

Helmhaus Zürich

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Talk to the Hand

Powerful Gestures, Patented Gestures

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From the clenched fists of mass protest in the daily news bulletins to the thumbs-up sign on social media sites, gestures convey human emotion more effectively than anything else. The group exhibition *Talk to the Hand* shows how Swiss artists today are once again engaging increasingly with this controversial area of human communication – that is on the brink of being routinely patented by technology companies.

“Talk to the hand!” is the famous retort given by the Terminator (played by Arnold Schwarzenegger) in the film *Terminator 3* when a gas station attendant asks him to pay for the goods he has scooped up. Although widely used as a contemptuous expression of refusal to listen, it takes on a more positive slant as the title of the new group exhibition at Helmhaus Zürich.

In the context of the exhibition, the phrase represents a connection between the spoken word and the human hand, in which the hand, as an instrument of human communication, is quite literally part of the conversation.

The exhibition at Helmhaus Zürich shows that this important aspect of communication is increasingly the focus of works by contemporary Swiss artists. That should come as no surprise in an age when gestures are seen everywhere. Whenever we watch the news, we see the clenched fists of some protest movement, from the Arab Spring to America’s Occupy. Whenever we visit social media sites, we express our approval by clicking on icons of raised thumbs. And if we do this using a touchscreen device, we are ourselves gesticulating with our hands just as the technology companies prescribe (photographic examples of ubiquitous everyday gestures can be found on the helmhaus_zuerich Instagram feed accompanying the exhibition).

The contemporary spectrum of hand gestures thus ranges from the ultimate expression of freedom-affirming protest to the gradual erosion of physical latitude in the hand movements that are dictated by electronic devices. Such is the diversity explored by the 19 artists in the *Talk to the Hand* exhibition. And they do so in very different ways:

Zurich painter **Karin Schwarzbek** (born 1969) takes the art-historical term gestural painting quite literally, sometimes painting directly on the canvas with her fingers. Her freely applied gestures, unlike the predefined multi-touch gestures on a touchscreen, leave their traces on the surface.

Thomas Hirschhorn (born 1957 in Bern, lives in Paris) has explored touchscreen gestures in his video works: for instance, scrolling through images of bodies mutilated by war or terror and obliterating the images with an almost insouciant flick of the hand. In *Talk to the Hand*, however, Hirschhorn presents works in which he intervenes more directly in the gruesome reality of our time: By collaging shocking images from the world's various war zones with advertisements from fashion magazines he creates a deliberate disconnect in our perception of these diametrically opposed visual worlds. Just like Saint Thomas probing the wound of Jesus with incredulity in the painting by Caravaggio, Thomas Hirschhorn here appears unwilling to accept just how brutal reality is.

In the works of **Sara Masüger** (born 1978) created from the plaster-like material Acrystal, the hand of the artist is fully in evidence: the casts of hands, some of them deformed, are appropriately displayed at Helmhaus Zürich hanging from railings taht we might grasp in daily life to avoid falling. The attention to detail in this grammar of gestures lends them an almost uncanny presence.

Sara Masüger's handiwork clearly illustrates the emotional and communicative potential we hold in our hands. In contrast to such aggressive approaches as the use of the phrase in *Terminator 3*, the slogan "Talk to the hand" as used by Helmhaus Zürich is to be seen as an invitation for us to communicate more clearly using hand gestures – before we reach the point at which our hand gestures are not only channelled, but even dictated, by technology and ideology. The first patents for certain gestures have already been filed.

Daniel Morgenthaler
Curator of the exhibition