



Charlemagne Palestine bespeelt het carillon van het stadhuis in Rotterdam, ter gelegenheid van de uitreiking van de Hendrik Chabot Prijs 2014 van het Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds aan Bik Van der Pol, 16 januari 2015, foto Peter van Mulken

BIK VAN DER POL X CHARLEMAGNE PALESTINE

De eigenzinnige kunstenaar, componist en performer Charlemagne Palestine bespeelde het carillon van het Rotterdamse stadhuis toen Bik Van der Pol de Bart Chabot Prijs 2014 kregen uitgereikt. De kleurrijke kunstenaar, die al geruime tijd in Brussel woont, vertegenwoordigt in zekere zin de rijke geschiedenis van de westerse conceptuele kunst waar het Rotterdamse kunstenaarsduo zo in geïnteresseerd is. Op verzoek van *Metropolis M* gingen ze met elkaar in gesprek.

Door Bik Van der Pol

Bik Van der Pol: Did you perform in the early days of *De Appel*?

Charlemagne Palestine: 'Yes, in the very first two years, I think. With Wies Smals and then at a certain moment, she collaborated with

CHARLEMAGNE PALESTINE

Charlemagne Palestine (in 1945 of 1947 geboren als Chaim Moshe Tzadik Palestine, of Charles Martin in Brooklyn, New York, tegenwoordig woonachtig in Brussel) is een Amerikaans componist van minimalistische muziek, performer en beeldend kunstenaar, met, zoals Wikipedia het omschrijft een voorkeur voor 'knuffelbeesten, cognac en kretek sigaretten'. Palestine, een tijdgenoot van Steve Reich en Philip Glass, heeft altijd zijn eigen werk uitgevoerd, in performances zowel op het podium als in kunstcentra, zoals *De Appel* in de legendarische tijd met Wies Smals. Afgelopen jaren trad hij op Rhys Chatham, Z'ev, Oren Ambarchi, Perlonex, Mika Vaino, Gol, Mondkopf, Grumbling Fur en vele anderen. Op 8 juli treedt hij op in het Barbican Art Centre in Londen.

Josine van Droffelaar, who was assistant curator at the Stedelijk in those days. I'm happy to be the "Uncle Appel".

Uncle Appel. The last one standing. 'I was a pilot at the time.'

You mean a pilot in the sense of flying?

'What happened is that I went to live for almost a year in Sweden, in Skåne, which is below Stockholm. It's in the countryside. I had a few shows of these drawings I was making those days with arrows that went in all kinds of directions. I was just dealing with directions, because I was doing body pieces where I would run into a wall and then into another one. It was all about motion. I met an art collector who wanted to buy an enormous drawing. I told him the price. And he said: "Well, wouldn't you like to be a pilot?" I said: "What?" "I have an airplane and a helicopter and I'm an official instructor. What if I give you lessons, so you get your licence, and give you the possibility to fly planes and helicopters? Would you then give one of these big drawings to me for free?" So I



Richard Serra (featuring Charlemagne Palestine and Nancy Holt), *Match Match their Courage*, 1974, kleur, geluid, 32:27 min., courtesy Ludwig Forum Aken

said, “Okay”, and I became a pilot. Martin, the boyfriend of Josine van Droffelaar, who was the assistant director of De Appel at that time, was a pilot too.’

Martin was in my class at art school in Rotterdam. We called him ‘Martin Air’.

‘That’s him. Yes, I’ve known Martin. We used to fly together.’

He went to Switzerland I think?

‘That’s right. He went to Bern. I was there the day they arrived. They came for an opening of a show of Larry Weiner and Regalia at the Kunsthalle in the Lake of Daniel Buren. They were filming the Daniel Buren, from their airplane. It was a very heavy World War II airplane, not like the kind people fly nowadays. I think they rented it. It was a small plane, a four-seater, a propeller plane. That’s how we all got together, sort of as a bunch of pilots. We didn’t do so much flying together, because it’s very expensive. So you had to plan carefully, as a group. We left at seven o’clock in the morning and brought back the plane at five o’clock in the afternoon, so as not to pay an enormous amount. You

BIK VAN DER POL

Het duo Bik Van der Pol, bestaand uit Liesbeth Bik en Jos van der Pol, werkt sinds 1994 met elkaar aan een op research gebaseerde kunstpraktijk met een sterk historische inslag. Regelmatig worden vergeeten kunst- en cultuurgeschiedenis op allerlei manieren gereactiveerd. Op de Biënnale van Venetië presenteren ze werk in het paviljoen van Mauritius. Ze exposeren momenteel in de tentoonstelling *Are you talking to me?* in het Wilhelm Hack-museum in Ludwigshafen (DE). In voorbereiding is een project in Toronto en een tentoonstelling in het Perez Art Museum in Miami. Eind vorig jaar werd hen de Bart Chabotprijs 2014 toegekend.

need to have a flight plan. It’s very complicated, but it was fun. Well, it was fun until they died. They all died in that plane crash. I said goodbye to them, to Wies, who at the time was with Gerhard von Graevenitz. They had a son, little Heinrich. I gave him a teddy bear. A new, fantastic Steiff teddy bear.’

He was in the plane too?

‘Yes, he was, just three months old. As was Von Graevenitz, Wies, Josine and Martin.’

Martin was flying?

‘Well Martin and Josine, I suppose. They flew from Amsterdam to Bern. The next morning they decided, at breakfast, that they would not go straight back home, but take a little detour through the Swiss Alps. As one knows now, in hindsight, that wasn’t a very good idea. They didn’t have much experience flying in the mountains, with its thermal changes that create very violent differences in air pressure sometimes. They were very arrogant-, even the woman I was with back then said to Wies, “Aren’t you scared to go in an airplane with this new-born baby?” “Oh,

no, no, no”, she said. I remember the whole conversation. Wies was always a very tough woman and now she was a mother, and she was a tough mother as well, and several hours later, they were all dead.’

We called him ‘Martin Air’, because it was a flight company at the time. But also, Martin Air, you know, ‘air’ is a little bit arrogant. It had this double meaning.

‘They were all a little bit arrogant. Anyway, Wies had invited me very, very early, in ’73 already. There is a video we did together that she hated. This tape is actually a dialogue between me and Wies Smals that goes on for forty-five minutes. She’s filming me, and in one part I start to get more and more aggressive with her and then I take the camera out of her hands and point it to her and she’s looking right into the camera. It’s one of the rare times that she was filmed, because even though she was into performance, she was very camera shy. She didn’t like to be in front of the camera. Yet she ran this art centre for all these narcissists which was working perfectly. There was no competition between her and the performers, because she didn’t want to be one.’

What did you talk about in the video?

‘About my work. It’s fabulous. You really should watch it. She was great and you’ll see what she really looked like. It’s called *Where It’s Coming From*, and until her death, nobody had ever seen it. Last year we did a whole evening at Electronic Arts InterMix, during my blitz in New York with the Whitney, with MoMA, with Sonnabend... I was everywhere. And we showed the film.’

We showed the film you made with Leo Castelli and Richard Serra at Boijmans. When was it made?

‘I’ll tell you a funny story. I spoke about that film to Joan Jonas and many different people. Long before Boijmans, before you guys wrote to me that you’d seen it, and I was shocked, because I was looking for this film for a long, long time. Everybody was thinking I’d made up this story, of making this film. They did not believe me because I was in a bad mood at the time. They said: “Charlemagne is having delusions.” I said: “There’s this damn film that

Richard Serra made of me and then it disappeared.” So I was telling all these disappearance stories, but they are really true. All the films they did with me, that they hated afterwards, have disappeared. It just happened to be like that and now they’re being revived. In this case, it was a 16 mm film that I made with Nancy Holt. So I was trying to get a hold of Nancy Holt, the widow of Robert Smithson, and then you guys showed up with it. It turned out that when it first came out, Richard Serra, who was quite well known as a video and film artist those days, did the scene. At that time, around ’74, the Netherlands were really hot for New York performance art and media art. So very early, Boijmans bought that film from Leo Castelli, who had just opened then. There were so many artists of their group who were doing film and video that Leo Castelli and Ileana Sonnabend decided: Why not open up a small office and get some equipment? They had enough high-paid artists to afford a stock of Portapaks and somebody at a desk. Robert Rauschenberg and a lot of their high-selling artists were interested in this stuff. It was not until the late seventies, that the Castelli-Sonnabend video company eventually closed and they gave everything to EAI.’

So how did this piece disappear?

‘Richard and I were friends for a few minutes and during those minutes he decided, “Why not have Charlemagne, he’s so confrontational”. Actually, at that particular moment, he liked that, and he himself is a very confrontational person. His works are, like (bangs something), but he himself, he’s a monster. So when the space opened, Richard had placed the piece right near Leo’s office. In the piece I do a lot of, “Ha, ha, ho, ho”, and I make all this noise and after the first week Leo went bananas. He couldn’t stand my voice anymore, so they turned the sound down and down. And once I had disappeared from their scene, they decided the piece didn’t exist anymore. But before they could nix that film, Boijmans and several other places had already bought it, and so through you I found out that there was an actual copy.’

What was the film about?

‘Like a lot of Richard Serra’s work, it was an enormous thing about nothing. I’m only joking, Richard, if this gets into the interview.’

You know that a film was made two years ago with Nancy Holt about Robert Smithson’s sculpture in Drenthe?

‘Yes. What was the name of that organisation? I used to know all those guys in the early seventies. That organisation that invited Robert Morris to do that piece.’

Kröller-Müller?

‘Yes, that’s it.’

I think the Smithson sculpture was made during the Sonsbeek exhibition in the seventies.

‘I was involved with that, because I did a lot of running pieces in those days, outdoors too, like the *Island Song*. I always thought of myself as the Minotaur in those kinds of sculptural environments. In the piece by Robert Morris (*Observatorium*, 1971), when you get to the middle there’s a certain place where, if you make a sound, it resonates all of a sudden. People would come in and sort of look, and the Dutch, they’re very polite. So I’m like a gorilla. You can see where sonically and bodily Morris’s piece is, with a Minotaur in your piece.’

You had a lot of fun with Nancy, apparently.

‘Yes, we had a lot of fun. Everybody there was so serious. I was always the clown and they were very open to clown with me, and that’s a good thing, because it wasn’t so funny otherwise. I was someone to have around if you were getting bored with being serious. It was certain that I would break the seriousness, because I’m allergic to being too serious. Aude [Charlemagne’s partner, ed.] says: “But you know you’re very serious in your way.” I’m very serious in another way; I don’t like official or superficial seriousness. I’m allergic to that. So when things need to be serious, I am. I don’t laugh at funerals. I’m like François Hollande. He’s great at funerals and at memorials, better than he is at every day. He just has the right look. You need to have a good look for funerals.’

Are we still going to see the palace, here in Brussels?



'Maybe we'll go to the Palais Stoclet first. There are two enormous Gustav Klimts in there, not flat paintings, but mosaics. Aude's grandparents commissioned Klimt to make these two enormous mosaics and a smaller one. Each mosaic is about the size of this room. You'll see it, it's in the dining room. The building was built by Joseph Hoffmann, the most important Art Nouveau architect of his time. This palace is considered his great masterpiece. The idea, in those days, which was from art and...'

Arts and crafts?

'I'm a *Gesamtkunstler*, a total artist, but the actual term used historically came at the time of Art Nouveau, with architects. The building that Aude's grandparents built is the only intact example of an Art Nouveau *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the world. And it's the most luxurious one, because Aude's great-grandfather helped building the railroads in Europe, and Aude's grandfather was living in Vienna with his new wife, who came from a family of artists. Aude lived there from when she was twelve until she was about twenty-four. Then she married Flagier, who recently died. At her birthplace, now lives Herman Daled, who founded Wiels. He's a famous collector of conceptual art. We now want to

make the Palais a cultural heritage site. Ronald Lauder, the descendent of the two sons of the Estée Lauder fortune, wanted to buy the Palais, about six, seven years ago, for a hundred million dollars. But he couldn't. Around the same month that he wanted to buy the whole building, it turned out that there was a little painting, which wasn't a part of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, made by Duccio, an Italian from the fourteenth century. This work was sold to the Metropolitan Museum for fifty-two million dollars by the family, the four sisters, of which Aude is one. Aude inherited one quarter of that. She gave half of it to her son, and we found this fantastic space. So she also paid for my studio.'

Do you like Brussels?

'Yes. New York isn't what it was before. I mean, I miss my sandwiches, but that's about it. I don't really miss the New York that it has become. In Brooklyn, there were maybe thirty artists when I was a young kid, now there are sixty thousand. I don't feel any connection anymore with any town. We go to so many different places, but Brussels is a nice place to come back to. It's perfect. I've even chosen my cemetery here. It's next to the theatre. Broodthaers is already there.

But I don't like his area, I've chosen another area, right near the exit of the cemetery. The cemetery in New York that I have the right to be in, a Jewish one, is wonderful, but it's one hour and ten minutes from New York City. When you leave the cemetery, there's not even a coffee place. But here, there are at least fifteen restaurants and twenty bars when you go out. There are people all the time, making noise, drinking, eating. Sexy people and everything. I love it. So that's where I want to be.'

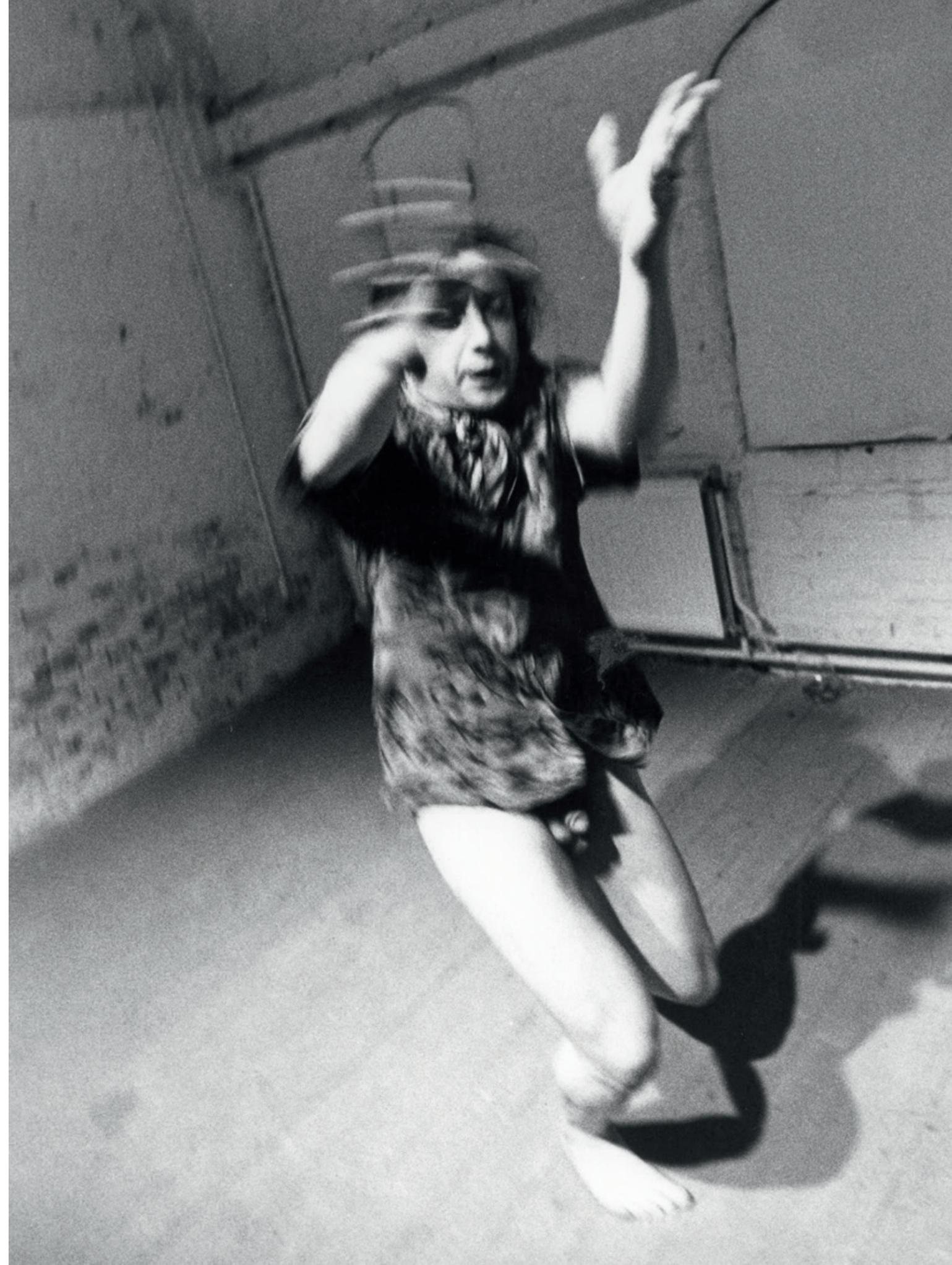
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'This is Aude's grandfather's house. This is the palace Stoclet.'

My God. It's crazy.

'It was built between 1905 and 1912.' **When you took part in Documenta, was it the one with Harald Szeemann or was it before or after that?** 'I participated in three Documentas, but the only one that really counted was the last one, 1987, when I built my big *Godbear* with three heads, six metres high, in mohair. It was the same year that Andy Warhol and Joseph Beuys died. That year they decided that the Documenta would have a real performance and installation part. My piece was in a park, and then eventually on a road. Everybody wanted it in front of the Fridericianum and Manfred Schneck-

foto's op p. 38 en p. 39: Charlemagne Palestine, Body Work, 29 mei 1977, performance met Wies Smals in De Appel in Amsterdam; foto's This Schouten (de video die hiervan gemaakt is, heel Where it's Coming From)





Charlemagne Palestine, *Godbear*, 1987, vlak voor de opening van Documenta 8 in 1987

enburger, the artistic director, and I had a terrible dispute about that during the whole summer. In those days, there was a woman called Elizabeth Yappe who came from Cologne. She had a performance gallery in Cologne that was quite well-known. So she was appointed the performance and installation curator of Documenta under Manfred Schneckenburger. She loved my work and asked me to do a piece, thinking that I would make a performance, but I had already plans for about three or four years, with Steiff, the company which is also not so far from Kassel, in Germany. They had invented the teddy bear, after the Jewish couple from Brooklyn invented it, where I was born, in that neighbourhood. I got to know the head designer, who was the great-nephew of Margarete Steiff, the woman with polio that invented the teddy bear in Germany.

How big was the bear?
'Six metres high. It's in that catalogue. I'm starting to rebuild them in smaller versions and they're getting bigger and bigger again. Now they're standing instead of sitting as they used to be. Schneckenburger found

it the worst piece he had ever imagined. Thanks to ZDF, who filmed it at the opening, the bear became the mascot of the eighth Documenta. It made Schneckenburger furious, because for the whole summer, whenever they would show what was happening at Documenta, the bear was there like a logo. It was in the newspapers every few days. The most important piece of that particular Documenta was Walter De Maria's *One Kilometre*. And so what did you expect the helicopters and the television to look at?'

What happened to the bear afterwards?
'Afterwards, my gallery went bankrupt and then it mysteriously burned after being stored in Germany in one of the most prestigious art storage places near Düsseldorf.'

It wasn't insured?
'All the capital that came into the gallery went immediately into paying off the liquidation of the bankruptcy of the gallery, so I got nothing. I just got a telephone call saying, "Your bear is destroyed". I was leaving works there without any paperwork, in Geneva. One day, the gallery closes and I

have no provenance for all my works, nothing that proves that they're mine. Nothing that proves that they were still mine. So the liquidators came and took the whole gallery apart, because it was in debt for about ten million. Not only mine, but a whole bunch of works became prisoners in a PricewaterHouse Coopers liquidation of the situation. From 1993 or 1992 to 2000, it was owned by the liquidator purchaser, which is a guy who goes to liquidations. Sort of a hedge fund, and Pricewaterhouse was a very famous one. I was eventually able to buy my own works back for about thirty thousand dollars. All of my works. I mean, thirty thousand dollars was a lot to ask Aude for. But for an artist of my pedigree, it was nothing. So, you know, we finally bought all my works back. He sent it with a truck, he was very correct. We got all the works back, except some of my works that his former Brazilian girlfriend had stolen: some of my very important works, and we don't know what happened to them yet. It's still out there somewhere.'

Studio van Charlemagne Palestine, foto Bik Van der Pol

