

Double Bind.

Louisa Clement

Descriptions of works

The Kunsthalle Gießen presents the latest series of works by artist Louisa Clement in the exhibition *Double Bind*.

Living things grow, procure food, reproduce, breathe, change. Physical activities and mental states are dependent on each other and together form a person's character.

In her current works being shown for the first time at the Kunsthalle, the artist Louisa Clement (*1987 in Bonn) departs from the familiar terrain of supposedly unambiguous bodily definitions, and creates with her *Repräsentantinnen* (2021) a kind of hybrid being that eludes explicit classification.

With her *Repräsentantinnen*, Clement questions the binary system of 'I' and 'You', of 'I' and 'the Other'. This transfers over to further concepts, and categories such as the almost perfect self-portrait, doll and clone, human and robot increasingly dissolve. She also underlines the difficulty of a clear classification on the linguistic level. The term 'double bind' comes from communication theory and is also used in psychology. It describes a so-called double message, in which language content on the one hand and tone of voice, gestures or actions on the other convey contradictory statements and signals. A contradiction in communication – for example, saying 'I'm fine...' in combination with a sad facial expression – leads the recipient to a dilemma, triggered by contradictory signals on the level of both language and relationship.

1 Louisa Clement, *Circling Head*, 2019, Video.

In the video works entitled *Circling Head*, the head of a mannequin in various stages of destruction is displayed on 7 monitors, its faceless portrait rotates in an endless loop. Despite its reduced form, which is completely devoid of eyes, nose, mouth and ears, the resemblance to a human head is evident. Injuries to the glossy black surface are visible in the form of scratches, wounds and fractures, and brightly coloured backgrounds can be seen flashing through these openings. Slight jerking movements further reinforce an impression of disrepair. At the same time, some of the shots appear like medical images from magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), the purpose of which is to visualise soft tissue beneath bones, such as the brain or muscles. The high-gloss aesthetics of *Circling Head* are enticing, yet the fragility of humans in the digital age shimmers beneath them and raises questions about the optimisation and manipulation of the body through technical and medical interventions.

2. Louisa Clement, *Gliedermensch*, 2017, Inkjet-Print.

The 27-part series takes the essay *On the Marionette Theatre* by the writer Heinrich von Kleist as its starting point. The piece is about a conversation in which the protagonist praises the superiority of marionettes (jointed puppets) over humans in dance. For the narrator, this superiority is due to the puppet's lack of reflection on its own actions. Unlike the puppet, humans see their own faults and through fear of committing them, they inhibit and limit themselves "in their natural grace". In Kleist's narrative, the marionette's lack of a soul becomes an advantage.

The delicate extremities of Louisa Clement's *Gliedermenschen* appear fragmented and in different poses, only subtly contrasting with the dark background. By using a light gold-coloured material, the artist emphasises the hinges at the joints of the depicted bodies all the more. The feature that most distinguishes the artificial from the human becomes – as in Kleist's story – the main protagonist. This series is deliberately positioned at the beginning of the exhibition to mark the starting point of Clement's conceptual reflections and ongoing exploration of the real, the virtual and the simulated body, as well as the associated media, social and psychological possibilities and effects.

3. Louisa Clement, *Mould*, 2019-2020, Bronze.

The heavy bronze objects lying on the ground are casts of supposed human bodies. The bodies, each presented here with a view from the rear, are those of models from the so-called real doll (sex doll) industry. In contrast to casting materials used in industrial mass production, Louisa Clement chose a material classically used by sculptors, which is also highly durable and almost indestructible. In doing so, the artist creates an individual character for each of the *Mould* and inverts the process from mass production to a unique object. The artist challenges a market that specialises in the production of artificial humans in order to satisfy needs, and that produces lifelike dolls as mass-produced goods with the potential to be understood as substitutes for partners. Thus, she initiates a discourse on the potential replaceability of human beings.

4. Louisa Clement, *body*, 2019, Inkjet-Print

The empty shells in the series of works entitled *Mould* were photographed with a smartphone and transformed into life-size, voluminous, convex bodies through the application of various image filters. Clement translates this phenomenon for herself by asking whether gaps in reality can be filled digitally.

The artist sees this phenomenon in interpersonal digital communication, especially on social media platforms such as Instagram and Tiktok. Here she observes an increased display of idealised self-images. Often, the identities that are presented online are far removed from the self and appear more as a transfigured, wishful ego in a flawless, illusory world. These self-portrayals aim to please, which manifests itself in the form of so-called 'likes' for all to see.

5. Louisa Clement, *Cast*, 2020, Inkjet Print

The series of works entitled *Cast* – closely related to the series of works *Mould* – addresses the increasing economisation and disempowerment of the human body. Consisting of a bronze cast and a photograph, both media depict a newborn lying on its stomach. Clement takes up the theme of the artificial birth of a synthetic being and makes it visual, in what is nothing more than the visual equivalent of the outer shell of a living baby. The economic act of production, which is usually hidden from the consumer, is revealed through the choice of media. Both the mould and the reproducible photograph theoretically allow for an infinite chain of creation, which can either be artificially limited by the (art) market or, as in the toy industry, only become lucrative when a large number of pieces are produced.

As in much of the artist's work, the title also plays a decisive role here. *Cast* – meaning 'to pour', 'to perform' or 'to occupy' – reveals the increasing objectification and appropriation of the body, and demonstrates, as it were, its broad acceptance. Almost no one takes offence at the indistinguishable likeness to real children in the context of the toy industry, as is the case with the so-called 'reborn' dolls. Louisa Clement alludes to a global industry, in which it seems that everyone can be artificially replicated, thereby she offers a glimpse into a dystopian future that has the potential to replace humans with their artificial selves.

6. Louisa Clement, *Repräsentantinnen*, 2021, TPE.

Exhibited for the first time at the Kunsthalle, the *Repräsentantinnen* are lifelike dolls – so-called 'Real Dolls' that are a replica of the artist herself. To this end, Clement worked with a Chinese company that specialises in the production of sex dolls. The artist's skin tone and texture have been imitated by means of innovative technological processes such as body scans, microphotography and cinematic movement studies. What's more, the *Repräsentantinnen* are able, as far as is technically possible, to imitate human facial expressions. These *Repräsentantinnen* are special in that they are equipped with artificial intelligence and are therefore also capable of communicating and learning. In order to create the AI, the artist answered more than 2,000 personal questions truthfully in advance, meaning that

the AI corresponds broadly to Louisa Clement's character. Additionally, the *Repräsentantinnen* are connected to the internet and draw on knowledge from the world wide web. The AI is able to hold conversations with the visitors in English, to learn and thus to develop its own character. The more they are linguistically challenged by external stimuli, the more the dolls develop their individual character.

Louisa Clement intends to have 10 of her *Repräsentantinnen* made, and for them to be sold after their completion. By relinquishing the *Repräsentantinnen* to private and public institutions, Louisa Clement also relinquishes control over her substitutes. As doubles with the same body measurements and the same physical attributes, as well as the basic features of her own character, her dealings with the *Repräsentantinnen* are thus beyond her control. Implying the question, to what extent does the artist also relinquish control over herself?

The plan is to bring all 10 *Repräsentantinnen* together after a few years in order to reveal the various evolutions of the individual *Repräsentantinnen* in an exhibition context. Thus, a doll that has communicated a lot through exhibition contexts may have developed a different character than a doll that has communicated less or perhaps not been switched on at all. A recurring theme in Clement's work is interpersonal communication, to which a comparison can be drawn here regarding loss of control, especially in the digital space. Once a picture, comment or video has been published on social media and thereby on the internet, it can be accessed for an indefinite period of time. It is almost impossible to track how often a post has been duplicated, saved or used, yet this risk is often not perceived as such due the 'media veneer' attached to posts. With the *Repräsentantinnen*, Louisa Clement transfers this phenomenon into the real (art) world and alludes to its highly explosive nature, which is accepted as normal in the digital realm.

7. Louisa Clement, *body fallacy*, 2021, Inkjet Print.

Louisa Clement's most recent series of works, *body fallacy*, shows the larger than life-size, naked body of a woman in various poses and postures. Always fragmented and never fully visible, the photographs reveal a young, fair-skinned body that, by Western standards, appears perfect, the body's surface is slightly out of focus suggesting a softness of skin that seems almost tangible. In place of a real person, it is the body of a 'real doll' that is depicted here, with a complexion that is barely distinguishable from that of a living human being. The photographs are reminiscent of social media images, in which bodies are always presented immaculately through retouching and filters. The fluid transition of media-influenced images that inscribe themselves in the collective visual memory and superimpose themselves on real bodies, is the expression of an increasing fusion of real and digital visual worlds, in which artificiality is elevated to the status of normal.

8. Louisa Clement, *Untitled*, 2021, Light box

The photograph *Untitled* appears monumental in the exhibition, and together with the two exhibits on the walls behind it, positioned to the left and right (title: *body*), it forms a triptych in this constellation. This designation of a three-part painting or relief that is hinged, and can be opened and closed is most often found in the form of a devotional work or altarpiece, and typically tells a biblical story. Instead of a statue of the Madonna, *Untitled* presents a mannequin cut off at the chest and neck. Due to how it is presented in a light box, the figure appears to radiate from within, lending the motif an otherworldly sheen. Thus, the exhibit's external appearance also recalls film advertising and evokes associations with the iconic film poster for Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927).

Clement's motifs are the result of observations and found objects taken from everyday life, yet they reveal her ongoing conceptual preoccupation with the transformation of the body. The mannequin is an artificial body motif that is on display in all its medial manifestations throughout the exhibition.

9. Louisa Clement, *mirrors*, 2015-2020, mirrored glass

The surface of the work *mirrors*, with its colourfully, tinted, reflective glass, is deliberately inspired by mirrored sunglasses from well-known manufacturers. If looking into someone's eyes is already made difficult by them wearing dark glasses, then it becomes completely impossible with mirrored lenses. As non-verbal confirmation through the other person's eyes is missing, the distorted reflection of oneself in the glasses suggests a kind of monologue instead of a dialogue with the other person. Reflected back on oneself, the interaction gives way to a voyeuristic view of oneself and, conversely, allows the wearer an uninhibited perspective of their counterpart. The artist takes up the theme of interpersonal communication and the shift between sender and receiver as soon as the classical structure is disturbed even slightly. The lightly curved surface of the object *mirrors* amplifies the confusion and transmits the aspect of altered perception into the three-dimensional space.