

# Letters to Artists

HANNIBAL

PHILIPPE VAN CAUTEREN

This book is almost exclusively composed of letters to artists that were written between 2005 and 2017. Included are also a few letters to colleagues, friends, collectors and even a gallerist. Most have been published previously, in books and catalogues. In recent years, I have often been asked whether my letters were also ever answered by the artists. This happened a few times, which can be an indication that it never was a goal to receive an answer. The epistolary form allows me to write down my thoughts in a form that is immediate and, by definition, subjective. Every letter originates in a personal experience and is intended to say something in a discreet way about the artist, the work and the world we move in. For the sake of clarity: the most important reason I work in the art world is the immense admiration and tremendous respect I have for artists. Unfortunately, I never had the talent or the exceptional courage required to become an artist. Without stating it explicitly, I wish to imply how much I experience the art world, of which I am myself a part, as being very problematic. But luckily – to borrow Johannes Cladders’ words – there is the museum as a ‘non-verbal mediating system’. During the preparation phases of this book, the question of who might write the introduction often came up. A fellow director? A curator? An academic? An artist? None of these options turned out to be meaningful, for a number of reasons. As was the case when I wrote three letters to you in the recent past, the only valuable option to me seemed to be to write an introduction in the form of a letter to you. The content of this letter is both a statement of intent and a plan, a sketch of a blueprint for the museum’s imminent future. In 1983 the MHK of Ghent (the Museum of Contemporary Art, which was to be rebaptized S.M.A.K. in 1999) organized an exhibition on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the museum’s friends’ association, known as ‘Vereniging voor het Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst’ (the Society for the Museum of Contemporary Art). The exhibition’s

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**Michaël Borremans (I)**

*Unicorn*, 2010

Oil on canvas

36 x 33 cm

Collection S.M.A.K.





Every time I see one of your works I have to think of a muted anarchism. A perverse unrest lies behind the pictorial elegance of the paintings. Or can I define it as a semantic suspense that slowly superimposes layers of reality on top of each other? Each work confuses by deceitful means and by the deceptiveness of the figuration, and as an artist you make it clear to us that you are in control. Human figures are objects, subjected and obedient to the framework of your pictorial decisions. Bodies and parts of bodies are props in a play that you orchestrate, called painting. Each painting is a crime scene where absurdity, melancholy and morbid beauty jostle for room. A world is constructed and conceived by analogy with the world we move around in. Each work is, as it were, censored to the point where it is impossible to find any meaning. There is an unease in these works, something sinister, perhaps even a deficiency. *Unicorn* (2010) also lies in this spectrum. The picture plane of this small painting is almost entirely filled by the back view of a body. The hands are probably crossed or tied at the back, and long, loose hair hangs down the back, casting strings of shadow on the pale, sallow skin. Nothing indicates the sex of this 'fabulous creature'. The skin of the body coincides almost entirely with the skin of the painting – the canvas. The framing of the subject is so bold that every touch or stroke of paint contributes to an underlying tension. It looks like a body that has been punished, a marked and chained body. The back view of a figure is not only a motif that has long existed in art history – think of Ter Borch, Ingres and Friedrich – but also one that recurs regularly in your work, as in *The Box* (2002), *A2* (2004), *The Neck* (2006), *Automat I, II and III* (2008), *The Pendant* (2009). And that is only the paintings. In landscape painting the rear view is of the figure with whom we are looking. In your rear views we look together at nothing, but we are witness to a conditioned, hermetic body. In my opinion, *Unicorn* occupies a special place in this iconography.

**Michaël Borremans (II)**

*De passanten*, 2017  
Bronze, polychrome with lacquer  
300 cm (height)  
Collection City of Ghent





suit and a woman with a white scarf on her head and a bag in her hand. The heads of the four figures lean towards each other, literally putting their heads together. As the title suggests, they are chance passers-by. There is something artificial yet entirely ordinary about them. The colours are vivid and cheerful. The sculpture itself is clear and comprehensible. The four characters appear to be innocent prototypical figures from a stylized, banal world. The idyllic miniature world of model railways only achieves perfection when populated by model figures. And it is these figures that provide the source for *De passanten*. The imperfect, distorted forms of their bodies and limbs result from magnifying the miniatures to the monumental scale of the sculpture that now stands on the square. In your drawings, scale and proportions are often a means by which to manipulate the relationship between reality and fiction. In *De passanten*, the scale of the sculpture lends support to its surroundings. The group of figures becomes a 'monumental miniature' that survives the transience of the everyday in a playful ritual. Not an enigmatic, cryptic image, but an artwork that is accessible and intelligible to everyone. *De passanten* relates not only to the architecture of the library, but also to its users, to the people who make a square a square.



BERLIN, 24 JULY 2016

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LETTER: TO

## *Kasper* Bosmans

In a letter to Carole Vanderlinden, written in 2014, I questioned how, as an artist, one can continue to work with one's back turned to the brutal geopolitical upheaval of our times. Not even two years later, the world continues to smoulder wherever it is not fully ablaze. Even as I write, the dust of the egregious attack on Baghdad of 3 July has not yet settled and France is still in deep disbelief and mourning over the barbarous attack in Nice on 14 July, France's national day. It has become all too easy to list the places where violence has left a deep wound in the vulnerable construction known as democracy. All around us, we see this turmoil often translated into conservatism and intolerance, panic and unrest. My paltry words had barely been committed to paper when breaking news reported by the newspaper *De Standaard* alerted me to yet another violent attack, this time in Munich. Saturday 23 July, nine presumed dead. This is the news that greeted me upon arrival in Berlin that evening. The taxi driver who took me to my hotel was not at all surprised by the day's events, immediately assigning the blame to the one million Arabs who have come to Germany, seeing this as the source of the problem. Where have I heard that before? With nuance defeated, the sole hinge now joining thought and action seems to be a form of polarization. But can I hold it against the man? I am not sure. And this in a city such as Berlin, where the taxi ride takes me past a museum with the name Topography of Terror. Suddenly the words of Karlheinz Stockhausen spring to mind; in 2001 he declared 9/11 as 'the greatest work of art imaginable for the whole cosmos'. I will refrain from delving into this quote and instead will connect the dots to a time, a little over a decade ago, when violence and lunacy became increasingly rife. And, with a heavy heart, back to art. Back to an artist who secretly collected the water leaking through the roofs of the Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels. Back to an artist, Kasper Bosmans, who makes subtle links between events big





