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TROUBLE DUTCH

On Keeping It Real Art Critics

By Theo Belci



KIRAC, *Honeypot*, 2021, HD video, color, sound, 51 minutes. From left: Tarik Sadouma, Jini van Rooijen.

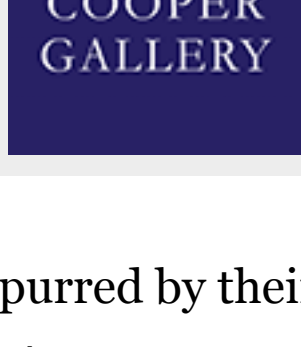
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IN 2016, Dutch video collective Keeping It Real Art Critics ([KIRAC](#))—led by Stefan Ruitenbeek and Kate Sinha—began documenting visits to museums for their YouTube channel, delivering monologues in white-walled galleries to express their disappointment with the state of contemporary art in their native country. In the years following these initial forays into video criticism, KIRAC has developed a reputation for searing, divisive critique, often delivered directly to their subjects in confrontational yet open dialogues. After adding (now former) member Tarik Sadouma to the collective’s roster of critics, KIRAC worked to refine their point of view, broadcasting their fraught encounters with artists (Jon Rafman, Jordan Wolfson, Anna Uddenberg), curators (Cecilia Alemani, Rem Koolhaas, Steven ten Thije), billionaire collectors, gallerists, and museum directors. Within three years, the group’s criticism had coalesced around a consistent aesthetic position, neatly summarized by Sadouma in a 2019 [film](#): “[Worthwhile art is] that which you cannot directly express in words, which confronts you . . . you *attempt* to find the right words. But that’s prompted by the work and not the other way around. The work has no absolute way of explaining something, but it demonstrates *how* a perceptual confusion functions.” In other words, by *destabilizing* a viewer’s presuppositions, the artwork opens one up to a multiplicity of possible meanings, confounding instead of reifying an observer’s individual perspective.



By the time that statement was delivered, the group had already begun to turn away from institutional collaboration to pursue projects with more financial and artistic independence. In that same year, a staged debate with administrators at Amsterdam’s Gerrit Rietveld Academie caused KIRAC to become further alienated from established circles, with Ruitenbeek denouncing a participating curator as being “the death of art”—a condemnation of what he diagnosed as a pandering institutional impulse to contextualize art within immutable, respectful, and widely agreeable frameworks, thereby neutering its potential to confront and change its viewer. In another discussion at a museum in Eindhoven, the collective pushed back against a director’s call to fix an ideologically polarizing society by “healing, trying to bring people together.” Sinha, quickly recognizing the absurdity of this position, asks whether we might instead “need to fight before we heal?” Of course, KIRAC’s stance has been vindicated over time—the proposition that any conscientious progressive participant in the arts could find common ground with the oligarchs and fascists driving political polarization (and in some instances, cultural funding) is laughable to viewers in 2025.

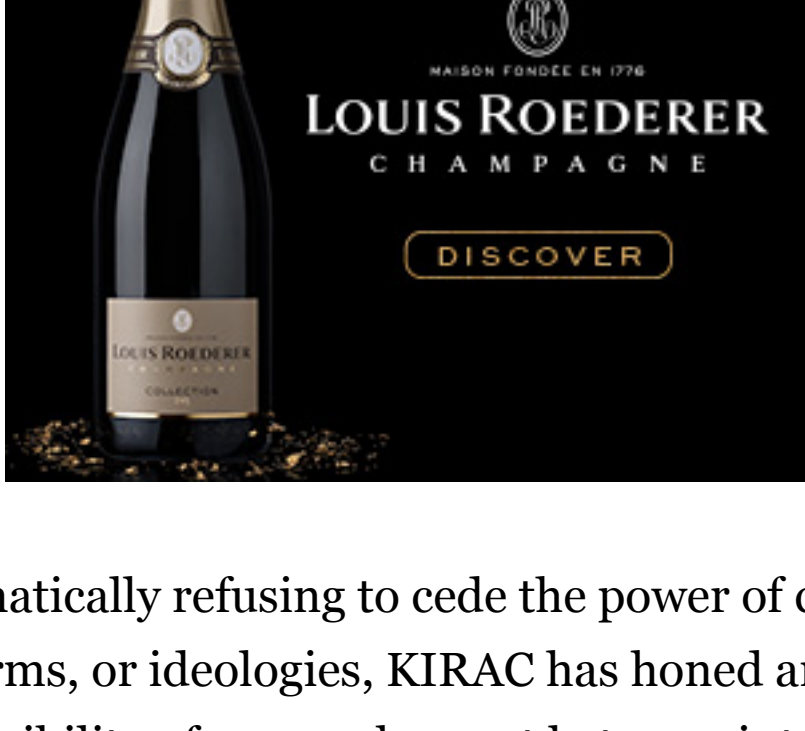
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Spurred by their growing notoriety, KIRAC began soliciting private patronage as a means of circumventing institutional oversight and supporting their turn to increasingly poetic, unconventional filmmaking. In a series of films ending with 2020’s *The Goat*, KIRAC grooms a charming but curmudgeonly millionaire, Philip van den Hurk, to drop his nouveau-riche sensibilities and become their benefactor. On a trip to Egypt, Sadouma and Ruitenbeek put it simply to their newfound patron: “Money is a part of art. You know that we are artists. If you join us, art happens and that means you pay.” Freed from the arbitrary bounds of “respectable” discourse that determined eligibility for institutional and state funding, KIRAC’s invective accelerated uninhibited. The group’s films began to quickly transition from video essays to character studies (something they had experimented with as early as 2017 in a film on art dealer Stefan Simchowitz, who has been accused of exploiting up-and-coming young artists)—twisting portraits of figures Ruitenbeek and Sinha found symptomatic of modern social psychoses.

Most significant among these is 2021’s *Honeypot*, in which the group ensnares Sid Lukkassen, a right-wing Dutch “philosopher,” at a beach house. Echoing the empathetic museum director from two years prior, they promise their hapless pigeon that he will have the opportunity to sleep with a leftist student to heal divisions in the contemporary society. This is obviously farcical. By entertaining Lukkassen, KIRAC instead hoped to turn his “delusional self-image into something actually genius,” recontextualizing the latent potential of the reactionary ideologue as a study in contemporary intellectual hubris, social malaise, and digital pathologization. Just as the philosopher is ready to make his move on the student, Ruitenbeek and Sadouma call the whole thing off, informing Lukkassen that he has not sufficiently courted her. The hosts take the philosopher to buy her an offering at a jewelry store, which turns out to be closed. He returns empty-handed to the student to face another crushing rejection. Lukkassen leaves humiliated and emasculated, his politics and social status destabilized by his role in KIRAC’s artwork.

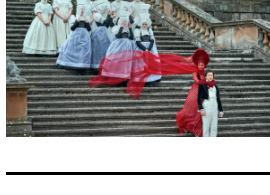
With the release of KIRAC’s expansive portrait of Michel Houellebecq looming, the group’s turn from reflective, intellectual criticism to productive, artistic disruption seems to have reached its apex. Sued by the author after he withdrew consent from the project, the collective has spent two years mulling over how best to use its footage of Houellebecq (successfully) having sex with the aforementioned leftist student. Upon completion, the question of effectuality in KIRAC’s work will come to the fore—while its films have long been gripping joyrides through the worlds of contemporary art and culture, they gleefully embrace spectacle, often as an end in and of itself. When combined with KIRAC’s love of reckless confrontation, sordid situations, and questionable figures, this approach offers few obstacles to right-wingers co-opting their work, who cite the films as takedowns of a decadent and inane art world. Hijacking the reputations of dubious and eccentric subjects might represent a detournement to Ruitenbeek and Sinha, but one wonders what the consequences of testing credibility will be down the line, and whether the position of perpetual persona non grata will begin to feel stifling for the hosts as their artistic ambitions continue to grow.



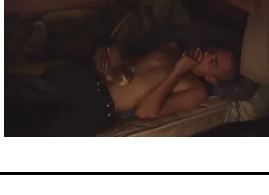
However, in systematically refusing to cede the power of contextualization to institutions, platforms, or ideologies, KIRAC has honed an ethos, not a mission. As the possibility of rapprochement between intellectuals and an ascendant reactionary movement against the arts becomes increasingly implausible, the critic’s most powerful tool is to set their own terms of debate, framing the views of their opponent in such a way that they crumble under the weight of their own failings. Absent an audience willing to listen and learn from a dissenting perspective, should we not reach out and grab our opponents, undermining their positions until they prove untenable? When the high road has virtually disintegrated, isn’t it better to fight in the mud than abstain from discourse entirely? Ugly as it may sometimes appear on camera, KIRAC’s technique places the affective power of the critic above all else—they have refined a method that alters and controls the context in which their subjects view their own lives.

Theo Belci is a New York–based writer and an editorial assistant at Artforum.

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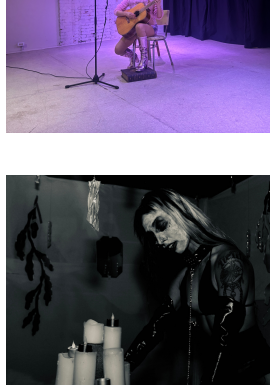
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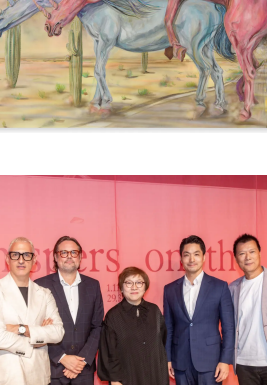
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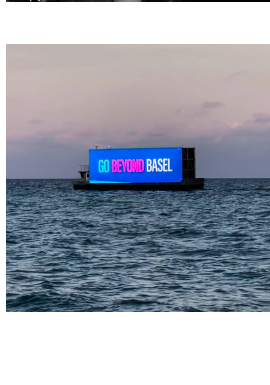
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