

*This interview is part of the example project focusing on artists' archives since the 1970s. It was conducted after making the initial description of the archive belonging to the visual artist **Raymond Barion** (°1946, Valkenburg). Project worker Jeroen Staes engaged in conversation with the artist and his wife, the architect **Grażyna Mielech** (°1955, Warsaw), about his artistic career. We looked back over his career, his years spent teaching at the *Akademie voor Kunst en Vormgeving St. Joost in Breda* (now *St. Joost School of Art & Design*), and the contacts he has had over the years. Lastly, we reflected together on the significance of his archive and explored possible future scenarios for his artistic legacy and the role the archive might play in that.*

Raymond Barion: RB

Grażyna Mielech: GM

Jeroen Staes: JS

Antwerp / academy / Ghent

JS: Raymond, why did you opt for the Sculpture programme at Antwerp Academy?

RB: I started out by studying psychology for a year at Amsterdam University. By halfway through the year, I was finding it such a bureaucratic business with statistics and all that kind of thing. I thought, I can't do this kind of work. It was also particularly expensive to live in Amsterdam at the time. I actually wanted to move on to teacher training in Tilburg. However my girlfriend, who was doing her entrance exam at the Royal Academy in Antwerp at that point, inspired me to take the entrance exam for the Nationaal Hoger Instituut voor Schone Kunsten at the last minute. The requirement for the Nationaal Hoger Instituut was actually to have completed a course at an arts academy, a condition I didn't meet. But I had built a foundry in the garden of my parents' house, where I had been casting small figurines in bronze. I entered those bronze figurines as my entrance exam pieces. I also had to make a life-sized statue out of clay with a model. That process took me about two weeks. It was the first time I had worked on such a large scale, since I was used to making small figurines about twenty centimetres high. Then they accepted me, and I spent five years at the Nationaal Hoger Instituut. I shared a studio with two others at first, which I found very disruptive, but eventually I got a studio to myself. After three years, I was a bit fed up of it and decided to go and study art history at Ghent University, two days a week. I spent the other three days in Antwerp, at the academy. So I was able to combine my last two years at the academy with the first two years of art history. And then I studied for an extra two years to get my licentiate degree.

JS: What do you remember about your time at Antwerp Academy? Who were the teachers or fellow students you got on well with?

RB: I was taught by Willy Kreitz (1903-1982). He was a very kind man, and also an excellent craftsman. His statues are still in the Middelheim Museum, as well as in other collections. I also had a good relationship with the head of the school at the time, Mark Macken (1913 - 1977). But Mark Macken was so busy that he rarely had the time to drop in. Sometimes he'd take a quick walk through the studios, and then we'd have short but very informative conversations.

GM: You're forgetting Wilfried Pas (1940-2017).

RB: Wilfried Pas, right. I mainly had contact with Kreitz and Macken, and now and then with Wilfried Pas. There was the sculptor Leopold Van Esbroeck (1911-2010) as well: he was a good craftsman, a very friendly person.

JS: Which artists and exhibitions appealed to you at the time? Did you have much contact with contemporary art, for example, or did you have other influences?

RB: The work of Henry Moore (1898-1986) made a great impression on me. That also influenced the first creations I made in terracotta. I still have those sculptures: they're not bad pieces. I won prizes with them as well. Back then, you could enter a competition every year. I won a prize almost every time. I also got a bursary to spend two months in Carrara in the summer. Obviously, that was a revelation to me. I also visited Francis Bacon's studio in London. I got to meet him and speak to him briefly. That was impressive. And for my thesis in Ghent, I interviewed Alic Cavaliere (1926-1998) in Milan, Eduardo Paolozzi (1924-2005) in Berlin, Wessel Couzijn (1912-1984) in Amsterdam and Roel D'Haese (1921-1996).

JS: Can you tell us more about the prizes you won at the academy?

RB: In Antwerp you had what was known as the Club of Twelve: industrialists, hoteliers and wealthy individuals who financed prizes for students every year. There were quite a lot of them. I received a prize almost every year, worth what was then 10,000 Belgian francs. That was the equivalent of 700 guilders at the time. It was a considerable amount of money.

JS: What period are we talking about now?

RB: Roughly from 1968 to 1972.

JS: Did you feel any reverberations in Antwerp from the student protests taking place in Paris in May 1968, did they make themselves felt here, too?

RB: They weren't such a big deal here. There were a few students in Antwerp who protested about pretty much everything. It was sort of a watered-down version of what was going on in Paris. But it wasn't as extreme, no.

JS: Why did you choose to go and study art history as well?

RB: I needed more information. It was a real revelation to me then to take classes with Professor Marcel De Maeyer (1920-2018), for example. He was a very passionate person, and also an artist himself. I had a very good relationship with him. Professor Broeckx, who taught musicology, has also stayed in my memory. He was another particularly intellectual man.

JS: What were Professor De Maeyer's classes about? Mainly the art of the past, or did he also discuss contemporary art?

RB: That too. He was following a syllabus, I think, about the Renaissance, Baroque and Mannerism. He alternated each year. The first class I took with him was about the Mannerists. That was new to me. I knew nothing at all about Mannerism and still saw it as a fairly formal art form, but the way he presented it was absolutely phenomenal.

JS: For your thesis, you opted to do a case study based on four contemporary artists and their application of the assemblage and lost wax casting techniques.

RB: That's right, *Assemblage in Cire-Perdue* was the title of my thesis.

JS: So that was something that fascinated you, based on your own experience as a sculptor?

RB: Absolutely. I had built a small foundry in my mother's garden, made ovens with fireproof bricks. That's where I cast my first figurines.

JS: How did you come into contact with the artists you discussed in your thesis? Paolozzi, for example, was already a famous international name at the time.

RB: I wanted to interview those people for my thesis. I had got hold of his address, probably through the consulate in Brussels, and I phoned him. He agreed to it and said he could spare a couple of hours for me. He was working in Berlin at the time, on an exchange with the DAAD (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst). I went to visit him there and it went on for longer than expected. I was there with my girlfriend at the time, and he suggested organising a spaghetti dinner that evening for 25 people, all figures on the German art scene. So we went to buy plates and a big pan to make the spaghetti. We ended up staying more than a week. We spent the whole time playing table tennis in his studio. And there was another English art historian, Frank Whitford (1941-2014), who wrote a biography of Paolozzi later on. It was a very interesting period. I just went ahead and picked up the phone, called them and asked if they were up for it. I did the same thing with Cavaliere in Milan.

JS: Do you still remember exhibitions you saw in Antwerp, in places like the Wide White Space or in A379089, performances by people like James Lee Byars (1932-1997) or exhibitions by Marcel Broodthaers (1924-1976), for instance?

RB: Yes, Byars; that was in the Wide White Space. Byars turned up in his top hat and started shining a mirror on the door of the gallery, using the sunlight to entice people in. And we thought he was a bit of a funny guy, you know. But he was a really friendly man. We also hung out with him for a while here in Antwerp. Later I met him again at documenta in Kassel, where we had a nice chat.

Breda

JS: You started teaching in Breda in 1975. What subjects did you teach there?

RB: When I graduated, I saw a vacancy in the newspaper for a position as a lecturer at the academy in Breda. They took me on as a lecturer in theory, not a teacher of practical subjects. I taught two different subjects. Social orientation, one was called, which was a kind of theoretical subject. And art history, with slides. That was what the students liked best. Looking at pictures and discussing the subjects. It was exciting because we were looking at the same image together. All our attention was focused on the image. I could talk about those subjects and analyse them for quite some time.

GM: I was a student then and attended Raymond's lessons, and he was a very enthusiastic teacher. After my architecture degree, I went there because I really wanted to study interior design at an art academy. The school was very pioneering at the time. There were also many artists and theoreticians from Belgium there. The graphic artist Dominique Ampe (°1944, Ukkel), Glenn Van Looy (1947-2022) from the ICC, Luk van Soom (°1956, Turnhout) and Thé van Bergen (1946, Achterveld) all taught there.

RB: I organised guest lectures, inviting people such as A.R. Penck (1939-2017). He had just had an exhibition at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven. Jörg Immendorff (1945-2007), Thomas Bayle (°1937, Berlin), T.O.P. office with Luc Deleu (°1944, Duffel), Anna and Bernard Blume (1936-2020 / 1937-2011), Panamarenko (°1940-2019), Luc Tuymans (°1958, Mortsel), Thomas Ruff (°1958, Zell), Guillaume Bijl (1946-2025), John Körmeling (°1951, Amsterdam), Herman Nitsch (1938-2022), Arnulf Rainer (°1929, Baden bei Wien), Tom Puckey (°1948, Kent), Dick Raaimakers (1930-2013) and the Austrian architects' and artists' collective Haus-Rucker-Co all gave a lecture in Breda.

GM: As students, we felt so honoured. I remember that Penck started playing the piano in a student bar. And he stayed overnight with Raymond in Antwerp.

RB: He slept here on the sofa. You see, I invited all the people who were in the spotlight at the time. And I had a small budget for that, 200 guilders back then, which would be 100 euros now; you'd never get anyone for that amount today. Most of them came from Germany, because speakers from England needed a plane ticket and that was far too expensive. Occasionally someone came over from France, but that often led to language problems. So I was suspected of being a bit pro-German. But it was just a pragmatic choice because of the cost of travel.

GM: But people from the United States came to speak, too. I remember lectures by Tom Klinkowstein (°1950, Trenton) and Judith Barry (°1954, Columbus), for example.

JS: How did you come into contact with Panamarenko?

RB: Panamarenko had an assistant, a good friend of mine, Xavier De Clippeleir. They were looking for a studio and had rented mine, in Peter Benoitstraat, for about six weeks. Panamarenko made that carpet there (*Magic Carpet*, 1978) with Xavier, that flying carpet with all the little propellers in it. So I went in sometimes to take a look and have a chat with Panamarenko. He was actually quite a shy guy. Then I asked him if he'd come and give a lecture. And, well, he couldn't really get out of it. We drove to Breda in my car. He was making jokes during the trip. I asked him, so what are you going to say, then? Oh, he replied, I don't know. We'll have to see. After a short introduction, he started explaining about elementary particles moving around each other. After two minutes, he came to a halt. Then I

thought, here we go. So I had to stand up again. I said to the students, does anyone have a question? And they did: someone had a question and then someone else. And then the conversation went on for another two or three hours. It was a really great success.

JS: Are there recordings of these lectures?

RB: There must be audio recordings, but I've never seen them since.

JS: Can you tell us the names of a few former students who went on to have an artistic career?

RB: Henri Jacobs (°1957, Zandoerle), Marieke van Diemen (°1959) and Jan van de Pavert (°1960, Zeist), Ab van Hanegem (°1960, Vlissingen), Rob Birza (°1962, Geldrop). They became well known.

GM: In 2015, there was an exhibition in Dordrecht to mark the 100th anniversary of the Pictura drawing company, and Raymond was invited to exhibit work with some of his former students.

RB: Right, that was with Henri, Jan, Marieke, Joost Bongers and Ab van Hanegem.

JS: Besides lectures, you also organised film showings. Which films were on the programme?

RB: Most of them were films that weren't shown in the cinemas. Or old classics by people like Fritz Lang, such as *Metropolis*. I'd also planned to do something with Hans-Jürgen Syberberg (°1935, Nossendorf), but in the end that fell through. Syberberg was a very controversial figure at the time because of his pretty right-wing declarations in Germany. I had long telephone conversations with him. He wanted to come, but I had a colleague who was opposed to it because he didn't believe the students were mature enough to be able to have a discussion with someone like that. Although I always believed the opposite.

JS: Did you also show films by visual artists?

RB: Yes, let me think.

GM: Certainly by Rebecca Horn (1944-2024), I'm sure of that, the one with the peacock (*The Peacock Machine*, 1981). And lots of films of performances. Raymond also taught music for a while, a kind of introduction to music for the students. Classical music, folk music, African music. Those were enjoyable lessons.

New York

JS: In the early eighties, you stayed in New York for a while. How did you end up there?

GM: I was doing an internship with the architect Peter Eisenman (°1932, Newark). Raymond came to visit at Christmas. He visited a lot of people, galleries, museums. Eisenman was incredibly impressed with his knowledge. Raymond wrote and translated several things for him. Eisenman had just started working on his book *HOUSE X* (1982).

RB: I translated a book by Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) and texts by Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) for him. It was an interesting period. The architecture critic Jeffrey Kipnis (°1951, Georgia) and the architect John Hejduk (1929-2000) were also around at that point.

GM: Eisenman also exhibited works in galleries. That's how Raymond came into contact with the Freidus/Ordovery Gallery, which ultimately led to him taking part in a group show in 1984.

RB: I exhibited two paintings there, *Landscape (Pick-Up)* (1982) and *Arena* (1982). I remember Jeffrey Kipnis saying that he didn't think my work was suitable for that exhibition. It was the time of the Neue Wilde, and clearly my work is designed to be very sterile and precise. My canvases stayed at the gallery for a long time after the exhibition. Fortunately, Jeff was able to send them back in the end.

JS: You also met the art historian and critic Hal Foster (°1955, Seattle) in New York. How did you get to know him?

RB: Eisenman had phoned him and asked if he wanted to meet me. So I arranged to meet up with him somewhere in New York on a Saturday. We went out for a whole day together. We visited all those galleries, all those openings, Mary Boone, etc. She was an attractive woman. But nothing else came of the meeting with Hal Foster. You see, if you want to do anything in New York, you really have to stay there for quite a while, but if you're not prepared to do that and just blow in on the breeze occasionally as a tourist, it won't work.

JS: You couldn't stay in New York because you had to teach and because Grażyna had to go home at the end of her internship, right?

RB: I had to teach. I wouldn't have had any money otherwise.

GM: It would have been quite a big step, financially. And of course then I would have been entirely dependent on the job I had with Eisenman. We also had to be here to look after Raymond's mother.

JS: Is it true that you stopped sculpting and started painting during or after your visit to New York?

RB: No, that was earlier, when I had that big studio in Peter-Benoitstraat. It was absolutely freezing there in the winter: I couldn't get it to warm up until about five o'clock in the afternoon. Then I thought, I have to stop making sculptures. By then I'd started renting this space here, in Constitutiestraat. This is where I did most of those paintings. I'd already been to New York once in 1980, simply to explore the city and see the sights. The difference with European cities made a big impression on me then. That's when I first got the idea for *Hotel*. The meetings with Eisenman and Kipnis were all in 1983 or 1984, but I painted *Hotel* back in 1980. The book *Delirious New York* by Rem Koolhaas (°1944, Rotterdam), which was published in 1978, had a great influence on my paintings.

JS: The image on the cover of that book is by Koolhaas' wife, Madelon Vriesendorp (°1945, Bilthoven). Did her portrayal of the metropolis influence you in any way?

RB: The style of drawing, maybe, but her work is far more anecdotal. The stories in the book were what really fascinated me. The description of the Downtown Athletic Club, for example, with that swimming pool somewhere up in the air. We visited that then as well.

JS: Did you go to Rem Koolhaas' exhibition *Drie ontwerpen voor Parijs* at Zeno X at Antwerp Zuid in 1984?

GM: I do think we saw that show. We often went to exhibitions, at De Zwarte Panter, the ICC, the space that the auction house Campo had on the Meir and so on. We also went a lot to various venues run by Kunsthal Mechelen.

Internationaal Cultureel Centrum (ICC)

JS: Glenn Van Looy was your colleague in Breda. Did the exhibition in the ICC happen through him?

RB: I did know Glenn as a colleague in Breda, and at that point, in 1986, I had an exhibition running in Tilburg called *De mens een Machine*.

GM: Raymond regularly exhibited at technical universities in the Netherlands in that period, also in Delft and Eindhoven, for example.

RB: Yes, for the architecture students. My subjects are all architecture, but painted architecture of course.

JS: How was the exhibition at the ICC received?

RB: We did get responses, but they were fairly superficial, I have to say. I don't remember them.

GM: I remember there were a lot of visitors to the exhibition.

RB: I heard from an attendant that people were satisfied with it. If people don't like what they see, of course, they start grumbling to the attendants.

GM: Raymond also sold a lot then. That big painting of the theatre that's in Amsterdam now, and drawings, because he also exhibited drawings at the ICC. I think the exhibition was a success in itself, but it didn't lead to other things in Belgium.

JS: Did all the works you sold go to private collectors?

RB: Yes, nothing ended up in a public collection.

JS: Who selected the works for the exhibition?

RB: I did, in consultation with Glenn.

JS: After the ICC, you didn't have any more exhibitions for a long time.

RB: I work very slowly. So I didn't have many new works to exhibit.

JS: Why was that? Didn't you have the time to make new works, or did you have the feeling that you'd already said everything you had to say?

RB: The airbrush technique is pretty labour intensive. It takes an incredibly long time to do a painting. You need to stick plastic film to it, then cut it out very carefully, then spray it and then cover it back up again. For example, I spent four months on that hotel painting.

GM: Selling those canvases made it possible for us to travel, to California and Mexico, for example. That was a period with an enormous wealth of impressions, but huge unrest as well. And if you're not here as much, you can't go to as many openings and it's difficult to keep in touch with people.

RB: Seeing Mexico was a dream. I found it very impressive, those pyramids, and phenomenal cities as well.

JS: In 2014, your work was rediscovered by Mihnea Mircan (°1976, Bucharest), who was the artistic director of Extra City arts centre in Antwerp at the time. How did you make contact with him?

RB: One day he just turned up at the door. He rang the bell. I don't know how he got my address. But anyway, I was surprised. He came in, looked at my work and then organised that exhibition.

JS: Do you have the feeling that your work wasn't properly understood in the eighties and that now your style is considered exemplary for the spirit of these times?

RB: Maybe, yes. I couldn't say.

GM: I read somewhere that he was ahead of his time, but I don't remember exactly where. Now we see the world through computers, animations.

JS: Your paintings also remind me of the works of the German artist Konrad Klapheck (1935-2023). Is that someone who influenced you?

RB: Yes, Klapheck, he did have an influence.

JS: Are there others, as well?

RB: Someone like Thomas Bayrle, he's a very precise man too.

Archive / Legacy

JS: None of your works have been included in public collections to date. How do you feel about that when you think about your legacy?

RB: It's not for me to judge. I don't have any influence over it.

JS: Have you ever considered donating certain works to a museum?

RB: No, not until now.

GM: If anyone were to approach Raymond, it might be possible.

JS: What does your personal archive mean to you?

RB: Well, I've kept all my drawings. I did sell a couple though, I think.

JS: Your drawings have an ambivalent status in your oeuvre, because on the one hand they serve as studies for your paintings, but on the other, you exhibit them as autonomous works. But how do you view the correspondence, pictures of setting up exhibitions, exhibition brochures and catalogues you have kept?

RB: They're memories of my life. It was always interesting to see that when you phone people and make contact, they respond. That you can actually contact these people. This is interesting both for yourself and for the students, of course. It led to remarkable situations. That's how you create contacts and extend your network. I have the impression that that wasn't appreciated sufficiently at the academy back then.

GM: I wonder why I don't throw your things in the bin, for example, but keep them. I think that each of us lives in a certain context, don't we, with a spirit of the times, with people and a way of thinking that develops out of that. And one way or another, we contribute to it by being present and participating in the process of producing those thoughts. And I think of that as a form of self-appreciation as well. I have a whole room full of models in my office as well. I think it's an expression of self-appreciation I have made this, and I have made my contribution with this. It has been exhibited, been built. People live inside my work, in my case. And none of the people who bought a painting or an object from Raymond ever said after a while, well, I don't like it anymore, you can take it back or I'll sell it on. But you can't

say we've deliberately built up the archive. It's more of a collection of little gems that we've kept.

RB: Of course it's linked to a certain time. Many of those people are no longer alive now, either.

GM: Have you also kept things that you have unpleasant memories of?

RB: I'd have to think about that. It's not something I've ever thought about.

GM: I believe that if those things are positive, there shouldn't be any reason to distance yourself from them.

RB: Yes, negative things. I'll have to think about that. I couldn't say.

JS: Have certain things been lost, things you might have liked to keep?

GM: Yes, I think so.

RB: What things?

JS: Possibly the recordings of the lectures at the academy.

GM: Has the academy kept them? That's the question.

JS: I'd say it would be worth asking. They're lectures by important artists, after all.

JS: How do you see the future of your archive?

RB: No idea. We have a son (Raymond W. Barion, °1995, Wilrijk), but what he'll do with all those things when I'm no longer here, I don't know. I'll ask him sometime.

GM: He has a lot of respect for your work.

JS: There are several institutions in Flanders that take care of artists' archives. You've got the Boekentoren in Ghent, and M HKA and the VAI in Antwerp. Those are organisations that also make these archives accessible for research. Is that something that would interest you?

RB: I've no idea. I've never thought about it before.

GM: We'll have to think about it sometime. It's the issue of his legacy. That reminds me of that quotation from that German musician. You can say it nicely in German.

RB: *Was wird mit meinen Instrumenten, wenn ich einmal nicht mehr da bin? Es ist niemand da, dem ich das sagen könnte.* (What will happen to my instruments when I'm gone? There's no one I can ask.) And the man just kept repeating that. It's true, you don't know what will happen to all those things.

GM: But you might have an idea or wishes. Whether your wishes come true is another matter.

RB: I hope things will be preserved. Fortunately, most people treat works of art with respect. The few items we sometimes loan out for exhibitions are still in excellent condition. I'm pleased about that. There's only one exception. A painting that was under a leaky gutter. So the painting got water on it, which completely destroyed that canvas in my opinion. I advised the owner to get it restored. But he said he wasn't going to do it, and I told him to throw it in a rubbish dump. That kind of thing is a sign of utter cynicism if you ask me.

GM: And don't you think the collectors of your work, and their children, might like there to be an archive somewhere where they could find information?

JS: We can't force you to answer that. If you haven't thought about it yet, or if you'd rather not, we should respect that.

GM: Our son came to visit us here recently, and he'd met the daughter of Alic Cavaliere in Milan. She was especially moved to hear that the letter from her father is in Raymond's archive. So we sent her a photo of it.

JS: The catalogue produced for your exhibition at Extra City doesn't contain all your paintings. Is there a complete overview anywhere?

RB: The book isn't exhaustive, no.

JS: How many paintings have you done?

RB: Thirty, or thereabouts. Not all that many, no.

GM: We should count them sometime. You see, that's how sloppy the archive is. I've got a list somewhere saying where the works that were sold are located. Recently I added the details of a man from London who bought that early sculpture.

RB: Oh, that was someone who sent me an e-mail. It's a statuette of a figure with a shield in bronze, *De Krijger* (1970). It was originally sold to the Century Hotel, I think. The buyer wanted to know if I was still alive and to find some more background information.

GM: That owner probably died and then the heirs put the work up for sale at Bernaerts auction house in Antwerp.

RB: I'm glad the work still exists. My name was engraved into it. So since then, I've also engraved my name into the other little sculptures that are still here.

Rationale

On 28 August, Jeroen Staes, a project worker at the CKV, conducted an interview in Dutch with Raymond Barion and his wife Grażyna Mielech at their home in Antwerp. The conversation was structured by prepared questions, along with additional questions that came up as the conversation progressed. The interviewees had received the questions, most of which were based on various historical facts, in advance. The conversation lasted a total of 120 minutes and was digitally recorded in full using the Apple Dictaphone app. The recording was transcribed using AI software and then checked and corrected by the interviewer. This full transcript formed the basic version of the conversation. An edited version was also produced. It contains a selection of questions and answers written out in full, plus corrections and additions by both the interviewer and the interviewees. To increase legibility, punctuation was added, syntactical and grammatical adjustments were made, and the order of certain passages was changed.

Both the digital recording of the conversation and the written-out version can be found in the CKV archive. The interviewees also have a copy of the full transcript and the edited conversation. Raymond Barion and Grażyna Mielech have given their permission for the interview to be published on the CKV website.