

CONVERSATION PIECES: ABOUT MIEKE BAL

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Travelling Concepts, Mieke Bal's recent exploration of the movement and migration of concepts across and between the humanities, is, in many ways, a series of conversations, as the author engages with contemporary theories, art works and ideas, with writers, artists and philosophers. Proposed as a 'rough guide', like its travel companions *Travelling Concepts* is full of wise advice and fun to read. It is handy for consultation in emergencies – how to approach a 'difficult' text – or for quick consultation – how has a travelling concept such as hybridity moved from the sciences to critical analysis?¹ This product of deep and sustained thinking is imbued with a lively, even irrepressible wit, and it is written in a sparkling style, often in the first person. Writing and speaking from a distinctively articulated position that conjures up her own experience, history and memories, Bal addresses her readers directly, engaging us in conversation with her as well as with the objects and texts of her analysis. As she has so often indicated, encounters between the art work or visual image and the theories deployed in interpretation are reciprocal, transformative: theory, she explains, is 'not an instrument of analysis, to be "applied" to the art object'. Rather, 'it is a discourse that can be brought to bear on the object at the same time as the object can be brought to bear on it.'²

Conversation, defined as the exchange of observations and ideas, takes its form from *conversatio*, in turn derived from *conversari*, to associate with, and it is resonant with *convertare*, to convert or to turn around, suggestive of the ebbs and flows of argumentation, the changes of mind that take place in debate. And Bal's polemical style and situated stance have provoked assent and dissent in equal measure. Her writings, and equally the lectures and seminars for which she is renowned – a founder of the Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis, she has regularly taught a seminar on critical theory – as well as those that engage with them, may thus be characterized as conversation pieces. Conversation pieces can take visual and literary form: poems with a serious subject and an informal tone, paintings of figures gathered together in convivial shared activities.

This art of conversation characterizes Bal's writings as she engages with, intervenes, interrogates, and confronts the critical and visual practices of past and present. She undertakes detailed visual and textual engagement with objects which are by no means silent witnesses but active agents in intellectual and aesthetic conversations, participants in the production of meaning and interpretation that constitutes cultural analysis. Based on her contention that 'art thinks', she has propounded the concept of 'visual thought'.³ This empowerment of the visual image or material artefact, which counters more conventional scholarly distinctions between the subject and the object, acknowledges an inter-subjectivity between

audience and interpreter, between interpreter and interpreted, in which the subject has a stake in the analysis.⁴ For Bal, then, interpretation is never impartial, distanced, or objective, but engaged and situated, a recognition which has also shaped her sustained interests in Emile Benveniste's theory that the exchanges between I and you, rather than the subject/object divide, constitute the basic foundation of language. Her admissions of complicity have accompanied a profound thinking about time, a break with conventions that plot a unidirectional chronological movement, which have shaped so much art-historical endeavour, to explore how the urgencies of the here and now inform the project of scholarly analysis. In forging what Giovanni Careri calls in these pages 'a critical history of art', Bal has departed from the thorough scrutiny of archives, documents, locations, the impulse to relocate the work of art in its historical contexts; indeed she has advised time and again of the problems with 'context', favouring the concept of 'framing' as a self-reflexive undertaking established by the interpreter. This departure from historical context, archival foundation, and what have become major approaches in the recent rewritings of art's histories has certainly provoked dissent.⁵ Bal has advanced interpretations of the image alive to its semantic potential, its open-ended but not unlimited profusion of meaning. And rather than returning into the past, for Bal the past is understood as part of the present, embedded in it through memory and desire. Alert to Walter Benjamin's insight that 'every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably',⁶ she has established that the past only appears in and through contemporary conversation with it.

Bal has called 'preposterous' that movement or reversal that 'puts what came chronologically first ("pre") as an after-effect behind ("post")'.⁷ This reconceptualization of the relations between past and present moves beyond linear models of time. Undoing art-historical concepts of influence and artistic genealogy with their notions of direct connection and unbroken transmission, 'preposterous history' emphasizes the active engagement between the work of art and what came before (or indeed after), how and in what ways the present encounters and acts upon the past.⁸ She has addressed those institutions that harbour and present to view the salvaged remains of what has gone before – the museum or the archive – and considered at length those practices of art that return to and reprise the art of the past.⁹

In investigating the relation between the historical (or perhaps more precisely, the historicized) and the contemporary, Bal has also been concerned with agency, with she or he who acts, views, interprets. *Double Exposures* offered a sustained account of the 'event' of display, the 'act of showing', examining the three-way conversations between the curator, the viewer and the object exhibited.¹⁰ Bal's reflections on the positionality of the subject (artist, viewer, curator, scholar) are threaded through the contributions following, as is her attention to vision and viewing. And the intense focus on the work of art is matched, as in Bal's own work, by an interest in its many afterlives, its reception.¹¹

The essays collected here are also conversation pieces enacting dialogues with, about and around many of Mieke Bal's most important ideas in the visual field. A point of departure is often provided by her proposition that interpretation begins with a question or an issue, a theoretical inquisitiveness. One of her major interventions in the fields of art-historical and visual studies has been her analysis

of the mediation of vision, her meticulous and precise considerations of the diverse ways in which the viewer comes to vision, comes into vision, whether in her attention to the relays of the gaze, to the structures that she has identified as ‘focalization’, or to the many forms of looking, from the concentration of ‘looking in’ to more distant observation.¹² And Bal’s vision is acute; it is a patient, insistent, attentive regard that in lingering on a detail elegantly elaborates an interpretation. *Reading Rembrandt* takes its readers on a journey that is as much about the paintings and prints of a canonical artist as it is about the acts and processes of investigation, of semiotic readings, of visual as well as psychoanalytic analysis. It begins with Bal’s observation of the seemingly insignificant, a nail and a hole in the wall that in catching the light comes under her scrutiny. Yet her attention has



1.3 Doris Salcedo, *Unland: The Orphan's Tunic*, 1997. Wood, cloth, hair and glue, 80 × 245 × 98 cm. Collection: Barcelona: CaixaForum. Photo: David Heald. Reproduced courtesy of Alexander and Bonin, New York.

also been given to that which almost escapes from view or disappears into obscurity, whether a patch of shadow lingering in the foreground of a photograph, or a passage of painterly illegibility. And, taking as her example the intricate weavings of hair in works by Doris Salcedo, she has written hauntingly of that ‘sticky image’ that demands our regard, enticing the viewer to meditate on the artist’s response to the political circumstances wrought into her work.¹³

The contributors of the present collection take one or more of Bal's theoretical propositions for examination, weaving her concerns with their own interests across a wide range of visual materials, from the historical art of the Sistine Chapel, altar paintings and watercolours, to more recent film, photography, graffiti, interactive immersive environments, online performance, areas of visual interest often positioned outside the pages of art history. While Bal has, unsurprisingly perhaps, become a key figure in the debates about visual culture,¹⁴ the extraordinarily wide range of visual materials collected here speaks of her movement between the visual registers of high art and popular cultures, her resistance to clear-cut distinctions between image and text, announced decisively in the sub-title to *Reading 'Rembrandt': Beyond the Word-Image Opposition*, the first of her books to have a profound impact in art-historical studies. In her counterpart in literary studies, *The Mottled Screen: Reading Proust Visually*, Bal exposes the canonical writer's strategies of visual representation, his articulation of seeing, and his snapshots of sensations.¹⁵

About Mieke Bal is imprinted with Bal's characteristic entanglements of the intellectual, the domestic and the political. They are examined in some detail in the conversation between Bal and Michael Ann Holly at the centre of this collection. And they have been evident, too, in her films, such as *Nothing is Missing*, about mothers whose children have migrated to the West, and in this film's recent screening and installation at the Ministry of Justice in Den Haag.¹⁶ Focusing on several of her recent films, Murat Aydemir offers a substantive discussion of cultural translation and migratory aesthetics in relation to 'minority existence in modernity'.¹⁷ This interest in translation reappears, very differently, in Giovanni Careri's analysis of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel interpreted through Samuel Beckett's theatre of the absurd; the author's proposition of anachronistic 'constellation' opens up an innovative analysis of the constructions of space, time and the body in the Sistina. Careri's reflections on 'preposterous history' are shared by Ernst van Alphen, whose essay focuses on the nature of the archive and the survival of a traumatic past in the present in installations by Christian Boltanski and by Ydessa Hendeles, and films by Peter Forgacs. His concern with 'Holocaust effects' resonates with Griselda Pollock's projection of an artistic moment 'before Auschwitz' in her sustained attention to Charlotte Salomon's major art work, *Leben? oder Theater?* This focus on pictorial complexity, revealed though intense and careful visual scrutiny, recurs in Hanneke Grootenboer's discussion of paintings of the Annunciation in a series, as she puts it, of 'Balian exercises', in which she demonstrates how visual analysis so often brings the invisible into visibility.

This collection has also been shaped by Bal's productive 'restlessness', her passionate interdisciplinarity.¹⁸ Sonja Neef starts from a comparison between theories of graffiti by Mieke Bal and by Jean Baudrillard to analyse public spaces in Germany before and after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, developed through an engagement with one of Bal's key concepts: that culture is not object-based but performative. Jill Bennett's essay explores how new concepts emerge from an interdisciplinary nexus. Investigating the work of artists such as Gabriel Orozco and Candice Breitz, she argues for the significance of 'intermedia' as a term, not just to indicate mixed media but to signify a 'transdisciplinary sphere of operation'. Kaja Silverman considers Bal's readings of Proust (visually), revisiting Proust's 'photographic' vision and photography's early history as well as Bal's

concept of 'focalization'. Reflecting on positionality in language and in the visual arts, especially through a sustained account of Chantal Akerman's film, *The Captive*, her essay explores one of the central theme of Bal's writing, one that recurs throughout this collection: the question of subjectivity.

These are essays written in the present, filled with its desires and needs for a recognition of the past, its legacies, disappearances and reappearances, whether in the 'Holocaust effects' of archival classification systems, in the recreation of a cultural moment 'before Auschwitz', in an assessment of the destruction and survivals of the Berlin wall, or in the making of a history of art that reappraises the art of the past. That they are essays written from the present is signalled by the broad engagement in these pages with contemporary theorists and philosophers, including Gilles Deleuze, Clifford Geertz, Hubert Damisch, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Giorgio Agamben. Agamben's philosophical writings have provoked considerable interest in contemporary art practice and aesthetics.¹⁹ The creation of visual and textual forms for a new empowerment of the subject alongside the visual representation of the global conditions of disposable 'bare' life remain among the most urgent issues for today.²⁰ Mieke Bal's writings and films have compellingly argued for an ethics and aesthetics of situated contemporary practice that comes to terms with the past, attends to 'cultural memory in the present',²¹ and addresses the most demanding issues of today and tomorrow.

Notes

This collection continues an occasional *Art History* series initiated by Adrian Rifkin's *About Michael Baxandall* (1999) and continued with *About Stephen Bann* (2006). It was first proposed in New York during a exchange between friends and colleagues early in 2003. Towards the end of its long preparation, I moved to the University of Amsterdam, where my colleagues now include Bal and other contributors.

My warmest thanks are extended to Mieke Bal, and to the scholars who have so generously and graciously contributed their work. I owe a special debt of thanks to Fintan Cullen and to the editorial board of *Art History* for their wise advice in preparing this collection. I would also like to thank Sarah Sears for her exacting copy-editing and imaginative layout, Jody Patterson for co-ordinating the essays, and Samuel Bibby for preparing the texts and for translating the text by Giovanni Careri. I am indebted to the artist and to the Artificial Eye Film Company for kind permission to reproduce stills from Chantal Akerman's *The Captive* (2000); to the artist and Alexander and Bonin, for permission to reproduce images by Doris Salcedo; and to the artist and White Cube for permission to reproduce Mona Hatoum's *Hot Spot*. I also offer special thanks to David Peters Corbett, Christine Riding, Jacqueline Scott at Wiley-Blackwell and Geoffrey Palmer for making the book version possible.

1 Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*, Toronto, 2002.

2 Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, 61.

3 Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio, Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*, Chicago, 1999, 117.

4 Norman Bryson, introduction to *Looking In: The Art of Viewing*, London and New York, 2000.

5 On these histories, see Deborah Cherry, ed., *About Stephen Bann*, Oxford, 2006, and *Art: History: Visual: Culture*, Oxford, 2005.

- 6 Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', Thesis V in *Illuminations*, ed. and with an introduction by Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, New York, 1976, 255.
- 7 Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio*, 7.
- 8 For Bal's rethinking of influence, see Ernst van Alphen, "'Reconcentrations": Bacon reinventing his Models', in *Francis Bacon and the Tradition of Art*, eds W. Seipel, B. Steffen, C. Vitali, Vienna, 2004, 57–69. I am indebted to Jane Beckett for this reference.
- 9 Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio*, offers a sustained address to twentieth-century Caravaggisti artists.
- 10 Mieke Bal, *Double Exposures: The Subject of Cultural Analysis*, London and New York, 1996.
- 11 Bal's significance in reception studies has been pointed out by Elizabeth Prettejohn, 'Løve in Copenhagen', *Art History*, 29:5, 2006, 937–41.
- 12 Focalization is explored in detail in Bal's *Reading 'Rembrandt': Beyond the Word-Image Opposition*, New York and Cambridge, 1991, 2nd edn (paperback) 1994.
- 13 Mieke Bal, 'Sticky Images: the foreshortening of time in an art of duration', in *Time and the Image*, ed. Carolyn Bailey Gill, Manchester, 2000, 79–99.
- 14 Mieke Bal, 'Visual essentialism and the object of visual culture', *Journal of Visual Culture*, 2:1, 2003, 6, published with invited responses.
- 15 Mieke Bal, *The Mottled Screen: Reading Proust Visually*, Stanford, 1997.
- 16 Mieke Bal, *Nothing is Missing*, 2006. Multiple-screen video installation, 25–35 minutes (looped).
- 17 Aydemir draws on Aamir R. Mufti, 'Auerbach in Istanbul: Edward Said, Secular Criticism, and the Question of Minority Culture', *Critical Inquiry*, 25, 1998, 102.
- 18 The breadth of her interests is signalled in *The Mieke Bal Reader*, Chicago, 2006.
- 19 'What is bare life?' is one of the questions offered by the *Documenta 12* magazines project. See, for example, *Control + P : Journal of Contemporary Art*, 5, January 2007, ed. Judy Freya Sibayan, with thanks to Erika Tan for this reference. <http://www.controlp-artjournal.org> and <http://magazines.documenta.de>, accessed January 2007.
- 20 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stamford, 1996.
- 21 Mieke Bal co-edits, with Henk de Vries, a series of books on *Cultural Memory in the Present*, for Stanford University Press.