Steven Cohen's art in the context of Ritual Theory and performance art

Introduction

In this article I will analyse the art of South African born and French based artist Steven Cohen. Cohen, who developed a very unique and individual way of performing art in the 1990s, is known to show a diversified number of aspects in his performances at the same time. Starting by transforming his body by wearing costumes, his usage of make-up can surely be described as extraordinary and exaggerated. The artist transforms fake eyelashes, jewelry of all kinds, glitter and even the star of David, a symbol of his Jewish heritage, into masks and costumes that often let him appear surreal, thus marking the difference between the artist and his audience.

His costumes, often exposing wide parts of his body, can be described as membranes implying elements of a ‘female’ appearance and also as a counteraction of his male body. Phallic symbols such as dildos and also his own genitals play a central role in some of Cohen’s performances. The artist himself explained in an interview that he used his penis, because “[…] it’s me. Everything about me is inscribed in my penis - white, Jewish, male, gay. It’s about identity, it’s not about fucking”[1]. The interview was uploaded on the internet platform Youtube on March 11, 2014, and refers to a piece performed by the artist in Paris in 2013 for which he was later charged guilty for sexual exhibitionism.

In the interview, and also by referring to his penis as being an essential part of the performance, Cohen discloses several central themes of his work. Sex, sexuality, religion, gender and the questioning of it can repeatedly be found in Cohen’s performances. Further, the artist focuses on his skin color, racism and politics. Death, as well as the decomposition of the body, may be found as elements in Cohen’s performances. As previously mentioned, his work is multilayered. Therefore, it seems practical and logical to approach the artists oeuvre from different angles.

Concerning his focus on his gayness and considering, that Cohen uses instruments of drag as central elements in his performances one should try to get an insight into the field of queer studies. Queer studies are a rather young science dealing with the field of sexual variety and the gays, lesbians, transgender and bisexual movements as well as putting the focus on the concerns of intersexuality. They are all often combined under the umbrella term LGBTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans, Inter) which is often used in the field of queer theory. With regards to society, politics and history it seems inevitable to reflect on queer studies when dealing with Steven Cohen’s work.

In addition Cohen’s oeuvre can be approached from a rather anthropological point of view since performance art can also be seen as a theatrical performance or a ritual. By studying ethnology as well as social and cultural anthropology one will find numerous links to Cohen’s work especially in relation to the field of religious anthropology. On the basis of Victor Turners work on ritual processes it should be interesting to highlight the concept of (religious) rituals and to project it on Cohen’s performances. By modifying his body the artist puts himself into a liminal stage, well described by Turner and also more recently by the British anthropologist Fiona Bowie. The work of Turner and Bowie should be the foundation of anthropological excurse made in this article.

During another interview given at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, South Africa, the artist stresses two additional major aspects of his work. Talking about his performance Cradle of humankind, Cohen refers to himself as an “old, Jewish bitch”. Also, he says about his audience “I heard one say, don’t touch him, he is full of AIDS-blood. I was monstrous enough to scare them with my fragile beauty.”[2] Talking openly about his religion and his sexuality in a negative way can be seen as an indicator for potential discrimination. The analytical approach of being discriminated for more than one reason (those can be racism, sexuality, disability and many more) is described as intersectionality. Derived from the feminist movement, the concept was first named in the 1980s and has been redefined ever since. Regardless of its multiple definitions, it has always described discrimination for several social and individual reasons - a theme that can be found in all of Cohen’s performances. The concept will broadly be described as well.

Furthermore, Steven Cohen’s reputation as an internationally renowned performance artist results in a discussion about the concept of performance art and the interaction between artist and audience. Since the ideas of performances and rituals are closely related to each other, the articles will refer to each other in order to gain a partial insight on the art of Steven Cohen.

Rituals and Ritual Theory
As it was mentioned before, an interesting approach on Steven Cohen's performance *Chandelier* (Johannesburg, South Africa, 2001) would be to take the concept of rituals into account following the definition made by anthropologists. First, it should be clarified what is meant by a ritual. An explanation will be necessary. Also, a closer look at *Chandelier* will be essential in order to explain the performance that is essential for this text.

The performance *Chandelier* took place in Newtown, Johannesburg, and can shortly be described as follows: “In *Chandelier* (2001-02), Cohen dressed himself in a reconstructed chandelier, that icon of Western wealth, and went to a black Johannesburg squatter camp”[3]. While the description offers an outline, it would not be one of Cohen's performances if it wasn’t considerably more complex than that.

Before the artist reached the decision that Newtown in Johannesburg would be the right performance venue, the artist observed the squatter camp for six month in order to find out if it would be the right place for *Chandelier* being shown for the first time.[4]

For further understanding, it is mandatory to explain what squatter camp is. The term describes urban areas where mostly black inhabitants live in huts and houses that are made out of the most basic materials, such as wood, cardboard or corrugated metal. Those settlements are usually illegal and are hence described as 'informal settlements'. Informal settlements or squatter camps can be located outside of towns or right in their center, often close to the railway station, as was Newtown in Johannesburg. The inhabitants, living under rudimentary conditions, are considered as squatters which is only added for the sake of completeness, but will not be used further in this article.

![Map of Johannesburg](image)

Having the social and political premises of the venue in mind, one should turn towards Cohen's performance. First of all, his costume was not only made out of an old chandelier but was also luminous which was part of his performance in Johannesburg (and also later when he took it to stage). It can nicely be seen in the video "Sexual Exhibitionism" or performance art in which Cohen himself explains his piece of art shortly (starting at 3'52min). Only a few seconds later, the viewer can witness how his costume is illuminated (4'07min) underlining his difference to the people or let’s say the audience surrounding him. As it has been described before, the audience was black since Newtown was a squatter camp mainly inhabited by people of color while Cohen was accentuating his paleness with a white body suit he was wearing under his metal dress.

The costume used in *Chandelier* does not only consist of the old luster but also includes high heels that make the artist move awkwardly on the uneven ground in the squatter camp. Cohens motions seem as if he is somehow disabled or restrained. A retenchment in motion is one of the typical elements in his work taking into consideration that Cohen likes to modify his shoes up to the point where he can not walk anymore. An example is a piece of performance first shown in 1999. In the performance *Crawling … Flying* Cohens "[...] extra high heels have evolved into meter-long gemsbok horns that disable the act of walking altogether".[5]

Besides his costume and movements which let him appear disturbing and mystical at the same time, Cohen's make-up is an additional element of disturbance and irritation in *Chandelier*. Disturbance is a word chosen in this context because Cohen himself likes to state that he is “monstrous” (Steven Cohen, *Cradle of humankind*, 1'42min), or even constitutes that he himself is “[...] a queer Jewish freak [...]”[6] In doing so, he can also combine negative elements and characteristics in his work. Nevertheless, mystical is not meant to have a negative connotation in this context. As depicted in the videos complementing this article, the artist is also described as angelic which is an inhuman figure in any way.

The make-up, as described in the introduction, is always exaggerated and in most performances emphasises Cohen's skin color. For *Chandelier*, he chose the colors white, black and gold which might also be seen as a link to Western wealth as described by Jillian Carman referring to the luster he is wearing. Especially gold as the symbol of pure richness seems to foil the surrounding and also the circumstances in which *Chandelier* took place for the first time.

A difference in appearance can be a marker for a ritual context and does, for this article, facilitate the connection between ritual theory and the performances shown by Steven Cohen. The outward appearance of the artist could not be more different to the inhabitants of Newtown losing their home that very same day. This is why exceptional costumes worn by the artist during his performances led to the possible connection to a ritual element as stated by Jeffery C. Alexander in 1997 that a “[ritual] defined in the most general and basic terms is a performance, planned or improvised, that effects a transition from everyday life to an alternative context with which the everyday is transformed”[7] With that definition of rituals in mind, the connection between Cohen's performance and ritual elements is obvious. The transformation of the outward appearance and the costumes Cohen wears, symbolize a transformation and also the turning away from the everyday. As it will be explained again, a shared understanding of signs and symbols used during a ritual or performance is mandatory for the performer and his audience alike. Please see the Article about performance art for further understanding.
Even though Jeffery C. Alexander's statement about rituals is comprehensible one must look closer into the theory of rituals to fully grasp connection to Steven Cohen's art. One of the most basic theories about the connection between performances and rituals has been made by the British anthropologist Fiona Bowie. She states that a “[…] ritual is in some sense a performance or cultural drama […]”. Somehow Bowie refers to what Alexander stated that a performance is alwasy related to a transformation of the everyday. The withdrawal from everyday occurrences is considered a cultural or social drama. The term drama is fundamental to ritual theory and can be traced back to anthropologist Victor Turner, which will be demonstrated later in the article.

For now, let’s concentrate on Bowie. In fact, if Bowie's statement is turned around it is still valid considering that “[it] the purpose of a performance is to be efficacious then the performance is a ritual”. One can suppose that Chandelier had the purpose of being efficacious. The artist himself stresses that point in an interview. By referring to his South African origins and stating that every action is political in his home country. It might be helpful to have a broad look on South African history to follow Cohen's statement. South Africa has faced political struggles for the longest time starting long before the rise of the Apartheid regime. In this article, it is the end of the Apartheid and the still ongoing inequality between different skin colors that are of concern, also because they are fundamental to the art of Steven Cohen. However, it should not be forgotten that South Africa has faced a long history of colonialism and was site of many different wars including the resistance of the native population against the colonizers (e.g. the Anglo-Zulu-War in 1879) and the Boer wars as well as the participation in the First and the Second World War. Further, it should not be forgotten that South Africa was not the only country under the rule of an Apartheid regime only naming Namibia and Zimbabwe in that matter. With that in mind it seems understandable that Cohen sees his work as a white, Jewish artist also as a political action remembering that the South African government was supporting Nazi Germany during the Second World War.

Leading back to ritual theory, it is clear that the artist is always aiming to reach someone with his performances. As mentioned before, the central elements of Steven Cohen's oeuvre are sexuality, queerness, religion, his skin color and sometimes even death. While performing he does allude to at least one or more of these central elements as it can clearly be seen in Chandelier. They are themes and social elements his audience can relate to, but at the same time they are tools the artist uses to alienate from them.

A common understanding of the meaning of things and signs is mandatory for both, the performer and his audience, because “[…] meaningful actions can be considered as texts exploiting codes and narratives, metaphors, metathemes, values, and rituals in such divers institutional domains as religion, nation, class, race, family, gender, and sexuality”. Since those are the central themes of Cohen's art it is important that the signs he is using are understood because through the understanding his performances can result in a social drama which is another fundamental element of the ritual theory.

In the following the ritual theory of Victor Turner will serve the basis to explain why Steven Cohen's art can be seen as performances containing ritual elements. First of all, it was Victor Turner (1920-1983) who "[more] than any other thinker, […] demonstrated the most profound interest in modernizing ritual theory, with notions of ritual processes, social dramas, liminality and communitas, being the most famous result". That statement underlines the three basic aspects of Turner’s ritual theory, namely social drama, liminality, communitas.

The liminal stage is the one of interest for this article although social drama and communitas should briefly be explained. A social drama may occur if a person moves outside of the social norm. That might be caused by an active decision or by the stage of life (e.g. upbringing which is the moment when someone is moving between the worlds of children and adults). Either way, this stage inevitably leads to a conflict that needs to be solved. That is the point where rituals get a meaning because they are the possibility to solve the struggle and either re-enter society or the ritual might, as a result, lead to a complete renunciation from the society known up to that point.

Further, those being positioned outside of society - by common understanding - tend to form communities: the communitas. Everybody in the communitas is undergo the same change and has the same personal and social position. Within the communitas, strong bonds can develop and they might even remain after the re-integration into the society. The sense of togetherness within those groups results out of a personal stage which is described by Victor Turner as liminality.

Turner states that "[…] liminal entities are neither here nor there, they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arranged by law, custom, convention and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions". Surely, as the example of adolescence was mentioned earlier "[…] each individual’s life experience contains alternating exposure to structure and communities, and to states and transitions." Yet, what this article is aiming for is the fact that Steven Cohen does move outside of social conventions during his performances. His usage of symbols, costumes and other forms of body-modification to reinforce his message represents a tool that is often chosen by people in a liminal stage to signify their exclusive position. Cohen himself does not move within two social stages or standards but it is peculiar that the tools used to reach a demarcation from society are the same ones used to signify a liminal stage at the same time.

To support Turner’s theory, a three-stage model introduced by Fiona Bowie might help to support the understanding. It is separated in a preliminal, a liminal and a postliminal stage. Sure enough, there is a preliminal stage for Steven Cohen - he is only changing his (social) position once he is preparing for his performances. Interestingly enough, in one of his interviews, he describes how he wakes up in the morning and does not want to do his performance. Though there is a transition by putting aside his fears and preparing to face his audience (Steven Cohen, Cradle of humankind, 115-130min). Besides preparing mentally, he also prepares physically by putting on his costumes and his make-up which can be considered to be a mask of some sort.

Within a liminal stage the "[normal] rules of behavior may be suspended or exaggerated". As previously described, during Chandelier, Cohen is limited in his motion which lets him appear different, unusual maybe even un-normal, if that is a term one would like to use. He is clearly signifying that he is different from his audience, just by his body language.

Furthermore, it should be taken into account that nakedness as an element of human interaction is rather untypical to be exposed in public. Nakedness is something private, intimate even sexual and makes one appear vulnerable. Cohen does take his vulnerability to stage by showing off his naked body and modifying it with make-up. In Chandelier nakedness is not a central part of the performance, but it is also present. The artists body is covered in nothing but his dress made out of the chandelier and the white bodysuit that was mentioned before. Again, it is the paleness of his skin Cohen is willingly showing off to prove his difference in appearance.

Going back to social standards, Cohen often chooses venues where it is unacceptable to present the naked body (e.g. Place de Trocadero, Paris, France). In his performances, it is especially the male genitals that are very presented. Undoubtedly, his penis is a central part of Cohen’s oeuvre. In Paris, France, he was even arrested and charged guilty in the year 2014 for exposing his penis in public. He was performing on Place de Trocadero with a rooster tied to his genitals putting the focus clearly on his private parts. Another example would be the performance Limping into the African renaissance in which “[…] his face “was covered by a bondage mask with an erected black cock for a mouth that is, a dildo sticking out of his mouth, a counterpart to his own, bound, white penis”.

The focus is clearly on the penis, the phallus being the indicator of manliness. By presenting his penis and his sexuality (referring to the fact that Cohen describes himself as gay or queer) as well as his nakedness and at the same time questioning it by wearing his costumes and putting himself in a liminal stage, the artist does dramatize the vulnerability of his manliness and the phallus as a symbol of masculinity.
Performance and performance art

In comparison to the article about ritual theory one could argue that elements of Steven Cohen's art and his performances also contain facets of rituals. The assumption is underlined by the videos chosen to demonstrate some of Cohen’s performances and also by paraphrasing what the artists stated in an interviews concerning his art. In general, the artist's oeuvre can be described as follows: "Cohen's work, whether object-based or performed, tackles a wide range of issues in South African society, but always with a highly individual touch of an artist working out and with himself and his world". It is clear that once stating Cohen's art would be some sort of a ritual one must also take a closer look at performances and what they actually are.

Let’s take a step back and have one more look at the concept of a ritual.

Rituals are episodes of repeated and simplified cultural communication in which the direct partners of a social interaction and those observing it share a mutual belief in the descriptive and perspective validity of the communication’s symbolic contents and accept the authenticity of one another’s intentions.

To provision (social) structures and to give the audience the possibility to reflect on their own (social) position is a very important element of performance and performance art. A difference to fine or visual arts is that performance art is always a process including the performance itself as well as the reaction of the audience. In Chandelier that would be the time Cohen spent in Newtown, Johannesburg, presenting his body and his whole existence as a piece of art and also including the inhabitants reaction to the artist. By counteracting his audience's status of life - as a reminder, Newtown was torn to the ground the day Cohen was performing and most of the inhabitants lost their existence the very same day - the showing off of his whiteness and also elements of Western wealth led to the outcome that Cohen reached one of the most basic goals of performances. That would be that "[cultural] performance is the social process by which actors, individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of their social situation".

As a result, it is mandatory that "[...] actors must offer a plausible performance, one that leads those to whom their actions and gestures are directed to accept their motives and explanations as a reasonable account." Eventhough Cohens audience is not prepared to participate in the performances, it is revealed and problematised most powerfully in his performance works.

Furthermore, the selected venues for his performances make it often possible to be shocking or disturbing. As mentioned before, places like Newtown in Johannesburg, Place de Trocadéro in Paris which is right in the city center, just across the Eiffel tower, or a white right-wing rally commemorating the Anglo-Boer War where Cohen appeared costumed as patriotic drag in 1998 make it easy to disturb the audience. On the other hand, it is a legitimate tool for performance artists to chose the right (or most controversial) venue, because at the end, "[performance] art subverts or even perverts symbolic traditions, runs counter to the conventional interpretation of symbols, shocks the spectators (at least the unprepared ones), and aims at the deconstruction of everything that is fixed, established and well accepted".

Furthermore, Steven Cohen does not address a certain group of people with exclusive knowledge and a certain understanding of art, but he refers to each and every one. As mentioned before, part of his performances is always his audience, to be more precise, the audiences’ reaction. Therefore, it is reasonable to say that the connection between the artist and the audience is also a link between the real world and the art world. Having said that and remembering that Cohens art is not exclusive, but an element of everyday life, it is important to refer to the usage of his body again.
As explained, Steven Cohen uses his (naked) body to strengthen the meaning and the message of his performances. By doing so, he moves within a tradition of performance art in which artists "[...] expose their own bodies and most intimate private behavior, i.e. their ultimate living reality, on stage:[31] The happenings on stage are real and reality is just another happening."[31] The word stage does have two meanings in that context. One is the venue where the performance takes place, the other would be the artists body which is used to symbolize and signify the proposition made by the artist. Taking for granted that there is a connection between the 'real' world and the art world and estimating that whatever happens during a performance is just another reality would once more prove that Steven Cohen is very well moving between different stages, as it was a thesis in the article on ritual theory.

One more step must be taken in trying to theorise Steven Cohen as a performance artist. Performance art as a genre has been an inherent part of postmodern art in the 1960s. And by defining post modern art as follows, it is inevitable to see Steven Cohen as postmodern and performance artist. Postmodern art is the result of aesthetic alienation. Quiet ordinary objects, bodily movements, or processes can be turned into art if they are taken out of their ordinary context, get shipped of their regular meaning and are presented under purely aesthetic premises which is certainly not to be mixed up with decoration or conventional beauty.[32] Turning back to Cohens performance Chandelier, it does fulfill some requirements to be postmodern using elements of everyday live and also everyday premises in order to lift their meaning to a different level.

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Queerness and Queer Theory

The goal of this article is to lay open how the art of Steven Cohen is related to the field of Queer Theory. Combining elements of different fields of studies such as feminism, anthropology, sociology and also medicine, it is important to mention some goals Queer Theory has. That would be to investigate the differences between sex, gender, identity, body and sexual desire. More precisely sex (biological) and gender (social) are two categories which must be differentiated, politically as well as analytically, through defining and constructing reality in a reciprocal manner.[33] It would be too complicated to disentangle the whole theoretical approach. Therefore, the latest ideas of Queer Theory will be introduced in this article in order to link them to Steven Cohen. First of all, it must be understood that within the term 'queer' the effort to be politically and socially equal is always included. Also it is about the acceptance of differences and the building as well as breakup of one’s own identity and the abundance of social categories.[34] Linking those intentions to sexuality, in the latest publication of the Bundesstiftung Magnus Hirschfeld it is explained that individuals who don’t want to use the binary system of heteronormativity, refuse any other categorizations and consider themselves to be queer.[35]

Remembering the given explanation of queer and taking a look at Chandelier (or most of the other performances Steven Cohen did) it is obvious that one of Cohen's major concerns is to deconstruct social norms and standards including social categories. Since he himself states that he is "a queer Jewish freak"[36] he is already naming two categories he breaks open repeatedly in his performances, religion and queerness (referring to his homosexuality). Having that in mind, one must understand that queerness can not only be described through sexuality and sex but also any other factors forming ones identity, which can be race, religion, age or the color of hair. Just to name a few. Each of those categories and the connection of them can result in discrimination of any kind. Talking Cohen as an example, his homosexuality does not contrast the very liberal law in his home country which was one of the first countries ever to accept gay marriage. Yet, in contrast to that in some parts of the South African society homosexuality is not very well accepted. It can result in insults, discrimination and also violence.

As explained before, Cohen uses not only his sexuality but also his biological sex, his religion, his color of skin and many more elements to signalize all the elements of himself as human being that could be 'controversial'. The conncetion of reasons for discrimination has been named intersectionality. The idea came out of the feminist movement in the U.S.A. and was [...] the recognition by feminist scholars that the unitary categories of ‘woman’ and ‘gender’ were clumsy tools with which to grasp the complexities of discrimination and injustice that led them to the ‘intersection’, the place where formations of class, race, and gender coincide.‘[37] So, enought it is a feminist approach it still resembles what Cohen shows in his art demonstrating the characteristics of his personality and putting his innermost out there. It is important to understand that intersectionality describes a discrimination resulting out of an identification with different identity markers. It must be stressed, that “[intersectionality] works with mixtures, a combination of individual or separated states or elements, each with its own determinate value (in relation to the others)”[38] which is clearly resembled by the art of Steven Cohen for whom the acceptance of the individual as a whole is of major concern.

One more and most recent theoretical tendency coming out of Queer Theory would be to differentiate between doing gender and doing difference. To explain what is ment by those terms it is mandatory to clarify that to Cohen’s work as performance artist “[...] the gay tradition of drag is employed and subverted as part of his artistic practice'.[39] Today, drag queens and drag kings are closely related to the queer community. Though, the concept can be described as the exaggeration of elements usually connoted with the opposite (biological) sex. In result, the person doing drag or travesty is hypersexualized or in consequence hides his or her gender completely. The explanation is given because Steven Cohen's performances often include make-up and costumes such as dresses, high heels and other elements that can be seen as tools of travesty. As a result, the concept of doing drag or travesty is a presentation of sex but, through counteracting it, can be considered as doing gender. Further, since doing gender usually results in someone presenting himself- or herself to an audience[40] it also results in a performance.

A further idea leading away from the estimation that Steven Cohen's performance art can be seen as a drag show results out of the earlier described concept of intersectionality. By not only presenting his sexuality and his (biological) sex but also other characteristics that make the artist unique (as any other person) the consideration of those factors and the pointing towards them could be described as doing difference. As a consequence, it is the downright goal not to see categories as sex, gender, race or religion as naturally given but as social construction.[41]

Having explained that and showing the connection between some of the latest tendencies within the field of Queer Theories and Queer Studies it must be concluded that it is a multilayered field of science. Out of that complexity and “as a form of critical theory, queer theory runs the risk of becoming resistance studies if it pays too much attention to the victim perspective and forgets that people are not always ‘negative’, are not defined totally by their resistance, if indeed they engage in any”.[42] An objection of major importance, since the art of Steven Cohen is also not about negativity but about living reality and about social structures that must be addressed discussed and at the end, may be changed.

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[1] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xv9gjQM8t6 [15.01.2015].
[2] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X4j93QP9Cg [15.01.2015]
To some readers it might be interesting to get an overview on what literature will be the basis for the articles about the artist Steven Cohen. In some publications only extracted articles might be relevant, some might offer interesting data that have been used and referred to and some will give an overall view on themes that are central to the articles main concerns. The sources being used deal with different scientific topics. Some have been published referring to the field of gender studies. Also, anthropological and ethnological literature is basic for the different approaches made in the articles concerning Steven Cohen’s art. Some might rather be counted to the field of art history which is also of major interest in the articles being presented.

**Literature**


