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ADVOCACY OF SHOCK: HOW TO BRING ART TO LIFE (AND ITS VISITORS WITH IT)

Mieke Bal

Curating is a delicate job; it is the mediation between artworks or other objects, and a public that tends to navigate on routine expectations. Rather than providing surveys, for information, the key moment when artworks ‘work’ is when they are juxtaposed, combined, with one another. As also argued by Nina Simon and Claire Bishop (Bishop, 2014; Simon, 2016), and in my 1996 book *Double Exposures* on this subject (Bal, 1996), meanings and effects, affects and appreciation are not inherent in artworks but are *events* that occur, in the present, when visitors engage with the art on display. Shaking visitors up, shocking them into an active engagement with artworks, is in my view the most important aspect of curating.

Shocking them out of the ‘consumerist’ attitude currently promoted by managerial anxieties over subsidies is the curators’ task. I am aware of the need of museums to attract new audiences, especially younger ones. To pre-empt this, the most frequently advanced argument: in the case presented below, shaking up and even shocking did not diminish but increase the visitors’ numbers. In this contribution I aim to make the case for countering conservative tendencies while shedding consumerism, both. And since art can also be seen as something that ‘shocks people into thought’ (Massumi, 2002), the distinction between making art and making an exhibition with it, in other words, between the work of artists and the work of curators, is relative. An effective exhibition produces the shock of unexpected visions that renews complacency in the face of repeated traditional ways of working. As does high-quality art.

Museums are almost by definition conservative, literally, in charge of conservation. That is their primary task, without which art would disappear and the past dissolve into dust. And what is more traditional than a one-artist museum, founded as the legacy of a great national artist? So, as a practice-based case-study, I will analyse precisely such a museum experience in the face of its inherently conservative task. The description of the experiment below is addressed to

(prospective) curators, especially those who, on a freelance basis, will be dealing each time anew with established museum staff, habits and collections I am talking about the Munch Museum in Oslo. The city got lucky when, upon his death in 1944, the artist left over 1,200 paintings and thousands of drawings and graphics to the city of Oslo. Another luck was that this collection contained some of the most emblematic works of this artist who deserves to be honoured as one of the founders of modern art. How can such a museum do the shaking up and shocking that, I will advocate in this chapter, can innovate, attract, but most importantly, transform the attitude and experience of visitors from consumerist passivity and obedient docility, into engaged, dialogic enticement to enjoy and think, at the same time?

Although art is not, and must not be, confined to museums, such institutions are still a safe harbour for precarious objects such as artworks. Moreover, the expertise of their staff accumulates and opens up knowledge of the artworks and their history. And for the public, museums provide an equally safe environment where they can slow down, immerse themselves in fictional universes, enjoy something that is useless to their careers but useful for their quality of life, hence for the social fabric in which they participate. For some time now, the Munch museum, under the guidance of the director of Collections and Exhibitions, Dr. Jon-Ove Steihaug, has made attempts to innovate. In 2015 he asked me if I was interested in curating an exhibition from the collection that would include my video installations *Madame B* and be accompanied by a book publication. The entire museum was put at my disposal, and the complete 19-channel video work including a large number of photographs, was welcomed. This was the first time that I was invited for my triple activities, as scholar, curator and artist – a first step in the ‘mixing’ that, as I argue below, is a major aspect of innovation within, and respecting, the tradition that this museum stands for.

For me, this integration began in 2002, incited by incidents in my scholarship and life, and continues to this day. To put it exceedingly briefly: wishing to understand the social tensions around immigration better and not learning this ‘about’ but ‘with’ the people concerned (my scholarly motivation), and witnessing the arbitrary treatment of an ‘undocumented’ neighbour (my social motivation), I used the opportunity of working with residents of an art centre where I did tutorials (my artistic motivation). With a small group I made a documentary. Then, a bit later a colleague invited me to lecture in Spain and show that film, an occasion I used to propose including films by others around the same issues. This became my curatorial motivation – something I had more or less accidentally gotten involved with a few years earlier and enjoyed enormously. In all three areas, the joy of doing it came from the sense of exerting creativity around a cause.¹

All three activities are related, in my view, and not only because I happen to practice them all. I am seriously convinced of the added gain coming from integrating them. So, Steihaug’s invitation was most welcome and came as the beginning of the most rewarding experiment of my working life. Eighteen months later, the exhibition happened. In order to shake up any tendency, on the part of

audience and staff, to get comfortable with routine, I wanted to refresh the page and cause some shocks that would help create a new view of this great artist's work. My goal was to make a museum experiment. The exhibition on which I base my arguments here, *Emma & Edvard: Love in the Time of Loneliness* ran from January 27 to April 17, 2017. The title was proposed by Steihaug and the in-house curator, Ute Kuhlemann Falck. The title I had in mind, which became the title of the accompanying book, was in their view too theoretical: *Emma & Edvard Looking Sideways: Loneliness and the Cinematic*. This was one of a good number of discussions where practice and theory were productively brought together.²

I was aware that this prestigious museum had a tradition that its staff was keen to forcefully shake up. Yet, if only for the sake of a productive collaboration, a basic acceptance of how this museum worked was an unspoken condition of possibility for my project. Hence, while I was reflecting on how to transform it, an equally deep reflection on what it was they were committed to was just as indispensable. Talking with the museum workers was the obvious route to mutual understanding and respect, not as a chore but as a practice of collective creativity. The basis for this was my admiration and fondness for the commitment they all had to do the best possible for Munch's art, and an awareness of my own limited knowledge of it, hence my need to learn. At the same time, I was eager to intervene in the traditional modes of exhibiting.

I had been critically studying these traditions at least since the 1990s, when there was a flurry of publications in museum studies, in the wake of Douglas Crimp's fiercely critical study from 1980. As in particular in my book *Double Exposures* (all based on case studies) I had argued, the understandable conservatism of museums leads to exclusions, as *per* Crimp, but also to modes of display that can be offensive to actual visitors, or just reconfirm what they expect to see. I knew that the Munch Museum staff, or the 'Munchies' (pron. Munkies) as I affectionately called them, were interested in change. This seemed an ideal case study for this chapter. The experimental museum: I seek to propose some constructive interventions that, according to my experience, make a difference in the relationship between art and the public, and are within the possibilities of most, if not all museums (Crimp, 1993).

Wishes for an updated museum

Through the experience of this experimental curation, I have three wishes for a museum that does better justice to the art it houses, preserves and shows than the traditional display in genre- or medium-based categories, and chronological sequencing. All three are attempts to innovate from within, to produce a kind of shock effect through what might be perceived as inappropriate mixing. Mixing up chronology, mixing artists and media and changing museum practice: height of hanging, wall texts and captions and most crucially, seating. Mixing modes of being with art, that is. In Figure 6.1, you see them all three implemented. The two video screens facing each other are dated 2013. The novel of which they stage



FIGURE 6.1 Section of room 3, 'Fantasy.' Photo: Ove Kvavik.

passages dates back to 1856. And the paintings by Munch are from the 1890s. The benches, constructed for the exhibition, are from 2017.

I have no principled objections to chronological shows nor to monographic ones – a good one-artist exhibition can give surplus value to what we know, or think we know, from scattered encounters with individual works. Two other models are quite frequent, the 'movement' exhibition – such as impressionism – and the two-artists exhibition, where influence and similarity is foregrounded: *Picasso & Toulouse Lautrec* in 2017–18 in the Thyssen Museum in Madrid; *Velázquez & Manet*, The French Taste for Spanish Painting, among other places in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris in 2002, *Van Gogh+Munch*, in 2015 in the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam and in the Munch Museum in Oslo. And then there is, of course, the collection-based exhibition. All these genres can work well – and can be boring. I propose other ways of combining artworks in the museum and thereby offering different experiences to viewers.

When I was invited to do a curation at the Munch Museum, Steihaug suggested including our videos because, for him, the theme of romantic love (I added: gone fatally wrong) of Flaubert's novel, on which our video work was based, offered a relevant link to Munch. This suddenly made the one-artist museum a three-ways combination: (1) in time – Flaubert, mid-nineteenth century, Munch, from late nineteenth to mid-twentieth, and our contemporary work; (2) in medium – painting, literature, video – and (3) in curatorial concept, where a theme such as love compelled a drastically anachronistic sequence. These were bound to cause a shock effect. And I decided, from day one, to design the hanging primarily in function of the desire to slow down visits. My official argument was simple: if video

requires time, since it is a time-based medium, Munch's paintings require similar durational looking. But for me it was more generally the need of artworks to be given time, no matter the combination with video. This intervention, it turned out, was the key to the success of the exhibition. The first review titled: 'The best Munch exhibition I have ever seen!' by Kjetil Røed, *Aftenposten* 28 January, sent almost 50% more visitors than expected to the museum. It may sound paradoxical, but slowing down, demanding time, concentration and contemplation, it turned out, was not an elitist, not only an aesthetic issue, but a popular one.

I would like to argue for the three *shocks* to be produced more often, in many different museums. With 'shocks' I mean ways of going against the grain of expectations. The first principle is that looking at art requires time; the second, mixing is stimulating; the third, chronology makes lazy, whereas 'temporal turbulence' activates. Why is the time of looking so important? In current museum practice, where, with luck, one bench stands in the middle of a large gallery for a bit of rest (far) from the artworks, this factor is neglected. Either you stand or walk, or you sit and talk. In order to see you must stand. No wonder that visitors spend barely 30 minutes on average in an exhibition, and 8 seconds with each artwork. This undermines what art can be and do for the people for whose benefit, in whose name, with whose tax money museums work. Instead, I had requested the construction of benches and hung the paintings extremely low, so that sitting in front of them was more comfortable than standing. The convention is to put one bench in the middle of a large gallery. You can sit there and rest from the tiring walk along the walls, but while you sit you cannot see the paintings, surely not close enough to appreciate brush strokes and nuances of colour. And usually, paintings are hung high, even higher than standing height, which also makes them hard to see up close. In contrast, I requested the construction of benches and an extremely low hanging of the paintings in order to promote, almost compel, durational looking.

From 'how to?' to 'why?': intership

Now, what is the museological vision behind all this? The *mixing* as such yields connections that were emerging in the process of visitors' looking. Connections across the borders of the fields, specialisations and disciplines inevitably invoke the term 'interdisciplinary.' I prefer the preposition 'inter-' to the frequently used 'trans-', which supposes that you can just traverse other areas without being affected by it; and even more to 'multi-', which denotes simply an assembly of different things. 'Inter-', in contrast, indicates *relationship*. I call this 'inter-ship,' a term wilfully alluding to 'internship,' denoting learning through practice. I include in the great variety of interships the one between analysing and making art – perhaps best called 'intermedial analysis.' Interships occurs in many different frameworks and guises:

Inter-ship
Inter-national

Inter-cultural
 Inter-disciplinary
 Inter-medial
 inter-active
 Inter-temporal
 Inter-scale
 Inter-medial analysis...
 all leading to the most wholesome social awareness:
 Inter-dependence

According to Roland Barthes's brief description of it, interdisciplinarity produces a *new* object, and this object belongs to no one (Parker et al., 2010). No turf policing, then; 'Munch' as I consider and had construed him, or it, for this occasion, belongs to no one. This also holds 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 draw out its consequences for the practice of curating. An exhibition is a meeting ground for that here-and-now of art with the people who come to see and ponder it. And to the connections already mentioned, exhibitions add the relationship among works themselves. Curating does not consist of providing surveys; the information it inevitably also conveys is not its first priority. Rather, it 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. As I wrote in the book *Emma & Edvard Looking Sideways*, curating is 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 she frames the artworks. In this exhibition, the primary framing was the suggestion of mutual connections, or resonances, between Munch and Flaubert, or rather, the fictional figures of Emma & Edvard. The groupings I have made follow in the wake of that primary framing.³

One of the 'shocking' interventions was also, to the delight of Steihaug, the introduction of literature in the museum. This was, of course, oblique, via the videos; but these extensively quote directly from Flaubert's novel, so that the resounding dialogues – I insisted on putting the sound as loud as possible without becoming disturbing – evoked the sentences from this world-famous prose. This semi-recognition, along with the sense of high-quality prose, and helped by beautiful actors' voices, was one of the elements that encouraged slowness: sitting on the benches installed rather close to the painting so as to prevent other visitors from walking in front of the seated ones, people sat keenly listening as well as looking. Sound is also, always, part of an exhibition, if only the murmurs of visitors walking and talking.

Underlying the three principles I had pursued is the conviction that art is performative but must be given the chance to perform: that makes the boundary between art making and curating porous. We tend to think that performativity came into being with the proposition of the concept by John Austin (1975). But in

fact, the age-old institution of censorship demonstrates the presence of the awareness of art's performativity in the entire history of art and literature. It is only after Austin's intervention that we have learned to take the consequences also in a positive sense. 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 addressing the present (Haynes, 2005; LaCapra, 1982). They seemed to panic about the moral welfare of that culture. So, the half-sentence that reversed the generally accepted morality and became a key target for the prosecution, was 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) uttered by the narrator and clearly – but perhaps, dangerously, not exclusively – focalised by Emma, hurt the not-yet-quite-modern sensibility of the prosecutor and his motivators.⁴

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 – heaven 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. But Flaubert won his case and was acquitted. This was due to his cheeky argument that his novel was art, not reality, which reassured the judges. This defence 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 enticing; more performative and this, sensuously, than, say, journalism. At least, art such as Flaubert's and Munch's. And both artists knew this only too well.

To convey this, in our video making we were compelled to do literary as well as visual analysis, in that inter-ship between studying and making, both as forms of analysis – now mostly called 'artistic research.' What we sought to do was integrate the three groups of artworks on the basis of the senses. To bind the three bodies of work together, I borrowed from a Danish museum director the phrase 'conceptual art of the senses.' He wrote: 'Can we allow ourselves to call Munch a conceptual artist of the senses – that is, an artist who works with ideas, but [...] one who realises them?' (Tøjner, 2001: 43).⁵

Rather than a specific characterisation of Munch's work, however, I take that phrase to be a description of all art worthy of exhibiting and made available to the public for sense-based perception and reflection. 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' – affectively effective and impacting, perhaps changing or confirming and implicating the position of the viewer or reader. And the senses cannot function in another than the present tense.

Curating as inter-ship

At this point, it seems most helpful to give an example. Not to 'illustrate' my argument, but in order to demonstrate it. In Room 4 'Loneliness,' the situation staged in Room 3, on which more later, deteriorates when fantasising is checked by a harsh reality. Visitors could either turn right and enter the chapel-like installation of the video of the wedding, a large projection in front of which a few rows of church-like benches are placed. Or, they can cross the room where, obliquely from the wedding video, the poster painting of the exhibition is resonating with it. Emma is already unhappy at her wedding, which ought to be a moment of happiness. She is ostracised and gossiped about by her own guests, and the day is full of rituals and thus relentlessly impersonal. Small incidents enhance the ambiguity of the wedding: an uninvited guest makes a disturbing appearance. Emma is lonely and her girlhood dreams begin to waver. Looking at herself in the mirror, she begins to doubt her requisite beauty.

The wedding scene as Munch depicted it, like the other paintings in this gallery, emanates an overpowering sense of loneliness, too. They all depict the main figures isolated from other persons and their surroundings. *The Wedding of the Bohemian*, a devastating portrayal of loneliness, manifests a deep sympathy with the woman's plight, and resonating with Emma's isolation at her wedding, it, too, questions the solidity of both artists' reputation of misogyny. And in the corner, in the video installation *Boredom Sets In*, an eerie atmosphere in an empty house contrasts with a loud party where Emma is again not socially accepted. More fantasy leads to more loneliness.

The Wedding of the Bohemian, here on the right, was chosen as the poster image, and installed low, alone on a wall, with a bench near it. This did attract not only sitting and contemplating this indictment of social ostracism, but also people who got to talk with one another, whether or not they had come together or were total strangers. I often saw visitors are clearly discussing the painting, some of them pointing out a detail, others responding. In the painting *Red Virginia Creeper*, a man, cropped below the face, seems to run away from a house on fire – or otherwise scary. 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 either be on fire or bleeding. This hung across from another painting, in Figure 6.2, the second on the left, where a woman, cropped even more violently mid-way her face, runs away from the depicted *Kissing Couples in the Park*, because, I imagined when making these paintings face each other, she has no one to kiss. In this painting, we see a green landscape, penguin-like couples and the fleeing woman with a yellow straw hat. These two acts of facing, from the two wedding scenes lengthwise to these two lonelinesses over the width of the gallery, were my 'acts of curating' that the artists when making the works, would not at all been aware of. Yet, as contributions to the ensemble that curating is meant to create, they gave added artistic meanings to the works that, seen individually, would be more limited, because alone in their performative effects.⁶



FIGURE 6.2 The left side of room 4, 'Loneliness.' Photo: Ove Kvavik.

This plea for meaning making on the spot, as acts of curating, does not mean, not at all, that the history, the past 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, 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, of the senses as a tool for experience are still with us, in the ever-increasing 'distractive' culture that is fatal for sociability in which the slowed-down exhibition attempts to intervene. This connection between the nineteenth century and today is not at all the logic of chronology but an accumulative and dialogic conception of time; an intertemporality. Here lies the 'conceptual art of the senses' (Tøjner) of our video work; which refrains from either reconstructing the past as a remote 'foreign country' as David Lowenthal wrote it in 1985; the past is not foreign but belongs to the present. Nor does the work position Emma's sad story exclusively in the present, as if trying to forget the continuity of duration, with ups and downs; or the resurfacing of the mid- and late-nineteenth century and its obsessions in our present, which considers itself so superior to it.⁷

Instead, in our videos, Michelle and I have merged, in blatant anachronism, two eras, and the space in-between. The respective eras of Flaubert and Munch are not the 'source' nor the 'cause' of the situation today, but neither 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' to the creative, fictional works. This is a different understanding of 'conceptual art of the senses.' Regretfully I have to limit my examples and hence, the tentacles of the concept of the exhibition.

An aesthetic that binds: the cinematic

The following is an example that resonates due to the concept of the specific aesthetic underlying the exhibition, 'the cinematic.' This became a curatorial strategy, binding the painting and writing of Munch and Flaubert, and the more

obvious cinematic nature of our videos. I explain this concept visually, and with Munch and Flaubert as the ‘theorists’ of it. The three paintings in the back of the first room are the site of an ambiguity that leads beyond 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 brush 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.

The term ‘cinematic’ derives from filmmaking and – in the context of paintings – is conventionally understood as conveying the illusion of movement. The concept can be widened, however. Paintings that show cut-off figures remind us of a camera frame, caused by the physical restriction of the lens. As a result, the figures appear to be moving out of the frame. Once paintings are considered as frames, it is easy to view them together as a sequence, animating a situation of movement. Munch’s figures also convey movement in their allusive eyes and facial expression, their vagueness suggesting that they can change at any moment. The onlooker is compelled to imagine what will happen next or what has just happened, as if watching a movie. Consider, also, Munch’s deployment of the sideways look. Looking is an act in the social domain. By avoiding looking someone in the eyes, one escapes from the dialogic nature of looking. This is typical of cinema. The sideways look can also be understood as a physical act: a move away from the other person. Due to this cinematic quality, the mode of ‘looking sideways’ can be understood as an expression of self-inflicted loneliness. Paintings that exemplify different aspects of the cinematic, are to be found throughout the exhibition, where I dispersed them to avoid a stylistic grouping or survey. The three paintings in the first gallery are visual representations of movement. But they also emphasise ‘camera framing through cropping, are edited through montage of different ‘takes’ within one painting and are strongly perspectival. Colour effects, blurs and other ‘camera mistakes’ add to the cinematic effect (see E&E 24–41).

The moving quality, obviously, is 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 synaesthetic 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 even 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 (Bal, 2017, p. 27), 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, and he arrests his movement. The middle one is taken from above, and still walks but may be considering stopping (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 individualises the workers, which is a political aspect. This, in addition to the steep, elongated perspective characteristic of many Munch paintings. 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 staging, 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. What we see here connects the painting both to Flaubert’s notoriously cinematic writing and to the medium of video’s moving quality.

Perhaps the most emphatically cinematic detail is the cropped and shadowy, semi-transparent left-over of a figure on the far left. 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 already gone. An after-image within the image. This happens in film, not in painting, one would expect. Munch thus visually theorises the kind of exhibition where the shock of the other medium helps the images linger. But the curatorial act of the low hanging, in a central position, and a bench near it, made the sighting of that shadow and the understanding of all it entails, possible. The artwork does need the curator as a subject that is, in a sense, a co-maker of the image in the present.

With Munch’s help, I have also attempted to bring a cinematic aspect in for the exhibition itself, in space, not only by integrating the moving images of our videos. Let me return for a moment to Room 4. As I suggested previously, here, an oblique line goes from the video of Emma’s wedding to the painting *The Wedding of the Bohemian*. In both wedding scenes, we see a woman who is lonely in company, on 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 was crossed by another one, between three eminently cinematic paintings, an effect due to steep perspective and, especially for the two most clearly opposite each other, to cropping. The man on the right of the room runs into our arms, or toward the other side of the room, into the arms of the woman who is likewise frontally leaving the frame. Little is left of her after the cropping, which suggests 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, when it is part of a row of paintings in the gallery titled ‘fantasy.’ It is now simply one of four paintings. The sequence or ‘film’ I have construed, is installed counterclockwise because visitors just exit a corridor of two floating video screens. This is also an encouragement to first consider the idealising painting at the end of the corridor, and then to realise that looking from left to right is not the only way in the world people read and look and construct stories.

This is an erotic film, but not a merely semi-pornographic appeal to taking possession. The narrative is more ambiguous than that. Increasingly naked, the first with a transparent top, the second is *Madonna* (Bal, 2017, p. 94). 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. The sequence ends on a weeping woman, with the same blue skirt, so, potentially identifiable as the one being harassed (Bal, 2017, p. 98). And after a ‘fade-to-black,’ in the form of a gap, the larger painting *Kiss* (Bal, 2017, p. 99) 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 fiction, the building blocks of which are ‘images of women’ bound together by the fictitious focaliser Edvard (Bal, 2017, pp. 91–99).

Another example of cinematic curating (Figure 6.3) is the sideways-looking older Edvard, 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). In these scenes of tragedy, I have attempted to insert a view of Edvard, the older Edvard, as compassionate (Bal, 2017, p. 178).

In the *Drowning Child* (E&E 179), the other people don’t bother to see the event, so that she dies. Edvard is not simply the inveterate misogynist he has often been taken to be, as we saw in my construction of a sequence of fantasies that could harbour a measure of sadism but also compassion, for the woman who is assaulted, in *The Hands*, and then weeps in the aftermath, due to the juxtaposition with the other painting of a semi-denuded woman in a blue skirt who seems to be weeping. And the most compassionate expressions of empathy are the ones I have mentioned regarding my curatorial cinematic constructions, *The Wedding of the Bohemian*, with *Kissing Couples in the Park* where the main figure has no one to kiss. This resonates with Flaubert’s empathy with Emma, all through the novel but



FIGURE 6.3 Older Munch (self-portrait in the back) looks concerned about three tragic events (on the right). Photo: Ove Kvavik.

relevant here, at the party which was her last hope, when, in the merry crowd of the party, she is so alone that her gestures predict her suicide.

The political between beautiful art and social life: 'emotional capitalism'

The social relevance of these three shock effects – mixing up chronology, mixing artists and media and changing museum practice – is not limited to providing people an intense and durational experience of art. In the best of cases, the art has *something to say* that touches more directly on the lives of people in the present. Without overtly proclaiming political ideas, which would turn it into propaganda, art can be curated in a way that will also point to a content, an idea, that visitors then take home to think about. Curating towards this effect is a viable alternative to both conservative historicism and opportunistic appeal to consumerist desire. In *Emma & Edvard* there was also such a thematic centre, diffused throughout the show. This central thematic cluster where past and present join, when addiction and love enter in tension and start to merge, is prominent both in Flaubert and in Munch, and thus demonstrates the inter-temporal mutual relevance of past and present. This we have called 'emotional capitalism,' retrospectively borrowing the term from sociologist Eva Illouz (2007).

The video work foregrounds Flaubert's prophetic political insight in the way emotions and the economy are put to work for the benefit of the latter. The political aspect is totally entwined with the psychology of 'love.' I am interested in the aspect of addiction – to love, sex, drink, food; and to buying to what is so

horribly callously called ‘fun shopping.’ Addiction as a false mediator, or merger, between excitement and routine, and between such seemingly different sense domains as sex and (other forms of) consumerism. Addictions make *lonely*. But more profoundly as well as generally, the underlying syndrome is a *confusion between domains*, the translation of desire from one domain to another, in response to frustration. This is as much of today as it is of the 1850s. This syndrome comes from a societal, ideological pressure. As Illouz writes:

... modern identity has become increasingly publicly performed in a variety of social sites through a narrative which combines the aspiration to self-realisation with a claim to emotional suffering.

(Illouz, 2007, p. 4)

Decades before Marx and half a century before Freud, Flaubert had seen it coming; he had also seen its deadly quality. Emma’s feverish overspending and excessive desire for excitement exhausted her long before she killed herself. The responsibility is collective and systemic as well as individual. This is where Spinoza’s concept of responsibility becomes deeply relevant. We, as we live now, are not guilty of the capitalist madness. But we are responsible for living in and with its consequences, not only for ourselves but also for others. Illouz defines the concept as follows:

Emotional capitalism is a culture in which emotional and economic discourses and practices mutually shape each other, thus producing what I view as a broad, sweeping movement in which affect is made an essential aspect of economic behaviour and in which emotional life – especially that of the middle classes – follows the logic of economic relations and exchange.

(Illouz, 2007, p. 5)

Flaubert’s art theorises this. According to his novel, people are especially vulnerable to this peculiar, powerful and still rampant social contrivance of emotional capitalism when they find themselves in slow time, or *duration*: the time of routine, of waiting, of boredom. It describes the state of waiting between the seduction and the routine-to-come. During this transitional time her dependency on the usurer Lheureux (‘She could no longer do without his services’ [Elle ne pouvait plus se passer de ses services] (III, 4) increases. She literally shops and buys out of boredom, horniness and despair. Seduction lures on all fronts. And although the extensive body of Flaubert criticism has noticed this, the centrality of this syndrome for modern life has been somewhat underestimated:

Then the desires of the flesh, the longing for money, and the melancholy of passion all blended into one suffering, and instead of putting it out of her mind, she made her thoughts cling to it, urging herself to pain and seeking everywhere the opportunity to revive it.

(Part II, Chapter 5)

The result is loneliness, disorientation, self-doubt, even a form of autism, or schizophrenia; in whatever form, a social incapacitation. Two photographs in *Emma and Edward looking sideways* (Bal, 2017, pp. 153–154) show the syndrome of emotional capitalism very forcefully.

Conclusion

In this exhibition, as in my account of the experimental curation that underlaid it, and by way of ending this chapter, emotional capitalism is both a political theme to think about after the museum visit, and an occasion to reflect on the museum as such, and what a contemporary curator can do to get out of the hopeless dilemma of conservation and a subsequently conservative curating, on the one hand, and attempts to attract more visitors and especially younger crowds to make budgetary ends meet, on the other. To get rid of the binary opposition, which is itself the most conservative form of thinking, hence, to exit the dilemma, it is worth realising that the goal of attracting more visitors need not be geared to consumerism; at least not towards the consumerism Flaubert's and our critique of emotional capitalism address as a theme, in inter-temporal reflection of the social syndrome's durability, present.

One key aspect is, again, *time*. The museum staff was a bit afraid that the encouragement of durational looking would enhance the quality of the visitors' experience but reduce the numbers of visitors. In fact, the opposite happened. Two anecdotes. When I saw a teenager, probably 14 or 15 years old, sit in front of a painting for at least ten minutes, I was very happy. Then I was called for a meeting. An hour later I came back, and there she was, two benches further. And then, at 4.30 p.m. on the Saturday I got to talk with a French couple who had come to Oslo for a weekend trip, and had planned to visit the Munch Museum for half an hour. You have to be quick, if you have only one weekend! But they got stuck, stayed for two hours, then the museum closed. They said, with a sigh: too bad; now we have to come back tomorrow.

The combination of the themes brought up in the exhibition is so close to our lives that it is worth thinking about, with the help of the art presented for durational looking. Only then will we notice the similarities between Emma's men, in spite of their social differences. The three men were played by the same actor, Thomas Germaine, and as the photo on page 145 in the book shows, the three characters look the same as well as different, thanks to the brilliance of the actor and the great work of the hair- and make-up artist Milja Corpela. Those resemblances point to an indifference in the emotional incapacity of distinction, which is perhaps the most devastating consequence of emotional capitalism. It is that heart-wrenching isolation, manifest in so many different ways in the exhibited objects and the spatially produced shudders, that is characteristic of modern life. If there is a political thrust to this exhibition, it can only work if the art can work; that is, when shock at surprising, jolting interventions in the expected traditional modes of presentation, happens, activating the visitors. In the exhibition at the Munch Museum, I have

done that through mixing. If emotional capitalism can infect us with its merging effects, the remedy with which I have experimented was also made out of mergings: of media, of artists, of times and of modes of being in the museum.

Notes

- 1 For more on these projects, see Miekebal (n.d.a). That first documentary is presented at Bal et al. (n.d.) and the curatorial project in Spain, which travelled to three other countries, at Miekebal (n.d.b). Madame B – the film and the installation pieces – were made by me and Michelle Williams Gamaker.
- 2 For the book, see Bal (2017). For the exhibition, see Miekebal (n.d.c) which includes a video tour, a ‘re-performance’ video, a video of the labour of installing, and many photographs. The gallery of photographs by Ove Kvavik (2nd column) amply show the descriptions in this chapter for which it was not possible to include them.
- 3 The difference between the titles of exhibition and book was due to the wish of the museum staff for the inclusion of the theme of love, hoping it would interest younger people, whereas I was keen on explaining the ‘cinematicity’ as also occurring in literature and painting. The exhibition title facilitated the presentation of the two figures as both fictitious, going through the stages of life. I refer to this book in brackets when discussing elements further developed in it, and with many images in colour, but no installation shots.
- 4 In order to facilitate finding the passages in whichever of the many editions and translations one uses, I refer not to pages but to parts and chapters. The chapters are short. I have consulted the most reliable edition, Flaubert (1971).
- 5 This book is brilliantly sensitive to the inter-ship between words and images, a relationality that Munch himself practised all the time.
- 6 More on this room: *E&E* 114–17 and 121–135.
- 7 On the inter-temporal changes of sense-experience, see Alphen (2017). The same issue of the journal *Text Matters* contains a substantial dossier devoted to the Emma & Edvard exhibition, edited by Dorota Filipczak. The allusion is to the Lowenthal’s book title (Lowenthal, 1985).

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