

# HANS OP DE BEECK

## Works

This book is published in conjunction with the exhibition

*Hans Op de Beeck. Out of the Ordinary*

Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg

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Hans Op de Beeck ©1996 – 2017

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# Table of Contents

7	In Search of Lost Sense	176	Location (5)
	Foreword by Ralf Beil	184	Location (6)
II	On Staging Silence	192	Location (7)
	by Hans Op de Beeck	198	Location (8)
		206	The Quiet View
		216	The Amusement Park
		222	Garden of Whispers
		230	The Collector's House
		248	Out of the Ordinary
		260	Sea of Tranquillity, the Museum
	SCULPTURES AND		
	SCULPTURAL INSTALLATIONS		
48	Exercising Nowheres		
54	Christmas		
58	Table (1)		
62	Leftovers		
68	Extensions		
74	T-Mart		
82	Entrance		
86	Secret Garden		
90	Pond		
94	The Garret		
98	Vanitas		
108	Gestures		
118	The Writer's Island		
124	Small Writer's Island		
126	Small Settlement		
128	The Settlement		
136	A House by the Sea		
	PHOTOGRAPHY		
142	The Room Series (1-8)		
	IMMERSIVE INSTALLATIONS		
160	Location (1)		
166	Location (2)		
170	Location (4)		
			SELECTED VIDEO WORKS
		276	Sea of Tranquillity, the Film
		308	All Together Now...
		314	Parade
		322	Dance
		332	The Thread
		342	Staging Silence (2)
			WATERCOLOURS
		360	Night Time
			THEATRE WORK
		426	After the Party
			a play by Hans Op de Beeck
			DATA
		444	Biography & Bibliography



# In Search of Lost Sense

Hans Op de Beeck's subtle Exercises  
on Space and Time

—

RALF BEIL

*Words must be rescued from the mill of  
time that's out of control. [...] freeze them in  
sentences with a safe full stop.<sup>1</sup>*

VENICE 1756. NIGHT. STORM. On the turbulent sea that envelops the city, Casanova rows powerfully towards an uncertain fate. He will soon be thrown into La Serenissima's Piombi prison, arrested for practising black magic. The wind roars deafeningly, rain lashes, foam splashes, the boat bounces up and down in the pale moonlight – everything is hyper-realistic, except the water: it is staged with the help of enormous, undulating, shiny black plastic sheeting.

Federico Fellini's artifice is beguiling. The sea is highly artificial and at the same time dramatically perfect in *Fellini's Casanova*<sup>2</sup> from 1976. The effect destroys any sense of cinematic illusion, yet the film itself loses nothing of its strength. The intensity of the scene is preserved at all times, despite or perhaps because of its undisguised artificiality.

*...it comes back, like a bit of slow motion film  
[...], leisurely and floating.*

VENICE 2011. BROAD DAYLIGHT. BLAZING SUN. The water in the harbour basin is as smooth as glass. A ferryboat brings me to a pier on the other side of the Arsenale. Very few deviate from the main path of the biennale; there is far too much to see anyway. In the end, I am all but alone in the large old shipyard building. In the far back, in the chilly darkness of the historical armoury, there is a steep staircase leading to a staged living space: a small room with sofa, bed, kitchenette, fag ends and dirty dishes... Everything seems petrified – grey in grey. Only the curiously oversized fountain behind the

panoramic window appears animated with its steadily spouting jet of water. The narrow row house garden with an abandoned banquet table is outlined by a skimpy garland of white light bulbs and enclosed by high walls of concrete panels. Violin and piano music infuse the surreal scene with a deep sense of melancholy. Everything is visually and audibly a work of art, and yet it exudes an unexpected intensity.

Here as well, in Hans Op de Beeck's *Location (7)*,<sup>3</sup> the beguiling charm of the 'Fellini effect' sets in. At the same time, the total installation offers an unexpected moment of contemplation and tranquillity in the hustle and bustle of the art circus. I don't want to leave this magical place, somewhere between daydream and *memento mori*. The ambiance of this 'elsewhere' resonates within me for quite some time.

*I'm a drifter [...], a traveller who never wants  
to arrive.*

HANS OP DE BEECK CREATES MODEL SITUATIONS WHICH RAISE AWARENESS of the archetypes of life and death: places of memory, imagination, and emotion. In all cases, we are dealing with intermediate spaces, 'heterotopias' as defined by Michel Foucault: 'real and effective spaces [...], in which all the other real arrangements that can be found within society, are at one and the same time represented, challenged and overturned'.<sup>4</sup> Foucault discovered these 'other spaces' in the history of gardens, cemeteries, museums, and feasts and, within each of them, recognized different dimensions of time. Whereas, along with museums and libraries, which are 'bound up with the accumulation of time, there are other heterotopias linked to time in its more futile, transitory and precarious aspects, a time viewed as celebration'.<sup>5</sup>

With his *Locations*,<sup>6</sup> Hans Op de Beeck realizes both the transitory and the supposedly permanent – in decidedly contemporary variants. We experience the intermediate space of a nocturnal crossroads in the middle of nowhere,<sup>7</sup> as well as the incredibly eclectic private museum of a turbo-capitalist. The intriguing mixture of Pompeii and an oligarch's treasure chamber eternalizes both art and life: exhibited here are masks, paintings, and books, as well as children, bare-breasted black women, and peacocks.<sup>8</sup>

The same holds true for Hans Op de Beeck's folk festival variant, a deserted, snow-covered 'amusement park', as well as the high-tech cruise ship *Sea of Tranquillity*, a swimming luxury fortress. Foucault again: 'Think of the ship: it is a floating part of space, a placeless place, that lives by itself, closed in on itself and at the same time poised in the infinite ocean [...]. Then you will understand why it has been not only and obviously the main means of economic growth [...], but at the same time the greatest reserve of imagination for our civilization [...]. The ship is the heterotopia par excellence. In

civilizations where it is lacking, dreams dry up.'<sup>9</sup> Hans Op de Beeck focuses on precisely these dream worlds and intermediate realms – including their mirroring of the present and the future.

*...watch the dawn from the motorway.*

UNLIKE THE TOTAL INSTALLATION ARTIST ILYA KABAKOV (b. 1933), with his cosmonaut apartment, occupied toilet facilities, and deserted Soviet school from the 1980s and early 1990s,<sup>10</sup> Hans Op de Beeck (b. 1969) works with deliberate breaks of illusion. This takes nothing away from his narration. On the contrary: Hans Op de Beeck achieves the immersion of the visitor into his art-reality, in full consciousness and with conventional application of the senses – without virtual reality or the aid of VR glasses. Today, it's still not enough to 'transfer people to another place. The place must tell a story, it must be saturated in iconography, and this in a dramaturgically meaningful chronology.'<sup>11</sup> It is precisely this that, like Ilya Kabakov before him, Hans Op de Beeck ultimately achieves. His works are simultaneously physical and experiential – in a society, in which we believe we know far too much and at the same time sense increasingly less. Just as the protagonist in Marlen Haushofer's novel *The Wall* experienced this: 'I no longer feel how beautiful it was, I only remember it. That's a terrible difference.'<sup>12</sup> Affective memory is increasingly losing ground in relation to rationalized data storage. With Hans Op de Beeck, knowledge alone does not bring us any further. His works are catalysts of both emotion and concentration. His concern is a fundamental charging of the world by paying special attention to spatial atmosphere, lighting climate, and sound level. Here, the search of lost sense and rediscovery of the senses is vital.

*...in any event what is said will be a cliché.*

IN THE WORLD OF HANS OP DE BEECK, SILENCE AND MUSIC REIGN, instead of countless words.<sup>13</sup> Even his video film in CinemaScope format, *Sea of Tranquillity*, follows this principle and does completely without spoken language for its entire thirty-minute length. The characters are staged as still-lives, while only the female singer of the ship's orchestra intones the credo specially written and set to music by Hans Op de Beeck: 'Please let me drift away...'

He is a true anomaly, this Belgian multimedia artist, who is also a playwright and composer as well as theatre and opera director. It is hardly surprising that he has conceived the first comprehensive retrospective of his artistic oeuvre as a highly atmospheric Gesamtkunstwerk. On nearly 24,000 square feet in and around the large exhibition hall of the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, visitors can immerse themselves in his equally ambivalent and fascinating world of art.



Everything is ambiguous; even the ostensibly simple exhibition title, *Out of the Ordinary*, has a double meaning: on the one hand, Hans Op de Beeck's places and situations – a garret or the container barracks of a shipyard – come straight from everyday life. On the other hand, they become literally extra-ordinary through the precise use of light, furnishing details, and musical accompaniment.

The entrée to the exhibition, the evocative interior of the eclectic private collector, is already 'out of the ordinary'. The large balcony of *The Collector's House*, which has been expanded for Wolfsburg with an elaborate exterior, enables a first glimpse onto the roofs of the factory buildings and suburban houses at the foot of the collector's domicile. This gloomy underworld, somewhere between industrial wasteland and suburban dreariness, with its utility poles and streetlamps, its cable clutter and street trash – in short: its 'authenticity of fake'<sup>14</sup> – is a key element of this total installation created specifically for the exhibition. In its interior it houses the most important installations, videos, and model situations created by Hans Op de Beeck to date. Like this book, the gamut of works on view ranges from his earliest models from 1998 and large-scale ensembles of works to the in-situ Wolfsburg installation, thus documenting nineteen years of intensive artistic activity.<sup>15</sup>

*...the morning sun through almost closed eyes.*

HANS OP DE BEECK IS A MAGICIAN OF LIGHT and a master of shifts of perspective: in his spaces on a scale of 1:1, the irritation lies more than anything else in the subtle change of colour or material. In some cases an entire landscape is shrunk, as in *Location (I)*, and in other cases the visitor himself, in relation to the oversized *Table (I)* from 2006, which also animates the senses of taste and smell. At all times we are dealing with the interplay of associative abstraction and a richness of realistic details – always also with the goal of introspection. The streets of the industrial suburb created for Wolfsburg are thus deliberately covered with sound-absorbing carpet. In comparison, the fountain on a barren space within the installation is very real. Especially because of its weakly spouting liveliness, the low-rising plume of water intensifies the surreal, dreamlike forlornness and the tragicomic absurdity of the scenery.<sup>16</sup>

*...caught by a still life of food and drink  
clustered near the edge like people herded  
together.*

HANS OP DE BEECK IS A NARRATOR OF STORIES BETWEEN THE LINES, without beginning or end, often intriguing, generally melancholy, always intense. At the same time, he asks what spaces trigger in us and, through the atmospheric density of his works, leads us to a more precise and intense sense of perception. He pulls us out of our

everyday lives and enables us to travel into his extremely peculiar, highly auratic world, the strange time of which, suspended beyond reality, allows us – paradoxically – to become that much more conscious of ourselves and our own living conditions.

In his novel *The Moviegoer* Walker Percy wrote: 'The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life.'<sup>17</sup> Hans Op de Beeck abducts us into and, with all our sense, out of our ordinariness – it is up to us to continue along this path 'out of the ordinary'.

- 1 All intertitles have been taken from Hans Op de Beeck's tale 'My Brother's Garden' (2006), first published in: Nicolas de Oliveira and Nicola Oxley, *Hans Op de Beeck. On Vanishing* (Brussels: Mercatorfonds and Xavier Hufkens, 2007), pp.269–277. Here, the page numbers of all quotes in their order of appearance: pp. 271, 271, 275, 275, 275, 277, and 270.
- 2 Federico Fellini, *Il Casanova di Federico Fellini*, 1976, Italy, motion picture, 148 minutes, based loosely on the biography *Histoire de ma vie* by Giacomo Casanova.
- 3 Cf. Alexander Ponomarev (curator) and Nadim Samman (co-curator), *One of a Thousand Ways to Defeat Entropy*, Official Collateral Project of the 54<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale of Art, 2011, Arsenale Novissimo, Nappa 89, Venice. In addition to Hans Op de Beeck, the exhibition also featured Adrian Ghenie, Ryoichi Kurokawa, and Alexander Ponomarev. See page 192.
- 4 Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias', in: *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. Neil Leach (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 330–336, here p. 332.
- 5 Ibid., p.335.
- 6 The artist's own term for his early installations.
- 7 Hans Op de Beeck, *Location (I)*, 1998, see page 160.
- 8 Hans Op de Beeck, *The Collector's House*, 2016, see page 230. Whereas, at the Art Basel 2016, the reception of *The Collector's House* was marked by an at times naïve pleasure in a virtuoso shift in reality in grey plaster, in the context of the museum, the same work paradoxically becomes what it already could have been at the art fair: depending on the point of view, a quietly ironic or openly sarcastic commentary on the ability to buy and exhibit anything and anyone.
- 9 Michel Foucault, op. cit., p. 336.
- 10 Cf. Ilya Kabakov, *The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment*, 1985, presented publicly for the first time at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York 1988, and now in the collection of the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; *The Toilet*, 1992, *documenta IX*, Kassel, since 1999 in the permanent collection of the SMAK, Ghent; and *The Deserted School or School #6*, 1993, permanently installed at The Chinati Foundation, Marfa, Texas.
- 11 Ursula Scheer, 'Bilder in einer Welt ohne Rahmen', in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Feuilleton), Monday, 27 February 2017, p. 11. [translated]
- 12 Marlen Haushofer, *Die Wand* (Gütersloh, Mohn Verlag, 1963), p. 213. [translated]
- 13 When Hans Op de Beeck uses words, as an author of prose texts and dramas, then they are extremely precise and atmospherically dense.
- 14 Hans Op de Beeck, 'Celebrating Emptiness. An interview', in: *Hans Op de Beeck – Sea of Tranquillity* (Antwerp: Ludion, 2011), p. 7.
- 15 In addition to hypnotic videos, such as *Staging Silence 2* or *Night Time*, the walk-in still life of a light-flooded rooftop loft in *The Garret*, and *The Settlement* (2003), reflected meditatively in water, one can also experience a veritable museum within the museum. Within high, dark halls with wall panels, *Sea of Tranquillity* (2010) brings together life-sized wax figures, models of ships and docks, and a cryptically fascinating motion picture of a very different kind – a Gesamtkunstwerk in the Gesamtkunstwerk of the retrospective.
- 16 Whereas the fountain basin and jet of water in the microcosm of the Persian garden were 'like the navel, the center of the world' (Michel Foucault, op. cit., p. 334), this fountain is especially irritating because it marks neither the centre of a garden nor a representative town square.
- 17 Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961), p. 13.

## 128 THE SETTLEMENT

2013, sculptural installation, wood and mixed media  
10 x 13 x 4 m

*The Settlement* was initially produced for the Emscherkunst project in the Ruhr in Germany. A rectangular pool was excavated and a fictional stilt village built. A ramshackle conglomeration of wooden houses, jetties, rowing boats, fishing nets, deadwood and suchlike was made in soft monochrome grey.

The village recalls the makeshift houses on the water that exist in archipelagos like the Philippines. Here, however, the use of grey augments the sense that this is a deserted place, a quiet after-image of what must once have been lively and colourful.

To those of us with a Western European background, such a setting may appear quite idyllic and exotic. It makes us dream of another life, beside the water, in the midst of nature, close to the elements. But to the people who actually live in such an environment, the water is often an extremely problematic element; one that must be fought every day in order to survive.

There is also a second, indoor version of this work.









## 206 THE QUIET VIEW

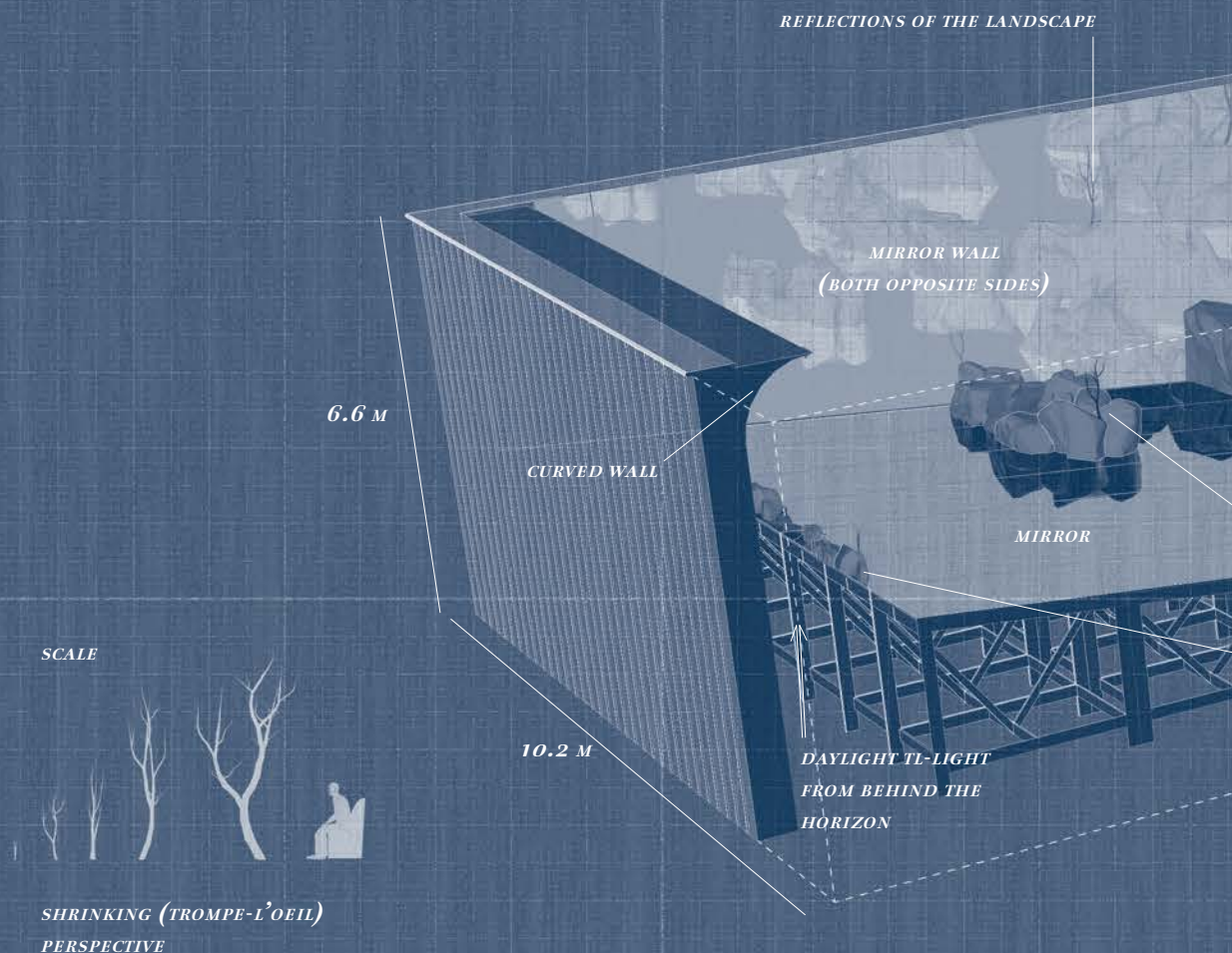
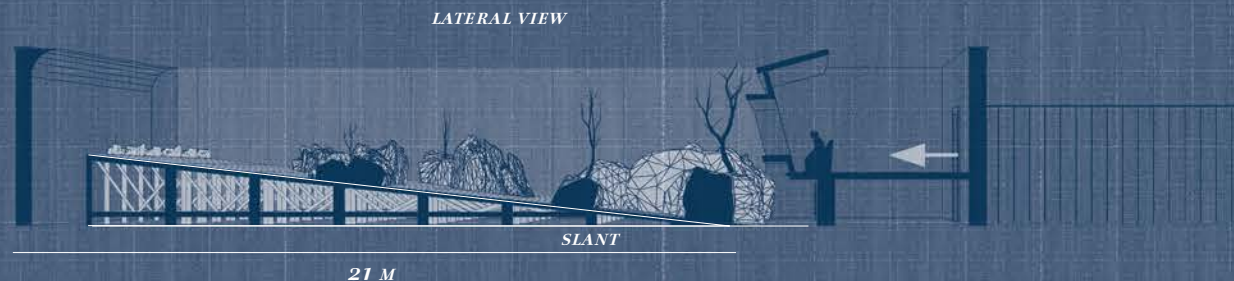
2015, sculptural installation, mixed media, 21 x 10.2 x 6.6 m

*The Quiet View* is a permanent installation that leads you down a long corridor to an observation room with a large window. From there you can gaze out over a landscape sculpted to scale.

Following the installation of *Location (5)* in the Towada Art Center in Japan, this is Op de Beeck's second monumental perception-oriented artwork to be given a permanent home. The remarkable sense of depth in this fifteen-metre-long sculpted landscape is a trompe-l'oeil, achieved by the cunning manipulation of perspective. Mirrors on either side of the daylight landscape create an optical illusion of endless breadth and depth.

We're offered a prospect of what appears to be a large lake, with rocky islands, bare trees and subtle traces of human activity. It's a cross between a flooded Arizona landscape and the devastated countryside around Ypres in the immediate aftermath of the First World War. The work thus encompasses both the splendour of nature at its most sublime and its destruction by man.

Permanent installation at the Abdijsite Herkenrode, Hasselt, Belgium







*EXTREMELY WIDE PANORAMIC WINDOW*

*SPECTATOR'S OBSERVATORY*

*ENTRANCE*

*LONG CORRIDOR LEADING  
TO THE OBSERVATORY*

*SCULPTED TREES*

*MIRROR*

*SCULPTED TREES*

*SCULPTED ROCK FORMATIONS*

*SCULPTED ROCK FORMATIONS*

*SHRINKING (TROMPE-L'OEIL)  
PERSPECTIVE*

