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Art's Agency: On Being Flabbergasted¹

Mieke Bal

Setting Up

In a sixteen-screen video installation I have recently made (2019) and am showing right now, titled *DON QUIJOTE: SAD COUNTENANCES*, the founding moment when Don Quijote goes mad because, as Cervantes's novel has it, he reads too much, is flabbergasting. After quietly sitting with a book, sometimes laughing, sometimes worrying, he shifts from the floor where he was sitting to a sofa, and begins to deploy the senses to absorb or consume the book. He smells it, feels it with his fingers, looks at it close by, and then tears off a page which he puts into his mouth. As the director of the video I was not prepared for this. The actor did it suddenly, in an intuitive gesture. To my shock and anxiety, he actually swallowed it; something I *saw*; I saw his Adam's apple go up and down. I was dumbfounded. How could he do this? Was he going to suffocate? Nothing bad happened, other than that the copy of the book was damaged. After this, he looks ahead with a catatonic gaze, stands up, and leaves the room. End of scene. The viewer-visitor stays behind, compelled to think about this eerie moment. But then, fifteen more scenes confront her with other moments when thought is needed.

The aim of this project is to bring art, the university, and the public domain together. A research question underlies this: how can art, museums and cultural analysis together help in the current situation of the world—mass migration, dictatorships, religious and nationalistic strife, destruction of the planet—to counteract violence's assault on human subjectivity, resulting

1 I wrote this article before my book *Image-Thinking: Art-Making as Cultural Analysis* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), which appeared before the article. Some of the ideas between the book and this article will overlap.

in trauma? The question is examined on the basis of these video installations and photographs. In a *theatrical* display, they constitute an interdisciplinary case study, anchored in critical reflection and experimental art-making. The project deploys art in museum practice in order to affect spectators, in this case with the otherness of a socio-cultural state of violence-induced “madness.” But is the madness of Cervantes’s character really induced by an excess of reading?

In this project we have reversed that standard interpretation, countering the one that the author, or rather, narrator, himself explicitly offers. But as so often in this novel, he self-contradicts and thus confuses readers all the time. Instead, most importantly, and for us, the motivation that drives the project, *El Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha* (1605; 1615) conveys prolonged hopelessness and temporal stagnation, leading to “trauma.” This notion has been over-used, and hence risks losing its specific meaning, and consequently, the social recognition of, and the possibility to help traumatized people. In this project, “trauma” is considered as a state of stagnation and the impossibility of subjective remembrance that ensue from horrific, traumatogenic events. The events themselves do not traumatize, rather the distortion of time and its forms that results from the violence is what causes the trauma. Following Cervantes’s confusing reflections on authorship, I see in the reading scene described above another confusion: between fiction and reality, or art and life. The speaker called “the Captive” who tells his horror story in three chapters (I, 39–41) becomes the spokesman of the author who cannot have remained un-traumatized by his five and a half years of slavery, as well as of the “mad knight” who stands in-between these two figures. Hence the casting of Montanier in both roles of Don Quijote and the Captive.²

2 In this article, the use of the pronoun “we” does not indicate the usual disingenuous modesty but the actual collective making of this work. It was initiated by French actor Mathieu Montanier, with whom I developed the first ideas for the scenes. He plays Don Quijote as well as the Captive. Once this preparatory work was done, Mathieu preferred a division of labor: for him, to concentrate on

This literary work has achieved and retained world-wide status as a masterpiece. It has not lost any of its actuality. Like the timelessness of trauma, its time, too, stretches into the present. Relevant for the present is the fact that the novel is based on what the eminent specialist of Cervantes, María Antonia Garcés, has called, in the subtitle of her edition of a contemporary witness report, “an early modern dialogue with Islam.” The temporality of the project is based on the idea that in deep history, things happened that still happen, or happen again, today. In the real world, “once upon a time” does not lead to “happily ever after.” Hence, “the past is today.” With the research group in colonial and postcolonial studies at the Linnaeus University in Växjö, co-producer of this work, I call it “concurrencyes.”³

Art and life con-fused, merged (fused) together (con-): this merging reaches its pinnacle in an autobiographical element inserted in Cervantes's exceedingly long novel. In the chapters of the *Captive's Tale*, Don Quijote encounters a man who has been held captive for years, in abject slavery. Just like the author. How can we now, in the twenty-first century, when slavery is still rampant, take up such a grave theme and turn it into a video installation, compelling museology to revise its basic concepts and practice? The art, here, must deploy its agency: “do something!” is the motto. The tool is empathy. This term

his acting and for me, to focus on the writing of the dialogues and the directing of the cinematography. The list of volunteering participants is too long to cite here, but can be found in the publication that accompanied the first instalment of the exhibition, Niklas Salmose, ed., *Don Quijote: Sad Countenances* (Växjö, Sweden: Trolltrumma, 2019).

3 On Cervantes's captivity, see María Antonia Garcés, *Cervantes in Algiers: A Captive's Tale* (Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002); for a contemporary witness, María Antonia Garcés, ed., *An Early Modern Dialogue with Islam: Antonio de Sosa's Topography of Algiers (1612)*, trans. Diana de Armas Wilson (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011). On the concurrencyes between past and present, and the subsequent methodology of colonial and postcolonial studies, see Diana Bryson, Peter Forsgren, and Gunlög Fur, eds., *Concurrent Imaginaries, Postcolonial Worlds* (Leiden: Brill|Rodopi, 2017). “Concurrencyes” is the group's alternative term for what cannot be called “post-colonial,” for the simple reason that the world is still too steeped in colonial relations. I share their resistance against the use of the preposition “post-.”

indicates “the capability to ‘think in the mind of another’, to anticipate the reactions of another human being.” This is not easy when that other is strange to us because “mad.” If the public is willing, however, to bring empathy to madness, the figure of Don Quijote, the classical “mad knight” can be transformed into a “sad knight.”⁴

In what follows I will bring up some of the issues that the Don Quijote project puts forward in audio-visual art, to argue for art’s agency. The underlying thesis is that art has agency: it can and must do something. It must, in order to entice visitors to a strong-enough empathy that their thinking, and subsequently, their actual behavior, on the street and in the voting booth, might be impacted, if ever so slightly, by those moments when they were flabbergasted in the museum. The disturbing act of eating the page of the book is not the moment of madness but the character’s figuration of that important merging, con-fusing, of art and life, fiction and reality. In the following section I will first outline the political agency of art. Following that, I discuss the issues surrounding the apparent contradiction between trauma and visual art. I will end on a too-brief reflection on the integration of art-making and art-analyzing, of which this article in combination with the installation, is an example.

Looking Up

Neither art nor the political are defined by subject matter. They are domains of *agency*, where acting becomes possible and can have effects. In the case of political art, that agency is one and

4 This definition of empathy is from the Introduction to a volume that helpfully opens up the concept and its uses for discussion: Aleida Assmann and Ines Detmers, eds., *Empathy and its Limits* (London: Palgrave, 2016). “From mad to sad” is my variation on Freud’s view that psychoanalysis helps people to turn unbearable to bearable grief (*passim*). So, psychoanalysis does not produce merry, happy people, but more modestly, contributes to making lives tolerable, manageable. Importantly, that new state does not preclude happy moments.

the same; it “works” as art because it works politically. My argument here concerns the inseparability of those two elements, which nevertheless remain irreducible to one another. The central element in the process is art that is not *about* politics, but *does* it, performs it. That doing is the human activity without which art makes no sense whatsoever: it engages the act of looking in thinking. Affected by the art, the viewer, visitor, or “engager” looks up: the world is different from before, and the person who does that looking up is transformed into a more active thinker and doer.

Looking happens in time, at specific moments, in situations, between people or between people and things. It is performative and dialogic. Instead of dividing the world, the political moment takes place *in* the world. And we know what the world is, from the opening sentence of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: everything that is “the case.” This casts the world in the *present* tense; the present where Cervantes's work continues to roam, unsettling the self-satisfied stultification of those who either forget the past or consider it fixed and finished. Wittgenstein's phrase also evokes the notion of the case study, seemingly opposed to philosophical generalizations. The Don Quijote project is a case study. Some questions emerge from Wittgenstein's phrase that challenge the case study as an investigative genre, however: What is the relationship between the situation described by the phrase “to be the case,” as a way of understanding “the world” in the present, hence, the political moment; and the notion of the case study, a practice of scholars who seek to understand art? What is political about that relationship? Where and when does this relationship take place?

The presentation of the revitalized early-modern literary work in audio-visual form is our attempt to bring this as a “case-study” of the relation to “being the case” in the world. Art and the political deeply impact each other. I search where art's political efficacy can be located; how it performs; how it exerts agency; and what the point is of art's political agency for culture. If I put forward a view of political art for our present time through and

with the collective work of revitalizing this monument of our cultural heritage, it is because the installation aims to be loyal to the way Cervantes's novel relentlessly keeps together the three components of such art I find distinctively indispensable for our present time: the *affective*—albeit oblique—engagement with the *present*, the refusal to excise the *past* from that present, and the *displacement* or “migratoriness” so characteristic of today's world. The mission of the first component, affect, is to make the art compelling, without dictating how viewers will be affected specifically. The concept of affect offers a perspective on art that suspends the centrality of representation in favor of art's solicitation of viewers' engagement through affect. This perspective focuses analysis on the resulting interactivity between artworks and their viewers. Instead of taking what is there to be seen on the screen's surface, for example, affective analysis will establish a relationship between that display and what it does to the people looking at it, and, precisely, being *affected* by it. While detailed affect-oriented analysis of artworks may seem more difficult to achieve than, say, a form-based analysis of the artwork alone, such analysis is called for to account for the cultural processes in which art functions.⁵

The second component of political art, the implication of the past in the present, turns perception—an indispensable element of the process of art—into a companion to memory, and requires we take the past on board as relevant for the present. The third, displacement, is a spatial condition for the efficacy

5 For a fundamental discussion of affect in art, in an article that underlies my reflection here, see Ernst Van Alphen, “Affective Operations of Art and Literature,” *RES: Journal of Anthropology and Aesthetics* 53/54 (Spring/Autumn 2008): p. 20–30. I also want to take on board the critical questions film scholar Eugenie Brinkema has posed to the frequent use of the concept of affect, which she finds too vague because it leaves the relation of affect to form unaccounted for. See Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014). See also a recent volume edited by Ernst Van Alphen and Tomáš Jirsa, *How to Do Things with Affects: Affective Triggers in Aesthetic Forms and Cultural Practices* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), to which I have contributed an article, “Affectively Effective: Affect as an Artistic-Political Strategy,” p. 179–199.

of art. These topics converge with my own efforts in video works that I have been making from 2002 on. For these videos, these principles have compelled us—the small collective of filmmakers called Cinema Suitcase—to a particular cinematic style, appropriate for the goal of making them work politically. They are specifically geared towards what I have termed “migratory culture”—which is such a hot and painful issue in both politics and the political. Art can only be art in the specific sense I here attribute to the term—art that is of and for the world, that is “the case”—if it is political. This formulation does not propose synonymy between the two terms, nor overlap between the two domains. Instead, it rigorously rejects the still-lingering “Kantian” idea that art stands outside the world. Rather, the intertwinement—not the identification—of art and the political is essential rather than incidental.⁶

A vital part of that intertwinement occurs through the senses, conceived as inseparable from affect and cognition, of which vision is central in the present case. This is, at least in my interpretation-in-being-flabbergasted, the meaning of Montanier’s unexpected eating of the page of the book, after emphatically smelling and stroking it. Visual practices of surveillance, of “othering,” and of hierarchization, make a critical examination of this area of cultural practice a meaningful endeavor. More generally, much of social life is influenced by what we see—or think we see. And that includes seeing others, pre-programmed to be seen in their otherness that is presented as natural but is nothing if not cultural. Visual images are sometimes able to subvert these cultural, socially damaging powers or circumvent censorship, but are also tools to manipulate, specifically because they are harder to pin down for unambiguous meaning. What we must realize is that seeing is the result of

6 I have developed this concept of time in my book on the subject, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). I put “Kantian” in quotation marks because I don’t accept this vulgarized alibi that justifies social indifference and even requires such indifference as a feature of true art, as really Kant-derived.

an activity: of looking. And that activity is the responsibility of the person doing the looking. This makes visual analysis, as a branch of cultural analysis, better suited than classical art history to point out how looking is steeped in the political. Titling this section “Looking Up” is meant to mark the “art event”: the moment immersive looking becomes staggering or shocking, rupturing the process by creating an event of looking up.

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* Erving Goffman convincingly argued that what we consider the “self” is the product, not the cause of social *role playing*. This makes theoretical fictions, with their theatrical actors, very relevant. Everyday life as a stage: this view implies, among other changes in the classical psychologically-bent conception of subjectivity, a *visualization* of ordinary behavior. Goffman’s description of a person entering the “stage” of social encounter is as vivid in its anxiety-raising production as stage fright. But then, consider how a young child who, yet again, noticed his mother’s camera pointed at him, almost automatically straightens his back, putting his hands at his hips, ready to shoot. Through that role-play or body-language he takes on his favorite, television-inspired role of cowboy, for this is how he wishes—or has been trained to wish—to be captured on camera. A third example that complicates this appears in the way psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas conceptualizes dreams as a stage on which the dreamer plays a part, subject as she is to the director of the play she definitely is not.⁷

None of these examples consists of material images one can make, present, and sell. Yet, they are starkly visual. These three conceptions of the subject share a concern with appearance and exteriority. The visibility of behavior—whether seen in social

7 The term “theoretical fiction” originates in Freud, and has been applied to characterize the fiction-based Cinema Suitcase films after 2010. The sources of this paragraph are Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1956); Christopher Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987 [1964]). The middle example comes from my own personal experience of trying to photograph my son.

reality, the television-informed world of the child, or in dreams—turns the everyday appearance of people into a potential object for visual analysis. This is not to suggest that people only exist (socially) as far as they can be seen, but to emphasize that the visuality of social life is a meaningful entrance into questions of what subjectivity is, how it can be perceived, and what this visibility tells us about human existence on the apparently shallow, yet so profoundly formative “stage” of interaction. Visual representations and interactions, sense-based presentations and absorptions shape the world as we see it. Images of desirable postures and faces, bodies and clothes, flickering colors of light, smiling and unsmiling faces fill our fantasies before we can even shape any. Some of these images captivate us for a little bit longer than most; others fleetingly pass but do not fail to leave their mark.

All these examples are related to “staging”: play-acting, theatricality, and display. Theater studies is an interdisciplinary field, and so is museology. Since with the Don Quijote project I seek to connect theatricality and museology, I returned to Eilean Hooper-Greenhill’s study *Museums and the Interpretation of Culture*. Museum studies clearly has an affiliation with visual analysis, and intersects between the latter and material culture studies. In her reflections on the imbrications of museum studies with visual and material culture study, the author makes the case for what each participating discipline can contribute. Her point is not that the disciplines she invokes constitute a comprehensive list, but that her object requires analysis within the conglomerate of these disciplines. Within this conglomerate each discipline contributes limited, indispensable, and productive methodological elements, which together offer a coherent model for analysis, not a list of overlapping questions. This constellation may shift, expand, or shrink according to the individual case, but it is never a “bundle” of disciplines (multi-disciplinarity), nor a supra-disciplinary “umbrella.”⁸

8 Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2000 [1992]). For issues of inter-, multi-, and transdisci-

Visual analysis can help us connect the political tenor of acts of looking with the seemingly self-evident occurrence of seeing. The object domain of visual analysis consists of things we can *see* or whose existence, agency, and encounter are motivated by their *visibility*; things that have a particular *visuality* or visual quality that opens up to, and addresses the social constituencies interacting with them. One can think of family snapshots that so poignantly display family ideologies along with affective bonding, gender role playing, and a peculiarly intimate relationship between subject and maker. But one can as well think of the appearances in particular social settings of subjects of sexual, age-based, or professional milieus. The “social life of visible things,” to recycle Arjun Appadurai’s phrase for a segment of material culture, would be one way of putting it.⁹

On the one hand, then, photographs, videos, internet and social media; on the other, people, whose appearance is as fleeting as it is socially framed and pre-scripted. A house, street scenes, posters, ads—enumerating the possible objects seems futile. This raises the question whether the object domain of visual analysis can consist of objects at all? Hooper-Greenhill draws attention to the ambiguity of the word “object” itself, which we can consider with Bill Brown’s differentiation between object and thing in mind. According to the *Chambers Dictionary*,

plularity, see my book *Murder and Difference: Gender, Genre and Scholarship on Sisera’s Death*, trans. Matthew Gumpert (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988).

9 The phrase “the social life of things” is the title of Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). For a good example of the kind of analysis that ensues from this definition of the object of visual analysis, see Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge, “Museums are Good to Think: Heritage on View in India,” in *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*, ed. Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kraemer and Steven D. Lavine (Washington, London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), p. 34–55. In this paper, the authors consider museums as interpretive communities. On family snapshots, see Marianne Hirsch, ed., *The Familial Gaze* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1999), and Ernst Van Alphen, “Visual Archives and the Holocaust: Christian Boltanski, Ydessa Hendeles and Peter Forgacs,” in *Intercultural Aesthetics: A Worldview Perspective*, ed. A. Van den Braemrusche, H. Kimmerle and N. Note (Berlin: Springer, 2009), p. 137–156.

an object is a material thing, but also an aim or purpose, a person or thing to which action, feelings, or thoughts are directed: thing, intention, and target. The conflation of *thing* with *aim* is an instance of how languages—here, English—are imbued with political conceptions. This conflation does not imply attributing intentions to objects, although to some extent such a case could be made. The conflation, instead, casts the shadow of intention of the subject over the object.¹⁰

But in order to enhance the affective effect of vision I add *theatricality* into Cooper-Greenhill's constellation of disciplines. My appeal to theatricality is meant to preserve the "liveness" of theater without invoking the rhetoric of materiality. This rhetoric can, of course, be countered, or—to the extent that it is not entirely useless in the face of still-rampant idealism—revised and supplemented in various ways. One of these ways is to pay attention to the *framings* that affect visibility, not only of the object framed but also of the act of looking at it and the ways in which that act is framed. Looking up when being flabbergasted is an example of the framed act of looking. Such a description of the object entails not only the much-advocated social perspective on things. If these things address people, the analysis also includes the visual practices that are possible in a particular culture or subculture. Hence, *scopic* or *visual* regimes are subject to analysis as well. The regime in which the rhetoric of materiality was possible and often effective is just one such regime that is liable to be analyzed critically.¹¹

Thus formulated, visual analysis can be distinguished from object-defined disciplines such as art history and film studies,

10 *Chambers Dictionary* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2020), <https://chambers.co.uk/search/?query=object&title=21st> (accessed October 7, 2022). With "intentions of objects," I am alluding to Kaja Silverman's philosophical study of vision, *World Spectators* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), especially ch. 6.

11 A succinct exposition of the kindred but more limited phrase "scopic regimes" can be found in Martin Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity," *Vision and Visuality 2*, ed. Hal Foster, Dia Art Foundation, Discussions in Contemporary Culture (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), p. 3–38.

through the centrality of conditions of visibility, also summarized in the term “visuality.” The question of visuality is simple: what happens when people look, or as I call it, look up, rather than just automatically seeing, and what emerges from that act? The verb “happens” suggests that the *visual event* is under scrutiny, and the verb “emerges” tells us that the visual image is considered as a fleeting, fugitive, subjective image accrued to the subject, rather than the material thing we can collect. These two results—the event and the experienced image—are joined at the hip in the act of looking and its aftermath.

At the hip, hence, in the body. The act of looking is anchored in the body and thus, profoundly “impure,” neither limited to one sense organ, nor even to the senses. First, sense-directed as it may be, the act of looking is inherently framed, framing, interpreting, affect-laden, cognitive, as well as intellectual in kind. Second, this impure quality is also likely to be applicable to other sense-based activities: listening, reading, tasting, smelling. This impurity makes such activities mutually permeable, so that listening and reading can also have visuality to them, while looking is “contaminated” by these other acts. Hence, literature, sound, and music are not excluded from the domain of visual analysis. Contemporary art practice makes this clear.

Vision is itself inherently *synaesthetic*. It involves and entails bodily sensations that cannot be reduced to perception through the eye. Many artists have been “arguing” this through their work. In eating the page of the book after smelling and stroking it, actor Montanier as Don Quijote makes this point strongly: concretely, materially and literally. Visual analysis focuses on visuality not images; it is the possibility of performing acts of looking in relation to the object seen, not the materiality of it, that lies at the heart of visual analysis. Let me put this in even stronger terms: Even “purely” linguistic objects such as literary texts can be analyzed meaningfully and productively in this way *qua* visuality. The latter not only include an untameable mix-

ture of the senses involved, but also the inextricable knot of affect and cognition that every perceptual act constitutes.¹²

In her discussion of imagery related to historical trauma, Jill Bennett makes a powerful case for the affective quality of relating to visual artifacts within a context rife with political violence. Regardless of the status of the images—artistic, journalistic, propagandistic—Bennett theorizes an “aesthetics of relations” as the most productive response of viewers to images that, in whatever way—representational, but also anti-representational—address that violence. That address, not the predominance of visuality, is what makes visual culture and the acts of looking politically important. At the end of her introductory chapter, she writes: “What I seek to show, then, is how, by realizing a way of seeing and feeling, certain conjunctions of affect and critical operations might constitute the basis for something we can call *empathic vision*.”¹³ This empathic vision is what the Don Quijote exhibition seeks to solicit; according to my conception of collective authorship: to create, with the visitors.

The politics of looking this requires is based on an integration of cognitive, intellectual, and affective engagement with the present world (that is “the case”), an engagement that is mindful of the past from which the horrors seem to be so constantly repeated. It requires looking *with* the mad knight, not *at* him, so that he, or the likes of him in real life, can exit the trauma-induced madness. For this “curative” looking-up to be possible, however, it is necessary to confront trauma with the

12 On the importance of visuality in literature, see Ernst van Alphen, “Caught by Images,” in his book that is of utmost relevance for the present article, *Art in Mind: How Contemporary Images Shape Thought* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 163–179, and my book *The Mottled Screen: Reading Proust Visually*, trans. Anna-Louise Milne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

13 Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 21; emphasis in text. Bennett states that there is a fine but crucial line between empathy and identification. See Dominick LaCapra’s useful term “empathic unsettlement” in his “Trauma Studies: Its Critics and Vicissitudes,” in *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004). Bennett engages LaCapra’s concept in detail.

visuality that counters it; a countering that isolates the traumatized further than their “madness” already does.

Trauma and Vision: From Activist to Activating Art

The term “trauma” has been terribly over-used in the aftermath of discussions of cultural memory in the 1990s, when holocaust survivors and witnesses started to disappear. That end of the possibility of consulting eye-witnesses 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 serves to focus on and help remedy a real and severely grave issue of today’s world and its 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. For this purpose, it is imperative to distinguish 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 by re-entering social time. This distinction can be formulated succinctly as follows:

violence – an event (that happens)

trauma – a state (that results)

empathy – an attitude (that enables)

The subjects of these three events are different: the violence has a 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. This is the inflection from bystander to witness. In the case of this project, this is the visitor who is the primary target of the exhibition; its interlocutor, and the interlocutor of the fictional figures brought to life; the



Fig. 1: Photographer artist Ebba Sund has brilliantly captured the state of trauma. In the two-dimensional image, the Captive cannot speak, but his eyes implore for the viewers' empathy.

co-author of the affective effect. The display is meant to have performativity.¹⁴

There are many very helpful publications on trauma that do not take it as lightly as those fashionable ones that callously use it as a catch phrase to indicate anything sad or bad. Between psychoanalysis and cultural analysis, I have made a video project with Michelle Williams Gamaker—a feature film and installations—based on Françoise Davoine's ground-breaking book *Mère Folle*, which deploys her “theoretical fiction” to argue with—not against—Freud about the possibility to analytically treat psychotic patients; something Freud considered impossible, because, he alleged, they cannot perform transference.

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

Reversing the burden, Davoine claimed that the psychosis, the madness resulting from trauma, is mainly inflicted by social agents, and that hence, society has a duty to help. For this purpose, she revised some tenets of the Freudian method, and with great clinical success.¹⁵

How can we approach this challenge as ordinary social agents, not mental health professionals? 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 ground-breaking philosophy of language first developed by John Austin (see note 13), it is better to change gears and not consider such images informative but enhance their performativity. The rationale of this shift is the insight that the trauma and the powerlessness that result are not inherent in the violent events, frequently the object of representation in the information formats. As analytical psychiatry has diagnosed and cultural analysis has studied, it is the impossibil-

15 The top list on trauma: Ernst Van Alphen’s article, “Symptoms of Discursivity: Experience, Memory, Trauma,” in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, ed. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe and Leo Spitzer (Hanover N.H.: University of New England Press, 1999), p. 24–38, provides a lucid, systematic explanation of trauma in relation to narrative. This is my primary interlocutor. Other key publications on *trauma*: in psychiatry 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: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 158–183; Françoise Davoine, *Mère folle: Récit* (Strasbourg: Arcanes, 1998); translated as *Mother Folly: A Tale* by Judith W. Miller (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014); in cultural analysis, Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Ernst van Alphen, “Second-Generation Testimony, Transmission of Trauma, and Postmemory,” *Poetics Today* 27, no. 2 (2006): p. 473–488, and Marianne Hirsch’s reply, “The Generation of Postmemory,” *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1 (2008): p. 103–128. We worked with Davoine, who brilliantly plays her own character, in the *Mère Folle* project. For more on the 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” (both accessed October 7, 2022).

ity to process, even experience extreme violence that generates the trauma and obstructs its representation.

Confusions and ethical problems threaten in attempts to show such horrid acts of violence. 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 is, 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 when, in the episode “The Failure of Listening,” a traumatized young man acts out, as a consequence of earlier violence. The young man Cardenio’s attacks on his interlocutors are responses to the latter’s failure to allow him to speak without being interrupted. This, as most dialogues, is literally quoted from Cervantes’s 1605 novel. But do we get “secondary trauma” when watching such images, or are we enabled to look up? This is where trauma can be countered by empathy. A counter-part to the episode where Cardenio is secondarily-traumatized is the one where Don Quijote is listening to witnesses 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 traumatogenic 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.¹⁶

We foreground the non-evental, enduring situation of *captivity*. As we know since Adorno’s famous 1949 indictment of making and enjoying poetry “after Auschwitz,” *modesty*—restraint, discretion, but neither prudishness nor censorship—is a crucial issue in our relationship to representation. Let me

16 Davoine published two books on *Don Quijote*: Françoise Davoine, *Don Quichotte, pour combattre la mélancolie* (Paris: Stock/L’autre pensée, 2008), p. 93, and Françoise Davoine and Jean-Max Gaudillière, *A bon entendeur, salut! Face à la perversion, le retour de Don Quichotte* (Paris: Stock/L’autre pensée, 2013).

briefly revisit this important debate. The philosopher explains his severe indictment: he refuses to make sense of what doesn't make sense. Such sense-making would be honoring violence with semiotic access; and 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." The violence in the word "squeezing" suggests that semiotic behavior can be as violent as actual violence. The verb intimates that language is performative: it has consequences in that its utterances affect the addressee. The verb "to squeeze" recurs when Adorno explains his refusal to condone such renderings in its potentially pornographic use: "The so-called artistic rendering of the 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." It is the sheer possibility of this pleasure that Adorno calls "barbaric."¹⁷

However, here is an important dilemma. 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 forbidding attitude to representation for this reason, when he wrote: "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. It is against this taboo

17 The classic passages are in Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), p. 361, emphasis added; and in Theodor W. Adorno, *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 252, emphasis added. On the concept of the barbaric, see Maria Boletsi, *Barbarism and Its Discontents* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013). I must revisit this here, because while many refer to it and partially quote it, precise references are scarce, and for a reason, as I have argued several times. On the violence of language, see Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

that French art historian Georges Didi-Huberman spoke out in a plea for attention to even the vaguest Auschwitz photographs: "In order to know, you must imagine," (his opening sentence). And in order to relate to others we do need to know, and when full knowledge is impossible we still must try to approximate, encircle, or *feel* it. That is what it means to imagine, and why the imagination matters. This, in turn, is why art is important; offering the visual 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; it is art's agency.¹⁸

Another risk is involved. The abundance of representations of traumatogenic events in the electronic media generate a forgetting of their historical and psychological impact. The mass is produced by, and produces *consumption*. Through their graphic explicitness and their recurrent appearance, these pictures are confined to historical insignificance. Our project designs an intervention in that cultural attitude, in a public-oriented art, for a more general change of attitude. The case is made for a community-creating effect of art that helps repair 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, it must be done

18 Adorno's retraction is in *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 362. Didi-Huberman makes this argument in *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, trans. Shane B. Lillis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). His strong plea for the importance of the imagination is crucial for any attempt to make politically relevant art. My discussion here revisits passages from the first chapter of my book *In Medias Res: Inside Nalini Malani's Shadow Plays* (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2016), where I examine these two positions in much more detail. For an illuminating article on the middle voice, see Maria Boletsi, "From the Subject of the Crisis to the Subject in Crisis: Middle Voice on Greek Walls," *The Journal of Greek Media and Culture* 2, no. 1 (2016): p. 3–28.

through reducing that double loneliness. This is a social task for which everyone is qualified. I attempt to contribute to this by inflecting *activist* art into *activating* art. That is art's agency: to activate.

In this attempt to describe or show, or rather, subtly hint at the unrepresentable state of trauma, while still making a work that is loyal to Cervantes's hectic story-telling, the challenge is to circumvent the traps mentioned in the previous paragraphs. "The Captive's Tale" 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 fulfillment, or fairy-tale magic. The Captive is played by the same actor who plays Don Quijote. But as it turned out—and this is how art-making as analysis works—once I immersed myself in Teleborg Castle in Våxjö, Sweden, and reread the scene 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. Today, the title of that scene, "She, Too" speaks for itself. This implicitly feminist aspect of the tale resonates with the more explicit, strongly feminist tenor of the story of Marcela in the scene "Woman as Anti-Suicide Bomb."¹⁹

Cervantes foregrounds very precisely several key aspects of the traumatic state in his novel, at a time that the term, the theory, and the attempts to remedy it were not available. One of these is *time*. 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. This matches unexpectedly, but with great relevance, the work

19 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 Sorraluz for insisting on the feminist aspect of the novel. The creation of "She, Too" was also influenced by that insistence.



Fig. 2: Zoraida, imprisoned by her doting father who jealously guards her, looks catatonic in this photo by Ebba Sund.

of Norwegian artist Jeannette Christensen, who plays the artist-photographer in the scene “Who Is Don Quijote?.” In a series of Polaroid photographs and currently also videos, titled “Woman Interrupted,” Christensen brilliantly explores the relationship between exceeding, exasperating slowness and the interruption of time. This project is a counterpart that helps understand what can be called the formless shape of traumatic time.²⁰

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’ portrait of René Descartes, or in literature, e.g. in Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*. This is not in itself a feature of the traumatic state, but in *Don Quijote* it is especially the result of the

20 I have followed Christensen’s art work for a long time. See my book *Fragments of Matter: Jeannette Christensen* (Bergen: Bergen National Academy of the Arts, 2009). The works of “Woman Interrupted” were on display as an interventionist—or why not call it “interruptive”—exhibition in the Museum Kode in Bergen, Norway, March–November 2020.

hectic rhythm of the story-telling itself, as well as of the adventures told. The inserted novella of Cardenio, in our project presented in the scene mentioned above, “The Failure of Listening,” is cinematic in its presentation of the event.

We realized this in that 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. 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 images of religious sculptures that were part of the decor, but became silent witnesses. The cinematic aspect is thus mobilized to demonstrate the particular contribution of the medium to a presentation, not a representation, of trauma. But in his literary “madness,” Cervantes already invoked the possibility.²¹

The transfer of Cardenio’s aggression from Fernando to himself is the final aspect I want to mention where Cervantes has so staggeringly well understood trauma. This is the allusion to the self-immolation frequently associated with trauma. 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 subjectiv-

21 Davoine, *Don Quichotte*, p. 389. 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: Loneliness and the Cinematic* (Oslo: Munch Museum / Brussels: Mercatorfonds / New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), p. 25–43, 57–61. On cinematic movement in Frans Hals’ tiny portrait, see *Allo-Portraits: On the Impossibility of Likeness in the Face of Movement*, brochure for the exhibition *Rendez-vous with Frans Hals* (Haarlem: Frans Hals Museum, 2018).

ity; a revolt. In narrative terms, this is what Van Alphen analyses 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. The most famous instance of this is the heroine of the Roman legend of Lucretia, who killed herself after having been raped.²²

Incidentally, this legend allegedly explains the founding of the Roman Republic, which goes to show how deeply political the issue is. I have interpreted this act as an attempt to regain control over the destroyed self. This attempt at reactivation of the subjectivity that is bludgeoned to death by the rape, 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 was able to invent cinema, why not psychoanalysis, of the kind that can help overcome trauma by repairing the broken social bond?²³

22 The concept of "actantial" is derived from the structuralist analysis of narrative, popular in the 1960s. For a succinct explanation, see the fourth edition of my book *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), p. 166–176.

23 See Van Alphen, "Symptoms of Discursivity." My analysis of Lucretia—in Shakespeare and Rembrandt—is chapter 2 of my book *Reading "Rembrandt": Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991). 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, on which more at <http://www.miekebal.org/artworks/films/reasonable-doubt/> (accessed October 7, 2022) and for an analysis, my article "Thinking in Film," in *Thinking in the World: A Reader*, ed. Jill Bennett and Mary Zournazi (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), p. 239–279. The phrase "repairing the broken social bond" is my integration (or con-fusing) of Davoine's life work and Cervantes's / Don Quijote's confession of his incapacity to narrate adequately, what Cervantes called in the Prologue to his last novel, *The Travails of Persiles and Sigismunda* (1617), the "broken thread" of memory. This metaphor is quoted in the scene "Narrative Stuttering."

Art Making as Analysis

The project of which this article gives some glimpses pertains to what is most frequently called “artistic research”—a search through analysis through art making. The concept is quite problematic, but the undertaking is worthwhile. In such an endeavor, the search is not for direct academic answers. It is an attempt to make “thought-images” (from the German *Denkbilder*) by means of its counterpart, the activity of “image-thinking” that helps understanding on an integrated level of affect, cognition, and sociality. When the source of the imaginative imaging is fictional, the genre of video production that seeks to create thought-images can be called “theoretical fictions.” This is the deployment of fiction to understand and open up difficult theoretical issues, and to develop theory through imaging what fiction enables us to imagine.²⁴

Making a video project based on *Don Quijote* is challenging due to its troubled relationship between content and form, and between the narrative and visual aspects involved. The “research” part, based on a literary-cultural analysis of the novel, was, firstly, to decide which aspects of the novel are crucial to make a work that has a “point.” Secondly, that point had to make connections between artistic and social issues, and to improve our understanding of how these two domains can go together, in the present, with the collaboration of the past in what we call “cultural heritage”—here, Cervantes’s novel. This term, again, is somewhat problematic, since it suggests the passive reception of a gift. But the importance of the past for

24 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), p. 215–233. 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).

the present must be foregrounded. And finally, of course, the selected aspects and fragments had to be “audio-visualizable,” to be able to liberate them from confinement in language that requires reading, and open them up for collective perception, interpretation and discussion. The project pursued two goals. First, the current situation of the world makes a deeper, more creative, and “contagious” reflection on trauma and its assault on human subjectivity an urgent task for art, which can exert its agency in this specific area. The insights the novel harbors uniquely connect to other experiences of war, violence, and captivity. Second, a well-thought-through video project can explore and transgress the limits of what can be seen, shown, narrated, and witnessed.

In particular, the mode of story-telling is the primary target of the search. Full of incongruous events and repetitive stories, maddening implausibility, lengthy interruptions of the story-line, inserted poems and novellas, and at the same time, anchored in a harrowing reality, while also making readers laugh out loud, this novel challenges reading itself. This, not the alleged madness due to over-reading, is what Montanier shaped in the eating-the-book scene. The films based on this novel mostly bore me—in spite of 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.²⁵

On my reading, the predominant issue that rules the novel's aesthetic is the difficulty of story-telling due to the horror encountered. In line with this, the most adequate example to unpack what this project's image-thinking contains is the scene titled “Narrative Stuttering.” This shows Don Quijote alone on a dark theatrical stage. Sancho Panza is sitting on a chair on the

25 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 “agism” or “gerontophobia” inherent in this mode.

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 bursts into tears and Sancho holds him in order to comfort him, demonstrating, by physical touch, that he is not entirely alone. The darkness of the stage deprives the space of perspectival depth, at times making Don Quijote almost seem floating. The stage isolates him and, at the same time, gives him an audience. The theatrical setting is a material “theoretical fiction” that explores how theatricality can perhaps help to enable the narratively disabled.

For this 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, whose near-silent presence is sometimes audible. To solicit such an audience is a primary goal of the exhibition. For this to be possible, 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. Moreover, such routine display is testing on the audience’s physical condition, since standing and walking are the habitual modes of visiting. This governs the temporality of looking. In the theater, by contrast, visitors can sit, and so if the display is nearby and accessible, and visiting can consist of quietly sitting, the museum becomes a kind of theater. This exhibition as a whole seeks to produce such material comfort, facilitating affective attachment in visitors. The consequence is a radically different temporality of viewing. And time, thus, turns out to be a factor of affect. This imagining, testing, and reasoning produces the creative con-fusion that I call image-thinking and others call artistic research.

As a mostly narrative medium, film cannot do justice to the turbulent incoherence, repetitiveness, and incongruous adventures told in the novel. Nevertheless, thanks to film’s capacity for audio-visualization, something must be possible that is

more in line with the difficult novel. This is how we got the idea that a video installation consisting of different, non-linearly disposed episodes might instead be more effective in showing, rather than representing, not the moment trauma occurs but violence-generated traumatic *states*. 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. The theatricality of this display, with its moment of flabbergasting, helps to turn onlookers and voyeurs into activated, empathic witnesses. Looking up, they can actually do something. This is what activating art can do.²⁶

26 See the final sentence of Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. David Francis Pears and Brian McGuinness (New York, London: Routledge, 2001). On his change of opinion see *Philosophical Investigations* #41, commented on by Davoine and Gaudillière, *A bon entendeur, salut!*, p. 51–52, who quote Maurice O'Drury, *Conversations avec Ludwig Wittgenstein*, trans. J.-P. Cometti (Paris: PUF, 2002), p. 159, 170, 173. The full exhibition of the project has been displayed at Leeds Arts University Gallery a.k.a. The Blenheim Walk, January 7–February 14, 2020; Sala de exposiciones, Universidad de Murcia, Facultad de Bellas Artes, November 14, 2019–January 18, 2020, and in Småland Museum / Kulturparken, Växjö, Sweden October 31–December 31, 2019. More exhibitions are planned.

