

## Interview with Hans Op de Beeck

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Interviewer: Mitome Syaka (Towada Art Center)

### **What made you become an artist?**

As a child I was a rather shy, introvert boy, not into sports like the other boys of my generation who enjoyed playing football and other boyish things. I was mainly staying at home, indoors, making drawings and comics, like my brother, both of us immersed in our own fantasy worlds. My parents somehow always assumed that later I would do something creative in life. My interest in drawing and graphic novels then evolved towards the visual arts.

### **Your current activity as an artist revolves more around sculptural work rather than 2D work, however you started from drawing and painting. Was that your initial stage as an artist?**

I started at the art school here in Brussels in what today is called a bachelor's degree in painting. And then I did my master's in what then was called the 'Experimenteel Atelier', which was a multidisciplinary studio. I graduated with sculptural work, photography, and video work. Over the past twenty years, I have been creating large-scale immersive installations, like the one at the Towada Art Center. Today, the core of my work consists of immersive installations, sculptures, and video works.

Aside from that, I also create large watercolour paintings, photographic works, and texts. As a playwright, scenographer, and stage director I also started to be active in the theatre and opera world. I wrote and directed three plays, for which I also did the stage design and costumes.

But of course, in contrast to in my visual art, film, and theatre work, I do not consider an opera production as my own work; there I am a 'serving' artist, who provides a visual and dynamic platform to the composer and the soloists, the orchestra, and its conductor.

### **Is there common ground between your visual art and your performing arts productions?**

Whether it's visual arts or performing arts, it is very important to me to create an atmosphere that the audience can experience and easily relate to, without necessarily rationally understanding it. When you step into *Location(5)* in Towada Art Center, for example, you step into a staged night, you can sit down at a diner table, and you are invited to look through a panoramic window that offers a view on a handcrafted nocturnal landscape. I think every one of us can relate intuitively to the night, the motorway, being on the

road, the mood of the night, the calm and tranquility of such a moment. Such a setting triggers introspection: all those diverse thoughts that cross your mind when you're by yourself. Almost on automatic pilot, you fill the tank of your car, park the car, enter the motorway diner, sit down with your cup of coffee, and gaze outside at the horizon. Suddenly you somehow dissolve in time and space, into a mental no man's land.

When I make an installation or film or watercolour painting, I always hope that I can deliver a sense of calm, of tranquility to the viewer to start with, and departing from there I then smuggle in other questions about how we are, how we live, how we deal with time and space, how we deal with emotions, how we deal with each other, and, ultimately, how we deal with mortality, the idea that we have a short presence here on earth. As a spectator of visual art, myself, I also hope to find a sort of calm, inviting atmosphere rather than a loud, spectacular, or irritating one. That's not really my cup of tea [laughs].

**In *Location(5)*, your immersive installation at the Towada Art Center, you also make use of the presence of music, a soundtrack the spectator is immersed in when seated in the diner part. It consists of a compilation of strange instrumental '70s music. Why did you decide to add that auditory component?**

I was doubtful whether I would include music or not because most of my immersive installations, such as *Location(6)*, which is an evocation of an infinite snow landscape, are totally quiet, and the silence there truly serves the image.



*Location (6)* 2008  
Sculptural Installation: wood, glass, paint, glue, Polyamide  
18 x 18 x 4 m, Unique work

But there was a time that I was traveling a lot by car, doing long nocturnal drives back and forth from the north of the Netherlands to Belgium. Then my old radio was my companion, and on some radio stations I then would find strange electronic music, or outdated instrumental tunes, creating a most alienating atmosphere in combination with the gloomy darkness of the night. And for me, somehow that was part of the experience of being nowhere, because on the road you're in between places. That nowhere zone, being immersed in a daze of darkness, speed, and music, is sort of the universal nowhere of the modern and

post-modern era; we can experience this blend almost anywhere. That's why I finally decided that sound should be part of *Location(5)*.

In general, when I create an installation or a film with sound and or music, I invite a musician to collaborate with me to specially create an original score for the work, or I create it myself. It is more challenging for sure, but also way more adventurous and appropriate than using existing music that initially wasn't created for your work. In that sense, *Location(5)* is a rare example of a work where I did make use of a mix of existing music, but then reworked. To me, it gives this specific feeling of an obscure radio station at night. It's a long time since I've heard it, I must admit. So, I'm curious how I would receive it now if I were to listen to it again.

**Is there a nostalgic reason why the music refers to the '70s, and the interior of your diner to the '80s?**

Indeed, the interior of my motorway diner looks '80s because many of the motorway restaurants we have in Belgium were constructed in that decade. Before that, they didn't really exist. And indeed, some nostalgia probably has to do with it as well; an '80s interior transports me back to my youth. The architecture I conceived for this work, with its specific windows with rounded corners, evokes that original period of the first motorway restaurants that bridged the motorways in Belgium.

When it comes to architecture, I must admit, at times I do have a soft spot "charming ugliness" and its significance [laughs]. I say that with a wink, but, for example, if I take my mom to have coffee on Sunday to the shopping mall, then we'd be sitting in a fake art-deco kitsch tavern with wrong taste furniture with fake golden details, nostalgic lamps and so on, and I truly think that speaks more about the human condition than a perfect, stylish, minimalistic architectural setting.



*Location (5)* 2004  
Sculptural Installation: Mixed media  
12 x 24 x 4.3 m, Unique work

Life is not the perfectly designed object. It really isn't. Marvellous artists like Anish Kapoor, who, amongst other types of work, made very pure, minimal, and sublime works, spoke with those works about the very essentials of life as well, but from a totally different point of view.

As a Belgian though, coming from a messy, anachronistic, most unstylish, eclectic setting, I somehow feel that, if I wish to speak about life, I need to include my own inept background in the parallel worlds I evoke, that I should smuggle in some of that clumsiness. So, the score in *Location(5)* isn't exactly pleasant music, nor is it annoying: it has a mild awkwardness or subtle eeriness to it that makes you curious.

I often love to include things that are a bit silly, strange, weird, inconsequent, funny... to avoid that a work might become too weighty, too overly serious, or too evident. Otherwise, your artist's voice might become pretentious, as if you, in a paternalistic way, understand the world better than anyone else. So, I will always bring in some silliness to the margins of a work. And as a strategy, I love to freely associate, rather than trying to establish a conclusive statement with my imagery.

Curators, I noticed over the years, at times have difficulties with such a creation method, since not every step of the process has a logic, theoretical legitimation. I always opposed the idea that an artwork needs to be overly consequent. Yes, a work of art does need a precise balance between form and content, and it surely needs a self-evident, inner logic. But as a teacher, I have always told my students: "Please, be stubborn. Don't try to be too "artistically correct". Please allow yourself to make decisions purely based on your intuition". Because if everything has a pure and logical theoretical legitimation, then why would you

bother to make art, right? Art implicitly has layers that cannot be tamed into words.

Their choice to create a whole of experienced based, immersive works as a permanently displayed collection, works wonderfully well. The visitors first experience and discover, and then, layer by layer, find meanings and questions.

Also, the curators Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath of the recent Lyon Biennale (2022), understood that perfectly well; they profoundly welcomed openness and free association by the participating artists, rather than asking for the art to become a flat illustration of a theoretical point of view. My work *We Were the Last to Stay*, was an immersive and site-specific installation of 1,900 m<sup>2</sup>, specially conceived and created for the Lyon Biennale.

The viewer entered a monumental factory hall, in which my team and I created a sculptural evocation of a life-size abandoned camping site, somewhere between a nomadic, improvised caravan camp and a dilapidated city park with a playground and a pond. There was also a vegetable garden and a repair place for cars.



*We Were the Last to Stay* 2022  
Immersive Installation: mixed media  
7900 x 2400 x 1360cm, Unique work  
Photo Credits: Blaise Adilon

It seemed like an isolated place where a closed community of a handful of families might have lived

together in a self-supporting way of life. The entire installation was executed in monochrome grey, and some parts, like the pond, in black, making it, as a whole, quite ghostly, alienating, as if petrified, frozen in time, left discoloured under a layer of dust, or covered with ashes. Each trailer told the story of its fictitious inhabitants through the still-lives of abandoned furniture, banal objects and peculiar props lying around.

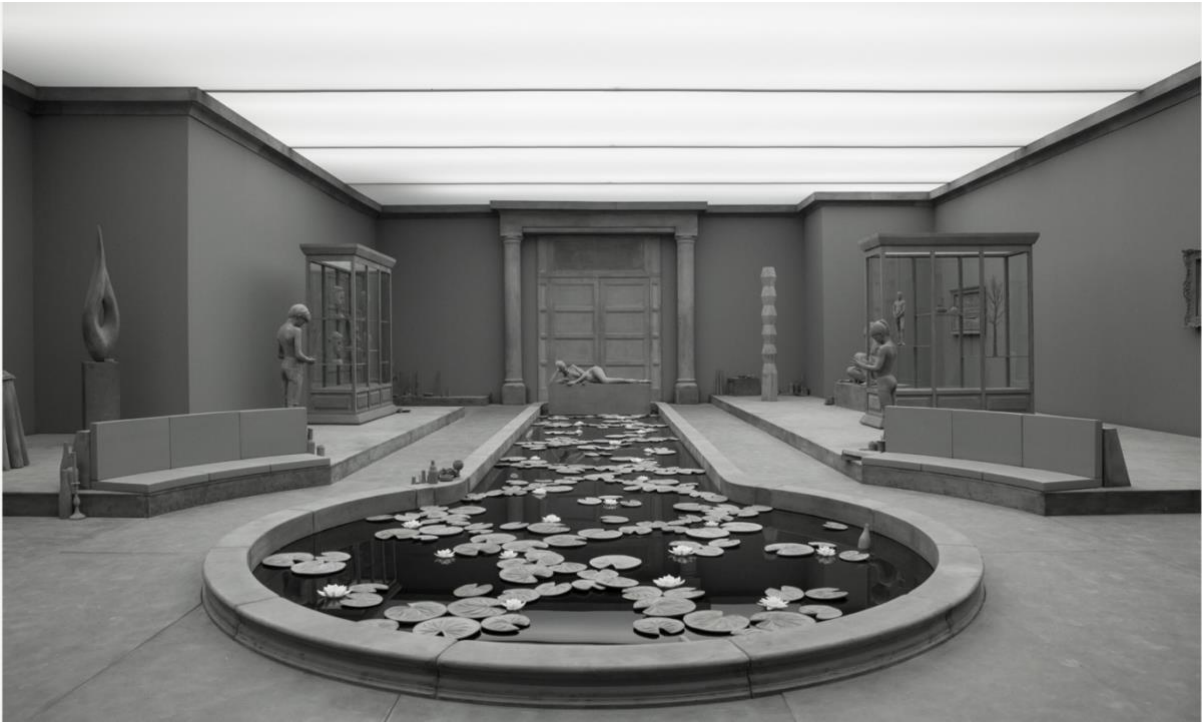
The installation was like a contemporary ghost town, which talks about what an improvised life in the margins, away from the rat race and for a small fictitious community, possibly a commune, might have looked like; how that small fragile world may have resonated with the big one.

The title *We Were the Last to Stay* refers to the last inhabitants who stayed there when the momentum of the shared dream and lives had passed, and the setting turned from a lively place into a mood close to the sobering and melancholic emptiness after a party. The installation was a gigantic memento mori and functioned in a way as a kind of large cinematographic establishing shot, from which many possible stories could depart.

**Regarding your heavily reduced use of colour in *Location(5)* at the Towada Art Center: you solely used black for the sculpted landscape and motorway diner's interior, and orange for the road lights on the motorway. Why did you make that specific choice?**

By reducing the use of colour, you create more liberty for the viewer's imagination. If you make everything in full colour, you visually leave little for the viewer to fill in or complete. I believe it is not my task as an artist to painstakingly simulate the world as it is, but rather to interpret the world and to evoke some of its essence, to reveal some of its underlying core. My work is about evocation, and not about -in my point of view- useless simulation or imitation.

I love to try to grasp something more essential, something underneath. Like with my work *The Collector's House* (2016): it works more strongly because you step into an abstraction, a world in black and white, a depopulated, three-dimensional, petrified space. And as a spectator you are the only ephemeral, dynamic and colourful thing in this inert discoloured setting. It's an alienating experience, dreamlike, different. I always opted for this sort of alienating approach to my life-sized depictions.



*The Collector's House* 2016  
Sculptural Installation: mixed media  
12,5 x 20 x 4 m, Unique work

If I were to execute *Location(5)* or *The Collector's House* in full colour, they would look like deserted film sets, and, in a way, much less monolithic and sculptural, and way more fake, mock-upish, and cardboard like, while, when everything is an achromatic or made of two, three colours, it comes across more intensively. It has a stronger effect on the viewer. The furniture and objects in these immersive installations, whether it's a seat, a representation of a sculpture, a plinth, a showcase... it is handcrafted, it's an interpretation, it's made at the studio. So, it is a poetic interpretation of the real things. Ready-made objects, like things belonging to and recognisable as objects of a certain brand, bring in unnecessary references and I try to avoid that. I think an image becomes stronger when you select colours, shapes, proportions.

You could say that *Location(5)* is made as a sort of a duotone: black and orange. It is like a poem: you still have a lot of space for imagination and for what you can add to it. My sculptures of human figures have always been monochromatic as well: if they were created fully in colours, they'd be too much of a 'Madame Tussaud' exercise, too much about the very craft of making something look confusingly realistic, which I do not consider an interesting artistic quest or research.

I also read something interesting about Ron Mueck, who has the sculpture *Standing Woman* at the Towada Art Center. He said he doesn't work on scale one-to-one, but works with blow-ups of human characters, or he makes them on a reduced scale. I understand why: Ron knows his play with the perception of scale makes the magic happen for his work. Pure, life size simulation would not be sufficient, or could even

limit the potential quality of his works. He is a master in understanding twisted scales and proportions, and that tremendously elevates his work compared to colleagues who are focused on life-sized hyper-realistic simulations.

If the goal of your art was mainly about trying to visually fool the viewer, then your story would be told in two seconds, right? And then what? So, I believe -even though it might sound as a contradiction- the more that the artist straightforwardly and openly shows his work is an interpretation of what we know, the more the artificiality of it can potentially turn into a true and authentic experience.

**Regarding the use of colour in the selected parts of your work, is this also a guide for the visitors to know where, and how to view your work?**

Regarding *Location(5)*, the orange colour of the streetlights is inviting you, guiding your gaze, for sure. There is hardly any light inside of the motorway diner itself. In the work *The Collector's House*, for example, I made one big luminous ceiling that gave a very soft, tender daylight effect on the entire installation. If I were to have used spotlights, your gaze would automatically go to the things in the spotlight, and I didn't want to have that hierarchy. To avoid a sort of a hierarchy in this space, I put all the same light throughout the entire space, an evocation of the most soft, tender daylight.

The use of light, and the preciseness of it, is extremely important for my sculptural installations, and similarly in my video works or paintings. I learned that from the old masters like Johannes Vermeer, that the light makes the entire difference when it comes to making an atmosphere experienceable. Even in a watercolour: the light source there is the white of your watercolour paper, the parts you leave untouched with your brush. So, what you don't paint is the light. That's why it's difficult [laughs]. So, the light is, basically, what makes the painting into an experience to the viewer.

If you go to the Louvre in Paris, there is a room where you have paintings by Vermeer. And in that room, you also see the very same type of paintings done by his contemporaries. I thought for a long time Vermeer was the only one in that era in the Netherlands that painted that specific genre of quiet, unspectacular domestic scenes like a lady pouring milk, or resting her hands on a harpsichord and looking at us. For a long time, I thought he, subject wise, was quite a unique voice in that time where you had the big historical, mythological, and religious themes and depictions of the Baroque era. But when you look at his contemporaries from the same region, who were painting similar intimate scenes, they simply do not manage to make them as immersive as Vermeer, because they don't master the use of light as well as Vermeer. He stands out because of the light, the subtle magic way he makes it work.

If I were to put very cheap, random spotlights on an installation work of mine, I can simply ruin it's



potential. Or, for instance, if a spectator would photograph *Location(5)* with a flashlight, the picture might look absolutely horrible [laughs].

**Today your work covers many mediums, ranging from sculpture to installation, video to painting, to theatre and opera. How did this all happen? Was it a gradual process, a strategy?**

Unconsciously, organically, by intuition, with one thing leading to another. No strategy at all. It was not even a choice to become multidisciplinary; that's how it feels. I somehow ended up doing all that. Sometimes I wish I were a painter making tiny works. That would save me a lot of work and logistics [laughs]. If I think about a single strong landscape by the great painter Peter Doig, for example, I think I'd need a work the size of a museum gallery to achieve a similar immersiveness for the viewer [laughs]. I need so much stuff sometimes, like my current exhibition at the Amos Rex Museum in Helsinki of about 2,000 square meter, for which my team and I sent nine trucks, each of fourteen meters, to Finland, full of artworks.

I didn't consciously choose for that kind of latitude, scale, or approach; over the years I just very spontaneously and intuitively started to explore size, proportions, immersiveness and perception through diverse media. My works range from very tiny to most monumental, and content-related from slightly silly and funny or inept to serious or even dramatic. Each work demands another approach, I learned. Scale or duration doesn't say anything about quality. It is just about trying to be precise in the balance between form and content. Or example, my film series *Staging Silence*, where two pairs of anonymous hands construct and deconstruct fictitious landscapes and interiors on a reduced scale, was simply such a joy to make, with the playful enthusiasm of a child, fooling around on a tabletop film set of about two square meters. That's an example of a small, studio-based production that my team and I could not have delivered in any other medium or way.



*Staging Silence (3)* 2019  
Video: Full HD video, stereo sound, black and white  
44 minutes

When I graduated from art school in Brussels, I made a little video. It was a sort of a photograph with time inserted into it, you could say: a little boy sitting on the backseat of a car, on his knees, looking at what the car is leaving behind. Sometimes when you drive on the highway, you look at a car in front of you, and then there's this kid looking at you, right? One time there was such an angelic little boy gazing at me when I was driving on the road. And it was hypnotising.



*Determination (1)* 1996  
Video: DVCAM on DVD  
2 minutes 36 seconds

So, I staged a little video of an anonymous little boy staring at us from the backseat, the golden hour sun hitting his face, and then disappearing again, a living portrait. The notion of distance, the monotonous

feeling of being on the motorway, the idea of time passing... is a small, subtle, and poetic feeling that I felt I could never capture in a photographic form. So, it needed to be a film, my first little video work. In a picture you wouldn't have the constant changing of light on his face, you wouldn't have the feeling as if you as a spectator are driving behind him...

By now I have made about twenty-five films, all very different in style and approach. My shortest videos are about four minutes, the longest about forty-five minutes; I have been learning to explore the medium in form and contents along the way. Some people sometimes ask me how I learned to master a certain technique or medium, or how my team skilled themselves in certain domains. It always literally was learning by doing.

My team and I aren't technical experts, but enthusiasts in the first place, eager to learn and discover new techniques and approaches, much rather than repetitively executing skills we were taught in schools. Trial and error, at the studio and on location, day in day out, until we figure out how it can be done. The same for my writing and watercolour painting: just me, mostly in the calm of the night, with the white paper in front of me, with a pen or with my brushes; an unpredictable journey, a being on the road until results arise.

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