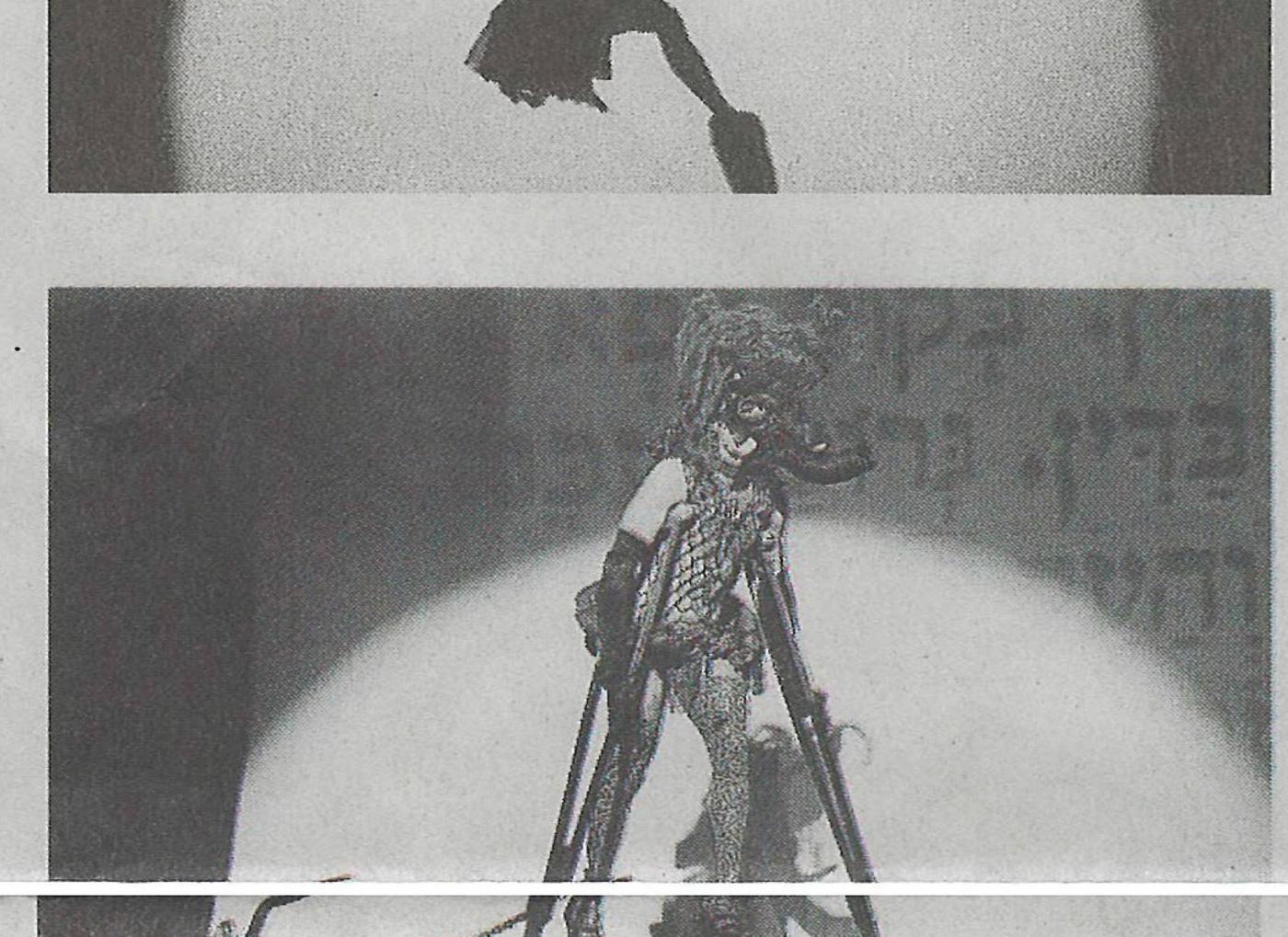


GLITTERING SQUALOR: 'Chandelier' performed at a Joburg squatter camp. It was also performed at the 2002 FNB Dance Umbrella Pictures: JOHN HOGG

PRICKLY PRESENCE: Top, the artist in 'Limping into the African Renaissance' in 1999-2000, in which he wore a prosthetic leg; middle, 'Jew', from 1998, which referred to hunting and cruelty; and bottom, Nomsa Dhlamini, the

woman who was once Cohen's nanny and who has collaborated in several of his works, appears in 1998's 'Faggot' with a giant inflatable penis on her

head





## Tye been calleda fraud, a Winore. It's been like atrashy American

Steven Cohen, South Africa's most hardcore performance artist, talks to Robyn Sassyn about being arrested in France for sexual exhibitionism this week

OUTH African performance artist Steven Cohen has hit the international headlines after dancing in front of the Eiffel Tower in Paris this week. The performer wore a stuffed cockerel headdress, a boned corset, seveninch heels, long red gloves and feathers — but no pants.

Furthermore, his penis, with only the glans exposed, was tied to a live rooster which Cohen calls Frank Gallus Gallus.

The artist was arrested, thrown in jail for 10 hours, interrogated, invasively measured, psychiatrically evaluated, forced to give DNA and charged with sexual exhibitionism.

"I carried on until they absolutely forced me to stop. I do not stop when told to. I stop when stopped," said Cohen.

Lawyer Agnès Tricoire told French newspaper Le Parisien: "He danced with the cock for around 10 minutes before being arrested by the police.

"It's a disgrace. With this performance, Steven Cohen wanted to evoke his situation, split between two countries: South Africa, his native land, and France [the rooster is a symbol of France], where he lives at the moment," she explained. "France is throwing artists in prison."

performance and his fear at what happened.

"I am frightened of my own shadow, but it's a formidable shadow.

"The charge is on a par with child molestation. It's a combination of perversity and national insult, and has to do as much with my costume as the context."

He specifically chose the site of his performance — the Place du Trocadéro — because "my art is political". The square, which also commemorates the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is "a site of contestation and manifestation, where art and politics cross".

Cohen said his performance was "about being pulled in many directions simultaneously".

"Frank's a feisty cock and wonderfully capable of deciding the choreography. He's got me by the

balls, as we say." The French police might not have appreciated Cohen's presence at one of the world's top tourist destinations, but in the dance world a work of this nature is taken seriously. In fact, it was commissioned for My Joburg, a group exhibition at La Maison Rouge, an arts foundation in Paris.

Cohen's performance — or "intervention" — in the sight of the Eiffel Tower forms part of a larger work, Sphincterography — The Politics of an Arsehole — the Tour. His work is due to be performed this weekend and next.

in South Africa and various parts of the world, including Austria, Japan ..." he said, referring to his 20-year performance career.

Cohen is known for antics such as doing handsprings around the water fountain in Sandton Square dressed in his corset, high-heeled shoes and a Star of David.

In the 1990s, similarly attired, he went to Loftus Versfeld in Pretoria to see if he could buy a ticket to the rugby. He also interfered in a bridal show in Killarney, Johannesburg.

In 1998, he won a Vita Award for his work, but when he used an enema on stage during the Dance Umbrella festival in 1999, he alienated himself from South African dance circles and turned to guerrilla performances.

Over the years he has engaged with difficult topics — like the death of his brother, which was depicted in a work called Golgotha, which debuted in Paris in 2009.

Central to his work is who he is. Cohen is white. He is homosexual He is Jewish. He is South African. And he is ageing. Each a quality for which he has been hated.

Tuesday morning was not the first time he has been arrested in France. In 2004, while performing Dancing Inside Out at the Museum of Deportation and Resistance in Lyon, he Cohen laughed drily on the phone was also detained and searched. from Paris as he described the "That was violent." But the charges were dropped because Lyon's mayor intervened in the name of art.

Cohen has been alarmed by the

raged and mobilising.

are furious. I've been called a fraud, a whore. It's been like a trashy American movie. Ismail Mohamed, director of the National Arts Festival, contacted me personally to offer support. He's been remarkable. My gallery, Stevenson, is

me. It made me realise that if I don' perform this intervention, I would never work in a risk-taking way again." Two high-profile lawyers are keer

to represent Cohen, Tricoire, whom he met by chance at a conference and Roland Rappaport, who played a role in the prosecution of Naz criminal Klaus Barbie in 1987. Ran paport has offered to work pro bono on this case.

"Madame Tricoire saved my arse," Cohen said. "They wanted me tried and convicted and serving sentence the same day. Madame Tricoire had an urgent consultation with the Ministry of Culture in Paris and, through that, the process has been delayed, not stopped. Suddenly I was free in the chicest part of Paris, looking and smelling like a criminal. Then I saw how beautiful and mer-

"I've never been locked up and humiliated for that long and with such swift fury before," he said. "All I could do in the 10 hours was examine my conscience, fortify my resolve and do yoga. When I get home to Lille, I expect a queue of gay bashers, police, government officials, animal welfarists — new-day Nazis in multivarious forms.

"What I have left in France is fragile. I have nothing left here in France, but I am not sure I am equipped to return to South Africa either ... I will have to refight fought fights.

"Nowhere feels safe right now. The world suddenly feels so Dark Ages. France may be a good country

for art, just not this century. "Of all the strange things I have done, this is the strangest. It has shaken my faith in the concept of justice — and made me question how to function in an art world composed of a sea of detractors and adversaries, but it has also shown me who my friends and supporters are. My technical support and accomplice, Erik Houllier, has really stood by me throughout this ordeal in a calm, rational and furious way, horrified by the conduct of his own country. I am ready to go to battle with the Justice Department here now, Cohen v the State of France, and I am glad the State is in a state."





"It's so much less than I have done SPARKLING: 'Faggot', part of Cohen's award-winning 'Living Art' work in 1998