

**Creative production and existential thought: a feminist existential analysis of  
South African visual artist Berni Searle's artwork**

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## **Abstract**

Through an analysis of the work of South African artist Berni Searle, my study will investigate feminist existential ideas and concepts that have been explored by various creative producers in and outside of Europe/South Africa through different forms of creative productions and under different epistemological categories. ‘Canons’ of European existentialist/feminist thought often exclude the existence of feminist existential knowledge productions and producers outside of Europe. In conducting this study, I am responding to the past and present separatist and identitarian categorisations of creative productions from black/African creative producers, particularly women creative producers in South Africa, creating an alternative canonisation around their selected works. Although canons have been and can be used to drive separatist and identitarian categorisations, it is my hope to elucidate a discourse around the preservations and acknowledgements of South African creative and knowledge productions through a feminist existential framework that canonises important black feminist existentialist works and thereby brings to light their intellectual contributions over and above their identities. My development of a South African feminist existentialism is an attempt to graft a more intersectional, holistic framework to introduce in the feminist and existential discourses, and to proffer a new intersectional holistic paradigm of discussing categories that do not limit creative productions. To frame this research, I will reflect on the politics of historical and contemporary South African society as it is reflected in the works of the chosen creative producers and theorists and to question how we respond as creative feminist existentialists to contemporary South African struggles and how such a lens can be activated as a creative-theoretical tool of investigation.

## Declaration

I, the undersigned declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and that

I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any University for a degree.

Signature:  Date: 04/06/2019

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## INTRODUCTION

Pertinent to this study is the resolute role that creative productions play as epistemological substructures that continuously inform theory, politics, as well as philosophy. Creative productions offer different ways of expression and various means of arriving at and presenting any given idea.

Recognising the formation of ideas as an intricate process, one can say that the intermediate phases that the production of ideas go through and manifest evidences not so much a reliance on the creative production's sustenance on the branches (theory, politics, philosophy) but confirms a reciprocity that exists due to the faculties of the imagination.

The power of the imagination and the sequential reification of concepts can form and transform our world and the ways in which we exist in the world. South African professor of African literature and feminist Pumla Gqola in her book, *What is slavery to me? Post-apartheid South Africa* (2010), explores issues relating to slavery and gender in post-apartheid South Africa by questioning the role of the imagination in nation building. Gqola (2011:01) explains that the book "Examines how the South African imagination conceives of, constructs and interprets itself at a time of transition, and how slavery is evoked and remembered and part of negotiating current ways of being".

What results from this is an intersectional study that explores historical memory through poetry, literature and the visual arts. In this book Gqola uses the conceptual art of Cape Town born Artist Berni Searle (b.1964) to further communicate her ideas on slave memory in the past and present.

The overt way in which Gqola uses creative production, theory and politics to reify her ideas shows the epistemological value she places on creative productions. The interface between politics and creative production again opens a broader and new pedagogical approach to South African history and places our future in the hands of imaginative productions and producers.

Similarly, I will use an interdisciplinary approach in my thesis using South African conceptual artist Berni Searle to explore the congruence between the visual arts, feminism and existentialism, as I feel Searle's work carries best the ideas conveyed in feminism and existentialism.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For this research I have used three research methods. The first research method involved a careful identification of relevant theoretical and philosophical material. I looked at how works of art were written about, most specifically works made by black women artists. I ventured to explore the limitations as well as the possibilities that exist to speak or look at black/feminist art from different perspectives. I have chosen to explore the work of South African artist, Berni Searle, to show how the work has been written about and also to demonstrate how the work expresses philosophical and feminist ideas.

The second research method includes a visual as well as a comparative analyses of selected art work as well as theoretical and philosophical texts. Through the identification of relevant texts, I have gathered that the writers (philosophers) often use creative productions to express their most complex ideas. From this one easily realises how visual culture (creative productions) informs philosophy and most importantly one notices the intersectional nature of visual culture and how this intersectionality allows one to tackle issues relating to human freedom, value and worth (existential and feminist issues).

The third research method deals with the application of the identified theories and philosophical ideas, as well as my theoretical integration of existential and feminist ideas to visual culture. I do so in order to graft my own model of feminist existentialism in visual culture. My study reveals that although the idea of existential feminism exists, one is never made aware of feminist existentialism, what it entails and why it should be referred to in this manner.

The above-mentioned research methods were explored in order to exemplify the possibilities that exist in fostering new ways of interpreting black feminist art and South African art in general. It is my hope to show that alternative ways of making art also call for different ways of writing and talking about art.

## THESIS STRUCTURE

This thesis is divided into four chapters.

Chapter one ('On visual culture') identifies the type of art that Berni Searle produces. This chapter lightly tackles the principal ideas that inform conceptual/performance art. I delve into the history of conceptual/performance art to show what sets conceptual/performance art apart from other art movements. Chapter one highlights that conceptual/performance art is idea-based art; this means that creative productions of a conceptual/performative nature demand cerebral engagements. This suggests that there needs to be alternative ways of approaching conceptual/performance art, because that is precisely what the movement demands.

Chapter two ('An introduction to existentialism') focuses on the type of existentialism that was selected for this study. I begin by focusing on Sartrean existentialism and I then continue to show and explore the work that was contributed by not only Sartre but also by his associates. This chapter highlights the importance of collective responsibility and community-based ideas. It explores the shift from past to present day existentialism and reveals not only the contributions but the gaps that still exist.

Chapter three ('Feminism and existentialism') emphasises the role played by feminism in existential thought and visual culture. This chapter explores past and present-day feminist existentialism (existential feminism) and reveals the contributions as well as the gaps in feminist existentialism (existential feminism).

Chapter four ('Art and feminist existentialism') explores creative production and feminist existentialism. It looks into the grafting of my own brand of feminist existentialism in visual culture. I attempt to provide a definition in order to suggest the need for alternative ways of tackling/approaching visual culture.

From the above mentioned chapters, I hope to show the possibilities that exist in finding alternative ways of approaching and interpreting visual culture.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1. Pumla Gqola: What is Slavery to me? Postcolonial/ Slave Memory in Post-Apartheid South Africa

South African professor of literature Pumla Dineo Gqola explores slave memory in Post-apartheid South Africa in her 2010 book *What is Slavery to me? Post-Colonial/Slave Memory in South Africa*. Gqola identifies the imagination as a liberating force; she argues that freedom is determined by our capacity to ‘imagine’.

For Gqola, freedom is only attainable and measured in the ways that we see ourselves and, in the spaces, that we will ourselves to exist within. Gqola deftly investigates our imaginative capacity and the ways in which we have used it to restructure our country after democracy by questioning models that were put in place to atone for the cruel apartheid system.

She questions models such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), but more importantly, her book explores post-apartheid creative producers/products such as literary works, fine art and scholarly essays. Gqola does this as an attempt to probe into the minds of post-apartheid creatives and map how far our country has come using creative productions as evidence.

Gqola’s work is of interest in this study because although she is a literature professor, she has managed to produce interdisciplinary work like most existentialists (Beauvoir, Sartre). Her work focuses on the state of the country and its freedom and she does so by not only using political texts but by relying on creative productions to measure our recovery from apartheid South Africa.

Gqola’s link between the imagination and the attainment of freedom is reminiscent of Jean-Paul Sartre’s book, *The Imaginary*, which serves as a philosophical look into visual culture. Gqola’s work is important to this study because it serves to highlight the new emerging feminist voices of our generation and because it elicits the various existential concerns tackled by present South African feminism, even if it does not explicitly use the term existentialism.

## **2. Jean-Paul Sartre: The Imaginary**

Published in 1940, *The Imaginary* can be seen to be an application of later projects such as *Being and Nothingness* (1943) in the visual arts. In *The Imaginary*, Sartre explores an existential reading of the art product/object, dealing with the nature of the image, the imagination and the parallel relations between consciousness and perception. However, in art discourses one finds that this work is hardly ever spoken about, even in conceptual art, which began in the late 1950's in the West. It is perplexing that Sartrean existentialism has not been engaged much in visual art discourses.

The history of visual arts shows that the field has always been influenced by various philosophical thoughts and activist movements. The movement following conceptual art (1950's) which is postmodernism (1970s) managed to establish a harmonious space for fine art, feminism and philosophy with philosophers such as Jean Baudrillard, whose semiotic work draws from mass media culture and translates easily into the feminist works of Barbara Kruger, whose work is synonymous with the postmodernist movement. I am interested in this work because it teaches individuals how to see and like Pumla Gqola's ideas on the imagination being a liberating force, *The Imaginary* expresses this idea clearly and in depth.

## **3. Jean-Paul Sartre: Being and Nothingness**

*Being and Nothingness* is Jean-Paul Sartre's (1905-1980) exegesis on existentialism published in 1943. This essay on phenomenal ontology is divided into five chapters, it looks into the problem of nothingness: 1), being-for-itself 2), being-for-others 3), having, doing, and being 4) and it closes with a conclusion discussing two major key points and this includes in-itself and for-itself and metaphysical outlooks and ethical perspectives.

Although this work ends with a discussion of ethical perspectives, many writers have suggested that the work is incomplete and that more attention should have been given to the problem of ethics. *Being and Nothingness* is one of the most important philosophical works of the twentieth century. Central to its argument is that human beings should always be responsible for their lives, but more importantly Sartre insists that we are always free or rather we are condemned to be free. This work is important to my study for various reasons. First, Sartre's working relationship with his associates, this includes Frantz Fanon, Simone de Beauvoir and Richard Wright show that philosophical enquiry is not limited to one discipline. Second, Sartre used creative productions such as literature and theatre to express his philosophical ideas clearly. Finally, Sartre believed that philosophy should be lived.

Performativity, or action, remains an important area in his work. With this being stated, *Being and Nothingness* is not just a philosophical work, but it is a work grafted with all the actions that were taken during the twentieth century by the author and his associates to ensure that models of freedom can not only be spoken of and written about but can be performed and lived.

#### **4. Simone de Beauvoir: The Second Sex**

*The Second Sex* is a book by the French writer and 'existential philosopher' Simone de Beauvoir. Published in 1949, it became synonymous with the second wave of feminism. Beauvoir gave voice to issues such as inequality, equity, sexual liberation and abortion rights through her writings as well as her activism.

Many writers have criticised the book noting that it expresses a disdain or hatred for women, others have suggested that it is problematic because it universalises women's issues or rather it universalises the experience of patriarchy for women. In other words, concerns have been expressed over the essentialising of women. *The Second Sex* covers an impressive range of subject matters; for example, Beauvoir discusses biology, sexuality, love, and the female in the different stages of her life, but her work is mostly identified under one category (feminism) although her work is strongly philosophical in nature.

As Sartre's partner, Beauvoir's work was often overlooked and most of her writings are said to be mere references to Sartre's work. In this study I am interested in Beauvoir's work because of how she effortlessly marries feminism and existentialism and gives us a model of what this theory may look like. Beauvoir, like Sartre, also demonstrated that creative productions such as literature can be used to explain philosophy in a clear and understandable manner.

## **5. Frantz Fanon: Black Skin White Masks**

*Black Skin White Masks* is a 1952 book written by the French psychiatrist, philosopher, political figure and intellectual Frantz Fanon (1925-1961). Fanon's work is hard to canonise or rather to categorise because as much as his work is political, it is also philosophical in nature. Fanon is an associate of Sartre and Beauvoir and like these two writers Fanon used poetry and prose as forms of creative production to communicate clearly his political as well as his philosophical ideas.

Although he is mostly associated with Francophone and French poet Aime Cesaire and the Negritude movement, Fanon's work shows a commitment towards the ideas expressed in his work through action. *Black Skin White Masks* explores the double consciousness that colonised individuals often experience, Fanon being a black person who speaks French questions the black experience and attempts to explain what it meant to be a black person of his generation.

The book is divided into eight sections, in which he investigates: (1) The Negro and Language, (2) The Woman of Color and the White Man, (3) The Man of Color and the White Woman, (4) The So-Called Dependency Complex of Colonised Peoples, (5) The Fact of Blackness, (6) The Negro and Psychopathology, (7) The Negro and Recognition, and (8) the Conclusion. Fanon's work is important to my study because like Beauvoir's successful link between feminism and existentialism, Fanon's work presents an account or model of 'Black existentialism' but more importantly, his work and his association with the Negritude movement served as inspiration for South Africa's political figure, Steve Biko and catapulted the Black Consciousness Movement (1960s-1970s).

## **6. Lewis Gordon: An Introduction to Africana Philosophy**

Published in 2008, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy* by American philosopher Lewis Gordon is a central existential text, in part because it explores the central argument in my theses and that is of subject of canonisation or categorisation. Gordon discusses the long histories of writers whose works are mostly neglected or rather discussed in an unsatisfactory way. In four chapters and a conclusion, some of the things that Gordon investigates include the classic eighteenth and nineteenth century foundations of Africana existentialism, Black feminist and Womanist thought, and Afro-Caribbean philosophy. Gordon's work is important to my study because it highlights the important histories as well as the individuals who are sometimes left out of academic discourse. However, this template that Gordon offers also shows the amount of work that still needs to be done in placing works within their deserved/rightful categories.

## **CHAPTER 1: ON VISUAL CULTURE**

### **1. Introduction**

This chapter is divided into six sections, it contains an Introduction, a section on *Vision and Visuality*, a discussion on *Conceptual Art*, followed by a section titled *The Conceptual Art of Berni Searle*, I later discuss ideas on *Epistemic and Aesthetic Disobedience* and I close the chapter with a conclusion. My aim is to provide an introduction to conceptual/performance art, I lightly discuss some of the ideas and concepts that inform conceptual /performance art. By doing this it is my hope that some of the principles applied in Berni Searle's work will be easily identifiable as being of a conceptual nature and more importantly in later chapters other elements or theories such as feminism and existentialism will also be easily discernible.

## 2. Vision and visuality

Images are used in society through various sectors (commercial/cultural) as viable communicative tools for the production, dispensation and consumption of knowledge or information. This is possible because images function under a simple and universal language.

The utilitarian purpose of images is founded upon their ability to compact or to distil life, experience, emotions, culture and history through mediums such as photography and film. Images<sup>1</sup> are often taken to be serviceable because of their seemingly uncomplicated language. American linguist Joseph Greenberg in Alberro and Stimson (2000:25) observe that “Language can be approached in either of two ways, as a set of culturally transmitted behaviour patterns shared by a group or a system confirming to the rules which constitute its grammar.”

Greenberg explains that to a group of people, language can be viewed as an authorising medium and at the same time it can also become authoritative, which means that, depending on how language is used, it can either be used as a determinant for all that is considered true or it can be used to challenge the notion of truth and tradition. For Greenberg, language is a big part of who we are; it links the individual to a collective or to a culture.

British-Jamaican sociologist Stuart Hall, quoted in Gqola (2001:95), holds that “Identity is never complete, but it is defined, inscribed and accessible in language”. Hall, like Greenberg, argues that language is always linked with the individual’s relationship to the collective or the identity of a collective meaning that any language used by any specific collective holds the key to the collective’s beliefs and values. Just as “identity is never complete, but it is defined”, language is also ever-changing and therefore this capacity for language to shift and change ensures the

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<sup>1</sup> John Berger in *Ways of seeing* (1971:1) “Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak, but there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it.”

possibility of there being a shift in the ways in which collectives use language and how they see themselves through language.

Greenberg's assertion of language being authorising and authoritative can be answered with the fact that language too can change, and it is this possibility that can change the ways in which individuals view themselves and the world.

The communicative ability of words (language) is one often shared with visual language. We have seen that language is a part of our identity; it influences how we see and imagine ourselves. Similarly, visual language plays a crucial role in the way that we see ourselves and others; visual language uses visible objects whereas language uses words. While both mediums require a different kind of literacy, one can say that the impalpability of words make visual language more accessible. This is of course not always the case since visual language is recognisable or imitates reality, whereas with language one must learn its vocabulary and grammar in order to gain an understanding of a text.

This relationship between language and visual language can be seen in advertisements where pictures are inseparable from text. As we will see in this study, conceptual art emerged from this relationship between text and objects and it challenged the traditional ways of making art. More importantly, it challenged the communicative role of art objects in gallery spaces: what made a work of art translatable or untranslatable foregrounded the advent of the movement.

One gathers that the simplicity of certain images may be apparent because of their exposure to visually literate audiences. This means that, similar to language,<sup>2</sup> images can be made complicated or uncomplicated by those who are in control of the image production; the image maker has the

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<sup>2</sup> Jean Paul Sartre in *The Imaginary* (1986:83) "Words are not images: the function of the acoustic or optic phenomenon, the picture. The only feature common to the sign consciousness and the image consciousness is that each, in its in its own way aims at an object, through another object."

power to make any given image translatable or untranslatable.<sup>3</sup> Professor of performance studies, Diana Taylor in *Fleetwood* (2011:19) states “The problem of untranslatability, as I see it is actually a positive one, a necessary stumbling block that reminds us that ‘we’-whether in our various disciplines, or languages, or geographic locations through the Americas do not simply or unproblematically understand each other.”

Taylor addresses the fact that, there are various ways to get closer to an object, and that sometimes there are alternatives to knowing and to understanding, very often images require one to know how to read them. For instance, French literary theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes in his book, *Image-Music-Text*, discusses the notion of translatability and untranslatability in images; he insists that images are made in such a way that they are clear enough for everyone to understand. For Barthes (1977:33) “if the image contains signs, we can be sure that in advertising these signs are full, formed with a view to the optimum reading: the advertising image is frank, or at least emphatic.” Here, Barthes explains that images are constructed in a clear manner, which means that images are always made with the viewer in mind, so that the making of images goes hand in hand with who will be consuming the images.

Having stated this, one can say that visual literacy is often prescribed rather than acquired; this means that visual illiteracy often exists under the guise of visual literacy, because generally images are consumed rather than examined. This brings one to the question: how can one learn to see, and what are the dangers of not seeing?

American cultural theorist and writer Nichole Fleetwood in her book, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality and Blackness* (2011), explores the subject of black visibility in mass culture and how black art often falls within the same normative framework and conceptualizations. In *Troubling Vision*, Fleetwood (2011:8-9) critically deploys concepts to “probe the space between

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<sup>3</sup> Mbali Khoza in *What difference does it make who is speaking?* (2016:24) “If one accepts that the voice is intersubjective and comes from multiple sources then the act of translation should be understood as one that pushes this idea to its limits.”

subject and object, between instantiation and affect, to show how visualization works in the production of blackness as that which is viewable and as discourse.”

Fleetwood probes the surface of visibility to better understand the dynamics that determine and perpetuate the entanglements of history and culture of the black body, Fleetwood argues for newer ways of interpreting the black body in art. For her (2011:16), “Visibility implies the state of being able to be seen while visualization refers to the mediation of the field of vision and the production of visual objects/beings.”

The terms ‘visibility’ and ‘visuality’ are manifestations of an optical process. Fleetwood acknowledges this factor, explaining that while both visibility and visuality<sup>4</sup> present a relatively optical positionality, visuality represents the congruence of vision with the production of things in the world. As a person of colour, Fleetwood addresses the subject of black bodies and how black bodies are received in different spaces, but particularly how images of blackness are produced in gallery spaces. Her explanation of the words ‘visibility’ and ‘visualization’ stem from the fact that images still have to be decolonised. She insists that the state of visibility is not the same as visuality, because visibility means to be seen, while visualization points to the fact that one is able to see while reflecting and thinking about what one is seeing. More importantly, in visualization, one is able to shift the subject that one is seeing by thinking about it in different contexts and it is not bound to the manner in which it has been portrayed.

This concern about the black body’s historicity and the ways it is portrayed and seen has been explored also by American feminist and theorist, bell hooks in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*.<sup>5</sup> In this book, hooks (1992:04) “critically interrogates old narratives, suggesting alternative ways to look at blackness, black subjectivity, and, of necessity, whiteness”. hooks argues that decolonisation makes it possible to love oneself or to love blackness. Like Fleetwood

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<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Mirzoeff in *The Visual Culture Reader* (1998:05) “The visual disrupts and challenges any attempt to define culture in purely linguistic terms.”

<sup>5</sup> bell hooks in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992:04) “The critical essays gathered in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* are gestures of defiance. They represent my political struggle to push against the boundaries of the image, to find words that express what I see, especially when I am looking in ways that move against the grain, when I am seeking things that most folks want to believe simply are not there.”

she interrogates the gaze and the portrayal of black bodies and insists that decolonisation is needed for us to love ourselves and to portray ourselves in a better light.<sup>6</sup>

According to hooks (1992:04), “For some time now the critical challenge for black folks has been to expand the discussion of race and representation beyond debates about good and bad imagery. Often what is thought to be good is merely a reaction against representations created by white people that were blatantly stereotypical. Currently however, we are bombarded by black folks creating and marketing similar stereotypical images. It is not an issue of “us” and “them”. The issue is really one of standpoint.”

For hooks, what lies at the heart of the problem is not who is producing negative images of blackness. Instead, hooks insists that the gaze has to be decolonised and to be able to decolonise the ways in which we see images one has to understand the historicity behind the subject matter (the black body) and how it functions in previously colonial spaces.

We can see the relationship between visibility and visibility in the ways in which art is consumed and in the various ways in which art is written about. In the work of Berni Searle, her use and placement of the black body in institutions (art galleries) that systematically excluded the participation of black/women artists within art spaces during apartheid can mean different things to different individuals. The presence of a black body (the visibility) may be indicative of the artist’s intention to perform using the body as a tool, while the visibility of an artist does not account for its intention. The thoughts or perception of a body (visuality) enables the viewer to understand the intention behind the presence of a body (historicity) within a space; visuality allows one to translate visibility.

One can say that visuality represents a continuum and reveals an incessant aspect of visibility and while visibility may seem inchoative, and limited, it is in visuality that the act of visibility is

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<sup>6</sup> bell hooks in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992:4-5) “Decolonisation as a political process is always a struggle to define ourselves in and beyond the act of resistance to domination, we are always in the process of both remembering the past even as we create new ways to imagine and make the future.”

imputed. In his book, *The visual culture reader* (1998), American visual culture theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff (1988:06) explains that “Visual culture does not depend on pictures but on this modern tendency to picture or visualise existence. This visualizing makes the modern period radically different from the ancient and medieval world in which the world was understood as a book. More importantly, pictures were seen not as representations, artificial constructs seeking to imitate an object, but as closely related to, or even identical to that object.”

Throughout the ages the production of images remains problematic, as images today are still closely linked and identified as real representations of a prescribed narrative. This is concerning as certain images often produce negative stereotypes and this can be come problematic when images are consumed and believed to represent the truth. In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, hooks also questions our role in the way in which images are received and dealt with, hooks (1992: 06) holds that “If we, black people, have learned to cherish hateful images of ourselves then what processes of looking allows us to counter the seduction of images that threatens to dehumanize and colonise.”

The question posed by hooks is found in the view that is held by Fleetwood, in highlighting the difference between visibility and visibility Fleetwood makes clear the fact that visibility not only makes visible, but it also allows us to think about that which is in sight and imagine new possibilities.

Visibility presents to us options to create and dispose of the old, but the sense of historicity and, culture or normative constructs carried by individuals in society permeates and delimits the narratives that surface from the new production of images. American art critic and historian, Hal Foster in Fleetwood (2011:16) claims that “Although vision suggests sight as a physical operation, and visibility as a social fact, the two are not opposed as nature to culture: vision is social and historical, too, and visibility involves the body and the psyche. Yet neither are they identical: here, the difference between the terms signals a difference within the visual – between the mechanism difference, many differences, among how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing or the unseen therein.”

Foster posits vision as individualistic and visuality as a social act, making a distinction between the two terms proves difficult because both vision and visuality are taught and both operate from a referential perspective as well as from a positionality that is marked by possibilities. Furthermore, Mirzoeff continues (2011:16) by insisting that “Visuality has very much to do with picturing and nothing to do with vision, if by vision we understand how an individual person registers visual sensory impressions.”

One could make the argument that the two terms are entangled because of their optic relationship. Visuality and vision are bound by factors such as time, space, place and knowledge. Visual culture affords us the opportunity to investigate the content as well as the context of images as this involves a process as well as a willingness to learn and unlearn the normative constructs that come with different existences or objects.<sup>7</sup>

Philosophy lecturer, Kathleen Stock in Goldie and Schellekens (2007:178) explains that “No matter how long I may look at an image, I shall never find anything in it but what I put there.” Here, the act of seeing reveals to us not the image itself but the ways in which we understand the world and our attitude towards the world through a singular object (through an image). Stock (2007:175) also explains that “the claim that one cannot learn about objects from visualizing is consistent with the possibility that one can learn thereby about other things: for instance, about one’s emotions, desires, neuroses, and so on.” Perhaps this sentiment shared by Stock is reflective of Mirzoeff’s (2011:16) connection of “vision and the registration of visual sensory impressions.” If one cannot receive anything from an image either than what one already knows, then perhaps it is fair to state that what adds meaning to images is our ability and willingness to feel; emotion and sensation still present to us reasons as to why images are made and why they should continue being produced.

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<sup>7</sup> Nicholas Mirzoeff in *The Visual Culture Reader* (1998:07): “Visual culture is a necessarily historical subject, based on the recognition that the visual image is not stable but changes its relationship to exterior reality at particular moments of modernity.”

### 3. Conceptual art

Conceptual art was established in the early 1960's; it was and came to be known as a movement based on the production of ideas, and the ideas thereof became and served the function of works of art.<sup>8</sup> In the essay "*Authentic Ex-Centric*" at the Venice Biennale: *African Conceptualism in Global Contexts*, Goldwin Smith Professor of African and American Diaspora Art History and Visual Culture in Africana studies, Salah Hassan and Nigerian-born American artist and intellectual Olu Oguibe (2001:66) explain that:

Conceptual art emerged in the last century from a long series of often unconnected and not altogether intentional acts and interventions in which artists elected or rejected certain forms or strategies in art making, and in the process revised the received understanding of the nature and essence of art. Because these interventions occurred in several different locations and precede the term itself, most recent historiographers of Conceptual art admit that attempts to designate a firm genealogy or lineage can only be futile, or at best viewed with skepticism.

Oguibe and Hassan argue that it is hard to trace exactly when conceptual art emerged, for although conceptual art is a Western phenomenon, one can argue that similar conceptions of visual culture might have been held in different parts of the world before or after its inception in the West. Oguibe and Hassan (2001:73) add that "in South Africa Conceptualism was already evident in the 1970s, in the work of Willem Boshoff and Andries Botha." Although signs of conceptual art emerged later in South Africa, one sees more artists such as Berni Searle, Dineo Bopape, Tracy Rose, Mohau Modisakeng producing work that have elements that are both conceptual and performative.

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<sup>8</sup> Roberta Smith in *Concepts of Modern Art from Fauvism to Postmodernism* (1974:256): "starting in the mid-sixties an extended free-for all began in art which lasted for almost a decade. This free-for-all, a broad and extremely diverse range of activities known as conceptual art or idea or information Art- along with a number of related tendencies variously labelled Body Art, Performance Art and Narrative Art."

From a Western perspective, one of the founders of conceptual art, American artist Sol Lewitt (1928-2007) in Alberro and Stimson (2002:12) explains that:

In conceptual art the idea of the concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art. This kind of art is not theoretical or illustrative of theories; it is intuitive, it is involved in all types of mental processes and it is purposeless. It is usually free from the dependence on the skill of the artist as a craftsman.

Here Lewitt proposes that it is not the form that gives an artwork meaning, but rather it is the idea that creates and shapes the form of the artwork.<sup>9</sup> This notion suggested by Lewitt complicates the idea of vision and visuality because, as discussed by Fleetwood and hooks, what we see forms the basis of what we think about. Moreover, as suggested by Greenberg, our use of language also determines how we view certain things and how we understand them to add to this. The fact that the object is dematerialized should in fact encourage the viewer to focus on the work of art. So, to return to Lewitt's statement, the relationship between form and thought should be interactive in this sense, and conceptual art seems to manifest this relationship successfully.

Conceptual art has complicated the ways in which we look at art. While traditional art (painting) represented beauty through precision and attention to detail, conceptual art's focus on objects and ideas encourages the viewer to question the relationship between what they are seeing and what they are perceiving (vision and visuality). Visuality is necessary in conceptual art because one needs to think about what one is seeing (vision/visibility) instead of judging what one is seeing from a point of reference.

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<sup>9</sup> Chandler in *Semiotics* (2002:14) "Information or meaning is not contained in the world or in books/computers or audio-visual media. Meaning is not 'transmitted' to us – we actively create it according to a complex interplay of codes or conventions of which we are normally unaware."

Unlike paintings, some conceptual works are made from production of things in the world, such as furniture or clothing. The introduction of everyday objects can transform the relationship between the viewer and the art, insofar as viewers find the art work relatable because the items are accessible and have a shared connection with their everyday lives.

However, this relatability to everyday objects does not mean that the work is translatable; in fact it can be alienating to find familiar objects within a gallery space which one recognises but then again one is unable to recognise the objects' significance as works of art. This can occur because the artist has given the object a new identity and this new identity changes the function of the object. This means that the process of meaning-making not only gives the object a new identity but it turns it into an art object. One can argue that the space also plays an immense role in the way in which we see objects; galleries command viewers to shift their thinking about ordinary objects and to view them as objects of value.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Brian O'Doherty in *Inside the White Cube: Ideology of the Gallery Space* (1986: 15) "A gallery is constructed along laws as rigorous as those for building a medieval church. The outside world must not come in, so windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white. The ceiling becomes the source of light. The wooden floor is polished so that you click along clinically, or carpeted so that you pad soundlessly, resting the feet while the eyes have at the wall."



Figure 1: Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain* (1917-1964), Porcelain, Unconfirmed: 360 x 480 x 610 mm, Tate Gallery. (Reproduction taken from <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/Duchampfountain-t07573>)

The introduction of Duchamp's ready-mades also marked an important shift in ways in which art is viewed and engaged with.<sup>11</sup> Viewers' engagements with the work reveal that conceptual art communicated philosophical ideas clearly and visually. Roberta in Smith (1974:257) explains that Duchamp's "colleagues rejected this work and in doing so helped make Duchamp's 'Readymade' (as he called it), perhaps the quintessential 'Pro-Conceptual' art work, one of the first to question self-consciously and irreverently both its own status as art and the multifaceted context of

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<sup>11</sup> Roberta in *Concepts of Modern Art: From Fauvism to Postmodernism* (1974:257) "Duchamp became one of this century's most influential and lastingly Controversial artists. He used language and all manner of verbal and visual punning, randomness as well as deliberately plotted chance, trivial and ephemeral substances, his own person, provocative gestures directed at his own or other art, as the means and subjects of his work."

exhibitions, critical criteria and audience expectations, which had traditionally conferred that status.”

Duchamp’s work the *Fountain* also problematized the purchasing of art, because ready-mades are essentially objects that are accessible to everyone, unlike the materials that were used traditionally, that were costly and expansive eg, bronze, oil paints (see Figure 1 above).<sup>12</sup> For Roberta, conceptual art not only challenged audiences to learn how to view art from a different cannon; the concept of the dematerialization of art objects also changed traditional art spaces and shifted the discourse, so that art no longer became predictable but was filled with a sense of possibility and freedom.

Australian curator Sabine Breitwieser in Alberro and Buchmann (2006:09) argues that “Conceptual practices are often discussed in reference to the aspects of a >> Dematerialization<< of the art-object, and of the democratization of the art-world that, it is hoped, will accompany it.” Breitwieser, like Lewitt, identifies conceptual art as being formless and cerebral. By ‘formless’ I am alluding to the fact that conceptual art can take any form or no form at all since it is not limited to any traditional form of making and presenting art. One must note also that the indeterminate manner in which conceptual art is produced makes the commodification of conceptual art difficult, and this is not to say that conceptual art cannot be sellable. Conceptual art not only changes the way in which art is produced and interpreted in the public, but it challenges art institutions to form new ways of packaging and selling art.<sup>13</sup>

Lewitt in Alberro and Stimson (2002:106) affirms that “Ideas alone can be works of art, they are in a chain of development that may eventually find some form. All ideas need not to be made

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<sup>12</sup> Salah M Hassan and Olu Oguibe in “*Authentic / Ex-Centric*” at the Venice Biennale: *African Conceptualism in Global Contexts* (2001: 67-68): “Fountain was also presented as a critique of Western painting at the turn of the twentieth century, and it should be recalled that another decade would pass before Georges Braque (and then Picasso) made what some would consider the radical shift that Duchamp anticipated and sought with his critique.”

<sup>13</sup> Salah M Hassan and Olu Oguibe in “*Authentic/ Ex-Centric*” at the Venice Biennale: *African Conceptualism in Global Contexts* (2001:69-70): “A third crucial element or tendency in Conceptual art is the preeminence of framing, whereby the placement of a work of art and the consequent context become more important to its meaning and significance than its form or its “aesthetic” qualities. Whereas within tradition, meaning was dependent on narrative or coherent image, in Conceptual art these become secondary to the careful location of the work in relation to its surroundings and their relevant associations.”

physical.” Conceptual art presupposes a re-evaluation of how we see art; it challenges our ability to read images by seeking new ways of understanding. This challenge of finding new ways of understanding causes the viewer to engage creatively and imaginatively with the work, in the case of ready-mades which are composed of found objects, which are then rearranged or given a new identity, the newly found identities of objects serve to also create a new language that adheres to its own way of being read this also challenges traditional art discourses, specifically the ways that art is written about.

As early as 1917<sup>14</sup> French artist, Marcel Duchamp introduced the idea of ‘ready-mades’ which was centred on idea-based art and objects. In an essay titled “*Conceptual Art*”, Roberta Smith in Stangos (1974:257) states “Duchamp, a young French artist who claimed to be more interested in the final product, took an ordinary urinal, signed it ‘R. Mutt’ and entered it as a piece of sculpture titled *Fountain* in an exhibition he was helping organize in New York.”

One can say that this introduction of ready-mades upset the art community not because of their untranslatable nature, ready-mades were filled with ambiguity and the art community lacked the tools to unpack and understand the work. In other words, art audiences were not able to see (visibility) what is in front of them and they were unable to visualise what the art work conveyed.

Duchamp’s ready-mades introduced new ways of seeing and more importantly he introduced a canon/category that caused a noticeable shift in visual culture. An important factor in Duchamp’s work is that it highlighted how certain artworks are privileged over others and how the standards that have been set in the art world cause the stagnation of art because artists made art in accordance to what is expected from them to make. Similarly, in *The Power of the Archive and Its Limits*, the Cameroonian philosopher, political theorist and public intellectual Achille Mbembe discusses the

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<sup>14</sup> In the west, four years before Duchamp’s *The Fountain*, feminist Dadaist Baroness Elsa Van FreytagLoringhoven created the work titled *Enduring Ornament* (1913). Caroline Giepert in *Baroness Elsa Van FreytagLoringhoven in New York Dada* (2016:05) “Elsa arrived in New York in 1913, the same year as the Armory show, which opened the floodgates for the arrival of revolutionary avant-garde art. Additionally, she married her final husband, the Baron Leopold Van Freytag-Loringhoven in 1913, thus lending her an air of haughtiness in her critiques of culturally inferior Americans. Her first found object piece, enduring ornament, a simple iron ring, actually dates to the day of their union since she found it on the way to city hall. For this reason, this ready-made object proved to be sincere and sentimental since it resembles a wedding ring, but the Baroness meant for it to signify a Venus symbol.”

notion of archiving and how this process takes place. Mbembe's writing also demonstrates how certain biases determine the way in which certain documents or creative productions are considered as important while others are not. This is important since gallery spaces and museums determine what can be called art and what can't be called art and also what can be collected and what cannot be collected.

For Mbembe (2002:20) "The archive is primarily the product of a judgement, the result of the exercise of a specific power and authority, which involves placing certain documents in an archive at the same time as others are discarded. The archive, therefore, is fundamentally a matter of discrimination and of selection, which in the end, results in the granting of a privileged status to certain written documents, and the refusal of that same status to others, thereby judged 'unarchivable'. The archive is, therefore not a piece of data, but a status." Here Mbembe brings to our attention the complicated and mostly unfair process of archiving. Art galleries serve as ground on which artworks are judged, and while some artworks are considered up to standard others are not.

Duchamp's work also questioned, who has authority over the quality of artworks? Who gets to determine the shift in art? And do artists themselves have the license to set the rules in the artworld? Duchamp's work not only assisted in answering those questions, but it showed that there still remain other possibilities to think creatively through the use of new materials or objects.

Hassan and Oguibe (2001:67) argued that Duchamp's "*Fountain* was significant for its relevance, namely that it questioned not only the general social definition of art accepted in the West since the Greeks, by which art was restricted to varying degrees of mimesis." Hassan and Oguibe stress the fact the traditional ways of art making were based and sometimes graded on how well an artist can "copy" or rather on how realistically an artist can paint or sculpt, Duchamp's introduction of ready-mades continues to show that is ever-changing and these shifts in art should be embraced to further develop other ways of communicating and thinking creatively.

Artist works are usually seen to challenge institutions through the productions of their images but the types of artwork which achieve this and why such receptions or interpretations from the artists and audiences surface problematizes and sometimes delimits the role of image production.

Fleetwood (2011:13) holds that “Contemporary artists and thinkers have launched various attempts to conceptualize black visibility in ways that do not continue to marginalise black visual practices or that do not promote prescriptive notions of cultural engagement.”

An example of the issue which Fleetwood addresses would be for example, the presence of a black body engaged in a performance or forming as part of a portraiture collection in an art institution being seen to challenge the normative structure of museums or curation. One of the difficulties in the conceptual art of people of colour is that their artistic production is often entangled by history race and culture. There still remains a certain invisibility in the visibility of the art production, and the notion of the total democratization of art and institutions proves to be more regressive when it comes to the consumption of black creative productions even under the hypervisibility of black bodies in conceptual art.<sup>15</sup>

This problematic phenomena of canonisation or prescriptive interpretation of art is not new, grappling with this very idea, Director and Chief Curator of the studio museum in Harlem, Thelma Golden and American conceptual artist Glenn Ligon developed the term Post- Black as a means to interpret black art without any attachments to culture, politics or any normative construct which is applied to black images. Thelma Golden in Fleetwood (2011:14) clarifies that: “Post-Black” was shorthand for a post-black art, which was shorthand for a discourse that could fill volumes. For me, to approach a conversation about “black art” ultimately meant embracing and rejecting the notion of such a thing at the same time... It was a clarifying term that had the ideological and chronological dimensions and repercussions. It was characterised by artists who were adamant

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<sup>15</sup> In a book edited by Mirzoeff, theorist Paul Gilroy in *The Visual Culture Reader* (1998:332) “Visual art currently constitutes a significant battleground because aesthetic issues are particularly close to the surface of individual judgements and, above all, because the majority of its critics are bound by the common sense view that good art is universally recognizable and cultural background is not a factor either in its production or its appreciation.”

about not being labeled as “black” artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested in redefining notions of blackness.

For Golden, post-black art encourages both the viewer and the artist to examine the progression of visual culture and to strategically seek a placement in the visual arts for emergent of art production that does not necessarily fit the prescribed paradigm of the operational /functional visual language of a given period. Curator and theorist Irit Rogoff in Mirzoeff (1998: 07) states that “Visual culture is a necessarily historical subject, based on the recognition that the visual image is not stable but changes its relationship to exterior reality at particular moments of modernity.”

Rogoff confirms that visual culture and meaning making should not remain stagnant; conceptual art should be able to offer new possibilities and positionalities for art and artists. Relatedly, German art historian Rolf Wedewer in Alberro and Stimson (2000:142) contend “Conceptual art is not only a name for one of the most radical movements in art, but, in addition, this term also draws attention to a general change in art as well as to a change in its conceptualization. Its designation marks an opening of new perspectives which may lead to a form of art which cannot be judged and understood on the basis of its concrete and manifest creations, but – similar to other communication media – based on its procedural potentials.”

Wedewer brings our attention to the limitless possibilities or potentialities that conceptual art can bring; he insists that a work of art should not be fixed to any particular idea but should instead exist in the processes and the procedures that the particular work of art allows. With this statement I conclude that conceptual art represents potentialities and is marked by art production that is not definitive but rather progressive.

#### 4. The conceptual art of Berni Searle

Berni Searle<sup>16</sup> (b.1964) is a Cape Town born artist, who uses photography, studio-based recorded performance work and site-specific performance art. Searle's installations often include large-scale photographs and double screen video projections of recorded performances, where at times these installations can include everyday materials such as spices and containers

In the 2007 catalogue titled *Berni Searle: Recent Work 2007/8*, art historian Marion Arnold (2008:20) states "Searle is an artist, but that essential description is extended by identity politics – she is South African, of mixed race, female. These dimensions of her being contribute to Searle's creative vision but do not control it. Once removed from imposed classifications, artists should express individual energy and ideas and human concerns not the clamour of breaking news and politico-babble that punctuate daily life."

Here, Arnold uses her own prescriptive notion of what art should be. She states that art should not be essentialist, but then again the artist whom she writes about is already placed within a framework that represents the normative construct of the black body in art. South African curator Rory Bester in the 2003 catalogue titled *Berni Searle: Float* (2003:25) states "Berni Searle is a South African artist of mixed race. In the language of apartheid South Africa, she would have been classified 'coloured', and it is a rebellion against the rigidity of this classification that is at the heart of so much of Searle's work. The immutability of tension between being neither black nor white, and at the same time either black or white."

Much of Searle's conceptual work has been discussed under topics such as displacement, miscegenation, dislocation, geopolitics, identity, black feminism as well as slave memory. Her work is considered as conceptual because it adheres to the rubric which 'supposedly' informs all

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<sup>16</sup> Clive Kellner in *On Beauty, Loss and Transcendence* (2006:17) "Searle is part of a generation of South African artists who are transcending the dictates and limits of identity politics to create powerful images that resonate within a global cultural discourse while still referencing particular aspects of home and place. Her artistic production, although always personal and encompassing the human form, most often the artists own body, has evolved from overt concern with body politics and identity framing to gestural, poetic subject matter."

conceptual works of art. The shift from traditional painting and the focus on the artwork as an idea points best to the direction that conceptual art took during the early 1960's.

South African feminist writer, Desiree Lewis (2012: 108) identifies Searle's work as being of a conceptual nature and explains this positionality, stating that:

Searle eschews representational painting, life-like sculptures or the artworks usually associated with political engagement. Embracing video performance and photography, her work falls under the rubric of conceptual art, a practice in which core assumptions of realistic art are radically questioned.

Conceptual art avoids being 'logical', realistic or aesthetically 'pleasing'.

Instead the artwork critically scrutinizes these assumptions to develop a 'conceptual' exploration of the social and intellectual contexts in which art circulates.

Conceptual art challenges the viewer as well as the artist to experience art that is not informed by old tradition. The change in materiality forces viewers to think instead of readily consuming ideas; the audience formulate their own conceptions while being cognisant of the fact that it is their thoughts that inform the work. One sees in the work of an artist such as Searle how her work has been written about in various ways by writers from different fields, including Pumla Gqola, Gabeba Baderoon and Desiree Lewis as I discuss below. This shows that there can be various interpretations of an artist's work, but this does not mean that the writer's views cannot be challenged.

One can disagree with Lewis's statement because much of Searle's work is 'logical', aesthetically pleasing and is reflective of a long and thorough investigation and staging of the work. One might revisit the concept of vision (visibility) and visuality and get a sense of how Searle challenges this very notion of learning to see or to imagine by using the medium of photography to decolonise the gaze. To highlight this point Searle in Bester (2003:31) shares her work process stating "The camera is placed in a specific position and there are a number of formal and conceptual concerns

that are negotiated. The use of the medium also draws attention to the way photography has been used, often as a way of producing ‘evidence’ that systematically classifies and categorises information. As a counter strategy to the use of the camera as verification and proof, I have used the medium to withhold information, thereby pointing to an indeterminacy of content.”

Through this, the artist herself states that her work is meant to “withhold information” and is representative of an “indeterminacy of content” but Searle’s work has gone through innumerable publications which maintain the similar normative construct and definitiveness of race and gendered identity. Related to the subject of her photographic work process and the interpretation of her art, Searle states that “issues of race are unavoidable, especially since the body was a primary site of identification in terms of racial classification in the South African context and therefore cannot be overlooked. What interests me more, however, are ideas of ambiguity and mutability in relation to the concept of identity, and the various subject positions we occupy, which are always fluid.” (Searle, quoted in Western et al. 2011: 8) Again Searle points out the potentialities that exist within her work but more importantly one also realises how much planning goes into each work. Searle in these interviews discusses how technology is used in her work to change the narrative, she not only focuses on the black body but on the tools that portray the black body in violent ways, in this instance her usage of photography not only challenges the gaze but the mediums that produce the subjects for viewing.

Fleetwood (2011:17) explains that “Vision and visual technologies in this context are seen as hostile and violent forces that render blackness as aberration, given the long and brutal history of black subjugation through various technologies, visual apparatus among them.” One can say that for Searle to consciously use the camera as a tool that incites violence in the field of visibility on the black body points to her awareness of the lens in which her art may be viewed and also plays with the idea of stagnation as a result of using the camera as a tool of documenting her work. She is aware of the dangers as well as the advantages that may arise from using it. Berni Searle’s work fits in well into the idea of conceptual art because of the play on ambiguity but also because of the careful planning or cerebral energy that goes into each production of her works. Searle’s ideas are

strong not only because of their execution but also because they problematize the ways in which we interpret and consume works of art.

Conceptual art also poses a question of “value”. For example, if conceptual art is based on the dematerialization of art, how can the worth of an artwork be measured? Or is it that conceptual art is refocusing the value of an object to that of the person who is creating the art object? In reference to the sentiments explored by American conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth (b.1945) with regards to the work of French-American artist Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), art historians Blake Stimson and Alexander Alberro (2000: xvii) write “The ‘value’ of particular artists after Duchamp, he writes, can be weighed according to how much they rejected “the handed-down ‘language of traditional art’ and there by freed from morphological constrictions of inquiry into the meaning of art.”

Kosuth like Mignolo alludes to the idea of aesthetic disobedience as a way of destabilizing the power structures that control the way that art is made and consumed and this process allows formations of aesthetic culture to emerge within art spaces. In the book *Conceptual art: Theory, myth and practice* (2004) Artist and art historian Michael Corris (b.1948) writes (2004:01) “Exasperated by the flood of generalities accompanying recent reconsiderations of the art of the late 1960’s and 1970’s, Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden – two artists who currently comprise the British group, *Art and language* characterised conceptual art as ‘modernism’s nervous breakdown’ and the homeless art of the culturally displaced.” Both Ramsden and Baldwin recognised in conceptual art its overt reaction to the old and its welcoming of the new; the aesthetic and epistemic disobedience of conceptual art is used as a directive for cultural transformation. The conceptual art of artists such as Berni Searle challenges normative constructs through art productions and extends this to the ultimate transfiguration of institutions.

## 5. Epistemic and aesthetic disobedience / self-recovery and conceptual art

Searle's work is reflective of a self-examination and a distillation of the world and situations through objects and materialities. Searle's approach to the exploration of slave memory reminds us of the concept of self-recovery by American black feminist bell hooks.

In the work, *killing rage: Ending racism (1995)* hooks proposes that black rage can be seen as a form of love, when it is directed at perpetrators and it is used as a defence to protect one's selfhood and it is not shared amongst repressed groups. hooks informs us that confronting one's pain and directing rage at the source or at systems of oppression is a strategy for self-recovery and clarity. hooks (1995:4) states "My rage intensifies because I am not a victim it burns in my psyche with an intensity that creates clarity. It is a constructive healing rage. Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh teaches that self-recovery is ultimately about learning to see clearly." hooks reminds us of the importance of self-actualisation and healing; she shows that clarity can be attained by taking a reactionary stance against sources of pain and oppression. In this regard, one is able to see in Searle's work the confrontational stance against coloniality and art institutions by her insertion of a black female body in artwork and through seeking meaning and recovery in materiality's associated with displacement, race and gender.

Argentinian semiotician Walter Mignolo (b.1941) in his writings on globalization and contemporary art (2011:71) states that "museums and universities were and continue to be two crucial institutions for the accumulation of meaning and the reproduction of the coloniality of knowledge and of beings." His assertion points to the manner in which knowledge has and continues to be disseminated in cultural and educational institutions. He reminds us that knowledge too has been used as a tool of exclusion and this essentially means that decoloniality can be reached through the process of learning and unlearning.

Mignolo's views on decoloniality and the power structures governing knowledge are similar to the ideas that form conceptual art. As is seen in the work of Searle, not only is the art created for the purpose of beauty the work itself disrupts the spaces in which it is displayed. Commenting on the

role of disruption in decoloniality, He (2011:72) observes that “one of the tasks before us is to engage in decolonial projects, learning to unlearn the principles that justified museums and universities and to formulate a new horizon of understanding and of human living conditions behind the sacred belief that accumulation is the secret for a decent life.”

Similar to the American feminist bell hooks, Mignolo’s writings on decoloniality and decolonial options prove to be solution orientated; his work urges a call for what he terms as “aesthetic and epistemic disobedience” meaning that decolonial options can be attained when one works against a colonial framework. In his book *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (2011), Mignolo explains that “Decolonial thinking and options (i.e., thinking decoloniality) are nothing more than a relentless analytic effort to understand in order to overcome”. From this one gathers again that the notion of self-recovery by hooks serves as a decolonial option because of the claim that self-recovery is an incentive for mental clarity and health, echoing Mignolo’s notion of ‘understanding in order to overcome.’”

Conceptual art presents to us “options” of decoloniality and also ways to look at the art world from a skeptical and critical perspective; one questions how knowledge is dispensed and by whom, and to which audience. Through aesthetic and ‘epistemic disobedience’, conceptual art reveals how art can be used as a tool for self-actualisation and self-worth through the usage and creation of new knowledge systems.

## **6. Conclusion**

In conclusion, by probing the surface of art history and by investigating how art institutions function in relation to the producers of art, this chapter explored how images, most importantly how the black body through images, maintains an invisibility in its visibility. Using Berni Searle as the main artist, I questioned the role in which the black body plays in present society and in the context of South African history. I suggested that black art should present possibilities of being seen and read anew. In this regard, conceptual art as a platform promises to democratize art and art institutions but this proves difficult given that black bodies in art are still entangled and still operate within the same normative constructs in which culture and history are the only lens in

which black bodies are seen. By investigating the meanings behind conceptual art, vision and visibility, value, epistemic disobedience and self-recovery I have attempted to draw out the different ways in which conceptual art could achieve this model of the total democratisation of art, and hopefully this will lead us to more insightful and imaginative ways of interpreting black art.

## **CHAPTER 2: AN INTRODUCTION TO EXISTENTIALISM**

### **7. Introduction**

This chapter conducts an in-depth reading of the work of Berni Searle through the lens of existentialism: its historical roots, its development over time and contemporary contributions. By doing so this chapter seeks to shift the Eurocentric association with this philosophy by offering an African positionality. This African positionality is situated within the South African context. As such, this chapter aims to probe and fill in the missing gaps in South African philosophical practices. In particular, the interrogation of South African existentialism forces one to investigate the existence of South African existential art.

### **8. What is existentialism?**

In the book, *Plato not Prozac: applying external wisdom to everyday problems*, Canadian Philosopher Lou Joshua Marinoff (1999:73) explains that “existentialism emerged at the end of the nineteenth century when much of intellectual thought was collapsing on itself. Many people had thought humans were on the verge of acquiring all the knowledge. The line of reasoning went that there were just a couple of problems left in physics and mathematics and that once they were solved, our knowledge of the theoretical and natural world would be complete.” Marinoff posits that although there is a presence of change and progress in the world, what remains the same is our human condition and our struggle with the unequivocal meaninglessness of life. He adds “as we came to grips with this sudden loss of absoluteness – that is, were sentenced to imperfect knowledge in logic, mathematics, and physics – we confronted even greater gaps of knowledge in the biological, psychological, and social realms. We could no longer look to the sum total of

knowledge to make us wise. Scientific and technological progress had to be tempered by new philosophical insights.” (1999:73)

Thus, existentialism did not emerge as a response to a state of emergency or a specific crisis situated in the world. Instead, Marinoff contends, it is rather our situatedness in the world, our ‘Being’ in the world, that brought about existential philosophy. Existentialism can be described as a philosophy that stresses human freedom and encourages self-examination; it supports the idea of humans taking full responsibility for their lives as well as their choices.<sup>17</sup>

English philosopher of morality Mary Warnock (1965:38) insists that “the central existentialist doctrine is that men are nothing but what they choose to become, their essence consists in what they choose to do. But it also consists in what they choose to know.” Existentialists hold that human ‘essence’ is not intrinsic, meaning that we do not come into the world with a predetermined way of ‘Being’. Simply put, existentialism emphasises that our choices make us who we are.

## **9. A brief overview of Sartrean existentialism**

Jean-Paul Sartre is famously known as a philosopher, but not much is known about the fact that his work was aided by his interest in creative productions such as literature and theatre. It is through these creative productions that Sartre managed to bring to life major concepts such as Nausea, bad faith and being for others. But with interests so vast, one might wonder as to how he managed to create a comprehensive and interesting body of work on the subject of existentialism.

In the introduction to Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, Warnock (1943/2003:XV) explains that “existentialism does not recognise the boundary between ethics and epistemology, nor between ethics and ontology (as for logic, it has no interest in it). Just as there is no sharp distinction

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<sup>17</sup> Jean Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* (1943/2003:631) “Since there is no pre-established pattern for human nature, each man makes his essence as he lives.”

between knowing and acting on one's knowledge, so there is none between perceiving and feeling."

As indicated by Marinoff, existentialists focus on the production of ideas and as much as they have a vested interest in the creation of solution-orientated ideas, they use ideas for the purpose of self-examination. This means that every idea is to be challenged, and the production of good ideas is not necessarily driven by the need to seek acceptance or allegiance with a particular group. Instead it is driven by a need to seek and to develop a sense of refutation, even against one's own set of principles and philosophy; it is to place something in the world but at the same time it is the ultimate denial of this placement.

In the preface of Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, Sartre (1961:15) explains that "We only become who we are by the radical and deep-seated refusal of that which others have made of us." In reference to the relationship between colonisers and the colonised, Sartre identifies in the foundations of oppression a refutation in the oppressors that erases the humanity and dignity of the oppressed and thereby seeks to justify oppression.

Historically, from the position of the oppressed, a sense of refutation is used to garner strength, and used to develop a sense of self that is authentic and non-essentialist. Relatedly, Marinoff (1999:74) also recognises that "existentialists were on a moral quest to do the right thing in the absence of some essential idea of goodness and bereft of divine authority. They argued that we must do the right thing even when there is no reason to do it and that real courage and integrity mean doing the right thing not because we fear punishment, or crave accolades, or find it expedient, or wish to avoid sinning but simply because it is the right thing to do."

Existentialism can be seen as a moral philosophy, because central to existential ideas is one's ability to grow from strength to strength and to evolve as a human being by existing in the world as one's authentic self. Warnock (1965:10) explains that "Sartre is also an existentialist, or at least for a time he was one. This means that his descriptions are for the most part designed to convey a certain definite thesis about human freedom, and, a thesis which is supposed to have a practical

bearing on how to live. How beings, alone of all objects in the universe, have to make free choices, and the range of their freedom is immense.”

Warnock in her opening paragraph alludes to the fact that existentialists are aware of their own mortality and dispensability; for this reason, existential ideas can be seen as being solution orientated because of the drive and the direction towards living a free and authentic life.

*Being and Nothingness* (1943) remains one of Sartre’s most important works. His exegesis on existentialism focuses on the relative relations between the words ‘Being’ and ‘Nothingness’ when applied to problems of functioning and of being in the world.

The text demonstrates that the terms ‘Being’ and ‘Nothingness’ cannot be viewed as separate entities, because we can only define Being only if we understand its Nothingness, and the definition of Nothingness relies on the definition of Being as well. In short there remains a sense of equity and reciprocity between the two words.

A more important observation is that Sartre’s title *Being and Nothingness* is a direct response to the German philosopher, Martin Heidegger’s philosophical work called *Being and Time*. This idea between things which we find in the world is reminiscent of German-born theoretical physicist Albert Einstein’s (1879-1955) *Theory of Relativity*. According to Marinoff (1999:73) “Einstein’s relativity theory showed us that length, mass, and time were not absolutes, but that things are measured in relation to other things.” Existentialism as a philosophy therefore draws some of its dynamic ideas from other disciplines such as science, the arts, and mathematics.

It is for this reason that one is able to draw parallels between Sartre’s ideas and that of other writers from different disciplines. Interestingly, In the book *Relativity*, Einstein (1916/2001:x) wished “to show that space-time is not necessarily something to which one can ascribe a separate existence independently of the actual of physical reality. Physical objects are not in space but these objects are spatially extended, in this way the concept ‘empty space’ loses its meaning.”

As mentioned by Einstein, emptiness cannot exist on its own; its being is due to “extended relations” to objects or things that we might not even be aware of. For Sartre (1943/2003:46) “the being cannot produce nothingness while remaining indifferent to that production.” In this case we approach Einstein’s “empty space” as ‘being’ or rather that which exists and is liable or responsive to things by which it is surrounded. For example, being in an empty room implies being part of a space, which owes its being to the walls of which it has been built, hence to be within a space means to comprehend “Nothing” as something or rather “Something” as nothing.

Sartre’s ideas stem from experiencing the world as an individual and through one’s consciousness, one can also refer to it as being a sensory philosophy. By sensory philosophy I mean that it focuses on experiencing the world through the senses – we can see this in Sartre’s novel *Nausea* when the character Roquentin discovers his nausea upon touching a tree.

Australian-born philosopher Thomas Martin in his book, *Oppression and the human condition: an introduction to Sartrean existentialism* (2002:02) states “Consciousness always posits an object, and thus, consciousness is directed outward and contains nothing, though it would be incorrect that it is empty.” Martin’s reiteration of the reciprocity between Being and Nothingness through consciousness brings one to the fact that we need to exist and to determine ourselves first as conscious human beings before we can call ourselves existentialists.

The subject of consciousness in turn brings to the fore one of the differences between Marxism and Sartrean existentialism. British postcolonial theorist and historian, Robert J. C. Young, in the preface to Sartre’s *Colonialism and Neocolonialism* (1964/2006: XII), states that “In *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Sartre rejects Marx’s argument that consciousness is determined by the world, proposing instead freedom as the central characteristic of the condition of being human.”

Additionally, Martin (2002:3) holds that “The world is really out there, and it does not depend on consciousness for its existence. On the contrary, the reverse is true. It is consciousness that depends on the world for its existence.”

Sartre's proposition of freedom as the central characteristic of being indicates that one's consciousness is also determined by one's ability to choose. One's freedom allows the individual to consciously perceive any given situation as one sees fit. If this is true, then it follows that Marx's assertion of consciousness being determined by the world loses its credibility. On the other hand, Martins point out that the "existence" of consciousness is dependent on the world –it assists one in seeing freedom from the aspect of Being and Nothingness, for instance, freedom or the consciousness that comes with being a free being depends on the fact that this freedom has to be already in the world and in order for this freedom to be functional. It also depends on the radical subversion of the things that already exist in the world and the things that encroach on this state of freedom.

Because of Sartre's vast interest in disciplines or organizations that are concerned with the restoration of human dignity, Sartre examined his role in 'Being' from a Marxist perspective and found that there are certain aspects of Marxism that he did not agree with such as his views on freedom.

Marx viewed freedom as purely being circumstantial whereas Sartre sees freedom as a matter of choice. For Sartre (1943/2003:503), "Freedom is the freedom of choosing. Not to choose, is in fact, to choose not to choose." Sartrean existentialism emphasises the limitless freedom at the disposal of each individual and sees each individual's capacity to make free choices as a means of attaining that freedom and a sense of authenticity.

Another aspect which sets existentialism apart from Marxism is the way in which projects are perceived. Earlier on I discussed how aspiration is more important to existentialism than success. In contrast, Marxism focuses on the pursuit of fulfilling 'an end chosen'. This difference between the attainment of end results or outcomes alienates Marxism from existentialism.

According to Sartre (1943/2003:505) "Historically and politically, moral-freedom has been the ability to obtain the ends chosen.' For the abuse of power to end, there has to be a model that offers solutions that will put the "oppressiveness of power to an end chosen." Sartrean existentialism is

not concerned with victorious endings or the absolute. It accepts life as it is and only remodels it according to one's free will.

I have veered off to engage in this discussion of Sartrean existentialism and Marxism to further add to the deployment of ideas found in chapter one, specifically the ideas on art production and consumerism. It is important to begin by acknowledging the significant role played by existentialism in ways that objects can be viewed and consumed.

It is also important to scrutinise the systematic consumption of art objects with the advent of conceptual art. It is interesting that with conceptual art, the individual has become the subject as well as the object of art. Yet art projects are often perceived as something separate from oneself – things that can be hung, preserved and reproduced. This means that conceptual art often remains deeply entrenched within a system or spaces that continue to exclude and exploit the “art objects” (bodies) that subvert the unchanged tradition of consuming and possessing subject or art objects. In this context, art objects are still subject to systems that perpetuate inequality and inequity.

According to Marx (1939/1993:92) “The need which consumption feels is created by the perception of it. The object of art like every other product creates a public which is sensitive to art, art – like every other product creates a public which is sensitive to art and enjoys beauty.” For Marx, the institutions that are responsible for the production and the dispersal of art products are like commercial sectors or any given cooperation that produces dispensable products.

French sociologist, philosopher, cultural-political theorist and photographer Jean Baudrillard, in Linker (1990:75) explains that “all things... are condemned to publicity, to making themselves believable, to being seen and promoted... in the very heart of merchandise (and, by extension in the very heart of our entire universe of signs).”

Baudrillard having written widely about semiotics echoes Karl Marx's sentiment on an object's perceptibility and its relationship to consumerism. The British visual semiotician, Daniel Chandler (2002:02), writes: “semiotics involves the study not only of what we refer to as signs in everyday

speech, but anything which stands for something else.”<sup>18</sup> Semiotics as the study of signs or rather the study of sign systems, allows us to study the structure of meaning and how meaning can be easily manipulated, and then again how easily we ourselves can be manipulated by the very construct of meaning.

Similar to visual culture or the arts, existentialism is largely based on the examination of the various roles that certain objects play in the construction and deconstruction of meaning in our lives. It is through both philosophy and the arts that meaning is deconstructed and objects are dematerialised in an effort to formulate meanings and healthier spaces which contribute to the betterment of the human condition.

Mirzoeff in *The Visual Culture Reader* (1998:03) argues that “Visual Culture is concerned with visual events in which information, meaning or pleasure is sought by the consumer in an interface with visual technology. By visual technology, I mean any form of apparatus designed either to be looked at or to enhance natural vision, from oil painting to television and the internet.” Mirzoeff raises views shared by Chandler, Marx and Baudrillard on perception, consumption, and our moral responsibility towards what we choose to consume and most importantly our willingness to examine what we see.

It is important to note in this short introduction that existentialism was involved in combatting one of the world’s leading causes of exploitation, human indignity and inequality (capitalism). One can easily grasp as to why this branch of philosophy chose not only to engage in issues surrounding socio-economic issues but as a result of Sartre being drafted into the military and working as a meteorologist during world war two, Sartre became more involved in contributing to an anti-racist narrative. Sartre, like many of his associates grew increasingly concerned about creating a

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<sup>18</sup> Nicholas Stangos in *Concepts of Modern Art from Fauvism to Postmodernism* (1974:272) insists that “Postmodernism sees representation and reality as overlapping, because conversations of representation or language (signification) are learned and internalized so that we experience them as real. Especially in an age where television and other mass media play such a significant role in creating human consciousness, what we perceive as real is revealed to be always present in and filtered through representation.”

philosophy that could be lived and experienced; it became a philosophy of action which emphasised that individuals should take full responsibility for their actions.

This aspect will be seen in the work of Berni Searle as well. In works such as *Seeking Refuge* (2008) and *Home and Away* (2003) and *Spirit of 76* (2007) one finds that the artist travels to different places and positions her body in spaces that are significant to the geo-political issues in her work. In this instance Searle's artistic practice, like existentialism, is based on action and on experiencing a situation rather than viewing it from a distance.<sup>19</sup> In the previous section, I have discussed existentialism and its orientation towards human life and human projects. I have discussed the role of existentialism in socio-political and geo-political issues as these serve as the main areas that mark the work of artist Berni Searle.

I have chosen to discuss Marxism and the relationship it shares with Sartrean existentialism, as I feel this adds to the concepts discussed in chapter one, more specifically on the conversation of galleries, value and the recent changes in art production. I am introducing existentialism and discussing its brands with the hope to introduce various existentialists who like Sartre, have utilized the philosophy to contribute to anti-racist dialogues and engagements, this is important to this study because Berni Searle's work is concerned with the socio-economic<sup>20</sup> as well as the geo-political conditions of South African as well as the world. Her work also serves as commentary on her struggles with displacement, miscegenation and femininity<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Sophie Perryer in *Berni Searle: Recent work 2007/8* (2008:7) "Many of the works have links to places and people across the world. *Spirit of '76'*, commissioned by the Philagrafika in Philadelphia, has Searle establishing a connection across centuries between that city, where the declaration of independence was signed in 1776, and the Soweto uprising in 1976."

<sup>20</sup> Peggy Phelan in *Performance, Live Culture and Things of the Heart* (2003:295) "Performance's ephemeral nature, I was arguing, is absolutely powerful and can serve as a rejoinder to the 'preserve everything', 'purchase everything' mentality so central to the art world and to late capitalism more broadly."

<sup>21</sup> Griselda Pollock in *Painting Feminism History* (1992:145) "Feminist theory problematizes notions of the self, of woman, of the subject, arguing that these are not essences, the pre-social sources of meaning, but intricate constructions in social and psychic space. Furthermore, feminist cultural theory refuted absolutely the idea that art was a kind of blank space upon which to deposit meanings through the singular look and self-affirming gesture."

When reading about the life of philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre, very often he is referred to as a black existentialist, and this is because of the anti-racist stance which he took in his textual work and through his actions.

According to British historian and postcolonial theorist, Robert J. C. Young in Sartre's *Colonialism and Neo Colonialism*, Young (1964/2006XXV) states "For Mudimbe, Sartre symbolically became a Negro philosopher because it was Sartre who recognised the complexity of African epistemological roots. Sartre was one of the few European intellectuals to recognise in Senghor, Fanon, Memmi and others that, together with the anti-colonial movements, the pursuit of political liberation had been accompanied by the development of new forms of knowledge, a counter modernity set against that of the West."

Sartre believed that existentialism should be a philosophy capable of being lived, because this philosophy is built on the function of human consciousness and how this can be applied in our lives. Existentialism has morality fixed at the center of its ideas and that we have the responsibility to be liable to our beings and our function in the world filled with other beings.

To add to Mudimbe's remark, in an essay titled "Sartre and Black Existentialism," found in the book *Race after Sartre: Anti-racism*, Africana existentialist, Lewis Gordon (2008:158) explains that Sartre "did not relate to black existential thought in an ethnographic way but as a participant in its living debates, critical reflections, and political structure. His interest in the condition of blacks was animated by concerns for freedom and the appreciation of black aesthetic production as a leitmotif of the modern world."

Gordon emphasises Sartre's role not only as a writer but as a participant in the struggle for liberation; this means that the spatial presence as well as the physical work already separates him from past philosophers because there is a sense of authenticity in what he writes and in how he acts towards his beliefs and thoughts.

Gordon (2008:160) further insists that “Sartre’s black existentialism was not only as an antiracist theorist and activist, since Sartre also loved jazz. It and the hipsters that emerged in black communities in the 1930’s and 1940’s offered examples of the assertion of freedom under claustrophobic circumstances. There are moments in which Jazz and correlated hipsters punctuated *Nausea*.”

Gordon strategically makes reference to Sartre’s novel titled *Nausea* (1938)<sup>22</sup>. In this novel, the main character Roquentin struggles with his existence and he realises that he cannot model himself after his heroes and that he must strive to be himself in a world full of objects and other beings. Throughout the novel the main character listens to a single jazz tune called ‘Some of these days’ and the book ends once more with the character listening to this specific song. It seems as if it is this song that finally cures Roquentin’s *Nausea*.

Apart from being a philosopher, Gordon is also a Jazz drummer, it is evident that existentialism has always relied on creative productions to express its most difficult ideas and concepts. England-based couple and writers Edward Fullbrook and Kate Fullbrook in *Feminist interpretations of Jean-Paul Sartre* (1999:47) state “One of the admirable qualities of Sartrean scholarship is its tradition of placing Sartre’s philosophy in the context of his antecedent and contemporary philosophers. Of course, Sartre himself encouraged this practice through his example in *Being and Nothingness*, with its exposition on the similarities and divergences of his ideas and from those of his philosophical forebears. By doing so, Sartre reminds his readers of how philosophy is intrinsically a collaborative process, even if one’s collaborators are long dead.”

Edward Fullbrook and Kate Fullbrook recognise that Sartrean philosophy is centered on collaboration and represents the collective effort of other philosophers and social activists who consciously and unconsciously contribute/contributed to existentialism through art, feminism and

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<sup>22</sup> Jean Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* (1943/2003:653) described Nausea as “the taste of facticity and contingency of existence. ‘a dull and inescapable Nausea perpetually reveals my body to my consciousness’. On the ground of this fundamental nausea are produced all concrete, empirical nauseas (caused by spoiled meat, excrement, etc.).”

Negritude/Africana existentialism. In this section I have discussed Sartre's collaborative efforts with Marxism as well as with Einstein's ideas in the sciences. It is this interdisciplinary nature of these various fields that allows one to draw parallels between the arts, feminism and existentialism.

<sup>23</sup>However, Sartre did in fact contribute to visual culture through his 1940 work titled *The Imaginary*, and this I will discuss in detail later. Since the beginnings of Sartrean existentialism many important writers have sought to establish their own brands of existentialism that responded to the particularities of their critiques, such as Simone de Beauvoir, Franz Fanon and Albert Camus.<sup>24</sup> These writers were concerned with environmental issues, race and gender, aspects which are tackled in the work of Berni Searle.

With a career that spans more than twenty years, Berni Searle's work employs performance (studio/based/recorded performances) photography, double screen video projections as well as voice recordings. In the 2003 catalogue titled *Berni Searle: Float* Searle in Bester (2003:34) explains that "there is an assumption that because its performative, I perform. The problem with 'performing' is that I am more directly and easily consumed [...] mediating the 'performance' through lens-based media provides me with options to reconstruct myself in the process."

Searle's performances are often carefully planned. It is often when reading interviews on her work that one finds that she explains in detail, the well-thought-out conceptualisation that goes into the work, careful attention is paid to how her body is used as a site of struggle and how it relates to spaces as well as to human beings.

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<sup>23</sup> The history of visual arts/culture shows that the field has always been influenced by various philosophical thoughts and activist movements, the movement following conceptual art (1950's) which is Postmodernism (1977) managed to establish a harmonious space for fine art, feminism and philosophy, with philosophers such as Jean Baudrillard whose Semiotic work draws from mass media culture, translates easily the feminist works of Barbara Kruger, whose work is synonymous with the Postmodernist movement. With this being stated it is a surprise that Sartre's work is not associated with conceptual art since his work – *The Imaginary* (1940), was published on the cusp of the rise of conceptual art (1950's).

<sup>24</sup> Philosopher and Romantic Partner of Jean Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir developed existential feminism whilst using literature as a creative product of choice to communicate her ideas in a clear way, one of the founders of Negritude, Frantz Fanon used poetry and prose in his texts on colonialism and Albert Camus, who was a Pagan, developed the concept of absurdism. I will later look at how Black philosophers and creative producers have been influenced by these intersections of existentialism. I will look at the work of Lewis Gordon (Africana existential philosopher/ Jazz musician-drummer) South African founder and leader of black consciousness, Steve Biko and lastly, I will engage with the work of Psychiatrist and political writer, activist and poet, Frantz Fanon."

To add to this, University of Chicago's professor of English and history of art, William John Thomas Mitchell in Mirzoeff (1998:3) agrees that "the realization that spectatorship (the look, the glance, the practices of observation, surveillance and visual pleasure) maybe a deep problem as various forms of reading (decipherment, decoding, interpretation, etc) and that 'visual experience or visual literacy might not be fully explicable in the model of textuality.'"

Berni Searle's choice of sometimes engaging in studio-based recorded performances as opposed to live performances proves that the bases of her work stems from careful planning and consideration. Based on some of the observations shared by Mitchell, insisting that performance art often involves the gaze and the perception of others which means that the creative production itself can be consumed in various ways. Searle takes it upon herself to take control of some aspects of the performance so that she can have a sense of autonomy over her body (the art object) and how it is perceived by others.

Searle's work draws from history, identity, spatiality and socio-economic issues. Her conceptual body of work shifts away from traditional art making, by employing various technologies that challenge and foster a new way of looking and analysing art. Searle's conceptual / performance art is also defined by its pioneering explicit engagements with issues of race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and nationality.<sup>25</sup>

Searle's work can be seen as being of a feminist existential nature because of the angst and the historical, geo-political as well as the economic narrative supporting her questions on identity. These aspects tackled in Searle's work attempt to define the times we live in and aim at creating and attaining freedom through self-examination and self- recovery.

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<sup>25</sup> This is mostly employed by Searle against the backdrop of political themes. Very often Searle employs the use of water and fire, two oppositional elements that are aesthetically brought together in works such as *Home And Away* (2003) -**Figure 3-** In the ocean, Searle's floating body is visible at the beginning of the video projection, but later becomes obscured, and darkened by what seems to be squid ink. The ink under water takes the resemblance of smoke fumes. One can say that this is suggestive of hybridization, encounters and disruptions caused by foreign objects. The use of smoke (fire and water) and substances relating to food- in addition to the use of fire and water- include spices, flour, grapes, etc. These are used to foreground the relationship between materials and exploitation. Historically and presently, food is still at the heart of imperialism.

One of Searle's works that better carries narratives of existentialism and femininity is the 2001 performance and video work titled *Snow White*. According to Bester (2003:31) "*Snow White* is a synced dual screen video projection. Both mural sized images document the same action, but one camera was placed directly in front of Searle and the other camera directly above the artist. The latter view provides a more abstract interpretation of her actions."



Figure 2: Berni Searle, *Snow White* (2001), Double channel video projection, 9min, Ed. 2/3, Daimler Art Collection. (Reproduction taken from <http://universes-inuniverse.de/car/venezia/bien49/auth-exc/e-searle.htm>)

Figure 2 above shows the artist Berni Searle in her video projection/performance titled *Snow White* (2001) portraying her naked kneeling figure, while from above, flour falls on the artists body. The artist remains still as the flour falls on her body, her brown skin is slowly covered and her identity obliterated. The artist does not fight this process and remains still.

Bester (2003:31) writes, “kneeling in a darkened space, Searle’s body is covered by softly falling flour. Neither view points to the source of the flour. Snow like, the flour marks her body in ways that subtly reference colonialisms civilizing mission, or as Olu Oguibe suggests, being “whitedout”, of “erasing” indigenous populations.”

*Snow White* is a work suggestive of the power structures impinged by colonial rule to conquer and oppress, it also represents the dynamics of colour or how tonality has been used as a tool to segregate and subject others to oppression.

*Snow White* also references femininity or gender roles. Bester (2003:1) observes that “the flour deposits on her body in especially the front view transform the kneeling artist into an utterly sculptural form. Water, falling from above, touches parts of her body as it falls onto the pile of flour. Searle then uses the water to mix with the flour into dough. It is especially Searle’s body position that references the subject of domestic work in so many ethnographic postcard photographs.”

There are three distinct ways in which *Snow White* can be viewed. In the first instance, Searle represents a passive figure, her passivity is apparent when she remains still even when the flour starts falling on her body. Second, one realises that the artist is nude but her state of nudity does not promote or position the female nude as a salacious figure. The work frees the female nude from the traditional role that it has served in art history. Thirdly Searle’s kneeling figure suddenly engages in an act of production. As the water and the flour falls, Searle starts kneading the dough, she transforms from a state of passivity into action. Passivity and action are two main subjects that are dealt with in existential philosophy because our decisions to commit to a state of action or inaction are reflective of our moral responsibility towards our own lives.

Gordon (2008:167) writes, “Growing up is a painful ideal. It is a form of productive loss. Our attachments are often the source of misery, and much liberation is gained in discovering how much there is in life of which we must let go.” Interestingly, Gordon regards the process of growing up as a form of “productive loss,” meaning that the projects that come with one’s life suffer the same

fate as one's own existence. Again, we see that the ideas and efforts that are invested into projects are not inviolable but should be approached with a sense of arduousness and commitment.

Relatedly, in her essay titled "The Conceptual Art of Berni Searle," Deseree Lewis (2001:110) explains that "Stills from *Snow White* often capture myths, many images convey an alert and creative presence. In the video's series of images, passive bodies are juxtaposed with vibrant, energetic and creative figures. Also noteworthy in this video are the imagistic allusions to redemption and a transformative productivity."

Here, Lewis argues that Searle's shift from passivity to productivity authorises a transformative nature to the production rather than that of loss. In chapter one I discussed topics relating to the role of conceptual/performance art and how this functions as a new form of art within spaces that catered/cater historically to traditional ways of making art. I have also discussed issues relating to the value of art more so when there is a change in medium and method. This was done in an effort to understand why it is that conceptual/performance art is perceived with indifference and fatuity while traditional art such as oil painting maintains a sacrosanct role within the arts.

In a critique of the work of Berni Searle (*Snow White*) Nic Dawes in Lewis (2001:110) writes, "Indeed, as one stands poised between the two screens that compromise the video installation, a single question imposes itself: And who among you, when the public asks for something to chew on, would give them a video of Berni Searle making roti?" Dawes points to the non-traditional way of positioning the two screens or the double screen video projection and dismisses the entire performance. Dawes in Lewis (2001:110) continues:

Indeed race, gender and domestic labor cut across the body of the black but not-quite-black woman in complicated ways. Indeed, woman's work has a transformative and sacramental character, but how tedious the lecture, how easily we could have read it in a book, mirror on the wall, wicked queen and all. The perfectly banal surface of identity politics, of a comfortable academic discourse on hybridity, smoothes everything over here. In the end we are

standing in front of yet another video of a naked woman performing a repetitive task, and we are bored beyond words.

Dawes wrote this of Searle's work in his review of the 49<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale. Dawes acknowledges factors of race, medium, gender, the traditional female nude and the suggestive play on gender roles and double consciousness.<sup>26</sup> However, Dawes fails to explain how these factors function in the space that the work is staged and its role in the subversion of traditional art processes and consumption. But more importantly his interpretation of the work reveals not only a sense of inviolability towards traditional ways of art making, but also carries fallible subjectivities that exist as a result of patriarchy.

Mirzoeff (1998:06) insists that "In order to do interdisciplinary work, it is not enough to take a "subject" (a theme) and arrange two or three sciences around it. Interdisciplinary study consists in creating a new object, which belongs to no one." For Mirzoeff, interdisciplinary work consists of a dynamic amalgamation of subjects, and the purpose of this fusion is to get the subdivisions or threads to function as a unit, in other words interdisciplinary art represents the shift from heterogeneity, and this is not to say that it can be described as functioning under a form of homogeneity but it is rather having different subject matters that are analogous. Mirzoeff's conceptualisation of interdisciplinary art alludes to the fact that in order to interpret interdisciplinary art (such as the work of Berni Searle) one has to understand that since the work functions under different standards then the work demands a new way of being looked at and interpreted, and this is what the art critic Nic Dawes as well as many others fail to do when writing on conceptual/performance art.

To add to this argument, British historian, writer and academic Paul Gilroy in Mirzoeff (1998:332) explains that "Visual art currently constitutes a significant battleground because aesthetic issues are particularly close to the surface of individual judgements and, above all, because the majority

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<sup>26</sup> Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin White Masks* (1952:08) "The black has two dimensions. One with his fellows, the other with the white man. A negro behaves differently with a white man and with another negro. That this self-division is a direct result of colonialist subjugation is beyond question."

of its critics are bound by the common sense view that good art is universally recognizable and cultural background is not a factor either in its production or its appreciation.”

Gilroy makes an important point, that is, cultural background and appreciation for a particular kind of art are often dismissed but yet, these factors permeate in the ways that art is written and in the ways that art is viewed. I therefore conclude by stating that interdisciplinary art adheres to the standards that it has created and therefore the ideas or concepts that are formulated by critics or writers can only be functional if they operate from this newfound way of making and looking at art. It has also become apparent that visual culture does in fact foster a much-needed visual literacy and assists in utilising visuals to get to understand oneself and the world better.

## **10. Black existentialism: Fanon and Negritude**

In the previous sections I have provided an introduction to existentialism and a brief historical background of Sartrean existentialism as well as a discussion on the work *Snow White* (2001) and I briefly discussed the work *Home and Away* (2001). In this section I will discuss black existentialism to elicit the histories or the contributions of people of colour to this philosophy.

As discussed previously, existentialism encourages self-actualisation and authenticity; it is a philosophy that urges the individual to take full responsibility for his/her choices and life. But what if one's own race is the determinant of how one is perceived in the world? This is one of the questions that black existentialists sought and still seek to answer in their work. One of the most influential figures in philosophy concerning race related issues is Martinique-born psychiatrist, poet and revolutionary- Frantz Fanon.<sup>27</sup> Fanon is one of the founders of the movement formed around the 1930's called Negritude, a collective that affirmed blackness and instilled a sense of

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<sup>27</sup> Lewis Gordon in *Fanon and The Crisis of The European Man: An essay on Philosophy And The Human Sciences* (1995:01) “Frantz Fanon was born on the Island Of Martinique. He Died on the 6<sup>th</sup> of December 1961, of bronchial pneumonia, apparently as a consequence of leukemia. He died in Bethesda, Maryland, where he was brought at great resistance for treatment for his illness upon the recommendation of physicians in the former Soviet Union.”

value and pride.<sup>28</sup> In *Fanon And The Crises of the European Man: An Essay On Philosophy And The Human Sciences*, Gordon (1995:01) explains that “Fanon was a key figure in the Algerian FLN (National Liberation Front). Before he died, he declared that he would have preferred to have been sent back to the Algerian battlefield, where even with his frail sickly body he could have been thrown as a strike against the enemy’s dehumanization of humankind.”

Fanon is best known for his work in psychiatry, and for his efforts toward understanding the mechanisms of colonialism and the indelible disfigurement it leaves/left on the collective memory of both the colonised and the colonisers, marking him as a key figure in ‘colonial psychiatry’. In *Black Skin White Masks* Fanon (1952:xxiii) explains that “If psychiatry is the medical technique that aims to enable man no longer to be a stranger to his environment, I owe it to myself to affirm that the Arab, permanently an alien in his own country, lives in a state of absolute depersonalization ... the social structure existing in Algeria was hostile to any attempt to put the individual back where he belonged.”

Fanon had already struggled with issues of identity and nationality as a result of being a black man born in the French colony of Martinique. But serving as a psychiatrist in the psychiatric hospital at Blido-Joinville in Algeria, Fanon experienced first-hand the inimical powers of colonialism, more specifically the ultimate power of colonial governance over the mind of the oppressed. Fanon’s *Black Skin White Masks* prefigures not only the effects of colonialism on the mind of the oppressed, but it also serves as a catalyst for redefining blackness and in instilling and restoring a sense of pride and agency in the psyche of the oppressed. In other words, *Black Skin White Masks* seeks to instill a sense of responsibility and insurgence in those who exist under persecutory conditions or states. According to Fanon (1952:08) “What matters is not to know the world but to change it. This matters appallingly in our lifetime. To speak means to be in a position to use a

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<sup>28</sup> Robert J.C Young in Jean Paul Sartre’s *Colonialism and Neo Colonialism* (1964: xxiv) “Negritude, which developed out of the context of a militant metropolitan diasporic anti-colonial radicalism utilized any and all available sources to formulate its cultural redefinition which would enable African colonised subjects to transform themselves from the object status of abject deculturalization to which they had been reduced.”

certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of civilization.”

Like most existentialists, Fanon was an active participant in the struggle for liberation. Here Fanon reminds the oppressed that the world only changes in accordance with actions. In the preface to Sartre’s *Colonialism and Neo Colonialism*, Young (1964: xii) writes, “In certain respects, Sartre thus anticipates the performative basis of today’s identity politics by several decades except that for Sartre politics begins rather than ends with identity.” Like Fanon, Sartre viewed identity as a crucible for liberation and nation building and this was on the basis of knowing oneself fully. Yet as Gordon (2008) points out, writers such as Fanon and Wright are often overlooked when discussing matters relating to the fight for equality and equity. Gordon (2008:161) writes “Let us refuse to collapse those relationships into familiar roles of black dependents on white originality. “Were Wright and Fanon ‘Sartrean’?” is a question that cannot account for the cross-fertilization of these thinkers. The truth is that Wright and Fanon were simply too original and historic in their own right for their egos to be crushed under the weight of Sartre’s greatness.”

Apart from being one of Sartre’s associates, Fanon increasingly grew aware of the function of language and how languages are an intricate part of nationhood, Fanon questioned his position as a black man who speaks French and as a person of colour residing in Martinique. Similar to the artist Berni Searle, issues of displacement, nationality, race and language come into play and reveal themselves as Being of an existential nature.

In the book, *What is Slavery to me? Postcolonial/Slave Memory in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, Searle in Gqola (2010:182) writes: “My great-grandmother from Mauritius was a cook and I have indirectly experienced her expertise through the food that my mother cooks, pointing to food as cultural signifier. Apart from my physical features, very little connects me to this heritage, one of the tentative aspects being food...this effectively means that the local or potential indigenous part of me can be traced by looking at my lineage of my maternal and paternal great-grandmothers.”

Searle focuses on food as a way of tracing her ancestral lineage. Food is a basic human need: we need food to exist, it is a life source. Food is also beneficial for the restoration of energy and health.

In patriarchal societies, cooking<sup>29</sup> is often seen as “women’s” work, but it also raises the question on land and landlessness because the viewer is forced to think about where the food is produced and the ethics surrounding that production. Interestingly the subject of cooking, or rather of materials used in Searle’s work, such as flour, spices, grapes etc. offers a lens on the racial, patriarchal, geo-political, socio-economic, as well as existential factors surrounding the production of food and the formation of identity and slave memory.

Searle’s work can also be viewed from an eco-feminist perspective since most of her work is executed around natural environments and makes use of natural materials. In the book, *Staying alive: Women, Ecology and Survival In India*, environmental activist and feminist Vandana Shiva (1988:xvi) writes, “women’s ecology, as the preservation and recovery of the feminine principle, arise from a non-gender based ideology of liberation, different both from the gender based ideology of patriarchy which underlies the process of ecological destruction and women’s subjugation, and the gender based responses which have, until recently, been characteristic of the West.”

Eco-feminism represents a branch of feminism which focuses on environmental issues and recognises the role of women and their relationship in and to the natural environment. One of the leading African figures in eco-feminism is the 2004 Kenyan Nobel peace winner prize Wangari Maathai (1940-2011). Gqola (2013:155) shares that Maathai was the “founder of the Greenbelt Movement, whose radical Pan-Africanist and feminist environmentalist politics did not always

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<sup>29</sup> Shireen Hassim in *Gender, Social Location and Feminist Politics in South Africa* (1991:72) “The political identities of women and of men are constituted through different relationships with the public and private spheres. Patriarchy forms a barrier between these two spheres, a barrier which feminism attempts to break down. Women are defined primarily in relation to their location within the private sphere, roles defined in terms of the family. For men, it is the public role outside the family which is emphasized.”

translate well across borders, repeatedly highlighted why taking care of the environment was a multilayered political project.”

Established in 1977, The Green Belt Movement responded to the plight and poverty of rural Kenyan women, this movement grew to involve men and women to help plant trees and to get them actively involved and educated about their environments and to put an end to the cycle of poverty. Gqola continues (2017:155), that Maathai “insisted that women were closer to the earth in many African contexts, not because of the essences that colonial and African patriarchies mythologize, but due to their burden of agricultural and domestic work, both of which depended on the health of the earth.” Again, eco-feminism highlights the struggles that women face on a patriarchal as well as on a political level; it connects the materials that women use on a daily basis such as food to highlight the existential backlog overriding the narrative of the woman of colour as well as that of slave memory.

The use of the environment as a directive for redefinition and pride can also be seen in the work of Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin White Masks*. Fanon (1952:31) contends that “if I am black it is not the result of a curse, but it is because, having offered my skin, I have been able to absorb all the cosmic effluvia. I am truly a ray of sunlight under the earth.” One of the goals of Negritude was to attain the complete restoration of value and pride amongst colonised groups, Fanon does this creatively by applying prose to his colonial psychiatric theories. Here he sees the state of blackness as natural; he associates himself with the environment and sees no distinction between him and the sunrays that fall on his skin. In comparing himself with his environment, Fanon compacts the world and makes it manageable or smaller, this alludes to the fact that all is one and that everything is connected. Fanon (1952:31) continues, “I am the incarnation of a complete fusion with the world, an intuitive understanding of the earth, an abandonment of my ego in the heart of the cosmos.” Fanon also places the black male within the environment and this indirectly makes an argument for male bodies of colour that have been subjected to labour and had to take care of the natural environment under colonial rule. Thus, Fanon like Gqola, Maathai and Shiva, sees the relationship between nature and the black body as innate because of slave memory, and he utilises this factor for redefinition and self-recovery.



Figure 3: Berni Searle, *Home and Away* (2003), Double-channel video projection, 6 min, Ed. 5 + 2AP, NMAC Montenmedio Arte Contemporaneo. (Reproduction taken from <https://fundacionnmac.org/en/collection/berni-searle/home-and-away/> )

Searle's six minute and twenty-three second video work titled *Home and Away* can be viewed on a double screen projected video (a still of which can be seen in Figure 3 above). Searle is seen wearing a black vest and a heavily layered skirt with translucent white material on top of a deep red solid fabric. Shot from above, from a distance Searle resembles a jelly fish or a sea creature. When viewing the double screen projected video, Searle's body appears on the left and it shifts and sometimes disappears from view, her body occasionally shifts in focus and out of focus. This may be indicative of the instability that may be caused by experiences of migration: her body vanishes into the corners of the screen at times, exposing her hands and feet and this is ritualistic in most of Searle's work, which often suggests the incompleteness or erasure of colonised beings. In some instances, her work can suggest the reordering or the construction of colonised bodies. This is more apparent in the work titled *Girl* (2001) where Searle's body is dissected through a number of separate photographs and displayed in the rightful order.

On the left side of the video, one sees the ocean but unlike the aerial shot on the right which portrays Searle's floating body, the projection on the left reflects that the individual who shot it was moving successfully away from a particular point and that this individual was moving in a straight direction towards a specific place. Apart from this indication that the left side of the video projection represents movement and the right side reflects stagnation or contentment, Searle can be heard whispering and repeating these words in the following sequence, "I love, you love, he loves, we love, you love, they love, I fear, you fear, she fears, we fear, you fear, she fears, I leave, you leave, he leaves, we leave, you leave, they leave."

Searle references both genders through the use of the words she and he, she uses the words I, they, and we. "I" is used as a reference to the individual, "they" is used to mark one's separation and shows one's awareness of a particular group or collective. "We" is used to indicate belonging to a collective. As this video plays, Searle's body is suddenly covered by what seems to be ink. Again, this concept of erasure through materiality plays out again in this work. One can also say that the manner in which Searle floats on the water, motionless as though she is dead is reminiscent of the 1840 painting by William Turner, titled *Slaves Throwing Overboard The Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On*.<sup>30</sup> Turner's painting became highly criticised for memorialising the slave trade and capturing/representing black bodies through slavery and not through a lens that supports a new narrative of freedom and of self-definition.

Bester (2003:43) holds that "*Home and Away* focuses on the sea mass between Spain and Morocco and uses the burdened meanings of this body of water – undocumented migrants from Morocco in makeshift and overloaded boats make nightly crossings from North Africa to Spain in the hope of a better life in Europe, often with tragic consequences for the expectant sojourners – to explore the relationship between borders, journeys, displacement and home."

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<sup>30</sup> Abigail Ward in "*Words are all I have left of my eyes*" blinded by the past in J.M.W Turner's *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying and David Dabydeen's "Turner"* (2007:50) "I would suggest that the painting is vastly different in its memorial function and might better be thought of as a monument forgetting the black person's role in contemporary Britain by focusing on the past, rather than the growing political consciousness of black people, in order to better maintain a racially homogenous British sense of nation."

*Home and Away* tackles multiple subjects that deal with the psychological effects of displacement and the sublimative cases of colonialism that often leaves the imagination of colonised individuals in a state of stagnation, and this is problematic because if individuals lack the capacity to reimagine themselves in a different situation this impedes movement.<sup>31</sup>

It is particularly important that Searle's work takes place in what one may call a historical site, a site that is right in the middle of the ocean, where a monument cannot be erected. This is suggestive of how certain places or spaces cannot be claimed because of their instability; the ocean's movement as opposed to the stillness of the land again challenges the question of historical monuments, which are mostly sculptures that are placed comfortably on unmovable pieces of land.

From this one learns that through performance art Searle has the liberty of physically placing herself amidst the poetry of raging oceans and this act transforms her into a mobile work of art. Performance art supplies the artist with the gift of movement but most importantly this type of art does not claim authority over certain spaces or places. When a performance<sup>32</sup> is done, the site-specific work does not latch onto that specific space, in this case the purpose that the work serves is not mnemonic in nature, the work does not exist for the sake of preservation of memory but rather for the sake of the destabilization, deconstruction and re-ordering of the new.

In an essay titled "*The African Oceans-Tracing Sea and Memory of Slavery in South African Literature and Culture*", South African poet and academic Gabea Baderoon (2009:92-93) shares that "A recent video work by Cape Town based visual artist Berni Searle offers a provocatively different way of looking at land and sea. *Home and Away* (2003) is a video piece set far from South Africa in the Mediterranean Sea between Morocco and Spain, a border of immense

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<sup>31</sup> Steve Biko in *I Write What I Like* (1978:53) "Liberation therefore, is of paramount importance in the concept of Black Consciousness, for we cannot be conscious of ourselves and yet remain in bondage. We want to attain the envisioned self which is a free self."

<sup>32</sup> Peggy Phelan in *Performance, Live Culture and Things of the Heart* (2003:295) "In live performance, the potential for the event to be transformed by those participants in it makes it more exciting to me - this is precisely where the 'liveness' of live performance matters. Of course, a lot of live performance does not approach this potential at all, and of course many spectators and many actors are incapable of being open to it anyway. But this potential, this seductive promise of possibility of mutual transformation is extraordinarily important because this is the point where the aesthetic joins the ethical."

significance given the millennia-long traffic between the continents and the current patterns of migration by poor Africans seeking work in Europe.” Here, Baderoon reiterates that ‘movement’ plays a crucial role in the work as well as in Searle’s artistic practice, as a conceptual/performance artist Searle was able to place herself within a historical site between Morocco and Spain. The space is not marked in a traditional sense by way of erecting a public monument. Searle’s role as a mobile work of art negotiates her history as well as her identity by choosing to experience momentarily the space in which made possible, the movement of migrants from one point to another. More importantly, this site between Morocco and Spain is known as the spice route, meaning that trade was established through materialities that are linked with cooking, a duty often assigned as “women’s work”. This is pertinent in Searle’s work because it is food as well as the generation of women in her family who continued to preserve a sense of heritage and identity through the act of cooking.

Returning to the subject of movement, in the book *In The Break: The Aesthetics of The Black Radical Tradition*, American poet and scholar in black studies Fred Moten describes blackness as follows (2003:01) “Blackness – the extended movement of a specific upheaval, an ongoing irruption that anarranges every line – is a strain that pressures the assumption of the equivalence of personhood and subjectivity while subjectivity is defined by the subject’s possession of itself and its objects, it is troubled by a dispossessive force objects exert such that the subject seems to be possessed, infused, deformed by the object it possesses.”

Having written a body of work that is premised on radical performativity and its subversive role in redefining blackness through jazz as a form of creative production, Moten identifies black performativity as transformative and beneficial to one’s identity and selfhood and questions black performativity and its positionality in the world, more specifically its “object relation to the world.” For example, the historical state of blackness occupying a place of servitude is put into question along with subjectivities that burden the black body.

Moten offers a glimpse into how works of the imagination or creative productions such as jazz offer movement and produce possibilities for conversion. Moten’s definition of blackness is

similar to Fanon's ideas on love and movement in *Black Skin White Masks*. Fanon in a chapter titled "The Woman of Color and The White Man" holds that "Man is in motion toward the world and toward his like. A movement of aggression, which leads to enslavement or to conquest; a movement of love, a gift of self, the ultimate stage of what by common accord is called ethical orientation." (1952:28) As seen in Searle's work, movement plays an important role and it is used ritualistically in most of her performances. Interestingly, both Fanon and Moten identify blackness as a state of flux. Moten identifies its object relation with the world and insists that blackness is always troubled by subjectivities because of its constant objectification. Fanon adds that projects are ultimately executed because of love, insisting that this motion that the black body is constantly in uses love as a directive towards being actively responsible for our choices.

Fanon uses the term "ethical orientation" to describe this.<sup>33</sup>

When thinking about the relationships between ocean, land, migration, movement and slavery in Searle's *Home and Away*, one is likely to think about the work of the American writer Paul Gilroy. In the book, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double consciousness*, Gilroy tackles issues of displacement and contests the notion of there being such a thing as true 'authentic culture.' Gilroy (1993:01) explains that the term Black Atlantic "refers to a system of historical, cultural, linguistic and political interaction and communication that originated in the process of enslaving Africans." Similar to the work of Searle, Fanon and Moten, Gilroy's work does not exist merely for the preservation of memory or as a biographical account of black experiences in slavery. Rather, his work exists to challenge notions of slave memory and the positioning of the black body within a state that does not disavow its humanity.

Similar to Searle, Gilroy makes the distinction between the black body and its experiences with the land and sea. Gilroy (1993:02) holds that "land and sea suggest the different ecologies of belonging that reveal themselves in the opposition between geography and genealogy. We can begin to perceive the irresistible force of the ocean and the associated impact of those who made

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<sup>33</sup> Fanon (1952:28) writes; "If a Sartre has appeared to formulate a description of love as frustration, his *Being and Nothingness* amounting only to an analysis of dishonesty and inauthenticity, the fact remains that true, authentic love – wishing for others what one postulates for oneself, when that postulation unites the permanent values of human reality – entails the mobilization of psychic drives basically freed of unconscious conflicts."

their dwellings on it, as an alternative form of power that confined, regulated, inhibited and sometimes even defied, the exercise of territorial sovereignty. Here, *The Black Atlantic* opens out into theories of the diaspora, culture and dispersion, and memory, identity and difference.”

As such, Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* offers a dialogue on historic inscription.<sup>34</sup> Gilroy challenges the notion of home by not denying the black body’s history and its displacement as a result of the slave trade. For Gilroy, there remains still, a sense of belonging for black bodies towards both the land and sea, while the sea offered, in Gilroy’s terms – “mobile dwellings” – the land provided stability. Often, such polarities subject the black body to constantly negotiate identity and nationality. As we have seen these polarities can be geographical (between sea and land), gender based (male and female) and also racial (black and white).

Returning to Fanon, the title of his book *Black Skin White Masks* is indicative of the inseparable histories shared between coloniser and colonised. The title suggests a historical inscription that continually constructs and deconstructs both races through the past as well as the present.

Fanon’s work is pertinent to this study because of its contribution to black existentialism, but more importantly his efforts towards addressing the South African situation during Apartheid, inspired political activists such as Steve Biko to form the Black Consciousness Movement as a means to regain black pride and to fight the apartheid Government.

Addressing South African racial issues during apartheid, Fanon (1952:68) states that “In South Africa there are two million whites against almost thirteen million native people, and it has never occurred to a single black to consider himself superior to a member of the white minority.” Concerned about the oppression in South Africa, Fanon alludes to the effects of colonialism by stating that the colonised often lose the capacity to realise that they can change their situation, and this is the basis on which Biko’s Black Consciousness was formed. the Black Consciousness

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<sup>34</sup> Pumla Gqola in *What is Slavery to Me? Postcolonial Slave Memory in Post-Apartheid South Africa*. (2010:170) “Historic inscription refers to both meanings gathered through historic inheritance, as well as to the ways in which such historic weight continues to disrupt meanings into the present.”

Movement's goal was to instil pride and agency in blacks.<sup>35</sup>

In conclusion, Searle's *Home and Away* offers a lens into slave memory and, the historic inscription the work carries allows viewers to draw connections between its existential positionality that reveals not only the country's struggles but also the writers / activists that chose movement over stagnation.

## **11. Black existentialism: Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement**

Steve Biko (1946-1977) was a South African anti-apartheid political figure. He was one of the founders of the Black Consciousness Movement which was formed in the late 1960's and 1970's to end apartheid or racial oppression in South Africa. When defining Black Consciousness, Biko (1978:74) insisted that "the call for Black Consciousness is the most positive call to come from any group in the black world for a long time. It is more than just a reactionary rejection of whites by blacks. The quintessence of it is the realisation by the blacks that, in order to feature well in this game of power politics, they have to use the concept of group power and to build a strong foundation for this. Being a historically, politically, socially and economically disinherited and dispossessed group, they have the strongest foundation from which to operate."

Biko recognises in the situation of blacks during apartheid, the need to regroup or to consciously form a collective that is guided by the same principles that are aimed at liberation and the restoration of humanity. The concept of a collective effort to fight against oppression during apartheid was also shared by South Africa's late poet Laureate, Professor Keorapetse Kgotsitsile in an essay which appeared in the Medu Art Ensemble newsletter, titled "Culture and Resistance in South Africa".<sup>36</sup> Like Biko, Kgotsitsile (1983:26) writes, "In our view there is no intrinsic

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<sup>35</sup> Steve Biko in *I write what I like* (1978:52) "Merely by describing yourself as black you have started on the road towards emancipation, you have committed yourself to fight against all forces that seek to use your blackness as a stamp that marks you out as a subservient being."

<sup>36</sup> Medu represented a group of cultural workers from the townships during Apartheid South Africa, it was established in 1977, the group consisted of different creative producers working in the areas of music, fine art literature etc... the Medu collective as well as the news letter made it possible for creative producers who were in exile to use their art to address the political situation in South Africa while still in Exile.

contradiction between the personal and the social in the sensibility of an integrated, whole personality – whether the person is an artist or not. Love, even the love between a man and a woman, parent and child, friend and friend, is a unifying factor in the wholeness we seek. Fulfilment is the quest of our lives. In any society, group, community or class, where this does not exist there is no peace.” Interestingly, Kgositsile makes use of the words love and unity. This is a common thread in the writings of freedom fighters, who often invoke love and peace as a foundation or plan of action in overthrowing establishments that continuously disavow the humanity of others.

One may argue that one of the greatest gifts that came with this movement is that of the imagination.<sup>37</sup> The colonised managed to envision themselves positioned in a different situation, because this movement was based on raising the consciousness of the minds of the oppressed. The colonised were made aware of their situations as well as their sense of self and worth. In this way, Biko and Fanon share in common this orientation of the restoration of mental health and recovery so that previously oppressed groups can be in a better state to fight for their liberation upon realising that the times that they exist within can be altered through one’s capacity to act.

This notion of time and how the course of history can be changed through our actions and choices reminds one of Berni Searle’s 2003 video work, *A Matter of Time* (a still from which is captured in Figure 4 below). In this video, Searle daringly walks barefoot on a slippery glass surface that has been drenched with olive oil; the video projection captures Searle’s body from the bottom so that the viewer is able to see the gut-wrenching walk. At times Seale slips and falls only to get back up again. For Bester (2003:37) “Aside from the title’s reference to a comment made by Searle’s grandmother while she was growing up – that it was only a matter of time her ‘olive skin’ would be appreciated ‘elsewhere’ – *A Matter of Time* is probably Searle’s least political work to date. It is dominated by her body’s negotiation of a slippery surface and becomes a choreographed mediation on movement. Oil not only creates fluidity, it also creates waves of the

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<sup>37</sup> In *Being Black in the world*, Chabani Manganyi (1973:21) writes, “Black Consciousness and solidarity must mean something more than sheer nostalgia. In their present and future thrusts, they must mean the birth of a new creativity.”

uncertainty of her moving body. Searle uses olive oil to establish a relationship between the movement of her body over the olive oil and its pressurized effect on its skin surfaces.”



Figure 4: Berni Searle, *A matter of Time* (2003), Double-channel video projection, dimensions variable, BAM/PFA (Reproduction taken from <https://archive.stevenson.info/exhibitions/searle/works.htm> )

Once again, Searle makes use of olive oil as a material of choice for her creative production. Oil as a substance used for cooking carries the narratives found in previous discussed works, such as *Snow White* and *Home and Away*. The statement that Searle’s grandmother makes in *A Matter of Time*, when she insists that one day her olive skin will be appreciated indicates that there exists a tension around the tonality of her skin. One gathers that Searle’s skin was unacceptable for the times that she existed in but then again there was hope and a consciousness that in another time her skin will someday be seen as beautiful and will be accepted. Based on this I disagree with

Bester's assertion that *A Matter of Time* is one of Searle's 'least political' works. One can make the argument that this work is politically charged for it offers hope and affirmation in the beauty of one's tonality and race.

In her discussion of Searle's work and the role that food plays in displaced communities, Gqola (2010:169) explains that "eating is part of this inescapable bodily presence. In this respect, it is logical that food cultures can provide stability for displaced communities living under conditions that deny them control over their lives, over their specific nourishment, and can therefore provide enslaved people with the power to heal or harm."

Gqola shares that the availability/unavailability of food can result in communities being stable or unstable. It is this factor that comes into play in *A Matter of Time*. Searle's attempt at walking on the oiled glass surface demonstrates how existence itself is unstable; there is no predetermination but rather opportunities to reconstruct and reconfigure one's path, and this is embedded in the spirit that formed the Black Consciousness Movement, existentialism and Negritude. These movements thrived on their engagements with the uncertainty of life and our tireless commitment towards projects that help define who we are and our roles within the world and the times we live within.

Biko's work can be said to be philosophical, but more specifically, philosophical in the black existential sense.<sup>38</sup> In the essay, "Sartre and Black Existentialism", Gordon in Judaken (2008:158) explains that "existential philosophy is not only existential philosophy produced by black philosophers. It is also thought that addresses the intersection of problems of existence in Black contexts. One does not need to be black to raise and study such concerns."

From this one gathers that black existentialism is intersectional, and that its thought is guided by engagements in conversations around blackness. One can be situated within the environments of

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<sup>38</sup> Lewis Gordon in the essay, *Sartre and Black Existentialism* (2008:167) "Black existential philosophy is not however, only concerned with antiblack racism, the contexts of black culture, the genealogy of black existentialism and its concomitant epistemological framework. It is also concerned with the complexity of building on ideas germane to communities designated black, most of which are African and African Diaspora communities, and also include indigenous East Indian and Australian, Aboriginal populations."

blacks and experience the lives of others through social encounters. Gordon is stating that black existentialism does not entail philosophy created by blacks but rather philosophy that engages with issues surrounding black lives; he alludes to the fact that everyone has the responsibility to create spaces that promote freedom and equality for all and a sense of community.

In an attempt to describe the mission of the Black Consciousness Movement, Biko (1978:102) explained that “in order that Black Consciousness can be used to advantage as a philosophy to apply to people in a position like ours, a number of points have to be observed. As people existing in a continuous struggle for truth, we have to examine and question old concepts, values and systems. Having found the right answers, we shall then work for consciousness among all people to make it possible for us to proceed towards putting these answers into effect.”

Here, Biko identifies the Black Consciousness movement as a philosophy that takes a philanthropic stance; its main objective is to ensure that people of colour commit themselves to the search of finding their own authentic selves and to living freely and this coincides with existential principles. South African existentialist, Mabogo More in the essay, “Sartre and South African Apartheid,” recognises Sartre’s impact and influence in the South African liberation struggle. More also acknowledges the contributions made by the Black Consciousness movement. More (2008: 189) contends that the “work of Frantz Fanon, Lewis Gordon, Robert Birt, Lucius Outlaw, Kwame Toure (aka Stokely Carmichael), Noel Chabani Mangani and Steve Biko, to name just a few, bear special testimony to this project. Sartre’s contribution to the destruction of apartheid, mediated through the courageous political and intellectual efforts of Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement, therefore, is beyond question, a project that has ongoing relevance in post-apartheid South Africa.”

More identifies Sartrean existentialism as an important landmark in South Africa’s liberation struggle. He then continues to acknowledge the contributions made by the Black consciousness Movement meaning that More approaches Biko’s work as a philosophical project, rather than focusing solely on his biography. But more importantly, More categorises Biko’s work as a form of existential philosophy.

However, a closer look at More's list of black existential philosophers reveals that he did not include even a single female existentialist. It is fair to pose the question then, where there no women existentialists during apartheid South Africa and post-apartheid South Africa? And secondly where there no individuals who made use of different forms of creative productions either than the one of writing and that of music (jazz)? The answer to these questions is that, yes there have been and there are women existentialists, and yes there are individuals who continuously find new creative productions that best express existentialism from their own positionalities.

A case in point is Searle's work, which can be seen as existential in nature. Her work expresses feminist existential ideas that are reminiscent of Sartrean existentialism: her work tackles socioeconomic issues and aims to find an outlet or expression of blackness that coincides with the times that we live in. In doing so, she offers a framework of blackness which is not essentialist but is instead steeped in a desire to examine the self and its relationship with the world.

Searle in Bester (2003:37) shares that "there are physical sensations that I encounter in the process of making the work. For example, nothing could have prepared me for what it feels like to walk on oil. I've made the choice of materials that, when combined with movement of the body, produces a sensuous experience, if not a daunting one. The material or substance used in *A Matter of Time* produces a smooth, sliding quality which does things to the way my body engages space – things that I don't necessarily expect."

*A Matter of Time* presents to us the idea of the unexpected, but in the same instance Searle dares to walk on the oily glass surface while conscious of the fact that she might fall, upon falling, Searle continues with her walk. This happens repeatedly, and the audience can hear the sound of a clock ticking. This act demonstrates how one goes through existence not knowing what might happen, but at the same time, it is this awareness of not knowing that keeps us alive, hopeful, and appreciative of our time on earth.

On many levels, our existence revolves around time and the events that ultimately contribute to what we are and who we become. Searle's title *A Matter of Time* is also indicative of assuredness

or consciousness that a particular thought or idea will come into fruition, and this certainty without evidence has been used as a strategy in fighting oppression. This is to say that oppressed groups firstly had to ascertain their worth and envision or imagine themselves as free beings while still fighting for freedom.<sup>39</sup> Anti-racism fighters usually have no knowledge of the moment in time in which they would be liberated but nevertheless they commit themselves to executing their life's mission.

To support this, Biko (1978:173) insists that “you are either alive and proud or you are dead, and when your dead, you can't care anyway. And your method of death can itself be a politicising thing. So, you die in the riots. For a hell of a lot of them, in fact, there's really nothing to lose – almost literally, given the kind of situations that they come from. So, if you overcome the personal fear of death, which is a highly irrational thing, you know, then you're on the way.” As a political activist, Biko was well aware of the certainty of his death under the apartheid forces. He too knew that it would only be “a matter of time” before his life was taken, yet he consciously continued fighting for freedom because he saw this as his moral responsibility to actively act in a manner which is free even though his situation portended tragic endings.

I conclude this section this by stating that an examination of the Black Consciousness Movement reveals not only its central role in the South African liberation struggle, but also its connection with existentialism through the links between Biko, Fanon and Sartre. It is important to note that during this time that there are different creative productions other than that of literature/writing that express existential ideas. In my thesis I take the opportunity to introduce existential expressions carried in works of art. I specifically do this by looking at the work of Berni Searle, for Searle's work can be identified not only as being existential in nature, but it rightfully belongs under the category of South African feminist existential art.

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<sup>39</sup> Mabogo More in the essay *Sartre and South African Apartheid* (2008:174-175) “Sartre held an ontological theory of “absolute freedom” and its complement, a theory of radical responsibility. “I am absolutely free and absolutely responsible for my situation” he maintained. He argued that since we are all condemned to freedom, each, each one of us “carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders; he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being.”

## 12. Black existentialism: Mabogo More and South African black existentialism

Mabogo More is a South African writer and philosopher and a leading contributor to South African black existentialism. He has published widely on topics that engage with the work of Sartre, Fanon, Biko and the impact and legacy of the Black Consciousness Movement. Recently, More has published the book titled *Biko: Philosophy, Identity and Liberation* (2008).<sup>40</sup> More's work locates Sartrean existentialism as a catalyst for the liberation struggle in South Africa and identifies existential philosophy as a landmark in helping to shape the thoughts that assisted oppressed groups to redefine themselves and their political role and responsibilities.

In his essay, "*Sartre and South African Apartheid*", More (2008:187) writes, "Black existential philosophers, most of whom were directly or indirectly influenced by Sartre's philosophy, have made it their philosophical project to articulate the existential realities of black people in the antiblack world in which they live. This project involves revealing the alienation of black people, bringing it to their consciousness, and thereby, hopefully, moving them to collective action and transformation of their situation."

More emphasises the importance of collective action. In contrast, existentialism often encourages self-evaluation, where a deeper look into the self is taken to mean that there is a concerted effort to turn away from the collective and discover oneself without it. In this regard, More makes the distinction between "ontological responsibility" and "moral responsibility." More (2008:181) holds that "Ontological responsibility, as Biko himself recognises, assumes that there is a solidarity among human beings that constitutes each one of us as responsible 'for every injustice and every wrong committed in the world' against humankind, because in choosing for myself I am at the same time choosing for all human beings." More (2008:181) then continues to define moral

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<sup>40</sup> Lewis Gordon in the essay *Sartre and Black Existentialism* (2008:163) "More has written on Sartre in the South African context over the past two decades. More's dissertation, "Sartre and The Problem of Racism", is the most systematic and comprehensive statement by an indigenous African on Sartre's thought and its influence in South Africa. It offers, as well an important critique of the most recent effort at colorblindness in race theory, namely, K. Anthony Appiah's *Cosmopolitanism*. Using Sartre's discussion of groups-in-fusion and the pledge group in the critique, More points out that racists see the subjects of racial hatred in terms of groups, not individuals."

responsibility as follows: “Moral responsibility, on the other hand, involves blame worthiness and praise for actions performed or not performed. Put differently, moral responsibility involves answerability and accountability for one’s choices and actions.”

Based on More’s distinction of ontology and moral responsibility, one can say that self-introspection and examination is done as a means of preparation and protection. When one engages in self-introspection and one comes into contact with others, one discovers the way in which receiving love from oneself can better prepare one to recognise and to safeguard the love that is received from others and all living beings on earth. To do so is to be respectful of life and the individual freedoms that come with every life, and to understand that these freedoms should neither be restrained nor disavowed.

In focusing on the collective, black existentialism raises questions about whether Sartrean existentialism is too individualistic, and whether this individualism is in tension with its political orientation, in the sense that the fight against oppression requires a collective response. On the other hand, Sartre’s work demonstrates that he was surrounded by a group of individuals whose works contributed to his ideas as much as his work contributed to theirs. It is this reciprocity that makes it hard for one to determine whether Sartre’s philosophy is overly individualistic.

If there is a tension between individualism and the fight against oppression in Sartrean existentialism, however, Black existentialism unapologetically and unambiguously focuses on collective action and responsibility. In More’s view, apartheid South Africa gave South Africans, both black and white, the opportunity to work towards existing in a salubrious environment. More holds that both groups had the responsibility to actively participate as a collective to help destroy the deleterious conditions that resulted because of apartheid.

One recalls Biko’s definition of Blackness, Biko (1978:52) maintained that “Being black is not a matter of pigmentation, being black is a reflection of a mental attitude.” From this, one gathers that Biko understood that the struggle for liberation was a cause that was aimed at liberating the mind of the oppressed, and this means that he acknowledged that both blacks and whites were

oppressed and that they were living within environments that were not reflective of self-love and these environments hindered the reciprocal relation of self-love to collective responsibility. This is why Biko, like Sartre focuses on the work of self-examination and self-becoming as a way of achieving a sense of self-worth.

With this in mind, More poses questions on post-apartheid South Africa. He questions why there is still a divide in a democratic South Africa, specifically when it comes to the issue of land distribution. More (2008:184) writes, “historically, black people in South Africa have been subject to systematic and brutal dispossession of their land, the basic means of production, and finally the control of their labour. It is these that have been alienated from black people.”

More highlights the conditions that most blacks had to live under during apartheid and compares this to the present conditions of blacks living under a democratic South Africa. He asks, what does the question of home and belonging mean to them? Are their surrounding spaces reflective of the imagined freedoms that were fought for in the past? Most importantly, More compares South Africa’s system of oppression (apartheid) to that of Germany (holocaust) and he interrogates the matter of collective accountability.

He investigates why institutions such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) were established by blacks to address historical events and questions the accountability of the white population in South Africa and its moral efforts in addressing historical events.<sup>41</sup> More (2008:186) argues that “Germany has accepted and taken collective responsibility for the holocaust. This responsibility is expressed by what the Germans themselves call *Wiedergutmachung*, meaning “making good again” or simply restitution. For this, Germany paid approximately DM100 billion

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<sup>41</sup> More (2008:181) notes that, “In January 1996 President Nelson Mandela launched the TRC under the leadership of archbishop Desmond Tutu. The TRC was a transitional statutory body constituted by the promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act (1995) to promote justice through the process of uncovering past violations (from 1960 to 1994) of human rights and to create the necessary conditions for achieving national reconciliation.”

to holocaust survivors, a sum that is likely to increase for at least the coming two decades. This policy is the result of the German's taking collective responsibility for their past."

It is problematic that South Africa's project of 'reconciliation' and Germany's '*Wiedergutmachung*' are based on words that connote a time in which relations between groups or individuals were perfect. To use the word 'reconciliation' is indicative of one's acknowledgment of a healthy relationship that once existed and has now presently been destroyed and certain steps have to be implemented in order to get to that faultless state again. Similarly, the word *Wiedergutmachung* directly translates to 'make better again', and like the word reconciliation, one finds cases of amnesia and even a sense of denial. The discourse directed at 'fixing' a situation is telling of how certain historical events are understood and whether or not certain situations can be resolved based on the solutions offered. The use of the word's reconciliation and *Weidergutmaching* are problematic because there was never a time when South Africa or Germany established a perfect and healthy relationship for all citizens.<sup>42</sup>

Nevertheless, one recognises that there has never been a model or a template for these countries to follow setting out the ways in which citizens can love and help each other develop a sense of home and belonging. This undertaking is an imaginative one and this is why I engage with art, politics, philosophy, science and literature at their interstice because I recognise the importance the imagination plays in our freedom.

As the previous discussion illustrates, black philosophers often refer to Sartre as a black existential philosopher in order to emphasise the point of collective action and moral responsibility directed towards the world and the place that one lives in and this includes the individuals that this place or planet is shared with. More continues (2008:186) that "unlike the Germans, most white South

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<sup>42</sup> Pumla Gqola in *Defining People: Analyzing Power, Language and Representation in Metaphors of the new South Africa* (2001:97) "The task of 'reconciliation' is more ambitious than it is often framed to be. It often leads to the denial of responsibility and the assumption that revelation itself is an antidote to the countries problems. The TRC is neither wholly responsible for this perception nor entirely blameless. In its naming there is implied as truth precisely that which is not always achievable: that confession leads to absolution and reconciliation."

Africans are denying collective moral responsibility for apartheid partly because of the TRC's unwillingness to deal with the issue of white moral responsibility for the system."

South Africa still remains one of the most unequal and most racially divided countries in the world, and this is more apparent in the racial geography of the country.<sup>43</sup> As a result, land dispossession and displacement are common themes in creative works. In this regard, Searle's work expresses slave memory and femininity and translates this into a dialogue that grapples with the question of the purpose of our lives and our willingness to commit our lives.

In Searle's work, one can see the focus on land dispossession, displacement and alienation in works such as *Home and Away* (2003), *Night Fall* (2006), *Lull* (2009) and *Seeking Refuge* (2008). Searle's work recognises the historical tensions that are connected to land and dispossession. Having lived through apartheid, Searle not only gives her own account of surviving under oppressive conditions, but she also connects South African racial tensions to the rest of the world by travelling and placing herself in 'foreign' environments. I placed the word foreign in inverted commas to show that her work abandons the idea of foreignness in itself. In positioning her own concerns about migration and alienation, she comes to terms with her own experiences and reflects the collective struggle of South Africans and their negotiations with space and time.

### **13. Lewis Gordon and Africana existentialism**

Lewis Gordon is an American existential philosopher and musician. Gordon is notable for his extensive scholarship on the work of Sartre, Fanon and More. Pertinent to his body of work is his ideas on the concept of Africana existentialism. Gordon (2008: 01) claims that "Africana philosophy is a species of Africana thought, which involves theoretical questions raised by critical engagements with ideas in Africana cultures and their hybrid, mixed, or creolized forms worldwide."

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<sup>43</sup> More (2008:186) notes, "As president Thabo Mbeki puts it, today South Africa is still largely a society of "the two nations" one, white and rich and the other black and poor."

Like Biko's ideas of Black Consciousness, Gordon identifies Africana existentialism as thought that is aligned with active expressions of blackness. He does not tie down this brand of existential philosophy to a place or a group of people but allows the concept to function under a unifying framework that tackles historical memory and agency.

In the book, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man: An Essay on Philosophy and The Human Sciences*, Gordon (1995:x) argues "against the tendency to reduce black thinkers to their biographies and to treat them as writers without ideas." Gordon's work is concerned with reading black texts anew and focuses on placing black works within their rightful categories. Gordon regularly emphasises the interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary nature of works by writers such as Fanon; he does so in order to make the reader aware of these writers' wide interests and to explore the meanings and limits of categorisation.

Gordon (2008:165) writes; "Fanon, for example, in his discussion of sociogenic dimensions of race, racism and colonial psychological maledictions in *Black Skin White Masks* clearly portends both the archaeological and genealogical discussions of the production of subject, but he does so in dialogue with the work of Merleau Ponty and Sartre, as well as Césaire." Gordon recognises in Fanon as well as in other creative productions produced by people of colour that there is often a need to identify the categories of their works. Gordon (1995: IV) explained that his "work argues for the expansion of philosophical categories." One finds that in most cases, the work of writers who often engage with a range of different subject matters is more likely to go unrecognised or more prone to erasure because of the difference in scholarship and in style.

The difficulties of categorisation are also evident in Searle's work. The dynamism of her work demands close examination so that the art does not suffer any erasure under unsuitable categorisations.

The danger of erasure is acute in the case of black women and their intellectual and creative work. Thus, for instance, while Gordon (2008) claims to argue for the categorisations of the work of creative producers as well as productions in African philosophy, he fails to express the

philosophical input as well as the existential nature of black feminist work. In an informative but non-transformative ‘inclusion’ of women’s work and their contributions to his model of Africana existentialism, Gordon offers two sections that focus on the contributions made by women, where he confines his discussion to the contributions of African American women and ignores the contributions made by women of colour working and living outside of America.

This is perturbing since his Africana existentialism, like, contemporary art and the Black Consciousness Movement is grounded on collectivity and visibility. I am consciously making use of the words ‘inclusivity’ and ‘selection’ to evidence the different ways in which male works are systematically/comfortably ‘chosen’ whereas female works are ‘inclusively’ inserted into academic works. This suggests that men are the norm or the foundation, to which a small number of women are then added. This in turn suggests that women of colour produce very few works, so that the ones who are included are exceptional.

Gordon’s ‘selection’ of male Africana contributors draws from different geographical settings. These include abolitionist Quobna Ottobah Cugoana, a Ghanaian who later lived in England; philosopher Anton Wilhelm Amo, a Ghanaian who went on live in Germany; anthropologist Antenor Firmin, a Haitian; and the educator George Wilmot Blyden, a Liberian. This effort of sourcing an impressive multicontinental male reference, supplemented with several African American women, is clearly unbalanced, insofar as it ignores the many contributions made by other women living outside of America.<sup>44</sup>

Gordon unintentionally positions American feminist thought as the apotheosis of all feminist voices.<sup>45</sup> This illustrates the danger of ‘including’ female thinkers, instead of implementing a thorough, fastidious selective process on the contributions of feminist works. Gordon’s unbalanced

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<sup>44</sup> Gordon (2008:105) writes, “Although their numbers are still small, the community of black feminist professional philosophers continues to grow. Jennifer Lisa Vest, Anika Mann, and Kathryn Grines are three women who are part of this growing community.”

<sup>45</sup> Gordon (2008:100) states that, “The question of building a future is strongly focused on African-American feminist thought, whose genealogical foundations are from at least two primary sources. The first is the thought of Anna Julia Cooper and the public intellectual work of women, particularly black women, such as Sojourner Truth (Isabella Baumfree) and Maria Stewart from the early nineteenth century to women such as Church Terrell and Ida B. WellsBarnett (1862-1931) at the beginning of the twentieth century.”

efforts show that feminist work, even under these new developments of black existentialism, is not seen as a line of work that surpasses engagements dealing with the topic of gender.

Moreover, this recent book defending the categorisation and visibility of black thought in 275 pages manages to discuss black femininity in two brief sections that add up to just nine pages. These nine pages are composed of a section titled, “Anna Julia Cooper and The Problem of Value” from a chapter on African American philosophy. The section is based on one of the most important figures in nineteenth century black feminist thought makes up four pages. A second section on black women philosophers is titled “Black Feminist and Womanist Thought” and makes up the remaining five pages.<sup>46</sup>

In the short section, “Anna Julia Cooper and The Problem of Value”, Cooper’s work is only discussed as “feminist work”. This is a concern since the intent behind Gordon’s book is to fight for the rightful categorisation of creative productions. What the reader receives instead is an introduction to who Julia Anna Cooper is, but the style and scholarship of Cooper’s work is devastatingly ignored.

In this regard, one recalls Cooper’s work titled, *A Voice from The South by a Black Girl from the South*, in which she (1892:229) enquires:

How much owest though? What have you produced, what consumed? What is your real value in the world’s economy? What do you give the world over and above what you have cost? What are you worth? What of actual value would go down with you if you were sunk into the ocean or buried by an earthquake tomorrow? Show up your cash account and your balance sheet. In the final reckoning do you belong on the debit or credit side of the account?

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<sup>46</sup> Lewis Gordon in *An Introduction to Africana Existentialism* (2008:71) “Cooper’s most influential work is her book *A Voice from The South*. In that work she articulated the argument that continues to resonate in much black feminist thought, namely, that black women must become agents of their own future, and that much of the health of their community rests on their shoulders because of the burdens they are forced to carry.”

This is a work which therefore clearly center's on human value and worth. Cooper asks questions which are existential in nature and enquires on the value and worth of black lives and wonders how human value and worth can be measured. Interestingly, Cooper's feminism centered on the collective efforts of both men and women. She was a pan-Africanist, an educator, idealist, activist, linguist, humanitarian and theorist, yet Cooper's work is hardly ever spoken about or mentioned in relation to the work of her contemporaries or even with regards to other feminist works.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, a reader would anticipate that Gordon would refer to Anna Julia Cooper as a philosopher and existentialist. But instead Gordon describes Cooper as follows: (2008:71) "She is without question the most sophisticated thinker on what is known today as black feminist thought from the late nineteenth century into the early twentieth century."

Gordon aligns the brilliance of Cooper's thought to a movement but fails to acknowledge and to direct her contributions and achievements to her generation, meaning that her work is not discussed equally to the contributions made by the members of her generation.<sup>48</sup> Gordon does not describe her as a philosopher or existentialist, and uses black feminism as the only category for Cooper's work, failing to address the philosophical as well as the existential nature of feminist work, particularly that of black feminist thought as compared with early white feminist thought.

Right at the beginning of his book, Gordon makes the conscious effort to define the word philosophy/philosophical categorisations in his own terms to ensure that his conceptualisation of Africana Existentialism is not misconstrued. Gordon (2008:08) holds that "philosophy emerges where problems that stimulate critical reflection come to the fore. By critical reflection I mean subjugating each assumption to conditions of evidence, rational assessment or reason." From this,

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<sup>47</sup> Vivian May in *Anna Julia Cooper, Visionary Black Feminist* (2007:03) "When considering Pan-Africanism in the United States, why do we often point to W.E.B Du Bois or Marcus Garvey, yet rarely to Cooper, who not only spoke at the 1990 Pan-African Congress in London but was also a member of the international executive committee? As Cooper complained to Du Bois, she, and many radical Black women, might well have participated more fully in the later congresses, except for the fact that they were mostly held during the school year, rather than the summer break when the many African American women who worked as educators could have participated."

<sup>48</sup> Lewis Gordon in *An Introduction to Africana Existentialism* (2008: 72) "Cooper, like Marx, was in fact working with a model of alienation that did not require the category of oppression, although subjugation and correlates with slavery were hallmarks of their thought."

one finds based on the delivery of the two sections on femininity in Gordons book, that Cooper's work as well as black feminist work was not engaged with in a scholarly manner and I reiterate the fact that Cooper's style of writing for example is not measured against any given writer or any of her contemporaries and even more apparent is the lack of 'critical reflection' or examination on how Cooper's work can be newly experienced from another lens by categorising it differently.

For example, Gordon's successful attempt at categorising work can be found in his book, *Fanon and the Crises of the European Man: An Essay on Philosophy and The Human Sciences*. In it, Gordon agrees with Emmanuel Hansen's categorisations of Fanon's work, Gordon (1995:02) observes; "Hansen identifies four perspectives from which Fanon can be examined: Political Philosophy, Social Science, Ideology, and Myth Making. He adds, 'It is my view that, in order to gain a clear understanding of the totality and complexity of Fanons thought, his work must be viewed from all of the above perspectives, and that is the approach taken in this study.'" With poignant enthusiasm and scholarly vigor, Gordon then continues to add two more categorisations. According to Gordon (1995:02) "I would add two other perspectives: the perspective of Philosophical Anthropology and the perspective of the Philosophy of the Human Sciences." From this one gathers that Gordon, like Hansen, diligently examines Fanon's work, so much so that he develops and defends new possible categorisations in relation to the emergent categorisations suggested by other scholars.

Gordon's two categorisations pass as philosophical identifications aimed at the work of Fanon but again, one can argue that the same philosophical identifications that draw on anthropology as well as the human sciences is also suitable for the work of Anna Julia Cooper or feminist work in general.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Indian English scholar and critical theorist, Homi K, Bhabha in *Black Skin White Masks* (1995: XXII) Fanon "is either revered as the prophetic spirit of third world liberation or reviled as an exterminating angel, the inspiration to violence in the Black Power Movement. Despite his historic Participation in the Algerian revolution and the influence of his ideas on the race politics of the 1960's and 1970's, Fanon's work will not be possessed by one political moment or movement, nor can it be easily placed in a seamless narrative of liberationist history."

Yet the evident neglect for new categorisation in the work of Cooper occurs at the same time as Gordon (2008:06) contests that “the kinds of intellectual activity that were called philosophical in the past and have joined the fold in the present were thus limited to one group of people, most of whom were artificially lumped together to create false notions of unity and singular identity.” Here, Gordon makes clear his stance on the incorrect manner that philosophical works, or rather “creative productions” in his words, have often been lumped together and left without critical engagement. Gordon does the same thing by lumping together the section “Anna Julia Cooper and The Problem of Value” and the section “Black Feminist and Womanist Thought” without the proper diligence and scholarly vigor that he usually offers to the work of philosophers such as Fanon.

To prove yet again that as effortlessly as Fanon’s philosophical work can be placed under the categories of philosophical anthropology and philosophy of the human sciences, Cooper’s work, based on the following observation made by Gordon, proves fitting for both categorisations of philosophical anthropology and that of philosophy of the human sciences.

From Cooper’s work, Gordon (2008:71) draws that “the anti-black racist argument is that the absence of black contribution to civilization suggests that humankind could do well without black people. Cooper’s response was that worth was a function of what an individual produced in relation to that which was invested in him or her. She pointed out that very little was invested in blacks and even less in black women. Yet what blacks have produced is enormous. There is not only the slave labor used to build much of the Americas, but also the innovators and strides of black communities under enormously handicapped conditions.”

Here, Gordon recognises in Cooper’s response her collective concern over the wellbeing of blacks and she carefully states factors that lead oppressed groups to accept the conditions that have been imposed on them. It is important that Cooper addresses the fact that black women suffer doubly in comparison to black men because not only are they discriminated on the basis of race but also on the basis of gender as well. Cooper insists that “worth is what an individual produces in relation to that which has been invested in him and her,” and this statement is true, more especially when

one looks at the ways in which works by women of colour have been dealt with. And even in Gordon's position, he fails to direct the worth of Anna Julia Cooper's work by giving it the kind of attention that asserts her importance.

This discussion of male scholarship and the question of inclusivity versus that of fastidious selection of women's works does not take away from political male activists who advocated for the full responsibility of women to participate equally in the political issues of their country. Burkinabe revolutionary, Thomas Sankara (1949:1987), comes to mind, as one of the leading political male activists who addressed the subject of women's role in struggles for liberation. For Sankara (1988:79), "The weight of age-old traditions in our society has relegated women to the rank of beasts of burden. Women suffer doubly from all the scourges of neo-colonial society. First, they experience the same suffering as men. Second, they are subjected to additional suffering by men."

This doubled suffering and its attendant double identification is evident in this case of creative productions and categorisations. Here, one sees that in most instances a work of literature written by a man of colour might be ignored for its scholarship or its genre and might be categorised under "African literature". Most works by men of colour are more likely to be placed within this category that is representative of their geographical setting instead of locating the work within a specific genre. This is an issue that still persists in the categorisation of creative productions. This issue becomes more apparent when works by women of colour are called into question. These works are doubly categorised: they are not only categorised through their geography, such as African literature or art, but frustratingly the work will be titled 'African women's literature' or 'African women's art'.

The double identification indicates not only a singular mark as seen with the categorisation of male works but reveals a double erasure that ignores scholarship and puts above all, geography and gender as the basis on which the work finds its meaning.

This is evident in the emergent voices of black existentialism and the rich exchange between Gordon and More. Both Gordon and More are well-aware of the impact of Sartrean existentialism on the thought of the Black Consciousness Movement and the liberation struggle of South Africa, but both philosophers fail to acknowledge that the Black Consciousness Movement represented a collective formed by both men and women. Thus, their location of certain male figures, such as Steve Biko, as the only existentialists in the history of South African politics is a major oversight.

This not only poses a challenge to existing feminist works, but also proves that there is still work that needs to be done in visual culture. In conclusion, I reference Gordon's definition of the word existence, for Gordon (2008:132) "existence comes from the Latin expression *ex sister*, which means to stand out or to emerge from indistinction or insignificance or simply, to appear." To exist is to bear witness the presence of other existences. It is to encounter the self as multidimensional and eternal. It is to remove the concept of singularity and to welcome the call to serve others because in doing so you are serving yourself, and this counts as a form of selflove.

#### **14. Sartre and the 'illusion of immanence': The image and the imagination in visual culture**

The act of imagination, as we have just seen, is a magical act. It is an incantation destined to make the object of one's thoughts the thing one desires, appear in such a way that one can take possession of it. There is always in that act, something of the imperious and infantile, a refusal to take account of distance and difficulties. (Sartre, 1940 :125).

For Sartre imagining is a magical act, the imagination has the power to bring things into existence; this is a similar role played by the arts as imagination is central to creativity and image making. The imagination affords us the opportunity to recognise our very existence, the ability to form different modes of existence through consciousness. The seemingly reclusive act of formulating multitudinous modalities of existence within consciousness (imagination) informs us of our being.

Sartre's *The Imaginary* is an existential text published in 1940. This text was published in the modernist period, just on the brink of the emergence of contemporary art (late 1950's). This book is pertinent to this study because it teaches one how to see and it interrogates the role of perception and that of interpretation and I feel that it is a text that would be highly beneficial in visual studies but surprisingly this text only remains under the philosophy category and it has not been engaged with in visual cultural studies.

It focuses on the function of the imagination in the shaping of human existence and freedom, central to Sartre's argument in the book is his concept of the "illusion of immanence", which holds that consciousness is not made up from a series of indwelling images from within us but rather consciousness and the imagination are informed by what exists outside of ourselves.<sup>50</sup>

This notion of images being influenced by other factors outside of our own consciousness is shared by English painter, poet, and art critic John Berger. In *Ways of Seeing*, Berger (1972:02) argues that "the way we see things is affected by what we believe." Berger insists that what we see is most likely informed by what we already know, in other words, pictures often take the role of signs and we as viewers interpret signs when we view pictures. Relatedly Sartre (1940:58) adds that "an image could not exist without a piece of knowledge that constitutes it. This is the deep reason for the phenomena of quasi-observation. Knowledge, on the other hand can exist in a free state, which is to say constitute a consciousness all by itself."

Both Berger and Sartre therefore view the image as an entity that is informed by something else. Sartre also makes note that while the art object remains the same, the knowledge of the art object remains in a free state, meaning that it is bound to change. Sartre alludes to the fact that our consciousness and perception plays an immense role in the way that we interpret objects or signs.

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<sup>50</sup> Kathleen Stock in *Philosophy and Conceptual Art* (2007:176) "The illusion of immanence: The view of mental images as objects 'in' the head, to be interpreted on the rejected view, in having an image of an entity E, one has an 'extrinsic' relation to the objects it represents, standing toward it in the relation of a sign or a picture, which has to be interpreted in order to render its meaning."

In most instances, the act of viewing works of art often turns the viewer into a semiotician rather than an individual involved in an imaginative act.<sup>51</sup> The individual is encouraged to search for coherent linkages between objects that are presented in real life and those that already exist in our consciousness, but one may pose the question about objects that already exist in the world, more specifically objects that already exist in our own consciousness. If these objects were to be brought into the world through the imagination and even when they have gone on to function as things in the world that are there for the transmission and consumption of information, where does this leave artworks? Does the artistic product still function as an object of the imagination upon the completion of the art product?

Sartre (1940:97) argues that the image “is a consciousness that aims at producing its object: it is therefore constituted by a certain way of judging and feeling of which, we do not become conscious as such but which we apprehend on the intentional object as this or that of its qualities. This can be expressed in a word: the function of the image is symbolic.” Here, Sartre shares that through images one can see the production of human consciousness in palpable form through objects; again, Sartre claims that this relation between the production and the final art product is aimed at projecting art objects as products that are symbolic and products that serve to elicit certain messages.

One can argue that imaginative products are less likely to lose their quintessential role and that is that of being products that ‘were never there’ in the world; creative products/objects in their newness or in their old form still remain as imaginative projects because of perception, how we choose to see objects maybe an important reason for why certain objects stimulate thoughts while other objects only lead us to search for references or prescribed notions of what we think we are seeing. Perception may be the answer to sustaining creative objects within the category of imaginative productions.

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<sup>51</sup> Daniel Chandler in *Semiotics* (2002:78) “Semiotics helps us to not take representation for granted as ‘reflections of reality’ enabling us to take them apart and consider whose realities they represent.”

But how can one make this argument scientifically, that objects are defined on the basis of positionality, and by this, I mean spatially and mentally? How does one's distance from an object (mentally and physically) affect the ways in which we perceive and reciprocate meaning? In his argument focusing on objects in space and our relation to objects in space, Einstein (1920:07) states "every description of the scene of an event or of the position of an object in space is based on the specification of the point of the rigid body (body of reference) with which that event or object coincides. This applies not only to scientific description, but also to everyday life." Here, Einstein explains that in order for objects to find meaning, it is important to first look where the object is positioned, and this is very important when one recalls Sartre's definition of existence. Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* simply stated (1943:333) that "to exist is to be situated." Like Einstein's description of objects and their relation to space, Sartre simply explains that existence is a matter of positionality and this goes for objects as well.

Returning to objects and how we relate to them, interestingly Sartre (1943:332) holds that:

an observer placed at the heart of a system cannot determine by any experiment whether the system is at rest or in motion. But this relativity is not relativism, for it has nothing to do with knowledge; better yet, it implies the dogmatic postulate according to which knowledge releases to us what is. The relativity of modern science aims at being. Man, and the world, are relative beings, and the principle of their being is the relation. It follows that the first relation proceeds from human reality to the world. To come into existence for me is to unfold my distances from things and thereby cause things 'to be there'. But consequently, things are precisely 'things -which-exist-at-a-distance-from-me'. Thus, the world refers to me that univocal relation which is my being and which I cause it to be revealed.

Sartre starts his description of objects and their relation to the world and humans by referring to 'movement'. One assumes that he is referring to planetary movements in his opening statement; for example, if we are situated on planet earth, we cannot tell that the earth is moving and we

cannot guess at what rate we are moving although this can be scientifically proven what is certain is that we are situated on a planet and the planet that we are situated on functions in relation to where it is situated in space. He continues to make an argument about relativity theory, but he refers to this as “the relativity of modern science,” Sartre makes no effort to mention the scientist behind the theory he is critiquing and is applying some of his ideas to his own work. However, the important point that he makes is that one’s existence is governed by distances or spaces, meaning that the steps taken to traverse distances through space and time ultimately guides one to freedom and to being a complete human being.

Sartre also explains that this process of recognising the distance between things in space and the willingness to position oneself around things that are “already there in the world causes things to be there” again. According to Sartre, to cause things to be there is an imaginative act, but through the statement that he made on objects and their relation to space and time, one realises that the statement that the purpose of his existence is to “unfold my distances from things and thereby cause things to be there.” Sartre explains that one moves from one point with the knowledge that another thing exists where he is headed; he therefore causes that specific thing to be there by situating or placing himself at that precise location.

And this act of “unfolding distances and causing things to be there” is mastered by Searle in her countless performance pieces where she already knows of a place and its historical significance to her culture and heritage and she chooses to travel to these places, ‘causing the imagined places to be there’ and at the same time affirming that through distance she is revealing that she is alive and therefore has the agency to make certain things exist or not exist as a means to support her own existence (to creatively bring meaning into one’s life).

I make references to Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* because some of the ideas that are in the book *The Imaginary* are later expanded in *Being and Nothingness*.<sup>52</sup> Interestingly, Lewis Gordon observes how Sartre discusses images in his book *The Imaginary* to discount some of the beliefs

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<sup>52</sup> Lewis Gordon in the essay, *Sartre and Black Existentialism* (2008:158) “as early as *L’Imaginaire* (1940), Sartre had pointed out that we sometimes even try to deny the role we play in the images we construct.”

held by phenomenologists. Gordon (2008:159) insists that “for phenomenologists to believe what they claim to believe about perceiving and imagining they must literally present an image as that which they did not present or they must collapse their perception into a purely voluntary act. Since the contradiction of presenting something as not being encountered requires the agent’s intentions or, in this case, wilful presentation of the image, Sartre, in effect, reveals phenomenism as a malediction of belief. It is, in other words, a form of believing what one does not believe while denying the responsibility for doing so.” Here, Gordon too observes that through creative productions that require one to think imaginatively one relies on images or the imagination as a framework for ideas and this applies to phenomenology as well.

Mirzoeff in *The Visual Culture Reader* also makes this observation of philosophy as a subject that often relies on images or image-making to support its arguments, Mirzoeff however attributes this acknowledgement of philosophical practice being supported using images (imagination) to German philosopher Martin Heidegger. According to Mirzoeff (1998:06) “one of the most striking features of the new visual culture is the visualization of things that are not in themselves visual. Rather than myopically focusing on the visual to the exclusion of all other senses as is often alleged, visual culture examines why modern and post-modern culture place such a premium on rendering experience in visual form. Among the first to call attention to this development was the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, who called it the rise of the world picture.”

Mirzoeff explains that visual culture does not necessarily mean visualisation in palpable form (painting/ performance). He explains that visual culture also includes the act of thinking about things and how we visualise our thoughts and acknowledges that visualisation plays an important role in thinking. Like Gordon, Mirzoeff identifies in the phenomenological work of Heidegger this tendency to make use of the imagination.

Mirzoeff notes that Heidegger referred to this as “the world picture.” He quotes Heidegger (1998:06), who explains that that “a world picture...does not mean a picture of the world but the world conceived and grasped as a picture...the world picture does not change from an earlier medieval one into a modern one but rather the fact that the world becomes a picture at all is what

distinguishes the essence of the modern age.” For Heidegger the world picture refers to the way in which thoughts can compact the world, in this way the overwhelming existence of things that are in the world becomes manageable and weightless if carried in thoughts.

It is important to note that this reflection of philosophy using artistic practice (imagination) to support it has also been discussed by writers and editors Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens. Goldie and Schellekens (2007:X) observe that “many conceptual artists even go further, claiming that conceptual art and philosophy are in much the same business, so that even if they approach their subject matter from different angles, there is considerable overlap in the questions explored by the two disciplines.” Both philosophy and art require one to think about certain subjects in different ways and this requirement relies heavily on creativity and imagination.<sup>53</sup>

Goldie and Schellekens (2007:X) continue, stating that “one conceptual artist and writer, Joseph Kosuth, even heralds conceptual art as the eventual successor to philosophy.” Whether the arts will be the successor of philosophy or not is not important. However the parallels drawn by both artists and writers working in various fields shows that visual culture is not just about the creation of beauty; it is an act that requires a certain love for beauty as well as for knowledge (philosophy).

Gordon also gives an example as to how philosophy is made beautiful by concealing its own beauty. This factor is also apparent in conceptual art and performance art, where the work of art becomes beautiful when one starts to think deeply about it. For Gordon (2008:09) “writing through the voice of Socrates’ lover, Alcibiades, Plato, rather poignantly, argued that loving the philosopher (and by implication loving the wise or wisdom) entailed encountering that which at first appeared very ugly yet revealed an inner core so beautiful that it was ‘intoxicating.’”

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<sup>53</sup> Lewis Gordon in *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy* (2008:09) “Philosophy requires hard work; it requires thinking in ways to which most of us are not used, and it often requires appealing to things that are not immediately evident.”

Again, one returns to the concept of distance and how movement towards things transforms not only ourselves but confirms the existence of other things in the world and their relation to our own existences. This revelation of hidden beauty within ugliness as being the nature or framework of philosophy as observed by Gordon, confirms that it is our imagination that is responsible for the transformation of ugliness to beauty.

Gordon (2008:11) makes a distinction between poetry, science and theology, holding that “the poet, as one might guess, is not as constrained by evidence as the scientist or the philosopher or even the theologian. This is because, whereas the philosopher looks at reason, the scientist at nature, and the theologian at faith, the poet is guided by the imagination itself without ‘constraints beyond those internal to imaginative play.’”

Surprisingly, Gordon insists that poetry uses the imagination more expansively when compared to theology and science, but one could argue that the imagination supports existence itself and that all projects that are governed by our existence and its relation to the imagination. As the poet Keorapetse Kgositsile (1983:26) explains, “life is itself the major creative activity. And what is truly creative in art is a reflection and an affirmation of life in moving images. We are not interested in how it is to be an artist, if the artist is finally interested in fooling around with paints and brushes or in perverse juggling with words, while he contemplates his next royalty cheque or how he is going to mesmerize his liberal patrons at the next exhibition or book party; we are interested in how it is to be alive. And what or how is it to be alive today?” Kgositsile wrote this while in exile during the height of apartheid, and this is extracted from an essay titled “Culture and Resistance in South Africa”. It is important to note that Kgositsile sees imagination as an integral aspect of life; in fact, he sees existence as a creative act, meaning that the imagination itself is ‘situational’, and this is to compare his statement to the assertion that Sartre made, that “to exist is to be situated.”

Kgositsile brings us to the realisation that to be situated is to be condemned to live creatively. In this sense, it resonates with Einstein’s theorisation of how we know where we are or how we recognise our existence through the existence of objects, together with Sartre’s idea of existence

being 'situational'. Kgositsile sees existence as an imaginative act in itself. The statement he makes is also interesting in that he makes reference to moving images or visualisation. He discusses the role of the artist and criticises the way in which artists are often seen in the public, and how this projection of working artists within gallery spaces is often misconstrued as being the real work that artists do. Kgositsile urges us to think about art and imagination as a life force, so that death only becomes a reality when we lose the capacity to use the imagination.

For Mirzoeff (1998:06) "visual culture does not depend on pictures but on this modern tendency to picture or visualise existence. This visualizing makes the modern period radically different from the ancient and medieval world in which the world was understood as a book. More importantly, pictures were seen not as representations, artificial constructs seeking to imitate an object, but being closely related, or even identical, to that object." As such, Mirzoeff emphasises the importance of not the object itself within existence but our capacity to perceive or to visualise and to think in various ways about the object that we are seeing. Mirzoeff also discusses the 'nature' of images, how they are supposed to function and if what they portray should bear the real representation of what is not there.

This is a concept that is discussed clearly in Sartre's *The Imaginary*. Using an example of photography and drawing, Sartre (1940:17) writes "I get up and take a photograph from a drawer. It is an excellent portrait of Pierre, it gives me all the details of his face, some of which had escaped me. But the photo lacks life: it gives perfectly the external characteristics of Pierre's face; it does not capture his expression. Fortunately, I possess a caricature that a skillful artist made of him. This time the relations between the parts of the face are deliberately distorted, the nose is much too long, the cheeks are too prominent, etc. Nevertheless, something that was lacking in the photograph, life, expression, is clearly manifest in the drawing: I regain Pierre."

Like Mirzoeff, Sartre observes that the capacity to visualise supports or gives life to objects, meaning that through consciousness we can facilitate or take notice of other existences in the world. The act of imagining is not only an attitude towards life or the manner in which we choose to live; it is also another way of giving the gift of life or existence to objects.

Sartre continues with his comparison of photography by identifying aspects that come into play when we view objects. Sartre (1940: 18) notes that “mental representation, photography, caricature: these three very different realities appear, in our example as three stages of the same process, three moments of a unique act. From beginning to end, the aim is the same; to make present the face of Pierre, who is not there.” Sartre acknowledges distinct differences between the process of imagination, photography and drawing. He explains that although photography affords us the subject Pierre – or rather a clear and accurate representation of the subject Pierre – the act of looking at a photograph does not strain the mind and cause us to tap into memory and use other mental faculties to construct an image of the subject Pierre as one remembers him in real life; it does not allow us to imagine Pierre. Sartre then explains that a distorted image or drawing allows one to use the imagination and to trust one’s recollection of the real subject (Pierre) to bring him back to life through an object (photograph /drawing). Sartre also makes us realise that although one is looking at a photograph or a drawing of a person (Pierre) one must remember that it is only an object and that we are never at any moment looking at that individual. Sartre applies this example in his book through his discussions of different movements in art history such as Cubism,<sup>54</sup>

However, his take on the knowledge and its relationship with objects is challenged by Kathleen Stock in the essay titled “Sartre, Wittgenstein and Learning from Imagination”. Stock (2007:176) claims “one cannot gain observational knowledge from visualizing (that is, knowledge acquired, relatively directly, via observation); however, this is not the only kind of knowledge there is, obviously. Sartre has been charged with implying that all knowledge is observational: that I cannot gain knowledge about something through a purely activity – i.e. without taking in something ‘from outside’ or more specifically without perceiving something about it.”

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<sup>54</sup> Jean Paul Sartre in *The Imaginary* (1940:191) “One is accustomed, since Cubism, to claiming that the painting need not represent or imitate the real but should constitute an object in itself. This doctrine, as an aesthetic program, is perfectly defensible and we owe a number of masterpieces to it still, it needs to be understood. If it means that the painting, although altogether devoid of signification, is nevertheless a real object, it commits a grave error certainly, it no longer represents nature.”

Here Stock interrogates Sartre's tendency to posit knowledge as only being observational but based on the example that I previously gave on Sartre's analogy of visualisation, photography and drawing, one sees that Sartre questioned observational knowledge by applying memory and intuition as factors in the disputation of real knowledge-based objects such as photographs. One looks at a photograph and often based on the knowledge of the accuracies of the photograph one does not refute the objects reality. But then Sartre turns to the example of the distorted drawing of his friend Pierre and depends on visualisation, memory and intuition to bring the image to life. This example shows that Sartre's thoughts on knowledge and how objects are viewed fluctuated. Nevertheless, Stock (2007:176) insists that "if this is indeed his view, then, the existence of conceptual knowledge, derived via reflection on existing non-perceptual beliefs it remains to be seen whether, analogously, non-observational knowledge of some kind is available from visualizing." In this essay, Stock discusses philosophy together with the subject of visual culture.

She holds that conceptual knowledge requires one to seek more avenues for creative thinking and that the knowledge we gather on objects can come from both the inside and the outside (consciousness). Stock challenges the notion of knowledge and the role it plays in the way in which we interpret objects.

Interestingly Sartre also makes the argument that in most instances one also has to depend on intuition. According to Sartre (1940:29) "the image, said Husserl, is a 'fulfilment' (Erfüllung) of signification. The study of imitation rather gave us to believe that the image is a degraded signification, descended to the plane of intuition." Here, Sartre makes reference to the German philosopher who established phenomenology, Edmund Husserl and acknowledges that for Husserl the images represented a form of completion. Sartre then goes on to mention that the "image is a degraded signification descended to the plane of intuition" and by this he means that images are not the real thing but rather they stand in the place of the real thing; in this way, the image represents a degraded form of a real existing being and only serves to represent it and through representation the viewer is enabled to use intuition, memory and other strategies to bring the representation into a real form (imagination).

In this regard, one can say that performance art, if witnessed live, gives one the opportunity to see art instantaneously as it is produced. Works such as those of Berni Searle are knowledge-based but also encourages the viewer to approach the work from an emotional level and that is as important as a knowledge-based approach. Indeed, in an essay titled “The Power of The Image. Berni Searle: Interlaced,” curators Michel Dewilde, Beatrice Josse and Mirjam Westen (2011:09) state “Searle couples her critical attentiveness with tenderness, empathy, loss, memory and beauty and transposes them into compelling images that simultaneously confront and console us. She allows us to share in her vision of wounded humanity in the hope of transcending it.” Here, they draw our attention to the ways in which performance art is centered on the need to transcend objects and to transmit and receive information in various ways. In this chapter, I have shown that performance art plays an important role in the arts in challenging the role of visibility, because we no longer depend on objects for interpretation, but we rather hold ourselves responsible for the construction of meaning.

Related to this, one can see the importance of movement and travelling in order to make works of art and to bring meaning into our own lives and into the lives of others. This sentiment on art and collective responsibility is shared by Kgositsile. For Kgositsile (1983:29) “Our artists have over the years struggled along with the people, sensitized to and expressing the feelings, sufferings, hopes, failures and achievements in our struggle for national liberation. The past few years have seen attempts by the artist, both at home and in exile, to organize themselves with the struggle and fashioning ways of making their talents functional in their communities and to the struggling masses of the people as a whole.”

Like Kgositsile then, Berni Searle recognises that art and collective responsibility go hand in hand, for when one creates for oneself, one is also creating for others; as such, creativity gives us the opportunity to communicate with others through the individual self.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Nthabiseng Motsemme in *The Mute Always Speak: On Women's Silences at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, (2004: 916) “Pain, suffering, humiliation and joy do not necessarily only find their expression through verbal language, but a number of other representations such as song, dance and, as I argue, even via silence.”

## 15. Conclusion

I first provided a basic overview of existentialism. I then discussed the histories of existentialism as well as the gaps, I have done this in an attempt to show the work that has already been done and to tap into the possibilities that exist in the arts.

In conclusion Kgositsile (1983:30) reiterates the fact that “the artist is both a participant and imaginative explorer in life. Outside of social life there is no culture, there is no art; and that is one of the major differences between man and beast.” Kgositsile insists that our humanity is found in creativity or in imaginative acts. This study has shown so far that creative productions whether through literature philosophy, science or visual arts provide life with purpose and meaning. This chapter has also demonstrated that one is able to commit to one’s life through the pursuit of artistic practice because to be alive is to live imaginatively and one cannot escape from living creatively or imaginatively. Like Sartre’s view on human freedom, we are condemned to live imaginatively.

## CHAPTER 3: FEMINISM, ART AND EXISTENTIALISM

### 16. Introduction

Very often the term ‘feminism’ is misunderstood because it is believed to carry adversarial and counteractive connotations, given its misconstrued assimilations with misandry. Feminist discourse is often put in a difficult situation because introductions to feminist epistemologies are more likely to lead the reader to question the debatable polarisations as well as the historical schema in feminist pedagogies. I begin by discussing feminism and art, so that I can later link this to my discussion of feminism and existentialism. This chapter aims to show the interconnectedness of these theories and how they have always maintained to focus around similar subjects.

### 17. Feminism and art

The term feminism was coined in 1873 by the French dramatist Alexander Dumas, in his book *Homme Femme* (Man Woman), which focuses on femicide, women’s rights and women’s relationships with men.<sup>56</sup> In the essay, “Feminist Theory and Feminist Movement: The Past Before Us”, Nancy F. Cott (1986:49) explains that “feminism is nothing if not only paradoxical. It aims for individual freedoms by mobilizing sex solidarity. It acknowledges diversity among women while positioning that women recognise their unity. It requires gender consciousness for its basis yet calls for the elimination of prescribed gender roles. These paradoxes of feminism are rooted in women’s actual situation, being the same (in a species sense) as men; being different, with respect to reproductive biology and gender construction, from men.”

Cott identifies the paradoxes presented by feminism mainly because of the different views that were held by women from different cultural backgrounds and women from different classes;

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<sup>56</sup> Editor- Translator of the book *Homme-Femme* George Vandenhoff in Dumas states (1873:05) “The author expresses that perfection of a coupled humanity which is the rest of a true union, soul and body, of two beings properly constituted for such a union, in accord physically and mentally in desire, in aim, in purpose in act, in conscience,- as man and wife.” Although Dumas wrote about both sexes, the bulk of his work focuses on feminist issues.

feminism then became divided or rather evolved from era to era. These shifts were known as the feminist ‘waves’, where each wave provided new platforms for conversations among women who felt that they were excluded from feminist conversations.

Feminism is typically understood in terms of its different waves: first wave feminism<sup>57</sup> (1900-1959) focused on women’s suffrage and political candidacy; second wave feminism<sup>58</sup> (1960’s-2008) focused on reproductive rights as well as the reduction of inequalities; third wave feminism<sup>59</sup> (1990-2008) encouraged the expression of individualism, diversity and inclusivity. And lastly fourth wave feminism (2008-to present day) readdresses some of the issues of third wave feminism and its aim is to prevent/address sexual assault, misogyny as well as other issues that govern the relationships between men and women and how those relationships affect our daily lives in institutions as well as in work spaces.

Feminism has succeeded in finding modes of expression beyond political spaces, and has made inroads in scientific, academic, theoretical and commercial spaces. In her essay “The Artist, The Critic and The Academic”, art historian and writer Janet Wolff (1995:16) interrogates the relationship between feminist practice and theory, posing the following question:

Why has feminism had an ambivalent relationship to theory? On the one hand, it is clear that theory is necessary if we are to produce a systematic understanding of gender inequality in our society (which theory or theories

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<sup>57</sup> Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie and Rebecca Munford in *Third Wave Feminism a Critical Exploration* (2004:01) “We have understood feminist history in three stages. The first in the nineteenth century women’s movement which was a response to a shared exclusion from political, social and economic life. Objectives common to those involved, were to extend the social contract so that it included political citizenship for women.”

<sup>58</sup> Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie and Rebecca Munford in *Third wave Feminism a Critical Exploration* (2004:01) “The second stage in feminist history, a clear self-defined, feminist movement emerged in the 1960’s and 1970’s. Reflecting on the gains of the suffragists and disappointed by the formal structures, feminists concerned themselves with broader social relations. Formed within a context which already included a program for legal and political emancipation, modern feminism concentrated on issues which specifically affected women: reproduction, mothering, sexual violence, expressions of sexuality and domestic labor.”

<sup>59</sup> Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie and Rebecca Munford in *Third Wave Feminism a Critical Exploration* (2004:01) “The elusiveness of this category of ‘woman’ raised questions- about the nature of identity, unity and collectivity. Appearing to undercut the women’s movement, fundamental principles of the feminist project were hotly contested. What we now understand as the third wave emerges from these contestations- and responses to them.”

might be most useful has, of course, been a contested question at least since debates between Marxist feminism, radical feminism and liberal in the 1970's: these days, the question of theory tends to be the issue of whether or not theories of representation are employed, loosely and generically referred to as 'post-structuralism') on the other hand, we also know that theory has traditionally been made 'male'.

Wolf makes one aware of two issues. First, if one develops a theory, where does one place it in the existing fields of theories – which era does it belong to and how does one defend or draw out associative links between the new theory and past theories to evidence the fact that that body of work qualifies to exist and to be inserted amongst other theories? She poses this question while also elaborating on the efforts made by the feminist waves to fashion and to establish other forms or schools of feminism (e.g. Marxist feminism, radical feminism, womanism, Black feminism, existential feminism) to demonstrate the multifaceted nature of the sub-theories that are emerging as a result of one theory.

Second, Wolf makes one aware of the ways in which theory is conceptualised as "male". This means that the challenge that feminism often faces is the fact that upon the successful insertion and justification that a certain theory should exist and function amidst other theories, feminists have to develop strategies to allow the theory to function in a way that male theories do not function (counter male strategies). This is not to say that there are no male writers who are writing against patriarchy. Rather, it is to suggest that the ideal theorist is conceptualised as male, and the ideal form of theoretical writing is conceptualised as masculine. One way of understanding 'male theory' to look at theoretical writings that aim to counter male theory. Thus, for instance, cultural theorist bell hooks and existential feminist Simone De Beauvoir write in a simple and accessible manner: their writing avoids jargon, it is self-reflective, and it speaks back to the marginalised and unheard.

Canadian-American radical feminist Shulamith Firestone shares the same sentiment as Wolff. Firestone speaks about the execution of works that can be made or that are intentionally “*made in a female way*.” American art historian Linda Nochlin also shares the same sentiment in the essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”<sup>60</sup> In the 1970 essay titled “(Male) Culture”, Firestone makes this assertion:

It would take a denial of all cultural tradition for women to produce even a “female” art. For a woman who participates in (male) culture must achieve and be rated by standards of a tradition she had no part in making and certainly there is no room in that tradition for a female view, even if she could discover what it was. In those cases where a woman, tired of losing at a male game, has attempted to participate in culture in a *female way*, she has been put down and misunderstood, named by the (male) cultural establishment ‘lady artist, i.e. trivial, inferior and even where it must be (grudgingly) admitted she is ‘good’, it is fashionable – a cheap way to indicate one’s own ‘seriousness’ and refinement of taste to insinuate that she is good but irrelevant.

Although this was written in 1970, Firestone’s essay highlights the same issues faced by artists who are female. Both Wolff and Firestone identify that one will always have a problem when trying to find expression within a sphere or space in which one was previously excluded. One not only has to execute the work that is expected exceptionally, but one also must defend one’s difference by remaining authentic or rather by creating work in a feminine way because the idea is not to make male art but rather it is to make exceptional works.

This reminds one of the arguments made by the British-Australian scholar Sara Ahmed, as she addressed how the differences in race can be sites of struggle when it comes to freedom of expression. Ahmed argues that black bodies often minimise their blackness and presence in white

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<sup>60</sup> Linda Nochlin in *Why Have There Been no Great Women Artists?* (1971: 02) “A simple question like “Why have there been no great women artists? Can, if answered adequately, create a chain reaction, expanding to encompass every accepted history and the social sciences or even psychology and literature, and thereby, from the very outset, to challenge traditional divisions of intellectual inquiry.”

spaces because the histories of these spaces always reveal that black bodies were never supposed to exist in such spaces.

In the essay, “Feminist Killjoys (And Other Wilful Subjects)” Ahmed (2010:08) argues that “if you already pose a problem or appear “out of place” in the institutions of whiteness, there can be ‘good reasons’ not to exercise what is heard as a threatening vocabulary. Not speaking about racism can be a way of inhabiting the spaces of racism. You minimize the threat you already are by softening your language and appearance, by keeping as much distance as you can from the figure of the angry person of colour.” For Ahmed, in order for black bodies to function within white spaces and institutions, blacks have to distance themselves from their own blackness, their own identity, in order to erase what they are or what is seen as stereotypical of blackness and function as expected by white people.

Black artists have assimilated into these spaces by complying with the standards but continuously executing work in subversive ways. When considering the emergence of conceptual art in Africa Hassan and Oguibe argue that the advent of conceptual art in Africa was as radical as its emergence in the West. For Hassan and Oguibe (2001:73) “Colonialism had created a rift between the past and the present within which new languages of art making developed in Africa that were more akin to the old tradition in Europe, or to early modernism. The (re)turn to concept, therefore, was as radical and controversial as it was in the West.” For Hassan and Oguibe African artists have assimilated into these spaces and have attained some form of visibility as it shows in the progression of African contemporary art, but challenges still lie in the manner in which the art is received and understood and this sometimes can erase or take away from the intention behind artists’ works.

Feminism or doing feminist work becomes doubly difficult for black women, because not only do they have to defend their gender they also have to defend their race while trying to provide enough evidence that their work is worthy of a philosophical, artistic, scientific or theoretical category. In *Demarginalising the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*, American Civil rights

activist, Kimberle Crenshaw (1989:149) states “Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women’s experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with black men. Yet often they experience double-discrimination – the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as black women – not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women.” Here, Crenshaw draws our attention to the ways in which vectors of oppression intersect to produce complex experiences that are not always reducible to single categories of ‘race’ or ‘gender’. She goes on to explain: “Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars travelling from a number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination.”

In the book, *Gendered Visions: The Art of Contemporary African Women Artist’s*, Goldwin Smith professor of African diaspora Art history and visual culture in Africana studies, Salah Hassan expands on why theories should exist and why old forms or systems should be disrupted in order to welcome new dialogues. Hassan (1997:01) holds that “Art, produced in almost all known styles, is influenced by a value system and directed by art theories prevalent at a certain time; even the most realistic works of art cannot be proclaimed to merely imitate life but interpret life from a specific stand point.” Hassan sees the need for theories to exist, for theories are able to support existing works (this can include art and science) that express these theories or ideas but are executed in a different way. Art and science can and have used feminist theory to improve their fields.

One is aware of the long history of the exclusion of women from art institutions.<sup>61</sup> An expansion or interrogation of this issue of exclusion can be found in the book *Women, Art and Society* by art

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<sup>61</sup> Shulamith Firestone’s essay ‘(Male) Culture’ (1970) in *Feminism-Art-Theory* (2001:16) “Women today are still excluded from the vital centers of human activity; and art is one of the last self-determining occupations left often done in solitude. But in this sense women are like a petty bourgeoisie trying to open up shop in the age of corporate capitalism.”

historian and educator, Whitney Chadwick. Chadwick (1990:38) explains that “women were isolated from the theoretical and the intellectual debates that dominated the arts because in most cases they were barred from membership of the academies in Rome and Paris, the major centers of art education during the eighteenth century.”

This exclusion of women still applies today in the arts, although there is an increasing number of women in the arts, one notices how their works are often placed within categories that are not suitable for the work which is produced. For Nochlin (1971:05) “In the arts as in a hundred other areas, things remain stultifying, oppressive, and discouraging to all those – women included – who did not have the good fortune to be born white, preferably middle class and, above all male.” Nochlin also highlights the fact that our institutions present to us problems because most discourses have been previously dominated by male scholarship. In the arts as well as in other areas, for women’s work to be appreciated institutions too must change. Women are more visible today, but their artworks are often associated with the historicity of the artist’s race and gender and very often the artist’s work is ignored or forgotten. In this way theory, as much as it can assist and support an artist’s work, can sometimes overpower the work. Artists have the responsibility to ensure that this does not happen by explaining and being able to defend their positionalities.

## **18. The feminist work of Berni Searle**

The oeuvre of Searle’s contribution to the world of visual culture is suggestive of an individual whose artistic production is hard to be tied down to one particular genre or theory. One recalls the Art Throb interview by the England-born South African artist and writer Sue Williamson where she interviewed Berni Searle. When asked about the nature of her work and how she wishes her art to be perceived, Searle in Williamson (2000:01) insisted that her “work raises questions about attitudes towards race and gender. I think it operates on different levels and reflects different racial and political experiences – but I don’t think my pieces are limited by that.

I hope they transcend and go beyond that and provide a space for illusion and fantasy.” Searle clearly points out that the themes around her work interrogate the politics of race and gender, but it is also clear that her work is not limited to these two main themes. As the preceding discussion has shown, her work grapples with a rich array of topics, such as dislocation, migration, and the history and meaning of food. Interestingly, in the essay “Identity Politics of Mobility: Kara Walker and Berni Searle”, community performance artist and disability activist Petra Kuppers (2009:47) introduces Searle as a “South African artist working in relation to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.” Although this is valid, one cannot ignore the varied subject matters that are addressed in Searle’s work.

In particular, Searle makes constant references to iconic works of art, and this can be anything from historical artistic works to pieces of music. These intertextual references are sharply delineated in Searle’s 2009 video work titled *Lull* (see a still in Figure 5 below). The work portrays Searle mournfully wearing a black dress; she is out in the veld and surrounded by lush bushes and trees and can be seen swinging on a swing made out of tyre and rope in a peaceful state. The viewer is thrown off guard when Searle gets up and leaves the swing swinging softly on its own. Suddenly the swing catches fire. This work is a direct reference to the iconic Rococo art work titled *The Swing* (1767) made by the English romantic painter, print maker and water colourist Jean-Honore Fragonard (1732-1806).

The painting depicts three main figures (Figure 6 below). A lady in a bright orange dress swings happily backwards and forward. The swing is propelled by her older partner or lover who is almost obliterated by the bushes. One sees that on the left side of the painting another male figure or lover is lying flat on the grass and joyfully watches his mistress swinging while her older partner is unaware of the new partner’s presence. One notices that this romance is kept secret because of the sculpted figure just above the figure of the new lover lying on the grass. The sculpted figure is portrayed with his index finger held against his lips to evidence the fact that what is taking place should not be spoken about so that the figure of the old lover in the background can falsely believe that he is the reason for his partner’s joy as she swings.



Figure 5: Berni Searle, *Lull* (2009), single channel video projection, 7min 33sec, Ed. 5 + 2AP, Stevenson. (Reproduction taken from [http://archive.stevenson.info/exhibitions/searle/black smoke rising/index.htm](http://archive.stevenson.info/exhibitions/searle/black_smoke_rising/index.htm))



Figure 6: Jean Honore Fragonard, *The Swing* (1767), Oil on Canvas, 81x 64.2 cm, Wallace Collection. (Reproduction taken from <http://www.wallacecollection.org/collection/les-hazardshereux-de-lescarpolette-swing/>)

The artwork reveals that every situation is not what it seems. With this in mind one thinks about why Searle chose to make a direct reference to this specific work. She noted earlier that her work is premised on gender and race, and here we can see that her work not only speaks about the relationships between men and women and the idea of love but it also politicises Fragonard's work. Burning tyres are highly charged symbols in South Africa. During apartheid, the burning tyre was used to start many protests or riots and it is still used today in post-apartheid South Africa to disrupt systems of oppression. Tyres were also used for "necklacing" where if members of an organisation where not trusted they would be executed through necklacing. The victim would forcefully wear a tyre or tyres around his/her body and would be set alight. This practice continues today.

In his book *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: Post-Apartheid Perspectives on America and Israel*, Ugandan academic and author Mahmood Mamdani (2004:05) insists that “the South African debate on necklacing turned out to be part of a broader political debate on questions like: who is a settler and who is a native? This debate differentiated three different political views on how to distinguish between settlers and natives and, hence, three different political futures for post apartheid South Africa.” He confirms that the tyre as a symbol conjures up memories from the past: it is mostly associated with the repercussions of belonging to a group, betraying that group and submitting to punishment because the group has lost trust in the victim/traitor. Searle’s work *Lull* and its reference to Fragonard’s *The Swing* makes one aware that in Fragonard’s *The Swing*, the secret lovers have not been exposed for their lies and that there is still no punishment for the two lover’s deception. The work leaves the viewer feeling that the secret lovers are on the verge of exposure or punishment. One can say that Searle makes connections with the work *Lull* and Fragonard’s *The Swing* to evidence the tensions that still exist in the country because of lies, hatred, love, greed, disloyalty. Searle shows that all these things pose a threat in a microcosm as well as is in a macrocosm.

Searle uses her work *Nightfall* (2006), a work based on the history and conditions of people of colour who worked on wine farms,<sup>62</sup> to refer once again to the work *Patience on a Monument – A History Painting* (1988) by South African feminist artist Penny Siopis. Art writer and artist Sue Williamson (1989:20) explains that *Patience on a Monument – A History Painting* takes a critical look at history as recorded from a “dominant white patriarchal point of view. Traditionally, history paintings, often authorized by the state, are heroic in character, and allegedly objective accounts of what really happened.”

*Patience on a Monument* represents what it means to be female in a patriarchal society.<sup>63</sup> In the work, Siopis place a black female figure amidst a myriad of objects that are symbolic of life, decay,

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<sup>62</sup> Ann Farrell in *A Soliloquy on Strength and Solitude* (2006:22) “During apartheid, many South African wine farmers paid workers a percentage of their wage in second-rate wine. This system of payment, known as the ‘tot’ or ‘dop’ system, while no longer legal in South Africa, left behind a destructive legacy of alcohol abuse amongst wine farm laborer’s in the Western Cape.”

<sup>63</sup> Williamson in *Resistance Art in South Africa. Cape Town* (1989:20) “In Siopis painting, a monumental black female figure- ‘anti- heroic, an inversion of liberty leading the people sits casually on a pile of natural waste and debris left behind by civilization.”

hope and history. The work poses a question about where the female black figure stands within South African politics and how this figure has been presented or seen in the past as well as in the present.

An example of this can be seen in the current discourse concerning the portrayal of Winnie Mandela in comparison to Nelson Mandela. One notices that the narration of the two struggle icons is different because Winnie Mandela is still not seen as a political figure, she is seen only as the partner of Nelson Mandela. In the essay, “Winnie Madikizela-Mandela: Revolutionary Who Kept the Spirit of Resistance Alive”, professor of political studies Shireen Hassin (2018:01) holds that “this way of seeing her as primarily beauty, and not as an emerging political figure, has coloured both contemporaneous accounts of Madikizela Mandela (for she was surely too young and too beautiful to have a serious political idea) as well as scholarly accounts of the period (which focused on the thoughts and actions of men).” Winnie’s visibility in the South African liberation struggle brought to question the role of women in politics and evidenced our societies patriarchy, but her misrecognition also points to the broader misrecognition of black female figure in different spheres and this is captured succinctly in the work *Patience on a Monument*.



Figure 7: Berni Searle, *Night Fall* (2006), Three channel video projection, 5 min 52 sec, Ed. 5 + 1AP, Stevenson. (Reproduction taken from <http://archive.stevenson.info/exhibitions/searle/crush/nightfall.htm> )



Figure 8: Penny Siopis, *Patience on a Monument – A History Painting* (1988), Oil and Collage on Board, dimensions variable, Stevenson. (Reproduction taken from <http://artthrob.co.za/2016/08/19/the-contemporaries-penny-siopis/> )

Searle draws again from the historicity of the transatlantic slave trade in the 2001 performance and video work titled *Home and Away* (see Figure 3 on page 15). This performance is remembered for its morbid portrayal of the female black figure, motionlessly floating amidst a vast ocean. One easily makes the connection between this imagery and that of William Turner's Painting *Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming Soon* (1840).



Figure 9: William Turner, *Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming soon* (1840), Oil on Canvas, 35 3/4 x 48 1/4, Museum of Fine Arts-Boston. Reproduction taken from <https://www.mfa.org/collections/object/slave-ship-slavers-throwing-overboard-the-dead-and-dying-typhoon-coming-on-31102> )

Turner's painting is a ghastly depiction of black bodies drowning; these individuals (slaves) chose death over slavery by taking the conscious decision to jump off the slave ship. Many writers have argued that Turner's painting is not a celebration of black people's lives and that it rather memorializes black people's suffering.

In the essay "Words are all I have left of my eyes" Ward (2007:57) argues that "Turner's painting may seem to be comfortably located within a visual rhetoric of abolitionist work, but its date of composition is vital in challenging this positioning. Whilst taking on a familiar abolitionist subject matter, by composing his picture at a date not only six years after the abolition of slavery, but

almost sixty years after the events aboard the Zong, the painting perpetuates the image of black people as suffering victims.”

Ward clearly sees that for slaves to jump from a slave ship and to wilfully choose death over slavery, this act demonstrates self-love and self-worth and more importantly it shows how freedom can be manifested in different ways, in this case death/tragedy can also liberate. But as Sara Ahmed warned us in her essay “Feminist Killjoys (and other Wilful Subjects)” of the debilitating efforts made by black bodies in white institutions to minimize their blackness, bearing our complex history in mind, why is it then that we are seeing an effort mostly in performance art to make visible the black body given its complicated history?

Searle’s work unapologetically portrays the female black figure, her body is not the usual emaciated female figure that is often portrayed in advertisements.<sup>64</sup> She wears no make-up and she is mostly seen wearing soft coloured, flowy dresses in her videos. A reading of Enwezor’s essay “Reframing the Black subject: Ideology and Fantasy in Contemporary South African Representation” can help us better understand why differences should be made visible rather than be erased. For Enwezor (1997:26) “The rainbow as what ‘disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules; has made artistic practice a volatile and transgressive act by realpolitik, for it has suddenly made South Africans clearly aware of how different, culturally, ethnically and linguistically they are as a nation. No longer is that hardened position of binaries, black, white, settler, native, coloniser/colonised, etc, tenable.”

Here Enwezor criticises the idea of the rainbow nation, “a term coined by Desmond Tutu to describe the multicultural population of South Africa.” (1977:26) He points out that most individuals, especially artists, felt that the idea of the rainbow nation encourages erasure of difference over a celebration of diversity and a holistic understanding of why differences matter.

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<sup>64</sup> Tom Martin in *Oppression and The Human Condition: An Introduction to Sartrean Existentialism* (2002:124) “We are inundated daily by images, visual images in particular, from the mass media. These images carry with them societal norms regarding the way in which people are supposed to be, and there is surely no stronger and no more defined a norm than that regarding the way in which women’s bodies are supposed to look. Women who do not match up to this norm are often portrayed as being sad, farcical, evil, or even just downright offensive.”

According to Gqola (2001:98) “When Archbishop Desmond Mpilo Tutu first spoke of us as the rainbow children of God, he did not appear to deny difference. The analogy foregrounded his belief in the ability of all South Africans to co-exist in spite of and because of difference. In the democratic dispensation, this was a possibility for the first time. However, as this label was thrust into the mainstream discourse of new South Africanese, it took a somewhat less progressive turn. Rainbowism became an authorizing narrative which assisted in the denial of difference”.<sup>65</sup> For Gqola, the concept of the rainbow nation was authorising in the sense that South African’s avoided discourses about difference, thinking that without any emphasis on difference South Africans will be exposed to more equal opportunities.

To elaborate further on this, one recalls the formidable works by the black American sculptor Edmonia Lewis<sup>66</sup> (1843-1911). Lewis was known for her talents as an artist and her technical abilities as a sculptor. Lewis being a person of colour chose to model mostly male white figures/sculptures; in doing so she felt that she would successfully erase her identity. Chadwick (1990:29) notes that Lewis “felt that her sex and her race left her all too vulnerable to charges that her work was not her own (similar accusations forced a public defence of her working methods from Hosmer in 1864). Moreover, it has been argued that her decision to suppress physical signs of ethnicity in her female figures resulted, in part, from her fear that the public would view the works as self-portraiture.” Here one sees that Lewis, an exceptional sculptor, had to battle against her race and her gender. Lewis chose to erase her heritage, her race and her gender by sculpting what has been traditionally been expected and accepted.

But presently, with theories such as feminism (as well as existentialism) and the insertion of feminism into philosophy, politics and art, one recognises in Searle’s work – and contemporary

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<sup>65</sup> Pumla Gqola in *Defining People: Analyzing Power, Language and Representation in Metaphors of the New South Africa*. (2001:98-99) “By rainbowism I mean the intertwined and competing process through which: (1) The label rainbow grew synonymous with ‘South Africa’. (2) The invocation of the collective ‘rainbow nation’ stifles rigorous discussions of power differentials. (3) The inherent contradiction contained in a label which specifically emphasizes difference but prevents its discussion is enabled.”

<sup>66</sup> Whitney Chadwick in *Women, Art and Society* (1990:28) “The first North American artist of color to achieve international recognition for her work as a sculptor, joined other expatriate artist’s and writer’s in Rome in the 1860’s. The daughter of a Chippewa Indian mother and a black father, Lewis was educated at Oberlin college, a private liberal arts college which had admitted African-American’s since 1835.”

South African art more generally – the need to make the black body visible, because usually its voice is muted, and its presence continues to suffer erasure. Searle’s art demonstrates how presences can be embraced and how the concept of gender can be experienced anew.

## **19. Existentialism and feminism through the work of Simone de Beauvoir**

### **(feminist existentialism)**

In the previous sections, I explored the relationship between creative productions and feminism, and delved into the concerning issue of the rightful categorisation of work. My discussion of the relationship between feminism and art aims to evidence the reciprocity between theory and practice and how one is useless without the other. But more importantly, this chapter will serve as an important introduction to feminist existentialism and how this can be applied or be read in the inimitable works of Searle.

In an interview, Searle in Williamson (2000:01) explained that “the self is explored as an ongoing process of construction in time and place. The presence and absence of the body in the work points to the idea that one’s identity is not static and constantly in a state of flux.” Here Searle explains how complex it is to be a human being because one is always growing and evolving, and the world around us changes also, this instability complicates even more the concept of identity. One grows more aware of the fact that what existentialism, art and feminism have in common is the foundational efforts put into self-examination.

Existentialism, art and feminism are all centered at self-examination, self-recovery and self-actualization. This self-work is undertaken to understand how the self-functions in a community or collective and how this consciousness of existing amongst other beings can help us better understand the roles we have to play in order to exist freely knowing who we are and why we choose to be/ or choose to live in any given way that better expresses our own sense of freedom.

For this study, I have chosen to use the term ‘feminist existentialism’ instead of ‘existential feminism’ as it is traditionally phrased. I have done this because I recognise the contributions made by feminism to existential thought. If anything, feminism should be naturally assimilated with existentialism or rather existentialism should be seen as a branch of feminism. The work of the late French novelist, existentialist and political activist Simone de Beauvoir<sup>67</sup> (1908-1986) comes to mind, with notable works such as *The Second Sex* (1949), *The Woman Destroyed* (1967), *The Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (1958), *The Mandarins* (1954), *She Came to stay* (1943). *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947), *All Men are Mortal* (1946) and so on.

Even though Beauvoir has extensive work covering the subject of existentialism simultaneously with femininity<sup>68</sup>, Beauvoir’s contributions are often ignored or attributed to her lover and partner, Jean-Paul Sartre. In the introduction to *The Second Sex*, American writer and biographer Deirdre Bair (1949: viii) states, “Simone de Beauvoir, a French writer who until 1949 was better known as Jean-Paul Sartre’s companion of more than twenty years than as an author of several well-received novels, decided to write a book about women.” This book that Beauvoir wrote is titled *The Second Sex*<sup>69</sup> (1949). One sees even in Sartre’s biographies or in writing on existential philosophers that Beauvoir is often excluded and is not considered as a legitimate existentialist, arguably because of gender.

Professor of philosophy Susan Brison (2003:32) argues that “there is much debate regarding how influential her work was on his thought and how much her work differed from his. While Beauvoir was alive many philosophers understood her work as purely derivative of Sartre’s. Some philosophers continue to hold this view, and Beauvoir is often excluded from textbooks on

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<sup>67</sup> Barbara Andrew in the essay, *Beauvoir’s Place in Philosophical Thought* (2003:24) “Beauvoir was born in Paris in 1908 and died there in 1986. She went to school with Simone Weil, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Claude Levi Strauss, and Jean-Paul Sartre. She and Sartre became lovers and companions, and although their relationship was not exclusive, it continued throughout most of their lives. Beauvoir had many friendships and love affairs with women and men. Some are revealed in her autobiography, others in posthumously published letters.”

<sup>68</sup> Susan Brison in *Beauvoir and Feminism: Interview and Reflections* (2003:31) “Femininity can be understood as an aspect of human reality but not as natural or innate. Beauvoir is clear about this interaction between self and world, between bodily experience and one’s understanding of it.”

<sup>69</sup> Deirdre Bair in *The Second Sex* (1949: vii) “In over 700 pages of analysis, Beauvoir, scrutinizes the facts and myths of women’s lives, using the disparate methodologies of (among others) literature, history, biology and philosophy to examine not only the problems women encounter but also the possibilities open to them.”

existentialism and phenomenology. She is interpreted as applying Sartre's philosophy to women's issues, but not as contributing original work (as if such analysis were not original work)."

As much as Beauvoir's work has been excluded from texts and from discussions around the subject of existentialism, one recognises how Beauvoir's thought has contributed to Jean-Paul Sartre's work and how some of Beauvoir's ideas were borrowed by Sartre and later used in the work *Being and Nothingness* (1943). In the book *The Feminist Interpretations of Jean-Paul Sartre*, writers Edward Fullbrook and Kate Fullbrook in Murphy (1999:58) explain that

the presentation of the phenomenon of absence in *Being and Nothingness* is one of Sartre's most wonderfully virtuoso and inimitable philosophical performances. In terms of depth of exploration, it surpasses by a long way anything Beauvoir wrote on the subject. But Sartre's account also shows itself as profoundly influenced by and indebted to Beauvoir's exploration of absence in *She Came to Stay*. First, there is the general point that he no longer holds the view that absence can occur only between two people for whom the absence of the one alters the being of the other in an essential manner.

*She Came to Stay* was first published in 1943, the same year that Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* was published and is commonly interpreted as a fictional account of her and Sartre's open relationship with Olga Kosakiewicz and Wonola Kosakiewicz. The novel demonstrates how Being can manifest in many ways and how absences can at times serve as presences. An example of this is how we remember people through the existence of objects they have interacted with.

This exploration can be seen in the extract directly taken from the book *She Came to Stay* (quoted in Edward and Kate Fullbrook 1999:56):

Elizabeth looked at the couch, at the mirror-wardrobe, at the bust of Napoleon on the mantelpiece beside a bottle of eau-de cologne, at some brushes and several pairs of stockings. She closed her eyes once more, and then opened

them again. It was impossible to make this room her own: was only too unalterably evident that it remained an alien room. Elizabeth went over to the looking glass in which the face of Françoise had so often been reflected and saw her own face.

Here one sees how Beauvoir had already laid out the framework for Sartre's idea of the relationship between absence and presence, that one cannot separate 'Being and Nothingness'. The reciprocal nature of being somewhere and yet being nowhere in sight as shown in the work of Beauvoir cleverly provides us with the example that objects also embody our Being, as much as we can give being to an object.

The production of an artwork, for example, also possesses the Being of the person who made it; this applies again to the individual who purchases an art work; the art work is set up in a new place and becomes familiar in this new place and is thus assimilated with the place and becomes the space itself or the space becomes identifiable because of that artwork. Performance art challenges this sense of permanence and the idea of how places become easily identifiable because of permanent monuments or artworks. Performance art challenges memory by positioning itself temporarily in certain spaces and erasing evidence of the occurrence of the art work.

Writings on philosophy, art and feminism often overlap, and Beauvoir's multidisciplinary work is reflective of that. One notices again, that like Sartre and Fanon, Beauvoir's work relied and made use of literature as a creative tool or as a creative production that better expressed her philosophical ideas. Similarly, the work of Searle carries overtones of politics, philosophy, and feminist thought.

Searle's body of work can be canonised from different lenses. As much as some writers have claimed that Beauvoir's work is an application of Sartre's work to the feminist situation, Beauvoir's work, *The Second Sex* did in fact radicalise Sartre's statement "One is not born a Jew,

one becomes it<sup>70</sup>”, Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949:267) responded “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine.”

One can relate this statement also to an earlier discussion of Berni Searle’s sentiment, when she made the assertion that identity or the self is always in a state of flux. Like Searle, Beauvoir claims that who we are is mostly determined by a construct. Again, one could argue that Beauvoir may have taken Sartre’s statement and turned it into a feminist rhetoric partly to evidence the paucity of feminist engagement in Sartrean existentialism, but also to strategically evidence gender as a social construct and as a sight of performativity/performance. American philosopher and gender theorist, Judith Butler (1999:179) holds that “gender ought not to be constructed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movement, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.” Butler argues that gender is not stable it is founded upon various acts or rather it is performed, and this sight of performance cannot be formed in isolation but it is administered by the existence of others, the expectations of others.

As discussed earlier, existential philosophy tends to focus on how we think about the world and how we perform our thoughts or beliefs through our bodies or rather through our actions. A performance artist such as Searle has the advantage of executing philosophic work through artistic practice or through an artistic tool such as performance art that directly relates to philosophy and its emphasis on description and narrative which usually involves writings on performing certain

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<sup>70</sup> Professor of Contemporary French Studies, Jean Paul Boule in his book, *Sartre, Self-Formation and Masculinities* shares his views on Sartre’s main character in the novel *Nausea* and parallels that with Sartre’s personality (how Sartre viewed himself), for Boule (2005:17) “in terms of embodiment, his ugliness is psycho-socially produced. He is measured and measures himself up against an ideal of beauty that he cannot attain, and his inadequacy is defined against a ‘norm’. Levy makes the point that the origin of Sartre’s phrase ‘one is not born a Jew, one becomes it.’”

tasks to better express or carry a complex idea. Beyond the aid of words and the imagination, one sees through the work of Searle, Beauvoir as well as Sartre that race and gender are just ideologies and that they only exist through performativity.

When thinking about performance art, one realises that even slight movements and gestures can be political and can reveal so much more about ourselves and the subconscious, but one important aspect about performance art or performativity (in existential terms, 'being in the world') is the specific site where the performance is taking place, meaning that how one performs gender or race depends on the environment.

This is also important in the arts, where one is performing is often an indication of the concept behind the work; performativity or performance art often demands an alternative space. One recalls the essay titled "Alternative/Experimental Art Spaces in Johannesburg" by South African curator Portia Malatjie. Malatjie (2013:376) explains that "alternative spaces are often conceived as a means of working against certain institutional structures. This does not mean that all alternative spaces exist without the logistics or programming of traditional institutions; they do, after all, function as institutions, albeit different and often in opposition to traditional forms of institutions. But can one assume that a space that is commercial cannot be alternative?"

Malatjie explores the topic of alternative spaces mainly because of how new forms of art, such as performance art often reject the gallery as a suitable space for their body of work. This example of performance art and its refusal to perform within a traditional space reminds one of Sartre and Beauvoir's views on freedom. One can say that firstly performance art demonstrates how one's freedom is often linked to place and space, and why it is important to choose specific sites for performances so that the artist can better express his/her freedom. Secondly, one sees that the freedom that comes with performativity or performance art is interchangeable and this exchange can be experienced through the environment or through the audience.

From this one gathers that Sartre associated freedom with choice. For Sartre (1943:503), "freedom is the freedom of choosing but not the freedom of not choosing. Not to choose is, in fact, to choose

not to choose". Choosing (freedom) is inevitable in Sartrean existentialism, Whereas Sartre associated freedom with choice, Beauvoir saw freedom as being exchangeable or reciprocal.<sup>71</sup>

In the essay "Beauvoir's Place in Philosophical Thought", Barbara Andrew (2003:33) explains that "in the *Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir argues that each person needs the other's freedom for her own to be realizable. This is already a huge move away from the radical freedom of *Being and Nothingness*." Beauvoir held the view that one cannot be free unless others are free; she viewed freedom as exchangeable and this involved freedom on a collective basis. One can say that feminist existentialism also reminds one of the views held by the Black Consciousness movement because their ideas focused on collective action and freedom.

In conclusion, I have discussed feminism and existentialism by focusing on the work of Beauvoir because she has contributed immensely to both existentialism and second wave feminism. Her interdisciplinary approach exemplifies how feminist theory goes beyond issues of women seeking power that is equivalent to the opposite sex, Beauvoir's work demonstrates that the roots of feminism are not only gender orientated but are philosophical.

We see how philosophy often attempts to express or explain the role of performativity and how literature as a form of creative production was used by Beauvoir and Sartre to express their philosophical ideas and how these ideas often involved performance (performing Being, gender and race in the world). One recognises that the performance art of Searle easily expresses philosophical and gender/racial politics because she is the palpable subject; she is a living being who chooses freely how to act and how to interact in the arts as well as in the world.

Searle becomes the living, organic form on which the creative descriptive style of existential work finds its expression. It is only through her work that one does not have to imagine the narratives

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<sup>71</sup> Barbara Andrew in the essay *Beauvoir's Place in Philosophical Thought* (2003:33) "It is generally agreed among Beauvoir's scholars that Beauvoir's idea of freedom differed significantly from Sartre's. Sartre maintains in *Being and Nothingness* that we are always free to choose, even if that freedom takes the form merely of refusing the situation, perhaps by committing suicide. Kruks, Kate and Edward Fullbrook, Gothlin have written detailed analyses of Beauvoir and Sartre's evolving notions of freedom, in fact, both Kruks and the Fullbrooks argue that Beauvoir disagreed with Sartre about freedom before the publication of *Being and Nothingness*."

and the elaborate descriptions that are formed on the basis the performativity of characters in existential texts. Searles work embodies the philosophy itself.

This section demonstrates that one cannot speak about feminism without considering the existential foundations that were laid during the second wave of feminism, specifically by Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Although the second wave of feminism presented problems for women of colour by failing to account for the lives of women of colour, one acknowledges the issues raised specifically about gender as a site of performativity and one recognises from Beauvoir's work how difficult it is to categorise her work as only being feminist work, because her work focused on so many areas including biology, sexual studies, philosophy and literature. Her work also reveals how women's work should be canonised rightfully and this is still an issue in visual culture, artists biographies are always put to the fore and their work is ignored.

## **20. Black feminism and some criticism on Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex***

Previously I have discussed Simone de Beauvoir's work *The Second Sex* and I have identified it as an existential text which was at the forefront of the second wave of feminism. This work addressed issues such as women's oppression/liberation, equity biology, abortion rights and sexual liberation.

In "Feminists Read the Second Sex: False Universalism in The Second Sex", professor of philosophy and women's studies, Jo-Ann Pilardi argues that Beauvoir's work projects false universalism, meaning that there is no effort in addressing feminist issues from a multicultural stance. Pilardi (1995: 38) contends:

On an issue which holds great interest, multiculturalism or "cultural diversity", *The Second Sex* has been found seriously lacking. The problem is sometimes identified as "false universalism". Important critiques have come from anthropology as well as philosophy. In Elisabeth Spelman's analysis of

the problem, Beauvoir is given credit for a high level of consciousness about class and race privilege, though it was “sabotaged” by her universalization of women as a group, a problem that feminism continually encounters.

Pilardi warns us of the false universalisation in Beauvoir’s work, but this universalisation of women is indicative of the tensions that cause feminist theory to expand into different movements/waves because women from different backgrounds and cultures did not identify with white feminism mainly because of class privilege, culture and their relationship with their communities as well as men.

One feminist who comes to mind when discussing the issue of essentialising women is Nigerian critic and feminist Molaria Ogundipe, who is well-known for her ideas on Stiwanism (Social Transformation in Africa Including Women). In her 1994 book titled *Recreating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations*, Ogundipe (1994:09) argued that “there is no such thing as ‘the African Woman’”. She cannot be essentialised in this way; rather she has to be considered, analyzed and studied in the complexity of her existential reality; her classes, cultures, races and ethnicities among other variables.” Here Ogundipe addresses some of the issues facing feminists, or how women are generally perceived; her concern stems from the fact that the term feminism allows for a group identification and sometimes the sense of individualism and the right to express one’s autonomy is often overshadowed by the movement itself which focuses on collective consciousness and unity. One notices in the artwork of Searle that issues of the black female body are handled in an intersectional manner, an example of this is the wording she uses in the video performance *Home and Away* (2003). Here she refers to the collective suffering or displacements caused by the spice routes by using the words I, we, he, she to stress collective experiences and memory.

Ogundipe’s work focuses on the lives of black women; she does this to address mainly the often-overlooked issues of black women in feminist movements. This often happens because dominating voices are often those of women who hold power and are privileged because of this power and are fortunate because of this power. It is known that Ogundipe expanded the concept of the ‘four

mountains' identified by Chairman Mao, based on his observations of the burdens carried by Chinese women, given various socio-political situations in China, namely (1) colonial oppression, (2) feudal oppression, (3) backwardness, and (4) man. Ogundipe expanded on these and added (5) her colour and (6) herself. Ogundipe's concept of the six mountains on her back shows that her feminism does not ascribe to essentialist ideals; her addition of the burden of colour and herself is also indicative of her realisation that often black women have to consider not only gender when addressing gender related issues, but they have to be cognisant of their race as well as class difference.

Beauvoir in Bauer (1960:01) insists that "a man never begins by establishing himself as an individual of a certain sex: his being a man poses no problem". Like Ogundipe, Beauvoir investigates this issue of the self as a problem; that is, the mere fact of being female and the problems that arise because of this factor. She identifies that women's participation or contributions are often overshadowed or questionable because of their sex. However, Beauvoir's observation of the self posing as a problem is limited; it does not discuss the issue of race in conjunction with femininity. Very often black women's feminism is inseparable from race related issues because race often becomes an additional problem. Third wave feminism demonstrated that talking or exploring the self becomes a way in which black feminism can be expressed on an individual level; it gives feminists the opportunity to deal with problems relating to socialisation instead of identifying themselves (individuals) as problems.

Although *The Second Sex* essentialises issues affecting women, Beauvoir makes an important observation on the responsibility of those who are in a position of power to avoid at all cost their abuse of power. In the essay, "Beauvoir and Feminism: Interview and Reflections" by Susan Brison, one of the questions asked by Brison in this interview is on feminism and power structures/relations. In response to a question on feminism and power Beauvoir in Brison (2003: 198) explained:

what exactly is power? And how can you reconcile a certain kind of power with freedom? Or must all power be completely suppressed? For example,

American feminists refuse all hierarchy, all bureaucracy, practically any organization whatsoever. Well, everything's disorganized and for that reason it turns back on itself, it is not a real democracy, because those who speak loudest or with the greatest ease, talk all the time, and others can't make themselves heard. That's pretty horrible, too, and it creates a lot of difficulty for the feminist movement. It's hard because it ends up being always the same ones who are the leaders, almost in spite of themselves. But they are still the leaders and have a certain power.

Here Beauvoir explains that dominant voices are often in a position of privilege and that in most cases these voices usually silence those who are not in power. Similarly, Ahmed (2010:04) warns that "a feminist call might be a call to anger; to develop a sense of rage about collective wrong. And yet, it is important that we do not make feminist emotion into a site of truth: as if it is always clear or self-evident that our anger is right. When anger becomes righteous it can be oppressive; to assume anger makes us right can be a wrong." Like Beauvoir, Ahmed discusses the ways in which feminism itself can sometimes work against itself. Ahmed looks at how emotion mostly plays a big role in feminist discourse and at times the power of emotion and confrontation sometimes outweighs that of truth and logic and for Ahmed this becomes a site of power but regrettably an oppressive power.

One can say that Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* reflects various power dynamics because the text became synonymous with feminism and it is reputable for its ability to address coherently a number of common problems that face women from all backgrounds. The historical genesis of the terms feminism and existentialism are both Eurocentric, however the existence of these movements evidence themselves in creative productions and theorisations all over the world and it is important to show diversity in a subject as well as reflect on all those who exist in the world in which the text is directed.

In *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* (1984), bell hooks investigates the role played by white women as well as women of colour in feminist discourses. hooks proposes a feminism that is not

separatist, a feminism that acknowledges male contributions in the 'struggle to end sexist oppression'. Additionally, hooks (1984:24) explains also that the role of feminism (Black feminism) "is not to benefit solely any specific group of women, any particular race or class of women. It has the power to transform in a meaningful way all our lives. Most importantly feminism is neither a lifestyle nor a ready-made identity or role one can step into."

For hooks, feminism involves everyone who exists, and this includes men. hooks has dealt with the subject of male pain and how feminism should deal with women's issues in relation to the community. She argued that the relationship between white women and white men is different when compared to the relationships between black women and black men; she insists that women of colour shared the same struggles together and have therefore demonstrated the capacity to work together and practice equity and equality. An example of this would be the civil rights movement, the Black Panther's and the Black consciousness movement. hooks (1984:6869) insists that "anti-male sentiments alienated many poor and working-class women, particularly non-white women, from the feminist movement. Their life experiences had shown them that they have more in common with men of their race/or class group than bourgeois white women. They know the sufferings and hardships men face and they have compassion for them. They have had the experience of struggling with them for a better life"

Here hooks explains that one of the downfalls of first wave and second wave feminism is that males from marginalised communities were often overlooked and assumed the similar oppressive role as that of white men. First wave and second wave feminism forgot that men of colour often suffered at the hands of white males. Furthermore, hooks (1984:68) insists:

Bourgeois white women, especially radical feminists, were envious and angry at privileged white men for denying them an equal share in class privilege. In part, feminism provided them with a political platform they could use to call attention to issues of social equality, demand change and promote specific reforms. They were not eager to call attention to the fact that men do not share a common social status; that patriarchy does not negate the existence of class

and race privilege or exploitation; that all men do not benefit equally from sexism. They did not want to acknowledge that bourgeois white women, though often, victimized by sexism, have more power and privilege, are less likely to be exploited or oppressed, than poor,

uneducated, non-white males. At the time, many white women's liberationists did not care about the fate of oppressed groups of men. In keeping with the exercise of race and/or class privilege, they deemed the life experiences of these men unworthy of their attention, dismissed them, and simultaneously deflected attention away from their support of continued exploitation.

hooks explains that feminist movement should recognise that the same essentialisation of black women also applies to the essentialisation of black males. She shows us that during the first wave as well as the second wave, white women were still in a position of power when compared to men of colour. She warns us that feminism should be more focused on solidarity and the celebration and acknowledgement of difference. Although Beauvoir's<sup>72</sup> 'feminist existentialism'<sup>73</sup> is often criticised for its generalizations, one is also aware that *The Second Sex* is self-reflective. And even though its assimilation to the second wave feminist movement turned it into not only a universal template for feminism, it also provided a framework for what a more expansive feminist existentialism might look like. For this study I hope to show how feminist existentialism can be reimagined through art by looking at its roots as well as its initial objectives.<sup>74</sup> In conclusion, the

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<sup>72</sup> Barbara S. Andrew in *Beauvoir's Place in Philosophical Thought* (2003:32) "Beauvoir was not interested in constructing a philosophical system, which might turn into a system of given meaning for others. Instead, she developed what we may think of as a set of tools for philosophical analysis, including her ideas of freedom, ambiguity, situation, the human condition, social ethics, reciprocity, and gendered existence."

<sup>73</sup> Jo-Ann Pilardi in *Feminists Read the Second Sex: False Universalism in the Second Sex* (1995: 39) "Judith Okely, a British Social anthropologist offered a clearer analysis of the faults of the Second sex along the lines of false Universalism, which Okely called "pan cultural generalization". She claimed that the Second Sex itself was a work of "Anthropology"; the ethnographic study it provided was of an Urban "Village", that is, mid-twentieth-century Paris; the women studied were white and middle class, like Beauvoir herself."

<sup>74</sup> Simone de Beauvoir in an interview by Susan Brison, in the essay *Beauvoir and feminism: Interview and Reflections* (2003:189) "I think that feminists, at least those I'm involved with, want to change not only women's situation but also the world. That is, these are women who would like to see a certain dismantling of society and who think that if feminism were victorious, if the oppression of women were completely eliminated, well, society would be shaken to its foundation. This cannot be accomplished without other kinds of action, for example, actions supporting class struggle and immigrants, in other words, all the actions one can imagine in favor of society. They must all be linked

introduction of feminist existentialism and its relation to visual culture is an extension of the theories that were used against and along with feminism and existentialism, it is my hope to show that artistic practice can be understood and interpreted through a feminist existential lens.

## **CHAPTER 4: FEMINIST EXISTENTIALISM**

### **21. Introduction**

As it is seen in the title of my thesis, I am conducting research on feminist existentialism in the work of Searle. My choice to pair the words feminism and existentialism was a conscious one. Traditionally one sees for example, Simone de Beauvoir being referred to as an ‘existential feminist’ although during her life time she was not considered to be a philosopher or an existentialist. With this study I have demonstrated that her feminist work contributed to the work of existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre, so that it becomes hard for one to disassociate feminism from existentialism. For this reason, I have chosen to identify this study as ‘feminist existentialism’ instead of ‘existential feminism’, and in doing so demonstrate that feminism has always been an ally of existential philosophy.

I have discussed how Beauvoir did not provide the perfect model for feminist existentialism during the second wave, and how Black feminism addresses some of the problematic issues that surfaced during this period. Hence we see the continuation of feminist existentialism (although it is not used under these terms) from different ethnicities and different social groups following third wave and present day feminism.

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So, it's a matter not of women taking men's place in this world, but of their being emancipated in such a way as to simultaneously change the world.”

An aspect which is important in my study is the issue of categorisation/canonisation, I have argued that there is a growing need in the visual arts to identify the categories in which artists belong to because not doing so may result in the erasure of an artist's work.

## 22. Girl by Berni Searle

Although canonisations might lead to the essentialisation of artists' work, one can also say that the lack of identification or categorisation of work leads to poor interpretations of the work. Although variation or different perspectives of an artist's work is of paramount importance, the discourse should be allocated so that the artist's narrative maintains its significance while there are other existing narratives available in the public domain.<sup>75</sup>

Bearing this in mind, the 2001 essay by Desiree Lewis titled "*The Conceptual Art of Berni Searle*", explains why Searle's work is difficult to be put in a category or canon because the work is a direct response to the nature of the time or the political climate in which the work was produced. In other words, Lewis makes the argument that the work is and should remain as it is so that it can speak true of the South African situation, which in this case seems unsolvable or still in a state of flux.

Lewis (2001:112) insists that Searle's work "asserts that creativity which resists canons, restrictions, official political and aesthetic labels can only be a form of being in process, a political and cultural struggle through the debris of an oppressive cultural legacy." Here Lewis argues that part of the difficulty with categorising/canonising Searle's work, lies in the cultural legacy of colonialism. She insists that Searle's work is always in a state of flux just like South Africa's political climate, therefore, to categorise it or to put it within a canon would assume that the cultural legacy of colonialism is in the past and does not affect the present. Lewis (2001:112) continues, stating that Searle refuses "to embrace any monolithic and idealistic celebration of selfhood, she explores possibilities for new ways of seeing and being." She notes that Searle's body of work is

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<sup>75</sup> Jorge Ribalta in '*Experiments in a New Institutionality*' (2010:229) "Our starting point is an understanding of social life as being constituted by different publics, with different publics, with differing interests. According to this logic, the museum has to accommodate different and equal uses for these different publics, which are neither limited to the exhibition space nor excessively determined by the imperative of visibility."

attributable to the fact that it is non-conclusive. Just like Sartre's Work *Being and Nothingness*,<sup>76</sup> which has been criticised for being incomplete, Searle's<sup>77</sup> work is arguably difficult to categorise because in a sense it would need to first be complete in order to categorise.

Just like human existence is founded upon or cherished for the fact that it is incomplete, when one dies the tragedy lies in the incompletion of one's journey and the inconclusiveness of it rather than the pain and agony of death. One can say that to truly establish a feminist existentialism is to first think about how philosophy or theory embodies human values as well as human life. In earlier chapters I have noted that Searle is a performance artist, and this also means that she is a conceptual artist, because both conceptual art and performativity are idea based rather than based on the traditional focus on medium and precision.

One recalls from earlier chapters that in works such as *Snow White* (2001), *Night Fall* (2006), *Home and Away* (2003) and *Lull* (2009) that Searle's body, which serves as the artwork along with other various technologies, appears before us in the form of video projections and often it encounters or meets different materialities and at times becomes obscured or driven out of sight. This process of appearing and disappearing, contacting, integration and disintegration through materials not only speaks to notions of hybridisation, the hybridity of the self and societal influences, but speaks to the hybridisation of the arts as well as the apparent hybridisation of her work and process.

Being that this is a feminist existential analysis, this erasure of the artist as well as the artwork only solidifies the presence of the artist and artwork rather than obliterating this presence. By the erasure of the artwork, I mean the instability of meaning and the variations in interpretations which can

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<sup>76</sup> Mary Warnock in *Being and Nothingness* (1943:XVII) "Did Sartre go on, after *Being and Nothingness*, to a genuine ethical theory, as he suggested that he might? (we should notice the famous footnote on page 434 of *Being and Nothingness*: "These considerations do not exclude the possibility of an ethics of deliverance and situation. But this can be achieved only after a radical conversion which we cannot discuss here.")

<sup>77</sup> Pumla Gqola in *What is Slavery to Me? Postcolonial/ Slave Memory in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (2010:32) "The activity evident in contemporary negotiations of colored identities demonstrates the importance of creativity in political memory process. To the extent that memory is an imaginative process, and not simply a recuperative one, the dynamic articulations of colouredness along with the rejection of the identity 'coloured', bear witness to the collective reinvention of identities which is at the heart of memory."

sometimes blur the main discourse behind an artist's work. The concept of erasure in Searle's work reveals that the erasure performed in slavery keeps the subject from being free enough to be himself or herself; (it is alienating) one becomes what one is not. This sentiment is echoed by Gqola, and this is with reference to Searle's work titled *Girl* (1999) (Figure 10 below). Gqola (2010:185) questions the relations between absence and presence in the work of art "in the same way that presence of body distils concepts as discussed above, its absence in the body as evidence locates the proof of existence, thereby equating visibility with existence, what happens under/during and through displacement in slavery, colonialism and apartheid? What kind of subjectivity and reality is shaped under these circumstances and how does the absent body map and negotiate subjectivity."

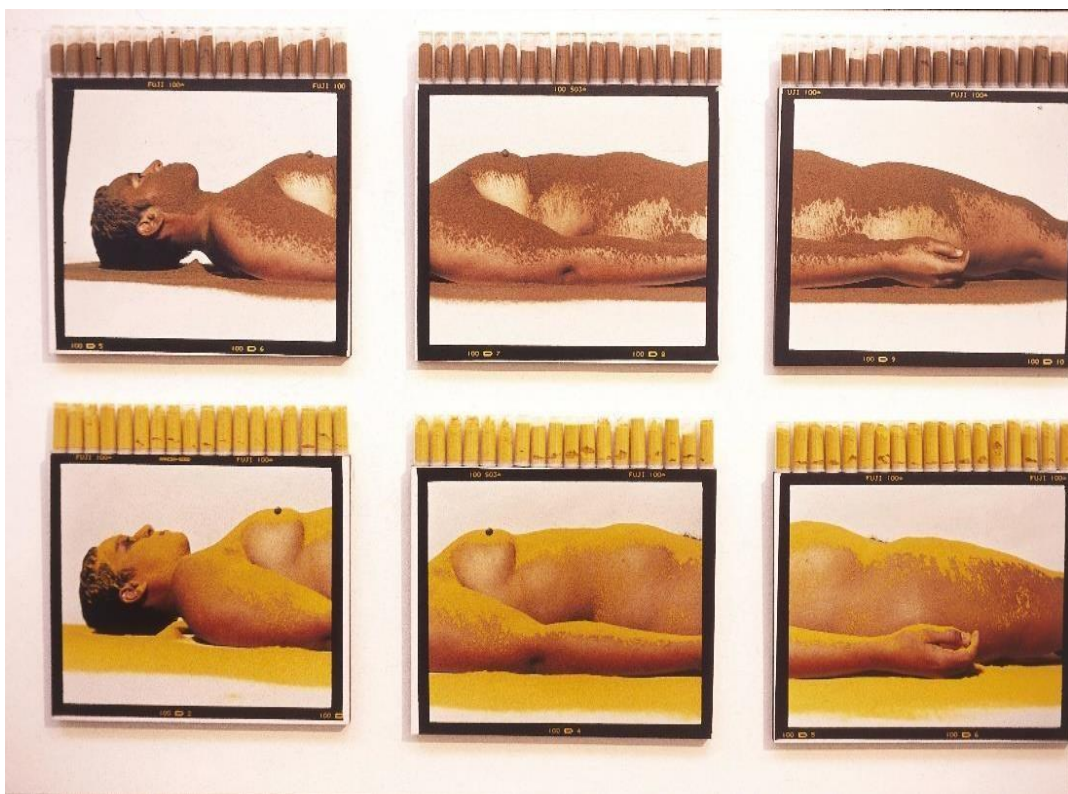


Figure 10: Berni Searle, *Girl*. From the *Colour Me Series* (1999), Hand-printed colour photographs, mounted glass tubes, spices, photographs, 42 x 50cm each, Stevenson.  
(Reproduction courtesy of the artist and Stevenson gallery)

The narrative and the non-objective stance taken by Searle easily passes as historical interpolations in her photographic and video work, and by this, I mean that Searle taps into slave memory and places her body in different sites that have little to do with her individual history but rather a lot to do with the collective histories of different people, although she is aware that she was absent during certain historical occurrences. She uses the presence of her body during this present time to go back into history by placing herself within pivotal spaces that altered the lives of many people. One can say that this absence and presence is also experienced in her body of work. At times Searle executes a performance at any given site (outside gallery spaces) and appears before an audience or no audience and at other times she appears in the form of videos or pictures. In this way her absences and presences always take a different context.

Gqola's view on the relationship between absence and presence reminds one of Sartre's interpretation of Nothingness. In *Being and Nothingness* (1943:655) Sartre states: "Nothingness does not itself have being, yet it is supported by being. It comes into the world by the for-itself <sup>78</sup> and is the recoil from fullness of self-contained being which allows consciousness to exist as such." This definition of Nothingness positions Nothingness as something which cannot exist without Being. It is this consciousness, this knowing and awareness of Nothingness in human beings that guides us to position ourselves in the world by acknowledging first what we are not.

In an attempt to explain the body of Searle's work, Gqola (2010:173) holds that she "read the installations as linguistic and visual texts which foreground the preparation and synthesising of diaspora and competing identities." Like Lewis, Gqola identifies Searle's work as always being in a state of flux. This idea of competing identities not only applies to Searle's diverse heritage but also to the different characters and characteristics embodied in every performance. In the work *Girl* (1999) one notices how once again Searle disintegrates objects (photographs/spice containers)

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<sup>78</sup> Jean Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* (1943:650) "The nihilation of Being-in-Itself; consciousness conceived as a lack of Being, a desire for Being, a relation to Being. By bringing Nothingness into the world, the for-itself can stand out from Being and judge other beings by knowing what it is not. Each for-itself is the nihilation of a particular being."

and integrates them again in the rightful order; this alludes to how multiple identities may seem separate but through one body they can function harmoniously.

In the work *Girl*, one sees a display of twelve photographs divided into four symmetrical rows, placed above each other. In the photographs one sees Searle's naked body partially covered in spices; she lies flat on the ground facing upwards and the photographs cut her body in such a way that there are noticeable differences between the different but yet similar photographs. Just above each photograph one sees small containers of spice, just like the unpredictability of each photograph, there seems to be some contents in each container.

This work seemingly expresses the idea of there being no difference in 'differences' or rather the fact that most things are more similar than they are different. Here Gqola (2010 :178) provides a beautiful interpretation of the work *Girl*:

lying on her back, open to the gaze of the audience, the woman in the art work appears helpless, still an impression which the frames seem to confirm. However, the installation at the same time evokes a range of intertextual associations. It gestures towards two apparently divergent associations. The first connections hints towards one of the most famous of magic tricks where a magician 'slices' a woman into several parts. That the different body parts in Searle's piece will not fit into one box but rather create a 'spilling over', drives home the illusory nature of the compartmentalization. The use of her own body in her installations, or traces of it interrupts bodies of knowledge and offers her body as evidence. Searle's choices in this regard further undermine the expectations of passivity in the artistic tradition of the nude and of the obedient poses assumed by the magician's assistant.

For Gqola, Searle's work carries magic within it, and this can be seen and measured through objects. Once again there is a link between Gqola's view of Searle's work being magical in nature and being similar to Sartre's idea of art and imagination being magical acts or forms of magic (see

Chapter Two).<sup>79</sup> What is most striking about Searle's work is the fact that her art adheres to the rubric of conceptual art which focuses on the dematerialization of art and the embrace of idea-based art. One realises through this study that much thought and planning has gone into the work. Searle's work is both emotive and cerebral. There needs to be a stronger engagement with her work, an engagement that demands the same amount of intellectual effort from audiences as well as writers as that given by the artist.

Similar to the American conceptual artist and minimalist Sol Lewitt (1928-2007), Lewis also argues that works of art inherit multiple meanings, For Lewis (2001:112) "art can unveil and create meanings in ways that words can't. Visual art arouses hidden or buried memories, subliminal feelings and associations. It appeals powerfully to the senses and is also polysemous". Here Lewis identifies Searle's work as being very emotive, but does not account for the intellectual prowess of the artist and also the intellectual effort that conceptual art demands. Lewitt (quoted in Alberro and Stimson 1999:15) once made a comparison between ideas and objects, and argued that above everything else, ideas are paramount, insisting that "new materials are one of the great afflictions of Contemporary Art. Some artist's confuse new materials with new ideas." Here Lewitt explains that strong conceptual ideas are crucial in conceptual art. This means that the objects used are as good as the ideas that carry them.

Although conceptual art has been criticised for its simplicity, some of its prolific artists have argued against setting stable meanings to a work of art. One recalls here the words of Lewitt (quoted in Alberro and Stimson 1999:13), who holds that "Conceptual Art is not necessarily logical. The logic of a piece or series of pieces is a device that is used at times only to be ruined. Logic may be used to camouflage the real intent of the artist, to lull the viewer into the belief that he understands the work, to infer a paradoxical situation."

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<sup>79</sup> Jean Paul Sartre in *The Imaginary* (2004:125) "The act of imagination as we have just seen, is a magical act. It is an incantation destined to make the objects of one's thoughts the thing one desires, appear in such a way that one can take possession of it. There is always that act, something of the imperious and infantile, a refusal to take account of distance and difficulties." (see chapter two)

Lewitt makes the claim that sometimes conceptual art aims at being ambiguous. Yet this can sometimes mean that the conceptual content of ideas-based work is not engaged with or contested because of the ambiguity in the subject matter. For this reason, I argue that idea-based art should be categorised in order for the serious intellectual efforts made by the artist to be identified and preserved. Although variation is needed in works of art so that the work is not fixed, I argue that identifying the main discourse or canon for works of art ensures the specificity in narrative and presents directives that evidence the artist's main intent and where the work may go in the future.

It is interesting that Lewis insists on “the communicative ability of visuality being more effective than the use of words”, when one recalls that Gqola noted that Searle's installations served as “visual texts” and that her body of work is “linguistic” in nature. However, both observations by the two writers are valid. To see this more clearly we can turn to the essay “What Difference Does it Make who is Speaking?” by South African visual artist and scholar Mbali Khoza. In it, Khoza discusses the symbioses between words (authorship) and art, arguing that “unlike writing, where the writer cannot necessarily be available to interpret the text, in fine art the artists can choose to give a brief summary of their intention behind the work. This however does not necessarily mean it is a fixed perspective. It is open to interpretation.” (2016:31)

Here, like Lewitt and Lewis, Khoza elaborates on the differences between art and works of literature (authorship). She acknowledges the important role that visual artists play in making themselves present and available whereas this is limited in the work of writers. While some of the advantages of visual artists is founded upon their agency to be present and available to speak in most artistic spaces, one can say that writers do not have to be available always because their writings have to be clear and voluminous while most artists only write a short artist statement. This is a concern when works of art are ambiguous and when meaning is not contested but accepted based on what everyone sees.

I have chosen to discuss Searle's work using both Desiree Lewis and Pumla Gqola's interpretations of her work for two reasons. First, both writers are South African Black feminists, and secondly both of these feminists are literary professors. This in itself demonstrates how applicable art is in

interdisciplinary studies and shows that categorisation is important in order to discuss the complexity of ideas that may be generated from artworks.

But most importantly, canons usually make criticism allowable because one's ideas are identifiable and can be contested because of their non-ambiguity. In other words categorisation/canons require from artists the responsibility to commit to ideas and the bravery to respond and defend their intellectual work (idea-based art).

Ambiguity erases the artist's responsibility and by responsibility, I mean that conceptual art is mainly idea-based art, and as much as there may be variation in the public's own ideas about artworks, it is important for artists to be able to speak for their works and allow the public to understand the discourse/canon identified by the artist. It is a known fact that visual culture encourages art to be read in different ways and this is valid. Indeed, my study points out that visual culture, like existential philosophy, is characterised by the freedom that is given to readers and viewers to approach works in intersectional ways; this intersectionality cannot be taken away from visual culture or existential philosophy. However, the assumed paucity of existential works or feminist existential works from Africa calls for a stringent categorisation or identification of discourses in these fields to show that these discourses (existentialism/feminism) are not necessarily Eurocentric but exist globally.

## **23. Alternative art spaces and performance art/conceptual art**

In the previous chapter I have discussed visual art's capacity to reach other researchers and scholars in other fields, in other words interdisciplinary research should be encouraged, especially when one identifies that a subject matter in any given field encapsulates the ideas and concepts of another field. This should be done to excavate and rework the differences that separate these fields as well as their similarities.

In the previous section I have given examples of such interdisciplinarity from literary studies – Desiree Lewis and Pumla Gqola’s writings on the work of Berni Searle – and I have shown how artist and scholar Mbali Khoza has explored the symbiosis between the visual arts and language. Another writer I have included in this thesis who was also involved in literary studies and consistently engages in interdisciplinary studies is South African poet and feminist Gabeba Baderoon, as seen in earlier chapters, Baderoon also wrote on the work of Berni Searle.

A look at the recent feminist work in South Africa shows a growing engagement in issues surrounding the lives of women and more importantly an interest in the intellectual contributions made by women in the country. Searle’s work also traces the quality and amount of work made by women of colour to try to explain the narratives carried by her work and how these narratives speak to their previous and present-day experiences.

In this section I am interested in the spaces in which performance art functions. In this respect, South African curator Portia Malatjie (2013) discusses the issue of traditional white cube art galleries and the existence of alternative spaces. Malatjie (2013:369) uses “the term alternative to speak about spaces, organisations, project or art experiences that aim to bring to the fore, strategies and methodologies that are progressive and not necessarily mainstream or foregrounded. This is not to suggest that these structures are in opposition to the mainstream, but rather that they have chosen to exist outside it.” For Malatjie, alternative spaces are different from traditional art spaces (art galleries) in the sense that they are experimental but at the same time experimental art spaces need traditional spaces in order to define themselves as being different. One can say that alternative spaces exist because of traditional art spaces and as much as they may seem different, they may still adhere to the basic functions as traditional art spaces. For example, work that takes place in a different space may require cataloguing and this includes performances that may take place in secluded spaces. Such work often also involves archiving, where performances are captured through the use of photography or video, and this usually leads to the work being displayed digitally on websites and at times within art galleries.

One sees this in Searle's work, where some of her performances are staged outside in a nontraditional space and later displayed in a gallery. This factor is problematic when one thinks about some of the issues that her work addresses. Searle's work addresses slave memory, and it is riddled with questions that engage with the histories of black bodies and how the black body functions in post-apartheid South Africa.

Historically, traditional art spaces hardly displayed or engaged with black art. The history of black art in South Africa shows the neglect and lack of documentation of artist biographies. South African scholar Nontobeko Ntombela in her essay, "A Fragile Archive: Refiguring/Rethinking/Reimagining/Representing Gladys Mgudlandlu" (2013) discusses the importance of archiving. Using the visual artists Gladys Mgudlandlu as an example, she elaborates on how Mgudlandlu's archive is missing and shows ways in which missing archives can be reimagined and re-established.

Ntombela (2013:17) explains that "in South Africa, public art galleries and museums have a key function in the representation and presentation of art productions and in keeping records of these productions. However, it is also known that museums and galleries in this country previously operated under exclusionary systems that prevented fair representation of all South African arts. As a result, there is a scarcity of archive material on many early black artists in public museums today." Here, Ntombela argues that art institutions during apartheid had to play key roles in the preservation of art and set necessary archival systems and materials. She points out that although this is the main purpose of galleries, this failed to be the case under the exclusionary systems of apartheid. Ntombela (2013:18) continues: "What also remained unaddressed was the inequalities inherent from the education and political systems, which were apparent in the quality, aesthetics and intension of art making and thus furthered differences that existed between the work of white and black artists, unlike white artists whose work was often taken up in academia and written about in academic art historical contexts, black artists were left with journalistic reviews as the only form of textual engagement."

Here Ntombela reminds us that under the oppressive system of apartheid, black artists also battled with enrolling in art institutions (universities) because they were excluded from them because of their race. She also notes that because scholars hardly wrote or were kept from writing about South African black art in universities this made the process of archiving difficult because the only source of preservation for the works of black artists was short journalistic reviews. Interestingly American feminist, bell hooks argues that even under non-oppressive systems, the arts still operate under exclusionary terms and systems. In the book, *Homegrown*, hooks argues that power structures are systematically put in place in art institutions or art spaces in order to control discourse and education. hooks (2006:54) holds “my theory is that people in power don’t want art to be an accessible resource in the schools because of the consequences of art making in the last ages of multiculturalism. The work of Basquiat, Carrie Mae Weems, and Lyle Ashton Harris are fine examples of this, of the way art becomes a vehicle to narrate struggles and demands for marginalised people.” Here hooks explains that people in power, purposefully want art to be elitist because the contemporary art of today in fact takes a multicultural approach, meaning that it includes works by people of colour.

One draws from this statement an awareness of the change that is taking place in art institutions. Yet judging from the open participation of artists of colour, the problem arises when the art audience, which is mostly upper-class and middle-class attendees, does not change. Here we see where the problem lies with the work made by individuals of colour: the fact that their work addresses issues and histories of marginalised groups in society but these groups cannot afford to visit galleries.

And more importantly, these groups are not able to purchase the works of art. Hence the issue of creating alternative art spaces and performance art being a practice that initiates artistic practice in these new spaces raises the question: who is the artist making the work for? And who benefits from these narratives if the groups whom the work’s narrative is based on are still economically challenged and are unaware of these discourses that centre on and draw from their lives?

Interestingly, Malatjie's essay, "Alternative/ Experimental Art Spaces in Johannesburg", discusses what alternative spaces are and does not conclusively define alternative spaces as entities which are separate from traditional art spaces. Instead, she argues that alternative spaces and traditional art spaces are united by their difference. Her conclusion ends with a question aimed at the reader: "alternative spaces are often conceived as a means of working against certain institutional structures. This does not mean that all alternative spaces exist without the logistics or programming of traditional institutions; they do, after all, function as institutions; albeit different and often in opposition to traditional forms of institutions. But can one assume that a space that is commercial cannot be alternative?" (2013:376)

Malatjie sees traditional art spaces and alternative spaces as institutions that function differently but are held together by the key role of producing art that speaks of its generation or time. She holds that even commercial art spaces can be alternative and this is true because by putting a different audience (marginalised communities) within gallery spaces to experience art and to see themselves through narratives/discourse can be "alternative" because this is one of the challenges in contemporary art.

One sees this tension in Searle's work: the fact that although she creates works that are political and mostly based on marginalised communities, her work is still not accessible to these communities and the spaces in which her art takes place are systematically excluding certain groups from new artistic developments in the country. Performance art such as the work of Searle should be accessible to all since its politics are against the systematic exclusion of black bodies and black art from galleries. The change in performance art and alternative spaces should be measured by the inclusion of marginalised groups in the audience; who gets to be part of the conversation matters as much as the development of that conversation.

## **24. What is art from a feminist existentialist perspective?**

I propose the following tentative definition of art from a feminist existential perspective: 'Art is nothing but everything and everything but nothing.' By this I mean that art is always evolving; its

nothingness is the foundation on which its being will be supported. As such, this definition adopts the same stance as that which is applied in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) principled on the notion that Nothingness only exists because of Being.

This definition does not instruct the reader to adopt a definitive stance on racial, geographical or sexual politics. Instead, it impels the reader to *question*. Strategically, the reader assumes the role of enquiry rather than that of epistemological pre-conversion. And it is precisely in this position of questioning that racial, geographical and sexual politics comes back once more into the conversation.

I propose this tentative definition as a tool for making African feminist existentialism legible. The assumed paucity of feminist existentialism in South African visual culture, and South African work more generally, is a result of the lack of identification in discourse and categorisation. Yet this study has shown that the work of conceptual artists in South Africa, like Berni Searle, is deeply intertwined with Black feminism and existentialism, and that feminists and existentialists can use art as a form of creative production to express their theoretical as well as their philosophical ideas. Of course this does not limit the multiple meanings that artworks present, but since we are dealing with conceptual art or idea-based art the artists' ideas are as important as the public's and therefore should be taken into consideration. Existential ideas, whether expressed in philosophy or visual culture, will continually be based on human freedom, and self-examination as well as self-actualisation.

It is true that definitions of art, like feminism, vary in accordance with time, place and use of medium. And it is also true that Sartre refused to provide a definition for existentialism. But I believe this complicates the process of contributing to an intellectual tradition if one is an outsider. One's contribution could be easily passed off as being tendentious because of the lack of definition and of positioning.

It is this factor that brings me to bell hooks' comments on the dangers of hegemonic epistemologies and the essentialising definitions drawn from the first wave (19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century/suffrage movement)

and the second wave (1960's- reproductive rights/Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*) of feminism. hooks (1984:26) in reference to the first and the second wave of feminism makes the assertion that "Lack of adequate definition made it easy for bourgeois women, whether liberal or radical in perspective, to maintain their dominance over the leadership of the movement and its direction. This hegemony continues to exist in most feminist organizations. Exploited and oppressed groups of women are usually encouraged by those in power to feel that their situation is hopeless, that they can do nothing to break the pattern of domination." Here hooks explains that definition is important; one can say that definition can assist one to be able to recognise one's mission and vision in one's ideas. One can also say that definition plays a significant role in one's ability to defend ideas or one's own positionality.

With discussions on Beauvoir and second wave feminism, I have shown that while Beauvoir's text, *The Second Sex* has been heralded as a text that represents and captures the struggles of all women, it does not account for the struggles of women of colour. I have engaged in a discussion of black feminism to show how third wave feminism offered a more inclusive conversation about women's positionality in the world. Moreover, I have argued that Black feminism (which includes women of all races) can be seen as the continuation of feminist existentialism. One sees women who are defining themselves and their brands of feminism in South Africa. In this regard, Gqola (2017:161) shares her views on working collectively to produce cohesive works of literature, art, philosophy and so on, explaining that "the African feminist imagination is not just the product of cultural workers and activists who self-identify as feminist, although it does create a feminist public consciousness. Rather, the African feminist imagination is what the productive collision of writing women and rioting women births." For Gqola, true definition lies in the collective imagination of women (and men) who have dedicated their lives and their time to fight for their freedom and for their dignity. African feminism represents all the contributions made to ensure that we live in an equal and free society. With this study I have demonstrated how feminist existentialism is neither divided by country, gender, race, nor practice.

Feminist existentialism represents the collective efforts as well as a continuum of collective engagement with human thought and freedom. I stress that works of art should be categorised as

well as theorised so that one can clearly identify the philosophical ideas that can be drawn from works of art as well as the contributions made by the artist to that philosophical area of study. I hope that South African contemporary art spaces will start engaging in the subject of canonisations and how this can further challenge the artists and the arts.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

This study aimed to probe the surface of feminist existentialism in visual culture. My interest in this research was brought on by the fact that visual culture in most instances conveys ideas which are philosophical and theoretical.

I was interested in how creative productions helped philosophers express some of their ideas. I showed, for example, how Sartre depended on creative productions such as theatre and fiction to express his most complex ideas. We see this also in Fanon's poetic application of prose and in Beauvoir's use of fiction. One notices with this study that creative productions have helped existential philosophers to express their ideas and it is for this reason that I examined feminist existentialism in visual culture through the work of Berni Searle.

An example of existential ideas being applied to visual culture can be seen in Sartre's book *The Imaginary* (1940). While few if any artists explicitly described their work as a form of *feminist existential art*, my study explores the possibility of the existence of a tacit feminist existentialism. I argue that although the genealogies of feminism and existentialism are Eurocentric, one also finds that these discourses have in fact been explored worldwide under different titles.

I presented an intersectional study that explored feminism, existentialism and visual culture. I argued that in order to prevent erasure and to ensure visibility in feminist existential works, artwork must adhere to a specific canon or rather a discourse must be identified in order for such works to be recognised and preserved.

Chapter One ('On visual culture') served as an introduction to visual culture so that the reader can understand the histories as well as the type of art which Searle produces. It was divided into four sections. In 'Vision and visuality', I discussed the ways in which we view art. I presented a conversation in which decolonising the gaze plays a key factor. The section on conceptual art evidenced the history of conceptual art and revealed its roots, which are embedded in language and in ideas, I then presented a section titled 'The conceptual art of Berni Searle', which introduced Searle and identified her as a conceptual artist. This section also questioned the way in which we see Searle's work. Lastly, the section titled 'Epistemic and aesthetic disobedience/self-recovery and conceptual art' explores the ideas of decoloniality and visual culture.

Chapter Two ('An introduction to existentialism') served to introduce the type of existentialism that is dealt with in this study. It delved into the histories of existentialism and it also explored the present discourses involving Blackness in existentialism and it formulated a criticism based on current writings on the subject. It was divided into seven sections. It began with an introduction to existentialism, followed by a section on Sartrean existentialism, where I discussed Sartre's ideas on freedom and self-actualisation. The section titled 'Black existentialism: Fanon and Negritude' then addressed the idea of race, specifically the contributions made by black individuals to existentialism, while the section titled 'Black existentialism: Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement', evidenced the existence of existentialism in South Africa during apartheid. Furthermore the section on 'Black existentialism: Mabogo More and South African existentialism' explored present discourses on Black existentialism in South Africa. The section, 'Lewis Gordon and Africana existentialism' provided a critique of recent existential discourses and called out for an intersectional approach. Lastly the section 'Sartre and the illusion of immanence: The image and the imagination in visual culture,' went back to some of the ideas discussed in chapter one concerning vision and visuality; I unpacked this from an existential positionality.

Chapter Three (Feminism and existentialism) helped to provide a historical context for feminism and explored the subject of existentialism not only from a racial perspective but also from a feminist as well as an artistic perspective. It was divided into four sections. In section one, 'Feminism and art' I provided an introduction to feminism and the histories of feminism. In section

two, 'The feminist work of Berni Searle', I explored the notion of feminist art and its challenges. In section three, 'Existentialism and feminism through the work of Simone de Beauvoir (feminist existentialism)' I explored the strengths and the weaknesses of Beauvoir's existential feminism, arguing that Beauvoir's feminism is not intersectional and does not discuss issues relating to multiculturalism. The last section, 'Black feminism and some criticism on Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*' showed that ongoing conversations around feminism provide a more intersectional approach.

Chapter Four (Art and feminist existentialism) was divided into three sections. The first section 'Girl by Berni Searle' explored Pumla Gqola's take on Searle's work. I provided a discussion of this with direct reference to Sartrean thought. The second section 'Alternative art spaces and performance art/conceptual art' discussed the importance of space in visual culture. This section questioned whether the shift in the ways in which we use space makes a difference in the way in which art is consumed. The section 'What is Feminist existentialism' provided my own definition of feminist existentialism and explored some of the future possibilities that this conceptualisation of art provides.

I have argued that it is necessary to create canons so that works of art are not ambiguous but are based on ideas that are identifiable. If works of art are specifically based on a set of ideas, then the criticism of that work becomes stronger and more fruitful. I have proposed the feminist existential category or canon for the artist Berni Searle to demonstrate how visual culture speaks to various practices and how on so many occasions artists' works or contributions are not acknowledged because artists never specify what type of work they are doing within the "contemporary South African Art category/canon", which often limited their work.

I hope that my proposition of feminist existential art in the work of Searle shows how both feminism and existentialism exist in her art and demonstrates the important role that art plays in bringing to life feminist as well as philosophical works.

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