

Muscle jew and the monument: excercises in materiality

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This paper situates a critical and reflexive reference to my own recent explorations with the body and the Monument in two video performance works: 'Muscle and Jew and the Voortrekker Monument' (2012) and 'Muscle Jew and The Miners' (2013). It is in the cross mediations of reflection and politic and autobiographical trajectories that produce a distorted and spontaneous similitude (association) of enactments occurring as re-enactment of engagement between the body and the Monument.

Key words: Performance, body, monument.

Muscle jew et le monument: exercice dans la matérialité

Cet essai se pose comme référence critique et réflexive à ma récente exploration du corps et du monument réalisée à travers deux performances vidéo : *Muscle Jew et le monument Voortrekker* (2012) ainsi que *Muscle Jew et les mineurs* (2013). Une réflexion liée à des références donent lieu à des simulacres spontanés et détournés de représentations qui se produisent en tant que reconstitution d'un engagement entre le corps et le monument.

Mots clés: Performance, corps, monument.



Figure 1

'Muscle Jew' as presented as an example of an exercise in materiality, *South African Journal of Art History Conference, Nelson Mandela University, Port Elizabeth 2013*.

(Source: Author's own image)

Muscle jew: a collective response to the subjective

'You, or your group allow another to find you, and in so doing, you find both the other and yourself' (Mirzoeff 2011: 474).

'The reflexive project of the self, which consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives, takes place in the context of multiple choice as filtered through abstract systems (Giddens 1991:5).

This essay forms part of a larger research based performance project that speaks of the re-narration of the self through a series of reflexive inter-disciplinary interventions occurring alongside material sites of history that include monuments and events. The performances as projects consider how identity might be subverted as much as inverted as an exchange of sublimation between the material and the subjective. Recognition as a subjective act is not ‘a reflection of the creator’s identity, a representation of some imagined “internal” self, but rather as a deliberate inscription and dissemination of non normative discursive identities’ (Baker 2010:21). Recognition is made from an understanding of what these discursive moments are—in the interplay between innate identity and the reveal of that innateness from a performance type that sublimation, as performance, would also imply. To reveal from within the exchange of identities is to understand a process of performative sublimation as a collective and subjective response to the material thus making these responses exercises in materiality. As Hannah Arendt suggests in her essay; ‘The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition’ (2007), in which she reworks examples of Jewish stereotypes as a sublimating act towards becoming ‘a human type’ (2007: 276). It is how the idea of the pariah evolves as human with which Arendt exemplifies in very particular kinds of stereotypical tropes. These serve as modes of resistance and sublimation, both as theoretical underpinnings and generators of research, for if the pariah is consciously realized it could be becomes a fluid type of category informed also by resisting against the material presence of history.

As part of this larger research project are two recent telematic performances created by the collective *Against Jealousy* of ‘Muscle Jew and The Voortrekker Monument’ (2012) and ‘Muscle Jew and The Miners’ (2013). The works are consciously articulated engagements with a careful yet provactive study into the relationship between otherness and authority. *Against Jealousy* is a collective made up of Dean Hutton, John Trengove and the author, Myer Taub, whose primary collaborative project is the ‘Muscle Jew’ video art works. As telematic performance works they are video art works and registers of the political and personal development as artists, collaborators and activists; one that makes a practice of intervention, on the landscape of history, and memory and otherness as something that is situated as play.

And within the act of playing, reconstructed in the interplay between materiality and history, namely the body and the monument is the broader statement or question of how to re-engage with the traditions of the heritage site, the monument, the museum and/or gallery in order produce alternate dramatic encounters and performance. For it is in these dramatic encounters that challenge convention by producing alternate and empowering ways of telling stories in spaces that are governed by place, by histories, and by events.

The works already made-speak to notions of ownership and otherness; materiality and an engagement with the non-material, themes that are inherent within the interdisciplinary events that occur alongside this ongoing project of video performance works

Muscle Jew is a video-ed, archived, performance-character whose performative subversions of his own histories include: a whimsical homage to comedy and buffoonery; a reflexive interrogation of the self upon the landscape of history and exposure of the historical trope, monument or memorial. Is it a simple yet complex interrogation. It is a playful relationship with history that suggests something about the historical site and the being of the body, as a tacit physical responsive relationship—by the body responding to the monument, evoked by memory and imagining and the monument re-revealed by the body because of their juxtaposition.

The name ‘Muscle Jew’ is also an embodiment and provocation of an universal contemporary experience in order to counter the exclusivity of a monument belonging to one particular historical experience and imagining: (this is also a reworking of the historical origins of the term ‘Muscle Jew’ as both as an imaginary historical construct and a historically grounded ideal—one that emerged from, participated in, extended and justified a range of discourses concerned with the politics of regeneration.)

There is a doubling here, of differences, of Muscle, and of Jew, of body and of monument, presented in a kind of generative terminology, both in the construction of the imaginary and the sublimation of history, of what the project attempts to be as an interconnection between the self and the other. This is reflexive and collaborative project, a project of the double narrative space that suggests ways to visualize the self, beyond limitations that have been made through others and ourselves, by reimagining these limitations.

As a comedic type Muscle Jew is also a dreamer. The *schlemiel* who is at first the fool. This is drawn from Hannah Arendt’s essay *The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition* (2007) where Arendt proposed how the pariah if self consciously realized, becomes more of a fluid type of stereotypical categorization that could be self-informed, similarly resisting against the presence of history (Arendt 2007: 275–297). Here the self-conscious realization is like Arendt’s example of the *schlemiel* as a “‘lord of dreams’ who stands outside the real world and attacks it from without” (Arendt 2007:280). Similarly the character of the “Muscle Jew” is an innocent, bumbling, fitness fanatic *who happens* to stumble on the monument; so as the monument becomes a prop to the exercise suggesting an objective amplification of the monument by a naïve but also ironic resistance to it.

Muscle jew and its histories

‘We must think of creating again a Jewry of muscles’ (Nordau 1903).

‘The Jewish experience turns out to embody the universally modern experience of isolation and alienation in intensified form because of Judaism’s special historical circumstances’ (Olin 1996: 52).

‘He loose himself in the object in order to annihilate his subjectivity’ (Simone De Beauvoir 1949).

Muscle jews or *Muskeljudentum* emerged as an appeal for the regeneration of European Jewry at the end of the nineteenth century, (emerging in the aftermath of the trial of Alfred Dreyfus in France). It was term invented by Max Nordau, who as deputy to Theodore Herzl, founder of Zionist movement, constructed a symbol of supposed strength and heroic salubrity and applied it to the preconceived body of the Jew as a weak one.

For no other people will gymnastics fulfill a more educational purpose than for us Jews. It shall straighten us in body and in character. It shall give us self-confidence, although our enemies maintain that we already have to much self-confidence as it is (Nordau 1903).

This application of historical difference – of Muscle and of Jew – evolved from an emerging resistance to anti-Semitism, as much as from a fear of degeneration, as well as the call to colonize Palestine as part of a pioneering movement that utilized physical labor as part of a political and symbolic agenda. Muscle Jew represented an idealized form of masculinity, according to Daniel Boyarin, ‘the dawning ideal of the “New Jewish man”, the Muscle Jew, is a figure almost identical to his “Aryan” confreres and especially the “Muscular Christian” also born about this time’ (1997: 37). Implements of modernity such as virility, strength, enterprise and politic inform the Muscle Jew as a term of contestation. ‘The aesthetics of power were matched by

the aesthetics of the body not simply as form but as affect and need' says Mirzoeff (2011: 4) in the context of cementing the operation of power by classifying through the aestheticization of the body. This kind of operation might extend towards the interplay and counter-play of body, aesthetic and politic in the difficult terminologies that are activated by Muscle Jew by becoming a monument in and of itself. I say this, not only in reference to its inherent difficult terminologies, for them being complex, but also in referring to Todd Samuel Presner who monumentalizes Muscle Jew as both as an 'imaginary construct' and a 'historically grounded ideal', one that emerged from, participated in, extended and justified a range of discourses concerned with the politics of regeneration' (2007: 12–13). However in extending the notion of regeneration beyond the exclusivity of one culture or race, demands the appropriation of Muscle Jew as an embodiment of a universal contemporary experience in order to counter its exclusivity as a monument belonging to one particular historical experience and imagining.

If one is to consider anything from the appropriation of Muscle Jew, then it is to extend its context beyond the expectations of regeneration onto the possibility of how the conceptual form might inform more universal concepts of regeneration that endorse not merely obvious and traditional specific historical contexts. In doing so, the term might invert on itself because sublimation suggests how it might become its own chastiser to its own point of origin, while similarly pointing to the universality of experience. Therefore, this kind of retransmission of terms informs a new emerging terminology as ironic. In doing so, there is a right to look back at the term's histories and interconnections in order to reinvent it as a term that assumes new forms. Alternate forms might destabilize rather than endorse the apparent hegemonic operations of power and classification inherent within traditional Jewish and Zionist identities. Firstly, by referring to Nordau's observation of the emancipation of European Jewry as a moment that meant that Jews were allowed 'space for bodies to live again' (1903), means engaging with this idea of freedom and space as way to interrogate, as much provide a function in destabilizing the authority of one particular kind of viewership that demarcates space through classification and control. The suggestive act of destabilizing and the displacement of authoritarian space allows for a space for all our bodies to live again. Secondly, to interrogate how the term is historically made might revoke difference in its own naming. Thereafter to position it as a term of fissure and as an activator of ideas, then its application alongside the fixity of place broaden the notions of space. In order to do is to locate an affinity to a queer agenda, particularly of nomadism, dispossession and disorientation, and importantly to failure in reading Judith Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011). In doing so, the term also finds a likely accordance alongside Arendt's pariah figure of the suspect.

Arendt describes the pariah type of the suspects by drawing comparisons to Charlie Chaplin:

To be sure, he too is a schlemiel, but of the old visionary type, not a secret fairy prince, a protégé of Phoebus Apollo. Chaplin's world is of the earth, grotesquely caricatured if you will, but nevertheless, hard and real (2007:286).

It is a 'hostile world (Arendt 2007: 287).

...his conflicts with it may assume a manifold variety of forms, but always and everywhere he is under suspicion (Arendt 2007: 286).

The point of his charm, albeit suspicious, is one of innocence. There is an irreverence and unsuspecting quality that plays at the suspect being unaware of his own embodiment of the suspect; it is a treatment that is 'both warm and convincing' (Arendt 2007: 287). And even though 'he is able to get away with a great deal' (Arendt 2007: 287), there is also 'expression

of the dangerous incompatibility of general laws with individual misdeeds' (Arendt 2007: 287). Arendt considers this to be a kind of impudence, although charming it is also:

... a worried, careworn impudence—the kind so familiar to generations of Jews, the effrontery of the poor “Little Yid” who does not recognize the class order of the world because he sees in it neither order nor justice for himself (Arendt 2007: 288).

Consciously drawing on this figure, in the making of its persona meant finding a correspondence with Halberstam's theories around queer failure. Halberstam states that:

... under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing might in fact offer more creative, more surprising ways of being in the world (Halberstam 2011:2).

Therefore in the case of the re-embodiment of the Muscle Jew, as an ironic symbol of universal regeneration, is also to paraphrase some of Halberstam's terms of failure; he is not athletic, strong or even muscular but is stupid, a failure, non-athletic and with little prowess, a figure that is 'resistant to mastery and is 'anti-discipline', is 'frivolous, promiscuous, and irrelevant, also lost, naïve, nonsensical, unaware and innocent. His only dependence is on the monument, a site that he encounters not by chance but in qualification. It is a relationship that informs his 'illegibility' onto the site and to history. This 'illegibility' counters the manipulation of the monument and within this interaction the monument is provoked to reconsider its own hegemonies of regulation, control and authority (Halberstam 2007: 1–15).

Arendt's figure of the suspect and Halberstam's notion of failure relate to how Judith Butler's 'constitutive acts' (1988: 519) is often used in performance terms to describe how the body performs prescribed acts of societal routines. Being conscious of these prescribed routines as an emplacement of prescribed reactions to what memorializing might invoke, means a conscious re-alteration of the constitutive act. The conventional constitutive act in the case of myself performing alongside the monument occurs when the body engages with the monument as a constructed site of memory and place (see Pearson and Shanks 2001: 121). The body performs prescribed expectations alongside the monument but in doing so also becomes part of the performed text as a temporal absorption into the text of the monument. Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks have suggested how 'architectural surface and closure might necessitate and prescribe certain altered bodily behaviors and bodily orientations' (2001: 121), thus the monument's constructed materialism is a catalytic starting point for how the body will respond to the monument. But in doing so the body, as in the activating of both the figure of the suspect and the figure of failure, means not only a conscious absorption of difference but also embodies a response to how these differences might occur as exercises of materiality. There is a reconfigured relationship of body and image and space that occurs in this engagement alongside the monument.

The body as it is absorbed into the text of materiality at the monument also becomes a counter to this text; not merely losing itself in the object but by countering the object, the object extends into both a transmission of materiality of both body and monument. This engagement is uneasy and dramatic, the body is fluid and temporal while the monument appears fixed. It is this uneasiness that is exemplified by what Laurie Beth Clark indicates as 'placed', 'displaced', and 'placeless' memorials [that] create social spaces in which spectators embody and enact memory' (2006: 129).

To do this is to reconsider the act of memorializing itself, so as to paraphrase Halberstam:

It becomes a way of resisting the heroic and grand logic of recall and unleashes new forms of memory that relate more to spectrality than to hard evidence, to lost genealogies than to inheritance, to erasure than to inscription (Halberstam 2007: 15).

The moment the body engages with monument its unsettles both its own innate histories alongside the emplaced histories of the monument, suggesting an interplay between subjective histories and material histories that are sublimated into performed roles of identities alongside acts of provocation and play. It is this exchange that produces a distorted and spontaneous similitude (association) of enactments occurring as re-enactments.

Muscle jew and the monument

‘The Monument has elements of the pyramids and the Zimbabwe ruins. This makes it typically African. It as massive and simple as the Voortrekkers themselves’ (Marx citing Moerdyk 2008:280).



Figure 2
‘Muscle Jew and the Voortrekker Monument’: Work Will Set You Free
(video still, *Against Jealousy*, 2012)

There has been two archival video performance works of the Muscle Jew project. This is an ongoing project determined by a narrative trajectory that begins in South Africa, with its particular historical antecedents in relation to heritage, identity and memory. The first work, ‘Muscle Jew and The Voortrekker Monument’ (2012) situated the figure of the Muscle Jew alongside the Voortrekker monument as an exercise in materiality and an experiment in countering the prescribed constitutive acts that occur when body and monument meet. The figure in this first incarnation translates as suspect in Arendt’s terms and failure in relation to Halberstams

theory of failure. It was a work that set out to re-alter not only a response to the monument but to reconfigure exclusivity and the authority of historical figures' lexicon determinations. An analysis so as to reflect upon style, composition and is not the mandate of it's co-creator or its collective but rather one that is to reflexively consider how both body and monument might reconfigure in a translation of their correspondence to each other. This might be obvious that the monument does not change and that it is fixed; only in the transient exchange with the other might change occur.

Christoph Marx says: 'Not only in its architecture but in its symbolism too the religious undertones are evident; the Voortrekker Monument is less a monument than a nationalist temple' (2008:280). In the context of the performance work, situated within this symbolic manifestation of religion and nationhood is the paradoxical symbol of the pariah like 'Muscle Jew', also a symbol of inherited religion and nationhood, whose interrupted moments of exercises at the monument interrupt inheritance into an inverted state of unsettled subjective identities.

Muscle jew and the event

'Events, by definition, are occurrences that interrupt routine processes and routine procedures' (Arendt 1970: 7).

'The right to look confronts the police who say to us, "move on, there's nothing to see here." Only there is, we know it, and so do they' (Mirzoeff 2011: 474).



Figure 3
Muscle Jew and the Miners
(Screen Grab from video-still, *Against Jealousy*, 2013)

The second work in the series, ‘Muscle Jew and the Miners’ (2013) performed at the Miners Monument in Johannesburg is a direct response to the recent and uncomfortable event in South Africa’s present history. That is the shooting of 34 striking mineworkers by the South African police force near the Marikana platinum mine in August 2012. This example of brutality raises not only specters from South Africa’s violent and unpleasant past but also suggests a difficult, if not incomplete moment of the present. The video work intervenes with material emplacements of power and authority situated in the places of memorializing and the monument. The work intends to honor that intent and the severity of the Marikana event and unlike the previous performance work suggests something incomplete and menacing. The work video is a text of distorted sounds distilled from actual cellphone recordings of the police shooting and visual ellipsis captured alongside the everyday mundane moments of exercise. Peter Alexander says ‘The Marikana Massacre was ghastly’ (2012:155). This written reflection of the performance response to Marikana (evoked in the ‘Muscle Jew’ video work) wants to speak directly to Alexander’s sentiment; that if these performance works are interpretive injunctions against historical materialism than they as performance utterances are a subjective sublimation of brutal events like Marikana that do not end, so instead are presently situated in an inconclusive positioning of events as the event continues to unfold; as to suggest—to paraphrase Andrew Webb citing Judith Butler how the performance act exceeds ‘the moment it occasions’ (2013:90).

Notes

- 1 The two video works can be seen at the following links: http://youtu.be/exiDzC_rmUc; and <http://youtu.be/RzKM2NJulag>.
- 2 *Against Jealousy*: as a name was inspired from an incense brand to suggest resistance to acts of jealousy in order to provide a counter insurgency to the centralized and conformist modes of thinking and doing. A name that rejects jealousy for sake of love and for the sake of countering coveting because it is a commoditizer of creativity, an enclosure inciting alienation and producer of anxiety. Acts against jealousy are evoked in order to activate political, intellectual and aesthetic risks, and also aim to reconsider pillaging and proliferating as acts that do not merely suggest subjugation, but are acts of salvation and redemption.
- 3 Muscle jews or *Muskeljudentum* emerged as an appeal for the regeneration of European Jewry at the end of the nineteenth century, (emerging in the aftermath of the trial of Alfred Dreyfus in France). It was term invented by Max Nordau, who as deputy to Theodore Herzl, founder of Zionist movement, constructed a symbol of supposed strength and heroic salubrity and applied it to the preconceived body of the Jew as a weak one.
- 4 Arendt (2007:277) cites Heinrich Heine for the origin of this Yiddish word. She writes how Heine relates ‘schlemiel’ to the humorous supposition in the Biblical Book of Numbers, whereby Shelumeil ben Zurishadai as the leader of the tribe of Simeon, by standing too close to his brother chieftain Zimri, he got himself killed accidentally when Zimri was beheaded by the priest Phinehas for dallying with a Midianite woman.
- 5 The Voortrekker Monument was the realization of the national Voortrekker movement to coincide with the centenary of the Great Trek (1835–1854), and is also considered to be a tribute to the Voortrekker victory of the Zulus at the Battle of Blood River (16 December 1838). It is referred to as a symbol of Afrikaans nationalism. The site of the monument is situated on a hill in Pretoria called Monument Hill. The architect is Gerard Moerdijk, whose design is a 62-meter cubic shrine, made of granite and ringed by a laager of 64 synthetic ox wagons. The cube is designed in such a way that on 16 December the sun shines through the oculus in the vaulted roof of the hall of the monument so as to illuminate the inscription *Ons vir jou Suid Afrika* carved upon the sarcophagus in the basement symbolizing the Voortrekker heroes. At the four external corners of the monument are the statues of Piet Retief, Andries Pretorius, Henrik Potgeiter and an unknown Voortrekker hero. The monument is derivative in design of the Völkerschlagsdenkmal, the monument of the Battles of Nations in Leipzig (See Ferreira 1975: 4–5; Marx 2008:277–280; Peters 2012: 221–2; Picton-Seymour 1989: 162; Witz 2003: 95–100 for more on the Monument).
- 6 The Miners Monument in Braamfontein, Johannesburg was sculpted by David F. Macgregor and was presented to the city in 1964. (see [O]: www.allatsea.co.za). The monument pays tribute to Johannesburg’s mining origins. The group of gold miners represents a typical underground team of 1936. They face west towards Langlaagte where the Main reef was discovered in 1886 (see [O]: blueplaques.co.za).

7 For more of account of this event, see: *Marikana: Voices from South Africa's Mining Massacre* (Alexander et al 2013).

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