

ODE TO AN INDETERMINATE WOMAN

Koen Deprez

THREE EXERCISES IN INDETERMINATION

THIS VOLUME brings together three texts that emerged at different moments in my life. They differ in time, form, and perspective, yet share a common inner tension. Each text retains its original contours, as if it were the imprint of a specific state of thought — fixed in language, yet fragile and still permeable to interpretation.

The first text takes the form of a travelogue and bears the title *Ode to an Indeterminate Landscape*. It recounts a journey without a predetermined destination, an experiment I undertook at the end of 2011 for Lokaal 01 in Breda under the title *The Indeterminate Journey*. This journey was both a physical displacement and an inquiry into the potential of purposelessness: what emerges when direction is relinquished and only movement itself remains?

The second text, *Ode to an Indeterminate Construction*, is connected to an installation I realised between 2023 and 2024 at Foundation Verbeke in Kemzeke. During its development, the idea arose to construct a fictional dialogue between art collector, entrepreneur, and museum director Geert Verbeke (1948–) and artist, composer, entrepreneur, and gallery owner E.L.T. Mesens (1903–1971) — two figures whose paths never crossed, yet who, through the project and through time, were placed opposite one another in an imagined, almost semi-architectural space. Their conversation constitutes a construction in itself: a structure of ideas situated somewhere between reality, entrepreneurship, art, and projection.

The third text, *Ode to an Indeterminate Woman*, is more recent. It departs from a concrete event in Bruges involving Sofia Speybrouck (1970–) and myself, and it moves within a border zone where the personal and the reflective overlap — much like sliding two coloured sheets of cellophane over one another, only discovering the depth of life in the resulting colour. Here, indeterminacy is no longer examined as a method but experienced as a phase of life that presents itself and demands form. In this third confrontation, titled *Ode to an Indeterminate Woman*, I came to realise that indeterminacy might also signify a *modus vivendi*.

What binds these three texts together is the concept of indeterminacy. Not as a synonym for vagueness, but as an intentional openness: a space in which meaning can emerge without a predetermined form. Over the years, this indeterminacy has become a constant in my way of seeing, living, and working — a willingness to embrace the provisional, to allow the unfinished to exist, and to admit the unexpected. Indeterminacy is not a lack but a method; not a weakness but an attitude.

This attitude forms the underlying structure of the volume. The texts function less as closed narratives than as three rooms within the same house — connected by passages that are not always visible yet are nonetheless tangible. In these interstitial spaces, indeterminacy takes shape: as an invitation to wander, to interpret, and to keep moving.

Guidecca, February 2026

DEZE BUNDEL verenigt drie teksten die op verschillende momenten in het leven van Koen Deprez tot stand kwamen. Ze verschillen in tijd, vorm en invalshoek, maar worden gedragen door eenzelfde onderstroom. Elke tekst behoudt haar oorspronkelijke contouren — als een momentopname van een denken in beweging: vastgelegd in taal, maar niet vastgezet in betekenis.

De eerste tekst, *Ode aan een onbestemd landschap*, ontstond uit *De onbestemde reis*, een experiment dat hij eind 2011 ondernam voor *Lokaal 01* in Breda. Het was een tocht zonder bestemming, een verplaatsing die geen aankomst verlangde. De beweging zelf werd het uitgangspunt. Zoals een roeier die over een onbekend kanaal glijdt, volgt het pad zich pas in het gaan. Onbestemdheid verschijnt hier als daad: de keuze om het kader niet vooraf te tekenen.

De tweede tekst, *Ode aan een onbestemde constructie*, vond haar oorsprong in een installatie gerealiseerd tussen 2023 en 2024 in de Verbeke Foundation. Tijdens het ontstaansproces groeide het idee om een denkbeeldige ontmoeting te ensceneren tussen Geert Verbeke en E.L.T. Mesens — twee figuren die elkaar nooit hebben ontmoet maar hier in een semi-architecturale ruimte tegenover elkaar worden geplaatst. Hun gesprek is geen reconstructie maar een constructie: een denkruimte waarin ondernemerschap en verbeelding, verleden en projectie elkaar kruisen. Zoals water dat door smalle gangen van een stad stroomt, vindt betekenis zich langs onverwachte bochten. Wat wordt gebouwd, is niet alleen een installatie, maar een mogelijkheid.

De derde tekst, Ode aan de onbestemde vrouw, vertrekt vanuit een ontmoeting in Brugge met beeldhouwster Sofia Speybrouck. Hier verschuift het register. Het onbestemde wordt niet langer opgezocht als methode maar wordt ondergaan als ervaring. Het persoonlijke en het reflectieve schuiven over elkaar heen als transparante lagen; in hun overlapping ontstaat diepte. Zoals licht dat weerkaatst op water wordt duidelijk dat onbestemdheid geen tussenfase hoeft te zijn, maar een manier van leven – een *modus vivendi*.

Wat deze drie teksten verbindt, is niet hun onderwerp maar hun houding. Onbestemdheid verschijnt niet als vaagheid of tekort, maar als intentionele openheid: een ruimte waarin betekenis zich kan vormen zonder vooraf bepaalde bestemming. Doorheen de jaren is die openheid een constante geworden in Koens manier van kijken, werken en zich verhouden tot de wereld. Het voorlopige mag blijven bestaan. Het onafgewerkte krijgt recht van spreken. Het onverwachte wordt niet geweerd maar ontvangen.

In deze bundel functioneren de teksten als drie kamers binnen één huis in een stad van water. Hun onderlinge volgorde ligt niet vast. Kamers kunnen telkens opnieuw worden betreden, herschikt, anders geordend. Wat in de ene configuratie als oorsprong verschijnt, wordt elders gevolgd; wat afsluit, kan openen. Niet de inhoud verschuift, maar het standpunt vanwaaruit zij wordt gelezen.

Betekenis ontstaat hier niet alleen uit wat er staat, maar ook uit de plaats die het inneemt. Zoals een boot haar route vindt tussen architectuur en haar fundamenteën, beweegt de lezer door de tekst, geleid door stroming, niet door verplichting. De ordening wordt instrument, de volgorde een stille regie.

Zo tekent zich het scenario af van één boek in drie mogelijke configuraties – een constructie waarin onbestemdheid niet wordt opgelost maar bewoond.

Guidecca, februari 2026

I had no specific line of thought in mind, nor did I expect to undertake particular activities or see anything special along the way. There were no appointments, no flights, no one else travelling with me. Every decision was mine alone to make.

KOEN DEPPEZ

I WROTE this passage shortly after completing the research project *The Indeterminate Journey*, fifteen years ago (cf. Lokaal 01, Breda). At the time, it was inconceivable that this way of thinking and acting would anchor itself as a lasting life attitude – as a *modus vivendi*. What then appeared to be a method later became a stance. What was an experiment became a principle.

Over the years, I wrote three texts on the indeterminate: *Ode to an Indeterminate Landscape* (2012), *Ode to an Indeterminate Construction* (2023), and now *Ode to an Indeterminate Woman* (2025). Together they form a triptych.

January 2012

In preparation of *The Indeterminate Journey*, I literally burned a hole in the map of Europe. This intervention would later become known as *The Burned Map*. The travel route unfolded primarily within that burned-out area. A map is a reduction of reality. A hole in the map opens the possibility of another reality. That was, at least, the hypothesis.

The method was strict. I imposed a number of unyielding rules upon myself. Choices within the burned area were not

to rely on planning or prior knowledge, but on the immediate moment and chance. The journey began with a minibus. The tires functioned as pencils, the tarmac as drawing paper. The bus became a moving instrument – not a means of transport, but a device that leaves traces.

Guidelines and escape routes were excluded. They were predefined as forbidden territory. Only the unexpected was granted passage. I deliberately drove through areas where GPS signals were unreliable or absent. Night and weather became allies. It snowed incessantly. Visibility was murky. The windshield wipers ran at their limit – or conversely, not at all. Where I was exactly became increasingly irrelevant. That it was East Germany and Poland is, in hindsight, merely an icy detail.

Language functioned as abstraction. Polish – unreadable to me – withdrew from meaning and became form. Currency, too, escaped logic: although Poland was European, multiple forms of payment circulated simultaneously. And so it happened with everything. Nothing coincided. Everything remained provisional.

On Clay, Golems, and Mentors

In Genesis, it is described how God created the first human being, Adam, from dust:

“Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being.”

“Breath” signifies “human” or “humanity.” The name Adam derives from *adama*, the Hebrew word for arable soil. The first human was therefore not born of a woman but made from dust. According to the Talmud, Adam can be regarded as the first golem: a being formed from clay.

Over the centuries, countless golem stories have been written in various versions. Among the most well-known are those from sixteenth-century Eastern Europe. One of the most widespread and influential versions is that of the Polish-Jewish writer and Nobel laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer. His story *The Golem* first appeared in 1969 in New York, published in eight instalments in the Yiddish socialist newspaper *The Jewish Daily Forward*.

Singer's protagonist is the Kabbalist Rabbi Leib. When he learns that a Jewish banker has been falsely accused of kidnapping the daughter of a local count, he decides to intervene. On the advice of a chance passerby, he moulds a golem. That same passerby warns him: "Keep this secret and use the golem only once."

To bring the giant to life, Rabbi Leib writes one of the sacred names of God on its forehead. As soon as the final letter is completed, the clay figure shows signs of life. The rabbi immediately makes it clear that it exists only briefly and for a single, specific task.

The golem succeeds in finding the girl and exposing the count's lie. Its power is used only once. When Rabbi Leib removes the name of God, the golem returns to dust. "For this is the law of all magic: the slightest misuse corrupts its power."

Later, Rabbi Leib allows himself to be persuaded by his wife, Genendl, to bring the golem to life a second time. This time, it is given a task for which it was never created: moving a mountain beneath which, according to legend, a treasure lies hidden. The golem refuses. In that refusal, something new emerges: a sense of autonomy. Rabbi Leib loses control over his creation. The giant increasingly begins to resemble a human. "I want to be like real people," he tells his creator. The relationship becomes untenable. Ultimately, Rabbi Leib destroys the golem.

In the summer of 2025, almost by chance, I encountered visual artist Sofia Speybrouck on a digital platform. It is highly unusual for me to address people in this way — let alone expect a reply. Sofia Speybrouck did reply. From that coincidence emerged first a correspondence and soon after a meeting.

That writing developed in a peculiar manner. I quickly recognized a parallel between writing with Sofia Speybrouck and driving through East Germany and Poland years earlier.

Just as I once entered unknown territory with a minibus, I now entered a female cartography through writing, without a predetermined destination. Sofia Speybrouck ultimately became neither an address nor a destination, but a space into which I accidentally arrived and became anchored — a place found without a map, where direction only acquires meaning afterward.

This led me to the realization that this, too, belonged to what I call the indeterminate: not an exception, but a structure — inseparably woven into my way of thinking.

† Zand, 10:30 a.m.

It is rare that the subject you write about begins to write back. Rarer still that this same subject forges unexpected connections in your mind. And exceptional is the moment when the subject sits down beside you on a terrace in Bruges on an ordinary weekday and begins to speak without hesitation.

There she was. Legs crossed. Feet cast in wedge sandals. With an unselfconscious certainty that left little room for doubt. Before me sat — or so it seemed — a contemporary, and therefore female, variant of a creating goddess. Her name: Sofia Speybrouck.

Speybrouck is, for the moment, not merely my subject.

More than that: she is a Flemish sculptor. The primary material from which she creates her bronze and ceramic work is clay.

Two days before the meeting in Bruges, she sent me a photograph of one of her works, titled *Mentor*.

Mentor is a bronze sculpture, approximately 6 × 6 × 8 cm, produced in an edition of seventy-five copies, each signed and numbered. The sculpture depicts a mentor figure kneeling beside his pupil — not above him, but next to him. This physical posture is meaningful: it suggests no hierarchy, but proximity; no instruction, but attention.

What is depicted here is not a moment of transmission in the classical sense, but a condition of shared time. The mentor does not bend down to imprint knowledge, but to be present in a becoming he does not control. The kneeling is neither a gesture of submission nor of power, but of recognition: the recognition that learning unfolds in a space that cannot be fully directed.

A mentor is someone who guides, advises, and supports; someone who shares knowledge and experience to allow another to grow. This figure, too, was once born of clay. But where the golem in the narrative was created to execute commands, Speybrouck — if I may believe her — sculpted not a servant, but herself. *Mentor* is a self-portrait.

The mentor is not made to carry out tasks, but to create space. Not to obey, but to be near. Where the golem was ultimately destroyed for its refusal, a figure emerges here that finds its very right to exist in that autonomy.

Sofia Speybrouck, or the Impossibility of the Golem

Sofia Speybrouck does not appear as a figure that can be formed, but as a presence that withdraws from form. In this sense, she embodies what I here call the indeterminate woman: not a lack of identity, but a refusal to be reduced to definition.

Her work and her speech — insofar as she allows speech — resist any inscription that would fix her in function, meaning, or expectation. Precisely for this reason, she cannot be approached as a golem.

In relation to Sofia, the distinction between mentor and golem becomes sharp. Whoever approaches her with the desire to steer, to name, or to correct encounters resistance — not because she closes herself off, but because she follows no trajectory that can be designed by another.

Mentorship, if it has a place here at all, can only exist as a form of restraint: being near without appropriation, speaking without laying claim, looking without fixing. The mentor Sofia can endure is one who is prepared to lose his own position.

Golem logic, by contrast — the desire to understand her work by reducing it, to frame her presence by explaining it — necessarily fails. What arises from inscription lives by repetition; what arises from indeterminacy lives by displacement.

Sofia's practice refuses the obedience of the made body. She allows no word that activates or deactivates her. Her work moves not according to command, but according to necessity.

In this sense, Sofia Speybrouck is not an object of guidance, but a touchstone for the guide himself. She poses the question of whether mentorship is still possible without formal coercion, without projection, without the desire to complete.

Where the golem embodies the dream of control, Sofia

confronts us with the risk of proximity. She cannot be made, only encountered – and even that encounter remains provisional.

Perhaps this is the difference between then and now, and between the golem and the mentor. And perhaps, through this encounter with this woman, almost by chance in August in Bruges, after the indeterminate journey, after the indeterminate construction, I have now also arrived at the indeterminate woman.

August 2025