Steven Cohen's *Golgotha* as a cultural critique of capitalism

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ABSTRACT

South African performance artist Steven Cohen's film *Golgotha* (2007-2009) is investigated with reference to twentieth-century French theorist Georges Bataille's philosophical enquiry into the notion of expenditure as a critique of capitalism. This article examines the representation of excess in relation to the body, and makes specific reference to Cohen's use of real human skulls as shoes as a cultural critique of capitalism. Bataille's notion of expenditure, as it is developed in the first volume of *The accursed share* (1949), centres on the concept of excess: A society, he argues, reveals its structure most clearly in its treatment of its surplus energy. Bataille's analysis of the necessity for luxury, on the one hand, and expenditure and sacrifice, on the other, is of particular relevance. With his performance in *Golgotha*, Cohen uses his art practice to deliver a critique of capitalist culture. Cohen's visceral performance with real human skulls in the capitalist setting of New York's Wall Street and Times Square combines references to death with references to materialistic excess. This article draws parallels between Bataille's notion of expenditure and Cohen's staging of his critique of capitalist excess.

Keywords: Steven Cohen, excess, capitalism, expenditure, *vanitas*, sacrifice, sacred/profane.

Introduction

> They say that only what is dead can be fully understood (Bataille 2006:54).

South African performance artist Steven Cohen presents a curious representation of death in conjunction with excess in his film, *Golgotha*[1] (2007-2009). This article

1. *Golgotha* is a single-channel HD video running for 20 minutes 8 seconds.

investigates the ways in which Cohen employs his body as site of conflict as a means to critique the excess prevalent in western capitalist culture. The investigation is placed within the theoretical framework of texts on capitalism by the twentieth-century French writer and philosopher, Georges Bataille.

Cohen, a South African-born artist of Jewish descent, is renowned for his provocative performances in the public realm and in gallery and theatre spaces. Identifying in equal terms as both a performance artist and a visual artist, Cohen describes his performances as 'living art' (De Waal & Sassen 2003:5). With his carefully choreographed public interventions, he draws attention to issues that are generally marginalised in society. His unsettling performance pieces are created for traditional art spaces (galleries, contemporary dance platforms, theatre) as well as public spaces[2] (taxi ranks, train stations, sports events, city streets, national election queues). Sartorial choices are a prime feature of the performances, and his elaborate drag costumes, or 'sculptural assemblages' (Perryer 2010:6), accentuate his identity as a gay Jewish man. Gender identification is disrupted in the way that Cohen wears his idiosyncratic drag costumes. In the seminal Taxi-008 publication on Cohen, Shaun de Waal and Robyn Sassen (2003:13) describe Cohen's form of drag as 'confusing and threatening: it is "monster drag", a constructed portrait of a sort of bogeyman or golem'.[3] In his previous performances, Cohen's hybrid identity is a point of departure. *Golgotha*, however, does not reflect issues regarding his queer Jewish identity in the ostentatious and sexually shocking way that characterised his earlier and later performances.[4] It is rather a subtler, but still very theatrical, reflection on aspects of western capitalist society that appal him, and his personal attempt to deal with death and trauma.

Like most of Cohen's 'lived art' pieces, *Golgotha* comprises both videography and performance. It premiered in 2009 as a theatre production at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, as part of the Festival d'Automne. *Golgotha* exists in three parts: the killer skulls shoes were first revealed to an unsuspecting public during Cohen's performance in the streets of New York City; its second presentation to an audience was at the Festival d'Automne in Paris in 2009; and lastly, the montage of footage manifested in the 20 minutes 8 seconds film[5] of the same title.

At the start of the film, the audience is introduced to Cohen's white, male, and ageing body. Set in a white studio, it shows Cohen dressed in a Baroque-style corset made of wedding crowns, velvet, and mirrors. His face is masked with glitter

2. 'I've always looked for non-theatrical time or setting for an enormous action' (Cohen cited in Powell 2010:14).

3. The golem refers to the legendary creature of Jewish folklore – made of earth and blasphemously brought to life with magic spells and misuse of holy writ (De Waal & Sassen 2003:13).

4. His identity as a gay man is not reiterated, for instance, by objects protruding from his anus. This can be seen in his 2007 performance *Cleaning time (Vienna) … a shandeh und a chapeh (a shame and disgrace)* in which Cohen scrubs the pavements and streets of Heldenplatz in Vienna with a diamond protruding from his anus. Heldenplatz is a site where Jews were forced to scrub the public square with toothbrushes during the Nazi reign (Pather 2007:76). In May 2014, a Paris court convicted Cohen of sexual exhibitionism for a performance in which he danced, high-heeled and partially naked with a rooster tied to his penis, for ten minutes across the Seine from the Eiffel Tower (Cascone 2014).

5. This article focuses on an investigation of *Golgotha* in its last manifestation, in the form of the 20 min 8 sec film.

make-up and butterfly wings (Figure 1) that remind one of the *vanitas* symbols of the Renaissance and Baroque. The camera reveals close-up shots of Cohen's ageing body while he dances at a slow pace – the choreography reminiscent of a bird awakening. This scene is followed by the footage of Cohen's performative intervention in New York City. The idea for the performance originated with Cohen's discovery of two human skulls for sale in a shop in SoHo, New York City. Also a remarkable crafter of objects, Cohen skilfully transformed the skulls into a pair of very high stilettos (Figure 2), which he calls 'skullettos' (Cohen cited in Powell 2010:11). He wears this ghoulish pair of shoes in a pilgrimage reminiscent of the Stations of the Cross[6] – the road to *Golgotha*, the place of Christ's crucifixion. Wearing a stockbroker's suit with the *vanitas* mask and the skullettos (Figure 3), Cohen starts his precarious trek with the dramatic high-heels[7] at Wall Street (Figure 4), the nucleus of global economic imperialism, passes Trinity Church (Figure 5), proceeds through Times Square (Figure 6), the epicentre of western consumer culture, and ends at Ground Zero – the site of the fallen World Trade Center. Cohen performs a macabre ballet-style dance; almost a lament for the lives lost in 9/11, with the skulls on the marble platform at Ground Zero (Figure 7). The film concludes with footage of Cohen cradling the skullettos still attached to his feet (Figure 8).

Cohen's gesture of transforming skulls into shoes, and then staging various ritualistic performances with them in the capitalist setting of New York City's Wall Street, Times Square and Ground Zero, can be read as a cultural critique of capitalism. It becomes relevant, in this instance, to analyse *Golgotha* in the light of Georges Bataille's notion of expenditure, as I will explain.

Cohen expresses his concern with materialistic excess visually by means of his conspicuously corporate outfit and his perilous journey down Wall Street and Times Square. In the opening sequence of *Golgotha*, Cohen's body is decorated with glittering symbols of wealth (Figure 9) – a Baroque-style corset made of wedding crowns, velvet, and mirrors (perhaps also a symbol for vanity). The later scenes, where stock exchange tickertape is juxtaposed with views of the The Evolution Store (the upmarket SoHo shop where Cohen bought the skulls) (Figures 10, 11), are indicative of Cohen's questioning of western capitalism. It is the fact that one can buy skulls in a public shop in a city that embodies key values of the west that makes it so abhorrent. '*Golgotha* is a work made on feelings rather than convictions,' states Cohen in an interview with Ivor Powell (2010:11); 'It started off all morally indignant when I found the human skulls for sale, but over the years of making the work it became about trauma and loss and grieving rituals and how to stay human.' He bought and transformed the skulls as a way to provoke shock and disgust in viewers – similar to the reaction he had when he found the skulls for sale.

6. The Stations of the Cross refers to a series of fourteen images, often arranged in numbered order, depicting Christ on the day of his crucifixion.

7. Since Cohen started performing his 'living art', the heels of his shoes have been getting higher and higher to the point where walking becomes almost impossible. *Crawling … flying* (1999) takes the exaggerated glamour of drag to a new level with meter-high gemsbok heels that disable walking altogether. Cohen took *Crawling … Flying* (1999) to public places such as the voting queues of the South African general election in 1999. Unable to walk on the hyperbolised gemsbok heels, Cohen could only crawl – thereby delivering wry comment on the slow moving queues, as well as South Africa's dreadfully long 'walk' to democracy (De Waal & Sassen 2003:24).

FIGURE **Nº 1**

Steven Cohen, *Golgotha* (still). 2007-2009. Single channel HD film. 20 minutes 8 seconds. Copyright Steven Cohen, courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

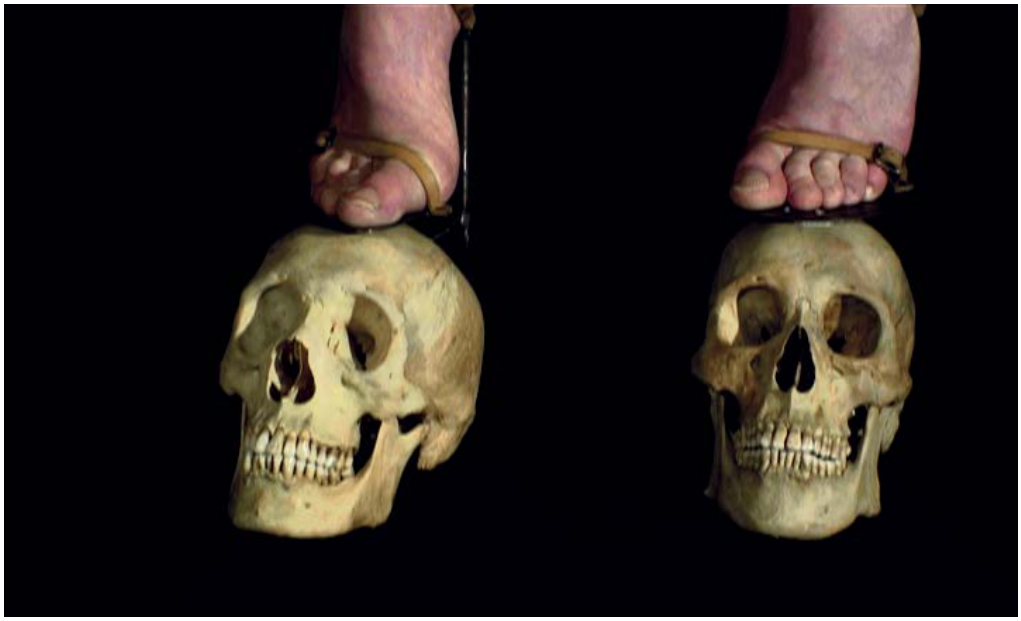

FIGURE **Nº 2**

Steven Cohen, *Golgotha* (still). 2007-2009. Single channel HD film. 20 minutes 8 seconds. Copyright Steven Cohen, courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

FIGURE **Nº 3**

Steven Cohen, *Golgotha* (still). 2007-2009. Single channel HD film. 20 minutes 8 seconds. Copyright Steven Cohen, courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

FIGURE **Nº 4**

Steven Cohen, *Golgotha* (still). 2007-2009. Single channel HD film. 20 minutes 8 seconds. Copyright Steven Cohen, courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

FIGURE **Nº 5**

Steven Cohen, *Golgotha* (still). 2007-2009. Single channel HD film. 20 minutes 8 seconds. Copyright Steven Cohen, courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

FIGURE **Nº 6**

Steven Cohen, *Golgotha* (still). 2007-2009. Single channel HD film. 20 minutes 8 seconds. Copyright Steven Cohen, courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

FIGURE **Nº 7**

Steven Cohen, *Golgotha* (still). 2007-2009. Single channel HD film. 20 minutes 8 seconds. Copyright Steven Cohen, courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

FIGURE **Nº 8**

Steven Cohen, *Golgotha* (still). 2007-2009. Single channel HD film. 20 minutes 8 seconds. Copyright Steven Cohen, courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

FIGURE **Nº 9**

Steven Cohen, *Golgotha* (still). 2007-2009. Single channel HD film. 20 minutes 8 seconds. Copyright Steven Cohen, courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

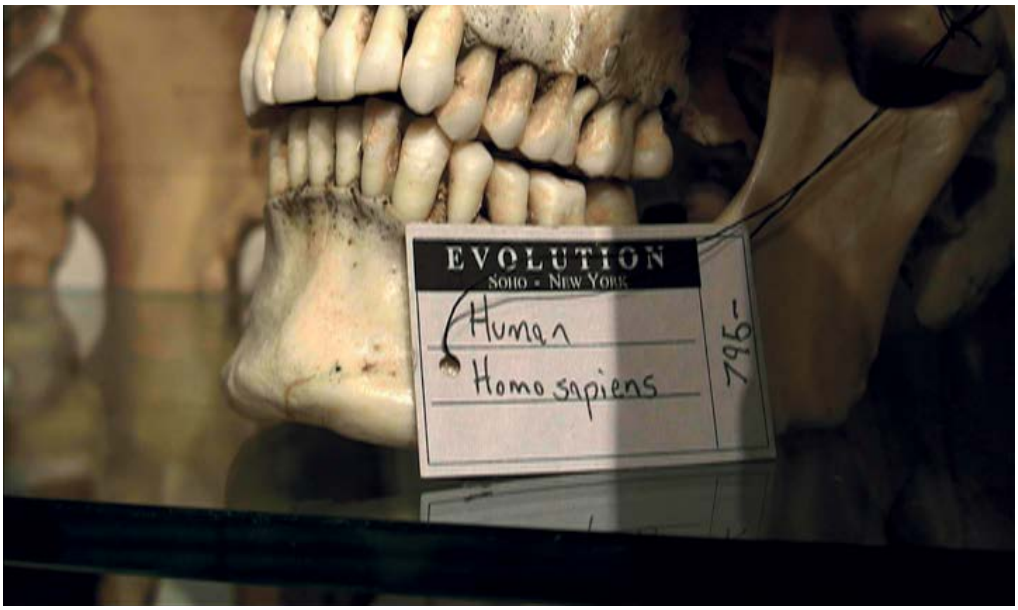

FIGURE **Nº 10**

Steven Cohen, *Golgotha* (still). 2007-2009. Single channel HD film. 20 minutes 8 seconds. Copyright Steven Cohen, courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

FIGURE **Nº 11**

Steven Cohen, *Golgotha* (still). 2007-2009. Single channel HD film. 20 minutes 8 seconds. Copyright Steven Cohen, courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

'Is it not the ultimate insanity of consumerist culture – selling the dead? And the American government taxed the purchase, so they are complicit in selling human remains – which is for the most part forbidden across the planet' stated Cohen in a *Times Live* interview with Charl Blignaut (2011). 'It is a civilized form of savagery. And I was complicit buying them as they were selling them' (Cohen cited in Blignaut 2011).

Walking on the skullettos through Manhattan bespeaks a critique of capitalism as Georges Bataille wrote about it in the mid-twentieth century. Bataille presents a philosophical enquiry into the notion of expenditure as a critique of accumulation in his book *The accursed share: volume I* (written in 1949 and translated 1991). The status of excess or expenditure is a pivotal point in this text, as Bataille was of the opinion that capital accumulation is a malevolent force that distorts social relations. One of the fundamental themes of Bataille's work is the critique of the belief that we should save for the future instead of living in the instant.

Bataille's conception of excess is first introduced in *The notion of expenditure* (1933) and later refined in *The accursed share* (1949). In the first text on excess, he starts exploring the idea that it is within the nature of any living organism to produce more than it needs for its own survival. Consequently, economic activity is not determined

by shortage, but rather by the need for distribution of the excess wealth produced. Bataille states that 'the world is sick with riches' (cited in Richardson 1998:78). He presents his 'notion of expenditure' as a social function. He deliberately avoids analysing the complexities of a crisis of over-production, and rather focuses in general on the mystery of economic activity through 'tracing the exhausting detours of exuberance through eating, death and sexual reproduction' (Bataille 1991:13). It is in these domains of human life – eating, death and sexual reproduction – that excess is often most noticeable in visual form.

In a discussion of Bataille's critique of accumulation, it is necessary to investigate his views on social life and the organisation of society. Of these views, Bataille's analysis of the necessity for luxury, on the one hand, and expenditure and sacrifice, on the other, is of particular relevance.

Firstly, Bataille's argument for the necessity of luxury needs to be explained. The point of departure for his argument in *The accursed share* is the fact that the sun, source of all energy on earth, 'gives without ever receiving' (Bataille 1991:28), as it discharges an energy that can never be entirely consumed for productive ends. 'Solar energy is the source of life's exuberant development. The origin and essence of our wealth are given in the radiation of the sun, which dispenses energy – wealth – without any return' (Bataille 1991:28). This implies that there is always excess, because the sun's rays, which are the source of growth, are given without measure (Piel 1995:102). In other words, any restricted system receives more energy from the surrounding environment than it can profitably use up in simply sustaining its existence. Essentially all energy exchange, and therefore all economy, consists of the dynamics of expenditure – production and accumulation only enter after this, as they constitute an effort to confine and channel this expenditure of energy in the interest of utility. Thus, at the base of Bataille's thinking is the belief that life is essentially energy that strives to expend itself without fulfilling any specific purpose.

For Bataille (1991:33), this means that there is an accumulation of energy that can only be used up in dynamic exuberance – through the 'luxurious squandering of energy'. (As mentioned previously, Bataille presents the three luxuries of nature as eating, death, and sexual reproduction.) In nature, the least burdensome form of life is that of the green micro-organism, because it absorbs the sun's energy through the process of photosynthesis. Generally, vegetation is less burdensome than animal life. Animals develop more slowly and they turn the space occupied by vegetation into a field of slaughter. 'Eating brings death, but in its accidental form,' states Bataille (1991:34), '[o]f all conceivable luxuries, death, in its fatal and inexorable form, is undoubtedly the most costly'. Bataille believes that we curse death only

because we fear ourselves. 'We lie to ourselves when we dream of escaping the movement of luxurious exuberance of which we are only the most intense form' (Bataille 1991:34). To state this in simpler terms: we loathe death, but we need it in order to survive. This necessity can be linked with our carnal needs: '… the luxury of death is regarded by us in the same way as that of sexuality, first as a negation of ourselves, then – in a sudden reversal – as the profound truth of that movement of which life is the manifestation' (Bataille 1991:34-35). Together with eating and death, sexual reproduction is one of the primary 'luxurious detours' (Bataille 1991:35) that guarantees the intense consumption of energy.

Of these 'luxurious detours', death, with its paradoxical connotations of loathing and necessity, is particularly evident in *Golgotha*. Cohen signals a macabre cycle by combining the skulls with references to capitalism. This implies that capitalist consumption is inevitably linked to death – no matter how much we accumulate or consume, death is inescapable, thereby rendering all kinds of capitalist accumulation futile. A linear chronological reading of the narrative of *Golgotha* implies that humankind is the beginning and the end-point of this futile cycle. In the history of life, according to Bataille (1991:37), humans play a significant role in two respects: on the one hand, the development of human technology allows new possibilities for life, while on the other, 'man is the most suited of all living beings' to consume the excess of energy vigorously and luxuriously.[8]

Autobiography informs Cohen's artistic output, and his revolt against capitalism, albeit a public one with his performance in Manhattan, remains highly personal. Prior to the making of *Golgotha*, Cohen lost his brother through suicide.[9] Cohen's various private dances with the skullettos throughout the film radiate a sense of grief. By expressing his private grief in the public domain of the city, the artist takes the psychological and sociological factors of a public capitalist setting such as New York City into account. This is not only clear when the artist ends his journey at Ground Zero, a site loaded with collective public and private grief and anger, but also with the personal scenes edited in-between the footage of his performance in the streets of Manhattan. One particular scene shows the artist, dressed in the baroque-style corset and the skullettos, alone in a bare studio, performing a slow dance to the song *Hope there is someone* by Anthony and the Johnsons. It is a poignant song about death, the lyrics including: 'Hope there is someone, who'll take care of me, when I die, will I go'.[10] *Golgotha* not only connects excess, death, and capitalism in the walking with the skullettos through Wall Street and Times Square, but also in the soundtrack that accompanies the film. The song *Rest in peace* starts playing when Cohen arrives with the skullettos at Ground Zero. Sung

8. Jean Piel (1995:102), a French writer and friend and contemporary of Bataille, states in the context of Bataille's insistence on useless consumption that 'man becomes a summit through squandering', thereby emphasising humankind's sovereignty in the living world.

9. The personal trauma of his brother's suicide gave rise to *Golgotha*. For this reason the piece is 'more of a ritual than a performance' (Cohen cited in Blignaut 2011). Cohen shares his personal story with Blignaut (2011): 'My brother e-mailed and said I'm going to kill myself and I talked him out of it. A year later he wrote again and said I'm going to kill myself and I said I don't have time for this. You can't do this by e-mail, you must call me. It was the last time I heard of him.'

10. The song Hope there is someone by Anthony and the Johnsons can be listened to on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d_Nq9fUX2WE

by men and accompanied by trumpets, it almost seems to mock the situation implied by the connection of the skulls and Ground Zero. Sites of large-scale terrorist attacks, of which Ground Zero is one of the most prominent, remind us that the United States of America as a capitalist stronghold also makes it one of the main targets for capitalist critique and terrorist attack. With *Golgotha*, Cohen reminds us of the USA's, and therefore also the western world's, capitalist power and its subsequent fragility.

The invasive presence of the body-as-artwork[11] challenges and disrupts viewers, especially when encountered in the public realm. This is characteristic of Cohen's performance works. The physical presence of the artist's body, coupled with the acute awareness of discomfort – of both Cohen's perilous walking, and of the viewer's shocked and awkward gaze – makes the engagement more profound, as it is direct and confrontational. It forces the audience to engage with their own kneejerk reactions and prejudices.[12]

With *Golgotha* Cohen furthermore explores the tension between personal identity (related to Jewishness, homosexuality, and race) and its experience in public life. Footage of Cohen's staged spectacle in the city is juxtaposed with footage of the artist in solitary mourning, thereby collapsing the boundaries between public and private. The footage of his live performance in the streets is interrupted by a solitary sequence of 'upside-down' dancing with the skullettos. Set to opera music, the viewer sees only Cohen's legs and feet in the air performing a mockingly playful dance with the Empire State Building in the background (Figure 12). The two points of the stilettos could be a teasing albeit macabre reference to the absence of the twin towers of the destroyed World Trade Center. In addition, Cohen wears the skullettos and butterfly makeup throughout the entire film, but the rest of his outfit changes in the public and private scenes. Cohen wears the baroque corset, with exposed legs and arms, in the private dancing scenes set in the studio, while he wears the stockbroker's suit when he performs in the public spaces in New York City. Perhaps his business ensemble implies his attempt to fit in, or be accepted by, the capitalist western world, but despite his efforts, he remains an outcast. His sartorial choice can also imply the artist mocking the conventions of capitalism, especially in the way that he degrades this traditional western corporate attire by wearing it with the skullettos – grotesque shoes that raise issue of death as well as of feminism or homosexuality. It seems as though Cohen is questioning the excess, or 'expenditure' as Bataille would say, of capitalist culture: by combining references to death with references to capitalist excess, Cohen is staging his own critique of accumulation.

11. In 1996, at the age of 33, Cohen was diagnosed with glandular fever, hospitalised and bed-bound for a few months. The physical ramifications of the illness made him aware that his body could become the primary medium for artistic output (De Waal & Sassen 2003:14).

12. Cohen states: 'My performances are like forced interactions between us (artist and audience) – not usually on the level of touching each other, it's more through the visual' (Cohen cited in Powell 2010:14).

FIGURE **Nº 12**

Steven Cohen, *Golgotha* (still). 2007-2009. Single channel HD film. 20 minutes 8 seconds. Copyright Steven Cohen, courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

Chandelier (2001-2002) is an earlier work by Cohen that also questions the capitalist accumulation of wealth. For this videographed performance, Cohen wore an illuminated chandelier, a symbol of western wealth, as a tutu, and interacted with the residents of Newtown, Johannesburg, as the settlement was in the process of being demolished. Dramatically teetering on stilettos and bearing under the weight of the crystals, Cohen painfully performs his slow idiosyncratic dance moves amid the chaos of the forced removal. This 'ballet of violence', as Cohen (cited in De Waal & Sassen 2003:26) describes it, mourns the travesties of the polarisation of wealth produced by capitalism. Pain and performance are often companions in Cohen's practice. Despite the physical exertion of many of the performances, Cohen is also mentally and emotionally pained. Cohen (cited in Powell 2010:16) describes the performance for *Chandelier* as a traumatising and bewildering experience – it is 'hard on the body, but it's even harder on the mind'.

In Bataille's critique of accumulation, he contrasts his concept of the 'general economy' with what he classified as traditional economics, which he calls the 'restricted economy' (Richarson 1994:67). Bataille regarded society as a social whole, believing that economics responds to all the elements within the social body. Accordingly, a clear conception of the general economy must consider economic

factors in their totality; taking into account not only the financial structure of society, but also the psychological and sociological factors that are integrated within it (Richardson 1994:67). Classical, or traditional, economics – what he calls the 'restricted economy' – is based on the assumption that the need to protect scarce resources is fundamental to human society. Bataille (1991:49) sees this assumption as problematic, however, and highlights the importance of useless or gratuitous consumption and the fact that in some earlier societies (that is, societies prior to capitalism) it was the need for consumption that was considered primary, not that for accumulation.[13]

From Bataille's perspective, in classical or traditional economics the extent to which people play or rest is negatively related to the need for work (Richardson 1994:72). What this economic calculation essentially means is that people should rest just enough to make them fit enough to work as hard as they can and produce as much as possible. As a result, the need for leisure, in particular laziness in itself, is seen as a curse,[14] as it is perceived to exhaust productive forces and undercut the 'society of accumulation' (also called the society of restricted economy) that capitalism essentially is. Bataille, however, disputes these characteristics of classical economics and rather insists that leisure, and the expenditure that it requires, is part of the core of the effective economy. In Bataille's view, any labour that only satisfies the need for accumulation is a perversion of genuine human needs. 'Capitalist society, which explicitly bases an economy on scarcity, is thus a perverse society, devoted not to the satisfaction of its own needs, but to the benefit of a particular part of society that controls the productive process' (Richardson 1994:72). Humankind's 'inner sensibility' is disturbed as the economic needs are displaced from expenditure to accumulation. The consequence of this is that people become overwhelmed by a voluntary 'enslavement to the world of things' (Richardson 1994:72). Bataille (1991:134) expresses his critique of capitalism vehemently: 'The multitude has surrendered to the somnolence of production, living a mechanical existence – half ludicrous, half revolting – of things'. Thus, Bataille sees in capitalist economic principles a progressive dehumanisation of communal relationships. 'Capitalism in a sense', he writes, 'is an unreserved surrender to things, heedless of the consequences and seeing nothing beyond them' (Bataille 1991:136). Cohen's poetic critique of capitalism seems to be making a similar claim – it also, albeit more poetically, subverts the 'society of accumulation'. Both Bataille and Cohen question what it means to be human in a world driven by unrivalled accumulation.

This brings the discussion to the second important aspect of Bataille's critique of accumulation, namely his explanation of expenditure and sacrifice. Bataille reserves the word 'expenditure' for unproductive forms, thereby excluding all the modes of

13. Bataille (1991:49) explains how the ancient Aztec communities sacrificed human beings as offerings to the sun to convey their gratitude to this primary source of life. Therefore, they placed an extreme value on consumption.

14. This is particularly the case with a Calvinist view of economy (Bataille 1991:131).

consumption that serve production as the norm. 'Human activity is not entirely reducible to processes of production and conservation,' explains Bataille (1985:118), '… so-called unproductive expenditures: luxury, mourning, war, cults, monuments, games, spectacles, arts, perverse sexual activity – all these represent activities which, at least in primitive circumstances, have no end beyond themselves.' The human need expressed in these 'unproductive' activities 'remain as great as ever', states Michael Richardson (1994:76) in the context of Bataille's critique, 'but everything is done to divert such activity to the needs of utility rather than accept them for the pure effusion that they are.'

Bataille was fascinated with what was involved in sacrifice – where a generally willing victim was offered up, in other words 'given away' by the community as a whole in order to assure its own welfare. 'The victim is surplus taken from the mass of useful wealth,' writes Bataille (cited in Richardson 1998:63-64); '[s]acrifice is the antithesis of production, which is accomplished with a view to the future; it is consumption that is concerned only with the moment'. Hence, for Bataille the problem of expenditure is inseparable from that of sacrifice. 'Sacrifice was precisely the highest form of expenditure, which involves a consecration of pure loss' (Richardson 1998:61). In Bataille's (1985:119) own words: 'It appears that sacred things are constituted by an operation of loss.'[15] Sacrifice also serves a transgressive function, as it stands for a collective crime that binds the community together and helps control its internal violence, situating it in harmony with cosmic forms. As a result, Bataille states that it is impossible to comprehend sacrifice fully only in terms of the individual victim.

Potlatch, an archaic form of gift-giving practiced by the indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest Coast of North America, is discussed by Bataille as a form of exchange that stands in opposition to the traditional notion of barter.[16] Bataille (1985:121) explains:

> Potlatch excludes all bargaining and, in general, it is constituted by an considerable gift of riches, offered openly and with the goal of humiliating, defying, and obligating a rival. The exchange value of the gift results from the fact that the donee, in order to efface the humiliation and respond to the challenge, must satisfy the obligation (incurred by him at the time of acceptance) to respond later with a more valuable gift.

However, 'the gift is not the only form of potlatch' writes Bataille (1985:121), 'it is equally possible to defy rivals through the spectacular destruction of wealth.'[17]

Bataille believed that sacrifice challenges death because it is an institution of 'pure

15. Bataille (1985:119) refers to western religion to explain the parallel between sacrifice and the principle of loss: 'the success of Christianity must be explained by the value of the theme of the Son of God's ignominious crucifixion, which carries human dread to a representation of loss and limitless degradation'.

16. Bataille draws upon the writings in *The gift* (1925, 1950), a short book by Marcell Mauss, a French sociologist. The book investigates the ways in which the exchange of objects between groups builds social relationships (Bataille 1985:121).

17. Bataille (1985:121) mentions the example of a Tlingit chief who appeared before his rival to slash the throats of some of his own slaves: 'This destruction was repaid at a given date by the slaughter of a greater number of slaves.'

loss'. Human experience, for Bataille, is an experience of limits and 'these limits are defined by the fact that the condition of life for human beings is the recognition of death.' (Richardson 1994:98). Bataille recognises the paradox inherent in humankind's desires regarding death: We wish to live and we fear death, yet, at the same time, myths like those connected to vampirism demonstrate that if there is one thing we fear more than death it is not being able to die.[18] 'Despite this urge to … deny the inevitability of death,' writes Richardson (1994:100-101) with reference to Bataille, 'humans nevertheless pay homage to the ultimate triumph of death and even celebrate it through the festival and through rituals that have the double purpose of binding the community together and recognising the precariousness of the conditions of life. Death is from this perspective the affirmation of life as well as its negation; its consecration as well as its ruin.'

Incidents of sacrifice can be traced in *Golgotha*. Firstly, in the act of transforming genuine human skulls into an art medium, it seems as though the remains of these anonymous individuals are offered up as sacrifices to art. The fact that human remains are for sale in a shop[19] speaks of a contemporary form of sacrifice – victims (willing or not, we do not know) whose bodies are used for the benefit of the needs of others. Secondly, with Cohen ending his journey at Ground Zero – a site loaded with psychological, political, and capitalist tension – he signifies death, and thereby expenditure in its highest form. Cohen's dance on the marble platform at Ground Zero becomes a lament for the victims of the crimes of the capitalist west. The two skulls come to represent the almost 3 000 lives lost in the 9/11 terrorist attacks. With grotesque reminders of the inequalities of human existence on his feet, he mourns the atrocities committed against humanity in general.

The use of human skulls in *Golgotha* reminds one of the tradition of *vanitas* painting.[20] *Vanitas* is Latin for 'emptiness' and loosely translated it refers to the meaninglessness of material life and the transient nature of vanity. It is relevant to compare *Golgotha* to other artworks that also incorporate the symbol of the human skull to express a critique, or celebration, of capital accumulation. A classic example of sixteenth-century *vanitas* painting is Holbein's *The ambassadors* (1533). Firstly, in the foreground of the painting a strange, slanting, oval form reveals itself as a skull when viewed from an angle.[21] It can be read as a *memento mori*: the medieval idea of representing a skull as a continual reminder of the presence of death. This motif of the *memento mori* overlaps with the intention of *vanitas* painting, as paintings in this genre are intended as a reminder of the transience of life, the emptiness of pleasure and the inevitability of death. Secondly, the way that the painting is executed alludes to tremendous wealth. All the objects and textures in the picture are painted with great skill to create the illusion that the viewer is looking at real objects. Even

18. This fear of not dying is emphasised by the fact that in nature, suicide is unique to the human species (Richardson 1994:100).

19. In addition to the SoHo shop front, The Evolution Store also has an online shopping platform. All of their products can be viewed at http://theevolutionstore.com/.

20. *Vanitas* is a symbolic still-life painting genre that originated and flourished in Flanders and the Netherlands in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

21. Holbein's painting is famous for the highly distorted skull in the foreground of the picture. Berger (1972:91) insists that if the skull had been painted like the rest of the objects in the picture, its metaphysical significance would have disappeared: 'it would have become an object like everything else, a mere part of a mere skeleton of a man who happened to be dead.'

though the two ambassadors have a definite presence, the objects and materials that surround them dominate the painting. John Berger (1972:90) states in *Ways of seeing* that from the sixteenth century onwards, oil painting began to celebrate a 'new kind of wealth – which was dynamic and which found its only sanction in the supreme buying power of money'. Before this, works of art also celebrated wealth, but wealth was then a symbol of fixed social and divine order. For this reason, artworks such as Holbein's *The ambassadors* were the first to demonstrate the attractiveness of what money could buy.

Cohen makes a direct reference to the tradition of *vanitas* with his use of skulls as shoes. However, *Golgotha* also makes other, less obvious, allusions to the transient nature of material life. The scenes in *Golgotha* where Cohen is dressed in the corset, crowns and mirrors show close-ups of the artist's figure, thereby drawing attention to his ageing body. *Golgotha* also signals death when Cohen ends his pilgrimage through Manhattan at Ground Zero.

A contemporary artwork that stands in contrast to *Golgotha* in relation to capitalist accumulation is Damien Hirst's infamous sculpture, *For the love of God* (2007). Consisting of a platinum cast of a human skull encrusted with 8 601 diamonds, it communicates an entirely different kind of capitalist excess than *Golgotha*. While Cohen's film mourns capitalist excess as a travesty, *For the love of God* seems to be celebrating it. The excesses of western capitalism are exaggerated in both works, albeit quite differently. Cohen's performance with the skulls can be read as a response to Hirst's infamous sculpture – the economic and socio-cultural moment that produced both works makes it difficult not to think of them as being in dialogue with each other. By spending money to buy human skulls, and, in turn, transforming these objects into an art piece that delivers biting commentary on capitalist accumulation, Cohen ironically subverts the purchasing power of capitalism. I suggest that Cohen enacts Bataille's theory of expenditure by spending money (in the moment of buying the human skulls) for 'pure effusion' – for expenditure – rather than in the service of capitalist accumulation. Hirst's sculpture, on the other hand, is produced as a commodity to circulate within the art market, thereby blatantly serving the interests of capitalism. As a conceptual art piece, *Golgotha* resists circulation in the art market as a commodity; it is critical of the system of capital accumulation, even though it does not fully operate outside of the system.

Distressing as it is to engage with a corpse (and representations of it), Bataille refers to the corpse as a means to differentiate between the sacred and the profane. Dead bodies 'can be dissected and treated as an object of science only to the extent that it passes – even if this scandalizes the devout or superstitious – from

the domain of the sacred to that of the profane' (Bataille 2006:114). Bataille insists that speaking of the sacred requires a recognition that one is still within the area of the profane. The corpse, for example, is considered sacred in most cultural and religious contexts, but it loses its association with the sacred on the dissecting table, 'where it has the status of a profane object, an abstract object, and object of science' (Bataille 2006:114). 'Therefore, it appears that the same object can be both sacred and profane,' according to Bataille (2006:114), 'depending on the situation in which it is located.'[22]

I argue that Cohen's appropriation of the human skulls also transgresses this boundary. The skullettos are sacred in their association with fragile human life and profane in their interchangeability as commodity fetishes. Bataille's (2006:114) philosophy suggests that the profane state is the necessary precondition for the 'abstraction of the object from the totality of being'. This means that an object needs to be in the realm of the profane before its sacredness can be grasped of appropriated. The commodification of the skulls is similarly a 'necessary precondition' for the abstraction of the object into the realm of the sacred through Cohen's ritualistic performance.

In an interview, Tracy Murinik (2004:25) notes that Cohen's works 'test and push some excruciating boundaries: prejudice, injustice, hypocrisy' – Cohen pokes at 'boundaries that are physical, social'. To this remark, Cohen responds: 'For me the question is, "How far can you push without compromise? Where is my compromise? Where is somebody else's?"' (cited in Murinik 2004:75).

Dwarfed and displaced[23] by the superabundant displays of consumer culture, Cohen's precarious 'skulletto' journey through the capitalist setting of Times Square reminds viewers of Fredric Jameson's (1991:6) critique of the 'depthlessness of postmodern culture.'[24] In Jameson's critique of capitalism he introduces the concept of the 'waning of affect' as a feature of the new depthlessness in art attributed to the cultural transformation known as postmodernism (Buchanan 2010:485-486). Even though *Golgotha* can be read as a reaction to the 'depthlessness' of postmodern consumer culture, Cohen's performance can be said to overcome Jameson's concern about the 'waning of affect' that accompanies representations of depthless culture. Cohen's gesture penetrates the surface value of contemporary consumer culture. It is possible that viewers might not necessarily be moved by his macabre trek through consumer culture central, but his arrival at Ground Zero certainly strikes an emotional chord that goes beyond the 'depthlessness' of postmodern culture about which contemporary critics such as Jameson are so concerned.

22. A grim, but compelling, illustration of this is the corpse of a child upon which a scientist works. For the scientist, the body is an anatomical object 'in its concrete totality', whereas for the mother that moment when the body is presented for scholarly observation is 'the totality of being'. 'Without any doubt,' argues Bataille (2006:114), 'her grief will accuse the scientist of placing her child's totality of being at risk. She would, nevertheless, be wrong: the scientist has before him nothing but an abstract concept.'

23. For Cohen, the sense of displacement perhaps also reflects the Diaspora of the Jews. Cohen's Jewish identity is important to him and he often makes viewers aware of this in his other works. In addition, the references to capitalist accumulation perhaps deliver commentary on the stereotypical notion of Jews being money-makers.

24. Fredric Jameson's book *Postmodernism, or, the cultural logic of capitalism* (1984, 1991) investigates the effects that late capitalism has on cultural production. Jameson's analysis of capitalism is grounded in a specifically 1980s understanding of postmodernism, and his perspective on global capitalism is historically and culturally specific.

In the context of an analysis of *Golgotha*, it is important to reiterate Bataille's loathing of the focus on capital accumulation in western civilisation, and the fact that with the advent of capitalism, people were encouraged to save for the future rather than live optimally in the present. As mentioned previously, Bataille's aim is to prove that it is not scarcity that governs our condition, but that excessive production is the primary problem, as it is in the nature of the world and human beings to produce a surplus. Therefore, Bataille asserts that the real problem facing capitalist society is to learn how to spend the surplus that we naturally produce.

Through a theoretically informed analysis of *Golgotha*, I contend that Cohen's ritualistic performance with the commercially acquired human skulls can be read as a cultural critique of capitalism. To a certain extent Cohen's performance can be seen as an enactment of the 'principle of loss' Bataille talks about, as he highlights the excess of capitalist culture through the means of aesthetically transgressive representation. The controversial staging of his body as a site of conflict in the streets of New York City recalls Bataille's insistence that the excess of capitalist culture should be spent lavishly and catastrophically, 'with no other reason than a desire to do so' (Richardson 1998:79).

Cohen's visceral performance exudes a poetic and complex engagement with the themes of capitalist excess and death. Collapsing the boundaries between public and private, Cohen's poignant performance manages to represent excess and death in a cathartic, almost liberating way. '*Golgotha*, it seems' states Cohen in a reflection on the work, 'was more rebirth than death after all' (cited in Blignaut 2011).

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