

The Search for a More Desirable Origin: Steven Cohen's *The Cradle of Humankind* (2011)

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Abstract: *This paper analyses The Cradle of Humankind (2011), as a questioning of Western notions of beauty and reason through a strategy of abjection. Steven Cohen's work is often focused on his own marginal identity as a queer, Jewish homosexual performance artist which can be seen in many of his works; Ugly Girl at the Rugby (1998), Dog (1998), A Shame and a Disgrace (2007). In The Cradle of Humankind, which explores notions of evolution, Cohen relieves his performance of its usual spectacular theatricality and instead focuses on a complex relationship. Performing with childhood domestic worker Nomsa Dlamini, Cohen challenges perceptions surrounding Africa and the African body. As a white-male artist, Cohen reveals a self-reflexive approach as he pays careful attention to the politics of representation through his immersion in the work and his careful design of the space.*

Steven Cohen has been creating controversial performances in South Africa and abroad since 1988. Cohen's queer, white and Jewish subjectivity are woven into the tapestry of his interventions and the intention of his work. In *Cleaning Time (Vienna): a Shandeh un a Charpeh (A Shame and a Disgrace)* 2007, Cohen dresses in his drag make-up, with a horn headdress sporting a fake diamond on his anus: to re-enact the humiliation of Austrian Jews in the second World War who were forced to clean the city's streets with toothbrushes. So with an oversized toothbrush Cohen crawled on the streets of Heldenplatz, Vienna, per-

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forming the historical shaming of Jewish culture during the holocaust. As a live artist working through his body, he constantly exposes himself as a marginalised identity and his performance of very personal aspects are brought to bear upon audiences who have not necessarily invited him. This paper focuses on *The Cradle of Humankind* (2011) and how in this work Cohen veers from his usual performance to deconstruct Western notions of beauty and reason through a strategy of abjection and a careful design of the performance.

Cohen's Abjection

Cohen's work can be described as abject in that his work often involves using his own body and bodily processes to challenge social norms and reveal his own marginal experience. In *Limping into the African Renaissance* (1999), for example, Cohen dances with a prosthetic leg and consumes his own faeces. He says of this work, "I swallowed my pride—together with a glass of goo from out of my arsehole" (Cohen, Official Website). By working with his own marginality Cohen disturbs notions of the purity of the white body and constructs a very particular subjectivity.

A term mostly associated with psychoanalysis, "abjection" attempts to account for how human beings cast off certain aspects of the self in order to construct a clearer sense of identity. Abjection is also used to describe works of art that engage with or embody this concept. Kristeva distinguishes between the "condition of being abject" and the "operation to abject." The operation of abjection is a regulatory function which is performed to ward off those non-objects which threaten one's stability as an individual within the symbolic order: "Abjection is what the symbolic must reject, cover over or contain" (Grosz, 73). One separates from these unwanted parts in order to assimilate a sense of self even though the abject persists in defiance of the desire for "identity, system, order" (Kristeva, 4). This waste being a reminder of our mortality threatens our stability. Kristeva states:

...refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These bodily fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and difficulty, on the part of death. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—*cadere*, cadaver (Kristeva, 3).

Abjection reveals the instability of the individual's sense of identity, as it underlines the potential of the subject to be drawn back into the "chaos which formed it" (Grosz, 74). The condition of abjection, however, subverts both the subject and society and thereby highlights its fragility. The abject works in these two ways, in one instance it assists in upholding the symbolic order: its operation. And in the other, is a constant reminder of the instability on which

language or symbolic functions are founded: its condition. Therefore, being in a condition of abjection (revealing one's corporeality) challenges the way in which meaning has been constructed. Since the knowledge of the abject is based on one's corporeal existence and since the body cannot escape its own abjection; it makes sense that it has become a central site for artists engaged in abject art (Foster, 112). This is true of Cohen's work, as Wendy Gers observes:

The body in these and other—physically gruelling—performances is a central concern, serving as both canvas and clay—it is painted, polished, manipulated, worked and reworked, both literally and metaphorically (Gers, 48).

Since abjection in art does not aim at presenting a consolatory image to its viewers, it can be seen as a resistant strategy within performance practices. While a confrontation with the abject may provoke the operation of abjection, it may also reveal the crisis in the symbolic order and expose the limits of meaning. Hans-Thies Lehmann proposes that performance's ability to break taboos by revealing them in the moment of performance is at the heart of the "politics of perception" (Lehmann, 187). When Cohen exposes himself in his public performances he achieves the inverse of the operations of abjection by revealing what has been socially forbidden. When he consumes the contents of his own enema, for instance, he not only shocks his audience and debases himself, but also highlights the fragility of the symbolic order. Revealing how the human need to contain and to socialise is part of a fragile process which could be undone. Confronting this aspect in oneself and the world creates an opportunity to identify the self as in a constant process of assimilation. It also challenges the symbolic order as the only means of expressing ourselves and brings attention to the corporeal existence of the individual.

The Cradle of Humankind

In relation to Cohen's artistic oeuvre, the subject matter and concerns of *The Cradle of Humankind* extend this notion of abjection to views which have in the past been ascribed to Africa. In his essay entitled 'Abjection and its Miserable Forms', George Bataille argues that certain parts of the population, "the dregs of the people, populace and gutter" are excluded from representation as moral outcasts (9). In the case of colonial or apartheid systems, this marginalisation is the result of an invented idea of racial inferiority. In *The Cradle of Humankind*, Cohen is not only dealing with his own peculiar subjectivity, but the abjection of the African continent itself. He thus moves away from his usual performance style and approaches this concept of abjection in a different way. Rather than represent himself as the abject outsider as he does in so many of his works, Cohen practices a resistant strategy in *The Cradle of Humankind*. While transgression seeks to overthrow the symbolic order, resistance seeks subversion

from within the “arrangement of presence and absence it seeks to challenge” (Mckenzie, 43).

It would certainly do a disservice to *The Cradle of Humankind* to describe it in a chronological or linear fashion. It is after all a live art performance and does not lend itself to any easy description.¹ Cohen himself feels that this is one of his works that needs to be seen to be understood: “in the retelling the essence of it, is lost” (Cue). *The Cradle of Humankind* is a complex and provocative performance that deals with human evolution and seeks to undo racial presumptions regarding the inferiority of Africa and the African body. The production exposes myths of racial difference by referring to evolutionary theory with two different bodies, Cohen’s and ninety year old Nomsa Dlamini who performs with him in this work. Cohen and Dlamini challenge the persistent desires for white power that surface in philosophies regarding non-white people—desires that influenced and justified the imperial project and subsequent processes of colonization.

The title is borrowed from a World Heritage site located in Sterkfontein, which is believed to be the birthplace of the first human beings with fossil evidence that dates back three million years. As Cohen notes, “It was supposed to be a work about evolution, instead it turned out to be a work about love” (Grid Lab). Cohen and Dlamini created a work that subtly tells the story of Africa’s contribution to civilization weaving the narrative of evolution within the story of a white man and a black woman. For Cohen it’s all about one’s perception:

We are all from Africa. White people are just mutant black people, and we don’t acknowledge that in the Western world, we feel that we are superior when in fact we’re the same ape in different drag (Grid Lab).

In the beginning of the performance, Cohen is (re)born from an opaque ball structure which the nonagenarian Dlamini helps him out of, metaphorically giving birth to him and mankind. Dlamini has known Cohen for most of his life, working for his parents and looking after Cohen as his childhood nanny. The result of this collaboration is an intensely moving image of their long relationship, the micro-narrative of which brings the private into the politics of this display. Under the Apartheid regime, their relationship was premised on a servant/master dichotomy. The middle-class South African family, even today, will most often have a domestic worker to help with household chores and the needs of younger children. Although the relationship clearly represents the asymmetrical class relations between people in South Africa, it also reveals the complexity of these relationships as Cohen and Dlamini expose a kind of intimacy that develops between people via their social standing.

¹ I watched *The Cradle of Humankind* at Rhodes University, Theatre, Grahamstown at the National Arts Festival in July 2012.

Dlamini's performance shifts between that of a maternal figure as a matriarch of humanity to images that recall the exploitation of Saartjie Baartman as she is topless, manacled and made to measure herself against an almost ridiculously tall ruler. In an interview Cohen states provocatively that, "she is my Saartjie Baartman and I brought her to France, and I am completely culpable of all that and I take credit for being guilty. I am proud to be guilty of making a 90 year old woman walk naked for money and take pleasure in it" (Grid Lab). Yet, Cohen's choice to exhibit Dlamini is part of the conceptual intention of the piece, revealing Cohen's desire to challenge his audience members, who paid, just like they paid, to see Baartman on stage. Dlamini's body becomes a vessel of representation for those abjected others who suffered at the hands of the imperialists. Cohen's reference to Baartman is significant as she was seen as a specimen of the "most debased group on earth"—the Hottentot). To the Europeans, Baartman was associated with savagery—as someone who lived closer to nature; she was not seen as civilized human being. This uncivilized notion of Baartman alongside her femininity, contributed towards her abjection. For instance, the physical differences between Baartman and her audiences were also based on exclusion; her enlarged buttocks and extended labia disqualified her as a human being and positioned her as a "freak show" attraction.

In response to the work, critics have wondered just who is leading whom in the performance? (Buys). Is it the white master leading the savage woman out of the wilderness and onto the European stage, or is it Dlamini ("Mother Africa") leading the white man into the future? The visual signifiers combined with the historical evidence of white on black exploitation is simultaneously a simple image of a white man and elderly black woman who have known each other for more than forty years. Cohen uses what is already in existence as the basis of the work. It might therefore be seen as an ode to Dlamini who he claims is like a mother to him. In an interview, Cohen talks about the way he followed Dlamini around as a child and how he still does (Cue). This simplicity/complexity of their relationship disturbs any neat sense of coloniser/colonised or victim and oppressor. It is in this sense that Cohen and Dlamini disturb the perceptions of their audiences.

Dlamini and Cohen's presence on stage is like a discomfiting wound in the eyes of those who would rather not be confronted with the fragility of the human body, especially one old enough to have suffered both colonialism and the Apartheid system. Cohen speaks of the vulnerability of Dlamini's body in relation to the human showcases in which Africans were displayed and de-contextualised in European countries, "A hundred years ago Nomsa could have been killed, stuffed and put into a museum" (Grid Lab). Cohen's body at the age of fifty is also no longer a picture of youth. Neither of these two fit into the neat, ordered and desired image of the body that one is exposed to in the popular media. They reveal the unspectacular bodies of the aged and marginalized. Cohen attacks notions of beauty and ugliness notably in relation to the ways in

which African aesthetics have been regarded as a site of ugliness in Western conceptions of beauty and form. This work challenges the “inscription of Africa in dominant Western aesthetic discourses as the figure of the ugly” (Nuttal, 22). Cohen and Dlamini expose what is often considered ugly and inferior by exhibiting themselves as a “modern day human zoo” (Kennedy).

Although the performers are mostly nude, the design of the bodies is carefully considered. This simplicity is part of the conceptual basis, “not [his] usual glamour” (CueTv). Cohen is painted white and Dlamini is naked without make-up, and at one point dressed with a fluorescent green tutu in a parody of ballet. There is a questioning of Western standards of beauty and harmony through these aged bodies. The pedestrian quality of this performance reveals Cohen’s sensitivity in relation to the subject matter. Cohen litters the stage with items that reference slavery and early anthropology. The stage is filled with objects that evoke both the past but also the present, such as the opaque ball from which Cohen is born, the ruler to measure Dlamini, as well as a small coffin.



fig.1: Dlamini (Photo courtesy John Hogg).

One of the most powerful images in this piece is that of spot-lit Dlamini, manacled by Cohen with a pair of animal paws. After this, a large visual projection of an anus is manipulated so as to appear to animate the singing of the Afrikaans verses of the multi-lingual South African National Anthem. These

sections of the anthem are what remain of *Die Stem*, the original hyper-nationalist poem by C.J. Langenhoven, which served as the national anthem of apartheid South Africa (Cohen uses the anthem of whatever country the piece is performed in). The singing sphincter in turn evokes the entrance to the Sterkfontein caves, images of which are projected earlier on in the performance. The inference is that civilisation as we know it was originally spawned from the “dark cave” (anus) that Africa is perceived to be. The imagery repeats Cohen’s assertion that we are all Africans—we are all from this Cradle of Humankind. Or, as Dlamini told one journalist, “Even if you are white you are black” (Blignaut). The anus, a sign of the abject, the space from which waste falls, and the place where meaning collapses, paradoxically becomes the birthplace of meaning.

Cohen then uses a projection of a larger primate killing and devouring a smaller monkey to comment on the savage desires of human beings. The violence represented by the primate fight relates to humankind’s potential for violence and destruction. Cohen says of this footage that it “is the most human behaviour I’ve ever seen in apes” (Grid Lab). The reference to cannibalism is significant as it represents humankind’s ability to consume. Cohen often attacks an idea by presenting a literal image, such as cannibalism, to convey something he means quite metaphorically. In this instance, one of the possible meanings might include a reference to the consumption of Africa by the Western gaze. Europe has, of course consumed Africa in many other ways, robbing the continent of its resources and enslaving many of its inhabitants. According to Bill Ashcroft, cannibalism is probably the “central trope of the colonial myth of savagery” (Ashcroft, 45). In *The Cradle of Humankind* this savagery is inverted into the gaze of the spectator.

Cohen’s Whiteness

This is about negation, it’s about accentuating my whiteness. (CueTv)

Deleuze and Guattari argue that racism is not even concerned with the “other” but with what is deviant in relation to the subjectivity of the racist:

Racism operates by the determination of degrees of deviance in relation to the White-Man face, which endeavours to integrate nonconforming traits into increasingly eccentric and backward waves, sometimes tolerating them at given places under given conditions, in a given ghetto, sometimes erasing them from the wall, which never abides alterity (it’s a Jew, it’s an Arab, it’s a Negro, it’s a lunatic...). From the viewpoint of racism, there is no exterior, there are no people on the outside. There are only people who should be like us and whose crime it is not to be (Deleuze and Guattari, 178).

From this point of view, European racism seeks to dis-identify the “other” and does not recognise any value in alterity. This is not an exclusionary function but establishment of a hierarchy of types from which the white male surfaces as the dominant major identity. The “White-Man face” is related to the representational force and power of white patriarchy symbolised by the white male and his gaze; a dominant standard. The more you divert from the “White-Man face” the less likely you are to represent the interests of its oppressive model. Women, children, homosexuals and animals divert from this “face” and are thus minoritarian (Deleuze and Guattari, 291).

Without his usual glamour, Cohen disrupts the importance of the face and emphasizes his and Dlamini’s bodies in the work. He attempts to make his whiteness strange and even undesirable in relation to Dlamini. One scene in particular deals with whiteness quite directly (see image 1). Here, a rich, smokey voice-over in the style of old cigarette advertisements accompanies a text projected onto a large, white moon-like ball on stage: “that’s an off-white white...The proper colour for flesh to be is the proper colour it is, varying from complexion to complexion”. This perhaps pertains to aspects of Cohen’s identity as Jewish and queer and thus “off white”. Richard Dyer has observed how there are degrees or “gradations of whiteness: some people are whiter than others”, he mentions Latin Americans, Irish and Jews, who are often cast as non-whites compared to Anglo’s and Nordics (Dyer, 12). The tone of the voice-over theatricalises notions and degrees. In this short scene, whiteness is represented as something that is consumable, through the allusion to the logic of an advert, as something that can be bought and sold.

Cohen negates his own whiteness by exposing it. Without his usually audacious theatricality he plays a role that goes beyond his personal marginalisation, deliberately creating a provocative image of himself as exploiter, and becoming something of a savage: oppressor, object, curator, child, man, animal. Dlamini already embodies aspects of the minoritarian, while Cohen *becomes minoritarian*² through his critique of whiteness. Deleuze and Guattari argue that, “a determination different from that of the constant will therefore be considered minoritarian...” “all becoming is minoritarian” (Deleuze and Guattari, 106). Cohen enters a becoming which is made possible through his body in performance.

² The notions of “becoming” and “minoritarian” are derived from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their writings on “becoming” in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Both ideas are interpreted as affirmative notions which consider the nature of “being” as in a process of constant flux: a becoming. Becoming-minoritarian can be understood as “a potential, creative and created, becoming. The problem is never to acquire the majority, even in order to install a new constant. There is no becoming-majoritarian; majority is never becoming. All becoming is minoritarian.” 1988, p. 106.

He disturbs desire through performance by accentuating his whiteness and exhibiting himself with Dlamini. As much as he is displaying her, he is also displaying himself as a marginal figure. By portraying the curator as well as an object of display Cohen immerses himself within the performance. Everything Cohen does, however simple or mundane it might be seem to an audience, reveals his concerns.

In a later scene, Cohen dances with a taxidermied baboon—a duet between the living and the dead. He also dresses himself with a prosthetic monkey's posterior, wearing it as a sort of skirt over his pelvic area which has a certain humorous, grotesque element to it. This reference to the baboon can be related to the belief that Africans were previously regarded as closest to apes, genetically speaking, on the evolutionary scale. Conceptualised as primitive, Africans were thus seen as closer to nature and akin to animals. Dlamini and Cohen both sport small trees on their heads as they become mythological creatures in a search for origins. The relationship between human beings and animals is continuously referenced. Gers has argued that Cohen's work hints at ecofeminism as a critique of anthropocentrism—the idea that humans are the most significant and important life form on earth (50). This view is challenged by situating Africa with its image of wildness and natural plenitude as the birthplace of reason. Cohen's duet with the baboon could be seen as a sign of "going native" where the indigenous soil is seen provoking people into wildness by adopting the lifestyles of the local inhabitants. It also relates to the threat of miscegenation.

The placement of a baboon's posterior may also signify homosexual sex and the idea of bestiality. Perhaps this is a comment on the myth that the Aids virus first originated in Africa from men having sex with apes, before it was passed on to other men. One may argue that Cohen is issuing a commentary on the idea of homosexuality as a virus, but also of Africa as a continent which produces viruses since it "lacks civilisation" or is in the developmental phases of what is determined to be the path to civilisation. The idea of bestiality as well as miscegenation is clearly part of the inferred meaning of this image; as Cohen baldly states: "it's about interspecies fucking" (Grid Lab).

Cohen's unspectacular presentation of these signs also provides a commentary on humankind's treatment of animals:

I feel a little guilty about working with the baboon because I don't have the baboon's permission and it's a big sacrifice on the part of another primate and baboons are really intelligent animals and they are the last tailed monkeys before great apes, before us. We are the final great apes (Grid Lab).

While Cohen critiques white "morality" and Western standards of beauty, he also questions anthropocentrism and points out the voiceless-ness of the deceased baboon he dances with. This clearly connects to Cohen's deconstruction and re-presentation of the "other."

Designing the Sterkfontein Enlightenment

Cohen's use of a proscenium arch creates an interesting perspective on the notion of evolution, and particularly in relation to the evolution of representation. The proscenium arch sets up certain expectations, as it divides the audience and performers and frames the stage space. As an aid in the construction of the fourth wall, the proscenium arch creates two worlds, that of the performers (illusory space, make-believe) and that of the audience members (real space). Cohen uses multiple references and set pieces (technological equipment, projections, bows and arrows, and balls) in this work, the "world" he and Dlamini inhabit span millions of years. In an interview with CueTV Cohen speaks of how the caves reveal an eclectic mix of styles from Baroque to futuristic art. The design does not entail the construction of an imaginary world but an exhibition of objects which represent the multiplicity of images and symbols evoked by his explorations in the Sterkfontein caves. In identifying these disparate objects the audience member is alienated and dissuaded from trying to place the performance in a particular time frame or setting, and one becomes acutely aware of the careful staging of this performance.

The stage decor is unusual. A cherub/ seraph is positioned on stage right (see fig. 3), which is a hallmark of the Baroque period of theatre design. It was during this time that theatre practitioners shifted their attention from divine and religious themes to that of human accomplishments and politics. The Enlightenment or "birth of reason" in the 17th and 18th centuries identified with the Greek mythological Prometheus who stole fire from the Gods and gave it to mankind. This "fire" is symbolic of reason and human capability beyond the limits of religion. These enlightenment philosophies often justified and promoted imperial desires.

The cherub, suspended from the "heavens" recalls the elaborate stage design of the Baroque theatre. The Gods or angels would be flown down from the stage heights to solve the problems of mankind below via the *Deus ex Machina* (the god machine). The *Deus ex Machina* (borrowed and adopted from the Ancient Greek theatre) became a spectacular effect as audiences in the Baroque period would visit the theatre to see the stage craft rather than the performers. Audiences were enamoured by the spectacular quality of theatre design and going to the theatre was a multi-media experience. Cohen's reference to the stage practices of the Baroque period aids his pictorial and performative critique of the "birth of reason."

Cohen's reference to different movements or stylistic periods in art history, particularly the Enlightenment, is related to the Sterkfontein Caves which he redefines as the true scientific enlightenment: "I think we need to remember, Africa is and was civilised and is not a dark continent" (Cohen, La Batie). Cohen's "birth of reason" is not only related to social enlightenment but to the Sterkfontein caves which become the birthplace of art-making and represen-

tation—through the presence of parietal art. Specifically the first time humans became bipedal and the first time humankind could use light (fire) for making art. As Cohen has it, “performance art, theatre, visual art, [started] in the caves, in the rock paintings, it all happened then” (Cohen, La Batie).

A Slow Ontology: The Timelessness of Evolution

As mentioned above, the lack of theatricality and the arrangement of objects on stage contribute to a shift in time. *The Cradle of Humankind* could be argued as engaging in a “slow ontology”. This notion is described by Andr e Lepecki in *Exhausting Dance* (2006) through his attempt to account for a lack of interest in contemporary choreography, at least where dance is concerned. Lepecki highlights the movement of dance from a theatrical to a performance paradigm in which dance is no longer exclusively attached to the demands of virtuosity or flow (Lepecki, *Rethinking Dance*, 172). The contemporary philosopher, Peter Sloterdijk argues that modern life demands speed and sheer mobility:

The categorical impulse of modernity is: in order to be continuously active as progressive beings, man should overcome all the conditions where his movement is reduced, where he has come to a halt, where he has lost his freedom and where he is pitifully fixed (Planes, 5).

Sloterdijk argues that this mobilised conception of modernity is a form of “kinetic complicity with movement of the world processes” (11). He thus argues for slowness and silence as modes of interruption, “for beings who are through-and-through condemned to act” (12). This notion of slowness and stillness is also evident in Nadia Seremetakis’ idea of the “still act” when the subject disturbs the incessant flow of history to engage in historical interrogation (*Exhausting Dance*, 15). This finds resonance with the *The Cradle of Humankind* in relation to the “historical interrogation” taking place in the work. For instance, neither Dlamini nor Cohen reveal any urgency in their performance which recovers the silence and slowness of evolution evoked in the Sterkfontein cave footage. Cohen states “It’s about Nomsa...about me taking the pace from Nomsa” (CueTv). The distrust of speed or absence of it, is evident in Cohen’s opinion of anthropocentrism. The slowness of the performance also critiques the speed with which we are impelled to “get over” things or to accept the aftermath of imperialism and colonialism, or apartheid. As Lepecki puts it:

The kinetic spectacle of modernity erases from the picture of movement all the ecological catastrophes, personal tragedies, and communal disruptions brought about by the colonial plundering of resources, bodies, and subjectivities that are needed in order to keep modernity’s “most real” reality in place: its kinetic being (*Exhausting*, 14).

Speed becomes another way to disown history in the fast paced capitalist world bent on satisfaction. The measured pace of *The Cradle of Humankind* does not rely on conventional ideas of rhythm or a climax to seduce the audience or to offer an opportunity for some kind of “catharsis”. This is resonant with Sloterdijk’s idea of demobilisation, “to be still in the midst of the storm” (Planes, 12). The lack of a formalised beat structure to guide the performance alters the sense of time, absent is the fast-paced frenzy of narrative driven plots which audiences have become accustomed to. Deleuze and Guattari write about a sense of time that is not chronological but an “indefinite time of the event” linked with the notion of *Aeon* (262). This indefinite notion of time is evoked through the deliberate and organic slowness of the two older bodies on stage. This timelessness is manifested by the engagement with the evolution of humankind as a process which stretches over an indefinite period of time. The lack of rhythmic devices which conventionally aid in constructing a sense of time adds to the quality of measured and deliberate stillness.



Fig. 2: Cohen and Dlamini (Photo courtesy John Hogg).

The performance’s time exists in a different time/space to the demands of mobility and consumer satisfaction. Lepecki argues that, “while the slow-act does not entail rigidity or morbidity it requires a performance of suspension, a corporeally based interruption of modes of flow” (Exhausting, 15). Although Cohen’s work is not situated within the European dance scene discussed by

Lepecki, *The Cradle of Humankind's* sustained pace and Cohen's lack of "glamour" (the lack of his usual spectacularly abject performance) is unspectacular. Lehmann observes how time has become an "object of the aesthetic experience" of performance: "for only an experience of time that deviates from habit provokes its explicit perception, permitting it to move from something taken for granted as a mere accompaniment to the rank of a theme" (156). The presence of these performers becomes the predominant element of the performance which lacks coherence or any dramatic sense of urgency, which disturbs "modes of flow".

Conclusion

In *The Cradle of Humankind*, Cohen works against his "usual glamour" and creates a non-spectacular performance. The "shock" value is already there with the presence of Dlamini which makes Cohen culpable as a transgressor within an allegedly colour-blind society. As one critic states, "*Cradle* lacked awareness of the politics of display" and Cohen "became the facilitator to this mass objectification" of Dlamini (Sizemore-Barber, 263). According to this accusation, Cohen commits a crime within the politics of display by attempting to represent the "other". To say that Dlamini lacks agency is to subject her to being the "other" when it is in fact, her minoritarian singularity that Cohen reveals to his viewers—that behind every "other" is an individual with his/her own particularity. Cohen reveals the minor narrative of Dlamini: "I made the work because it wasn't there" (Cohen, Cue). The notion of abjection and exclusion are provoked subtly without being forced on the audience, they are, rather, inferred throughout the work. Cohen manages to reveal the vulnerability of his and Dlamini's friendship built on asymmetrical class relations, but the work is also an affirmation of Africa. Furthermore, his attitude is deliberately antithetical to the demands of the theatre industry, "I didn't make the work to sell tickets and I didn't make the work so it could be a success (Cohen, Cue).

Cohen's statement that, "I don't make performance for satisfaction, not for them and not for me" (Cohen, Cue), is extremely significant. The work is not about satisfaction, it does not want to cater to the emotional needs of its viewers. Cohen would rather that spectators do not arrive at conclusions from his work but that they remain undecided:

If people encountering my work wonder about what they see, I am happier than if they conclude something—I would rather be the cause of wonder than of conclusion. The value of my work is more in its being a speculum than a suture (Cohen).

Cohen's desire for his work to be a speculum—as a tool of investigation, is a resistance to enforced and prescriptive meaning. As a "speculum" the work

demands a deep investigation into the cavities of symbolic violence. This is why the abject is so important to Cohen's work, as it disturbs any easy reading of his art. Cohen disturbs the desire for meaning to be fully present and affords his audiences the opportunity for wonder, rather, meaning surfaces as a process of becoming. Cohen's strategy to disturb desire for clear-cut meaning is clearly significant to *The Cradle of Humankind*. This is because the exploitation and oppression of the African continent and its inhabitants under colonialism and apartheid (and neo-liberalism), begs for a reason and a meaning, which is ethically impossible to argue or justify.

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