



# STEF VAN LOOVEREN

## COSMIC BODY FIRST INCISION

24.01-17.05.2026

EN

M

**Melting / Dissolution** | softening or dissolving of forms, materials or boundaries. This makes transitions between states, bodies and identities tangible.

**Mercury** | in alchemy, Mercury represents fluidity, transformation and the capacity to move between the states of solid and liquid, material and spiritual. Mercury serves as the intermediary that unites Salt (the feminine principle of the Moon and body) and Sulphur (the masculine principle of the Sun and soul). Mercury's associations with communication, hybridity and transition echo the work's themes of continuous becoming, queerness and non-binary embodiment.

N

**Non-binary / Queerness** | identities rejecting fixed male/female categories; fluid, hybrid and shifting.

P

**Philosopher's stone** | the symbolic aim of alchemy: a purified, completed form. It represents the ongoing search for balance, integration and new possibilities of identity.

**Prosthetic object** | costume-like or body-modifying forms that extend or transform the body.

R

**Red** | a colour symbolising energy, vitality, passion and transformation. Associated with blood, it evokes life force, intensity and sacrifice. In alchemy, red is often linked to the final stage of the *magnum opus*, Rubedo, representing completion, integration and wholeness.

**Reflection / Mirror** | surfaces revealing identity through self-perception and relational dynamics.

**Ritual** | a structured, repeated set of actions or gestures that are often symbolic. It is performed to mark transformation, connection or transition within spiritual, social or artistic practices.

S

**Seed** | a seed holds the power to sprout into a different form. It is a source of growth and development. When a seed is nurtured, it will go through a process of transformation. It is a symbol of possibility.

**Shadow work** | confronting suppressed or conditioned aspects of the self to support identity exploration and transformation.

**Silver** | reflective material with purifying qualities, linked to celestial objects. It symbolises the transformative interplay between spiritual and material realms.

**Solve et coagula** | Latin for "dissolve and recombine." This alchemical concept describes deconstruction followed by re-composition. It shows transformation as a constant cycle of dissolution and reconstruction.

**Sphere** | in alchemy and cosmology, a sphere symbolises wholeness, unity and oneness, reflecting the harmony of the cosmos. It represents the cyclical nature of transformation, the integration of opposites and the continuous interplay between material and spiritual realms. In the context of a cosmic body, the sphere evokes celestial bodies, the orbit of energies and the alchemical ideal of the unified, evolving self.

T

**Transmutation** | changing from one state into another. It functions as a metaphor for personal, bodily and social transformation, enacted through material, gestural and symbolic shifts.

**Tree of Life** | symbolic structure representing connections, cycles and spiritual transformation.

W

**Worldbuilding** | creating immersive environments with an internal logic; guiding visitors through participatory, interconnected narratives.

The new site-specific project by Stef Van Looveren treats the museum space as a hybrid of temple, body and alchemical laboratory. The focus is on metamorphosis, with melting, merging and mirroring as ways to explore the idea of transformation as both ritual and embodied experience. The exhibition begins with the performance *OPUS II*, in which visitors witness the space being constructed in real time through a ritualised procession of performers carrying and activating objects. This performance forms the first chapter of the work, establishing the spatial and symbolic framework for the rest of the installation.

At the core of the work are sound-producing sculptural forms that draw on organic structures, egg and seed shapes, bell forms and elemental vessels. Light reflects off their silvered surfaces and interacts with the movements of visitors. The sound that the sculptures produce acts as a structural element within the installation. Music unfolds like a mantra, beginning with the artist's voice: it links sound to gender expression, healing and inner strength. The voice expands through bells, tuned objects and live instruments, shaping the space and connecting it to ongoing transformation.

The shifting light and repetitive music suggest life cycles, decay and renewal. The metallic shapes evoke alchemical ideas of matter as both physical and symbolic. References to cyborg bodies, androgyny and intersex embodiments highlight the capacity for continual metamorphosis, while silvered bodies hint at medical, futuristic and sacred resonances, combining aspects of surgery, machinery and divine presence. As a whole, the installation loosely echoes the structure of a Tree of Life, suggesting an interconnected system of bodies and energies.

The work invites visitors into an interior, introspective space where social conditioning can be questioned. Van Looveren refers to this as a form of "shadow work," exploring what remains when inherited roles and identities lose their hold. Alchemical processes such as dissolution, transformation and reconfiguration metaphorically reflect fluid identity, queerness and the rejection of binary thinking.

Throughout the exhibition, materials shift and surfaces appear to melt, keeping the installation in a state of continual flux. Visitors experience a space of ongoing becoming, which is open-ended, reflective and grounded in the presence of bodies, sound and materials.



**ABOUT THE ARTIST** | Stef Van Looveren is a Belgian multidisciplinary artist working across performance, video, photography, sculpture and installation. Their practice explores the politics of embodiment, sexuality and the constructed nature of identity, often employing humour and prosthetic objects to reveal how identities are formed, constrained and liberated. Using symbolic transformation and ritualistic gestures, Van Looveren explores the continuous evolution of inner states, bodies and selves.

Their installations and sculptural works often incorporate materials such as silicone, wax, metal and glass: substances that evoke the malleability of the body and states of transition. These material choices reinforce a central interest in transformation, both physical and psychological, and reflect the fluidity inherent to identity.

Van Looveren's performances and installations blur the boundaries between theatrical spectacle, ritual and bodily exploration. Drawing on influences from religious iconography, technology, popular culture and subcultures such as BDSM, their work creates an immersive and charged visual language that questions normative expectations of the body while inviting viewers into a heightened, transformative experience.

**GLOSSARY** | A collection of terms and concepts reflecting a body in constant flux, where meanings, interpretations and associations are continuously evolving and transforming.

A

**Alchemy** | a symbolic, philosophical and proto-scientific system centred on transformation. In traditional practice, base metals such as lead or copper were transformed into noble metals like gold or silver through melting and purification. This process was both material and symbolic, representing the purification of the self, the release of old forms and the restructuring of identity.

**Alchemical stages** | blackening, whitening and reddening symbolise chaos, purification and integration, appearing through rhythms, materials and gestures that reflect inner transformation and shadow integration.

**Alchemical wedding** | a symbolic concept in Western alchemy referring to the sacred union of opposing principles such as masculine and feminine, sun and moon or spirit and matter, whose integration results in transformation, balance and the emergence of a higher or unified state of being. In an artistic context, the term is used metaphorically to describe processes of synthesis and inner transformation, echoing the culmination of a spiritual or psychological journey.

**Androgyny** | blending masculine and feminine qualities, often in hybrid bodies where gender boundaries dissolve.

**Anus** | considered a non-binary site for passive pleasure, beyond reproduction or waste.

B

**BDSM** | bondage, domination and sadomasochism, exploring pain, pleasure and relational dynamics.

**Bells** | sonic devices to guide the rituals. They can announce a start, a change, the ending of a sequence, a call to action, a call to reflection, or whatever feeling the sound activates in you.

**Binary** | a system of two fixed options (male/female, good/bad, life/death). This logic is challenged in the work to reveal the complexity of identity.

**Butt Plug / Chastity belt / Piercings** | these objects or adornments explore pleasure, pain, gender performance and embodiment.

C

**Coagulation** | solidifying or reforming what has dissolved, which leads to moments of rebuilding identity within cycles of transformation.

**Cyborg** | a hybrid of a human, machine and imaginary body; the cyborg acts as a transformative model that breaks through the fixed borders between the body, technology and identity. It is used by the artist to imagine alternative forms of embodiment.

E

**Egg-shape form** | in alchemy, the egg symbolises origin, potential and the process of becoming, echoing the shape of a seed. It represents the container of transformation, the gestation of new forms, and the emergence of life and consciousness; it is a recurring motif in the artist's vocabulary.

**Embodiment / Disembodiment / Flux** | shifting experiences of presence and continuous movement, expressing ongoing transformation.

**Esotericism** | hidden or spiritual knowledge informing rhythms, objects and transformations.

I

**Interconnection** | objects, bodies and meanings that form a shared, evolving system.

L

**Laboratory** | a space or environment where experimentation, creation and transformation occur; in alchemy, it symbolises the site of material and spiritual investigation, discovery, inner surgery and transmutation. This reflects how the artist views the exhibition space as a site of exploration and transformative experience.



### INFO & CREDITS

**Artist**  
Stef Van Looveren

**Performers**  
Adelita Baks  
Adrien Souchet  
Arya K/Nell  
Inci Gül Civelekoğlu  
Manuel Joaquin Gutierrez Ruiz  
Michiko Limanya  
Mira Biermans  
Sam Hawkes  
Sam Van Goethem  
Stef Van Looveren  
Tamara Sam Garcia  
Tuchila Jamees

**Assistants**  
Anais Maes  
Aukje De Coen  
Bruno Heselmanns  
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Céline Yetter  
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**Thanks to**  
Carl Jung, Donna Haraway,  
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Mercury, Salt, Sulphur, The  
Divine Androgyne Universe

The IN SITU programme at M HKA offers exhibitions by significant early and mid-career artists from around the world. It focuses on the commissioning of new artworks and experimental practices in what is M HKA's largest and most atypical exhibition space.

#### PROGRAMME

**17 January 2026**

19:00, performance *OPUS II* as part of Art's Birthday.

**26 March 2026**

19:00, conversation with Stef Van Looveren as part of the FRONT ROW programme, organised in collaboration with NICC.

Further exhibition-related activities can be found at [www.muhka.be/en/programma](http://www.muhka.be/en/programma).

#### Guided Tours

Explore the current exhibitions with a guide in Dutch, English, French, or German. More info and booking: [reservatie@muha.be](mailto:reservatie@muha.be).

#### Ensembles

Read more on M HKA's online research database, via [ensembles.org](http://ensembles.org) or the QR code.

All images courtesy the artist. *Confessions*, De Singel, 2024. *Confessions*, video stills, 2024.

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M HKA

IN SITU

