

## CINEMATIC THINKING WITH MIEKE BAL

### ON MIND'S EYES AND TOOLS

A conversation between Mieke Bal and Anna-Helena Klumpen



1. The curator caught in her work. Mieke Bal between the screens of *Madame B*, “Everyday Life”, in room 3, “Fantasy”, with paintings by Munch. Photo: Michelle Williams Gamaker.

**On Friday, March 17, 2017, the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA) organized a special symposium in collaboration with the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, entitled “IN MEDIAS RES: A TRIBUTE TO MIEKE BAL”. During this symposium, various colleagues from the wide range of academic and artistic fields in which Mieke Bal (born 1946) has intervened during her prolific career highlighted the influence of her work. Eventually, to the great surprise of the audience, and above all to Bal herself, the**

vice-mayor of Amsterdam appointed her, in the name of the King, “Knight of the Order of the Netherlands Lion”—a royal recognition of the kind that Descartes, the protagonist of her latest film, hopes for when travelling to Queen Kristina. In conjunction with the symposium and the opening of the exhibition *Transgressions* of the work of Indian artist *Nalini Malani* (until June 18), Bal presented her recent book *In Medias Res: Inside Nalini Malani’s Shadow Plays* (Hatje Cantz, 2016).

The day after, on Saturday, March 18, there was the opening of Bal’s latest video installation project *Reasonable Doubt* at the Castrum Peregrini, Amsterdam (until April 13). Together with this show, three exhibitions of Bal’s artistic work run at the same time, all in the Northern countries: The installation *Madame B: Explorations in Emotional Capitalism* is displayed the Museum Aboa Ventus & Ars Nova in Turku, Finland, and simultaneously, at the Munch Museum in Oslo, Norway, runs the exhibition *Emma & Edvard – Love in the Time of Loneliness* (until April 17) that Bal has been commissioned to curate. In this exhibition, at the request of the museum, she combines the installation pieces of *Madame B.* with selected artworks by Edvard Munch.<sup>1</sup>

**ANNA-HELENA KLUMPEN:** Mieke, you have an intense weekend behind you. One could say that it represents not the entire, but a broad spectrum of your academic and artistic practice. We were confronted with three different, and I would argue, in your case, interrelated modes of thinking: first, your theoretical writings—your book on Nalini Malani—, second, your film and video making, including the art of video installation, and third, your practice of exhibition making. You are combining creative and critical research practices to a degree scarcely met by any others. In your research approach, these multiple activities are profoundly intertwined and complementary: the different methods and epistemologies influence and construct each other. Rather than concentrating on the content or the aesthetic of one of your works, for today’s conversation I would like to focus on the methodology and epistemology of your approach, discussing film and filmmaking, or respectively, video making as a (medium-) specific

mode of thought and knowledge production, which can be situated at the intersection of art and scholarship. While a considerable amount of studies explore the topic of “artistic research” within art, little attention has been given to approaches of “art-based research” within the humanities. Yet, your *way of thinking* is profoundly interdisciplinary: it moves in-between different theoretical and artistic fields, and integrating textual, visual, sonic and spatial media.

To begin with, I would like to talk about the (inter-)disciplinary contexts or dispositifs, your work is shown in. When I first saw one of your installation pieces—that was *GLUB (Hearts)* in 2006 at the Eigenheim Galerie in Weimar, Germany, and then, shortly after, in 2008, I attended a screening of your film *Becoming Vera* at the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar—I immediately saw your film work as a continuation of your practice of Cultural Analysis that I have been familiar with as student in European Media Culture.<sup>2</sup> Is there such a thing as a culture-analytical film, in the sense of the five principles of Cultural Analysis, as you have summed them up on [Vimeo](#)?

**MIEKE BAL:** Absolutely, I think my films are forms of Cultural Analysis. That is why I never had the feeling that I was doing something else than the scholarship I was payed to do. It was just another form I gave it than writing, but I think it is completely an analysis of contemporary culture, and of the past seen from the present. As for the five principles, it is exactly that: close looking at phenomena, and at people, with a starting point in the presence. It is obviously interdisciplinary because the world is not divided in disciplines, and so what you film is always already interdisciplinary. It is theoretically based, because my thinking is theoretical and I cannot help that the films are informed by that... and what is the fifth principle?

**AHK:** That they are speaking back. I was especially intrigued by the microscopic view that is developed in the film *GLUB (Hearts)* (fig. 2).<sup>3</sup> In this work, one has the impression that these tiny, inconspicuous objects of seeds, seen as cultural object, are somehow ‘speaking back’, in their own language.

**MB:** Absolutely, and that is a language of multisensorial experiences. It is something you taste, but it is also something you smell, you feel in your fingers and on the floor when you walk on it, and you hear it cracking, and then you see it. All the senses are involved in this seed.

**AHK:** Concerning the use of objects and concepts, one could say that the way of editing or the form somehow is the concept imposed on the object. I was wondering if the film, the exploration of the seeds, actually performs the concept of diaspora.

**MB:** It does, but it is not *imposed* on it, because imposing would mean that you come up with a theoretical concept and put it down there on the object. Instead, the object performs it, that is a very different thing and you are right to use that word: the seeds perform the relationship between Western and non-Western people who are eating the seeds and who are actually manifesting or performing *diaspora*, but at the same time, *interculturality*. So, it is not one concept, because they are in Germany, that is, most of the scenes were shot in Germany, in a particular area of Berlin. For the people in the film come from everywhere. I don't think there is a frame or a scene in the film in which you don't see people eating seeds. They are constantly eating seeds. In that sense, you can say that the editing of the film is an imposition, because, of course, you can meet people in Berlin who don't eat seeds. But this was our way of intimating the depths of the intercultural influence, the change in the society, especially in a city like Berlin (fig. 3).



2. Pumpkin seeds. Video still from *GLUB (Hearts)*, by Mieke Bal and Shahram Entekhabi, 2004.



3. Artist explaining how to eat glub. Video still from *GLUB (Hearts)*.

**AHK:** I would like to come back to the “framing,” that is, to the different contexts within which your work circulates. It is shown internationally, both in academic and artistic contexts. And I was wondering which role the different institutions such as ASCA or the University of Amsterdam, or the Stedelijk Museum, to name but the Dutch institutions, play in the reception and the definition of your films and installations. Do you think that the framing has any authority on the reception of the work, if it is conceived as art—certainly, when something is displayed in the Stedelijk, you would immediately talk about it as an artwork, but then, during the screenings within ASCA or at the University of Amsterdam, one rather perceives the films as part of the research you do within the humanities.

**MB:** Of course, I always maintain that artists think and thinkers are creative; there is already a fluid boundary. But you talk specifically about the framing and the institutions, and in that sense, yes, when I am asked to give a lecture and to send a film, the lecture and the film become together an object for reflection because that is what the conference—or whatever the context is. Usually the conference wants us to reflect. Well, in a museum, I remember a big exhibition in the Museum of the History of St. Petersburg, and there, it was completely conceived as art, and because it was a Museum of the History of that city—a city with a very turbulent history, it also became historically relevant.<sup>4</sup> People would focus more on the question “Why are those migrants here?”, because in the past, they were colonized and they were impoverished by the domination and all that, so it makes total sense that the institution influences the way it is perceived.

That is why I am so incredibly happy about these exhibitions in the Northern countries, one in Oslo and one in Turku, because those are art museums, especially in Oslo, where I’ve got to combine *Madame B* with Munch—I mean, that was the assignment: please combine *Madame B* with Munch. Munch is one of the great thinkers of modernity. And to be able to do that, is reframing the work that was already made as modern art.<sup>5</sup>

**AHK:** It seems to me that, for the art world, it is quite natural to have you included in their world, as they would also agree saying that art always also is research, but on the contrary, as for the academic context, they rather state, in biographical notes for instance, that you achieved this and that as scholar, and you are *also* an artist, creating video art, for 15 years now.

**MB:** I cannot get it into their heads that it was not a career change. People say, well, it is all right, you published so many books, you are entitled to a career change. No, it is not a career change, it is a further expansion, an exploration, of the ways in which thought can be developed. And that is very different from a hobby. I must say that, in the art world, there also is a little bit of a prejudice wondering how, as a scholar, can I make art? For example, we had a proposal in Copenhagen in the National Museum, at the request of its own curator; and that proposal was rejected by the board. We did not get it through because they said “your art is not good enough”. But they had never seen the art, they just assumed that it could not be good enough, and that resistance lasts until this day: they will not have me in that museum.

**AHK:** I mean, your earlier film work of course has amateurish aspects, which is part of the aesthetic—we come to this point later. Now is a good moment to shift over to your methodology. I am particularly interested in the use of audio-visual devices within the humanities, on a broader level, and in particular, how you integrate writing and filmmaking in your research approach—the way you combine the different medialities of text, sound, space, and images, to make complex cultural phenomena “thinkable”. In your essay “Spatialising Film” from 2012, you give a brief account of your understanding of the term “auto-theory”. You argue, I am paraphrasing, that auto-theory is a form of thinking that integrates your own practice of image making as itself a mode of thought and the reflection on what you have made as a continuation of the making, hence, the thinking.<sup>6</sup> Could you elaborate a bit more on the status of the visual in the different steps of investigation? How does your approach, especially the early documentary way of your cinematic thinking, differ from approaches in visual

anthropology, where images and photographs are also used as investigative tools? It seems as if the “image” in your agenda is as much an investigative tool as it is itself the object of analysis.

**MB:** That is an interesting point, also when I think back myself on my own intellectual development. I was very early on, when I was a straight literary scholar, developing a theory of narrative, what became the central concept in my narrative theory was “focalization”. Focalization is about perception. And it was very clear that my interest was in the participation of *visuality* in all cultural communication, including reading. When you read, you also see. And all these sorts of seeing in the mind’s eye... you know, when a famous novel is turned into a film, they always say something about “she does not look like that”, so they know what the character looks like. And then, in the film, of course, it is never the same. When I started to show in trial screenings bits of *Madame B*, the first critical comment I got was: “Charles cannot be so handsome!”—my actor [Thomas Germaine, AHK] is brilliantly handsome (fig. 4)—and, “he cannot be so handsome, because Charles is ugly.” Charles is not ugly and to say that is supposing that Emma is stupid. That she accepts to marry him on sight, because she never really got to know him, as an ugly sort of schlemiel. He is ugly, in all the films he has been cast as ugly, and I think that is a way of taking the end, when he comes, a little fat and a little lazy, he doesn’t shave well, this does not make him ugly, but that is the image that people then develop and that has to be Charles. It proves that reading is visual, and that even if people make a mistake by saying this, it is visual: you see things, people, and landscapes and all that. So, for me, to then film it and look at those images with intensity and repetition, because when you edit a film, you look at every frame a hundred times, you see so much more than when you just read an analysis that has already censored out a lot of stuff.

Here, I can give another example: the film *Mille et un jours*, that’s a film about a wedding, and a Tunisian family had, as a surprise for the groom, ordered the attire of a traditional bride from their town, for the bride who was going to marry him in France. That was going to be



4. Thomas Germaine as Charles worried. Video still from *Madame B.*, by Mieke Bal and Michelle Williams Gamaker, 2013. Photo: Thijs Vissia.

a surprise. They showed it to me and said “don’t tell Tarek [the groom, AHK] that we have this”. And they showed me the costume and said “You know, it is like in the Hindu way, this is how we do it, as Hindus do it.” I had never seen that in the first cut of the film, but then, we cut it again, because we had to reduce it and integrate some more material, suddenly, we saw this and thought: this is interculturality! If these Arabs of the South of Tunisia refer to the Hindu culture as a background for the costume of their local practice, that is amazing, but shouldn’t be; the world has always been intercultural. And the fact that you keep looking at that material and listening to the people makes the analysis much more profound.<sup>7</sup>

**AHK:** The editing process represents thus an intrinsic part of the research process.

**MB:** Absolutely. If I then, with this term “auto-theory”, reflect on it, I get an integration of what I knew when I started the project, that were

my research questions; what the people contributed beyond that particular topic; and then, what happened in the editing when I reflect on it. So, there are all these layers of theorizing that make it a very good tool.

**AHK:** There is yet another dimension to this integration of image and text. You have started to use images and the visual to reflect on your own theoretical work, and recently, with the book on Eija-Liisa Ahtila's work and regarding the Munch exhibition, you use your artistic work to reflect on the works of others. In so doing, there is another exchange of different modes of thinking. In a footnote in *Thinking in Film (The Politics of Video According to Eija-Liisa Ahtila)*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), you state that you implicitly draw on your own artistic work and practice to explore the political potential of Ahtila's moving images.<sup>8</sup>

**MB:** Yes, Eija-Liisa Ahtila actually said at some point that she was so happy that I was writing about her work because I make images, too; so I'd understand her work from inside.

**AHK:** To come back to your publication *Thinking in Film*, in this book, you explore the political potential of art by means of an approach you call, as the title suggests, "thinking in film". If I understand it correctly, you employ this phrase to explain your own approach, the interactive thinking, or the dialogue between you as critic and the artwork. But "thinking in film" also defines what the works do, that films, videos and installations think in audio-visual movement, but eventually, it also comprises what the spectators or visitors are enticed to do: to think in film. Thus, we are confronted with a complex "thought-triangle", consisting of you as artist/theorist, the artwork and the viewer. In my own research, I am often confronted with the question "How can film think? That is not possible!" This is just a metaphor, or a "poetological maxim," the term Volker Pantenburg uses to describe Godard's practice of "cinematic thinking".<sup>9</sup> Most people understand by the concept of "thinking" something related to the human subject, to neurological processes.

**MB:** Yes, how can an object think? I would not say that the object thinks, but it entices thought. It offers process. It is not that it *is* thought in a material sense, but it comes to live in the interaction with the spectator. That is already a dialogue. The spectator could not have these thoughts without the object, while the object, of course, is mute, at least, the still image is. It is because the spectator develops thoughts through the interaction, through the perception—that I call it a “theoretical object”. A theoretical object is not exactly an object that thinks, but an object that solicits, entices, co-produces thought. And thought is never totally individual—this is why I made this third fiction film about Descartes [*Reasonable Doubt*, AHK]. It is an interaction with the world, with other people, and with objects. The social side of thought is what you can see quite clearly in some of these object-related works like *GLUB*. Glub in itself is just an exotic little thing, that people considered exotic until it spread all over Berlin. But people never thought about it until somebody comes up and says: “Look!” And then, they start to wonder what that means, where does it come from, and then it becomes a symbol of diaspora. People start to think and this is how it becomes culturally, socially, and politically productive.

**AHK:** I would like to theorize these ideas a bit more. In my dissertation, I develop the term “cinematic thought” as key concept to analyze your interdisciplinary approach.<sup>10</sup> I aim at disclosing the productive intersections that arise when crossing over between academic theory and artistic practice, between artistic theory and academic practice respectively. The focus lies on possible syntheses of sensuous and conceptual forms of thought within the cinematic. I am wondering what aesthetic and epistemic categories collide within these, what Deleuze would call “mobile relations” of art, science and philosophy, that can be observed in your work.<sup>11</sup>

**MB:** Deleuze often came up with formulations that really help: “mobile” thought: so you’re in the moving image. I think the integrational aspect, this moving together of these domains that you mention, I can make clear by just saying: when scholars who only write scholarship,

who don't do anything in the creative domains, in the arts, the visual, just a scholar, when they write, they make sentences that sound good, you do it automatically, you have a feeling for language. So, you are already in the aesthetic domain, you cannot avoid it. So, this is just the beginning of the next step and the next step and the next step... but I know that in my first writings, when I had never thought of anything like making, not even about analysing visual works, I remember moments that I came up with a sentence that had a lovely sound to it, and that helped me seeing something, understanding something in what I was analysing. That I would not have thought of without that sentence. It is constantly intertwined. We make an outline, you make an outline for your study, but it is never quite exactly that. You revise it as you go along. In your work, in your thinking, you are creative, inevitably.

**AHK:** I would like to inquire a bit more on the idea of thinking in film. You describe it as a practice, but at the same time, especially for *Reasonable Doubt*, you locate thought within the film. In the description of the project, you state, I quote: "Rather than explaining by means of voice-over, the film proposes thoughts-in-action through conversations as social engagement and walks as moments of solitary thinking." I would like to take up this little detour through the voice-over, to come to another question, the question of "knowledge". In contrast to other filmmakers or theorists, who use film for epistemic purposes, such as Jean-Luc Godard or Trinh Thi Minh-ha, you entirely dispense with commenting the moving images of your films although you strongly defend the first-person perspective within your academic writings. Could you explain a bit more the politics behind the decision of not using the device of the voice-over? Maybe in relation to your latest project *Reasonable Doubt*, but also regarding your earlier body of work.

**MB:** Yes, I think this is a very important point. First of all, in the early work, the experimental documentaries, the point was to let people tell their own story. I remember, when I was presenting *Mille et un jours* to a French television person, she said, "I am sorry, you can only get this on television if you have a voice-over that explains the situation."

Thank you very much, I won't do that, I am not these people that do the film, that make the film. There is that aspect, then there is the aspect of how would I presume to know what thinking is, in Descartes? Now, this is also the collaborative, social aspect of filmmaking. I was asked by one of the actors of *Madame B*, "What shall we do next?" Well, I said, "what about Descartes?" "Descartes? Ok." He went home and read Descartes. That is the kind of actor he is.

**AHK:** Thomas Germaine?

**MB:** Yes. And then he said, well, I would like to not speak the thoughts. He said: "This man was walking." And Thomas likes to walk, so he said "I will walk in the film and that will be my thinking." And that happens. You have these moments of solitary walks in the dunes, but then I thought, of course he doesn't verbalize the thoughts, but he sees things and has thoughts about them (fig. 6). That is why I integrated an artwork by a young Italian artist [Giovanni Giaretta's video *A Thing Among Things*, 2015, AHK] that shows the inside of mineral stones, but in the film these images suture Descartes walking to the way he *imagines* the stones to look inside (fig. 5). Thus, you see Descartes walking and then you see these minerals. This is the way that he was thinking. He saw, in his mind's eye, what these things would look like on the inside. And then he actually did experimental work to find the empirical evidence. But we didn't want to do that all the time, we did it in the Garden Scene and we did it in the Butcher Scene, where he really wants to see behind the slaughtered animal's eye (fig. 7). There, you see him, but he is never going to do the discourse, because that would be silly for the film, and I think that isn't how thinking works either. He wrote it up, in the end—I don't particularly like his writings as much as Flaubert's—he wrote it up, in the process and after, figuring it out, in interaction with others, in interaction with what he saw, the phenomena in nature (fig. 8).



5. Descartes imagines the inside of a stone. Video still from the work *A Thing Among Things*, by Giovanni Giaretta, 2015, incorporated in *Reasonable Doubt*, by Mieke Bal, 2016.



6. Walking-Thinking. Thomas Germaine as René Descartes. Video still from *Reasonable Doubt*, by Mieke Bal, 2016.



7. Descartes trying to see behind the eye. De Pastijbakkerij, Amsterdam. Thomas Germaine as René Descartes. Photo: Margreet Vermeulen.



8. Descartes writes up his thoughts. Maison Descartes, Amsterdam. Photo: Margreet Vermeulen.

**AHK:** I also like this decision of not using voice over as I think that the voice-over can function as an authoritative device per se. In certain aspects, your work stands in the tradition of the New Wave, especially of the films by Agnès Varda and her idea of *cinécriture*. Yet, in contrast to the “auteur theory” and the *politique des auteurs* as it has been propagated by the *Cahiers du cinéma* critics at that time, advocating a rather internationalist analytical position, “auto-theory” denotes a much more autonomous form of cinematic thinking. Concerning this aspect, there is an interesting idea in Badiou. He says that cinema is “visitation.” In film, an idea “visits” the sensible. Such a cinematic idea is not embodied, not represented in the work of art, neither is the idea separable from it—thus, it exists only in its passage. Therewith, he insists on the fugacity and performativity of cinematic thought.<sup>12</sup> Therewith, his reasoning is in line with the idea that the viewers’ or the spectators’ “thinking in film” is bound to the process of perception. In other words, to what extent is the artistic thought, the knowledge of the film limited to the work itself, or can it be translated, through interpretation for instance, into other forms of thought, or into other media such as the written word?

**MB:** Yes, of course. First of all, a visitor who comes to the work does not come with a *tabula rasa* mind. They come with their own baggage; they come from the street and have just encountered many of the situations that they then revisit in the film. So, it is already framed by each visitor. Then, there is the difference between film and installation. There are all sorts of formal differences between the two, perceptual and experiential differences. Therefore, in the Munch exhibition, I paid a lot of attention to height of hanging of paintings and screens, and providing benches, because I thought that people who sit down with the paintings have a very different experience than people who walk.

**AHK:** Oh yes, this is one of the things that struck me when I saw some of the exhibition views, that the paintings are hung so low. This curatorial decision really offers an unusual perspective (fig. 9 and 10).

**MB:** Yes, for me, it was one of the first things that I mentioned, when we started to talk about how to do the exhibition. I said, well I'll see, I want to make a selection, but they all have to be hung low and with seating. You know, the Munch Museum has this institutional trauma of having had a terrible burglary and although the paintings were retrieved (after five years!) they were severely damaged. So they have top security. They said: "Oh, no chairs, they can just smash the paintings with the chairs!" Well, I said, then you make benches. So, they made about 30 benches just for this show! But of course, they will use them later, because they are now really convinced by this. And it is just an example of how I felt as a curator to impact on the physical thinking. You know, Descartes' Cogito doesn't mean that he only thought, and therefore existed; no, for me it means: if I think, there has to be a body that does the thinking. And that body has its requirements and it wants to sit in order to take the time to see.

**AHK:** Especially when facing video works.

**MB:** Video work needs the time, and my point was: if video gets the time, then painting also gets it. I want people to slow down with the paintings so that they put it on the same temporal level as the videos.

**AHK:** The spatial arrangement also offers a very intimate and close encounter with the artworks.

**MB:** Yes, because the benches are quite close to the artworks, and there are no captions, just numbers and a little booklet. All is done to encourage the intimate, personal, durational encounter with the works.

**AHK:** This is a good moment of transition. The intermediality of your practice is also manifested in two reverse moments: from film to exhibition and from exhibition to film. The latter is the case for your latest projects, the collaborative project with Michelle Williams Gamaker, *Madame B*, and also for *Reasonable Doubt*. In both cases, there existed first an installation version, which has subsequently been turned into a film. Hence, the discussion of "thinking in film" or "cinematic thought" must be extended, if not to say *expanded*, to the museum and



9. Edvard Munch, *Young People on the Beach* (1904) and *Kissing Couples in the Park* (1904). Installation view *Emma & Edvard*. Photo: Ove Kvavik, Munch Museum, Oslo.



10. Videos of *Madame B.* and paintings by Munch. Installation view *Emma & Edvard*. Photo: Ove Kvavik, Munch Museum, Oslo.

gallery context. The medium of the exhibition and the art of video installation with their specific devices of large-scale and multiple screens, monitors, headphones, floating screens and sound-showers emphasize yet another constitutive element of cinematic thought: the spatial dimension. This is what you describe with the phrase “spatializing film.” Is the practice of transferring a film into an installation at the same time *spatializing* the cinematic thought process? Due to my own research, I really like the suggestion by Kjetil Røed, in his review of the show in Oslo, that you’d want the viewers to think “cinematically”. The framework of the paintings is thus only a fragment of a far more comprehensive narrative; there is no beginning and no ending in cinematic thought. He also wrote: “*Emma and Edvard* is an exhibition where the main story takes place in the minds of whoever is experiencing it—as demonstrated by the exhibition’s last ‘work’: a mirror.”<sup>13</sup>

**MB:** This review was fabulous. He really understood everything, and I can’t believe, in such a short newspaper review, how much he could get in. To say, for example, “mind tools”. If you see that little interim heading, Mind Tools, you don’t even need the text that follows, you know immediately what he is saying. But this is not an answer to your question—the “spatializing”. Starting point was the fact that everybody who visits the paintings in the Munch Museum, when they see a red-head woman, they will come up with Tulla Larsen, the lover with whom he was always fighting. If they see a man drinking: “Munch was an alcoholic!” Now, I think that those are vulgar associations, but the fact that people need that, that they need to have some other thing than the painting itself, to relate to the painting, proves that the painting is not autonomous. But then, instead of going to the artist and doing such traditional thing, like reading the biography first and then project it on the paintings, you can also take the painting as a starting point and go with that to these others domains. Then, you’ll get something really different. There is this famous painting called *Self-Portrait with a Bottle of Wine* (fig. 11), and there we go again: “Oh, he seems so lonely and unhappy because he has been drinking this whole bottle.” But if you look at the bottle, it is full and the glass is empty, so, what

do you mean? You need something else. He looks lonely. What is happening? Then, when you start to really graze the surface—I can show it to you in the book [*Emma & Edvard Looking Sideways: Loneliness and the Cinematic* (2017)]—you realize that his chair is half eaten up by an abstract patch of orange. For me, that is the dilemma of abstraction and figuration, its beautiful colour effect compared to his jacket; it is an experiment in brushstroke, or, if you stay with figuration: he is on fire, these are flames! He had better get out of there or maybe suiciding by not going out. This interpretation is based on what you see, and then you can think about abstraction and figuration, you can think about the desire to die, you can think of all sort of things that have nothing to do with the biography, but more with the connection between you as viewer, your own associations, and what you see.



11. Edvard Munch, *Self-Portrait with a Bottle of Wine* (1906), Munch Museum, Oslo.

**AHK:** Would you say that, by the fact that you put the paintings in relation to or in dialogue with the cinematic works, your installation pieces also trigger these new interpretive approaches to the Munch paintings? Is there even a reciprocal interpretation going on, between the works themselves, with the viewer standing in-between?

**MB:** In the fourth room, which is halfway the exhibition, we have Emma's wedding on a big screen with benches—it is like a little cinema in the gallery—and then, obliquely across, at the other end of the gallery, there is this incredible painting that became the poster image for the exhibition, called *The Wedding of the Bohemian* (fig. 12). You see a woman in a pink top, sitting there at the end of the table, a bit like Christ in *The Last Supper*, and around her are men doing things. One is walking away, one is looking like this, one is talking... and she is completely lonely, among all these men, on her wedding. A wedding is supposed to be happy. Well, you can doubt that, with Munch and Flaubert, you can doubt that. You see Emma first, Emma in her wedding in the film is also ostracized and isolated (fig. 13). People are gossiping about her; it is a very nasty situation. There is a woman with a baby on her arm; Emma tries to be nice with the baby, but even the baby turns away from her. The two brides are completely lonely, the painted woman and the cinematic woman. Depending on which you see first, it is going to help you to understand the other (fig. 14).<sup>14</sup>

**AHK:** To conclude, I would like to briefly address the question of *knowledge* and *knowledge production*. Currently, the idea that art produces a specific kind of “knowledge,” genuine artistic knowledge, proliferates, especially in German-speaking academia, where research initiatives in Berlin, Zurich and Munich take on the question of knowledge and explore the epistemology of aesthetics. Conversely, I wonder whether your artistic work *creates* knowledge, or has rather to be seen as a *critique* of knowledge and representation. The philosophical, or encyclopedic concept of “knowledge” as being static, a “true justified belief” seems to be in stark opposition with what your film work performs. The cinematic is, in essence, moving and performative. I was wondering how you would think about it. For, on the one

hand, it is a problematic political issue: art must participate in knowledge production, also in the sense of getting financed, which is, in my eyes, a really dangerous trend for the visual arts, potentially censoring (“state-sponsored art”). But on the other hand, I also like the idea that art creates knowledge, which is, supposedly, a different kind of knowledge. This would explain why you, at the height of your academic career, turn to the medium of film to get new insights into contemporary cultural phenomena—to “think” a phenomenon like “madness”, which seems to be ungraspable by reason and language, or reason’s language, to allude to Foucault.<sup>15</sup>



12. Edvard Munch, *The Wedding of the Bohemian* (1925-26), Munch Museum, Oslo.



13. Wedding. Looking elsewhere. Marja Skaffari as Emma, Thomas Germaine as Charles. Photo: Thijs Vissia.



14. Emma's Fall at her Wedding, video of *Madame B*. Installation view *Emma & Edvard*. Photo: Ove Kvakvik, Munch Museum, Oslo.

**MB:** Absolutely, I am completely convinced that art, in principle, produces knowledge as much as scholarship. In both cases, there is the problem of the required stability, as you say, the static; the idea that once you have built this knowledge, it exists, it stays and you can possess it, you can acquire it. But that goes totally against what knowledge actually is, because knowledge in the form of the visual, or as images, demonstrates that knowledge is a process, and it is never finished. Even at some point, you decide that you know enough to make computers, but as you know that every six months, there is a new version of the computer. Why would that be the case if knowledge was static? It is because there is constant development. This is of course also steeped in capitalism. All knowledge is constantly on the move and in development, including medical knowledge, for example. In the AIDS crisis, people died, they knew it was a death sentence; not anymore, because something has changed in the knowledge of the human body and of this virus. Fortunately, knowledge is never static. To conclude from that about the knowledge that art can produce, it makes total sense if you realize that art cannot do anything on its own. Art doesn't think, it is not a human being, but it has *cognition*, and cognition is not the same as thinking. It constantly produces inside, always in interaction with others.

This is what I wanted to express in *Reasonable Doubt*. The constant doubting that he [Descartes] did, made it possible for him by the end of his career, in his latest book [*The Passions of the Soul*, AHK], to express in his somewhat pompous rationalist prose what we can read between the lines of all his earlier work, and thus to reconsider all the things that we keep imputing to him. Well, his whole last book is devoted to the problematization of that, and to ask: if the mind is separate from the body, how is it possible then that the body responds to the mind? Because he was constantly doubting, he was able to come up with brilliant ideas, and that last idea has informed modern thought and modern philosophy much more than the rigid rationalism and body-mind split we have made of it. This is just an example. I think it is really important to realize that nothing in the world is static. Which is why the Italian artist Giovanni Giaretta made the minerals inside

the stones that you see, by way of an inner vision of Descartes during his walks, *move* a bit. Of course, minerals don't move—it is the deadest things that you can imagine, a stone with an inside—but the connection of seeing it, seeing the beauty of it, seeing the aesthetic of the inside of a stone, that is a movement. There is a constant movement everywhere and art can make that tangible and visible, because it works more explicitly with the senses than writing, although writing is also not without the senses. That mobile aspect of thought and of knowledge makes knowledge also very precious, it makes it also possible to want to acquire it, but in the process. Your beautiful M.A. thesis, I still remember, I learned new things about my work from your thesis, because your relation to the film work is different from mine, and so, necessarily something else comes up. And that is what is so beautiful about human societies.

I want to say one thing that, in the beginning, I didn't address. When you asked, in how far my approach is different from visual anthropology. For visual anthropology, the films and the photographs are a source, a resource, it is like a documentation. My documentaries are not documentations. It is very important to not see the documentaries as anthropological sources, because they are all about the intercultural situations; it is always about an encounter with people, who have different backgrounds. In that encounter, we develop knowledge about them, but not only about them, because in the conversation, they also develop knowledge.

**AHK:** In this sense, I would like to thank you, Mieke, for this insightful conversation!



15. *In Medias Res: A Tribute to Mieke Bal*, Teijin Auditorium, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 2017. Photo: Erik de Jager.



16. *In Medias Res: A Tribute to Mieke Bal*. Photo: Erik de Jager.

**MIEKE BAL** is a cultural theorist, critic, and video artist. She works on feminism, migratory culture, psychoanalysis, and the critique of capitalism. Her books include a trilogy on political art: *Endless Andness* (on abstraction) and *Thinking in Film* (on video installation), both 2013, *Of What One Cannot Speak* (2010, on sculpture) and *A Mieke Bal Reader* (2006). In 2016 appeared *In Medias Res: Inside Nalini Malani's Shadow Plays* (Hatje Cantz), and in Spanish, *Tiempos trastornados* on the politics of visibility (AKAL 2016). Her video project, *Madame B*, with Michelle Williams Gamaker, is widely exhibited, in 2017 in the Museum Aboa Vetus & Ars Nova in Turku, and combined with paintings by Munch in the Munch Museum in Oslo (with a book). Her most recent film, *Reasonable Doubt*, on René Descartes and Queen Kristina, premiered in Krakow, Poland, on 23 April 2016.

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17. Anna-Helena Klumpen and Mieke Bal, 2017. Painting in the background: Nalini Malani, *Courtesan I*, 2016. Private collection Amsterdam.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The interview was held on Sunday, March 19, 2017. Exhibitions mentioned: *Emma & Edvard – Love in the Time of Loneliness*. Oslo, Munch Museum, January 27–April 17, 2017, curated by Mieke Bal. *Mieke Bal: Reasonable Doubt*, Castrum Peregrini, Amsterdam, March 18–April 12, 2017, curated by Nina Folkersma. *Madame B: Explorations in Emotional Capitalism* (together with Michelle Williams Gamaker), Museum Aboa Ventus & Ars Nova, Turku, Finland, March 9–May 28, 2017, curated by Silja Lehtonen. Exhibition with works of Nalini Malani: *Nalini Malani: Transgressions*, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, March 18–June 18, 2017, curated by Margriet Schavemaker.

<sup>2</sup> *GLUB (Hearts)*, video installation, exhibited i.a. at Eigenheim Galerie, Weimar, Germany, October 21–November 4, 2006. *Becoming Vera*, 2008, by Mieke Bal, Alexandra Loumpet Galitzine and Michelle Williams Gamaker, 54' video, Colour.

<sup>3</sup> *GLUB (Hearts)*, 2004, by Mieke Bal and Shahram Entekhabi, 29'43" video, Colour, Berlin/Amsterdam.

<sup>4</sup> *Towards the Other*, exhibition, State Museum of the History of St Petersburg, Peter & Paul Fortress, St Petersburg, Russia, October 11–29, 2011, curated by Maria Veits and Ana Bitkina.

<sup>5</sup> *Madame B.* (2014), multiple-screen video installation, by Mieke Bal and Michelle Williams Gamaker.

<sup>6</sup> See Mieke Bal, "Spatialising Film". In *Hunting High and Low*. Festschrift for Jostein Gripsrud, ed. Jan Fredrik Hovden and Karl Knapskog. Oslo: Scandinavian Academic Press, 2012, pp. 160-182. See also Mieke Bal, "Documenting What? Auto-Theory and Migratory Aesthetics," in: *A Companion to Contemporary Documentary Film*, edited by Alexandra Juhasz and Alisa Lebow, Oxford, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2015, pp. 124-144.

<sup>7</sup> *Mille et un jours* (1001 Days), 2004, by Mieke Bal, Zen Marie, Thomas Sykora, Gary Ward and Michelle Williams Gamaker, 44' video, Colour.

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<sup>8</sup> See Mieke Bal, *Thinking in Film: The Politics of Video According to Eija-Liisa Ahtila*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> Volker Pantenburg, *Farocki/Godard: Film as Theory*. Amsterdam University Press, 2015, p. 68.

<sup>10</sup> Anna-Helena Klumpen, *Cinematic Thought: Creation and Critique of Knowledge in the Work of Mieke Bal* (working title), 2013–dato. For an abstract of the PhD project, see <http://artes.phil-fak.uni-koeln.de/21670.html>.

<sup>11</sup> See Gilles Deleuze, “Preface to the English edition.” In *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, p. xvi.

<sup>12</sup> See Alain Badiou, “The False Movements of Cinema.” In *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. Alberto Toscano. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005, p. 78. For a comprehensive account on cinema, see Alain Badiou, *Cinema*, ed. Antoine de Baecque, trans. Susan Spitzer. Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2013.

<sup>13</sup> See Kjetil Røed, “Den beste Munch-utstillingen jeg har sett!” *Aftenposten* (January 29, 2017), p. 4. For an English translation of the exhibition review, see <http://www.miekebal.org/artworks/exhibitions/emma-edvard-love-in-the-time-of-loneliness/responses-to-the-exhibition/>.

<sup>14</sup> See Mieke Bal, *Emma & Edvard Looking Sideways: Loneliness and the Cinematic*. Oslo: Munch Museum, and Brussels: Mercatorfonds, 2017. For an elaborated analysis of the *Self-Portrait*, see pp. 204-213. For Bal’s analysis of Munch’s *Wedding* painting, see pp. 127-135.

<sup>15</sup> See Mieke Bal’s film *A Long History of Madness* (together with Michelle Williams Gamaker), 2011, 120mins, Colour. See also Michel Foucault, *History of Madness*, ed. Jean Khalfa, trans. Jonathan Murphy and John Khalfa. London and New York: Routledge, 2009. See also Anna-Helena Klumpen, *Theoretical Fictions of Madness*, 2011, M.A. thesis, <http://www.christinelange.com/index.php?/projects/theoretical-fictions-of-madness/>