

Poor Artists

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Gabrielle de la Puente
and Zarina Muhammad
(aka The White Pube)

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Foreword

This book has been written by 90,000 people or thereabouts. We lost count.

The first two writers are us: Gabrielle de la Puente and Zarina Muhammad. Born seven days apart in Liverpool and London, we met in art school where we entered as painters and left as critics. It turned out we enjoyed talking about art more than making it. We enjoyed talking about art more than reading about it too. We didn't get on well with the essays by dead French men, or the non-committal newspaper reviews. Tutors would order us to subscribe to expensive art magazines and the more we think about it, the more we're convinced they were working on commission.

One afternoon when we were busy doing nothing in the studio, we joked that we should start our own art criticism website. *What should we call it?* Gabrielle asked. *The White Pube!* Zarina screamed, and that one joke changed the course of our lives. The name simultaneously took the piss out of the White Cube gallery format, the international gallery chain, white supremacy, the old guard and professionalism. Gabrielle bought the domain name and that was that. Since 2015, we have been posting weekly reviews on exhibitions, games, films, books, restaurants, theme parks and a friend's

wedding. We take turns writing about whatever gets on our nerves for better or for worse, and try to write with accents, chests and guts. We work as part-time critics now, and we can't really believe that Zarina's joke has led us all the way to a book.

The next twenty-two writers are people we interviewed during the research phase of *Poor Artists*. During our time as critics, we have often zoomed out from individual pieces of art to think about the creative industry that artworks and artists have to contend with. It's not easy to be an artist. It's not easy to secure yourself a life in which you get to do the creative thing that gives you a reason to live, and yet art gets made *anyway*. This book is about the *anyway*. We spoke with artists, curators, technicians, teachers and museum directors. We spoke to a Turner Prize-winner or two, a Venice Biennale fraudster, a communist messiah, a few ghosts and a literal knight. We wanted to know the strategies people put in place to hold on to their relationship with art. With their support, the contents of those anonymous interviews informed some of the dialogue, metaphors and general narrative panic in the story we went on to write – a story made much richer for including perspectives beyond our own, from people who were able to be honest, ashamed, generous and truly critical in their anonymity.

The other 89,976-odd writers come from the international readership we have accumulated. Our sense of the art world has been shaped in part by the endless

conversation we have been having online since this very serious joke began back in 2015, and, honestly, we don't go outside much, so thank you for letting us know how bad it really is on the ground.

Poor Artists blends fact and fiction. We see it as a series of interviews with ourselves and other people, told as a story. The book is full of composite characters who present an exquisite corpse portrait of what it means to work in contemporary art. *And* art history, because we did also speak to ghosts, remember? These are not rational events, and even though you are reading a piece of art criticism that might well have come from the non-fiction section, it is important that you let go of any expectations of rationality. The book features cannibal gallerists, a talking mountain and a terrible man called the Art King, and it's up to you how much you're willing to believe is real.

Warning

I'm dying. Or this is a panic attack. I thought panic attacks meant breathing fast and sweating profusely, not shitting fast and feeling existential on a plane toilet. Listen, the next twenty-nine chapters might be overwhelming, but I need you to feel how overwhelmed I felt when all of this real stuff really happened to me.¹

It's my own fault. I'm lying about my identity. My name is Quest Talukdar, but the gallery paying for this flight to an art fair in LA is under the impression I am April Furst, assistant to the emerging artist QT. I am all three of these people, hence the business-class panic attack. They think I'm hand-delivering them an exclusive new painting for QT's booth at Frieze Art Fair, a classy shindig where rich people buy neon lights for more money than my Nani ever made in her entire life. I cannot look this anxious as a brown person on a flight. I need to come to my senses. I need my tummy to stop

1. Speaking of overwhelming, there are going to be a lot of footnotes to back up this story. You can ignore every single one of them and not miss out. You just might gain something if you do look into them. Maybe you'll feel like you're gaining enough by reading the main body of text, in which case, fuck the footnotes, but we'll include them in case you are in the mood, or in need.

hurting. I need people to believe the reason I'm panicking is not because I have a bomb on me but because my desperation to become an artist has sent me off the narrative deep end. This is what art has done to my poor body. This is what art has been doing since act one.

Lemon

I am literally a baby. Soft, chubby cheeks, big moon eyes. There is a bangle on my wrist; the gold disappears into a fold on my fat brown arm. Matching studs in my ears, hair all over the place. I need baby hair gel, but I'm not sure Mum knows it exists.

I'm only wearing one sock. When Mum cottons on, she is going to have to backtrack through the entire museum until she finds it. By that point, I will have kicked the other one off. If I could speak, I would let her know that I am getting ready to experience these weird dusty rooms, rooms where a surprising number of people keep gathering to just . . . *look* at stuff. Including us. Mum wrestles the pram on to the bus and gets off on the waterfront to begin our tour through The Museums. There is a people museum, a boat one, an animal one, but I like the picture museum best – and there is no point coming to The Museums if I can't feel the glossy wood under my feet when Mum finally lets me loose from the pram. I want my Experience!

Have you been to an exhibition before? You should go, I reckon. They can be kind of insane. I overheard Mum telling her friend that they're the only time I stop crying. She's right, to be fair. My baby brain is too

busy processing what I am seeing and feeling. I think everyone should try them, especially if they have trouble controlling their emotions like I do. I never know what is going to happen inside an exhibition, and that's what makes it such a good training ground for the rest of my life.

If you're not familiar, exhibitions are special rooms with special things inside them. There are things that resemble other things and other-other things that look like nothing at all. The rooms can be great big halls, normal rooms like the ones in your house, or tiny places with random things crammed in. You have to pull a Goldilocks to decide which kind you like best. There are cosy wooden rooms that are often full of grandparents, and less cosy ones painted white. Not as many people go to the exhibitions in white rooms; the floor is concrete, and it's a bloody nightmare when you've got no socks on.

Exhibitions usually consist of pictures stuck on the walls. I didn't know why, or how. Maybe Blu Tack? I've also seen quite a few tellies in exhibitions. They are never playing anything I recognize, but if you watch for long enough, the programme eventually loops back to the start. If you liked it the first time around, you can watch it ten more times – or however high you can count.

Sometimes it's not even pictures or tellies filling the rooms, but humans are the things on display. I've seen

grown-ups doing some weird dances. They're very serious when they go about it. Usually donning adult Babygros, they move in slow motion while ignoring my constant waves. I *have* to specify humans when I talk about the exhibition dancers because I've seen chickens and butterflies performing in galleries too. Except, I don't think the animals had rehearsed because they weren't very good.

No, you never know. Exhibitions are a pass-the-parcel surprise. Sometimes Mum and I roll in and there isn't anything to see, only strange sounds for us to listen to, sounds that seem to rearrange the atmosphere. The mad thing is that rearrangement never ends. We once went into a room to find a car crash, but for some reason the car wasn't on the road where cars go, it was on the top floor of the museum. We went back another time and the crash was gone. Instead, the room was a beach. Mum didn't comment on it, but I was speechless because, quite frankly, it was the biggest peekaboo I'd seen anyone pull off to date.

In the randomized dream of the exhibition space, Mum has carried me through pastel-coloured fog, and towards a burning sun. We've walked under black rain that stopped as soon as we approached. How did they coax the weather inside like that? I am desperate to know. I get the sense the rules are different inside museums. I've seen walls covered in blue crystals, and really strong lights in the shape of alphabetti spaghetti. We once walked into a room that you had

to hum to get into, and that's when I learnt how to hum. We had to queue for a very long time to get into a dark box full of pumpkins and mirrors, all so that Mum could take a picture of us on her phone. We queued a separate time to bump around inside a room that had been filled with balloons. Everyone was taking pictures inside there as well. The static really aggravated my look, but Mum still didn't give me any hair gel. She has no shame.

When we are ready to go home, Mum plonks me back in my pram and we exit through the gift shop. *One time*, there was a playground slide attached to an upstairs window and the visitors were pumped out of the side of the building. I screamed, and then I stopped screaming and laughed. I wanted to go again right away, but I was fighting sleep. It really takes it out of me to do all of this experiencing. That must be the other reason Mum brings me to The Museums. By the time we leave, I am always out like a light.

Mum said that this stuff is what people call Art. It lives in museums, galleries and fancy homes. It can be outside in the wild. There is a big sharp silver line sticking out of a roundabout near our house, and Mum says that is Art too. I remember when we went into town and the whole of Liverpool had been taken over by colourful sculptures of animals. They were yellow lambs with sharp, curvy tails. Mum leant over the pram and said that the lambananas were Art as well. Did she say 'lambanana'? It is hard enough making

the *baa* sound when an adult points at a sheep; what the fuck is a genetically modified banana supposed to sound like?

I enjoy being a baby, but it can't half get confusing. There is a lot to catch up on. In her live bedtime lecture series on the story of Art, Mum explained that there were certain people responsible for these fruit-animal hybrids. They were called *artists*. She said these people, *artists*, made stuff up in their heads and then later made them with their hands. They shared their art in dedicated exhibition rooms, and on roundabouts, so that other people got to see inside their heads.

And that's all well and good, but Mum delivers this information as if it is the most normal thing in the world. She takes me to museums like they are standard days out, but exhibitions are a changing, alien landscape. I *know* Tesco. Tesco has food. I know the zoo. Not a single lambanana in sight. In the gallery, I don't know what is going on. I know I am enjoying myself, but I am big enough to admit that I am absolutely lost for words. I don't know if there is something I should be *doing*? I feel like a bit of a melt just sitting there, you know? For all Mum's wisdom, she has never actually told me what to do. I have had to figure that one out on my own.

I have learnt to make sense of the art by making sense of myself.

I was sitting in a greasy plastic high chair in the museum café where Mum often meets her friend for carrot cake. Disgusting. There were no other babies to do baby-telepathy with so I made sure to do a really annoying cry to let Mum know I wanted to go back upstairs. She didn't budge. Instead, she placed a wet yellow thing on the tray in front of me. Mum and her friend both had their phones out. I didn't know why. I forgot my audience and grabbed whatever it was. I pushed it between my gums and I – I knew right away that she had poisoned me. My tongue got hot. My face started squeezing itself into a smaller face. Big dribbles. Really big dribbles. If the adults were laughing, I couldn't tell because my eyes were full of tears. As soon as they put their phones away, something took over. I decided to put the hot-yellow-poison straight back into my mouth.

I felt rabid. Genuinely elated. I felt this good, mad rush because I couldn't decide if I loved or hated this thing. I had to taste it over and over again to find out. I was squirming in my seat, dancing, tears rolling down my cheeks. A third time, a fourth, just to be sure. The conclusion was: I hated it. But I loved the experience that contained such hate. Discovering something new was giving me a thrill for being alive in a body, all meat and bones, with these opinions bursting out of me.

Mum cleaned me up, and on returning to the gallery, I realized that I could go about art in the same way. When I am in an exhibition, I am a baby trying a lemon for the

first time. I place the art on the sticky plastic tray in front of me, consume it, and then await my own reaction. It's a game I play, an experiment; a way to feel less lost in the exhibition by following the lead of my feelings. This reaction is slippery. It might bubble out of my conscience, or come out of my heart. It can land anywhere on my body or nowhere, depending on the art and me. It might make me laugh out loud. It might make me feel warm. It might be a vague flavour, something to mull over. Or it might sting. I can get angry and distressed; spit the art back out, or swallow it fast like medicine. I can get a shock, a stomach drop. I might find an artwork that's harder to parse, a feeling I've never felt before. Each discovery leads to an expansion.

Art is only a picture on a wall, but I am there getting clammy in my pram. A painting reminds me of something scary, and I have to close my eyes. A statue shows me who I want to be, and I stare. Once I know what face the art has made me pull, it is up to me to decipher my nervous system's response. Like, OK, I can't look the painting in the eye because it reminds me of the clown at the fair. The fear is a clue towards shame because really I wish I was braver. See that statue over there – that one has always been easy to love, and my love for it easy to understand, because the statue looks exactly like Mum (Mum is really muscly).

I leave the art messy on the tray, examined; art leaves me messy in the seat, transformed. How can an

exhibition do this to me, even for a moment? Who am I now the experience is over? I trace a line from the artworks to each of these questions, and it is tricky, like a dot-to-dot puzzle I scribble over with my wobbly baby hands. I am proud when the connections reveal a new hidden picture between the constellation of art and myself. It is how I began building a conscience, and it makes me believe a gallery is the very best place I could grow up in.

Mum takes us all over, but on Tuesday mornings, we go to the big museum by the river where there is a regular playdate for kids. The pictures are hung really low on the walls so we can crawl right up to them. There are lots of buttons with sound effects to press, and a wavy mirror that makes my head look even bigger. There are costumes, puppets and – I don't know what else, because the adults drop us in a circular soft-play area and we don't have the upper-body strength to climb back out.

The other babies are all right. A few like art, but most aren't fussed. Those ones must have been sick of me because every Tuesday morning I would try to tell them about the revelation of The Exhibition. Better than CBeebies, I'd tell them. Better than YouTube. I'd ask how everybody felt about lemons, and they'd tell me they weren't on solids yet, so I'd vaguely stand up and say: 'I go to exhibitions and my senses get pulled in opposite directions; my sense of self becomes a work in progress under the tension.'

I'd babble: 'If I can use big words for a moment, I think it is fascinating to witness a roll-of-the-dice aesthetic experience become a somatic event inside of me. It's destabilizing, like when Mum throws me up into the air – that split second before gravity remembers I'm there – I hope the art will catch me.'

Nothing.

'I like to imagine exhibitions are where we all go to change.'

I'd continue: 'The artist offers us something. What do we offer back? Is the exhibition a conversation? Maybe artists are talking to us. Whispering and singing and telling secrets and making very important speeches like this one.'

One of the regulars threw a toy at my head. I'd insist: 'When I experience art, I feel as though I am supposed to reply. It might be time I learnt how to speak. But I get the feeling I shouldn't reply with any exact language, though. When I grow up, I should make my own art so that I can speak back.'

I think I'm going to have to be an artist. I should practise my drawing. We have crayons at home, and I've been getting this real urge to draw on the walls of the living room lately. I should lean into that.

God, artists are the luckiest people alive! They get to have ideas for a living. The artists honoured in the museum are so lucky. Being an artist must be a really

important role that the whole world takes very seriously. So seriously that they build convoluted houses to keep art safe. If art lives in palaces, I wonder where artists rest their heads at night. Ha! I am so excited to find out!

Phrogging

The creaking over my head was distracting at first. I kept having intrusive thoughts about the new tenant breaking through and squashing me. I had to keep reminding myself that I never got the sense the ground was going to give way when I was living up there – not the floorboards, anyway. Only then could I start to relax. Learn the lie of my new miniature land, the directions of the pipes. Arrange a home for myself: a bed in the insulation, a giant pet mouse and, of course, my own studio.

Mum would have burst out laughing if she could have seen me, except she'd have had to squint through a gap in the floorboards. I never told her what happened. Not Mum or the aunties. As good as it felt to have so much space, I also had a lot of shame. Everyone expected me to move straight back home after art school. They kept going on about how London was too expensive, *especially for an artist*. I didn't disagree, but the way they said it made me want to prove them wrong. It made me want to cling to London for dear life. Because, for better or worse, I was convinced that it was a place where enough creative things were happening that if I hung around for long enough, I was bound to get swept up by one of them.

Maybe the sweeping would occur on First Thursdays, when galleries in the east held late-night openings, and there were drinks and music, and the tourists filling the streets were replaced with hundreds of artists in thrifted outfits. Or maybe I'd make an impression at an intersectional reading group, where intense people competed to prove their intensity; where I might say something that was poignant and new and political, but not problematic to anyone, anywhere, at any time throughout history. Maybe on a silent walk, at an artist's talk, a book launch or a life-drawing class – the kind that happened in cafés after hours, where well-moisturized women wore linen and drank herbal tea. I didn't know how to communicate this London-specificity to my aunties. They didn't quite realize how long I was willing to wait to become a part of the art world. But I did. It was for ever.

When I first told my family I wanted to study art, they held a really shit intervention. The aunties said that artists only make money when they're dead. Nani put a hand on top of mine and said that I was a smart girl. I shouldn't waste my talents. I should do something with numbers. With money. I could get a nice house, a nice car, and then a nice man would want to marry me. Once I'd had his many, many babies, I could paint to my heart's content. I was only sixteen – she'd had two kids by my age.

Nani nudged my uncle, who'd been quiet the whole time; I'd spent the summer scanning family photographs on his orders. He'd given me fifty quid because

he didn't know how computers worked, and this man – who knew my plans to cut a one-inch fringe and buy a jarg² Fjällräven bag off eBay with my summer earnings – had the cheek to say: 'Quest's next job could be in cyber. She just doesn't know it yet.'

Mum flipped. She said Nana would be rolling in his grave if he could hear the way they were carrying on.

'Nana didn't come to this country for us to live a small life that other people decided for us. The whole point was for us to have choices.'

She went on about how it can't only be rich kids who get to have exhibitions or the world would end. South Asian kids can't all be lawyers or doctors or accountants or, God forbid, politicians. (She neglected to mention I didn't actually have the grades to do any of those things.) She said that if I did any random subject at university other than art, I'd end up dropping out due to sheer misery. That shut them up because, really, all they wanted was someone in the family to finally have a degree. I'd never seen his work, but I reminded them Nana used to tell me all the time that he was an artist; Nani looked at the floor and said that's because he was always drawing the dole.

2. 'Jarg' is a word used colloquially in Liverpool to mean 'fake', specifically a knock-off branded item.

It would have been more sensible to study something like *cyber*, they were right. The house opposite got shot at last year, my 'Dad' is AWOL, Mum's a dinner lady and unfortunately kids don't tip. But I thought everything would work itself out. I'd get maximum student loans. I'd try really hard. I'd sell all the paintings I'd eventually make for the degree show³ – and then when the bill came at the end of my graduation dinner, to celebrate my First Class BA (Hons), I'd humbly pay for everyone and they'd finally respect my chosen field because I'd have gallery representation and get nominated for the Turner Prize or something.

None of that happened, obviously. I ended up making very uncommercial sculptures and getting a 2:1. There was no fancy dinner because the price of train tickets in this country means that Nani can't fucking see the country she lives in beyond the view out of her own front windows – the drive-by shootings, the year-round fireworks, the police wandering around aimlessly because no one will tell them shit.

University was over with, and I was hanging around London like Billy-no-mates, and sort of instantly depressed having reckoned with the amount of debt I was in. It was £47,701 on graduating, a number that didn't seem real or mine, rising to £57,823 a mere six

3. University degrees in Fine Art typically culminate in an exhibition of students' work called a degree show.

years later due to 'interest'.⁴ Money is all I could think about. I think maybe it's all I've ever thought about. Art first, money a close second. I was simply terrified once I realized that there was a cost to living. Doesn't seem right, does it? Not one of us asked to be born. Doesn't seem right that the poorest students leave with the most debt.

Max

Does anyone wanna come and see Apichatpong Weerasethakul's new film at Tate Modern on Saturday?

Quest

i'll pass

Quest

going outside means £travel plus £tickets if we go to whatever's on upstairs at Tate, £food and £drink if we stay out too long, and then £travel home and my £rent is already £too £much

4. Gabrielle de la Puente's real student finance figures on graduating from Central Saint Martins in 2016.

Yelena

Yeah, I can't do a day out either

Max

The screening is free btw

Yelena

London is not

Quest

i've been trying to find
somewhere new to live and I
keep coming across listings for
rooms you can ONLY rent
during the weekdays or ONLY
rent between 5pm and 9am

Yelena

life is hell on Earth

Max

wait are you moving?

Quest

the rent is going up again

Quest

also i was trying to do an art
shift after a work shift and i got

expanding foam on the floor and
i had to go at it with a hammer
and there were blue chips flying
everywhere and the security
deposit flashed before my eyes

Quest

and it's just shit because none of
this would happen if i had a
studio

A studio is a space where artists can make a mess without consequence, or where mess is only a consequence of research. It is space where art can stay a work in progress, and art is allowed to settle. However ugly or precarious or unbalanced the uncooked work is, the artist can come back the next day to see what needs to change. If I mix a certain colour of paint but have to wash the palette because there's nowhere to leave it – because this 'studio' is also my bedroom, dining room, living room and wardrobe – then there's no guarantee I'll be able to achieve that exact shade a second time.