

STEVEN COHEN, NANDIPHA MNTAMBO

Neo-Baroque Hybrid Forms

Lisa Greyvenstein



Steven Cohen, *Golgotha*, 2007–9.

Single-channel HD video, 20 min 8 sec. Edition of 5 + 2AP.
Courtesy the artist and Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg

In contemporary South African art a Neo-Baroque aesthetic of excess appears to be on the increase. In support of postcolonial ideals, the Neo-Baroque style's characteristic excessive layers of meaning and artistic trends—often using the body as a means—serve to cultivate a context for cultural resistance that can accommodate a more inclusive, socially mixed scenario of contemporary South African culture.

In artist Steven Cohen's work, its abundance of detail and complexity, as well as its extravagance, characterize this excess, forms of which are also particularly evident in works such as those of Minnette Vári, Tracey Rose, and Daandrey Steyn, which use new media, photography, and performance art, or a combination thereof. The work of artists such as Nandipha Mntambo, Nicholas Hlobo, Celia De Villiers, Mary Sibande, and Leora Farber may at first appear simpler; yet on closer inspection, any number of implied layers of meaning is revealed, most often to the point of excess and transgression of social boundaries placed on the body.

Neo-Baroque artistic trends may also reveal a tendency among artists to combine various media and forms, including the old and the new.¹ Artists such as Cohen and Mntambo create hybrid art forms by combining new digital media and technologies with various visual-culture references to create spectacle and engulf the viewer in their displays. This essay analyzes the Neo-Baroque in terms of this use of excess, in particular the human body against a broader background of body politics involving notions of the gaze, the object, and the erotic.



Steven Cohen, *Golgotha*, 2008. Courtesy the artist and Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.
Photo: Marianne Greber

The Neo-Baroque style and the Baroque share a fascination with spectacle and sensory stimulation. According to Angela Ndaliansis, artists classified as working within the Neo-Baroque genre often compose their work in ways that are similar to the dynamism of the seventeenth-century Baroque art style, but express it differently in terms of technology and culture.² Genre analysis reveals that these artists merge various media and references to produce new hybrid art forms, in which the extravagance, excess, and aesthetic beauty openly play against the minimalist and conceptual control of postmodernism and the artistic practices of the last decades of the twentieth century.³

Neo-Baroque Hybridity

In South Africa a mixture of cultures and identities operates in a continuous state of change, creating a hybrid society, which, as Gen Doy explains, thereby removes stereotypes.⁴ Hybrid forms are used by contemporary artists to deliver commentary about social concerns and body politics, by referencing reality against the artist's illusion in order to make people question their own realities. New-media art forms allow artists to break social and cultural boundaries as a form of resistance, to contest issues relating to body politics about which they feel strongly. These Neo-Baroque hybrid forms combine contradictory and multiple references with various media and technologies in order to push the limits of the artwork beyond norms and rupture boundaries, creating spectacle and shock as viewers begin to interpret and interact with them.

The development of new digital technologies and advances in global communication can be seen to intensify hybridizing processes. Néstor Canclini explains that new cultural technologies open new ways in which to understand others' cultures and reconstruct cultural identities.⁵ This allows artists to find new forms of representation, ways of addressing their concerns and communicating them to the public.

Similar to the Baroque, the Neo-Baroque can be seen to exploit technological advances by moving the border that separates representation from reality, enhancing human perception. According to Omar Calabrese, the Neo-Baroque reveals an excess of visual presentation in terms of content, surface,

detail, and reference, as well as in spatial terms, manifesting in illusionistic artworks that stir the uncanny within the viewer.⁶ Ndaliansis holds that the Baroque's infatuation with imitation and the questioning of social existence has been adapted to a contemporary cultural context.⁷ Speaking of entertainment media, she explains that artists use technology to construct imaginative spaces that appear to convert into actuality, while reality itself often seems to combine with the fictive. This explanation can be stretched, however, to all forms of contemporary art that make use of new media because although images used by artists might appear realistic, they are often referentially unrealistic, resulting in a hyperreal expression of illusion as reality. Such spectacles are designed to foster not only engagement from the viewer, but also participation. In this way, transgression through illusion is used to contest truth, reality, and dominant ideologies.⁸ Both the Neo-Baroque and Baroque's characteristics of creating spectacle and engaging with the viewer's senses often involve constructing such illusions.

This ambivalence between illusion and reality has left the viewer wondering if our understanding of the real world is indeed real. Advances in modern digital technologies, particularly those used by mass media and Hollywood, have made almost anything seem possible, so that it has become difficult to determine the difference between special effects and spectacle. According to Ndaliansis, this approach, modified from the Baroque style, uses destabilization and the disbelief of reality as means by which to question dominant ideologies.⁹ The form's concern with simulacra of various realities and layers of meaning with multiple references reveals a self-reflection of current social circumstances typical of the Neo-Baroque art style.¹⁰

Digital techniques may provide a way to expand concepts that will continuously change the overall style of contemporary art. Artists will be able to push the limits of both old and new media to larger extremes, allowing for greater freedom of expression and means of approaching concerns within society. Timothy Murray states that artistic exploration of what he calls "digital Baroque," as part of the Neo-Baroque aesthetic, shows a shift from the technological to the personal.¹¹ This has resulted

in a revelation of opposing cultural and emotional contexts that expose societal tensions much like in the art of the seventeenth-century Baroque. Digital Baroque art criticizes many current social trends, and indulges in the tumultuous expression of artistic and social probabilities. South African artists are combining various cultural, economic, and political circumstances from the past and present to express their feelings and anxieties about current situations. This approach seems to offer a means of creating a conversation with the viewer, making one aware of his or her own apprehensions about current social conditions.

Ivani Santana believes that digital cultures allow artists to revisit and reconstruct the body.¹² He also notes that the body is in a continuous relationship with its surroundings, which can be used to assemble cultural constructs and reconfigure society's bodily ideals. Murray moreover holds that digital Baroque forms reveal conceptual approaches to art and art making that set up movements between conflicting cultures, social politics, and ideologies, as a familiar artistic result of electronic crossing points with the Baroque past.¹³ According to Christina Degli-Esposti, the main intention is to erase the emphasis on distinctions between gender, race, and sexuality, in order to embrace the idea of equality among all people.¹⁴ This allows for a more inclusive reflection on society.

***Golgotha* by Steven Cohen**

Steven Cohen's performance-video-art piece *Golgotha* has been displayed in various spaces, although versions differ slightly from one another.¹⁵ The original, one-off street performance, which took place in New York, has been turned into a video performance combined with other staged performances and audio.¹⁶ This discussion will focus mainly on the original performance. *Golgotha* takes its name from the Hebrew word for "cranium." It is a work made with the body and about the body, about how we live and the demands made on us by our consumer-driven society. Cohen comments on our contemporary lifestyle, where "anything is for sale and everything concludes in death,"¹⁷ and the way society has become so dependent on or conscious of mass media and consumer items.

In this performance piece Cohen wears a dark

business suit and tie, referencing capitalism and its reflection in society's current values. His face is painted white, with black lipstick and patterning around the eyes and over the nose. Decorative elements resembling butterfly wings are attached to the top of his head, eyelashes, and tips of his ears. His custom-made stilettos are attached to human skulls. In relation to César Salgado's view, the outfit and makeup reveal a complex hybrid identity that combines various elements from dominant discourse to create a space for cultural resistance, specifically against the lack of personal identity found in contemporary society.¹⁸

In an artist's statement Cohen says that he is literally bringing the dead into life as he walks on dead human skulls through streets, shopping centers, and busy metropolitan areas.¹⁹ According to Julia Kristeva, the human corpse is the ultimate form of abjection, as it upsets and aggressively confronts society, reminding people of their own inevitable mortality.²⁰ The use of human skulls makes clear Cohen's intention to engage with the abject in his work, bringing the reality of death into daily life. In South Africa, we are confronted by death daily with, among other factors, violent crime and the AIDS crisis. In the face of this, Cohen's video piece alludes to the fact that we spend too much time concerned with material items and similarly unimportant things. His suit and tie can be seen to reference the contemporary working world, with its potentially health- and life-threatening stressors of job tension, financial difficulty, or unemployment.

The skulls in the work also draw on deeper concerns relating to death and commerce. The buying and selling of deceased human body parts is seen to be immoral by society and forbidden in most countries, even abject. In an interview with Charles Blignaut, Cohen revealed that these were real skulls that he bought in a store in New York.²¹ In this conversation Cohen remarks: "Is it not the ultimate insanity of consumerist culture—selling the dead." This highlights the fact that truly everything is for sale and that today's society is largely influenced by consumerism. The fact that Cohen's shoes were made by drilling, and so breaking, the skulls is even more shocking, thereby becoming transgressive.²² Cohen takes this transgression even further by walking through the city streets on the skulls,

considered an act of disrespect toward the dead. Blignaut maintains that the work also refers to the death of Cohen's brother.²³

Shoes have become an important signature element in most of Cohen's performances, and he usually creates his own. Whereas women usually wear high heels to glamorize or embellish their bodies, Cohen uses them to create ambiguity. A man in high heels assumes the less socially approved appearance of a transvestite. According to Wendy Gers, shoes, particularly high-heeled shoes, can be seen to cut the wearer off from the earth, providing a form of elevation.²⁴ Cohen's use of high heels may link to the idea that the human race has the impression that they will move above death and one day become immortal. In this work it appears as if Cohen is expressing a concern about social obsession with consumerism and material items, rather than with social concerns and traditional values. This apprehension can also be seen in some of his other works, such as *The Weight of the Media—the Burden of Reality* and *Chandelier*.

The adapted *Golgotha* video piece, combining his original street performance in New York with three other stage performances, as well as different audio pieces, suggests a hybridized space of performance spectacle. The video is divided into five parts, each scene in a different space with different costumes and makeup, each piece a narrative on its own, each accompanied by a variety of music.

The video begins with a close-up view of a hand moving rhythmically to music, then the camera zooms out to reveal Cohen's elaborate red velvet costume, decorated with mirrors in between gold decor. The corset-style costume contrasts strongly with Cohen's pale, bare legs and buttocks, giving the bizarre and excessive effect typical of the Neo-Baroque. Cohen also wears a corset and keeps his legs exposed in other works such as *Chandelier*, to comment on gender and sexual constructs. In *Golgotha* this is accentuated by his slow, awkward movements, which emphasize his unsteady heels and uncomfortable outfit.

In the next scene his hands, appearing to be dark spots, move toward each other, emerging from the dark as the screen slowly becomes lighter. This use of light and dark to emphasize aspects of the work is again typical of the Baroque. In the third scene,



Steven Cohen, *Golgotha*, details of skull stilettoes, 2007–9.

Single-channel HD video, 20 min 8 sec. Courtesy the artist and Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg

Golgotha, details of skull stilettoes, 2007–9. Single-channel HD video, 20 min 8 sec. Courtesy the artist and Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg

Cohen dances on an empty stage to the rhythm of music from a record player that he holds. He is dressed in a black lacy corset with gold trim, and blackleather, heeled boots shaped like the hooves of a goat. The camera zooms out to a crucifix shape, made, according to Blignaut, from vintage lamps.²⁵ Here Cohen's face is excessively decorated with glitter and butterfly wing accessories, with a butterfly bow adorning his neck. Cohen sits down and unties his shoes, momentarily distracted by the music playing from the record player.

The fourth scene relates to the original *Golgotha*, with Cohen dressed as described above in a business suit with skull stilettoes. As Cohen walks

through the busy city streets, he struggles to keep his balance while passersby stop to stare and shout comments. He waits at an intersection for the pedestrian light to change, then crosses the street, stopping in front of a church, where he gets down on his haunches in a pose of meditation. After this he stands and crosses back over the busy street. The audio from the original footage can be heard in the background with Cohen's footsteps, the comments of the passersby, and the noise of the cars and city. The video shifts back to the previous scene, where Cohen, barefoot, is dancing to the music. Finally, he puts back on his shoes, which are now decorated with dollar bills; the scene darkens, and the ornaments laid out in a cross formation on the floor light up like small lamps. The scene ends with Cohen walking over and breaking the ornaments as he exits the stage.

This video embraces some similarities with the Baroque. For example, the stage scenery and outfits reveal an obsession with decoration and detail that goes to the extreme.²⁶ The five different scenes appear to be individual and unrelated to one another, also typical of the Baroque style, favoring a degree of chaos with no order or reason.²⁷ According to Ndalianis, the Baroque artists usually favor multiple and disjointed formations made up of multifaceted layers. She goes on to mention that Neo-Baroque narratives often merge and extend into and form part of one another. This can be seen in *Golgotha* as Cohen merges different scenes, which makes the video appear fragmented. The audio heightens this effect, as it is not continuous throughout the video and changes abruptly in places.

Above all this work reveals how performance art can play on the notion of illusion within the reality of everyday life. *Golgotha* can clearly be read as an example of Neo-Baroque art, as it combines various references to engage viewers and push them into questioning their own reality about the world. In the street performance Cohen himself is a corporeal presence, despite his appearance and costume, which aids in creating the illusionary dynamic in the work. Robyn Sassen comments on how the work seems to offer a sense of engagement, as seen in viewers' reactions to it. Cohen is well known in the South African art community for his shock tactics, going back to predemocratic times, when he

used them to cause outrage as a form of protest.²⁸ The audience for *Golgotha* appears to be stunned by the unexpected spectacle, and some seem shocked at details such as the skulls. This is particularly evident in the live performance, as passersby are not quite sure of what to make of the strange event they are witnessing. The fact that Cohen uses his own body is the basis of the work's most powerful spectral illusion, as he himself becomes part of it.²⁹ Andrew Darley states that a change has transpired in contemporary visual culture in that it favors an aesthetic that highlights appearance and sensory engagement, which Cohen deliberately plays on in his work.³⁰ According to Ndalianis, the Baroque and Neo-Baroque spectacle contests traditional views on realism, choosing an adapted view of the real world instead.³¹ Cohen's appearance is so bizarre that it appears fictional, yet the use of his own corporeal body within an actual environment makes it real.

Peter Wollen further emphasizes that the Baroque style was known to be dramatic, with artists striving for the spectacular and often incorporating the fictive within their work.³² These elements are seen in *Golgotha*: Cohen has created the character from his own imagination, appropriating aspects of contemporary society. His defiantly outrageous costume deliberately turns him into a freak, giving the work a sense of the carnivalesque, another characteristic of the Baroque style.

The audio aspect of the work also draws viewers in, as the video performance has been combined with audio soundtrack by Antony and the Johnsons, creating a sense of dialogue in the exhibition space. According to Sassen, the digital and electronic art forms have created a technically brilliant piece.³³ The work combines various new technological media with the more traditional medium of performance, creating a hybrid art form—firmly aligned with the Neo-Baroque aesthetic. The viewer engages in a technological spectacle and sensory experience, where the meaning becomes dependent upon the viewer's ability to understand complex visual and auditory texts.³⁴ The combination of audio and visual interplay help make the performance piece seem more real, as the viewer is forced to use more than one sense. It could be said that this produces dynamism within the work, another important

aspect of the Baroque. However, here it is expressed in technological and culturally different ways, made possible by advancements in digital media.

Similar to the Baroque, Neo-Baroque artists are displaying an intrigue with imitation, but have adapted their questioning of the world around them to the contemporary cultural context in which they live. According to Valerie Steele, the use of illusion that appears to be real has a powerful appeal, as it becomes a sensory experience that incorporates tactility, hearing, and visual qualities, which in combination with their symbolic associations create a strong emotional response within the viewer.³⁵ Jean Baudrillard states that this sense of hyperreality in our contemporary environment is a state within society created by advances in communication technologies and media, revealing a strange mixture of fantasy and desire that is unique to the twenty-first century.³⁶ A potential, infinite use of signs is used within culture and is employed as a means to order society while providing the individual with an illusory sense of freedom and individuality.

Europa by Nandipha Mntambo

Mntambo's digital print *Europa* also embraces new digital-media art forms. This self-portrait shows the artist's face partially morphed into a bull's by superimposing her face with animal fur, bullhorns, and ears, while her facial shape, nose, and lips retain some human attributes. Her neck and body have been left unchanged and reveal the nude skin of a black woman, which fades into the dark background, simultaneously drawing on the erotic and the abject.

In this work, the bull-like Mntambo gazes directly at and confronts the viewer, her horns and shoulders angled as if ready to charge. The creature's aggressive stance, direct gaze, and facial expression seem to challenge or dare the viewer into a confrontation; in particular the bull-like Mntambo appears to be challenging dominant and African cultural notions of the gaze, since in some African cultures direct eye contact is seen as disrespectful and is made mostly to challenge a person's authority. The gaze, a significant facet to be considered when working with the subject of the female or black body, if used aptly can reconstruct concepts relating to body ideals. According to Alyce Mahon,

the gaze within an artwork can help strengthen the artist's message and resist social oppression within society by using eroticism as a means to undermine bodily constructs of difference.³⁷ With *Europa*, viewers find themselves in an uncomfortable position, as this figure subjects them to the artist's gaze, so making them the point of her focus. And transforming her nude female figure into part animal, Mntambo becomes abject, even monstrous, rather than desirable, reversing erotic, abject, and fetish roles. This is also evident in her *The Rape of Europa* and *Narcissus*.

Based on the Greek myth in which Zeus turns himself into a white bull in his pursuit of Europa, in this particular work Mntambo inverts conventions of gender as well as classical Western mythology. As is well known, cattle (including the bull) play a significant role in many traditional African cultures, such as Xhosa and Zulu societies. According to Alistair Boddy-Evans, in Sotho cultures a black bull is sacrificed during times of drought as a rain ritual, while in Zulu cultures, a bull is beaten to death by Zulu men as part of Ukwehwama, a ceremony that celebrates the new fruit harvest.³⁸ In a number of southern African cultural traditions a bride's worth is measured in cattle. *Lobolo* is a customary form of payment in which a father exchanges his daughter for cattle.³⁹ The work hence references a multifaceted interaction of myth, gender, race, culture, and bodily transformation.⁴⁰ Drawing on various constructs and interweaving traditional European legends with her own African body and culture, Mntambo leaves the viewer to make sense of the intertextual references, which is typical of the Neo-Baroque style.⁴¹ Also, her referencing of various cultures highlights South Africa as a hybrid society composed of various cultures and traditions.

Furthermore, Mntambo's work demonstrates how contemporary technology is used to enhance illusion and create spectacle, in this case through digital photography in combination with computer image editing programs. Here, the morphing of a bull and a human creates a hybrid African human species. This realistic animalistic form also functions as a highly erotic signifier, challenging traditional social constructs about the ideal body and further emphasizing excess.

Like Cohen in *Golgotha*, Mntambo draws on



Nandipha Mntambo, *Europa*, 2008. Archival ink on cotton rag paper;
image: 100 x 100 cm, paper: 112 x 112 cm. Edition of 5 + 2AP.
Photographic composite: Tony Meintjes.
© Nandipha Mntambo, courtesy Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg

the abject as she deliberately makes a spectacle of herself. Both artists turn their bodies into hybrid human forms, which simultaneously reference different aspects of their societies and cultures. In accordance with Mary Russo's argument in *Female Grotesques*, *Europa* also exploits the taboos that are used to construct the female body as grotesque.⁴² The artist's use of representational transgression, as considered within the context of Russo's writing, is used as a means of creating social change and re-creating the female body. Russo comments that the figure of the female as transgressor and public spectacle is a strong tool, and the use of this type of representation in art to demystify the female body has numerous possibilities. She further notes that this approach has been used by many artists to disturb idealizations of female beauty and to change notions of desire, as the female body has become a sign of excess, but this is yet to be discussed within a Neo-Baroque context.

This work engages the viewer with its technological skill and multiple references, and shocks the viewer by the suggestion that the human could become animal or that the creature of one's desires may be something between human and beast. Within a postcolonial and South African context, the work carries deeper meaning as it alludes to the idea constructed by the colonizers that black people were uncivilized and closer to animals on the evolutionary scale than were European peoples.⁴³ According to Okwui Enwezor, in gazing back as the monstrous Other, the artist arguably confronts heteronormative constructs in an attempt to take control of her own identity while at the same time forcing the viewers to participate in this act in confronting their own fears, which are embedded within the abject or Other body.⁴⁴

Conclusion

According to Homi K. Bhabha, hybridity is a common and effective means by which to undermine dominant values, since it demonstrates the necessary deformation and dislocation of all forms of inequity and dominance.⁴⁵ The hybrid in art thus becomes a site of creative resistance to the dominant ideal. Creative practices that incorporate hybrid approaches make visible and instigate practices of renewal and opposition that direct the construction

of identity in colonial and postcolonial contexts. Francoise Lionnet believes that artists aim to re-create creative spaces where power formations can be used to reconstruct society to allow for a more inclusive and fair assembly of knowledge.⁴⁶

The Neo-Baroque has become a source of cultural alternatives, which continuously morphs and develops through artists' combining various cultural elements and social values and incorporating Baroque elements into the dominant discourse to create a context for resistance. Moreover, when combined with bodily performances or the theatrical, as well as with new technologies, the works become potent and able to disturb dominant constructs about the body.

Lisa Greyvenstein received a master of fine arts degree in advanced art discourse in 2013 at the University of Pretoria.

Notes

This essay was extracted from the minidissertation completed for my masters in fine arts degree at the University of Pretoria, titled "An Investigation of Excess as Symptomatic of Neo-Baroque Identified in the Work of Selected South African Artists."

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5 Néstor Canclini, "The Hybrid: A Conversation with Margita Zires, Raymond Mier and Mabel Piccini," *Boundary 2* 20 (Autumn 1993): 77–92.

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- 23 Blignaut, "Walking the Dead."
- 24 Gers, Public lecture.
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- 30 Andrew Darley, *Visual Digital Culture: Surface Play and Spectacle in New Media Genres* (London: Routledge, 2000), 6.
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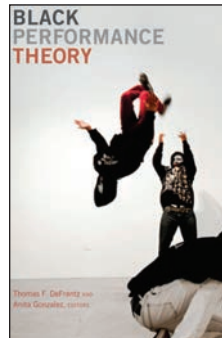
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