



# Marguerite Humeau

15 October 2016 – 15 January 2017

## FOXP2

With this exhibition, titled FOXP2, Marguerite Humeau set herself an impossible challenge: to artificially re-create the emergence of sentient life. Conceived as a biological showroom, the presentation suggests the possibility that consciousness might now be reproducible on an industrial scale. It displays prototypes of living beings with different degrees of sentience.

98% of human and chimpanzee DNA is the same. According to the scientist Jared Diamond, in his book *The Third Chimpanzee*, the crucial 2% difference lies in the mutation of a gene called FOXP2. This event was responsible for the evolution of the vocal tract, which generated a dramatic change in the larynx structure around 100,000 years ago. Noam Chomsky has called this a "single-chance mutation", an accident of evolution that allowed our ancestors to produce the first forms of an articulate language.

Humeau consulted linguists all over the world to re-enact the moment when this mutation occurred. Reverse-engineering processes have been used to create a sound piece, while a speculated proto-language was created in collaboration with Pierre Lanchantin from the Laboratory of Voice Synthesis at the University of Cambridge. A voice has been synthesised to beatbox. It joins a "celestial chorus" composed of everyone to have lived on planet Earth, since the very first tribes 100,000 years ago – 108 billion voices in total.

For FOXP2, Humeau contacted a number of zoologists, palaeontologists, biologists and psychologists, and asked them to imagine what might have been the biological evolution of elephants if, instead of humans, they had become sentient beings able to use language. The death throes of a matriarch elephant lie at the heart of the exhibition. Her slow passage towards death triggers the evolution of others in the group, which

have been programmed to display a wide variety of feelings and states: sadness, melancholy, drunkenness, nostalgia, joy, love or amazement.

On each platform lies a pink carpet, dyed with pigments created from chemical components of the human body, along with patches of a purple pigment concocted using *Datura*, a toxic plant whose berry is suspected of being the forbidden fruit in Genesis. Reduced to a liquid state, humanity becomes a "soulless body", on which other sentient beings evolve.

**1 FOXP2, A synthetic voice beatboxing the origins of language, joined by 108 billion Homo sapiens**

2016  
Multi-channel sound installation

**2 ECHO, A matriarch engineered to die**

2016  
Polystyrene, white paint, acrylic parts, latex, silicone, nylon, glass artificial heart, water pumps, water, potassium chloride, powder-coated metal stand, sound

**3 EDWINA, AMELIA, ANTONIA, Three females whose larynges have dropped, allowing them to sing in an almost articulate language**

2016  
Polystyrene, white paint, acrylic parts, latex, silicone, nylon, powder-coated metal stand, sound

**4 ENID, A female engineered to cry out of sadness**

2016  
Polystyrene, white paint, acrylic parts, latex, silicone, nylon, artificial tear drop system and reservoir in glass, depressant hormones powder, 3 drops of elephant tears sourced in Thailand, water, water pumps, powder-coated metal stand, sound

**5 JEAN, An elephant watching the scene with a sense of wonder**

2016  
Polystyrene, white paint, nylon, powder-coated metal stand

**6 FELICIE, A female engineered to be self-destructive – getting drunk with ethanol that comes from a masala fruit**

2016  
Polystyrene, white paint, acrylic parts, latex, silicone, glass artificial masala fruit, ethanol, water pumps, water, nylon, powder-coated metal stand, sound

**7 EMMETT, A male in artificial oestrus showing highly visible signs of aggressivity**

2016  
Polystyrene, white paint, acrylic parts, latex, silicone, glass container, artificial black must, water pumps, water, nylon, powder-coated metal stand, sound

**8 BASTIEN, A foetus is being born**

2016  
Polystyrene, white paint, acrylic parts, latex, silicone, nylon, sound

**9 PIERRE, An elephant engineered to be happy**

2016  
Polystyrene, white paint, acrylic parts, latex, silicone, nylon, endorphin powder, powder-coated metal stand, sound

**10 FOXP2**

2016  
Acrylic sign, LED light, various electronic components

**BODY WITHOUT SOUL, Liquid Human.**

2016  
Carpet dyed with: 2.2g *Datura*, Liquid Human Body (65% Oxygen, 18% Carbon, 10% Hydrogen, 3% Nitrogen, 1.5% Calcium, 1% Phosphore, 0.4% Potassium, 0.3% Sulfur, 0.23% Iode, 0.2% Sodium, 0.2% Chlorine, 0.08% Iron, 0.033% Magnesium, 0.02% Molybdenum, 0.009% Silicon, 0.0027% Zinc, Traces of Fluoride, Cobalt, Strontium, Copper, Lithium, Manganese, Selenium, Aluminium, Lead, Vanadium, Arsenic, Bromine)

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All works courtesy of the artist, C L E A R I N G (New York, Brussels) and DUVE (Berlin).

FOXP2 has been curated by Rebecca Lamarche-Vadel. The exhibition at Nottingham Contemporary has been developed in collaboration with Sam Thorne, assisted by Angelica Sule.

The exhibition has been conceived by the Palais de Tokyo, where it opened in June 2016. The exhibition presented at Nottingham Contemporary is a collaboration between Nottingham Contemporary and the Palais de Tokyo.

Cover image: Marguerite Humeau, FOXP2 (Mutation), 2016. Close up detail. Courtesy of the artist.

