

# O GRANICACH W SZTUCE I HISTORII SZTUKI / ON BORDERS / BOUNDARIES IN ART AND ART HISTORY

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## MAKING AND BREAKING BORDERS

### BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

I cannot begin this article without affirming that everything I have to say and have thought about borders has emerged from a triple experience of twenty years ago. This experience contained a few border-experiences. Telling the story may, in the end, help understand how and why “borders” are not ever something stable, permanent and reliable. Before all this happened, I was convinced that borders were demarcations, lines that defined spaces and their ownerships. All I knew before that had come from crossing a border with my parents, and seeing how they had to show their passports; and then the sign that said: “You are now entering Belgium” or some other name of a country different from where we lived. I must, therefore, begin with a story, as an overture, in three episodes.

PRELUDE: IN MEMORY OF INGE E. BOER (MAY 26, 1957 – MAY 19, 2004)

*Episode One.* With my life-long commitment to “teaching” PhD candidates, from a utopian desire to ensure the productivity of our work in the next generation, nothing was more devastating than the repeatedly occurring horror of a tragic death, all through cancer, of four of the brilliant people whose PhD dissertations I had felt the great privilege and profound pleasure to “supervise”. Thanks to the still-vital publication business, their works are available even today. “Teaching” and “supervise”: although they signify my

life-long commitment to my work, those are already two words captured in relativizing or doubting quotation marks, meaning that they don't quite denote what they say according to dictionaries and standard usage. Such quotation marks expressing uncertainty also fit the word "border".

I try not to become overly sentimental, but it seems clear to me that the boundary between life and death is the most radical one imaginable. It is a boundary that defies all other conceptions of borders. I will only go over the legacy of one of those precious people who were pushed over that border that, on one side (life), is of uncertain duration, while on the other side (death), it is so definitive and clear that the concept of border does not even seem right, since there is no "other side" to it. When Inge Erica Boer had finished and defended her brilliant critical analysis of orientalist stereotypes in French culture, ten years after she and I had organized a conference and co-edited together a book on "the point of theory", exploring answers to the cliché question "What's the point?", she undertook the editing of a collective volume "after" (in the two senses of that preposition) the world master of the critique of orientalism, Edward Said, who had just died when the book appeared (2003). Today, Said's Palestinian background gains new relevance for his ground-breaking work. Inge's passion for a critical engagement with orientalism was her life-long commitment.<sup>1</sup>

*Episode Two.* Soon after her brilliant and festive PhD defense in Rochester, New York, she became an associate professor of Women's Studies at the University of Amsterdam, and when we founded ASCA (the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis, in 1994), she joined enthusiastically. And it's true that her legacy of creative intellectual productivity was a model for what we as founders had in mind for this new, interdisciplinary, socially relevant and analytical approach that took the present as its starting point, thus undermining the strict chronology of traditional history. Inge and I became close friends. But then, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. And quite rapidly this transformed into a death sentence. When that sad outcome became clear, knowing how much her intellectual work meant to her and to the scholarly world, I jumped up, promised her a book publication of her thesis, and got down to work on it.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Inge's books from before her passing: *The Point of Theory*, eds. M. Bal, I.E. Boer, Amsterdam–New York 1994; *After Orientalism: Critical Entanglements, Productive Looks*, ed. I.E. Boer, Leiden 2003 (Brill; in the series *Thamyris. Intersecting: Place, Sex and Race*).

<sup>2</sup> For a succinct summary of ASCA's principles, see the 3-minute video on this page: <https://www.miekebal.org/about> [accessed: October 21, 2024].

She was clearly very happy that her work and its pointed critical engagements against stereotypes of “otherness” would survive. I made an appointment and hurried to the Amsterdam-based publishing house Rodopi with her thesis under my arm. And explaining the author’s situation, I asked the director, Fred van der Zee, if he was willing to give it a quick reading with a view to considering whether to publish it. Not only did he do that, and had one of his assistants draw up a contract, but a few days before Inge passed away, he came to her house to make her sign the contract. To see a dying person glow with joy is an extraordinary experience. Like dying itself, this, too, was an experience of border-transgression. The memory of that moment still brings tears to my eyes.<sup>3</sup>

*Episode Three.* And then, an astounding event happened, another border-crossing, which brings the theme of the special issue of this publication closer. After the funeral service, I asked Inge’s husband, legal scholar Carel Smith, if I could browse on Inge’s computer to see if she had the necessary images for the book publication, which were needed due to her detailed and precise visual analyses of 18<sup>th</sup>-century French orientalist paintings. Yes, she did! This sped up the publication considerably. Once Carel and I were sitting at her desk, however, I saw to my surprise a large number of disorderly documents I had never seen or heard of before. “What is this?” I asked. Carel said that she had been working on a new project, which she had, alas, not been able to finish at all. He didn’t know much about it, just that it had something to do with borders, and that she was always excited when working on it, although there was never enough time nor energy.

The documents were drafts for chapters, perhaps, or for articles. On the whole, it seemed too substantial to leave it at that, to let it sit in an out-of-use computer, and so, after digging up the images necessary for the thesis publication, I asked to borrow those documents to see what they amounted to. We copied them on a floppy disk, the usual technology at the time. I couldn’t believe what I saw. With Bregje van Eekelen, my then-P.A., now a professor at T.U. Delft, who at the time helped me with editing my writings, and with one of Inge’s close friends, Patricia Spyer, then a professor of anthropology in Leiden and also keen on critically analyzing orientalist stereotypes, we went through the enormously relevant and inspiring drafts. My jaw kept dropping. A lot of editing was needed, but the coherence of the content was there. The

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<sup>3</sup> The thesis that she never saw as a book but for which she was able to sign the contract is I.E. Boer, *Disorienting vision: Rereading Stereotypes in French Orientalist Texts and Images*, Amsterdam 2004.

result appeared two years later, in a book, also published by Rodopi, thanks to Fred's ongoing commitment to Inge's work, for which we came up with the motivating title *Uncertain Territories: Boundaries in Cultural Analysis*. The title alone laid out a program that begins to answer the questions of the present special issue of this journal.<sup>4</sup>

For this article with its thematic focus on borders in literature, art and art history, there could not be a more stimulating publication. To put it clearly: everything I have since then been pondering and theorizing about borders and boundaries has its roots in that book that Inge never saw or even considered really a book, let alone ready to go to print. "Uncertain" is a fitting qualifier. That word expresses the status of those documents on her computer, and her own view of these. But it also expresses the doubt about what we think borders or boundaries are, how they function, and what they do; hence, how this special issue came into existence. "Territories" is the noun that came up frequently, countering the idea that borders are simply lines of demarcation. Instead, as Inge argued in those drafts, filled with very precise analytical passages, they are, rather, spaces, "territories" where negotiations are possible, even necessary, considering what is, or belongs to what or whom. Not only national territories, but also, and most importantly, spaces instead of lines. This gives borders a substance: spaces that are always uncertain because, as Inge's analyses in the now-book demonstrate, they are constructed, not "natural", and unstable, never remaining the same over time; and they don't really belong to anyone or any community. This multiple meaning of "uncertain" calls for a further probing of what borders or boundaries can be. Making borders can only lead to breaking them. So, don't expect definitions. Uncertainty reigns. This seems a productive methodological direction not only for thinking about borders but also the equally uncertain territories of art and its histories, as well as our attempts to define concepts and objects. Definitions appear to construe certainty on boundaries, but this is a deceptive illusion.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Uncertain Territories: Boundaries in Cultural Analysis*, eds. M. Bal, B. van Eekelen, P. Spyer, Amsterdam–New York 2006.

<sup>5</sup> On the uncertainty of making definitions the boundaries of concepts, see my book *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*, Toronto 2002.

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 THE USEFULNESS OF IMPOSSIBLE DEFINITIONS

Early on, after a critical note on binary opposition, Inge wrote that her primary interest was

[...] the question as to how one gets from one extreme to the other, or rather, how one reorders such sharply drawn borders so that we perceive and can inhabit a wider space "in between". What, indeed, happens in between? (2–3).

In her brave but ultimately hopeless attempts to define what borders are, Boer titled the first section of the introduction in which the problem of definition comes up: "Boundaries as Confrontations, Lines and Obstacles". Just think about it: how do these three nouns relate to one another, as tentative (non-) definitions of boundaries? Confrontations invoke conflicts, tensions, most directly political. Lines would be demarcations, separating areas from one another, and thus avoiding confrontations, and obstacles have that prohibitive connotations: they impede the possibility to cross, to transgress, the border. The three nouns can be connected but cannot be considered a single definition of boundaries. Later on, in what became the book, she declared other attempts to define borders even more clearly hopeless. Referring to Derrida's probing of Kant's concepts of the *parergon*, she proposes that boundaries are not a dividing line between inside and outside, since those two cannot be separated, as the inside always invoked the (invisible) outside, but must be imagined as spaces, not lines. Because they can belong to either of the domains they are supposed to separate, "encounters between the two are possible as well." (52). But such encounters are "not likely to be peaceful. The point of this focus on the space of boundaries is to shake up their sheer immovable rigidity." (52) And, probably alluding to Homi Bhabha's view of otherness in *The Location of Culture*, which she had discussed earlier in what became Chapter Two, she adds: "Where contestation is possible, newness may occur."<sup>6</sup>

The most typical instance of such space-borders would be deserts: large, always in movement, and unclearly belonging to countries. In the chapter on deserts that contests the emptiness of this kind of land, she comes up, not with a definition but with a statement on the impossibility of such fixating use, or abuse, of words:

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<sup>6</sup> On Kant's concept of the *parergon*, see J. Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. G. Bennington, I. McLeod, Chicago 1987, esp. Chapter II "Parergon", pp. 15–147. H.K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London 1994.

A boundary is a space that separates worlds of difference but is itself a world of difference: deserts are instances, precisely, of the notion that boundaries are not lines, limits, cuts through the inhabited world, but spaces themselves. Spaces, that is, in which people live, but also, spaces that people defend, attack, that nourish them and that they fight over; they are places of contestation. (108)

The uncertainty in her book's main title turns the space of the territories into a great openness, a void, instability; in short, into everything that contradicts the idea of the border as a separating line. In art history, lines that divide between periods, styles, genres, even media are always contestable, even if no attacks or the resulting wars ensue. Instead, such pseudo-lines serve to understand better the "worlds of difference" between such contestable yet provisionally useful distinctions that assist us in discussing each artwork or each group of works that curators and scholars compose, on their own tentative terms, of "artistic geography", periodization, and stylistic differentiation. The point of making (always provisional) distinctions is not to produce borders as fixed and permanent dividing lines, but to demonstrate the dubious, unstable, and constantly changing existence of such divisions. But this is not only providing the indispensable critique of the categorizations that result. A competent art historian, curator, or museum visitor will realize this, and can put it to use, for example, in teaching situations or discussions, and the different art experiences that result, or in raising awareness of the interest in distinctions for the understanding of differences outside of their hierarchizing effects. It is precisely because borders are undefinable that they can be productive, on condition that no fixating definitions are put forward. Borders and definitions have this uncertainty in common. Definitions pretend to declare what something *is*; the many forms uncertainty takes undermine that ontology-signifying verb "to be". This would encourage us rather to consider what they *do*, as in a performative sense.

Of the many forms of uncertainty, the one that is strongest in the study of art is the questionable status of fixating criteria for judgment. For any attempt at further circumscribing what border are, become, or can do, must account for the criteria put to work to decide, delimit, and further describe. For quite some time now we have been accustomed to the standards that flesh out the distinctions between categories such as styles, periods and genres, and no one will be surprised to see long-term fixed values of genre, race, ethnicity being critiqued and rejected in any work of cultural analysis. Nevertheless, when such critical perspectives begin to replace artistic norms, as is happening today, the risk is that values become confused, and art itself loses out to social norms. Art and politics are mutually important, but can never be identical. This confusion is currently happening, and also critiqued in its turn, in some museums, such as most (in-)famously the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam,

where ethnic and sexual backgrounds are systematically replacing artistic qualities, to the detriment of art and its audiences.<sup>7</sup>

In order to understand better the damaging effects (for art and its experience) of this confusion, the most effective border between these two domains can only be understood through a more in-depth reflection on the way these domains are, precisely, neither separated by a border as line, nor confused as through the illusion of representativeness. Key to this discussion is another uncertain but important distinction, that between “politics” and “the political”. In a concise book about this distinction, Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe differentiates the two terms as follows:

[...] by “the political” I mean the dimension of antagonism which I take to be constitutive of human societies, while by “politics” I mean the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political.<sup>8</sup>

“The dimension of antagonism”: at first sight, this does not sound very appealing; it reminds us of Boer’s term “obstacle” in her beginning attempt to define borders.

In this distinction, politics is the organization that settles conflict, turning a border into a “thing”; the political is where conflict “happens”, as an enduring process, undefinable, uncertain, but alive. Yet Mouffe’s point is that it is by virtue of the political in that sense that social life is possible. In the social conflict-ridden environment, power inequity and manipulation are never far away. I will say more about this below, apropos of the somewhat harsh discussions between Don Quijote and Sancho Panza as audio-visualized in my video installation responding to the cultural heritage novel by Miguel de Cervantes. In the scenes “Conversation” and “Delirium of Words”, the video work demonstrates Mouffe’s point, through the undefinable social borders between social classes. In the political, social life can thrive, be alive, and also be at risk, due to conflict, which can be dangerous.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> For two decisive critiques of the harsh, de-aestheticizing politization of art, see E. van Alphen, “Museumactivisme”, *De Witte Raaf* 2021, 213, pp. 5–6, and C. van Winkel, “Het representatieve museum”, *De Witte Raaf* 2024, 227, pp. 12–13. Both articles (also in Dutch, but published in the most important art journal active in that language) severely critique the confusion of aesthetic and artistic values and properties with the predominantly political issue of “representation”. In line with this, see also J. Rebentisch, “Realism Today. Art, Politics, and the Critique of Representation”, in: *Thinking-Resisting-Reading the Political*, eds. Esch-van Kan, S. Packard, P. Schulte, Berlin 2013, pp. 245–261.

<sup>8</sup> C. Mouffe, *On the Political*, New York–London 2005.

<sup>9</sup> The quotes come from Chantal Mouffe’s book cited in the previous footnote. But this is best seen in more concrete analyses of art. For a more extensive discussion in interaction with

No wonder, then, that we usually tend to seek to avoid conflict by means of consensus. Politics comes in to avert the potential of danger. But in a more critical assessment we can say that politics, which responds to it, constantly attempts to stifle the political. This sets a border that would be a line, not a space of negotiation. The positive view of conflict according to Mouffe might sound counter-intuitive, since most of us try to avoid conflict. But we also tend to hate politics as domineering and menacing, especially at the current turn to right-wing parties more and more dominating. But this is precisely why Mouffe's concept of "the political" is useful. We tend to attribute the negativity of conflict to politics rather than to its counterpart, yearning to be reassured by political leaders that conflict can be eradicated. And true enough, in our own social environment we shun conflict. Yet, as Mouffe argues, the culture of consensus resulting from politics does not eliminate conflict entirely; it suppresses conflict, and thus leaves it to its own, underground, hence potentially volcanic devices. Borders won't help. Politics is in fact highly exclusivist, and lives by "the negation of the ineradicable character of antagonism" (Mouffe 10). It is also in blatant contradiction to lived social reality, in which conflict is generally present. Let's avoid drawing lines and instead open up spaces for negotiation. This brings us closer to what Deleuze has termed "Sahara aesthetics": a permanently changing, unstable territory.<sup>10</sup>

## LEARNING FROM AGE-OLD BORDERS

The social contact of Don Quijote and Sancho Panza fits Mouffe's distinction quite precisely. Theirs is a working relationship including a power difference (employer and employee) but also a social background (nobility and working class) as well as other differences, none of which can be defined as a border-line. The episode titled "Conversation" embodies the need and the difficulty of distinctions and differentiations. The video piece can be watched here: <https://vimeo.com/468905975>. We made the video work in view of the need for empathy on the part of museum visitors. Don Quijote and Sancho Panza seem inseparable. But at the heart of their relationship is the servitude of the latter, employed as s/he is by the former. They are constantly together and depend on each other, yet they experience difficulties communicating. This seems an ordinary con-

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the art of Doris Salcedo, see my book *Of What One Cannot Speak: Doris Salcedo's Political Art*, Chicago, IL 2010. I made the video work *Don Quijote: Sad Countenances* in 2018–19 together with French actor Mathieu Montanier, who initiated the project and plays the main role.

<sup>10</sup> For a lucid explanation of that concept, see M. Buydens, *Sahara: L'esthétique de Gilles Deleuze*, Paris 2005.



versation, yet, as such, an implicit philosophy of communication emerges from it. The conversation happens after Don Quijote has been wounded in a battle, when he tried to be helpful but failed – his usual situation. The battle itself is barely represented: which one is invoked doesn't matter, since fighting is the routine of the adventures. But the knight has been hurt and is in severe pain after having been beaten up by the character Cardenio. The situation of pain should help mutual understanding, we expect, but it barely does so. There is empathy, perhaps, and certainly friendship. But affection is not enough for support that goes beyond physical care, which is what Sancho has to offer.<sup>11</sup>



1. Mieke Bal, *Don Quijote: Sad Countenances*, 2019, video installation (frame description: The attack on Don Quijote by the madman Cardenio; Sancho defends him), courtesy of the artist

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<sup>11</sup> The French actor Mathieu Montanier proposed to cast the Argentinean performance artist Viviana Moin for the role of Sancho. This gender-bending is, of course, another border-transgression. Moin discusses the inter-species non-functional border when she invokes the right of dogs to vote.

In the conversation, there is misunderstanding, manipulation and rhetoric. Is that real or fictitious? In the end, the figures address the heart of what we are witnessing. Initially, and again at the end, they talk about merging, hence, abolishing the border between two cultural domains: reality and fiction, which also becomes political manipulation – Don Quijote twists it so that he is right. But Sancho Panza expresses his own wisdom, too.



2. Mieke Bal, *Don Quijote: Sad Countenances*, 2019, video installation (frame description: Sancho cares for the wounded knight, whose ear is bleeding), courtesy of the artist

The issue is the difficulty of communication itself, as a social need and problem. This is acutely relevant for today's diversified world. This contemporaneity of the situation asks for a resounding gesture of anachronism, as a way of annihilating the border between past and present. In the middle of the episode, the figures abandon their roles, thus eradicating the border between social classes they had first set and followed. Instead, they become once more ordinary, contemporary friends. Consequently, they enact the difficult border between reality and fiction they had been discussing. Sancho becomes Viviana Moin again (as the Argentinean actress is called) and returns to the French that is the language of her current domicile (Paris) and of her friendship with the actor Mathieu. Then, it turns out, something sticks: the past is not just remote, it is also part of who we are. And so is fiction.



3. Mieke Bal, *Don Quijote: Sad Countenances*, 2019, video installation (frame description: The two protagonists discuss the world), courtesy of the artist



4. Mieke Bal, *Don Quijote: Sad Countenances*, 2019, video installation (frame description: Sancho knows best, or thinks he does, when claiming that animals should have the right to vote), courtesy of the artist

Five episodes later (if we follow the somewhat arbitrary order of the screens) there is another Mouffean event in the political, titled “Delirium of Words”. The noun “delirium” evokes the increasing “madness” so frequently attributed to Don Quijote. That episode can also be watched online via this link: <https://vimeo.com/468949315>. This scene echoes the episode of the conversation, taking the border issue a step further. There, the main topic of discussion was the difference between reality and fiction, hinted at in many other episodes. Here, it is the medium of communication itself that is at stake. Don Quijote and Sancho Panza sit together, in dialogue; one of those mad and maddening ones that can only lead to frustration and anger. A delirium of words is at the same time a probing of language. This is the more forceful but also, more complicated as the two discussants not only speak different languages but also come from different educational levels and uncertainly belong to different genders, as Sancho’s role is played by a Spanish-speaking woman. This, too, is inherent in social interaction. It seems as if they go back to the Rousseau-ist question of the “origin of language”: what

is language for, what does it allow us to do, and what not? They are trying to help culture.

Sancho uses proverbs, which irritates Don Quijote. The proverbs appeal to common, popular wisdom and in that sense, they counter individualism. Tweets versus communication, we would say today. We can also think of Wittgenstein's broken words. Sick words. The Spanish word *razón* means both reason and the precise word. Through the idea of sick words, this scene alludes to Colombian novelist Azriel Bibliowicz's imaginative concept of "word hospital" in his 2013 novel *Migas de pan*, where second-generation Holocaust trauma haunts a family whose father, a holocaust survivor, has been kidnapped in the present by Farc terrorists. The allusion suggests the imminent threat of violence when people talk together, a danger the two episodes of the Don Quijote installation also raise.<sup>12</sup>



5. Mieke Bal, *Don Quijote: Sad Countenances*, 2019, video installation (frame description: Don Quijote and Sancho have a rather hostile discussion in front of the cathedral), courtesy of the artist

<sup>12</sup> This brilliant novel is important in view of the idea of borders as well. A. Bibliowicz, *Migas de pan*, Bogota 2013. I have written some bits about this novel in the 4<sup>th</sup> edition of my

The reason I invoke these two scenes in the discussion on borders in art is hopefully clear: where we have seen that definitions necessarily fail to tell us what a border or boundary is precisely, and that indecision attached to words and to things (if we keep trying to decide on ontological clarity) also impacts all the categorizations we bring to bear on art and its history. What our contact with art needs, more than clarity and divisions, is the abolition of yet another binary we are so used to: that between art and politics, or rather, the political. If I have devoted so much of my working life to the endeavour of bringing those two into closer connection, it is because, as I will now argue, between art objects such as images and their processing, the people relating to art must be given responsibility, so that the border between art and society can be profoundly undermined. The following section provides the arguments and conceptual ideas for that undermining.

#### BEYOND DEFINITIONS: ART AND THE POLITICAL RECONCILED BUT NOT CON-FUSED

In this section, I attempt to make borders meaningful in Inge Boer's sense, as spaces of negotiation, and probe the way they pertain to visual (here, audio-visual) art. Mouffe continues her presentation of the two antagonistic domains of politics and the political with reference to an area of real conflict in contemporary societies:

[...] the dominant tendency in liberal thought is characterized by a rationalist and individualist approach which forecloses acknowledging the nature of collective identities. This kind of liberalism is unable to adequately grasp the pluralistic nature of the social world, with the conflicts that pluralism entails; conflict for which no rational solution could ever exist. (10)

Paradoxically, then, individualism, which takes multiplicity as its starting point, is unable to deal with the actual plural nature of the social world, while also making the problematic nature of the logic of binary opposition that underlies the idea of borders as lines, clear and untenable. The hypostasis of individual freedom is in fact a severe limitation of multiplicity and diversity. The repression of group identities in the name of the individual makes for an easy slide from individualism to conformity, or worse, dictatorship. Today,

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book *Narratology* (M. Bal, *Narratology. Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, Toronto 2017, pp. 81–82, pp. 87–88, pp. 128–130, p. 146).

when so many countries are ruled by allegedly democratically elected dictators, the early-modern tension between the two protagonists of the art installation I brought in above as my example of border problematics gains new actuality as a warning to not suppress tensions. I am alluding once more to my 2019 sixteen-screen video work *Don Quijote: Sad Countenances*, which has been exhibited again in May 2024 in Wrocław, Poland and will be installed in Lublin in April 2025.<sup>13</sup>

If I put forward a view of art that has political force for our present time through and with the collective work of revitalizing Cervantes's world-famous novel, a monument of our cultural heritage, it is because the installation aims to be loyal to the way it relentlessly keeps together, hence, refusing borders between them, 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. All three components involve borders, the first emotive, the second temporal, the third spatial, but with border-lines as both futile, yet, in political practice, predominant. The mission of the first component, affect, is to make the art compelling, without dictating in what way viewers will be affected. The concept of affect offers a perspective on art that suspends the centrality of representation, in both of its two meanings, in favour of art's solicitation of viewers' engagement through affect. This perspective places affect at the centre of attention and focuses analysis on the resulting interactivity between artworks and their viewers. That interactivity destroys the border. Instead of taking what is there to be seen on the screen's surface, for example, at an appropriate distance, affective analysis will establish a relationship between that spectacle and what it *does* to the people looking at it, and, precisely, being *affected* by it, in interaction. While detailed affect-oriented analysis of artworks may seem more difficult to achieve than, say, a form-based analysis of the artwork-only, such analysis is called for to account for the cultural processes in which art functions. Such processes cannot occur on the basis of borders. Art and the political inter-act, but are not con-fused, to recycle a creative hyphen that connects the preposition “con-”, meaning “with”, to the risky activity of “fusing” that destroys the distinguishable elements. This use of the hyphen was suggested to me by South-Korean philosopher Kyoo Lee, who teaches at the CUNY Graduate

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<sup>13</sup> In the Wro Art Center, dir. P. Krajewski, Widok 750–052, Wrocław, from May 16, 2024 to the end of July with the title *Don Kichot. Smętne oblicza/ Don Quijote: Sad Countenances*. I gave an artist talk on June 16, on the same day as the opening.

Center in New York and is one of the three main editors of the journal *PhiloSOPHIA: a journal of TransContinental Feminism*.<sup>14</sup>

The second component of political art, the implication of the past in the present, binds perception – an indispensable element of the process of art beyond the usual boundary – to memory; it erects no border between past and present. Perception happens in the present tense; but without memory we cannot make sense of what we see. The third, displacement, is a spatial condition for the efficacy of art, requiring transgressing the border between the art and its interacting viewers, as much as migrants and refugees must transgress geographical borders. 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. Especially in the first years they were 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 – if it is political. This formulation does not propose synonymy between the two terms, nor any overlap between the two domains. Instead, it rigorously rejects the still-lingering “Kantian” idea that art stands outside the world, beyond an imagined border-line. Instead, the intertwinement – not the identification – of art and the political is essential rather than incidental.<sup>15</sup>

A vital part of that intertwinement occurs through the senses, conceived as inseparable from affect and cognition, of which vision is central, as we are considering (audio-)visual imaging. Visual practices of surveillance, of “othering”, and of hierarchization also make a critical examination of this area of cultural practice a meaningful endeavour. More in general, 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, thus undermining yet another border. Visual images are sometimes able to subvert these cultural, socially damaging pow-

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<sup>14</sup> For a fundamental discussion of affect in art, see E. van Alphen, an article that underlies my reflection here: “Affective Operations of Art and Literature”, *RES: Journal of Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 2008, 53/54 (Spring/Autumn), pp. 20–30. I also want to take on board the critical questions film scholar Eugenie Brinkema has posed regarding the frequent use of the concept of affect, which she finds too vague and leaves the relation of affect to form unaccounted for. See E. Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects*, Durham, NC 2014.

<sup>15</sup> 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.



ers 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 an activity: of looking. And that activity is the responsibility of the persons doing the looking and responding to what they see. This makes visual analysis, as a branch of cultural analysis, highly appropriate, and better suited than classical art history to point out – as if by the sword Don Quijote carries, waves, and sometimes even uses – how looking is steeped in the political. To probe that, visual analysis, which includes the rejection of borders in different ways, is the most productive approach.

Let me give first three examples of border-transgressing objects for visual analysis. After that I will briefly return to the 2019 video exhibition on Don Quijote. 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 *visualisation* of ordinary behaviour, and a social space for negotiation; a moving border that is not a line. As a first example of an object of visual analysis not liable to art-historical study, Goffman’s description of a person entering the “stage” of social encounter is as vivid in its anxiety-raising production as stage fright. Entering involves transgressing whatever border might be constructed. Second, a young child who, yet again, noticed his mother’s camera pointed at him, almost automatically straightens his back, putting his hands by his hips, ready to shoot. Through that role-play or body-language he takes on his favourite, television-inspired role of cowboy, for this is how he wishes – or has been trained to wish – to be captured on camera. Finally, 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 herself.<sup>16</sup>

None of these examples consist of material images one can make, present, delimit; no border works. They are moments, not things. Yet they are starkly visual. These three conceptions of the subject share a concern with appearance and exteriority, which implies transgressing whatever delimitation might be involved, or imagined, between the acting subject and the looking “second person”. The visibility of behaviour – whether seen in social reality, the television-informed world of the child, or in dreams – turns the

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<sup>16</sup> E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, New York 1956. C. Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known*, New York 1987. The middle example comes from my own personal experience of trying to photograph my son.

everyday appearance of people into a potential object for visual analysis. An object, a thing? No, a moment in which something happens.

This is not to suggest that people only exist (socially) as far as they can be seen, and in that situation, circumscribed, but to emphasize that the visibility 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. No border intervenes. Visual (re-?)presentations and interactions, sense-based presentations and absorptions shape the world as we see it. If any situation can be considered a space of negotiation, it is these moments; images of desirable postures and faces, bodies and clothes, flickering colours of light, smiling and unsmiling faces fill our fantasies before we can even have any. Some of these images captivate us for a little bit longer than most; others pass fleetingly but do not fail to leave their mark. These are some of the objects of visual analysis that can do, exist, happen, without a need for borders; certainly, without borders as lines.

As is hopefully clear, all these examples are related to "staging": play-acting, theatricality, and display. Theatre studies is an interdisciplinary field, and so is museology. Both produce images. Since with the DON QUIJOTE project I sought to connect theatricality and museology, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill's study *Museums and the Interpretation of Culture* is helpful. This is an instance of museum studies, a field that clearly has an affiliation with visual analysis, as well as a distinction from it, and intersects the latter and material culture studies. In her first chapter, on the imbrications of museum studies with visual and material culture studies, 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. Such a conglomerate is a space for negotiation; a Boer-based border. Within this conglomerate, each discipline contributes limited, indispensable, and productive methodological elements, which together offer a coherent model for analysis, rather than a list of overlapping questions. This concatenation 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." In the final section of this article, I focus on a border-line-less space of negotiation where, in line with Mouffe, looking becomes a tool to make the political an instance of "inter-ship": connection rather than distancing; an instance of inter-disciplinarity.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> E. Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*, New York 2000. For issues of inter-, multi-, and transdisciplinarity, see my 1988 book *Murder and*

## LOOKING AS POLITICAL AGENCY

I received a few responses after encouraging people to look at the two episodes of Don Quijote and Sancho Panza talking, CONVERSATION and DELIRIUM OF WORDS. I alleged these episodes for their communicative “Sahara aesthetics”: a constantly changing tone, first/second person exchange, and changing situations; but mostly, the unstable power relations that the unsteady borders build up. Importantly, those borders are not expressed in words, or at least, not entirely. Don Quijote’s linguistically expressed adversity to proverbs establishes a border between him and Sancho, which can also be seen. In the CONVERSATION episode, the visualisation of Sancho’s caring, bandaging the wounded face of the knight, and the latter’s outcry of pain, are in slight tension with the verbal discussion they are having. There, the exchange of arguments, friendly enough in spite of disagreements, visually contrasts with the moments when hostility threatens. And when Sancho moves back from Spanish to French, we are aware that the video insists on recalling borders, whether or not these matter much. The point is that they can only be spaces of negotiation, not lines. In DELIRIUM OF WORDS, the urban architecture frames the tense discussion between the two figures. In front of them stand two empty chairs. One respondent alerted me to the fact that these empty chairs figure an invitation to identify with the position of the “second person”,

[...] to be a virtual, potential participant of their “conversation” – on both sides of the screen, as it were, and nowhere specifically. But there is an invitation/suggestion to join them somehow – and the empty chairs function as pronominal shifters to me.

I quote this comment not only to say that I agree with this viewer, but also to foreground once more the merging of visuality with language, which is the more prominent because of the linguistic vocabulary (‘pronominal shifters’) alleged to interpret a visual aspect of framing.<sup>18</sup>

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*Difference: Gender, Genre and Scholarship on Sisera’s Death*, trans. M. Gumpert, Bloomington–Indianapolis 1988. I first wrote on inter-ship (then still without the hyphen I later found crucial) in an article from 2017, “Intership: Anachronism between Loyalty and the Case”, in: *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, ed. T. Leitch, New York–Oxford 2017, pp. 179–196.

<sup>18</sup> This comment and some others came from Filip Lipiński, who knows my video work in depth, as he demonstrated in an article on the thrust of my artwork in its relationship with my scholarship that appeared in December 2020 in *Artium Quaestiones*, no. 21. That special issue, edited by Filip Lipiński, is titled *The Cinematic Turn in Art Practice*

The space of negotiation that remains the best way to circumscribe (not define) borders is for me the approach of cultural analysis, in its visual variant. Visual analysis can help us connect the political aspect of acts of looking with the seemingly self-evident, almost automatic 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 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 and adapt Arjun Appadurai’s phrase for a segment of material culture, would be one way of putting it.<sup>19</sup>

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*, 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 (104). The conflation, or con-fusion of *thing* with *aim* does not imply attributing intentions to objects, although to some extent

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*and Theory*, and the opening article is “Cinematic Art (History) and Mieke Bal’s Thinking in Film”, pp. 5–38. That issue contained another article on my artwork, in Polish. In his response to the two episodes I have brought up here, he also mentioned a few architectural details that confirmed the difference, threatening to become a border, between the backgrounds of each of the figures.

<sup>19</sup> The phrase “the social life of things” is the title of Appadurai’s edited volume, *The Social Life of Things*, Cambridge 1986. For a good example of the kind of analysis that ensues from this definition of the object of visual analysis, see A. Appadurai, C. Breckenridge, “Museums are Good to Think: Heritage on View in India”, in: *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*, eds. I. Karp, C. Mullen Kraemer, S.D. Lavine, Washington–London 1992, pp. 34–55.

In that paper, the authors consider museums as interpretive communities. On family snapshots, see *The Familial Gaze*, ed. M. Hirsch, Hanover, NH 1999 and E. van Alphen, “Visual Archives and the Holocaust: Christian Boltanski, Ydessa Hendeles and Peter Forgacs”, in: *Intercultural Aesthetics: A Worldview Perspective*, eds. A. Van den Braemrusche, H. Kimmerle, N. Note, Berlin 2009, pp. 137–156.

such a case could be made. The conflation, instead, casts the shadow of the intention of the subject over the object. In this guise, the ambiguity of the word "object" harks back to the goals of nineteenth-century object-teaching and its roots in pedagogical positivism. "The first education should be of the perceptions, then of memory, then of the understanding, then of the judgment".<sup>20</sup>

This temporal order is clearly meant as a recipe for progressive education, in which the child is empowered to form her own judgments based on perception. This was a much-needed emancipation of the young subject at the time. However, it is also precisely the reversal of what the analysis of visual culture ought to disentangle and reorder. For, in the then-welcome attempt to counter the newly "invented" ideological brain-washings produced by the primacy of opinion, the sequence established proclaims the supremacy of a rationality that represses subjectivity, emotions, and beliefs. It is an attempt to *objectify* experience and delineate it. But no border-line can do this. For the idea of the "real" thing suppresses the constructed nature of "reality."

*Visibility* is not synonymous with materiality. Just as there is a rhetoric that produces an effect of the real, there is one that produces the effect of materiality. Authenticating an interpretation because it is grounded in acts of looking resulting in seeing or, more strongly, in perceptible material properties, is a rhetorical use of materiality. On the one hand, meeting the material object can be a breathtaking experience: for students of objects, such experiences are still indispensable to counter the effects of endless classes, where slide shows instil the notion that all objects are of equal size and texture. But there can be no direct link between matter and interpretation. The belief that there is such a link, which underlies the object-based pedagogy, resorts to the authority of materiality, seen by Davey as the thrust of such rhetoric: "The 'thingness' of objects, the concrete 'reality', gives weight, literally, to the interpretation. It 'proves' that this is 'how it is', 'what it means'". My appeal to theatricality is meant to preserve the "liveness" of theatre without invoking the rhetoric of materiality, and without separating it from other forms of visuality.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> With "intentions of objects", I am alluding to Kaja Silverman's philosophical study of vision *World Spectators*, Stanford 2000 (esp. ch. 6). The object-based pedagogy has been put forward by N.A. Calkins, "Object-teaching: its purpose and province", *Education* 1980, 1, pp. 165–172 (166, quoted in Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums...*, 105).

<sup>21</sup> N. Davey, "The Hermeneutics of Seeing", in: *Interpreting Visual Culture: Explorations in the Hermeneutics of the Visual*, eds. I. Heywood, B. Sandwell, London–New York 1999, pp. 3–29, rendered in Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums...*, (p. 115). This rhetoric also beckons anthropology in, as well it should.

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 various *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. 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. In short, visual analysis examines all forms and aspects, conditions and consequences of visibility. The regime in which the rhetoric of materiality was possible and often effective is just one such regime that is liable to be analysed critically, in ways that undermine the categorization and its borders.<sup>22</sup>

Thus formulated, visual analysis can be distinguished from object-defined disciplines such as art history and film studies, through the centrality of conditions of visibility, also summarized in the term “visuality”. The question of visibility is simple: What happens when people look, 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. Again, the border-line vanishes. 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. Borders lose out against mergings. Firstly, sense-directed as it may be, the act of looking is inherently framed, framing, interpreting, affect-laden, cognitive, as well as intellectual in kind. Secondly, 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 visibility to them, while looking is “contaminated” by these other acts. Hence, literature, sound, and music are not excluded by a border-as-line from the domain of visual analysis; they partake of the multi-sense-based space of negotiation.

Visuality’s “impurity” is not a simple matter of mixed media. More fundamentally, vision is itself inherently *synaesthetic*. It involves and entails bod-

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<sup>22</sup> A succinct exposition of the kindred but more limited phrase “scopic regimes” can be found in Martin Jay’s article “Scopic Regimes of Modernity”, in: *Vision and Visuality 2*, ed. H. Foster, Seattle 1988, pp. 3–38.

ily sensations that cannot be reduced to perception through the eye; it erases the borders between the senses. Such artworks challenge any reduction of the sense domains involved in attempts to establish hierarchies. If visual analysis focuses on visuality rather than on particular images, then it is the possibility of performing acts of looking in relation to the object seen, not the materiality of it, that decides whether an artefact or process can usefully be considered from the perspective of visual analysis.

Let me put this in even stronger terms. Even “purely” linguistic objects such as literary texts can be analysed meaningfully and productively in this way *qua* visuality. The latter not only include an untameable mixture of the senses involved, but also the inextricable knot of affect and cognition that every perceptual act constitutes. This empathic vision is what the Don Quijote exhibition seeks to solicit. The politics of looking that this requires is based on an integration of cognitive, intellectual, 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 can exit his trauma-induced madness. This also commands critique, and the courage to look it, as well as the self, in the face; straight through that imaginatively made but failing border.

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#### ELECTRONIC SOURCES

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## MAKING AND BREAKING BORDERS

### Summary

The concept of border or boundary has two ambiguities to deal with, if it is to serve a useful intellectual purpose in art and art history. One is to decide whether a border is a line, one that divides, separates, and thus can lead to competition, even to animosity; or whether it constitutes a space within which negotiating can happen. The other ambiguity concerns the differences, in style, period, national background, religious or sexual orientation, between artworks we contemplate in exhibitions, for example. That also raises the question if and how such differences can bridge the gaps and connect the artworks. I propose to take one case, a scene from my installation *Don Quijote: Sad Countenances* (from 2019), in which the knight errant and his squire have a conversation, seated at a café terrace, and probe their differences in social status, educational level, a probing that threatens their friendship and thereby establishes a new boundary.

The scene is ambiguous in that the two sit next to each other in seeming equality, whereas their conversation itself establishes hierarchical relationships, thus making a border. Yet after that tense moment, they revert to their previous, friendly being-together. The border as a dividing line they were building up breaks down when the differences fade away, as the actress playing Sancho reverts to the French of her "boss". With this making and breaking of borders, the two figures manage to share insights they would not have had before. The conversation scene is only eight minutes long, and establishes differences subsequently fading. There is very little acting, and there is nothing like a beautiful landscape. The differences between the languages they speak (French and Spanish) and the disagreements between them vanish in the face of the impossibility to maintain borders as lines, and instead produce that space of negotiation within which relationships can be restored. This enables the dynamic of empathy between the figures but also, and more importantly, between the fictional conversation and the real visitors.

Keywords:

borders, boundaries, video, empathy, politics

