

# DEAR GATE KEEPERS,

LETTER BY

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WRITER

EDITORIAL LETTERS

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- MARILYN VOLKMAN
- KASPER VAN MOLL
- LUCIA FERNANDEZ  
SANTORO



Dear gatekeepers of the art world,

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Cc: Emirhan Akin, Patrycja Rozwora, Carmen Dusmet Carrasco, Veronika Babayan, Linda Stauffer, Maria Mazzanti, Laile El Mehelmy, Marek Mrowinski, Marilyn Volkman, Kasper van Moll, Lucia Fernandez Santoro

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This is a proposition. It is to be taken seriously, but not personally. If this proposition is an attack on anyone, or anything, it would be the art world as we know it.

I've been trying to make this proposal sound like a movie trailer, so I would appreciate it if you, the reader, would be willing to experience it as such.

In a world ... (you know the type of movie trailer I'm referring to) ... In an art world ... without ... any imposed hierarchy ... ten people graduate.

(Graduating isn't the right term here, because it would imply a hierarchy between the students who haven't met the criteria to fly off – or couldn't or did not want to meet those criteria – and the students who did.)

So ... In an art world ... without any imposed hierarchy, ten people exhibit their work amongst their peers in a set of buildings previously used for military purposes. (Within our society, the military is the absolute epitome of hierarchy. Not one institution relies on the pecking order as heavily. An army consists of collective action that is ranked. Those military ranks define the level of authority, prestige, compensation, honour, dominance and responsibility each individual of the collective carries and deserves.)

The first thing to be discovered in this exhibition is a black screen mounted on a deteriorated wall. On that screen, we see a face that is surrounded by black matter. A human face, the face of the maker, possibly. But in this proposition for an art world without

hierarchy, one shouldn't pay attention to authorship. We can forget about the concept of origination altogether. Authorship and origination belong to the system of individuality and individuality belongs to religion of the ego. That damned ego, celebrated so profusely and shamelessly in the art world of the past. A celebration that cemented the relation between the social status of the artist and their work, a celebration of the bad boy. An art industry that produced stars.

No, here, in this instance, the face is nothing more than a face. Whether it belongs to a man or woman, is of no relevance. Neither is the presumed age of that face, or the presumed ethnic heritage of said face. We will ignore whoever made this work. It is just a face, looking into the camera and repeating the word *human* until it is nothing more than a sound, a collection of movements of the mouth, rendered meaningless.

In our neoliberal, bureaucratic society, we (are) often (forced to) lose one another's humanity out of sight. We place the importance of money and rules and paper and documents and ranks above our innate sense of values, care and love. The face drifting through the black seems to try to remind us of what we all are in the first place: human.

I would like you, the gatekeepers of the art world, to carry more weight to the humanity of others, and your own, for that matter, from here on. It could make your gates more fluid, more honest and could make the institutions more durable.

Next to the black screen and its' moving mouth, stands a kitchen-like set up. There are some fruits lying around, some jars, some cooking has happened, some fruit leather was extracted from a pomegranate. (Here, I could use the pomegranate as a metaphor, for surprise, for violence, and mostly for bombings. But if I were to do that, I would consciously ignore the mangoes that were there).

The fruit leather on display was turned into passports, another pillar of the hierarchy that exists in our world. One could easily imagine those passports to melt, to turn into fruit juice again. Or what if they

would disappear into mould, that transition fruit is so capable of?

I would like to quote a fragment of a poem that accompanied this work if that's OK:

*I am both the oppressor and the oppressed  
I am both the victim and the perpetrator  
I am both war and peace  
I am a wandering call for those who are longing;  
I am a quest for new geographies of belonging.*

In the very same room, hangs a series of puppets. Helpless marionettes awaiting their puppeteer, whom I hope never shows up. I prefer them while they wait, are inactive, not yet put to work. Flamboyant, fun, full of potential, and seemingly genderless these characters hang, stuck in a moment of uncertainty.

Gatekeepers, a fresh load of graduates can often seem like a group of puppets, to be celebrated, marketed and exploited, one by one. Let's try not to do that to this particular group. Please.

Be collaborators of these artists instead, be on equal footing with them, let go of your status.

In the kitchen I mentioned before, stands a table. On that table a podcast is presented. Podcasts are great, for a number of reasons. Mostly, because anyone can experience them, no matter where they are. That makes this a non-hierarchical work by its very nature.

*Kitchen Conversations* is a series of talks with artists that create work that in some way relates to their post-Soviet heritage. (I like to think of conversations as opportunities for equality, but they can be many things, especially in kitchens, conversations tend to take on a fluid character.)

In one of these talks I heard a thought that, however simple and some might say obvious, I want to underline: we all have two things in common, they are the great equalizers, we are all born at some point and we all die at another point. In between those two points, we all try to find a sense of purpose (no, that is not true, to be in search of purpose is to revel in privilege).

(When I was invited to write this text, I was assigned ten artist names that are listed below and was asked to write an *email letter form based on the final works of these Sandberg graduates*. I was also told I was not obliged to describe all of their works, but to not do that would feel unfair, a random omission on my part that I would not want to be responsible for.) (But when I went looking for one of the works of the artists on my list, a classmate told me that they had in fact, *not* graduated that year.) (It ruled out the possibility to see any work of this person, so I won't be able to describe it.) (The Sandberg Institute had deemed this artist unfit to graduate.) (And that is that.)

Gatekeepers, what does it even mean to not be able to graduate as an artist?

Underneath the staircase I watch *EVERYTHING IS VALUES*, an artwork shining a light on the conditions in which these students graduate. The video piece is a meta reflection on the master's degree at Sandberg, a display of what can or what did occur on an art school. And what struck me was, YES, if all participants of an institution feel that they have the agency to comment and to reflect on the processes and dynamics that play out during their education, that would be a lot healthier. That kind of agency can only be experienced in a system in which each participant has a voice, possesses an equal amount of power, and that is rarely the case, in the art world as we know it. And the outcome would not only be healthier, but could also be a lot slower, or more diffused, (possibly even more bureaucratic) but it has the potential to diminish the upholding of toxic power dynamics.

When I leave the room under the staircase and attempt to walk upstairs, a person wearing an ill-fitted black suit stops me. They show me a collection of keys. Keys that would allow me entrance to different rooms in this structure and the structures surrounding this structure. As the key chain dangled in front of my eyes, all I could think of was *access* and of whom holds it and how much of those power dynamics are usually invisible. We all belong to systems of hierarchy, that is how

much of the world is presented to us since we are born. It is what gives our families structure, it is how our schools are organized, it is so much a part of every-day experiences, so intertwined with the fabric of life that we often don't even recognize it. (Some armies have attempted to get rid of their ranks, like the Soviet Red Army, the People's Liberation Army of China and the Albanian Army. All of them found themselves forced to reinstate the hierarchy after stumbling upon operational problems of command and control.)

I wonder what were to happen if we'd let go of it. Perhaps non-hierarchy will always be a goal, a dream, an ideality, something to strive for, never a reality. But I do think I know where it could begin. It could begin with confusion, with anonymity, by placing the power of community, the strength of these ten artists put together, above their individual potential. So, no prices or awards, no name tags, no headshots, no resumes, no biographies, no private anecdotes.

Gatekeepers, I want to propose to look at this group as a collective, one wave of art works, stripped from signatures. The importance lies not in the individual projects (or art works) but in the commitment to the whole. A decentralized entity of which the individuals control and influence one another in equal measure.

We all have mothers, mother like figures, an aunt or uncle, an elder. We all drift closer to them and drift further away from them as our lives evolve. We love our elders, it's almost impossible not to, because on some (if not genetic) level we ARE them, BUT it's not always easy to love the elders of others. It's not very common for us to succeed in that kind of loving. The video *The Swimming Pool*, that I watch on the TV set in the master bedroom, does manage to translate the love for and of a mother towards the viewers' heart (my heart, of course). What a mother, what a struggle, what restlessness lie in both the way the film was shot, the way the mother behaves, the way the material was cut into a kaleidoscopic, crystal clear portrait, full of charm. The mother wears the most colourful star-shaped

earrings I have ever seen. She keeps altering their length, adding one star, taking one off. In between her jittery alterations, she smokes. (Sorry, this is untrue. Those earrings are another art work.) The mother in the film becomes OUR mom. We LOVE her. We LOVE her, but we LEAVE her.

I leave her for a series of paintings in the hallway, showing different foods and monsters. In all of them, I recognize a sense of togetherness. I also see technicolor dreams, or maybe they're failures, and not dreams. In Freudian psychoanalysis (not that I usually quote him) the basement represents unconscious drives, repressed fears, traumas and fantasies. The basement also represents that in this proposition.

I descend the staircase, and another staircase, and reach the dark. I walk into a plastic cube; a light shines on the other side of it and shows me the silhouette of a genderless person who seems to be very far away. A part of me wants to help that black shadow of a person. I want to help them come out, reach me, (us), the people on the other side of the plastic structure. I want those things, until I realize that person is better off than I am. (I was, by the way, not asked to write about this particular work.) There is a specific beauty in not knowing who it is you're looking at. It creates an opening, an uncertainty that we reject once we fix our eyes on the sign with the artists' name, their home country, their year of birth. Not only does it close doors instead of opening them, the emphasis on the makers' identity also feeds into our shared fantasy of the genius.

I turn my back towards the plastic bubble. My shoes hit shards of ceramic that are spread across the floor, the sound announces my presence, even though the pop music pumping through this side of the tunnel is most likely much louder. The music protects me from being an individual, in that sense, from making myself know. In front of a huge screen, stands a soldier. Or better said: a person making salutations the way a soldier would. I later learn that the ceramic shards belonged to six hundred replicas of the artists' face. So, in



a sense, by crushing them under my shoes, I was also freeing the artist from being an individual, from making themselves known. The imagery on the screen: soldiers shooting rifles. After that, a monotone voice delivers statements on daily routines, violence, desire, activity, shame, all the stuff basements are know to hold. The saluting person answers these statements with *true* or *false* and then salutes, an endless, all-encompassing repetition of tough, imposed movements and fragile, personal confessions. The body standing in front of me possesses the signature body language of the collective, and releases the fluid outpourings of the individual.

I leave this house, and its artworks. While I stand in the front yard, I see the street, the neighboring lanes, I can almost see the whole town.

We all belong to both spheres (the collective, the individual), we all find ways to navigate between the two. It is my hope these ten artists find power in the collective, in their anonymity, in their power to confuse, but that is just me (my proposition). Even more so, it's my hope that the gatekeepers (whether they are in charge of galleries, museums, art academies, masters programs, art fairs or any other art-related institution) will help to dismantle dysfunctional systems of power, will strive for shared leadership, transparency, accountability, and will include the voices of all participants.

If all gatekeepers could get back to us, that would be great.

Maurits de Bruijn

Graduates mentioned:

[sandberg.nl/graduation2020/final/emirhan-akin](https://sandberg.nl/graduation2020/final/emirhan-akin)

[sandberg.nl/graduation2020/final/patrycja-rozwora](https://sandberg.nl/graduation2020/final/patrycja-rozwora)

[sandberg.nl/graduation2020/final/carmen-dusmet-carrasco](https://sandberg.nl/graduation2020/final/carmen-dusmet-carrasco)

[sandberg.nl/graduation2020/final/veronika-babayán](https://sandberg.nl/graduation2020/final/veronika-babayán)

[sandberg.nl/graduation2020/final/linda-stauffer](https://sandberg.nl/graduation2020/final/linda-stauffer)

[sandberg.nl/graduation2020/final/maria-mazzanti](https://sandberg.nl/graduation2020/final/maria-mazzanti)

[sandberg.nl/graduation2020/final/laila-el-mehelmy](https://sandberg.nl/graduation2020/final/laila-el-mehelmy)

[sandberg.nl/graduation2020/final/marek-mrowinski](https://sandberg.nl/graduation2020/final/marek-mrowinski)

[sandberg.nl/graduation2020/final/marilyn-volkman](https://sandberg.nl/graduation2020/final/marilyn-volkman)

[sandberg.nl/graduation2020/final/kasper-van-moll](https://sandberg.nl/graduation2020/final/kasper-van-moll)

[sandberg.nl/graduation2020/final/lucia-fernandez-santoro](https://sandberg.nl/graduation2020/final/lucia-fernandez-santoro)

Maurits de Bruijn is the author of two novels (*Brother* and *Behind the Sun*) and one work of nonfiction *Not Only Your Holocaust*, that was published in 2020. He writes think pieces for Dutch newspaper *De Volkskrant* and is the editor of online art magazine *Mister Motley*. His recurring themes include collective memory, trauma, queerness and identity.