



THE UNTAMABLE HAND

HEDWIG HOUBEN

Exhibition:

from 15 May to 26 July 2025

Opening: Wednesday 14 May, from 6pm to 9pm

Curators: Émilie Renard

PRESS RELEASE

Wednesday to Friday, from 11am to 7pm
Saturday, from 2pm to 7pm · Free entrance
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BÉTONSALON CENTRE FOR ART & RESEARCH

For the past fifteen years, Hedwig Houben has been reflecting on production in a dialogue that initially involves two protagonists: the figure of the artist and the sculptures she produces. This dialogue between an omniscient narrator or unwilling spokesperson of the identities she creates has often taken the form of a lecture-performance, recorded and then broadcast on site alongside sculptures, in an exhibition. Using manipulable forms in plasticine or plaster, she has created a vast gallery of characters endowed with transitional identities. Occasionally, the artist allows others - family, students, institutional staff, collectors - to play the role of guide-interpreters of her work, offering their expert perspectives as people involved in the various processes of making, transforming, mediating or maintaining her works.

As is often the case with Houben, this exhibition at Bétonsalon originates from a real-life experience that is interwoven with other accounts of similar situations and the concepts they convey. It all began with the artist's hand suddenly shaking uncontrollably during a public speech. From this patent dysfunction, Houben draws several consequences, notably the representation of an independence of the members of her body from her own will, the manifestation of an open conflict. She also notices how reflexes, emotions and gestures are much faster than any articulated language and outpace it. From this physiological experience and inverted rhythm, Hedwig Houben draws a broader reflection on the agentivity of a hand that does not obey the subject's intentions, places them in an uncomfortable situation. Frees itself from any injunction to be productive, the Hand prefers instead improvisation and rambling. Beyond the discomfort generated by this loss of control, this situation raises the question of the real or presumed vulnerability of the unity of a self, manifesting a split through the simple resistance of a body part who no longer conforms either to the expectations of a subject or to the social conventions.

Although the Hand is a recurring character in Hedwig Houben's performances, here it acquires a new independence: it acts first as an entity with a dual personality, whose duality is highlighted by the impossibility of superimposing the right and left hands. In massive, stable forms, two outstretched hands oppose each other: one palmar, open, hollow and helpful, collects and distributes; the other dorsal, also flat but full, is available to no one.

What she calls the 'Pleasant hand' and the 'Unreliable hand' are two sides of the same hand, the right. While coordination between the two hands is generally a sign of good cooperation, Hedwig Houben likes to undo any directive body schema to imagine their conflicts, with one seeking to gain the upper hand over the other, and the other ignoring the first. In this scenario, left-handedness is a guarantee of emancipation from the cultural habitus that hinders their agentivity, leading her towards a form of regressive idleness, a salvific surrender. Elsewhere, the Hand is broken down into several protruding fingers, fixed on extra-flexible rods and equipped with cameras that can be manipulated to point and film from a non-optical point of view.

With this visual device live streaming disordered interactions of images, Hedwig Houben seeks to decentre herself from the narrative scheme generated by the perspective of a single person, preferring instead the visual cacophony of an incomplete, unprogrammed, spontaneous multitude.

The issues of interdependence that run through this exhibition are questions that Hedwig Houben addresses to herself and, more broadly, to her status as an artist and polyactive worker, but also to her dependence on and attempts at autonomy from the art world, a world that, moreover, knows how to plead collective causes while perpetuating the atomization of authorship within its own organizational structures. Without seeking to theoretically resolve these dilemmas common to many artists, the primary purpose of this exhibition would be to collectively formulate these questions, to find public forms that can be shared, and to engage with them in their most unresolved aspects.

↘ This exhibition is supported by the Mondriaan Fund and the Embassy of the Netherlands in Paris.

Biography

Hedwig Houben (1983) is a Dutch artist who lives and works in Brussels. She creates filmed performances in which she explores the relationship between subjects and objects and the role the latter play in shaping our identity. Using malleable plasticine sculptures that she makes and unmakes, she engages in a dialogue with these constantly evolving creations or with herself in a controlled flow of words, thwarting the codes and expectations of conferences and official speeches.

Her work has been presented in numerous exhibitions and festivals such as: 'SWEEP, TAP, SWOOOOOP' at MHKA, Antwerp (2019), 'You and I' at Spike Island, Bristol (2016), 'UnScene', at Wiels, Brussels (2015), 'Don't You Know Who I Am? Art After Identity Politics', MHKA, Antwerp (2014), "Six Possibilities for a Sculpture", La Loge, Brussels (2013). With Émilie Renard, she has participated in four group shows: 'Le corps fait grève' at Bétonsalon (2021), 'Tes mains dans mes chaussures' (2016-2017, co-curator Vanessa Desclaux) and 'La langue de ma bouche' (in duo with Jean-Charles de Quillacq, 2018) at La Galerie, centre d'art contemporain, Noisy-le-Sec and 'The Bridegroom Suites' (co-cur. Hugues Decointet, with the Guy de Cointet Society) during Performance Day at the Centre d'art de la Ferme du Buisson, Noisiel (2019).

From 2015 to 2023, she was professor at the Art and Research Department of the St. Joost School of Art and Design in Breda (Netherlands), which she recently left, just as she left her gallery in 2020. Since 2019, she has joined forces with Rob Leijdekkers and Brenda Tempelaar to reflect on the conditions of artistic production based on collective experiences. Today, alongside her artistic practice, she restores furniture.



Borborygmus (2019), Lecture performance video, 20', plasticine attributes, Permekemuseum Jabbeke, Belgium.



Hedwig Houben performing Phewzlopffffffffff (2019), performance video, 20', plaster, plaster bandage, aluminium, steel, in « The Body goes on Strike », Bétonsalon, 2021, Photo: M HKA/Christine Clinckx.



Hedwig Houben, The Hand, the Eye, and It, 2013, performance as part of '.perf', Geneva.
Photo © Emmanuelle Bayart.



De Freule en Gladiool (2018), Video, 19', hobbyfoam and plasticine, Esch, The Netherlands.



Pillar Mata Dupont activating Appendix (2020), part of the immune system at A Tale of a Tub, Rotterdam, The Netherlands, Photo: LNDWstudio.

Upcoming

Orla Barry
"Spin Spin Scheherazade"
From 17 October to 20 December
Opening : 16 October

Practical
information

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Access :
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Free entrance
from Wednesday to Friday,
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All events are free of charge.
The entire space is wheelchair-accessible. Group visits are free of charge with advanced booking.

Please check our programme on social media: Instagram · LinkedIn:
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