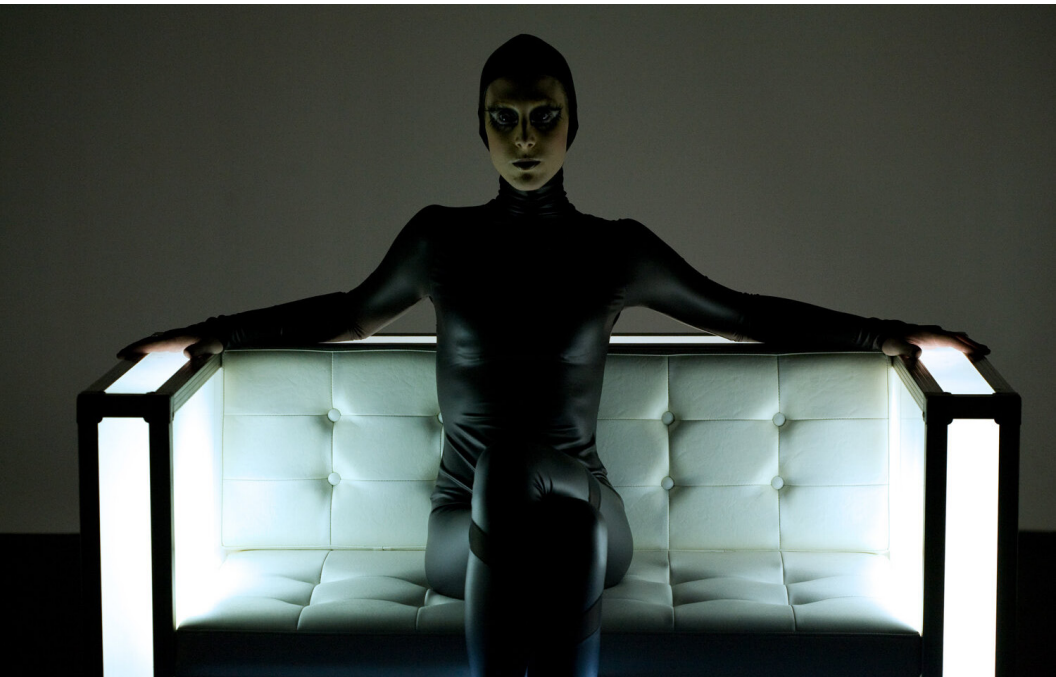


MICHELLE HANDELMAN

These Unruly and
Ungovernable Selves

Imprint Gallery
April 24 - August 15, 2021

MMoCA
MADISON MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART



top and bottom:
Irma Vep, The Last Breath (production still) 2013/2015,
HD video installation with sound, 33:13 min

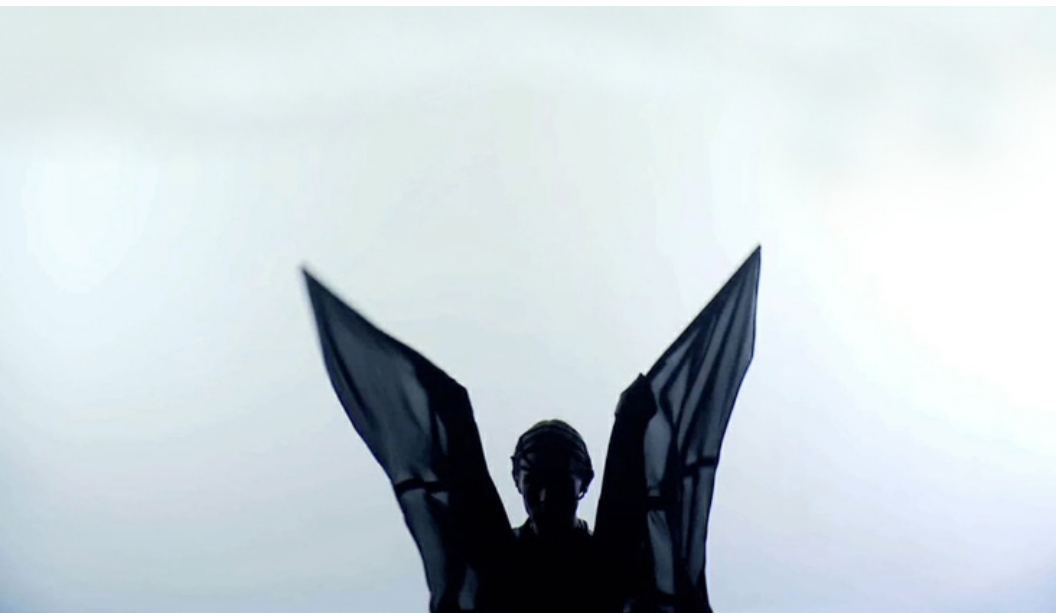
These Unruly and Ungovernable Selves

MICHELLE HANDELMAN (b. 1960, Chicago) is best known for her moving image installations that present strikingly stylized worlds populated by complex and sexually-charged characters. Influenced by gothic literature and expressionist cinema, the artist is drawn to the aesthetics of the supernatural and romanticism, while creating work firmly rooted in counterculture. Handelman bases her filmic narratives on her own life experiences and those of her performance collaborators, combining lived experiences with fictionalized archetypes to deliberately blur the line between fiction and reality while exploring the existential questions of life.

Michelle Handelman: These Unruly and Ungovernable Selves traces the trajectory of the artist's moving image installations, from her raw performances for the camera during the late 1990s through her sleekly produced queer reinterpretations of historic texts. Her most recent works respond directly to the current pandemic, and the reality of socially distanced interactions. The resulting exhibition is a visual and emotional explosion of color and bodies that engages viewers in considerations of life, sex, death, and the pain and pleasure of relationships.



Irma Vep, The Last Breath (production still) 2013/2015,
HD video installation with sound, 33:13 min



top and bottom:
Irma Vep, The Last Breath (production still) 2013/2015,
HD video installation with sound, 33:13 min,
bottom: photograph by Laure Leber

Irma Vep, The Last Breath

Irma Vep, The Last Breath takes characters and elements of plot from Louis Feuillade's 1915 serial film *Les Vampires*, a thriller about a gang of jewel thieves starring the silent film actress Musidora as Irma Vep. In Handelman's reimagining of the story, artist and trans woman Zackary Drucker plays Irma Vep, and drag icon Flawless Sabrina acts as Musidora. They are presented both as separate persons at different stages of life with their own heartbreaks and demons, and as two reflections of the same spirit.

Examining hidden lives and true selves, Handelman and her performers dig deep into the plotlines and motivations of Irma Vep, the character, and Musidora, the actress and film persona who played her, as a means to consider strategies of survival for queer people and others treated as outlaws in contemporary life.



Irma Vep, The Last Breath (production still) 2013/2015,
HD video installation with sound, 33:13 min



top and bottom:
Candyland (production still), 1998-2000 from the *Cannibal Garden Series*, single-channel video, 5:36 min

Candyland

Candyland is one of a series of performances from Handelman's multimedia project *Cannibal Garden* (1999-2002). The artworks in this series are colorful and irreverent, inspired by fairytales and the artifice of contemporary life. *Candyland* engages not just with sexual fantasy but also with themes of surveillance and digital mediation. At the edges of the screen the round eye of the camera lens encroaches on the visible frame, emphasizing the voyeuristic relationship between audience, screen, and performer. Inside this saccharine visual fantasy, digital editing cuts and reverses, advancing and interrupting the performer's task of devouring the lengthy trail of jewel-like rocks. Framed this way, this bright scene takes on an ominous weight, raising questions about compulsion and the confinement of the recorded frame.

Two decades after its recording, *Candyland* continues to resonate with our increased use of the performative space of social media and the way the Covid-19 pandemic forced a reliance on screens and digital mediation for most, if not all, social interactions.



installation view, *Michelle Handelman: These Unruly and Ungovernable Selves*

The Pandemic Series

The exhibit in the galleries is supported by the virtual screening of Handelman's *Pandemic Series* (2020/2021), created in reaction to the social restrictions imposed by Covid-19 during the past year. *These Unruly and Ungovernable Selves (The Lockdown)*; *Solitude is an Artifact of the Struggle Against Oppression (The Uprising)*; and *Claiming The Liminal Space (The Aftermath)* are each composed of recut footage from her archive. These works bring together faces and themes found elsewhere in the artist's oeuvre, reshaped in response to the current moment, and designed to be experienced on personal devices.



These Unruly and Ungovernable Selves (production still), 2020
from *The Pandemic Series*, single-channel video with sound,
6:00 min

About the Artist

Handelman is a 2019 recipient of the Creative Capital Award and was a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellow in 2011. Her work has been shown widely in such venues as the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Pompidou Centre, Paris; ICA, London; PARTICIPANT, INC, New York; Lincoln Center, New York; and The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art and reviewed in *The New York Times*, *Art in America*, and *Artforum*. Based in Brooklyn, Handelman is a Professor in the Film, Media and Performing Arts department at the Fashion Institute of Technology, New York.



These Unruly and Ungovernable Selves (production still), 2020, from *The Pandemic Series*, single-channel video with sound, 6:00 min

Acknowledgements

Members of the Design Thinking for Exhibits course and their professor, Anna Campbell, wish to thank Leah Kolb, Curator of Exhibitions for her generosity and vision, without whom this exhibit would not be possible, and Elizabeth Shoshany Anderson, Assistant Curator, for her guidance in developing the exhibit and for moderating the Virtual Opening Celebration. We would also like to thank Charlotte Cummins, Director of Education and Programs, for supporting our outreach work, Marni McEntee, Director of Communications, for helping us to generate public-facing language to inform our audience about the show, and Christina Brungardt, Gabriele Haberland Director at Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, for her support of the exhibit.

Generous support for Imprint Gallery programming has been provided by Willy Haeberli in memory of Gabriele Haberland.

Design Thinking for Exhibitions is a class taught by Professor Anna Campbell. The class developed an exhibition over the course of the 2021 academic spring semester, using MMoCA as a critical training ground for hands-on application. Stemming from a shared interest in utilizing museum spaces for direct learning, this cross-institutional venture cultivated the next generation of museum professionals by introducing participants to the practical and theoretical matters of curation. The resulting exhibition opened in the museum's Imprint Gallery on April 24th and was on view through August 15th, 2021. For this course, classroom-based learning with Professor Campbell employed the strategies of design thinking—a human-centered approach to understanding and solving real-world problems.

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All images courtesy of the artist.

Brochure design by Taylor Fote.

cover: *Irma Vep, The Last Breath* (production still) 2013/2015
HD video installation with sound, 33:13 min