

'Material Girls': Linger in the presence of the material sublime

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Abstract

By exploring selected, recent works produced by amongst others Zanele Muholi, Nandipha Mntambo, Tracey Rose and Leora Farber it is the aim of this essay to trace *a possible resurgence of the real* through the depiction of the corporeal in their work. The artists have been selected because their work provide a fecundity of 'corporeal realness' or corpo(real)ity. The exploration is further layered by inquiring how the resurgence of the real corresponds to the aesthetic category of the material sublime. The material sublime dates from the nineteenth century as has been regarded as a sub-theory within the broader classical sublime. It is argued that the material sublime together with contemporary feminist theorists e.g. Bonnie Mann, Karen Barad, Elizabeth Wilson and Vicky Kirby, provide a useful lens for re-thinking the engagement between matter and discourse. It is in particular through the resilient flesh represented in Muholi's, Mntambo's and Farber's work, that they and their subjects are turned into what can be playfully termed 'Material Girls'.

Key words

material sublime, classical sublime, corporeality, matter, materiality, the real, feminist theory

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Language matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters.
There is an important sense in which the only thing that
does not seem to matter anymore is matter.

(Karen Barad 2003: 801)

The matter at issue is very much the issue,
the bodying forth, of matter.

(Vicky Kirby 1997: 80).

In 1990 amidst the high tide of postmodern deliberations on the 'loss of the real', Linda Brooks, in a carefully delineated argument on the eighteenth-century material sublime, ends off by musing how in our present time 'the ground or the fiction of "real" presence has, at least for the time being, been set aside' (1990: 961). Reflecting on Brooks's assertion, I cannot help but wonder twenty years on, whether the tide has not changed again and if the fiction of 'real' presence is not upon us once more. Thus, my interest here in the material sublime is a precarious effort to outline the status of 'real' presence and by implication the material realm, for the time being, at least. Coinciding with the post-liberation era in South Africa, it is my contention that post-9/11 the 'real' is differently positioned now than twenty years ago.

By exploring selected, recent works produced by, amongst others, South African artists Zanele Muholi, Nandipha Mntambo, Tracey Rose and Leora Farber, I trace *a possible resurgence of the real* through the depiction of the corporeal in their work. The artists have been selected because their work provide a fecundity of 'corporeal realness' or corpo(real)ity. Although, conflating the real with the corporeal may be a slippery gesture, they do operate in the same order of things or rather form part of the same enveloping 'flesh' in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological project. For Merleau-Ponty, 'consciousness [is] caught up in the ambiguity of corporeality, directed toward a world of which it is inextricably and materially a part,' write Stanton B. Garner (1993: 448). In other words, viewed phenomenologically, real and corpo(real) are always already inextricably meshed together.

My exploration is complicated, furthermore, by inquiring how the resurgence of the real corresponds to the aesthetic category of the material sublime.¹ I argue that the material sublime provides a useful, although perhaps not obvious, lens for re-thinking the engagement between ‘things’ (ontology) and ‘words’ (epistemology). Contra the classical Kantian sublime, the material sublime offers a framework of how the interaction between ‘things’ and ‘words’ can be understood and interpreted differently than merely being split into separate spheres. It is from this different thinking of ‘things’ and ‘words’ together, as suggested in the material sublime, that my analysis takes its cue.

Undoubtedly, this inquiry comes at a time when the body (as placeholder for the real) is for the most part understood as a hollow signifier stretched over an endless network of possibilities as patently evident in consumerist ‘make-over’ phenomena.² In fact, in our contemporary ‘liquid lives’ (cf Baumann 2005),³ it would be more apt to note that ‘the human body is effectively and steadily reduced to just another interface or a “second life”’ (Du Preez 2009: xi). Perhaps (phrased even more cynically), given the popularity of the *avatar* phenomenon lately, corporeal existence can effectively be condensed into an animated avatar? Contingent on these conditions, it is in particular through the resilient flesh represented in Muholi’s, Mntambo’s and Farber’s work, that they and their subjects are turned into what can be playfully termed ‘Material Girls’.⁴

A resurgence of the real: how does matter come to matter again?

In a recent re-assessment of the status of the real post-9/11, entitled *The spirit of terrorism* (2002), Jean Baudrillard – sage of the simulacrum – comes to the conclusion that the new regime of terrorism has toppled globalist optimisms and that the ‘real’ has returned (in some form at least). Baudrillard explains: ‘What happens then to the real event, if everywhere the image, the fiction, the virtual, infuses reality? In this present case (9/11), one might perceive (maybe with a certain relief) *a resurgence of the real*, and of the violence of the real, in a supposedly virtual universe’ (2002: 27, emphasis added). Naturally, Baudrillard does not concede that the real has returned innocently or simplistically, in fact, he continues by adding:

The collapse of the towers of the World Trade Center is unimaginable, but that is not enough to make it a real event. A surplus of violence is not enough to open up reality. For reality is a principle, and this principle is lost. Real and fiction are inextricable, and the fascination of the attack is foremost the fascination by the image (the consequences, whether catastrophic or leading to jubilation are themselves mostly imaginary).

It is therefore a case where the real is added to the image as a terror bonus, as yet another thrill. It is not only terrifying, it is even real. It is not the violence of the real that is first there, with the added thrill of the image; rather the image is there first, with the added thrill of the real. (2002: 29, emphasis added)

Thus, even if, the reality principle has been lost, it cannot preclude reality from appearing as a bonus or even a 'thrill' added to the image of terror. Although initially overshadowed by the image (simulacrum), the real succeeds in emerging again as excessive by-product. Therefore, one may read into Baudrillard's conjecture of 'a *resurgence of the real*' that it heralds a 'breach' or some form of rupturing to the simulacral vitrine through which the real is now messily seeping.⁵

In concurrence with Baudrillard's postulation about the possible *resurgence of the real*, comes current research of feminist scholars exploring the boundaries between the social sciences and technosciences, or for the purposes here, between representationalism and the real/matter/nature. By means of different projects, but with very similar conclusions, feminist scholars such as Donna Haraway ('situated knowledges' (1997)),⁶ Katherine Hayles ('embodied virtuality' (1996)), Iris Young ('lived body' (2005)), Rosi Braidotti ('enfleshed subjectivity' (2002)), Elizabeth Grosz ('embodied subjectivity' (1994)); and recently, Vicky Kirby (2002), Karen Barad (1998), Isabelle Stengers (2000), Elizabeth Wilson (2004) and Bonnie Mann (2006) (to mention only a few), all dare to enquire about the status of the corpo(real).⁷

Investigating the material and corporeal realms are, however, not a very popular undertaking in contemporary poststructuralist feminisms and usually discrediting accusations of essentialism are quick to follow such ventures. As Mann recounts the curse of essentialism in feminist theory: "Essentialism" functioned for a time hegemonically, and still tends to function as a sort of scarlet letter, alerting all around to the moral danger of association with those who wear it' (2006: 8). This is not to oppose the valuable critique offered by non-essentialists on careless generalisations made in the name of the 'real'. In

fact, perfunctory references to 'essences', such as woman or man, need to be treated cautiously as evidenced in the heated essentialism/non-essentialism debate.⁸ I am, however, in agreement with Mann that in our time the 'forgetfulness of women [and] nature' (2006: xiii) has led to a general forgetfulness of the necessary conditions for our material existence. What is more, our time is marked by a general forgetfulness of place and earth with all the subsequent disastrous consequences of such a forgetting. In other words, keeping non-essentialist criticism in mind, it cannot be denied, however, that even 'postmodernism has material conditions' (Mann 2006: xiii). Or that postmodernism is fixated on a fantasy that defies 'the historicity, the mortality, and, indeed, the very materiality of the body' (Bordo 1993: 245). In effect, postmodernism's response to its own founding material conditions can broadly be divided into either choosing to forget these material conditions spectacularly while opting for a disembodied virtual existence, or embracing the loss of the real through nihilistic extreme activities.⁹ Both endeavours leave the postmodern subject in an awkward position in terms of its own embodied materiality.

Attempting to remind again of our founding material conditions – our embodiment – Wilson warns: 'It is my concern that we have come to be astute about the body while being ignorant about anatomy and that feminism's relations to biological data have tended to be skeptical or indifferent rather than speculative, engaged, fascinated, surprised, enthusiastic, amused, or astonished' (2004: 69). Wilson calls for 'gut feminism' or feminist analysis of biomedical theories by considering the biological stratum when researching (predominantly female) diseases such as hysteria and other eating disorders. It is Wilson's contention that if feminism were to align itself with biological sciences it 'could build conceptual schemata about the body that are astute both politically and biologically' (2004: 86).

Similarly Barad develops a highly sophisticated framework of 'material-discursive intra-activity'¹⁰ based on physicist Niels Bohr's philosophy-physics in order to counter the overwhelming flood of social representationalism or cultural constructivism, on the one hand, and traditional realism, on the other. Barad proposes 'a richer account of materiality' (1998: 89) and attempts to articulate 'how matter comes to matter' (1998: 91). Space does not allow for a detailed discussion here, but suffice to say that Barad does not want to

return to a naïve and unmediated position in terms of materiality. Rather, she questions the emphatic emphasis placed on discursivity while the material is constantly relegated to mere citation.

Kirby, like Barad, suggests ‘that nature scribbles, [and] that flesh reads’ (Kirby 2002: 278), which means that Kirby allows for ‘nature’s literacy’ (2002: 279). Matter is not an inarticulate thing, but a clever writing – ‘an outside [to language] that reads’ (Kirby 2002: 279) and together matter and language creates a ‘corporeography’.¹¹ If matter (nature) is valued as writing outside culture, as Kirby suggests, ‘[p]erhaps the politics of the subject can be *substantially* reconceived’ (Kirby 1997: 161, emphasis in the original) if we dare ‘to open the question of matter’ (Kirby 1997: 160) again.

What feminist theorists, such as Kirby, Barad and Wilson, therefore explore is another way of dealing with materiality. They suggest a process that may lead beyond the impasse of ‘no outside to the text’, on the one hand, and a missionary belief in having direct access to things, on the other hand. The suggestion made by these theorists is that matter is not a mute pre-given or a mere functionality of language, but it acts as an intelligent and active co-author of the life world we experience every day.

The material sublime: giving form to the formless

My interest now shifts towards the category of the nineteenth-century material sublime exactly because it may assist in foregrounding and re-addressing, together with the feminist theorists discussed above, the material realm in our times. The material sublime – as can already be detected from its name – offers an ontologically engaged and phenomenologically contextualised encounter with overwhelming materiality that differs considerably from the predominant epistemological classical sublime as put forward by Immanuel Kant. Even though, a number of theorists view the material sublime as a bastardisation of the transcendent sublime (cf Weiskel 1976), it is more correct to state that ‘the material sublime [is] always already embedded within the discourse of the transcendental sublime’ (Pipkin 1998: 597). In some ways the material sublime can

possibly be described as 'other' to the classical sublime, reminding it of its own corpo(real)ity.

The British Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge coined the term 'material sublime' in 1822 while appraising the German philosopher and poet Friedrich Schiller's dramas (Stokoe 1926, 135).¹² Coleridge used the term in a derogative sense when he made negative reference to the Schiller's dramas that apparently invested too much in a spectacularised corporeality, and too little in the intellect. The material sublime as embodied in Schiller's dramas was thought to be 'a kind of debased spectacle: specifically, with crude theatricality and sensationalism' and 'a vitiating, privative and expropriatory simulacrum of the sublime' (Vine 2002: 237). Clearly, the material sublime – looking to the experiential and material world for inspiration – stood starkly in contrast to the transcendental Kantian sublime, with its vestiges of rational epistemology founded upon the inner sanctum of the subject. Whereas the Kantian sublime appealed to the intellectual and inner eye, or the supersensible, the material sublime corresponded with the base corpo(real) and sensuous eye (cf. Jones 2004: 360). John Pipkin identifies the material sublime as follows: 'If, as I will argue, the rhetorical success of the transcendental sublime is dependent upon the poet's successful suppression of encroaching material forces in Romantic texts, then the "material sublime" denotes those moments either when the physical world announces itself within the textual gesture toward transcendence, effectively disrupting the act of suppression, or when the text itself foregrounds the materiality upon which the sublime experience is based' (Pipkin 1998: 599).

Thus, instead of suppressing the 'encroaching material forces' through disinterested transcendence, the act of suppression is disrupted by either announcing the physical world in 'the textual gesture towards transcendence' or through foregrounding the materiality of the encounter in the text, according to Pipkin.¹³ Accordingly, the material sublime encounter is announced and foregrounded through text. We should note, however, that originally the material sublime applied solely to literature and not the visual. (It is the task of my analysis of the visual later on, to make some suggestions of how the material sublime can be utilised.) Walking the tightrope between self-annihilation and self-preservation, the poet/artist turns the material sublime event with the formless (transcendent, sublime)

pressing dangerously close into poetics (beautiful form).¹⁴ Importantly, in the sublime encounter, a dialogical interaction is constituted between form (containable form and thus femaleness) and the formless (uncontainable formlessness and hence maleness), meaning that form verges on the formless, whilst simultaneously the formless erupts into form.¹⁵

In order to explain further the dialogue between form and the formless, it may be worthwhile to mention another variation on the material sublime as put forward by Johann Gottfried Herder, student of Kant.¹⁶ In brief: Herder questions the unattainability of the 'purely rational morality' of Kantian reason for 'us as sensible beings' (Zuckert 2003: 218). In fact, Herder argues that a 'formless' object in nature is a contradiction in terms – 'no object, no aspect of nature, can be understood as formless' (Herder 1800: 877–878). Art works, precisely give 'form to great, potentially incomprehensible things such as death, divinity, fate, and infinity' (Herder 1800: 904). It is thus, because we are embodied beings in the world, Herder argues that we understand sublime experiences. It is precisely, because we as humans add a sensible measure to the experiences of the sublime that they become meaningful (Zuckert 2003: 219), whereas in the Kantian account, we are required to act as disembodied and dislodged creatures in order to make sense of the sublime. In perhaps the greatest opposition to Kant, Herder states: 'We belong to nature, we can know no sublime fully beyond her' (Herder 1800: 898). Herder's critique of Kant's sublime places emphasis on the embodied and experiential (thus phenomenological) aspects of the sublime encounter. It is through giving form to the formless that we make sense of sublime experiences and if this is not the case, Herder argues, the interaction cannot be deemed uplifting (as presumed in the disembodied Kantian version).

To summarise: the material sublime dismantles the classical sublime by putting considerable emphasis on the phenomenological encounter and finding ways of giving form to the formless. It does so by rooting the experience in the embodied corpo(real)ity of human existence. During this confrontation, the subject meets with an(other) that in its material thingness cannot be contained, transcended or avoided.¹⁷ This does not mean that the encounter should not be spoken of or given representational form. In fact, following Herder, we can only feel uplifted if the event is given form, not in order to contain it, but to make roughly sense of the initial awe.

Applying the aesthetic category of the material sublime to visual examples may prove difficult, as already hinted at previously. Not only was the category of the material sublime mostly applied to literature, but the images and artworks discussed here, are already mediated and thus part of language. I cannot but reflect on their materiality by making use of language again. As suggested by Herder, this means that the material event can only be shown in and through language, and in this case visual language. Acknowledging the indebtedness to language, though, does not lessen the ‘realness’ of the matter at hand. Perhaps this is so because the bodies referred to here (in language) evokes the so-called elemental ‘third term’ or ‘flesh’ in phenomenological terms. Maurice Merleau-Ponty as the most important representative of this strand of phenomenology understands flesh as a chiasm dialogically connecting opposites: ‘The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. To designate it, we should need the old term “element” in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of a general thing. ... The flesh is in this sense an “element of Being”’ (Merleau-Ponty 1964; 1968: 138).

In accordance with Merleau-Ponty then, the fleshy subjects selected here for analysis all push the boundaries set up between ‘words’ and ‘things’, mind and matter, in their unique manifestations. In other words, I have not merely selected ‘flesh’ on display to put forward my argument, but the flesh selected bears on language in a very pertinent way. For instance, in the case of gendered outlaws as represented in Muholi’s images, their unwanted flesh pushes on language forcibly. Their flesh can even be said to disrupt the ‘words’ used to describe and contain them. In a similar fashion, Mntambo’s cowhides evoke a very vivid and embodied reaction from her audience, even if only through their smelly presence. Equipped with these notions of the material sublime and re-evaluations of the material realm I now turn to selected works of my selected artists in the hope to ask (differently) how matter comes to matter.

Standing their ground

The ‘activist photographer’ (Wilson 2005), Zanele Muholi’s images of black queens and drag artists provide a form of material resistance through their mere existence. Muholi admits as much when she emphasises that her photographs ‘examine how gender-queer

identities and bodies are shaped by – but also resist, through their very existence – dominant notions of what it means to be black and feminine’ (Muholi 2009). Muholi’s work disrupts and discloses oppression at least on two significant levels: firstly by ‘erasing the stigmatisation of ... sexualities [notably lesbians] as “unAfrican” ...’ (Muholi cited in Corrigan 2007);¹⁸ and secondly through the depiction of bodies out of bounds through their mere unpalatable corporeal being. It is argued here that through their brute manifestation, these sex and gender outsiders evoke a material sublime encounter by suspending the categories of form and the formless. Through the suspension of these previously neatly contained categories, it is possible for the beautiful (form) to become formless (sublime) and the formless in turn to become beautiful. If the material sublime is, as Steve Vine proposes ‘more an act than an object’ (Vine 2002: 241), and ‘an aesthetics of incompleteness, process and becoming’ (Vine 2002: 242), it corresponds significantly with Muholi’s outsider figures.

As illustrated in the series of *Miss D’vine* (2007–2008) (Figure 1), the mere existence of the cross dresser’s somewhat fragile, yet, brave embodiment resists any preconceived ideas of how matter should preferably (according to hetero-normative standards) come to matter in its brute ‘thingness’ and ‘realness’. In other words, the ways in which matter comes to materialise (as in the case of Miss D’vine) cannot entirely be predetermined or dictated, and neither can discourse sufficiently contain it. *Miss D’vine II* (Figure 1) – high heeled and bare-breasted – is seemingly abandoned in a winter *veld*,¹⁹ lost amongst the garbage and the waste. She dallies between the endless possibilities of discursive gendered becomings and the manifestation of her own flesh, where self and other meet head-on. As in the encounter of the material sublime, which is materialised ‘eventhood’ (Vine 2002: 239) not frozen into finality, but rather matter inscribed with sublime potential, Miss D’vine embodies her quandary valiantly. She is left ‘court[ing] the approaching storm’ (Pipkin 1998: 599) of ‘material-discursive intra-activity’ (Barad 2002: 818), since there is no quick fix for her physical circumstances possible. The fact that her mere physical instantiation, as cross dresser, is possibly not tolerated and rather unwelcome in her own community cannot stop her from materialising defiantly. Miss D’vine wears her body nimbly as it in turn bears her with dignity. Through the specific form she takes, a ‘textual

gesture towards transcendence' (Pipkin 1998: 599) is made and all attempts at suppressing her unique embodiment are disrupted.

The same corporeal disruption applies to Muholi's images of lesbians and in particular the image *ID crisis* (2003) (Figure 2) of a woman wrapping her breasts so as to cover-up her female form.²⁰ Here the woman's breasts are not flaunted or seductively corseted for hetero-normative viewing pleasure, but rather covered and shunned. Evidently, what Muholi wants her art to demonstrate is 'that the absence of images of black lesbian women from the South African art canon – or popular culture – has negated their existence and therefore implored them to conform to stereotypical notions about black women as heterosexual beings' (Muholi cited in Corrigan 2007). Muholi further explains: 'There are so many cases of African women who are raped or beaten for their sexuality every day' (Muholi cited in Neidhardt 2008), thus to 'materialise' as lesbian is a life-threatening predicament in most parts of South Africa.²¹ Moreover, the act of tying-in and binding-up (as in *Id crisis*) does not lessen the matter and pertinence of the female form, in my view. If anything, it fixes the viewer's attention on how the body comes to materialise in spite of dominant crippling discourses and regardless of this particular woman's wishes to deny her own materiality. Presumably, this woman wants to rebut her own femininity because she performs 'butch' in her interactions, which, ironically, is met with unprecedented aggression in her community. Overwhelming evidence concurs that in South Africa 'butch' females in particular meet with extreme brutality and violence once uncovered as different and 'deviant'.²²

It should be noted that in no sense am I denying the influence and impact of dominant discursive practices on these women's bodies. Naturally dominant discourses have left their imprints on their flesh, with brutal and yet sometimes joyous effects.²³ What I am after, however, is to ask not only how matter comes to materialise in discourse, but also the other impossible question of how matter materialises as a force that pushes on language. Can we search for an erudite nature, a flesh that scribbles by itself and intelligently engages with the discursive as co-existing force in these images?

In the images *Flesh I*, *Flesh II* and *Flesh III* (2005) (Figure 3), as well as *Reclining figure* (2006) (Figure 4) an abundance of resilient flesh, as well as the inability of discourse to

wholly consume it, explodes onto the surface. One is tempted to make a visual reference to Saartjie Baartman's corpulent body whose remains have mercifully returned to the Gamtoos valley in August 2002 after having wandered for 200 years. As re-enacted in Tracey Rose's *Saartje Baartman* (2001) (Figure 5), Saartjie has returned to freely roam the pastures of her homeland. Rose, as Saartjie, prowls and prances undeterred like a skilled huntress. This untamed version of Saartjie blends with the magnificent sarcoid women materialising before the viewer's eyes in Muholi's photographs.

Muholi does not shy away from their abundant corpo(real)ity, in fact, she rejoices in their strange beauty as she captures them in the privacy of their bedrooms and bathrooms busying themselves with intimate cleansing and private toiletries. The use of the camera does not appear voyeuristic or intrusive, but acts more precisely on the level of a revelation. In fact, it would be more precise to compare the camera's touch to that of lover's caress. Similar to her project of rendering marginalised sexualities visible Muholi's depiction of the corpulent bodies of lesbians can be said to 'render [them] visible and present, rather than invisible and absent: seen, rather than unsightly' (Lebesco and Braziel 2001: 1). In fact, these corpulent bodies announce themselves with a grand gesture that sweeps aside any form of 'transcendental sublime suppression' (Pipkin 1998: 559).

As Jana Braziel describes the corpulent female body, perhaps in another context but nevertheless, applicable to Muholi's photographs: 'Her excess is both jocund and rotund; her body is the site of performative excess – she is the unbound carnality of hypercorporeity' (2001: 235). The corpulent body thus over-complies with flesh, it over-materialises in a culture that suffers otherwise from physical anorexia and an excess of digitised information. Clearly 'fat female bodies undermine the stability of Western metaphysical and dualistic thought: they topple philosophical binarisms in which the female is subordinated to the male, the body subordinated to the soul, and materiality to form' (Braziel 2001: 232). Through the proliferation of their 'licentiously saturated' (Braziel 2001: 232) materiality 'with its soft, loose, excessive flesh, [they have] come to signal resistance to [the] cultural norm. ... For these reasons, the obese woman is an unruly woman, a paragon of outrageousness and transgression' (Stukator 2001: 199). Not only are these bodies unruly they visually foreground their own materiality and disrupt the

boundary between elegantly contained form (beauty) and overwhelming formlessness (sublime). In fact, similar to the material sublime, theirs is 'the irrepressible materiality of an event' (Pipkin 1998: 599).

Expanding the discussion into the beauty/ugliness debate, it is noteworthy that Sarah Nuttall provocatively claims in *Beautiful/ugly. African and diaspora aesthetics* (2006) that before beauty can be addressed or understood, the question of ugliness first has to be understood. This bears significantly on the matter of Muholi's rotund female bodies for their beauty may require some unlocking, since it may still be locked up within the registers of the anthropological and '*a socially inflected ugliness*' (Nuttall 2006: 28).²⁴ Nuttall presents the quandary of beauty in Africa unequivocally by indicating how closely the concepts of ugliness and beauty are interlocked. She states: 'Ugliness emerges here not as the opposite of beauty but as tied to it with an intricacy that belies a binary relationship' (Nuttall 2006: 28). In other words, beauty and ugliness, or for our purposes here, form (beauty) and the formless (and thus the sublime), are bundled together in most discourses on the topic in Africa. Thinking through beauty and ugliness can only be done through a 'crisscrossing of the senses' at 'the limits of beauty' and through its subsequent 'resistance to naming', explains Nuttall (2006: 28).

The ways, in which the notions of beauty and ugliness are, thus, unpacked in Nuttall's investigation noticeably corresponds with the tenets of the material sublime. For the material sublime is precisely such a crisscrossing of the senses, a material eventhood or a fleshy encounter between form and the formless, or then beauty and ugliness. The material sublime is exactly where the formless moulds into form, where ugliness draws the curtain on beauty and Muholi's depiction of women and sex/gender outsiders glimpsed through this lens, indeed become 'material girls' that firmly stand their ground.

No-where to hide

When it comes to foregrounding the interplay between 'things' and 'words', Nandipha Mntambo's suspended skins moulded of cowhides masterfully create 'a vivid, even shocking encounter' (Minnaar 2009). Mntambo's highly unusual source material is a very difficult if not nearly impossible medium to manipulate²⁵ – is tanned and moulded on to

casts of the female body (Figures 6 & 7). 'They need to be hard and rigid; they don't smell like leather, they smell like a cow', explains Mntambo (cited in Sichel 2008). Evidently, Mntambo does not set out to cultivate her medium beyond recognition. On the contrary, her medium remains close to its origins, smelly and hauntingly alive, contributing to the vividness of the encounter and foregrounding the materiality of the event. Melvyn Minnaar notes as much in a review of Mntambo's exhibition entitled *The encounter* (2009) at the Michael Stevenson Gallery: 'The hides were unaffected of their animal source, yet these dead animal skins were spookily fused to a patently pronounced physical human endeavour. They represented a primordial, African incursion into the familiar of the typical gallery environment. And, yes, there were the odours' (Minnaar 2009).

However, on another level: cowhide and female body merge, since cattle and women share a unique and almost interchangeable rank in traditional black communities.²⁶ Yet, when it comes to the audiences' responses to her work, Mntambo notes: 'I've been surprised how males and young women don't know how to react. Black males in particular have a hard time. They become quite confused' (Mntambo cited in Sichel 2008). In other words, even though the link between female and cowhide should be obvious to young black males in particular, it does not appear to read unambiguously at this level. Or perhaps, it is received with such confusion precisely because it is so overwhelming obvious?

Despite their evocative realness, Mntambo's figures also suggest an apparitional aspect. They are 'at once visceral and pristine ... animal hides that read as if they are stretched over a voluptuous female body. Were they modeled by someone whose human form was digitally extracted, or is it a trick of the eye?' (Katchka 2009). Regardless of the fact, that Mntambo's figures may appear like 'space-invading ghosts' (Minnaar 2009) – here no trickery of the eye is at work. The shapes embraced by the hides has laboriously been imprinted by a female body (that of the artist and her mother) (Mntambo 2007) – precisely those bodies that have traditionally been associated with brute matter. The cowhides proudly parade what fashioned them; in fact, the hides emphatically wear or embody womanly shapes – soft breasts, rounded belly and curved thighs. Even if the bodies that have provided these contours are no longer present and have become hauntings, what remains and reminds, is how matter has and is continually materialising even if it is

through its own constant decomposition. In this regard, Mntambo's investment in temporality can be analogised with Czech-Canadian artist Jana Sterbak's early 'meat dresses', which consist of constructed flanks of steak and salt for preservation (presumably), stretched over mannequins and sometimes even worn by a model. Sterbak cunningly titles one of her meat dresses, which are inevitably doomed to transpire, *Vanitas: Flesh dress for an albino anorectic* (1987). The meat eventually decomposes, as will Mntambo's hovering hides in the end.

Nevertheless, it is through a very personal and corpo(real) negotiation of her circumstances that Mntambo gives substance and form to her work. It would not be over-productive then to interpret her work as a creative 'real-izing' and 'fabric-ation' (Kirby 1997: 80) of matter and discourse into a mutual constitutive act. Mntambo explains:

Through the interpretation of my own and my mother's bodies, I have taken control of their representation, and directed the way in which viewers encounter these forms both in their material realization and installation. The figures although hanging, have assertiveness in their posture and are intended to be sensuous but ambiguous in their presence. While these fragments of female form may elicit repulsion, it is repulsion intended to evoke the residue of life and the actual presence of the corporeal rather than the female body as victim, damaged, abused or abject (Mntambo 2007).

The ambiguous presence that Mntambo therefore wants to evoke is what she refers to as 'the actual presence of the corporeal'. Through her powerful real apparitions, she successfully reverses the logic of merely concentrating on evidencing how discourse materialises, by equally revealing how matter comes to matter. The animal skins act as reminders of presence – that there once where a body present – but they do not only remind of a lost presence they are present as files of skin themselves. Elaborating on this point, Mntambo's hides can meaningfully be analysed as corsets of a lost curvature, a material reminder to a substance no longer present. What Mntambo leaves the viewer with is the formal imprint of an absent formlessness.

Arguably, the corset is not only an undergarment worn to shape the body (mostly the female body) it can also be described cynically as a type of bastion that keeps abundant flesh at bay. Phrased differently: as a piece of clothing, which simultaneously enhances and controls, the corset provides form, and supports the formless flesh it encapsulates. This is

perhaps the territory explored by Musha Neluheni's recent exhibition *Vantage* (Figure 8) held at the Johannesburg Art Gallery (1 July to 27 September 2009), which consisted of photographs and an installation of a huge corset made of ribbon. Except in Neluheni's case, the bearers of the corsetry 'can only be described as suspect' (JAG Happenings series: Musha Neluheni 2009). On closer inspection, the viewer's initial certainty about the subject 'begins to unravel when [Neluheni's] ribbon clad models reveal themselves to have masculine qualities such as muscular biceps and pulsating veins. Before long the initial attraction of the works metamorphose from that of sensual titillation to that of sensual, androganistic unease' (JAG Happenings series: Musha Neluheni 2009). The corset may move into unknown territory in the *Vantage* exhibition, but it still operates on the principle of putting form and the formlessness at play.

In similar vein, Leora Farber's *Dis-Location/ Re-Location* (2005–2007) exhibition creates an exhilarating documentation of the entanglement and interrelatedness between form and the formless. In short, what Farber wants to convey (amongst other things) is the hybridity of her own identity as Euro-African in contemporary South African: 'As transforming conceptions of South African identities (individual and collective) are so relevant to our post-1994 democracy, it seems pertinent to use my own body through self-representation in a way that allows for the visual articulation of a new hybridity' (Farber 2005: 318).

Within the parameters of the broader *Dis-Location/ Re-Location* exhibition Farber has chosen her own flesh as 'ecstatic ontolog[ical]' (cf. Huntington 1998) site from where to re-enact the trauma and violence of dislocation and inevitable relocation. It is in particular the photographs entitled *Aloerosa: Maturation I*, *Aloerosa: Maturation II* and *Aloerosa: Supplantation* (2006–2007) (Figures 9, 10 & 11) that can be analysed through the visual trope of the corset as interplay between form and formlessness. In *Maturation I & II*, we see the Farber persona as the English rose who has wandered too far into the *veld*, beyond her range, beyond her location. She has collapsed onto the ground re-locating, maturing into the new species more adapted to these arid parts. The viewer witnesses the aloe taking over her flesh. The bodice that she is wearing, as emblem of her heritage, is being undone, it is unlaced. Finally, what lingers in *Aloerosa: Supplantation*, is the small corset as a token of

her fled presence. What remains is the shape, the form, the formalities, but the flesh is gone. We are stuck with a trace and reminder that it once was present.

Reminiscent of the material sublime there is no safe distance between subject and threatening object as Farber in her supplantation, 'accepts the irresolvable character of the sublime experience, in which the exact balance between pain and pleasure cannot be reached ...' (Zylinska 2001). In fact, in Farber's case as in Mntambo's hides, both subject and object are immersed in the same ecstatic and constitutive moment of foregrounding the material event visually.

Conclusion

In what was considered above a possible resurgence of the real through the depictions of the corpo(real) in selected South African artists have been explored. It is considered to be a meaningful political gesture that post-liberation South African artists invest in corpo(real)ity as a topic. This investment in corpo(real)ity cannot be viewed as a mere extension of fashionable contemporary ideas that propagate an endless flow of material possibilities, but rather it accentuates that there are limits to how the body materialises. Grosz states as much: 'The body is not open to *all* the whims, wishes, and hopes of the subject ...' (1994: 187, emphasis in the original). As has been argued by contemporary feminists matter places a counter-force on the limitless flow advocated in language. This is not to imply matter is a stable and unchanging entity, but rather to foreground matter as vigorous intelligence with a 'mind' of her own manifesting in 'multiple modalities' (Kerin 1999: 91).

In the analysis above, the intelligent nature of matter is exemplified in Muholi's photographs of sexual others testifying to the fact that certain bodies defy controlling discourses by stubbornly materialising any way. The fleshy bodies that Muholi dare to represent, breach the discourse of the beautiful and the sublime in fascinating ways, for not only do they unhinge uncomplicated ideas about beauty (containable form) and sublimity (awe inspiring formlessness), they quite literally enact a material sublime encounter through their substantive corpulence.²⁷

Likewise, Mntambo's haunting cowhides dispel unchallenged notions that we cannot ask about the matter of things, since we do not have access to them. One should rather consider as Barad suggests 'materiality is discursive ... just as discursive practices are always already material (2002: 822). Accordingly, Mntambo's work shows that the matter of things (what they are made off) cleverly contribute to our understanding of them. Quite literally, we also understand things because they come to matter to us. Mntambo's hides have also provided the opportunity to test the failed boundary between form and the formless as disrupted in the discourse on the material sublime. I have argued that Mntambo's ghostly presences give form to the formless just as it allows the formless to seep into form; it records or freezes the suspension of the two.

By dusting the aesthetic category of the material sublime and weighing the work of imminent feminist scholars such as Barad, Kirby, Wilson and Mann, I have attempted to place the resurgence of the real and the corpo(real) on the agenda again. Obviously, I have merely been able to skim the surface of an intricate debate that is currently unfolding by making some recommendations on how the real and the corpo(real) manifest in the work of selected South African artists.²⁸ What has possibly transpired from this exploration is that rethinking how matter and discourse interrelate may yield different expositions of coming to terms with our founding materialities. Perhaps it may even lead to not forgetting place and earth, and the other material preconditions for our existence, as Mann suggests.

Figures



Figure 1:

Muholi, Z. *Miss D'vine I & II*, from the series, *Miss D'vine* (2007–2008).

76.5 x 76.5cm.

Paper size: 86.5 x 86.5cm.

Lambda print.

Edition of 5 + 2AP

Courtesy of the artist and Michael Stevenson, Cape Town.



Figure 2:

Muholi, Z. *ID crisis* (2003).

32.5 x 48.5 cm.

Silver gelatin print.

Edition of 8 + 2AP.

Courtesy of the artist and Michael Stevenson, Cape Town.



Figure 3:

Muholi, *Z.Flesh I* (2005).

50 x 37.5 cm.

Silver gelatin print.

Edition of 8 + 2AP.

Courtesy of the Artist and Michael Stevenson, Cape Town.



Figure 3:

Muholi, *Z. Flesh II* (2005).

(Left) 60 x 45 cm.

Silver gelatin print.

Edition of 8 + 2AP.

Courtesy of the artist and Michael Stevenson, Cape Town.

Figure 3:

Muholi, Z. *Flesh III* (2005).

(Right) 32.5 x 48.5 cm.

Silver gelatin print.

Edition of 8 + 2AP.

Courtesy of the Artist and Michael Stevenson, Cape Town.



Figure 4:

Muholi, Z. *Reclining figure* (2006).

55 x 80 cm.

Lambda print.

Edition of 8 + 2AP.

Courtesy of the artist and Michael Stevenson, Cape Town.



Figure 5:

Rose, T. *Venus Baartman* (2001).

120 x 120 cm.

Lambda photograph.

[Edition of ...?](#)

Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery.



Figure 6:

Mntambo, N. *Silent embrace*, no.1 & 2 (2007).

173 x 910cm.

Digital print on cotton rag paper.

Edition of 5 + 2AP.

Courtesy of the artist and Michael Stevenson, Cape Town.



Figure 7:

Mntambo, N. *Silence and Dreams* (2008).
Installation of eight figures, approximately 245 x 650 x 300cm.
Cowhide, cows' tails, resin, polyester mesh, waxed cord.
Courtesy of the artist and Michael Stevenson, Cape Town.



Figure 8:

Neluheni, M. *Vantage* (2009).

42 × 59.4 cm

Photograph

Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 9:

Farber, L. *Aloerosa: Maturation I* (2006–2007).

90 h x 120 w cm.

Archival pigment printing on Soft Textured Fine Art paper, 315 g.

Edition of 10 + 1 AP.

Photograph by Michael Meyersfeld.

Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 10:

Farber, L. *Aloerosa: Maturation II* (2006–2007).

90 x 120 cm.

Archival pigment printing on Soft Textured Fine Art paper, 315 g.

Edition of 10 + 1AP.

Photograph by Michael Meyersfeld.

Courtesy of the artist.



Figure11:

Farber, L. *Aloerosa: Supplantation* (2006–2007).

52 x 70 cm.

Archival pigment printing on Soft Textured Fine Art paper, 315 g.

Edition of 10 + 1 AP.

Photograph by Michael Meyersfeld.

Courtesy of the artist.

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Notes

¹ In short: the material sublime is a counter discourse or sub-discourse within the classical sublime that describes the sublime encounter in immanent (physical), as well as transcendent (metaphysical) terms, as opposed to the classical sublime that concentrates mainly on the transcendent or supersensible aspects. While researching the material sublime, it has transpired that the term has come to stand in for and is associated with several other tropes as well. For instance, Brooks (1990) identifies the 'negative sublime', whereas Joanna Zyliniska (2001) identifies the 'feminine sublime' to describe exactly the same phenomenon mostly referred to as the material sublime in Romantic Studies (cf. Vine (2002) and Pipkin (1998)). Leaning strongly on Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida in order to formulate an ethical (female) sublime in opposition to the classical aesthetical (male) sublime, Zyliniska explains the female sublime as follows: 'Unlike the traditional sublime, the feminine sublime, as I see it, does not domesticate the object that might be a source of threat. Instead, it accepts the relationship of both pleasure and pain, or life and death, and the potential dispersal of the self. The term 'the feminine sublime' does not stand for an encounter with the magnificence of mountain peaks and 'piling-up clouds' – as it did for Burke and Kant – but rather for a meeting with the incalculable alterity of the other' (Zyliniska 2001). The category of the feminine sublime is however not a novel idea and has been developed by, amongst others, Barbara Freeman in *The feminine sublime: gender and excess in women's fiction* (1995) and Paula Yaeger *Toward a female sublime* (1989). Carolyn Korsmeyer also describes the feminine sublime in almost the exact terms as Zyliniska: 'The feminine sublime is neither a rhetorical mode nor an aesthetic category but a domain of experience that resists categorization, in which the subject enters into relation with an otherness – social, aesthetic, political, ethical, erotic – that is excessive and unrepresentable. The feminine sublime is not a discursive strategy, technique, or literary style that the female writer invents, but rather a crisis in relation to language and representation that a certain subject undergoes' (2004: 136).

² For more on the 'make-over' phenomenon in terms of cosmetic surgery and reality television see Meredith Jones's *Skintight: An Anatomy of Cosmetic Surgery* (2008).

³ Compare in this regard the series of recent publications by Zygmunt Bauman with the word 'liquid' in their title: *Liquid Love* (2003), *Liquid Life* (2005), and *Liquid Fear* (2006). Obviously, liquid refers to the pliability and malleability of materiality in contemporary consumer society.

⁴ By using the term 'Material Girls' the following proviso is attached, namely that in no way is the term used in a derogative or belittling sense, as for instance making reference to incompetence, greed or worse, victimhood. Rather, I take my use of the term from activist groups such as the Guerilla Girls, Riot Girrls and other riotous females. The use of 'Material Girls' may furthermore be associated with the 1994 exhibition entitled *Bad Girls* curated by the late Marcia Tucker at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York and Marcia Tanner at UCLA's Wight Gallery. In addition, I find it a happy coincidence that Wendy Steiner refers particularly to 'material girls' in order to describe women's exclusion from the sublime and its consequent transcendence in nineteenth-century discourses on the topic (Steiner 2001).

⁵ Leonard Wilcox comes to more or less the same conclusion:

Baudrillard suggests that the "absolute event" of September 11 produced a breach between the real (however entwined in the fantastic and surreal) and media event, between event and medium. Such a breach constitutes a dismantling of the formal correlation of signifier and signified, a radical dismembering of the mechanisms of the code (McMillan and Worth 125–26). It transgresses the codification of signs and their semiotic/economic exchange (the definitive act is "not susceptible of exchange" [Spirit 9]). The attack on the World Trade Center constituted a condensed site of symbolic power that "radicalized the relation of the image to reality" (Spirit 27). It breached the bar between life and death, between semiologic and the symbolic, constituting an incandescent moment in which the semiotics of extreme spectacle and the symbolic dimension of extraordinary challenge were utterly melded and fused (Wilcox 2006: 92).

⁶ See Celia Roberts's review article 'Thinking biological materialities' on Donna Haraway's delineation of materiality' (1999). Roberts proposes that in Haraway's work materiality is not merely a function of language but also exists in different modalities that require different approaches.

⁷ Other feminist scholars that have also addressed the issue of the real and representationalism are Genevieve Lloyd and Moira Gatens. See Claire Colebrook's 'From radical representations to corporeal becomings: The feminist philosophy of Lloyd, Grosz and Gatens' (2000) for a worthwhile introduction to their work.

⁸ See Naomi Schor's deliberated analysis of the essentialism debate in the article entitled 'This essentialism which is not one' (1989), in the edited volume *The essential difference: Another look at essentialism* (1994) for an excellent overview of the debate.

⁹ See in this regard Amanda du Preez's explication in 'The sublime and the cultures of the extreme: An exploration' (2009) of the contemporary obsession with the extreme in all its facets such as extreme adventures, extreme make-overs and so on, and how this contributes to the postmodern subject's loss of a coherent self.

¹⁰ Barad provides an analysis of the relation between 'things' and 'words', which she formalises in a complex but workable theory of 'agential realism' and 'material-discursive intra-activity'. Space does not allow for a comprehensive overview of her thinking but hopefully the following short reference will provide a glimpse: 'In summary, the universe is agential intra-activity in its becoming. The primary ontological units are not "things" but phenomena—dynamic topological reconfigurings/entanglements/relationalities/(re)articulations. And the primary semantic units are not "words" but material-discursive practices through which boundaries are constituted. This dynamism is agency. Agency is not an attribute but the ongoing reconfigurings of the world' (Barad 2002: 818).

¹¹ See Kirby's *Telling flesh* (1997) for a detailed elaboration on her concept of 'corporeography' that views both language and body as textuality.

¹² Stokoe (1926: 135) quotes a remark made by Coleridge about Schiller's earlier work: 'Schiller has the material sublime; to produce an effect, he sets a whole town on fire, and throws infants with their mothers into the flames, or locks up a father in an old tower. But Shakespeare drops a handkerchief, and the same or greater effects follow'.

¹³ It should not come as a surprise then that the material sublime was a rhetorical device most often used by female Romantic poets (but not exclusively), such as Charlotte Smith and Mary Tighe. It provided these women poets in particular with 'an idiom through which to articulate the epistemological uncertainty surrounding their ambiguous status as poets in an age that would not allow them to discard the discursive trappings of material existence in pursuit of the transcendence valorised by their male contemporaries' (Pipkin 1998: 599).

¹⁴ Kant puts his theory of the beautiful and the sublime forward in *The critique of judgement* (1964 [1790]), from which it becomes abundantly clear that beauty is a 'small' and 'pleasurable' (1964: 41, 60) experience, whereas the sublime is likened to that which is 'absolutely great' (1964: 94–95) and 'transcend[s] every standard of sense' (1964: 98). Kant explains that: 'Sublimity, therefore, does not reside in any of the things of nature, but only in our own mind, in so far as we may become conscious of our superiority over nature within, and thus also over nature without us (as exerting influence upon us)' (1964: 114).

¹⁵ It should be noted that the Kantian gendered division between form (female) and the formless (male) stands in opposition to the historically determined association of femininity with uncontained matter, thus formless, and masculinity with containment and form. In this, the Kantian division inverts the traditional binaries of hard/soft, restraint/excess etc.

¹⁶ Although Herder's analysis of the sublime is mostly interpreted as a critique on Kant, I have appropriated it here as part of the material sublime discourse because it overlaps almost perfectly with all descriptions and notions of the material sublime.

¹⁷ Zylinska continues by arguing: 'The alterity of the other, both fascinating and threatening to the unity of the self, is the starting point of the ethics of the feminine sublime. ... The self no longer remains 'at certain distances' from its source of enticement and fascination, but rather embarks on a fearful encounter with the other who poses a threat to its integrity but also offers a promise of bliss' (Zylinska 2001).

¹⁸ The so-called 'un-Africaness' of homosexuality is a heated debate on the continent, especially in the sub-Saharan parts. African political leaders such as President Robert Mugabe (Zimbabwe), Yoweri Museveni, President of Uganda and Sam Nujoma previous President of Namibia, all declared homosexuality as unnatural, un-African and borrowed from an alien culture (read Western culture). For elaboration, see insert first name please Rukweza's 'Is homosexuality really "unaffrican"?' (2006).

¹⁹ The term *veld* is an Afrikaans word for an outstretched piece of land, a field or pasture.

²⁰ Mythologically the act of breast binding can be traced to the Amazons who also covered-up and bandaged their breasts before battle so that these would not to interfere with their bowstrings. History abound of examples of women warriors who bound their breasts e.g., Joan of Arc who did so, also to hide her female form.

²¹ One of the latest reports by ActionAid entitled 'Hate crimes: The rise of "corrective" rape in South Africa' (2009) 'describes some of the most shocking violence that continues to be perpetrated – including instances of "corrective" rape, where men rape women in order to "cure" them of their lesbianism'.

²² Muholi also works as a human rights activist and is the co-founder of Forum for the Empowerment of Women and in this capacity, she examines the status of violence on lesbians. She notes that 'butches ... are often the target of hate crimes, because they don't conform to what some men think an African woman should look and act like. Butches are more of a threat because their masculinity threatens the male ego, which then leads to what is called curative rape' (Muholi cited in Neidhardt 2008).

²³ Compare with Jodi Bieber's exhibition entitled *Real Beauty* (2008) at the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg wherein Bieber photographed ordinary women of generous proportions mostly in their underwear. Bieber (2008) tries to 'create a space in which women could explore [their] own ident[ities] in relation to beauty' and even create 'an environment of fantasy' for a short while. In other words, the aim of Bieber's project not only reveals each woman's *real* beauty, but also shows how joyous ordinary beauty can be.

²⁴ Nutall addresses the question of beauty by implementing four registers or modes of inscriptions onto the African body – 'firstly, the complex and integral association of beauty with *a socially inflected ugliness*; secondly, a *distributional* sense of beauty, crisscrossing the senses; and thirdly, an anti-aesthetic, or the notion of the *limits of beauty* or its resistance to naming as such' (2006: 28).

²⁵ Melvyn Minnaar explains: 'Working with animal skin in the way she sets out to do is not only hard and technically challenging work, it contests cultural and gender traditions in quite a revolutionary fashion' (2009).

²⁶ The practice of *lobola*, also referred to as 'the bride price', is steeped in African tradition and it entails the negotiations between the two families (of bride and groom) of a price in cattle for the bride (although currently the trade is no longer in cattle but cash). Once the woman is bought, she effectively becomes the possession of the man, and divorce will only be granted on rare occasions when the bride's family can 'buy' her back. See Mark Mathabane's '*Lobola, AIDS and Africa*' (2000) wherein he explains the problems of contemporary African women still bound to the *lobola* tradition, while their husbands indulge in extra marital

affairs and in many instances infect them with HIV/AIDS. Also, see *Lobola: It's implications for women's reproductive rights* by Sara Mvududu (2002) for a helpful source on how *lobola* affects women's lives in seven Southern African countries.

²⁷ Due to space constraints, I cannot elaborate on this fascinating point. See Wendy Steiner's *Venus in exile. The rejection of beauty in twentieth-century art* (2001) for an intriguing exploration of the debilitating influences of the Kantian sublime on the ordinary. Sarah Nuttall's *Beautiful/ugly. African and diaspora aesthetics* (2006) also contributes to the unravelling of how beauty and the sublime have come to influence contemporary ideas and aesthetics.

²⁸ Noteworthy in this regard is a conference organised by the Glasgow School of Art entitled 'The state of the real' (2003) and the subsequent publication entitled *The state of the real: Aesthetics in the digital age* (2007) that also provides an impetus to the topic.