The construction of Karen Karnak:

The multi-author-function

Abstract

The context of this paper is the changes in authorship which have occurred within the comparatively recent developments of Web 2.0 and the emergence of interactive WikiMedia. The mode of authorship within a Read/Write culture, compared to that of a Read/Only tradition, is that the role of the audience has become merged with the author, and as such, represents new functions and attributes. Modes of multi-authorship, demonstrated in the use of the pseudonyms Karen Karnak and Karen Eliot, represent declarative authors whose names signify multiple origins, whilst concurrently indicating a distinct body of work. The function of these names forms an important tool of deconstruction involving an experimental mode of multi-authorship utilising WikiMedia technology in the creation of a collective multi-author pseudonym *Karen Karnak*. The paper ends with a discussion of the implications of multi-authorship on the concept of the *body of work*, ownership, and copyright.

Keywords:

The Construction of Karen Karnak: The multi-authorship function

This paper describes the conceptual development of an experimental form of multi-authorship based in the participatory culture of the WikiMedia (Wiki, 2002). The experiment centred on the construction of a pseudonymous authorship, a created name, Karen Karnak, under which a body of work was collectively produced, resulting in a discussion of how this mode of multi-authorship intersected with traditional forms of authorship. Foucault's author-function was used as the basis of the theoretical framework and the experiment used a WikiMedia web application to enable the collaborative construction of a virtual author, under the name of which a body of work was produced. The aim of the constructed author was to create a neutral space in which the thirty nine participants could interact under a decentralised, many to many, communication model facilitated by cutting edge multi-author, web-based, geographically de-centred technology. It soon became apparent that the power structures inherent in technological, legal and social constraints of the participatory space, was a major factor in controlling the limits and content of participation. Much of the delimiting of participation came from my role as researcher and Sysop (administrator and owner of the WikiMedia) battling with the potentials of legal implications brought about by copyright and ownership issues surrounding pseudonymous uploading of material.

My dual role as researcher and participant in the experiment in multi-authorship resulted in a methodology and academic approach which made the power structures associated and surrounding the participatory environment visible and accountable. As researcher my data collection requirements tended towards a centralised interactive environment whilst, ironically, the most interesting and truly participatory events occurred when the multi-author name, Karen Karnak, was abducted from the confines of the WikiMedia and joined an art strike in the physical space of Lithuania with a motley crew of past and present multi-author names.

Originating in the centralised form of the WikiMedia and an academic research environment Karen Karnak has expanded outwards into multiple forms. At least three of the original participants are currently using the name in wider contexts: an art-strike in Lithuania, where Karen Karnak mingles with Karen Eliot and Luther Blissett; an exhibition of moving images in

New Zealand which a whole new series of works are attributed to the pseudonymous author; as well as, sporadic appearances on blogs or forums expressing a variety of ideological stances and languages, mainly in Catalan. This on-going experiment forms a larger context to this paper and can be found through an internet search under the name Karen Karnak.

Karen Eliot multi-use / multi-author name:

The name Karen Eliot was initiated by Stewart Home, in the early nineteen eighties, as a multiple-use artist name to "democratise the star system" and question the concept of the individual artist (Saper, 2001: 42-43).

The multi-user name Karen Eliot functions as an indeterminate identity: "Karen Eliot is a name that refers to an individual human being who can be anyone. The name is fixed, the people using it aren't" (Home, 1999). This view of identity is evident in the origins of Karen Eliot which Home describes as a social constructed identity:

> "Karen Eliot was not born, s/he was materialised from social forces, constructed as a means of entering the shifting terrain that circumscribes the 'individual' and society" (Home, 1999).

The *shifting terrain* which Home mentions above can be interpreted as the play of power which shapes concepts of the individual and which can be applied to the power structures which shape the author-function. Home's strategy of using a virtual author in which to examine the play of power which *circumscribes* the concept of the individual can be compared to the research environment of the Karen Karnak project, in which, a similar multi-use name is used to examine the functions of the author. Home supports the hypothesis that the multi-use author is a vehicle suitable for an examination of the power structures which shape and define the concepts of authorship. Home's intention is:

"[to]create a situation for which no one in particular is responsible and to practically examine western philosophical notions of identity, individuality, originality, value and truth" (1999).

These *philosophical notions*, *identity, individuality and originality*, are central paradigms within which the author-function, and authorship in general, operates. In the operation of a multi-user name, such as Karen Eliot, Home is attempting to remove the author as an individual origin, since the name is one which can be used by anyone and therefore, from the outset, represents in the proper name, what Foucault calls the *plurality of egos* which are usually dispelled by the author-function (Foucault, 1977). The function of identity in the multi-use name is both a refusal of a fixed identity, due to the disparate entities which operate under the name, as well as the enforced consolidation of the *plurality of egos* into a singular form, enclosed within the function of the name. This is seemingly paradoxical since the name of the author Karen Eliot simultaneously functions to disperse the multitudes of users by invoking the author-function, whilst at the same time, since the author does not hold *value,* as Home suggests, as a valid and enclosed entity, the name simultaneously functions as a signifier of multiple entities.

The primary function of the multiple name, the multi-author, is not to identify a single origin of a text, through which attribution is then made possible, but to deny the possibility of attribution through a complex system of subterfuge and dissipation of origins across multiple identities and participants.

"It does not name, as names usually do, any one particular body and the history that body has come to assume. Rather, the name is dissipated across many bodies, it resides nowhere, in a place between bodies, above bodies" (Eliot, 2002).

The construction of Karen Karnak:

In 2009 thirty nine participants were invited from the contact list of the Hamilton Underground Film Festival to collaborate on the production of a body of work attributed to the pseudonym Karen Karnak, the name which had been created specifically for this study. The Hamilton Underground Film Festival is a small low-budget and no-budget film festival located in Hamilton, New Zealand, and is active in representing filmmakers and artists involved in the production of D.I.Y. culture. The self-selected participants were mainly international in origin, with less than forty per cent from New Zealand.

The aim of the experiment was to experience close hand the workings of the multi-author within the specific context of the WikiMedia, creating a participatory culture in which the surrounding power structures could be observed through their influence on the resultant mode of authorship. The points at which multi-authorship is shaped and distorted by certain influences were used to generate data by firstly identifying power structures and secondly to suggest attributes and functions of these contextual influences.

The still image uploaded on the 26th May 2009 by user KarenKarnak111 introduces the theme of copyright, since it is a still images taken of a television set with the face of a well known German painter and performance artist (Figure 1). This was a concern for the researcher and Sysop of the Wiki site since this image would not comply with the Creative Commons license if it was part of a television broadcast from a commercial company. The caption "My German Uncle gives a TV interview", supplied by the participant, offers some indication of familiar ownership, but since the photograph of the face is on a television set the ownership of the image, and its copyright status, becomes doubtful.

To be able to present the image here, within an academic study, and to be able to attribute ownership to Karen Karnak, within a creative commons license, I have added to the image by obscuring the original face, adding another layer of authorship to the image. This additional level of authorship is an overt and visible alteration of the original image, just as the image itself has already gone through several layers of authorship before reaching the WikiMedia site: the image has been captured via the video camera of the television company, broadcast into the

private living room of, presumably, the niece (or nephew), who has then recorded the image on a stills camera, complete with the context of the room surrounding the television set.

The stage of authorship, which publishes the image in this paper, requires that the artist is obscured, since its image may be subject to copyright control. Instead, we have the surroundings of the artist, complete with video transmission artefacts, the screen of the television set and the surrounding room of the niece or nephew: the actual artist, the supposed subject, has been shifted as the central focus of the portrait.

Figure 1: *My German Uncle gives a T.V. interview*
(Source: Karnak, 2009).

If, as McSherry claims, "copyright was born at an intersection between censorship and the regulation of piracy" (2001: 42; Goldstein, 1992; Kaplan, 1967), does the censored image, such as that above, taken from the confines of a private house fall into the realm of copyright law? With the removal of the central subject, I believe, the image has been altered sufficiently to fall outside of copyright law. The next question is whether the image has been successfully de-authored to fall outside of the realms of ownership, since user KarenKarnak111 is pseudonymous and the declarative author Karen Karnak, to whom is attributed the body of work, is a non-material avatar.

This re-authoring of material, which has been executed on behalf of the concerns of the administrator / researcher role, is an example of the gate-keeper aspect of the author-function to delimit the boundaries of discourse and by extension to shape discourse into a desirable form. The attribution of the image to Karen Karnak displays the function of the author to reduce the multiple to the singular, suggesting that the image is no longer *My German Uncle*, which relates to the fixed identity of the image, but, rather, is a signifier of the processes which necessarily render an image into an acceptable and publishable form.

The re-authoring function, in the case of the Karen Karnak mode of authorship, is complex, since the reduction of the multiple authors to the singular name of Karen Karnak also functions to diversify the attribution of origins. The single image, when attributed to Karen Karnak, evokes a multitude of participants, acting with a reverse flow to that of Foucault's author-function in which cohesion is generated by the author-function, dispelling the "variety of egos" and unifying "a series of subjective positions" under the name of a single author (Foucault, 1977: 130-131).

The masking of the face not only obscures the identity but also acts as a de-authoring of the original portrait which allows any number of entities to inhabit the image. The image also acts as a signifier of the trajectory, as discussed above through the work of Stuart Hall, which identity describes as it moves between the originating essentialist view point to that of the indeterminate and constructivist viewpoint. The subject of the photograph has shifted from a signifier of a singular recognisable identity, to a description of a series of complex processes, resulting in an image which could be anyone. The above image can be substituted as the subject in the following quote, from Foucault's author-function:

> It does not refer, purely and simply, to an actual individual insofar as it simultaneously gives rise to a variety of egos and to a series of subjective positions that individuals of any class can come to occupy (1977: 131).

The unified and essentialist identity is that which dispels the possibilities of the image to represent a *plurality of egos,* offering exact coordinates to the "stable core of the self" (Hall, 2000: 17). The social constructivist view of identity runs contra to the author-function, which

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relies on an essentialist view of identity to attribute authorship and therefore ownership. The use of this photograph as a portrait of Karen Karnak suggests a re-reading of the author-function outside of the essentialist viewpoint, something which appears to be a developing theme in the analysis of the WikiMedia content produced by Karen Karnak

The multi-author challenges the concept of ownership as part of the author-function through a re-definition of its associated concepts. For example, identity is challenged as a signifier of a single source of a text, through the construction of an author of indeterminate identity: both multiple and individual. Through this the concept of originality is altered as an indisputable foundation for the ownership of a text, since the origins of a text by Karen Karnak evokes multiple origins. Origins and ownership are the central focus of the author-function, whereas the disruption of essentialist concepts of identity and the malleability of text form the focus of the multi-author-function. The disruption of essentialist identity questions the elements of the author-function which support proprietary ownership, since the indeterminate identity of the multi-author negates the maintenance of a specific concept of identity, upon which ownership is attributed. This is not to say that the attribution of ownership is universally erroneous but that as a meta-function, in connection with non-essentialist forms of identity, its effectiveness can be shown to be inconsistent.

The posting of a faceless silhouette on 1st of June 2009 (Figure 2) was a deliberate intervention by the administrative Sysop Karenkarnakadmin to direct the flow of the research to examine, not the author, but the space which surrounds the author: the space examined by Foucault, bringing the question of whether a face is indicative of identity to the foreground. The caption *no face is* suggests the possibility that the lack of recognisable face is one of the defining features of the multi-author, that identity is operating in a different mode than that of the singular individual identified by a face.
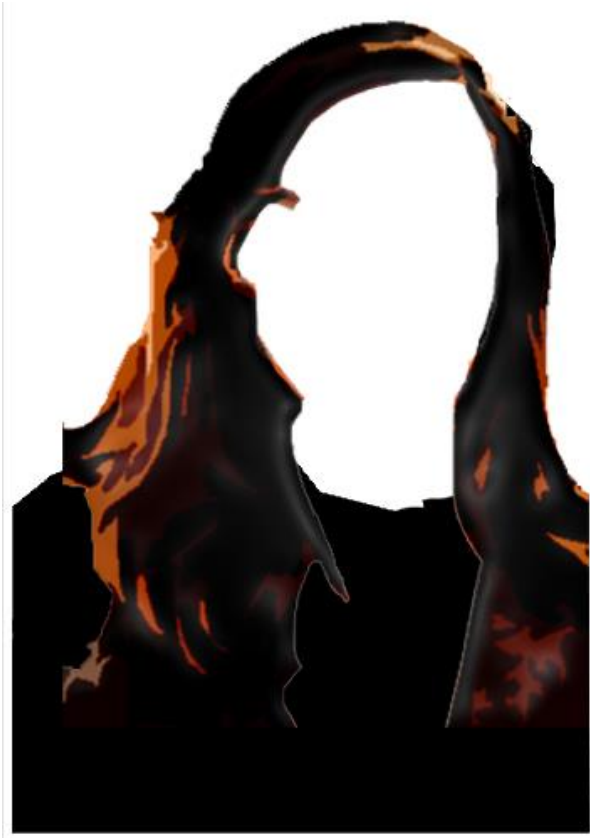
Figure 2: "no face is" A portrait of Karen Karnak (Source: karnak, 2009).

I am reminded of a cardboard cut-out photographer's prop, an embodiment, defined by the outlined character into which anyone could stand and momentarily become Karen Karnak. This represents the author, not as a determinable and natural identity, but as a function which surrounds the indeterminate author and provides an environment which can be occupied by any number of diverse identities.

The faceless image also represents the *Fukuwarai Face*, a Japanese children's game in which elements of a face are pinned blindfolded on to the empty face template. In the case of Karen Karnak the pieces of the game have been misplaced and the Karnak Fukuwarai face is frozen in the initial undefined state. In the context of the Fukuwarai metaphor: the game, in which the features are defined, is that of the processes of attribution, which slowly piece together the identity of the author through the construction of the body of work.

The above image of Karen Karnak as a dysfunctional Fukuwarai represents the framework which surrounds the author, described by Foucault as the power discourses which are

circulated by the author-function (Foucault, 1977: 127-131). This image emerges as a volatile and unstable device which, lacking a fixed identity, will be *attributed*, just as an unclaimed or author-less text will be appropriated through the flow of discourse activated by the author-function.

Figure 3: still from Karnak_t7v.mpg movie file (Source: Karnak, 2009).

Figure 3, uploaded 15th June 2009, represents the attribution of the individual author as central to the author-function which encompasses the complex procedures of authorship. A final touch has been added by the researcher in the obscuration of the identity of the *German Uncle* since this may infringe on copyright. The fragmentation of the features by the administration process of avoiding copyright issues adds a further level of authorship to suggest the possibilities of multiple identities: a visual reference to an identikit of interchangeable facial elements commonly associated with the (judicial) search for a responsible party.

A note should be made here of the transgressive qualities of the portrait of Karen Karnak which appears to be uncontained within the allocated gender role which the name signifies. This signifies that the mode of identity of Karen Karnak does not subscribe to the essentialist viewpoint but a social constructivist viewpoint in which gender, amongst other identifying traits, is not fixed and essential to the being but constructed and therefore changeable.

The connotations of imagery generated by this masking process, intended to avoid the implications of copyright infringements, provide fertile ground for an examination of the power structures which surround the protection of ownership and identity, suggesting further areas of study into discourses of power connected with the suppression and expression of identity.

In a continuation of this theme the identity of Karen Karnak can be seen generated through the reflective surfaces of the two television screens, the internal screen formed by an adaptation of *my German uncle* and the additional captioned screen added by user KarenKarnak (Figure 4, uploaded 25th June 2009). The portrait of Karen Karnak, in this composite image, represents a fleeting image which has been frozen between the reflections of two media-mirrors, a reflection of a reflection, of which the original source has departed or, in the case of Karen Karnak, did not exist in the first instance.
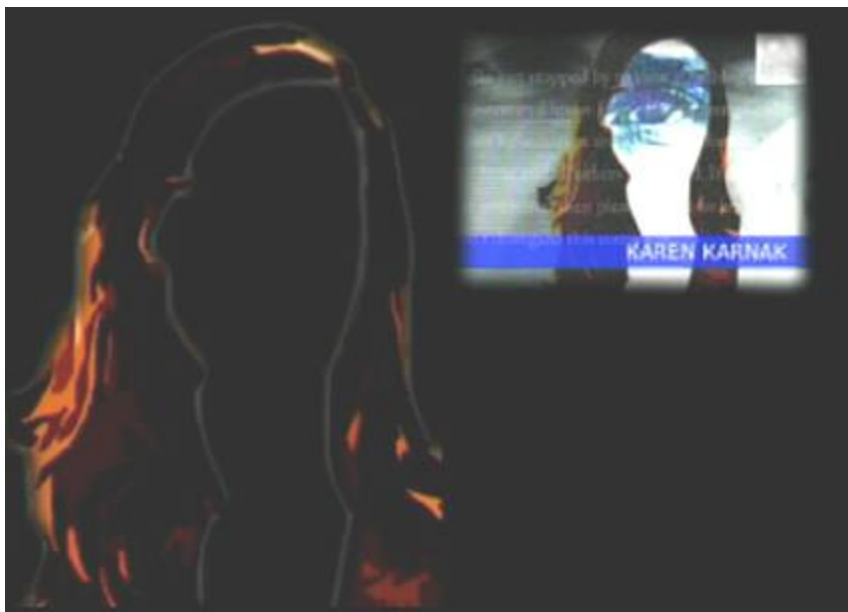

Figure 4: Still image from Karnak_TV.mpg (Source: Karnak, 2009).

Figure 4 also suggests the ability of media to generate a reflective surface which informs us of the author's identity, which depicts the faceless Karnak back-grounded by a screen which suggests consciousness, represented in the form of the eye, an instrument of sight, now seen filling the previously empty space of the author's face. We see ourselves through the reflections generated by the media. Karen Karnak, in the above image, is depicted as becoming sentient

through the actions of the media: an image representing the author as simulacra, a placeholder for an absent origin. This image represents an expressionistic view of how it feels to be Karen Karnak. The autobiographical aspects, as evident in the self-reflexive imagery, describe an emergence of consciousness from behind the layers of screen.

The self-reflexive author

In viewing these interactions I ask the question, where does Karen Karnak place herself in her work? Does the work contain unifying themes necessary for the author-function to operate?

Figure 5: Still image: Mannequins.jpg
(Source: Karnak, 2009).

The posting by user KK (Figure 5, uploaded 7th July 2009) continues with this self-reflexive theme in which a mannequin, stripped of facial identity, is shown looking at a reflection of itself in a shop window. This posting interacts with several other postings in a continuation of the theme of identity, as depicted in the self-reflexive postings, since the mannequin sees the reflection of itself in the shop window, the commercial environment providing a reflected self image for the mannequin.

Mannequins.jpg contains many of the hallmarks of a work by Karen Karnak since there is again the self-reflexivity and a reflection on the processes of authorship as intersecting the concepts of identity and ownership. The mannequin, stripped bare of its defining features, finds a

validation of its identity through the reflective surface of the border between desire, located in the external environment beyond the shop window, and the displayed commodity. The validation of the identity of the author lies in the ownership of the work through a reflection of the author which is in turn validated by the cohesive link to its origin.

In this work Karen is reflecting on the process of attribution, a central aim of which is the assignment of ownership. There is a distinctly Foucauldean aspect to the work in the selection of a situation in which the face has been obscured, since the focus falls on the surroundings: the functions of the author which allow us to observe the surrounding power structures which form the mode of authorship. This theme of the author-function adds a dimension of the "legal and institutional systems that circumscribe, determine, and articulate the realm of discourses" (Foucault, 1977: 130): the system of control which determines the contents of the reflective surface which validates the author through publication and gate-keeper functions.

In a continuation of the Foucauldean theme the mannequin is depicted as a neutral entity, a blank space around which the clothing and accessories, signifying the legal and institutional systems that control attribution, form the identity of the author within the delimited discourse made available and/or restricted by off-the-peg tailoring. *Off-the-peg* functions, here, as a metaphor for the permitted mode of authorship, as delimited by the centralised determinates.

The recognition of seemingly self-reflexive work produced by a multi-author is discussed by Jeremy Braddock in looking at the collectively produced works of Allen Smithee, the multi-user pseudonym used and validated by the Directors Guild of America. Braddock uses a theoretical framework of the auteur to ask the question of where Smithee, the presumed auteur, *places himself in the work* (Braddock, 2001: 153). Braddock initially looks at the *Directors Guild of America Basic Agreement of 1996*; the document which is used to decide whether a director can apply for the use of the name Allen Smithee:

> The director's function is to contribute to all of the creative elements of a film
> and to participate in molding (sic) and integrating them into one cohesive
> dramatic and aesthetic whole

(DGA, 2008: Braddock, 2001: 154).

As Braddock observes, the passage reads as surprisingly familiar to a section from Foucault's author-function, in the above case renamed as the "director's function". The director-function is to impose a unifying or "cohesive" shape to the work, just as Foucault argues that the author's function is to validate the text in terms of subjectivity, providing a coherent line of consciousness which unifies the work. This is an aspect of the author-function which enables the dispelling of a plurality of egos in place of the coherent work of a singular author (Foucault, 1977: 130-131). This is a function that Braddock claims can be activated equally by both a legitimate director or through the attribution of the declarative author-function (Braddock, 2001: 154-155) by the ficticious Allen Smithee.

In the case of a work attributed to Karen Karnak, ownership has a function of erasing the disparate origins and allowing the collective work to be seen as a coherent unity. This declarative function is necessary for the formation of a body of work, since it is the adhesive which unifies the authorial process. The problem occurs when we ask *who* owns the body of work of Karen Karnak? Is it the researcher who owns the work, since the body of work was produced within a research environment? Events in which Karen Karnak is outside of the control of the researcher, occurring outside of the research WikiMedia and the research environment, cannot so easily be attributed to a centralised cause or origin. Karen Karnak's body of work becomes not only indeterminate and decentralised but more truly participatory in the sense of many-to-many interactions.

Conclusions

The points at which multi-authorship fails, that is, the name of the author fails to signify the multiple and becomes part of the author-function, has provided the most interesting and useful data. These points indicate the processes in which concepts connected with Foucault's author-function reassert their sphere of power over the mode of authorship. This can be related to Foucault's strategy of observation along the "gaps and fault lines" of authorship to determine the power structures which the author-function serves (1977: 121), the fault lines being the points where multi-authorship fails. The concepts which authorship comprises, as shown in the

following diagram, can be viewed as part of the power structure which affects the mode of authorship.
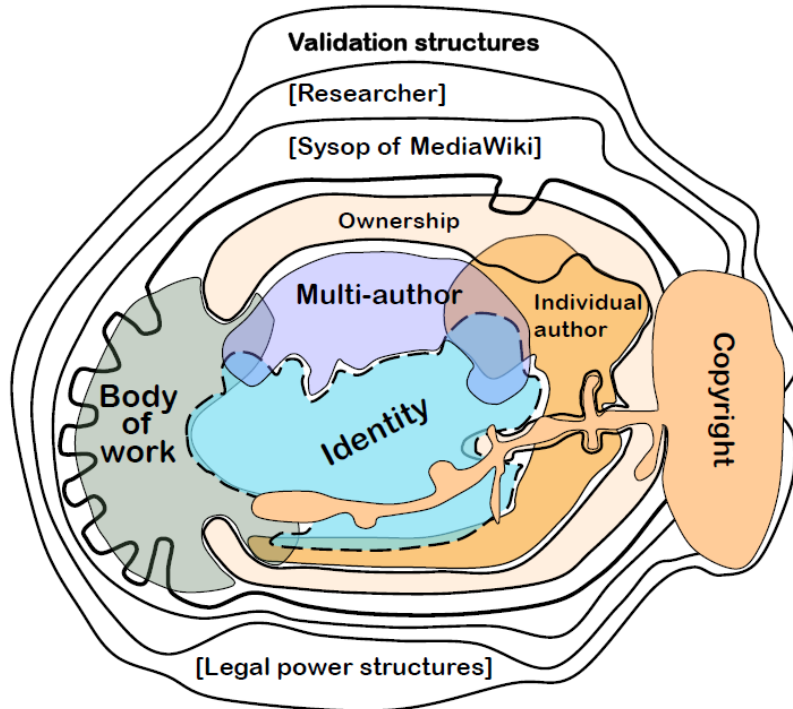

Figure 6: The multi-author construction (Source: Author).

Figure 6 is an illustration of the interconnectedness and interdependence of concepts involved in the eventual mode of multi-authorship constructed in this study. The central concepts are: the relationship between ownership and the body of work; the indeterminate zone between the multi-author, the individual author and identity; and the relationship between the body of work and the identity of the multi-author. The multi-author challenges the concept of ownership as part of the author-function through a re-definition of its associated concepts. For example, identity is challenged as a signifier of a single source of a text, through the construction of an author of indeterminate identity: both multiple and individual. Through this the concept of originality is altered as an indisputable foundation for the ownership of a text, since the origins of a text by Karen Karnak evokes multiple origins. Origins and ownership are the central focus of the author-function, whereas the disruption of essentialist concepts of identity and the malleability of text form the focus of the multi-author-function.

The interaction between these concepts has presented various possibilities, throughout this study, of potential identities of Karen Karnak. This is seen in the interplay between identity and Karen Karnak as both individual author and multi-author, as the identity of Karen Karnak emerges through the upload of a series of images of various universal self portraits (they could be anyone). This presents a portrait of the author as an *open* image, which has not completed Foucault's process of dispersal of the multiple egos, which are inherent in a text (1977: 130). This self portrait, which is open to adaption and appropriation by the multiple participants, who together constitute Karen Karnak, forms a strong theme throughout the body of work and illustrates the interplay of the individual, the multi-author, identity and the body of work as an indeterminate, multi-faceted construction open to temporary possession by Foucault's multiple egos.

In the case of the avatar-author Karen Karnak, the body of work is the visible manifestation of the author, which in turn, generates the identity of the avatar. This circular flow is devoid of a singular origin and does not possess a beginning or end, but perpetually generates coherence for both the identity of the author and the collective body of work. This circular flow is concurrent with Baudrillard's idea of the simulacra: suggesting that the author and the perception of a body of work are equally images of the unreal - a reflection of a reflection. The multi-author presents a challenge to the concepts of identity and the body of work, in that, both concepts are rendered as signifiers of multiple outcomes, and therefore, unable to function in the precise and excluding manner of attribution, which dispels multiple claims to a text or series of texts and attributes a single author/owner.

The actions of the Sysop, and the various roles of the researcher, are the main conduits through which external power structures are allowed an influence over the mode, and content, of authorship. The external power structures are those of academic purpose, legal power structures and the associated validation structures, responsible for many of the decisions made by the researcher concerning the enforcement of security issues, copyright, and the preservation of data. These decisions were responsible for the implication of a centralised communication structure, which restricted participants to interaction with each other through the mediation of the WikiMedia site.

One way in which this study could be improved, paradoxically, is in the removal of the centralised power structure of the WikiMedia and the research environment, which, in many ways, has delimited the mode of multi-authorship. With a decentralised structure the Karen Karnak name can more accurately and poignantly approach a truly collaborative, participatory culture, a mode of multi-authorship which allows a many-to-many interactivity, which is not anchored to a centralised power structure. With multiple participants currently using the collective pseudonym of Karen Karnak outside of the research environment, this experiment has not only already begun, but, is also an open invitation for anyone to use the name of Karen Karnak.

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