



THE COLLECTOR'S IMPACT ON THE CREATION PROCESS OF SITE- RELATED ARTWORKS

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ABSTRACT The collector's role within the art world is at times regarded suspiciously. This article aims to provide a differentiated view on the collector's influence on the creation process of artworks, addressing the complexity of contemporary art making and showing that the role actors play in the making process is often entangled. It aims to unravel some of the practices that determine the creation of site-related artworks. Collectors can stipulate a space for site-related artworks to evolve, and in providing this space can influence the artwork's creation, or even become a participant or collaborator. Nicolas Bourriaud's definition of relational art and Tatja Scholte's understanding of site-specificity as dynamic relational networks is employed to extend Kwon's three types of site-specificity, in order to define a fourth type of site-specificity anchored in what I call 'a relational site'. The relational site can be established in the process of creation through the participation of both artist and collector. By studying the biographies of three artworks from two different collections – the Eyck collection in Limburg and the Haubrok collection in Berlin – the collector's influence on the accordance of site-relation is illuminated.

Introduction

The impact of private collectors on the creation of artworks is often viewed critically, mainly in terms of the art market pressures it creates.¹ Trends within the world of collectors, for example, tend to influence which artist will be successful. For instance, it has often been noted that private collectors prefer particular motifs such as mortality and sexuality.² Similarly, as the serial production of works is better suited to simultaneously answer the demand of numerous collectors, this is increasingly the preferred working mode of artists.³ Therefore, one is able to surmise what artists will create, and the medium or size of works may be dictated by how efficiently they may be sold. Francis Outred, former head of post-war and contemporary art in Europe at Christie's, states "These large ... 21st century lofts in Manhattan demand beautiful large-scale works."⁴ Art adviser Marta Gnypp notes that collectors would ask if a painting by a successful artist might be available with more red, or in a different blue.⁵

The collector's impact, however, is not always directly dictated by market interests. This article elucidates the collector's influence on the creation process of artworks. It addresses the complexity of contemporary art making and shows that the roles of actors in the making process are often intertwined. It depicts how collectors can provide a space for site-related artworks to evolve and how during the creation process a relational site can be established in which both collector and artist participate. This allows the collector to influence the artwork, or even become a participant or collaborator.

To illuminate the collector's impact, it is necessary to not confine the examination to site-specific artworks but to take artworks that are site-related into consideration as well, as the quality of site-specificity is not always permanently fixed to the artwork.⁶ Some stakeholders (such as the collector, the artist or museum staff members) may claim site-specificity where other stakeholders do not,⁷ and the artwork may be site-specific during different stages of its trajectory.⁸ There can, for instance, be conditions that

warrant site-specificity during the creation process, which become irrelevant at the moment of presentation.

Tate defines site-specific art as designed 'specifically for a particular location and that has an interrelationship with the location', and further 'if removed from that location it loses all or a substantial part of its meaning'.⁹ This definition correlates with the common understanding of site-specific artworks. In contrast to site-specific artworks, site-related artworks are not dependent on a site. The Cambridge dictionary defines *related* as 'connected to, influenced by, or caused by something'.¹⁰ Site-related artworks take the site into account and also develop a relation to it, but the meaning is not transferred from the artwork to the site. The works can be conceived without acknowledging the site.

In order to investigate the art collector's impact in the creation process of site-related artworks, I will make use of Miwon Kwon's genealogy of site-specificity to contextualise site-relatedness.¹¹ Kwon's genealogy allows for the recognition of different types of relationships that can emerge in the making, and the various kinds of imprint the collector may leave during the creation of artworks.

This study makes use of ethnographic research methods, particularly participant observations, made during secondments at private collections, and qualitative interviews in order to explore the forms of engagement of individual collectors.¹² By establishing the biographies of three artworks,¹³ and by identifying the types of site-relation in which they were created, the private collector's involvement in the making could be delineated. Archival investigations as well as literature studies supported the research.

First, I discuss Kwon's genealogy of site-specificity. She distinguishes three types of site-specificity: phenomenological site-specificity, social/institutional site-specificity and discursive site-specificity. In particular, I build on Kwon's distinction of discursive site-specificity, which illuminates artworks' dependencies on sociopolitical debates and recognises those debates as the artworks' medium. I contend that discourse, when perceived as medium or site, should not be restricted to social issues. I argue that in the stage of the artwork's conception, in the process of making, relational networks between producers and multiple sites are established. These networks may partially constitute the artwork. In order to distinguish site-specificity which anchors an artwork in an individual shared discourse or interaction I propose the term *relational site*.

This extension of Kwon's definition is necessary to explore site-related artworks, to understand how the relational site is established, and to be able to analyse the private collector's impact on the creation. For my argument I use Scholte's definition of site-specific artworks as dynamic relational networks and Bourriaud's concept of *relational art*.¹⁴ After introducing the notion of the relational site, I discuss the collector's role in the creation of site-related artworks according to the different types of site-specificity through the use of three case studies.

Kwon's genealogy of site-specificity

Kwon, a curator and art historian, analyses the evolution of site-specific art in the last decades and distinguishes (1) phenomenological or experimental, (2) social/institutional and (3) discursive site-specificity, each describing a necessary and meaningful relationship of an artwork to a specific surrounding.¹⁵ The relationship can be physical or mental.

The definition of site-specificity introduced by Kwon identifies site-specificity's historical beginnings: 'site-specific art initially took the "site" as an actual location, a tangible reality, its identity composed of a unique combination of constitutive physical elements'.¹⁶ She calls this type 'phenomenologically or experimentally' site-specific. Its origins lie in the 1960s and early 1970s in the aftermath of Minimalism, which came into existence to overcome the restrictions of traditional media, as well as to allow a critical angle on art institutions and the work's commodification. According to Kwon, site-specific art allows a shift in meaning from an artwork to its context, creating a reciprocal relationship; to that end, it always requires the presence of an observer in order to be completed.

With the further development of institutional critique, the concept of site-specificity likewise evolved and Kwon introduces the term 'social/institutional site-specificity'. She demonstrates that various artists, such as Michael Asher, Hans Haacke and Marcel Broodthaers, 'conceived the site not only in physical and spatial terms but as a *cultural* framework defined by the institutions of art'.¹⁷ Initially the museum or art institution, with its clear architectural standards and controlled environment, served an ideological function that needed to be scrutinised. The exposure of its conventions and concealed motivations are the basis from which site-specificity emerged. Yet Kwon argues that in the 1980s it gradually became less dependent on physical parameters, and the critical intervention more broadly referred to the art world and its practices as a whole.¹⁸ With this move away from a physical space, site-specific art also started to embrace new strategies, which were not only rooted in spatial formations, but in situational, textual, immaterial time-bound expressions.¹⁹ The artwork thus does not need to have a permanent material manifestation, but can be an ephemeral process that is not necessarily embedded in an actual physical surrounding but in the framework of a critical discourse with the art world and its institutions.

Kwon recognises that the meaning of site-specificity has broadened even more, beyond the critique of institutional structures of the art world, and that issues addressed by artists such as Andrea Fraser, Mark Dion and Tom Burr at the end of the millennium not only include aesthetic, art historical or art social issues; in fact, any kind of public debate can serve as the site to which a work relates. She observes: 'unlike previous models, this site is not defined as a precondition. Rather, it is *generated* by the work (often as "content"), and then verified by its convergence with an existing discursive formation'.²⁰ A site can therefore be anything that goes beyond the personal realm of an artist and

emphasises something that is recognised by a wider public as a mutual concern in its social cultural context, such as a community, debates, theoretical concepts, historical conditions and so on.²¹ A site is thus not literally spatial anymore but can be understood as 'a nomadic narrative' articulated by the artist and activated by the public.²²

Site-specificity anchored in relations

Kwon developed her genealogy at the end of the millennium, embedded in the growing debate on homogenisation due to globalisation and at a time where sites in general started to lose their specificity.²³ Discursive site-specificity enabled an 'unhinging' of site-specific art that allowed the artist and the artwork to become nomadic. Kwon relates the rise of discursive site-specific artworks to the collecting practices of institutions of site-specific artworks of previous decades. Sceptical about this delocalisation of site-specific art, she asks, 'Is the unhinging of site specificity, then, a form of resistance to the ideological establishment of art, or a capitulation to the logic of capitalist expansion?'²⁴ This critical view of the development towards making site-specific artworks into 'portable' objects is also relevant when discussing the impact of private collectors on the creation of artworks, because portability has a bearing on art market value.

One effect of this unhinging, almost two decades later, is that the social debate in which site-specific art is anchored is defined ever more broadly. The art historian T.J. Demos points out that Kwon suggests that the site can be understood as a medium.²⁵ Various accounts over time have tried to incorporate the extended remit of site-specific art. The most relevant concept for my analysis is Tatja Scholte's understanding of site-specific art as a spatiotemporal relational dynamic network.²⁶ Building on art historian Anne Ring Peterson's *networked* site-specificity,²⁷ which embraces relationships, material parameters and their intersection points, and performance theorist and art historian Nick Kaye's performative approach to site-specificity,²⁸ Scholte conceives site-specificity as a *modus operandi*,²⁹ a term taken from philosopher Kevin Melchionne.³⁰ She refers to it as 'a strategy that sets a process in motion'.³¹ Similar to her understanding that site-specificity 'gradually unfolds as a network of relationships between the artwork and multiple sites',³² I argue for an extended understanding of discursive site-specificity, one that is anchored in interpersonal relations and which counts the intersection points of these relations as a site.

At the end of the 1990s, the French curator Nicolas Bourriaud developed the concept of *relational art* which recognises the medium as a social intersection.³³ The artwork initiates a social environment allowing the observer to relate to and interact with the artwork, by himself or together with others. This interaction is an intellectual and emotional activity, a process shaped by the subjectivity of the observer (his/her own experiences and expectations) and a shared context with the artwork. Unlike Bourriaud, I

look at this social activation of the viewer through the artwork, not at the moment of presentation, but at the time of its making, and shift the focus from the viewer to the producer or producers. Already here, in the moment of not-being, in its conception, the process of making enables relational networks between producers and multiple sites that later account for the artwork. I use the term *relational site* in the text to define a type of site-specificity which anchors an artwork in an individual shared discourse or interaction.

The collector's impact on site-related artworks

The collectors Jo and Marlies Eyck, based in Limburg (The Netherlands) commissioned the Dutch artist Peter Struycken to create a site-specific artwork: a wall curtain for their dining room in their estate in Wijlre. The *Wandbekleding kamer kasteel Wijlre*, 2007 (Figure 1) consists of woven curtains covering the entire wall space of the dining room. When closed they can also mask the windows and the room is completely encased by the play of colours of the curtains. The project was initiated and discussed during a dinner between the artist and the collector in that particular room and on several other occasions.³⁴ The work could not have come into existence without the relationship between the artist and the owners, a friendship that evolved over many years, a shared past, and common interests.³⁵ But also not without the relationship of all the individuals to the space, to its 'agglomeration of ... actual physical attributes ... (the size, scale, texture, and dimension of walls, ceilings, rooms; existing lighting conditions' which serves as 'a foil for the artwork'.³⁶ In that sense the work established a relational site, the shared experience of dinners in the dining room overlooking the garden, which evoked a physical connection to the space and the different actors, and generated a phenomenologically site-specific artwork.

Another artwork in the Eyck collection that initially embraced site-specificity, where the collector's role in the creation can likewise be retraced, is the *Paardebloemen atelier (Atelier pissenlits)* by Belgian artist Michel François, 1999–2005 (Figure 2). It was realised during an artist residency at the Kasteel Wijlre, 2005, where the collectors invited several artists and asked them to create an artwork that responded to the site.³⁷ It consists of a glass and wood showcase, with the dimensions 242 × 120.7 × 50 cm. Inside the showcase, dried dandelions are hung upside-down from a nylon thread on three levels over one another, and are reflected by a mirror on the bottom of the vitrine. It may be argued the artwork is not site-specific. The collectors avoid moving the work due to the fragile condition of the dandelions, but it has changed rooms at least once at the Kasteel. Interestingly, the collector claims site-specificity for the artwork.³⁸ Similar to the curtains of Peter Struycken, the collector again had an impact on the artwork in various ways. First of all there was a form of financial support; secondly he provided a space with a highly distinct character – the Kasteel with its architecture and garden which the



Figure 1 Peter Struycken, *Wandbekleding kamer kasteel Wijlre*, 2007, c/o Pictoright Amsterdam 2019 (© P. Struycken).

artist interacted with during the residency – for the work's execution and display; and thirdly he was engaged in a discourse that influenced the work's evolution. In the case of the *Paardebloemen atelier* he was involved in the artwork's creation even more deeply, and this resulted in a site-specificity of sorts. The artist asked Jo Eyck to hand-pick dandelions for the vitrine, and the dandelions were fixed by the collector with hairspray, exactly as directed by the artist.³⁹ The collector stresses that the artist was very particular in his directions that the flowers should be picked from a specific place in his garden. The collector therefore sees the work as site-specific. The artist, according to the new owners, the Bonnefantenmuseum,⁴⁰ nevertheless agrees that the dandelions can be renewed, meaning that the staff members of the Bonnefantenmuseum can now also pick the flowers, although some ambiguity remains as to the exact location from where they can be picked.⁴¹ The work with the withered dandelions is quite fragile and it is questionable whether the vitrine could ever be transported without renewing the dandelions. Through the collector's impact on the creation process of the work it acquired a site-specificity mainly perceived by the collector, since the museum confirms that a relocation of the artwork would be possible. Interestingly, it is through the collector's engagement in the creation process, and only perceived by the collector, that the work developed a specific relationship to its physical surroundings. Here a physical site, Kasteel Wijlre with its residency programme, activates a relational site: the discourse in the evenings between artist

and collector,⁴² which consequently strengthens a phenomenological site-specificity experienced individually by the collector when becoming practically involved in the making of the work.

Both in the *Wandbekleding kamer kasteel Wijlre* and the *Paardebloemen atelier*, the collector plays a direct and multilayered role in the creation process. He supplies the physical surroundings (the architecture and nature) which he anticipates will have an effect on the creation process of the artwork. Besides this, there is also a more active impact, when details of the work's realisation are discussed mutually or when individual operations are consigned to the collector, allowing him to become a co-worker.

In both cases there is also an immaterial context, of a friendship, of having a shared past or spending the evenings together during the residency. This intellectual discourse also occasions a relational site. Collectors, through enabling the creation process of site-related artworks, may have a strong impact on this creation process: the collector's role is not limited to providing the physical surroundings and the financial means, but also includes provoking an intellectual and emotional relationship to an immaterial context. This can activate a dynamic between the intersection points of physical components and the relationship amongst the actors, to form a relational site. The collector in other words not only provides a physical context but also an immaterial context. However, the artwork's affiliation to the relational site in both these cases is not site-specific but site-related, as the relational site does not function as



Figure 2 Michel François, *Paardebloemen atelier*, 1999–2005, c/o Pictoright Amsterdam 2019.



Figure 3 Jonathan Monk, 2004/2014, *A TEN YEAR PROJECT (1): Meeting No. 10*.

the artwork's medium or, to phrase it differently, meaning is not relocated in this specific relational site.

The examples also show that the understanding of site-relation as well as site-specificity changes at different stages in the artwork's trajectory depending on the actors.⁴³ This may occur during the creation process but also during display. That is, the context of the artwork's creation cannot necessarily be equated with its presentation. *Paardebloemen atelier*, for instance, at the time of its creation during the residency, due to the presence of a relational site and the physical engagement of the collector with the site, acquired a certain site-specificity. After completion of the artwork this site-specificity does not necessarily remain for the artist or other stakeholders and the later owner, the Bonnefantenmuseum. The site is no longer important for the artwork because the dandelions are now exchangeable.

How might a collector be involved in the making of a site-related artwork that is of a conceptual, non-material character and what does this impact look like? The Berlin-based collector Axel Haubrok made a contract stipulating he would charge 10,000 euros to the British artist Jonathan Monk annually, and would in exchange receive one artwork a year, for the duration of 10 years.⁴⁴ The first work is a wall text with two street names in New York and a date (Figure 3).⁴⁵ It is the same date 10 years after the contract was signed. The wall text thus describes the meeting point for

the two of them, the collector and the artist, 10 years later in New York. The planned meeting in New York at this specific address is the last work in the 10-year contract.⁴⁶ The wall text has no phenomenological site-specificity: it can be placed anywhere and replaced by as many versions as needed. Also, the meeting at a specific physical site was from the start a fictive meeting and never happened.⁴⁷ However the project can be said to have a social/institutional site-specificity: it is situated in the public debate concerning the interdependencies between private collectors and artists in relation to the art market. It engages with this debate in various ways: through the process of paying the artist to create an artwork for a private collection, through the artwork's nonmaterial character, and through its highly personalised configuration and the implication that it was therefore hardly conceived as a commodity.

When looking for the impact the collector has on the artwork, it lies most prominently in providing the financial means for the realisation of the work. But the impact can also be seen in the collector provoking the very existence of the work by providing the context. Haubrok with his collecting activity supplies the institutional relation of which the work is made. In addition, his collecting activities constitute a network of relations between him and the artist, culminating in the 10-year contract, which configures the relational site-specificity and functions similarly to

providing a physical site for a phenomenologically site-specific artwork. In the case of Haubrok I argue that his impact on the process of making is even more pervasive, because he not only provides a social/institutional or relational site but actually participates in establishing a dynamic relational network. Their narrative is the artwork's medium.

The artwork can barely be perceived without knowing the narrative, the story of the 10-year contract and the fictive meeting. In fact, when the audience looks at the wall text this is not the entire artwork but a part of it, to which the narrative belongs as well as the two participants who perform the contract and the fictive meeting. So, we have an artwork that operates on different levels and where meaning is situated in a complex interrelation between collector, artist, their social environment and the physical display of the artwork. It is indeed the artist who creates the work, but the collector has considerable influence on the creative process and final realisation because the meaning of the work is situated in their shared narrative. Due to the dynamic relational network between the conception of the artwork, the collector, and the artist, the collector can be perceived as a co-creator. The art critic Wolfgang Ullrich in his book *Siegerkunst* calls someone who commissions art in this vein a *sparring partner*, somebody who not only pays but also motivates, challenges, and engages in a discourse.⁴⁸ As Jonathan Monk notes: 'With some of my works, there is clearly some obvious collaboration within the production process. There is more to it than a straightforward exchange of goods or services.'⁴⁹

All three case studies show also that site-relation or site-specificity can be viewed as facilitating the personalisation of an artwork in the context of a private collection. This can be seen critically, as a ploy for increased engagement with collectors and making artworks more attractive to them, and therefore adapting too much to the needs of the collector. On the other hand, at other times it goes against the needs of the collector and may hinder resale, as Jonathan Monk recognises: 'It is very difficult to resell something that is very personal or specific to the one person.'⁵⁰

Conclusion

In the deliberations above I showed that a collector not only impacts site-specific artworks through financial support and by providing the physical spaces artworks respond to, but may also enable an intellectual and emotional discourse that influences actors, multiple sites, and the conception of the artwork. Building on Scholte's notion of dynamic relational networks and Kwon's discursive site-specificity, I argued that this discourse, as a social intersection, can also be conceived as an additional site, which I call the relational site in reference to Bourriaud's concept of relational art. This relational site can also function as the medium of an artwork, for instance in Monk's work, when the artwork's meaning is situated in its context.

I further demonstrated that even if a collector initially furnished one particular type of site-specificity, the

discourse during its inception may in fact provoke multiple sites to which the artwork can relate. On the other hand, the site an artwork relates to may only be valid/operative for a specific time, or be restricted to specific actors. Site-specificity of an artwork during its making therefore does not define its entire future development, and if a particular site-specificity was ascribed to an artwork, its attribution should not necessarily be considered fixed.

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Notes

1. Maho 2018.
2. Maak 2011.
3. Ullrich 2016: 15.
4. Francis Outred speaking in *The Great Contemporary Art Bubble*, BBC documentary, 2009, directed by Ben Lewis.
5. Gnyp 2015: 247.
6. For example, Melchionne 1998.
7. The most prominent example is *Tilted Arc* by Richard Serra: compare Crow 1996; Melchionne 1998', Meyer 2000.
8. Scholte, for instance, analyses the different stages of a trajectory a site-specific artwork may go through and how the artwork is impacted by those shifts: Scholte 2020.
9. See <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/s/site-specific> (accessed 1 August 2019).
10. See <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/related> (accessed 29 August 2019).
11. Kwon 1997, 2002.
12. The secondments took place at the Eyck collection/Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht from May to June 2017 and at the Haubrok collection, Berlin from April to September 2018. The research was carried out in relation to my PhD project 'Private collections as care-takers', which investigates conservation strategies in private collections. It is part of the EU-funded program *New Approaches in the Conservation of Contemporary Art* (NACCA).
13. Van de Vall et al. 2011.
14. Scholte 2020; Bourriaud 2020.
15. Kwon 1997, 2002.
16. Kwon 1997: 85.
17. Kwon 1997: 87.

18. Kwon 1997: 91.
19. Ibid.
20. Kwon 1997: 92.
21. Kwon 1997: 93.
22. Kwon 1997: 95.
23. Soja 1989; Jameson 1991; Robins 1993; Lippard 1997; Kwon 2002.
24. Kwon 2002: 31.
25. Demos 2003.
26. Scholte 2020.
27. Peterson 2015.
28. Kaye 2000.
29. Scholte 2020: 36.
30. Melchionne 1998.
31. Scholte 2020: 36. Here she also builds on conservation theorist Tina Fiske's analysis of the repeatability of site-specific artworks (Fiske 2009).
32. Scholte 2020: 45.
33. Bourriaud 2002.
34. P. Struycken, 2007 May 21, email to Jo and Marlies Eyck. Bonnefantenmuseum, Collection Department's documentation archive.
35. Compare various accounts, e-mails, and letters, Bonnefantenmuseum Collection Department's documentation archive.
36. Kwon 2002: 3.
37. Holman 2006.
38. Schüling 2013: 2.
39. Holman 2006.
40. In January 2012 the Bonnefantenmuseum, with the financial support of the Province Limburg, acquired 'the Eyck Collection', of which the *Paardebloemen atelier* is a part. Because of the fragile condition of the dandelions and some insecurities as to if and how exactly they can be replaced, the Bonnefantenmuseum for the time being avoided moving the artwork to the museum, although transportation to the Bonnefantenmuseum is under discussion. (I. Kentgens, personal communication, 29 March 2018). At the time of writing, the work is still located at Kasteel Wijlre.
41. Kentgens 2018, cited in note 39 above.
42. Holman 2006.
43. Compare also Scholte 2020.
44. A. Haubrok, personal communication, 26 November 2018.
45. 10TH AVE AT WEST 14TH STREET NEW YORK CITY USA OCT 10TH 2014 NOON.
46. Haubrok 2019, cited in note 44 above.
47. Ibid.
48. Ullrich 2016: 124.
49. Monk 2011: 78.
50. Monk 2011: 76.

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Biography

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