



# Responsive Environments and Protagonism: The Sustenance Principle

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## Abstract

This positioning paper is in two parts. The first part examines the notion of 'the gift' as applied to artistic works in *The 'Do-It-Yourself' Artwork*, edited by Anna Dezeuze (2010) and to *disrupt* this notion with the countervailing concept of *sustenance*. This analysis critiques sociologist Marcel Mauss' research into the First Peoples of Canada, specifically in terms of the development of his theory of 'potlatch' based predominantly on the Kwakw'wakw'wakw People and their destruction of property as a show of strength. The paper seeks to *disrupt* this concept, summarised as 'the 'gift' as obligation', with the Coast Salish Peoples' practices of offering *sustenance* to their fellow tribes through the sharing of food wealth. This can, it is asserted, provide resources for the author's present research on responsive environments. The second part explores the principle of sustenance. The paper argues that, from this perspective the artist's role is to create resources that can be *productively* extended, challenged or repurposed by a process of 'protagonism'. This is because those resources, supported by digital technologies, sustain opportunities both in and out beyond responsive environments. This position, it is asserted, supports an intensification and diversification of Claire Bishop's participation motivations of 'activation', 'authorship' and 'community'.

## Keywords

Responsive Environments, Protagonism, The Gift, Sustenance, Productive Principle.

## Introduction

This position paper examines the use of the term 'gift' in an art and digital art context with specific reference to *The 'Do-It-Yourself' Artwork*, edited by Anna Dezeuze (2010). Marcel Mauss' concept of 'the gift' was based, in part, on the Kwakw'wakw'wakw People's use of 'potlatch', *as an*

*obligation to return*. [1] This is referenced uncritically in Dezeuze's book as artists forcing obligations onto the viewer/visitor in the artists' own terms. Mauss' notion of the gift has received considerable attention from both advocates and critics. Most notable in the latter category is Derrida who took Mauss to task for his open-ended use of the term 'gift', questioning the project at the level of literary and linguistic probity. [2] By comparison, within the anthropological community Mauss is seen as a founding father. His detailed ethnographic research into the lived experiences of native Peoples is seen as pioneering. Mauss' work is cited continually both in terms of its exemplary methodological approaches and also in terms of its continued influence on notions of community cohesion and practices. [3]

There is, however, another way to critique Mauss' work without overtly questioning the other two perspectives supplied and that is through detailed historical analysis of the process that Mauss did and did not work through. This is about the choices Mauss made before his study began. The significance of this approach is that it seeks to critique the use of the term "The Gift" in an artistic context but by revisiting the origin of the term.

The author argues that more credence should be given to the Coast Salish peoples around the Vancouver area who used the potlatch to offer *sustenance*: surplus food shared with other tribes. This process is repeated so that all the tribes are sustained through communal support. Rather than being about obligatory gestures a potlatch could alternatively be a means of sustenance.

The paper goes on to apply this alternative concept of sustenance to the phenomena of 'responsive environments' arguing that this approach supports 'protagonism': opportunities for productive engagement building on Claire Bishop's participation motivations of 'activation', 'authorship' and 'community.' [4]

## A Historical Critique of Marcel Mauss' Gift

Mauss found many parallels in his contemporary France that matched what he had discovered in First Peoples of

Canada. However, for Mauss this commonality is based upon a form of *realpolitik* in the type of comparison across cultures. The notion of gift is translated in the term 'potlatch':

It is a struggle between nobles to establish a hierarchy amongst themselves from which their clan will benefit at a later date. We propose to reserve the term potlatch for this kind of institution that, with less risk and more accuracy...we might call: total services of an agonistic type. [5]

This refers to the Kwakwaka'wakw People's use of potlatch ceremonies as a means of expressing their wealth. In some cases this wealth would be deliberately thrown into rivers as an act of bravado. However, the presumption from Mauss to "reserve the term" potlatch must be challenged. The inference is that Mauss' decision is the result of wide ranging studies that confirm this definition. However, within his study he states:

We warn that it is incomplete even as to the number and names of the tribes, and to their institutions. We leave out a large number of tribes... [including] the Salish tribes of the south coast. [6]

This caveat is a serious one because it is not possible to agree with Mauss with regard to the *inclusiveness* of his definition. A conclusion from this is that Mauss is seeking to claim the term for anthropological purposes *irrespective* of its use within the communities in the locale. This conclusion is further backed up when the practices of the Coast Salish Peoples are studied with regards to their potlatch ceremonies. For example, William Suttles' study of Coast Salish Peoples includes the following:

[The Potlatch's] most important function is to be found neither in the expression of the individual's drive for high status nor in the fulfillment of the society's need for solidarity, neither in competition nor in cooperation, but simply in the redistribution of wealth. [7]

This offers a different interpretation of potlatch for the Coast Salish. But could the redistribution of wealth still reinforce the power over others i.e. be an agonistic activity? No, for the Coast Salish Peoples the concept was not agonism but *sustenance*:

Since wealth is indirectly or directly obtainable through food, then inequalities in food production will be translated into inequalities in wealth. If one community over a period of several years were to produce more food than its neighbors, it might come to have a greater part of the society's wealth. Under such circumstances the less productive communities might become unable to give wealth back in exchange for further gifts of food from the more productive one. If amassing wealth were an end in itself the process of sharing surplus food might thus break down. But wealth, in the native view, is only a means to high status achieved through the giving of it. [8]

This is a direct rebuff to Mauss because it is clear that potlatch is not only used to describe "total services of an *agonistic* type". From the author's perspective there should

at the very least be a tempering of Mauss' concept to allow the principle of sustenance as well as agonism.

## Artworks and the Principle of Sustenance

The importance of this call for a reassessment is made clear when we read the following quote from Kwon's paper "Exchange and Reciprocity in the 1960s and After" from *The 'Do-It-Yourself' Artwork*:

*As we know* from the work of Marcel Mauss, the French sociologist and author of the hugely influential 'Essai sur le don' ('The Gift', 1924), as well as subsequent theories of the gift, *there is no such thing as a free gift* or entirely disinterested, uncalculated giving. [9]

The use of the phrase 'As we know' in this context is telling. We are drawn into the certitude of Mauss' concept here. Kwon's treatise on the relationships between artist and public is founded upon the hegemony of Mauss' research focus and definitions. This interpretation is presented as a *fait accompli*.

But the author's line of argument *disrupts* this assumed complicity. Rather than being presented with a *fait accompli* of perceiving the sharing of any art form as an obligation to return something within the remit of the artist we are able to argue that it is equally possible to share art works that offer sustenance to the other. Here the author offers an alternative means of developing art out of an interpretation of the Coast Salish's social practices of sustenance. This accords with Claire Bishop's participation motivations of 'activation', 'authorship' and 'community' i.e. that participation can result in openings for agency, in creative opportunities and in sense of social connection. [10] However, the construction of a responsive environment, through digital technologies, offers the possibility for the intensification and diversification of those opportunities and cohesions.

There has been a long history of research into responsive environments and it is time for that research to inform the debates on 'the gift' and 'participation'. For brevity, this position paper will introduce these possibilities through the pioneering work of Dr. Omar Moore then of the Department of Social Psychology, University of Pittsburg. A sample of other investigations into responsive environments is supplied in the Bibliography below. In 1962 Moore founded the *Responsive Environments Corporation*, which was concerned with the development of computerized educational devices including *The Talking Typewriter* and *Talking Page*, two interactive learning support tools. In this case, the responsive environment was educationally focused and about the innovative use of technology in constructed environments (learning labs). [11]

In 1968, Moore together with Alan Anderson, also of the University of Pittsburg, wrote “Some principles for the design of clarifying environments.” [12] This paper sought to both define responsive environments and offer principles on learning that could be applied in practice. Working within a constructivist theoretical framework, Moore and Anderson proposed four principles: perspectives, autotelicity, productivity and personalisation. [13] These principles, as applied to their “Talking Typewriter” project, seek to delineate the roles/positions that a learner can take with regard to the environment. Two of the principles are examined here.

The *perspectives principle* explores the different parts that a person may take in relation to the environments i.e. Patient, Agent, Reciprocator and Referee. These roles express increasing awareness of the processes contained in the environment from a ‘patient’ role of being in receipt of an activity through an ‘agent’ role taking control of action through to a ‘reciprocator’ role of being aware of the moments in the environment where a patient or agent role is being conducted to an overarching role of ‘referee’ where the person is aware both of the processes at work and also the rules by which those processes are played out. [14] Of significance here is the qualitatively different activities made available in environments but, in each case, the focus is on different level of awareness of the systems at work. These different perspectives open out opportunities for new forms of content to be *sustained* within the system precisely because the means/media, or tools/content, are within reach of, what the author contends are, ‘protagonists.’

The *productive principle* privileges the quality of the activity in terms of the degree to which the experience can be taken forward, *sustained* and utilized in new situations. This could be about the promulgation and/or activation of the same idea in a new context or the *principle* or the toolset that is reapplied/repurposed in the new context as an act of ‘protagonism’.

It is important to note that the first exploration of the concept of responsive environments offered a *principled* approach. It is asserted that these criteria, drawn from the experience of developing educationally supportive technologies, can be re-applied within electronic art contexts. Furthermore, these principles are complementary to Bishop’s stated motivations, although more work needs to be done to integrate these components. However, there are some elements of theoretical framework here, informed by the principle of sustenance and also a variety of ways that protagonism can be supported through artworks. For example, the ‘productive principle’ connects with the Coast Salish notion of sustenance with resources being moved out into new areas to sustain existing and new

developments. Furthermore, the sustenance of an idea relies upon the development, and extension of perspectives. However, while it is important to state that this position paper has sought to challenge certain presumptions regarding artistic practice within *The ‘Do-It-Yourself’ Artwork*, this analysis has not focused on the specific forms of content/political motivation of the artist. In this regard, the same book contains an article, by Claire Bishop, entitled “Antagonism and Relation Aesthetics.” [15] In response to Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics*, Bishop offers ‘relational antagonism’ i.e. it is not always the case that viewers/visitors are invited in to engage in sympathy with the artist. It may be more the case of a *provocation*, an antagonism whereby what is taken away are resources for change both in others and the viewer/visitors that are challenging to all and unexpected, rather than empathetic and supportive: “This relational antagonism would be predicated not on social harmony, but on exposing that which is repressed in sustaining the semblance of this harmony.” [16] This might, at first sight, seem to contradict the central premise of this position paper. However, this merely differentiates the possible motives of artists from the specifics of the Coast Salish method of sustenance. Of primary importance here is that digital technologies can *sustain* such challenges both in responsive environments and out beyond them in ways not open to gallery-locked content. What can be sustained? This is the question that provides the context for further research into the notion of responsive environments. Furthermore, there are opportunities for responsive environments unbounded by limitations of learning labs or galleries because they are enabled by digital *mobile* technologies. This is also part of the author’s present research. Responses/critiques are welcome with regard to both cases.

To conclude we return to Mauss’ book *Essai Sur La Don*. This book is known as *The Gift* in English but “don” can be translated as “talent”, “offering”, “bestowal”, “charity”, “hand out”, “donation” and “bounty.” [17] These additional definitions at least complexify the concept and, it is argued here, point to other social formations that can equally support or provoke protagonist behaviour.

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2. Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).
3. cf. Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago: Aldine Transaction, 1974)

4. Claire Bishop, ed., *Participation* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2006), 12.
5. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, 8.
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7. Wayne Suttles, *Coast Salish Essays* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1987), 23.
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9. Miwon Kwon, "Exchange and Reciprocity in the 1960s and After," in ed. Anna Dezeuze (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 232, emphasis added.
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## Author Biography

Russell Richards is a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Creative Industries, Southampton Solent University, UK. He has written on digital aesthetics and interactivity: "An Aesthetic or Anaesthetic? Developing a Digital Aesthetics of Production", *Journal of Media Practice* 5 (3) (2005) and 'Users, Interactivity and Generation' *New Media and Society* 8 (4) (2006). He is a member of KikiT VisuoSonic who have performed/presented across the world including Interactive Futures, Victoria, British Columbia (2007), Sainsbury Centre for the Visual Arts, UK (2008), ISEA, Singapore, (2008) and at the London Design Festival at the Victoria and Albert Museum (2010). In the latter case, interactive visuals in real-time to create "Digital Tapestries" projected along side 500-year-old tapestries in gallery 94 of the V&A. Richards is researching a PhD in 'Responsive Environments' at Southampton Solent University. His research is focusing on how such environments can position users as protagonists.

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