

*Molitor*

# Emanuel de Carvalho *of Malabou*

Opening:

14 November 2025, 6—9 pm

Exhibition:

15 November 2025

— 17 January 2026

Talk between Catherine Malabou  
and Emanuel de Carvalho:

9 January 2026

On January 19th 2023, Emanuel de Carvalho attended a lecture by Catherine Malabou at the Royal College of Art where he was a student. He was struck that day by the affinities between his own practice and the veteran philosopher's research. De Carvalho's work is informed by his academic background in neuro-ophthalmology and sustained reading of twentieth-century continental philosophy. It is unsurprising therefore that he was interested in Malabou's use of recent neurological findings to extend Derrida's attack on semantic fixity to the realms of human biology and embodied experience. He emailed her soon after the lecture, asking if she might consider some kind of collaboration, and to his surprise she replied enthusiastically.

For the current exhibition Malabou agreed to contribute a sequence of drawings which might convey fundamental aspects of her thought and guide de Carvalho's work. The pair met in a café near Malabou's flat in Marseille last August. De Carvalho provided her with pens, paper and postage materials, and by the end of the month she had sent three simple drawings back to his London studio, each presenting a single totemic symbol. In the parcel she also enclosed a picturesque postcard of the Calanque de Niolon, a little bay near Marseille, with the following message:

*Here you are dear Emanuel, I hope you can do something with these horrors!.. Catherine*

At first glance the postcard seems insignificant: the image an incongruous glimpse of sun and sea within the cold domain of high philosophy and the note a piece of self-deprecating marginalia. But, as we know from Derrida as well as Freud before him, throwaway remarks and marginal jottings often contain signifiers of central importance.

Perhaps Malabou's words express not only shame about her basic draughtsmanship but also anxiety about the use value of her project in general. 'I hope you can do something,' the philosopher writes to the world beyond her desk, with what I have done here. And more specifically in this case, the note signals an uneasiness about the interaction between ideas

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and art. ‘I hope you can do something,’ the philosopher writes to the artist, can make something tangible and even beautiful, with my troublesome thoughts, ‘these horrors.’ I hope art – to go several steps further – might bring an end to the horror.

More than any one text or concept, the subject of de Carvalho’s exhibition is the question Malabou instinctively raises: how can art contain complex philosophical ideas? Each work tests a different response to this problem. Two engraved plates on the mezzanine level visualise the concepts of Malabou and her teacher Derrida in diagrammatic form – through sets of symbols positioned on either side of a rectangular grid, like pieces on a chessboard.

The sculptures and paintings, meanwhile, communicate different theoretical notions through the phenomenological encounter between viewer and artwork. Two pictures of sealed doorways, for example, embody Derrida’s notion of *différance* – how meaning is not held within a sign but formed through an endless deferral across associated signifiers. The viewer is suspended between opaque images, similar but distinct, and is unable to enter any interior or locate any semantic origin.

Bisecting the basement is a long, tall sculpture which resembles an enclosed storage rack. Visitors can crawl under its sides and enter a narrow internal corridor illuminated only by a thin horizontal slit above eye level. Here de Carvalho attempts to find sculptural form for Malabou’s concept of ‘destructive plasticity’: the ability of the brain not only to change but to transform completely after traumatic incidents, of a nascent identity to supplant an old one. The structure is formed from modular units inspired by wooden panels in a classroom, so its manufacture (creating something new, futile and blank out of something familiar and wholly distinct) mirrors the idea of transformation through loss, of creativity as a destructive act.

Like Malabou’s note, de Carvalho’s art is ambivalent about the production and dissemination of knowledge. The lecture hall in the painting by the entrance is empty, full of pedagogical potential but also as derelict and dilapidated as the scene of a violent crime (a long way from Niolon). And the steel sculptures look in shape and patina like pieces of laboratory furniture but are rendered useless, even hostile, by de Carvalho’s design. This equivocal tone befits Malabou’s belief in the possibility of total rupture: revolution is, after all, both salvation and murder.

The philosopher’s drawings are held between two sheets of steel which extend vertically from the surface of the table-like sculpture on the ground

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floor. They are out of sight and reach, as if their preservation is dependent on their concealment. This sharp-edged sculpture is typical of de Carvalho's approach. Raising and protecting the papers, it expresses sincere respect for the heights of human thought which they symbolise. But it also presents Malabou's ideas as violent or incompatible with human life – encased in heavy metal like a medieval soldier or radioactive waste. Rather than fulfilling her wish that he 'do something' with the sketches, de Carvalho exacerbates her anxiety, creating an exhibition which is poised between hope and horror.

— Michael Kurtz

Emanuel de Carvalho works across painting, sculpture, and sound. He holds an MA in Painting from the Royal College of Art alongside a PhD in Medicine from the University of Amsterdam and postgraduate studies in neuro-ophthalmology at University College London. Recent exhibitions include Perrotin, Paris (2025); Galerie Molitor, Berlin (2025); Hauser & Wirth, Somerset (2024); X Museum, Beijing (2024); Duarte Sequeira, Braga and Seoul (2024, solo 2023); Nir Altman, Munich (2024), Gathering, London (2023, solo 2024); Gallery Vacancy, Shanghai (2022) and The Sunday Painter, London (2022).

Catherine Malabou is a professor of philosophy in the departments of Comparative Literature and European Languages and Studies at UC Irvine. Her last books include *Before Tomorrow, Epigenesis and Rationality* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016, trans. Carolyn Shread), *Morphing Intelligence, From IQ to IA*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018, trans. Carolyn Shread), *Pleasure Erased, The Clitoris Unthought* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022), trans. Carolyn Shread), *Stop Thief! Anarchism and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2024, trans. Carolyn Shread), and *There Was No Revolution*, tbo with Polity Press, 2026.

Michael Kurtz is a critic based in London, who writes regularly for *Art Monthly* and *e-flux*. He won the International Award for Art Criticism in 2023 and is currently a Creative Mediator of Manifesta 16 Ruhr.