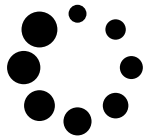


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Con-Temporary:  
Thinking and

Feeling Together

by Mieke Bal

Exhibition

Video essay

Don Quijote

Political art

Artistic process

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# Con-Temporary: Thinking and Feeling Together



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## Abstract

The paper focuses on exhibition practice, taking exhibitions as the key to contemporaneity. I will make a strong plea for the mutuality between past and present, the encouragement of visitors becoming participants through soliciting affective empathic attitude, and the accommodation to make this possible thanks to the enticement of durational looking. I will do this through the theoretical analysis of what exhibiting means and does, and through a consideration of my recent video installation *Don Quijote: Sad Countenances*. One episode of this project will be the hook on which to hang my view of art-making as, not an illustration of but a method of cultural analysis.

## Keywords

[Exhibition](#)

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[Artistic process](#)

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In this article I am particularly keen to explore the implications of the preposition “con-” as a guideline for immersive art. With the qualifier “immersive” I aim to suggest that art can offer insights into the *process* of art, rather than the aesthetic, intellectual qualities, objecthood, or history of particular artworks. The process is what involves people, social issues and contexts, and what is “live” – dynamic, unstopably moving, and never stable – about art. Art is not a “thing;” we, as its viewers or users, are inside it. In particular, I would like to argue how making audio-visual installations can be a terrific resource for the integration of “academic” reflection and scholarship with art processing through immersion. The *making* aspect enables me to reflect on and create situations where the relationship with visual art can become a social route while remaining artistically relevant. For this to happen, *contemporaneity* is key: immersion can only happen in the present.

The integration of approaches I have termed “cultural analysis:” the detailed analysis of cultural objects or artefacts, not in isolation but in their live, social and political context, as artistic and aesthetic, intertwined with intellectual reflection. The two approaches of detailed, close analysis and framing in context are not in contradiction: this is my starting point. More than 25 years ago I have co-founded an institute at the University of Amsterdam, called ASCA: Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis. Its goal was and is to promote an approach wherein the socio-political and the contemporary are not in contradiction, only in a productive tension with detailed analysis and lessons in looking; nor is the contemporariness in tension with history. When, in 2002, by chance I found myself in a situation where I had to make a film as a witness statement, witnessing the police injustice against immigration, I bought a small video camera and started filming. It concerned the life of my neighbour – an immigrant “*sans papiers.*” Meeting him in the courtyard,

by chance, seeing his arm was in a cast, I asked him what happened, invited him in, and our conversation about his situation led to an enduring friendship – given the need for mutual trust, this is the a priori condition of making a documentary. With a small group of friends, under the heading of Cinema Suitcase we made a documentary, *A Thousand And One Days*, obviously alluding to the Arabic classic, and inspired by the name of the collective, a number of documentaries and performance films followed, focusing on “migrimages,” to borrow a term from a research project at the University of Granada indicating visual presentations of situations of migration.<sup>1</sup>

This was the moment I discovered how deeply *making* an artwork helps intellectual thinking. But also, how intellectual thinking is never alone. In the book that has appeared in 2022, titled *Image-Thinking: Art Making as Cultural Analysis* I explain in detail how making the films I have since then made, have helped me immensely to deepen my thinking. That is what I have termed “image-thinking,” in an attempt to come up with a term for integration of the different activities of which my work consists. Of course, in a short article I can only briefly touch upon the important questions this endeavour brings up. To make it work, I would like to count on you having seen, or going to see, the episode 6, of 8 minutes, of my installation from 2019, *Don Quijote: Tristes figuras*, based on fragments from (mostly) the first part of the novel by Cervantes (from 1605). Hard as that decision was, I declined to make a feature film, as I had done with my other projects based on the cultural heritage of fiction. This seemed unacceptable, because

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about the resulting documentary: [https://www.miekebal.org/films/mille-et-un-jours-\(1001-days\)](https://www.miekebal.org/films/mille-et-un-jours-(1001-days)), accessed July 15, 2023, and M. Bal, “A Thousand and One Voices,” in M. Anders Baggesgaard, J. Ladegaard, eds., *Confronting Universalities: Aesthetics and Politics under the Sign of Globalisation* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2011): 269-304. The third chapter of my book *Image-Thinking: Artmaking as Cultural Analysis* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022): 90-130 is devoted to the question of “who speaks?” in documentaries, with this film as the example. The term “migrimages” was invented by literary theorist Domingo Sánchez-Mesa Martínez.

turning that novel into a linear, coherent narrative film would be a betrayal of the most crucial aspect of the novel: its non-linearity, even incoherence. Instead, an immersive installation, as you can see in the documentation, where we showed its installations done immediately after finishing the project.<sup>2</sup>

Take the scene *Narrative Stuttering*, which I hope you have watched or will do so. This scene shows Don Quijote alone on a dark theatrical stage. Sancho Panza is sitting on a chair on the side, helping him when needed, as a prompter. The knight is desperately trying to tell his story, the adventures, his opinions, whatever happened to him, but he is unable to act effectively as a narrator. At the end, he bursts into tears and Sancho holds him in order to comfort him, demonstrating, by physical touch, that he is not entirely alone. See the photograph on the web page, second column. The appeal to empathy is a key aspect of what we tried to achieve with this installation. Sancho is giving the example; the visitors can follow his lead (imaginatively).

The darkness of the stage deprives the space of perspectival depth. The dark stage isolates him and, at the same time, gives him an audience. The theatrical setting is a material “theoretical fiction” that explores how theatricality can perhaps help to enable the narratively disabled. My commitment to addressing the issue of narrative

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2 See <https://www.miekebal.org/film-projects-1>, accessed July 16, 2023. <http://miekebal.withtank.com/artworks/installations/don-quijote-sad-countenances/episode-6-narrative-stuttering>. For a book on the installation, see M. Bal, *Don Quijote: Sad Countenances* (Växjö: Trolltrumma, 2019), also in bilingual English-Spanish edition as *Don Quijote: Tristes figuras / Don Quijote: Sad Countenances* (Murcia: Cendeac, 2020). The installation has been exhibited at a World première in Småland Museum / Kulturparken, Växjö, Sweden (October 31, 2019), then at Usina Cultural, Villa María, Argentina, VIII Congreso (April 26 to May 6, 2022), the Zürcher Hochschule der Künste (ZHdK), as part of the congress of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Ästhetik (German Society for Aesthetics) *Ästhetik und Erkenntnis* (July 13-15, 2021). Installed in the Aktionsraum of Toni-Areal (July 13-21, 2021), in the exhibition *Art out of Necessity, video installations by Mieke Bal* at the Museum Jan Cunen, Oss, Netherlands (October 3, 2020 - January 31, 2021), interrupted mid-December by the second corona lockdown); in the Leeds Arts University Gallery a.k.a. The Blenheim Walk (January 7 - February 14, 2020). Curator: Catriona McAra, and in the Sala de exposiciones, Universidad de Murcia, Facultad de Bellas Artes (November 14, 2019 - January 18, 2020), curated by Jesús Segura.

disablement through trauma has been nourished especially when I made, with British artist Michelle Williams Gamaker, and with the participation of psychoanalyst of trauma Françoise Davoine, the theoretical fiction film *A Long History of Madness* (2011) and installations derived from it. This film is “about” madness, but it also stages, performs, enacts, and critiques ideas about madness and their cultural history. Based on the 1998 book *Mère Folle* by Davoine, the film stages the question and practice of the psychoanalytic treatment of people diagnosed as “psychotic” and whom, to avoid narrowing diagnostic discourse, we call “mad.”<sup>3</sup>

The film raises the art-historical question whether we can say there is an “iconography of madness.” Most of the actors *play* “madness.” None of them *are* mad. Davoine’s book, written as a fiction, theorizes this question. In that sense it is a “theoretical fiction.” That term comes from Sigmund Freud. He came up with it to defend his quite crazy story of the sons who kill and eat their tyrannical father. Freud made up a fiction, not simply to *explain* his theoretical finding of the Oedipus complex, but primarily to *develop* it through immersion in fiction, which he needed to understand and articulate what he had been intuitively groping toward. This is thinking *in, through* and *with* fictional characters and events. My book title “Image-Thinking” was derived from Freud’s concept.

When, later, I showed my film *Reasonable Doubt*, on René Descartes and Queen Kristina of Sweden, to an artist friend, she complimented me on the “theatrical” quality of the film. Then I understood why theatricality had, in fact, always been an important aspect of my fiction films. The theatricality helps to do what I have called “exhibiting

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3 On this issue of madness as a consequence of trauma, the book by Françoise Davoine *Mère folle: Récit* (Paris: Hypothèses Arcanes, 1998) is crucial. Our film *A Long History of Madness* came out in 2011 (directed by Mieke Bal and Michelle Williams Gamaker). For more information: <https://www.miekebal.org/films/a-long-history-of-madness>, accessed July 16, 2023. See also the special issue on the book and the film: E. Landa, ed., “Cinéma et psychanalyse,” *Le Coq-héron* 4, no. 211 (2012).

ideas.” In the video project based on *Don Quijote*, this theatricality is even more prominent, not only in the acting, but in the exhibition itself. The exhibition as installed is, then, itself a “theoretical fiction.”

Theatre scholar Kati Röttger considers theatricality

a specific mode of perception, a central figure of representation, and an analytic model of crises of representation that can be traced back to changes in the material basis of linguistic behaviour, cultures of perception, and modes of thinking.<sup>4</sup>

The multi-tentacled description gives theatricality many functions, and foregrounds its inherent intermediality. In addition, and more specifically for our project, theatre and performance scholar Maaïke Bleeker gives theatricality the critical edge that the exhibition seeks to achieve when she calls it “a critical vision machine.”<sup>5</sup> These two definitions together already show that theatricality can offer a critical perspective on the images and ideas that circulate, in this case, in the exhibition that is as mad as the main figure of Cervantes’s novel is generally assumed to be. A madness in which the visitor is *immersed*.

For this need of the narratively incapacitated figure an empathic audience is indispensable. It is the task of the artwork to solicit such an audience. This requires a form of display that changes the traditional museal display, which keeps audience members at a distance and is quite hard on the audience’s physical condition. But it is primarily an artistic issue. This governs the temporality of looking. In the theatre, in contrast to traditional display, visitors can sit, relax, and concentrate. If the display is nearby and

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4 K. Röttger, “The Mystery of the In-Between: A Methodological Approach to Intermedial Performance Analysis,” *Forum Modernes Theater* 28, no. 2 (2018): 105-16, <https://doi.org/10.1353/fmt.2013.0014>.

5 M. Bleeker, “Being Angela Merkel,” in E. van Alphen, M. Bal C. Smith, eds. *The Rhetoric of Sincerity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009): 247-62. See also Bleeker, *Visuality in the Theatre: The Locus of Looking* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

accessible, and visiting can consist of quietly sitting, the museum can become such a theatre. You see people sitting down, and as a result, talking together about the painting that is in front of them, low-hung, on eye-level. The Don Quijote exhibition seeks to produce such material comfort, and thus will facilitate affective engagement in visitors. The consequence is a radically different temporality of viewing. *And time, thus, turns out to be a condition of an immersion that effectively affects.* If affect is a vibrant communication between people, or between people and artwork, then they must be given the time, the physical comfort this requires. This imagining, testing, and reasoning regarding the affective effectivity of museum display shows how this project pertains to what is currently called “artistic research” – a search through analysis through artmaking.<sup>6</sup>

That concept is deeply problematic. It maintains the hierarchy between academic and artistic research, suggesting that artists can earn academic diplomas if they can explain and articulate how their works came to be. The risk is an over-intellectualizing of art. The linearity built into the concept is deceptive; this is not how art-making happens. As Kamini Vellodi warns us in her Deleuzian critique of the concept of “artistic research:” “it is difficult to deny that a major impetus of artistic research has been *economic, policy-driven, and managerial.*”<sup>7</sup> With these words she invokes the curse that is destroying universities word-wide as we speak. Both art and thought are thus being damaged. When thinking is subjected to methods, it becomes

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6 I have strongly argued for the relevance of seating in exhibitions in a show I curated at the Munch Museum (Oslo) in 2017 (with a book publication).

7 K. Vellodi, “Thought Beyond Research: A Deleuzian Critique of Artistic Research,” in P. de Assis, P. Giudici, eds., *Aberrant Nuptials: Deleuze and Artistic Research 2* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2019): 215-33, 216.



re-productive. In a Deleuzian view, thought, instead, ought to be the production of the *new*.

This thinking is congenial to art-making, but just as much to academic work. The integration of these two creative activities is explained in my book *Thinking in Film* from 2013, on the video art by Finnish artist Eija-Liisa Ahtila. But the search is not for direct academic answers. The concept of “image-thinking,” in the form of a verb, renders the interaction between thinking and imaging more forceful. To foreground this, we titled an exhibition of my video work in 2019 in Murcia, Spain, *Contaminations: Reading, Imagining, Imaging*. The noun “contaminations” suggests that the art is inevitably in process and “contagious,” having an affective impact, as I said above. The verb “imagining” was my attempt to foreground the way the imagination creates images. The collaboration with Hernández made these issues clearer and the neologisms more productive.<sup>8</sup>

The fourfold challenge to make a video project based on *Don Quijote* engage its troubled relationship between content and form, and between the narrative and visual aspects involved. The research part was, firstly, to decide which aspects of the novel are crucial to make a video work that has a point. Secondly, that point had to connect artistic and social issues, and to improve our understanding of how these two domains can go together, in the contemporary, with the collaboration of the past in what we call “cultural heritage” – here, Cervantes’ novel. The importance of the past for the present, and vice versa, how our present changes the past as we can see it, must be foregrounded on the basis of non-chronological, mutual relations. The fourth chapter of my new book, *Multi-Tentacled Time: Contemporaneity, Heterochrony, Anachronism for Pre-posterous History* analyses time in its multiplicity.

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<sup>8</sup> That exhibition was curated by Miguel Ángel Hernández. A collective volume, edited by Hernández, was published in 2020.

This is also a central concern both in narrative theory and in film.<sup>9</sup>

In my academic work I have a controversial reputation as someone who does not take chronology for granted. After publishing *Reading "Rembrandt"* (1991) I was blamed for being ahistorical, which, although not true, was a stimulating incentive to think harder about historical time. That led to my book *Quoting Caravaggio* (1999), in which I addressed that critique, and developed a new sense of history in relation to time. But it was when, already filmmaking, I was working with Miguel Ángel Hernández Navarro on a large collective video exhibition devoted to the connections between the movement of images and the movement of people, in other words, video *and* migration (not *on* migration), that my thinking about temporality took another turn. 2MOVE (the exhibition), was shown in four countries, with in each a local artist added.

The last concept in the chapter's title, "pre-posterous history," is presented again through my latest, 2020 short "essay film" *It's About Time!* This film, the title of which is as ambiguous as the concept of "pre-posterous history" with its self-ironic wink, addresses the world's self-destructive impulse. It does this through the voice of Christa Wolf's character Cassandra. She was the prophetess from antiquity, who will see and know the future, as a gift with the purpose of seduction from the god Apollo. But when she refused to sleep with her employer, he punished her: she was doomed never be believed. An antique case of #MeToo.

In that fourth chapter I discuss the different issues of time that, in narrative theory, are usually divided into order, rhythm, and duration. I complicate that tripartite

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9 M. Bal, *Image-Thinking*: 131-74. I have first developed this neologism, "pre-posterous history," in my book on Caravaggio in its mutual relationship with contemporary art *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999). "Multi-tentacled" stands for the plurality of temporal relationships, for which I chose the octopus as a symbol.

theory by adding the experiential aspect (heterochrony) and the categories of the historical disciplines. This rethinking of chronology has an important impact on how we see ourselves in history. For the first time I have taken a biographical fact on the novel's author on board. This "fact" is the five-and-a-half years Cervantes spent as a slave in Algiers, without knowing he would ever get out. If we take this on, all the adventures, the madness, the violence that colour the adventures of the Knight Errant, get a different shade. On my reading, the issue that rules the novel's aesthetic is the difficulty of story-telling due to the horror encountered. This is now called "post-traumatic stress disorder" – except that, as usual, the preposition "post-" perverts the connections between past and present. The traumatized subject is "disordered" because, precisely, the trauma doesn't go away.

There is nothing "post-" possible for the traumatized. The insights the novel generates connect to other experiences of war, violence, and captivity: contemporary ones. You can see succinctly what the consequences of traumatization tend to be, according to a very lucid article by Ernst van Alphen. The author analyses the experiential handicaps resulting from trauma as well as the narrative ones. To sum it up succinctly: as a failed experience, trauma leads to semiotic incapacitation, unavailable forms of representation, the stalling of the discursive process, which would be needed for having experiences. Specifically, in narrative terms, ambiguous actantial position, the negation of subjectivity, the lack of meaning-giving plot, and unacceptable frames. But a well-thought-through immersive video project can explore and transgress the limits of what

can be seen, shown, narrated, and empathically witnessed, in relation to notoriously un-representable trauma.<sup>10</sup>

Full of incongruous events and repetitive stories, maddening implausibility, lengthy interruptions of the story-line, inserted poems and novellas, and at the same time, anchored in a harrowing reality, while also making readers laugh out loud, this novel, in form and content, challenges reading itself. This requires interdisciplinarity, in all meanings of that preposition “inter-.” I have termed it “intership.” The similarity to the word “internship” suggests that this, too, concerns learning, as a practice of mutuality.

Film seems the least apt to do justice to the novel’s turbulent incoherence, repetitiveness, and incongruous adventures told in the novel. Talking about it with actor Mathieu Montanier, who came up with the idea of making a Don Quijote video work, we decided that an immersive video installation consisting of different, non-linear episodes *presented with seating* would be more effective in showing, rather than representing, not the moment trauma occurs but enduring violence-generated traumatic *states*. The importance of showing is to enable *witnessing* as an engaged activity against the indifference of the world, our worst opponent. The ambition was to make a work the theatricality of which in immersive display helps to turn onlookers and voyeurs into *activated*, empathic *witnesses*.

This artwork must yield “thought-images” or *Denkbilder*, created by means of “image-thinking.” The small iconic texts that Adorno, Benjamin, Kracauer wrote, were texts only. What did the word *Bilder* do there, then? This is where “image-thinking” can meet, and yield, “thought-images.” In a study of the genre, US-based scholar of German

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10 E. v. Alphen, “Symptoms of Discursivity: Experience, Memory, Trauma,” in M Bal, J. Crewe, L. Spitzer, eds., *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* (Hanover NH: University of New England Press, 1999): 24-38.

Gerhard Richter begins his description with a whole range of negativities.

Indeed, a programmatic treatise would be something like a political pamphlet, as opposed to historical objectivations – an opposition that audio-visual art is devoted to questioning. This is an important point in connection to attempts to separate political art or scholarship from propaganda. The difference is important: propaganda *dictates*, as in dictators, which is close to imposing; whereas political art and scholarship expose and propose, but leave the freedom of the addressees intact; as long as they are immersed, so that they are enticed to respond to the art they see. What Richter disparagingly calls “*fanciful fiction*” stands opposed to an equally dismissed “*mere reflections of reality*.” “Rather,” Richter continues, “the miniatures of the *Denkbild* can be understood as conceptual engagements with the aesthetic and as aesthetic engagements with the conceptual, hovering between philosophical critique and aesthetic production.”<sup>11</sup> The word “engagement” is crucial; it requires contemporaneity. This matches Benjamin’s fifth thesis on images of the past, which has been a guideline for my work on art between history and anachronism: “Every image of the past that is not recognized by the present *as one of its own concerns* threatens to disappear irretrievably.”<sup>12</sup> This warning is one of the main motors of immersive projects and needs endorsement of their contemporariness. For, the cultural heritage from the

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11 G. Richter, *Thought-Images: Frankfurt School Writers’ Reflections on Damaged Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007): 2.

12 W. Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn (London: The Bodley Head, 2015): 245-55, 247.

past matters for today's world. But only if we manage to bring it to bear on the present.<sup>13</sup>

Richter further describes the thought-image thus: "The Denkbild encodes a poetic form of condensed, epigrammatic writing in textual snapshots, flashing up as poignant meditations that typically fasten upon a seemingly peripheral detail or marginal topic."<sup>14</sup> The word "flashes up" suggests the quick flash that Benjamin urges us to preserve by means of recognition in the first sentences of that thesis V from which I now quote a later sentence: "The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again."<sup>15</sup> This also connects to the question of historical truth, at stake in the scene "Who is Don Quijote?"<sup>16</sup>

In this regard, in his *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno writes:

What cannot be proved in the customary style and yet is compelling — that is to spur on the spontaneity and energy of thought and, without being taken literally, to strike sparks through a kind of intellectual short-circuiting that casts a sudden light on the familiar and perhaps sets it on fire.<sup>17</sup>

As in Benjamin's thesis, as well as Lyotard's figurality, the language here is again both visual and shock-oriented, with "sparks," "short-circuiting," "sudden light" and "sets it on fire." This is *thought alive*, living thought, here-now,

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13 On this necessary contemporaneity I have published the short book *Exhibition-ism: Temporal Togetherness* in the series *The Contemporary Condition* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2020), requested by the author of a fabulous later book on contemporariness: J. Lund, *The Changing Constitution of the Present: Essays on the Work of Art in the Time of Contemporaneity* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2022). My point was the idea that exhibitions are the most precise "model" for the contemporary.

14 G. Richter, *Thought-Images*: 2.

15 W. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History:" 247.

16 See for this scene, <http://miekebal.withtank.com/artworks/installations/don-quijote-sad-countenances/episode-4-who-is-don-quijote/>. This scene also suggests that the actor, Mathieu Montanier, bears a striking resemblance to the (totally imaginative and imaged) figure who never existed historically, but of whom we have a clear image.

17 T. W. Adorno, "The Essay as Form" (1954-58), in *Notes to Literature*, trans. S. Weber Nicholson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991): vol.1, 3-23.

and this living thought has *agency*; it is capable of engaging viewers in a dialogic relationship. And it is visual. For such sparks to happen, thought needs a formal innovation that shocks, and time to make immersion in it, possible. Thus, it can gain new energy and life, involve people, and make thought a collective process rather than the kind of still images we call *clichés*. Our attempt to achieve such “sparking,” shocking innovation can be glimpsed in this photograph by Ebba Sund: the frame is both blurred, since the escaping slave leaves it behind, and foregrounded, in the large proportions the iron bars have compared to the fleeing man (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Mieke Bal, *The Captive escapes*, photograph by Ebba Sund. An episode of the 16-screen installation *Don Quijote: Sad Countenances*, 2019, video, color, Dolby sound, 8 minutes. Courtesy the artist.

In the videos, such sparks lay in the combination of material, practical changes of the mode of display as immersive, short-circuiting the anachronistic bond between present and past, the confusion of languages and other categories we tend to take for granted as homogeneous, and the intermediality of the audio-visualization of a literary masterpiece. In view of the need for witnessing, such a messy “thinking” form enables and activates viewers to construct their own story, and connect it to what they have seen around them; on the condition that they



are immersed through being given time. Thus, we aimed to turn the hysteria of endless story-telling into a reflection on *communication*, as it can breach, and reach beyond, the boundaries that madness draws around its captive subjects, and instead, open up their subjectivity. Here, in the brilliant photograph also by Ebba Sund, the Captive cannot speak; his mouth is visually muzzled. But his eyes do speak, to us – if we are given the time, through seating, to respond (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Mieke Bal, episode 6 of the 16-screen installation *Don Quixote: Sad Countenances*, 2019, video, color, Dolby sound, 8 minutes. Courtesy the artist.

To give insight into the stagnation that characterises the adventures, these scenes are predominantly *descriptive*. Any attempt at narrative is “stuttering,” without development. The scene *Narrative Stuttering I* recommended you watch before reading this essay, shows both the incapacitation to narrate and the frustration this causes. The theatrical setting is meant to draw visitors’ attention to the way they are themselves situated: inside a theatre, sitting on the stage, rather than in front of it, where they can fall asleep or get excited, identify or not, and possibly remain indifferent. Here, such indifference is hard to sustain, because the viewers’ freedom to determine themselves how long they wish to stay with a scene makes falling asleep contradictory.



This is the tentative design of the installation I made beforehand, suggesting the total arbitrariness of the lay-out. The different installations follow this design roughly (Fig. 3).

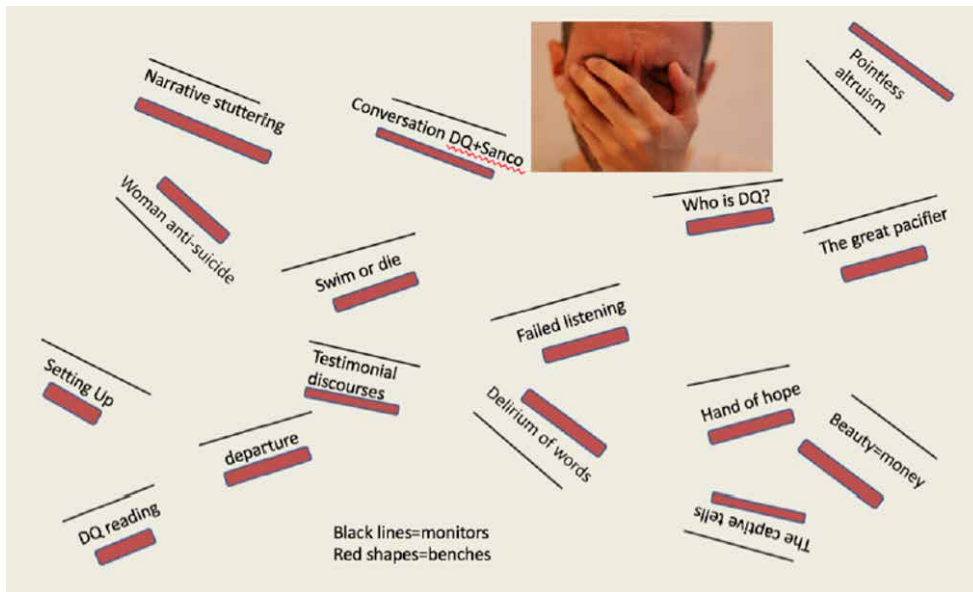


Fig. 3. Mieke Bal, project for the design of the 16-screen installation *Don Quijote: Sad Countenances*, 2019. Courtesy the artist.

What Françoise Davoine calls, citing historian Fernand Braudel: “*poussières d’événements*” (literally, dust of events) is the motto of this work’s form: sprinkling situations, moments, throughout the gallery space. This is adequate to the state of trauma presented in the pieces and in the juxtapositions among them. The disorderly display gives a shape, however unreadable and unclear, to the trauma-induced madness of the novel’s form.

Cervantes, I presume, was one of those “mad” ones. The trauma incurred by Cervantes after being held in captivity as a slave, has been beautifully traced in his writings and those of contemporary witnesses by Colombian literary historian María Antonia Garcés, a must-read book for anyone interested in Cervantes, *Don Quijote*, or slavery, then and now. Contemporary. As it happens, Garcés was held captive by the FARC terrorist guerillos for five months. This contemporaneity is incompatible with the ridiculing representation of the “mad Knight Errant” that is so routine, both in cinematic representations and in much of the scholarship. Supported by Garcés’s well-documented analysis, I

see a haunting autobiographical spirit in the three chapters on the *Captive* (pp. 39-41 of part I). But the shape of the theatrical display does not “re-present” the madness. It hints at it, makes us reflect on it.

The *Denkbild* is in the form, so that a contemporary aesthetic can reach out to, and touch, a situation of long ago that, as befits the stilled temporality of trauma, persists in the present. Through experimenting with possible forms of the art of video, we attempted to invent *new forms for the formlessness of trauma*. By means of image-thinking this installation had to answer to the paradoxical concept, or thought-image, of *the shape of formlessness*. Here, theatricality returns: ostensibly acting is the form that does not overrule the history, the violence, or the traumatic state. Acting, these videos suggest, is a social role. Acting, and making videos, exhibiting them in a thought-through immersive mode, is an attempt to give the formlessness of society a form. This is an attempt to do just that: to shape formlessness as the form of the traumatic state, by designing a display that is both theatrical, in that it appeals to empathy, and turns “live,” that primary characteristic of theatre, into “life,” which concerns the social reality we live in and are responsible to sustain; and the knowledge acquired through the integration of making, analysing, reflecting, and boldly proposing new insights.

Filmmaking begins with casting. In the case of *Don Quijote*, the actor cast himself; knowing he was the spitting image of the character as we know, or think we know him. An earlier significant casting decision occurred when Michelle Williams Gamaker and I decided to cast the three men in Emma’s life, in *Madame B*, in the same actor, suggesting the woman was in love with love and its promises of excitement, not with any man in particular.

I have made many films and installation pieces, over the last twenty years, and I guarantee you, there is

no more effective mode of doing research and developing ideas than integrating these two activities. You can learn more about these films on the relevant page of my website. So, let me end on my personal motto, already cited, which demands the remedy of immersion: “Every image of the past that is not recognized by the *present* as *one of its own concerns* threatens to disappear irretrievably.” This is pre-posterous history. The past without present is pointless. The present without past is empty. But as soon as we try to fix either one, the future disappears.

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**of Environmental Images**



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