

Exhibition-ism:
Temporal
Togetherness

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PROLOGUE: REVISING RODIN

Fernando Sánchez Castillo, *The Thinker*, 2018

The phrase “contemporary art” is frequently used; it is rather ordinary. Yet some unpacking, which I will do through a short “case study,” can help grasping what “contemporary” means in relation to “art.” To respond to Rodin’s most famous sculpture through gender-bending is a timely intervention in a tradition where thought is tenaciously connoted masculine, leaving for women other roles, mostly servicing masculine desires. In all its brilliance, Rodin’s masterpiece fits into a tradition of falsehood, reductionism, and iconographic stagnation. What Spanish contemporary artist Fernando Sánchez Castillo has done in 2018 is shake this stagnation up, waking it from its slumber, and contributing to a small redress in the gender-biased culture we so obstinately continue. But even if the placement of the sculpture at the Eurojust building in The Hague gives that attempt at gender justice more weight, this alone would not be an earth-shaking innovation, albeit an appropriate and useful act of activism. The construction of a tall and heavy bronze sculpture one hundred years after Rodin’s death, which is symmetrical to Rodin’s iconic representation of “man in thought,” is much more than an activist gesture of gender awareness, however. For, it implies and involves reflections on the relationship between visuality, thought, and matter, in a search for justice in an unjust world in the present. At the same time, it indicates that this bias that seems a thing of the past happens now—it is *with* our time, *con-temporary*.¹

At any given time, what each of us sees when looking at an image, whether historical—“old master art”—or contemporary, is a new image, fresh from the thought-act the viewer and his or her baggage of experience, earlier viewings, and thoughts brings to bear on it. That makes art contemporary: it acts on and with its viewers in the present. This is not, not

1. This “case study” contains fragments from a catalogue text I wrote for Sánchez Castillo’s work. To my knowledge, this has never, or not yet, been published.

ever, our own thinking power only, but primarily the image that persuades us to enter into the interaction. This is how images can be said to “think”: in interaction (performatively), in theoretically relevant ways (as theoretical object), and across time (anachronistically). These three facets point to those aspects of the image that seem more like ideas than things or people. Those ideas result from an integration of forms, narrative strands, modeling, color, and quotations of the same in other, older images, or texts. To make more of Sánchez Castillo’s sculpture than seeing it as a refreshing redress of gender bias—more, in order to see in an activist piece its activating power—these aspects together matter; they are the *matter* of this work, the materiality of which is so emphatically present in the now.

We can look at both sculptures—Rodin’s quoted one and Sánchez Castillo’s present one—in terms that do not get mired in iconographic permanence or allegorical abstraction but instead in a relationship with their viewers that is, to use a paradoxical phrase, constantly on the move. The artist seeks to give the sculpture that combination of smooth and rough, still and moving, shiny and dull aspects that both sculptures end up having. The process of making such a sculpture is long and materially multilayered. From a plaster modeling retouched with plasticine, finished with wax; then, decisively, cast in bronze, polished, and covered with patina, and in turn, waxed; I cannot imagine a more profoundly material practice. This materiality is one of the motivations of my choice to begin this text with it. It connotes permanent presence.

How is this sculpture con-temporary, beyond the date of its inauguration, last year, in 2018? “Last year,” a deictic phrase, already loses its meaning when you read this text, in 2020 or later. And the sculpture’s date disappears from view with each event of seeing it. Standing in front of the Eurojust building and looking at Sánchez Castillo’s sculpture inevitably brings Rodin’s along, and as a result, the old sculpture

becomes contemporary. This is how the anachronistic—what I will term below “preposterous”—aspect of artworks, in tandem with their performativity, brings old images to life. Every viewer who will see both Rodin’s heroic man and Castillo’s familiar-looking woman—notice the ponytail hairdo!—together, becomes a performer of a new vision. This performance is directed—in the sense in which a theater or film director indicates to the performers how to enact their roles—by the work’s performativity. In this way, the two concepts of performance and performativity are inextricably connected.²

Temporality most crucially defines the former concept, and the event it names: performance takes place in time. It occupies duration, and its effects—its performativity—necessarily occur during, and in the wake of that duration. Moreover, time affects ontology. It defines existence, and life, as impermanent, as always on the move. Not only is a performance something J. L. Austin aptly compared to fire, because fire hovers between thing and event, and so do performances. But the inevitable ontological indeterminacy *takes time* in and of itself as well. The performative work, then, is ontologically anchored in time, even if the “thing” that constitutes its dead letter exists primarily in space, as does a sculpture. In a highly original and relevant study of iconographic allusions to Caravaggio’s paintings in contemporary activist photography on refugees, art historian Francesco Zucconi makes a lucid case for this performativity in and with time. His argument itself is contemporary, since it binds the images to the issue that is happening in the present.³

2. I have argued this in a detailed analysis of a work by James Coleman in the chapter “Performance and Performativity” of my book *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

3. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975 [1962]); Francesco Zucconi, *Displacing Caravaggio: Art, Media, and Humanitarian Visual Culture*, trans. Zakiya Hanafi (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

I choose a sculpture in bronze for this argument, because its material makes it seem enduring, barely open to the effects of duration. But as an artwork, it is not, since it requires acts of viewing to exist. The material solidity of bronze foregrounds this time-space paradox. Persistent into the present and future, this sculpture is dated 2018, a date the relevance of which comes from the fact that it indicates and indicts the overly long time it took to notice the bias in the universal-masculine conceptualization of thinking. Spatially, its connection to a building of justice and the cliché allegory of the blind woman such a building would inevitably invoke, superimposes another layer of meaning. Austin's felicitous comparison with fire also foregrounds the materiality of performance, and *its* temporality, which is more fugitive than the materiality of bronze. Fire is substantial enough to help us produce as well as destroy. Let us take this comparison as a conceptual metaphor and see if perception shares that risk and potential with fire. For, in all its instability, fugitivity, and destructive potential, fire also helps us see—a necessity if we are to experience the impact—the activating performativity of images on our thinking. Fire, now, becomes a metaphor of art. What I tend to infer from analyzing artworks are “thoughts” about the conditions, circumstances, modes, or strategies of social life and the function of art in it; these thoughts are, in turn, up for discussion—they are neither recipes nor prescriptions. Enveloped in the movement and noise of the city, the social rumors, ideas, and issues that are “in the air,” this work makes visitors or passersby co-perform simply by walking through the space. But this “thinking” or rather, “thought-inducing” work is also *about* thinking, which makes it an allegory of my argument here.

Co-performing: the work's performativity compels viewers to wish to have, feel, a response; in other words, to do what is inevitable anyway: co-perform a work that depends for its successful performativity on such participation.

The primary feature of this sculpture set in its still materiality, is that it is *moving*, in many senses of that word. One of which is helping us *see through*: through time and space to the issue it presents to us, and thus theorize the work and its medium—and this is literally, or allegorically, the case. Seen from the back, Rodin's *Thinker* appeals to the tactile gaze by means of the smooth surface of the figure's back, which almost seamlessly morphs into the lump on which "he" sits, yet contrasts with the pedestal's rougher surface. The equalizing material smoothness makes a point, not only about our desire to touch and stroke, but also about the questioning of anthropomorphic looking in its bond with tactility and eroticism.

With the figure transformed into a woman, this enticement of the tactile gaze puts a sudden stop to the naturalized accessibility of the material. For we cannot help but realize that stroking and touching a female figure counters, with its traditional eroticism, the effect of the "thinking" pose. This ambiguity is strengthened by the subtle transformation of Rodin's muscled body to one that, with ribs and vertebrae protruding, looks the opposite of masculine strength: undernourished. Thus, the work intimates another aspect of justice and the lack of it in our world where economic differences become harsher by the day. The face of Sánchez Castillo's figure now takes on a decidedly melancholic aspect. The eyes are cast down, in a less universalizing version of "blind justice." Perhaps thinking and melancholia are getting too close for comfort here. The heroic male doing his deep thinking on the meaning of life; the woman, perhaps discouraged, considering where to get food, reflecting on the possibility of life.

This art in space and in matter, co-performed by its social participants, has the potential to produce knowledge and insight greater than that of its creator. Here lies its contemporaneity. This knowledge is constantly on the move, since

its fragile articulations can only occur in a singular relationship with viewers, users, or readers of a work of art who “see through” it. Seeing through—the etymology of “theory” in the Greek verb *theorein*—implies a double vision: one of the objects we see; one of the thoughts it invokes, that go further, detach themselves from the material object in its place, and bring the issues brought up both closer to home and moving further, in a thinking variant of the rippling effect.

I see this prologue with its focus on *The Thinker* as a “case study.” The primary motivation for this is my insistence, in what follows, on the need to closely engage cultural objects such as artworks, in order to let them “speak,” perform, and thereby become contemporary. However, the case study as a genre has acquired a dubious reputation as a facile entrance into theoretical generalization and speculation. As Lauren Berlant wrote in her introduction to the first of two volumes of *Critical Inquiry* devoted to the case study, the genre is “a problem-event that has animated some kind of judgment.” In the introduction to the second volume, she elaborates that typically, when something becomes a case of something, this becoming a case is itself an event. That event verifies something in a system, or series. This has consequences for such as system or series, which is why the “becoming a case of” constitutes an event. When certain symptoms are named, this event can lead to a diagnosis. Alternatively, it can occasion a reframing of a cluster of objects or activities. The new case may trigger a solidifying of the cluster or series, or transform them. They may also be explained through the new case.⁴

This is very different from the anecdotal and the individualistic that characterize particularity. Sánchez Castillo’s

4. This is a paraphrase of Lauren Berlant, “Introduction: What Does It Matter Who One Is?,” in “On the Case: Missing Persons,” special issue, *Critical Inquiry* 34, no. 1 (Autumn 2007): 1. I will have more to say on the concept of “event” below. The preceding reference is Lauren Berlant, “On the Case,” in “On the Case: Making the Case,” special issue, *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 4 (Summer 2007): 663.

sculpture, with its insistent recall of Rodin, can hardly fit the idea of particularity. Yet, with its very specific features and meanings, neither can it be generalized. Between particularity and its underlying individualism, voyeurism, and anecdotal irrelevance, on the one hand, and generality with its erasure of specificity on the other, I propose to position the contemporaneity of viewing artworks in terms of *singularity*. I find that term most apt to account for the elements of multiplicity without either erasing or hyperbolically and defensively hypostatizing group identity. I understand singularity in a relation of opposition to generality in order to acknowledge and focus on the strictly irreducible differences between people and what happens to them. At the same time, this distinctiveness is not reducible to anecdotal information. Instead, the singular is that which maintains difference without turning it into the (generalizable) ground for group identity. As will become clear throughout this text, singularity allows for an active life of the political where particularity would be silenced and generality would turn out to be irrelevant.⁵

The term “case study” has been overly inflected by particularity, then generalized to exemplarity. This leads to the stabilization of the case’s impact and a thematization of its meaning. In the case at hand, a hasty generalization might stop the thinking process as soon as the unmissable gender rectification has been noticed. Sánchez Castillo’s sculpture is too complex for that. I therefore recommend using the alternative, more specific term “theoretical object,” which I will discuss below, to account for the relation between image and thought in its “evental” happening, *now*. All these aspects of this obviously “contemporary artwork” will return in the following reflections.

5. The concept of singularity is mostly discussed in philosophy. The distinction I am proposing here between particularity and singularity does not play a major role there, and the two are frequently used interchangeably. See, for example, Alain Badiou’s *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004). More concretely, Derek Attridge discusses it in literature, in *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004), e.g., 23.

FROM COMPOSITION TO EXHIBITION

I wish to focus this text on a “case study,” but as will become clear, this is not a facile road to generalization, but instead, a complicating one. To make matters seem worse, the “case” is a work I have (co-)made myself. But if you fear self-indulgent narcissism, rest assured: I will complicate authorship in the wake of doing that to contemporaneity. The video installation *Don Quijote: Sad Countenances*, like *The Thinker* a contemporary artwork in the routine sense, and also addressing an older, famous artwork, allows me to unpack the many aspects of the concept of the contemporary.

A video installation, comprising also photographs, consisting of an incoherently displayed ensemble of sixteen dispersed screens with the photographs randomly dispersed among them: this is the moment, the now, in other words, the contemporaneity of the cultural object around which this essay circles. No linearity is suggested. It looks a bit like the social world, in its disorderly display. For each screen, seating is provided, offering time. The screens are not numbered. As a consequence, visitors are left free to construct their own stories. The seating welcomes and encourages durational looking. The space looks messy; but small islands of concentration are available. Juxtapositions makes some sense but suggested coherences are not compulsory. This combination of disorderliness and the comfort of seating is the material, practical, but also, or even primarily, artistic concept of the exhibition. The term “exhibition” is my friendly alternative to Terry Smith’s term “composition,” so adequately presented in the first page and a half of his book in this series, and with which I have no qualms. The remainder of his book is a precious source with many relevant analyses of artworks. His focus on Christian Marclay’s 2010 *The Clock* is highly, and allegorically, relevant for any

discussion of the contemporary. My term is meant to slightly slant the focus on contemporariness.⁶

There are by now many published reflections on “the contemporary condition,” as the title of this book series has it. Several are quite valuable, and I don’t seek to add to them. Except for that one small proposal to look at how in *exhibition* the contemporaneity traverses all levels of space, visitors, material conditions, and much more. The word “exhibitionism” is typically used as the converse of voyeurism. In this essay, “exhibition-ism” is a plea for the recognition of the fundamental contemporaneity that defines the cultural practice of exhibiting, and hence, a plea for taking exhibiting under certain conditions as a model for making, presenting, and thinking about art as contemporary. The hyphen distinguishes this word from the conventional noun that denotes the tendency, or desire, to show oneself, in sexual contexts or otherwise. The noun stands for vanity. Instead, here exhibition-ism turns exhibition practice into a key for what the qualifier “contemporary” can mean for understanding art as emerging from and returning to the social world of today; and “-ism” indicates my conviction that this is an important lead to follow. Not as a period label, nor as a stylistic qualifier, but as taken literally in order to analyze what art is and can do. The practice of exhibition-making, called curating, here becomes central, rather than derivative and secondary to the art-making that allegedly precedes it. Instead, I contend that curating is part of the art-making; the art is nothing if not seen, hence, curating and art-making are converging in a process that can only reach its accomplishment in the moment, *now*.

6. Terry Smith, *The Contemporary Composition, The Contemporary Condition 02* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 9, 10, and 44–50.



“Don Quixote” in Växjö (Photo: Ebba Sund)



“Don Quixote” in Murcia (Photo: Luz Bañón)

It is the task of art to solicit an audience that can relate to what is on display, to be seen. This is a primary goal of exhibitions. And when what is to be seen is intertwined with what happens in the contemporary world, that relation can have a critical, amused, admiring, confused quality. In one way or another, the viewer participates, co-performs: the art-viewer relationship is affective. How that affective bond is fleshed out is up to each viewer. In this project, we aimed for it to be empathic, for example. That relation is what makes art—all art, that is—contemporary. For this to be possible, however, a form of display is required that changes from the traditional museal display, which keeps audience members at a distance—a distance often materialized by bars, cords, signs, and enforced by guards—and turns it into a *theatrical* setting; for theater happens in the present; it is *live*. And this is a first important qualification of exhibition if it is to become a model of contemporaneity, as I am proposing here. Moreover, the routine mode of display is testing on the audience's physical condition, since standing and walking are the habitual modes of visiting. Paintings are usually hung high, so that standing is necessary to see them. This governs the temporality of looking, reduced to brief moments.

In the theater, by contrast, visitors can sit. And if the display is nearby and accessible, and visiting can consist of quietly sitting, the museum becomes a kind of theater in this sense, without binding the viewer to one seat for the duration, as is traditionally the case in the theater. The kind of exhibition I see as a key to contemporaneity—to understanding and deploying the concept and the practice—seeks to produce such material comfort. This helps facilitating affective attachment in visitors while preserving their freedom to decide how long they wish to sit in front of each artifact. The consequence is a radically different temporality of viewing. And time, thus, turns out to be a

factor of affect. Affect, a relationship of intensity, is only possible in the present.⁷

The exhibition “Don Quijote” consists of sixteen video screens with what I call scenes or episodes in looped videos. The scene titled “Narrative Stuttering” shows Don Quijote attempting desperately to tell. But he fails—I will explain why in the final chapter. He cannot really narrate; he is narratively incapacitated. The scene was filmed in a theater to make the point of theatricality in exhibition as I just proposed, making that feature more “medium-specific” and thereby allegorically foregrounded. It shows Don Quijote alone on a dark theatrical stage. The darkness of the stage deprives the space of perspectival depth, at times making Don Quijote seem almost to be floating. The stage isolates him and, at the same time, gives him an audience. Sancho Panza is sitting on a chair on the side, helping him when needed, as a prompter. The knight is trying desperately 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 sags to the floor and bursts into tears. The sagging was designed in the scene’s dramaturgy. Sancho leaves her/his prompter chair and holds him in order to comfort him, demonstrating, by physical touch, that he is not entirely alone. In the exhibition in the Småland Museum in Växjö, the photo above shows that the darkness of the entire space, which was simply due to the material conditions, mirrors the scene in the theater. The latter thus becomes a *mise en abyme* of

7. I first experimented with seating in an exhibition I curated for the Munch Museum in Oslo in 2017. See the accompanying book, *Emma & Edvard Looking Sideways: Loneliness and the Cinematic* (Oslo: Munch Museum; Brussels: Mercatorfonds; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017). It has become my primary principle for curating. On affect—one of those overused terms that, like “trauma,” also at stake here, are in danger of losing their meaning—see Ernst van Alphen, “Affective Operations of Art and Literature,” *RES: Journal of Anthropology and Aesthetics*, nos. 53/54 (Spring/Autumn 2008): 20–30. For a valuable recent edited collection, Ernst van Alphen and Tomáš Jirsa, eds., *How to Do Things with Affects: Affective Triggers in Aesthetic Forms and Cultural Practices* (Leiden: Brill, 2019). My view of affect as a relationship of intensity is based on Deleuze. See his *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 182, where he defines intensity as a “qualitative difference within the sensible.”

the entire exhibition—an effect that the display in Murcia did not have. There, other special effects of the dramaturgy played out, such as the disposition of the primary scene, the seemingly simple one of Don Quijote reading, on a large screen, put directly on the floor near the entrance, halted visitors who tried to do a quick turn-around in their tracks, and almost compelled them to sit down and look, slightly downward.⁸

The theatrical setting in “Narrative Stuttering” is a material version of a “theoretical fiction” — a term I will explain below — that explores how theatricality can perhaps help to enable the narratively disabled. But this raises the question, what is theatricality? This question does not ask for a definition, but for a consideration of the potential, of placing the concept as a mini-theory in a constellation of discourses, uses, and meanings around the idea of contemporaneity. Theater scholar Kati Röttger explores the many meanings and implications of it when she 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.” The multi-tentacled description gives theatricality many functions, and foregrounds its inherent intermediality. In addition, theater and performance scholar Maaïke Bleeker gives theatricality the critical edge that the exhibition seeks to achieve when she calls it “a critical vision machine.”⁹

8. Here, too, a gender-bending intervention appears. For the role of the historically fat and ridiculed lower-class servant we cast Argentine performance artist Viviana Moin; an idea proposed by main actor Mathieu Montanier. This alone is already a decision that brings the age-old source work into the present.

9. Kati Röttger, “The Mystery of the In-Between: A Methodological Approach to Intermedial Performance Analysis,” *Forum Modernes Theater* 28, no. 2 (2018): 105–116. Maaïke Bleeker, *Visuality in the Theatre: The Locus of Looking* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); “Being Angela Merkel,” in *The Rhetoric of Sincerity*, ed. Ernst van Alphen et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 247–262. In these publications Bleeker demonstrates, through detailed analyses, how productive such a conception of theatricality can be for a political art that is not bound to a political thematic.

For the need of the narratively incapacitated figure in his theatrical setting, and the likes of him in real life, an empathic audience is indispensable. For this reason, there was an audience in the theater during the filming, whose near-silent presence is sometimes audible. It is the task of the artwork to solicit such an audience.



Sancho (Viviana Moin) holds Don Quijote (Mathieu Montanier) in order to comfort him at the end of "Narrative Stuttering" (Photo: Mar Sáez)

This example, like the case of Sánchez Castillo's *The Thinker*, has an allegorical surplus in the theatrical setting. According to the choreography, the figure of Sancho was to abdicate his/her role of prompter, which gives a certain authority and (near-)invisibility, and step into that of "second in combat," in ancient Greek, *therapôn*, from which contemporary notions of therapy and therapist were derived. Now, the authority of the servant over the master is entirely dependent on the former's willingness and capability to achieve equality with the latter. The move from the chair to the middle of the stage was carefully choreographed to make that transformation visible.

This allows me to move from a singular case where the phrase “contemporary art” sounds too habitual to strongly make my case, to the equally allegorical instance of a real exhibition. From there, the theatrical aspect can be extended to encompass exhibition-ism more in general. Below I first consider the concept of the contemporary a bit more closely, in search of suitable concepts to bring to it. In that discussion, I go through some works in the writing or making of which I have been made aware of what contemporary means and does over the course of my career as an academic cultural analyst and later, as (also) an artist, and a sometimes-curator. Throughout the essay, my plea for an integration of analyzing and/as making runs along, in contemporaneity, with the argument about time and history, converging into what I have termed “preposterous history.” Based on an inter-temporal dialogue between past and present, this concept revisits history, in this case, the historicity of art, from the starting point of the present. Past and present, thus, become contemporary. But what do I mean by this word “contemporary”; how can it become a concept?¹⁰

10. More on the concept of preposterous history later. See my book *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). Later, Georges Didi-Huberman—in “Before the Image, Before Time: The Sovereignty of Anachronism,” in *Compelling Visuality: The Work of Art in and out of History*, ed. Claire Farago and Robert Zwijnenberg (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 31–44—proposed the concept of “anachronism,” which I hesitate to endorse because it flattens the idea, and it has a bad reputation which is not necessarily wrong. “Anachronism” is well explained in Jacob Lund, *Anachrony, Contemporaneity, and Historical Imagination, The Contemporary Condition* 13 (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2019), 23–24.

GROPING FOR A TERM

There is no elegant, smooth word for what I aim to explore in this book: different forms in which “contemporariness” happens. The key word consists of the preposition “con-” from the Latin “cum,” meaning “with,” alongside, side by side, together, in dialogue; and the noun “time,” notoriously hard to pin down, materially non-existent while suffering from self-evidence. As notably Gérard Genette’s narratology has made clear, “time” is a complex term that encompasses order, the messing up of linear chronology; duration, which, as Deleuze wrote, the philosopher of duration complicated: “Bergsonian duration is defined less by succession than by coexistence”; and frequency, which inserts in thinking on time the potential of reiteration and extension into generalization. The verb “happens” foregrounds the event, the act, the punctuality, the momentariness, instead of, say, a period label, as in “contemporary art.” For Slavoj Žižek, the first meaning of “event,” of the six he discusses, is reframing. All this amounts to an immensely complex gathering of ideas.¹¹

To bring these aspects together—to make them “con-” as in a “constellation”—I want to discuss art in this frame of eventness, as something that happens, which is always temporally specific. It is also spatially specific, and involves agents and their performative acts. When I write “art” I mean an “art event” in this sense. For this reason, I concentrate on what we call “exhibition,” a term that is usually understood to intimate that what is exhibited already existed before. It did, and it did not. I will briefly mention

11. Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (1972), trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980). Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 60. On Repetition, see Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*. On the event, Slavoj Žižek, *Event* (London: Penguin Books, 2014).

some moments of encounters, in my own academic work, with the contemporary, before zooming in on what is most contemporary in my work: the present tense of what I am up to *now*, which is an exhibition that is happening at the moment of writing this text.¹²

The current reflection is the most recent step in a process of two decades, of what a colleague once told me I should call “auto-theory.” With the term “auto-theory” he thought I would describe my academic-cinematic practice of the last eighteen years, of integrating academic and artistic research and analysis. What happened in 2002, were two seemingly unrelated events that became deeply intertwined. On the one hand, a nasty event happened to my then neighbor, a then undocumented migrant, and I felt I should stand by him and become a witness to the blatant injustice and cruelty perpetrated in my name as a European citizen. On the other hand, as a keen cultural analyst, I was seeking other methods, ways, and tools to analyze the contemporary—the world around me—than an objectifying analytical writing based on documentation, which is always already belated. The primary motivation that made me acquire a simple video camera was the wish to do both. The one was an instantaneous social event; the other a longer-term intellectual dissatisfaction. Both continue into the present.¹³

Present and past are not opposed; nor are contemporary and historical; they are related in a dialogue, in what I have termed “inter-ship” in my plea for the use of

12. The premiere in the Småland Museum in Växjö opened on October 31, 2019, and lasted until December 31. Meanwhile, the version in Murcia opened on November 14, 2019, and continued until January 18, 2020. In Leeds it opened on January 8, 2019, and ran until February 14. So far, there were two exhibitions overlapping in time.

13. For more on the film that resulted from that first moment, titled *Mille et un jours* (A Thousand and One Days), see <http://www.miekebal.org/artworks/films/mille-et-un-jours/>, and my 2011 article on the experiment, “A Thousand and One Voices,” in *Confronting Universalities: Aesthetics and Politics under the Sign of Globalisation*, ed. Mads Anders Baggesgaard and Jakob Ladegaard (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2011), 269–304.

the preposition “inter-” over the frequently used “trans-.” I sought to understand the contemporary, what happens *now*, as a way of historicizing without the invariably deterministic chronology, built on blaming the past and praising the present as more “developed.” A key text in my growing antagonism to chronology was Johannes Fabian’s book *Time and the Other* from 1983. Frustrated by the inevitable delay between what happens now and how to understand it, due to the several years that pass between writing and publishing, I started to make films as a mode of documenting the undocumentable; of trying to see what cannot be archived; and to learn from the alleged (usually objectified) subjects, turning the tables and make them the “first-person” narrators; from objects of analysis they became subjects in the active sense. These were decisive interventions in my academic work, in addition to making me aware of the creativity in myself so far repressed. From the beginning the filmmaking was conceived as a dialogue. At the heart of this is the idea of the contemporary in a strict sense. How can we *know the now*?¹⁴

I resisted that label “auto-theory” a bit, in spite of its descriptively clear and fair meaning, because in addition to suggesting a self-centeredness, it intimates singular authorship. This is untenable. The author, if that concept is still valid, is by definition plural. As I have argued elsewhere, Barthes and Foucault have not really killed the author, but undermined many of the traditional features assigned to the one who holds the copyright. According to the introduction of a special issue on authorship of *Vesper*, a new Venice-based journal for cultural theory, art and architecture, authorship is an act of creation as augmenting, expanding what is already

14. In his *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), Fabian rigorously analyzes the way anthropology as a discipline needs this superiority complex even in order to exist. On inter-ship, see my article “Intership: Anachronism between Loyalty and the Case,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, ed. Thomas Leitch (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 179–196.

existing. This formulation helpfully rules out the norm of originality and individualism. It also acknowledges the past in the present—here, the “already existing”—as well as the relativity of the idea of “creation,” not *ex nihilo* but as a response, in a dialogue with the world. It was in these terms that I analyzed the contemporaneity of Sánchez Castillo’s sculpture. And that dialogue can only occur in the present tense.¹⁵

With this qualification, I propose to modify the notion of auto-theory for yet another reason. It is not theory as coming from the outside of the visual work, but from the inside. This also holds for its temporality: the theorizing, or thinking, happens *during, through* the art-making. This is an additional meaning of the contemporary. What that colleague termed auto-theory is now generally called “artistic research”—a search through analysis through art-making. The concept is not unproblematic, but the undertaking is worthwhile. It is problematic in the first place because it leaves the hierarchy between artists and academics in place. The former are supposed to be creative but inarticulate; the latter are supposed to be smart but dry and unimaginative. Both presuppositions are erroneous, and restrict what people involved in either domain think they can do. This limitation is kept alive when “artistic research” is used as a basis for the claim that artists, too, can make PhD-level work. It does nothing about the alleged dryness of the academic mind. Thanks to that hierarchy, I have left my creative side dormant for a very long time. Until, even before making the leap to video-making, someone told me my writing style had become more creative. That judgment resurfaced on

15. See my article “Challenging and Saving the Author, for Creativity,” in “Author-Matter,” special issue, *Vesper: Journal of Architecture, Arts & Theory*, no. 2 (Spring–Summer 2020): 132–149.

the occasion of the double event mentioned above.¹⁶

In such an endeavor, the search is not for direct academic answers. Instead, it paves the ground for a more fertile academic practice, of which it does not contradict or undermine or even necessarily amend the routinely used methodologies. It is an attempt to make “thought-images” (from the German *Denkbilder*) by means of its counterpart, the activity of “image-thinking” that help understanding on an integrated level of affect, cognition, and sociality. I have called the specific genre of video production that seeks to create thought-images in previous works, “theoretical fictions”—a term briefly used above. This is the deployment of fiction to understand and open up difficult theoretical issues, and to develop (academically viable) theory through “imaging” what fiction enables us to imagine. The crucial role of the imagination in thinking is key to this concept. This is how Leonardo da Vinci solved his problem of making complex, abstract knowledge concrete and thus clearer for himself, and understandable through visualization in painting.¹⁷

As it happens, the thought-image has a preposterous-historical past, too, which roams around in the present. Sánchez Castillo’s sculpture is clearly a thought-image, at least according to my presentation of the work. But the concept comes from writing, rather than from visual images. It was a literary-philosophical genre, a favourite of the group of writers of the pre-World War II Frankfurt School of social

16. For an excellent relevant critique of the concept of “artistic research,” see Kamini Vellodi, “Thought beyond Research: A Deleuzian Critique of Artistic Research,” in *Aberrant Nuptials: Deleuze and Artistic Research 2*, ed. Paulo de Assis and Paolo Giudici, Orpheus Institute Series (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2019), 215–231. A recent collected volume of interviews edited by Lucy Cotter both shows the difficulty and the promise, while reconfirming and critiquing the sense that it is the artists who need to claim the research aspect of their work. Of the need for academics to claim their power of imagination and the way it helps their work not much is said. See Lucy Cotter, ed., *Reclaiming Artistic Research* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2019).

17. On this search in Leonardo’s work, see Federica Fiorani and Alessandro Nova, eds., *Leonardo’s Optics: Theory and Pictorial Practice* (Venice: Marsilio Editore, 2013).

thought. The small iconic texts Adorno, Benjamin, Kracauer, and others 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, California-based scholar of German Gerhard Richter begins his description of the genre with a whole range of negativities: “*Denkbilder* are neither programmatic treatises nor objective manifestations of a historical spirit, neither fanciful fiction nor mere reflections of reality.”¹⁸

“Rather,” Richter continues, in a more affirmative tone, “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.” This double, mutual engagement is a quite precise articulation of the way I see my own work in this domain. This view resonates with Benjamin’s fifth thesis on images of the past, which has been a constant guideline for my work on art between present and past, 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.” This warning that we lose, even erase the past if we don’t make it relevant for today, is crucial, also, for my current project; it is one of its main motors. It states the importance of the contemporariness of all things past. Most centrally Benjamin’s statement has impacted my work on baroque art today—which I decline to call “neo-baroque” because of the unidirectional implication of that term. This has inspired me to develop the concept of preposterous history. Before this, and although I was not yet aware of it, it is also the motivation

18. See Gerhard Richter, *Thought-Images: Frankfurt School Writers’ Reflections on Damaged Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 2. Ernst van Alphen proposed the concept of “image-thinking” as a counterpart to “thought-images,” an idea for which I am very grateful. His concept, in the form of a verb, is more dynamic, rendering the interaction between thinking and imaging more forcefully (personal communication, August 2019).

behind my approach to Rembrandt, a book that got scolded for its alleged ahistoricism. This was a productive encounter with “opponents,” a criticism that set me on the course toward the preposterous-history book. I felt that history is important, and I owed my critics an explanation of why the work was not ahistorical but differently historical.¹⁹

Image-thinking, then, as a way toward thought-images; theoretical fictions as a deployment of the imagination for understanding. In order to relate to others, we need to know about them, and when full knowledge is impossible we still must try to approximate, encircle, or *feel* it. That is what it means to imagine. That is why the imagination is so important. In turn, it is why art is vital; offering the imagination something it *images*. Taking the element “image” of the imagination, turning it into an active verb that allows a *middle voice*, and thus bringing it to the viewer, both body and mind, is the material practice through which art matters. I have deployed this bond between the contemporary, its preposterous-historical other, and the imagination, in my film and installation work on René Descartes and Queen Christina.²⁰

There is one more term that further enhances and thickens all these forms of contemporaneity. To learn from the films I make, both about documentary-making and about migratory culture; both about how to produce knowledge

19. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 255. This reflection on thought-images reframes a few elements of my extensive discussion of the genre of the thought-image a propos of the art of Nalini Malani, in *Medias Res: Inside Nalini Malani’s Shadow Plays* (Östfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2016), esp. ch. 2. On baroque, see my *Quoting Caravaggio: On Rembrandt, Reading “Rembrandt”: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

20. The imagination is crucial for any attempt to make politically relevant art. For a highly illuminating article of the middle voice, see Maria Boletsis, “From the Subject of the Crisis to the Subject in Crisis: Middle Voice on Greek Walls,” *Journal of Greek Media and Culture* 2, no. 1 (2016): 3–28. About the film *Reasonable Doubt*, on Descartes and Kristina, see my article “Thinking in Film,” in *Thinking in the World*, ed. Jill Bennett (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 173–201, and for information, clips, and photos, <http://www.miekebal.org/artworks/films/reasonable-doubt/>.

ethically and how to deploy the medium to do so, I consider artworks, including my films, as “theoretical objects.” As Hubert Damisch, the creator of that term, explains it in an interview with Yve-Alain Bois, a theoretical object

obliges you to do theory but also furnishes you with the means of doing it. Thus, if you agree to accept it on theoretical terms, it will produce effects around itself [... and it] forces us to ask ourselves what theory is. It is posed in theoretical terms; it produces theory; and it necessitates a reflection on theory.²¹

In the dynamic between the works as objects, their viewers, and the time in which these come together, accompanied by the social that surround both, a compelling collective thought process emerges, thanks to the contemporaneity in the moment. Events of viewing are the sites of these thought processes, this triple theoretical activity Damisch mentions.²²

In my theoretical fictions I have extended the idea of the theoretical object to include the dialectic between making and reflecting. In a series of articles and documentary films I (co-)made between 2003 and 2010, which culminated in a large exhibition in Saint Petersburg in autumn 2011, I have experimented with this idea around the issue of the still somewhat shapeless cultural changes I described as “migratory culture,” also explored in a traveling group exhibition I cocurated with Spanish art historian Miguel Á. Hernández Navarro, in 2006–8, to indicate a culture no longer easily defined in terms of nationality. Our goals were to understand “migratory culture” as a culture of movement, best grasped in the moving image, as well as the ways the

21. Yve-Alain Bois et al., “A Conversation with Hubert Damisch,” *October*, no. 85 (Summer 1998): 8.

22. Bois et al., 3–17. Damisch’s concept of the theoretical object sometimes seems to suggest these are objects around which theories have been produced. At other times, as in the interview quoted here, he attributes to the artwork the capacity to motivate, entice, and even compel thought. It is this meaning of the term that I endorse.

movement of images and the movement of people mutually illuminate each other; to understand how works of art and other material artifacts can harbor, stimulate, and compel the development of thought; and to reconsider my own theoretical convictions in view of encounters with otherness of which I am myself a party. Most crucially, this culture happens today in an ongoing “durational,” hence juxtaposed, process of contemporaneity.²³

All these concepts come together in my intense engagement with the contemporary. Image-thinking, thought-image, theoretical fiction and theoretical object: they are all based on a form of being “con-” (with) and of simultaneity: thinking while making images; imaging thoughts for nuance and concreteness; exploring through the imagination, and perceptual thinking. Although each somewhat differently slanted, these activities combine thinking, perceiving, exploring in acts that are contemporary with one another. In order to explain why I privilege exhibition as the model for contemporaneity, I will now bring these activities together in a brief discussion of the exhibition that is presently on display in three different museums, in different countries: Sweden, in Växjö, Spain, Murcia, and Leeds, United Kingdom. I compliment and thank the many collaborators in Sweden and England for taking on a project about a monument of “cultural heritage” from another country; those in Spain, for embracing a project that they could as well have considered “abducted” by a non-Spanish colleague and, which could be considered worse, a non-Spanish speaking actor for the main character. The openness of both groups I found heartwarming in its resistance to the

23. For just a few examples, see my “Food, Form, and Visibility: *GLUB* and the Aesthetics of Everyday Life,” *Postcolonial Studies* 8, no. 1 (2005): 51–77; “Becoming the World versus Identity Politics,” *Nordlit: Tidsskrift i litteratur og kultur*, no. 24 (2009): 9–30; “The Commitment to Face,” in *Commitment and Complicity in Cultural Theory & Practice*, ed. Begüm Özden Firat et al. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2009), 120–136. With Miguel A. Hernández Navarro, I curated the traveling exhibition “2MOVE,” with our catalogue *2MOVE: Video, Art, Migration* (Murcia: Cendeac, 2008). On the exhibition in the State Museum of the History of Saint Petersburg, see <http://www.miekebal.org/artworks/exhibitions/towards-the-other/>.

growing nationalism in the contemporary world. This, too, I wish to foreground, is a feature of contemporaneity: the participation in the political. A major issue, a testing ground of this view of the contemporary as “being-with,” is “madness.” In what follows, I will discuss this as an exemplary, perhaps also allegorical, instance of the feature of the contemporary as sharing.²⁴

24. I don't have space to go into this important topic, to which I devoted several books. For a succinct reflection, see Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

SHARING MADNESS

In order to grasp the fundamental contemporaneity of exhibition, I present an extreme example: extreme in the many-tentacled contemporaneity, and in the thematic and poetic sense. The “original” or “source” is four centuries old, and is a literary text, whereas the exhibition consists of videos. The issue at stake is trauma, a psychic illness that is notoriously unrepresentable; and a term not yet invented at the time of Cervantes’s writing. The central figure is mad (supposedly). The videos are spoken in different languages, and set in different places. But the visitors come together in time. This coming together is the theatricality: they sit together on benches. They can talk, laugh, and cry together, at the same moment in time. About what, with whom?²⁵

In the late sixteenth century, a young Spanish soldier was captured by Corsairs, and sold into slavery in Algiers. This was common practice in the Mediterranean area; primarily a commercial endeavor. From 1575 to 1580, the young man had no idea if and when he would ever get out. Imagine the feeling—or rather, the incapacity to have any. His parents did not have the money to redeem him. In the extant documentation, not much transpires about how the detained experienced their situation. We can only imagine. Yes, we need the imagination, in the face of such unrepresentable events and situations that we call “traumatic.” Captivity is not only a horrific experience, but the worst of it is, I would think, not knowing if there will ever be an end to it. Time loses its meaning. And it stretches endlessly. Into today. This harrowing stagnant or even atemporality is at stake in this exhibition. This is

25. In what follows I select from and expand on fragments of the publication that accompanies the exhibition, for which I wholeheartedly thank Niklas Salmose, who made it all possible: the exhibition itself, and the publication.

in confrontation with the temporal liberty offered to the visitors. The way the screens are disposed is without order. Dramaturgically, people can choose their own order, roam through the gallery, return to their starting point, stay for the entire eight minutes of each screen or leave after a minute. This disorderliness of the theater is both in contrast with the unfreedom of the character, and fits with the impossibility to establish a sequential orderliness. It is what turns Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra's 1605 and 1615 masterpiece into a contemporary novel. For he was that soldier. French actor Mathieu Montanier, with whom I had worked on earlier video projects, approached me, more or less out of the blue, asking if we could not do a *Don Quijote* film. I immediately saw the point. We began to analyze and think, creatively, about how that would make sense. This collective process yielded what is now on display as *Don Quijote: Sad Countenances*.²⁶

The image-thinking research of which this project is the result in substance and form, concerns more than the novel's content, relevant as it is; nor does the work directly address the biography of the author. But it does take seriously these three facts *together*: Cervantes was captured and held in slavery; the novel contains an inserted story about such a soldier captured and held in slavery (chapters 39–41, of part 1); and slavery is not a thing of the past at all; in the contemporary world live over 40 million slaves, of whom 70% are women. The video pieces “She, Too” and “A Hand and the Thread of Hope” make the biographical issue contemporary while staying very close to the old-master novel. ◊f the former scene, the allusion in the title makes the connection to the contemporary obvious:

26. Montanier played a key role in the film and installation pieces *A Long History of Madness* (2011), <http://www.miekebal.org/artworks/films/a-long-history-of-madness/>, and played the nasty pharmacist Homais in *Madame B* (2014), <http://www.miekebal.org/artworks/films/madame-b/>. He is brilliant, in particular, in playing on the edge of hysteria and (other forms of) madness. This made his Homais character in *Madame B* more convincing, more profound, than even in Flaubert's masterpiece. In the history of films on *Don Quijote*, there is no more suitable actor imaginable.

“She, Too” alludes to and thereby become contemporary with “Me Too.” Of the latter scene, the intertwining of the real-life horror with a fairytale ending dreamed up, the actual naming of the author (Saavedra is mentioned, which is Cervantes’s second surname) and the set in a fake-gothic castle with cars parked in the garden, all merge fiction and history, past and present, and especially, the first-person/second-person exchange between artwork and visitor—the heart of the contemporariness of the work.

The mode of storytelling is the primary target of the search, between past and present, as between literary and audiovisual—two instances of “con-,” togetherness. To start with the latter, the intermedial translation: what is it that must remain for it to stay con-temporary? First of all, a specific kind of contemporariness within the novel, which is its (non-)narrative form. 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 an ongoing, atemporal, harrowing reality, while also making readers laugh out loud, the novel challenges reading itself. I wonder every time I read in it, what the appeal is that keeps me haunted. Yet the films based on this novel mostly bore me—in spite of all due respect for the great makers who tried, from Orson Welles who could not finish it to Terry Gilliam who took fifteen years to do so. This paradox triggered the underlying “artistic research” or “image-thinking” question. Whereas Gilliam’s film, in a postmodern vein, attempts to make the story contemporary, it does not make the novel so.²⁷

Talking about it with Mathieu Montanier, we got the idea that a video installation consisting of different, non-linear episodes might instead be more effective in showing, rather than representing, not the moment trauma occurs

27. Gilliam’s 2018 film, a good example of a postmodern “versioning” of the novel, cannot avoid the ridiculing of the old man, which is standard in interpretations in whatever medium. I object to the “gerontophobia” inherent in this mode.

but violence-generated traumatic *states*. In this respect, it seemed relevant that Wittgenstein's ending of his *Tractatus* (1921), "Of what one cannot speak, one should keep silent," was modified later into "Of what one cannot speak, one can still show." The importance of showing is to enable *witnessing* as an engaged activity against the indifference of the world. For the present argument it matters that witnessing is only possible in the present tense, as is looking. Hence, showing depends on the present of looking, with which it is simultaneous. The theatricality of this display helps to turn onlookers and voyeurs into activated, empathic witnesses. Since, like looking, witnessing is only possible in the present tense, this is the locus of the contemporaneity.²⁸

In order to connect, in the now, to the peculiar, cyclic, perhaps even "hysterical" form of the novel while pursuing these two goals of showing and, or for, witnessing, only an equally "incoherent," episodic artwork can be effective. Beyond formal similarity, it needs to yield "thought-images" or *Denkbilder*, created by means of "image-thinking." The key is that the incongruous storytelling follows the lead both of narrative as ongoing, sequential, and of situations as contemporary, as staying in the moment. This further qualified my concept of preposterous history, as well as the historical one of thought-images. The image of the past-present is not a symbiotic collapsed one but an instantaneous event. To grasp this fully, we need to consider language, metaphors, and even simple word choices, in the light of the idea of thought-images. I expand this concept to include even just single words. This becomes clear when Richter further

28. See the final sentence of Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. David Francis Pears and Brian McGuinness (New York: Routledge 2001). On his change of opinion see *Philosophical Investigations*, section 41, commented on by Françoise Davoine and Jean-Max Gaudillière in *A bon entendeur, salut! Face à la perversion, le retour de Don Quichotte* (Paris: Stock—L'autre pense, 2013), 17, 51–52, who quote Maurice O'Drury, *Conversations avec Ludwig Wittgenstein*, trans. J.-P. Cometti (Paris: PUF, 2002), 159, 170, 173.

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."²⁹

The word "flashes up" is one of those words that approach the thought-image status. It suggests the quick flash that Benjamin urges us to preserve by means of recognition in the first sentences of that 5th thesis quoted above, from which a later sentence says: "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."³⁰ The word choices in these two passages "image" quite precisely why and how we seek to revitalize Cervantes's novel for today, as contemporary. We cannot do this in a linear film, which would have to endorse chronology with its evolutionist linearity, but in "flashes." A flash is a temporality between the no-time of the instant and the stretch of durational time. In our exhibition, these take the form of short, 8-minute video clips. These each present a scene, or episode. Only two out of the sixteen of these have a narrative tenor, with an outcome of sorts. Mostly, they trail by, with sometimes hectic talking, sometimes challenging slowness. But neither in between nor within each, is there a narrativity suggesting continuity. This (anti-)narrative poetic impacts on the relationship between the space and the visitors. By lack of narrative continuity, the visitors are directed only by the space itself, which gives it performativity.

In the use of metaphorical language, Benjamin's sentence also connects to the question of historical truth. This is a huge issue when intertemporality or preposterous history must be thought in relation to the contemporary as

29. Richter, *Thought-Images*, 2.

30. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 255.

well as the historical, connecting to the real world. This issue is at stake in the scene "Who is Don Quijote?"

Dramaturgically, the scene is staged as follows. It is set in two different, adjacent parts of a large room. During a voice-over about the need for truth in the work of historians, in the right-hand side of the room, an artist with a large camera, shot in close-up, is trying to capture the knight-errant's portrait on the left side. The figure of the actor as Don Quijote with an ambiguous identity is facing the artist as well as a mirror, a little more distant, slowly changing his face. Every time the artist looks up, the figure's face is dramatically different. The artist is choreographed to frantically start anew every time he changes, visibly a bit annoyed. The final one is the "sad countenance." The artist looks happy, in contrast with the sadness Don Quijote's face expresses. She/he now "gets it."

This scene is based on portraiture, which is a pictorial genre that raises the question of truth. Portraiture is truth-based in the historical sense, since the sitter has existed, whether or not the likeness portraiture presupposes has successfully come across. It is not, however, the physical likeness that matters; in most cases we cannot verify that. Instead, the sitter performs a role, as Louis XIV played his role of a powerful man, according to Louis Marin's analysis. The sitter puts on a mask, showing the face he or she wishes to show to the world. It is that role, that mask that is visible. But then, there is that other, affiliated genre, the self-portrait. In the case of self-portrait, the portrayed cannot look at the viewer, since a mirror serves to paint the self. The performance (role-playing; the mirror) and performativity (effect of make-believe; the mask as persuading us) of the two genres go together; the mirror and the mask are coextensive.³¹

31. See the essays in the collected volume *Mirror or Mask: Self-Representation in the Modern Age*, ed. David Blostein and Pia Kleber (Berlin: VISTAS Verlag, 2003).

Don Quijote never existed; yet his face is so well known, thanks to many depictions, that people in the street in Murcia where we were filming, “recognized” the actor as the literary figure. This raises and challenges the question of historical truth. 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.³²

The choice of words and metaphors is what matters here. As in Benjamin’s thesis, 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, and this living thought is active. It has agency, it is visual, and it happens, producing an event, *now*. The words, the imagery they signify, are performative. Taken seriously as a thought-image, this recurrent visualizing language of short-circuiting, fire, and sparks implies that thought needs formal innovations that shock. 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. It can only do so in contemporaneity between the works as shown and the visitors seeing them. The metaphorical language of these thought-images became a thought-image of time, in a temporality where the instant and duration remain bound up together.

Our attempt to achieve such “sparkling,” shocking forms lays in the combination of material, practical changes of the

32. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone Press, 1997), 322–323.

mode of display, the anachronistic or rather preposterous bond between present and past, the confusion of languages and other categories we tend to take for granted, and the “trans-mediation,” the intermediality of the audiovisualization of a literary masterpiece into an audiovisual media product, or text. This term undermines the idea that, for example, literary authorship would be fundamentally different, in this respect, from the making of works of sculpture or architecture, made for public use.³³

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 in real life. This is one of the primary goals of the seating as the material condition for contemporaneity. Thus, in the case at hand, we aimed to turn the hysteria of endless storytelling as the “mad” poetics of the novel performs it, 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. This requires two conditions that can only be fulfilled in the present of contemporaneity. These two conditions became the point of one of two narrative scenes of the project. Close attention and selfless interest are preconditions of such helpful empathy. Present and past share this need, here played out in the need for, and failure, of the act of listening.

33. On the term “media product,” see Lars Elleström, “Adaptation and Intermediality,” in Leitch, *Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, 509–526. Elleström is director of the research center Intermedial and Multimodal Studies (IMS) at Linnaeus University in Växjö, Sweden, which was a partner in the production of the *Don Quijote* project. Along with the Research Centre Concurrences for Colonial and Postcolonial Studies (dir. Johan Högglund), IMS not only cosponsored the project but also shaped it concretely in many ways, with actors, locations, and the possibility to exhibit it in the Småland Museum. Most centrally, Niklas Salmoose did more for it than I can acknowledge.



Fernando (Ramón González Palazón) and Luscinda (Jessica Cerán González) are getting married against their will. Location: Sala Palacete, Murcia (Photo: Mar Sáez)

Listening is enacting the position of the second person, who becomes the first person when the roles are reversed. This is known from that other intertemporal discourse, psychoanalysis—over a century old, as well as now. One of the two most narrative scenes of the exhibition, “The Failure of Listening,” is based on chapters 26–27, the story of the unfortunate Cardenio. Typically situated in the time of Cervantes, this story of nobility, great love, betrayal—his best friend seduces his beloved, whose parents insist she marry her seducer—and subsequent traumatic madness, can become contemporary if we take it as a theoretical object, with the necessity of the performance of listening as the common ground. In the video project we have adjusted the temporal sequence, in difference from the novel. As a prologue to the story of Cardenio’s madness, in the video

we see the equally sad wedding. The enactment, by the two young Spanish actors, of the misery of the couple driven into a loveless marriage, is so convincing that it is hard not to feel for, or rather, with (“con-”) them—not through vicarious identification but with true empathy.³⁴

As another, underground prologue, in the wedding scene, the Priest, played by Miguel Á. Hernández, reads from the marriage formulae of the catholic church. The bible-thick book he holds in his hand is, in fact, a volume of the collected writings of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan—an allusion almost invisible to the visitors. When Cardenio, who attends the wedding, hears Luscinda say “yes” to Fernando, he breaks out into violence, first trying to kill his rival, then himself. Luscinda screams, in a way that betrays her ongoing commitment to Cardenio. The Priest, as the “bad” psychoanalyst whose book he is holding, simply continues to read; he does not listen—nor look, for that matter.

This turns out to be a prologue within the video, for, in the next episode of this piece, the same Priest is standing in the forest and Cardenio, now stark raving mad, comes upon him. Inviting him to tell his story, the Priest, however, cannot hold his tongue, even though the young man has explicitly begged him to not interrupt his story. As a result, Cardenio attacks the holy father. The ensuing fight is choreographed as a true “scene,” with limited distance, showing the fierce aggression as somehow also a begging for closeness. The well-meaning Priest, who tries to protect the knight from too much reading in the first scene, now seriously wants to help the traumatized Cardenio. But he fails, because he is too strongly invested in his own conception of “doing good,” and assumes he possesses the wisdom needed. This investment in feeling good about doing good is also Don Quijote’s disorder.

34. Again, I must skip the need to qualify this concept, also not unproblematic. For a variety of opinions, see Aleida Assmann and Ines Detmers, eds., *Empathy and its Limits* (London: Palgrave, 2016). This scene is sixteen minutes long, which is twice the length of the other scenes.

In this sense, the fight between Cardenio and the Priest is in turn a prologue to the subsequent repetition of this structural failure to listen, now between Cardenio and Don Quijote. The dramaturgy now puts the fight at a little more distance, so as to display the tangle of bodies with more emphasis, in the well-known similarity between erotic and aggressive engagement. The temporal structure of the scene, with prologue after prologue, is both a parody of narrative suspense and a statement about frequency, repetitiveness as “everything happens at the same time,” enacting the mad contemporaneity on all levels of this episode.



Don Quijote (Mathieu Montanier) attacked by Cardenio (Theor Román), defended by Sancho Panza (Viviana Moin). Location: “Paisaje lunar” near Murcia (Photo: José Martínez Izquierdo)

Both men interrupt the story when it hints at something that they are themselves interested in. This demonstrates a selfishness inherent in social interaction, today as much as formerly. The slight slant toward therapy, of an analytical

kind, makes this video even thematically contemporary. The therapeutic attempt fails. Violence ensues. At the end, Cardenio himself seems surprised and taken aback by it. When Sancho exclaims “What have you done?” Cardenio seems to wonder about this himself. Listening, as we have staged it, is a requirement for sociality, as it is key in psychoanalytic practice. These two domains of contemporary social life join forces here. Through the enactment, quite “faithful” to the novel’s text, of the old story, including literal quotations, in a landscape that neither states nor denies its historicity, in an electronic medium and displayed on a monitor, the specificity of time recedes and instead, in the temporal void, the empathy of the contemporary viewer can emerge, and achieve, perhaps, what the self-centered characters were unable to do.

For this to be possible, the performativity of the space is indispensable, which is one motivation for the disorderliness of the exhibition space. The performativity of space, in our project enhanced by the lack of sequential order, has been articulated usefully by Spanish artist Concha Jerez. In an interview from 1988 she gives expression to the art-space “reciprocation”:

For me an installation is something that requires a place for it to be developed. This place is part of the work. I do not consider a work that appears in different places in the same form, without a close relationship with the space, to be an installation. To my way of thinking, the installation is associated with the place as a support and part of the narrative. In each emplacement the work changes radically because the space is part of it, it is a living element.³⁵

35. I quote it from Alicia Murriá, “Ideas, Spaces, Fissures in the Work of Concha Jerez,” in *Concha Jerez: Interferencias* (Las Palmas: Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno, 2018), 26.

The word support denotes more than the floor, pedestal, or canvas. While it also calls up the technical, material need for a support, as a thought-image the word "support" resonates with its social use as "helpful," "making possible"; a friendly relationship. The benches respond to both these meanings of the word. The central point is the importance, liveness, and participation of the place. It is no longer just an environment into which the viewer is admitted but a full participant in the process that art constitutes or sets in motion. The sensation of this participation of the space also changes the visitors. A respect for the specificity and the liveness of the space transforms their sense of mastery over a neutral space. This spatial aspect cannot be reduced to architectural, physical space. Participation presupposes a dialogue, of which the space is one of the "speakers." Since they change at each occasion, this uniqueness also precludes any detailed description of the works. This doesn't mean that the visitors "become" psychoanalysts, of course. But they will have an opinion, they will feel that the behavior of the Priest and Don Quijote is a betrayal of the young man in need. They can do what I called "perceptual thinking" above, and function affectively.

BEING-WITH

Being-with is the key element of contemporaneity. Time passes, but the consequences of what happens stay, and thus move on with the passing of time without changing, unless we, the inhabitants of the now, act upon the produced needs.



Zoraida (Nafiseh Mousavi) looks out with frustrated longing, or in catatonic stupor.
Location: Teleborg Castle, Växjö (Photo: Ebba Sund)

Actress Nafiseh Mousavi brilliantly enacts the role of a captive young women as traumatized. The state of trauma in which she is caught shows in her gaze: beyond craving liberation, she seems catatonic. This is the only moment that we can see her face in the episode “She, Too.” The impossibility for the visitors to look her in the eyes, whereas her captor-father constantly does so, is the cinematic visualization of her captivity, and the inevitability of unfreedom under patriarchy. Visitors catch on to this, in their being-with, in the moment; I have had people ask why it is that we cannot see her face. Also, this episode is slow,

including no narrativity whatsoever; all visitors can do is stay behind the young woman. Eager to see her in the face, they actually do stay, and seem reluctant to leave after the eight minutes of slowness. To make the example even more extreme, this chapter focuses on something that cannot be shown—trauma. Trauma offers an opportunity to explore the paradox of time that contemporaneity contains. The stagnation of time that characterizes the traumatic state, the stilling of ongoing time, needs a contemporaneous “second-personhood” to be relaunched into livable motion.

The term “trauma” has been terribly overused in the aftermath of discussions of cultural memory in the 1990s. This was the era when holocaust survivors and witnesses started to disappear. That end of the possibility of consulting eyewitnesses made a renewed examination of the issues the holocaust had generated, most urgent. But from that moment on, the term began to float around. As a result, it has practically lost its meaning. This is unacceptable, since it indicates a real and severely grave issue of today’s culture. The alleged unrepresentability of trauma, serious as it is, might threaten to relegate it also to incurability, which is especially intolerable, since it entails giving up on human beings. In this project, therefore, the attempt is to present, but not re-present trauma.³⁶

For this purpose, it is imperative to distinguish, however difficult it may seem, between three aspects of trauma: its cause, the situation or state that cause produces, and the possibility to help people suffering from it to come out of it. This distinction can be formulated succinctly as follows:

violence – an event (that happens)

trauma – a state (that results)

empathy – an attitude (that enables)

36. The best and most useful article on trauma, in relation to (failed) experience and to (incapacitated) narrative, is Ernst van Alphen’s “Symptoms of Discursivity: Experience, Memory, Trauma,” in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, ed. Mieke Bal et al. (Hanover, NH: University of New England Press, 1999), 24–38.

The subjects of these three attitudes are different: the violence has an agent (culprit, perpetrator), the traumatized subject is the victim of it, and the subject of empathy is the social interlocutor, who can potentially help to overcome it. The first of these is located in the past, the second floats in atemporal stagnation, and the third, in the now, has the potential to make the atemporal victim contemporary again. The medical term PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder, wrongly suggests that one can get *post* the trauma. This is only possible through the help of others. In the case of this project, it is the visitor who is the primary target of the exhibition: its interlocutor, and the interlocutor of the fictional figures brought to life, as well as to the now. This exhibition aims to activate visitors to become such empathic subjects. The display is meant to have performativity. And, as said before, performativity occurs in the now, in the present, and so, even in the case where the traumatized is “only” acting, and the video has been filmed in the past of the moment of looking, the effect happens in the art-event in the present.³⁷

There are many very helpful publications on trauma that do not take it as lightly as those fashionable ones that use it as a catchphrase to indicate anything sad or bad, or even without any specific context. Between psychoanalysis and cultural analysis, I have collaborated with Michelle Williams Gamaker to make a video project—a feature film and installations—based on Françoise Davoine’s ground-breaking book *Mère folle*, which deploys her “theoretical fiction” to discuss with—not argue against—Freud the possibility to analytically treat psychotic patients; something

37. On performativity, best begin with the original, J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (1962) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975). Of the many discussions, I consider the most lucid one the overview by Jonathan Culler, “The Performative,” in *The Literary in Theory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 137–165. A brilliantly ground-shifting recent text focusing on trauma is Ernst van Alphen, “The Performativity of Provocation: The Case of Artur Zmijewski,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 18, no. 1 (2019): 81–96.

Freud considered impossible, because, he alleged, they cannot perform transference. Reversing the burden (of proof, if you like), Davoine claimed that the psychosis, the madness resulting from trauma, is mainly inflicted by social agents, hence society has the duty to help. For this purpose, she revised some tenets of the Freudian method, and with great results. For the present discussion, what matters most is that the potential to help psychotic patients depends entirely on contemporaneity; the empathic second person must be there, *with the mad one*.³⁸

How can we approach this challenge as ordinary social agents, not professionals of mental health? In everyday life, images of violent events conducive to trauma are considered informative (“the news”). We take them in, even get bored by their repetitive nature, not even absorbing what that repetitiveness says about the world. According to the groundbreaking philosophy of language first developed by J. L. Austin, mentioned above, it is better to change gears and consider such images not informative but enhance their performativity. This can result in a shift from *activist* art, which focuses, informatively and with a persuasive aim, on specific political issues, to *activating* art that seeks to strengthen the performativity of the images and the space. The rationale of this shift is the insight that the trauma and the powerlessness that result are not inherent in the violent

38. In addition to Van Alphen’s article, other key publications on trauma: Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, “The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 158–183; Françoise Davoine, *Mère folle: Récit* (Strasbourg: Arcanes, 1998); translated by Judith W. Miller as *Mother Folly: A Tale* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014); in cultural analysis, Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Ernst van Alphen, “Second-Generation Testimony, Transmission of Trauma, and Postmemory,” *Poetics Today* 27, no. 2 (2006): 473–488; and Marianne Hirsch’s reply, “The Generation of Postmemory,” *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1 (2008): 103–128. For more on the *Mère folle* video project, renamed *A Long History of Madness*, see <http://www.miekebal.org/artworks/films/a-long-history-of-madness/>; and on the resulting exhibitions, see <http://www.miekebal.org/artworks/exhibitions/>, from “Saying It” to “Landscapes of Madness.”

events frequently represented in the information formats. It is the impossibility to process, even experience extreme violence that generates the trauma and obstructs its representation. Violence is an *event* that is inflicted on people; trauma is a resulting *state*, in the victims. Between the two, no connection is possible, as long as the traumatized victim is unable to process what happened, and thus cannot live time along with others, in contemporaneity.

Artist Ebba Sund, also the author of the photograph of the captive young woman, made a photograph of Cervantes's character of the embedded novella, the *Captive*, as literally locked up. This is in my view a masterly presentation of trauma and the need for reintegration into the contemporary. The photographer has managed to capture—if I may use that tainted verb—the essential problem that the exhibition, as a model for socially committed communication in the present, seeks to achieve. The man is locked behind bars. These are as flat as the two-dimensional artwork. But the gradual move from blurred (on the right) to sharp as we move to the left, hints at the three-dimensional situation, both in the story and in the exhibition. Most remarkably, the two aspects crucial to trauma are central to the image. The mouth is covered, indicating his incapacity to speak, to tell what happened to him. But he is not entirely doomed to remain outside of time. For his eyes do speak. Looking straight at the viewer, with infinite sadness, he addresses the viewer and begs for help. Sund has achieved a clarity and an empathy together, so that the first and the second person can come together, in the con-temporality. This helps; it suggests that the man can escape from his plight—as if the slanted grid, from blurred to sharp, indicates an escape route, which at the end of the scene, it actually does. This is an example of how art exerts its performativity. Not a trace of the violence is visible, other than the permanence of the captivity.



The Captive (Mathieu Montanier) locked up in trauma.
Location: Castle Ruin in Kronoberg (Photo: Ebba Sund)

Confusions and ethical problems threaten in attempts to show the horrid acts of violence that cause the traumas. In our project we do not show these acts. A solicitation of feel-good identification (“trauma envy”) always lurks and is utterly unhelpful, even ethically problematic. So does, as we know from Adorno’s caution against it, the risk of voyeurism. Davoine writes in her 2008 *Don Quichotte*: “Cervantes doesn’t try to arouse visions of horror for voyeuristic readers.” One moment where violence occurs in our videos is Cardenio’s attacks on his interlocutors. But as mentioned, these are responses to the latter’s failure to allow him to speak without being interrupted. But we, the beholders of the images that stage such situations, can step in and reach out. This is where trauma can be encountered by empathy. A counter-part to the Cardenio episode is the one where Don Quijote is listening to witnesses who are deeply involved in contemporary situations of refugees. There, he is able to be sensitive and forget his own obsessions. This scene,

“Testimonial Discourses,” acutely updates the traumatic events in the other scenes, so that visitors are alerted to the actuality of the issues Cervantes was able to draw out from his own life experience, with the help of his imagination. This is how the four centuries merge in the present.³⁹

To avoid confusion between event and state, and agent and victim, we foreground the non-evenemential, enduring situation of *captivity*. As we know since Adorno’s famous 1949 indictment of making and enjoying poetry “after Auschwitz,” what I call *modesty*—restraint, discretion, but neither prudishness nor censorship—is a crucial issue in our relationship to representation. The philosopher gives the reason for this severe indictment: he refuses to make sense of what doesn’t make sense. Such sense-making is wrong because it would be honoring violence with semiotic access; and perhaps even to take pleasure, in other words, in making a potentially pornographic use of the suffering of others. Later Adorno wrote:

After Auschwitz, our feelings resist any claim of the *positivity* of existence as sanctimonious, as wronging the victims; they balk at squeezing any kind of *sense*, however bleached, out of the victims’ fate.⁴⁰

Taken as a thought-image, the metaphoric violence in the word “squeezing” stipulates that semiotic behavior can be as violent as actual violence. The verb intimates that language is material. This is so because it is performative: it has consequences in that its utterances affect the addressee. The verb “to squeeze” recurs when Adorno explains that his refusal to condone such renderings is its potential pornographic use: “The so-called artistic rendering of the

39. Françoise Davoine, *Don Quichotte, pour combattre la mélancolie* (Paris: Stock—L’ autre pensée, 2008), 93.

40. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), 361.

naked physical pain of those who were beaten down with rifle butts contains, however distantly, the possibility that pleasure can be squeezed out from it.”⁴¹ It is this pleasure, the sheer possibility of it, that Adorno calls “barbaric.”⁴²

However, the flip side of Adorno’s compelling call for modesty is a forbidding taboo that makes the violence invisible and thereby, unknowable. It is less well-known that Adorno himself retracted his severe attitude to representation for this reason, when he wrote in a passage that explains the retraction: “Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream.” The earlier statement has turned the representation of trauma into a moral censorship, which is what a taboo tends to be. Another, less philosophical, more banal risk is involved, however. The abundance of representations of traumatogenic events in the electronic media generates a forgetting of their historical and psychological impact. The far-too-many, the surplus, is produced by and produces *consumption*. Our project designs an intervention in that cultural attitude, by inflecting activist art into activating art, public-oriented, for a more general change of attitude. The case is made for a community-creating effect of art that helps repairing the broken social bond that has resulted in trauma. The traumatized person is alone, and not even able to (fully) remember the horror that caused the state of trauma. As a result, they are even alone within themselves. If anything can be done to help such victims exit their paralyzing state of stagnation and regain contemporaneity with others, it must be done through reducing that double loneliness. For this, everyone is qualified.

41. Theodor W. Adorno, *Can One Live after Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 252a.

42. The classical passage is in *Can One Live after Auschwitz?*, 162. The retraction is in *Aesthetic Theory*, 362. On the concept of the barbaric, see Maria Boletsis, *Barbarism and Its Discontents* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013). On the violence of language, see Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

In this delicate attempt to describe or show, or rather, subtly hint at the unrepresentable state of trauma, while still making a work that does justice to Cervantes's hectic storytelling, the challenge is to incorporate, while questioning it, the narrativity that is, after all, the novel's seemingly primary mode. The problem is to simultaneously, literally at the same time, thematically foreground captivity, that state where time loses its binding power, and the dream-come-true liberation, with the help of a beautiful young woman who implausibly sets her eyes on the emaciated captive. For this, "The Captive's Tale" (part 1, chap. 39–41) is included, explored, and given a shape that image-thinking can design. This was originally developed in three scenes. It is the one "captivating" story of captivity: an embedded novella, with a plot of sorts, of a soldier taken in slavery, and the intricate adventure of his escape.

This story is clearly based on autobiography, but supplemented with dreams of wish fulfilment. The fact that the Captive is played by the same actor who plays Don Quixote allows viewers to reflect on, and decide, how they consider narrative and its complex, delicate connection to fiction, itself not without relevance for reality. But as it turned out—and this is how art-making as analysis *works*—once I immersed myself in Teleborg Castle in Växjö, Sweden, and reread the scene there, the space exerted its performativity. For then and there it dawned on me that the rich, beautiful young woman Zoraida, the dreamed savior of the Captive, is herself also a captive. She is subjected to the patriarchy, embodied by her doting father who is jealously guarding her. As mentioned above, there is no narrative in this made-up scene; the novel does not elaborate on the woman's sense of being a captive.

Today, however, the title of that scene, "She, Too," which enhances the implicitly feminist aspect of the tale, resonates with the more explicit, strongly feminist tenor of the story of Marcela in "Woman as Anti-Suicide Bomb." There, the seventeenth-century novel is explicit in its feminist tenor,

even if a dubious qualification spoils the fun a bit. Defending Marcela, accused by some young men, friends of the deceased, on having caused the death by suicide of a suitor she had rejected, the knight cannot help himself. Implicitly, the suicide is indicted, not the woman who chose to live her own life. So far, so good. But Don Quijote's desire to feel important in his crusade against injustice leads to his being contaminated when he adds that Marcela may still have some guilt. She pushes him out of the way. This is the most feminist moment of the novel, and deserves to be foregrounded. Together with "She, Too," the Marcela scene questions our contemporary tendency to evolutionist thinking, and projecting sexism on the past and feminism on the present. Which is why I have added to the script, otherwise entirely based on quotations, the very contemporary "no es no."⁴³



The Captive alone within himself. Location: Kronoberg Castle ruin, Sweden
(Photo: Ebba Sund)

43. This is yet another case of coauthorship. The title of the Marcela scene is inspired by Davoine's take on the scene, and her use of the phrase. I also thank Luis Rebaza Soraluz for insisting on the feminist aspect of the novel. The creation of "She, Too" was also influenced by that insistence.

Again, Ebba Sund, on her own initiative, managed to grasp this being-alone as a state of being locked up. It is impressive how precisely both this young woman and good old Cervantes foreground several key aspects of the traumatic state, the latter at a time that the term, the theory, and the attempts to remedy it were not available. Not only is time stopped in its tracks, halted and stretched out, it is also frequently interrupted, but such interruptions do not restore the everyday experience of time. In a study of war trauma after World War I, Thomas Salmon discusses as one of the features of “shell shock” the permanent presence of *immediacy*—a synonym of contemporary I propose to distinguish from it, by the absence of “con-.” This immediacy alone cuts through the immobility of the stretched-out time, interrupting it with accelerations that flash up like lightning—again that image from the Benjaminian thought-image. This matches unexpectedly, but with great relevance, the work on time of contemporary Norwegian artist Jeannette Christensen, with whom I have worked together on several occasions. She plays the artist-photographer in “Who Is Don Quijote?” In a long-term series of polaroid photographs and currently also videos, Christensen brilliantly explores the relationship between exceeding, exasperating slowness and the interruption of time. This project matches mine as a counterpart that helps understand what can be called with a paradox, the *formless shape* of traumatic time.⁴⁴

Another aspect of trauma, also related to time, is the *movement* of the invoked images of actions. Davoine remarks several times on the “cinematic” in the novel, and in this she joins my own view of cinematicity in either still images, such as Frans Hals’s portrait of René Descartes,

44. The remarks on time in shell shock are a loose rendering of Davoine’s account of Salmon’s study in *Don Quichotte*, 59. She sums up these points from Thomas Salmon, *The Cure and Treatment of Mental Diseases and War Neuroses (Shell Shock) in the British Troops* (New York: War Work Committee of the National Committee for Mental Hygiene, 1917). I have followed Christensen’s work for a long time. See my book *Fragments of Matter: Jeannette Christensen* (Bergen: Bergen National Academy of the Arts, 2009).

or in literature, such as Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*.⁴⁵ This is not in itself a feature of the traumatic state, but in *Don Quijote* it is especially the result of the hectic rhythm of the storytelling itself, as well as of the adventures told. The temporality of film is subject to technical and artistic manipulation. But precisely because of this potential, it is also a mode in which traumatic atemporality can be made contemporaneous by means of a recognition and endorsement of heterochronicity; the variability of temporal experience.⁴⁶

Both the madness of the wild man and the story of the wedding that triggered it, read like a film. The moments of calm and madness alternate in the sequence of the encounters between Cardenio and the others. The shepherd who tells the story of Cardenio's mad attacks of violence, warns his listeners, but to no avail. Both the Priest and Don Quijote overrule the madman's attempt to tell his traumatogenic story, turning oral narrative with listeners into a film. For the wedding sequence, the movement of slowness, ritually made routine, is interrupted by Cardenio's attack, first on Fernando, then on himself. These are incidences of shock, as actress Jessica Cerán González interpreting Luscinda brilliantly demonstrates. The interruption is repositioned in relation to traumatic stagnation by the inserted still images of religious sculptures that were part of the decor, but became silent witnesses. Only cinema can do this, with its technology of montage that facilitates the play with movement and sound-editing together. The cinematic aspect is thus mobilized to demonstrate the particular contribution of the contemporary medium to contribute to a presentation of trauma. But in his literary

45. Davoine, *Don Quichotte*, e.g., 389.

46. Heterochrony is a social reality not enough considered. See Nancy D. Munn, "The Cultural Anthropology of Time: A Critical Essay," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, no. 21 (1992): 93–123; and in relation to migratory culture and video, Bal and Hernández Navarro, *2MOVE: Video, Art, Migration*.

“madness,” Cervantes invoked the possibility.⁴⁷

The montage cinema and video deploy is kept to a minimum in our project, because of the wish to make long, durational shots the ground of the work with contemporaneity in the space. But the way the scenes are disposed, and the encouragement to visitors to roam around the space, gives the latter the freedom to make their own montage. Choosing places and times for the visit turns viewers into editors. I have seen visitors traversing the entire exhibition space in order to come close to something they must have glanced from a distance. And conversely, a young man was sitting at a screen in the middle of the show when the museum’s director came in to say it was time to close. The young man begged him to leave him a little time. In the end, it was half an hour later when he finally surrendered to the order of the day. That half hour, with its inevitable repetitions of the eight-minute episode, was the young man’s own montage, turning a potential narrative of episode into an avant-garde aesthetic of reiteration.

The transfer of Cardenio’s aggression from Fernando to himself is the final aspect I want to mention of how Cervantes has understood trauma so staggeringly well. This is the allusion to the self-immolation frequently associated with that disorder. It is the victim’s response to the perpetrator’s attack on her or his subjectivity. This response is not a resignation to being destroyed as a subject, but an attempt to recuperate the destroyed subjectivity, a revolt. In narrative terms, this is what Van Alphen analyzes as the impossibility, in the traumatic state, of knowing who one is, whether one is (co-)responsible or not for what happened; in short, of occupying an actantial position.

47. I have extensively written about Flaubert’s cinematic writing, in connection with that in Edvard Munch’s paintings, in my book *Emma & Edvard Looking Sideways*. On cinematic movement in Frans Hals’s tiny portrait, *Allo-Portraits: On the Impossibility of Likeness in the Face of Movement*, brochure for the exhibition “Rendez-vous with Frans Hals,” Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem, 2018.

The most famous instance of this is the heroine of the Roman legend of Lucretia, who killed herself after having been raped. Killing herself was the only way at her disposal to retrieve her subjectivity. At least, she could be the agent of that destructive act.

Incidentally, this legend allegedly explains the founding of the Roman Republic, which goes to show how deeply political the issue is. In *Reading "Rembrandt"* I have interpreted this act as an attempt to regain control over the destroyed self. Davoine also mentions the association with Lucretia's suicide several times in her 2008 book on Don Quixote.⁴⁸ This attempt at reactivation of the subjectivity that is flat-rolled as if by a steamroller, by a greater force that cannot be resisted, is totally negative, since the subject dies as a consequence. Cardenio survives, and reiterates the violent impulse when the Priest and the knight interrupt his account. When they do so, they are bad analysts. This insistence on listening is Cervantes's psychoanalytic understanding, if I may end this reflection on such a preposterous anachronism. But if he can invent cinema, why not psychoanalysis, of the kind that can help overcome trauma by repairing the broken social bond?⁴⁹

48. Davoine, *Don Quichotte*, e.g., 137, 295.

49. See Van Alphen, "Symptoms of Discursivity: Experience, Memory, Trauma." My analysis of Lucretia—in Shakespeare and Rembrandt—is in chapter 2 of my book *Reading "Rembrandt": Beyond the Word-Image Opposition*. Another "preposterous" claim related to trauma is my interpretation of Descartes as the inventor of psychoanalysis in a "post-Freudian" variant. See my film and installation on Descartes, *Reasonable Doubt*, <http://www.miekebal.org/artworks/films/reasonable-doubt/>; and for an analysis, my article "Thinking in Film," in *Thinking in the World: A Reader*, ed. Jill Bennett and Mary Zournazi (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 173–201.

EPILOGUE: BECKONING BERNINI

I began this book with an example of contemporary sculpture, and I end it on one as well. Both artists are Cervantes's fellow Spaniards. The difference between the two sculptures is significant, not only between their historical references — not only, that is, between Rodin, who made his *Thinker* after the turn to the twentieth century, in the era of modernism, and Bernini, who made his sculptures in the first half of the seventeenth century, when the baroque was still the dominant aesthetic and religion-impelled violence was at the order of the day. In view of my argument for the contemporaneity of exhibition and the calling this proposes to viewers, the sculpture *El soplador* (the blower) from 2019 by Spanish artist Lidó Rico differs most drastically from Sánchez Castillo's work by its multiplicity. Instead of a single figure sitting still, here we see an innumerable number of figures, and in the installation some of them even escape from the unified materiality of the sculpture, breaking away from it and turning the sculpture into an installation.

There is a mass of figures, mostly putti, those baroque little angles, but also statues from ancient Egyptian, Mayan, Greek cultures, a gigantic key, and pieces of jigsaw puzzles, populate the stream of "air" that the gigantic head blows out or, when thought in terms of mutuality, inhales. The work's title suggests movement, liveness; the figure is doing something. The preposition "between" holds for the multiple dimensionality (the enormous human head and the small angels), the temporality (between contemporary and baroque), and the moods (the disgust of the seemingly vomiting large figure, and the active, some smiling, some looking angry, smooth-skinned angels). The stream of small figures coming out of the main figure's mouth also lends itself to a movement in-between that goes in both directions. The icons of the past,

if entering the mouth, come back to the present, and thus can stand for the “preposterous history” in which past and present exchange places, mutually meeting, instead of going in one direction.

On the one hand, the temporality, between past and present as a two-way street; on the other hand, the questioning of the “stillness” of the allegedly still sculpture. Moreover, there is an insistent ambiguity of color, which invokes painting: the monochrome bronze of the materiality, but then the traces of blue. This blue evokes the patina bronze acquires over time, but then, it is the “wrong” color. Patina would be greenish, and as a color, almost invisible; just a sign of time, of the long duration of sculpture. The blue, in contrast, enlivens the sculpture as well as unifies it. It takes it out of its self-evident durationality, by means of the ostentatiously “wrong” color. Moreover, it evokes the sky, introducing the endlessness of the universe into the suddenly small-appearing exhibition space.

The dubious notion of “still” of still images, in this sense, matches the “moving” aesthetic of baroque sculpture. Bernini created tangible flesh out of hard marble, as well as running figures and ontological transformations. Rico makes his large figure glued to, imprisoned in the wall, yet actively involved in an action of blowing, or, to put it as an in-between action: respiration, in and out. The almost frantic movement of the happenings in, and the event of seeing this sculpture, makes the notion of the still image highly questionable indeed. To reiterate: Bergson’s 1896 book *Matter and Memory* states that perception is not a construction but a *selection*. The perceiving subject makes that selection in view of her own interests, as a form of *gathering in duration*. Perception is an *act*, of the body and *for* the body as it is positioned in the midst of things to select from, in the now of the act of perception. Hence, this selection takes place in the present. Not only the interests of the perceiver motivate it, but also her memories.

This is, then, the participation of the body of the viewer. Hence, texture, color, and dimensions matter as much as figures, space, and perspective; this is the relevance of the materiality mentioned above. Perception is an act of the present. This might entail a naïve presentism—a narrowing of time to the brief moment of *now*, a temporal selfie—if it wasn't for the participation of memory. Occurring in the present, perception needs memory. Since it is the subject's interest that motivates the perception-selection, an image that is not infused with memory images would make no sense. Nor would it have a sensuous impact, since we perceive *with* as well as *for* the body. This is why the body also remembers. In this epilogue I focus on a figurative artwork, although it is as “mad” as Cervantes's allegedly narrative but in fact quite incoherent novel. Similarly, Rico's sculpture is hard to capture in a description. This difficulty invokes the fact that the kind of contemporaneity I have been attempting to analyze in this essay is not at all bound to figuration. In older work I have made a strong case for the “Caravaggesque” narrativity of supposedly abstract paintings by American painter David Reed. I described that narrativity as “second-person” because of the way the paintings, with no figurativity whatsoever, reach out, through suggested volume, to the viewer. The Bernini appeal of Rico's installation is comparable, in this precise sense, with Reed's Caravaggism. The sensuousness, or what psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas would probably call “sensual intelligence”—analogous to his concept of “intelligence of form”—of both Reed's and Rico's work matters more for the production of contemporaneity in the sense I have developed here, than the figuration of the gigantic but clearly unhappy blower and the small, mischievous putti.⁵⁰

One issue that this art is clearly deeply engaged with, and that binds the two “inter-ships” of time and media,

50. Christopher Bollas, *Being a Character: Psychoanalysis and Self-Experience* (London: Routledge, 1992), 43.

is scale. The striking discrepancy between the large head and the small things that exit (or enter) it is further complicated by other discrepancies. The pieces of the puzzle that pop up here and there have almost the size of the angels' heads. A head looking like a small version of the self of the *soplador* intervenes in the cheerful stream of putti, smaller than they are. A key that is much larger than the angels sits forbiddingly on a plain, a baroque cloud, near the large-seeming leg of one of the putti. But in case we think they are all more or less the same size, the lower angel, having barely ground under its dangling feet, is holding a small simulacrum of itself in its hand, and looks at it with astonishment. Scale is, of course, an element of space. In Rico's installation it becomes the bearer of the space's performativity. In its incongruity, it is also a mode of questioning the abstraction-figuration distinction. As it happens, scale is a typical question in baroque sculpture as well. This is one of the many ways this contemporary work beckons the historical Bernini. Thus, the play with scale leads us inexorably to the issue of time, intertemporality, and the rejection of the linearity that we are used to endorse without thinking.

And since this multitude of beings out of which our contemporary world consists is swallowed or expelled by a self-portrait, I like to let the artist with his figures together have the last word. Rico himself has beautifully commented on this work. In a presentation for its first display, in December 2019, he stated,

The man breaks his size at the same time that his scale is magnified, turns on himself and in a frozen gesture he blows, expelling new destinies. The angels populate that exhalation full of symbolic elements that speak to us using pasts to predict future unknown, their self-absorbed faces who were expelled from the celestial are filled with

a melancholy that screams, is surprised and strives,
betraying their concern for that one handhold reduced to
the earthly.



Fragments from Lidó Rico, *El sopador*, 2019



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PEN=0,10,2,30, WEIGHT=100, SLANT=0, SUPERNESS=0.5

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Meta-the-difference-between-the-two-Font is essentially the same as MetaFont, abiding the obvious fact that it swallows its predecessor. Although the result may look the same, it clearly can't be, because in addition to the software, the new version embeds its own backstory. In this sense, MTDBT2F is not only a tool to generate countless PostScript fonts, but **at least equally** a tool to think about and around MetaFont. Mathematician Douglas Hofstadter once noted that one of the best things MetaFont might do is inspire readers to chase after the intelligence of an alphabet, and "yield new insights into the elusive "spirits" that flit about so tantalizingly behind those lovely shapes we call "letters."

For instance, each volume in The Contemporary Condition is set in a new MTDBT2F, generated at the time of publication, which is to say **now.**

Dexter Sinister, 12/08/20, 13:11 AM