



*Interview: Marguerite Humeau – Breathing New Life into Old Monsters*

Rain, July 2020

(author: Mark Benjamin)

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# RAIN



The French artist Marguerite Humeau was born in 1986 and now resides in London, where she obtained a master's in design interactions from the Royal College of Art in 2011. Her work tests the boundaries of biology, history, technology, and consciousness, often taking the form of monumental sculptures situated in complicated ecosystems bound together by synthesized sound, bureaucratic-looking carpeting, and organic liquids. The latter have ranged from elephant tears to black mamba venom, to a mixture Humeau refers to as “liquid human,” composed from the chemical components that make up our bodies, and for which she sourced her materials from eBay.

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Humeau is an obsessive researcher and the projects she produces frequently reflect thousands of hours of conversations with hundreds of collaborators, themselves mainly scientists and historians, whom she pushes to think beyond the bounds of their practice to imagine what lies beyond the pixelated limits of our understanding. She has previously reanimated scenes of animal mourning, resurrected the spirit of Cleopatra, looked for the revenge of the sphinx on humankind. For her most recent show, at the Kunstverein in Hamburg, Humeau updated prehistoric Venuses in hand-carved stone and cast metals, looking to reexamine the relationship between trance and the precepts of civilization.



Marguerite Humeau  
*Venus of Frasassi, A 10-year-old female human has ingested a rabbit's brain.* Installation view, 'Ecstasies', Kunstverein in Hamburg, February 16–April 28, 2019 Photograph by Julia Andréone Courtesy the artist and C L E A R I N G New York/Brussels

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**Quinn Harrelson:** Let's first talk about your show "Ecstasies", held at the Kunstverein in Hamburg this spring, which took a speculative past as its point of departure. I was wondering if you could tell me a bit about that past and about the role of speculation in your practice as a whole.

**Marguerite Humeau:** Over the past year I've been investigating the world of trance and talking to a lot of neurologists and people specializing in the brain in general, also shamans, magic-mushroom specialists. A lot of researchers agree that, at some point in the history of humankind, there has been a random encounter between a group of humans and a psychoactive substance, though we don't really know what it was, maybe it was a magic mushroom, maybe a psychoactive flower or a plant. Maybe it was the rhythm, the beat of a drum. It's known that a drum, when played at a specific beat—I think 140 beats per minute—can induce a state of trance.

So anyway, we don't really know what it was, but what we do know is that it must have been completely random and, when it happened, these humans who encountered the psychoactive substance went into a trance for the first time in the history of mankind. When you go into a trance your brain rewires, opening up a whole new range of pathways in its information-transportation network. [These researchers] believe that these early humans started to have visions and may have wanted to portray those visions to their group, so possibly the original trance might be at the origins of religion, and art, and language, which are all means for humans to communicate with each other.

“**Speculation is not fiction, because it's based on real facts using the process of acceleration—either accelerating something that already exists and seeing what it could become or what it could have been. Or sometimes it's through taking a step aside onto a parallel road. So instead of accelerating things, it's taking something existing and thinking about what it would be if just a tiny thing were to change**”

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So that's what the show was based on, and I conducted a long project of research and discovered a scientific paper written by the American researcher Bethe Hagens based on the Venus figurines—the prehistoric Venus statuettes. There have been many different explanations and speculations about what these Venus figurines were and why they were made, but Hagens is comparing the form of the Venus figure to the animal brain. I mean, I didn't have any idea what animal brains looked like before I read this paper, but they really look like female bodies and, more specifically, like Venus figurines, like small female bodies with prominent genital parts and breasts. So her speculation is that prehistoric humans knew that animal brains contained psychoactive substances and that they were ingesting them to go on spiritual journeys.

This is an interesting idea—literally, to ingest animal brains to do spiritual journeys, but also conceptually, to imagine that those brains are these animals souls, and that by ingesting an animal brain, one ingests its soul to become or to embody this animal.

In my project, my goal was to attempt to reenact a scene from 150,000 years ago, where a group of female humans is ingesting psychoactive substances of animal brains for the first time. In the show, each female body, as it went into a trance, was transforming itself into animals, animal brains, but also Venus figurines. They were these mutating bodies, and each of them had a voice. I asked 10 to 15 women who worked with me—women of different ages—I asked them to perform or to give a voice to what could be a mutation, or what could be the sound of a voice going into a trance.

For example, one of them transformed into a storm, one became a forest, another became a whale, and so it was about the transformation from human to animal, or to a natural element, through trance, but at the same time, it was also about the opposite, about the birth of humankind emerging from an animal state. All these women were reaching the limits of their corporeal existence, their larynges were trying to perform sounds that cannot be performed by a human voice, and as they reached their bodily limits, they were forced to mutate into something else, into other forms of existence and of consciousness, they were forced to transcend themselves to be able to exist, to survive. They were forced out of their own body.

So that was that project—a bit of a long explanation—but now I can tell you about the role of speculation in my work at large. I investigate mysteries of human existence. Usually, I pick black boxes—ecosystems, beings, voices that are either extinct or prehistoric, hidden or invisible—and I try to reactivate them, to resuscitate them, to bring them back to life. I first consult with experts from different fields and invite them to speculate with me on what these worlds might have been like, and then I take one of these speculations, one single possibility among thousands of possibilities, and I try to translate this speculation into a coherent physical experience.

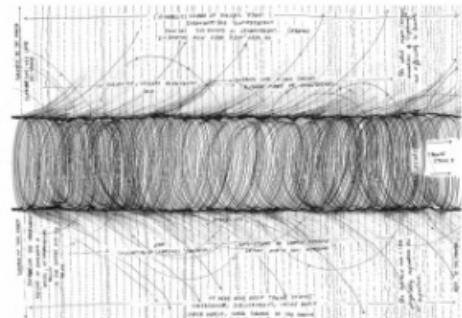
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I usually mix actual facts, scientific facts, with speculations. Speculation is not fiction, because speculation is based on real facts using the process of acceleration—either accelerating something that already exists and seeing what it could become or what it could have been. Or sometimes it's different, sometimes it's speculation through taking a step aside onto a parallel road. So instead of accelerating things, it's taking something existing and thinking about what it would be if just a tiny thing were to change.

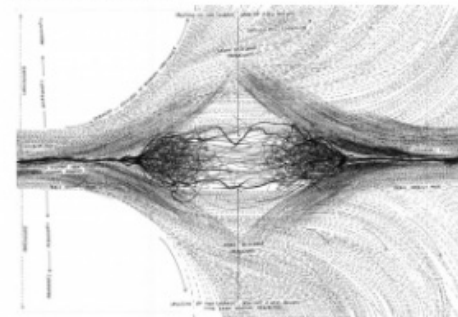
For example, for the project in Hamburg, I was thinking about how this encounter between humans and a psychoactive substance was completely random, so it could have happened, but also it could not have happened. I think it did happen, and maybe it's the reason why we evolved as humans. Maybe it did not happen. But we still evolved into humans, so, maybe psychoactive substances never had a role in the evolution of humankind. But if this random encounter really did happen, and if it really did have a role in the way we evolved, it is also interesting to imagine what would have happened if it had never happened, if that makes sense. If humans had never encountered this substance, it might have been that humans would never have evolved as individuals capable of speaking, creating art, following religions, and everything else. Does that make sense?



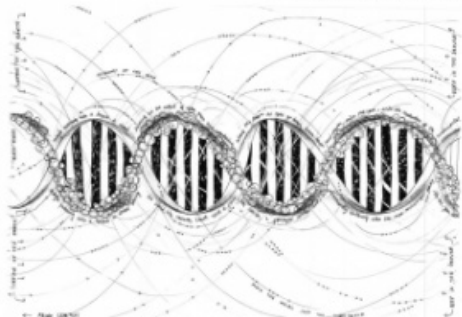
Marguerite Humeau, *150,000 Years Ago: The Missing Link, A random encounter between a small group of curious primates and psychoactive ingredients triggered the most important cognitive revolution at the origin of Humankind* Black ink pen on layout paper; 420 × 594 mm 'Ecstasies', Kunstverein in Hamburg, February 16–April 28, 2019 Courtesy the artist and C L E A R I N G New York/Brussels



Marguerite Humeau, *Ecstasies* Black ink pen on layout paper; 420 × 594 mm 'Ecstasies', Kunstverein in Hamburg, February 16–April 28, 2019 Courtesy the artist and C L E A R I N G New York/Brussels



Marguerite Humeau, *The Whirl, DNA (Trance Stage 1)* Black ink pen on layout paper; 420 × 594 mm 'Ecstasies', Kunstverein in Hamburg, February 16–April 28, 2019 Courtesy the artist and C L E A R I N G New York/Brussels



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QH: Yeah. I also want to talk about the way we see the prehistoric Venuses—they function not only as records of individual artistic output but also archaeological documents. And I’m interested in the way that the sculptures you produce, which draw on hundreds of collaborators and utilize these byzantine technological processes, actually in some way index what, as a society, we are capable of making at this very moment. It’s an interesting line to take.

MH: For my work, for research and production, I always try to use the most hyper-advanced technological processes. I won’t go into all the details, but I try to translate the research topics into physical experiences, by using contemporary and advanced technology— robots sculpt my sculptures, synthetic voices are crafted by voice engineers, and so on. I am trying to create works that seem to exist without any human involvement.

The Venus project was my first project dealing with humans— before, I was creating worlds that existed without humans, so it was important for me to use technologies where human involvement was minimal, such as getting my sculptures made by non-human hands. With the Venus project I also started to include the human hand, technologies that could not exist without humans—the [figurines] were made in bronze and in stone. I thought, as the project was about the birth of human civilization, it was interesting to have the sculptures being produced by human hands and robotic arms. For example, the stone sculptures are all sculpted by human hands, but the humans are actually sculpting replicas of 3D-printed sculptures made by computer modeling.

QH: In many ways, I think your project actually better fits into the category of historiography than it does art. But I’m troubled here by what Fredric Jameson once called “the ‘emotion’ of great historiographic form”—that is, the satisfaction of synthesizing the messy empirical data of the past into a neat and sophisticated historical arc, one that simplifies and places what’s happening now as the logical collection and conclusion of what has happened before. So I guess I have two questions, the first being, do you think history has emotion? And do you think historiography can go beyond synthesis and into disruption?

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Marguerite Humeau  
*Venus of Courbet, An 80-year-old female human has ingested the brain of a swallow*  
Installation view, 'Ecstasies', Kunstverein in Hamburg, February 16–April 28, 2019 Photograph by Julia Andréone  
Courtesy the artist and C L E A R I N G New York/Brussels

MH: I am interested in the idea of history, because when we think about history, we are thinking about a construct. We have invented the idea of time—I'm not exactly sure why, but maybe just to organize our lives, and to understand where we have come from and where we are going. Maybe to try to make sense of our condition. But when you think about history and about time, it's quite linear, the way in which we have worked around it so far. And what I'm interested in is what happens when you give way to a concept and it explodes, or when time escapes being linear, or when you think of all of these other histories that we can't be sure of, but might be there somewhere on parallel axes. Yes, I'm interested in what happens when you

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I think my work is much more about disruption. It's like I'm taking this linear axis and twisting it and seeing what happens. Or if you were to imagine you're in this tunnel of history, what happens when stuff really stops holding and you see what comes after? All this starts as mind games, and most of the time they stay that way—only sometimes do they become projects.

QH: At this historical moment, there is an increased interest in animism, spiritualism, and theology, at least in contemporary art. For many years, early modernism was defined by its contention with the widespread disenchantment that almost characterized the world at the turn of the century, or the loss of magic accrued through advances in war, technology, and labor, but now we are returning to magic and I'm curious why you think that is.

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MH: I think it's a mix of things. First, I think technological and scientific discoveries are opening up the range of life-forms and the very idea of life... For a long time we have been thinking about life as being a journey from birth to death, but now we know that there is a huge range of life-forms that are actually not quite alive and not quite dead. We can also create new life-forms, immaterial presences, disembodied voices. When you think of the algorithms that are constantly scanning our every motion on the internet, they are not alive but they are definitely not totally inert either.

In his show “The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things,” Mark Leckey also explored the ideas of animism in connection with contemporary objects that talk and that seem to be animated, to have a soul. There are more and more objects that are talking to us, and that are trying really hard to move us, and be like us, like humans. And when they manage to do that it's both really uncanny and frightening. It's not only fear, but I guess we are realizing that we have to include more and more life-forms in our ecosystem.

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But this is only one point—there are many, many reasons why we are turning to animism. Another is climate change, obviously. When I was researching consciousness and talking to brain specialists, I found there is more and more research into animal consciousness, and we are slowly, slowly realizing that we are not at the center, or that there are a lot of other centers, and that’s something we have to accept.

Right now, I’m researching animal mourning and animal suicide, and it’s really weird because there was previously almost no research on animal suicide—it’s just now starting to emerge. The most complete papers are as recent as 2010. It’s funny because it seems to me... I don’t know where I read it, but I read somewhere about the idea that the birth of gods happened during the agricultural revolution. That’s when we transformed animals into mute possessions—animals that, before, when we were animist beings, were our partners, but during the agricultural revolution were transformed into machines, like the cows we raise to eat, and so on and so on.

I guess what I’m interested in is that, at the exact same time when animals became our biological machines, we invented gods. We traded. What I think is happening today is the opposite—we are once again looking to animals, and giving them a voice, as we are also giving voices to artificial forms of life.

QH: I was reading something the other day that talked about how it’s the first time that technology is causing profoundly immeasurable changes to human order. And it was talking about how there might be a few other times that happens—a few other singularities, if you will—but it’s less clear what they are, maybe written language. But agriculture was really the first one.

MH: I have never really made the parallel between this time and our own, because, for me, they are quite different. Both are these technological changes, but their impacts are very different, don’t you think? The agricultural revolution was about humans making sure that the world around them was cultivated for their benefit, but the technological singularity that we are foreseeing today is about not being in control anymore, but about us being surpassed or challenged, or even exploited by our own creations. I’m wondering if it is the exact opposite. Or maybe the aim was the same, the consequences are just different.

QH: The way you phrased that reminds me of something I heard you say once about the sphinx, a recurring symbol for surveillance and security in your work, which is that mankind created it for our protection, but now we need protection from it.

MH: Yeah, exactly.

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QH: To go back to what you were saying about artificial intelligence and its uncanny and scary capacity to replicate qualities and attributes usually reserved for the human, you once said, referring to why the Venus sculptures are done in the way they are done, that you think perfection is horrifying. I was wondering if you could say a bit more about that, because that idea is so beautiful.

MH: It's an idea I started to play with in 2015. I created this show called "Echoes", for which I revived ancient Egyptian gods as animal products that were engineered to create an elixir of life. In the show, there were these sculptural animals creating the elixir and so it was a sort of acceleration of what life could be, and at the same time, the show [space] was completely covered with black mamba venom, which is one of the most dangerous venoms in the world.

It's bright yellow, so I used it as a pigment to create a bright yellow poisonous paint that covered the show, wanting to create a feeling of fascination that twisted to become horrifying. And, especially in the context of that exhibition, it was about this feeling of being totally exposed to pure light and having nowhere to hide, which I thought was interesting, because horror is often more bound up with the idea of obscurity. Horror has usually been shown as coming from the dark, but today the new horror is one of constant exposure, of being naked, with nowhere to hide. And then, as I was working on engineering these different forms of life, and death, and engineering emotions, like I did for another project at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, I was thinking that the horror arises when artificial beings try so hard to be like us, and then they start resembling us a bit too much.

More importantly, this idea is also about life being able to exist without death. Joseph Campbell said—I don't remember the exact sentence—that the first realization of humankind was the discovery of its own death, and that since then, the most important battle—actually, the only battle—has been to fight against death. To fight against it by creating religions that provide an afterlife, or find a form of life that makes you immortal.

QH: I think also, in a strictly religious sense, like a medieval Catholic or an Egyptian sense, life is really only important insofar as it foreshadows an afterlife—in fact, the essence of life is afterlife. Which is why monks withdraw from life and into asceticism, to wait and prepare for that next stage. I think that's probably why, for so long, we haven't acknowledged animal suicide, which is really a conscious battling with death in a way that we think is distinctly human.

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MH: And how far will we go biologically in this fight against death? For me, that's the most horrifying aspect of my work, because perfection from a human point of view might be that you become immortal, and that is just terrifying.



Marguerite Humeau Installation view, 'Ecstasies', Kunstverein in Hamburg, February 16–April 28, 2019  
Photograph by Julia Andréone Courtesy the artist and C L E A R I N G New York/Brussels