



# Museum für Zeitgenössische Kunst / Musée d'Art Contemporain / Museum of Contemporary Art

Pressemitteilung / Communiqué de presse / Press release

11.05.–15.08.2021

Helen Anna Flanagan

GESTICULATING ... WILDLY



Helen Anna Flanagan, *Gestures of Collapse*, 2019, video, sound, colour, 12'00, © the artist

IKOB – Museum of Contemporary Art is pleased to present “Gesticulating... Wildly”, the first institutional solo exhibition of Rotterdam-based artist Helen Anna Flanagan. The video- and installation-based presentation brings together Flanagan’s *Gestures* film trilogy (2019-2020) for the first time, in which the artist positions characters in a particular public space and causes them to collide in peculiar ways. Echoing this choreographed approach, her films are embedded within a playful installation in IKOB’s exhibition space. Elements such as minimal brick walls, floor markings and sculptural works that draw from various film scenes simultaneously structure and unsettle the viewer’s experience. Flanagan’s primary concern is the exploration of how and why people act in certain ways, leading her to imagine how different characters might relate and react to the underlying structures of society and power.

The first film encountered is *Gestures of Collapse* (2019), set inside a generic school gymnasium and featuring four uniformed schoolgirls carefully traversing the space, looking equally nervous and bored. Narrated by a fictional, old-fashioned male TV presenter, the film’s story takes inspiration from a notorious Belgian news story from the 1990s surrounding a group of schoolchildren who complained of headaches, nausea, and palpitations after drinking Coca-Cola; the incident sparked a chain reaction of nearly 100 such

claims related to the consumption of the soft drink. An investigation found that the grievances were likely a result of ‘mass sociogenic illness’: the widespread appearance of symptoms without an identifiable cause, passed from one person to another. *Gestures of Collapse* posits that social forces can be just as powerful as biological ones, and that one can easily become indistinguishable from the other.

Flanagan’s rotating *kinetic kebab* sculptures, which conjure associations between the DNA helix and Doner kebab meat, act as a segue to the second film of the exhibition, *Gestures of Matter* (2020). Rooted in the proverb ‘you are what you eat’, the film confronts the viewer with bodily functions we try and fail to control. In a greasy spoon restaurant, an eccentric cast of characters grapples with feelings of hunger, greed, and disgust, in a grotesque display of consumption and its consequences. Flanagan’s camera narrows in on the repulsive: soup infested by flies, a customer smacking and licking his lips, chopsticks grabbing and pulling at facial skin, a man experiencing maldigestion, or a frustrated waitress donning a mask resembling the notoriously ugly blobfish. *Gestures of Matter* makes clear that while eating is the ultimate equaliser – we all have to ingest, digest and excrete our food -- it is also what tears us apart, not only from each other, but within ourselves.

The third and final film of the trilogy, *Gestures of Anatomy* (2019), fittingly explores the idea of the ‘social fabric’ against the backdrop of a generic European laundromat. The laundromat is a private business that comes to act as public space where a variety of people are exposed to each other’s dirty laundry, both literally and figuratively. The characters muse about their ideas of pollution and purity while staring into the hypnotic rotations of the washing machines. Cycles and repetition are central to *Gestures of Anatomy*: menstruation, rolling a cigarette, moon phases, bodily excretions, changing the sheets, and taking a bath. Flanagan’s work reveals how we are in constant exchange with our surroundings, and no matter how hard we might try to stay autonomous; contamination is inevitable.

Like the houseflies that act as a recurring motif throughout the films, Flanagan’s work implicates viewers in turn as passive observers, carriers of information, or invasive parasites. It thereby resonates with IKOB’s theme for 2021, *Gossip*. The 2021 programme considers the potential of gossip and rumours to bind us closer together as a society and aims to be a critical examination of the social contexts in which these shared stories and narratives are created and disseminated. Helen Anna Flanagan’s *Gestures* trilogy is a primary source of inspiration for this concept, as her work grants us entry to sites of encounter and engagement between different ideas and people, with rumours and stories woven throughout her works as contagious whispers.

This exhibition takes place following the 2019 IKOB Feminist Art Prize, where a jury consisting of Daniella Géó (formerly HISK, Gent), Louise Osieka (CIAP, Hasselt), Marie-Hélène Joiret (Chataigneraie, Flemalle) and Eva Wittcox (Museum M, Leuven) chose Helen Anna Flanagan for the first prize, leading to the invitation for a one-person exhibition at IKOB. Established in 1993 to promote emerging artistic practices, the IKOB Art Prize became the ‘Feminist Art Prize’ for the first time in 2019, inviting artists whose work contributes to the dissemination of feminist ideas to apply. The next edition of the IKOB Feminist Art Prize will take place in 2022.

“Gesticulating... Wildly” is generously supported by Mondriaan Fonds and will be accompanied by a multilingual publication designed by Stefanie Rau and including texts by Brenda Guesnet (Curator, IKOB), Ash Kilmartin (Artist) and Eva Wittcox (Curator, Museum M Leuven).

## Biography

Helen Anna Flanagan (b. 1988, Birmingham, based in Rotterdam, NL) is an artist working in video, performance and installation. Flanagan was a resident at HISK, Gent from 2019-20 and is a graduate of Falmouth University of Arts (UK) and AKV St Joost (NL). Her work has been shown at exhibition spaces including most recently Kunsthal Gent (2021); Projektraum 145, Berlin (2021); Netwerk Aalst (2021); IMAI, Düsseldorf (2020); MHKA, Antwerp (2020); CAMPO Victoria, Gent (2019); and MOMA Odessa (2019). Her films have been widely screened on video platforms and at film festivals, including Sharjah Film Platform

(AE), Lo schermo dell'arte Film Festival (IT), Proyector Plataforma de Videoarte (SP), November Film Festival (UK), Film and Video Poetry Symposium (USA), Plymouth Contemporary 2017 (UK), Art Rotterdam (NL), and The Room Projects (FR). Her work *Gestures of Collapse* won the VISIO Young Talent Acquisition Prize 2020 and the work has become part of The Gravity Collection in Italy, a specialised collection of video art.

Flanagan is the winner of the 2019 Feminist Art Prize awarded by IKOB – Museum of Contemporary Art (BE) and the recipient of an upcoming fellowship with Needcompany in Brussels (BE). Upcoming exhibitions and screenings of her work include *Public Park*, SMAK & Citadel Park Gent (BE); *Emergency Biennial 2020*, Aspex Gallery, Portsmouth (UK); *Conjunctions*, Sonsbeek Quadriennial & HISK, Arnhem (NL); *Regenerate*, WIELS, Brussels (BE); *Big Screen Southend*, Focal Point Gallery, Southend (UK) and *TENT Online Cinema*, TENT, Rotterdam (NL).

Links to view the video works:

Helen Anna Flanagan, *Gestures of Matter*, 2020

HD video installation, 12'30

<https://vimeo.com/399177200>

password: 1988

Helen Anna Flanagan, *Gestures of Anatomy*, 2019

HD video, 14'00

<https://vimeo.com/403646424>

password: 1988

Helen Anna Flanagan, *Gestures of Collapse*, 2019

HD video installation, 11'00

<https://vimeo.com/337973184>

password: 1988

IKOB

Museum für Zeitgenössische Kunst

/Musée d'Art Contemporain

/Museum of Contemporary Art

Rotenberg 12b, 4700 Eupen

Belgien / Belgique / Belgium

+32 87 56 01 10

[info@ikob.be](mailto:info@ikob.be)

[www.ikob.be](http://www.ikob.be)