

Guest contributors

Encounters

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ABSTRACT

Migration is less an issue of “others” than a potential encounter within a culturally mixed society. Instead of the usual suspicion, even hostility, towards people “we” don’t know or find different, and either exaggerating or erasing those differences, it is better, I suggest, to go towards them, understand and enjoy those differences. The concept of knowledge underlying this view holds that knowledge is a never-ending process, rather than a hasty attempt to reach a fixed state of arrival in which one knows. I will develop some nuances of this view through a video installation I have made and exhibited, which is entirely geared toward personal contact, interest, and friendship.

KEYWORDS

Affect; Empathy; Friendship; Migratory; Motherhood.

Friendship and Empathy

In the current cultural climate, for those who do not personally, individually have such experiences, migration, as an act and a process, is first of all an issue that concerns others. We can get information about their experiences, “in the third person”. Documentary film and literature is a standard tool to convey that information. But when I started to make documentaries, in video films and installations, I realized immediately that the very notion that documentaries, in classical form, give information, is precisely what obscures the lack of access to the *affective* level of those experiences. This lack makes the presentations by definition incomplete. The experiences are mostly stored or re-made in *memories*; the memories of others. This lack of access limits what such films can do for the cultures they claim to document, analyze, and address. Therefore, it is crucial to experiment with the form, to break open the “third-person” aesthetic, replacing *showing* with *interacting*. The viewer or reader must be given access to the interactive level where the first and second person conduct a dialogue. This is necessary to overcome the easy, smoothing narrative impulse, so that the experience itself, rather than the exterior manifestations of it, can accede to visibility, solicit responses, and become relevant. The point is that the participants in the live culture we all share must thereby be assisted in *learning from* the video artwork.¹

For this to happen, the experiences must find expression in an intimate encounter; an affective, social proximity. That event of encounter is performative; it is the performance where migration is no longer fixated in otherness, and the tenacious opposition of self and other loses its grounding. Otherness tends to produce phobias: fears, which lead to hostility. Such encounters, instead, which can positively affect the social fabric, are not so much facilitated by knowledge but rather, need to be mediated by empathy as their medium for knowledge production and understanding; empathy as solicited by an aesthetic. *Encounter* constitutes the ground of an experience in the here-and-now in public space. It offers a productive alternative to the phobic concept of “otherness.”²

For an analysis of migratory culture, I have experimented with a mode of analytical filmmaking that performs the analysis not *about* but *with* the people concerned; a sort of fieldwork of a different kind. This approach made narrative an uneasy mode, and description and analysis based on statistics both too meager and, given the pace of academic publication, always *belated*. It is belated in relation to the constant transformation of *becoming* that is the dynamic aspect of the present, and underlies the concept of knowledge as process. The closest I was able to come to a different mode of analysis was a combination of live contact and video, as a tool for making visible what is there for everyone to see but remains unseen because it does not have a form that stands out. I attempted alternative forms in some of the documentaries I made between 2002 and 2010. These concern large and small issues, from the struggle with language, the difficulty of traveling through constantly closed borders, the break-up of families, the changes in social space through small eating habits, growing up between different cultures, and the traumatic events that compel migration even a generation later. The mix of such trivial and profound issues is, precisely, what characterizes migratory culture. These films have in common an open, undefined form that surrenders to the need to express what can barely be brought to awareness, let alone explicitly said, and seeks forms of expression that can be alternatives to political declarations. By making an audio-visual presentation of such tiny sheer-invisible things I try to enhance them, bring them to visibility, so that everyone can understand, empathize with, and participate in them, without, however, turning them into an exotic strangeness. To sum this up: when curating an exhibition with Spanish colleague Miguel Á. Hernández Navarro, we came up with the term “migratory aesthetics”.³

The “migratory” in the concept indicates a culture where older residents and newcomers merge; and hopefully, *encounter* one another. The qualifier does not focus on special people, those “others”, but on the mixed culture as such, in which we all participate. Then there is the “aesthetic” part. “Migratory Aesthetics” refers to the *sensuous* traces of migration as an aesthetic phenomenon, in the contemporary environment. From the beginning of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline, a misconstrued Kantian

perspective has prevailed over the founding view articulated by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten. To sum up a 900-page treatise (in Latin) into a single sentence: for Baumgarten, aesthetics is based on an experience of three features: *binding* through the *senses* in *public space*. The verb *to bind* contains a promise of connectivity. With a critical view of the integration one-sidedly demanded of immigrants, which is more adequately termed enforced assimilation, I consider that connectivity to be a *mutual* integration; not of “others” coming into a fixed social world, determined by traditions, but instead of an event of getting acquainted, affectively, in the present. The role of the *senses* alludes to the pleasurable, intense, and reflection-inducing quality of the aesthetic – the feeling that one has enjoyed, learned from, been enriched by an experience. And the *public space* is where the encounters happen. This is necessary if the social world is to be able to continue to be in constant movement and change; “in becoming” as Deleuzian ontology would put it. This must be learned; hence, it is a useful subject for teaching. It is a viable alternative to the stultifying and reifying categorization and binary obsession in an oppressive yet illusory feeling of familiarity as monocultural.⁴

How does this view of migratory aesthetics have potential for a different practice of teaching in an environment that is fundamentally culturally mixed? In philosophy, the figure of the teacher as a “conceptual persona” is usually presented as the lover. In her book *What Can She Know? Feminist Epistemology and the Construction of Knowledge*, Canadian philosopher Lorraine Code takes this tradition up and turns it around (1991). For Code, the concept-metaphor that best embodies her ideal is the *friend*, not the lover. Moreover, the conceptual persona of the friend – the model of friendship – is not embedded in a definition of philosophy but of knowledge. This view necessarily takes knowledge as provisional. If the authority of the author/artist, as well as that of the teacher, is unfixed, then the place it vacates can be occupied by *theory*. The teacher, then, no longer holds the authority to dictate the method; her task is only to facilitate a reflection that is ongoing and interactive. Knowledge is knowing that reflection cannot be finished. Moreover, to use Shoshana Felman’s phrase mentioned above, knowledge is not to learn something *about* but to learn something *from*.

Knowledge, not as a substance or content “out there” waiting to be appropriated but as the “how-to” aspect that bears on such learning *from* the practice of interdisciplinary cultural analysis.⁵

Within the framework of Felman’s description of teaching as facilitating the *condition* of knowledge (31), Code’s apparently small shift from lover to friend is, at least provisionally, a way out of the philosophy/humanities misfit. Friendship is a paradigm for knowledge production, the traditional task of the humanities, but then production as an *interminable process*, not as a preface to a product. Code lists the following features of friendship, as opposed to the lover’s passion, as productive analogies for knowledge production:

- such knowledge is not achieved at once; it develops
- it is open to interpretation at different levels
- it admits degrees
- it changes constantly
- subject and object positions in the process of knowledge construction are reversible
- the ‘more-or-lessness’ of this knowledge affirms the need to reserve and revise judgment (1991: 37-38).

This list helps to distinguish between philosophy in the narrow sense, as a discipline or potential inter-discipline, and the humanities as a more general field, “rhizomatically” (Deleuze & Guattari 1976) organized according to a dynamic interdisciplinary *practice*. I propose to take it seriously, not only to make a profile of a good teacher but in migratory culture of a good neighbor, who is interested in encountering, then developing friendship with others, from which they can learn.

Philosophy creates, analyses, and offers concepts. Analysis, in pursuing its goal, puts these together with potential objects that we wish to get to know. Disciplines “use” them, “apply” and deploy them, in interaction with an object, in their pursuit of specialized knowledge. But, in the best of situations, this division of tasks does not imply a rigid division of people or groups of people along the lines of disciplines or departments. For, such a division deprives all participants of the key to a genuine practice of *cultural*

analysis: a sensitivity to the provisional nature of concepts. Without claiming to know it all, each participant learns to move about between these areas of activity. In our everyday traveling through public spaces, such as the street and the classroom, one is compelled to constantly negotiate these differences. One must select one path and bracket others, but eliminate none. This is the basis of interdisciplinary work.

The most crucial condition to make this possible is a feature of friendship not mentioned in Code's very useful list: empathy. Without empathy, no friendship can thrive. At the beginning of an edited volume on the subject, memory theorist Aleida Assmann defined empathy in these words: "the capability to 'think in the mind of another', to anticipate the reactions of another human being" (1). During the conference in Sao Paulo, I presented three projects based on empathy: the installation *NOTHING IS MISSING* and the experimental documentary films *BECOMING VERA* and *UN TRABAJO LIMPIO*. Each of these works concerns encounters with unexpected "others": the mothers of migrants, nowhere present in the published literature, and yet, profoundly affected by the departures of their children; a child with a mixed cultural background, of three years old, unaware of the cultural pressure around her, yet smartly deploying fiction to resist it; and the desire of high-school students to simply achieve the acquisition of a "clean" job: where they don't have to dig the earth as the only possible mode of subsistence. In all these works, empathy is key. I will briefly present the first of these below.

There is also an aesthetic-material aspect to this need for empathy. This concerns the core feature of the aesthetic encounter that helps people to understand, and feel, the difference between the fear of otherness, or phobia, and the friendship that can emerge from a true encounter. In 2016-17, I have been involved in a project to develop an aesthetic, theatricality-based method of exhibiting as a mode of learning empathy. This can help in a society where friendship is a desired mode of knowing others, instead of a categorization of others as others. This aspect, easiest summed up as "providing seating", has been my near-obsessive point about curating ever since. It sounds so simple, even banal, but providing seating is an aesthetic-intellectual gesture. Only when visitors can relax, take/give the time, can they really emphatically

engage with the figures on the screens they are looking at. Seating, instead of walking fast through the galleries, provides time, and concentration, and solicits “facing” – the visual equivalent of the encounter.⁶

This poses a challenge to the idea of the universal. All over the world, and in your own living room: are we able to consider, experience, and value these two locations and the ensuing positions at the same time? One of the most severe challenges to the idea, or hope, of any universality is the division produced everywhere between people whose everyday life and its intimacy are safely assured and those who lead an existence of “infra-humanity”. Among other consequences, this division produced an unsettling tension when the two parts of our supposedly unified world collided in Western countries as a result of migration. Migration causes the coexistence in one social environment of people who can afford to live permanently in a place and those who cannot – those who are driven to displacement.⁷

Mothers Facing Migration

This situation deeply impinges on conceptions, experiences and practices rarely addressed in this context: of motherhood. It interrupts that relationship and brutally destroys the relation of intimacy, since the proximity or distancing between mother and child is no longer a matter of choice. The combination of motherhood and migration, then, is a good place to reflect on the confrontation between globalization and intimacy against the backdrop of a non-oppositional, unresolved dialectic of singularity and universality. The relationship between the singular and the general – to use a more abstract pair that encompasses both universality-singularity and globalization-intimacy – also holds for my own analyses. It has consequences for the relationship between my video-making (or, taking the word videography literally, video-writing) and my scholarly writing. I must foreground that, with one of my video installations being central to my argument, this is also an exploration, through one particular case, of the dynamic complementarity between media. One goal is to make the mothers staged in this installation full participants in what can only be a multi-voiced

discussion. Documentary videos, while of course not full accounts either, preserve something of the voice of their subjects.

The tension between intimacy and the consequences of globalization is enacted most explicitly in the video installation made between 2006 and 2008, with a supplement in 2010. Through this installation, I sought to image intimacy on terms that allow for the strategic use of universalism (“motherhood”) as well as for the acceptance, respect for, and even foregrounding of differences (“migration”). The central concept became “facing”. The installation is titled *NOTHING IS MISSING* after the statement of the first of the mothers.

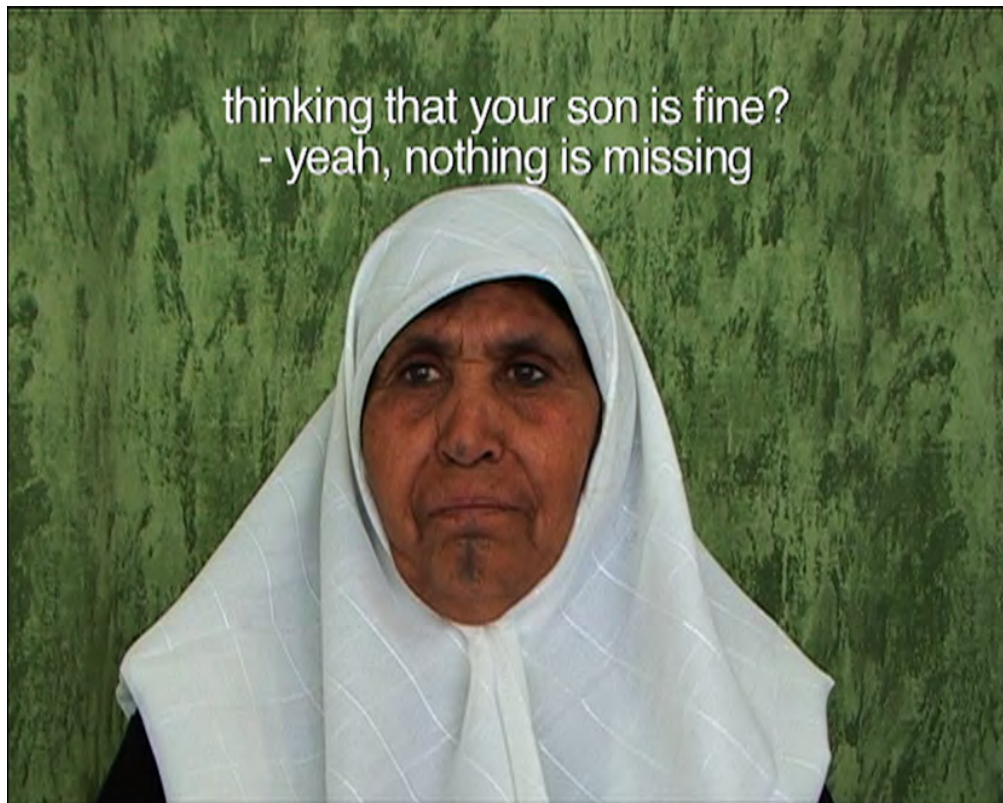


Fig. 1. Massaouda; Remada, Tunisia

Quoting her statement as the project’s title is already a first step in abandoning authorial authority. The work consists of a variable number of

audiovisual units, between 5 and 17, that play DVDs of about thirty minutes in which a mother talks about a child who has left in migration. Visually, imagine a gallery looking like a generic living room, where visiting is like a social call. The image is a portrait, a bust only, of a woman speaking to someone else.

Apart from a short introductory sequence that sets up the situation, the videos consist of unedited single shots. The decision to not edit is a step in abandoning authorial control, to do justice to the empowerment of the mothers through minimising my own authorship. Sometimes, we hear the voice of the interlocutor; in other cases, we hear no one other than the woman speaking. Every once in a while, they fall silent. In the multi-channel installation, this visually suggests that the silent one was listening to the others, although they have never met. The installation itself enacts the tension between global and intimate, since the domestic ambiance is created within a space that is public, although often not a space where such installations are expected. I have had it installed in museums and galleries, academic settings, and office spaces – most radically, in a corner office at the Department of Justice in The Hague, which had become unrecognizable as an office where the (anti-)immigration policies are being written.⁸

This installation probes the tension between usages of universalism as escapist exclusion and as a strategy to enhance differences. My provisional answer to the contradiction between these two elements is to replace any *thematic* universalism with a *performative* one, and an essential universalism with a strategic dynamic variant that is constantly challenged by *singularities*. Between aesthetic and academic work, activism for activation through the promotion of reflection in sense-based experience is at work. The question that the installation raises, and that I attempt to answer in the present article, is how it is possible to make intimate contact in the sense of friendship sketched above, across the many divisions that separate people in different cultures, that is, linguistic, economic, and familial situations, without ignoring or erasing differences, and why it matters to do so. The goal is not to reach a universal ground for communication but instead to establish the universal as the ground on which differences can performatively be brought into dialogue.

The women in the installation live in various countries from which people have migrated since the onset of modern-day globalization. Still living in their home countries, they all saw a child leave to Western Europe or to the USA. If we are to understand the possibility of a universal such as motherhood through insight into the intimate local relationships against the backdrop of a globalized world, we must, first of all, realize the enormity of the changes in the lives and life experiences of individuals taking this drastic step. We must wonder, that is, why people decide they must leave behind their affective ties, relatives, friends, and habits – in short, everything that constitutes their intimate everyday lives. Imagine! These motivations, which are too complex to allow any generalizations, tend to include economic necessity but are rarely limited to that overarching issue.



Fig. 2. Zuiderzeemuseum, Enkhuizen; photo: Astrid van Weyenberg

While my purpose is not to fully understand those complex motivations, I bring them up considering that they are among the ambivalences toward the migration of their child to which the mothers

testify. My primary goal was to explore the possibility of an aesthetic understanding that, by means of its own intimacy across the gaps of globalization, can engage the political. The proximity presupposed by the sense-based experience also establishes intimacy between the subject and the “object” of the aesthetic moment. Hence, this approach furthers my attempt to develop a method that approximates the “object” to becoming a subject, not as the anthropological subjects subjected to the researcher’s gaze, but as full co-authors of their image.



Fig. 3. Hamdiah; Gaza, Palestina

At the heart of this project is a triple deployment of the act of *facing*. Facing sums up the aesthetic and political principle of NOTHING IS MISSING, which is an attempt to reflect on severance and its consequences. Through this installation, I attempt to shift two common universal definitions of

humanity: the notion of individual autonomy of a vulgarised and misunderstood Cartesian *cogito*, and that of a subjecting passivity derived from the principle of George Berkeley's "to be is to be perceived." The former slogan has done a lot of damage in ruling out the participation of the body and emotions in rational thought. This does not only do an injustice to Descartes, but to the cultures that need a bit more rationality, precisely on behalf of the bodies. The latter, recognizable in Lacanian as well as in Bakhtinian traditions, has sometimes tended to over-extend a sense of passivity and coerciveness into a denial of political agency and, hence, responsibility. And that responsibility matters most for a nuanced view of effective political art that surpasses the propagandistic limitation of "activist" art.⁹

Reflecting on facing helps to rethink these notions. I try to shift these views in favor of an intercultural aesthetic based on performance of contact – that encounter mentioned above. In order to elaborate on such an alternative, I have focused this installation on the bond between speech and face. Here, I use speech not just in terms of "giving voice" but also and more importantly in terms of listening and answering, all in their multiple meanings. Briefly, I would like to turn the face, the classical "window of the soul", into an "inter-face."

Facing constitutes three acts at once. Literally, facing is the act of looking someone else in the face. It is also coming to terms with something that is difficult to live down by looking it in the face rather than denying or repressing it. Thirdly, it is making contact, placing the emphasis on the second person, and acknowledging the necessity of that contact to sustain life. Instead of "to be is to be perceived" and "I think, therefore I am", facing proposes, "I face (you); hence, *we* are". A "we", in this sense, that is not a false universal but an I/you exchange. For, *facing* is my proposal for a performance of contact across divisions, one that avoids the traps of universalist exclusion and relativist condescendence. The project NOTHING IS MISSING is structured through these three meanings of facing.

In a lucid book from 1999, Australian philosophers Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd unpack ideas in Spinoza's writing that can be deployed for

contemporary social thought. Their book does three things at once that are relevant to my goal of furthering the activity of “migratory aesthetics” for encountering friendship, and implementing the performative *face* in that context. Firstly, they develop an intercultural relational ethics. They invoke the relevance of Spinoza’s work for a reasoned position in relation to Aboriginal Australians’ claim to the land that was taken from them by European settlers. These claimants are not migrants in the strict sense, but can be considered as such from within the opposite since they stayed put while their land was taken away from underneath them, but their claims are based on a culturally specific conception of subjecthood and ownership that makes an excellent case for the collective and historical responsibility the authors put forward through Spinoza. This responsibility is key to any possible universality. It is a relation to the past that we have to face today.

That this intercultural ethics should be based on a seventeenth-century writer who never met such claimants – although he was definitely a migratory subject – makes, secondly, a case for the historiography I have termed “pre-posterous” in a study of contemporary art responding to Caravaggio (1999). Clearly, this conception of history is focused on the relevance of present issues for a re-visioning of the past, as much as the other way around. In alignment with the intercultural relationality my plea for encounters promotes, I call it *inter-temporal*. Thirdly, the authors make their case on the basis of the integration of Spinoza’s ontological, ethical, and political writings – three philosophical disciplines traditionally considered separately. This exemplifies *interdisciplinarity*.

In order to transform it from a fashionable buzzword into an intellectually responsible and specific notion, interdisciplinarity could be modeled on *inter-facing* in the sense I am developing here: as a strategic-universalist practice. The face, with all the potential this concept-image possesses, seemed an excellent place to start. But to deploy the face for this purpose requires the elimination of an oppressive sentimentalist humanism that has appropriated the face for universalist claims – as the window of the soul, as the key to identity translated into

individuality, and as a tool for policing. With this move, I also seek to suspend any tendency to sentimentalizing interpretations of NOTHING IS MISSING.



Fig. 4. Elena; Bucovina, Romania

There is another thought-mistake underlying this traditional view of the face. The abuses of the face that individualism underpins are articulated by means of a form of thought that confuses origin with articulation, and runs on a historicism as simplistically linear as it is obsessive. Common origin is a primary ideology of universalism. This involves motherhood. Creation stories from around the world tend to worry about the beginning of humanity in terms of the non-humanity that precedes it. Psychoanalysis primarily projects on the maternal face the beginning of the child's aesthetic relationality. Both discourses of psychoanalysis and aesthetics show their hand in these searches for beginnings. Both are predicated on individualism,

anchored in the mythical structure of creation as ongoing separation, splitting, and specification.¹⁰

Origin is a forward-projecting illusion. Therefore, through this installation, I explored a different sense of beginning – not in motherhood, but in migration. The primary question is why people decide to leave behind their lives as they know them and project their lives forward into the unknown. With this focus, I aimed to invert the latent evolutionism in the search for beginnings. The portraits that compose *NOTHING IS MISSING* challenge the joint assumptions of individualism and realism. I “staged” the women – “staging” meaning: I asked them to choose a place in their home, a chair to sit on. Then I asked their interlocutors to take place behind the camera; I set the shot, turned the camera on, and left the scene. This method is hyperbolically *documentary*. It was to underline this aspect that I refrained from editing the shots.

Aesthetically, the women are filmed in a consistent close-up. The relentlessly permanent image of their faces is meant to compel viewers to look these women in the face and listen to what they have to say, in a language that is foreign, using expressions that seem strange, but in a discourse to which we can relate affectively. This is a second form of the performance of contact as encounter. The face as inter-face is an occasion for an exchange that, affect-based, is fundamental in opening up the discourse of the face to the world. It equates communication with identification and expression. This equation is grounded in the double sense of identification – *as* and *with* – that underlies the universalist paradox and to which my installation proposes an alternative. In line with my strong preference for the preposition “inter-”, I call that alternative “inter-facing.”

The socio-cultural version of this political ambiguity is most clearly noticeable in the dilemma of “speaking for” and the patronizing it implies, versus “speaking with” as face-to-face interaction. The self-sufficient rationalism of the *cogito* tradition is thus in collusion not only with a philosophical denial of second-personhood but also with a subsequent denial of what the face can *do*. In order to move from an expressionism to a performativity of the face that writes a program for a new, tenable strategic

universality, I deduce three uses of the preposition “inter-” from Gatens and Lloyd’s take on Spinozism that can be mobilized in a helpful way; three inter-ships. But in order to prevent an over-hasty, over-optimistic mystification, we must acknowledge that each “inter-” works across a constitutive gap.

Inter-cultural relationality, in its inscribed mobility of subjectivity, posits the face as an interlocutor whose discourse is not predictably similar to that of the viewer. These women speak to “us”, across a gap, as they speak to their own relatives, again across a gap. The first gap is that of culture, if we continue to view cultures as entities instead of processes. In such a conception, intercultural contact is possible on the basis of the acknowledgment of the gap that separates and distinguishes them. The sometimes over-extended emphasis on difference in ~~post~~ colonial thought is a symptom of that gap. The second gap is caused by “the cultural” conceived as moments and processes of tension, conflict, and negotiation, rather than as a reified “thing” or “state”, a dynamic view developed by Fabian (2001).

Second-Personhood in Practice

To highlight this dynamic, including recognition of the gap, I have invited the mothers to choose a spot in their own home and intimates as their interlocutors. The people to whom the women tell their stories are close to them, yet distanced by the gap that was caused by the migration of the loved one. Tunisian Massaouda’s daughter-in-law, for example, who was not chosen by her for her son, as her culture would command her to do, is reaching out to the mother across an unbridgeable gap produced by history. In Romanian Elena’s case, even the son himself struggles to overcome the gap that sits between him and his mother, with whom he talks during the short Summer period when he visits her.

There are yet other gaps in play. As I have suggested, the two simultaneous situations of speech – between the mothers and their relatives and between the mothers and the viewer – doubly mark second-personhood, but across gaps. The strong sense of intimacy emanating from the direct address of the mother to her closely familiar interlocutor at first excludes the

viewer. Only once one makes the effort and gives the time to witness or even enter the interaction can the viewer earn a sense of participation. When this happens – and, due to the recognisability of the discourse, it does – the experience is elating and, I contend, unique in public events such as art exhibitions. Once, during setting up, I saw a cleaner of the exhibition space in Melbourne, an immigrant from Sudan, put down his tools and sit, watching riveted a mother from his home country talk to a close friend. He remained glued to his chair for at least half an hour, with tears in his eyes.⁴



Fig. 5. Alham; Khartoom, Sudan

The third gap opens in the making, due to the theoretical and artistic alternative to artistic authority I had constructed, a “wilful abandon of mastery”, which underlies the filming in my own absence. There is *necessarily* a gap between intention and artwork – always. The gaps as entrances into

sensations that are “borrowed”, grounded in someone else’s body, open the door to the inter-face. Gaps, in other words, are the key to a universality that rejects a romantic utopianism in favor of a difficult, hard-won but indispensable inter-facing. Gaps, not links, are also the key to intermediality as well as to interculturality.

The resulting images are far from the documentary realism considered so important in Western culture. They possess a temporal density that is inhabited by the past and the future, while affect remains an event in the present – an event of *becoming*. This is especially strong in the affect produced by the close-up. This is not an event in the punctual sense, but a slice of process during which external events slow down. Becoming harbors the presence of the past. If we take this presence to the realm of the social, we can no longer deny responsibility for the injustices of the past, even if we cannot be blamed for it. Without that responsibility, the use of the vexed pronoun “we” - “the full deceptiveness of the false cultural ‘we’” Torgovnick commented on it – itself becomes disingenuous, even unethical.¹²

Gatens and Lloyd’s “Spinozistic responsibility”, then, is derived from the philosopher’s concept of self as social, and consists of projecting presently felt responsibilities “back into a past which itself becomes determinate only from the perspective of what lies in the future of that past – in our present”. Taking seriously the “temporal dimensions of human consciousness” includes endorsing the “multiple forming and reforming of identities over time and within the deliverances of memory and imagination at any one time.” (81) This pre-posterous responsibility based on memory and imagination makes selfhood not only stable but also unstable (82). This instability is a form of empowerment, of agency within a collectivity-based individual consciousness.

Making contact, the third and most important act implied in facing, facilitates that becoming – becoming world citizens, building our existence on mobility without having to move. This making of contact is suggested as an effect of the insistent facing in *NOTHING IS MISSING*. What faces can do is stage encounters. This is the point of the mothers’ faces – their

empowerment. In the installation, the face is constantly present, in close-up but not extremely close. As a visual form, the close-up itself *is* the face:

There is no close-up of the face. The close-up is the face, but the face precisely in so far as it has destroyed its triple function [individuation, socialization, communication] ... the close-up turns the face into a phantom... the face is the vampire. (Deleuze 1986, 99)

If the close-up is the face, this equivalent is reversible; the face is also the close-up. Through a slight distance nevertheless built into the image to avoid locking the viewer up and denying the women any space at all, the images avoid facile conflation and appeals to sentimentality. I wanted to give the face a frame within which it can exercise its mobility and agency. And to make the images also look a bit like the busts of Roman emperors and other dignitaries. That slight distance, then, provides the space for a certain kind of freedom.

This would be a freedom à la Spinoza – a freedom that is “critical”. Critical freedom, wrote James Tully in 1995, is the practice of seeing the specificity of one’s own world as one among others. Inter-temporally, this freedom sees the present as fully engaged with a past that, insofar as it is part of the present, can be rewritten a little more freely. The act of inter-facing can do that. The term, or illusion, of universality may not be the most felicitous one to characterize this act, but accompanied by the verb “confronting” it makes sense beyond a relativism that implies turning one’s back on such faces. I have attempted to create an environment within which all these considerations facilitate true encounters.

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Endnotes

1. The idea of learning from instead of about art was launched by Shoshana Felman (1982). Jeroen Lutters developed this into a concept; see his edited volume (2024). In a book of interviews with me I discuss the teacherly aspects of it. (Lutters 2018)
 2. In his early book on Proust, Deleuze came up with the notion of "the encountered sign" (1972).
 3. I have presented the issues and the resulting films in a recent book, from which some of the ideas presented here are derived (2022). Information about the documentaries can be found on my website, at <http://www.miekebal.org/artworks/films/>
 4. For a lucid presentation of Baumgarten's aesthetics, see Hlobil (2009). On Deleuze's 'becoming', Biehl and Locke (2010)
 5. Paul de Man defined theory long ago as "a controlled reflection on the formation of method" (1982, 4).
 6. On this exhibition project, see Bal (2017).
 7. The term "infra-humanity" comes from Colombian artist Doris Salcedo. Salcedo's Unilever Commission *Shibboleth* at the Tate Modern in London consisted of a long, deep, and elaborate crack in the floor of the Turbine Hall. The catalog explains the artist's attempt to put the global division between people, literally down. The term "infra-humanity" must be understood in that context. See Salcedo (2007), and for an analysis of her work, my 2010 book.
 8. For reasons of discretion, given the intimacy of the situations, I promised the mothers not to put the entire films on line. For a complete list, stills and synopses of the elements of NOTHING IS MISSING, see <http://www.miekebal.org/artworks/installations/nothing-is-missing/>
 9. For a subtler interpretation of the *cogito* than the traditional dualistic one, see Balibar (2017, 55-73). The complexity of Balibar's interpretation is anchored in a fundamentally interdisciplinary thinking practice, forging an inter-ship between philosophy, political science and anthropology. Descartes is the subject of a film and installation I made in 2016, titled REASONABLE DOUBT: SCENES FROM TWO LIVES. For information, photographs and clips, see <http://www.miekebal.org/artworks/films/reasonable-doubt/>
 10. For this view of creation in Genesis, see the final chapter of my book on Biblical Love-Stories (1987).
 11. The notion of "giving time" alludes to Derrida (1992).
 12. For this relevance of becoming in what could be seen as an anthropological context, which gains special relevance here. On the temporal effect of the close-up, see Doane (2003).
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Mieke Bal is author of 46 books and supervisor of 81 finished PhDs, the cultural theorist, critic, video artist and curator Mieke Bal writes in an

interdisciplinary perspective on cultural analysis, literature and art, focusing on gender, migratory culture, the critique of capitalism, and political art. From 2002 on she also makes films, as a different, more in-depth and more contemporary mode of cultural analysis. In her 2022 book *Image-Thinking* (Edinburgh UP) she develops her ideas about how to integrate academic and artistic thinking. As a filmmaker, she made a number of experimental documentaries, mostly about migratory situations, and “theoretical fictions”. www.miekebal.org

Guest contributors

Natureza Morta (Dead Nature/Still Life)

Denilson Baniwa

Artist



Fig. 1. *Natureza Morta 1* (2016–2019). Infogravura.



Fig. 2. *Natureza Morta 2* (2016-2019). Infogravura.



Fig. 3. *Natureza Morta 3* (2016-2019). Infogravura.

Denilson Baniwa is a visual artist and curator. He creates his work out of the intersections between visual languages of the Western tradition with those of the Indigenous people, using performance, painting, projections, and digital images. As an activist, he addresses the rights of indigenous peoples; the impact of the colonial system, proposing reflections on the current condition of the indigenous people.