

“I Made This Munch”: Mieke Bal Talks  
to Dorota Filipczak about the Exhibition  
*Emma & Edvard: Love in the Time of  
Loneliness*, opened in Munchmuseet,  
Oslo (27 Jan. 2017)<sup>1</sup>

**Dorota Filipczak:** Professor Bal, first of all, thank you very much for the opportunity to continue our conversation about *Madame B*, which you and Michelle Williams Gamaker premiered at the Museum of Modern Art in Łódź in 2014. Your exhibition toured to different places afterwards, but this site is completely new in the sense that the video installation has been brought literally into art and surrounded with Munch’s paintings. Could you say how this actually refigures the whole idea of immersive exhibition as a genre?

**Mieke Bal:** It changes the exhibition, of course, if you have two bodies of work together in dialogue. A good example is *Wedding*, where Emma is lonely at her own wedding, and on the other side you see *The Wedding of the Bohemian* by Munch, where the bride is also completely lonely in the crowd of men. The idea that you can be lonely in a social space because you are not allowed to participate, is the topic and the feeling or the affect that they share. But they also question the social world. The fact that Munch’s paintings have this dialogic relationship to the videos, and the videos to Flaubert, and Flaubert to Munch, makes it a multiple dialogue, and visitors are going to be a part of that dialogue.

**DF:** Now that you have mentioned the dialogic relation between particular artists, I would like you to comment on the concept of the cinematic which connects them all, and on the connection between the cinematic and movement, that is, physical movement or emotional movement (as the word *e/motion* suggests), and finally on the political aspect which is embedded in all of these.

**MB:** Yes, those are various aspects of the idea of movement, and the cinematic binds them together in the sense that the cinematic is based on movement.

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Michelle Williams Gamaker and Elan Gamaker for filming this interview in Munchmuseet, Oslo.

And our videos are an example of that. But the exhibition also shows that Munch painted in a way that expresses movement in the sense that you see people moving out of the frame, you see the galloping horse running madly towards the viewer, who may be scared and think: "Oh, I am in danger." There is the emotional movement of figures shown in poignant situations where you feel for them, so you are enticed to have empathy, which is a lesson in empathic living in society. So that goes towards the political movement where you are getting ready to make a change, getting ready to do something, because you get the feeling something needs to be done; not doing it yet, but getting ready in your mood. That's political movement. You have seen some nuances that you hadn't seen before. That's what art can do. And that's the third movement in the theory of movement.

**DF:** I would like to hear your comment on the concept of framing as you use it in the book [*Emma and Edvard Looking Sideways: Loneliness and the Cinematic*], and also as you use it here in the exhibition in order to shock us out of a passive look at Munch. When we are brought into the interaction between the paintings and the videos, we begin to see both, hence, also the paintings differently. It's no longer a passive or static view. So, immersive exhibition also affects the way we look at the paintings and we see them with a new eye. Could you comment on this process?

**MB:** Well, let me first say that immersive exhibition for Michelle Williams Gamaker and me is not the same as the old concept of immersive as going down under, being passive and being completely submerged by the exhibition. For us the genre of immersive exhibition means that you get close enough into it that you feel emotions that are around you but at the same time you can be critical of it. The critical aspect of looking is incited by these works. I think that Munch shows situations which are morally or politically objectionable, but he shows them so that you can have a critical perspective on them. So, he is not simply repeating the misogyny in the society but he is showing the dangers of it. In effect, he is not a misogynistic artist.

**DF:** I'd like to ask you about your approach to Munch because it seems that he's been the subject of a bio-critical approach that has done harm to the ambiguity and potential of his paintings. This is something you consistently refuse. How does that alter our perspective on him?

**MB:** I think with an artist such as Munch it is very important to get out of that mode of seeing, because due to that kind of knowledge you recognize what you think you already know. You see this image of a man sitting in

a restaurant with a bottle of wine next to him and a glass and you think: "Oh, yes he was a drunkard." Now, does that help to understand the painting? No! On the contrary. All you see is the bottle and the situation of drunkenness. And what you don't see is the novelty in the painting where you have the most poignant expression of loneliness combined with a portion of orange in the left lower corner, that is, behind his chair but also over his chair, and if you insist on seeing only the drunken man being lonely, you have to say that this chair is on fire. But you won't even see that colour. And that orange colour is, in fact, an experiment with abstraction that Munch brings into many of his paintings. There are barely any paintings that are realistic in a naturalistic sense. They are all figurative in a way that challenges figuration, and that dialogue between abstraction and figuration is what interests me in Munch the most.

13

**DF:** You stress in your book [*Emma and Edvard Looking Sideways*] that the cinematic is the site that leads beyond figuration.

**MB:** Yes, it's because the cinematic always shows before and after at the same time, and the scene itself because there is a continuity to it. So, what you see, for example, in *The Wedding of the Bohemian* is this man going out. Is he fed up with the situation? Has he been rejected? What's the social situation here? You know that something is coming, and it is this movement that allows you to speculate and that makes you active as a viewer.

**DF:** Let me refer to the scene in which Emma is shown walking into the space of Sol LeWitt's paintings, and she asks a question: "Where is the art?" The answer is "it's all around you," and here this is mirrored through the effect of Munch's paintings and video installation in combination. In a post-modern way, these works of art mirror each other. Could you comment on the effect and what it contributes to all the cultural texts quoted here?

**MB:** Yes, if you look at Flaubert's writing from a postmodern perspective, you are going to see it everywhere. He describes getting into the street Emma has never been to. First, you get the view of the houses, the steep perspective into the street that you see in Munch everywhere with lanes that go up. And in the next paragraph Flaubert describes a section of the house from below. Now, that makes no sense if you are a realist. Then you would have to say "Mistake," and Flaubert makes these mistakes purposefully. He also plays with verb tenses, for example, using the *imparfait* which is the tense of continuity with the word "suddenly," which is impossible. He does it and he does something with that. It is saying that Emma is

deceiving herself that this is a sudden excitement but it is, in fact, already a routine. And you also have that sort of effect in the space itself because you see these videos of Emma's life as you also see these other scenes and these fantasies. And because the one invokes the other, it all starts to go in many directions, and the viewer has to be active. You cannot sit here and just let it come, because then you don't see anything. So, in that sense it's postmodernism in the service of the activation of the viewer.

**DF:** The exhibition is actually defined by the phrase "looking sideways" or "the sideways look." Now, your art and your critical works have been consistently concerned with the act of looking and the act of seeing. Could you describe the role of "looking sideways"? What does it bring into our interpretation of your installation and Munch's works?

**MB:** What I try to convey with "the sideways look" is the refusal to engage with the world, with other people; avoiding the dialogic look. But at some point, it also becomes a form of seeing from the corner of the eye what's happening outside in the world. So, it's not only the avoidance of dialogic looking; it can also be an expression of shyness. He doesn't dare to enter the world of the girls in the first room of the exhibition. But it is also possible that the figures have the interiorized look of someone who is so absorbed that they don't express anything. Or, it can be a form of witnessing. Seeing what you are not supposed to see. Like the tragedies that you see at certain points when you see, for example, the painting of a drowning child in which the sideways-looking older Edvard sees that a child is drowning, while people are walking on the nearby pier, and nobody sees it. This is a suspenseful cinematic moment.

**DF:** I am intrigued by the concept of synesthesia which comes up now and again in this exhibition and also in your book. You tend to use it quite a lot, when you say, for example, that Charles's speech is "a sonic image" of boredom, or when you call the paintings by Munch "a visual novel" which is also a cross-senses comment. Or when you say that *The Scream* has a soundtrack. How can this quality of the exhibition affect the way we see?

**MB:** I think synesthesia is, in fact, the only way that the senses work. When you are in an exhibition, you feel your legs get tired, which is why these benches have been put here. The fact that people have the chance to sit and take their time with the paintings changes it. You see the texture of the surfaces, so you are almost feeling it, and because of this installation with

the videos and the paintings you constantly hear things, so you are already in synesthesia. Talking about *The Scream* . . .

**DF:** Yes, I've wanted to ask you why you didn't include it.

**MB:** I didn't select *The Scream* because it's on towels and T-shirts in the shop. I cannot see this painting anymore without seeing these kitschy objects, and so I thought it should be eliminated, so that people don't have these associations. It would fit the topic very well, though, because there is a scene when Emma screams, but I didn't think that it was properly placed in this situation. There are some famous paintings in this exhibition, but there are also some that are not so well-known. I want people to concentrate on them, whereas recognition as a way of looking is totally meaningless; so, we cannot see *The Scream* anymore. We can only recognize it, and that is something I find very problematic. I'm not avoiding the iconography of *The Scream* because it has the coloured movements, the waves around it, and this is a sort of visual soundtrack. And there is an allusion to *The Scream* in the series *Alpha and Omega*, for which Munch made twenty-six works on paper from which I selected six, and there is one there where you see the scream in a man in loneliness. You see that he is screaming and that he is alone, and the waves are there so you can construct that as a soundtrack. That's a much more discreet version of it. I am already nervous that people will just recognize it, but I am hoping that they will see it in the context of the other images, and then they will make more of it.

**DF:** I'd like to ask you about a famous statement by Munch: "I paint what I saw not what I see." In your book you are greatly concerned with the influence of Bergson, and with the role of memory.

**MB:** Exactly, the famous case is Munch's painting of the dying sister that he painted fifteen years or so after the fact. And he paints what he saw, but in the act of memory you see it again, in the present. So, he could as well have said: "I paint what I saw, therefore I paint what I see (in my mind's eye)." I think memory is the only way that you can actually perceive. If you look, you always look in the present. In the present I see it now, but I see loneliness because there is something in my own baggage that recalls that, for example, the scene in *Wedding* where Emma is so lonely, as in that *Wedding of the Bohemian* the bride is so lonely, and because you remember that you saw it there. Perception without memory is impossible, but perception is necessarily in the present; that is the wonderful thing. It fills up with memories, because otherwise it would make no sense. There would be no meaning.

**DF:** Talking about loneliness, I would like to ask you a question about fantasy. It runs through the whole exhibition not only through the part that is explicitly entitled "Fantasy." Fantasy presupposes concentrating on yourself. It excludes others.

**MB:** That's true. There is one room devoted to fantasy, and from there on in each room I want the viewers to carry on the baggage that I built up there, and go to the next room with that idea in mind, and then do something with that. You're right, fantasy is a way of being concentrated on yourself. You create your own fantasy; nobody can touch it. Well, that's not quite true. They do touch it. There is *Shaping and Moulding* (in *Madame B*) at the entrance to the gallery where the teaching and exercises in being creative at home are completely influenced by what Emma learns in society, fashion models, clichés and so on. So, fantasies are also filled with stereotypes and clichés, but they are liberated in the sense that you have the freedom to inflect them. As for the sexualized images of women in the fantasy gallery, it is a series where you see the fantasy going from lovely, innocent and romantic to more and more sexualized, sinister and violent. And at the end of this small sequence you see a woman weeping. There is a violent fantasy with all those hands around the woman whose skirt is a little too low. She wouldn't have put it that way herself. It's as if the hands have taken the skirt down. In the next image, you see the woman in the same skirt sitting and weeping. So, there is fantasy, and then it continues into the pondering of the consequences if fantasy were to become reality. And you think if you do this, this is the result, and that is also a response to the social situation, and social possibilities, which is why I put this image of a naked woman with long red hair next to the woman with red hair in a proper dress whom you would be proud to parade with on your arm in the city. And that is also a fantasy. So, fantasies are not disconnected from the social reality.

**DF:** I'd like to ask you about the charge of misogyny which sometimes comes up in feminist criticism of Munch's paintings. This is something you try to nuance if not reject, and then you actually try to draw the viewer's attention to Munch's empathy. That's a very different discursive position. Could you comment on that shift which in fact is a part of your own intervention as the curator of this exhibition?

**MB:** Exactly, I think it is really important to both acknowledge the misogyny when you see it, and then to realize that he is showing it to us in a possibly critical way. Like in *The Wedding of a Bohemian*, the woman is

completely isolated among these men, and nobody talks to her. They are just supervising her instead of engaging with her. That is a very poignant image of loneliness, as poignant as the man with the bottle of wine. And in the painting of a pubescent girl who is surrounded by big, phallic, dark shadows, Munch shows how difficult and scary this situation is for the young girl. He shows it with empathy. I think that showing the misogyny is not necessarily endorsing it. It can also be indicting it, and I think the indictment is very often implied, even if not always. There are also images where you think: "My God, do you have to do this?" But the possibility to read it in this ambivalent way is always there. There is nothing that is not ambivalent and ambiguous in Munch's work. By the way, Flaubert was also known to be a misogynist. He was not very successful in relationships, and the two had a lot in common in their respective biographies. But what's the relevance for their art?

17

**DF:** In fact, you call Flaubert's novel a proto-feminist novel, which comes as a surprise.

**MB:** I think it is a fiercely feminist novel. *Madame Bovary* is an indictment of patriarchy and an indictment of capitalism. And Emma is a victim, even if also a perpetrator, because you cannot step out of the ideology. So, she has no choice but to be a part of her own undoing. Yet Flaubert is not endorsing what he is showing. He is not saying: she was so stupid and so immoral to take a lover. How dare she? In fact, Gustave and Edvard are my buddies, and that is not really because they were good guys rather than bad guys. They were sensitive, and that's why they were great artists. And that sensitivity accounts for the political view and ambivalence that you see everywhere in their work. Misogynistic situations are shown with a critical angle, at least the potential of a critical angle. Munch is not preaching. Neither is Flaubert. It's not propaganda for a particular position, but they make it so ambivalent and complex that it's hard to avoid the awareness that you need to make a choice. So, if you are going to be lecherous and look at those half-naked women and say "Oh, great piece," that is a way of avoiding the richness of the depiction. Despite their alleged misogynistic practices in life, Flaubert and Munch are not misogynistic as artists. They are rather indicting the misogynistic culture around them. It's a very different thing to endorse than to show it. Because showing it can be a way of indicting it. The painting of a syphilitic child dying on his mother's lap is a way of saying: the problem is not the prostitutes. The problem is the men who visit them and then infect their wives. So that's where you have to take it on. It's just a banal example, and it's not even in the exhibition.



**DF:** Intervention seems to be the keyword throughout the exhibition.

**MB:** I think good art in general is an intervention in the sense that if the viewer takes time to really establish a dialogue with the artwork, it will change their mind. It's as if there is someone there telling you to pay attention to this or that. You need to empathize with this and understand that. And the artwork expressing that makes you change, change your opinions or automatic responses. And that is an intervention. But curating is also an intervention in the sense that I am completely aware that I am presenting a Munch that is very different from the usual but is also my creation. I made this Munch. And the protagonist Edvard, the holder of the point of view and the self-exposed individual is a creation; if I put them together in this way I am creating this cinematic, narrative sequence that Munch didn't make, because he did not put those paintings together. But he says himself in an interview that he was actually convinced when he saw the paintings exhibited, curated by someone else. Then he saw the coherence he hadn't seen before. So, even biographically he would be on my side. Art is always in a situation, in a context, and in an exhibition, it is in the context of more images. And that is how they speak to each other. So, when you come from a certain room, like "Fantasies," and you come to this room, "Loneliness," then you go to the next room, "Turmoil," you carry over what you have just seen. And so, in that sense the curating is an intervention that changes the work. For the time being, of course; it is only up in this way for two and a half months.

**DF:** So, we could say this is your narrative with Edvard as the focalizer. In fact, you liberate Edvard, the focalizer, from Munch. And that is a major distinction. At the moment when Edvard sees something we can turn around and see the paintings that he sees, even if he keeps looking sideways which might suggest that he is trying to avert his eyes from something. This is the artistic gesture that you have been using throughout the exhibition. The example I have in mind is *Kissing Couples in the Park* focalized by Munch's character.

**MB:** Actually, facing this painting is another painting of someone escaping from a burning house—although it is not officially a burning house, but for me it is. He runs out and he runs towards *Kissing Couples in the Park*, so you have the cropped man who is facing a woman who is even more severely cropped because the face of the woman in *Kissing Couples* is half-cropped. All you see is her eyes, and that is because she is not participating. She is not one of the couples. She has no one to kiss, so she becomes the lonely one. And she escapes from that loneliness by going out of the frame.



And the man is going out of the burning house and also going out of the frame. That is the curatorial intervention because when you get these paintings facing each other, you gain something different. The interesting thing is that in the same room where these paintings are you have the video installation *Boredom Sets in* where Emma is at a party flirting with a nice-looking man who dances with her because her former teacher has said to him: "You should dance with her. She's so lonely." And that is a scene Charles is witnessing, but he doesn't want to see it, because he is so upset that in front of him Emma is dancing and flirting with someone else, so he's desperately trying not to see it. That is an example of the sideways look.

**DF:** I'm intrigued by what you've said about the girl who is trying to escape the frame in the painting with kissing couples. There is this cube in which we have four screens with Emma at home, and it's like she cannot escape the frame. The whole spatial arrangement makes it impossible for her to leave that prison. Could you comment on the use of space here?

**MB:** The cube in which we have the four routines of Emma, where she is with Rodolphe, or she is at home being bored till she screams; then she is in the shop trying to overcome her boredom by acquiring luxury goods; she is being meddled with by the neighbors. Those are her routines of life, and they are confining. And the cube is just a little narrow for having these four screens but that is intentional so that you feel the confinement. You can sit comfortably enough, but it's a bit small. That is the smallness of her life. So, it's the confinement she cannot escape, and we cannot escape it either. Therefore, we have reason to be empathetic.

**DF:** Now I would like to ask you about technical aspects: how all the artists in the exhibition draw attention to the materiality of their medium, the texture, the formal aspects. You seem to juxtapose the opacity of Flaubert's language, the patches in Munch's style of painting and also the blurs that you and Williams Gamaker use in your video installation.

**MB:** This is a really good question and a good point. What is very important in this exhibition is the texture, the texture in all sorts of ways, the material objects. And the reason that the benches are there and the paintings are hung so low is to make people immerse themselves in that confrontation with materiality. Munch is a very material painter. You have moments in his work when faces become masks, but that is because the paint is so thick that they become like masks; and that becomes the imaginary of the mask. Hence, you don't know what comes first; it could very well be

the intervention of the materiality. For example, the melancholic woman sitting on the beach at the end of the exhibition is so thinly painted as if melancholy is erasing her. She is already half-dead; melancholy is a sort of paralysis. You cannot do anything when you are melancholic. It's a kind of severe depression, and that is conveyed in the materiality of the paint that is almost transparent; also, the canvas is a part of the colours playing along.

**DF:** So, abstraction is in the eye of the beholder as you say in your book [*Emma and Edvard*]?

20

**MB:** Like in the painting of a lonely man with a bottle of wine. Is the orange colour the indication of figuration or abstraction? It's your choice, but you cannot say it's just a chair because the chair is half-overwritten by the orange. And the patch of orange is what you want to see that is relevant for you. But not to see it would mean you follow the biographical criticism—his figure is drinking and that is why he is lonely. Then you don't see the painting. You don't see the paint. You don't see the colour.

**Michelle Williams Gamaker (co-director of *Madame B*):** Could I ask a question that might be relevant for the back story of our work? It is about the complicity of the viewer in witnessing and participating in the exhibition and the complicity of the artist to draw upon our personal experience, even misogynistic elements that might play out through their life. Are we judging or are we participating when we are in it?

**MB:** That is the point of our new conception of immersive exhibition, that's exactly right. The curation creates a situation in which we are invited to participate. And we are there and in that sense, we are complicit because we endorse the traditional marriage, and at the same time the things that go wrong there like the creepy priest and the loneliness of the bride, the gossiping around her: we don't have to endorse it; we can hear the gossiping and think: "Damn, at her own wedding she is the object of gossip," and then you take a critical attitude, not to Emma but to the society surrounding her and making her miserable. Hence, because of the immersive installation you are enticed to be complicit, and from within to be critical. There is no place outside of ideology, but within it you can try to turn the screws a bit and to say: "Maybe we should think a little more about this," because ideologies too can change. But you have to do it. This is the idea that Judith Butler put forward: "you have to repeat and repeat and repeat, and then turn it around a little bit." And then it can change. You cannot go outside of ideology but you can change it from within. And that is what

we try to do in the installation, to invite people to go into these fictional situations and see what happens, and then reflect on it. We try to make self-reflection a part of the situation, which is why at the end we have a mirror. It says: in case you haven't discovered yet, this is an exhibition about self-reflection. People may think, of course, we have seen that. But it's a good reminder at the end.

**DF:** On a different note, I would like to ask you about the intermedial quotation. I am quoting a phrase from your book. The whole exhibition here is intermedial; it connects various media, genres and conventions; it is informed by synesthesia, so it dissolves many boundaries. How does it relate to the theatre? You seem to influence the viewers the way theatre does, especially Grotowski's theatre. It's a different organization of space with the viewers asked to come to the stage and witness the play, but also participate. The same happens here. We are invited to face these screens; we wander around, we select. Could you comment on the way you use a theatrical element in this particular exhibition, which is different from the previous ones, for example, the one in Lodz?

**MB:** Yes, it is different, because through the concept of the cinematic as the basis of the exhibition it is inviting a kind of awareness of continuity that you go to the next painting with the other painting in mind that you have already seen. You see the screens and you recognize something from the paintings. The resonances between videos and paintings are stronger and more numerous than I've ever foreseen, because you can only see it when you see it and undergo it at the same time. It is theatrical in the sense that it is one big stage and we are in it; we are on it. We are characters in this play.

**DF:** We become characters in the installation; we share the same status. Incidentally, I wonder how important previous commitments were to you. You dealt with the Bombay artist, Nalini Malani, and her shadow plays which, in fact, seem to share some features with your installation, because you have to walk into the shadow play, you get inside it. Do you bring the insights from that previous commitment into this exhibition?

**MB:** Well, you always do, because it's me doing it. I've been interested in narrative; I began to make films, so I got interested in the cinematic. I dealt with political art, so you can't help bringing yourself along. There is a lot in common between this installation and the previous project. What Malani is doing is also compelling the viewer to come inside.

I titled the book *In Medias Res* because that's exactly what it is. You have to be inside it, now, and then you have the effect. It's hard to talk about my own influences. I think it is the continuity in my work that is inevitably playing along.

**DF:** Do you think this intermedial way of seeing can actually feed into literary studies and cultural studies? It is a new method of engaging with the literary work, art and video installation, all combined, with curating as an additional tool.

**MB:** Yes, I think you could give students the assignment to read a novel and mark the cinematic passages and then explain why. That would be a nice essay to write for literary students dealing with visuality. Then you realize how much literature is engaged with the visual, because it is. There are texts where you don't realize it, but you constantly see it. So yes, it could absolutely feed into literary studies and cultural studies perspectives. Curating is putting things together; it is another assignment you can give them, and say: "Take from Flaubert's novel visual descriptions; put them together and explain what the meaningfulness is." That is a very useful exercise.

**DF:** What strikes me is that your preoccupation with the intermedial is close to the concern with the multimodal metaphor (for example, in advertisements) initiated, among others, by Charles Forceville. Has this been relevant for you at all?

**MB:** For me it's nothing new. It's been around since Roland Barthes's text about advertisements. In that sense, Forceville is not doing anything new. He is applying a method. But I am constantly aware of the word and image interaction, for example, which in the cinema is totally normal. People talk and you see them. So, you have the dialogue and you have the images. It is a little more challenging with painting, and that is why the viewer has to provide the story. But there is always an interaction, and I think advertisement is actually in danger of being seen as more banal than it is, and that makes it more powerful because you don't see what it is really doing, the way it manipulates you. If there is an advertisement for a very expensive car which says things about the make of the car in small letters, and on the hood of the car there is a beautiful woman in a bikini, you know that you will not get the woman along with the car. And yet there is emotional capitalism at work, where the desire for the woman makes you want to buy the car. That is beyond what the written word will say, because it will not want to declare that. But the connec-

tion must be made to understand the far-reaching social consequences of emotional capitalism.

**DF:** I would like you to comment on my favourite painting, *Separation*. When I looked at it I realized that the book I had studied previously, *The Whirlpool* by Jane Urquhart, would connect beautifully with this because there is a man imagining himself to be in love with a woman but for him the woman is actually the landscape. There is a confusion between the two, which we get in this painting by Munch. Could you comment on this?

**MB:** Yes, I don't know that novel. But in *Separation* the severance between the man and the woman is the anecdote, but what you see is the woman disappearing, merging into the landscape. She becomes the landscape. Her hair goes into the trees. Her dress merges into the path that leads away from the man. So, *Separation* is more than her leaving him. She fades away, and that is what you have with a separation: you are slowly taken away into another life. She goes into another life, and he doesn't have any grip on her any more. The real separation is her fading into the landscape rather than the fact that she leaves him. So, it is also a vision of landscape and human subjectivity and the danger of its disappearing or being effaced. There is continuity with what we have seen at the exhibition.

**DF:** I want to ask you about major surprises that happened while you were dealing with *Emma & Edvard*, because I am sure that the whole process was rich in surprises for you.

**MB:** Well, as you know the whole video installation had already existed before I knew I would be invited to this. Actually, the invitation came with the request to integrate *Madame B* into the work by Munch from the museum's holdings. They had eleven hundred paintings, and I chose eighty; so I had a good choice. The big surprise, first of all, was to get to know Munch. I had no more than a superficial knowledge of his work, from some exhibitions I had seen. I knew he was important, but I had not discovered it yet. So, I first made a tentative selection and then I went to the storage to look at all those paintings and then decided I'd take this one, and leave that one alone. And that was because there was a surprise in each one. Take *The Drowned Boy* where you see that horse outlined in the lower left front. It took me a long time to see that horse. It is curved, and it is turning around to bring us in. Its body is turning, which creates the cinematic effect: the horse is really moving towards us as if to say: "Come on in and look at this. Be a witness." And then you see two tall men who are on their way to be

witnesses. And then behind them you see the tragedy of the drowned boy. That horse was the surprise. That's an example of a big surprise, something you don't immediately see. There are other surprises, like a mask in the painting showing a man and a woman with a tree. The tree has an eye, while the man and woman don't have eyes, and what made me select that painting was the fact that I saw that the man's white face at the top had a little brown line suggesting that white was a mask. Without that brown line, you could say: "He is just a little white." But no, he's wearing a mask, and that changes the whole painting. If you look closely at these images there is always a surprise. In *Red Virginia Creeper* I don't see any creeper. I just see a house on fire. As for *Kissing Couples the Park*, the real subject is that half-face of a woman who is going out of the frame because she has no one to kiss. So, I selected each painting because there was something that I saw that went against the criticism, either immediately or after a long time of looking. This is, again, why I wanted the paintings to be hung low, and as many benches as possible provided. So that people can have the same experience that I had in the storage. Take your time with the paintings. The major surprise may be that looking at a painting takes as much time as reading a novel or seeing a video. If you sit and watch a fifteen-minute film, why don't you look for fifteen minutes at a painting?

**DF:** Thank you very much for your innovative and illuminating exhibition. It was a real privilege to hear you talk about it in the Munch Museum.