial approach to institutionalism appears tenuous. Matthew Blackman (2010:[sp]) remarks on closing YOUNGBLACKMAN:

I feel the failure of [YOUNGBLACKMAN] shows a real lack of interest in the appreciation of contemporary art in South Africa. Furthermore, I think it also confirms that very few South Africans believe that art has any moral, revelatory, humorous or pedagogical value ... The interest in art in this country is all too often driven by ... a search for profit and a certain desire for social self-

aggrandizement ... I ought to have realized that a project sustained only through funding, and not through commerce, had a predisposition towards failure.

The question then arises: if artist-run approaches to institutionalism are to 'succeed' within a South African context, what are the specific strategies, particularities and methodologies that will inform them?

Through the use of a meta-analytical approach in this article,<sup>6</sup> I look specifically at the Parking Gallery – an ARI initiated by Simon Gush in 2006 that has been consistently generative within a South African context over the last decade. Exploring the *raison d'être* and evolution of the Gallery, from its first brief incarnation as a project space, to its current form as a malleable, relational, participative platform, I examine the influence of artist-founder Simon Gush's practice on the initiative and how his overarching interest in the politics of labour has influenced its working methodology and participative approach. I contend that, despite characterising itself as curatorially neutral,<sup>7</sup> the Parking Gallery is in fact tacitly underpinned by a committed, socialistic approach to the presentation and dissemination of art, and is thus a highly politicised project. I argue that this socialistic approach to the institutionalisation of art provides a valuable prototype of the potentialities of non-traditional economies (trade, collective funding, gift exchange and so on), within a South African context of arts conservatism and funding deficits.

It is vital to note that, while ARI's are very much the subject of current critical debate globally (see, for example Kouoh, Lind, Stanhope), there appears to be no past or current comprehensive research on artist-run initiatives in South Africa. More specifically, there appears to be no engagement with the Parking Gallery outside of a brief paragraph on the first iteration of the space in Kathryn Smith's chapter in *Visual Century Vol 4*, entitled 'The

Experimental Turn in the Visual Arts' (2011). This 'lack' could perhaps be attributed to the often ephemeral and short-lived nature of ARI's, meaning that events and projects often go unpublicised, undocumented, and unpublished. It is hoped, however, that this article will go some way towards filling this significant gap within the literature.

### **The Parking Gallery v1.0**

The first iteration of the Parking Gallery was formed in 2006, by artist Simon Gush,<sup>8</sup> in response to the lack of non-commercial exhibition space in Johannesburg.<sup>9</sup> According to Gush,<sup>10</sup> the only space outside of a 'traditional gallery/museum environment' at the time was the artist-run initiative, the Gallery Premises a platform initiated by collaborative group the Trinity Session (which comprised artists Kathryn Smith, Jose Ferreira, Stephen Hobbs, and later Marcus Neustetter).<sup>11</sup> As such, Gush set out to create 'space', both for young, less-established artists, and for artists wanting to exhibit experimental or non-commercial projects.<sup>12</sup> The first site for the Gallery was a disused storeroom in the basement parking lot (hence the name) of the Pritchard Street block of flats where Gush lived.<sup>13</sup> Utilising his experience as a part-time technical assistant at a number of institutions, including the Johannesburg Art Gallery, Gush was able to set up a surprisingly polished and professional white-cube exhibition space, complete with gallery track lighting, on a self-funded and very limited, budget.<sup>14</sup>

One of the first exhibitions, Dorothee Kreutzfeldt's 'Adversary', which ran for one night only on Tuesday, September 5 2006, is perhaps most emblematic of the kind of work displayed in the space – namely projects that move away from institutionalised forms of production, towards the experimental, the playful, the ephemeral, and the process oriented. Reflecting on notions of competition, opposition and contestation, 'Adversary' presented a series of

actions and installations within the space. These included a set of increasingly 'tricked out' spoilers, complete with flame decals and custom LED lighting; a roughly taped-up poster declaiming 'I BELIEVE IN MIRACLES'; and a live performance featuring four marathon runners, from competing athletics clubs, racing up-and-down painted track lines on the floor (figure 6).

Kreutzfeldt describes the project:

[Adversary] came together as a kind of confluence – of a place, its aesthetics, an interest in the economics ... car merchandise (custom wheels, mags, spoilers, dash kits, accessories); mechanics; spares; panel beaters where cars were sprayed and changed appearance quickly; the manual care; the skill of spraying; the unhealthy working condition; cars and car parts piled up in spaces that were too small ... All those details interested me, the labour, the aesthetics of stacking, negotiating, displaying, the money exchange ... And the gendered, clearly male, 'world' in which I didn't belong ... The parking garage in the basement had a similar dimension to these spaces, as regards the physical measurement. So I thought the space could lean towards these other spaces and, call them up; or rather call up some of their parts and dynamics. Not only the car businesses/mechanics etc., but also the hustle of street traders, sex workers, taxis, long distance buses, people passing by ... <sup>15</sup>

The incorporation of long distance runners was similarly drawn from Kreutzfeldt's aesthetic and inter-personal experience of the New Doornfontein area:



I had met a runner near Ellis Park, he lived in Bertrams and trained all over the city. Very determined, despite not having always guaranteed sponsorship, along with the needed diet/coaching/gear etc. ... I asked him if he would be interested in running a different kind of length, in a small space, over a given amount of time ... He was interested and brought his running team ... We spoke about how to run – the runners would need to find their rhythm in the small space and on the floor (I painted a track, which continued up the walls; the floor was quiet slippery); it wasn't clear as to who the winner would be, but they would challenge each other ... [they] would always run in tandem, next to each other, do a number of laps, then change, so there was a constant movement backwards and forwards ... Their endurance was impressive, and they 'made' the space. I had installed an electric metronome as a kind of echo to their laps, a different kind of timing ... Clothes, shoes – these details were important ... Their presence was key ... The audience was secondary, although they also made the space/event ... as such, 'nothing much' really happened; or something fairly ordinary, even though constructed. No sprint, no finale, no applause.<sup>16</sup>

Surveying various listings from the period, it becomes evident how cutting-edge 'Adversary' was within a South African gallery context at the time. Other openings during the same month consisted almost entirely of traditional institutionalised forms of display – painting (Norman Catherine at the Goodman Gallery, Bronwen Findlay at Artspace), printmaking (Gerard Sekoto at the Standard Bank Gallery, Wilma Cruise at David Krut), and photography (Greg Marinovich at Everard Reed, Pieter Hugo [et al] at Warren Siebrits) (*Artthrob* Listings 2006:[sp]). Furthermore, the rhetoric used in various reviews of the show points to its precocity. *Artthrob* (2006:[sp]), for example, wrote: '[Adversary] includes painting, an installation and, *believe it or not*, local middle distance runners', while from *Art South Africa*

(2006:[sp]) included the following: ‘the main attraction ... is undoubtedly the four professional long-distance athletes ... they run in pairs, back and forth, literally and figuratively connecting the walls of the gallery ... *my first response was simply to laugh ... it was funny. Quirky. Odd. Massive*’ [emphasis added]. These observations are not to say that South African artists were not working with live art, or experimental practices at the time – for example, much of the work at the first Johannesburg Biennale, *Africus* (1995), almost ten years earlier, consisted of ‘non-traditional’ formats (Breitz 2008:94).<sup>17</sup> Rather, the quizzical tone evidences a certain conservatism within the South African art market, and a generalised lack of institutional support for the presentation of alternative media. Within such a ‘moribund framework’, to quote Joseph Gaylard, the Parking Gallery, in its support of experimental and non-commercial practices, filled a very specific void within the South African gallery scene during the mid-2000s.<sup>18</sup>

Yet, despite its curious location in a parking basement and the rhetoric characterising the reviews, from a new-institutional perspective, the Gallery remained comparatively conservative. That is, with its spotlighting, white walls, vinyl lettering (et al), the space largely imitated traditional exhibition semantics and conventions, allowing, in turn, only standard ritualised kinesics from ‘the viewer’ – such as considering, observing, studying, reflecting and so on (Richter 2009:49).<sup>19</sup> Thus, it could be argued that, rather than challenging the sovereignty of the white-cube and its concomitant signifiers, the Gallery in fact reinforced its hegemony. From another perspective however, the clear legibility of the Parking Gallery as ‘a gallery’ allowed its points of disparity to a wider South African art-system to be brought sharply into focus. In other words, by utilising traditional display conventions, the experimental and process-driven programming of the gallery, and its non-commercial economy, were accentuated. Paradoxically, these differentiators also meant that, as a long-term project, the Gallery was ultimately unsustainable. With no revenue,

donations, or funding, Gush absorbed all of the exhibition overheads personally. This included drinks for the openings, vinyl lettering, installation hardware, and occasionally even 'chipping in' for the artists' production costs.<sup>20</sup> While expenses were kept to a minimum, each project still amounted to between R1000 and R2000 per show, as a result of which Gush accumulated sizeable debt trying to keep the space up and running.<sup>21</sup>

What is perhaps most significant about the first iteration of the Parking Gallery, is Gush's own relationship to the space. Gush viewed his role at the Gallery as that of a *service position*, where his time, labour and expertise were offered up for the benefit of other artists.<sup>22</sup> This included setting up the initial space, painstakingly installing each exhibition as professionally as possible, managing the openings, repainting the walls after every show, and so on. This notion of the 'provision of labour', while perhaps more of a practical decision at the time (simply in order 'to get things done') than a conscious political statement, becomes the linking factor between both iterations of the project, and one that would come to define the participative relational strategy of the second Parking Gallery.

The first version of the Parking Gallery remained open for six months and, despite its short lifespan, held a prodigious 12 exhibitions. It ceased operating when Gush left South Africa to attend a two-year programme at the Hoger Instituut Voor Schone Kunsten (HISK) in Belgium.<sup>23</sup>

### **The Parking Gallery v2.0**

By 2012, on Gush's return to Johannesburg, a number of other non-commercial exhibition (project) spaces, including Outlet, Room, and GoetheOnMain, had opened up.<sup>24</sup> In response to these changing conditions, and influenced by alternative models encountered abroad,

Gush conceived a new version of the Parking Gallery – this time seeking to address what he perceived as the lack of forums for peer engagement within the South African arts community.<sup>25</sup> Fortuitously, VANSAs had recently relocated to larger premises in New Doornfontein and were looking to open the space up to their network of artists and practitioners.<sup>26</sup> Gush, in collaboration with artist Ruth Sacks,<sup>27</sup> proposed a three-month long ‘residency’ for a new format Parking Gallery – one that would centre on the creation of space for discussion, debate, sharing and participation.<sup>28</sup> While initially conceived of as a short-term project, the programme picked up a small but dedicated following, and has continued operating, resulting in over 80 interventions, discussions or events since 2012 including Ahmet Ögüt’s ‘We Won’t Leave’ (2014), which I described at the start of this article (figures 1-5). Other projects have included: *23 Kilograms*, a curated evening by Bettina Malcomess, in collaboration with fellow artists Francis Burger, Siemon Allen, Zen Marie and Donna Kukama; a guest lecture by senior curator at the Palais de Tokyo (Paris), Akiko Miki; an open rehearsal performance by Mohau Modisakeng entitled *1st Rehearsal [Dikubu]*; a screening of Gilles Baro’s short documentary on DIY punk spaces in North America, *Invisible Nation*; a round-table talk facilitated by Raimi Gbadamosi on practice-led research; a photographic installation by George Mahashe entitled *Dithugula tša Malefokane*; and an open discussion about the future of the Johannesburg Biennale led by curator Clare Butcher.

The influence of relational aesthetics and new-institutional theory is clearly evident in the ‘un-exhibition’ approach of this new format gallery.<sup>29</sup> Counter to the traditional primacy of display, the Parking Gallery focuses on so-called ‘secondary’ institutional activities, such as panel discussions, artists’ talks, round-table events and so on. As such, even if artworks are exhibited (as with ‘We Won’t Leave’), the Gallery’s emphasis remains on the production of discourse around the work, positioning the audience as an active-participant rather than

passive-viewer. Amidst these sorts of engagements, both the artist and the artwork become increasingly 'transparent'. Bourriaud (2002a:41) states in this regard:

[A successful relational work] ... will invariably set its sights beyond its mere presence in space: it will be open to dialogue, discussion, [and] ... inter-human negotiation ... which is a temporal process, being played out here and now. This negotiation is undertaken in a spirit of 'transparency' which hallmarks it as a product of human labour.

Along with its content, both the physical space occupied by the Parking Gallery, and its working methodology, are similarly bound up in this notion of transparency. The 'lo-fi' aesthetic of the Gallery, for example, more akin to that of a house-party than 'an institution', actively denudes the conventions of the white-cube. That is, with its DIY bar, plastic lawn chairs, and Ping-Pong table (figure 4), the Parking Gallery replaces the 'formal matrices' of 'the institution' with an everyday heterogeneity, declaiming the space as a 'place like any other' (Bourriaud 2002b:60). Being situated within the VANSAs workplace contributes further to this process of demystification, a scenario which enables the literal 'backstage' of 'the institution' to be revealed to the public, exposing it as nothing more than a typical office space – complete with cluttered desks, pot plants and personal miscellany. In terms of its organisational approach, the Parking Gallery is equally pellucid. This is manifest in a number of ways, one of which is an 'agnostic curatorial stance' in which, counter to the usual adjudicated open-call system used by galleries and residencies, the Parking Gallery endeavours to undertake all projects from the applications it receives, excluding only those which are unfeasible in terms of funding or logistics.<sup>30</sup> Thus the actual programming of the Parking Gallery is user-generated and driven by self-organising principles rather than a specific (and often undisclosed) curatorial agenda. This translates into diverse programming

with thematics ranging from telepathy, to capitalism and schizophrenia, to theme parks, to Afrofuturism, to name but a few. Furthermore, the actual management of the Parking Gallery is inclusive and transparent, with regular administrative forums being held to allow the Parking Gallery community (the audience and participating artists) decision-making input into the administration and development of the space.<sup>31</sup>

Turning now to its economy, this version of the Parking Gallery clearly embodies a relational approach to the notions of 'value', 'commodity' and 'worth'. That is, rather than producing or transacting in tangible and potentially profit-making goods, the Parking Gallery trades purely on services and exchange. Viz. VANSAs shares their infrastructure (the space, chairs, miscellaneous hardware), the Gallery provides production services (press releases, help with installation), the artist provides the artistic situation or premise, and the audience provides participative input. No money changes hands. This dynamic exemplifies Bourriaud's (2002a:16) notion of 'social interstice' and 'trading communities', in the sense that the Gallery is able to exist outside of the capitalisms of the art-market by removing the law of profit in favour of reciprocal exchange.<sup>32</sup> Thus, unlike the first iteration of the Gallery, the Parking Gallery v2.0 is able to run on a (nearly) zero-budget premise – and is consequently sustainable as long as the community of interest remains invested. This distinction – between non-survivability due to lack of funding, or simply running its course because of shifting curatorial and/or audience interests – is of critical significance. That is, the longevity of the Parking Gallery is not of primary importance. Rather, the project is envisaged as reactive and responsive; a site for production and exhibition, which can morph, merge, evolve, shutdown, reopen, or pop-up, based on the shifting needs of its community.

### **A socialistic space**

While the Parking Gallery refers to their artistic and curatorial stance as agnostic, the subtext of the project – extant to varying degrees in both the first and second iteration of the Gallery – in fact seems a very particular, and resolute, political statement within a broader South African arts landscape. That is, despite its overt position of ideological neutrality, the Parking Gallery is, as I see it, underpinned by a deeply socialistic approach to the institutionalisation of art. If looked at in light of Gush’s individual artistic practice, and his overarching interest in neo-Marxism and autonomist-Marxism,<sup>33</sup> the latent politics of the Gallery become increasingly legible as an extension thereof. The following example will attempt to draw this claim out further, and explore the manifestation of these socialistic tendencies in practice.

#### **Case Study: Simon Gush’s ‘Red’**

In 2014, I was able to attend Gush’s solo show at the Goethe Institut in Johannesburg, entitled ‘Red’. The exhibition explored a series of unprecedented events that took place at the Port Elizabeth Mercedes-Benz factory in 1990, directly after Nelson Mandela’s release from prison on February 11. In the feature documentary made for the exhibition, Gush interviews Mercedes-Benz worker Phillip Groom (in Gush & Cairns 2014) who recalls the mood at the time:

When [Mandela] was released it was indescribable. People were absolutely joyous. If you were in the township on that Sunday (whistles), people didn’t know what to do with themselves, it was crazy ... And then obviously the following day was a Monday. You get up. It’s work. And what now you know?

Wanting to mark the significance of the occasion, and after much deliberation, workers collectively elected to build Mandela a Mercedes-Benz 500 SE – a vehicle ‘fit for a statesman’

(Groom in Gush & Cairns, 2014). Groom (in Gush & Cairns 2014), who played a critical role in this process, again describes the events:

There was lots of debate. Some people felt like we should have a day off, an official holiday ... I got to my feet and I said to the guys ... Nelson Mandela offered up 27 years of his life, let us do something for him. My proposal is that we build a car for him, one of these Mercedes-Benz cars - top of the range ... When I said that ... everyone stood up and clapped ... and basically that was the mandate given to management, to say the workers want to build a car for Mandela.

In response to this directive, management gave their go-ahead for the construction of the vehicle. Workers agreed to contribute free overtime, and Mercedes-Benz supplied the raw materials. Critically, rather than the customary black of apartheid state vehicles, the workers chose to spray the car red – a colour associated with trade-unionism and worker emancipation (Groom in Gush & Cairns 2014).<sup>34</sup> The Mercedes-Benz was handed over to Mandela on July 22 1990 at the Sisa Dukasha stadium in Mdantsane.

However, despite this momentary gesture of worker/management participation, and the seemingly libertarian act of ‘allowing’ workers to repurpose the factory and ‘produce something for themselves’, the artifice of collaboration collapsed shortly thereafter. On August 16 1990, workers embarked on a nine-week sleep-in strike at the plant, largely in response to Mercedes-Benz’ announcement that they would go ahead with collective bargaining at a national rather than company level. The decision, which put workers at a considerable disadvantage, served as a clear reminder that despite a momentary gesture of



egalitarianism, the balance of power was still very much in favour of management (O'Toole 2014:[sp]).<sup>35</sup>

Along with the documentary, the exhibition centred on two installations, namely *Red (Mandela Car)* and *Red (sleep-in strike)*(figures 7-9). The first of these consisted of a semi-built replica of the Mercedes-Benz 500 SE, with its attendant body panels (boot, doors and bonnet) hung on the gallery walls. Each of the panels were sprayed a slightly different shade of red automotive paint – perhaps testing out the most ‘red’ red before final assembly. In a separate room, *Red (sleep-in strike)* comprised a set of bunk-beds constructed from scaffolding uprights, plywood, and upholstery foam – a reference to the sleep-in strike at the factory, where workers resorted to repurposing manufacturing materials for bedding during the gruelling nine-week occupation.

At its core, ‘Red’ explores a number of critical themes in relation to labour, labour-power and labour-value. Firstly, the mandate to build the Mandela Car represents an attempt, by the workers, to rebalance power relations within the factory. That is, in opposition to standard capitalist pecuniary practice, where employers autocratically decide when, where, and for how long, they wish to purchase labour (Harvey 2010:252), workers demand the right to autonomy and self-determination. Moreover, by repurposing the factory for their own use, the workers bring *the means of production* under their control. Thus, there is flattening of hierarchies and structures, albeit a temporary and unstable one, where workers regain control of their labour-power. This instrumentality over production, and the product itself, is key to a Marxist socialist conception of political and industrial democracy, which envisions

a form of production and an organization of society in which man can overcome alienation from his product, from his work, from his fellow man, from himself and from nature; in which he can return to himself and grasp the world with his own powers, thus becoming one with the world (Fromm 1961:[sp]).<sup>36</sup>

Secondly, by 'gifting' their labour to the project, the workers redefine their labour-value outside of traditional economic terms. That is, in contrast to the commodity view of labour, calculable as  $revenue \times labour \% \div average\ hourly\ rate\ of\ labour$ , the 'value' of their labour becomes abstract and symbolic. This notion is central to Marxist-ethical theory, which argues that worker freedom 'does not commence until the point is passed where labor under the compulsion of necessity and of external utility is required' (Marx 2007a:954). And finally, *Red* hints at the potential paradox of soft-tactics in terms of effecting real economic change. That is, despite the ostensive inroads made by the workers during the optimistic period of Mandela-car-building, the terms of their 'rebellion' were in fact endorsed and co-opted by management, simply because it suited their ends (namely, to appear pro-democracy).

The thematics explored in 'Red' are highly significant within South Africa's current socio-political climate where, 20 years into a democracy, labour value and workers' rights are still subordinate to the power of Capital interest. The tragic events of the Marikana Massacre are of particular relevance in this regard. On August 16 2012 (coincidentally the same date as the Mercedes-Benz sleep-in strike) 34 striking miners were tragically shot dead, with many more severely injured, by police at the Lonmin Platinum Mine in Rustenburg, marking the 'biggest massacre by police of civilians in post-apartheid South Africa' (Tiwana 2015:[sp]) Moreover, the subsequent lack of action, interest and recourse shown by the South African officials has radically affected the way in which communities view their 'democratically elected

government' (Tolsi 2013:[sp]). Within this context, 'Red' serves as a marker for reflection and comparison of workers' rights, trade unionism and democracy – 20+ years into South Africa's 'liberation'.

Returning now to the Parking Gallery, and viewing 'Red' as a reflective site for Gush's wider artistic practice and research interests, the ideological linkages between the two become clearly legible. Firstly, counter to standard gallery practice where curators and/or gallery directors have the final say over what artworks will be shown, as well as when and how, the Parking Gallery puts decision-making power (back) into the hands of the artist. Thus, they are able to reclaim autonomy over the processes of production and curation, and consequently over 'the institution' itself. Secondly, by utilising an economy of exchange, the burden of commercial necessity, and the concomitant alienating demands of commodity-production are removed from the artist/institution dynamic. As such, artists are able to regain their labour-power, and redefine their labour-value, outside of the terms dictated by the capitalisms of the South African art-market.<sup>37</sup>

From a wider sociological perspective, both the Parking Gallery and the events depicted by 'Red', describe a similar form of social resistance. That is, both attempt to 'generate new patterns of behaviour, institutions, policies or practices' through 'resource and/or relationship-creating activities' (Bartkowski 2009:[sp]). Sociologist Kurt Schock (2007:4466) defines this archetype, within social movement typology, as a 'creative non-violent intervention'. According to Schock (2007:4466) this approach is significant because not only does it reject oppressive relations, but also in that it suggests alternatives to the current status quo. Thus, counter to traditional forms of protest action (strikes, pickets and so on), which only disrupt and damage existing conditions, creative non-violent interventions 'engage in positive action to build alternatives' via the implementation of 'constructive

programs and parallel structures' (Schock 2007:4468). In other words, rather than staging its critique via insurgency from 'the outside' (as with much of the anti-establishment art of the 1960s),<sup>38</sup> the Parking Gallery's 'rebellion' takes place through cooperation and generativity from within. This self-organising method of social resistance is, again, central to Marxist theorisation; in his text *Instructions for the Delegates of the Provisional General Council*, Marx (2007b:[sp]) states:

We acknowledge the co-operative movement as one of the transforming forces of the present society based upon class antagonism. Its great merit is to practically show, that the present pauperising, and despotic system of the subordination of labour to capital can be superseded by the republican and beneficent system of the association of free and equal producers.

From a contemporary perspective, collective action is given even greater emphasis as a route to worker emancipation within autonomist-Marxism. Economist Harry Cleaver (2012:[sp]) writes in this regard:

Working class self-activity [can] been seen both in workers resistance to the capitalist organization of work and in workers' ability to transform creatively their work and work environments. [This kind] of continuing self-activity [is] not seen primarily as something 'within' capital, but rather as autonomous activities constantly checking, rupturing and overthrowing capitalist management.

Thus, with its self-organising, user-generated, and co-operative principles, and the utilisation of social-interstice as an economic mode, the Parking Gallery reads both as a real-world extension of Gush's interest in Marxism and autonomist-Marxism, and a working diorama of

socialistic institutionalism. Moreover, as a platform that simultaneously ‘challenges the interests of the elite’ and ‘generates power among the oppressed’ (Schock 2007:4466), the Gallery embodies the characteristics of organised civil resistance. As such, while the Parking Gallery positions itself as a politically and ideologically neutral space, it is in fact a deeply politicised project.

### **Paradoxes of inclusivity and co-operation**

However, within the Parking Gallery’s socialistic approach to institutionalism lie a number of potential paradoxes. Firstly, while the space attempts inclusivity, its ‘outsider’ position (both geographically and ideologically) means it runs the risk of becoming exclusionary. In her essay *Actualisation of Space*, Maria Lind (2004:74) articulates this as an issue common to many ARI’s:

Activities are primarily pursued far from the established art institutions, in other social contexts such as housing areas or schools. In this way, a kind of reverse exclusiveness arises: those who are attracted to and captured by the project have more access to this art than the usual art public.

Nevertheless, while the Parking Gallery is perhaps less accessible to a wider public than commercial galleries or museum collections (which often have prominent street frontage and utilise periodical listings), its remit as a platform for peer engagement, rather than public presentation, is clearly articulated via its website and correspondence. In other words, the Parking Gallery’s ‘exclusivity’ is more akin to that of a union or guild than a deliberately exclusionary cabal for ‘those-in-the-know’. In terms of its accessibility *to artists*, the Gallery’s open-call distribution via the VANSA

network (which is distributed bi-monthly to almost 7500 network members), and its user-generated approach to programming, means it is highly inclusive and accessible to practitioners.<sup>39</sup>

What is perhaps more difficult to navigate, however, are the unavoidable contradictions that arise in employing a relational, and essentially Marxist-socialist, programme within a wider capitalistic system. Firstly, while the open-call approach appears egalitarian and inclusive, ultimately the programme is being taken up and shaped by privilege. That is, only those who can 'pay-for-play' (Perlin 2011:162) are able to access the Parking Gallery. Practically speaking, a project at the Gallery inevitably requires some form of capital outlay – be it incurred in developing the project, transport to and from the space, or simply by taking time off work to attend meetings. As such, artists with access to capital are arguably in a better position to realise a project in the space. This dilemma of 'working-for-free' within a wider capitalistic society is comparable to the cycle of social inequality perpetuated by the unpaid-internship model, where key positions are more likely to be filled by practitioners from privileged backgrounds, who then go on to control and shape that specific landscape (Perlin 2011:162). Within a South African context still fraught with issues of socio-economic and racial privilege, this issue becomes highly relevant and deeply problematic.

Moreover, galleries which utilise capitalistic systems of revenue are indirectly benefiting from the unremunerated labour-power of the artists. In other words, as arenas for experimentation are available elsewhere, commercial galleries are relieved of any obligation to support experimental praxis from their side. And furthermore,

they are able to profit off the generative effects of process driven experimentalism without incurring any 'risk' of investment – both ideological or in terms of capital.

In this sense, the Parking Gallery could perhaps be seen to as an ultimately unresolved attempt to undermine the capitalisms bound up within contemporary South African institutionalism. However, if we accept that they are operating as a Bourriaudian micro-community, with only modest micro-utopian aims, the argument loses some of its force. To reiterate Bourriaud's (2002a:45) plea: 'the age of the New Man, future-oriented manifestos, and calls for a better world [are] truly over ... it seems more pressing to invent possible relations with our neighbours in the present than to bet on happier tomorrows'. And undoubtedly it has proved a highly generative, and much needed, platform for a community of practitioners working within a South African climate of funding shortfalls and widespread institutional conservatism.

As of 2014, the Parking Gallery has begun operating on an ad-hoc rather than weekly basis – a decision made largely in response to increasing external commitments for Sacks and Gush. Currently, the open-call for applications remains in place. Plans are also in the offing to rethink the project from a wider Pan-African perspective at a later date – a Parking Gallery v3.0.<sup>40</sup>

*This study is based on my current D.Phil research in the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Pretoria.*

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## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Euridice Kala (born 1987) is a Mozambican artist and curator currently based in Johannesburg (ICI 2015:[sp]). She initially began her association with the Parking Gallery in an internship capacity, and has since become an integral part of the program (Sacks 2014). Kala also runs the PAN!C platform, and is the acting public programmes coordinator at VANSAs (ICI 2015:[sp]).

<sup>2</sup> According to the 2010 report *An Assessment of the Visual Arts in South Africa*, while South Africa has a ‘robust’ arts sector, it is ‘composed almost entirely of small and micro-enterprises’ – dealers, gallerists, auction houses – and is ‘largely commercially driven’ (Gaylard 2010:3). Outside of this commercial market, there are also a number of independent, non-profit, membership-based organisations (such as the AVA Gallery in Cape Town, and the KZNSA in Durban) who seek to encourage emerging and contemporary practice. However, these galleries are often reliant (or semi-reliant) on artists paying ‘rental’ on exhibition space (Ntombela 2010:9). Consequently, they privilege artists who can afford to ‘pay-for-play’, and/or necessitate that the artwork shown be commercially viable in order for the artists to recoup their costs.

<sup>3</sup> The term ‘filling the void’ comes from Koyo Kouoh’s (2013:17) seminal paper of the same name, which she presented at the ‘Symposium on Building Art Institutions in Africa’ in Senegal in 2012. The term has become a leitmotif of sorts to describe the response of artists to numerous artistic and critical voids within a Pan-African arts landscape.

<sup>4</sup> Artist Abrie Fourie initiated the first iteration of Outlet in 2002 at the Tshwane University of Technology (then Pretoria Technikon). He then ‘passed the space over’ to Ascroft and De Lange who opened a space in Braamfontein, Johannesburg (Outlet 2015:[sp]).

<sup>5</sup> Although serialworks hasn’t officially closed, it has been largely dormant since 2010 (serialworks 2010:[sp]).

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<sup>6</sup> The bulk of the research pertaining to this article has been compiled via ethnographic research, participant observation and case studies. This includes case-study analyses of relational participative praxis (for example Dorothee Kreutzfeldt's 'Adversary'), and personal interviews with various stakeholders (for example Parking Gallery directors Simon Gush and Ruth Sacks).

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Ruth Sacks in Johannesburg on 05/06/13.

<sup>8</sup> Simon Gush was born in 1981 in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. He studied Fine Art at Wits University (1999 to 2003), and completed a postgraduate programme in visual and audiovisual arts at the HISK in Belgium in 2008. He is currently represented by Stevenson Gallery and lives and works in Johannesburg (Stevenson 2015:[sp]).

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Simon Gush in Johannesburg on 05/06/13.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Simon Gush in Johannesburg on 05/06/13.

<sup>11</sup> The Gallery Premises (often referred to as the Premises Gallery) set out to provide a platform for emerging artists, and experimentation in the visual arts – encouraging multi-disciplinary events and projects (Kaganoff 2008[sp]). The space, which was housed in the basement of the Johannesburg Civic Theatre, closed in 2008 (Kaganoff 2008[sp]).

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Simon Gush in Johannesburg on 05/06/13.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Simon Gush in Johannesburg on 05/06/13.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Simon Gush in Johannesburg on 05/06/13.

<sup>15</sup> Email correspondence with Dorothee Kreutzfeldt on 21/08/2015/.

<sup>16</sup> Email correspondence with Dorothee Kreutzfeldt on 21/08/2015/.

<sup>17</sup> *Africus* was title of the first, and highly controversial, Johannesburg Biennale. The event was heavily criticised for, among other things, 'papering over' the socio-political divisions of the South African cultural landscape (Breitz 2008:94). Despite these problematics, the South African work shown indicates that a number of artists were working outside of traditional media at the time. Belinda Blignaut's 8345223 for example, was made up of a standard

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telephone and answering machine, the number to which was placed on posters, along with an unexplained image of the artist semi-naked and bound, in and around the Johannesburg CBD. The audience was able to listen to the incoming messages live in the gallery space (Blignaut 2014:[sp]). Willem Boshoff's *Blind Alphabet ABC* was similarly interactive, encouraging sighted audience members to momentarily 'blind' themselves, and experience a number of sculptural forms, and games, through touch alone (Boshoff 2014:[sp]).

<sup>18</sup> Gaylard recalls: 'I had been in Johannesburg for about four or five years and the [Parking Gallery] was the first thing that I saw that really struck me of being of any kind of interest, and of really creating a space for people to work and experiment in what seemed a very moribund framework'. Taken from an interview with Joseph Gaylard in Johannesburg on 05/06/13.

<sup>19</sup> In her essay *Exhibitions as Cultural Practices of Showing*, Dorothee Richter (2009:49) refers to the 'conventions of perception' used in established exhibition display formats. These include devices such as the use of pedestals, hanging, spot-lighting and so on, which in turn demand certain ritualised behaviour on the part of the audience – 'mov[ing] about in expressive surroundings, observing intently, holding back, passive vis-à-vis what is shown' and so on (Richter 2009:49). Richter argues (2009:49) that within such a context, the objects displayed 'obtain a quasi-religious value' where 'visitors must control and curb their movements' – in which the role of the audience is subjugated to the supposed sacred value and importance of the art-object.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Simon Gush in Johannesburg on 05/06/13.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Simon Gush in Johannesburg on 05/06/13.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Simon Gush in Johannesburg on 05/06/13.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Simon Gush in Johannesburg on 05/06/13.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Simon Gush in Johannesburg on 05/06/13.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Simon Gush in Johannesburg on 05/06/13.

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<sup>26</sup> Interview with Joseph Gaylard in Johannesburg on 05/06/13.

<sup>27</sup> Ruth Sacks was born in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, in 1977. She completed her Master's degree in Fine Art at Cape Town University, followed by a postgraduate programme in visual and audiovisual arts at the HISK in Belgium. Sacks is currently working and living in Johannesburg, and studying towards her doctorate at WiSER (Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research)(Ruth Sacks 2015:[sp]).

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Simon Gush in Johannesburg on 05/06/13.

<sup>29</sup> The term 'relational aesthetics' was first used by French theorist Nicolas Bourriaud in connection with his curated exhibition *Traffic* at the CAPC Musée d'Art Contemporain (1996, France). For Bourriaud (1996:[sp]), the term, and the exhibition it described, articulated an emerging sensibility in art practice; namely work that 'highlights social methods of exchange [and] interactivity with the onlooker'. In 1998, Bourriaud concretised these ideas in his seminal text *Relational Aesthetics*, which describes artworks as 'states of encounter' in which discursive, open-ended, and dynamic inter-human relations are formed (Bourriaud 2002a:112). Within this framework, the audience becomes an interlocutor within the artwork, and the arena for this interlocation (a meeting, an event, a game) becomes the artistic form (Bourriaud 2002a:28). The term 'new-institutionalism' is directly linked to these practices, and refers to a set of 'curatorial, artistic and educational practices' that attempt to reimagine art institutions as sites for social interaction, engagement and debate (Kolb & Flückiger 2013:12).

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Ruth Sacks in Johannesburg on 05/06/13.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Ruth Sacks in Johannesburg on 05/06/13.

<sup>32</sup> The term 'social interstice' is adopted from Karl Marx's description of the way in which trading communities are able to elude capitalist economies by removing the law of profit in favour of reciprocal exchange economies such as bartering (Bourriaud 2002a:16). Within a contemporary exhibition context, 'social interstice' refers to a kind of economy which "goes

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beyond the dry and reductive simplification in which modernity rigs it”, taking the form of a negotiation (conversation, compromise, discussion) between two people (Bourriaud 2002b:30).

<sup>33</sup> Neo-Marxism broadly refers to a renaissance of interest in Marxist theory, which combines “a fidelity to Marx’s critical and political aims with a sense of the limitations of Marxism in the face of phenomena like fascism” (Toscano 2012:3178). Particular emphasis is placed on the influence of global corporations and so-called ‘state monopoly capital’ on economies (Toscano 2012:3179). Autonomist-Marxism places an increased focus on the importance of the ‘self-activity of the working class’ in order to achieve emancipation from capitalism (Marks 2012:937). According to political and economic geographer Brian Marks (2012:937), autonomist-Marxism can be said to encompass three aspects: ‘the working class’ actions take a multiplicity of forms autonomous from and not determined by capital; working class self-activity can be autonomous from organizations or representations of the class; and different fractions of the class are autonomous from each other, constituting a changing overall class composition’.

<sup>34</sup> According to author Pablo Lafuente (2008:65), the colour red has been used as a symbol of the fight against oppressive rule since the French Revolution of the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century. That is, the red flag, which was previously used by the gendarmerie to signal martial law, was appropriated by the revolutionaries as a ‘bloody symbol of bourgeois repression’ (Lafuente 2008:65). Since then, it has become associated with socialist and communist movements, and the ‘pursuit of a social organisation based on equality’ (Lafuente 2008:65).

<sup>35</sup> According to O’Toole (2014:[sp]), Mercedes-Benz workers at the Port Elizabeth plant were already earning R5.62 per hour – 12 cents higher than the proposed new standardised wage of R5.50.

<sup>36</sup> Marx explains his concept of alienation in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844): ‘What, then, constitutes the alienation of labour? First, the fact that labour is external



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to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his essential being; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He is at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home. His labour is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is forced labour. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it. Its alien character emerges clearly in the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labour is shunned like the plague. External labour, labour in which man alienates himself, is a labour of self-sacrifice, of mortification. Lastly, the external character of labour for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own, but someone else's, that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another' (Marx in Duncan 1973:76).

<sup>37</sup> In his essay *The Production Process of Capital* Marx (1864:160) states that the worker cannot enrich himself through the sale of labour since 'in exchange for the available value magnitude of his labour capacity he surrenders its creative power like Esau his birthright for a mess of pottage' wherein 'he has to impoverish himself, because the creative power of his labour becomes established as the power of capital, as an alien power confronting him'.

<sup>38</sup> During the late 1960s and 1970s, a number of artists, including Allan Kaprow, placed a virtual moratorium on museum and gallery establishments and their inherent Capitalisms – choosing instead to relocate art literally 'beyond the confines of the institution' into public space (Taylor 2005:22).

<sup>39</sup> From email correspondence with Lauren von Gogh 2015/07/07.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Ruth Sacks in Johannesburg on 05/06/13.