

# Lessons in retrospect: a McLuhan reading of the controversy surrounding Michael Elion's *Perceiving freedom* (2014)

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## ABSTRACT

This article<sup>1</sup> explores the convoluted debate and spaces of intersection between Michael Elion's recent public art installation, *Perceiving freedom* (2014) and its subsequent defacement by The Tokolos Stencil Collective. This article employs the media-orientated lens of Marshall McLuhan's work *Understanding media* (1964). The application of McLuhan's work in present-day Cape Town allows for a more dialogical understanding, and sheds light on why Elion's work was controversial even before it had any meaning attached to it. This 'technique of insight ... is necessary for media study, since no medium has its meaning or existence alone, but only in constant interplay with other media' (McLuhan 1964:26). This article considers the contention around *Perceiving freedom* both before and after the 'attack', in order to better understand the dynamics at play. Lastly, McLuhan's ideas are used as a lens through which to understand the dialogical, yet unseen, forces at play.

**Keywords:** Michael Elion, *Perceiving freedom*, Sea Point, Tokolos Stencil Collective, Cape Town, McLuhan

## Introduction

1. This article forms part of a larger Master's dissertation and serves to highlight some of the key concerns without essentialising an inherently complex debate.

Visibility and representation are contentious practices in the South African city space. Any space that is declared public automatically elicits a site for collective cultural representation Okwui Enwezor (2004:42) articulates this moment best

when he states that ‘it can be argued that no significant work of art has been produced in South Africa that has not at the same time confronted the obdurate edifice of the politics of the country’s divided memory. Consequently, the past is no longer a foreign country-divided between Europe and Africa – but a native land’. Therefore art created in South Africa, particularly in public space, has a responsibility to address this divided memory critically. The employment of beauty and aesthetics in an African context only pulls the audience’s eyes away from a cultural understanding of current socio-political contexts. Nuttall (2006:13) expands on this problem in her work on investigating the discourses of aesthetics, when she points out that:

in view of the forms of human degradation of which the African continent is seen to speak, to talk about beauty has been implicitly encoded as not simply superfluous but indeed morally irresponsible if not reprehensible. According to such a view, a study of beauty would distract our attention from the multiple permutations of social distress with which we are confronted.

Nuttall’s explanation highlights the importance of the South African public art object having a moral responsibility to go beyond aesthetics. South Africans have yet to establish a common and sustainable nationhood, and therefore any representation that aims to speak for the collective automatically falls short. Furthermore, the public that responds to any visual communicative practice<sup>2</sup> is not static or essentialist. Perhaps the best way to conceive of this ‘general public’ is not through a shared identity, but rather an intricate and complex entanglement of hybrid identities in a constant state of flux between past, present, and future modes of representation.

In light of this, this article considers the South African nationhood as best articulated by Dubin (2012:219) when he states that South Africa presents itself ‘as a nation continuously redefining what it represents and one being created through on-going clashes over values, symbols and ideas. Collectively [characterising] episodes in an on-going culture war.’ This culture war is multifaceted and as such, occurs on many different levels. Dubin (2012:219) therefore refers to the South African city space as a ‘semiotic marketplace’ created by the polysemic nature of the visual communicative practices that occur in this space. Schirato and Webb (2004:16) explain this polysemy as ‘[a]rt and pop culture [are not] neutrally aesthetic practices, but meaning making symbolic practices which both reflect and inflect social values – with the capacity to establish and confirm (or sometimes challenge) those values’.

2. This article employs the umbrella term ‘visual communicative practices’ to denote a category that encompasses a contemporary understanding of outdoor artistic practices that are official and unofficial, sanctioned and unsanctioned, and exist in a peculiar place between street art, muralism, graffiti, stencils, vandalism, advertising, and public art. The interchangeability of these terms presents the problem in a precise definition and categorisation.

Therefore, owing to the complexity of its communicative potential, South African public art is imbued with great responsibility towards the city space that it occupies. Bronwyn Law-Viljoen (2010:1) sets out the parameters for this relationship:

African cities, especially, are being intensely theorised, and many critics are pointing to ways of city making in African urban environments that force a profound rethinking of city space. In South Africa, rethinking this space means grappling with what is to come *and* rereading the fragmented city that history has left us. If art is to have any presence in the city, it too must radically rethink this space. And by presence I do not mean only grand occupations of space, but the subtle presence of that is possible through a number of art forms and through a new architecture. It must tell the history of the city, its possible futures, and its many and various inhabitants. But it must also create the city, give us the city as our home, if indeed it is to be the only one that we will know. It can only do this in conversation with the real readers of city space; its tenants, vendors, pedestrians, small-business owners, long time residents, commuters; the people, in other words who traverse the city daily, and live in it at night. A failure to understand these intimate human trajectories will be reflected in art that does not know the difference between solid and liquid space.

It is in this response that a clear differentiation needs to be made between spaces that represent concrete memories, and spaces that have been moulded into malleable collective sites of aspiration and representation, and are therefore liquid.

When situating Cape Town in this debate, it is important to remember that its turbulent history of segregationist practices still has modern day implications. As Besteman (2008:47) notes, '[t]he way one moves through and experiences Cape Town has everything to do with where one was placed during the massive urban geography campaign engineered by the Group Areas Act of 1950.' The creation of the 'white' southern suburbs stood in stark contrast with the creation of coloured areas that served to expel people of colour as far away from suburbia as possible (Besteman 2008:47). However, the city space can be described very differently as it becomes a singular place where multiple identities form, interact, fragment, and reform. Tonkis (2005:60) best articulates this dynamic when she states that '[o]ne of the most visible ways of exercising power, after all, is to occupy or to control space ... .'

The spectrums of visually communicating outdoor arts in Cape Town present an interesting way of occupying the city and controlling space. A good starting point in dissecting the dialogue around the visual occupation of public space in Cape Town is explained in the article, 'Gagged, bagged and tagged', which was published by *Times Live* in April 2014. In it, City Councilor JP Smith spoke of the city's continuous efforts to erase graffiti and gang-related tags as he deemed it to be

'dubious art' (Williams 2014). Smith makes his intentions clear when he states that '[t]hrough the city promises to continue to expunge invasive and obtrusive art, plans are afoot to engender a sense of love and happiness by utilising the talents of artist Michael Elion [as he] aims to turn Cape Town into the city of rainbows, complete with arcs of crystals and hearts' (Williams 2014). Later on in his statement, Smith states that 'the only criterion for public art in Cape Town, whether graffiti, statues, or any other form of visual expression, was that it be displayed with the consent of the community and did not pose a threat to the public [as] communities must have a voice as to what happens in their back yard' (Williams 2014).

## Michael Elion's perception

Michael Elion (b. 1975) is a Cape Town-based artist who is formally trained as an architect. After graduating from The University of Cape Town in 1998 with his architecture degree, he enrolled in the London Architecture Association and then subsequently for an MPhil in aesthetics in Paris (Michael Elion 2015). He describes himself as an artist that creates large-scale artworks that engage with the environment and his basic principle is to 'seek beauty in all things' (Hunkin 2014). He does this '[t]hrough large-scale urban art installations, [whereby he] reimagines the environment we inhabit infusing what he refers to as a 'layer of fantasy' into the everyday experience' (Hunkin 2014).

Although Elion's *oeuvre* includes a large amount of pop art, large scale installations and statues in Paris, London, and Johannesburg, the scope of this article focusses on a few pieces of Elion's work in Cape Town to give further context to the focus of this article, *Perceiving freedom*.

Elion has a notable preoccupation with creating an aesthetically-pleasing outside world that can correlate with an inner sense of harmony (Hunkin 2014). This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in his Rainbow and heart (*I love you!*) public artwork. The Rainbow public artwork made use of a petrol-fuelled pump with a very fine nozzle in order to create water droplets of a size that would allow sunlight to refract off them and effectively create a rainbow across a street (Hunkin 2014). *I love you!* was a giant hanging heart erected in Camps Bay that worked with similar principles of reflection, where the collection of crystals momentarily caught rays of sunlight and threw off colourful hues. Elion says that his fascination with light developed organically to the point where he began to use it as a creative material so that 'light becomes the object of the perception. And it happens to perform uniquely and beautifully in and of itself' (Hunkin 2014).

In 2014, the City of Cape Town was named The World Design Capital (WDC). Various public and street artists collaborated with WDC to create artworks in and around the city. The aim of the World Design Capital is to acknowledge cities which recognise design as a tool for social, cultural and economic development, and provide a platform through which design projects aimed at transforming the city can operate (World Design Capital 2014). Elion was one of the Cape Town artists who decided to take his work further by collaborating with WDC to create City of Rainbows World Design Capital project number 518 (WDC#518). City of Rainbows (WDC#518) is what Elion describes as a:

Citywide project that transforms the urban landscape in Cape Town with moments of fantasy. It has four components: real rainbows appearing in public places and over the streets and across the city; thousands of faceted glass crystals hanging from the city's lamp posts creating flashes of colour in the skyline; pedestrian crossings transformed into colourful crossings; and The Secret Love Project (Hunkin 2014).

As part of the WDC project 518, Secret Love Project is an urban art project that employs Elion's much-loved motif of the heart to experiment with the ways in which visual perception can influence behaviour. By placing heart stickers, shapes, and installations all over Cape Town, particularly in the Central Business District (CBD), Elion attempted to rebrand Cape Town (Figure 1).

Whilst acknowledging the city and street's utilitarian purposes, Michael Elion also points out that 'we shouldn't [sic] revert to function alone. For me, it's more important that a space is beautiful, that it makes you feel good and reinforces your sense of wellbeing' (*Cape Town Magazine* 2015). Elion is adamant that this sense of well-being should be a driving force when it comes to developing city policy around urban architecture that creates a space for citizen interaction.

## The controversy around *Perceiving freedom*

In October 2014, Elion won a bid with the City of Cape Town's newly established public art board, Art54, to erect a public art sculpture. Art54 is a selection committee for temporary public artwork in the Ward 54 area (made up of a combination of the Robben Island, Sea Point and Three Anchor Bay area). The Art54 selection committee was created as a joint venture between the City of Cape Town's Arts and Culture Department and Councillor Beverly Schaffer (Tourism, Events and Marketing Directorate) in order to develop a mechanism to select temporary public art (Badsha 2014).



FIGURE **Nº 1**



The Secret Love Project, heart sticker. Kloof Street, Cape Town, 2014. Photograph by author.

This ward was chosen as a World Design Capital project (WDC#685), that '[p]romotes new and innovative ways of thinking about art in public spaces, considers their unique landscape, mix of people and character' (World Design Capital 2014). The Councillor and Department of Arts and Culture managed to raise 'just under R200 000' for the creation of selected public art proposals (Badsha 2014). The limited funding meant that although the initial amount was split between various artwork proposals, it was not enough to cover all the projects.

Elion he managed to obtain the additional funding needed for his public artwork though sponsorship from Ray-Ban sunglasses. Committee member Farzanah Badsha (2014) insists that the selection committee was very strict with corporate

branding and made it clear to Elion that '[t]he sponsor could use their own marketing strategy to leverage off its sponsorship of the artwork, but would only be acknowledged with a small logo on the A3 information panel to accompany the sculpture'. In describing the technicalities of this process, Badsha (2014) pointed out that the proposal that the Art54 committee had approved was for Michael Elion to create an interactive water installation on the beach in Camps Bay. The sprinklers would create Elion's much-loved rainbows on the beach, which would be an 'unashamedly kid friendly and popular' work (Badsha 2014). However, there was no funding for this, so the selection committee approved Elion's other proposal to create a large-scale pair of sunglasses on Camps Bay Beach, for which he had corporate sponsorship from Ray-Ban (Badsha 2014).

Although the location was originally supposed to be Camps Bay Beach, the sculpture appeared on the Sea Point Promenade in early November 2014. For the opening event, several government officials, WDC spokespeople and members of the public gathered on Sea Point Promenade to unveil Cape Town's newest piece of public art, a larger-than-life pair of Ray-Ban glasses gazing out towards Robben Island. Both Michael Elion and Councillor Schaffer were pictured wearing Ray-Ban Wayfarer's (Figure 2).

Elion used the new Sea Point spatial context and the fact that his sculpture gazed out towards Robben Island to inform his artistic statement. Elion noted that *Perceiving freedom* paid tribute to former President Nelson Mandela and coupled this statement with an image of Mandela wearing sunglasses during a visit to Robben Island a few years after his release. Elion used the repeated motif of the sunglasses, as well as the shared correlation with Robben Island, to add historical legacy to *Perceiving freedom*.

Owing to the fact that it had been less than a year since Mandela's passing when the sculpture was erected, this statement immediately angered both the media and the general public and many felt that it was an insult to his legacy. Moreover, several journalists were quick to point out that during his incarceration at Robben Island, Mandela's sight had been irreparably damaged from working in the limestone quarry, and that his request for sunglasses had been refused for the first three years (Jethro 2014; Sosibo 2014; O'Toole 2014). It later also became apparent that whilst the Mandela Foundation had, in fact, allowed Elion to make use of the 1977 photograph, they did not grant permission for Elion's use or further appropriation of his legacy. Communications Director Danielle Melville pointed out that '[s]uch permission does not constitute endorsement of the work [and that the] latter involves a complex process, including the signing of a code of conduct, and did not apply to the case in question' (O'Toole 2014).





FIGURE N° 2



Artist Michael Elion poses with Councillor Beverly Schaffer at the unveiling of his public art sculpture, *Perceiving freedom*, Sea Point Promenade, Cape Town, 2014. Photographer unknown. Image courtesy of *Africa is a country*.

Another issue that came to the fore was that the large-scale steel 1956 Ray-Ban Wayfarer sculpture bears an uncanny likelihood to Marc Moser's *Sea pink* (2011) sculpture in Denmark (Poplak 2014). The sculpture (Figure 3) is a pair of large sunglasses with pink lenses, situated on a beach looking out towards the sea. It pokes fun at the idea of perceiving the world through 'rose-tinted' lenses. Moser (2015:1) describes his approach to art as being one with the form; many of his artworks are large-scale public installations, much like Elion's. He believes that the scale of the work is of utmost importance as '[a]n enlarged everyday object is given new significance in its interaction with its surroundings, its transformation and its name. Their origin is a world turned outwards it is the materialization of impressions and situations' (Moser 2015:1).

Elion did not comment on the likeness of his 2014 public art sculpture to that of Moser's work from 2011. Whilst Moser's artistic statement clearly highlights his intention at exploring the relationship between the artwork and its surroundings, Elion made little attempt to consider the surroundings, context and interplay of art and advertising<sup>3</sup> critically that *Perceiving freedom* explores.

3. This interplay between art, sculpture, public space, and advertising is also prominent in the work of renowned American sculptor Claes Oldenburg, who gained notoriety in the 1970s as a pioneer in the field (Rose 1991:40).





FIGURE **Nº 3**



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Marc Moser, *Sea pink*, 2011. Sculpture, Unknown materials. Aarhus, Denmark. (Rainer Bollige 2015). Image courtesy of the artist.

As Schäfer (2014) points out: '[t]he arguments and the criticisms leveled at *Perceiving Freedom* come down to a combination of factors – the permissions process, corporate sponsorship and artistic integrity – and it is this combination that makes the debate a convoluted one'. The scale and complexity of the debate surrounding *Perceiving freedom* did not lessen, and the horror at Elion's 'opportunistic advertising' was picked up repeatedly in the press (Schäfer 2014; Sosibo 2014; O'Toole 2014; Young 2014). Perhaps one of the most vehement voices was that of the opinion blog, *Africa is a country*. Writer Duane Jethro (2014) describes Elion's sculpture as 'a pathetic appropriation of commemoration as cover for a commercial promotion. Really, it's a stunning emetic trigger that suggests that Nelson Mandela is beckoning us from the afterlife to buy Ray-Ban sunglasses, to do our duty for reconciliation and nation-building by consuming this luxury product'.

Jill Williams, Communications Manager at the African Arts Institute (AFAI) berated the lack of funding that landed Art54 in this dilemma in the first place. She further responded to Elion's sculpture by saying that: '[y]ou can say what you want regarding conceptual motivation, but at end of the day, it's funded by a sponsor that is branding itself, so is that really public art?' (Schäfer 2014). She also went further in suggesting

that city spaces used for public art should be governed by an independent board of artists from a variety of backgrounds in order to spark ‘transformative and necessary conversations’ (Schäfer 2014).

A *Mail & Guardian* article by Sean O’ Toole (2014) touches on some of these tensions when he includes statements from other South African artists such as Gerald Machona and Candice Breitz. Breitz publically condemned Elion’s work and asked ‘[w]hose freedom is being celebrated here really?’ (O’Toole 2014). Breitz<sup>4</sup> started an online campaign requesting the City Council to remove the offending artwork. Figure 4 shows a screenshot of part Breitz’s initial response on Facebook.

In Breitz’s extensive Facebook debate, fellow South African artist Herman Niebuhr posted a comment that read ‘[t]ell that charlatan Michael Elion that we’re sending a Jo’burg [sic] street fighter [artist] Stephen Hobbs down to settle this’ (Sosibo 2014). Elion did not realise that Niebuhr was referring to another public artist and as such understood the comment to be a threat to his personal safety. Elion responded by laying charges against Niebuhr and Hobbs for an incitement to violence, and included Breitz in those charges because she ‘liked’ Niebuhr’s comment and as such was a participant in the threat (Sosibo 2014). Niebuhr responded by pointing out that he did not feel that Elion was qualified to create such a public piece as no public consultation went into the creation of his artwork (Sosibo 2014).

When asked what he thought about the response to his work, Elion responded by saying that ‘[m]aybe its meaning should change ... it does not have to be fixed in space and time. My major error was sending an oversimplified explainer to the arts intelligentsia. It’s a public piece and I didn’t want to write something too intellectual for passers-by to read’ (Sosibo 2014).

## The Tokolos’ improvement tactics

The Tokolos Stencil Collective operates in the space of discrepancy between vague ideological aspirations and superficial artistic practices. Any attempt to define them would constitute an attempt to tie them to the very artistic canon that they seek to defy. The Tokolos Stencil Collective uses their resistance art to highlight what they perceive to be glaring racial and class-based inequalities in the City of Cape Town. In order to understand the way in which this South African street art guerilla collective operate, one need only understand their position towards ‘real’ art, which they see as ‘something that makes those with privilege feel uncomfortable’ (Tokolos-Stencils 2015).

4. There is a certain amount of irony in Breitz’s very public response on social media as she was also subjected to many of the same criticisms in her *Ghost* series (1998).

## THIS IS NOT THE WAY TO COMMEMORATE OUR PAST!

I'm reposting this article in favour of the opinions it expresses:

[http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/.../2014-11-11-junkyard-prom.../...](http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/.../2014-11-11-junkyard-prom.../)

It is a travesty and a disgrace to see the city of Cape Town allowing the legacy of Madiba to be trivialised and branded in this fashion. Located in private space, one could dismiss the gesture as simply irrelevant. In public space, it is heinous. The South African art community should express its disapproval loudly - this is nowhere near the 'public art' that we should be aspiring to as South Africans, particularly in the case of public art that reaches to commemorate our complex and dense history. A pair of Ray-Bans sponsored by Ray-Ban (how "fantastic" of them, says the artist on his FB page, which is worth a visit) just doesn't do the trick, regardless of the artist's protestations. Let's hear as many strong South African voices as possible insisting that this is not what public art should be or can be in our delicate public sphere.

With Sue Williamson, Mikhael Subotzky, Moshekwa Aron Langa, Jonathan Garnham, Zanele Muholi, Santu Mofokeng, Penny Siopis, Roger Young, Leonard Shapiro, Mary Corrigan, John Nankin, Stephen Hobbs, Marcus Neustetter, Lisa Brice, Adam Broomberg, Oliver Chanarin, Hasan Essop, Athi-Patra Ruga, Haroon Gunn-Salie, Gerald Machona, Tracey Rose, Nelisiwe Xaba, James Sey, Steven Cohen, Robyn Sassen, Simon Gush, Nicholas Hlobo, and many others who I am not listing. Oh, and for the sake of transparency, Michael Elion too.



Like · Comment · Share

FIGURE **Nº 4**



Candice Breitz's Facebook response to *Perceiving freedom*, 2014. Image courtesy of *Africa is a country*.

Although the methods of The Tokolos' socio-political aggravation are quite clear, their motives, beyond demanding public attention, seem to be vague. The primary contact or interaction point for The Tokolos Stencil Collective is through their social media pages, namely their Facebook and Instagram accounts. Their Tumblr page, Tokolos-Stencils, serves as a point of entry for any aspiring Tokolos members as it provides downloads of templates of their infamous stencils. Once they have stenciled a respective landmark, institution, building, statue or even pot plant, new Tokolos' are encouraged to post a picture of their work on to one of the various social media platforms.

The Tokolos point out that their collective is a loosely defined one as 'whoever puts up political stencils that remain progressive and not in the service of a specific political party, is automatically considered a member' (Gedye 2014). This collectivist approach towards the city not only ensures their anonymity, but also allows their 'art' to be a participatory one. The Tokolos embrace this anonymity for various reasons, stating that '[t]he struggle should not be about individuals and celebrities but about the collective working to change things. It allows us to speak parallel to popular struggles [and] to divert attention from us and refocus it on those who are struggling publicly for justice' (Gedye 2014). However, they are also quick to point out that 'they are not engaging in this conversation as artists but as an anonymous and universalised image of the worker wearing gas masks and blue overalls, and carrying [a] luggage of shit [sic] to disrupt spaces in which poor blacks are not welcome' (Botha 2014).

Young (2014b) problematises their desire not to be labeled as artists as it is unclear whether their desire is not to be recognised as artists, or if they wish to be identified as non-artists. This distinction is quite important; as the latter category implies that they would still participate in the artistic world, yet refuse to be defined by it. However, they do not appear to be too concerned with artistic legitimacy. They consider their work to be far from the auspices of vandalism, and instead, they are quick to point out that they are merely transforming public space:

[a] more relevant question is who is already censored [sic] in public space by the very fact of their oppression? Poor blacks, women (especially black women), LGBTI [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual and Intersexual] shack-dwellers, farmworkers, the unemployed. This is not their public space. With a more participatory public art under the auspices of government, they will remain censored. That is why public art must be made outside such a space of sanction. Art must work parallel to the efforts of the oppressed in building a counter-power (Gedye 2014).



In the early hours of the morning of 18 November 2014, the anonymous Stencil Collective, Tokolos released the following statement: '[a]s requested, Tokolos has heeded the call. You're welcome to have someone check out the new and improved Ray-Ban Madiba glasses this morning before the authorities arrive ... Aluta continua ... Tokolos' (Young 2014a).

The Tokolos' idea of improvement was to deface Elion's *Perceiving freedom* with their trademark 'Remember Marikana' stencils and the words, 'Myopic Art' and 'We Broke Your Hearts' (Figure 5). However, regardless of what light the actions of The Tokolos Collective are seen in, their wording is extremely significant. Young (2014a) points out that 'Myopic Art' refers to Elion's inward (or shortsighted) conceptualisation of Mandela's legacy, without considering a broader public context or possible implications.

Furthermore, 'We Broke Your Hearts' alludes to Elion's work with The Secret Love Project and his heart stickers that were an experiment in creating a happy, positive city. Young (2014b) points out that the manifesto of The Secret Love Project goes against the fundamental beliefs of The Tokolos who 'are part of a rising wave of resistance art, one that shatters the notion that Cape Town city management apparently likes to present to tourists – that we are living in a happy, transformed rainbow nation'

Perhaps the entire controversy is best understood through humour. In a satirical article entitled 'Michael Elion revealed to be an elaborate piece of performance art' published by *ZA Wire* (2014), the anonymous journalist dissects some of Elion's statements in the press:

... when unsanctioned graffiti artists have to creep into a public space under the cover of darkness, they are making a political statement against the arbitrary allocation of public space, by civil servants for their favoured white sons. When the artist says that his vandalised work is like a genocide, he is referring to the attempts to kill whiteness by reclaiming the public space.

## McLuhan's insights

In his book, *Understanding media* (1964) Marshall McLuhan wrote about media in an entirely new way. McLuhan's simple statement 'the medium is the message' has changed the way that media is practiced, analysed, and disseminated. The importance of this theory is pivotal as it considers 'the personal and social consequences of any medium – that is, of any extension of ourselves – resulting



FIGURE N° 5



The Tokolos Stencil Collective, *Improved version of Michael Elion's Perceiving freedom*, 2014. Sea Point Promenade, Cape Town. Tokolos-Stencils. Image courtesy of Tokolosh-Stencils.

from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology' (McLuhan 1964:7). This recognises the communicative and transformative potential of the medium through which the message is disseminated. In other words, it is a shifting of emphasis of the content of media to the form in which it is delivered. The medium is important because it determines which senses and levels of interaction take a primary role.

This mode of analysis is particularly helpful when it comes to the conflict around Elion's *Perceiving freedom* as it suggests possible reasons why the reception of Elion's work was so different from what he had initially anticipated. Although it should be pointed out that these insights are always much easier to address in



hindsight, the point of this article is to use some of McLuhan's ideas to highlight possible future points for artists operating in public space to consider. McLuhan's ideas about the medium as the message are particularly relevant over fifty years later because they illuminate the medium aspect of the debate, instead of purely focussing on the content of the work, as many other critiques have done.<sup>5</sup>

A good place to start with McLuhan's (1964:9) ideas is his discussion around the (almost invisible) centrality of the medium by referring to electric light as it 'escapes attention as a communication medium just because it has no "content". And this makes it an invaluable instance of how people fail to study media at all. For it is not until the electric light is used to spell out some brand name that it is noticed as a medium'. Then it is not the light but the 'content' (or what is really another medium) that is noticed.

## The cultural matrix

McLuhan (1964:9) states that the primary focus of his theory is not on the content of the medium as primary communicating device. Instead it considers the indirect communication of the medium that occurs simply by the user interacting with it. This indirect communication occurs on the level of what McLuhan (1964:9) calls the 'cultural matrix' within which media operates, as this forms and shapes understanding even before any message is disseminated. The power of the cultural matrix is that it enforces existing social norms created by '... the psychic and social consequences of the designs or patterns as they amplify or accelerate existing processes. For the message of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs' (McLuhan 1964:8).

The cultural matrix that precedes direct communication in terms of Elion's *Perceiving freedom* occurs simply by Elion choosing to place his sunglasses on the Sea Point Promenade, instead of the Camps Bay Beach. This already influences the audience's understanding of the sculpture as if it were placed on the beach; similar to Moser's rose-tinted glasses, then the work would have been received with an automatic sense of playfulness and light-heartedness often associated with the beach.

By placing his work on the Sea Point Promenade and looking out towards Robben Island, Elion loses that sense of playfulness in two ways. Firstly, he chooses to enter into a heavy political discourse by aligning his work towards Robben Island and memories of a national icon, Nelson Mandela. This situates his work in dialogue with the painful history of oppression that the pairing of Nelson Mandela with

<sup>5</sup> See Jethro 2014; Sosibo 2014; O'Toole 2014.

Robben Island has come to represent. Secondly, he places his sculpture in a place of recreation, as Sea Point is a place where joggers, strollers, and park-dwellers alike come to relax. Here, there is no rushing past Elion's work. Instead, it is set up in dialogue with other public artworks such as the Woolworths Rhino.<sup>6</sup> This is significant, because instead of seeing Elion's work as a piece of playful public sculpture that just happens to be partially sponsored by Ray-Ban, his work is situated as a piece of public art that comes into contact with many different people from all classes, stages, and racial backgrounds. Therefore, Elion allows his work to be 'assigned a cultural value that advertisements lack, so it attracts a long, slow gaze' (Schirato & Webb 2004:106). This cultural matrix already makes the work problematic before any level of meaning is applied.

In a similar manner, where Michael Elion did perhaps not take the time to consider the cultural matrix of his work, The Tokolos Stencil Collective thrive off the positioning of their stencils. Their stencils seem to occur in places that do not attract the 'long slow gaze' of art, and therefore adopt the sweeping gaze often applied to advertising. This is important, because it is only in this modality that viewers are forced to look again because their surroundings have been disrupted. In this way, The Tokolos tags work against the pre-existing cultural matrix in order to bring the space and its practices into question.

## The use of the media determines its potential

To take McLuhan's ideas further, the use of the media determines its potential instead of the nature of the media itself. Failure to recognise this results in what McLuhan (1964:18) describes as the 'numb stance of the technological idiot'. The only way to cure this idiocy would be to acknowledge the expression devoid of the content. If this does not happen, then media users are rendered into a subliminal and docile state where they become prisoners in prisons without walls (McLuhan 1964:20). In other words, if the recipient of the message cannot understand the power of the medium being used to communicate, then there is no way for that recipient to understand how the same message can change depending on the medium in which it is delivered.

This idea can be best understood when considering the materials Elion and the Tokolos Stencil Collective respectively used. Elion required a huge amount of material, labour and financial resources in order to craft the giant steel frames. On the other hand, The Tokolos Stencil Collective creates tags instantly and inexpensively. Once the stencil has been downloaded, printed and cut out, the

6. *Rhinosaur* (2014) by Andre Carl is an interactive sculpture that fragments the rhino into different dimensions so that viewers can engage with the harsh reality of its endangered status (Brown 2014:1).

placement takes a matter of seconds and is relatively small scale. The location or cultural matrix is intrinsic to the reception of their tags as it forms part of the larger interpretation of the message.

The Tokolos Stencil Collective has a very specific message, and therefore makes use of linguistic (textual) anchors with a limited inclusion of icons. The Tokolos is quick to point out that they do not speak for anyone in specific, and rather ‘aim to amplify the voices of those whose words are ignored’ (Gedye 2014). This easy-to-read, visual level limits alternative readings of their messages and promotes instantaneous reception, which ties in with their ‘in-your-face’ anti-authoritarian message of amplification. Furthermore, they propagate the myth of the working-class struggle and the real, tangible effects of poverty as a failure of the socio-political climate around them.

Michael Elion stands on the other side of this continuum. By creating a three-dimensional work that did not have any direct significance to the people or the area where it was created, he had to forge those connections himself. By limiting the textual description of his artwork, loosely tying it to the legacy of Nelson Mandela and accepting corporate sponsorship, the polysemic readings of his work became limitless and almost automatically resulted in outrage. The physical tangibility of his work is also a greater assault on public space, because it cannot merely be painted over, destroyed or easily removed: it occupies the space. It has quickly become a solid work with fluid connections or motifs.

## Hot and cold media

McLuhan creates categories for media so that the form can be wholly understood before the content is considered. This is important as it allows for a more in-depth understanding of the ways in which cultural homogenisation is either reinforced or subverted by a particular medium, depending on its cultural temperature. McLuhan (1964:21) sums up this relationship when he states that ‘[h]ot media are, therefore, low in participation, and cool media are high in participation or completion by the audience’. Firstly, McLuhan (1964:22) considers the extent to which the media extends one single sense with a large amount of data or information and uses this ability to define its temperature. He refers to this as the media’s definition, or in a sense, ‘filling-in’ capability. This means that cool media would have very little definition as the user is given a low amount of information. If hot media is understood as the opposite of cool media, then extensive amounts of definition or information are given. Therefore, the audience of a hot media would not have to ‘fill-in’ and the media is thus low in participation.

A cool medium is only effective if the audience has a vested interest in participating. If this is not the case, or audience participation is not required, then the hot medium keeps on generating into further degrees of abstraction and visual intensity. This repeatable intensity of the hot medium ends up eliminating participation until it is purely definition and as such, the hot medium becomes explosive (McLuhan 1964:23). McLuhan (1964:23) describes this as ‘the principle that hot form excludes and cool form includes’. This exclusion creates a culture of specialisation that results in dissociation or fragmentation where it occurs. Therefore, McLuhan (1964:24) cautions that any intense experience must first be censored and then cooled so that it can be learned or assimilated.

The downside of this cooled-off condition results in a lifelong state of psychic rigor mortis or somnambulism where users perform routine aspects of their everyday life without any intellectual engagement (McLuhan 1964:24). This repetitive somnambulistic state either has fragmentary or retribalising repercussions, depending on how it is used. McLuhan (1964:24) describes this relationship: ‘[s]pecialist technologies detribalise. The nonspecialist electric technology retribalises’. When man/woman extends himself/herself, he/she also fragments himself/herself. McLuhan (1964:25) sees unified consciousness ending with the idea of the machine becoming an extension of man/woman.

Michael Elion’s *Perceiving freedom* is a hot medium. This is because it is high in visual definition and engages with its audience primarily on the level of sight owing to its highly visible and easily accessible location and its size. It is also, ironically, a pair of sunglasses. Elion did not discuss the concept with the Art54 board or open dialogue up to the public. The Sea Point Promenade is not as hot as the city space, and presents itself as a cooler culture where people meet to relax, exercise and essentially retribalise, although this space is rapidly gentrifying (Brown 2014).

The Tokolos Collective Stencil’s work is the coolest medium, as their stencils and tags are high in audience participation. This occurs on two levels, firstly, anyone can be a Tokolos, and secondly they invite audience participation explicitly.

McLuhan’s (1964:34) observations about in-depth social reactions turning into conservative responses with the transformation of instant technology is best articulated when Candice Breitz started the online debate about Elion’s sculpture. By moving the debate out of its physical space and into the virtual realm, Breitz cooled down *Perceiving freedom*, and its virtual form allowed boundaries of time and space to flatten. Thus, it instantly engaged a larger audience and kept the conversation going. By making the artwork synonymous with his personal brand, Elion indirectly ensured

that any attack on the artwork would be an attack on him. This approach is different from that of The Tokolos Stencil Collective: by being an anonymous collective, they do not attach any personal identification to their work. This allows their message to function in a completely different way to Elion's hyper-extended branding.

When the debate moved out of the physical confines (barriers) of Sea Point and onto an online as well as mediated space (even making news in the United Kingdom), any shortcomings of the public artwork were inverted to shortcomings in Michael Elion himself. This lack of physical barriers resulted in Elion confusing commentary against his public artwork with commentary against his personhood. This could serve as a possible explanation regarding why Elion laid charges of 'incitement to violence' against Breitz, Hobbs and Niebuhr after their Facebook comments about sending a 'street fighter' to show Elion how public art is done. Elion mistook their joke (as it was devoid of the practical elements and real world references) as an actual physical threat.

As more and more people joined in on the Facebook, Twitter and media debates around Elion's artwork, the medium cooled down to the extent that it became information itself. This pliability and adaptability was heralded by The Tokolos' attack (or improvement as they called it) on *Perceiving freedom*. Elion responded by saying that '[h]ealthy debate is welcome, but this is inexcusable' (Joseph 2014). However, he did not take well to the original Facebook debates. Perhaps the debate was not so much about where it occurred, but the fact that there was a debate at all. When audience participation increased, the underlying power dynamic of Elion's work was revealed to be a standoff between Michael Elion's artistic intent and the public's expectation of an artwork existing in the public sphere.

The object that represented this power dynamic then became the object of power. If McLuhan's (1964) ideas are applied to this power dynamic understanding, then neither The Tokolos Stencil Collective nor Candice Breitz took away Elion's power. It was never his to begin with. All they did was reveal the power structure by making the implicit, explicit. This was achieved by communicating directly to the form, which they understood to hold the power. Breitz cooled down the form by putting it into the realm of the global village (a product of the electrical age) and by collapsing spatial and temporal boundaries she provided a participatory platform through which the public could communicate. As Elion did not approve of or understand this debate, The Tokolos Stencil Collective then took this communication and reheated it by placing it directly onto the sculpture, in a hot language that the hot artist could perhaps understand more clearly. However, the heating up of this cool collective dialogue still proved too cool for Elion to fully comprehend, and as a result he understood the attack as a criminal defacement of his work and his

primary concern was how costly the damage would be to remove. This provides an example of the hyper-extended closed system that McLuhan refers to. It is important to note that Elion was not alone in his anger, as the City of Cape Town also condemned the criminal defacement of *Perceiving freedom*.

## Freedom is only found in meeting points

If McLuhan's (1964) argument is applied to *Perceiving freedom*, then it becomes evident that a public artwork has the responsibility to be an open dialogue that encompasses all perspectives. If the original artwork does not provide this to the public, the public will re-appropriate the artwork by either changing its context or its form. The moment when two different mediums meet is when a truth or revelation occurs from which a new form is born (McLuhan 1964:55). This meeting moment becomes prolific because it is in this moment of new form, truth, revelation, visibility, and recognition that man or woman truly gains a sense of autonomy and snaps out of his Narcissus-narcosis state of numbness and trance (McLuhan 1964:55). In other words, it forces him/her to engage with the form itself.

Candice Breitz responded by changing its context from Sea Point Promenade to an online forum, but asked for the form to be moved with her Avaaz petition. On the other hand, The Tokolos Stencil Collective responded by taking the debate to the form itself and changing it. This is perhaps where true collective representation and freedom is experienced, as Elion is granted his voice, but only alongside others.

If the artwork had been removed, then the destruction of the form would also destroy the site of debate. Therefore, as long as *Perceiving freedom* stands, the debate continues – and the importance of this is paramount owing to the failure of proper public art policy, governmental funding, and the dissolution of Art54. It is necessary that the public and concerned arts and government officials should have their say so that Cape Town can start thinking constructively about what visual communicative practices are placed in public spaces, and what this means for society as a whole. The Tokolos Stencil Collective (2015) brought this point to light when pointed out that '[o]ur public spaces are being privatised and defaced by corporate interests – is that not vandalism of the highest order?'

However, since Elion removed the polycarbonate lenses and scrubbed the graffiti off his work, *Perceiving freedom* is now just an empty shell that has transformed into a children's play object and popular photography spot. By reversing the dialogue he has censored the debate. This debate could have become what The



Chief Executive of The South African National Arts Festival, Ismail Mahomed, calls 'a more powerful form of community and artist protest' (Schäfer 2014).

## What are the implications of this research?

McLuhan (1964:65) refers to Wyndham Lewis' statement that '[t]he artist is always engaged in writing a detailed history of the future because he [or she] is the only person aware of the nature of the present.' Within this mindset, the importance of the artist should be recognised in terms of his or her work and in his or her ability to side-step the grasp of technological innovation. The genius of the artist should not overshadow his or her understanding of the medium. McLuhan (1964:65) describes this artist as 'the man [or woman] in any field, scientific or humanistic, who grasps the implications of his actions and of new knowledge in his own time. He [or she] is the man [or woman] of integral awareness'.

This 'integral awareness' is the crux of the argument, as it goes back to Nuttall's, Enwezor's and Law-Viljoen's introductory statements about understanding the context in which art operates. As Elion did not move past the aesthetic, his art missed the most important part of the process: engagement. However, he should not shoulder the blame alone. The lack of comprehensive and sustainable policy surrounding the creation of Art54 as well as the vague manner in which The City of Cape Town followed through, ensured that Elion was not held accountable to any level of cultural engagement or collaboration *before* he erected *Perceiving freedom*. The intervention by The Tokolos Stencil Collective only resulted in highlighting these procedural shortfalls by making an example of Elion.

Through explaining and applying McLuhan's (1964) insights to Elion's original work and the Tokolos' 'improvement', this article situated these two practices in dialogue with each other so that the complexities of the problem can be understood. These two seemingly opposing visual communicators serve as what McLuhan (1964:66) calls 'social navigation charts'. McLuhan (1964:66) elaborates on this idea: 'for those parts of ourselves that we thrust out in the form of new invention are attempts to counter or neutralize collective pressures and irritations. But the counter-irritant usually proves a greater plague than the initial irritant'. This is where the artist comes in, as he or she creates a form of entertainment that mimics reality in such a way that it simulates the real-world effect.

The only way to counter this real-world effect is through the construction of boundaries where two societies live side by side but do not interact. This frontier or wall creates tension. McLuhan (1964:69) describes this mounting tension: '[w]hen

two societies exist side by side, the psychic challenge of the more complex one acts as an explosive release of energy in the simpler one'. This explosion is perhaps nowhere better witnessed than in the city centre, where the more 'simple' society is fragmented through interactions with a Westernised one. The explosion cannot be rectified with a retrospective glance or a future-orientated glance. Instead, McLuhan (1964:70) notes that only the dedicated artist has the insight with which to encounter present day actuality.

It is perhaps best to understand this in terms of previously mentioned ideas about the reversal of the overheated medium: '[w]hen the technology of a time is powerfully thrusting in one direction, wisdom may call for a countervailing thrust' (McLuhan 1964:70). This countervailing thrust is usually an implosive fragmentation that results in decentralisation and flexibility of the smaller centres. Thus, the whole breaks up and reorganises itself into smaller components. Therefore, the importance of each visual communicative practice, whether alone or in conversation, is that they call public space and governmental policy into question. They force interaction, and allow one to feel their sense ratios by making these issues not only tangible, but also most importantly visible. Art provides the immunisation to the capitalist consumption of public spaces by visually suggesting this scenario to the public. By (intentionally or non-intentionally) doing this, the debate is brought into the public mediated realm and out of the purely visual one. This forces Cape Town to consider what the corporate consumption of space means and how disengaged it is from its surrounding cultural climate.

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