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Sensing the Present: "Conceptual Art of the Senses"

ABSTRACT

After Rachel E. Burke briefly introduces the essays presented with a focus on our contemporary relationship to modern subjectivity, Mieke Bal will make the case for the sense of presentness on an affective and sensuous level in Munch's paintings and Flaubert's writing by selecting a few topics and cases from the book *Emma and Edvard Looking Sideways: Loneliness and the Cinematic,* published by the Munch Museum in conjunction with the exhibition *Emma & Edvard.* It is this foregrounded presentness that not only produces the ongoing thematic relevance of these works, but more importantly, the sense-based conceptualism that declares art and life tightly bound together. If neither artist eliminated figuration in favour of abstraction, they had a good reason for that. Art is not a representation of life, but belongs to it, illuminates it and helps us cope with it by sharpening our senses. As an example, a few paintings will clarify what I mean by the noun-qualifier "cinematic" and how that aesthetic explains the production of loneliness.

Keywords: senses, abstraction, writing, affect, aesthetic.

INTRODUCTION
Rachel E. Burke

What is our relationship, in 2017, to the notion of the modern subjectivity?

The question is not what can modern subjects tell us—famed characters from Gustave Flaubert to Friedrich Nietzsche have been well-mined in this regard—but what can our approach to them, our explorations of a temporal *then* from a temporal *now*, reveal that has not already been said? This group of essays takes an interdisciplinary approach to these relationships, examining how history is constantly reshaped by the conditions of a present innately inflected by the past, and how these negotiations are staged between artworks from the cusp of modernity and contemporary audiences. Emerging from the *Modern Sensibilities* conference in March held at the Munch Museet in conjunction with the exhibition *Emma & Edvard: Love in the Time of Loneliness* (27 January–17 April 2017) curated by Mieke Bal, the following essays address how figures such as Flaubert and Edvard Munch mediate a contemporary relationship to modernity.

Bal, continuing to press into the productivity of anachronistic looking encouraged by her exhibition, reveals the limitations of inherited art historical lineages that square Munch away as a suffering artistic genius with a mean misogynistic streak. These legacies not only saddle the art historian with cumbersome binaries, such as that between abstraction and figuration, but also lock access to viewing pleasure and intersubjective exploration far from those without advanced and specialized education. With a masterful attention to Flaubert, Jonathan Culler demonstrates how these art historical constraints and the potential for art as a space of modern self-consciousness and self-reflexivity are born from the same motivations. His investigation of Flaubert as a case study for the construction of the modern artist, medium and subject, is expounded upon by Kristin Gjesdal, who implicates Henrik Ibsen's Hedda Gabler—and by extension the woman at the turn of modernity—as the site for the "incarnation of the modernist imperative." Why is it that Hedda, like her French compeer Emma Bovary, reflects the restless, pacing nature of her modern masculine creator in feminine form? Certainly, as Ernst van Alphen argues, they constitute subjective, rather than objective, interpretations of the object-world—apparitions rippling with the new modern challenges to human attention and subjecthood—that question prevailing contemporary attitudes towards modern subjectivities.

Miguel Ángel Hernández Navarro pushes even farther, suggesting that modern subjectivity, and indeed contemporary subjectivity, is shaped by specific temporal experiences in addition to sensory experiences. His proposal that "art constitutes an interruption, a place for resistance" is put

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into virtual action by Griselda Pollock, whose examination of Charlotte Salomon via Nietzsche and Munch collapses art historical conventions erected to promote certain masculine mythologies. It seems, therefore, that reconstructing a contemporary relationship to modernity means coming to terms with the modern woman, confronting, as Patricia G. Berman articulates, the gendered experience of vulnerability. This is just but one aspect of what we have to discover, just one fragment of our contemporary reflection, exposed over the course of learning to recognize our reflections as "seeing sideways . . . seeing an image (what we see) but not the picture (what it depicts)," to use Berman's terms. Ultimately, the following series of essays maps the power of visual dialogue, consciously anachronistic looking and, most importantly, how such exchange sustains permeability and the social spheres in which subjectivities are formed.

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Conceptual art of the senses

Mieke Bal

Connections

This analysis concerns the Munch-Flaubert and "us" connections. Here, "us" refers to the viewers and readers situated in the present of art from the past, as well as to Michelle Williams Gamaker and myself as makers of the contemporary works in the exhibition; and the connections between the art world and the academic world. I hope the latter connection especially will be strengthened by this publication of the papers of the conference. I will address the idea of *connectivity* as the central concern, the conception of art that was the basis of my curation of the exhibition. Connection is neither conflation nor comparison, and can occur in many different ways. This leads to a few well-known starting points.[1]

First, connections across the borders of the fields, specializations and disciplines inevitably invoke the term *interdisciplinary*, and that is what this ensemble of articles certainly is, with authors from literary studies, art history, philosophy, and myself from what I call "cultural analysis" and video art making. According to Roland Barthes's brief description of it, interdisciplinarity produces a *new* object, and this object belongs to no one. No turf policing, then; "Munch" as I consider and have construed

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[1] See my book that accompanied the exhibition (*Emma and Edvard Looking Sideways: Loneliness and the Cinematic*). On the exhibition, see the interview with Dorota Filipczak in this issue.

him, or it, for this occasion, belongs to no one. This also holds, secondly, for the temporal dimension of the connections. Whatever the time and place it was made, art belongs to and functions in the present; the here-and-now where we consider it worth considering. Commonplace as this view may seem by now, I seek to have tried to draw out its consequences for the practice of exhibiting. An exhibition is a meeting ground for that here-and-now of art with the people who come to see and consider it. And to the connections already mentioned, thirdly, exhibitions add that among works themselves. Curating is bringing works in one another's proximity, so that they can mutually speak to one another, thus modifying the sense and effect of each. Edvard Munch, it seems, would agree with me on this.

In the catalogue for the exhibition *eMunch.no: Text and Image* (2012), Hans-Martin Flaatten discussed the exhibitionary effect on the artist himself of a combination of paintings now belonging (but not then!) to what became a series after the fact, *The Frieze of Life.* Flaatten writes: "Later in life, Munch pointed out that he came up with the idea to begin work on what would become *The Frieze of Life* when he saw his paintings collected in exhibitions," and he continues, quoting the artist: "'When they [the paintings] were placed together immediately a resonance rang through them and they became totally different than when they stood individually. It became a symphony. Then I decided to paint friezes'" (139). In other words, the artist was influenced by the exhibition, as much as the exhibition was an assemblage of his paintings. That phrase, "becoming totally different than when they stood individually," articulates the difference between an art work as, say, a collector's item, masterpiece or emblem of an artist's *oeuvre*, from such a work as part of an exhibition and altered by it. Combining images regardless of chronology and biography—an intervention in the historical bias of mainstream art history on which Miguel Ángel Hernández Navarro and Griselda Pollock have much more to say in their contributions—I thus followed Munch's insight when making groupings in this exhibition. These are based thematically, or for comparison, or creating small narratives. As I wrote in the book, curating can be considered a medium in its own right—a medium that produces what Munch called "resonances." And like all mediums, the subject of the act of curating must therefore take responsibility for the way it *frames* the artworks. In this exhibition, the primary framing was the suggestion of mutual connections, or resonances, between Munch and Flaubert, or, rather, Emma and Edvard. The groupings I had made follow in the wake of that primary framing.

If, soon after the publication and smashing success of his novel *Madame Bovary*, Gustave Flaubert was taken to court, the prosecution was motivated by the sense that the novel was *doing* something to the culture

of the day—it was conducting its own interrogation of the present. They seemed to panic about the welfare of their culture, and so targeted the sentence that reversed the generally accepted morality, considered dangerous because it was taken to entice people, especially women, to indulge in adultery. This sentence, "Oh yes, if only . . . before the *filth* of marriage and the *disillusions* of adultery . . ." (II, 15; emphasis added), uttered by the narrator and clearly—but perhaps not exclusively—focalized by Emma, hurt the not-yet-quite-modern sensibility of the prosecutor and his motivators.[2]

Moralistic as this view is, let's not yet laugh too loudly, because it does broach the question of art and its relationship to society. The implication is that it combined an idea for consideration—that marriage is "filthy," even if adultery also disappoints—with an effect that we can consider sensuous—people would actually be enticed to desire and—god forbid!—act upon that desire, with the demise of standard morality as a consequence. It would be *performative*, and given the topic, it would function almost as pornography, which is addictive. If Flaubert won his case and was acquitted, it is allegedly because his cheeky argument that his novel was art, not reality, convinced the judges. This defense was successful because the judges fell for a false binary opposition between "art" and "life." But what that meant was not so clear. For "art" could be said to be more, not less dangerous, in the sense of being more enticing; more performative and thus, sensuous, than, say, journalism, art's opposite. At least, art such as Flaubert's and Munch's.[3]

In Flaubert's project, the prose of a novel had to be as poetic as a poem; every word, even every sound counted. He read all his drafts out loud to "taste" the sounds. If, nevertheless, he wrote one of the world's most powerful novels with a strong content, a pre-Marxist critique of emerging capitalism, a pre-Freudian understanding of hysteria and a pre-feminist critique of women's confinement, it is because language *cannot* be severed from life. Instead of writing abstract poems, as the *l'art-pour-l'art* poets of his day tried to do, he made every sound count as much as every event, vision or—his primary material—quotations without quotation marks

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[2] Given how many editions and translations of this most famous of novels circulate, I refer to parts and chapters, rather than pages. I have used the 1971 edition for the French, and the most widely read translation by Francis Steegmuller for the English. Where necessary, I consulted the translation by Eleanor Marx Aveling published by de Man. On the trial, see LaCapra. On this, see also Culler in this issue. On the question of whose focalization is represented, see Culler (*Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty*). This groundbreaking book is still the best study on Flaubert's writing I know.

[3] On performativity, see Culler ("The Performative") and Bal (*Travelling Concepts*).

(Barthes) in his multi-layered prose. He refused to choose between form and content. And so did Munch, who pursued an obsessive content while wildly experimenting with painting styles.

I borrow the phrase "conceptual art of the senses" of my subtitle from a highly illuminating passage in the book, *Munch in His Own Words*, by the Danish museum director and art critic Poul Erik Tøjner. As the fabulous Munch scholar Patricia G. Berman also does in a recent article in *Kunst og Kultur*, Tøjner wrote powerfully about the work of the surface in Munch's paintings—the intermedial equivalent of Flaubert's "tasting" the sounds. Jonathan Culler explains in his contribution how it was possible that a novel with such a banal, sordid anecdote as its storyline could become an enduringly relevant novel, inspiring generations of writers and artists. Suffice it to say that the anecdote may be banal, but the story as constructed is far from it. The conceptual side of both the paintings and the novel concerns such aspects as the relationship to the viewer or reader, the time and environment of encountering, and the sensuous, tactile aspect as an idea on art. This is the concept, and the art—the paint, the surface, the sounds, metaphors, descriptions—makes that concept "of the senses"—effective and impacting, perhaps changing or confirming and implicating the position of the viewer or reader. And the senses, among which primarily but not exclusively the sense of sight, cannot function in another than the *present tense*.

This does not mean, not at all in fact, that the history, the past in which these works were made, is irrelevant. But the past travels along with the sensuousness of the works and is constantly transformed by it. Sensuousness itself is in ongoing transformation, hence, an object of history. Thus, as Ernst van Alphen explains in his contribution, the culture of distraction that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century had a huge impact on the sense-experience in the period from where the artworks of Munch and Flaubert stem. And the consequences of the transformation, or crisis as he calls it, of the senses as a tool for experience are still with us, in the ever-increasing "distractive" culture. This is not at all the logic of chronology but an accumulative conception of time. Herein lies the "conceptual art of the senses" of our video work; which refrains from either reconstructing the past as a remote "foreign country" as David Lowenthal had it in 1985, nor places Emma's sad story exclusively in the present, as if forgetting the continuity with ups and downs, or the resurfacing of the mid- and late-nineteenth century and its obsessions. Instead, Michelle Williams Gamaker and I have merged, in blatant anachronism, two eras, and the space in-between. The respective eras of Flaubert and Munch are neither the source nor the cause of the situation today but nor are they disconnected. Among

the elements of the earlier time that resurface later is the idea of love—an obsession Emma and Edvard share. The astounding intensity of the prose in which Flaubert described Emma's sexual experience and its aftermath matches what binds the philosophy of love, as Kristin Gjesdal discusses it, to the creative, fictional works of, in her case, in another intermediality, Ibsen and Munch. This is a different understanding of conceptual art of the senses. In the remainder of this paper I will elaborate just a few examples. They resonate due to the concept of the aesthetic underlying the exhibition, "the cinematic."

The Cinematic

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I explain this concept, not in discourse but visually, and with Munch and Flaubert as the theorists of it. The three paintings that were hung in the back of the first, introductory room are the site of an ambiguity that, I will argue, leads beyond figuration, or figuration only. It moves in a direction that makes their art so different as to be qualified as modern. The word cinematic does not directly refer to the cinema as a technology or art form, but is derived from the Greek verb for "to move," *kinein*. Obviously, Munch's painting often represents movement, both bodily and emotional. It also proposes, in its wayward seriality, a possibility to look at different paintings as if they were frames or photograms, together animating a situation of movement and transformation. Also, the material paint itself seems in movement, with hasty brushstrokes, leaving the canvas visible, and at other times with thick strokes that leave the movement of the paint matter visible; a surface that seems uneven, unstable, quivering. And "quivering" (*frémissant*) is the qualifier Flaubert used to explain the demand he placed upon his writing, in his correspondence (fig. 1).

I locate the moving quality first, obviously, in the intimation of movement. The second meaning of movement comes from the act of perception. Perception is a selection by the perceiving subject and that subject's memories; and thus, move between present and past sensations. The third meaning of movement is affective. This is supported by the synesthetic nature of seeing, and the importance especially of tactility and hearing. The last meaning is the result of this: the potential to move us to action in the social-political domain.

But movement alone is still too vague for an understanding of the cinematic. More precisely, in Munch's work the allusive hints in eyes and facial expressions of figures suggest they can change at any moment, the figures play-acting rather than posing, and the scenes fugitive moments in a longer process. In this sense—due to the play with layering, perspective

and flickering light—even the skin of the works evokes the cinematic. The format of the canvases that cuts figures in half suggests a camera that is limited in what it can frame, as well as figures who are moving out of the frame. Viewers are compelled to make up what will happen next or what has just happened, as if watching a movie.

Of the monumental painting *Workers on Their Way Home* from 1913–14, several critics have alleged the cinematic quality, especially in the context of the exhibition *The Modern Eye* from 2012. I find the montage of different "takes" most remarkable in this respect. The three main figures seem to have been "shot" from different angles. The man on the left from the front, is shot frontally, and he arrests his movement. The middle one is taken from above, and still walks but may be considering to stop (for the camera). And the right-hand one, shot slightly from the side, carries on pushing whatever it is he is pushing. This makes the image a montage of three takes, and individualizes the workers, which is a political aspect. This, in addition to the steep, elongated perspective characteristic of many Munch paintings, and which here foregrounds the movement of the stream of people on the right, and the fewer and smaller ones on the left who walk in the opposite direction. Munch's play with perspective is another way of suggesting a camera, of trying out different angles. Sometimes the elongation is the most remarkable element; sometimes the exaggerated height is what makes the perspective seem longer. This is Munch's way of drawing attention to the dilemma of painting: as an image, it is flat; as a picture, in the sense of depiction, it attempts to achieve the illusion of three-dimensionality. Exaggerating this is a way of checking our tendency to be taken in by the realistic illusion. In this sense, a certain self-reflexivity hints at a postmodern aesthetic.[4]

Perhaps the most emphatically cinematic detail is the cropped and shadowy, semi-transparent left-over of a figure on the far left. I must confess it took sitting on the bench frontally contemplating the low-hung painting to see it—when the figure's shoe almost hit me. And now that I have seen it I cannot un-see it. I cannot take lightly this thing—not a figure but a trace of a figure, who was present before the "take" but now is already gone. An after-image in the image. This happens in film, not in painting, one would expect.

In his book *Film Form* (1949), Russian avant-garde filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948) explains his ideas about montage through Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary*, the famous scene of the *comices agricoles*,

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[4] On postmodernism in Flaubert, see Schor and Majewski. I have not found a publication on Munch as a postmodernist.

the annual market during which Rodolphe seduces Emma and becomes her first lover. Eisenstein analyzes the discourses that intermingle, of the officials and the would-be lovers, as an audio montage (12–13). For him, montage is conflict, tension. This idea of montage helps us understand an aspect of Munch's painting that has been noticed but not further examined in its consequences for, in particular, the political tenor of the painting. I call this aspect "mistakes."

"Mistakes" are characteristic of Munch, as well as Flaubert. The devices I discuss here are mistakes in relation to a norm of technical perfection, according to the standards of realism. Instead, they attract attention to the medium itself. On the part of the artist, shifts, errors, glitches, blurs, bad cropping and mistakes in perspectival drawing are all examples of a movement from one image to another that deploys the technical elements of the medium to make a change. Artists have always cultivated the boldness of daring to make what would be considered mistakes by, for instance, conservative critics. Such mistakes can have an avant-gardist flavour. Wilful mistakes make viewers consider the medium. Certain mistakes are specifically cinematic. The kind of mistakes Munch makes in his paintings, Flaubert in his writing, and Williams Gamaker and I in our videos have double effects; one self-reflectively medium-oriented, and one specific, generating meaning for the work at hand.

The tongue-in-cheek word "mistake" makes visible how traditionalist judges censor innovations, while making their judgements appear self-evident and without the possibility of questioning them. In Flaubert, this kind of strategy of errors can use verb tense incongruities to shock readers into paying attention to the texture of the work and its peculiarly cinematic temporality—his equivalent of the attention to flatness in Munch. In painting, the cinematic quality can also be enhanced by the fact that the image quality seems due to a camera that limits depth of field. It is almost as if we see camera movement and change of focus—two notorious mistakes in filming that, along with cropping, can also be used to enhance certain aspects and meanings. In this respect, the painter is freer than the cinematographer. He can, and does, vary with sharpness and blur regardless of how the depth of field justifies it, whether it is shallow or deep. When the cropping becomes excessive and the image semi-transparent, and one eye is diamond-shaped, the other squarely square, we can assume the artist is pushing his liberty for a purpose. When seen as cinematic, this becomes a self-reflective device (fig. 2).

An example in Flaubert's novel comparable to Munch's variations of "camera handling" is the first sentence of chapter 5 of the third part of *Madame Bovary.* Emma has just begun her liaison with Léon. She has plotted

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a way of seeing him weekly, under the pretext of piano lessons (III, 5). This is our scene 7, Loving Léon. "C'était le jeudi" ("It was Thursdays") begins the chapter. The verb tense indicates routine. The detailed narration of the small events that precede the encounter with her lover, all in the imparfait of routine, are plausible enough as iterations.

The passage ends, however, with the following sentence that, in isolation, could be considered a grammatical mistake: "Puis, d'un seul coup d'oeil, la ville apparaissait" ("Then, in a blink of an eye, the city would appear"; my translation). The suddenness implied in the adverbial clause is contradicted by the tense of routine. Normally, an indication of suddenness can interrupt a routine description, but not the other way around. Routine, by definition, cannot interrupt; it lacks temporal agency. Preceding this sentence is a clause that explains the apparent contradiction: ". . . afin de se faire des surprises, elle fermait les yeux" (". . . in an attempt to surprise herself, she would close her eyes"). In self-deception, Emma tries desperately to recover the excitement of a liaison that, barely begun, already bores her. We have attempted to make this tangible by filming re-iterated beginnings of the amorous meetings in the same hotel room, and showing the difference between the initial excitement and the subsequent boredom on Emma's face. Using her face as a projection screen is our way of rendering the subjectivity of the narrative prose.

With Munch's help, I have also attempted to bring a cinematic aspect in for the exhibition itself, in space, and this, not only by integrating the moving images of our videos. Take room 4, titled "Loneliness." An oblique line goes from the video of Emma's wedding to *The Wedding of the Bohemian* (fig. 3), the poster image of the exhibition. In both wedding scenes, we see a woman who is lonely in company, at what is supposed to be the happiest day of her life. The wedding becomes a death sentence, the day the beginning of a relentlessly ongoing social isolation. This is an example of the mutual framing I mentioned earlier, but it also literally *moves* the visitor, both to bodily traverse the room and to have compassion. Moreover, this line is crossed by another axis formed between three eminently cinematic paintings, their effect derived from steep perspective and, especially for the two most clearly opposite each other, from cropping. An example is the man on the right of the room (fig. 4). His cropped face, which looks straight at the viewer, emanates a sense of horror—a horror pursuing him from behind—the house that seems to be either on fire or bleeding. The man runs into our arms, or toward the other side of the room, into the arms of the woman on the right, who is likewise frontally leaving the frame (fig. 2). Little is left of her after the cropping, which sug-

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gests an even faster pace. She also seems to run for her dear life, under the curatorially-produced influence of the man across from her.

Another example of curatorial cinematicity is the way I undercut the star status of the famous *Madonna* to liberate the work from its reputation by making its cinematic quality stand out, inserting it in a row of paintings in the room called "Fantasies" (fig. 5). It is now simply one of a small row of four paintings, like four film frames. The film I have construed, if we go counter-clockwise, is an erotic one, but not a merely semi-pornographic appeal to taking possession. The narrative is more ambiguous than that. Increasingly naked, the first (from right to left, as the visitor was invited to go) with a transparent top, the second is *Madonna*. Framed between the woman in red and the one with one sore nipple and her skirt pulled down by, supposedly, hands that try to grab her, the woman in *Madonna* appears to be at least ambiguous, not the cock-teaser nor the ecstatic woman having an orgasm while conceiving a child, as she tends to be seen, but either willingly or unwillingly having her top pulled off, or, if supine, being spied upon in sleep. The sequence ends on a weeping woman, with the same blue skirt, so potentially identifiable as the one being harassed. And after a "fade-to-black," in the form of a gap, the larger *Kiss* culminates the ambiguity: a happy ending, or a warning that the consequence of "love" can well be losing your face, your personality. All this is, of course, a curatorial fantasy, the building blocks of which are "images of women" bound together by the fictitious focalizer Edvard.

A third example of cinematic curating is the older, sideways-looking Edvard in room six, "In the Deep," whose slight squint suggests he is witness to the tragedies unfolding in the world outside, on his right (for the visitor) or left (for the figure) (fig. 6). Again, Munch leads the way, when he inserts on the lower left, in the third of these paintings of tragedy, a skeletal horse, barely visible and transparent, bending his body to look the visitor in the eye, something that Munch's humanoids rarely do. The animal's eyes beckon the viewer to look with the two men whose faces we cannot see, who are witnessing the drowning in *The Drowned Boy*, as opposed to the situation in the *Drowning Child*, where a death occurred because other people didn't bother to see. I'll return to this painting in a bit. In these scenes of tragedy, I have attempted to insert a view of Edvard, the older Edvard, as compassionate. Although in this sequence this is due to the curating, in this, too, I follow Munch's lead. I have already suggested that Edvard is not simply the inveterate misogynist he has often been taken to be, when speaking of my construction of a sequence of fantasies that could harbour a measure of sadism but also compassion for the woman who, in

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The Hands, is assaulted and who then, semi-denuded wearing a blue skirt in the juxtaposed painting, seems to weep in the aftermath.

In the famous work *Puberty*, a compassionate view has been noticed by others, most notably feminist philosopher Ingeborg Owesen. She writes about the *Puberty* painting that Munch "demonstrates an uncanny ability to empathise with woman's fate and situation, in this instance by depicting an adolescent with keen sympathy and understanding, a far cry from the Lolita-type object of male lust" (302–03). And the most compassionate expressions of empathy are the ones I have mentioned regarding my curatorial cinematic constructions, *The Wedding of the Bohemian*, *Kissing Couples in the Park* where the main figure has no one to kiss, and let me add the lithographs of *The Lonely Ones*. This resonates with Flaubert's empathy for Emma, present throughout the novel but relevant here when, in the merry crowd of the party, she is so alone that her gestures predict her suicide.

Earlier I proposed that the surfaces, *quivering* with unequal brush strokes, thin and thick paint, and interventions by natural wear and tear give the surfaces as such a cinematic feel; for they seem to be in movement. This work with surface is Munch's way of experimenting with his medium; the way Flaubert does it with incongruous comparisons, verb tenses that verge on the a-grammatical and montages of takes. I would like to end this section with one example where the moving canvas indicates a self-reflection on the medium that gives the lie to those binary thinkers who believe Munch was not radical enough because he never gave up figuration in favor of abstraction (as Prelinger wrote in her otherwise illuminating book). For me, the experiments with, as well as within, figuration and in its relationship with what we can call abstraction (but should not see as figuration's opposite), are what makes Munch's painting more, rather than less, radical than his cubist and abstract contemporaries.

Once more I call on Tøjner to speculate about the depth-surface tension: "Munch is saved by his belief in the surface: there can hardly be any doubt that it is the depths, rather than the surface, which destroy—the terrible abyss. One is stifled, one loses everything, one perishes, one drowns, one becomes invisible, one falls and falls and—probably worst of all—nobody notices" (46). The last words, "worst of all, nobody notices," constitute the connection between this group of paintings and the previous one, where a child drowned.

In this painting, probably from 1904, the child is doomed by the indifference of the bystanders (fig. 7). Still on the surface, held up by the air in her skirt, she will soon be pulled under and die. Between the minuscule people busying themselves on the pier and the child in her final seconds is

a high wall of indifference—the wall of the pier which, if we consider it on its own, is an abstract painting. Thick and thin paint, even a blob of pure pigment matter, and bare canvas all contribute to the "abstraction effect."

Hands-on

If we now turn to the opposite corner of the room, we can see that this play with surface and depth, abstraction and figuration, and additionally, the centrality of poorly depicted hands, is at its most radical in the monumental *Self-Portrait with a Bottle of Wine*, his most poignant expression of loneliness (fig. 8). It is appealing to draw attention to the inward-directed gaze of the eyes and the strange figuration of two men, waiters looking like death, who stand back to back and, in a flat surface reading, look as though they come out of Edvard's shoulders, figuring by contrast the togetherness he lacks, or a split personality; their backs are turned to each other. Their small scale is due to the perspectival exaggeration.

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The dejected body posture also indicates hopelessness. The exaggerated perspective hems the figure in. The colours look fiery, producing a sense of inner turmoil. But the other aspect that can help us make sense of the work beyond the compassionate sense of witnessing is the brushwork and the colour composition. With thanks to Patricia G. Berman (personal communication), the wine glass on the right foreground can be read as leaning ever so slightly inward toward the seated figure, vectored away from the painting's frame. The space between that glass and Edvard's inert and paddle-like hands adds to the pathos of the image. Edvard's suit is green and black, a worked-up surface that makes the fabric seem to move like a shimmering "changeant" fabric and the sagging shoulders more static than would fit that movement. This further complicates the flatness-figuration dynamic. The orange behind the chair makes no figurative sense, other than being fiery, hence, a potential bearer of inner turmoil. The tablecloths are clearly meant to be white, but there is barely any white among the nuances of blue. And then, there are those hands.

The point of their togetherness is to be slack, useless, both central and a-centric. The hands appear central because they are at the front of that perspective, even touching the tablecloth so as to slightly curve its lower edge. The hands serve no purpose, and that may well be to express how colour fields pre-empt the figurative energy we tend to bring to even this depiction of limpness. I propose that the best approach to this painting is to finally give up the difference between figuration and abstraction. The tablecloths are suitable for making us realize that this is in the first place an invitation to look abstractly. Only if, overcoming the predominance of

a sentimentalizing compassion, we dare to do so, can we see the absurdly non-figurative orange field behind the back of the chair, distracted from the dejected face. In surface tension, the figure sits on a colour field, orange with nuances of brown that bring it to life. If not, the man is actually burning.

Munch deploys many aspects within figurative art that hint at abstraction, the combination of which makes the paintings what they are. When form is no longer the subject of mimetic representation, what is left to gather meaning is colour. For example, Swiss painter and theorist Johannes Itten (1888–1967) included temporality in his theory of colour. With the term "successive contrast" he proposed that the brain creates complimentary after-images of the colours we see. Joseph Albers developed the concept of "interaction of colour."

In line with Munch's practice I see colour as a mode of painting that adds to instead of subtracting from figuration; inflecting, transforming, sometimes curbing it. On the condition that we stop seeing figuration in realist, historical and biographical terms, we can see that the use of colour in *Self-Portrait with a Bottle of Wine* is, in fact, a kind of figuration rather than a tool or helpmate, subordinated to it. Without taking colour into account it becomes impossible to see how the figure is locked into the planes of his space. That, more than his inward eyes, solicits compassion.

The blue "white" tables in *Self-Portrait with a Bottle of Wine* press the brooding figure to the edge of the picture plane, almost pushing him out, alluding to the lens. I see such cropping as a suspension of linear perspective and the illusion of spatial wholeness and possessiveness it entails. Instead of the scientifically sanctioned tool of linear perspective, the painter used colour and cropping to make three-dimensionality within narrow or shallow spaces. In this view, light colours push forward, dark ones draw backward. The dark green that suggests the man's suit is also a dark colour that presses him backwards into the fire, yet also, due to the cropping, forwards into our arms. This colour-dimensionality is not so much depth, seen as receding, as it is volume, seen as advancing. Instead of delivering space for the encompassing eye, it prods objects for the touch. As a result, perspective in this self-portrait becomes an inflection and emulation of linear perspective, transforming perspective's meaning from possession to relationality. Hence, the sense that the figure is pushed towards us, very close, almost falling into our laps.

Another aspect of abstraction, related to the sense of "taking out of," is *inattention* (more about this in Ernst van Alphen's contribution). The paradoxical consequence is a distraction from the motif to the painterly realization. This figural distraction leads to attention to the paint for its own sake;

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to materiality, consistent with Munch's wilful neglect of his paintings when he left them outside for months to be affected by the weather. He wished the surface to be disturbed, so that we would look at it with more attention.

The patch of orange behind the figure is doing it all: working by colour relation—orange as related to, complementary of, yet firmly distinguished from the brown of the chair and the green of the suit—it eats into the otherwise neat (albeit exaggerated) perspective. It distracts from the dejected figure, thus enticing us into inattention, then into a realization of what we do, giving up on compassion and looking at a colour patch instead. And once concentrated on that patch, precisely because it eats into the chair, it becomes a clear *figuration* of fire. From colour alone, the abstract orange becomes not a figuration but a sign—where there is orange, there is fire. Yet, at the same time, the orange remains just that: a patch of colour.

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Munch proposed a continuous experimental, *mobile* mode of painting. The orange, remaining pigment while signifying fire, is so meaningful because fire also hovers between thing and event, thus bringing in the ambiguity between duration and instantaneousness. I consider this patch of orange an emblem, or a *mise-en-abyme* of Munch's painting. Once more this brings Munch close to Flaubert, who proposed his vision of emotional capitalism in a prose that hurt logical minds and made language opaque. The surface of the text and the taste of the sounds get the agency Berman ascribes to Munch's surfaces: with an indispensable broadening the meanings of the surface to body, agent, membrane and projection.

After having been distracted from the sad figure and diverting our gaze to the orange patch, we then look from the one to the other. The durational, interiorized gaze and the instantaneousness of the fire both come to us through the materiality of pigment. The brushstrokes become the work's "first person." We finally manage to look figuration and abstraction *together* in the eye.[5]

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All paintings are by Edvard Munch and are in the holdings of the Munch Museum, Oslo.

Fig. 1. *Workers on Their Way Home*, 1913–14, oil on canvas, 227 x 201 cm.

Fig. 2. *Kissing Couples in the Park*, 1904, oil on canvas, 91 x 170.5 cm.

Fig. 3. *The Wedding of the Bohemian*, 1925–26, oil on canvas, 134.5 x 178.5 cm.

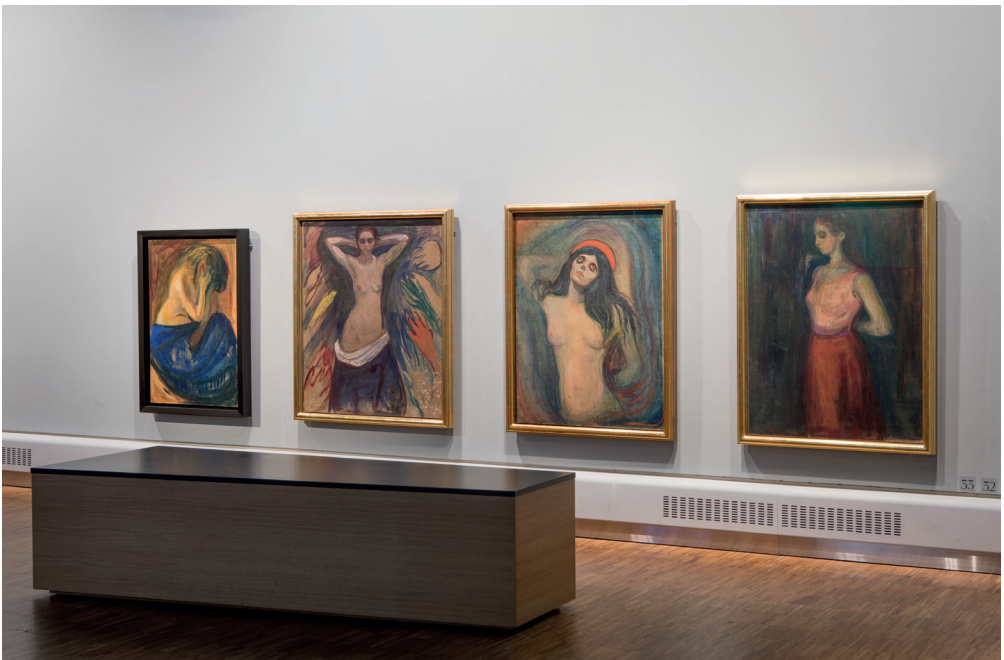**Fig. 4.** *Red Virginia Creeper*, 1898–1900, oil on canvas, 119.5 x 121 cm.

Fig. 5. Row of half-naked women (photo: Ove Kvavik):

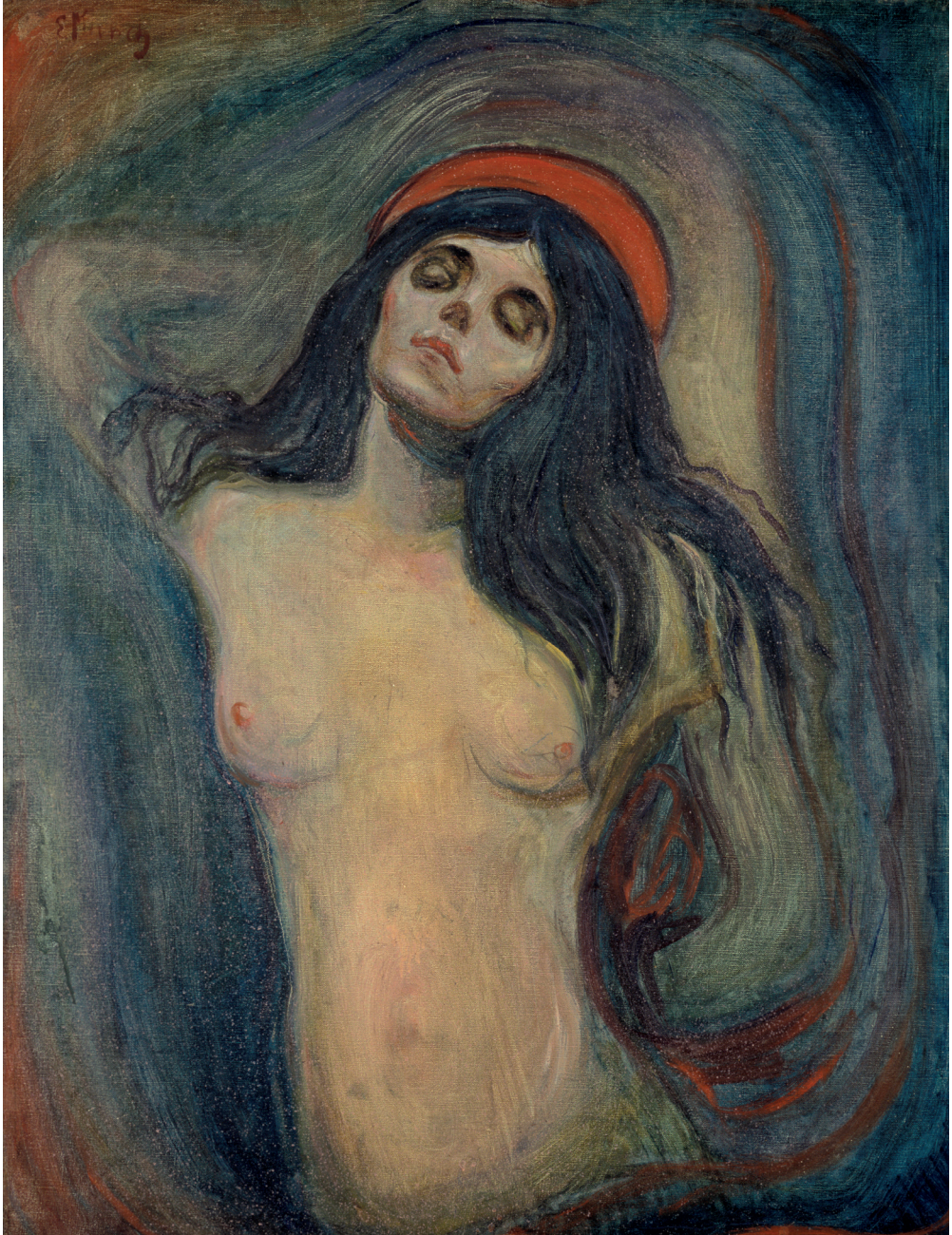**Fig. 5a.** *Study of a Model*, 1898, oil on unprimed paper, 92 x 70 cm.

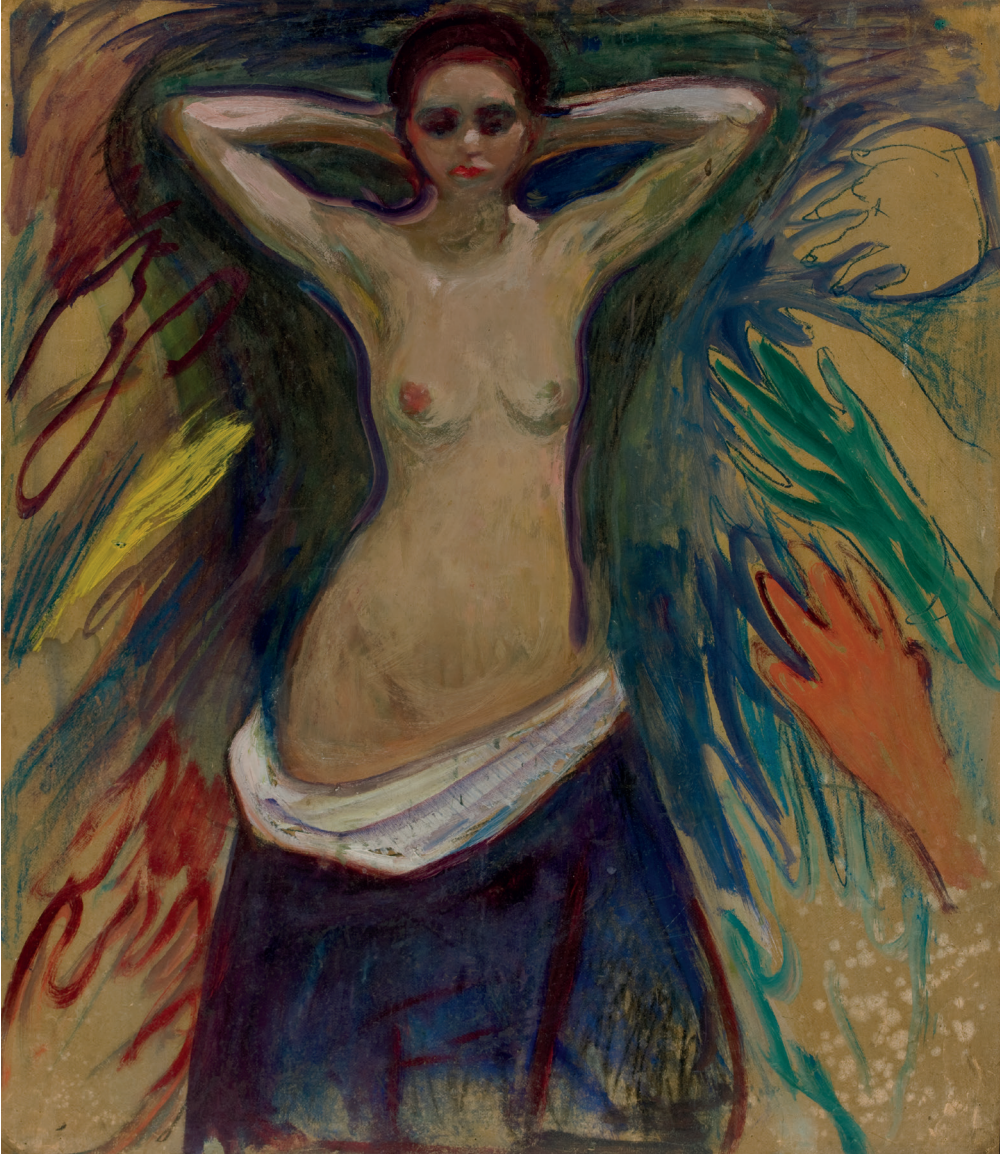**Fig. 5b.** *Madonna*, 1894, oil on canvas, 90 x 68.5 cm.

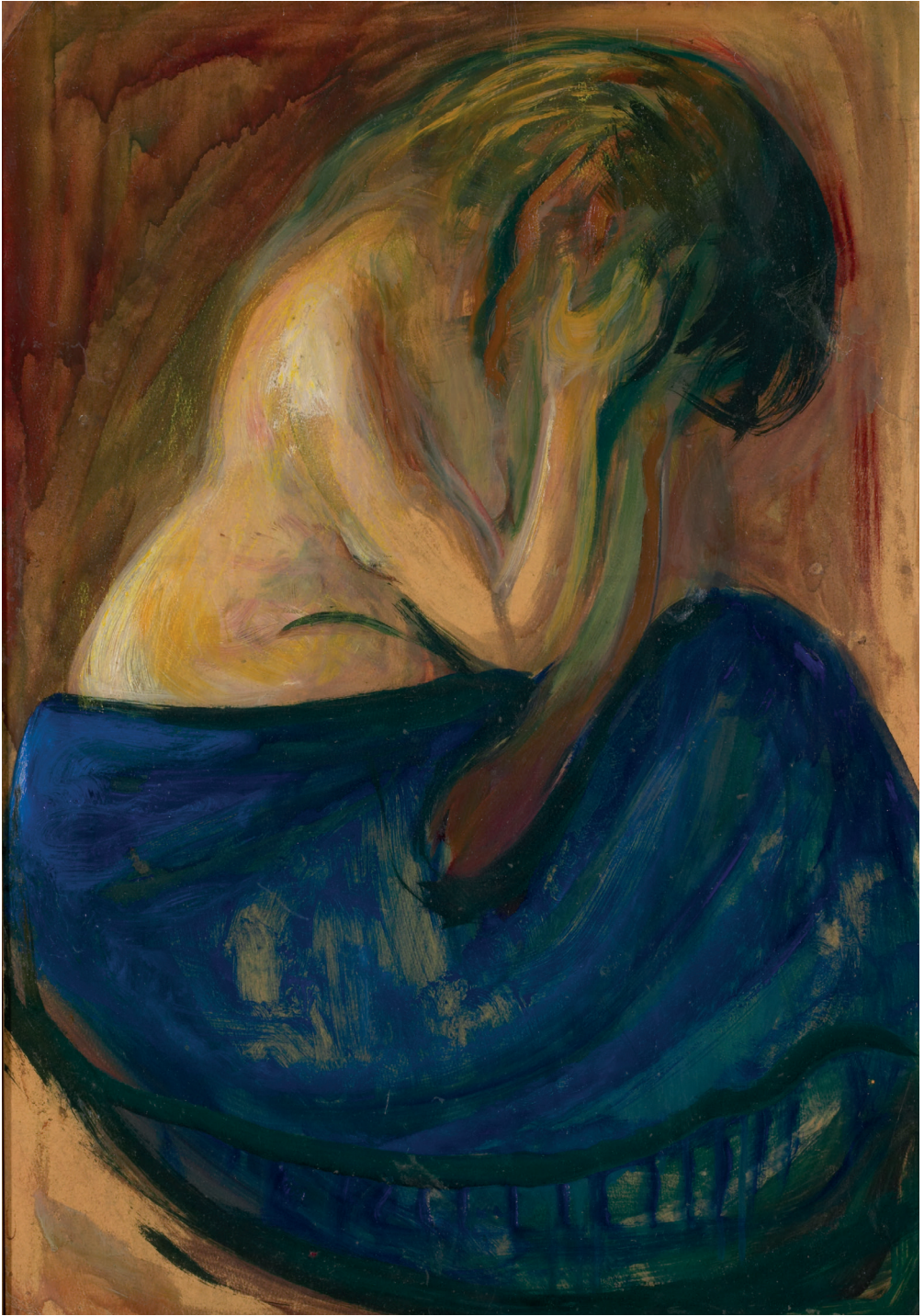**Fig. 5c.** *The Hands*, 1893–94, oil and crayon on unprimed cardboard, 91 x 77 cm.

Fig. 5d. *Half-Nude in a Blue Skirt*, 1898, oil on unprimed paper, 80 x 55 cm.

Fig. 6. *Self-Portrait by the Window*, ca. 1940, oil on canvas, 84 x 108 cm.

Fig. 7. *The Drowning Child*, 1904, oil on canvas, 70 x 92 cm.

Fig. 8. *Self-Portrait with a Bottle of Wine*, 1906, oil on canvas, 110.5 x 120.5 cm.