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Framing *Madame B*: Quotation and Indistinction in Mieke Bal and Michelle Williams Gamaker's Video Installation

ABSTRACT

The article engages with the video installation *Madame B* by Mieke Bal and Michelle Williams Gamaker. The work was premiered in the city of Łódź in Poland (between 6 Dec. 2013 and 9 Feb. 2014). The author makes use of the exhibition brochure by two artists published by the Museum of Modern Art, and the recording of a seminar held by Bal and Williams Gamaker after launching their work. The article focuses on the innovative audiovisual interpretation of Flaubert's famous novel. Basing the argument on the concept of framing created by Bal, the author applies it to Bal and Williams Gamaker's exhibition by relating it to the history and culture of the Polish location where it was first shown. Above all, however, the article discusses the importance of quotation and indistinction in *Madame B,* where the artists quote from (among others): Louise Bourgeois, Maya Deren, Artemisia Gentileschi, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, William Kentridge and Sol LeWitt.

In a Polish Location

An innovative interpretation of Flaubert's classic *Madame Bovary* emerges from the work of two visual artists, Mieke Bal, a scholar and art critic, and Michelle Williams Gamaker, directors of the video installation *Madame B: Explorations in Emotional Capitalism*. The artists decided to premiere their work in the Museum of Modern Art (*Muzeum Sztuki*) in the city of Łódź (from 6 December 2013 to 9 February 2014) in Poland. This choice of "framing," to invoke a concept thoroughly discussed in *Loving Yusuf* (Bal 218), attracts the viewer's attention to the capitalist exploitation of emotion, which became particularly aggressive in a place that after forty-four years went from the communist regime to uncritical consumerism whose mechanisms we see exposed in Bal and Williams Gamaker's take on Flaubert's novel.

Significantly, the video installation was placed in the rooms of the building that had been built as a residence for a nineteenth-century cotton tycoon, successfully pursuing his career at a time when Poland had lost independence, and Łódź belonged to the territory taken over by Russia. The residence brings to mind the original capitalist boom in the city that grew due to cotton and textile industry, creating leisure for its *nouveaux riches*, flaunting boredom as their status symbol. The location of the exhibition emphasizes the things that *Madame B* makes so apparent, that is, the seductions of capitalism, especially its unfulfilled and yet continually recycled promise that consumerism will offer permanent excitement.

The opening of the exhibition was accompanied by a seminar devoted to the project. Held in the former ballroom, it was framed by the architectural message of ample space, encouraging the participants to expand Emma-like in tune with its implicit promise. Several weeks later, the screening of the film *Madame B* took place in *Manufaktura*, the trendiest shopping centre in Łódź. The illusions created by these respective places in the past and the present played into the meaning of the video installation during its stay in Łódź. Like "travelling concepts" from Mieke Bal's book (*Travelling Concepts* 13–14), *Madame B* hit the road, and she did that in Łódź. In their booklet brochure on the exhibition, the artists describe it as "immersive" and "site-responsive" (Bal and Williams Gamaker, *Madame B: Explorations* 3). The next setting for the exhibition was going to be the country house playing the role of Rodolphe's place in the installation and the film (Bal and Williams Gamaker, *From Novel to Exhibition*).

Participatory Exhibition vis-à-vis Laboratory Theatre

The word "immersive," as defined by the directors, "refers to an artistic form, in which form, meaning, technique, and ambiance collaborate

to solicit the participatory presence of the spectator" (Bal and Williams Gamaker, *Madame B: Explorations* 3). The concept converges with and seems indebted to the idea of laboratory theatre envisaged by Polish director Jerzy Grotowski, who made use of the ritual significance of the theatre to demand the "total participation" of spectators and placed them in the role of "active" collaborators (Barba 154–55). If *Madame Bovary* is rendered in a different medium through an act of intersemiotic translation, so is Grotowski's theatrical project which gets translated into the site of the exhibition, where the spectators wander or sit in front of nineteen screens positioned in various ways, and forming eight video installations. As in Grotowski's project, there is no centre or stage, or, to translate it into the reality of the movie theatre, there is no screen that would dominate the audience grouped in predictable rows in front of the film's inexorably linear development. Let into the site of the exhibition, the spectator finds herself or himself surrounded by the audiovisual phenomena that beg for attention cascading from many screens at once in the visual and sonic stream of consciousness, whose initial amorphousness can only be sorted out with participatory attentiveness. The spectator can wander among the screens with actors playing literally around her or him, and since the moment of entry into the site is always arbitrary, every time the spectator lives through a different experience. While Grotowski strips the theatre of excessive make-up, scenography and verbosity, Bal and Williams Gamaker use an array of stimuli to involve the spectator, but, like Grotowski, they continually insist on doing away with aesthetic distance and passive contemplation. As in laboratory theatre, the goal is not to "show the world separated from the spectator but within the limits of the theatre to create with him a new world" (Barba 158). The description could not be truer when applied to the video installation *Madame B.*

Anachronism in Colonial Frame

During the seminar, the directors admitted they felt attracted to Flaubert's novel because of its theme and its audiovisuality. In their commentary on the exhibition Bal and Williams Gamaker stress the significance of anachronism for their project (*Madame B: Explorations* 2–3). In order to be faithful to the contemporaneity of Flaubert's *oeuvre* they both chose to translate Emma into the contemporary reality while retaining some elements from the past in directly quoted dialogue and also in dress code. Thus the spectator sees Emma at a party organized by a French pharmaceutical corporation, or on shopping sprees in a fashionable and expensive shop of *haute couture*. Also, the opera she watches is not *Lucia di*

Lammermoor by Donizetti, but *Refuse the Hour* (2012) by William Kentridge, a South African artist, who shows the influence of the European concept of time on colonization and trade (Bal and Williams Gamaker, *Madame B: Explorations* 11). The colonial undertone (involving fragments of Kentridge's work) is woven into the scene "Loving Léon," where a museum filled with stuffed exotic animals serves as a setting of the sexual hunt, reducing Emma to a trophy woman.

Thus the exhibition also responds to the colonial "framing" of Flaubert, whose other works were discussed from that angle by Edward Said in *Orientalism.* While *Madame Bovary* on the surface had nothing in common with French colonial expansion, the work became extremely important in the colonial and postcolonial reality, to mention only the novel *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973) by J. G. Farrell, or *Maya Memsaab* (1993), a film by Ketan Mehta. The former deconstructs the Raj as Victorian exotic fiction, by focusing on the issues that attracted Flaubert in his classic, namely: "preoccupation with illness, abject details of physical life, satirical deconstruction of bourgeois mediocrity" (Booker 86). Colonialism is satirized here the way Romanticism is satirized by Flaubert. While not informed directly by this text, the directors of *Madame B* pick up on colonialism as the fiction that was deconstructed in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and they use it in order to do justice to Flaubert's critique of illusions contemporary for his time. As for the Bollywood film made in independent India, it follows the metamorphosis of the eponymous character from the loving wife of a local doctor into an adventuress who takes lovers and spends huge amounts of money on her new image, a copy of Flaubert's classic sitting conspicuously at her bedside. Implicit in the name of the protagonist (Maya) is the Hindi concept of illusion that the eponymous character continually embraces so as to free herself from the tedium of country life which does not offer any stimuli to her intellect (Donaldson-Evans 38).

While not quoting from the above two sources, Bal and Williams Gamaker's project intersects with the highly intertextual field of interpretations of Flaubert's classic, including the Polish film *Pani Bovary to ja* (*I am Madame Bovary*), made in 1977 by Zbigniew Kamiński. Its protagonist, Anna, decides to walk out on her married life after reading *Madame Bovary.* Having experienced the communist glitz in a fashion show, shopping for expensive cosmetics and dreaming about a trip abroad, she returns home after a harrowing time spent in the city while looking for a former boyfriend who did not turn up for their date. Made much earlier than the Indian film, Kamiński's work also focuses on illusions embraced by a woman disappointed with everyday life and searching for agency and significance in the country colonized and exploited by the former Soviet Union in her days.

Approaching Quotation and Indistinction

During the seminar, both artists repeatedly stressed the importance of quotation for the project, thus situating it in postmodernist aesthetics. One of the inspirations behind their work, Sol LeWitt, was known for his rejection of individual authorship, and his collaborators did the actual work (Bal and Williams Gamaker, *From Novel to Exhibition*). The artists referred to their project as "interactive" in the sense that there was no clear-cut division of tasks. Also, actors and technical crew became contributors to the work, since each had their share in the actual message by offering their interpretations. LeWitt was also quoted in a direct way on the video screen showing Emma during an art history tutorial in the gallery with his murals all over the walls. Her question: "Where is the art?" and the teacher's answer: "It's around you" (Bal and Williams Gamaker, *Madame B,* Video Exhibition) provide an apt metaphor of the "immersive" exhibition as discussed above. Even before crossing the threshold to the rooms housing the installation, the spectator was immersed in an introductory soundscape (by Sara Pinheiro) already seeping into space, attracting attention. This dissolved the boundary between the installation and its outside. Indistinction is another feature of the audiovisual discourse in *Madame B,* and another quotation from Flaubert, a master of "elusive narration," where "shifts in perspective are designed to undermine one's judgement" (Culler 243–44).

Indistinction is certainly one of the key concepts in Flaubert criticism, associated as it was with the writer who challenged the binaries. While juxtaposing the scenes from Emma's everyday life (in the part of the exhibition titled "Boredom sets in") and an apparently adventurous event of party going, Bal and Williams Gamaker stress that "the contrast we expect [between the scenes] trained as we are in thinking in binary oppositions is challenged" (*Madame B: Explorations* 7). The experience of the exhibition abounds in realizations that when we have looked long enough, what we see is not quite (or is not at all) what we expected to see.

When Seeing Is (not) Believing

Bal and Williams Gamaker focus on seeing and looking not only in connection with the characters who look and see, but also in a deliberate attempt to make the spectators realize the cultural framing of what they see and the socially shaped ways of looking at particular people, events and settings. Emma's visit to the gallery featuring LeWitt's murals ends with her insistence on seeing a woman crouching underneath a layer of paint, while the teacher responds: "I don't see anything." Prophetic and ominous as the scene is for Emma's fate, it also draws attention to the way we construct

what we see. Bal continually brings the readers' attention to this issue in her books. Writing about one of the two paintings by Rembrandt depicting Joseph and Potiphar's wife, she discusses her experience of proximity to the actual canvas and the effect that arises when you step back or step forward. In one instance Joseph seems frightened by the erotic desire of a married woman; in the other, he seems to be smiling (Bal, *Double Exposures* 309). Bal's commentary on the painting ends with the words urging the reader to repeat her experience: "Do you see it?" (*Double Exposures* 311), another invitation to scrutinize the cultural, political or social preconceptions that get in the way of our act of seeing.

Visual quotations abound in the installation: for example, attention is drawn to a painting by the famous Italian artist Artemisia Gentileschi, known for her renditions of Judith, the slayer of Holofernes. Emma looks at one of these paintings in the company of her mentor, who refers to the work as "the birth of that head." Holofernes's head rests between his huge muscular shoulders, the way his frightening face might emerge from the belly of a woman, her solid thighs/arms spread to give birth. The "confusion of arms and thighs" in the painting is the object of Bal's study in *Double Exposures* (297), where the critic sees Gentileschi's *Judith and Holofernes* as a response to the painting of Medusa by Caravaggio. Significantly, in the video installation the painting of Judith beheading Holofernes is followed by Luca Giordano's *Perseus Turning Phileas and His Followers to Stone,* where Medusa's head is used as weapon. The spectator is now disorientated by the clash between what s/he hears and what s/he remembers, because s/he sees both in the video, where "that head" becomes ambiguous not only through the dialogue with Giordano's painting, but also due to the conflation of death and birth. Through Artemisia Gentileschi, Mieke Bal revisits her interdisciplinary works on biblical women, especially *Murder and Difference,* but also *Death and Dissymmetry,* where the murdering of Sisera by Yael is analyzed against the ambiguity of Yael's life-giving maternal role and her role of a slayer (Bal 216–17).

While facing the video with the painting by Gentileschi, the spectator can turn left and get a glimpse of Emma in a beautiful church singled out for a highly ritualized marriage ceremony. She can be seen walking towards Charles very slowly, as if reluctantly, for this will eventually take her towards her death. Having been warned that things are not what they seem, the spectator is wary of happiness apparently projected upon the ritual. Indistinction seeps in. "Do you see it" (Bal, *Double Exposures* 311)? If the spectator is reckless enough, s/he might lose her/his current mooring and dart across the room into the only space that is tantalizingly sealed off from the rest of the exhibit by means of a heavy curtain that must be lifted

in a deliberate gesture of trespass. Then a suffocatingly tight movie theatre with one screen is revealed. It is there that Emma's last erotic experience, "Loving Léon," is shown and seen. The space of four seats is indeed embarrassingly uncomfortable. Should anyone else be there, the experience of watching intimacies on the screen that is too large and too close to indulge in an illusion of innocent curiosity might become unbearably voyeuristic. It is voyeuristic enough for the spectators to be exposed to Emma and Léon's repetitive love-making which is not supposed to titillate them, but to prove that they should not pry into the room where the noises of physical contact between the two bodies are just too apparent, as are the creases in the material that their clothes are made of.

But when you enter the exhibition space you have to confront two screens that are opposite each other. On one of them you see Charles involved in what the artists call a voyeuristic act of seeing (Bal and Williams Gamaker, *From Novel to Exhibition*), while Emma goes about her business on the farm, trying to attract the invisible man's attention at the same time. In the cinema theatre the spectator ends up feeling like the people who watch, stalk or follow Emma, like Charles, Rodolphe, Léon or Homais. In her book *Loving Yusuf*, Bal reminds readers that the "voyeuristic position" is "gender-specific." The critic's comment made in the context of her analysis of a painting by Rembrandt is highly relevant for the spectator in the cinema theatre part of the video installation: "It is a 'me' who, in spite of my feminist convictions endorses a male habit as a reluctant guest" (Bal, *Loving Yusuf* 88).

On emerging from the sealed off space the spectator can watch Emma move downhill towards death, or can opt for a different ending. The final sequence of five screens adjacent to one another plays, among others, alternative endings. This, as Bal admitted during the seminar, was inspired by John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (Bal and Williams Gamaker, *From Novel to Exhibition*). The very fact of involving Fowles provides Flaubert's Emma with a choice she did not have in her time. She is released into the indeterminacy of two alternative endings. In one of them she becomes hysterical and nearly drowns herself, Ophelia-like, in the lake that used to be the background of her love affair with Rodolphe. On seeing that, Homais phones emergency and has Emma tied to a stretcher and locked in the ambulance, her small daughter watching an incomprehensible and cruel scene. Emma, like many women whose emotion has become excessive, will be confined to a mental asylum, and thus disciplined and punished, to invoke Foucault. Significantly, Homais imitates her behaviour in his most "abject" moment in the film, that is, after she poisons herself and dies. The pharmacist plunges into the water and is overcome

with hysteria, the weeds clinging to his body. As both artists suggested in the seminar, the water induced indistinction by dissolving the boundaries. A hysteric that Homais turns into "blurs the differences" within signification that abhors indistinction (Beizer 164).

The most "optimistic" ending in the last installation set at the exhibition is the one where a friendly female lawyer helps Emma file a divorce suit on the grounds that she does not love her husband. Although it is the only ending that leaves Emma safe from home or institutional confinement, she is going to live on welfare, and her perspective will be narrowed down, which is subtly suggested when she tries to peer through the slats of the Venetian blind in the lawyer's office, but her view is limited. Through anachronism in the two alternative endings Bal and Williams Gamaker show the consequences of female desire that are still difficult to deal with despite the apparent equality of the sexes. Pamela Sue Anderson contends: "Desire has a negative meaning for patriarchy; in the patriarchal configurations of Adam and Eve, it is a conscious inclination to deviate from a good rational intention" (151). It is certainly this aspect that has often made readers and critics judge Emma harshly. But the exhibition by Bal and Williams Gamaker elicits a different response. Dominic LaCapra was quoted in the seminar as an influence behind it. His concept of "empathic unsettlement," used in trauma discourse responding to the Holocaust (135–36), is applied by the artists who want to unsettle the spectator so that s/he would be able to empathize rather than either judge or sentimentally and uncritically identify.

The alternative endings played simultaneously with the actual one on adjacent screens make spectators doubt the finality of what they see. Beizer argues that Flaubert "accidentally substituted the symptoms of mercury poisoning for those of arsenic"; he was treated with mercury for syphilis, so "his cure" became Emma's "poison" (165). With an inky stain on her white dress, the result of poisoning, *Madame B* brings to mind a blank page marked by the writer's script, now rewritten and perhaps released, like Anna Karenina reclaimed in *Places Far From Ellesmere* (1990) by Canadian writer Aritha van Herk, who takes Tolstoy's heroine into the Arctic north, "un/reading" her there (86) in order to free her from "her lover/her killer/her necrophiliac scribe" (142).

From the Verbal into the Visual

Though image predominates, language is given a special power in the scenes of seduction. Only Charles is totally inept using it. In the only scene where he is shown talking to Emma at length, the spectator witnesses the visual

rendition of the famous quote from Flaubert about his conversation that was as flat as a sidewalk. The scene shows the effect of Charles's speech on Emma's bored face. Her husband keeps discussing medical cases involving arthritis, mentions his plan to make a garden shed, and finally tries to encourage Emma to make cherry jam, and upon her failure to reply he says he will ask his mother to do it. To this Emma responds with a scream. The couple are shown in an elegant setting of their home; the meal in front of them brings to mind communion because of fish and wine. But the fish looks more dead than in Dutch still lifes; it seems to fix the spectator with its glazed eyes. The way Charles speaks has a similar effect on Emma. She feels locked into her house, inert and served on the social menu in the role that deadens her, as it intensifies her passivity.

Emma has always dreamt of verbal seduction. When Homais talks her into persuading Charles to take part in the TV show devoted to antidepressants, she is only too eager to comply. Charles does appear on TV impeccably dressed, but verbally he fails conspicuously in front of Emma on the other side of the screen. A screen showing him is embedded in another screen that the participants of the exhibition watch, being able to follow Emma's excruciatingly acute sense of humiliation and her anger with the loser when he comes back home. Charles does not see the speaker's point when faced with the statement: "you are the gate-keepers," which refers to the general practitioners' responsibility for prescribed medications. He does not understand depression either; he is out of touch with psychological phenomena, even if he can treat physical wounds. He will not be able to see his wife's condition when she begins to develop bulimia. An ironic undertone to the speaker's statement is that Charles will not be able to keep the gate closed sexually. The gate opens the moment he loses, which is not explicit in the exhibition, but the film makes the spectator aware of the fact that Charles used a surrogate seduction, that is, the temptation of financial safety and social position—too little for an individual like Emma.

Brought up on novels, Emma lives on words, but "[r]eading persists as the most dangerous activity any character can engage in" (van Herk 135), to mention only Brian Moore's *The Doctor's Wife* (1976), a novel about an educated housewife from Belfast, who read herself into freedom from political and marital oppression after she had had a fling with a younger man in France, in another twentieth-century work inspired by Flaubert.

A Dialogue with *The Doll*

It is significant that Bal and Williams Gamaker mention the Polish novel *The Doll* by Bolesław Prus (1890), while commenting on the nineteenth-century

novels of female desire, a phenomenon that attracted male writers (*Madame B: Explorations* 3), who thus paved way for the Freudian colonial comparison of a woman to Africa, since her sexuality remained swathed in impenetrable mystery like "the dark continent" (Anderson 104). While *The Doll* is not, technically speaking, an adultery novel, it does contain the motif that invites comparison with Flaubert's work. Its protagonist, Stanisław Wokulski, is a shopkeeper who notices a beautiful daughter of an impoverished aristocrat at the theatre and decides to risk everything in order to make the money that would give him access to her. The theatre setting already alerts the reader to Wokulski's construction of romantic femininity he wants to adulate. When he returns from mysterious expeditions rich and generous, he gradually gets closer to Izabela Łęcka, who sees through his dream, and says to her confidante that if the man wants to buy her, he will find out she is very expensive (Prus 97). But Wokulski eventually proposes to her and is accepted as a solid and reliable investment in her future. Yet, while the couple are on the train with Izabela's father, her cousin begins to flirt with her in English, and it soon becomes clear to Wokulski, who also invested in learning languages, that they have been lovers. Izabela did not want a man to adore her wordlessly or simply buy her; she wanted a verbal seducer, the only advantage her lover has.

Early criticism in Polish was scathingly unkind to Izabela (Krzyżanowski 387), who was (falsely) seen as the eponymous doll and corrupting influence on the highly patriotic though disillusioned idealist fighting first for Polish independence, but then applying his great mind to financial machinations, so as to secure for himself the status of a husband to a woman of noble birth and rare beauty. Continually bored, prejudiced and brought up, Emma-like, on French novels, Izabela has long been treated as an embodiment of carnal temptation that made the hero fall. *Madame B* offers a fresh perspective with which to "frame" her. Wokulski is not really interested in a personal relationship but in adoration and conquest. He wants a fiction, not a real woman. Izabela plays his game mercilessly. Let him indulge in his fiction; he still will not be the master of her sexual life. The same could be said about Emma, who gets bored with the role the Victorians termed "the angel in the house," and her adultery is a way to regain influence on her life that she gave up out of obedience to custom and convention. Leckie notes that in Victorian England adultery challenged the dominant story of domestic stability, and problematized the angel turned into the adulteress in the house, knowledgeable about her sexuality (59–60).

Like Izabela, who falls for singers or suave talkers, Madame B is sensitive to singing and discourse. In the installation we see her reading the

Héloïse-Abélard Correspondance. This feeds into the "eroticization of women's reading practices" in the nineteenth century (Leckie 60). If Abélard seduced Héloïse, while being her teacher, using his intellect and speech, Madame B craves the same, and at some stage she seems to obtain it. Her lover, Rodolphe, seduces her by means of persuasion and promises he never intends to fulfil. On one of the screens we see Emma giving him a quill he uses in foreplay to touch the intimate parts of her body, while she responds with excitement. Through its connection with medieval scribes, the quill refers to the book Emma has been reading. The same quill is later used by Rodolphe to write a letter of rejection. It is dipped in water containing wilted flowers in order to stain the paper with moisture imitating tears. That is not what Madame B expected from her bourgeois version of Abélard. Léon later seduces her in a very similar way. Léon talks her into making love to him. When he stalks Emma at the beginning of her married life, he is first of all an interlocutor, even if they miss each other in their messages.

The casting decision that resulted in one actor playing Charles, Rodolphe and Léon was especially significant since, combined, they represent a fiction that Emma never ceases to indulge in. None of the lovers understands Madame B, who in turn does not really register that fact until it is too late. The lack of understanding is expressed in the fact that Charles/Rodolphe/Léon speaks French, while Emma speaks Finnish, the language of the actress (Marja Skaffari). Though distinct from each other due to make-up, hairstyle and dress code, the men are subsumed by indistinction as a result of conflating three different personalities in one actor, Thomas Germaine (Bal and Williams Gamaker, *From Novel to Exhibition*).

Gothicized Houses of Maya Deren and Louise Bourgeois

While discussing quotations embedded in the project, Michelle Williams Gamaker mentioned Maya Deren, a film director and actress, who had been born to a Jewish family in Kiev, and then made her home in the United States. Williams Gamaker referred specifically to the silent film *At Land*, which shows Maya Deren crawl along the driftwood on the beach, but the driftwood suddenly changes into a long table at a highly conventionalized social gathering. Maya crawls on ignored by elegantly dressed people and a man involved in a game of chess at the top of the table. When the man disappears, Maya suddenly finds herself on the road leading to a desolate house. Gothicized by the presence of a shape swathed in white canvas, the house exudes the sense of death and finality of destruction.

In the final part of the installation with five screens placed on the wall, in the one on the left edge, we see an actress playing Emma involved in

a sensual encounter with rough surfaces as her face is sliding off the wall of a broken, roofless, forsaken house. One more quotation can be detected here. Bal has written extensively on Louise Bourgeois, among others on her project called *Cells*, where "architecture is involved, explored and contested," and the form is infused with memory (Bal, *Louise Bourgeois' Spider* 2). "Cell Choisy" shows an opulent country house in France with the blade of a guillotine invincibly hovering above it, implying emotional devastation. Likewise, the broken house in *Madame B* is a comment on the loss, dissolution and breakup of a relationship and family.

Underneath "The Yellow Wallpaper"/Mural

Williams Gamaker repeatedly reverted to the intertext that both artists found so seminal in their installation, namely "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, where the nameless protagonist, another doctor's wife, spends her life confined to a former nursery in a country house haunted by colonial undertones. There she is dissuaded from writing since it is bad for her health according to her husband. Infantilized and always "at rest" she focuses on the hideous yellow wallpaper whose design apparently hides a woman crawling underneath, much like Emma's invisible woman crouching in the mural by LeWitt, or like Maya Deren crawling on the table, while being totally ignored, unseen by the participants of the banquet.

Williams Gamaker stressed in the seminar that Gilman had blurred the boundary between reality and insanity in her story, which is "quoted" in Emma leaning inside into the ground of LeWitt's work, without knowing it. Emma is concerned with crossing thresholds. Faced with LeWitt's mural, she senses a hidden dimension of herself that can only be seen when the light falls in a certain way. She symbolically dissolves the boundary between fiction that goes into the making of her socially acceptable self and inner reality that she intuits through the mediation of art whose message speaks only to her. The condition of Gilman's protagonist is anachronistically projected on Emma, who gives birth to her baby at home in the room upstairs that only Charles can enter. She is thus his wife and his patient at the same time. He admits in front of Homais that Emma is doing fine in response to the latter urging him to take his wife to hospital. While the two men discuss her below in the public part of the house, Emma is above, confined to the room that is turning into the actual nursery from Gilman's short story.

It is interesting that the men surrounding Emma (except Charles) encourage her to cross thresholds. Rodolphe does it by taking her into the open space around his mansion where peacocks flaunt their feathers the

way he flaunts his sex appeal and suave seductive discourse. Léon, who lacks Rodolphe's cynicism, eagerly draws Emma into conversations, first as an innocent interlocutor, then as a seducer hunting for her in the anonymity of the city. Homais makes her force Charles to take part in the TV show, and then facilitates her transit into the city, when he persuades Charles to give her permission and money to take singing lessons. Every time she is confronted with another fiction, rather than her inner self that she may have wanted to unwrap and express. This encounter with successive fictions is particularly acute in an *haute couture* shop where the screens on the wall hide another closet full of clothes that recycle the promise of self-fulfilment. Emma will lean into it in her imagination the way she leaned into the ground of LeWitt's painting, but she will return from the trip empty-handed, even if she has her hands full of shopping bags with attractive clothes.

The Art "Around You"

In the booklet on the exhibition, the two artists note that "Emma's activities are heavily indebted to the world that feeds them. Cutting out clothes from fashion magazines indicates that already before leaving the farm the lures of the world have her in their grip" (Bal and Williams Gamaker, *Madame B: Explorations* 6). Feeding becomes a crucial word here, since Emma consumes food for thought or literal food uncritically. Emma feeds on visual messages or erotic experience, or she feasts alone in the kitchen, her fridge emphasizing the isolation and compartmentalization of the consumerist world where she seeks solace in vain. The exhibition does solicit participation through empathy. But the full message will change with every spectator; with art around her/him, s/he will be encouraged to lean inside into the "visual narrative" (Bal, *Louise Bourgeois' Spider* 4) and answer the question: "Do you see it?"

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