

Words on fabric

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Opening speech for the exhibition 'Oprecht / Sincere ' by Sands Murray-Wassink
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(text translated from Dutch)

Dearest all,

A warm welcome to you at the exhibition of Sands Murray-Wassink. I am honored to open this exhibition. As an artist Sands is unique and I consider his traces, his 'art', of innumerable value to the contemporary art world. What art does Sands Murray-Wassink make? What are we actually looking at? A couple of weeks ago I described it to a friend of mine, who isn't an artist. I said: "He paints words on fabric." My friend looked at me and said: "Well, it matches your work very well then, Freddie." Freddie, that's me, but that's another story. About the work of Sands, she was right.

His work (and mine) is much more than the physical product, the painting, the drawing, the sentences on paper, the words on fabric. First of all there is the performance of making art; the well-considered, intuitive, necessary decision to take up the brush. At the same time there is the verbal or non-verbal analysis of the process. Why that specific word, with that color, on that fabric, on that spot? Decisions like these are not only esthetic or art-historical, but also political, art philosophical, therapeutic and economic. The artist Sands relates to the society in which he lives and works by means of his products. He wants to examine everything what he sees with his artist's eyes and heart; he takes other people's gazes into account, in interaction with his own. And that's a lot of work, since Sands notices a lot.

Positioning oneself as an artist, historically, politically and economically, needs a network of friends: artists, curators and other viewers who like your work and appreciate it. Sands calls these networks 'constellations'. Sands is an important junction in one of those constellations. Maybe he wouldn't say it himself, but I would. He maintains communication with loads of artists and curators, informs them about each others' work, brings them in contact with each other and shows where their visions cross. Without people like Sands there wouldn't be a contemporary feminist art historical discourse. Maybe it's invisible, or invisible to some people, but hey, that's not new.

It's also not new (though for some people it is) to question the power relations in all of those hundreds or thousands of constellations of artists, curators and spectators on earth, for example the power relations based

on gender differences or ethnic and cultural differences. For Sands power relations are never self-evident or unambiguous. Sands is a feminist. He relates to feminist artists and looks at art (and art history, and art criticism, and art economy, etcetera) in a feminist way. By doing so, he creates friendships, very important friendships. Those friendships enable him to question the dominant suppositions that he perceives in the practice that is called Art. He admires the art works of predecessors who did this as well, and of contemporaries who do this as well. And by showing this in his unique, own way, Sands writes *new* stories. These are stories that have meaning in the new context that he created himself. Sands is a renewing artist, *literally*. The anticipation of his art is the art of others. *L'art pour l'art*. Art for the art.

Sands' work relates to both institutional and activist art; he is active in both marginal art scenes and the institutional art world; he produces an esthetic quality but not without giving an account of the context in which that quality has a meaning. He creates a *fragmented, contextual* meaning, or —if you like— —if you work at that department— a universal meaning.

Sands shows what art means to him as a human. He is not naïve, or indifferent to his audience, you. He gives you an insight in what he does, what he calls art and why. And he informs you about his search, which he will always continue with pride, humor, seriousness and self-knowledge.

Maybe you like Sands' art. You think it's fascinating and interesting. Maybe it offers you pleasure, comfort, satisfaction, inspiration. Maybe you don't like it at all, or you rather read a book instead. What you see around you is an instrument by which you can relate to others, to society. After having seen Sands' work, you can tell your own story, whether you are an artist or not. And we, feminist artists and curators, believe it matters that we tell our stories, and you yours. That's the reason why we are here today, in this gallery.

It is feminism that constitutes art.

What's the role of galleries in making renewing, fragmented, contextual art possible? Where do galleries stand in contemporary, dominant suppositions and the ever changing art and culture policies of the Dutch government? How do they relate to policy terms like 'culture participation'? Weren't it artists and gallery owners the first ones to invent this concept? How profitable is art that essentially consists of the emancipation of both the audience and the artist? And what about the knitting projects with elderly people in the suburbs for which the city gives a bit of money to artists? Is that art, or not?

Following the artist art space still grows bigger and bigger. Esthetic, political and economic interests keep changing art and its production of knowledge. Art walls are —again and again— pulled down and built up, and I wonder, *Is there also an exit from this dominant fiction, because we are actually not so interested in the answers to the questions mentioned above?* But what do we find important, then?

Sands believes sincerity is important. He breaks taboos with it. Art is therapeutic for him. That makes him vulnerable, but it's also his protection. By showing his audience who he is, he gives his spectators the most powerful instrument, namely the recognition of pain, sadness and stress —things that any human experiences, whether caused by things from the past or by daily managing human life: making sense, work, friendships, love, income.

Having worked as the director of Transgender Network Netherlands and now being member of the patient organization for transgender people, I notice two myths in society that bother me as a transgender and as a not transgender:

1. First of all there is (still) the myth of sexuality and sex. We like to think of them as self-evident, preferably uncomplicated and easy. But, how do we talk about sexuality and sex, the feelings that accompany them, the reaction of our bodies, our insecurities, changes of our bodies? How do you develop your own language for your own sexuality in company of, and, always again, in absence of the other or others?

2. Secondly there is the myth of success. Maybe it comforts people to think that everybody can be successful if they really want to, but in reality circumstances and chance have a huge influence. The majority of people will — at some point in their lives— face anxiety, stress, weariness, burnouts, depressions, manic depressions or psychoses, or anything else that messes up the planning of our daily lives. Still, it's not neutral or easy to talk about these things in front of others.

Sands does have a language for these two things. His art and WHOLE PERSON artistry deconstruct these two myths in a way that only Sands is able to do. And I think that is unbelievably valuable nowadays. Sands tells his spectator: "Look, it's *all right*." And he does so without becoming the master, the substitute parent of partner. Through his art he gives an alternative for hierarchal, linear, kinship, patriarchal but also matriarchal relations, namely a constellation of *queer* lives.

I quote Judith (Jack) Halberstam from *The Queer Art of Failure*: "We will wander, improvise, fall short, and move in circles. We will lose our way, our cars, our agenda, and possibly our minds, but in losing we will find another way of making meaning in which, to return to the battered VW van of *Little Miss Sunshine*, no one gets left behind." (Halberstam, J., [The Queer Art of Failure](#), Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2011, p. 25)

In the meantime art historical discourses continue to spread, fragmentedly, contextually, sometimes visibly and sometimes not. Personally I am comforted by this thought. And I thank Sands for his contribution in this, and for the anticipation of my work, the words that I have expressed here today for him and for you. Enjoy Sands' art, your viewing experience and performance as a spectator. Tell your story. And if you were not convinced yet, I hope I have been able to convince you now that the art works by Sands Murray-Wassink are a good investment, emotionally and business-wise.