

***IN THE FOREGROUND:
CONVERSATIONS ON ART & WRITING***

A podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP)

**“CAN YOU SHOW THINKING?”:
MIEKE BAL ON FILM & WRITING**

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Transcript

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Welcome to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art & Writing*. I am Caro Fowler, your host and Director of the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts. In this series of conversations, I talk with art historians and artists about what it means to write history and make art, and the ways in which making informs how we create not only our world, but also ourselves.

In this episode of *In the Foreground*, I speak with Mieke Bal, cultural theorist, critic, and video artist. Mieke's work explores the intersection between art history and the cinematic. And in our conversation today, we discuss what originally drew her to filmmaking, and how for her writing, cinema, and exhibitions represent distinct modes of thinking and critical practice.

Mieke Bal

I was really interested in the question: Can you show thinking? And if so, can we make something of the social aspect of it?

Caro Fowler

Thank you so much for joining us today Mieke.

Mieke Bal

My pleasure. It's lovely. I love the Clark so it's nice to be in this contact.

Caro Fowler

When you first came to the Clark as a fellow [it was] with our current director Olivier Meslay, is that correct? I don't know if you remember, but you taught him how to make lasagna.

Mieke Bal

[Laughs] oh god, he's still on that?

Caro Fowler

At the beginning of every semester, he makes a lasagna dinner for all of the fellows, and he talks about Mieke Bal's lasagna [laughs].

Mieke Bal

It was so simple, a very simple recipe [laughs].

Caro Fowler

I know that you take teaching very seriously, and it appears often in your scholarship. And I know you've been a really important teacher for so many thinkers. And I'm curious: who was the teacher who was fundamental for your intellectual development? Was there a professor or seminar that really impacted you, and changed the way that you thought?

Mieke Bal

Yes, I would say not just one. But it was the way of teaching that inspired me. I remember there was a professor of medieval literature, and I wasn't interested in the Middle Ages, but I went to his class, which was an early morning class, simply because he was so inspiring in the way he was teaching and [his] enthusiasm. This was Paul Zumthor, a Swiss francophone professor who has become quite famous. And actually later in life we became friends when he was in Canada. I went to see him when I was there. And so we had a nice rapport, but that's the later phase. When I was a student, I was just a student. But I was just at his lips, listening to every word he said. And he had this quick writing, and he told us, don't bother with accents when you are writing because that's a waste of your time. And for me, that was amazing for a French speaker to say that. He would go on the blackboard, and then when the board was finished, he would almost go on on the wall. But he was so enthusiastic, and the same in a very different way, there was a teacher of French literature, more 16th century and 20th century, so older and modern. Her name was Francois [inaudible], and she was French. And I always had the sense that the people who were French speakers really was a bonus for me. I love the sound of that language. And she

was also very inspiring, and very quick thinking on her feet. And for me, that was also a stimulating thing.

Caro Fowler

What was your household like growing up? Was art prioritized? Did you go to museums?

Mieke Bal

Well, no, not really. And [during] puberty it became something like once a year. My parents had nine children. I was the third. And it was not easy for them financially and in terms of care and all that. But once a year, they took us to Amsterdam, and we went to the Rijksmuseum. And that was something that I remember very vividly, but maybe just because later I thought, "Why am I so adamant about that discourse of realism that I can't stand?" Well, my mother would take me to a still life and say, "Look, you even see the pores in that lemon peel is plastic," and I thought, "Well, it's a beautiful painting. How about the colors? And how about the composition?" I didn't have those words. But I thought she was beside the point. My older sister who was completely interested in one of the teachers of Dutch literature made me read literature and love literature. And so that was something, but it wasn't clear-cut. It wasn't like I was raised to be a scholar, especially not an art scholar, which I'm not by the way, as you hope we know.

Caro Fowler

You've written really beautifully about the ways in which exhibitions themselves are an embodied experience, and they tell a narrative, and that we must think of them not only as a presentation of images, but the ways in which they form arguments that aren't only intellectual, but also affective. What exhibitions first articulated this for you or made this really felt for you, not only in your mind, but also in the ways in which you experience the physical space?

Mieke Bal

Well, I do remember--this is not even an art exhibition--I went to an exhibition in the New York Museum of Natural History. I don't remember even why I went there, but I just went, and I was both really interested and grabbed by it, but also upset by certain captions and certain things. And that's when it became the first chapter in my book *Double Exposures*. That was, for me, an eye opener in the manipulations and the way exhibitions are really part of the art making. And then positive examples: in Rome, I had a really lovely encounter, so to speak, with Bernini and the--I don't remember the name of the famous museum. I loved that, and I there was one in London on Rembrandt's women, [which] I turned into women's Rembrandt in my article about it because I didn't like to [inaudible] [both laugh]. I've seen several exhibitions that put me in the thinking, and I've also curated some. And that was also a very formative experience. First a video exhibition in four different countries, but starting in Spain with a Spanish colleague who is also a former Clark fellow, Miguel Hernandez-Navarro. The climactic experience was in the Munch Museum in 2016-17 when I got the opportunity--I can still not get over it. I got this email, and two lines: "Dear Mieke Bal, would you like to curate an exhibition from our collection? And include your video installation *Madame Be*? Sincerely, the Munch Museum Department of Collections and Exhibitions?" What should I say? "Sure, I have to think?" So I said yes, yes, yes. And it was incredible. It was a wonderful experience. And there I really learned about exhibiting art, and about the fictional unity of a corpus of artworks. So I made that actually the theme of the exhibition. It was called "Emma & Edvard," and Edvard was Munch. And Munch has a lot of self-portraits, so I pretended that I was creating life stories of these two characters. But Munch became a fictional character, just as Emma. And so this was incredibly wonderful.

Caro Fowler

When did you start working in film? Was that about 10 years ago?

Mieke Bal

I was making films in 2002.

Caro Fowler

2002. So almost 20 years you've been working in film.

Mieke Bal

It's not even two decades. Again, I think I learned that the secret of my work is that I learn from the experience and the experiments. So for filmmaking I just did it because there was this person who was my neighbor, and he was being harassed by the police, and I decided to buy a little video camera, put it on a tripod and said, "Tell your story." It was as simple as that. And that became a very serious film. Actually, I still love that film, because my heart was in it. It's in all my films, but this was the first time I experienced that. And also because it was a way of getting to know the culture of others (the foreigners, the immigrants) from the inside. I was a guest in their home, and I got friendly with the parents and the sister and the brother of the bride. It was a formative experience, and it's a friendship for life.

Caro Fowler

You've talked about film as the best media for the examination of the contemporary. Could you expand on that a little bit?

Mieke Bal

Because you make live images of live situations, that is something that you can never get out of books. For example, this whole project on the mothers of migrants, I did nothing in the library about the mothers of migrants--and these poor women lose their child to immigration that's insecure, they don't know if they will get a green card, they don't know if they will ever see them again--and I tell the story in an intimate setting. And that was a beautiful project [with] insights that even they hadn't articulated. All these women--we had 17 of these films--all said, "I'm so grateful that you let me tell the story because I had never told it, and I wouldn't even have thought it in this way." Now, even for them it is a revealing tool. And I thought that was fantastic. That's of course a documentary side. For the, let's say, the larger cultural side--but that was way before I started to make films--I did this book called *Quoting Caravaggio*: A

Preposterous History. It's not your question, but an aspect of me and my work is that when I get criticized, which I get a lot, I say "thank you." And I think about it, and I answer, and that's my next book. I have a new book on Rembrandt, and people say, "Oh, it's ahistorical," and the art historians were very upset. And then I started to develop a project about contemporary art and historical art in dialogue. And that's how I came by that concept of Picasso's history that has then been taken over as anachronism. But I think it was really a more interesting one, the one that I came up with, and I was there, but never mind. That's how it goes. It's not only that you need to know ancient art, old art, to understand contemporary art. But the opposite is also the case. Actually Svetlana Alpers went the other direction with her book on Tiepolo with Baxandall. She also said something like that. But I developed that in detail in the Caravaggio and the contemporaries. And so that was also before I started to make films. And then of course with the filmmaking there was the issue: there's always multiple origins. I didn't have the money to do a decent historical film because that's very expensive.

Caro Fowler

Of course.

Mieke Bal

And so I had to be creative. And thank heavens I am creative enough to be able to do that, and to come up with a reason behind all those interventions in the historical [both laugh]. So it was not only the best tool to understand the contemporary, but out of the need to come up with something creative, I also started to understand the interaction, the dialogue between art making and thinking. I'm going to write a book on this whole body of films, and that will be from image thinking to thought images.

Caro Fowler

I'm curious about how or if your film on Descartes changed anything about your understanding of his philosophy. I feel like in the early modern period Descartes is such a major thinker for art historians, and his writing on optics has been

strongly appropriated by art historians of the early modern period, and he's been a really powerful figure for thinking through ideas of diagrams and printmaking. And I'm curious if making a film about Descartes and thinking about vision in that way changed the ways that you think about his writing or his philosophical impact on us today.

Mieke Bal

Well, I have to say that the reason I made the film, the impetus, the compelling moment was when I read again and again and again that we are all post-Cartesian and that Descartes is this positivist or positivist, but hyper rationalist, and nothing is right about him. Now we have the body and soul together, and he separated them. And I thought, it doesn't sound plausible that so many people would trash him without any decent argumentation. And I started to study the works, not the written work. So I was never really interested in his philosophy and his theory of optics and all that. I've never really studied that. I just read the school that I may [inaudible] but that's all. And then I started to find him a very interesting thinker, because I noticed that actually it's not he that is a rationalist or the hyper-rationalist. He's constantly rubbing against the grain of dogma. And that's it. He says that. But that rubbing against the grain is more interesting for me than the resulting thoughts. And so I started to think that I would like to make a film in which that thinking itself is made audio-visible. And that is something that's not easily done. There are films on Wittgenstein, and now on certain philosophers who all have biographies. And I didn't write a biography. What you said later on in your questions about the Damisch film is that the Descartes one was really a portrait of a church man, a lonely man, someone who was socially clumsy, who did a lot of things socially, not handy, not smooth. He wasn't good at that. But he became still the most important philosopher of early modernity. And so how did he do it? And I got really interested in his connections to other people. I was really interested in the question, "Can you show thinking? And if so, can we make something of the social aspect of it?" Because we all [inaudible] this man sitting in the armchair and study[ing] alone, and Descartes was shy and wanted to get out. He moved every three months because he was scared. He was a little crazy. He was mad as a hatter. I got

interested in: "How do you do that? How do you show the social side of thinking?" And I did that. And again, I had to be creative, also for low budget reasons. So I did something with childhood, and I did something with early adulthood, but then especially the meeting with Queen Christina. And it became a double portrait because I'm not interested at all in biography. I had to do a biography. I didn't want to do a biography. So I made it a double portrait of two people who are equally tortured by childhood trauma, and therefore equally difficult socially. And then things happened, and that's how it goes. So his theory of optics, I haven't even given that much thought specifically. Scientists have developed their own thing. That's fine. But I'm interested in how that thinking happens.

Caro Fowler

But that's beautiful. And in many ways that seems so true to Descartes because what are his meditations but really an examination of thinking and the thinking mind and then the responses that his work engendered in writing with his contemporaries and the dialogue that was between all of them? I mean, I could not agree more in the ways in which Descartes' own writings and thinking is so different than the Cartesianisms that followed afterwards. He profoundly wanted to be accepted by the Jesuits. He was devastated that they renounced his work.

Mieke Bal

He was erased at the [inaudible] by Jesuits. But of course, he was too radical in what he did. So this whole idea of the separation of body and mind, it's the Catholic dogma, and he tried and tried to reconcile that with his rationalism, but to no avail. He didn't manage it. And that is a beautiful book on the passion of the soul. And how can the soul have passions? That's the first question. He was really a very important role model, I would say, for thinkers. If people only knew how socially embedded that was. And he was even in a sort of feminist discussion with Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia who was challenging him: "For you, that's easy to say. But you are a man." It spoke to him, but he didn't become a feminist of course. But he had a sensitivity to her objections.

Caro Fowler

Yeah, I think that's true. Well, so many of your subjects: Rembrandt, Descartes, and migrants--I lived in Amsterdam for four years, and the question of immigration and migrants is, I think because the country is so small, very palpable there. And actually you wrote a beautiful article on Zwarte Piet that I thought was one of the most considered reflections on that very strange Dutch tradition that I've read. But I'm curious, the Netherlands is so famous for its specific geography: its flatness, its relationship to the sea, the long history of the Netherlands, the deep prevalence of Rembrandt everywhere. How did the specific geography and intellectual landscape of the Netherlands impact you as a scholar?

Mieke Bal

I have been thinking about that question, and I'm not sure if there was so much of an impact. Of course, you are born where you are born and raised--and I was sitting on the back of my father's bicycle to go to the seaside in the summer, and I have these memories, and the memory of the Watersnood in '53. My uncle was a helicopter pilot saving people from the roofs when I was [inaudible], and so that was a strong event in my life. In my scholarly work I've always felt very confined in the Netherlands. There was a lot of resistance against my work, a lot also in the literary circles. I wasn't quite [right]. I'm not a good enough lady. I wasn't wearing business suits and pearl necklaces. And then my theories were similarly not quite as they should be. I was polemical. I criticized big masters. And so I got a lot of resistance until I moved to Rochester, which was for me [inaudible], difficult as it was to be away from my family and all that. But it was a big transition in that the intellectual climate is much more open, [and] the country is bigger of course. From the beginning I had a sense that in the US people appreciated thinking, and I had colleagues with whom I could spar and discuss and think. In the Netherlands there was always a tone of anger in the reactions to my work, and that has been going on quite a long time basically until I moved, and then when I came back, it was a little better. It was a lot better. I

came back as a full professor. I came back through the front door, and that was a different situation.

Caro Fowler

Did it drive you to want to work more or write differently? There's a way in which I find we put so much of ourselves into our scholarship, and it demands such a commitment that it's so difficult, and it requires mental gymnastics and conditioning sometimes to handle the criticism.

Mieke Bal

What has always saved me is that quite early I had echoes to my work abroad in France, and part of that is that I'm a good polemicist. So I criticized [Gerard] Genette, who was the master of narratology. And my first book on narratology was really taking on his work, pushing it further, and also that includes criticism. And so Genette invited me in his seminar in Paris, and he didn't know the polemicist I am, so I wanted debate. Gloriously, I'm excited by the work, because you say it's difficult to do, but it's also very exciting. And I've always in the end enjoyed doing it. And I love to write, and I write pretty fast, and I don't a lot of problems that other people have. So I was a little less vulnerable than most. It goes back to the question about the Netherlands. When I started to work Rembrandt [it was] the moment I moved to Rochester. Never before. And there was something there.

Caro Fowler

Oh really? That's so interesting. Wow.

Mieke Bal

I think it is a coincidence. My partner said, "Oh, you should look at these Rembrandt etchings for the cover on your book on the Bible." I don't know if you know, but I have a whole body of work on the Bible. I needed an image for the cover. And that was the starting point. I thought the image was so crazy. I said, "That's not possible. Did he really do this?" And that was the starting point for my work on Rembrandt.

Caro Fowler

Yeah, but it does seem that both Rembrandt and Caravaggio--Caravaggio in art history surveys is often taught as one of the first artists in the history of Baroque painting or a turn in art history, and a turn in painting styles, and obviously Rembrandt is a Baroque figure. So it does seem that [in] Baroque painting, as problematic as that category might be, these two artists are part of a tradition that has been very powerful for you to think with. And they're both artists who play with and who really rethink narrative, which is obviously a very important question for you and construct. Why do you think--many people have speculated on this, but also I think sometimes people take it for granted--Baroque painting, using that term, has been so philosophically and theoretically important for people outside of art history and outside of visual culture disciplines? The Baroque is perhaps, much more so than the Renaissance, a category of painting that is really deeply engaged with philosophically.

Mieke Bal

Yeah. I think that you answered your own question. I think it is more philosophical than the Renaissance, although I have friends who work on things like that, but they're not here.

Caro Fowler

[Laughs]

Mieke Bal

I think that there is--and you also mentioned narrative--the issue as a problem of negativity of painting, and how to get beyond the simplistic "this happens here," and "that's the history painting as the model." And I think Caravaggio is particularly interesting for that. What I try to figure out in the Caravaggio book was to go back to the take I had had on Rembrandt as contemporary now, Rembrandt now, Caravaggio now. And what is it that we can get out of that work that is not the historical background, the commissions, the sponsorships, all that? It's all very important, and I'm not looking down on historical research at

all. But for me, that was not what excited me. My lifelong obsession is with narrative, but also how to overcome it, what to do with it, how to change it. And I would never accept that a painting is treated as an illustration of a story. I think in the Munch experience, when I wrote the book for the Munch exhibition, I came upon a painting that I had discussed in the Rembrandt book of the Last Supper. And I started to theorize more the concept of syntactic iconography, which is different from the iconography that translates one thing into a meaning, like "the fly or the flowers stand for death and decay." And so what it means isn't feasible. And I wanted to show how the syntax of the painting itself creates the meaning. I don't know if that's specific to the Baroque because I don't have a general knowledge of all art. But it is very specific in the cases of Rembrandt and Caravaggio. Thinking beyond the still image and beyond the narrative, how can you reconcile those two? That's, I think, why they are intriguing for a lot of people.

Caro Fowler

Yeah. Well, I loved in your film on Hubert Damisch when I saw Michael Anne Holly featured. It warmed my heart, and I realized that that film was based on the Clark seminar, and it was lovely to hear her voice in one of the questions. And I would argue it's a kind of portrait, although I don't know if that's what you think of it. I love the opening with the shot of the fromage. I feel like there's great humor in that still life of cheese.

Mieke Bal

What was the opening?

Caro Fowler

In the opening film there's a shot of cheese, kind of a still life of cheese, but it's also kind of humorous because it captures the food and consumption that happens in these intellectual settings [both laugh]. But how did you think about that? Did you think of that as a kind of intellectual portrait? Or are there other people who you would like to make similar films of in that genre?

Mieke Bal

That's a great question. I had no idea what I was doing. What happened is Michael [Ann] Holly had organized the seminar in the south of France and had invited me, and I knew that Hubert and his wife Teri [Wehn-Damisch] were going to go. And I knew that Teri, who is a great documentary maker on art (you should look at her films), was collecting footage of her husband because he was really getting on. He was getting old, and we knew it wasn't going to be much longer that he could do these things. And so I took my video camera along and I said, "Teri, would you like me to make some footage that you can use so that you don't have that burden on you the whole week to have to film? I can do some and you do some." And so that's how we did it. But then I had so much that she said--I wanted to give it to her--and she said, "Well, you make the film. It's your film. Why don't you make a film?" And I thought "My God, a film about Damisch? How do I do that?" So I had no idea what I was filming [and] that this was going to be filmed. My creativity and my academic rigorous mind come together when I have that stuff and I have to do something. It's out of need. I have to do it. So I did it. When I saw the footage, and I heard what he was saying, I thought "It's about Damisch thinking." And this was before the Descartes film. And it was probably preparation for the Descartes film because there the image is really a portrait. It's an individual portrait or a personal portrait. And with Damisch, it turned out yes, I can see that it would be something like an intellectual portrait. It's certainly not a life history--even not of that week. It's really his thinking aloud as the title is. My partner--among the things that I've been lucky in is that I got together with him, and for almost 14 years I've had a sparring partner, a critic, someone to bounce ideas off of all the time, and of course mutually. And that has been fantastic. I'm never going to get to raise the money for this, but if I was ever going to do something like between the Damisch and the Descartes, I would like to do something about the interaction between him and me. That would be an interesting thing. But anyway, so he would be worth doing one. And then I was also thinking, I am very interested in some artists who are thinkers, because it's not only as an academic [that] I became an artist. It just happened. But there are also artists who are thinkers. And I would like to do that. And of course, my favorites would be Marlene Dumas, Nalini

Malani, Doris Salcedo, Ann Veronica Janssens. I have these women that I've written about that I would find worth doing one.

Caro Fowler

Well, thank so much for joining me today Mieke. It was really lovely talking to you and hearing your thoughts, and perhaps the podcast is itself a form of thinking.

Mieke Bal

Warm regards to Olivier and Laure, and to all the friends at the Clark.

Caro Fowler

Oh, I will for sure.

Thank you for listening to *In the Foreground Conversations on Art & Writing*. For more information on this episode and links to the books, articles and artworks discussed, please consult clark.edu/rap/podcast. This program was produced by Caitlin Woolsey, Samantha Page, and myself, with music by lightchaser, editing by John Buteyn, and additional support provided by Gabriel Almeida Baroja, Alice Matthews, and Yubai Shi.