MÅRTEN SNICKARE

Affective knowledge

Getting to know Isaac Julien's *Western Union: Small Boats*

Looking with soft eyes

DURING A CLOSE-UP of a chandelier, slightly out of focus, a new sound takes over: the sound of water, subdued yet distinct, evoking the bodily sensation of moving vigorously under water. My auditory sense is activated, and so is my sense of touch and feeling; I feel the coldness and wetness together with water's peculiar way of restraining and slowing down my movements, making them strenuous and limber at the same time.

A moment later, a moving image appears that both matches and contrasts the sensations aroused by the sound: a man, lying on a richly painted, tiled floor, fiercely twisting and turning, the pace and intensity of his movements corresponding to the sound. This combination of sound and image produces a double tactile sensation, where the soft coldness of water blends with the hard, glossy coldness of tiles. Even though I have seen it before, it takes me a few seconds to become aware that the image is upside down—the floor apparently constituting a hard surface above the man, through which it seems he is trying to break.

Then the image shifts, the very same man performing similar vigorous twists and turns under water, creating bubbles that obscure my vision and occasionally conceal his body (fig. 1). Sound and image now fully match. Sunbeams penetrate the water, indicating that the man is just beneath the surface. Despite his fierce movements, however, he does not manage to break through to get some air. The surface of water appears as impenetrable as the tiled floor.

The intensity rises as images and angles shift at an increasing pace: clips of the body under water from different angles and at different distances, shifting to clips of the same body twisting and turning on the tiled floor. My bodily sensations get stronger and my heart beats faster. I become affected by the enhanced tempo, and by the man's movements, at the same time a beautifully choreographed dance and a ghastly death struggle.



Figure 1. Isaac Julien, *Western Union: Small Boats*, 2007, still from video.



Dance and death—the affective short circuit constitutes a culmination of *Western Union: Small Boats*, a video work by British artist Isaac Julien, made in 2007 in response to the continuous migrant and refugee catastrophe on the Mediterranean. The scene, and the work as a whole, has given rise to a debate about the ethical implications of aesthetics: is it ethically defensible to represent something as horrible as a migrant's or refugee's death struggle in the Mediterranean by means of such beautifully composed imagery and well-choreographed movements? Critic Alan Gilbert states that Julien's imagery is so stylized "that certain moments approximate a fashion shoot, lending what is a gritty, harrowing, and sometimes fatal journey a slightly incongruous quality of slick sensuality".[1] In a reply to this kind of critique, Julien argues that he understands dance as a parallel language with the capacity to open up for new, unexpected ways of thinking that involve not only the mind but also the body.[2] Through the bodily and kinaesthetic beauty of dance, the conventional gaze becomes dislocated and the beholder may experience the brutal and harrowing reality in a new way, in a stronger and more intimate manner than via the conventionalized news media imagery. Furthermore, the transgressing of borders between art and reality, beauty and horror, the documentary and the poetic, resonates with the migrant's transgressing of geographic and political borders. In addition to this, I would suggest that the beauty of dance works as a way of restoring the dignity of the anonymous migrant or refugee; to present them as something more than just another number in the chilling statistics of deceased migrants on the Mediterranean. Dance as a way of claiming the migrant's right to take their place, and to lead a dignified life.

These issues of ethics and aesthetics are important and well worth a deeper exploration. In the following, I will focus on a slightly different, yet related aspect of the affective mode of *Western Union: Small Boats*, an aspect implied in Julien's response to the critique above, and his way of pointing out the relations between dance and thinking, body and mind. Connecting my study to the issue at stake in this volume, *Knowing Visual Art*, I will frame it as an issue of the relation between affects and knowing. How can I understand the interplay between the work of art, its affective effects on me as a beholder and my scholarly interpretation of it? Or, to put it in more general terms, how can we approach the rela-

1. Gilbert 2008, p. 91. On this debate, see also González 2011, pp. 127–128; Petersen 2018, pp. 97–98.

2. Julien 2013, pp. 173–176.

tions between art, affects and knowing? Are (scholarly) knowledge and (aesthetic) affects incompatible, or could they be conceived of as interacting? Could we even, in any meaningful way, talk of *affective knowledge*, as suggested by this essay's title? What would that mean in the context of the scholarly interpretation of an artwork?

Western Union: Small Boats will remain at the centre of my essay, as a touchstone for the more general and theoretical issues of affects and knowing. My main reason for choosing that particular artwork in this context is its strong affective impact on me. Over the last ten years or so, I have been lucky to encounter it on a number of occasions and, over and over again, it has proven its capacity to arouse strong and complex bodily sensations and emotions. Thus, it makes a good case for this essay's exploration of the possible relations between art, affects and knowing. (And, vice versa, the theme of this anthology—*Knowing Visual Art*—has given me an opportunity to dig deeper into the aesthetic, affective and epistemic layers of Julien's artwork.)

Before continuing the exploration—or, rather, as a first step of it—I will get back to Julien's artwork in order to give a close description of it. In this descriptive part of the essay, I am deeply inspired by art historian Darby English, who has pointed out *description* as an essential art-historical method, and a way to deepen and refine one's gaze. English encourages us to commit ourselves to "deep sustained attention" to the work of art, in order to avoid the all-too-common repetition of "readymade perspectives".[3] Such a programmatic slowness, called for by the act of description, may be particularly difficult when dealing with an artwork like *Western Union: Small Boats*—a work entangled in burning political and social issues, which might imply an urge to move quickly to the safety of preconceived notions and readymade perspectives. How to stay with the unresolved questions, the complexities and ambivalences rather than hasten to the clear-cut answers? How to keep "looking with soft eyes", to borrow a phrase from English?[4]

English notices a frequent "gap" between a work of art and the art-historical interpretations of it. This gap, he states, is due to the fact that scholars often know beforehand what they look for in the artwork. As scholars, we come to the work with a hypothesis that we intend to verify or satisfy, and we leave with the piece we came for in order to confirm

3. English 2019, pp. 4, 26.
4. English 2021.

our thesis, or exemplify our theory, leaving the remainder of the work unaccounted for. Description, following English, can be understood as a kind of "gap tending" between what the work of art is and what it has been said to be.[5]

English's advocacy of attentive description has some affinity with political theorist Jane Bennett's suggestion that the scholar admits to moments of "methodological naïveté" in the sensory encounter with objects and the materialities of the world. That we, as scholars, "linger in those moments during which we find ourselves fascinated by objects, taking them as clues to the material vitality we share with them".[6] *Time* is an important factor for English and Bennett: the encounter between observer and object needs to take time, it needs "lingering" (Bennett) and "sustained attention" (English). Both scholars also propose a less hierarchical relation between the scholar and the artwork or object of interest. Rather than aiming at control over the artwork, by means of established methods and theoretical concepts, the scholar should be prepared to let the artwork lead them in unexpected directions, to accept its ambiguities, obscurities and contradictions as well as its resistance against being fully comprehensible, fully subjected to the scholar's interpretative manoeuvres.

Literary theorist Ernst van Alphen proposes a connection between the slowness of description and the affective powers of art and literature:

> The recognition of the role of affective operations forces us to slow down—not shut down—the reading for meaning and our haste to reach that destiny. A hasty flight to (allegorical) meaning can only end up in the already known, in the recognition of conventional meanings, whereas the affective operations and the way they shock to thought are what opens a space for the not yet known.[7]

Van Alphen's thoughtful reflections on the affective operations of art form an important source of inspiration for my essay, and I will return to them in more detail later. At this moment it suffices to point out that affect in van Alphen's understanding is social rather than personal. It can be transmitted between people, but it may also be triggered by non-human agents, such as a work of art or a literary text. Further, affect is

5. English 2021.
6. Bennett 2010, p. 17.
7. van Alphen 2008, p. 30.

physiological rather than psychological; it is connected to the body and the senses. Affect carries no verbal content in itself but it may trigger emotions and feelings—the latter could be understood as affects that have been put into words, or affects of which the affected person has made themselves aware. And—this is important—affect may also trigger thoughts, yes, even "shock to thought" and, by that means, "open a space for the not yet known". Following van Alphen, thus, there is a link between affect and knowing.[8]

Encountering *Western Union: Small Boats*

Western Union: Small Boats is an 18-minute video work that appeared in 2007, constituting a late step in Julien's gradual transition from filmmaker with distinct artistic pretensions to artist with film and video as his preferred media. The work exists in different versions: the original three-screen version, a five-screen version (shown in different ways depending on the exhibition space) and a single-screen version with another title: *The Leopard*.[9]

The artwork is enacted against the background of the thousands of people who every year endeavour to cross the Mediterranean from Asia or Africa to Europe, fleeing from war, persecution, poverty and climate crisis—an endeavour that for many ends with death by drowning. This is not to say that Julien's artwork *is about* the Mediterranean migrant and refugee crisis, or that it *depicts*, or *represents* the crisis; rather, that the crisis, and Europe's response to it, form a social and political space in which the artwork unfolds.

Western Union: Small Boats moves between different genres and expressive registers. Seemingly documentary scenes are followed by theatrical stagings and poetic, dreamlike sequences. Expansive views of the sea and sky are juxtaposed with the zooming in on a detail. The sound also shifts, between the sober voices of newscasters, sounds of the sea shifting from calm to fierce, the screaming of seabirds, the song of a female voice, and an electronic soundscape moving between the ominous and the serene. Image and sound are connected in a way that could be described as contrapuntal: at some instances, the sound strengthens and supports the image and vice versa, while at other points the two seem to go against or undermine each other. As a whole, the work is not held

8. van Alphen & Jirsa 2019a, see in particular van Alphen & Jirsa 2019b.
9. Julien 2013.

together by a pronounced narrative structure, an internal chronology, or a consistent chain of cause and effect. It is not—at least not primarily—about telling a story. This, however, does not mean that elements are arbitrarily joined. Quite the opposite: the work is characterized by a temporal and spatial precision, and by an unmistakable musical rhythm resonating in the body of the beholder.

The work's non-linear, fluid, musical rhythm is most fully developed in the multiscreen versions where themes and sub-themes, panoramic views and close-ups, are repeated and interwoven on different screens, sometimes in unison, at other times canonical or contrapuntal. Julien has stated—relating to an earlier video work—that "there is something about the three-screen version that allows a certain choreography that emphasizes movement and flexibility in narrative progression", while, on the other hand, "the demands of a single-screen piece of work lead to a slightly conservative way of viewing".[10] This being true, I would yet claim that also in *The Leopard*, the single-screen version, the fluent, rhythmic, non-linear character is maintained. My description of the work is based on the single-screen version to which I have had access during the process of writing, but it is also coloured by my memories of encounters with the three-screen and five-screen versions.

Western Union: Small Boats could tentatively be divided into three acts, each of them roughly six minutes long. No clear borders distinguish the acts—a particular sub-theme or scene may appear in more than one act—and it could be argued that this way of dividing up the whole of the work goes against its continuous musical flow and its lack of internal chronology. However, in order to avoid getting bogged down in the enumeration of endless details, the distinction might be helpful for the interpreter as well as the reader.

In the opening scene of the first act, two protagonists are introduced, two recurrent characters throughout the video work: the sea, moving from calm, sunlit and inviting to stormy and ominous; and a female character who might be described as an observer or a witness—art historian Jennifer A. González has likened her to the chorus in ancient Greek drama.[11] Rather than taking part in the events and actions, the character

10. Julien 2002, quote from p. 54.

11. González 2011, p. 117. The character is played by actress Vanessa Myrie, who appears as a similar character in two earlier video works by Julien: *True North* (2004) and *Fantôme Créole* (2005). In relation to these two artworks, Julien has stated that Myrie's character is "a trespasser, a witness who will never become part of either geography" (Julien 2013, p. 173).



Figure 2. Isaac Julien, *Western Union: Small Boats*, 2007, still from video.

observes, standing or sitting still, or moving slowly and gracefully. She is often, if not always, seen from behind, the beholder then looking in the same direction, following her gaze. In the opening scene, she appears from the shadows and approaches a gateway opening up towards the sea and a bright blue sky (fig. 2). A rocky coastline, barely visible on the horizon, suggests that the sea, peaceful and inviting, constitutes a passage between lands. The crystal-clear, proud voice of Malian singer Oumou Sangaré blends with the calm waves. A tension is suggested between the gateway, a promising opening to the sea, and its iron gate, first shown half open and then closed and locked, apparently conditioning the access to what is on the other side. The passage between lands is not for everyone.

In the next scene, a group of fishermen are introduced together with their small, wooden boats and their fishing tackle. A series of close-ups highlights the sunlit, white-painted planks of a boat, hands deftly handling a long fishing line, and a tanned, furrowed face—together emphasizing sensuous presence and tactile interplay between human beings and their lived environment. The fishermen seem to be in tune with their surroundings; they know their craft and their tools, and they know how

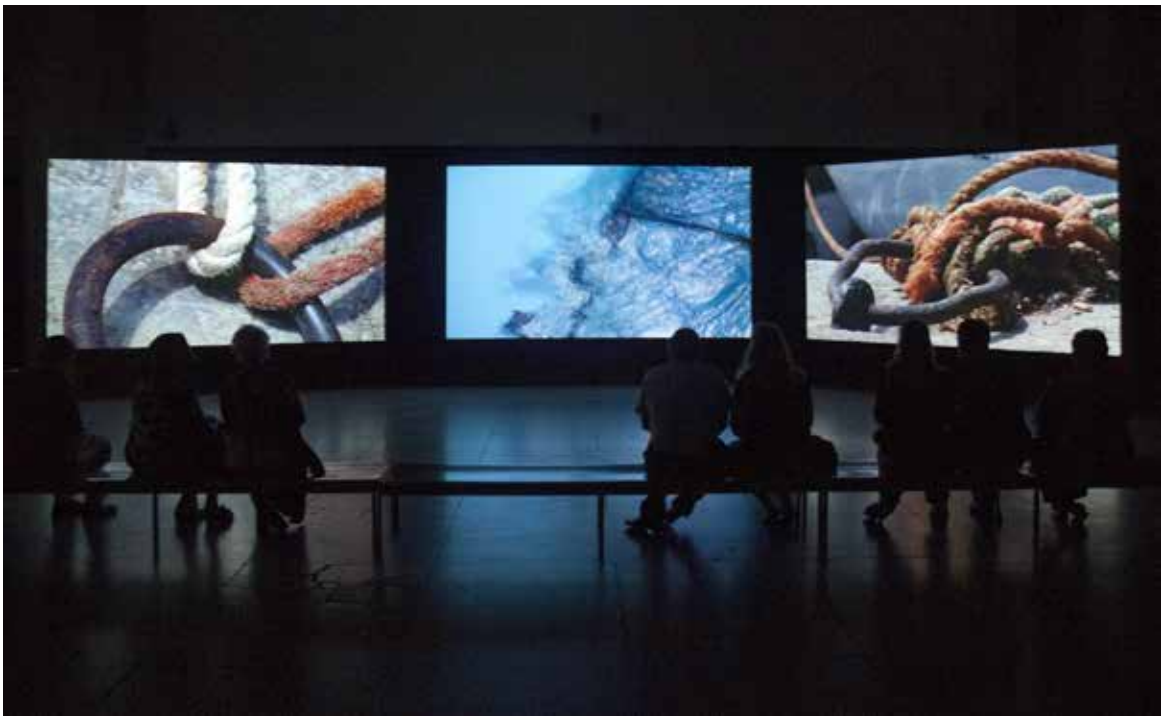


Figure 3. Isaac Julien, *Western Union: Small Boats*, 2007, still from video.

to interact with the sea. Yet another close-up shows a mooring ring with two mooring ropes that tighten and slacken pari passu with the gentle waves (fig. 3). I get an immediate sense of the weight and importance of ring and ropes, and their calm rhythm—not primarily as sign or symbol but rather as presence, relating to my own presence, and rhythm relating to my own rhythm.

Like in the preceding scene, there is a tension, this time between image and sound. While the imagery presents the sea as a workplace, harmoniously interacting with the confident, experienced fishermen, the sound consists of a sustained, ominous tone combined with crackling radio reports on shipwrecks and lost migrants. This tension brings forth an image of the sea as at once life-giving and lethal.

The Witness appears, her earnest gaze leading from the fishing harbour to a ship graveyard where broken boats are left to weather in the burning sun. The camera shifts between overviews of the graveyard and close-ups of single wrecks in which clothes and shoes are left behind, evoking an alarming sense of lost passengers. A sudden shift to a calm, sunlit shoreline with bright, stepped cliffs, recognizable as the *Scala dei Turchi* (the Turkish Steps) on the south-western coast of Sicily, facing

one of the shortest passages between Africa and Europe. The Witness approaches from the cliffs, walks gently into the sea and lifts up a red t-shirt floating in the shallow, tranquil water. Holding the wet, heavy t-shirt with both hands, she watches the water running and dripping back into the sea: again, an abandoned article of clothing produces a negative image of its lost wearer. A group of people descends from the cliffs. In contrast to the quasi-documentary character of the scene with the fishermen, there is something dreamlike about this scene, people moving slowly, choreographically. Next, a close-up of a man from the group, now sitting alone on the shore gazing out to sea.

Then comes another abrupt shift—in a way foreboded by the man's gaze—from the tranquil shore to the loud sound of waves on the open sea, arousing in me a bodily sensation of being in danger. A close-up of a hand, holding on tight to the rail of a small, open boat in high sea, the horizon rapidly moving up and down—the tremors and movements of the camera making me physically dizzy. Onboard is a group of men, one of them dozing. Dreamlike, impressionistic images of what might be understood as his African hometown in a sunbaked landscape are interspersed with images of the man, eyes half-closed. His head falls forward, marking the passage from dozing to sleeping. End of act one.

Whereas the first act takes place on, and around, the sea, as a site for the giving and taking of life, the primary setting for the second act is Palazzo Valguarnera-Gangi, an opulent late Baroque palace in Palermo (fig. 4). One possible approach to the setting is via the man in the small boat falling asleep at the end point of act one; the almost surrealistically sumptuous palace could then be understood as the migrant's dream about a world of infinitude and abundance. At the same time, the palace stands out as a blatant manifestation of global injustice and inequality, caused by centuries of European colonialism, dominance and extractivism. The splendid, elaborate Baroque interiors seem to embrace both these interpretations: European Baroque art and architecture is about endless power and colonial dominance, manifest in its scale, its hyperboles, and the excess of gold and other precious materials extracted from distant parts of the world and displayed at its self-proclaimed centre. But it is also about constant movement, the transgressing of borders and the opening of passages between the real and the imaginary. In the great hall of Palazzo Valguarnera-Gangi, where several scenes of the second act are set, the latter becomes manifest through the constant blurring of borders between illusionistic paintings and three-dimensional architectural



Figure 4. Isaac Julien, *Western Union: Small Boats*, 2007, still from video.

space, culminating in the barely graspable pattern of ornaments and openings in the ceiling. The sense of spatial ungraspability and constant transformation evoked by the hall's architecture and decoration is further enhanced in the video work by means of winding camera tracking, superposition of images and sliding transitions between focus and blur.

Through the setting in Palazzo Valguarnera-Gangi, a relation is also established between *Western Union: Small Boats* and Luchino Visconti's classic film *Il Gattopardo* (The Leopard) from 1963.[12] Julien describes the relation as a conversation with Italian film, particularly pointing out the long ballroom scene at the end of Visconti's film, "a total tour de force of visual composition", enacted in the palace's great hall.[13] Strong affects are at work in Visconti's film, in particular in the ballroom scene, by means of gestures, gazes, music, camera movements and, not least, the bodily motion of dance. Through dance, thus, a resonance is established between Julien's artwork and Visconti's film. And, to borrow a wording

12. Visconti's film is made after the novel with the same title: *Il Gattopardo*, by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa (1958). A relational chain is thus established between Julien's video work, Visconti's film and Tomasi di Lampedusa's novel.

13. Julien 2013, p. 175.

from van Alphen, the resonance between the two seems to be more about "affective" than "allegorical" meaning.

In the opening scene of act two, the camera moves slowly from a close-up of a decoratively painted, tiled floor, and gradually takes in what proves to be the great hall. A soundscape of repeated creaking, together with sustained, glassy tones on low frequency, lends the scene an elusive character, reminding one of the state of hypnagogia. A voice from a speaker, with a pronounced echo, seems to arrive from a different space, another reality. The voice announces "La Principessa di Lampedusa", whereupon a blonde woman enters from the blur and approaches the camera, smiling. During the sustained take, her smile seems to stiffen and become forced. A rhythm, like a rapid heartbeat, is added to the soundscape, giving an element of stress and threat to the scene. Next appears the Witness, with a confident smile, walking gracefully and fanning herself, temporarily leaving her role as observer and playing with the role of princess or noblewoman, quite at home in the ornate Baroque hall.

A man—the same man who was sitting alone on the shore in the previous act—enters, carrying another man, apparently a corpse, on his shoulders. He stops at the centre of the hall with a serious, even accusatory gaze at the beholder. Then follows the affective culmination described in detail on the first pages of this essay (fig. 1). The man who choreographically twists and turns on the hall's tiled floor and under water is the same man who entered the hall with a corpse on his shoulders.

After this strongly affective sequence in a border zone between dance and death, the camera moves slowly, apparently randomly, around the hall, eventually zooming in on the image of a leopard painted on the tiled floor, another visual allusion to Visconti's film.

The scene shifts to the palace's magnificent staircase. Dancers are seen rolling and sliding down the stairs, partially recalling the choreography of the man under water, but less vigorously, as if the power had left their bodies and they unresistingly follow the law of gravity. The Witness appears in the staircase, now back in her role as non-involved observer. The sound of church bells. End of act two.

In contrast to the first act, mainly set in vast landscapes and dominated by a straightforward filmic language, act two is thus framed by the palace milieu and characterized by a dreamlike, choreographic mode. The third act, then, opening with the same song as the first, initially returns to the sea and the straightforward tone. The small boat from the end of act one has now reached calm water close to the shore; its motor is off,



Figure 5. Isaac Julien, *Western Union: Small Boats*, 2007, still from video.

and the men onboard seem to sleep—or are they deceased? The red t-shirt is still floating at the edge of the water. Tourists are on their way in small boats to spend their day swimming and sunbathing in a small bay next to the *Scala dei Turchi*. Sounds of gentle waves and children playing are eventually overshadowed by a dark, menacing electronic soundscape as the camera zooms in on five dead bodies lined up on the beach, covered by metallic blankets, a mere stone's throw from the unknowing (or unconcerned?) tourists (fig. 5). Jarring details of the deceased, such as sandy toes protruding from under a metallic blanket, are juxtaposed with relaxed tourists, walking in the water, playing with a ball, lounging under their parasols. For a moment, the artwork abandons its open tone and its subtle play with tensions and ambiguities, shouting its message right in the face of the beholder: it is your looking away, your unwillingness to care, that allows this ongoing human catastrophe to continue.

Everything turns black, as if the work implodes under the pressure of its own horrendous imagery. A rapid, stressful drum rhythm emerges out of the dark, forcing its way into the body of the beholder, impossible to defend oneself against. When the image reappears, it is under water again. Human bodies recall the choreographed death struggle of the second act, but this time their movements are less vigorous, as if they

are in a state of giving up their resistance. The intensity of the drum rhythm increases until it becomes almost unbearable, the bodies sinking and sinking. Black again, and silence.

A peaceful sound of a distant boat engine, a harmonious chime of bells, small boats crossing a streak of sunshine on the calm mirror of the water, the Witness watching the scene, sitting high up on the *Scala dei Turchi*. No visible trace of the tragedy. The scene shifts one last time, to a close-up of a black sleeveless t-shirt, slowly lifted up from the water and held by a male hand, its water dripping and running back to the sea.

Affective knowledge

The concept of affect, part of aesthetic theory since Aristotle and with important philosophical contributions by Spinoza and Bergson, has attracted renewed interest over the last decades, partly thanks to the impact of the works of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and their English translator and introducer, Brian Massumi.[14] An "affective turn" has been proclaimed by many, but also contested by some: as is often the case when theoretical concepts become fashionable, the concept of affect sometimes tends to lose its edge and applicability, to signify everything and nothing at the same time.[15] Is affect just another word for emotion or feeling? If not, how to distinguish between them? Is affect primarily about reception, i.e. the subjective response of the reader, beholder or audience? Or is it rather about certain qualities and potentials of the text or the artwork? Where is affect situated? Here is neither the place to enter into the debate on the affective turn, nor to delve into the etymological and philosophical subtleties of the concept. For the moment I confine myself to proposing that the current interest in affects forms part of a gradual shift of attention within the humanities and social sciences, from meaning to effect, from semiosis to experience, from representation to presence, from structure to process, from the rational to the sensuous, from the linguistic to the material and embodied.[16]

Two scholars have been of particular importance for my understanding of affect, and for suggesting ways in which an at times elusive philosophical concept could be used as a practicable and productive tool for

14. Deleuze & Guattari 1980; Massumi 2002.

15. On the "affective turn", see e.g. Ticineto Clough & Halley 2007; Gregg & Seigworth 2010; La Caze & Lloyd 2011, pp. 1–13. On the questioning of an affective turn, see Rose 2012, pp. 201–211; Brinkema 2014; van Alphen & Jirsa 2019b.

16. On this shift, see e.g. Fischer-Lichte 2004. See also van Alphen 2008, pp. 21–22.

the exploration of the workings of art: media scholar Eugenie Brinkema and literary theorist Ernst van Alphen.

Brinkema approaches the concept with a critical edge, pointing out (at least) two recurrent fallacies in the current discourse on affects. The first fallacy is the idea that the study of affect—understood as something immediate and automatic that takes place before or beyond language—does not require deep attention to formal aspects of the studied text, film or work of art; that it does not require what Brinkema calls "close reading". These kinds of shortcuts past the strenuous work of reading or observing closely, Brinkema asserts, would only lead to a repetition of the general and already known. Affects, in all their manifold, shifting forms and appearances, are only graspable through the scholar's deep attention to formal idiosyncrasies and contingencies of the studied text or artwork, through "an analysis that allows the particularities of any individual text to disrupt those terms known in advance, to challenge the forms of the affects one is claiming those very texts provoke".[17] In the context of this essay, it is interesting to notice the link hereby established between Brinkema's critical approach to the study of affects, and English's insistence on "deep sustained attention" in the description of a work of art. (By the way, it could also be noted that the wording, "close reading", discloses Brinkema's implicit understanding of the written text as the paradigmatic medium, even though she mainly deals with the visual/audial/kinetic medium of film.)

The second fallacy, according to Brinkema, is the tendency among many scholars and critics to look for the affects within their own personal experiences. "It is often", she states, "*her* felt stirrings, *his* intense disgust that comprises the specific affective case study."[18] Such an account of the scholar's sensations and emotions while reading a text or watching a film is an impasse that can never "open up avenues for thought and investigation".[19] Rather, the study should focus on the ways in which affects take shape in the details of the artwork's specific "forms and temporal structures".[20]

I agree with Brinkema that a scholar's account of their individual affective experiences in the encounter with a text or an artwork is not enough for a study that wants to reach a deeper understanding of the affective

17. Brinkema 2014, p. xvi.
18. Brinkema 2014, p. 31.
19. Brinkema 2014, p. 34.
20. Brinkema 2014, p. 37.

operations of art. However, I think that it could be a productive method; that a reflective registering, and tentative translation into words, of the interpreter's affective response to a work of art could form part of the process of getting to know that work and its affective operations. If the sources of an artwork's affective powers—as suggested by Brinkema—are to be found in its forms and temporal structures, then the scholar's affective responses to the artwork could be regarded as *symptoms* of exactly those forms and structures. In the same way as a fever, rash or blood count are symptoms by means of which the physician may trace and define the physiological and mental whole of a patient's state of health, a scholar could look at their own affective reactions and responses as symptoms of the complex workings of an artwork. Hence, I propose an interpretive practice that constantly shifts between a deep sustained attention to the particularities and idiosyncrasies of the artwork *and* a close reflective registering of one's own affective response to it.

In my description of *Western Union: Small Boats*, I have consequently endeavoured to put my own affective experiences of the artwork into words, not as an answer to the question of the artwork's affective capacities, but as a way to get sight of, and clarify, the forms and structures where the affects take shape. If we get back to the affective culmination of the second act, as described earlier in this essay: what is it in the artwork that brings about my affective response, my bodily sensations and my increasing pulse rate (fig. 1)? It seems to be the forceful movements of the man on the floor and under water, the way he seems to desperately try to break out of a confined, suffocating space, together with the increasing pace of the shifting clips; but also the collision between two apparently incompatible bodily motions: the transient beauty of dance and the desperate horror of a death struggle. And what is it that makes the underwater scene at the end of act three almost physically unbearable? At least a part of the answer seems to lie within the tension between the frantic drum rhythm and the slowly, unresistingly sinking bodies. More generally, the affective operations of *Western Union: Small Boats* mostly seem to be situated in bodily movements and postures, shifts in tempo and changes between soft and abrupt visual and audial transitions, and in the relation between sound and image, a relation that is often fraught with conflict.

If Brinkema's critical approach points out limits for the study of affects, clarifying what is *not* a productive affective interpretation of art, van Alphen suggests a useful, practicable model for the study of "affective

operations of art and literature", to quote the title of one of his articles on the issue.[21] Together with Tomáš Jirsa, researcher in comparative literature, van Alphen suggests that affects be regarded as a process of three consecutive stages (stages that are often mixed up in the current discourse on affects, resulting in confusion). The affective operations of an artwork could schematically be divided in the following stages: 1. The formal characteristics of the artwork as a trigger of affect; 2. Affect (triggered by the artwork) as an intensity or resonance within the body of the beholder; 3. The bodily affect in the beholder as a potential trigger of emotions and imagination, but also thoughts.[22]

To regard affects in this way, as a processual series of stages, has at least three important implications. First, that affects are social rather than personal. Their place is not within me, but rather in the encounter between me and another person, an artwork, or another kind of object that might trigger affects. The chain might be prolonged: my affective response to an artwork could in its turn trigger affects in another person. (A small but important distinction is noticeable here between van Alphen and Brinkema: while they both mostly situate affect within the forms and temporal structures of the artwork, van Alphen also places strong emphasis on the encounter between artwork and beholder.) The second implication is that relations between humans and artworks (or other objects) seem to be less hierarchical than is often taken for granted. If we usually tend to understand the act of interpretation as an act of taking control of an artwork by means of the interpreter's gaze and conceptual tools, we could just as well consider the artwork as the initiator of the interpretative process, triggering an affective response in the body of the interpreter which, in its turn, triggers thoughts about the artwork. The third implication, finally, is that there is a strong link between affects (body, pre-language) and thoughts or cognitive operations (mind, language): an affect, triggered by an artwork, may in its turn trigger a cognitive process. In this context, it could be noted that Julien makes a similar connection, suggesting that the bodily movements of dance provide a way of thinking and, by extension, of knowing.[23]

This further suggests that the affective turn, if embraced in a meaningful way, is not about replacing meaning with effect, semiosis with

21. van Alphen 2008.

22. van Alphen & Jirsa 2019b, p. 4. van Alphen and Jirsa refer to Spinoza who distinguishes between stages 2 and 3 by means of the words *affectus* and *affectio*.

23. Julien 2013, pp. 175–176.

experience, or the linguistic with the corporeal, but rather about opening up a wider and richer field for approaching and getting to know the surrounding world, including its works of art; to enable a productive play between meaning *and* affect, representation *and* presence, mind *and* body. The whole idea of separating what seems to belong to the body from what seems to belong to the mind is undermined by the simple act of me writing this text: it would never have come into existence without the interaction of body (my fingertips dancing on the keyboard) and mind—and I am reluctant to establish exactly where in that interaction the words you just read have emerged.

One point of including affect in the act of interpreting an artwork is that it enables this wider field and richer play between what van Alphen distinguishes as "allegorical" versus "affective" reading.[24] The one is simply poorer without the other. Let us return once again to *Western Union: Small Boats*: it seems reasonable to state that the red t-shirt, floating at the edge of the water towards the end of act one, serves as a synecdoche for a deceased migrant, but it does not seem to capture the full experience of watching that particular scene. The allegorical meaning of the t-shirt is embedded in a whole world of sensuous impressions and experiences: the slow movements of water, the woman carefully lifting the t-shirt, her way of holding it with arms stretched, looking at it while the water runs and drips slowly back to the sea from where it came. Exactly what the movements, textures, gazes, muscular tension, dripping and running of water *do*, what they add to the synecdoche, is hard to put into words. But they find their way into the body of the beholder, where they resonate with the allegorical meaning, deepening and modulating its impact.

Another example from the first act is the close-up of the mooring ring with two mooring ropes that tighten and slacken, following the rhythm of the gentle waves (fig. 3). The close-up in itself is a cinematic device that calls for attention: "Look at this, this is significant!" But the allegorical reading seems to leave us groping in the dark. Do the ropes and ring want to say something about connection and safety, underlining the calm confidence of the fishermen? A safe harbour? Maybe, but that seems a rather shallow and superficial interpretation in relation to the complexity and precision of the work as a whole. Still, the ring and ropes possess gravity and presence; I sense their heft as their calm rhythm gives rise to a muscular response in my body. Unlike the instance of the red

24. van Alphen 2008, pp. 29–30.

t-shirt, where allegorical and affective interpretation seem to support each other, in this case the affective understanding almost stands alone. I am convinced that the scene plays an essential role in the whole of the artwork, but it eludes my efforts to translate it into written words.

Affective knowledge, as in the essay's title, was initially thought of as little more than a clash between two words that are usually sorted into different categories: one pointing toward the realm of the body, the senses and the irrational, the other to the mind, rationality and system-building. What happens if they are brought together? Could anything productive come out of the clash? In the course of my explorations of the affective workings of *Western Union: Small Boats*, and my reading of current literature on affect, I have come to believe that *affective knowledge* could be put to work as a theoretical concept. Indeed, it already is, within the field of pedagogy, where it refers to the ways in which knowledge and the process of learning may bring forth affects and emotions, and how these affects in their turn could serve a pedagogic purpose. That is, the process of learning may trigger affects that, in their turn, trigger further learning.[25]

Here, I propose that it might also be a valuable concept outside the field of pedagogy, albeit with a slightly different meaning. Inspired by van Alphen's and Jirsa's model—a work of art may trigger affects in the beholder, affects that in their turn may trigger thoughts and "open a space for the not yet known"—I suggest that *affective knowledge* refers to the capacity of affects to bring forth new knowledge. Rather than putting the affects aside as irrelevant, or even as an obstacle to the interpretative process, I suggest that the scholar's affective responses to a work of art could play an important part in the process of getting to know the work.

Approaching the end of my essay, I would like to return to the call by Margaretha Thomson, the initiator of this book, to delve into the issues of *Knowing Visual Art*. In response to the call, I set out to explore possible relations between *knowing*, *art* and *affects*. In connection with that, I also wanted to strike a blow for a kind of slow, humble description of art, mildly questioning the virtues of a kind of more theoretically driven art analysis that seems to want to domesticate and discipline the art. In that endeavour, I found support in Darby English's "looking with soft eyes" and Jane Bennett's "methodological naïveté". More unexpectedly, I

25. Ainsworth & Bell 2020.

also found support in current theories of affect: in Eugenie Brinkema's insistence on "close reading", and Ernst van Alphen's call to "slow down". That coincidence strengthened my sense that I was onto something—and that that something might open up for a less hierarchical and dominant relation between art historian and artwork, interpreter and object.

Throughout the modern history of art history, the art historian's established position has been modelled after the paradigmatic Renaissance artist before a painting made with central perspective: a mind without body placing itself at a specific distance from the work of art, in order to control it with the (one-eyed) gaze. Even if the idea of the scholar's detached, objective gaze has faltered in recent decades, at least on a theoretical level, it can be claimed that it still dominates art-historical prose. Inspired by English and Bennett, but also by Brinkema and van Alphen, I think that it is high time to reconsider the relation between art and art historian. For the art historian, it could mean leaving the detached position modelled after the Renaissance artist and, in its place, searching for a more humble and entwined, less hierarchical and objectifying relation to the artwork; to engage in the materiality and sensuality of the work of art, not only with gaze and intellect, but also with body and senses; to take the affective as seriously as the discursive—or what van Alphen calls "the allegorical"; to approach the work of art as an equal part in a dialogical knowledge process, and to be prepared to be affected and changed by that process. Brinkema is after something similar when she asks for "an analysis that allows the particularities of any individual text to disrupt those terms known in advance".[26]

Finally, I propose that the juxtaposition of *knowledge* and *art*, the core issue of this anthology, should not be about squeezing art into a prevailing Western concept of knowledge (as discursive, systematic, limited to the mind, etc.), but rather about the capacity of art to open up and push the limits of knowledge as we think of it. The act of juxtaposing knowledge and art might performatively do something to the notion of knowledge. It might bring forth qualities and aspects of knowledge, such as bodily and embodied, sensuous and sensual, aesthetic, mobile, transient, transboundary. *Knowing Visual Art*, the title of this anthology, calls for a closer connection between aesthetics, affects and epistemology.

26. Brinkema 2014, p. xvi.

Bibliography

AINSWORTH, STEPH & HUW BELL 2020. 'Affective knowledge versus affective pedagogy: The case of native grammar learning', *Cambridge Journal of Education* 50:5, pp. 597–614.

BENNETT, JANE 2010. *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.

BRINKEMA, EUGENIE 2014. *The Forms of the Affects*, Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.

DELEUZE, GILLES & FÉLIX GUATTARI 1980. *Mille Plateaux. Capitalisme et schizophrénie*, vol. 2, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit.

ENGLISH, DARBY 2019. *To Describe a Life. Notes from the Intersection of Art and Race Terror*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

ENGLISH, DARBY 2021. '"How to look with soft eyes": Darby English on description as method', *In the Foreground. Conversations on Art & Writing*, podcast with Caro Fowler, The Clark: Research and Academic, season 2, 9 February, https://www.clarkart.edu/Research-Academic/Podcast/Season-2/Darby-English, accessed 30 January 2023.

FISCHER-LICHTE, ERIKA 2004. *Ästhetik des Performativen*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

GILBERT, ALAN 2008. 'Isaac Julien: Metro Pictures', *Modern Painters* 20:1, p. 91.

GONZÁLES, JENNIFER A. 2011. 'Sea dreams: Isaac Julien's *Western Union: Small Boats*', in Saloni Mathur ed., *The Migrant's Time. Rethinking Art History and Diaspora*, Williamstown, Massachusetts: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, pp. 115–129.

GREGG, MELISSA & GREGORY SEIGWORTH eds 2010. *The Affect Theory Reader*, Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.

JULIEN, ISAAC 2002. 'The Long Road: Isaac Julien in conversation with B. Ruby Rich', *Art Journal* 61:2, pp. 51–67.

JULIEN, ISAAC 2007. *Western Union Small Boats*, https://www.isaacjulien.com/projects/western-union-small-boats, accessed 3 February 2023.

JULIEN, ISAAC 2013. *Riot*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art.

LA CAZE, MARGUERITE & HENRY MARTYN LLOYD 2011. 'Editors' introduction: Philosophy and the "affective turn"', *Parrhesia* 13, pp. 1–13.

MASSUMI, BRIAN 2002. *Parables for the Virtual. Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.

PETERSEN, ANNE RING 2018. 'Migratory aesthetics and the politics of migration: A case study of Isaac Julien's *Western Union. Small Boats*', in Lise Pennington ed., *Isaac Julien. Western Union: Small Boats*, Aarhus: ARoS Focus, pp. 85–99.

ROSE, JULIAN 2012. 'Trading spaces: A roundtable on art and architecture', *Artforum* 51:2, pp. 201–211.

TICINETO CLOUGH, PATRICIA & JEAN HALLEY eds 2007. *The Affective Turn. Theorizing the Social*, Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.

TOMASI DI LAMPEDUSA, GIUSEPPE 1958. *Il Gattopardo*, Milan: Feltrinelli.

VAN ALPHEN, ERNST 2008. 'Affective operations of art and literature', *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 53/54, pp. 20–30.

VAN ALPHEN, ERNST & TOMÁŠ JIRSA eds 2019a. *How to Do Things with Affects. Affective Triggers in Aesthetic Forms and Cultural Practices*, Leiden: Brill.

VAN ALPHEN, ERNST & TOMÁŠ JIRSA 2019b. 'Introduction: Mapping affective operations', in Ernst van Alphen & Tomáš Jirsa eds, *How to Do Things with Affects. Affective Triggers in Aesthetic Forms and Cultural Practices*, Leiden: Brill, pp. 1–14.