

Research Article

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Activating Temporalities: The Political Power of Artistic Time

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Abstract: Inspired by Marx' view of "untimely temporalities," I connect my own conception of the need for anachronism in art history with some contemporary artworks focusing on the political importance of art in the present. The analyses of work by three contemporary artists who each bring their own aesthetic of slowness, interruption, and activism to their art leads to a conception of political art as activating rather than directly activist. In addition to Marx, especially his view of temporality, and to Henri Bergson as a major philosopher of time, the article also establishes connections with the ideas of contemporary cultural analyst Kaja Silverman. These three thinkers, each in their own way, undermine the binary oppositions on which so much of thought is based.

Keywords: activism, activating art, tempo, multiple temporalities, embodiment, interruption, slowness, trace, spectre

Looking and the Time it Takes

For some time now, I have advocated anachronism, or as I prefer to call it, inter-temporality (which leads to "pre-posterous history") to understand the dimension of art that is not immediately visible. This is where I find a point of departure in a Marxian view. Already in *The German Ideology*, Marx made this point. As Harry Harootunian formulates it succinctly:

... the past, as such, does not necessarily lead to the present or constitutes its cause; at the same time, this historical perspective opened the path to the past that is constantly seen as mingling with the present, depositing in every present its residual traces that embodied untimely temporalities announcing their unevenness and difference. (17-18)

This view is couched in terms of tempo. (Marx and Engels, 5: 85)

In line with this turbulent ("uneven," "mingling") and embodied view of temporalities, I made time the main protagonist of this essay: time interrupted, disturbed, and thereby made experiential; and time interrupting, in positive and negative ways, leading to critical and felicitous situations. Life is defined by time passing. As one philosopher wittily summed it up: "time is there all the time" (Gjesdal 2017). Below I look at a few experiments with time robbed of its self-evidence; of that simply being there all the time. The artists probe the question what happens when that happens. Time is made visible, perceivable, sensible, by being interrupted. I look in particular at slowness: the time of video slowed down to the extreme, to the point that the difference between still and moving images becomes moot. Slowness is, then, contagious. Looking takes time, is what slowness makes us realise. Interruption is the motor of what can then be achieved in the domain of the political. The reflections below briefly examine a few different frames within which interruption occurs, and becomes an event, an act, a performance, a wound, an encounter. My interlocutors

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are artists whose works have a strong theoretical impact. In the end, my argument is entirely anchored in what is called today, “art-based research,” sometime “artistic research,” or “practice-based research,” or “art-based learning.”¹

In an attempt at further probing the specific temporality of art, in this contribution I examine tempi: the impact of pace, but without leaping to the political conclusions Marx attaches to these. I start from the self-evident fact that images, still as well as moving, cannot be seen, understood, and processed without taking the time to do so. The political consequences of this obvious fact are less self-evident. Inspired by passages in Peter Osborne’s short but illuminating introduction to Marx, where in one chapter he analyses the literary qualities of the *Communist Manifesto*, I will investigate the political role of time in the sense of tempo or pace, in a few artworks, including my own, in order to make a plea for a slow-down of our current culture of haste.²

Perception: Slowing Down for Better Looking

Dutch video artist Roos Theuws shows us something about the connection between looking and slowness that diverts attention from the illusion of realism to the image as such. Technology allows the creation of perfect visual illusions. Knowing full well that what we see in a video image is a 2-dimensional plane that doesn’t move, from the beginning of the moving image the endeavour of the art form has been to solicit the “willing suspension of disbelief.” The current quality of moving images, be they cinematic or videographic, makes it appealing to dream away in the illusion that what we see is something “out there”—a piece of the world. While many moving-image makers exploit that willingness to be deceived, especially art video and film counter it. In self-reflexivity, the medium is deployed to question what it is, can, and does. Many practitioners of lens-based art question the assumption of the world made visible and probe the properties of the technology that facilitates it. Theuws is among the most radical, profound, and creative of these. In her work she offers two very different ways of decomposing, dissecting, exploding the moving image. She takes the medium to its limits, with astounding beauty as a result. Three examples.

On three large led-screens disposed asymmetrically, in her work *KITAB AL MANAZIR* (2013) we see black-and-white images of the same room of a museum of optical instruments (the Boerhave Museum in Leiden). Yet, they do not become a unity. The question, what do you see? remains hard to answer. Two of the screens present a very slow panning shot that moves until a reflecting sphere, visible in all three images, coming from the left in one and from the right in the other, after some 15 minutes appears in the centre because the sphere reflects the lens that moves in search of a focus. Of our happy stabilising habit of linear perspective nothing remains. The images do not show anything but themselves. Meanwhile, a 10th century treatise on optics by the Persian scholar, after whom the work is titled, is read in Arabic, the language of the origins of much optical science.

In the two screens—one large projection, one monitor—of another work, titled *FENCES & POOLS* (2012) we see again a slow panning shot. It is of a fence on a peninsula of Salt Lake behind which at a distance mountain landscape of Yellow Stone Park. The images couldn’t be more different from those of *KITAB AL MANAZIR*: this work is in colour, blurry, and the movement, slowed down 600 times, is so slow that it is invisible. The only way to become aware of the moving quality of the image is by looking for quite some time at one of the screens, then going back to the other. You don’t see it change; you see that it has changed. Change happens while you are present, yet only becomes change in the past tense. This connects Theuws’s work with that of Norwegian artist Jeannette Christensen, discussed below.

¹ On the latter, lesser-known phrase, see, for example, Knowles & Cole (2008). For the implications in teaching, Lutters (2015; 2018), who is a strong advocate of this practice.

² See Osborne, *How to Read Marx* (2005, pp. 81-90); Harootunian (2015). On preposterous history, see Bal 1999. For a more extensive analysis of Marx’s view of time, see Tomba (2013).



Figs. 1 and 2 Roos Theuws, KITAB AL MANAZIR, 2013, three-channel video installation. Photos: GJ.van Rooij

In *FENCES & POOLS*, a voice in English reads from three texts that evoke this landscape: one from the biblical Book of Revelations, one from a Navajo creation myth, and one from the diary of a 19th century scientist. The same voice, three cultures, all three relevant for the space of the image. The voices are audible from different speakers so that the viewer who moves from one to the other can only hear fragments. Sitting in the middle, you seem to have three ears, in a bodily exercise in sculptural hearing. When on the left of the right-hand screen the tree we have seen disappear on the large screen, begins to enter the frame, an old oil-drilling installation on the right begins to leave the frame. When the tree is completed, the drill is gone; as if nature pushed economy away. The visual image decomposes in lines and planes of colour; the texts decompose the mixed society of the space.



Figs 3 and 4 Roos Theuws, *FENCES & POOLS*, 2012, 2-channel video installation



Figs. 5 and 6 Roos THEUWS, *THE SAME SUN*, two-channel video installation, 2017

In *THE SAME SUN* (2017) on a 27inch I-mac, two images are shown. The left screen shows the effect of the rising of the sun through a window, which enlightens a lamp that casts a shadow through the light that falls on it. The right screen shows the same film in reverse. At a certain point, they coincide and time seems to stand still, as if time did not develop as a linear program but created a still point of the turning world. The power supply is provided by solar panels, fed by the same sun as the camera was making use of when shooting the imagery. Physically, the solar panels darken the space, because they are installed in front of the windows.

Together, then, in these works the medium dissects itself, undoing representation and revising the standard conception of perception. What do you see? No piece of world “out there”; only the image blown

up in time, disrupted, laid bare. This art helps better understand how art demands our time, and this, in turn, leads to the view of art developed below: art as interruption. My next partner in this inquiry is Jeannette Christensen.³

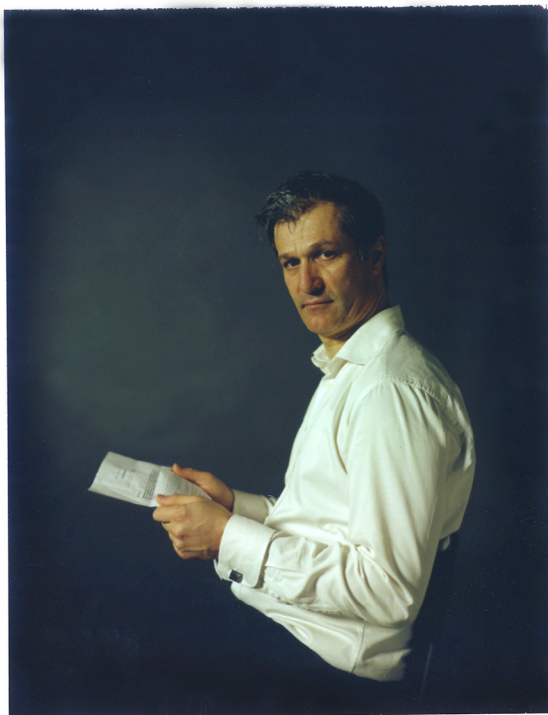
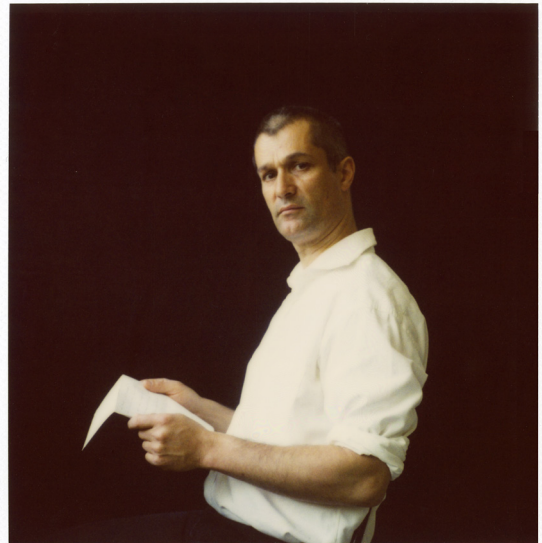
Interruption: From Everyday to Event

If any definition of art is possible, then the best we can do is come up with the notion that art is interruption. It interrupts the routine of everyday life; to the reality of which it presents fictional alternatives; the pace of work and other daily chores; the busy spaces through which we struggle to move. Art interrupts those endless flows of the breath of everyday timespace. To say that art most fundamentally interrupts is refraining from defining art ontologically—to say what it *is*—and instead, saying what it *does*; such a statement means considering art as an *act*. And indeed, acting, including the agency it implies, takes place in time, interrupting time's self-evident, hence, imperceptible stream. The impossibility to define art and the need to resort to considering it an act comes from the dual, paradoxical status of art. Both its relative autonomy and its sociality are crucial aspects. "Art cannot live, *qua* art, within the everyday as the everyday," writes British philosopher of art and time and expert on Marx, Peter Osborne, quoting Adorno (255). "Rather, it necessarily disrupts the everydayness of the everyday from within, since it is, constitutively, both 'autonomous' and a 'social fact'" (*Anywhere or Not at All* 140). If this first paradox holds, then what remains to be said about a specific "interruption artwork" such as Jeannette Christensen's *Woman Interrupted*, from 1994 to the present, based on Vermeer's oil painting *Woman Interrupted at her Music* from 1658-59, other than that it is self-reflective, a work of art on art, as is Theuws' work on and with slowness? Well—as it happens, both contribute a lot to what art does in the world. For time, hence, also its interruption, has many tentacles, touching on the most crucial aspects of social-cultural life.

Materially, this work started out as a polaroid photograph—the medium of the instant. Through temporal work, it is already an image that interrupts the enduring silence, the timelessness of Johannes Vermeer's masterpiece. We consider Vermeer's paintings silent, indeed. This is part of why and how images are *still*. But making a snapshot of such a work is probing the question of what that means—still? Vermeer's art can even be seen as the embodiment of stillness—harbouring the silence of images we call "still" in the double sense of (auditory) silent and (physically) unmoving. This double meaning contains a double paradox. For, firstly, still images do move, in the emotional sense, and more so due to their stillness. This is the autonomy side of art. And secondly, on the diegetic level—the represented situation—the interruption of the music-making silences the depicted woman, thereby drawing attention to her earlier and later sound-making in the fiction depicted. This makes interruption a motor of narrativity: because of the implied suddenness of the interruption, the times of before and after accede to the stage. The interruption also foregrounds the art work's sociality; it shows that it intervenes in the silenced movement of life. Christensen's series of polaroids shocks us into thought (Massumi) about time, silence and stillness by their live models. But still, these snapshots are still—differently.

Christensen's 2018 video installation takes as its starting point the situation depicted, in which the artificial stillness of the pose, on which the art work's stillness rests, is interrupted. The figure looks at the viewer, breaking the spell of the absorption of the fictional character and turning attention to this interruption of the fictional world and its timelessness. The interruption performs a subtle twist between two times, already foregrounded by Vermeer's notoriously still painting. Looking up, the woman figure breaks open the confinement of the fictional world. Her look disrupts the theatre's fourth wall, and engages viewers; however, much time has passed between the absorption and the theatricality. Depicting both, and taking into account Marx's view of chronology cited at the beginning of this article, Vermeer was thus countering Michael Fried's negative value judgments attached to the latter (1980), and instead, goes along with Maaïke Bleeker's later view that the theatre is a "critical vision machine" (2008). The interruption disrupts the complacency with which we assume routine is all there is, and the flow of time is simply there—all the time.

³ For a more extensive, in-depth analysis of Theuws' works, see Ernst van Alphen (2014).



Figs. 7, 8, 9 Jeannette Christensen, *Woman Interrupted (Hans)* 1995, 2009, 2015



Figs. 10, 11 Jeannette Christensen, *WOMAN INTERRUPTED (Hans)*, video stills 2018



Figs. 12, 13 Jeannette Christensen, *WOMAN INTERRUPTED (Meili)*, video stills 2018

We see that the figure's body and attention are divided. Even though the face and the eyes are facing the viewer, the body and much of the attention are facing the sheet of notes, or perhaps the letter that, on a diegetic level, upon being delivered already interrupted the music. This dividedness raises the question of

the relationship between the body and attention. The woman is partly in her own time and also in a time that she shares with ours. In-between, the time of modernism has passed, of which Jonathan Crary (1999) has illuminated the interruptive quality. And as Ernst van Alphen has recently reminded us, the current time of near-permanent interruption, to invoke another paradox, remains connected to this (2017). In a sense, we can even claim that among other artists Vermeer, through his aesthetic that so powerfully interrupts our routine of perceiving stillness in the still image, may well have intuitively called for the invention of cinema, which occurred so much later.⁴

Christensen's acts of re-photographing the same models in the same poses decades later, after letting the sitters age and the polaroids lose their colours and sharpness, and even mold, thus making process—hence, time—part of the artwork; and then, of filming the still scene while making the moving image rivalling the stillness instead of the other way around; and back-projecting the resulting images in a face-to-face of a woman and a man, on suspended (“floating”) screens, with the viewer being invited to stand in-between and choose with whom to look at whom: all this is an act of creating a multiply-complicating art of interruption, with Vermeer, for our time.



Figs. 14-17 Mathieu Montanier as Don Quichotte, in *Tristes figures*, (in prep.), photos: Sonia Thurel, 2017

The video project *Don Quichotte: Tristes Figures*, under development by Mieke Bal and Mathieu Montanier, seems, at first sight, the opposite of Christensen's. Rather than intervening in stillness, interruption is here a new, madness-inducing routine. The poetics of Cervantes's novel consists of sprinkling events in which times are collapses; in which, for more temporal confusion, formerly is today (Davoine 2008). As was to be

⁴ I have made this claim for Flaubert (2017), and more recently, also for Frans Hals (2018). Both in very different ways experiment with cinematic devices, such as movement (Hals) and variations of close-up and long-shots (Flaubert). My point is not, of course, that these artists really “invented” the cinema, but that their art was so experimental in terms of temporality and movement that the search for the technology of cinema, which occurred later, became almost its “natural” consequence.

expected, this project includes a conception of time that does not obey chronology with its linearity and its assumed evolutionism, which suggests that things get better while clearly, they get worse. *El Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quichotte de la Mancha* (part I 1605; part II 1615) stands out in its intensity and creative expression of prolonged and reiterated hopelessness. Formerly, in deep history, things happened that still happen, or happen again, today. Like spectres, they cast their shadow over the present—that time frame that is ours when we perceive images (Peeren 2014). The severely traumatised main character demonstrates, for the benefit of us all and through yet another paradox, that time is both constantly halted and hectically continuing; disempowering the traumatized subject who, deprived of the routine of life, is unable to keep a grip on living-in-time. Everything that happens, interrupting, makes an event.

Not music making but reading is Don Quixote's primary transgression, defect, or seduction. Even the quietest—stillest—scene, the first scene of reading, shows a string of interruptions. Although reading is not usually seen as an action, especially not compared to the anti-hero's hectic adventures to come, here it is the primary scene consisting of (tiny) actions, as interruptions. Through tiny shock effects, he changes during reading, his facial expressions and body language displaying how he transforms from sane to mad. Without uttering a word, he enacts horror, relief, loneliness, and the desire to be heard; announcing the situations of the other pieces. The scene is not suggesting to limit this transformation to reading alone—the suggestion is, instead, that there is an impossibility to remain the same when one is surrounded by the snippets of cultural and political “noise.” This offers a counterpart as well as companion piece to Christensen's single interruption. For, there, too it is unclear whether the woman is deprived of her concentration or offered a contact, freeing her from the loneliness of domesticity.

An Aesthetics of Encounter: Time and the Senses

Another attempt at definition is to be checked here. Art does not equal aesthetics, but neither are the two domains unrelated. Art can lead to, and at its most effective, *will* (inevitably) lead to aesthetic experiences. What is the relationship? The answer necessarily lies in the participation of the senses, for that participation makes the work of art a potential aesthetic object, or rather, an occasion for an aesthetic *event*. This makes art—not the works but its function—a material practice, open to a Marxian materialism. To call interruption a quality of an aesthetic is assuming that the moment, act, or effect of interruption is sense-based, senses-affecting, and affecting the subject through the senses. The closest we can come to an understanding of aesthetic, again, not as a “thing” but as an event, act, or performance, is to consider that predominantly, the senses are engaged in aesthetic experience. This experience can most easily take place in public space, where people encounter one another in their relationship with art works or other objects that act. Hence the importance of museums and other spaces where art is put in a position to act, and people to inter-act. Those are public spaces, and at the same time, they interrupt all those routines mentioned above, suspending them for a stretch of time, chosen by the visitor.

From the early moments of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline, the founding view developed by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1717-1762) has been overruled by a (misconstrued) Kantian one, although Baumgarten had a strong influence on Kant (1724-1804). Misconstrued, because Kant's primary criterion, dis-interestedness, does not mean indifference as it has been taken to mean, but unbinding from material, practical interests in order to engage the aesthetic trigger more intensely. That unbinding does not make the aesthetic event less material; it just disentangles it from irrelevant other materialities. For Baumgarten, aesthetics is based on an experience of binding through the senses in public space. This is how Jill Bennett discussed it (2011; 2012). The verb *binding* contains a promise of connectivity; of an event of getting acquainted, cognitively as well as affectively, in the present. The role of the *senses* alludes to the pleasurable, intense, and reflection-inducing quality of the aesthetic experience; the feeling that one has enjoyed, learned from, been enriched by an event. The senses also make the interruption sense-able, touching, in that other meaning of moving, and thus make viewers feel the interruption, in their bodies. And *public space* is where the encounters happen. All these aspects connect aesthetics to a Marx-inspired but extended materialism.

This constantly occurring interruption of routine—hastily passing through public space on our way to work or home, or hanging out there by lack of work or home—is necessary if the social world is to be able to continue to be “in becoming” as a Deleuzian (counter-)ontology would have it, instead of stultifying and reifying in an oppressive yet illusory feeling of familiarity as monocultural and mono-temporal—in stillness. In this emphasis, Deleuze encounters the Marx of the (unfinished) *Grundrisse*, where he speaks of humanity’s striving “not to remain something ... [it] has become, but in the absolute movement of becoming” (488, qtd. in Harootunian 12). The discourse, here, is an instance of the temporal turbulence of anachronism; the content shows how prophetic Marx’s ideas can be seen to have been.

In his early (1964) book on Proust, Deleuze developed the aesthetic moment as an encounter. This conception is crucial for the concept I have developed elsewhere, of “migratory aesthetics”—a framework unrelated to, yet congenial with the one within which Deleuze theorised encounter as an aesthetic of unreflected, perhaps unconscious signs. With that concept, I meant to focus on the temporal discrepancies between social participants from different cultures, acknowledging “heterotemporality”—the different experiences of time according to everyday lives of work, unemployment, social security or the denial of it. Thus, co-curator and author Miguel Á. Hernández Navarro and I aimed to make time humane again. To connect Deleuze’s encounter with Baumgarten’s aesthetics, I emphasise that the encounter interrupts, takes place in time, and affects the senses. This entails a certain thematic specification, of which migratory aesthetics is one.

In the framework of Christensen’s project, this binding, sense-based aesthetic is given a gender aspect. The woman was doing something and got interrupted, as is so common in women’s lives. The subtle feminist aspect comes to the fore and raises the question of gender politics in Vermeer’s time. And lest we fall into the trap of a facile evolutionism, we must assess this in view of the non-linearity of time that the aesthetic of interruption entails, in complicity with preposterous history. For the Don Quixote project, the interruptions are primarily bound up with trauma. This entails a state, not of heterochrony, but of a-chrony; the incapacity to live (in) time. Such thematic accents both provide insight into the cultural meanings of the flow of time, punctuated, punctured, by interruptions. In other contexts, the hetero-temporality that results from interruption—the disruption of smooth, invisible time—has consequences for our understanding of the subtleties of the migratory culture we live in but fail to understand enough to engage with it in a positive, constructive, even exhilarating sense of encounter.⁵

In addition to silence and lack of movement, two other aspects of art in relation to aesthetics and its time, and the possibility to interrupt it—of the possibility, or not, of a *still* image—are memory and form. For these aspects, the best source is French philosopher Henri Bergson whose work is, through Deleuze, connected to baroque philosophers Leibniz and Spinoza, and the baroque aesthetics of Vermeer’s time. Duration is his key term. Bergson rejects the tendency to divide time up, to measure it as if it was a space. On form, Bergson wrote the following in his best-known and most directly relevant book, *Matter and Memory*: “... forms applicable to things cannot be entirely our own work ... if we give much to matter we probably receive something from it” (223). This statement binds the concept of form to the sensate experience in public space I have cited from Baumgarten as the key to aesthetics. The title of Bergson’s book seems a fitting description of Christensen’s work with time and its impact on matter in *WOMAN INTERRUPTED*. The memory of Vermeer’s painting, that utterly still work of art, as made dynamic through the notion of interruption, then through time in the four-centuries stretch, the relatively short-term effect of the decay of the materiality of polaroid, accompanied by the aging of the models and the style of their hair and dress, then made into a moving image, yet so slow that the movement cannot be perceived by the eye, or experienced by the body, but cannot be erased either. It seems as if this accumulative, hectic sentence reflects even in its syntax what is at stake.

⁵ Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten published his *Aesthetica* in 1750. There is still no accessible English publication of this influential treatise. See Hlobil for an informative review (2009). Deleuze’s early Proust book (1964) was published in English in 1972; here cited from the 2000 edition. On the strongly visual aesthetic of Proust’s writing, specifically his aesthetic of the snapshot, see Bal (1997). On the concept of migratory aesthetics, see Bal & Hernández Navarro (2008); for an overview, Hernández Navarro (2014).

Time and the Trace

Yet another manner and medium in which temporality is the tool for activation is the most recent work by Colombian artist Doris Salcedo, on show for the first time in 2017-18 in the Palacio de Cristal in Madrid. Movement, of the smallest, subtlest kind, trembles through an immense plaza consisting of large slabs, in sand colour, with a grainy surface, designed to resist the absorption of water. Nearly effaced names are written on them, in sand. Other names overwrite these, in shallow relief engraved in the slabs. Suddenly, a shiny drop of water appears, rolling towards the relief; then more, until the letters of the name are filled, and the water becomes a convex shiny surface, surmounting the flatness of the slabs. After a few minutes, the water letters start to tremble; then they disappear. Appearance and disappearance: the names keep moving, as physical instability, and as emotional effect, producing turmoil. The water names overwrite the sand names, which remain as a palimpsest, a trace of forgotten people.



Fig. 18 Doris Salcedo, *PALIMPESTO* 2017, Madrid, Museo Reina Sofía, Palacio de Cristal (detail). © White Cube, photographer Patrizia Tocci

Salcedo, whose art has been devoted from the beginning in the 1980s to counter the oblivion of violence and the violence of oblivion, has made, over five years and with a team of twenty, the most brilliant political art installation I have ever seen. It is a performative work that keeps moving and changing. And inviting the visitor to walk on it—there is no other space for us—it includes the public in the performance, and binds them, through the senses, to the material fact of death. Every step, one has to decide whether to avoid stepping on the names or, in what seems to me a callous indifference, walk on top of them. The possibility of indifference also hits a nerve, since the names form a recollection of and homage to the innumerable victims of European indifference who drowned in the Mediterranean Sea.

This is not a “theme”; the work is not “about” this acutely political issue. Salcedo does not represent the violence she invokes, nor the oblivion she counters. Although her work is never abstract in the traditional sense, it never proclaims political opinions either, in the loud voice of so much art that calls itself political. Her work “deconstructs,” in line with Derrida and then Deleuze, the binary opposition between abstraction and figuration. The objects in her earlier work are concrete “things”—stacked shirts, pieces of furniture—but they signify on a very different level, deploying affect and subtle light to touch their viewers. Without ever stating a “theme” the work concerns, and is committed to, a political cause. In *Palimpsesto*, the issue at stake is the most tragic, over-visible due to the media, yet too well-known to avoid becoming invisible, of the world in our time. Too much sand and too little water push people to embark on the precarious boats of

human traffickers, only to perish in too much water. Sand and water: they are part of the basic conditions that preclude survival, so that people cannot stay where they were born and would like to have stayed if only they had the merest chance to survive the negative dialectic of too much (sand), too little (drinkable water), too much (sea water).

An artwork can hardly be more *contemporary*—happening in our time, today. And it is devoted to that tragedy of ongoing violence we all, in Europe, continue to condone. The names tell us that the drowned are not an anonymous mass but an enormous group of individuals, whose lives matter—each of them as human as we all are or pretend to be. Note the difference, in English, between “human” and “humane.” *Palimpsesto* shows the cultural necessity yet difficulty to mourn, to grieve for unknown dead; a protest against the violence of indifference and of the acceptance, and even a certain stimulation of the murderous violence by governments. She calls on the world’s population to acknowledge the violence committed by all governments, and in this case, especially the European ones. A protest that is at the same time an homage to each of those persons, now named by their names. That double effect, of soliciting indignation and grief, of beauty and pain, is unspeakable. As Ludwig Wittgenstein stated at the end of the *Tractatus*, of what one cannot speak, one must keep silent. But later, he retracted or modified that statement, when he said that of what one cannot speak, one must show. This is why I titled my 2010 book on Salcedo’s art after Wittgenstein’s statement.



Fig. 19 Doris Salcedo, *PALIMPSESTO* 2017, Madrid, Museo Reina Sofía, Palacio de Cristal (long view, detail). © White Cube, photographer Patrizia Tocci

The surface of this work covers the entirety of the Art Nouveau glass building of the Palacio de Cristal, of 1.065 square meters. Each of the 220 slabs is 4.53 x 1.29 meters and weights 980 kilos. The temporality of appearance and disappearance of the water has a strong impact. It makes the visitor want to stay, to see the vanishing water reappear, and thus witness the act of witnessing that this work constitutes and performs—becoming a co-witness. One cannot write on water, and sand will not stay in place. But the artist demonstrates that one can write *with* water, and *with* sand. There is also a play with chronology. The names written in sand belong to victims of European indifference who died before the year 2000; the names written with water, to those who died after 2000. Only a fraction of the individuals who died could find a place in this enormous work. But that each of them counts is clear. As clear as the brilliant drops of water. The name is what distinguishes one human being from another; it is the label of her uniqueness. Against the abjection of anonymous death, the brilliance of the water dignifies the persons named. The transparency and the evaporation of the water with which the names are written, constitute a subtle metaphor of the fragility of human existence, and in these cases, of the lives cut off too early.



Fig. 20 Doris Salcedo, *PALIMPESTO* 2017, Madrid, Museo Reina Sofía, Palacio de Cristal (detail: precious stones) © White Cube, photographer Patrizia Tocci

A complex mechanism underneath the slabs pushes the water up, drop by drop, to the surface. Through the tiniest hole in the stone, between the minuscule pebbles each drop “walks” towards the sculpted letters. When the drops merge and take leave from their brilliant appearance where the sun makes them look like precious stones, we realize we must resist that comparison because nothing stays stable and the material is humble. Instead of jewels, we see tears; the earth is crying. This weeping of the stone stands in for the absent tears of all of us, who shake off the everyday spectacle of deaths shown, in half a minute, on television. Instead, in Salcedo’s installation, one is captivated enough to spend a long time *with* the dead. While waiting for the vanished water to return, we can and must take the time to reflect on the political issue so powerfully made tangible, due to the absence of representation. Thus, as in all of Salcedo’s art, grief is brought together with at least a minimal effort to suggest that we can, indeed must break the cycle of silenced violence. The tool: memory and (its) time.

Memory is usually understood as a *cultural* phenomenon as well as an *individual* and *social* one. Although the term “cultural memory” has been quite popular for a few decades now, my assumption is that these three “kinds” of memory cannot be separated. All memories have an individual, a social and a cultural aspect. This is only logical since the subjects that remember are also participants in all three of these domains. Materially speaking, the past is according to Harootunian’s rendering of Marx’s conception of

time, “depositing in every present its residual traces that embodied untimely temporalities.” Traces is what Salcedo makes. Moreover, memories have a three-partite temporality. Memory is a connection between the three times of human temporal awareness: the past, in which things happened that the memory engages – or not; the present, in which the act of memorizing takes place and into which the remembered content is retrieved; and the future, which will be influenced by what the subjects in the present, together and embedded in their cultural environment, remember and do with those memories. The idea of “cultural memory” proposes a focus that brings forward political aspects, and the plurality of the subjects involved. In the installation, no visitor is alone. The fact of being together in a (social) space is an important aspect of the experience; while developing the thoughts that the work solicits, one is aware of being *with* those others as well as with the dead.⁶



Fig. 21 Doris Salcedo, PALIMPESTO 2017 (in the space)

Salcedo’s work addresses cultural memory in its negativity, its failure, and seeks to find hints of solutions. Failure of memory is not so much *forgetting*, a very useful concept we should not “forget” when considering memory; and one which Aleida Assmann, in her book *Formen des Vergessen*, usefully sums up in the cover text as “a filter, as a weapon and as a prerequisite for the creation of new things.” Instead, Salcedo’s focus is on *actively*, albeit not necessarily purposely *repressing* or, in a different view, *disassociating*—in other words, *dis-remembering*, as the title of a 2015 work calls it, on the one hand; or willfully, in what can even go as far as bad faith, *distorting* potentially helpful memories on the other, as *mis-remembering*. Both are devastating, wasteful, missed opportunities for the present and future. Without moralising, Salcedo counters these failures.⁷

These two failures of memory take shape in the cultural imagination in and with which, humans exist. The *human figure* constitutes the primary subject matter of figurative literature and art, although by no means exclusively. In literature, especially narrative, the human figure takes on the propulsion of narrative thrust. As agent or patient, it carries the action that is the motor of the plot. Here, this figure is named

⁶ On cultural memory, see Bal, Mieke, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer (eds.) 1999.

⁷ On the usefulness of forgetting, see Assmann (2015).

character. Both figure and character can be seen as figurations: *figurative* in that they embody ideas shaped in forms, and *figures* of anthropomorphic appearance that are, do, and appear. It is the convergence of figure and character in their guise of figurations that projects the terms in which we tend to analyse art. I see in the convergence between art and its analysis the work of “the anthropomorphic imagination.” With this newly-coined and somewhat clumsy term, I mean a tendency to approach cultural artifacts through the lens or frame of frequently unacknowledged anthropomorphic concepts. The tools of analysis are thus made congruent to the objects.

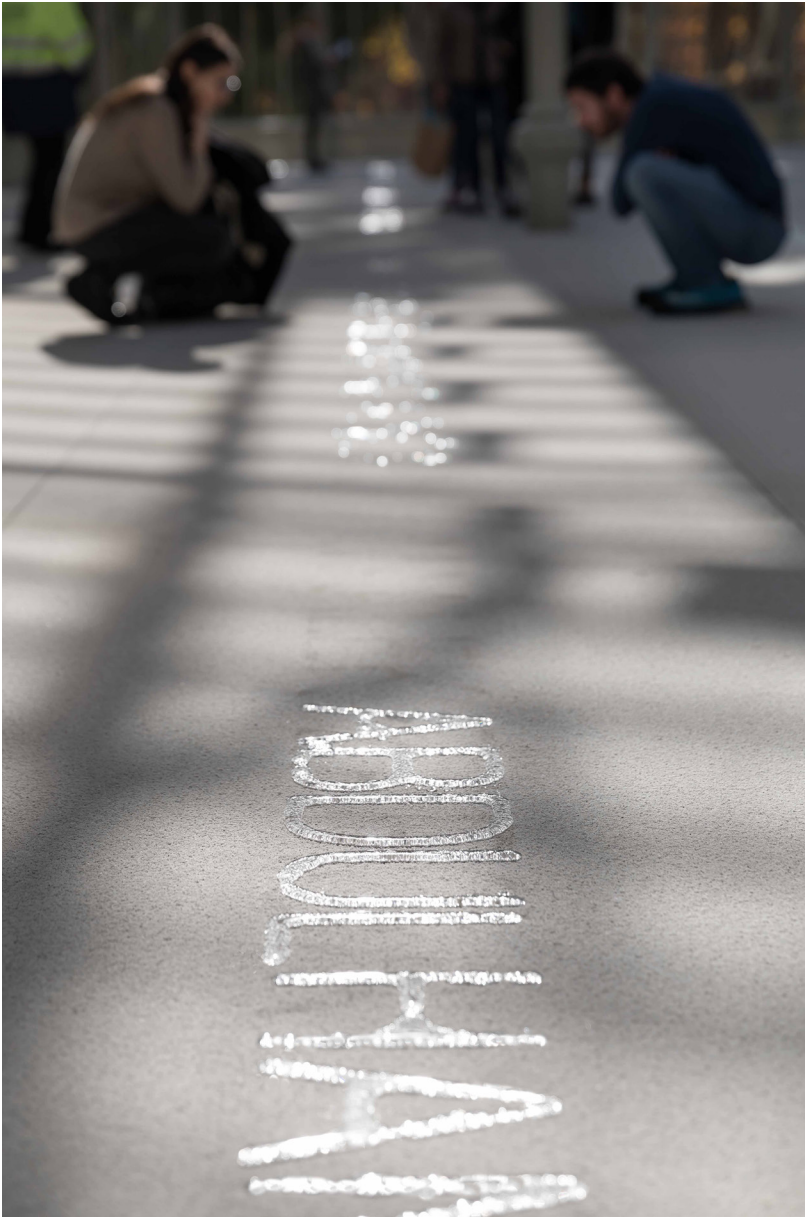


Fig. 22 Doris Salcedo, PALIMPSESTO 2017 (detail, Ghosts)

This telescoping of object and analysis produces a number of tendencies, of which I point out a few of the problematic ones. One such tendency is the conflation of artwork and the maker’s *intention*. Another is the *unification* of the artwork, to resemble a unified human being anxious to hold himself together. A third tendency is the “*spiritualization*,” the de-materialisation or dis-embodiment of art, art-making, and viewing or reading. These three tendencies produce instances of failures of memory. It is in countering

these tendency that Salcedo's work yields to the victims in need of remembrance. While recognisable for their subtlety and that intricate combination of formal beauty with affective bleakness, her works are impossible to "sign." They also pluralise the human beings they bring back to memory, thus precluding the anxious unification. And they are profoundly material. The material above called "humble" of sand and water make any spiritualizing tendency to disembody them, futile. And while the work is so large as to cover an entire museal space, every name, every letter, every drop and every pebble count as recollection of every human being destroyed by violence. To realise, feel, and hence, remember this is the *work* of art, which thus becomes a more serious, effective, and stronger utterance than any news item or political debate can effectuate.

The trace, such as the names written in sand in *Palimpsest*, becomes a spectre when we take time itself into account. And time is the motor of memory, as well as of forgetting, disremembering, misremembering. When we think of time, we cannot ignore history, but I am under the impact of the contemporaneity of this artwork, hence, of the history of the present. There, the plurality of experiences of time leads to heterochrony. One of the durational differences in the various experiences of time is the duration of the look. The Deleuzian "crystal image," that tangled unit of an actual image and its virtual image where we see the sprouting of moments of time through the various facets of the crystal, as if doubled: all these temporal forms are activated in the contemporary crystal of this multi-tentacled artwork. Salcedo has made an exemplary performative work, that keeps moving and changing. Salcedo de-naturalises our condoning of what happens, while bringing it so close that indifference can hardly be sustained. Time, in these artworks, is inseparable from space. The political effectivity lies in that bind.⁸

Art Moves: A Feeling for Change

For the concept of psychic space, the best source is Kaja Silverman's theory of the formation of subjectivity and the place of the body therein. She argues that

. . . one's apprehension of self is *keyed* both to a visual image or constellation of visual images, and to certain bodily feelings, whose determinant is less physiological than social. (*The Threshold of the Visible World* 14; emphasis added)

This statement explains how the relationship between the subject as individual and the culturally normative images we interact with on an everyday basis in the social and political domain is bodily without being "innate" or anatomically determined. This relationship is both materially solid and subject to change. Political artworks perform an insistent interrogation of the indexical relationship between image and viewer on the basis of cultural memories and myths mixed with contemporary realities.

In Silverman's statement, the issue is feeling: how the subject *feels* his or her position in space. This was also the verb Bergson chose to describe space and its "extensivity," when he countered, in his later book *Time and Free Will*, the idea of Renaissance perspective as a measurable and centralised certainty. This bring us back to Theuws's installations. Instead, our sense of space develops as a feeling with us *in the middle* of it, what Bergson calls a "natural feeling" (*Key Writings* 58). "Feeling" is the threshold of body and subjectivity in interaction with the outside world. Bergson insists on the materiality of memory, or rather, the interaction between both, as is expressed in the title, *Matière et mémoire* (*Matter and Memory*). The external images touch the subject's existence, which is experienced as bodily so that they become locked together; this is how the subject is locked into the external world. In the musical sense of the word "key," the external images and the body are adapted, harmonised; one is set into the tonality of the other. But the word "to key to" can also be understood through the notion of code, the key to or ground of understanding, comprehending, communicating between individual subjects and a culture. Silverman uses the felicitous term "postural function" to refer to this position of the "keyed" subject. The emphasis on the body pose between times—Vermeer's and ours, as well as between the domestic occupation and the contact with the

⁸ Since movement is key to *Palimpsesto*, I made a short documentary video on this, her most recent work. See <https://vimeo.com/239840671> for this.

outside world—in *WOMAN INTERRUPTED* can be understood socially as a postural function. In order to grasp the consequences of this view of space as image, and *vice versa*, our experience of space is best summed up as *deictic*. This means that the subject can only see the images-in-space in relation to her own self, body and mind together.

In this view, the image is moving by definition, whether still or actually moving or both, as in Christensen's and Theuws's video work. In developing the thesis that perception is not a construction but a selection the subject makes, Bergson presents as the criterion for selection that the object perceived should be "useful" in view of the subject's own interests. Embodied perception activates the seeing subject to feel, participate, and share. Artworks as acts that appeal to recognition as well as to the surprise of innovation are therefore Bergsonian acts; acts of the body and for the body. There lies their potential political effect. In what Bergson wrote at the end of this book, "contracting them into a single intuition," he expressed the bond between them-then and us-now. It also explains why Bergson insisted on the indivisibility of duration in our experience of time, but also that time cannot be linear. For this Bergsonian reason, politically relevant art requires *durational looking*. Difficulty, privilege: the awareness of that combination and the delicacy of the act of looking compel respect for duration.

The experience of space is bound up with multi-temporality, leading to heterochronic experiences. Thus, we unlearn the false security of the colonising gaze that surveys the field of vision as an experience of looking that ignores the viewer's body. The tradition of linear perspective and its scientific underpinning has naturalised that security. In this respect, perspective is complicit with the naturalisation of the colonising gaze. The image is in movement by definition. It is material because the bodily action of mobilising the image is material. This is what the slowed-down interruption of the Vermeer-turned-contemporary demonstrates in a most "touching," aesthetic manner; as an aesthetic of interruption. Hence, this work proves, *all images, including "still" ones, move*. This moving quality is no more limited to figurative images than to any medium. Even radically abstract and emphatically still paintings move. This leaves the question of the political effect of images, their potential to *move* us to action.

In 1907, Bergson described the type of movement that is both emotional and social and thereby becomes political. It occurs when understanding and action are imbricated. This Bergsonian movement, which produces *readiness to act*, lies at the heart of the political potential of the image, provided it works together with the other forms of movement. If we consider the art form a concrete instance of the multiply-moving image, then video installation can create the *literal* embodiment of this potential in a *fictional* space that—with the help of the viewer—can become a political, democratic space. Video installation can help grasp how art in general, including still images, can be eminently operative for political effect through its fundamentally moving quality. And the trembling water of *Palimpsesto* demonstrates that no medium or form can limit what art's temporality, thus, can do to push our "absolute movement of becoming" forward, to recall Marx's pre-figurative words. Time, both as sequentiality and as pace, is art's primary tool.

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