

Alice De Mont was born in 1985 in Ghent, Belgium. She studied at the Higher Institute Sint-Lukas Brussels where she graduated in 2008. In 2010, she did a second Master degree in Art & Mediation at the École de Recherche Graphique (ERG), Brussels. De Mont currently lives and works in Brussels and Ghent.

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ABOUT
BEHAVIOUR
AND
WAVES

Alice

De Mont

**Le Parti Pris des Choses:
The Imperfect
Art Objects of
Alice De Mont**
By Caroline Dumalin

KCSKPP: CONTINGENCY

Creating a character to visualize an idea can allow an artist to leap over the wall of self, whether it is the constraints of time and place, or previously acquired beliefs and routines. On a second level, it can allow a viewer to do so, too.¹ This may explain why Alice De Mont, born in 1985 in Ghent,

invented her first character after hitting a crisis point. Let me nuance this preliminary thought by retracing her steps. In her formative years as an art student, De Mont came to believe that the ways in which she conceived and displayed her works were essentially contingent; that is to say, “unnecessary, but not impossible.”² Contingency is an all-pervasive phenomenon. Once in sight, no thought or thing feels solid anymore. Her initial reaction was to make something that represented practically nothing. In order to deflect the burden of meaning, she reduced the complexity of form, so much so that her work looked distant and mute.

Seeking to steer clear from personal impression, De Mont avoided the use of her own hand. This led her to make simple but categorical installations with readymade components, such as a camera, tripod, cable, video projector, and projection (*StAAF 1*, or *Kcskpp*). According to De Mont, these “closed systems” disintegrated as soon as one element of the chain was taken out, thereby emphasizing the piece as an independent, tautological structure. Even cutting the power counted as a destructive gesture: “The elements lose their connection to each other and become haphazardly dispersed objects in a space”³ (*Kcskpp*, 2008), in which the border of another person’s drawing was simultaneously filmed and projected in an adjacent space, could then be seen as a synecdoche of a bigger question: where does the artist’s involvement end and the work itself begin?

However, emptying out the expressive qualities of her works and defining them strictly by their material soon proved to be misleading—it did not provide total control over external sources of meaning. How the work is placed inside a space, how it relates to its environment, and how it is viewed influences our ever-changing perception. In that sense, it also does not own its content. The lives of artworks are no more determined by a plot than ours. They find their subjects as they are made, framed, and perceived—by their maker as well as by onlookers. From that perspective, the meaning of an art object, and the ways to arrive at one, appear to be infinite. Whereas De Mont purposely sidetracked this reality at the outset, it eventually reappeared under an unexpected guise.

BADPAKMAN STRAATKAST: IMAGINATION

De Mont’s denial of the subject matter paradoxically generated a subject. After graduating from Sint-Lukas Brussels in the fall of 2008, a compelling

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- 1 I learned this simple truth from David Foster Wallace, may he rest in peace, while listening to the recording of an interview aired by BBC Radio 3 in 1995, when he was 33 years old and still relatively unknown.
 - 2 Rudi Laermans, *Communicatie zonder mensen: een systeemtheoretische inleiding in de sociologie*, Amsterdam (Boom), 1999, p. 54. Cited by Alice De Mont in: *Une mémoire*, unpublished dissertation. ERG, Brussels, 2010.
 - 3 All following quotes by the artist are taken from her dissertation.

thought struck her. Before that thought received a body, it was given a name: *Badpakman Straatkast*, also known as *Bpmsk*. These are the words that De Mont attributed to this character: “It’s due to language, imagination, and interpretations that an (art) object can ‘charge’ itself more and more. Sentences and thoughts form stories and meanings that lie in a world parallel to the (unknown) world of the object’s being. But it doesn’t matter that a world constructs itself parallel to the art object.” Of course, the inspiration and consolation provided by *Bpmsk*’s words didn’t really come out of nowhere. The personification of this thought—fundamental to her work ever since—nevertheless demonstrates two things. This artistic gesture may appear as a “*deus ex machina*” in the beginning and therefore seems “unnecessary, but not impossible.” For a young artist, numerous scenarios lie ahead, of which only one at a time will play out. Merely in hindsight does a certain scenario arise from the range of factors, which slowly but surely gives shape to a body of work. This is indeed also the case for De Mont, in whose eyes making art has become to mean a subjective process of discovery and response. Secondly, the invention of *Bpmsk* signals that the process of De Mont’s discoveries and the lives of her characters are one and the same. Each character embodies a history of observations and decisions, which is simultaneously unspoken and made apparent.

It appears that De Mont has become progressively interested in telling the story of her consciousness through fictional characters. Contemplative, analytical, and tentative, these characters echo the mind-set of their maker. *Bpmsk*, the father figure, manifestly stayed immaterial. To be precise, he was represented by a digital black rectangle, a so-called perfect shape, constructed by De Mont with Photoshop. Black may be an achromatic or non-color, refusing to reflect light, but it is hardly void of connotation. Despite all his wisdom and ideal body, *Bpmsk*’s life was marred by struggle soon after he came into being. In 2009, the black sheep was integrated in a series of small photographs accompanied by captions, which received the poetic title *Les petites images; les moments pétrifiés* (transl. “The small images; the petrified moments”). The series portrays the figure’s search for solidity and stability within the space of the image. In each picture, *Bpmsk* appears hindered by small furniture-like sculptures that De Mont refers to as “disturbing elements.” While our anti-hero never managed to attain the harmony that De Mont continuously seeks, thus ingloriously failing as a character, he succeeded in tearing down the wall of contingency in the mind of his author. He did so by revealing that “the touch of the artist,” especially when resisted, will surface in ways never before imagined. In the case of Alice De Mont, it surfaced as imagination. Since the character had fulfilled its role, De Mont killed him. In a video that she made, *Bpmsk* hits a tree and shatters into tiny black pieces. This allowed her to move on.

Contingency never really went away, but the feeling of arbitrariness did. There is indeed a difference, she subsequently concluded: “Artistic works in general and my works in specific are nothing more than possible reactions to a certain problem.” Considering this seemingly easy deduction

and the dilemma that triggered it in my own subjective perspective, the life of *Bpmsk* presents itself as an exemplary tale wrapped in an unassuming cover. The character confronts an artistic problem in a way similar to how saints in religious art illustrate a possible reaction to a certain matter of belief. This reading, informed by my background in art history, is exactly the kind of exterior projection, the kind of story or meaning parallel to the object's existence, that cannot be escaped when considering a work of art. Works of art, notwithstanding their degree of abstraction, have hungry surfaces that continuously ask to be fed with language, imagination, and interpretation. Imagining an art work as a living, mortal being seems like a fitting approach for an artist whose practice is so genuinely conceived. Should there be any doubt about this, perhaps the words of the philosopher Vilém Flusser will convince that “[t]o live’ means to proceed towards death. On the way, one came across things that blocked one’s path. These things called ‘problems’ had therefore to be removed. ‘To live’ then meant: to resolve problems in order to be able to die.”⁴ Taking this citation out of context, it could even be read as a reflection on *Bpmsk*'s *raison d'être*.

OBJECT 1: IMPERFECTION

Alice De Mont invented a character that can voice thoughts, experience obstacles, and—by Flusser’s definition—“resolve problems in order to be able to die.” The next character took the form of a manmade thing—a sculpture—, and that quality inevitably increased the problems it faced. Already in 1969, the famous conceptual artist Douglas Huebler stated that “the world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more.” No longer compelled to actually make objects, artists could free their hands and set their minds to tracing and uncovering how images, in a broad sense, were made and given meaning. For Alice De Mont, this freedom of craft and contingency brought about *Bpmsk*, a disembodied character that embodies a definite thought. Rather than a variable physical space, his sanctuary was the static photograph—a fixed perspective for an untouched image. Yet, unlike Huebler, De Mont did not give up making objects by hand. Most notably, she made *Object 1* in 2010. While the date marks Alice De Mont’s final year at the École de Recherche Graphique in Brussels—a school known for the value it places on theory—the work’s matter-of-fact title announces the launch of a new production cycle. The sculptures that *Object 1* introduces are made out of plaster and left in their raw, colored state. Whereas *Object 2 & Object 3* evoke a subtle, formal contrast through their pairing, *Object 1* is a vessel for its counterparts. *Object 1* consists of a geometric element and

4 Vilém Flusser, “The Non-Thing 1,” in: *Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design*, London (Reaktion Books), 1999, pp. 85-86. The proposed connections between De Mont’s works and Flusser’s theories are my own; the artist had not heard of him before.

an organic element joined together by a long, triangular bar. The square shape was directly cast while its logical and actual opposite, the organic form, was first molded in clay. On the surface, the sculpture is plain and simple. Its straightforwardness, however, is a consciously chosen means of bringing out an ambivalent tension. The tension exhibited by *Object 1* goes beyond its merely formal qualities. Because shaping bears the traces of its maker, notions of imperfection and “the artist’s touch” come into play. By materially pronouncing these conceptually associated notions, *Object 1* seems to ask: Would I have been better or nicer if I would have been machine-made?

When it comes to making a perfect square or a serial object, the human hand is believed to be an inferior tool. Regardless of the rigor with which the artist tries to circumvent her own impression, and no matter how “untouched” the material is, it can never result in an absolutely flawless or objective object. On top of this, De Mont realized that sculpture—as a discipline—is essential to her practice, even if it entails manipulating material by hand. As she puts it, “I have the will of a sculptor. I want to strip and remove the superfluous.” In her experience, a sculptor looks for a finished presentation of basic forms. As such, the exhibition of *Object 1* involved a measured process through which De Mont searched for its perfect place in space. Yet the only sure thing following her pursuit was another demystification. As soon as she had found the best position possible, every alteration or displacement caused degradation. In the progression of the obtained unity, she witnessed the object itself wearing out—literally as well as metaphorically. By moving it around, the triangular bar linking the geometric and organic shapes eventually broke. Unintentionally but significantly, *Object 1* was cast from a state of things into a state of being. De Mont finally decided to place the object inside a Plexiglas coffin and gave it a new, telling title: *La mort d’une harmonie*.

FILMSCULPTURENFILMS: IMMATERIALITY

Today, De Mont rejects the aforementioned title of *Object 1* because it sounds too heavy and lyrical. Instead, she proposes a more narrative reading of her objects in a less outspoken way. Having become characters, it was only a matter of time before they received their true place within a motion picture. *Filmsculpturenfilms*, realized in 2011, was De Mont’s first series of video projections that involved a new type of sculpture: *filmsculpturen*. Taking up a position between props and performers, their existence is only justified within the film—in other words, within the conceptual framework for which they were designed. With movement, time becomes part of their totality. And in time, thoughts unfold. Desiring to reflect the mechanisms of her thought process, De Mont opted for what would become a characteristically slow and descriptive filmic language. Although the name was new, the *filmsculpturen* were in fact an elaboration of the

so-called “disturbing elements” that functioned as the decor in *Les petites images; les moments pétrifiés*. In *Filmsculpturen* films, the viewer and the viewing context are featured as additional obstacles. In separately projected, looped clips, she stages simple yet specific interactions between unadorned, loosely crafted objects, persons seen from the back, and the surrounding architecture. By reducing emotions, facial expressions, and acting to a minimum, the human figures are treated not as psychological beings but as barely-animated objects. One unidentified person holds tightly to the long, slender legs of a quivering sculpture. Another *Rückenfigur* is seen wearing a cape, reminiscent of a Caspar David Friedrich vista, while staring at a piece of tape on the wall near a window. As he slowly walks backwards to widen his field of vision, he accidentally breaks a sculpture. Although the depicted space is indistinct, it refers to a museum environment where everything is fragile and nothing can be touched. It becomes clear that the *filmsculpturen*, although barely figurative, are vehicles alluding to familiar—which is to say, previously-viewed—surfaces of objects that are stored in our memories: either an art object, be it hung on the wall or placed on a pedestal, or a generic cultural form, such as a table.

To put it simply, the *filmsculpturen* impersonate things with a presumed place in the world. Filming these symbolic objects entails a further abstraction of objecthood. Not just in the sphere of art but in our daily life as well, things are losing ground to non-things. This shift culminated with the emergence of conceptual art, a movement that valued thoughts over things, and persists with the proliferation of technical images. The term “technical images” was coined by Flusser to separate photographic, filmic, and, later on, digital images from the old world of “traditional images,” such as paintings and sculptures.⁵ Although these so-called non-things still carry traces of materiality, making and viewing them involves distance from the object. What interests De Mont in particular is that while technical images allow for the construction of a visual narrative, they cannot be handled or manipulated by the viewer; they can only be consumed. Subjecting a sculpture to the framing device that is a camera lens makes it impossible to walk around it, see it from different sides, or feel its surface. The concept rules the object, and the artist directs what you see. But if the human hand seems to have become a redundant tool, fingertips have actually become indispensable. As organs of choice rather than of manual work, fingertips by their mechanical nature increasingly perform more pressing than impressing gestures: playing a piano, typing on a keyboard, or pushing the button of a camera. De Mont favors the piano over any other musical instrument because, in her opinion, the sounds are produced through “immaterial” gestures. Similarly, when using photography and film, she prefers to think of these mediums as

5 Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, London (Reaktion Books), 2000 (1st publ. 1983).

frozen moments and unfolding thoughts respectively, just as she prefers to think about things as characters.

TWAALFPOOT: CONTINUITY

A chronological account of Alice De Mont's concise and eloquent body of work makes it possible to discern how one thing leads to another. Until recently, she had always abstained from blatantly stating the questions that surround and relate to her works. That changed with *Twaalfpoot*, a video work realized at the beginning of 2012. The eponymous protagonist of *Twaalfpoot* is a table-like object with twelve long legs and, thus, unmistakably a variation on a recurring character. The sculpture existed well before it was a *filmsculptuur*. Ten months after its creation, the artist still could not figure out why she had made it. This search for completion eventually became the impetus for the film. Moving away from the brief, fragmentary, silent, black and white *Filmsculpturenfilms*, De Mont structured *Twaalfpoot* around a single character in three parts and included a voiceover. The film starts by slowly panning across a white wall, revealing its cracks and marks, while a computer-generated male narrator recites a text written by De Mont. After hearing that "a certain revulsion against the sculptural object arises because it is clumsy and too heavy to move around," we see how *Twaalfpoot* consequently disintegrates on top of an ordinary, functional table. The last part shows the artist in the process of filming. By concluding with a look behind the scenes, the viewer is made aware of how the sculpture's story—which ultimately legitimates its existence—is staged. Disclosing the production in its totality became an alternative way to "finish" it. At the same time, this Brechtian distancing technique affects her artistic intention, which is hereby openly confirmed: the implicit conceptual basis of *Object 1* lives on as a clearly-outlined movie script.

By adopting the opening sentence of *Twaalfpoot* as the title of her next work, De Mont made the continuity of her research undeniably explicit. Despite its unresolved name, *This object, or this table, should be considered more like a sculptural object* (2012) is her most table-like table. Compelled by her desire to perfect its appearance, she designed and produced the table with professional assistance and machines. Above all, we are invited to pinpoint the status of *This object, or this table* [...] because the table is, in fact, more than merely a sculptural object; it is a flexible conversation piece, moving the discussion of authorship and artistry beyond the realm of sculpture. This key object, as De Mont calls it, will furthermore become elemental in a future series of dialogues with the works of other artists. Nevertheless, its peculiar wave-like design permanently bears the mark of her latest film *Façade* (2012).

Unlike *Twaalfpoot*, the script of *Façade* was worked out before the surface on which the action is performed. On the slightly higher side of the tabletop, an older man lays a geographical map. He pins it down with a stone, which awaited its participation in the scene in a hollow space just

underneath the tabletop. Having mounted the lower side of the table to inspect the map's abstract lines, the older man, mesmerized, holds it up to the wall and strokes it carefully and affectionately. Indulging in the fascination of detail means losing perspective of the whole. Indeed, he pays no attention to the young man behind him, presumably his son, who observes the scene from a distance. All the while, the latter wonders if the object could ever have the same value for him. In contrast to its "perfectly" executed decor, *Façade* casts an unusually sensitive light on human relations. The central characters are people with faces, the façade concealing as much as revealing their inner lives. Still, their individuality makes them no less exemplary. They represent how each of us looks and takes a different side of things. In the end, this doesn't really appear to be a problem for De Mont, but a continual source of subjects and meaning.

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