

GESTURE (BALLOON), 2016, sculpture,  
pigmented plaster and wood, 35 x 18 cm.

All images courtesy the artist.

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INSIDE BURGER COLLECTION



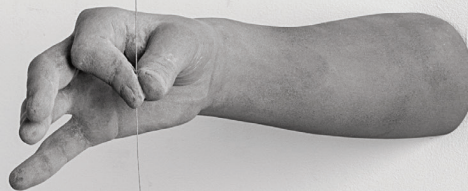
# T H E V O I C E O F T H I N G S <sup>1</sup>

By Nicolas de Oliveira and Nicola Oxley

*Time is the name of something which  
is consciousness.<sup>2</sup>*

Belgian artist Hans Op de Beeck combines painting, sculpture, drawing, photography, installation, sound, scenography and film. This apparent melding of mediums was noted by the critic Rosalind Krauss in her seminal book *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (2000). Her slim volume showcases the work of another Belgian artist, Marcel Broodthaers, whose ideas coincided with practices that were “emptied into the generic category of art: art-at-large, or art-in-general.”<sup>3</sup> Though both artists share broad concerns of abjection, social critique and poetics, Op de Beeck’s practice has a particular affinity with immersive experiences.

*The Collectors’ House* (2016), shown at Art Basel’s “Unlimited” sector, and its sister piece *Silent Library* (2016), which was first seen at Frieze London, are emblematic works by Op de Beeck. These walk-in environments, entirely fashioned from plaster, one gray and the other white, contain stately, well-ordered interiors. Both installations include selections from the artist’s ongoing “Vanitas” works (2012– ), reliefs from



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<sup>1</sup> Francis Ponge, *The Voice of Things* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1972.)

<sup>2</sup> Hollis Frampton, *An Evening with Hollis Frampton*, 8th March 1973, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

<sup>3</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000), p. 10.

“Archetypal Landscapes” (2016) and a number of life-sized human figures from the “Characters” (2016) sculptural series. While these are entirely new works made for the particular exhibitions, some of their parts remain familiar.

Op de Beek has actively refrained from presenting his works as autonomous and singular, electing to show them as a constructed, totalizing experience, a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Consequently, the artist is both an engaged maker complicit in every material process, and a dedicated collector and choreographer of his own oeuvre. The artist seeks to construct hermetic interior worlds via careful selection from a personal store of concepts and physical components.

The theorist Graham Harman argues that “we are all objects within a level playing field of things, processes and institutions constituted as quantifiable entities in which no one ‘object’ takes on more significance than any other.”<sup>4</sup> This inclination to categorize, archive and recombine is a recurring preoccupation for the artist. All that is restaged is dredged from the artist’s memory, and thus drawn from lived experience.

*Remembering is not the re-excitation of innumerable fixed, lifeless and fragmentary traces. It is an imaginative reconstruction or construction, built out of the relation of our attitude toward a whole active mass of organized past reactions or experience.*<sup>5</sup>

Memory thus induces a quasi-curatorial methodology of display.

The elements in Op de Beek’s work are familiar tropes curated from everyday observation. There are the emblems of institutionalized and commercial celebration in the form of amusement arcades, fun-fair rides, Ferris wheels, merry-go-rounds and colored bunting. We also see the paraphernalia of display—vitrines, plinths, shelves, book cases, as well as domestic furniture of every kind. There are skulls, bottles, crockery, ashtrays and even tiny, individually fashioned blackberries. The artist draws and sculpts topographies, seascapes, clouds and trees.

All of these things are brought together to create tuned spaces. Op de Beek’s spaces, while immaculately rendered or sculpted, do not seek to replicate the impression of reality. Instead, they mine the gap between reality and imagination by revealing the role of fiction. Stories are not only narratives of people and deeds, but also of places, and in this respect are closely aligned with the constructed quality of atmospheres—seemingly intangible, mutable ambiances, staged ecosystems of perception. Here, space melds language and image.

On the surface, Op de Beek’s spaces appear designed to draw us into their narrative, inviting the spectator to become immersed in aesthetic beauty and an unsettling awe within the sublime. However, carefully secreted within the experience lies an ever-present seed of anticlimax, not found in material imperfection—a crack in the glaze or a hurriedly finished artifact—but introduced by the artist in the form of kitsch.

Philosopher Walter Benjamin writes in his chapter “Dream Kitsch”:

*No longer does the dream reveal a blue horizon. The dream has gone gray . . . Dreams are now a shortcut to banality.*<sup>6</sup>

Benjamin equates the effects of capitalism with the growth of kitsch, a cultural phenomenon associated with mass-produced, cheap artifacts that find their origins in the industrial revolution of the 19th century. Kitsch is used pejoratively as an indicator of popular taste promulgated by the expansion of capitalism. Benjamin thus argues presciently that our very dreams have been infiltrated by the iconography of a culture governed by financial gain.

Op de Beek’s sculptures, paintings and installations thus meld aspects of “good taste,” which is rooted in a patrician knowledge culture, with elements of kitsch that are items of dubious popular taste. This is especially apparent in the artist’s still-life works begun in 2006. Works such as *Peacock Vanitas* (2015) show a display of artifacts carved from gray gypsum atop a plinth—a skull, a set of candlesticks, fruit, an ashtray with a half-smoked cigarette, some crushed drinking cans—all watched over by a peacock perched on a dead tree stump. The work refers to the codified arrangements of perishable goods in Flemish Baroque nature morte paintings, yet it is self-abasing. It is



(This page)  
**THE COLLECTOR’S HOUSE**, 2016, mixed-media sculptural installation, 20 x 12.5 x 4 m.

(Opposite page, top)  
**LOCATION (6)**, 2008, mixed-media sculptural installation, mist and artificial light, d: 18 x 4 m.

(Opposite page, bottom)  
**THE QUIET VIEW**, 2015, mixed-media sculptural installation, 21 x 10.2 x 6.6 m. Permanent installation at Abdijsite Herkenrode, Belgium.



not that the objects themselves, which refer to ideas of mortality and decay, are in poor taste; rather, it is their overabundance, their repetition and the insertion of inappropriate objects into the constellation that is designed to promote the very sentimentality of kitsch. The sculpture underlines the artist's sense of the absurd, while also asserting that even those with money and taste are not immune from making purchases of questionable taste and are just as likely to fall prey to hubris and vanity.

The "Location Series," begun in 1998, is central to the artist's practice. One of the shared features of these installations is that they depict spaces that are at once commonplace and deeply invested with emotional content. They are drawn from recollection and then rendered as semi-fictional spaces. Echoing the panoramas of the 19th century, *Location (6)* (2008) shows us an infinite white world punctuated with wispy, careworn trees without shadows that display a wordless sorrow. The central chamber from which the panorama unfolds suggests the artist's preference for solitary, contemplative viewing.

The work does not purport to show a real place, but triggers memories in the viewers' minds. It distances itself from the physical quality of nature and plunges into the realm of the symbolic. This reduction strips the display of narrative, augmenting its metaphorical presence: this is not a particular snowy landscape, it represents every such place. Op de Beeck's staged world is laid out with the eye in mind; the eye explores the landscape up to the horizon, and establishes a contact with the object that transcends sight, which evolves from a purely "scopic" function that emanates from the body to one that receives stimuli, as in the event of touch. A sculptural object does not require handling, since the eyes themselves have an ability to divine surface and texture. To "touch" with the eyes invokes a slowing of perception to the point of intimacy.

Telematics and virtual technologies have succeeded in substituting reality with signs and symbols of the real, whereby sensation and excitement can be fabricated, and individual experience is replaced with collective sensation through the wonders of artifice. Op de Beeck accentuates the extraordinary as a cardinal feature of the everyday. He does so by restaging the ordinary as the subject of his installations. The marvelous and the sublime exist among us, but it takes the artist's skill to manifest their presence.

The immersive installation *The Quiet View* (2015) occupies the site of Herkenrode Abbey, Hasselt, Belgium. As with *Location (6)*, it occupies its own architectural pavilion. The structure that houses the work was designed and built in association with Belgian architectural firm *Mimesis*, and combines a long, enclosed ramp with a viewing



<sup>4</sup> Graham Harman, quoted in Catherine Elwes, *Installation and the Moving Image* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2015), p.48.

<sup>5</sup> Frederick Bartlett, quoted in Andrew Hoskins, "New Memory," in *Vision, Memory and Media*, ed. by Andreas Brøgger and Omar Kholeif (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), p. 80.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. by MW Jennings et al, trans. by E. Jephcott et al (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 236.

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**SEA OF TRANQUILLITY**, 2010, still from HD video with color and sound: 29 min 50 sec. Co-produced by the National Centre for Visual Arts - Ministry of Culture and Communication (F), the Flanders Audiovisual Fund (B), Emmanuelle and Michael Guttman and Le Fresnoy - Studio National des Arts Contemporains.

(Opposite page)

**PARADE**, 2012, still from HD video with color and sound: 11 min 25 sec.

chamber clad in gray steel. Once inside the dwelling, Op de Beeck's installation reveals a staged view through a large window overlooking a constructed landscape of rocks and trees framing a still body of water. The work promotes spiritual contemplation, since it is built on the site of the abbey's church, which burned down in the 19th century. As in the snowy view of *Location (6)*, *The Quiet View* presents a choreographed archetypal landscape with roots in culture through the tradition of painting, rather than showing a truthful representation of a natural place. Unlike the mutable, seasonal quality of reality, artifice endures in an arrested, unchanging state.

These large-scale works combine aspects of external contemplation and introspection. Here, the outside world and the self interpenetrate and mutually define each other in a relationship whose boundaries are continuously being reassessed. *Location (7)*, which was created in 2011 and shown at the Venice Biennale that same year, ushers the viewer into an apartment overlooking a walled garden with a fountain at night. The room is equipped with various items of furniture, and shows signs of recent habitation via cluttered everyday objects sculpted in gray plaster on various surfaces. The recently vacated space gives the impression of arrested time.

The window appears frequently in the artist's work, providing a two-way passage between internal and external space. *Location (5)* (2004), which has been located at the Towada Art Center in Japan since 2008, emphasizes the use of the window as a translucent membrane to separate a directly experienced world from our sight. Once again, the artist deploys a painterly framing of the view. The spectator steps into a motorway cafeteria overlooking a deserted, nocturnal road that sweeps away into the distance. The interior is transformed into an observation chamber, or a vantage point. All that the second space contains becomes pure representation, and brings forth a specific spatial relationship between subject and object, viewer and viewed. It relates generally to two-dimensional work and to our relationship with illusion. Lens-based mediums such as photography and cinema have greatly contributed to this debate by integrating aspects of lived time into a compressed, abstracted space.

It should not be assumed, however, that to place something under glass renders it unambiguous. Its entrapment actually creates a further space, visually accessible, but otherwise beyond our grasp. Our other senses cease to function. Artists utilize these forms of separation and abstraction, not in order to confound the viewer, but because they have become integral codes to the perception and understanding of our surroundings.

In this light, it is worth recalling that the photograph *Location (7)* (2012) depicts precisely the view overlooking the garden with the fountain from its sculptural installation counterpart, while the photographic series "Rooms" (2013) shows a range of virtual interiors, each inhabited by a solitary figure. In these, it is as if single spectators had succeeded in crossing the threshold between real and pictorial space, and inserted themselves into these highly tuned images. Their gazes avoid visual contact and they remain absorbed within the confines of their hermetic architectural spaces, while the lack of reciprocity places the viewer in a voyeuristic position.

The role of the viewer has always concerned Op de Beeck, especially so in sculptural works that depict landscapes, buildings or interiors devoid of protagonists. Over time, bodies have begun to appear more frequently in his large-scale paintings and installations. These fulfill a number of functions: they exist as sculptural or compositional forms, as protagonists or actors, and as placeholders with whom the spectator can identify.

The German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich's elegiac landscapes often depict a figure standing in the foreground of the picture. The figure, facing away from us, partially blocks our sightline. It is arguable, however, that he invites a circumspective gaze of the image that he is already a part of. Therefore, the figure in the image is absorbed by what he sees and invites us to literally put ourselves in his place. The term "autoscropy," the





hallucination of seeing oneself, becomes a reality here, as the figure in the painting is none other than the viewer who is looking at the picture.

One of Op de Beeck's watercolors from the series "Constructions" (2008) reprises the subject of Friedrich's painting, but replaces the alpine view with a framed painting of an exotic landscape in a gallery. Accordingly, we stand outside the image, while picturing ourselves within it. We are always preceded by our own selves, like in a dream, simultaneously protagonists, scriptwriters and directors.

In art, the history of spatial perception is paramount; our perception and interpretation of space in the last 100 years alone have altered dramatically: Expressionism's distortion, Cubism's fractured perspectives, Surrealism's oneiric spaces, Minimalism's expanded field, and Conceptualism's void—each movement producing its own spatial coordinates.

Op de Beeck's large-scale installations return the qualities of stillness and slowness to the splintered experience of the spectator. The immersive quality of these spaces is often focused on a view that interiorizes an external spatial experience.

In order to develop these qualities, Op de Beeck has not shied away from using new technologies such as computer-generated imagery (CGI), rapid prototyping and 3D printing. In the video *Sea of Tranquillity* (2010), the artist makes extensive use of CGI to construct a virtual pleasure craft featuring every service and entertainment possible. Freed from labor, the passengers experience a state of permanent leisure. Suspended in a realm of never-ending sensual pleasure, their experience is comparable to that of the protagonists in *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), Alain Resnais's cult film based on a screenplay by nouvelle vague author Alain Robbe-Grillet. Op de Beeck's film was shown as part of a larger installation of the same name, which augmented the narrative experience by presenting waxworks of some

of the actors, showcases with artifacts, and even a vast model of the ship within an especially constructed architectural environment. A further component of the installation was a large exhibition catalog that contained a "virtual" novella written by authors Nicolas de Oliveira and Nicola Oxley. Oliveira and Oxley's text eschews a direct narrative structure, presenting a number of tableaux in which unseen forces move protagonists and objects, as if in an elaborate game of chance. The final addition to this artwork was launched in the form of an app, allowing audiences to download the moving images as portable miniatures.

The video *Parade* (2012) transposes the artist's protagonists to a theatrical setting, complete with a red-velvet curtain and a proscenium arch. A seemingly endless procession of people enters stage left and exits stage right, entirely absorbed in their actions. These ordinary people—schoolchildren, cyclists, hunters, lawyers, construction crews, a funeral cortege, a bride and even a toddler—are anonymous passers-by. They are protagonists in a scripted cycle of life and death, oblivious to their fate. Here, Op de Beeck asserts the so-called 180-degree rule employed in classic cinema, in which an imaginary line is drawn across the ground of a setting, compelling the protagonists to move along it without switching position, so as not to unsettle the viewer's spatial apprehension.

His oeuvre contains a number of other works that might be thematically linked to *Parade*, namely *All Together Now . . .* (2005), *Celebration* (2008) and *Celebration (Buenos Aires)* (2011). The first video work presents a continuous pan of guests seated at a funeral, followed by a wedding and a birthday celebration. The tracking shot appears to move along a straight line, though it actually follows a complete 360-degree rotation around a circular table. The two *Celebration* works chronicle scenes from a fixed camera angle, namely an elaborate, formal buffet staged in a rocky and mountainous desert,



(Top)  
**CELEBRATION (BUENOS AIRES)**, 2011, still from HD video transferred to Blu-Ray disc with color and sound: 5 min 39 sec.

(Bottom)  
**STAGING SILENCE (2)**, 2013, still from HD video transferred to Blu-Ray disc, black-and-white with sound: 20 min 48 sec.

complete with silver-service staff who never move, and a lengthy party on a rooftop. Despite the diversion provided by the action, the passage of time is palpable. Indeed we perceive time as a felt presence in these works.

The material changes brooked by the passage of time are referred to in a number of the artist's works, but especially in his animations *Gardening* (2001), *Places (Gardening (2))* (2004), *Night Time* (2015) and the "Staging Silence" films (2009–13). The animations bring together countless pencil drawings of changing landscapes and watercolor paintings of shifting locations. In all cases, material elements are subjected to changes as the seasons and the years roll by.

*Staging Silence 2* (2013) foregrounds Op de Beeck's activity as a director, a pursuit that has led to his writing and staging of a number of notable theater plays in recent years. In contrast to these full-scale productions, however, this work has an intensely miniaturized dimension. Shown as a "black-box" video installation, the monochromatic footage depicts a small stage on which scenarios involving everyday household objects, foodstuffs and constructions unfold, set to a soundtrack by the ambient composer Scanner. Op de Beeck writes:

*As in much of my work I'm trying to provide a sense of timelessness and privacy, and the seed of any number of possible narratives.*<sup>7</sup>

Hands appear in the margins of the screen, in the manner of a shadow play or puppet-show, to roll out the landscape like a carpet. Water is poured and becomes a shimmering sea, whose gentle waves are raised with long rods. An island is fashioned in its midst, made from half-peeled potatoes and a bonsai tree, whilst a boat is fastened to a pontoon. We can observe every gesture, and each subterfuge is revealed as the scenes unfold. The more the artist shows his hand and his artifice, the more it chimes with our imagination, and the more we believe in it. This seems paradoxical, since one would expect that only a surfeit of illusion would draw the viewer into the narrative. After all, we are accustomed to spectacles boasting seamless special effects, rather than the crude illusions in the circuses and dioramas of yesteryear. In the final sequence, a vast city emerges, built painstakingly from stacked cubes of sugar. Then, black rain is administered by watering cans, causing the buildings to melt and crumble into ruins.

This quality of the end-of-times pervades Op de Beeck's work. His apocalypse is, however, not of the grand kind. Rather, it takes place

gradually, almost imperceptibly. It is erosion that progressively dissolves the fabric of all matter and wipes away the lineage of all things.

*The Amusement Park* (2015), a portmanteau installation that combines influences and elements from previous sculptures, reprises aspects of the earlier *Merry-Go-Round (2)* (2005) installation. The amusements present cease to portend when closed, wrapped or switched off. We come to read them in reverse—that is, we see behind the facade, we recognize the falseness of their promises. Snow has settled on the ground and icy pools of frozen water punctuate the deserted nocturnal site. A carousel looms over the scene, with a black, funereal shape wrapped in its opaque protective cover. On the edges of the park, a dingy caravan is weakly illuminated by the flicker of a small log fire and its own tail lights, and a distant Ferris wheel is arrested in its motion. Gloom obscures the shapes of the objects, robbing them of all that made them innocuous and playful when fully functioning and visible. It is arguable that the effect of timing, combined with the partial visibility of the objects, renders them spectral: mere empty shells of their former selves that must be filled once more, perhaps with the audience's regret and fear.

This concept of absence is a recurring motif in the artist's practice. Vacancy may refer to an emptiness of a spatial, auditory or temporal order. It marks works that are ostensibly empty, but is also present in those that are filled with people, objects and activities. We are left with the impression that all our social pleasures and material diversions are but a brief prelude before we return to the void. Op de Beeck's oeuvre may then be interpreted as a tragic yet joyous railing against the dying of the light, in the moment before the inevitability of our end casts us into oblivion.

*Hans Op de Beeck is the subject of a major retrospective entitled "Out of the Ordinary" at Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, Germany, from April 9 to September 3, 2017.*



<sup>7</sup> Hans Op de Beeck, *Quiet Scenery and Wandering Extras* (Munich: Sammlung Goetz, 2014), p. 47.