

CHALLENGING JEWELLERY

Scenes from a Master's

MARILYN VOLKMAN

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This is a work of fiction based partially on real events. Some names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or have been used fictitiously. The content of this book is meant to supplement, not replace documentation of the master's programme, Challenging Jewellery.

PROLOGUE

Gerrit Rietveld Academy Gym

25 September 2019

The gymnasium hummed with the voices of students. One hundred chairs had been pushed into an oval while the audience was out for a communal bread baking ceremony. The configuration resembled a colossal therapy circle.

‘Welcome to year number two,’ a woman’s voice said robotically over the loudspeaker. ‘Please take out your cell phones, open Instagram, search for *challengingjewellery*, and follow.’

A handful of faculty smiled blankly, a few students shrugged and squinted, most of the audience looked at the centre of the circle suspiciously. A blond woman in her mid-thirties glided past the barrier of chairs into the middle of the room. She was wearing fleshy mauve, almost iridescent fabric. Students slowly dug into their pockets and bags for their phones and tablets. ‘When you see the first Instagram post,’ the woman continued, ‘tap it to reach our feed and periodically refresh to see new content added throughout the talk.’

Mila was crouched over in a secluded corner of the room. Her elbows dug deep into her thighs as she uploaded images to Instagram. Her long black hair fell over her iPhone 11 Pro as she listened for keywords from the blond woman’s mouth.

The Challenging Jewellery initiative is operated by way of a fully-functioning company structure. The collective that forms will naturally extend beyond the temporary programme’s time frame of two years. Tutors, guests, and participants form an intergenerational mix characterised by its potential to challenge the subject of jewellery on a fundamental level: how it relates to our present time...

Vasil shifted in his chair. His jaw tightened as he listened. He had applied for this program after receiving an email from a historic figure in the field. It wasn't a personal email, but one of those listserv advertisements soliciting people to apply. It was precisely the kind of thing Vasil felt he needed to pull himself out of a rut. Two years after emigrating from Poland, Vasil found his time in the Netherlands being eaten away by stupefying jobs to make ends meet. He still sold pieces here and there at a few prestigious jewellery galleries, but working in his studio had become more of a weekend luxury than the testing ground it had once been.

Vasil joined the programme because he was seduced by the prospect of a company structure. He didn't want to be an artist. He didn't want to join an art movement. He was a maker and he wanted jewellery to be his nine-to-five job.

On visits home to Koszalin, sometimes Vasil would go into the streets and show people his work. 'Look at this chain, it's made from a single piece of stone,' he'd say to them. 'Yeah,' they'd reply, 'you're crazy.' It wasn't just the townspeople who thought he was a bit batty. Vasil's parents were also confused about what he did until one day, he came home with a catalogue. Vasil opened it up while sitting on the beach next to his father. He turned to a page where his father could see that someone might pay 2,000 euros for one of his carved stone necklaces. That was the first time Vasil felt his father's acceptance about his work. 'Finally, you do something you can make a living off of!' said his father.

The blond woman angled toward Vasil and went on speaking. 'Now,' she said, 'to have succeeded in one of these things, let alone all of them, would have been a very big deal.' The woman made eye contact with Vasil. 'But let's be honest, we haven't been prepared.'

Vasil laughed audibly and then quieted himself. The woman positioned her hands shoulder width apart in front of her chest and continued to speak.

What began as problem-solving straightforward tasks on a commune became group paralysis once we realised we were the ones responsible for putting the tasks on the table. Things fell apart once we, the students, realised we were expected to establish the structure and content of our own department. We felt at once paralysed by lofty goals, and trapped by the freedom to do whatever we wanted.

Vasil loved the sea. It was a source of both beautiful and traumatic memories for him. He thought back to a time when his grandmother took him to the water. She was reading close to the shore and Vasil was playing with the sand. Driven by an irresistible curiosity, he began to walk away—a small child of just six years old walking and walking. He must have walked for two hours before he turned around, and when he did, he was so tired he couldn't go back. That's the kind of kid he was. He loved freedom, but at a certain moment that same rush would feel as though no one was paying attention to him.

The blond woman interlaced her fingers across her abdomen. 'The truth is, this course began in total darkness. That's not a metaphor. Our first meeting was in a closet at the old Sandberg: no lights, totally dark, completely sealed off.'

FOUR DAYS ON A COMMUNE

Somewhere in Drenthe

11 October 2018

Aurora's eyes were fixed on a grey-haired man across the table. His name was Edgar. Edgar could have been in his mid-seventies or early eighties. Looking down at his own hands neatly folded across his lap, Edgar began to speak.

'Before the sixties, you see,' Edgar closed his eyes and continued speaking, 'people in the Netherlands put themselves into these little boxes. Each box had its own laws, its own radio station, its own grocery store, and if you went from one box into the other, you had to follow their rules.' Edgar coughed and his voice faltered a bit.

The fourteen students surrounding Edgar leaned in, straining to hear his muffled words. 'We started out here in 1969,' continued Edgar. 'It was a time of, of—' Edgar wheezed then hacked something up and deposited it into a napkin. 'It was a time of extreme change—protests, riots, everything was in flux. By the time the revolution came, the youth had already started to ask real questions about their own lives...

Who am I?

What do I want?

How do I see my future?

Edgar had dropped out of Leiden University in 1969. He started tossing around the idea of a commune with his friends, and in 1971, they moved to an isolated piece of land somewhere in Drenthe. They started living together, working together, and eating together. They grew organic vegetables, taught Sufi Dance, reprinted expensive

books by hand, baked bread, did body movement for universal peace—whatever they sold, they sold for dirt cheap.

‘We wanted to be free,’ Edgar continued. ‘We wanted to have community without owning property, we wanted to have kids without getting married, we wanted to try out new kinds of love and relationships, and we wanted to do it all differently.’

Aurora found it amusing to think of Edgar in the context of polyamory. In comparison with her vision of non-monogamy in city life, polyamory in the rural countryside seemed so cultish to her.

The house behind Edgar was a simple wooden structure supported by a massive metal pillar. The pillar had replaced a tree, whose dried-out trunk remained nearby. They called this ‘De Herberg’ or ‘The Inn’ on the commune. These days, De Herberg was mostly rented to folks in their late twenties or early thirties searching for time away from their desk jobs. They adored the idea of a commune, and they loved paying rent in a mixture of money and labour. They’d sleep in the main house or shack up in a nearby caravan, wake up to the smell of fresh grass, brew some coffee, do some yoga, chop some wood, pitch in on building a shed before dinner, and end the night chatting around a campfire. After a week of this, they would feel whole again. They’d pack up, say their goodbyes, and return to their law firms, multinationals, or start-ups totally refreshed. Burnout averted.

Aurora wondered how this commune had transformed from an experiment in social ideals to a work-and-stay bed and breakfast for weary office personnel. She felt like just another one of these young professionals touring the commune to escape the failures of daily life.

The newly established master's programme, Challenging Jewellery, was on its first class trip to a commune in an isolated corner of the Netherlands. The programme was the brainchild of four influential Dutch jewellery and design professionals. We will call them

‘The Committee’. The Committee ranged in age from their mid-sixties to late seventies. They had the idea that Jewellery in the Netherlands, which had decreased in relevance over the years, could be revived through pedagogical models. So together, they organised their first collective project: an experimental two-year master’s programme called ‘Challenging Jewellery’. The director of the Sandberg Instituut in Amsterdam personally agreed to sponsor it.

The Sandberg Instituut was a strange beast. It functioned like an archipelago of autonomous yet interconnected islands, each island operating on its own and in relation to the others. The archipelago consisted of five main land masses and four temporary ones. There were no common structures to speak of, and it was up to each island to connect with the larger institute at will. Challenging Jewellery was one of these temporary islands.

To direct the programme, The Committee selected a pair of designers who met in the mid-nineties at a fashion competition. They had become pen pals and created what would eventually be known as an interdisciplinary studio hovering between product design, decorative art, and fashion. We will call them ‘The Duo’. Now well into their mid-forties, The Duo somehow maintained a deep purposeful idealism, a quality, that under most circumstances wears off decades earlier.

In addition to The Committee’s vision of promoting Jewellery as a learning methodology, The Duo threw a curveball. They pitched a format: the programme would, over the course of two years, form a fully functioning, collective company structure. The Sandberg published an open call, and together with The Committee, The Duo selected 14 participants to join the team.

The chosen participants of Challenging Jewellery were a hodgepodge of industrial designers in need of career changes, artists in need of visas, hopeful business owners in need of talent,

craftspeople in need of dialogue, and jewellers in need of something to set them apart. It was a hot mess.

Immediately, the participants noticed something unexpected. The Duo rejected anything that would place themselves in a leadership position. This included: establishing course content, selecting visiting lecturers, assigning readings, providing feedback, etc. The Duo would arrive and ask the students one question: 'So, what's the plan?' The students were confused. What were they paying for if all the teaching, managing and developing was done by the students? Why would The Committee select The Duo to head a master's programme if they weren't going to assume a leadership position?

Early on, The Duo told the students that the participants were responsible for building the master's programme from the ground up. So the first thing the students decided was that the programme's budget should be common knowledge amongst the group. The students wanted to deal with spending through egalitarian means, and join The Duo in reorienting institutional hierarchies with a full picture of available resources. The Duo saw it differently.

That morning, Aurora had packed her bags in a tumultuous rush and sprinted down her narrow Amsterdam steps just seconds before the tram departed for Central Station. Aurora lived on her own timeline, ran on her own terms. When pressured to make a decision, Aurora often refused. When pushed to perform, she usually rebelled. But when endowed with a complete sense of trust, Aurora was a productive artist.

In high school, Aurora was cool. A natural, enigmatic beauty, her high cheekbones angled precisely toward her sullen lips. Everything about Aurora developed early, and despite growing up on a goat farm in rural Sweden (where her parents still lived), she had cultivated an air of urbanity by the age of fourteen. Aurora had a dark,

playful wit that few were privy to. Her father was a carpenter and her mother was an activist at a local NGO. She felt cared for but not necessarily seen, loved but not nurtured, at least not to the extent she knew she ought to be.

Aurora had arrived at the station to meet the others that morning, excited and out of breath. After three hours in transit however, and now watching Edgar speak, the excitement for this venture had long worn off. Aurora was now listening to an elderly Dutch man imparting wisdom to an almost exclusively female group. They weren't asked any questions; they just listened. She felt a pain in her chest.

'It was important for us to move out here on this land,' continued Edgar, 'and create exactly what it was we were fighting for: a community of equal rights where no one owns anything, where everything is shared, where people do as much as possible with very few resources, and most importantly, where we agree on a common set of values.'

At this moment, Vasil and Zsófia made eye contact and slowly rose from their seats. After walking a considerable distance away from the outdoor lecture, Zsófia lit her cigarette. She peered back at the group and blew smoke in their direction. Squinting through the exhale, the scene reminded her of a nineteenth century genre painting, the dusty kind you walk right by in museum hallways. This one showed an aging man bestowing knowledge on the female townspeople.

Vasil and Zsófia were familiar with this kind of manifesto. They each grew up in eastern bloc countries just around the time the wall fell. Zsófia was nine in Budapest when Miklos Nemeth started poking holes through the Iron Curtain. Vasil's earliest memories were waiting in queues for trucks of food to arrive in the dead of winter in Poland.

'So,' said Zsófia, whipping her head in Vasil's direction. 'Why are

you here?’ Vasil’s jaw jutted forward defiantly.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, why did you join this programme?’

Vasil exhaled sharply; smoke shot down in two steady streams from his nose. He answered in a whisper, ‘Legitimacy’.

‘Is zat so?’ said Zsófia.

‘Yes,’ said Vasil, ‘Zat is so.’ He smiled suspiciously.

Aurora meanwhile, sat lost in the tenor of Edgar's voice. She felt the weight of her own carbon footprint while sitting across from him. ‘At the time,’ said Edgar, ‘this commune demonstrated a new form of living. It was collective like nothing we’d seen before. We were experimenting with our own lives and our parents didn’t understand one bit of it!’

Edgar stared at Vasil and Zsófia in the distance and then continued. ‘In Eindhoven there was this thing called the Kabouter, the Garden Gnome Movement. It was meant as a peaceful protest but the police were very brutal toward that group. Beatings in the street, all kinds of violence.’ Émilie visualised the scene and blurted out, ‘Police brutality against the garden gnome movement?! What kind of absurd comedy is that?’ As soon as her mouth closed, the corners of her lips turned upward and she burst into wild laughter. Edgar looked up from his hands, confused.

Émilie had a way of interjecting at just the wrong moment. It was a kind of superpower in social situations. Her intense shyness rubbed up against a total lack of inhibition, and most of her sentences

began with laughter or a long ‘ehmmmmm’. Émilie’s was simultaneous implosion and explosion. When she spoke, people listened anxiously.

Edgar’s face hardened and he directed his attention toward Rebecca. ‘Let’s talk values,’ he said.

The established values for living on the commune are:

- 1. An egalitarian community can have clear purpose without clear leadership.*
- 2. A member of that community can exercise rights without ownership.*
- 3. A community can introduce sustainable ideas into culture by working as a non-profit.*
- 4. A community’s decisions should be based on consensus.*

Vasil and Zsófia were still listening from a distance while chain-smoking. ‘Sometimes I am curious what you are thinking,’ said Zsófia softly.

‘Oh yeah?’ Vasil whispered back.

‘Yeah,’ said Zsófia. She tilted her head and exhaled sharply. ‘I mean, when you hear this Dutch man talking about the values of living on a commune, what is going through your brain? I know mine is very active.’

Vasil chuckled slightly. ‘Vell,’ he said, ‘Personally, I like spending time in the nature. It’s nice to be in a group like zis. It’s really nice, but I haven’t learned anything about self-organization out here. It is a weekend retreat, and that’s it.’

Zsófia nodded.

‘In the real life,’ said Vasil, ‘this has nothing to do with anything. Anyway, what do you think about how the programme seems to be glamourising some pretty essential qualities of communism?’ Vasil’s voice strained to whisper, ‘Somehow, within a week, we’ve "collectively" decided that our group functions on total consensus!?’ Vasil’s jaw tightened. ‘Seriously Zsófia, what do you think about that?’ Zsófia was staring at Edgar orating in the distance.

‘I grew up on a commune,’ said Zsófia. ‘None of this is a surprise to me; it’s always like this.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Vasil.

You never really get the full picture until it’s decided. Ideas, property, food, land, money—they’re all supposed to be divided equally, right? Common property, common endeavour, common ideas. But the thing is, you never get to see the full landscape.

By this time, Edgar had gotten up from his chair and walked away from the group to answer a phone call. It was about an upcoming booking. He nodded, agreed on a price, and wrote down the payment details.

RUNNING ON EPISTEME

The Sandberg Instituut

22 June 2019

Paul was shuffling papers as students trickled into the room. It was a quarter past ten. There was commotion about who would be present, who would be late, who was on holiday, and who in the group had gone completely MIA. Paul centred a printed page on the table in front of him, peered down from his glasses, checked his watch, and began to read.

The last great invention of a new literary genre in our time was achieved by a master of the short form, Jorge Luis Borges. It was the invention of himself as narrator, which enabled Borges to get over the mental block that prevented him from moving beyond essays into fiction. The idea that came to Borges was to pretend that the book he wanted to write had already been written by someone else, an unknown hypothetical author—an author in a different language, of a different culture, and that his task was to describe and review this already-invented book.

Paul's eyes darted back and forth between the eight students sitting in front of him. They were positioned at equal increments around a large white table. The Challenging Jewellery department was a single room on the fourth floor of the Sandberg Instituut's Bentham Crouwel Building, 'BC' as it was called by students. It was a tall grey structure plated with 16,000 identical glass tiles. When viewed from a certain angle, it resembled something of a war memorial.

The Sandberg campus was neatly nestled between the Loyens & Loeff law firm and The British School of Amsterdam. In the

afternoons, an uncanny mix of art kids, businesspeople, and families dotted the sidewalks. One could see hand-rolled cigarettes and ear-exposing beanies next to headsets and suits. Like clockwork, a slew of expat parents joined the scene at three in the afternoon as they loaded their children into bakfietsen and pedalled home.

Jane squinted and shifted in her seat. For weeks now, Jane had been turning inward to prepare for giving birth. She felt the constellation of her body changing by the minute, and all this thesis talk had put her in a strange mood. Jane often wondered how the master's programme would affect the little one inside her. Jane's first pregnancy had been so relaxed. She had time to focus and consciously invest in her womb. Now the master's programme and the thesis preoccupied her mind and stressed her body. She knew it was pure projection, but she was convinced that the fetus was jealous of how much the thesis was occupying her mind.

Paul sensed an unsettling energy at the table, so he decided to make eye contact with each student in the room; this was a strategy he'd learned at a low-residency MA on craft in North Carolina. He continued talking about Borges. *'The idea that came to Borges, was to pretend that the book he wanted to write had already been written.'*

Paul took a deep breath and continued to read as words puffed out amidst exhales. 'Part of the Borges legend—is the anecdote, that when the first extraordinary story he wrote with this method was finished, it was in fact believed to be a review of a book by an Indian author.'

The sound of children erupted from the neighbouring schoolyard. Meike van der Veld swung open the door. Meike was the staff coordinator who seemed to be second-in-command at the Instituut. Paul looked up from his page, made eye contact with Meike, and continued lecturing. 'The reason I bring this up, is that here, someone is having trouble writing in a certain style, and Borges is

finding a trick to invent himself as an author.’ Meike took one look at the tired group, calculated the attendance, searched for the department heads, and finding no one, vanished. Paul completed his thought, musing that, ‘Some great people have been in that position, the position of not knowing how to deal with a white page.’ Jane felt her heart rate increase.

Paul rose from his chair. ‘Italo Calvino was an interesting cat, one of those groovy writers who experimented with rules and limits. He thought about Speed, Multiplicity, Precision, Likeness...’ Paul noticed a look of consternation on three of the students’ faces. He reconsidered his approach, paused, and started again.

Look, the idea that you must produce a thesis in the context of this programme is an incredible challenge. The criteria have not been clearly defined for you. This can surely elicit a kind of anxiety in each of you. So the purpose of this workshop is to give shape to the desire you each have inside.

While preparing for birth was Jane’s main priority, her biggest worry was that she wouldn’t have enough time to write the thesis. She was scared that she wouldn’t be able to reach a level of professionalism that would legitimise her in the design world. She was terrified that her ideas would remain naive, and since no one had guided her thus far, it was as if a miracle was supposed to happen through this writing workshop. All the while, the baby was busy descending into position and Jane became overwhelmed with cramps. Paul continued.

So, the purpose of this workshop is to give shape to the desire you each have. The more this thesis is an exercise, the less interesting it will be for each one of you. I guess I want to insist on desire as the

impetus to do research.

Jane had been forcing herself to exercise her body one time per week to prepare for birth. She stuck with it because it gave her proof that she was invested in her pregnancy. In reality, the newborn baby was the ultimate deadline for Jane, and prepping for the thesis caused loads of unnecessary stress. Jane constantly spoke with her baby and reassured them that no matter what signals her body was producing, they did not need to worry.

Paul scanned the room again and made contact with each set of eyes. 'It would be nice if this thesis was located in a different place.' His eyes stopped at Jane's, 'Something close to what you want to do with your life. Think about how personal this can be. How relevant is the topic you have chosen for yourself? And remember, I'm here to help you to map a holocoen for your research.' Paul paused and frowned. He seemed deeply concerned with his own vocabulary, then abruptly shifted his focus back to the group.

'Ahem—What I mean by a holocoen is an *ecosystem*, an *ecosystem* of your network of resources. I'd like you to come out of this workshop with an actual map of where you can find information.'

Jane was hypnotised by how the fetus moved in her belly. She had the sensation of being part of two worlds at the same time. In one world, things functioned according to the logic of input/output, and in the other, everything was part of a secret universe expanding limitlessly inside of her. At times, Jane's thoughts were incredibly clear, and at others, the increasing pelvic pain obstructed her ability to think.

'Jane, are you okay?' Paul pulled her into the first world.

'Uh, yes, I'm fine,' She replied with a frown.

Jane felt embarrassed. She'd been called out. She reminded herself that Paul had listened in their private meeting. He took her situation into account at just the right dosage. But now, in front of everyone, he made her feel like a child in the fourth-grade disrupting class. Paul continued.

Our goal is to first map your holocoen, um, network of resources and plan your research timeline. Next, you need to figure out what questions to ask the librarian to make a list of readings for the summer. And finally, you should create a deadline by which each part of the thesis needs to be done. Do these sound like goals?

The sound of children playing in the neighbouring courtyard increased in volume. The group was silent. Rebecca broke in loudly to counter the commotion outside. 'I think it's important we formulate our thesis research into one sentence. It's the biggest challenge, I think.' Rebecca was tall, slender, and meticulously dressed. She had an immediate impact on the posture of a room as soon as she entered. Her chin was pushed forward, her ash-violet hair was animated, and her shoulders were pulled back, which caused her arms to appear slightly lifted.

Paul responded confidently, 'The way to look at this is to ask yourself, "*What is your research question?*" How do you move from an idea and a desire into something that's trying to make a point. This might feel a bit daunting, but I think this is all groovy stuff.'

Paul said 'groovy' a lot. The students weren't sure if this was a conscious reference to the seventies, or if he had picked it up while teaching in the United States. Rebecca thought maybe it was both.

Brit peered cautiously around the entryway of the department. She walked slowly toward the table, hunching to make her late entry

less obtrusive. Paul pivoted in her direction.

‘So how was it?’

‘Uh... amazing,’ Brit replied.

‘Can we see the ring?’

Brit cocked her head to the side, cleared her throat, and spoke wearily from lack of sleep. ‘Well, I don’t know if you can see it from there, but it’s *Golllld!*’ A burst of laughter erupted from half the women in the room.

‘This is a funny crowd to flaunt gold with, isn’t it?’ said Paul. Another explosion of laughter followed.

‘Did you document it in the end?’

‘What?’

‘The bells.’

‘Yeah, I got a lot of good photos.’

‘You hung them in a tree?’

‘Yep.’

‘Sweet.’

‘Did anyone pick them up?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Groovy.’

‘Uh, is this the right time?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Should we do this now?’

‘Well,’ Paul replied, ‘probably not, but I know we want to do cake. First, I should lay out a plan for the workshop, and then it would be nice to have cake. Really nice to have cake, I mean really nice.’ Paul let out a long ‘Uhhhhhh’ sound. ‘I do believe I have taken us off course.’

Paul’s mother was a climate change activist and his father was a pastry chef. Paul had studied philosophy and architecture, before turning to jewellery just after defending his thesis. Seeing a critical gap in the jewellery world, Paul quickly co-founded a jewellery think-tank, jumped in as editor of a prestigious jewellery magazine, and started working on a book called *Ornamentation and Neoliberal Economics*. Paul had been the second runner-up to head the Challenging Jewellery master’s programme, but was not selected. He was later called in by the students to help solve a deep collective crisis.

Paul took a long breath in and a long breath out before continuing to speak.

Today, we’ll talk about method, research, format, and what we mean by quality. Tomorrow, we will hear your presentations. Then we will talk about how to turn objects into research, and discuss how to create an index of literature to access later. Finally, we’ll speak about the

notion of an argument, holocoens, er, and circulation formats.

A brief silence came over the room as the group processed the agenda. Rebecca examined Paul starting with his square hedge of peppered hair. It was close-cut on the sides and topped with a thick tuft of black and grey. The lower half of his face was covered with a full beard. Rebecca's eyes lowered to Paul's thin, white T-shirt. There was a beige stain on the lower right hem, which hung limply over fitted grey jeans and New Balance trainers. Rebecca concluded that Paul had gone for a mature hipster look, yet stopped just shy of anything identifiable as such.

Helen cut in. 'What do you mean by circulation formats?'

'What I mean,' Paul replied, 'is whose hands do you want to get your research into?' Paul's single most contentious point of disagreement with the Sandberg's thesis guidelines was about whether or not this thesis should be made public.

'And what do you think?' Helen asked. 'I'm not sure we should we be automatically planning to make this thing public. This thesis is for our own growth.'

'Well,' said Paul, 'I want to take a position on that: Yes, it should be public!'

'Can you explain why?' asked Helen.

'Look, you don't need to print a book,' snapped Paul.

'I know, we can choose any format we want apparently, but why does this thing need to be made public?'

Helen's gaze was firmly fixed on the lecturer. Paul took a chair and settled in. 'You should all be retro-engineering your thesis based on who you think your ideal public is. How do you make sure that specific group, person, or *tree* sees your project?'

'Tree?' asked Helen. Her face contorted wildly.

'I'm channelling Donna Harraway here,' replied Paul.

The group fell silent.

After a long pause, Paul burst into action.

'Research!'

Paul jumped up and shuffled around the room looking for markers. He pulled the flip chart easel across the concrete floor, and spoke loudly as the legs screeched. 'Let's map out what we think research is! Everybody, throw some words at me! Anything, don't think about it too much! Let it out!' There was a silence. 'Anybody. Let's just see where we end up.'

'History!' blurted out Helen.

'Uh, did you just say "history"?' Paul asked.

'Yes,' said Helen.

'Well, research starts out as a verb. So, it's going to be an action here,' replied Paul without writing history on the flip chart.

‘Alright,’ said Helen, slumping back into her seat.

Paul exhaled.

Jane’s thoughts in this moment felt incredibly unclear. Her increasing pelvic pain obstructed her ability to concentrate, so she remained silent. Paul continued. ‘As you try to define research, the one thing I’d like to agree on is that research is an investigation that does not know its results in advance.’

‘Sure,’ said Brit, ‘it’s kind of study.’

Vasil grinned and crossed his arms over his chest. ‘Asking something you don’t know the answer to, inventing hypotheses, and testing,’ he said. Paul jotted keywords on the board.

‘Vasil, can you explain what you mean by hypothesis testing?’

‘Sure, it’s having a guess to answer your inquiry and seeing if it’s true.’

‘That’s scientific research,’ said Brit.

‘A kind of research you can falsify,’ added Paul. ‘The notion of proof in the scientific community—how will it apply to us?’ Vasil stood up and approached the easel to speak.

I think for us, in the arts, the idea is to precipitate evolution through many theses. Art research is very fast, you can explore shifts in perspectives. Let’s say, it’s because of a lightness of movement, a desire to test multiple possible alternatives outside of a singular truth. For

me, art research could be seen as a constant shifting of many scientific approaches of falsification and method.

There was a long moment of silence. ‘I’m not sure that it is,’ said Paul, ‘but it doesn’t matter.’ Paul was thinking of a 1969 lecture by Foucault called, “Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?” The lecture discussed a spectrum of authorship where one of the main distinguishing factors was the ability to validate or falsify positions in science, in contrast to the idea that it’s difficult or less pertinent to do the same with a work of literature. Paul decided to explain it like this:

Since your practices are creative, we need to acknowledge the fact that you are not producing a thesis to which other people can say, “You’re wrong”. The truth is, you are never wrong; you can be a joker, but you can’t be wrong.

So as we try to define what we mean by research, we need to remember one thing we agreed on about research, and that is: when you start, you don’t know what you’re going to end up with. What I mean to say is that you can’t say you’re researching a chocolate cake by baking a chocolate cake, because you’d already know you’re going to have a chocolate cake in the end. If you know the result in advance, it’s not research. It can be something very interesting, but it’s not research.

The sound of ambulances blared through the windows. ‘Out of curiosity,’ Marilyn chimed in loudly over the sirens, ‘how does that relate to the quote you read in the beginning?’ Paul’s face looked surprised. Marilyn continued.

If Borges was trying to figure out how to produce a new literary form by believing the book had already been written by someone else, how

can we understand that as a research method within the criteria that you've laid out? The idea that our outcome cannot be known before we begin. And what if we can visualise an outcome of something new before we produce it? Is that still research?

Paul replied quickly, 'I don't think Borges was doing research. I think he was just trying to get over a mental block by tricking himself.'

'I see,' said Marilyn.

'The Borges quote is not about the definition of research,' explained Paul. 'It's about the back and forth between the story told and the storyteller. How the experience of telling a story shapes the identity of the story teller.'

The room fell silent. Paul kept eye contact with Marilyn until she broke in.

This is a weird definition of research to throw into the mix, but I want to say that research can also be defined in narrative form. If you create a thesis that embodies the growing power of a protagonist idea; in that way, the idea becomes the author, and the researcher becomes the protagonist.

'Can you unpack that for us, Marilyn?'

Marilyn wondered if Paul wanted to give her the floor, or if this was a clever way of buying time to construct a retort. Marilyn smiled and drifted into a monologue.

I'm thinking of a definition of research that considers who the

protagonist is of any given thesis. Sometimes it's more important to think about research in terms of "whose perspective", than it is to set up conditions for creating something that can be qualified as new in the form of a statement. It's important to think about who you are as a speaker, and how your point of view may contribute to the protagonism of an idea, for better or for worse.

Marilyn smiled in Helen's direction, 'It's important to emphasise voices that are less amplified in a shared, historical definition of research.' She looked around the table.

In this room, we have quite a lot of underrepresented subjectivities. Namely, I'm thinking about the fact that we are a programme of thirteen women and one man from ten different countries and three different generations. It's phenomenal.

We just have to ask one another: "What is your subjectivity?" "What is your voice in a realm of research?" "Why is it important?" Because it most certainly is. We can agree on definitions of research, sure, but we should actually be creating strategies that work for us. And those aren't necessarily going to look like other methodologies we've seen out there. That's also part of the research—to create a way of uncovering ideas that's not formulaic and based on existing criteria that have historically held a position of power in defining what we understand as a valid, professional, and legitimate way of producing research. That's what I mean.

'Sweet,' said Paul.

He smiled and rubbed his hands together.

I would certainly agree that we can try to understand the conditions for research to happen, and whether we are in fact being asked to follow an historic formula that has been defined by someone else, at another time.

Helen shrugged after hearing Paul use the word ‘historic’.

I think this entire exercise of writing a thesis is hitting up against that very strongly. Whose criteria are you following? And, if those criteria are academic, and you yourselves are not academics, then there may be a problem.

Marilyn pressed her lips together after Paul’s bit about not being academics. It always troubled her when that word was used in a ‘this or that’ scenario. ‘You yourselves are not academics,’ she repeated to herself.

Now in her mid-thirties, Marilyn thought back to when she was twenty-two. She remembered what it was like to feel eclipsed by male spotlight huggers, as though her language had no place in an academic dialogue. She had only realised after her first master’s and four years of teaching university that her vernacular and positioning had been desperately needed in academia. Since then, she wholeheartedly rejected any ‘this or that’ use of the term. Paul picked up a fresh marker and wrote the word ‘Episteme’ on the board.

‘There’s plenty of stuff in what Marilyn is saying. Whose story? Whose history? That has political implications.’

‘What does Episteme mean?’ Helen asked.

Paul gave a response of which the group only absorbed bits and

pieces. To the students, it sounded like this:

So, if we go a little bit deeper into this question of subjectivity, we find two models. Foucault, 1969, the author principle... we believe in the "we"; this is western. Actually, it's French maybe, but more than that, this is also linked to a legal framework, the intellectual property of ideas, an idea about originality... Maybe it doesn't matter who's speaking... The last line of Foucault quoting Beckett, "What matter who's speaking?" And why do we believe so strongly that it does matter? Again, this is 1969... at the time super groovy stuff. People are starting to think, "Okay, it's actually interesting to think of the author in a different way, and at the same time..."

Helen was starting to see things in the space above Paul's head. She spotted antlers growing out from beneath his hair. The antlers morphed into a tree, the branches of which mapped a growing network of terms that merged and hovered like a raincloud deepening in colour just before it begins to pour.

'At the same time,' said Paul, 'the Civil Rights Movements are happening in the United States.' CRACK! Helen witnessed a downpour. Paul continued rapidly.

And for the first time in the Western World, what we call Subaltern Studies emerged—black literature, gay literature, lesbian literature, gay literature... all these different minority cultures were starting to produce something which is located in the subjective and they're saying, "Yes! It does matter." "Yes! my voice will be represented." "Yes..." I think that one of the texts to reference is a Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" It's a direct answer to Foucault. Actually, I think I have that text here with me. Anyway, all of these references,

I can give you later. I will give you later.

He paused, realising he was panting and out of breath. 'That's much more theoretical than I thought I would go.' Paul inhaled and exhaled slowly. 'I think I'm confusing you now. Let me backtrack a bit...'

'Helen,' Paul said, 'Episteme describes the state of knowledge that is accepted at a given time.'

Jane shifted in her seat. 'Wow, that's a big one,' she thought holding her belly. Jane sent a mental message to the fetus. 'Do you find this exciting little one?' The baby kicked again. 'Wow,' she smiled, 'Must be. There's another one.'

THE OLD SANDBERG

Overschiestraat 188, Amsterdam

13 November 2018

That morning, Marilyn did what she does every morning. She drank two cups of coffee, ate two biscuits, jogged, showered, shaved her legs, and blow-dried her hair. She applied a heavy layer of mascara to her eyelashes, and a thick sheen of gloss to her lips.

Just before exiting her apartment, Marilyn laced up her boots and crammed an enormous handful of spinach and almonds into her mouth. Gnawing on the greens and nuts violently, she pedalled her bike toward the Sandberg's temporary location.

From 2015 to 2018, the Bentham Crouwel building was under renovation. So for the first semester of the Challenging Jewellery programme, the Sandberg Instituut was housed in a nondescript business complex on the west side of Amsterdam. Overschiestraat 1-8-8, or 'The Old Sandberg' as students would call it just months later.

Overschiestraat was a place of high contrast. Tired office workers emerged from mirror-filmed windows to make eye contact with the defiantly trench-coated students and intensely hoodied Sandberg staff. If it weren't for the puff of smoke on the front stoop of 1-8-8, this five-story corporate complex would be one of mind-blowing mundanity. But that was the beauty of it. All these art nerds and tech geeks, scenesters and outcasts, academics and designers—despite their differences, they all stood in stark contrast to this hellishly corporate landscape. Upon swiping their access cards and entering this makeshift school, the students shared a feeling of absolute solidarity.

There was one group at the Sandberg however, that had achieved such colossal outcast status that even they were misfits on

the front stoop of 1-8-8. Not only was it a problem that the department was named “Challenging Jewellery” (the student body found it almost unanimously embarrassing), but it didn't help that the participants themselves looked quite traditional when compared with the rest of the students. A large fraction of the Challenging Jewellery folks looked like they had families. The one male in the department looked like a young, sweet dad. Marilyn repeatedly got mistaken for a lost teacher. Zsófia maintained the dress code from her banking days, and the majority of Challenging Jewellery wore clothing that conformed to the most average definition of clothing one could imagine. Only Rebecca and Aurora stood out for their choice of attire.

Aurora, while intrinsically cool, was so vehemently anti-trendy that her version of cool looked so uncool that it was truly not cool. It was confusing. Rebecca, on the other hand, was outfitted with such design-obsessed garments that she looked like a visiting collector against the raw plywood and concrete backdrop of the school. And then there was Zhi, a young Chinese designer with a bit of a name around Amsterdam. She barely maintained a presence in the Challenging Jewellery department, but everyone knew she didn't have to. Zhi had an overflow of projects to keep her busy and her student status kept the stipends flowing. Zhi would sweep in and out of Challenging Jewellery, prompting the occasional dance night at one of Amsterdam's dark underground scenes. ‘Just say my name at the door,’ Zhi would say, ‘and I'll see you inside.’

Apart from Zhi, the whole Challenging Jewellery lot was a weird insertion into the Sandberg context. Long before the programme began, Challenging Jewellery was the butt of a rolling list of jokes; the cockring meme was the most memorable. With Challenging Jewellery in the mix, the Sandberg's own definition of 'outcastness' became completely disturbed.

Marilyn bolted up the steps of the Old Sandberg and dropped herself onto the carpeted floor of the department. The rest of the students had already formed a jagged circle. Marilyn caught her breath and scanned the room until she made eye contact with The Duo. They had just flown in separately from Paris and Berlin.

‘So,’ said Marilyn. The room quieted. ‘What can we do to maximise our time with you?’ The Duo smiled in unison and waited.

Lately, Marilyn had been absorbing the happenings of the department and mirroring them back every couple of weeks. The Duo had been looking to hire an observer for the programme, a concept they picked up at a residency in France, but the participants couldn’t agree on who. So Marilyn was standing in as a diligent note taker in the meantime.

‘The group has been talking,’ said Marilyn, ‘and we’d like to propose an option to you.’ After glancing at her fellow classmates to confirm, Marilyn continued. ‘This proposal,’ she said firmly, ‘comes after weeks of discussions where we, the participants of Challenging Jewellery, have debated the format of the course.

One of the key topics in our debates has been the nature of your involvement as department heads. Up until this point, the group finds your involvement too loose and infrequent. So we’d like to increase it. Since you each live in different cities, we propose you try visiting Amsterdam separately. That would double our time with you without increasing the travel budget. Our main goal here is to have you more involved in the course. We want to feel more of your presence. Is that a possibility for you?

The Duo replied in unison, ‘Absolutely not.’

Challenging Jewellery hadn’t seen their department heads in a

month. What amount of momentum The Duo had inspired at the commune dissipated as soon as they tasked the students with building the curriculum themselves. While the heads were absent, the students had spent four long weeks voting on speakers, organising workshops, gathering tools for unknown projects, brainstorming their own assessment criteria, and attempting to collaborate on a large-scale unifying object The Duo had termed, 'The Treasure Box'. None of these tasks were going very well.

What The Duo considered an experiment as a made-to-measure master's programme, left the students of Challenging Jewellery feeling robbed of an education. Try as they might to surpass this feeling and build the elusive 'Treasure Box' of a department, the students felt increasingly wronged as each day passed and The Duo did not appear with a plan.

Marilyn cleared her throat to break the silence. 'The proposal comes from a desire to see your involvement in the programme double.' She paused, waiting for the other students to chime in. They did not. The group had spoken passionately about this into the wee hours of the morning, but with The Duo now in the room, the rest fell silent.

The Duo broke in with an affirming 'hmmm-hmmm' sound. They inhaled a whispered syllable like 'yeauuuu,' and then let it out with a puff of air through the lips. Relaxedly, they began to speak. 'When we are here with you,' The Duo said, 'the two of us learn from each other. In the moment we meet you, you are encountering real dialogue. It's in process, according to the moment. That is what's important.'

No one in the room felt comforted by that answer.

'Well—', continued Marilyn, 'we've been chatting about this,

and since you two normally work in separate cities anyway, we thought... ’ The look on The Duo’s face made it clear to Marilyn that this proposal was dead on arrival. ‘Okay.’ Marilyn decided to switch gears.

We’d also like to hear your thoughts on education. Many of us feel confused about your role in the department. It might help us approach the next two years better, if you can share a bit of your pedagogical philosophy with us now.

Marilyn sat back on her heels and shifted her eyes toward the grey carpet beneath her. The room fell silent. She dug her fingernails into the gridded nylon backing. Suddenly, Marilyn’s mind drifted to her father. She remembered how he used to sip coffee before work from a large plastic mug with silhouettes of tanks and rifles, ‘Big Red One.’

Marilyn had spent most of her childhood on US Army bases in Germany. Her idea of a hometown was any one of these hundreds of US military installations that dotted the German landscape of the 1990’s. Now, most of those bases were closed and Marilyn had no idea where she considered home. Her mind was on her father’s morning rituals.

First, he’d starch and iron the camouflage jacket, taking special care to press a sharp crease into the cuffed sleeves. Then he’d button it up, sit down to lace up his combat boots, and neatly blouse the bottom of his trousers. This was done by rolling the lower hem of the pant leg and placing elastic bands around the upper ankle. He’d then flip the pant leg under the elastics, and adjust the fabric neatly over the boot. Finally, he would meticulously shape his black beret to the top of his head. This had been Marilyn’s favourite part.

‘That’s right,’ said The Duo. The Duo's take on education had morphed into an origins story.

We had a deep feeling about working together, but we didn't know what it meant. So we invented this fictive person that's a bit of each of us, but also who we want to become. We called her "CELESTE". That was our manifesto. It was about finding a name and purpose for something that didn't exist yet. And by the way, twenty-three years later it's still valid!

Marilyn had read this narrative months before in a *Vogue* article. They looked at each other and snickered bashfully. ‘The most meaningful things emerge when we’re together. It’s how we create meaning,’ The Duo continued. ‘It’s also how we choose to interact with this group.’ The Duo scanned the room. They could sense scepticism in many of the students, yet in some faces they saw a spark of curiosity. They decided to run with it. ‘So about that manifesto—’ The Duo’s eyes lit up.

After five or six years we found our whole manifesto quite childish. This fictive character, at some point we were a bit embarrassed by it, but we pushed through and after ten years we found it really good again, incredibly relevant! For us, it was important to follow through on our original desire in that manifesto. It just took a while for the feeling to come full circle.

The Duo continued speaking, completing one another’s sentences amidst soft laughter.

Our first encounter was quite impressive—we met at a fashion competition and we jived immediately. Of course, this was in an era

before the Internet, so we became fast pen pals—Ah well, [chuckles] you can't say it like that—Why not?—The military was working with the Internet by then—Well, we weren't! [laughs] You get the point—So after a while we graduated, then all of the sudden we had so many questions.

What do we do now?

Where do we go?

How do we make money?

Should we get a job?

Who's going to look at our work?

Who will give us feedback?

Will we keep designing?

And well, the manifesto was an answer to all these things—It was the strategy to keep us out of that energy-sucking hole. After graduation it was difficult. We didn't know where to find our audience, so we became an audience for each other—Our relationship was never about starting a company. It was always about continuing to work. Sure, we had to take stupid jobs to pay the bills, but we always had CELESTE.

The Duo paused and smiled warmly. 'Ah, of course there was that summer of '95 when we spent a week in Vienna together...' Marilyn's thoughts flashed to 1995. She remembered waiting a week in frozen Budapest with her mother and sister, hoping to catch a glimpse of her father on a holiday pass to Hungary. It didn't happen. That year he spent Christmas in the rubble of Sarajevo. Marilyn's mom always made the best of these situations. They visited every museum there was to see in Budapest.

Everything Marilyn knew about art she learned from her

mother. Ginger was a grade school teacher but she lived like an artist. Wild, erratic, passionate and obsessive about her work. She spent late nights at school with her daughters writing plays, building theatre sets, and inventing experimental assignments for her students. They were a military family, but that reality was infused with Ginger's insistence on dance, theatre, and music. Creative production happened for Marilyn on a biological level. It originated from her mother. She was Marilyn's role model.

A young Marilyn always figured she'd become one of two things: a military psychologist or an artist. She made the plunge on her eighteenth birthday and accepted a scholarship from the Army. She didn't have any other ideas on how to pay for university, so Marilyn and her father went together to sign the contract: *Minimum five years active duty following graduation and four years of medical training.* Marilyn signed quickly, then looked down at her own signature for a long while. She flipped through the next ten to fifteen years of her life like the pages of a thin magazine. She saw herself at graduation, in uniform, and then on a chartered flight hauling soldiers to Baghdad. It was 2003.

Marilyn looked up at her father and asked, 'You mind if I pull out of this thing and study acting?'

Major Volkman looked at his daughter and answered softly, 'You should do whatever you want, sweetheart.' She tore up the contract and registered for student loans the same day. Her father was deployed to Iraq two months later.

'We were working with leftover fabrics from school,' The Duo continued. 'We couldn't afford to go on holiday so we got together in Vienna and experimented. We came out of that week with something spectacular, we called them "Moon Pants"!'.

We went out every night wearing those “Moon Pants”. People would stop us and say, “Hey, what’s that?” Or, “Ah, where did you get those?” Or, “Ooo, that’s sexy!” After that summer though, we decided we weren’t so interested in random comments about our pants. You never knew if something was really good or not.

The Duo looked at the group flatly. ‘By good, we mean good enough to make a living off it. So we decided on another approach.

A friend gave us this old contraption that made passport photos, but the best part was that this thing could superimpose images right onto the photograph. So we took magazine cut-outs of famous peoples’ heads and superimposed them onto our own bodies. We added our telephone number, printed a bunch out, and spread them all over the city. That was our first advertising campaign! No brand name, no nothing, just an odd image and a phone number. And you know what? People called us, but they were expecting a sex hotline or something. So we were really disappointed.

The Duo looked directly at Marilyn. Marilyn paid attention. ‘We believed in it you know,’ The Duo said, ‘but it didn’t happen how we wanted it to. It’s just like that sometimes.’ Marilyn nodded.

Since 2014, Marilyn had bounced between the United States and the Netherlands due to marital problems. Her relationship with her husband, now a Postdoc at the University of Leiden, wasn’t going so well. In fact, the situation between these two had become a disaster. What started as a high school romance blossomed into deep love and companionship, then commitment, then co-dependence over the course of sixteen years. Try as they might, they couldn’t figure themselves out in Holland. So on her final move back to the Netherlands, and in fear of her marital situation falling apart once

more, Marilyn applied to the Sandberg Instituut to secure a Dutch visa independently from her husband's research contract. Observing that Challenging Jewellery had extended its application deadline, she figured it was an easy in. She was right.

For all intents and purposes, Marilyn did not know how to integrate herself into the art world proper. The Dutch art scene was completely foreign to her. Even after years in Chicago, she had barely carved out a place for herself. Generally speaking, Marilyn was too disciplined and clear for the art world. She was regimented and ritualistic, calculated and controlling. She often wondered what would have been if she had accepted that Army scholarship and pursued a life more in line with the strengths she shared with her father, rather than nourishing the creative tendencies she shared with her mother. To make Marilyn's 'professional situation' worse, after four years of marital turmoil and working in restaurants and hostels to make ends meet, she had all but stopped making art.

'Um, what year was all of this happening?' Marilyn asked The Duo, 'After or before your master's?'

'It was 1995,' The Duo replied. 'That was after the diploma. Master's like this one didn't exist back then.'

Aurora felt a massive weight drop in her stomach. She had just realised The Duo didn't go to graduate school. 'They don't even have honorary master's degrees,' she thought. 'Shit, this entire thing is one big unhinged experiment. After all the measures I took to get here, *this* is going to end up being my fucking terminal degree?!' Aurora's thoughts began to race. She liked The Duo, but she couldn't contend with their laissez-faire attitude toward education. 'People have put their entire lives on hold to be here. I moved to Amsterdam for God's

sake!’ Aurora screamed inside.

‘But anyway,’ The Duo cut in, ‘after the sex hotline experience we knew we needed professional feedback. So we took out an ad in i-D Magazine. We were so naive.’

It was the one magazine that everyone in the fashion world read in those days. We called thinking it was something we could afford, but of course it was crazy—5,000 German marks. We didn’t have it so we went to our friends and families and borrowed the money. They thought we were completely nuts, we didn’t even have a company back then. We just wanted an ad to get attention, that was the moment we came up with a name: CELESTE. We just chose it because it didn’t mean anything to us. It was the sound we liked.

The Duo smiled. ‘You know, we just figured if we bought this expensive advertisement people would call us and we’d make the money back.’ They laughed. ‘Of course that didn’t happen.’

Two important people saw our ad though. They saw a product, our name, and a phone number. That’s all it took. We were so nervous when we got that first call. We didn’t even speak English!

We picked up the phone and we were like, “Augh, hi..., erm... yes, eh... hello?” This guy said he wanted to buy something and we were like, “Ah ja, zat’s zuper nice!” We were so excited, that’s all we could say. “Hey, ja, zo nice! Zuper gut!” We were really stressed about it. This guy was just trying to order and we were so shocked about the whole thing that we didn’t know how to deal with it. We were like, “Okay, we’ll send you the product and if you like it, you can send us the money!” He laughed and was like, “No, we should do it the other way around. I’ll send you the money, and you send me

the product.” “Oh danke!” we said. “Zat’s much better!”

A burst of collective laughter erupted in the room. The group’s energy lightened.

Then we made it worse! We told him since we were going to Paris anyway, we could bring the package to him in Antwerp during our train stopover. “No,” he said, “do it the normal way. That would be by mail.” We were so embarrassed.

More laughter filled the room. The Duo continued. ‘Totally unprofessional, right?’

You know, looking back it’s important to remember that we had no idea if this would work out. The whole CELESTE thing. Even when we signed our first contract with a major fashion house, we still couldn’t make ends meet. When we founded CELESTE, we just treated it like a private club. Each of us paid a certain amount to CELESTE each month. We worked to be able to afford her. We had no idea if she would succeed.

And you know what? Even if she did succeed, it was always part of the idea that CELESTE would become something else. We didn’t want to be a proper fashion brand trapped inside the expectations of calendar seasons and ∞ amount of runway shows per year. The goal was to stay private and become a symbol for good quality. Live the lives we wanted to live, and figure out how to have big impact as a small entity.

Last year we actually made a huge step in that direction. We spent a month in residence at that Richard Neutra house, 1930-

something. It was the first time the two of us lived together for so long. It was phenomenal, really incredible! After that, we could clearly say this living-working strategy was the method for us. That's the standard of testing. Create and apply products in a way that is totally anchored in daily life. Collectively form habits with the products. We are still continuing on that path.

The Duo's arc took an intentional thirty-five minutes to return back to Marilyn's question. This was the moment the answer would come.

'To respond to your question,' the Duo said, 'the one you had about how we see teaching—it's a lot like how we see our company. It's a made-to-measure construction.'

Aurora closed her eyes and released a jet of air through her nose.

'What do you mean by that?' asked Vasil.

'Well, we see people we went to school with—the ones who got amazing design jobs at big companies, and now they're totally burnt out. Those people are still asking themselves why they got into this whole thing in the first place.'

'Right!' The Duo continued with mounting energy. 'What we're trying to tell you is that the moment you prove something to yourself, and not to a professor, or a committee, that's the moment you decrease the odds of burnout in your future.' The group fell silent.

'It's quite pragmatic how we see it. You need to feel that you're following your own beliefs. In that sense, this is the only thing we can transmit to you.'

The air in the room was heavy. Aurora was having trouble breathing.

‘That’s why we put everything on the table for you to decide,’ said The Duo. ‘We want you to think about all of it.’

Why is it relevant to see tutors?

What should The Committee’s role be?

What skills would you like to develop?

What resources do you need?

What kinds of things do you think you should read?

What do you deem success in education?

What do you deem success in your work?

Have you found something you believe in?

Can you work on your future in a group?

None of this is a problem; it’s an opportunity. It’s not a restriction to develop the goals of your own education. It’s an invitation to come up with something amazing.

Marilyn thought about why she had joined the programme very plainly in this moment. It was partially for the visa, yes. But beyond that, it was to become part of an academic community again. She missed that from her days in Chicago. She needed recharge, intellectual sparring partners, readings, lectures, charismatic people to admire. Looking around at the tired group, she suddenly realized she’d been metamorphosing into some kind of mouthpiece for frustration. She missed the comfort of those old discussions on Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva and Karl Marx. Where were they now?

‘What about the frequency that you’ll be with the group?’ asked Helen. ‘We haven’t seen you much so far. Will that change?’

‘We may only be here once a month,’ said The Duo, ‘but in terms of interest you have us one thousand percent.’ Helen’s shoulders lowered with a prolonged exhale.

‘Hey,’ The Duo said emphatically, ‘It’s not like we’re egotistically saying, “*Hah! Let’s just run in this direction regardless of what the students need!*”’ That’s not it.’ The Duo shifted to the edges of their chairs.

We simply have the feeling that conventional education isn’t anchored in reality. We don’t think it’s good for you. Education shouldn’t be based on thematics. That just produces a load of junk nobody needs. We truly believe this open format education gives you freedom to test things and find new territory.

And, to be totally transparent: We don’t believe in master’s degrees. What we believe in is the freedom given to you by the Sandberg Instituut. We will not create a master’s degree for you. You will create what you chose out of this opportunity.

Rebecca’s heart sank. The Challenging Jewellery programme was her first acceptance into the design world as a maker. She had studied economics at university in the UK and her family wealth had allowed her to become a small-scale collector, but she dreamed of working on the inside. Rebecca saw this MA as a chance to legitimise her position. A chance to become closer to the legendary Committee, not as a buyer, but as a student. Now, listening to The Duo’s lack of belief in education, she had premonitions of leaving the programme completely empty-handed.

At that moment, Vasil noticed a blond woman sitting under the scraps of fabric he and the others had wrapped around a wooden tipi structure in the corner of the room. The group had intended this to be a sketch for the ‘Treasure Box’, but now it served more as a prop for a ‘work in progress’. Only the top of the woman’s head and the tips of her shoes were visible. ‘Has she been there the whole time?’ thought Vasil. He wondered if The Duo had invited this woman to interview for the ‘Observer’ position. ‘But why was she sitting behind that mess all morning?’ Suddenly, the woman rose from her chair, brushed aside the hanging fabric, and approached the group.

She wore a pale blue denim shirtdress with four vertical zippers, pleated at the waist. On her feet were taupe zip-up booties. Her champagne hair was precisely manicured, her skin matte and flawless. The woman paced around the room, making eye contact with each of the participants.

‘What kind of fucking power play is this?’ thought Aurora. And without so much as an introduction, the woman planted her feet and began to speak.

*If you have no concepts,
If you have no lust to create,
If you have no fire burning deep inside,
If you have no drive to push into new territories,
You should get up and leave right now.*

Aurora seriously considered exiting the room. ‘Wouldn’t that be great!?’ she thought. ‘One honest gesture of finality in this mess.’ The woman shifted her weight to the balls of her feet.

‘This isn’t a joke. Get up and go.’ She paused.

Your department heads will not lead this programme. They will not

function as educators. They will not assume a mentorship role. They will not facilitate or mediate your growth as a collective.

She lunged toward The Duo and extended one hand in their direction.

It's outrageous that these two designers are heads of a master's programme. They don't believe in education. They believe the way to do anything, is to go out there and do it. However, they also understand that everything is in flux, the world is changing, small-scale suppliers have closed down, buyers have moved on, the market isn't what it used to be.'

The woman began pacing back and forth.

You know, sometimes from the outside a company looks so coherent, so put together, so consistent. But on the inside, that company is no more stable than any one of you. Twenty-five years invested and tomorrow, [snaps] it could all be over. So ask yourselves, really ask yourselves: Why do you think they are here?

The woman looked knowingly at each student. 'Each of you needs insurance for the future, and that doesn't exclude the heads of this department.'

Something in Marilyn's brain snapped. 'The Duo's world is almost entirely based in sales! Regardless of their concepts, regardless of their edge, they still have to sell to survive.' Marilyn felt like she was solving a mystery for the entire group. 'Art and design education,' she thought, 'it offers The Duo a different paradigm, an alternate set of values. A new economy to explore!'

The blond woman approached Marilyn and crouched down in front of her. 'Have you ever considered why The Duo decided this programme had to take the form of a collective?'

‘They also want to become something else.’

THE COURAGE TO WALK AWAY

Challenging Jewellery Department

12 June 2019

‘Look,’ said Hans after a long period of silence, ‘one thing I noticed from this presentation is that you tried to give us some kind of update on your mental state. I’m not sure that—’

‘Yes,’ Rod broke in. ‘It was like you wanted to tell us something specific.’ He crossed his legs. ‘Something *very* specific.’ Rod nudged his peach acetate glasses up the bridge of his nose. He didn’t look his age. At first glance Rod wasn’t a day over fifty, but upon closer inspection he was definitely entering his golden years. Maybe it was his boyish grin, maybe it was his gold pinky ring and sockless ankles that split boat shoes from crop pants—whatever it was, he gave off the feeling that he didn’t give a fuck.

‘Next time you give me a pencil show,’ said Rod, looking at the students, ‘I’d just prefer that you schedule in some time for feedback. Five minutes or so. That’s all I ask.’ Rod was good-hearted and a smooth talker. He was empathetic, but never let anyone else’s worries drag him down. His work was the same: alluring, carefree, cheeky, and unabashedly clear.

‘Whatever this was today,’ Hans chimed in with a huff, ‘it was utterly suffocating.’

‘Oh, come on’ said Rod, ‘today wasn’t all bad!’

‘I don’t know,’ snapped Hans, ‘if I’m honest—’ Rod’s eyes were wide, ‘If?!’

‘Well yes, if you don’t mind, honest for a moment!’ Hans placed his hands on his hips. ‘What I’d like to say is that this assessment scared me to death. This durational pencil sharpening thing, this political speech about overcoming unidentifiable obstacles, this, this... foot washing ritual! It was all so—’ Hans launched into monologue.

Not only was there no space for me, as a committee member, to voice my thoughts, but it frightened the hell out of me because I’m thinking about the future of this programme. We are one year in, halfway, and we had nothing concrete to look at today. I couldn’t say or do anything to stop it. The only thing I could have done was maybe to shout, “Oh shit this is terrible!” Or “Dear God this is so boring!” But you didn’t allow me to tell you a word about any of this because of how you formatted the day. Today was your assessment for goodness sake. It was like an exam day rewritten into an amateur attempt at experimental theatre!

‘It’s true,’ said Marloes.

‘And whose fault is that?’ asked Hans fervently.

*Is it our fault?
Is it The Duo’s fault?
Is it your fault?*

‘Well,’ said Lucia matter-of-factly, ‘you’ve seen everything now. Maybe you can just ask us about it. Tell us your thoughts.’

‘Hah,’ replied Hans. ‘That’s a bit like having the cake after the sausage. I mean, the sausage after the cake. Oh whatever. It’s just the

wrong way around!’ Hans stood, hands on hips, shaking his head from side to side.

Aurora began softly, ‘Well, I thought we made the plan for today quite clear to you.’ Her voice increased in firmness. ‘We made the decision right from the start that we wanted our assessment day to take the format of a commemoration, a celebration—an observance of the struggles and hardships we’ve faced in the last year.’ Aurora’s voice quivered slightly when it reached full volume.

‘So yes, it turned into a performance.’ Aurora could feel her hands beginning to shake so she clasped them behind her back where no one could see. ‘I feel personally very happy that you are all here. But you, The Committee, you should know...’ Aurora looked directly at Hans and without blinking she said, ‘*I didn’t do it for you.*’

There was an overwhelming silence. Aurora continued.

Your presence here is welcome. You have become part of our assessment format and we’re glad for that. We invited you actually, and on that invitation stood the title of today’s presentation, “Home Visit: The First Rehearsal”. From the start, we informed you that today would be a performance and a trial. You came here knowing you would likely serve as an audience. And what you witnessed today, well actually, I hope you felt what we were trying to transmit. Hopefully it gave you the strange feeling of watching someone attempt to speak up for the first time, maybe for the first time in their entire life. So you should know, we didn’t do this presentation to give you objects to look at so you can show us how you run a critique. We did today as an attempt to speak up for what we believe in as individuals, maybe to figure out what we can believe in as a group, and to touch on what we learned over the past year.

Aurora's eyes welled up with liquid. 'That's why the microphone was here on this chair all day.'

For us, the microphone represents the journey to find our voices. And if you wanted to interact with us, you could have come on stage. You could have sharpened pencils with Lucia and Mila. You could have yelled from the audience as Marilyn attempted to pour words into your ears. You could have told Zhi to stop her pechakucha and talk to you from her heart. And you know what? It would have been okay. Because at least it would have meant that you got it enough to participate and ask for more.

Sometimes a rehearsal also just fails and you learn from it. But the thing I really learned from today, is that you want objects. You want objects on a table, and you want to talk about those objects in all the ways you already know how to talk about objects. And you want to do it in front of us. So I think you're right to say you're scared, Hans. You're scared of doing things differently. You're scared of taking a chance because it means that the process might not be so slick. It might in fact be embarrassing, and above all it means that your feedback won't become the be-all and end-all of this assessment.

Aurora's eyes had dried by now.

'The jewellery field is traditional,' said Aurora, 'It's conservative and it's traditional when you compare it to the rest of the art world. We all know that. What I had hoped for however, is that everyone involved in this thing was trying to do it differently.' Aurora was speaking very loudly by now.

‘I can accept that we arrived here and you all didn’t have a plan.’ She looked at The Duo and The Committee. ‘Given the challenge, it makes sense!’ Aurora couldn’t hold back her anger.

But what I cannot accept is that you all got together and created a course called CHALLENGING JEWELLERY, and not once did you ask what “Challenging” really means! Not once did you ask what “Jewellery” really means. We get the feeling that you all invited us here hoping we’d do the work for you. Make jewellery relevant again. Frame jewellery as a pedagogical model. Reinvent jewellery a symbol for working big on a small scale. Well if you wanted to go down that road, and I mean really go down that road, the road of changing things in the conservative field of jewellery and reviving your legacy in the art world, then you need to be willing to challenge yourselves.

Aurora was shaking. ‘You’ve all made this thing incredibly easy on yourselves.’ The tears had returned.

You don’t just invite fourteen people to participate in a massive concept you invented, and pretend like you don’t know what you invited them for once they get there. Dear god, just be honest! Say it! What’s the goal of us being here? Do you even know?

After about a minute, Hans spoke up. ‘Okay, well it’s clear what you’re saying.’ Hans nestled his chin in his palm. ‘We just didn’t know what we were supposed to do with you all performing up there. We were waiting for the plan to kick in, which is to look at the work and discuss it.’ Hans looked genuinely confused. ‘There was hardly anything on the table today. And the things that *were* there were so

ephemeral and quickly made. Everything was so unfocused.’ Hans raised himself from his chair.

For, for, for the generation of today... I think maybe focusing is the most difficult thing. It’s also the most important thing. You have so many possibilities in terms of materials, and techniques, and how easy it is to get information. Google! I’m from the period pre-Google. Now, when I meet a person for the first time, I Google them beforehand. I’m already pre-cooked before the first encounter. All the tools you have to develop yourselves are overwhelming. You’re all in this perfectly beautiful new building with clean floors and tables. I mean, what else do you want? Life is already completely filled in. And you poor creatures have to find your souls in this beautiful, overly complicated world. I can imagine that’s not easy. It was probably easier in post-war Russia.

I’m reading this book, you know, “The Russian AvantGarde”... What is it? Well, you read about all the terrible circumstances those artists endured after the Civil War and after the First World War and the Second... And well, how they had to survive as artists without anything. Not even paper, or a pencil, or paint. But they were still able to make things.

You all, here today, endlessly sharpening pencils with the materials falling to the ground. You don’t even see it as a waste, you see it as a symbol of frustration. So you and these Russian artists are living completely opposite lives. You live in a world where everything is at your fingertips. It’s wonderful, but it’s tragically distracting you from the real issues at hand. So, my answer to you... My solution for you is clear: focus. It’s very simple, but it’s also very difficult.

The sound of crickets rang out. Émilie exploded with laughter. The sound grew louder. Realising it was coming from his own pocket, Rod reached in for his phone. ‘Goddamn that ringtone!’ he exclaimed while walking to the other side of the room to take the call.

‘Well,’ Hans said laughing, ‘there were some nice presentations today, and some new presentation formats. In that sense it was really challenging.’ Aurora’s mouth had transformed into a deep scowl. ‘But then of course,’ said Hans, ‘when I consider what’s going to happen next year in this master’s programme, it’s suddenly quite difficult to think about, isn’t it?’ Hans crossed his arms. ‘For many of you this master’s is a totally open question. You don’t know what’s going to happen.’ Hans went into yet another monologue.

If I speak from my own expectations of a master’s degree, the best-case scenario is that you already have a research question in mind before you begin. In that case, through the process of this programme you discover new aspects, new ways, new solutions, new forms, that can function as a starting point of your career after this master’s. That’s the ideal situation. And from there, the thesis becomes the career solution for you. That’s the most important thing that you have to develop: certainty in your subject, a certainty that’s based in real life. One thing I heard from each of you today is, “I think, I believe, I wonder...”. There are quite a lot of maybes in that kind of talk. It’s all so quick and short and fleeting.

‘In some sense,’ said Hans, pinching his chin with his thumb and forefinger, ‘I look around and I see you all as little birds.’

Aurora knew where this was headed. Last week it had been Hans’ suggestion to hold a ‘Tupperware party instead of the fundraising campaign the students were planning. The week before it was how he identified a prominent editor in the jewellery field as ‘the

girl with the big ass'. The month before that, it was how he randomly said 'big tits' during a critique. Aurora wondered how this bird thing would play out. She was sadistically excited about the misogynistic metaphor brewing in Hans' mouth.

'Really,' said Hans.

You're all like little birds flying a very small distance above the roof of a home. And every time you dip down onto the roof of that house, you pick up a little branch. Then you put that branch into your nest. Then you pick up a little twig, and you put that in next to the other one in your nest. Then a little cotton, then a little rock, then a little string. Finally, you arrange it all together inside your cosy little nest, warming it up, hoping something grows out of it, but it never really does. All these little thoughts, little things, little pieces that you pick up. It's all quite nice, that is, it's all quite intuitive, but it's just the output of the part of you that feels and touches. That's the part of you that likes to gather and combine. But I want to see the part of you that commits, produces, incubates. What about the part of you that focuses on one thing and cares for it until it hatches into something amazing?

A sharp 'ding' pierced through Mila's pocket.

'But now,' continued Hans, 'it's really important that all those little intuitive feelings come together into something very tangible.'

Every time you think, "maybe I think so, maybe I believe so," every time you say these things, I want you to take yourself by the hair and say to your own face, "focus on what's tangible". And if you truly reach that point, I promise you, it will be something very great.

Hans looked at The Duo and said, 'This is a fantastic opportunity to get the best out of these birds in the coming year!' He laughed. 'What do you two think?'

'Yes,' The Duo said flatly. 'We also want to thank you. We were impressed that today went so smoothly. It was a good performance.' The Duo smiled at Hans then leaned back in their chairs to speak.

In general, we agree with what Hans is saying. Through persistence and interest, you will likely run into things you didn't expect. For us however, we are very happy to see the team playing together today. We like how you worked collectively. We're happy to see it was a natural process. It wasn't forced, it just felt real.

'We also want to tell you,' The Duo said with an earnest look in their eyes, 'that looking back on the last year, we learned a lot. It was a huge learning experience. We want the group to know that.'

The students were shocked. Each experienced that statement in their own way, but it was a collective wave of feeling that flowed over the entire group. They appreciated what was about to come. It was the first time someone behind the program would release a bit of weight from their shoulders about how quickly the program had slumped into crisis.

'Somehow,' said The Duo, 'it felt like we didn't really start with the proper plan.'

We never really presented you with the concept we had in mind for this master's programme. We left it open. Intuitively we were wishing and believing so much in this collective energy that we thought it would just work. We probably asked you for too much. But still, we think

the more you each concentrate on your own work, the subjects and practices you care about, the more and more it will be reinforced that it's nice to be a group. It's nice to be more than one.

One thing we underestimated is the importance of your personal work. We didn't realise that you might first need to define your individual capacities in order to work in a group.

You see, an individual needs to be able to develop a certain kind of striking power that makes the others say, "Yeah, this is great!" Or for someone like Rebecca to say to Zhi, "I like your work, I'd like to own it." As much as we can push you, we can also really thank you. It's clear that many of you accepted this challenge.

The Duo pulled themselves from their seats. 'All along, this has been one of the main subjects we wanted to bring to you. A practice of fearlessness. And today, some of you have shown it.'

The Duo looked directly at the students.

'The biggest gift is to bring everyone into your vision. Only then can you learn to stand for one position together. Even if you chose the wrong position, it's better to have tried and walk away empty handed, than to have done nothing at all.'

UTOPIA IN CRISIS

The Old Sandberg

7 November 2018

Mila was staring at a vertical expanse of grey. Ten meters of heavy woven carpet clumsily stretched between two pillars. The effort to raise it had happened the night before, and now this thick fuzzy curtain served as a barrier between Challenging Jewellery and the rest of the institute. Any open contact with the outside world engendered doubt and humiliation, so for the following months, no one knew what happened behind that curtain except the students of Challenging Jewellery.

‘Honey,’ Mila looked at Lucia flatly. ‘They didn’t just ask me to be more present. They called me a tourist in my own master’s. I feel completely attacked!’ Lucia flattened her lips and rolled them inward, not knowing what to say.

They told me I’m not a maker, that I’m just some kind of dilettante. What the fuck?! I hate that they have this power over me. I’m so fucking lonely here! No one in this place understands me. There’s no point to any of this! Why the fuck did I join this MA?

Mila broke into tears. One by one, the students of Challenging Jewellery arrived and squeezed themselves through a fissure in the carpet. Mila had sliced a vertical gash in the carpet the night before, jokingly naming it ‘The Department’s Vagina’. Now crying, Mila was far from the joy of raising a wall of carpet with her classmates. Lucia lowered herself in front of Mila to shield her teary face from the others coming in.

‘Oh dear,’ Lucia leaned in for a hug. ‘I think they’re just reflecting on what’s happening from their point of view. Maybe it’s just—’ Mila coaxed Lucia’s arms away with her hands. ‘Maybe it’s just a nudge for you to be more present—’

‘They’re never here!’ screamed Mila. Six faces turned toward the crouching couple. Mila whispered between sobs, ‘Seriously, they are never *really* present. I can’t rely on them. They don’t know what’s happening around here! I’m out here all alone and no one cares.’

Mila grew up in boarding schools across the United Kingdom. Her parents lived in Qatar, but Mila was only there for the first years of life. Now twenty-eight, she didn’t know where she was from. Lucia’s eyes were now as glassy as Mila’s. ‘Mila, It seems like this is really painful for you. Can’t you tell them the truth? That part of the reason you travel so much is because this master’s programme is hurting you?’

‘It’s true,’ said Mila. She hardened her face and wiped tears from her cheeks with both her flannel sleeves. ‘This do-what-you-like situation is horrible for me.’ Mila continued in a whisper. ‘I’m spinning my wheels here. I wake up every day not knowing what to do with this situation. So yeah, I travel because I have the money and there’s nothing else planned around here!’

Most days Mila was too upset to show her face at the Sandberg Instituut. She felt lost, walking around the school empty-handed while the other students hurried to their ‘planned lectures’ and ‘regularly scheduled critiques’. It made her angry that there was rarely anything scheduled in her own programme. Most mornings, Mila would sit in her apartment trying to come up with some grand plan to make this whole Challenging Jewellery thing worth a damn. ‘Maybe I’ll rent a storefront!’ Mila’s energy would spike. ‘But what would we sell? It’s not like we can just sell normal jewellery. What *is* Challenging Jewellery anyway?’ Her energy would dissipate.

Sometimes Mila would invite a handful of her cohort to her three-story flat just a stone's throw from the Rijksmuseum. Together they'd smoke cigarettes, drink coffee, and brainstorm a path forward. But when that didn't work, and it never worked, the others would pack up and go home, and Mila would inevitably walk down to her local coffee shop to purchase a new variety of cannabis. She'd end most nights pushing marijuana into the hull of an old Cuban cigar with her pinkie finger to produce a fat blunt. She'd smoke, chat with a slew of friends across the globe, then book a flight to some far-off destination before falling asleep cradling her pillow in her arms.

Everyone just does whatever they want around here. It's a string of randomness by a string of lost souls trying to make something out of nothing and no one's hands are on the wheel. You think I want to stand around for the moment when "Boom!" we all realise nothing happened for two years?! I came here to figure my shit out. Now I feel more lost than I did before.

Lucia thought about what her position should be in this moment. She wasn't sure The Duo actually had a mentoring strategy behind the name-calling, but she figured it was a good time to invent one. 'Do you think them calling you a tourist could potentially help the situation?'

'What?' said Mila. 'I mean, no. It's totally judgmental, right? They're picking at me on a personal level. Sure! They want to motivate me to come up with my own stuff since nothing is going to happen otherwise, but I don't appreciate how they're doing it.'

'Well,' said Lucia looking over her shoulder to see that the entire group had arrived. 'Don't they always say there's no hierarchy in this master's thingy? Why not just go up to them and tell them that you're not okay with being singled out on a personal level?' Lucia could see

a shiny layer reforming on Mila's eyes. 'I'm just not sure it will help,' said Mila.

Mila had moved to Amsterdam from New York. She had studied jewellery at Pratt, and not knowing what to do after that, she stuck around the city to feel things out. After eight years in New York, Mila decided the city wasn't for her. Brooklyn had too many rats, the Upper East Side was too sparkly, the Lower East Side was too gentrified, and Chelsea was too divided. So just two years before Mila could call herself a New Yorker, she knew it was time for a change.

First, Mila went to her parents for advice. It was the same every time. 'You chose this jewellery thing sweetie, now you can make something out of it.' Or, 'Why don't you just move somewhere nice and open a shop?' Neither of her parents' non-advice helped Mila. She wanted more. The truth was, Mila was full to the brim with ideas. She had so many causes and dreams welling inside, but each day Mila's energies went unspent, the rock in her gut got harder. It wasn't a lack of ambition or her heavy weed usage that kept Mila down. It wasn't that at all. The thing that prevented Mila from tackling the world had one origin. Mila lacked meaningful mentorship in her life. She lacked an empathetic guardian, an advisor, a real confidant who cared about her future. Someone who talked with her in order to understand. Someone older and wiser who knew which rhetorical questions would bring her to a point of clarity, not shame or defeat. No one had ever invested focused care in Mila, and at twenty-eight, it showed.

'Hello!?' a voice called crisply and melodically from the other side of the carpeted curtain. 'Challenging Jewellery, where are you my friends?' James popped his head through the slice in the carpet. 'Ah, there you are!' he said jovially. Helen darted across the room to greet the visitor.

'Come in! Come in!'

James pulled his head back through the carpet and disappeared. A few seconds later his foot popped through the hole. He playfully shook it like he was in a peepshow, then extended his calf, knee, and thigh through the opening. James' entire leg waved violently for a few seconds until his foot landed with a thud onto the floor. Suddenly, he popped his head into the room once more with a big smile. After his other arm and leg made their way through the carpet opening, he fumbled around finding his balance.

'Well,' said James, 'that wasn't made for folks my size, now was it?' The room erupted with high-pitched squealing laughter. 'Cosy in here though, eh?'

James stood at the helm of the room like a savior with a mullet. Shaved along the sides and topped with a wild mane of curls, his brown locks extended from hairline to the back of the neck. He was clothed entirely in navy blue and wore silver square-framed glasses.

'Sooooooo,' said James. 'Shall we get started?' Pulling several markers from his left pocket and piling them into his right hand, he clenched his fingers and began to speak.

'After today, you will have the basic theory of Deep Democracy under your belts. Particularly, how to make decisions.' Émilie was the only one who hadn't seen James' comedic entrance. Hunched in a far corner, she was staring at the carpet with her headphones in. Lost in the greyness of the carpet's surface, Émilie was running through the adventures of the night before—Mila slicing up the huge rolls of carpet with a razor blade, Aurora getting tipsy on box wine, Vasil teetered atop a broken ladder yelling, 'I need backup, I need backup!' Émilie let out a squeal.

'Okayyy, alright friends!' James projected in Émilie's direction and waved. Émilie removed her headphones. 'Everybody, come closer and clear away these chairs.' The students jumped to their feet

and shuffled around the room to execute James' instructions. 'Let's sit in a circle on the floor, right up here in the front.'

Émilie slowly shifted her weight onto to her knees and braced herself with one hand as she stood up. Still hungover, she dragged herself very close to James and plopped down next to him. James looked at Émilie, smiled, and nodded. 'That's much better.' He remained standing and continued his introduction. James spoke with a clean pan-American accent. The sounds that flowed from his mouth made him seem kind and reliable, yet hip.

Today we'll work a bit with group dynamics, just to give you a feel for the technique. Keep in mind, I usually teach Deep Democracy with a series of courses—the first being a two-day intensive, but since you're students I'm cutting you a deal. I'll just give you a taster and hopefully you'll have enough to use in your own decision-making from here. I got a rundown on what's been happening in the department from Marilyn. I hope I can help your situation.

Marilyn first heard about Deep Democracy while working as the content creator for an 'expats platform' in Amsterdam. In reality, it was just a Facebook page created by a real-estate company to lure international clients to the most expensive pockets of the city, but Marilyn used it to introduce Amsterdam's finest: a young trans designer from Australia, a tattoo artist from Canada, an infamous queer refugee from Iran. After publishing her fifth article on a Bulgarian immigrant sex worker however, Marilyn was quickly fired. 'What were you thinking?' asked the company's slick director. 'We're looking for something relatable, something that pulls people to Amsterdam, not scares them away!'

'You'd be surprised,' said Marilyn.

Before leaving, Marilyn managed to secure one last interview with Charlie on the company's dime. Charlie was a second-year student in the Sandberg Instituut's temporary programme, *Utopia in Crisis*, a cataclysmic concoction of activism, neoliberal funding schemes, and performance neatly packaged into a master's degree on the periphery of the art world.

'*Utopia in Crisis* was a mix of hell and the best time of my life,' said Charlie when Marilyn asked about it. 'A place to self-organise, find a cause, and—well, just get really weird and intense about stuff.'

Utopia in Crisis hit crisis just as soon as one might expect. In the first month of its operation, students from other departments signed a petition against *UIC* for being a privately funded, tuition-free master's programme threatening the ideals of the Sandberg Instituut. *Utopia in Crisis* had corporate sponsors, so their students didn't pay tuition. The rest of the Sandberg's students did. The petition read something like this:

The acceptance of this privatised structure into The Sandberg Instituut provides justification for the government to further reduce the budget for higher education in the arts. Utopia in Crisis not only inserts a corporate funding model into the Sandberg, but actively promotes privatisation in art education worldwide. One of the main goals of Utopia in Crisis is to relieve financial shortages in higher arts education through corporate donations and charity schemes.

We believe that once the door to privatised funding has been opened, it is incredibly difficult to shut. We do not want to spend our precious education years preparing ourselves to navigate a landscape of competing interests in which murky exchanges in cultural capital reign

supreme. We urge the administration to disconnect The Sandberg Instituut from Utopia in Crisis immediately.

The students hated the way WeTransfer and other corporations threw money at this department in lieu of government backing and student payments. For them, it produced a seedy network intertwining the corporate world with public education. Little did the protesting students know however, that programmes such as these could keep government funding flowing at maximal levels. These temporary islands were a flex space for moving around numbers and pumping up graduate student enrolment on the Sandberg campus. *Utopia in Crisis* was the perfect self-funded island in this grand archipelago of transactions. While the student protesters saw *Utopia in Crisis* as a symbol of corporate takeover thwarting government funding, the Sandberg administration saw it as an opportunity to increase it.

Naturally, this protest caused the students of *Utopia in Crisis* a great deal of strife. Within the first month of their enrolment they were alienated from the larger Sandberg community. Under attack from all sides and feeling pressure from their department head to publish propagandistic podcasts defending their programme, the students of *Utopia in Crisis* called out for help. Amidst their cry, they found James.

‘James appeared out of nowhere,’ said Charlie. ‘I don’t even remember how we found him. He just swooped in and figured out what each of us in the group needed to find peace with the situation. It was so fresh and real. If there was ever a group in crisis, James could help.’

Marilyn remembered Charlie’s endorsement while sitting in a *Challenging Jewellery* meeting just weeks before. The group had attempted to democratically elect workshop leaders for the

programme's curriculum. Should it be Aldo Bakker or Ben Lignel? Bureau Belen or the Bernadette Corporation? After hours of presenting, discussing, voting, and drawing maps on the floor, the group wound up fighting and ultimately admitting defeat. 'Why do we even need workshop leaders or lecturers?' said Zhi. 'We don't even know what we want out of this programme.' Marilyn shot her hand into the air. 'I propose our first self-programmed workshop leader take the form of an interventionist from The Deep Democracy Institute.' The group unanimously voted 'Yes'.

'Okay,' said James. 'We are not doing circle of death introductions! That's just awful. We're going to go popcorn style, which means pop when you're hot!' The students laughed. James clapped his hands together. 'So who wants to go first?'

'Uhhhh, I can,' said Émilie.

'Here's how it starts,' said James.

A check-in is composed of four questions that each person answers before the session begins. This allows the group to land and establish the tone of the room.

- 1. Who are you? (name, background, etc)*
- 2. Which part of you wants to be here?*
- 3. Which part of you does not?*
- 4. What do you want?*

'So who's first?!' There was a long silence.

'Now don't wait too long or you'll burn,' said James.

‘Uh, okay,’ said Émilie, ‘I’ll go.’

My name is Émilie. I’m French-Ukrainian. I trained as a graphic designer, but I wanted to challenge my practice. I think there’s a part of me that needs deep attention. Maybe I need to go to a psychologist, I don’t know. That’s the part of me that doesn’t want to be here today. But the part of me that does want to be here? Well, she’s looking for excitement. Whatever kind of adventure this group will or will not produce... [laughs] Whatever.

‘Thank you,’ said James. ‘Who’s next?’

I’m Zhi. I come from China. I lived a primitive life until the government took my family home to build a road through our village. That’s how I eventually applied to the Instituut and ended up here. The part of me that wants to be here is the same as why I joined this master’s: I want to work with people. There is no part of me that does not want to be here.

James nodded. ‘Okay fine,’ said Mila, ‘I’ll go.’

My name is Mila. [forced smile] I’m from the Middle East. I grew up in England. My background is in jewellery-making and the part of me that wants to be here is interested in talking about what democracy really means. Let’s see if it can be implemented. The part of me that doesn’t want to be here would rather escape from the mess of this master’s programme.

Mila reclined onto her elbows.

Yes, Okay. I'll jump right in. My name is Agnes, I'm a Finnish jeweller. I'm mostly interested in the technical side of things. I had my choice of graduate schools but I chose Challenging Jewellery because I thought it would set me apart. I second-guess that now, but I'm trying to stay positive. The part of me that wants to be here is committed to the group. The part of me that doesn't would rather be in the studio.

'Thank you,' said James.

'Okay I'll go,' said Maggie.

My name is Maggie. I'm a Dutch jeweller. I have a collective studio here in the city. The part of me that wants to be here is excited to push for something beyond the constraints of the jewellery bench. The part of me that doesn't want to be here would rather just be at my bench making something.

'Alright, thank you,' said James.

Er, hello everybody. My name is Jane. I grew up in a little South African family. I went to an all-girls Afrikaans school. It was very traditional. I got a degree in fashion and then I did an internship with The Duo. That's why I was drawn to this master's. And, oh yes! I also became a mother a year ago. The part of me that doesn't want to be here would love to listen to my ego. I have so many ideas but the chaos of designing this master's drains me. I think this Deep Democracy method could help us develop a language together. So that's why I want to be here.

Jane smiled and dropped her hands into her lap with a shrug. She looked around the circle and caught Helen's eyes. 'Ah okay, it's me now,' said Helen.

My name is Helen. I'm a Dutch jeweller. I work mostly with traditional techniques, but I'd like to become more contemporary. That's why I joined the programme. The part of me that's excited to be in this session today is really happy to have a leader. The part of me that's not? Well, one of my kids is sick so I'm thinking about that.

Another long silence.

I am Zsófia. I was raised on a commune near Budapest. I studied economics and worked as an investment banker for a while, then after my son was born I became a jewellery artist. I joined this programme because I worry about repeating myself in the studio. I was also interested in The Committee since they are quite influential. Today, I want to be here because I think it's important to make progress on the structure of our programme. The part of me that would rather not is just a bit tired of the same conversations.

'Thank you, Zsófia,' said James.

I will go next. My name is Vasil. I'm from Poland. I studied industrial design and then changed to jewellery. I am a jewellery maker, with emphasis on the "maker" part. [chuckles]. I had a little break from jewellery because of side jobs. So I joined this programme to re-energise myself. I want to make this my real job. The part of me that wants to be here believes in the power of a diverse

group. The part that doesn't can see the consequences of our differences very clearly.

'Thanks Vasil,' James nodded.

'I can go,' said Marilyn.

My name is Marilyn. I'm from the United States. I'm a performance artist and a curator. I got an MFA from the University of Chicago and then taught for a while. Applying to this programme was complicated. It was about finding community and learning more about the Sandberg. I'd like to teach again, so maybe I also wanted to think about what it's like to be a student. The part of me that wants to be here is excited to get things moving. The part of me that doesn't realises that this, [motions to window] might be the last bit of sun for the year.

James looked out the window. The others followed. It was sunny and crisp on the other side. 'It's true,' said Brit, 'that might be it.'

Alright hi, I'm Brit. I'm also from the States. I went to art school, did a little work in fashion, then wound up in jewellery. That's why I'm here. To be honest, this programme has broken my hopes for an MA a bit. Anyway, the part of me that doesn't want to be here is the brutally honest Brit that doesn't do so well in captive settings. The part of me that wants to be here hopes we can become bigger together.

'Thanks for that,' said James. Rebecca cleared her throat and began to speak.

My name is Rebecca. I'm from London. I studied finance and now I work in the arts. I actually have my dream job at the moment! [Laughs] But I joined this programme because I want to understand what attracts me to certain pieces of art, and I want to see if I can share that attraction with the world. The part of me that wants to be here is happy to finally have a facilitator in the room. Already I feel more positive. The part of me that doesn't want to be here is still thinking about my job, which I care about very much.

James nodded. 'Um, okay,' said Lucia, 'hello.'

I'm Lucia from Spain. I studied industrial design then traveled a bit. I saw this programme and just applied. I didn't think about it much. The part of me that doesn't want to be here is kind of huge now. I've lost trust in it. It doesn't have anything to do with us, it's more about the whole thing. I put a lot of the failure on myself because I think maybe I'm not taking enough action. I stay because I really want this to work out. That's it.

'Thank you for that,' said James. Aurora, having arrived late, was seated just outside the circle. 'Okay, I'm always the last one,' she said.

I'm Aurora. I come from Sweden. I studied fine arts and worked as a curator and a teacher. I even made my own art collective at some point, but it's hard to compare those times to now. At the Sandberg we're trying to find this collective dynamic, but we're also waiting for a leader. We have knowledge that a budget exists, but there's no transparency. [exhales] It's really confusing. So now I'm just wondering: "Is it better to be in a group, or is it better to be alone?" I feel very alone at the school. It's very upsetting to be here.

Aurora teared up, then quickly shook it off. ‘Thank you,’ said James looking at Aurora. ‘Thank you all very much.’ James shifted his weight to kneel in front of the group. ‘To honour the richness here, I would need a few days with you. However, your coordinator told me there’s very little budget for this kind of stuff. So, let’s look at how we can address what you’ve brought up.’ James joined his hands in a praying position. ‘Let’s really listen to what’s happening here.’

What I hear is a wish to collaborate. I also sense a desire to use the diversity of the group as potential. At the same time, I sense issues around communication, unmet expectations, different types of artistry, transparency, and the fact that you might feel very alone. My thinking is that it would be very important to discuss four factors.

James stood up and pulled out a blue marker. He approached the flipchart and speaking aloud, he began to write:

1. What is standing between us and collaboration?
2. How can we communicate our differences?
3. What do we actually want out of this programme?
4. What are we waiting for?

So, for the rest of the session today, we’re going to talk about the above four questions, which you can consider as rational ways of thinking about democracy. But your emotions are just as important.

You might feel alone in this institute, alone in waiting for a leader to stand up, but are you waiting too much? Are you waiting for someone who isn’t coming? Is this a ‘Waiting for Godot’ situation?

James saw a look of confusion pass over the group. ‘Don’t worry,’ he said, ‘it all comes down to a single question: Are you going to speak up, or just let it be and see what happens?’

EVERYTHING IS VALUES

Challenging Jewellery Dept.

16 April 2020

Long after the other students had gone, as darkness slid over the tables, chairs, and benches of the Challenging Jewellery Department, Aurora closed the door. She switched off the lights, and approached a massive metal rack. Hunching over to slide her fingers gently along the underside of the bottom shelf, she located a key. Aurora peeled the key from a piece of masking tape, walked across the room, and unlocked the door to the Challenging Jewellery administrative office.

Her heart was racing. She had no idea what she might find inside. All she knew was that this office was off limits. The students of Challenging Jewellery had tried to gain access to the room. They attempted to reason with The Duo and the coordinator as to why they needed it. ‘At times, we each might want a quiet space to work,’ said Jane in a meeting. ‘The open floorplan of the department makes things hectic. The option for a little privacy would do us good.’ The request was denied. The answer was this: ‘The moment you need privacy in this department, is the moment in which you should seek another place to work.’

Now inside, Aurora realized she’d only been in the office a handful of times for the occasional check-in. There was a white desk, two chairs, a lamp, and a cabinet with a pink and turquoise frosted sliding door. The coordinator had told her the real reason students weren’t allowed in the office had to do with that cabinet. ‘It doesn’t lock,’ said the coordinator, ‘and since it contains confidential information, the office must remain off limits at all times.’ Aurora had snuck into the office hoping to find the budget, and although she knew these things were likely not printed anymore, something deep

inside her wanted to know how the money was spent. How much went to 'The Committee? She'd only seen them three or four times and would be furious if the fraction was substantial. How much went to 'The Duo's monthly travel? And where was that 3,000 Euros reserved to pay this mysterious observer that was never hired? How much did that thesis advisor retreat to which the students were not invited cost? Just as Aurora placed her slender fingers on the sunken handle of the cabinet, she heard a voice.

'Well, hello there,' it said. Aurora froze. She remembered that voice. She recalled it perfectly. It was something between a politician and a phone sex operator. Smokey, rich, convincing—each syllable pronounced with unfaltering accuracy. Aurora turned to see a blond woman in her mid-thirties leaning in the doorway.

'I bet you're searching for clues in here, aren't you?' the woman said. Aurora opened her mouth but nothing came out. 'It's funny how the main themes of your programme ended up being freedom and administration, isn't it?'

Aurora laughed instinctively. She wasn't sure if she ought to let her guard down with this woman.

'This whole Challenging Jewellery thing?' the woman said walking into office. 'You didn't really think that's what this was all about, did you?' She motioned for Aurora to take a seat. Aurora did, and the woman continued.

'The arc of this journey—it could have been a bit more explicit, don't you think?' She chuckled. 'The idea of *community* as the synthesis of the dialectic between freedom and administration. *Collectivity* as the key component in the production of knowledge and value.' She knocked on the desk. 'Now that's good stuff. But I agree, it could have been much more clear. Yet in a way--' The woman walked across the room and drifted into monologue.

Perhaps one of the things that's so specific about Challenging Jewellery as a pedagogical model, is scale. Somehow, if you zoom in very close on what's been happening, you see how everything becomes a micro of the macro. We haven't been talking about a thematic exploration of the body for two years. No. We've been talking about large existential questions as extracted from small-scale experiments in self-organisation. At the core of this journey is the question not of how the body relates to objects, but how the individual relates to ideas of democracy on a meta-level.

The woman began pacing.

It's interesting what participants have struggled with in the arc of this programme. The idea that hyper-self-reflective freedom leads to fire overlooks the role administration plays in executive power. There are so many examples in history, not to mention in the arts, that reveal to us that 'the commune' must become realistic. While the idea of utopia as a predestined failure is clear, how much did the creators and the participants understand it before this all began? Knowledge finds one source in the unravelling of failure, but in this model, whatever is thrown at you, in some way, will be validated as a 'learning experience'.

The woman looked down at the lapel of her black suit jacket. There was a thin, polished rectangular pin. It seemed to be made of platinum.

And that whole thing about jewellery? Well, if you ask a layperson or an academic, I think they'll both agree that jewellery is often connected to the idea of self-selection, self-appointment, the maker of one's own identity through ornamentation, pleasure, status,

belonging, wealth. Everything is a matter of values. Jewellery is a complicated notion. I must admit, it's a very provoking term in the title of this master's.

The woman pulled a cloth from her pocket, buffed a smudge from the shiny pin, and walked toward the exit.

‘And by the way,’ she said to Aurora, pausing in the doorway, ‘the only thing you’ll find in that cabinet is an expensive bottle of wine. You know, leftover from that thesis retreat you weren’t invited to. The corkscrew is in the left drawer.’

AUTONOMOUS ZONES OF LEARNING

Fedlev Auditorium

15 June 2020

Yousef Amiri peered through a blue, translucent curtain. He watched as a shifting pattern of hair, fabric and skin expanded on the other side.

The glass auditorium was packed. Its monumental wooden bleachers were nearly full by now. Students and faculty balled up their jackets and hugged their bags to make room for others filing in. The crowd swelled at the edges of the sunken stage and stretched upward where it spilled out onto an open courtyard at ground level. This was the inauguration of the Sandberg Instituut's first annual graduation symposium:

‘Temporal Education: Autonomous Zones of Learning’

Yousef's heart raced behind the curtain. He hadn't returned to The Sandberg Instituut since finishing a temporary master's just five years earlier. Yousef had been part of *Plan B*, a programme exploring the political implications of the morning after pill. ‘Emergency contraception as a way of unthinking’, he had explained to his parents on a trip home.

It was hard for Yousef to come back to this campus. The space was filled with both painful and triumphant memories. This was where he met his first love, where he learned to think as a self-acting citizen, where he felt free for the very first time. It was also the place he was forced to leave when his visa expired just twelve months after graduation. Returning to Iran was difficult for Yousef. He'd thought about the Sandberg Instituut every day since.

Yousef shook out his arms briskly, adjusted the wire extruding from his left ear, and delicately pushed a small microphone close to his mouth. The sound of Yousef's breathing filled the auditorium. He took a deep inhale, straightened his collar on his exhale, then swiftly brushed the blue curtain aside before proudly walking on stage.

'Hello,' said Yousef confidently. The sea of faces converged in his direction.

This is it my friends. This is where it all begins. The moment when desire and life become one. Let's start with a big round of applause for this year's graduates of the Sandberg Instituut's Temporary Master's Programmes of 2020!

The room exploded with ecstatic applause.

'Without you, we wouldn't be here today.' Yousef smiled and gazed at the audience until the clapping diminished to a few slapping hands.

Whether you've pursued your own research from the beginning, or spent the last two years struggling to find collective purpose within a group of peers, you have inevitably asked yourselves the essential questions of life.

Who am I?

What do I want?

What do I believe in?

What is my purpose on this planet?

As of today, you have undoubtedly achieved a level of self-reflection that is uniquely yours: the desire to reinvent daily life through your creative process. I can tell you from the bottom of my heart — No matter what political, social, or economic factors come your way — no one can take that away from you. It's yours till the end of time!

The audience clapped and cheered. Yousef walked to a wooden podium and braced one hand on each side.

You have found something deep within yourself that will continue to push you forward. A curiosity that runs through your veins, and even though your time here at the Sandberg Instituut is coming to a close, that deep sense of inquiry will stay with you no matter where you are off to next.

This is, after all, a temporary space of learning, and not just for those graduating from the Temporary Master's programmes. The Sandberg Instituut is temporary for everyone. It's made temporary by design. From its unfinished interiors to its part-time faculty, things at the Sandberg are purposefully in transition.

Four audience members in the front row bent over their own laps then reappeared holding violins. Cradling instruments between shoulder and chin, they began to play softly as Yousef continued speaking. The tune was Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings*.

I started at the Sandberg Instituut in 2012. I had no idea who I was. I thought I knew, but I didn't. A life in Tehran had trained my brain for one way of living. I only knew myself in contrast to my surroundings. I didn't yet understand myself as autonomous from them.

Growing in emotional fervour, the violin's melody back dropped Yousef's words.

When I came here, I was given a blank slate. The opportunity to explore my own ideas, establish my own way of living, understand life apart from the rules I grew up with. When I arrived, I felt a huge weight lifted from my shoulders. It was as if anything was possible, and even though there were limitations, I used the institute's resources as an open field for reinvention. The open format allowed me to detach myself from the finality of expectations so deeply ingrained in me since childhood. Even after I was forced to return to Iran, the weight of my surroundings returned, but my psychology remained changed. It's hard to imagine where I'd be without the freedom of Sandberg Instituut's Temporary Master's Programmes. It was this autonomous zone of learning that turned my perception of life upside down.

The violins played their sweetest notes, and then suddenly froze in silence.

While some of you will return for a visit every now and then, the focus will be on your futures. Your development in the real world, a world which involves not only your ideas, but securing food and shelter and a way to sustain everyday life.

The violin's tune resumed, but this time graceful and calm.

So I'll return to that moment when your desire and your life become one, and I'll tell you the truth: It won't be as simple as it sounds, and it may not happen at all. Religion and politics and the mechanics

of being will always get in the way. But no matter the boundaries you will face, one thing will remain with you always, and that is your understanding of psychological freedom. This has forever been ingrained in me at this institute.

Low notes played behind Yousef's words.

‘For you, the process of putting that knowledge into action begins today. The foundation is there.’ The violin’s approached a crescendo as Yusef’s words rose in fervour. ‘Let this foundation live inside of you from here on out! Graduates of 2020, I congratulate you. I wish you the very best in all your endeavours!’

Yousef released his hand in a flash toward the audience and a stream of white doves flew out from between two blue curtains. The violins roared. The flock of doves flapped and slapped their wings in all directions, then hovered momentarily over the audience before dispersing to the four corners of the room. As the violins approached their final notes, the white doves gracefully swept downward to lightly graze the tops of the audience’s heads. They arched upward and flew toward the ceiling. One behind the other, they traced circles around the upper perimeter of the room. The violins faded, and the doves’ laps narrowed before swiftly exiting the auditorium through an open glass door. Dispersing into the sky, the audience watched the birds with bewilderment.

Slowly, the audience returned their eyes to the stage, where a single remaining dove flew toward the podium where Yousef once stood. Yousef had vanished, and in his place, was a blond woman in her mid-thirties. She was dressed in a fleshy mauve, almost iridescent pantsuit.

‘Welcome,’ the woman said with a grin. ‘I’m very excited to introduce our first panel of the conference. There is no better way to

celebrate autonomy in education than with all of you. Our 2020 graduates of the 'Temporary Master's Programmes!' The woman patted her hands together next to her cheek. The audience applauded instinctively.

First, I want to thank the administration of this institution for supporting the openness necessary to host such experimental programming. We are also grateful to our generous coordinators for dedicating countless hours outside of their paid allotment to make it all happen. We are especially thankful to the temporary department heads for taking time away from their busy careers to agitate and disrupt educational models at the Sandberg Instituut. It's you who makes this all possible. Another round of applause please!

The audience clapped obediently.

Now, let's introduce our first panellists: the department heads of the Challenging Jewellery Temporary Master's Programme. Two champions of anti-establishment practices in education and fashion: Please welcome The Duo!

The woman lifted her hands toward the ceiling and the audience broke into a confused applause. The Duo rose from their positions in the audience and joined the blond woman on stage. One wore a dark grey sweater with wooden beaded elbows, the other a fur-lined jacket over jeans with the front panel of a kilt attached.

While I suspect that most of you are familiar with their trailblazing work, I am going to give a brief introduction. The Duo are the creators of CELESTE whose artistic vision is one of deep human value transmitted through limited edition products. As department

heads of Challenging Jewellery, The Duo represent anti-establishment approaches to education through small-scale experiments in self-organisation blended with value transmission as a form of non-teaching. Their primary aim in this programme has been to inspire a platform for participants to reinvent their own education with a focus on a self-sustainable future. In addition to shunning the standard expectations of a master's and inverting the traditional hierarchies of education, The Duo believes their primary purpose at the Sandberg is to transmit one thing to their programme's participants — a cultivation of fearlessness. Let's give The Duo a round of applause!

The audience joined in spirited clapping.

‘Blair Greene,’ said the blond woman, ‘it’s also wonderful to have you here. Please join us up front.’

Blair walked on stage and took a seat next to The Duo. She wore an oversized crimson blouse tucked into black nylon trousers. ‘Please welcome, Blair Greene,’ said the woman. The audience applauded.

Blair, we are so happy you're a part of this panel. As I'm sure you all know, Blair is an independent curator, publisher and historian. She is the creator of the Slovenian Art Station, the founder of 'The Swiss Academy for the Near Future', and the co-creator of 'Double-Agent' — a publishing house for artist-written fiction.

‘Thank you all for being here,’ said the blond woman to the panellists.

My first question is for The Duo. You are business owners and department heads of the Challenging Jewellery master's. Your programme description explicitly stated that Challenging Jewellery would focus on building a persuasive collective that could be defined as both a corporate association and a movement. Please tell us, how did you guide your students into such a complex journey while still providing an autonomous space for learning?

The Duo sat silently for a long while. The mauve-clad moderator stared blankly at the back of the room. Only Blair seemed to be conscious of the time passing. Blaire flipped her eyes back and forth between the moderator and The Duo. She turned to the audience as if looking for help. Eventually, Duo Number One spoke quietly from beneath her cap.

'We see a master's programme as an act of generosity from all sides.' There was another long silence. Duo Number Two jumped in. 'Our hope is that the participants of Challenging Jewellery leave with a fire burning inside.'

'Yes,' said Duo Number One. 'We call them participants because we don't believe in hierarchical education, by the way.' Duo Two nodded. 'That's right, we hope that everyone walks away with a deep burning flame, a totally convincing energy that makes anything possible.'

'I see,' said the blond woman. Blaire motioned with her finger as if about to speak, but was quickly cut off by the moderator. 'Why did you formulate the master's programme as a collective corporation? What does that mean to you?'

'For us,' said Duo Two, 'the biggest gift one can give is to create a platform where people bring one another into their vision. In that space, you can always find ways of standing for a position together. The other part of that gift is to not be afraid anymore.'

‘Exactly,’ said Duo One. They continued in unison.

To not be afraid of failure

To not be afraid of money

To not be afraid of judgment

To not be afraid of making a piece of shit

To not even be afraid of fighting for the wrong cause

‘To not to be afraid of anything,’ said the blond woman. ‘Correct,’ answered The Duo. ‘Especially in times that are so financially tight, people must learn to be fearless together. We actually proposed collectivity as a way to deal with that.’ Blaire leaned forward as if to speak and was once again halted by the blond moderator’s words. ‘You just said *proposed collectivity*—was working collectively a requirement of the course?’ she asked. ‘For us,’ said Duo One, ‘the way is always the goal.’ The Duo continued filling in one another’s sentences.

What we can appreciate is that sometimes one definition of ‘collectivity’ will look different than another—Right. For us to require ‘collective working’ would place our definition of collectivity above someone else’s—It would force us to define it for the others and take a hierarchical position in assessing whether or not it was attained by the participants—We were not interested in that.

‘Well,’ said the blond woman, ‘that leads me to my next question. How did you deal with evaluation in such an open format? There were no predecessors and there will be no successors to this department. How does that work?’

‘We always encouraged the participants to create an assessment grid for themselves. It never materialized though,’ said Duo One. ‘It’s true,’ added Duo Two. ‘We were even thinking about--um,’ Duo Two looked toward Duo One. ‘How do you say, *Auszeichnung*?’

‘Reward,’ replied Duo One.

Right, reward! We asked the participants: Can assessment criteria get linked to a reward? Can a reward be a kind of decoration? If one participant achieves specific criteria—can there be some kind of decoration to symbolize that? We actually thought maybe this interpretation of assessment criteria could help the group develop something physical as an alternate form of jewellery—like a sash, or a chain, or a badge or whatever.’

‘Like a military service with stars,’ added Duo Two. ‘Exactly,’ said Duo One, ‘but it never materialized.’

In the course we mostly talked about everyone being equal. But we also wondered if at some point the participants would want to create a distinction between themselves. We left it totally up to them. We wanted them to have full autonomy and for us that means no leadership.

The Duo did not understand the impact their refusal to lead would have on the group. Each student arrived to the program with their own particular needs to reach the next level in their lives and work. Aurora required meaningful conversations, trust, an insightful mentor. Vasil needed a watchful eye, someone to track his progress and pull him back when he wandered too far. Jane longed for intimacy

and a facilitator to bring the group to something concrete. Marilyn craved intellectual exchange and needed guidance on where to direct her energies. Zsófia required someone to forcefully break her habits in the studio. Rebecca needed honest criticism and tender care in finding a new path forward. Mila's capacity for growth was dependent on the presence of reliable mentorship in her life. Émilie needed structure, council, and boundaries.

The Duo's refusal to lead the master's programme sent the participants sprinting in opposing directions. Mixed with a lack of transparency and the Committee's intermittent demands for object-based results, the group's collective journey was marked with heavy streaks of cynicism and doubt. The students had arrived hungry for teamwork and group learning, but nearing the end of the programme, most of their energies were spent navigating the requirements of their thesis alone. By the time graduation hit, there was a spike in hope. The Duo pulled a massive ring from their pockets and opened the glass doors of The New Institute to let the students in. Upon entering however, an overwhelming sense of confusion and loss still lingered over the group. 'What had happened to these years?' 'Where did all the time go?' 'Why couldn't we find a collective purpose? What will become of us now?'

Each in their own way, this prolonged search for leadership and the inability to democratically produce a collective structure prevented the students from finding the fire they so desperately longed to ignite in their own bellies. Each student had responded differently to overwhelming freedom and open-ended creativity...

The auditorium had fallen into silence for a long while. The Duo began to examine the audience from their seats on stage. Scanning back and forth, their heads moved from left to right. They were searching for something in the crowd. Duo One stood up and made her way to the edge of the stage. She fixed her gaze on the brightest

light in the back of the room. Shielding her eyes with her hand, Duo One squinted and motioned for Duo Two to join her. The Duo stood side-by-side peering out into the distance together. Projecting their voices very, very far away, they began to speak.

‘Hey! You know you’re part of this thing too, don’t you? This whole bit about not finding the fire in the belly. You’re implicated here in a major way.’

‘You’ve been watching this entire thing the whole time. You could have done something. You’re the one who chose to sit comfortably analysing all this from a distance. You could have done anything here. Anything. The page was completely clear for you. Everything was possible.’

‘Don’t you want to say something?’

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Marilyn Volkman's research work *EVERYTHING IS VALUES* restages the complex interactions between people and their values during the two-year master's programme, *Challenging Jewellery*. Drawing on methodologies from anthropology, auto-fiction and institutional archiving, the work is at once this novel, a film, and a physical object interrogating how communal ideals, failure, taste, money, scale, and jewellery interact in the collective search for inspiration and purpose.