Chapter Three
Making Art

[Virtually Blond] is very clearly about the people on stage. Ultimately as an audience we can engage and try to find ourselves inside those performers. They’re a reflection of us and of society.

(Gregory Maqoma, personal communication 26 January 2004)

The meaning of an artwork cannot be discussed in isolation from its context or the way in which it is structured. Art is inextricably tied to the conditions of its making – socially, politically, geographically, economically and historically. The previous chapter was about the external constraints on art created by the idea of an ‘authentic African’ representation. This chapter begins an exploration of the internal constraints on making art and what kind of art these produce. It focuses on Maqoma’s Virtually Blond to examine how he creates his work, and what happens to its meaning when it is translated into a stage performance. In the case of contemporary choreography such as this, it creates meaning on a number of levels. These layers consist of: the choreographer’s initial intention and use of choreographic devices that inform the structure; the use of multiple media such as text, set, music and movement; the relationships between the choreographer and the dancers, and the performance and the audience; and the use of the physical space of whatever constitutes the stage and the theatre. These elements are part of a broader process of signification, which will be discussed further in the next chapter.

In a continual search for ‘the new’, it is in the nature of contemporary dance to comment, explicitly or implicitly, on the context within which it is created. Contemporary dance allows for experimentation that each choreographer approaches from his/her own angle. The way in which they create movement affects the final performance that goes on stage.

As Pieter Scholten, the director of Emio Greco/PC, states:

Contemporary means for us an awareness/involvement/engagement in the time where we are living in; it’s a continuous moving state of being in which research is the leading artistic goal. We are not interested to represent the heat of the moment but more in the visionary aspect of the consequences of that moment.1

1 Personal communication, 6 April 2006
As a result, Emio Greco/PC’s work does not seem to comment directly on any political moment, but rather abstracts form using a vocabulary that arises in the creative process from each dancer’s individual expression. Maqoma, by contrast, creates meaning through a potent engagement with social issues and an unusual melding of different stylistic elements even though his work is also abstract in many ways.

Maqoma’s initial intention with *Virtually Blond* was to deal with the question of visibility. As will become clear, he did so through his dancers’ individual stories of their own hidden wounds and how they embodied these using his choreography. The chapter begins with a discussion of his creative process in this work to show how a dance work makes meaning. It then develops this analysis to include aspects beyond the phases of choreography such as elements of the stage performance and audience response. What this examination shows is that it is one thing to describe the potency of an artwork and its meaning, but entirely another to analyse what happens to this meaning when the work is considered in its broader context. *Virtually Blond* seems a great success from the discussion of its creative process and performance. However, there is a disjuncture between Maqoma’s original objective and the final product. Art does not always achieve its initial aims. What this discussion points to are the problems of interpretation and meaning in art, and the trickiness of judging its quality. This chapter raises the questions of how art is interpreted and how meaning is made in its creation and performance. It is about what an artwork sets up as important, and how successful or unsuccessful it is. At what point does an artwork make or lose its meaning? When is art good, and when is it bad?

**Making dance**

To make a work, choreographers must consider the following essential components: a variety of actions, time and space, relationships within the body and between bodies (Preston-Dunlop 1998: 77). Within that, a choreographer creates his/her own movement vocabulary. Structuring a work can be based on specific choices or on what emerges
through intuition during a rehearsal. According to Preston-Dunlop (ibid: 147), “our body is our datum point for making sense of events”. The kind of structure that is chosen must therefore support the initial intention of the choreographer. For example, if the choreographer’s idea is to create a sense of fragmentation in order to represent “how...unruly our lives are”, the movements that are chosen will include “interruptions and cut offs and unexpectedness” (ibid: 148). The distinction between everyday movement, gesture and dance is something contemporary dance plays with, in strong parallel to modernist artists such as Jackson Pollock (cf. Doss 1991). Contemporary choreography is recreating vocabulary all the time.

According to Foster (1986: 59), there is a “blueprint for choreographic meaning”. She distinguishes five categories for this: 1) the frame – the dance as a unique event, 2) the mode of representation – the way the dance refers to the world, 3) the style – the way the dance achieves an individual identity in the world and its genre, 4) the vocabulary – the basic units from which the dance is made, 5) the syntax – the rules governing the selection and combination of moves. What is particularly interesting in contemporary dance is the variety of ways in which movement and ideas are developed. This form of dance breaks down the stylistic codes expected in more rigid genres such as ballet and folk dance, as described in the previous chapter. This allows for the choreographer’s freedom to create new vocabularies of movement. Although a number of devices are used to create movement phrases, there is no set form that they are expected to take. The structure of a dance work is then also open to a number of possibilities. As Schechner (cf McNamara, Rojo and Schechner 1975) illustrates in his theatrical work, playing with space, for instance, creates new relationships between the audience and the performers. For Maqoma, it is his mixing of incongruent elements that creates an unexpected picture, and a whole that does not always seem whole. This is a clear illustration of the centrality of experimentation to contemporary dance.
Creating *Virtually Blond*

Maqoma’s aim with *Virtually Blond* was to address the question of visibility. He focused on the personal stories of the dancers as a representation of public social issues. The core of this approach was to make the hidden visible through a range of media, predominantly movement but also through music, text, set and costume (discussed further in the next chapter). On the 7 January 2004 Maqoma and MIDM officially commenced their work on *Virtually Blond*. He began the first phase of choreography by teaching the company a movement phrase that he had improvised in the class that morning. This became the first of the five key phrases in the performance. Prior to that first day, in discussions with them towards the end of 2003, Maqoma had hinted at the personal nature of this work. The performers knew they would have to transcend certain of their personal boundaries in order to serve his creative ideal. The build-up to this choreography was clouded in a haze of speculation of just how far the dancers would need to push themselves.

Maqoma’s first instruction to the performers was for them to:

> think of how far you can go: whether you become visible with your physical appearance, your mental state, your spirit, hidden agendas, secrets, personalities - something you’ve never shared – and reveal it physically.

As he gently clawed his stomach, he explained that they would “be getting into each other’s intestines”, and led them through an interpretation of his movements. In his words,

> You want to take a movement and create a journey that reveals you, and use this phrase as a guide. Create something that’s very much a part of you….. We’re getting very very personal, and it’s not going to be easy.

One of the dancers asked him if he was scared, and he replied that he was.
Maqoma's approach

Maqoma’s view of the title of the work reveals the issue of visibility most clearly:

If you’re blond, you’re blond. But if you’re virtually blond, you’re blond but you’re also not blond. You might have been something before you were blonde, or there’s something underneath being blonde.²

Kunene (2004) describes some of the audience interpretations of this title varying from “an African person who behaves like a Caucasian person, to seeing South African’s modern life and culture as being visually swallowed by Western culture.” An audience member remarked to Dzanibe (2004), “I expected to see at least one blond person on stage. But I’m not surprised because Greg is full of surprises.”

Although there is no single understanding, the original meaning of the title lies in Maqoma’s initial intention in creating the work. His aim was to reveal the invisible scars of society – those aspects of social life that seem to be simply “blond” but are not completely “blond”. There are elements that we do not see. He explained to me that his intention was to address the issues that he believes are “regularly swept under the carpet”. It was his aim that through the narratives of each performer and the audiences’ interpretations of them, the broader tales of South African society would be revealed. As he explained on the first day of rehearsal, he had realised that he has an important platform and believes that it should be used to:

address personal issues, to free us, and to touch others, and in so doing teach our society about the things we have suffered.

As in the case of Virtually Blond, contemporary dance is about experimentation, to different degrees depending on the choreographer and the concept they are dealing with. Preston-Dunlop (1998) has developed a choreological approach to dance in which she outlines a range of choreographic techniques that are available in the creative process³. She explains that once a choreographer has created their basic movement material they

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² In discussion, Johannesburg, 22 January 2004
³ In her seminal book A Handbook for Dance in Education (1980), Preston-Dunlop bases this approach on her teaching methods that she developed using Laban’s movement themes. These are adapted into choreographic devices for the creation of what she calls “dance-as-art” (1980: xv)
can: contrast movement phrases, vary themes to create dramatic changes, form a “canon” out of a string of repeated phrases, develop “satellite” material from the original phrase, layer two pieces of material in counterpoint, fragmenting and reassembling movement, dancing material backwards and inverting levels, layering movements into a tapestry, sandwiching a second kind of phrase into a first, using chance to choose the ordering of movements, adding moments of improvisation into the final product, and playing with codes through contradiction (ibid: 151-155). Central to all of these are the questions: “does the choice support the central choreographic idea? Will it engage the spectators in the way intended?” (ibid: 155). Maqoma has used aspects of many of these devices at different times, often deciding in the moment which he will apply. As he explained:

I don’t use set choreographic tools. I never plan, I wait for that moment to hit me and trust my intuition and go with it… I ask, what will happen if I do this or that. For example, if I kill the legs or fly.\(^4\)

The basis of his choreographic material was the stories that the dancers revealed to him in one-on-one sessions in the second half of the first day of rehearsals. Many of them described this experience as emotionally harrowing. After privately revealing to him something they had not exposed before, the dancers were required to interpret their own stories using the movement phrases that he had given to them. Maqoma used these sessions to choose the four dancers and narrator who would perform. As the work developed, Maqoma encouraged these performers to feed their curiosity about each other’s secrets. He would simultaneously make his own connections to their stories and what they interpreted from each other’s movements. Although the content of the individuals’ stories, except for one, have remained confidential throughout, the effects of having to use these secrets as the basis for the choreography weighed heavily on the performers.

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\(^4\) Personal communication, Johannesburg, 26 January 2004
At different times during rehearsals, Maqoma would put pressure on the dancers to push themselves. He would ask repeatedly “what are you feeling, what are you thinking”, addressed particularly to a dancer who struggled to express emotion. One dancer explained to me that it was necessary to remain emotionally detached throughout the choreographic process. That dancer constructed a fictitious story as a way of coping with the emotional load of the work. Another coping strategy used by a dancer was to concentrate on the mechanics of the movement and the intricacies of the crafting, conserving energy where necessary, and pushing beyond his limits when needing to impress. Another dancer described the process as cathartic, incredibly difficult but also
healing. One of the company members who was not dancing in the work was concerned with what she was observing. She explained:

When I dance it’s to heal myself. When you’re dancing your path every day, it’s too much. And there’s also the chance that it could become pretentious.

During the rehearsal process, some of the dancers struggled with their personal experiences of the work. Segoe (2004) relates part of a conversation in the kitchen of MIDM between some of the dancers: One dancer said, “‘ba bang ba qabana le banna ba bona, ha ba bang ba ba lahlwa ke digarebotsa bona’, meaning some people are arguing with their husbands, while some are being dumped by their girlfriends”. The work clearly put a strain on individuals and their relationships. The creation of a dance work is also dependent on these experiences of the individuals involved – in the studio, on the stage and also behind the scenes. Another example of the difficulty that they had was related to the poster, which was based on an intimate ‘seduction scene’ (my label) with two of the men moving their hands and mouths over the woman’s body. Some of the dancers were worried about the response that their partners would have to the image of them like this\(^5\). While it is the responsibility of the performer to balance their private and professional lives, the dancers in *Virtually Blond* had to face particular difficulties that they may not have had to deal with in other less personal works.

**Choreographic phases**

Maqoma’s creative process developed through a number of phases. In the first stage of choreography, he worked concurrently with the concept of visibility and with the crafting of steps and movement phrases. At first there seemed to be a disjunction between his ideas about visibility and the movements that he gave to the dancers to practice. He would have discussions with them about what they had kept hidden and then spend days after that working on movement phrases without any mention of his concept. The dancers would rehearse particular movements for hours with much repetition until they had mastered a phrase. Often these sessions would be about the movements alone. Concept

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\(^5\) Discussion, Johannesburg, 4 August 2004
and steps converged when the dancers used the movements that Maqoma gave to them as a way of expressing their feelings and stories, and as a way of communicating with one another. They also brought their own gestures and styling into the choreography that personalised aspects of the movement phrases. During this stage, Maqoma did not express much concern about structure. He was working with the following framework: the work was going to be an hour long, and he would divide that time into four sections – one for each dancer to ‘tell’ their story through a solo.

This phase lasted three weeks until they had enough material to which Maqoma could continue to apply the choreographic devices mentioned above. During this time, Maqoma developed the five key movement phrases (discussed below). Once he had completed this, he could shift in the second phase from what he described as “choreographer” to “director”6. This was also when he continued to create the solos with each individual. The characterisation of each performer and the role that they would play was a big part of this phase. In certain ways this is reminiscent of Stanislavsky’s acting technique. As Carnicke (2000: 16-18) explains, the fundamental aspects of this approach are that: 1) the mind and body belong to the same “psychophysical continuum”, and therefore emotion is embodied, and 2) acting is an “experience” where actors reach into their inner worlds and organically allow a role to grow. This creates a “pathway into the actor’s unique creativity as a performer” (ibid: 33). It was Maqoma’s aim that each dancer would find his/her own vocabulary of movement that would grow out of their emotional journey.

In phase two, Maqoma’s structuring was very loose, but he began to make decisions while playing with different ideas for duets and trios. Phase three in the choreography was about crafting and polishing the work into a ‘final product’. Although with Maqoma, this is never really the case. Nothing is ever really ‘final’. He has 42 versions of one of his works because he has ‘re-worked’ it many times for different performances in different contexts for different audiences. He is therefore always experimenting with new ideas as a work develops and travels. In phase four he handed over the work to the dancers and they could make it their own. They rehearsed over and over until the

6 In rehearsal, Johannesburg, 27 January 2004
movements were a part of their bodily memory. This was an especially difficult task for
the dancers because of the emotional roots of the work. While in the initial phases of the
creative process Maqoma often pushed them emotionally, at this point he handed over the
responsibility to them to decide how they would deal with the emotional aspects of
performing the work. Once the work reached the stage, the creative control was no longer
in Maqoma’s hands.

The structure of Virtually Blond

The final work was structured around four main sections – each focusing on one of the
dancers’ stories including a solo by each performer and text written and narrated by
Nhalnha Mahlangu. The transitions between the solos included a range of duets, trios
and group performances. The work was held together by a repetition of different elements
of the five central movement phrases mentioned above. The first phrase began with a
sweeping arm movement around the body, which was carried through in a series of turns
at unexpected moments. Maqoma developed the sense of turning in the second phrase,
which was based on the dancers rolling on the floor between other movements. In the
third phrase, the dancers began upright and swung their left legs around their bodies into
three glisés. The focus of the fourth phrase was on the qualities of jumping, which were
combined with the circular floor movements of the other four phrases. In the fifth phrase,
the dancers moved from side to side in a series of lunges, interspersed with balances on
one foot and arm movements broken by flicks of the wrist.

There was no particular order to these phrases in the final work. They were the primary
material that Maqoma and the dancers used to create the transitions between the solos. In
other words, Maqoma used these phrases as the basic material for his choreography, to
which he applied the choreographic devices of contrasting phrases, breaking and
reassembling movements, inverting levels, layering pieces of material, and adding
moments of improvisation. This created a general sense of fragmentation and repetition at
different times throughout the work. For instance, two of the male dancers used the
movement of rolling across the floor in their own solos that had very different qualities to
them. One provoked a feeling of desperate anger, and the other of pathos. In another example, the second and third phrases were the basis for a ‘dog trio’ (my label), which consisted of the three men fighting over an imaginary bone. Their movements were like an elastic pulling them together and apart in diagonals across the floor. Maqoma used the principle of attraction and repulsion to create this motion. The overall structure had a feeling of fluidity that was purposefully broken at particular junctures, which added to the unsettling effects of the work. This was important to Maqoma’s overall aim of cracking through the surface of a false sense of harmony and revealing what lies beneath.

Luyanda Sidiya, Muzi Shili, Thabo Rapoo rehearsing the ‘dog trio’, MIDM studio, Johannesburg, February 2004
Layers of Meaning

The structure of a dance work provides the first layer of meaning. It is the raw material that is linked to the choreographer’s initial intention. In Virtually Blond, the structure is based on the solos of the individual dancers that were created out of Maqoma’s concern with visibility. Each artist has their own approach to the creative process that is influenced by their personal histories, bodies, social standing, emotional engagement with the world, political and economic context. Mercé Cunningham, for example, created the set, music and choreography separately and would only bring them together on the first performance (Copeland 1994: 194). This was also part of the modernist interest in foregrounding the elements that make up an artwork, for example Kandinsky’s interest in colour and shape (cf. Roskill 1992). This separation of elements created an “intentional disunity” that distanced the audience and disallowed them from becoming passive viewers of the performance (Copeland 1994: 194). Cunningham would also use ‘found’ movements from the external world and stripped dance of reference to inner emotion, while Martha Graham, for example used emotion to “make visible the interior landscape” (ibid: 190). What is central to the discussion here is that the meaning of a work shifts when it moves from studio to stage, rehearsal to performance, process to product. Once it reaches this phase, there are many possible ways of interpreting it and the context of the performance becomes central. Preston-Dunlop (1998: 22-23) outlines four levels of meaning: 1) the what emerges during the making process, 2) what is embedded in the medium, 3) what is added/altered by each performer, and 4) what is added by the spectator.

Abbs (1989: 198-204) describes this shift in meaning as part of a broader process of art-making. He proposes five phases beginning with the “release of impulse”. In this phase, Abbs (ibid: 199) describes art-making as the expression of an instinct that is rooted in the body. Second is the grappling with a medium for expression that extends beyond an individual impulse to something representative beyond the personal (ibid: 201). In dance, there are particular devices that choreographers use to make this possible, as described above in the example of Maqoma’s creative process. The third phase proposed by Abbs
In this phase the artist focuses on the “communicative and communal intention” of the work that extends beyond the personal, instinctive creative aspect. The public element of an artwork is highlighted here. In the fourth phase, the artwork is presented to an audience. In this presentation, the performers adopt an aspect of the authoring of the work. The dancers become responsible for the shift “from subjective to objective, from self to other, from private to public, from self-expression to representative embodiment” (ibid: 202-203). In application to *Virtually Blond*, phases three and four continued throughout the creative process. Maqoma would apply his “critical judgement” from the first day of rehearsals, and the dancers were co-authors from the very beginning, even though most of the movements were Maqoma’s.

The last phase that Abbs (ibid: 203-204) delineates is the audience response and evaluation, which he defines as collaborative – the audience too becomes co-author of the artwork. This is a crucial element in the shift from the studio to the stage. It is not, however, the only aspect to the relationship between an artwork and its meaning at the moment of its performance. Also important are: the relationships between the performers on the stage, the choreographer and the dancers, the individual stories and broader social issues; the use of multi media such as text and music in adding possibilities to interpretations of a dancework; and then the role of the audience and use of space.
My main impression of the dance was that it expressed a lot of pain. Each dancer was telling their own individual painful story. Also, the interaction of the dancers … spoke to me about a collective and perhaps unconscious pain that exists in South Africa as a society.

(Sarren Mikael Small, Anthropology student, personal communication, 29 April 2005)

[Virtually Blond] is a theatrical inquisition of notions of gender, age and existence that slips beneath layers of psychology to expose the raw nerve at the centre of many human lives.

(Gilder 2004: 4)

On the evening of the premier performance on 17 August 2004, the dancers prepared themselves backstage by tuning into their emotions and practising some of their movements. This was after a long afternoon of waiting for the set to be ready so that they could have at least one technical run before the performance. It had been a difficult day. The dancers had been frustrated that they could not rehearse properly on stage and had had lunch a lot earlier and were becoming edgy and tired. They had attempted to occupy themselves by reading the newspaper, catching up with a bit of sleep on the couch in the back, or chatting with each other to pass the time. The change room was hot and it felt like a time capsule. We heard muffled sounds from the stage through the backstage speakers, and waited. The dancers were also excited about finally performing this work, and I suspect were also happy in part for it to be over.

During that afternoon, while Maqoma, Nhlanhla Mahlangu, Thembu Nkabinde (the technical manager) and I waited in the theatre, Maqoma mimicked the movement styles of his teachers. We sat in the front row of the Wits theatre and watched the parody in his rendition of choreographers Steve Paxton, David Zambrabo and Sylvia Glasser, while the set designer panicked on the stage behind him. Our enjoyment of his unplanned

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7 This was the only response to Virtually Blond in the media. The lack of wider media response may be attributed to the fact that arts journalists no longer write on work that is performed for less than a week per run
performance was short-lived as Maqoma was becoming increasingly tense. Just before the performance was about to begin he was interviewed by e-TV, one of South Africa’s independent TV channels, in the auditorium. It was at this time that the dancers were backstage, in costume, rehearsing certain of their movements. Those not performing were offering moral support, and snacks of Energade, apples and Super C’s.

At 7:30pm, as the audience filtered in, the dancers entered the stage. Certain audience members were unsure about when the work was supposed to begin until Nhlanhla jumped off his podium that was centre stage and shouted to the audience, “who the fuck do you think I am!” With this the dancers, clad in skin-tight pants and muscle-tops in shades of white and grey, their bodies wound in uneven rows of white strapping, began stumbling in slow circles around each other and tumbling over, loosing their footing, and then struggling back up to their feet. The work opened with a sense of chaos and confusion that Maqoma wove through the choreography. At this time, Mahlangu began to narrate his opening text, which was followed by a sequence of solos (discussed further in the following chapter) broken up by the duets and trios interspersed at unexpected points throughout the work.

A key element to the work was the role of the female dancer – Sonia Radebe - in relation to the four males (three dancers and one narrator) – Thabo Rapoo, Luyanda Sidiya, Muzi Shili and Nhlanhla Mahlanhgu. For at least the first half of the work, Sonia stood motionless at the back of the stage. This was either for creative purposes or because she joined the work late, after Connie Kau (who was originally chosen) could not perform due to an accident. Her entry into the work was through a connection with Shili. Just after Mahlangu narrated a text about claiming one’s space, Sonia came to the front of the stage to stake her claim. This led into Shili’s solo, which combined ‘traditional’ Zulu movements (such as the Ndlamo kick) with Maqoma’s contemporary style. The pinnacle of this section of the work was the ‘marriage’ of Radebe and Shili pronounced by Mahlangu with the words:

In the name of the spirit, the monkey and my neighbour, I now pronounce you woman and man.
The three male dancers then confronted Radebe, after she took her pants off. At this point is a series of lifts where she was thrown back and forth between them. Maqoma originally choreographed this section of the work out of his dream of flying. It was not clear at the time that this dream, interpreted by the three dancers through Seal’s *Love’s Divine* would become a scene that was one of the climaxes of the choreography. Although the work was not intended to have a beginning, a middle, and an end, this one scene was the culmination of many themes that had been more covert in the rest of the choreography. It was the least cold section of the work, and a part that certain audience members found most disturbing.

In this ‘seduction scene’ Sidiya and Rapoo moved their lips and hands over Radebe’s body while she stood between them, swaying slightly, with her eyes closed. It was an ambiguous moment, as were many others in the work. Was Radebe being raped? Or could she have been the seducer controlling the men surrounding her? It was unclear if this was a criticism of an abusive sexual act based on unequal power relations, or a fantasy scene where the woman imagines the freedom of her sexual expression. While this was happening, Mahlangu and Shili performed a duet that was a verbal and movement battle between them. In a tight group, the five performers were at the front, stage right. The music was soft and Musi lunged forward in an Ndlamo sequence shouting Zulu phrases to Nhlanhla, to which Nhlanhla replied, “this is my house … just shut up!” Musi explained the English translation of his words as: “what is this; do you like what you see; is this our teaching”8. MIDM company members interpreted this in different ways. Thoko Seganye, for example, said, “I saw a house-wife being abused”9. Faith Maseko described, “I saw the boys as prisoners and the female is the visitor”10.

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8 Personal communication, Johannesburg, 4 August 2004
9 Personal communication, Johannesburg, 6 February 2004
10 Personal communication, Johannesburg, 6 February 2004
The ‘seduction scene’: Nhlanhla Mahlangu, Sonia Radebe, Thabo Rapoo, Luyanda Sidiya in a *Virtually Blond* rehearsal, MIDM studio, Johannesburg, August 2004

They repeated this sequence three times, each time slower, and as they did so, Radebe increasingly woke from her dream-like state to find herself surrounded by men. Sidiya and Rapoo had already resumed their previous ‘broken-man’/’wounded animal’ posture (my description) – hunched over cupping their genitals. The two men shuffled away from her towards the back right corner of the stage and Radebe froze, realising her isolation on the stage. Radebe then performed her solo. For the first time, she was in the centre, claiming her space. She had perfected the movements that Maqoma had taught her only 10 days before. During her solo, Rapoo and Sidiya moved to the back of the stage to remove their pants. When Mahlangu and Shili finished their duet at the front of the stage they joined the other males and removed their pants too.

It was then Radebe’s turn to confront the men who were lined up in their underwear upstream to the right. She then made her way to the podium on which Mahlangu began his narrative at the start of the work, as the men slowly walked forward in a linear formation. The work ended with Radebe narrating Mahlangu’s opening words in reverse:

> I am not a man, I am not a woman, I am not a child, I am not a human being, and this is good…. When I talk, you can’t hear me. When I stand, you can’t see me, I can’t see you. (excerpt)
While she did so, the men repeated movement phrase three. In the rehearsal, Maqoma instructed them to keep their hands on the floor, clearly wanting to limit their ability to move freely. The female figure therefore ends in an empowered position, while the males are trapped into a repetition of uncomfortable movements. In terms of the text, Maqoma wanted Mahlangu and Radebe to reverse the positive and the negative because to him:

it makes sense that she has gone through all of that pain to say these things. She knows what it’s like to be these things and doesn’t want to see them.¹¹

Mahlangu thought that it was as if “she’s going to kill herself”, to which Maqoma responded: it’s “Like she’s committing suicide”¹².

Although the work was not necessarily about gender relationships, this section of the choreography and performance opens up the space for a discussion about this theme. Maqoma used sexual differences between the performers to make statements about gender issues. This will be discussed further in the following chapter. For now, what it points to is the way in which a dancer’s story becomes a group narrative on stage that is crafted into a broader story about society. This happens through the relationships between the performers on stage and that of the choreographer and the dancers. It is through this, beyond the content and structure of a work, that meaning is also created.

At the end of a performance, one of the dancers remarked, “it was a deliverance to do this piece”¹³. Maqoma therefore achieved his aim in part – at least one of the dancers felt that it had transformed his life. As Maqoma expressed, it was a unique experience for him to receive that level of intense emotional connection with dancers performing his work. This is clear in his words to them at the end of their first official run on 6 August 2004:

It’s all in your hands and you’ve taken it. Thank you for your trust and generosity and for moving me. It’s the first time I’ve seen my own work and it’s moved me to tears.

¹¹ In rehearsal, Johannesburg, 4 August 2004
¹² In rehearsal, Johannesburg, 4 August 2004
¹³ Personal communication. In post-performance discussion with Wits Anthropology students at MIDM, 29 April 2005
Text and Music

The use of text and music provide additional layers of meaning to the dance work. A clear example of this is Mahlangu’s *I Want This Bone* text, which he narrated early on in the work. It was initially performed for Kau’s solo, before she had her accident. It then became the partner to Rapoo’s performance of Kau’s hip-swaying and hand-clapping movements that are a reference to the role of a woman in a ‘traditional’ African setting. What an analysis of this text also shows is that there are many possible interpretations of the meaning of a contemporary dance work. This is partly because it is experimental, and partly because an interpretation of an artwork is separate from the ‘text’ of the work itself.

*I want this bone*

This is the bone  
I thambo lombango  
Mowgli bone dangling like those who hanged on poplar trees

Bone has no flesh  
Yet all kinds of dogs  
Fight, scratch, bite and bark  
For the bone

I want the bone – I don’t want the bone  
The bone is mine – The bone is not mine  
Is the bone yours – The bone cannot be yours  
Is this our bone? – Never, ever the bone our bone  
I want my bone  
Your bone, my bone, our bone

I want this bone!  
This is the bone  
I thambo lombango  
Mowgli bone dangling like those who lived in that Island

This bone is so dry  
Burned by the suns of al seasons  
Yet dripping, dripping and dripping  
Long and slowly dripping  
This bone is dripping thick, filthy blood

Throw this bone away – Give me this bone  
Leave the bone alone – Everybody have a bone  
Every child away from the bone – Every child after the bone
I want this bone!

This is the bone
I thambo lomgango
Mowgli bone dangling like that one between your firmer bones

This bone is clean
Washed by the rains of all seasons
Touch the bone, only once
Look at your hands
Your hands and your all
Filthy, sticky, filthy forever

I know this bone – I don’t know this bone
Who is the bone – No one is the bone
What is the bone – What is not the bone?
Every one is the bone – I am not the bone
But I am the bone

Mame shane!!
I have never seen such a bony bone!
This bone is not de-boned like those delicious fillets you had in bed last night
This bone will bone you like you’ve never been boned by the bone before

This dry but dripping – Clean but sticky
Bone
Will bone your kinky flesh
Fuck! This bone
I want this bone. I want it so bad!! I want it so bad!!

(Written and performed by Nhlanhla Mahlangu. First written 18 March 2004)

At a first reading, these words seem to be an explicit statement on sexuality and sexual abuse or provocation or anger. Coupled with Rapoo’s hip swaying and pelvic thrusting to these words, this section of the work is almost clearly about sex. It is also about questioning sexuality. When Mahlangu shouts “mame shane”, Sidiya and Rapoo are upstage leaning towards one another for a kiss. They are startled out of this by Mahlangu’s shout. In the context of the ‘seduction scene’ described above, and the different meanings of the word “bone” (eg penis) and “boned” (eg being fucking), there seems to be no space for an alternative interpretation. However there is a range of possible interpretations of its performance. Mahlangu describes this as an abstracted political commentary.
He explains:

Most people think of sexual connotations, which is good, but it has nothing to do with sex originally. It’s about sex as a shield for political statements. 14

Mahlangu explained to me that this piece of writing is about abuses of power, politicians who want it all, and the exploitation of those in subordinate positions of power. The reference to poplar trees, for example, could be an allusion to slavery and racial violence. One audience member remarked that “the technique was wonderful, but I didn’t like the text because I’m a Christian – I have a lot of issues about what the guy was saying” (in Dzanibe 2004). Clearly this text hit a nerve related to beliefs about power, but also the way in which power is expressed through sex.

An additional element to the multiplicity of possible meanings, in Maqoma’s choreography in particular, is his use of inversion and disruption. For example, Radebe’s repetition in reverse of Mahlangu’s opening words from his Sense Make no Sense text (excerpt described above). Maqoma subverts the order and opens up the space for questioning meaning. With this inversion, he leaves the audience with questions about what it means to be a human being. This is reinforced in the final moments of the work, while Radebe is narrating her last words. The ceiling of the white gauze dropped inch by inch to obscure the dancers behind it. The three men continued with phrase three at three different levels (heights). The repetitive drum beat and long line of base that had been playing throughout the work faded with the lights that had shifted through the full colour spectrum from red to purple. Maqoma obscures the view for the audience while Radebe reverses Mahlangu’s words. One element of what he is saying is that there is no clear answer, and that to find one we must look beyond the surface of what we can see.

Maqoma is also criticising those who live in denial of the problems that fester at the deeper levels of ourselves and of society. This is illustrated by a discussion that he and Mahlangu were having about their ideas for the text in the work. In a kind of word-play,

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14 Personal communication. In post-performance discussion with Wits Anthropology students at MIDM, 29 April 2005
they were bouncing ideas off one another and came up with a reference to social inequality and the damage that it does:

Greg: *virtue, virtual, virtually*

Nhlanhla: *vanity, sanity, insanity*

Greg: *things you can find in a vanity case...red lipstick – one thing can open you up. That lipstick has left so many stains in high society on so many glasses*¹⁵

Mahlangu, constructed his text in relation to his experiences of being involved in the choreography. Kunene (2004) describes his observations of the use of the text:

> Text is somehow used as the main lifeblood of the whole choreographic work. It actually gives life to the dance movements without dictating their exact execution or flow.

For Mahlangu, the text was a way for him to tell his own story. Although he interacted with the dancers on stage, his role was to give voice to the movements that the audience was witnessing. The link between movement and narration, however, was indirect. As Mahlangu describes:

> The whole dancework is poetic because it’s not a straightforward story.¹⁶

The text evolved concurrently with the choreography of movements. At times, Mahlangu would read his words to the dancers for them to interpret. At other times, he would ad-lib to the movements of the dancers, until he and Maqoma set the text for the final performance. An audience member (in Kunene 2004) described his impressions of the text in the following way:

> The story is inside Nhlanhla and each dancer is an organ inside him.

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¹⁵ Discussion, Johannesburg, 15 January 2004
¹⁶ Personal communication. In post-performance discussion with Wits Anthropology students at MIDM, 29 April 2005
The music, too, adds a layer of meaning. The composer, George Motaung, created the music from his observations of the work as it was being developed. Maqoma gave Motaung the directive that he wanted “something that is hypnotic, with a long line” (in Matamela 2004). As Matamela (idem.) explains, this was so that the music would create its own narrative, and at the same time represent that “life is continuous (hence the long line), we pick up from where others left and so do the generations after us”. Maqoma wanted Motaung to juxtapose contrasting elements, while also keeping the overall effect simple. Matamela (idem.) describes the use of dripping water against the backdrop of Motaung’s repetitive drumbeats and synthesized sounds as:

   a constant irritating sound which is contrast to the whole emotional journey of the choreography, therefore also adding to what the theme portrays; which is that life is not always on one level, it has contradictions of its own and can sometimes be uncomfortable.

Motaung divided his music into four sections – each representing a dancer’s story. These then overlapped and repeated throughout the work as it progressed. As one audience
member remarked, “the music has a sad feeling, and yet portrays individual journeys that each dancer portrays” (idem.). As Motaung explained, “I heard Greg say the work is about individual expressions. I identify with the emotions”17. What stood out most of the music was the repetition of drumbeats, like a thread that bound each story together. This was interrupted at times for the sounds of a thunderstorm or a long chord that would unsettle the audience, but always returned to a variation on the drums.

The text and music together, therefore, added layers to the meaning of the work at the time of its performance. In conjunction with the relationships between the performers, and the dancers and the choreographer; and the way in which the work was created and structured, the music and text allow for multiple ways of interpreting Virtually Blond. On a broader level the context of the performance is crucial to an understanding of its meaning. This includes the role of the audience - how they read a work and what it raises for them, and the use of space in delimiting the boundaries for the audience and the performers.

Audience

the ways in which we look at dance are not quite as neutral or as individual as we might think but are inscribed in a chain of cultural codes and practices in and through which our bodies, our subjectivities, are situated and implicated.

(Thomas 1996: 83)

The dancers in Virtually Blond were aware that their private stories would become the material that they and Maqoma would craft into a theatrical dance work. They knew that they would be performing their secrets through movement on stage with a viewing audience. The space of the stage therefore contributed to the shift in the nature of the work from a private articulation in the intimacy of the studio to a public expression of the social ills that caused the wounding in the first place. A crucial moment in its process of

17 Personal communication, Johannesburg, 23 January 2004
communicating meaning, then, was when the audience could read their own interpretations into the work. As Thomas (2003: 161) states:

> the ways in which we look at dance are profoundly partial and social at the same time.

Art makes its meaning in the creative process, but also through a conversation with the audience.

The relationship between an audience and the performance/performer is an integral part of the meaning created by the work. Hanna (1983: 8) introduces this relationship in terms of the power of a moving image to influence society. She also emphasises the centrality of emotional responses to the moving body. Dance, for Hanna, is therefore a nexus of experience that reaches beyond the everyday and allows for a communication that reaches into the realm of social transformation (ibid: 4). Through a series of case studies she concludes that an audience-performer relationship is based on a number of elements: the expectations of the audience member, and the fact that there is diversity in an audience based on both the universal experience of being human, and the culturally-patterned ways of affecting emotional perception (ibid: 182-183).

An audience’s response is also dependent on their knowledge of the genre that they are viewing, even though dance can be enjoyed on the general level of entertainment. Royce (2004: 178) explains the importance of aesthetic codes and conventions for an audience’s interpretation of a work that they are viewing. In her comparison of Tewa ritual, Commedia dell’ arte and Kabuki, she explains how a performance is evaluated through the conventions that are particular to each aesthetic (idem). In a contemporary dance performance, an audience knows to expect a blurring of boundaries, new vocabularies of movement, and the blending of media elements, for example. It is within this context that they respond to a work. The structure of a work and the process of this creation therefore define the parameters for an audience’s interpretation. Sichel draws on Myers (1993) description of ‘African-American’ dance in America to describe how these dancers make the performance a “shared” experience between audience and performer\(^\text{18}\). She applies

this notion (which, as she notes, is a generalisation) that the African dance works that she has seen recently have a quality that is able to connect with and move the viewer which is significant, whether through triumphs, emotion, spirituality or vibrant body intelligence (idem).

From a semiotic perspective Zelinger (1979: 17) explains how dance is interpreted depending not only on its historical positioning but also in relation to the context of the moment of its performance. In his view, there are three factors that influence a spectator’s reading of a dance performance. First are their assumptions about the context of the performance – who has created it, where, and why. The venue, cast, and programme notes give clues to this. Second is the context itself – the physical environment; and third, the content, structure and “semantics” of the dance-work. As stated above, our bodies are “implicated” in the “chain of cultural codes” (Thomas 1996: 83), and a reading of these bodies, particularly in relation to dance, must be linked to an understanding of the social context.

The dancers at the premier of Virtually Blond performed to an audience of about 300 people. Included in this number were journalists; dance practitioners from South Africa, Nigeria, Mozambique, and the DRC; other artists; international presenters and arts festival organisers; arts students from the Universities of the Witwatersrand (Wits) and Johannesburg (UJ/RAU); friends and family of the dancers and Maqoma; loyal supporters of MIDM; and members of the public who wanted to have a night out. I was backstage before the performance, but was told by members of MIDM that there was the usual crowd of soap-stars and local celebrities that attends such events. During the performance I watched the audience from the back row. There were occasional chuckles and a few mumbled comments as the work progressed, but mostly the audience was silent. When the work ended, some stood as they applauded wildly and whooped, some wiped their eyes, while others looked at each other with raised eyebrows. Theirs was a mixed response, which is not surprising for contemporary performance, especially one that aims at discomfort.
The responses from the audience have fallen into two broad categories. On the one hand, there have been individuals such as Maqoma’s close friends, the organiser of the festival, two other choreographers, an academic in the School of Arts at Wits and a South African writer who felt moved by this work and thought it was groundbreaking especially on the level of emotion. A journalist told Maqoma that the work was thought provoking and the images were strong. On the other hand certain members of the dance community felt disappointed by what they described as a limited use of movement vocabulary and detachment of emotion from the body. According to an interview by Ndimande (2004), “people keep on talking saying that Virtually Blond is similar to Ketima … they saw the same movements”. Certain non-dance audience members and other academics said that the level of angst that was portrayed and the crafting of the narratives were alienating and reminded them of 1970s protest theatre that no longer has a place in South African performance. Students from UJ/RAU said that they felt that they could not engage with the content of the work, although they enjoyed watching the dancers.\textsuperscript{19}

Khalid, a choreographer from Hush Hush – a hip-hop group from Belgium, explained that he “loved the tension and the expression of the faces”, while his partner Abdelaziz liked the music because it “had a good atmosphere”\textsuperscript{20}. According to Ndimande (2004), “some guys were not liking it because they believe that Gregory is promoting the gay issue” and “some ladies say they won’t watch it because it exposes dirtiness…they found it offensive… When the guys are touching the woman in the immoral way, they feel that the piece is insulting women and destroying/degrading women’s dignity”. As Segoe (2004) expressed: “Some people said ‘it is absolutely not for children under 16 years’”.

Maqoma told me that he was satisfied with the result and had received phone-calls from people saying that they were moved by the performance. He was pleased to see the dancers work at such a high level of performance\textsuperscript{21}. However, it was difficult to read his response. He was creating Virtually Blond at the same time as Somehow Delightful, a criticism of the superficiality of certain of South Africa’s celebrations of its democracy.

\textsuperscript{19} From interviews with audience members – after performances on 17 and 18 August 2004, Johannesburg
\textsuperscript{20} Personal communication, Johannesburg, 15 March 2004
\textsuperscript{21} Personal communication, Johannesburg, 20 September 2004
The latter was for his own company VDT, and the former for MIDM. Maqoma has a well-established relationship with MIDM and is often called in as associate artistic director to arrange performance programs, for management meetings, or to give feedback on choreographic works. That said his first commitment is to the success of VDT. It is undetermined to what extent his different priorities affected the outcomes of each work but possible that his priority is the success of VDT.

In Maqoma’s view, because he created the works at the same time, there are bound to be similarities. There are, however, also clear distinctions. For example, he describes that

    In *Virtually Blond* I am far away personally from it in the sense of the issues. *Somehow Delightful* is my response to circumstances sharing with dancers my personal interest drawing from history and celebrating ten years of democracy.  

His approach was therefore also different for the two works. His aim with *Virtually Blond* was for the dancers to make their own statements about their experiences and primarily use his movements in order to do so. For *Somehow Delightful*, he created the narrative himself and the dancers performed his steps to tell his story and offer his direct critique of society.

Although the first run of *Somehow Delightful* at the State Theatre in Pretoria did not have the same audience numbers as *Virtually Blond*, it had a much larger response in the media, and traveled to Holland as part of the Afrovibes 2004 festival, for which Maqoma was artistic director. Matshikiza (2005: 26) described *Somehow Delightful* as an example of “simply the best and bravest all-round theatre that is going on around here today”. Its small audience could also be attributed to the lack of proper marketing at the State Theatre, compared to the full houses for the New Dance Festival at which *Virtually Blond* premiered. This event was linked to a conference on African choreography and included invited sponsors and four other African choreographers. Maqoma also has a loyal following based in Johannesburg. These individuals would not necessarily travel to Pretoria to see his work.

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22 Personal communication, Johannesburg, 20 September 2004
There are, therefore, a number of elements that influence an audience’s response to a work. Those who knew Maqoma’s work would not have been surprised to experience some discomfort during the performance; they may have even enjoyed that aspect of it. The content of the work did not appeal to everyone and neither did the style. What is clear is that there was no single interpretation of its meaning. There was a diverse response from the audience, as underlined by the discussion of Hanna (1983) above. Maqoma sparked a certain amount of debate, especially around issues of sexuality, which is often his most potent commentary. What this discussion shows is that the audience response is an indicator of whether or not a choreographer has achieved his/her initial aim. In the case of *Virtually Blond* this is up for debate, and will be discussed further later in the chapter.

**Space**

A further element that influences an audience’s reading of a work is the use of space. In certain traditions of performance the theatre is a rarefied space. With the development of private theatres and indoor performance in the late Renaissance, audiences were delimited by class and performances were expected to be true-to-life representations (Aston and Savona 1991: 91). The line between audience and performer became fixed as the “fourth wall” in the space of the stage (idem) and the audience became the passive viewer (ibid: 92). Art in this domain is expected to reflect reality or change it, depending on the approach. One example of this role of art is in the figure of the puppet in the ballet Petrushka (1911) who bursts through the wall of his performing booth. According to Ritter (1989: 169), this is an example of motifs of “liberation from the stage”. This image was used to create a structuralist analogy of ‘man’ as a puppet trapped by his character.

Maqoma is not the first example of an artist who has asked something of his/her audience beyond applause. In the early to mid 1900s, the audience was provoked into becoming an active participant in theatre that is politically engaging, for example, Meyerhold in Russia, Brecht in Germany (Aston and Savona 1991: 92), and the anarchism of Fo in Italy (cf. Fo 1980). In protest theatre in South Africa under apartheid, for instance, the
performance itself became the challenge to the established order (cf. Coplan 1985). The stage became the podium for critiques of social, economic and political inequalities. The theatre space was also a relatively safer way of expressing what was censored in everyday life. As Steadman (1998: 56) states: “In the struggle against apartheid theatre practitioners demonstrated that theatre can play an important role both in mediating social consciousness and, indeed, in constituting it.” (the target was also clearer: apartheid was bad)²³

The way in which the theatre space is used affects the mode of expression and the relationship between the performer and the audience, as in the case of Virtually Blond. Firstly, Virtually Blond was performed on a proscenium stage in a box-like structure. The stage, including the dance-mats on the floor, was white. The wings, backdrop and suspended ceiling were made of white gauze through which the dancers could be seen throughout the work. At the back of the stage, set-designer Nicholas Hlobo had placed a row of billy-cans beneath bamboo rods that dripped water slowly throughout the work. Attached to the cans were microphones so that the amplified sound of the drops added to the repetitive layered drumbeats of the music that dissolved in and out with the changes in the structure of the work. Maqoma explained that:

I was thinking of a set which will symbolise a room which leaks, or drips all the time. How many people live in shacks which leak, and they carry on. The government hospitals leak but life goes on. …And [I] wanted [it] to create a sense of anxiety and uncertainty for the dancers – a floor which is slippery.²⁴

Although the stage itself was not slippery, there was an unsettling dripping sound that overlapped with the music at different levels of amplification during the work. In this way, Maqoma is not creating a comfort zone for his audience. His approach is confrontational rather than escapist.

²³ Steadman (1998: 61) cites the example of Shanti illustrate how there were also slippages in representation in the plays of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM). On the on hand, the BCM was searching for a wide-ranging Third World struggle against injustice, but some of its plays represented a call for a fake sense of authenticity and a false essentialism
²⁴ Personal communication, Johannesburg, 17 March 2004
Choreographer Faustin Linyekula describes why he likes the proscenium stage:

with that setting, I’m allowed to just stand, come forward and say: “Hello, here I am. Do you see me? And if I say my name is this, do you hear that?” And that applies whether I’m here or in Europe or maybe more when I’m in Kinshasa.25

In this context he is not under the same threat that he faces in his everyday life in Kinshasa. One that he describes as an existence of survival in the ruins of what was his country (idem). The theatre space therefore allows for a commentary that is disallowed outside of its bounds. The stage becomes the podium of the performing artist and the space for interaction, albeit conditioned, with an audience.

A proscenium stage limits the use of movement in certain ways. The audience reads the work from the front, so movements forwards or backwards, side to side, and up or down have meaning A site-specific work, on the other hand, creates a different relationship with the audience – and therefore signifies meaning in a different way. It also affects the way in which movements may be performed, which again changes the meaning of the work. For example, by the 1960s Cunningham had made dances in a variety of spaces including gymnasiums, lofts and theatres-in-the-round (Foster 1986: 167-168). In his own style of expressionist dance, he challenged the relationship between dance and feeling and symbolism. He played with conventions of dance by incorporating everyday gestures into his dances, he worked against a harmony between movement and sound, and used chance methods in creating work (idem). So his use of space in this way was tied into his overall project of upsetting the codes of choreography and the creation of meaning in modern dance. Maqoma uses the conventional space of the proscenium stage in a similar way to Linyekula, rather than playing with space to challenge norms. As discussed in chapter two, his subject matter, use of movement and the body (discussed further in the next chapter), are what create discomfort.

Ritter’s (1989: 151-173) examples of performing troupes and carnival folk in the work of Rilke, Picasso and Apollinaire describe well the ways in which the use of the visual setting signifies the place of the artist and the meaning of the work that they create. For

instance, the ragged carpets used by acrobats symbolise their homelessness, which in turn reminded popular audiences of their own rootless legacy. These props are therefore “unifying symbols” (ibid: 173), which draw the audience and the performer together. The reverse may be true in the case of *Virtually Blond* where the use of the stage created a distance between the dancers and those watching them. It was all white, the dancers were often separated from one another, and the stage was divided with the sheets of white muslin creating a barrier at times between the dancers and the centre of the stage. This alienating effect also added a protective element by not allowing the audience to become overly involved in the intense and potentially overwhelming emotion of the work.

Maqoma’s (and Hlobo’s) design of the theatre space therefore defined a particular relationship with the audience. It was predominantly distancing even though certain individuals had strong responses to some of the images on stage and some of the themes in the work. A performance that is detached from a direct emotional connection to its audience can also be disturbing, because of its coldness (cf. Brecht 1964). This raises the issue of the link between emotion and intention. Maqoma wanted the dancers to use their own emotional journeys to connect with their audience. However, in the actual moment of the performance this connection was strained by the difficulty that many audience members had in accessing the work. The question remains whether or not this was in fact the ultimate aim of the work – to disturb through an alienating effect, or whether the original intention did not translate into the stage performance and why.

**Lost in translation? The problems of art, meaning, and interpretation**

The artistry lies in saying what you want to say while allowing the spectator to be touched uniquely by his own life experience.

(Preston-Dunlop 1998: 23)

To what extent did Maqoma realise his initial intention in *Virtually Blond*? The mixed response by the audience is one route into finding an answer to this question. It can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, the work was popular among those who know and like
Maqoma and what he creates. These individuals support what he does even if it is not necessarily his best work, or they responded favourably because they were moved by it. The reverse of this is the reaction of those who strongly disliked the work because it felt empty and inaccessible. Secondly, whether or not people knew him and his work, and liked *Virtually Blond* or not, it did unsettle a large number of the audience members. It is this effect of the work that is the root of the argument that follows. Was this discomfort a follow-through of Maqoma’s original aim, or does it reveal a breakdown somewhere in the shift of the work from studio to stage, process to product, and rehearsal to performance? What does this say about judging a work aesthetically?

As this chapter has explored, there are a number of ways in which meaning is created in the process of making art. In the case of *Virtually Blond*, this includes the way in which the work is structured, the relationships between the dancers and Maqoma, the use of text, sound and space, and of course the audience. The idea that informed these layers was Maqoma’s aim to address social issues by the dancers using his steps to reveal their personal stories. This was where there was a mismatch between his initial intention and the product that they created. By giving them the steps through which they would express their hidden narratives, Maqoma was defining for them the boundaries of this expression. This is one of the roles of the choreographer. However, the steps that he had created did not necessarily tie in with what he wanted them to reveal. Although there were moments when each dancer found their own gestures or movements within his choreography, the work was based predominantly on the movement phrases he had put together. This is not problematic as a method for creating work, but in the case of *Virtually Blond*, it did not allow for the dancers’ emotions to become directly embodied in the steps. The steps were meant to be a tool for the expression of their feelings, but landed up becoming a separate element from what they had spoken about and revealed during rehearsals. This is what left many of the audience members cold – and unchallenged.

There were two creative processes happening at the same time: firstly, the dancers and Maqoma were dealing with issues of visibility during which time the dancers created a few steps for themselves, and secondly, Maqoma taught them movement phrases to
perform that were detached from this issue of visibility. What this reveals is a mismatch in his original idea for the work and his creative process. The way in which he worked did not necessarily allow for his intention to be realised. Grotowski (in Richards 1995: 96) defines intention as a physical impulse in the body that is “linked to some objective outside you”. Intentions are “related to physical memories, to associations, to wishes, to contact with the others, but also to muscular in/tensions” (idem.). Maqoma used these physical impulses in his body to create steps that he handed over to the dancers. His objective was for them to use these steps to embody their emotions and tell their stories. At the same time, he pushed the dancers to a place that he describes as “a stripping of emotions until you feel numb”\textsuperscript{26}. There was, therefore, a contradiction in his intention, objective, and process. On the one hand, he wanted the dancers to tell their stories through the embodiment of emotion, and on the other hand, he wanted the story to be “forced through the loss of emotion”\textsuperscript{27}. Maqoma was caught between a Brechtian anti-bourgeois approach (cf. Brecht 1964) and an abstract expressionist commentary on social ills (cf. Doss 1991).

The question is, did this work create any meaning at all or was it empty? Does it sound more significant than it actually was, and who gets to decide? These questions are pertinent to a discussion of contemporary dance more broadly because it is an art form that is based strongly on experimentation and the breaking of more classical dance conventions. Schechner (1982: 17-18) explains how theatre groups in the mid 1970s began new experimentation in communicating their art, which expanded the possibilities for contemporary performing art in the new millennium. They became concerned with who was defined as a performer, where they would perform, and how they could reconfigure their relationships to their audience. His work with The Performance Group is illustrative of new ways of communicating through art that was groundbreaking in the 1970s (Schechner 1973). For example, McNamara, Rojo and Schechner (1975: 18) constructed the Performing Garage in SoHo in New York City became the home of The Performing Group. For their performance of Dionysus in 69 (1968), McNamara, Rojo

\textsuperscript{26} Personal communication, Johannesburg, 17 August 2006
\textsuperscript{27} Personal communication, Johannesburg, 17 August 2006
and Schechner created two long towers and platforms. The audience could sit in any part of it, which created different kinds of relationships with the spectators (ibid: 80).

What makes an experiment, such as Virtually Blond, meaningful? Maqoma is not concerned with linear narrative or a modernist rebellion against what has come before. He incorporates elements of his history and influences and uses this as the basis to create a work that is never ‘finished’ and that is always open to revision. He plays with form, creates ambiguous gender roles, uses multimedia, and fragmentation in order to challenge society. The form of his work is therefore based on the function that he hopes it will have. Many of his contemporaries share his concerns with commenting on society and doing so through the embodiment of individuals’ stories, as illustrated in the previous chapter with the case of Congolese choreographer Faustin Linyekula. However, Virtually Blond was alienating in ways it was not meant to be, and the only people who were transformed by it were some of the dancers and a few audience members. When the work shifted to the stage and was open to an audience, some of the potency was lost of the stories that the individuals told to Maqoma and one another in the studio. Although the audience and the theatre space added dimensions to the meaning of the work, Maqoma’s initial intention did not carry through to the final phase when the audience becomes a co-author. The audience itself also bordered more on the conservative than the radical. It does not take much to shock this kind of audience, which in part dilutes the idea of Maqoma’s work as radical in this context.

This points to broader questions of art and interpretation. In contemporary dance, an audience is free to find their own meaning in a work, but what happens when the work falls flat? How does an audience’s knowledge of a form or ability to engage with it affect its meaning? Despite all postmodernist protestations, is it possible and indeed necessary to judge a work? What is the role of art? For an artwork to have meaning there must be a connection between the intention of the artist and the product that they create. No amount of description of creative process or set design, and no amount of analysis of movement or text gives a work its meaning. Virtually Blond was a fascinating process to observe because of the journey of the individuals involved in creating it. As an artwork, however,
it raises the problem of making art: an artwork is a product that must be informed by its process, and the process must be based on a clear intention. The alternative is to have a great idea that does not fully materialise.

Many thought that *Virtually Blond* was a great success. However, when it is analysed in terms of the translation from intention into product, it is clear that there was a disjuncture here, no matter how potent certain of the images and how provocative the performances. Much of the problem here lies with the relationship between the audiences of contemporary dance for two reasons. First, in the context of South Africa’s social and economic transformation, the performing arts are attempting to find a place in this new landscape of freedom (elaborated in chapter five). There is not a clear place for contemporary dance in this context. Second, the theatre is a rarefied space, no matter how populist contemporary dance tries to be. It has to grapple with that space and its audiences. One of the problems that inform this relationship between audience and contemporary dance is the narrow definition of culture by the new elite, and a profound anti-intellectualism, as in the case of Johannesburg, for example (cf. Czeglédy 2003). South African audiences are not passive – there is an understanding of the conventions of contemporary dance. However, they are also not necessarily discerning. There are two related issues here. An artwork that is not about safety (such as Maqoma’s) is dependent for its meaning on the role of aesthetic judgement – the ability to say whether it is good or bad despite postmodernism’s weakness that it is not possible to judge. This is dependent on a self-critical and discerning audience that is able and willing to take responsibility for its judgements. As Eagleton (1983) asserts, it is what we do after we read a work of art that is important.

**Conclusion**

Maqoma began *Virtually Blond* with the intention of exposing the problems in society, as in many of his other works. Once the work left his creative control, the transition from studio to stage widened the gap between his initial intention and the final representation. In certain ways, then, this work is not the best example of an artistic representation that
critiques society especially because of its obscurity for many audience members. Apart from the disjuncture in the signifying process, Maqoma’s work opens up the space to probe more deeply the way in which dance functions as a meaningful statement or symbol in a broader social context. The meaning of a work is not only manifest in the audience’s interpretations of it, but also in the dancers’ embodiment of the choreographer’s ideas, and the perceptions of the choreographer as a social actor. These are elements in a broader process of signification.

Despite the problems with *Virtually Blond*, and the issue that these raise regarding interpretation more broadly, something is still being said. Whether a choreographer’s intention is translated into a performance or not, there are still bodies performing on stage. The body speaks despite a choreographer’s aim and regardless of who is reading it and how. It is an agent of signification in its own right. Maqoma’s work may not always do what it says it will, but it is still attempting to make important statements. This is possible because the instrument of this communication is the moving body. There remains, therefore, a further aspect to the signifying process that must be explored: the role of the body in making meaning.

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28 There may have been better choices of Maqoma’s choreography for this research, however, I was limited by time and access to Maqoma. My choice of this work for this research was informed by my relationships with the dancers that I had already established, and was also due to the timing of Maqoma’s schedule and this project. The initial focus was on creative process, but in the course of the research it became clear that the shift from studio to stage is a crucial aspect of a dancework’s meaning.