

Marianne Berenhaut:
To Change
Is Human

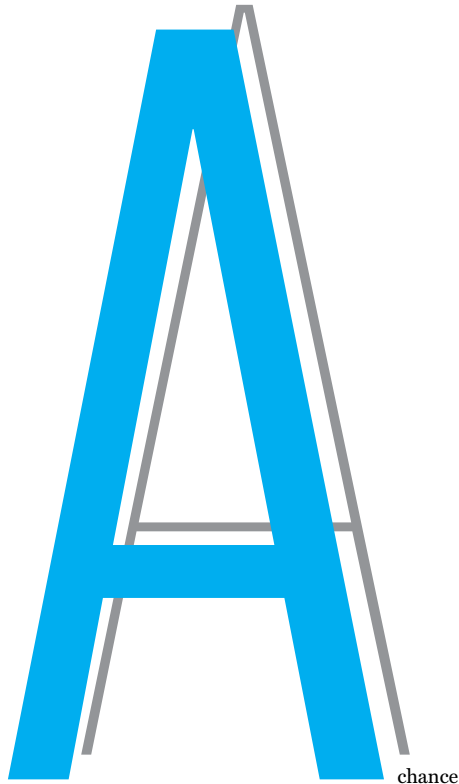
by John Gayer



M HKA

Installation view
of "Marianne Berenhaut:
to the right and back,"
M HKA, Antwerp,
Belgium, 2021–22.

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chance encounter with two of Marianne Berenhaut's evocative sculptures—*Pour la troisième fois on l'a sorti du tiroir* (*For the third time it was taken out of the drawer*, 2010) and *Fleur électrique* (*Electric flower*, 2020)—proved a watershed moment for me. Hushed, melancholic, and surreal, they raised more questions than they answered. It was impossible to decide whether they were meant to be gut-wrenching or hallucinatory. The context provided some clues since both works were included in “Lacrimae Rerum, homage to Gustav Metzger—Part I” (2020) at the Dvir Gallery in Brussels. But next to the directness of Metzger’s *Historic Photographs: No. 1: Liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto, April 19–28 days, 1943* (1995–2020), Berenhaut’s works exuded a cryptic and stimulating aura. To whom does the gown draped across the desk in *For the third time* refer? Empty sleeves reach into empty drawers, but what are they seeking? *Electric flower* is similarly

inscrutable. The outdated electrical fittings set on a bed of coiled wire transmit a sense of playfulness—or is it a whiff of danger? Knowing little about the artist who produced these mysterious and fascinating works made me want to see more of her work.

That opportunity arrived within the year, with two career-spanning surveys. “to the right and back,” at the Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp (M HKA), featured a compact selection peppered with significant works; while “Mine de rien” (“Acting casually”), at C-mine (a former mining complex in Genk), showed an extensive survey spanning the more than five decades of Berenhaut’s practice, accompanied by biographical material and a previously unseen video.

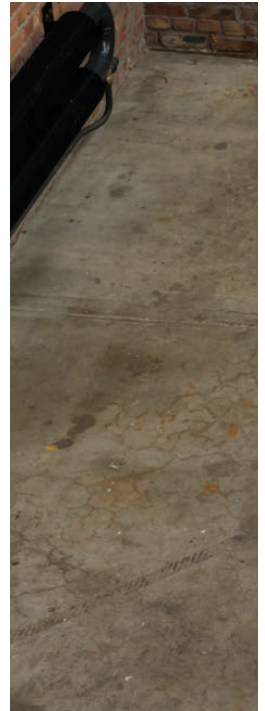
Berenhaut, who grew up knowing nothing of art, was born in Brussels in 1934 to parents of Jewish descent. The family faced the impending threat of World War II by moving to separate living accommodations: one for Berenhaut’s parents, another for her older brother, and a Roman Catholic orphanage for her twin brother and herself. Her parents and older brother were all apprehended and executed at Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1943. Berenhaut, who struggles with prosopagnosia, a brain disorder commonly known as face blindness, has no visual memories of them. She only gained a sense of family life after she met the painter Jacques Simon, with whom she had children. After Simon introduced her to the world of art, she studied at the Académie du Midi and Atelier de Moeschal in Brussels.¹

“Maisons Sculptures” (“House Sculptures,” 1964–69), an exceptional series of plaster and wire works that Berenhaut produced shortly after her studies, survive primarily in photographic form—all but one were destroyed. Together with Berenhaut’s unprecedented take on Brancusi’s *The Kiss*, these images were among the highlights of the Antwerp show. *Hommage à Brancusi* (*Le Baiser*) (1965), produced in tandem with the “House Sculptures,” not only omits the eyes, lips, limbs, and hair of Brancusi’s work, but also pairs a tall and angular form with a shorter and curvier one; it then takes the extraordinary step of opening a hollowed-out space between them, which makes that touch of the lips much more vivid. The result is an abstract form of phenomenal emotional intensity that expresses the kiss in an unexpectedly natural, passionate manner.

OPPOSITE: M HKA. COURTESY MARIANNE BERENHAUT/DVIR GALLERY

Hommage à Brâncuși
(Le Baiser),
1965.
Plaster and lead,
45 x 36 x 27 cm.



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FROM LEFT:
La règle de multiplication, 2013.
Bamboo stems, cardboard, and masking tape, 45 x 90 x 150 cm.

Installation view of "Marianne Berenhaut: Mine de rien," C-mine, Genk, Belgium, 2021–22.

Berenhaut's artistic progress was suddenly upended when she fell through a glass roof. In addition to suffering a broken back and having to relearn how to walk, she was left with a persistent limp. Battling pain and limited movement, she began to produce what she considered wonderful potato-like shapes using old stockings and the mattress stuffing within her reach. Her friends disagreed; in fact, they were appalled. But seeing Edward Kienholz's 1971 London exhibition validated this new direction, and Berenhaut moved ahead with her *Poupées-poubelles* (*Trash dolls*, 1971–80) composed of discarded materials.² In Antwerp, one of these oversize and somewhat grisly figures, *Tentative avant les poupées-poubelles* (*Attempt before the trash dolls*, 1970s), called to mind Yayoi Kusama's sewn and stuffed *Accumulations*, Joyce Wieland's politically themed quilts, and the well-padded, body-extending costumes that Pat Oleszko made for her performances,

placing Berenhaut's direction well within the social and cultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

Yet she quickly abandoned the idea of using only soft materials. The skillful bagging of kitchenware, mannequin parts, broken toys, artificial flowers, shoes, and inoperative clocks permitted greater freedom of expression in these mostly female bodies. The fact that most of them also happen to be headless and, therefore, faceless, directs attention to the composition of the bodies and expressiveness of their postures. Notable exceptions include a metal colander, whose handles suggest ears protruding from a wide, circular face, and a lampshade resembling a sunhat that effectively camouflages what might otherwise be a head.

The *Poupées-poubelles* shocked many viewers when they debuted at Brussels's La Maison des Femmes in 1972, just as the women's liberation movement was in full swing. Today, reactions are different. When close

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to 40 of Berenhaut's figures were assembled in the Church of Saint-Loup in Namur, Belgium, Violaine de Villers cast them in a nuanced emotional light for her short film *Poupées-poubelles* (2010). Stills from the production reveal a battle-weary troop savoring a moment of solace while suggesting a silent plea for compassion. *Vietnam* (1974), a family group portraying a mother and four children, evinces a similar, though more direct expression. Berenhaut jammed the remains of the children's bodies into individual lengths of pantyhose and then used the hosiery to secure them to the mother's frame to create a work that manifests the burden of war in an unexpectedly literal manner. In 2019, *Vietnam* and several other *Poupées-poubelles* drew attention when they appeared in "Gossamer," an exhibition curated by Zoe Bedeaux for Carl Freedman Gallery in Margate, England, that explored hosiery's use in art. Presented alongside works by

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Polly Borland, Louise Bourgeois, Shirin Fakhim, Sarah Lucas, and Senga Nengudi, Berenhaut's crude and wrinkled forms stood apart with their embodiment of misery and chaos. They also took their place as precursors, predating the other works by two to four decades.

Berenhaut's exhibition at C-mine paired a shrewdly conceived installation of the *Poupées-poubelles* with *Morte Saison à Drohobycz* (*Dead Season at Drohobycz*, 1986), a previously unseen video of a performance in which the figures serve as supporting actors. Described as “a score for an actor, mannequins, and accessories,” *Morte Saison à Drohobycz* offers an interpretation of Polish-Jewish writer Bruno Schulz's prose. The collaboration between Berenhaut, Brigitte Louveaux, and Szczepan Szczykno was staged in Krakow and Warsaw and won a festival prize in Wroclaw, Poland. Its six or seven episodes include scenes of Louveaux pulling nylons lumpy with dolls' heads out of a stroller and dancing with the torso of a mannequin strapped to her upper body. Transmitting a potent mix of yearning, emptiness, and despair, this moving performance is not easily forgotten. At C-mine, the haunting imagery contrasted sharply with curator Alicja Melzacka's placement of *Poupées-poubelles* in the next space, where they playfully lounged on and around the massive machinery in the former engine room. In this once male-dominated place of industry, whose picturesque appeal might suit a fashion shoot, the figures' misshapen limbs and ragged garb couldn't help but raise questions concerning gender roles and ideals of beauty. With thoughts drifting to the curvaceous female nudes of art history and the over-edited selfies flooding social media, the *Poupées-poubelles*' subversion of past and present notions of bodily perfection became ever more striking.

In the 1980s, Berenhaut shifted to creating assemblages from salvaged objects, grouped under the rubric “Vie Privée” (“Private Life”). She then began making “Carnet-Collages” (“Notebook Collages”) during the mid-1990s and “Bits and Pieces,” another series of assemblages, around the time that she moved to London in 2015. Though the titles of these series would seem to propose distinct periods and linear progressions, the designations are not consistent, and confusion occurs between them.³ In many ways, these series are part of the same project, so their separation is not as important as their shared formal strategies and subject matter,

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which offer ways to address the human condition.

Berenhaut approaches this theme through compositions that delineate seemingly familiar circumstances but occupy undetermined places and times, leaving the viewer to imagine what led to these situations and what might ensue. Suggestive titles and the implication of change or movement frequently contribute to the works' impact. Do the entangled handlebars of the three toy scooters in *La recontre* (*The meeting*, 2013) signal an amicable playground gathering or a confrontation? What does it mean when paper shopping bags aligned in a row begin to fall on themselves, like dominoes? What to make of a herd-like grouping of suitcases or the collection of typewriters in *En Rang* (*In a Row*, 1992)? Though *En Rang* initially conjures a barrage of clacking by a multitude of typists, that impression was profoundly altered at C-mine with *Marianne Berenhaut at MAC's* (2014), a film by Luc Malice and Serge Simon, which documents the artist installing works at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Grand-Hornu, Belgium, and features the voice of her son reading out instructions: "Set up the typewriters in marching order." *En Rang* thus embodies a militaristic overtone, too.

The film offers a fascinating glimpse of Berenhaut's critical eye at work and reveals the connection between the disposition of the individual pieces in her assemblages and their emotive power. Despite the specificity of the instructions, she constantly rearranges and re-directs. Because the broken chairs in *Jardin d'enfants* (*Kindergarten*, 1986) portray a destructive act, they cannot be placed the same way. Regarding *Escarpins sur balatum* (*Pumps on linoleum*, 1991) she asserts: "It must appear to have been torn out of life." The fact that several works in the film also appeared in the C-mine exhibition allowed viewers the opportunity to make comparisons between the different iterations.

Thierry de Duve, in his 2003 essay "Vie Privée," zeroes in on the changeability of *Le départ* (*The departure*), both in terms of its configurations and its content, which tends to point more directly to Auschwitz than Berenhaut's other works.⁴ Shown four times between 1982 and 2001, *Le départ* was altered for each presentation. de Duve's text responds to something that Berenhaut kept private for decades. In an admission made by way of André Darteville's 2002 film—also titled *Vie privée*—she verified the fate of her parents and elder brother.



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En Rang, from
the “Vie Privée” series,
1992.
12 typewriters and
4 light bulbs,
35 x 160 x 325 cm.



THIS PAGE:
Installation view of
"Marianne Berenhaut:
Mine de rien," with
Je nous quitte, 1981.

OPPOSITE:
L'inachevé,
2008.
Mixed media,
320 x 380 x 230 cm.

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Le départ consists of a baby stroller, a silver-painted wooden ladder, a poster-size timetable, and a small photograph of a woman on a balcony from 1943—the year that Berenhaut’s family members died. She pictures a railroad simply by setting the stroller on the ladder, which rests on the floor. Over the course of the work’s different configurations, the orientation of the stroller changes, and she swaps the timetable poster, too. In two showings, it lists departures, but arrivals appear in the other two. These perplexing changes raise questions. Is Berenhaut searching for an ideal configuration or, as de Duve proposes, struggling with survivor’s guilt? Or is change an end in itself? The answer may be all three. The elements that make up her assemblages are rarely, if ever, fastened together. This lack of fixity, mentioned in de Duve’s essay and apparent in the film *Marianne Berenhaut at MAC’s*, enables her to tweak or freely reinterpret her works.

In recent interviews, Berenhaut explains that, though she has spoken about how she was affected by

the deaths of her parents and brother, horrible things happen to people all over the world—and it is people that have always been the focus of her work. She uses discarded items because they hold memories of their previous use and of the people who once owned them. In her view, her works are not about recycling, as some critics have said, but about identity and life in general. They are about allowing things to survive.

These works, which result from a process of trial and error, usually develop slowly. *Le Lit (The Bed, 2000)*, another standout piece exhibited at M HKA in Antwerp, is perhaps the exception. An effervescent dreamscape, it consists of large glass spheres that seem to bubble out of layers of dried seaweed and burlap covering a dilapidated bed. *Le Lit* surprised Berenhaut; it emerged quickly and was unlike anything she had made before. In retrospect, she explains it this way: “The work is related to sensuality, to the fact that being a woman is more than sexuality... It’s your whole being as a woman, you see. And it

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was the first time I talked about myself so explicitly.”⁵

In contrast to the somber subject matter in much of Berenhaut’s work, *Le Lit*, though also related to her life, represents a bright spot, offering an unexpected glimmer of what appears to have been missing since *Hommage à Brâncuși (Le Baiser)*. In this respect, *Le Lit* may be viewed as a critical signpost that, along with the admission made in Darteville’s film, highlights Berenhaut’s trek out of darkness. More recent works, like *The Man Next Door* (2015) exhibited in Antwerp, which presents a whimsical portrayal of a grouchy neighbor, and the humorous *Just for fun* (2021), a long and colorful strand of paper clips emulating a much larger and heavier steel chain in Genk, could be said to bear this out.

This characterization, however, risks simplifying Berenhaut’s work. There is no clear stylistic progression that can be applied to the “Vie Privée” series, so attempts to determine the dates of works based on their appearance prove fruitless. Since virtually all of them are composed of discarded items, they all look old; and then there is the matter of their changing nature, open to the artist’s shifting interpretation. Bruno Maiter and Rauno Matikainen, in a 1989 edition of a journal dedicated to Berenhaut’s work, put forth alternate perspectives that highlight its open-endedness and complexity.⁶ Maiter writes, “Now you put the pieces together on a mat, you place them, you move them, you replace them, you replace them, then you

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OPPOSITE:
Installation view of
“Marianne Berenhaut:
Mine de rien,” C-mine,
Genk, Belgium, 2021–22.

THIS PAGE:
La rencontre,
2013.
Three wooden scooters,
62 x 85 x 35 cm.

simplify, freely, without prejudice, you with your story, always the same, and everyone can come with theirs: you have left enough loopholes for everything to be possible.” Matikainen, on the other hand, offers a pie chart analysis expressing the values of 25 percent poetry, 20 percent tenderness, 19 percent Marianne, 17 percent verisimilitude, 14 percent humor, and five percent humility. But the final word belongs to Berenhaut, who possesses an intuitive ability to summarize complex matters in a few words. The introduction to the “Mine de rien” exhibition guide closes with her thought that “we are wrong to believe that more painful things are more meaningful than happy things. Life comes and goes.” ■

NOTES

- 1 *Talk Art Podcast*, September 3, 2020.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Alicja Melzacka, CIAP/C-mine and Dvir Gallery, personal communication, 2021.
- 4 Thierry de Duve, “Vie Privée,” in *Marianne Berenhaut: Sculptures* (exhibition catalogue), Centre d’Art Nicolas de Staël, 2003.
- 5 Marianne Berenhaut in conversation with Juan Pablo Plazas and Lotte Beckwé, Brussels, July 15, 2021, M HKA.
- 6 *Art en Marge*, Bulletin N° 21, (September 1989).