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Responding to *Modern Sensibilities*:  
Emma and Edvard Entangled

## ABSTRACT

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This article is an edited version of the response paper offered at the conclusion of the symposium, *Modern Sensibilities*. It ties together themes from the symposium papers, as well as ideas prompted by Mieke Bal's exhibition, *Emma & Edvard: Love in the Time of Loneliness*, and her accompanying book, *Emma and Edvard Looking Sideways: Loneliness and the Cinematic*. It focuses on the anachronistic entanglements among Flaubert's "Emma," Munch's motifs, Mieke Bal and Michelle Williams Gamaker's *Madame B*, the Munch Museum's architecture and exhibition scenography, and the exhibition viewer.

**Keywords:** Munch, Bovary, desire, entanglement.

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It is an honour to respond to the *Modern Sensibilities* conference, and at its centre, Mieke Bal's book, *Emma and Edvard Looking Sideways: Loneliness and the Cinematic*, her exhibition, *Emma & Edvard: Love in the Time of Loneliness*, and her collaborative multi-channel video work, *Madame B* (2014). I move back and forth among the installation, the book and the lectures in this response. Mieke Bal made for us, as in the words of Miguel Ángel Hernández Navarro, "a new object." Juxtaposing works by Edvard Munch with video screens displaying *Madame B*, still images from the video, parabolic speakers and storyboards, while intermingling the visual, auditory and literary, the exhibition is manifestly interdisciplinary as Bal reminded us *inter alia*, quoting Roland Barthes:

it begins effectively . . . when the solidarity of the old disciplines breaks down . . . in the interests of a new object and a new language neither of which has a place in the field of the sciences that are to be brought peacefully together, this unease in classification being precisely the point from which it is possible to diagnose a certain mutation. (155)

Bal used the phrase "the space between" in her introductory lecture as a way of charactering the interdisciplinarity of her exhibition, and I want to tease out some of the resonances of that space by calling attention to three of the critical avenues that she offered through the exhibition, the accompanying book and the selection of this group of papers: first, the concept of entanglement; second, the theme of desire; and third, the problems of mobility and formlessness, sight and erasure, and suturing and montage that constitute the cinematic.

The exhibition *Emma & Edvard: Love in the Time of Loneliness* (created with the assistance of curator Ute Kuhlemann Falck) followed a sequence of exhibitions held at the Munch Museum collectively entitled "+ Munch": *Melgaard + Munch*, *Van Gogh + Munch*, *Vigeland + Munch*, *Mapplethorpe + Munch*, *Jasper Johns + Munch*, *Jorn + Munch*. In this series from 2015–2016, Munch's works were paired with those of other artists to demonstrate a parallelism in careers, a direct influence or contemporaneous mutual influences. Bal's exhibition and its related book are fundamentally different in their pairing of Munch with Emma Bovary, who is 1) a woman, 2) a fictional woman, and 3) a woman not of his time.

In so doing, Bal opened a space for "associative connections" through the activity of the visitor who moved between static and time-based art, and among a dense web of intertextual figures. Bal also installed the exhibition according to a series of themes, interrupting art-historical linearity in what Griselda Pollock termed "a non-canonical logic of association."

In so doing, Bal also staged Munch's work as, to use Pollock's word, "biographyless." This is to say that Bal decoupled Munch's motifs from any references to his own lived experience, a troubling and tantalizing idea in relation to Munch, whose work is often essentialized through the details of his biography (Berman 1284–89). Similarly, the multi-channel video installations decoupled Emma from Flaubert's narrative through a series of "reverse quotations" (references to texts, images, and material culture from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries) and by virtue of its emphasis on the physical and thematic gaps between the screens (fig. 1).

In her conceptualization of the exhibition and in her video installation *Madame B*, her collaborative interpretation of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856) with Michelle Williams Gamaker, Bal literally staged anachronism. She asked us to consider how the present animated the past and made it meaningful and useable for the contemporary moment. One of the introductory wall texts read: "Flaubert imagined it. Munch depicted it. What is our role in it?" Two actors—Emma and Edvard—comingled across time with us, the viewing public. In so doing, their images and identities both shaped and were filtered through our particular associations and moments of viewing. Munch was born in 1863 and died in 1944; Emma was "born" as the serialized novel *Madame Bovary* in 1856 by the hand of Gustave Flaubert, who was himself born in 1821 and died in 1880, at approximately the same time that Munch endeavoured to become an artist. We viewed the exhibition in winter 2017.

The troubling of chronology and the richness of heterochrony was the subject of Miguel Ángel Hernández Navarro's talk. He characterized the encounter of figures from different temporalities as mutually transformative, as "alternatives to the monochronic regime of modernity [that] release the different tenses of experience, in which present pasts, memory, and differing continuities allow for a consideration of the so-called modern sensibility." He identified the exhibition as a "temporal space" in which "tenses [were] confused" and the discursive habits of viewing were interrupted. In his formulation, the kind of encounter within the exhibition as a "trialogue" among the manifest subjects and ourselves as subjects who constituted meaning. The heterochrony of actors offered, in Navarro's words, "a new thing," whose ruptures in time, glitches and breaks were central features of modernity. Invoking Georges Didi-Huberman's notion of montage, of "the art of producing this form that thinks" (120), Navarro emphasized the foundations of Bal's project to bring together resemblances while resisting easy assimilation.

The effects of montage within the exhibition, the resemblances and juxtapositions, yielded associations that, for me as a student of Munch's

work, recast entrenched meanings. For example, the plastic cups used for a champagne toast in Emma's wedding scene in *Madame B*, stabbed me with their tawdriness. For me, they crystallized the irony of Emma's thwarted desire and the simulacra of relationships at the centre of the project. Turning from that sequence to Munch's *Wedding of the Bohemian* (1925–26), I recognized freshly the "martyr-like" aspect of the central female figure. I am not certain that I will view this painting, which Mieke Bal identifies as "a merciless critique of the institution [of marriage]" (*Emma and Edvard* 127), without the image of a made-in-China plastic cup as a metaphor. Nor will I be able to read that scene in the novel *Madame Bovary* without picturing that plastic cup. In this regard, montage and anachronism create entanglement.

"Entanglement" is a term, borrowed from quantum physics and from postcolonial studies, that describes a process which signifies more than mutually transformative temporality and experience, as it engages the ongoing, the political. Entanglement vectors particles, or peoples, so that they correlate, interact and remain entangled even when distanced and in isolation from one another. Within postcolonial studies, entanglement recognizes the condition of a mutually-constitutive relationship between colonizer and colonized (Therborn 295–97). I think about "entanglement" within the context of the exhibition and the book as a way of processing the many nexuses that they offer to us: anachronic temporality, in which Flaubert's Emma of the 1850s, Bal and Gamaker's Emma of 2014, Munch's works of the 1880s–1940s, *our* Emma (as we know and invent her from our reading of Flaubert), our Munch (as we know and invent him through our encounter with his works), the architecture of the Munch Museum, Bal and Gamaker's encounters with Maya Deren, Emily Dickinson, Sol LeWitt and others (among the many intertextual references in the videos), the mobility of our own bodies, and the symposium's references to Friedrich Nietzsche, Hedda Gabler, and Karl Ove Knausgård. Once Emma and Edvard are no longer looking sideways at or away from one another across the galleries of the Munch Museum, they will remain mutually transformative.

A difference between anachronism and entanglement may reside in duration, and in further webs of entanglement moving forwards and backwards. Entanglement in the installation requires a slowing down of time itself, and Mieke Bal's installation design prompts slow recognition. The unorthodox decision to install many of the paintings at knee-level, the benches that were provided throughout the galleries, and the increasingly darkened rooms were all prompts for deceleration. Here I am reminded of the art historian Jennifer L. Roberts, who practices what she

terms “immersive attention” (40). We often visit exhibitions in order to recognize, categorize, and Instagram individual works. The unexpectedly sunken location of the paintings on the walls of *Emma & Edvard: Love in the Time of Loneliness* required that the body of the standing adult viewer arched downward or became seated to regard the works at eye-level. Even the act of bending over invited a deceleration of the viewer’s transit through the galleries and a new temporal relationship between the viewing subject and the object of the gaze.

Slow regard enabled unseen or under-regarded details of Munch’s paintings to come into consciousness. For example, I had been looking at the painting *Nude with Long Red Hair* (1902; fig. 2) for many years and never before considered relevant a triangular wedge of dark brush strokes in the bottom left corner, which—viewed within the context of Bal’s installation—coalesced into the suggestion of a figure cropped at the canvas’s edge.<sup>1</sup> Were there a second figure in the original format (as I now imagine it), the red-haired women would seem (in my imagination) to be vulnerable, her wide-eyed, sideways look not one of seduction (Bal, *Emma and Edvard* 108) but of self-protection. The kind of immersive attention required by the exhibition transformed canvas after canvas. The presence of the video screens installed through the galleries, which prompted the viewer’s attentiveness over time, provided cues to a more temporally generous regard of Munch’s paintings.

At the same time, as Ernst van Alphen notes, slow attention is constantly interrupted by the sideways glance—by the magnetic pull of objects and images that occur in our peripheral vision. This continual state of rupture is a central problem of modernity, according to van Alphen, a space between traumatic fragmentation and the creative deformations of the modern sensibility. Beginning with texts that articulate and manage the phenomenological shock of modernity, including Rainer Maria Rilke’s tram that races in, rattling with excitement, and then rattles on, over everything, to Walter Benjamin’s critique of cinema and agency, van Alphen locates literary and artistic modernism in that space of contradiction in which the troubling of the perceptual field intervenes. What Bal sees as a space “in between” figuration and abstraction, perhaps, van Alphen offers as a third thing, a modern arena filled with glitches and collisions that obviate any distinction between the abstract and the figurative or figured—what Bal in her book calls “dis-unification” (*Emma and Edvard* 122). The

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<sup>1</sup> Munch Museum conservator Eun-Jin Strand Ferrer subsequently confirmed that the canvas had been part of a larger composition, and that excess canvas from the original format was folded at the back of the painting.

collisions and fragmentation engage both style and sensation. What van Alphen characterizes as higher insight is ours to experience through the contradictory collisions of video, the sonic environment and the paintings in the gallery through slow time and the eruptive proximity of entangled objects. The project is a form of cinematic suturing.

The state of desire seems, in all of the works encountered in the exhibition and in the symposium papers, to undergird the condition of loneliness. And desire is the medium for disunification. Bal's book, *Emma and Edvard Looking Sideways*, emphasizes how powerfully Emma Bovary desires desire itself. Upon entering the exhibition architecture, the viewer was framed by two large video screens. On them, Emma was seen to focalize desire: the left-hand screen displayed Emma conjuring images into being by creating a montage of photocopied images from art books and fashion magazines, and by colouring in black line drawings of pastiche works of art—including Bernini's *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa* inserted into a landscape setting (fig. 3). Emma's manipulation of historical imagery thematized anachronism while also expressing her desire for sensation that can never be achieved through black-and-white renderings of such impossible montages. As Bal argued elsewhere, Bernini's image of St. Teresa's mystical experience was itself "the indispensable prosthesis through which Teresa's ecstasy can come to be preposterously an aftereffect" (Bal, "Ecstatic Aesthetics" 13). Emma's manipulations of St. Teresa's "prosthetic" ecstasy marked the distance between herself and her desire for sensation. On the right-hand screen, we saw Emma as she herself tried to see, to focus her eyes, to grasp an exhibition of the work of Sol LeWitt: "Where is the Art?", she queries. "It's around you," replies the Parisian gallerist. On both screens, Emma's desire was manifested through the impossibility of seeing what was right before her.

Kristin Gjesdal's paper concerned Ibsen's character, Hedda Gabler, and the impossible status of her own subjectivity as a desired subject/object and as the accumulation of perpetually thwarted desire. The play *Hedda Gabler*, she pointed out, is Ibsen's only work that is titled after a protagonist who no longer possesses the name. Hedda carries her father's surname, rather than her husband's (Tesman), as the embodiment of a past existence, her very name resonating with an eerie lapse in temporality. Gjesdal quoted the critic Edmond Gosse, identifying Hedda as the epitome of the monstrous New Woman, displaying "indifferentism and morbid selfishness, all claws and thirst for blood under the delicate velvet of her beauty." In contrast, Gjesdal offered one of Munch's scenographic sketches for Hedda Gabler, picturing the central figure as trapped in an "existential cul-de-sac of a life that appears unliveable."

Hedda is not the sum of her parts, but is instead profoundly fragmented through desire. Gjesdal located Hedda as a creation within the space occupied by Edvard and Emma, thereby offering a fascinating reading of Munch's Hedda, or one of Munch's Heddas, as a locus for the entrapments and discontents of domesticity (see Templeton). Through the rigid and almost hieratic body of the protagonist, held in a rectus of suppressed desire, Munch's Hedda can be seen as shaped and eroded by the desires of others. What I find so compelling here is the claim that in a sense Hedda cannot be pictured, as she is the object of so many networks of desire in the text and in the reviews and audiences that have shaped her that she, in a sense, becomes enigmatic, formless, existing in that space in between abstraction and figuration, fragmented, modern. As articulated by Slavoj Žižek, the desired object cannot be achieved: "desire's *raison d'être* is not to realize its goal, to find full satisfaction, but to reproduce itself as desire" (39). Munch's Hedda, as Gjesdal interpreted the image, articulates this conundrum of the object that is—like the Emmas of Flaubert and of Bal and Williams Gamaker—so propulsively doomed both to desire desire and to extinguish desire with finality.

Griselda Pollock identified such vulnerability as especially gendered. Pollock considered the performative function of a second self, or an avatar, the deployment of an image operating as a form of negotiation with history, memory and politics, that manages loneliness, desire and violence. Her discussion of the works of Charlotte Salomon had great resonance for the discussion of Edvard and Emma, both of whom look sideways in acts of distancing. Charlotte Salomon's autobiographic/autofictive *Singspiel* entangles with Emma's deployment of "Emmas," those facades that mask her loneliness, and Edvard's representations of "Edwards," those painted figures that stand in for the artist himself (see Endresen). This association is not to flatten differences among the identities of either the avatars or their inventors—by age, class, gender, ethnicity, privilege or inhibition, or by their radically different physical and political circumstances—but Pollock's discussion of "the production of the artist-subject" allowed for greater fluidity in interpretation in the gallery. Artists produce meanings and not subjects, Pollock reminded us, just as she redirected us to what she termed "the pleasure in paint itself." In this, she charged us to consider the inventive, experimental and often internally interruptive surfaces of Munch's works.

Bal's Munch is Edvard the narrator, Edvard the focalizer, the self-exiled, the deployed and performative identity as separate from Edvard Munch in history (Bal, *Emma and Edvard* 49). Likewise, Jonathan Culler called attention to Flaubert both as a focalizer of modernity—with its banalities and

cacophony—and the creator of Emma as the self-exiled. He quoted Henry James as characterizing Flaubert as “the novelist’s novelist,” and “for many of our tribe at large, the novelist.” He also emphasized Flaubert’s labour of art, the seeking of an aesthetic that would engage with modernity, endeavouring “a words book about nothing” in which “the book . . . would have hardly any subject—or at least in which the subject would be almost invisible.” Culler spoke of Flaubert’s writing as transcendence, the purity of expression. Emma as a character, as he reminded us, was limned through Flaubert’s absolute specificity of language and both empathic and critical analysis.

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I find notable, in this regard, the contrast between Flaubert’s and Munch’s articulated ambitions to shape a contemporary idiom: Flaubert, in a letter to Louise Colet in 1852, wrote: “There must be no more archaisms, clichés; contemporary ideas must be expressed using the appropriate crude terms; everything must be as clear as Voltaire, as abrim with substance as Montaigne, as vigorous as La Bruyère, and always streaming with colour” (qtd. in Steegmuller 160). Munch expressed a programme in 1889 that eschewed any notion of an “invisible” subject: “No longer would interiors, people who read and women who knit, be painted. There would be living people who breathe and feel, suffer and love” (qtd. in Heller 164).

At the same time, Culler noted that, despite *Madame Bovary’s* multi-generational presence, Emma was shapeless in and to history. She was seen in hyper and fictive acuteness by Charles to the point where she could not be seen at all (the whiteness of her nails) and was, moreover, disfigured by her own desire. Cullen’s demonstration of the many Emmas in history and criticism, the “Bovarysme,” whether pathological, liberationist, or both, exercised the entanglements of historical desire itself and magnified anxieties about women’s power, the social order, class and political economy. Emma’s shoulders were overburdened by accumulated meanings. Her pain and her appetites, her proclivity to look sideways rather than at the material and emotional realities set before her, and her desire for desire constituted, as Pollock and Gjesdal both remarked about Hedda Gabler, existential pain itself. Emma’s crisis was grounded not so much in “Why do I exist?,” but “How do I exist?,” or even, “Do I exist?”

Bal appealed to the cinematic as a way of approaching such questions interpolated through the figures of Emma and Edvard, through the entanglements, achronicity, accumulations and appeals to desire that framed her exhibition and set into motion the entire conference. Bal offered definitions of the cinematic—an intimation of movement and temporality (including the recognition of a painted surface that expresses motion); acts of perception (the superimposition of memory and embodiment); an invoca-



tion of the affective and the synesthetic; and the potential to move us to action in the social and political realm.

The exhibition architecture itself made the cinematic conspicuous, for example, in the perspectival tunnel created by two video screens that framed and guided vision toward Munch's painting *The Voice / Summer Night* (fig. 4). The activity of Charles and Emma as they first see one another across the facing screens made the figure in Munch's painting all the more fiercely silent in her fixity. The juxtaposition of painting and video fragments created a web of entanglements as the viewer suddenly recognized, reflexively, her or his own gaze enmeshed with the eyes of the painted woman. The network of looks that activated that space, and the soundscape created by the parabolic speakers, animated the gaze of the figure in *The Voice / Summer Night* so that it/she seemed fervently to be gazing back. Such was the entanglement of video and static painting.

Further, a small side gallery became a theatre of reflexive spectatorship, outfitted as a cinema with two rows of attached seating installed before a screen. Only a small corner of this gallery was visible through the doorway (lower right corner of fig. 1). Painted a deep red colour and embellished with an antique glass wall sconce, it called to mind a Victorian parlour or a bordello. Upon entering the gallery and recognizing the screen and seating to the right, the viewer realized that the illusion of entering a parlour suddenly collided with the sensation of being in a small motion picture theatre. This suturing of space, enacted through the movement of the viewer's body and gaze, created a cinematic sense of rupture. The theatre seating was designed perhaps not so much as an invitation to sit as it was a station to exercise a double form of looking, a discursive platform, watching the space of watching, itself.

The exhibition concluded with a mirror, installed next to a self-portrait by Munch. Its manifold operations included the reminder of the orthodox technique of the artist who, in the making of the self-representation, had to "look sideways" into a mirror to view himself in order to make himself visible. To coin a phrase from Pollock's lecture, such an effect demystified the "the production of the artist-subject" by calling out the apparatus of image construction: the mirror, present in the making of the self-portrait, but "off screen" in the painting, was therefore a reminder of representation itself. Further, by literally mirroring and trapping the viewer's scopic experience, that final object in the exhibition reflected the tensions within the project. Looking in the mirror, the viewer momentarily confronted the self before moving on, cinematically, to round the corner and exit, each movement and moment a motif. It operated in the space in between incomprehension and recognition, causing a rupture in viewing that brought

the notion of the cinematic into relief. Upon encountering a rectangular frame, having accumulated the memory of so many of such frames throughout the exhibition, the first glimpse of the mirror was of an “other,” so unexpected was it to see the self in the exhibition, a re-enactment of Freud’s “uncanny” encounter with his own reflection (Freud 371). To recognize the self was also to recognize that we were “seeing sideways,” suffering from “Bovarysme,” seeing an image (what we see) but not the picture (what it depicts) (Bal, *Emma and Edvard* 33). The mirror, along with Bal, Pollock, van Alphen, Gjesdal, Culler and Hernández Navarro, focalized the creators’ presence—Flaubert’s, Munch’s and our own—in an entangled authorship. A reviewer of the exhibition articulated this entanglement well:

Bal’s dual focus on the visual and the verbal not only enables me to see how strongly visual Flaubert’s writing is in *Emma Bovary*, thus making me more appreciative of the thematic effects of verbal visualisation. It also enables me to understand better how readable Munch’s painting is: seeing the exhibition, I “read” Munch’s paintings not least by responding to the elements of narrative of which they are possessed, and these narrative elements bear a significant relation to aspects of Flaubert’s verbal narrative. (Røed)

In the exhibition, the book, and the conference, we encounter Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* and Bal and Gamaker’s *Madame B*. But we also need to consider Mieke Bal, the third “Madame B,” the curator of our intellectual and sensorial experience. As she reminds us, curating is the act of making meaning, “the dialogue between work, space, and viewer” (*Emma and Edvard* 48). It is her Flaubert, her Emma, and her Edvard that inhabit the intermedial and intertextual exhibition space in which we are actors constituting the “space in between,” in which we in turn invent and invest our Edwards and Emmas.

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Emma & Edvard Looking Sideways  
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Fig. 1. Mieke Bal, *Emma & Edvard: Love in the Time of Loneliness*, exhibition design.

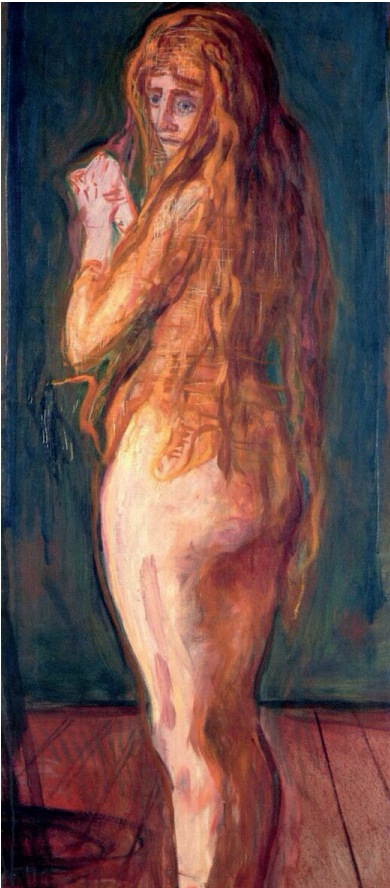


Fig. 2. Edvard Munch, *Nude with Long Red Hair*, 1902, oil on canvas, 120 x 50 cm. Munch Museum, Oslo.



Fig. 3. Mieke Bal and Michelle Williams Gamaker, still image shot from *Madame B.*



Fig. 4. Edvard Munch, *The Voice / Summer Night*, 1896, oil on unprimed canvas, 90 x 119.5 cm. Munch Museum, Oslo.