

THE SIX

Leesexemplaar

OSCAR VAN DEN BOOGAARD

THE SIX

The Untold Story of the Antwerp Six

PELCKMANS

For Marina (1958-2025)

Leesexemplaar

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Photographer's Note

“Let's return to the bygone days of 1986,
when Marina, Dries, Ann, Dirk B., Walter en Dirk V.S.
first appeared on the stage. There stood the Six in formation,
with one – smaller than the others and keen to stand out –
popping up like Buster Keaton to steal the show.
I pressed the button and that's how the image came to be.”

– *Karel Fonteyne*

CAST OF CHARACTERS

The Six

Ann Demeulemeester (**ANN**)

Dirk Bikkembergs (affectionately **DE LANGE**, a.k.a. The Tall One)

Dirk Van Saene (affectionately **DIRKSKE**, a.k.a. Little Dirk)

Dries Van Noten (**DRIES**)

Marina Yee (**MARINA**)

Walter Van Beirendonck (**WALTER**)

+ 1

Martin Margiela (**MARTIN**)

Patrick Robyn (**PATRICK**), photographer, Ann Demeulemeester's partner

Geert Bruloot (**GEERT**), fashion retailer, curator, scenographer

Mrs. Prijot (**MARY**), head of the fashion department at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp

Inge Grognaard (**INGE**), makeup artist

Ronald Stoops (**RONALD**), photographer

Etienne Russo (**ETIENNE**), model, organizer

Linda Loppa (**LINDA**), curator, fashion consultant

Agnes Goyvaerts (**AGNES**), fashion journalist

Luc Willame (**LUC**), photographer

Anne Kurris (**ANNE K.**), graphic designer

Michèle Beeckman (**MICHÈLE**), Institute for Textiles and Clothing Belgium employee

Patti Smith (**PATTI**), rock poet

Johan Pas, art historian

Pieter Coene, fashion and costume designer, singer (bass)

And more...

FOREWORD

This book is my reconstruction of the rise of the Antwerp Six, the designers who the fashion world discovered almost by chance, tucked among the wedding gowns on the second floor of the British Designer Show in London in 1986. Since their names were impossible for the international visitors to pronounce, someone must have shouted “*Come up and see the Antwerp Six!*” The echo of those words never left the Six. On the contrary, it only grew louder over the years, elevating the group to mythical status.

The Six were never a rock band whose members had chosen each other. They never created anything together. As fellow students, they got along well, they inspired and stimulated each other, but a number of dramatic events meant that a number of them were not on speaking terms for many years.

During the creation of this book, produced with the unconditional cooperation of the Six, I conducted extensive interviews with the designers and those in their circle who contributed to their rise. One key figure – Martin Margiela, often considered the Six’s plus-one, though I’d rather call him their shadow – preferred anonymity from the very beginning of his career. *The Six* strips away that mask, revealing his real human face for the first time.

I thought long and hard about the form this book would take, but there was no question that I wanted to stay true to my own writing style. I am not a scientist and not a journalist. I am not a bull in a china shop or a shark in a swimming pool. I am a writer whose goal is to put the essence of existence into words, in this case the existence (and origins) of the Antwerp Six. Even though – or rather because – their personal names are also their brands and their images are so carefully cultivated, my aim was to get under their skin. To achieve that goal, and to bring the group’s dynamics to life, I chose to present the conversations as much as possible as an oral account, with each person speaking from their own perspective. These subjec-

tive threads come together in a true-to-life fabric, just as real as the Six themselves. Even when I occasionally set aside the monologue form to describe a scene, I am simply drawing from what I've been told.

I also wanted to convey in vivid terms that these designers took a city and a country that were complete unknowns in the world of fashion and put them on the map. It's striking that since the emergence of the Six, the international fashion world and the artistic direction of major fashion houses have been dominated by Belgian designers or people who studied fashion in Belgium. The fact that it all started with the Six makes their story as noteworthy as it is extraordinary.

I could track the beginning of my personal story with the Six to 1988, when I came to Belgium from Amsterdam to earn a master's degree in European law at the Université Libre in Brussels – an alibi I used to be able to work on my first novel. It was a few years before the European unification, which I envisioned as one big symbiotic sphere of love.

I lived uptown among the bourgeoisie near the Ixelles Ponds, and my fellow students were quite conservative too. On weekends, I would go out downtown, and in the area around the Brussels Stock Exchange I would see people unlike anyone I'd seen before, very unique and sophisticated. The same applied to their clothes. The word "fashion" never crossed my mind. They were people of a new era: authentic, artistic, individualistic. In my journal, I wrote, "They don't want to be like other people, only like themselves." It was around the same time that I attended early performances by choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker and dance company Rosas; I saw such energy, such individuality – it was unstoppable. But it was also the era of AIDS and the constant fear that sex could cost you your life. For my first novel, I signed with a publishing house that only published dead authors. Perhaps I felt at home there right off the bat. And then the Berlin Wall came down. The symbiotic love sphere grew ever larger.

One evening, near the Grand Place, I followed a guy with buzz-cut hair who wore heavy black leather boots with long laces that

looped through a hole in the heel, then knotted at the back. He led me to STIJL, Sonja Noël's shop in Dansaertstraat, where I'd be introduced to the clothes of the Six: Dirk Bikkembergs, who had designed the boots with the laces through the heel, Dries Van Noten, Marina Yee, Walter Van Beirendonck, Dirk Van Saene, and Ann Demeulemeester. Along with Martin Margiela, they expressed a zeitgeist that was impossible to put into words just yet. It didn't seem related to fashion; that word sounded too superficial and tame. What they created was anti-fashion, something for people who wanted to be uniquely themselves. We were willing to spend a small fortune for the chance to wear their designs. Even though we could barely afford it, it was a necessary sacrifice. They helped us push our own boundaries, explore our potential. Through their clothes, we could reveal our inner selves.

I wrote this book with a 22-year-old Asian guy from Los Angeles in mind. I don't know his name, I've never met him. Last year, he was in Antwerp, sitting next to Geert Bruloot at a dinner hosted by Dries Van Noten. Bruloot was introduced as the man who, almost 40 years ago, had been at the forefront of the Six's international success. The young guy spent the rest of the evening interrogating Geert – who were the Six, who *exactly*, how did they get started, how *exactly*, why, why *exactly*?

"It's impossible to explain," Geert replied. "It was a different era."

"Take me there," the kid urged him.

"There were no cell phones, no social media, no internet yet. You were where you were, and nowhere else. You allowed yourself to be inspired by each other and you made do with what you had. We wanted to change the world, and ourselves too. I remember we went to Paris to attend a runway show by Romeo Gigli, the Italian romantic who rebelled against power dressing. Afterward, everyone was standing on their chairs crying. It was so beautiful and tender, like nothing you can imagine these days."

The young guy looked at him, mesmerized.

"Or you'd go to a Jean Paul Gaultier show, which was like going to a concert. Everyone was excited, the first model would come out, everyone would jump and shout, there was emotion, so much emo-

tion. And then one day Martin Margiela and the Six came along. Their runway shows were huge events. It was about looking at a new world together. It was dreaming out loud.”

“And nowadays?”

“Fashion has become packaging, with real curiosity nowhere to be seen. Celebrities and influencers sit front row, spectators stand around filming with their iPhones in the air, everything is instantly shared via Instagram or streamed to millions of people. The experience is gone.”

“Isn’t that exactly why Margiela quit?”

Geert kept going, despite the interruption from his dining companion. “Within weeks, the fast fashion industry has copied the collection and it’s hanging in stores at bargain prices...”

“And six months later, the unsold leftovers get dumped on beaches along the African coast,” the kid added.

“And the designers work for big brands, where shareholders call the shots. Everything is about money and marketing. They move from one fashion house to another. It’s a constant game of musical chairs. Designers who still have their own brand are almost extinct.”

“Good thing Walter and Marina are still around.”

“How is it you know about all of this?” Geert asked, surprised.

“I’m a fashion kid,” the young guy replied without a trace of irony. “Archive fashion is my thing. I’ve watched the Six’s fashion shows on the internet, and I hunt down their pieces on Grailed and Instagram. I don’t see them as old clothes, but as time capsules. Every piece tells a story, but I can’t seem to grasp the soul of the Six.”

“The soul...” Geert repeated, as though he were attending a spiritualist séance.

“How could these young people, in a remote corner of the world that no one had ever heard of, transform fashion all on their own?”

“They were in the right place at the right time,” said Geert.

“Then I must have been born at the wrong time,” the kid concluded with a touch of melancholy.

I feel for them both, the young fashion kid as well as the old one. You can’t bring back a time that no longer exists. You can’t ex-

F O R E W O R D

plain an experience, you have to experience it. And trying to grasp a soul is like chasing a butterfly with a net. And yet, I want to try. I want to catch six rare butterflies and observe them up close without damaging them. And then I'll set them free again.

**THE
REUNION
(2024)**

Leesexamenjaar

Antwerp, May 16, 2024. In the auditorium at MoMu fashion museum, the Six gather discreetly for the first time in many years. Ann Demeulemeester, Dirk ‘*De Lange*’ Bikkembergs, Dirk ‘*Dirkske*’ Van Saene, Marina Yee, Walter Van Beirendonck, and Dries Van Noten sit awkwardly around a large table, meters apart, eyeing each other warily like it’s their first day of school. They’re in their sixties by now.

The last time they were all together was over ten years ago, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Antwerp Fashion Academy¹, sitting side by side, front-row at the end-of-year runway show. A well-known photograph shows the Six in profile: at the front is Suzy ‘Samurai’ Menkes, the doyenne of British fashion critics, with her voluminous pompadour, then Marina, Dirk, Ann, Walter, Dries, and Dirkske. Typical of how different their lives are and how uneven their careers have been: their noses are all pointed in different directions.

It’s the man who contributed to the foundation of the Six who has brought them together today. Geert Bruloot – the T at the end of his last name isn’t silent – wants to meet in the context of the exhibition he hopes to organize at the museum in two years’ time. By then it will have been forty years since he took the Six to the London fashion fair, where their unpronounceable names quickly led to them being hailed as ‘the Six.’ Explaining why he doesn’t want to wait for the fiftieth anniversary, he says, “Right now, we’re all still alive.”

Geert calls himself an entrepreneur, which I consider true in the broadest sense of the word. He brought the Six to London, sold their designs in his iconic store, Louis, and helped found the Flanders Fashion Institute. But above all, Geert is a child of fortune, strolling

¹ Officially “the fashion department of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp.” All over Flanders and throughout this book, it is most often referred to as the (Antwerp) Fashion Academy or simply the Academy.

through life without a care in the world, spotting opportunities and possibilities everywhere he goes. That's why he reminds me of *The Three Princes of Serendip*. In the Persian fairy tale, they make constant unexpected and happy discoveries, just like Geert. In 1754, English writer Horace Walpole coined the word "serendipity": the fortune of finding things of value without looking for them.

It's been quite the tour de force to get the Six together. Dries is busy preparing for his final fashion show in Paris before retiring, even though no one – himself included – believes he'll ever be able to stop working. Ann is in the midst of a major transformation after she stopped designing clothing in 2014 and continued her examination of form through other materials like porcelain and glass. After twenty years abroad, she and her partner, Patrick Robyn, decided to return to Antwerp, where they are now renovating a monumental building. Marina, unable to show her own work for thirty years, has found new energy and, as "the most mysterious of the Antwerp Six," is enjoying international success with her unique clothing designs. (She will go on to win the jury prize of the Belgian Fashion Awards in November 2024). Walter is tireless in releasing new collections that reach a large young audience, and he teaches at Polimoda, the fashion academy in Florence. His partner, Dirk Van Saene, quit fashion design during the COVID pandemic and has since been creating sculptures out of ceramics and fabric, wonderfully merging fashion with art. The trickiest person to get to the table is Dirk Bikkemeborgs. Since retiring in 2011, he has been living alternately in Cape Town, Rio de Janeiro, and London, turning his back on fashion for good. Today, he's making a quick stop in Antwerp on his way to visit his parents in Hasselt, before traveling thousands of kilometers away again.

Geert wants to meet with the Six today to go over their history together – not only to prepare for the exhibition, but also for the book I'm writing about them. "Because," he says diplomatically, "over the past decades, some memories may have faded or become unclear."

During the three-hour roundtable that follows, his assumption turns out to be an understatement. The designers struggle to reconstruct their own history. It certainly doesn't help that they each have a microphone in front of them, carefully monitored by a sound engi-

neer creeping around the table, since this conversation is set to be preserved for eternity in the museum archives.

As they follow Geert's lead in covering an almost fifty-year journey – starting from the moment they first thought of studying fashion – they not only disagree about the sequence of events and corresponding dates, but also about the details of those events. They contradict each other, but also themselves, speaking in sentences that are left unfinished; I'm listening to a Dadaist sound poem. To translate this into written word, I'd have to brush aside my sense of logic and write in overlapping sentences. I decide not to worry about it and simply surrender, since I know that the past is a maze.

Not only am I hearing overlapping voices, but the people at the table also seem to meld in my head. The Six are a mythical creature with six heads, each facing a different direction, and six mouths that speak only for themselves. None of them want to go the same way, but they're stuck together. As individuals, they lead their own lives, but as the Six, they're bound to one another. It must feel alienating to these people, who never chose to be united under one banner, that the first question any journalist invariably asks each of them is "How are the Six?"

It's conceivable that the Six would never have existed if Geert hadn't taken them to London. They would have found their own way separately, and the Belgian big bang would never have happened. Without the fireworks of the Six and the resulting enthusiasm of Geert and a number of supporters, the MoMu, where we're sitting today, might never have existed. The Antwerp Fashion Academy would not have rapidly become a global player, Antwerp would not have emerged as an international city of fashion, and Belgium would not be renowned for its fashion design. Without the Six's breakthrough and fame, subsequent generations of designers would likely not have generated so much attention so quickly. The Six may have even been a burden to them.

Beyond the Six, their enigmatic seventh also keeps coming up. Even though Martin Margiela was no longer around at the time of the London breakthrough – he was in Paris, working as Gaultier's assistant – he was very much a part of the group at the Academy, just as he is an invisible presence at this table today. "Even the Three Mus-

keteers had a fourth,” says Ann Demeulemeester in a wistful mention of his absence.

What binds the Six together is that Martin Margiela turned his back on them in the late 1980s to lead the anonymous existence that created his own mythology. It’s a wonderful paradox that this is precisely what has kept him inextricably linked to the group. Every illusionist knows that a disappearing act is nothing more than a sleight of hand.

And then Geert begins to talk about the exhibition in this very museum, a museum of which the Six are the founding fathers and mothers, no matter how you look at it. He believes it should be obvious to exhibit visitors that they never planned to present themselves as a group. That’s why the early years – before they were known as the Six – will be particularly important.

When Geert mentions he’ll only have limited space available for each of them, the Six seem to hold their breath. There’s an undertone to the rest of the conversation; I hear a need to mark territory and claim space, a fear of being pushed into a corner, of not standing out enough, of being judged. That was undoubtedly the case during their years at the Academy, but the same will be true now. This is the end game for the Six, their grand finale; not as individuals, since they’re all unique, but for their place within the whole. It’s the trauma of individuality that’s formed in a group, through trial and error, through trust and betrayal, through competition and with humor and at times through its total absence.

“The exhibition has to be explosive,” says Walter.

“Otherwise it doesn’t make sense to do it,” Dirkske mutters.

“It’s weird to spend years and years doing your own thing,” Ann notes, “but in the end you only get to showcase the beginning.”

“That’s definitely weird,” says Marina.

“Everything you’ve ever fought for isn’t important all of a sudden, only the beginning counts,” says Ann.

“No, no!” The men are shouting in unison.

“I’m sure we’ll get to see that fight too,” Marina says, sounding combative.

The auditorium windows can’t be opened, and the lack of oxygen leads to complaints. The polyphony has once again become a cacophony.

After the meeting, Marina and I leave through the revolving door. We're heading in the same direction.

"They were all being so difficult again," Marina says with a sigh.

"I didn't notice," I reply, but I think to myself that it's how things go when it comes to people. Time doesn't affect sensitivities. That's what a group's dynamic is like; it takes on a life of its own.

"What kind of book do you want to write?" she asks me.

"I, I..." I stutter.

"A novel? A biography?"

"No, the story... The story of the Antwerp Six."

"The *real* story?"

"Of course, Marina. The *real* story."

"That's something I can give you," she says.

"I imagine all six of you can, no?"

"Surely you don't believe they'll..." But she doesn't finish her sentence. "I can be pretty fierce," she says apologetically.

As we continue to walk, I attempt to travel back half a century to see the young Six passing by, their sketchbooks in tow. I have a year and a half to get to know the real story.

The night of the gathering with the Six, a mirror ball appears to me while I'm asleep. It sparkles like a gemstone as it slowly rotates. I seem to be gazing at a distant planet that's enchanting me little by little... Then, the ball suddenly shatters – no, it isn't sudden, it happens in slow motion, without a sound – coming apart in a steady shower of sparks. I'm surrounded by hundreds of tiny mirrors, scattered around me in all kinds of colors. Gently, I begin to pick them up, one at a time.

**OFF TO
ANTWERP
(1957-1977)**

Leesvoorbeeldjaar

WALTER

Zandhoven is a village 20 kilometers (roughly 12 miles) east of Antwerp in the Kempen, the sandy border region between Belgium and the Netherlands. This is where Walter grew up and later returned to, along with his partner Dirk Van Saene. His studio – as bewitching as a Tim Burton film – is on the second floor of a stately nineteenth-century home. There’s a wooden rack with a collection of dolls, animals, figurines. A work table full of drawings. Timelines merge into one another.

We found the giraffes in Paris, at the Vanves flea market. We bought them from a ten-year-old boy who was selling his old toys. He had them in a box that was half burned up. Those Flintstones we found just last week. I don’t have the time to dust all those little dolls and animals. But they inspire me, all those colors and shapes.

A yellowed photo of Walter as a child. A little blond boy with a sparkle in his eyes, a teddy bear in his arms. Walter seems untroubled and unscathed. He still is – the man with the child in his eyes. His voice is calm, settled, as though unaffected by stress. The wise old man in a fairy tale.

As a child, I was always drawing, with colored pencils and markers. Little characters in bright colors, alien, futuristic. I was never lacking in inspiration. I come from a harmonious family, but I learned through trial and error, like any child does. One day, a neighbor gifted me a bunny. I held on to the poor animal so tightly that it died on the way home.

In another photo, Walter holds his mother’s hand. A cute little boy in a double-breasted camel-colored coat. It appears to be the mid-1960s. They’re

posing in front of a shoe store window. A large handbag dangles from his mother's wrist; she wants to buy her son everything. She gazes into the lens tenderly. His father also wants the best for his son. In this moment, it's impossible to imagine that he'll one day be called the most controversial of the Six.

My parents would make regular trips to Antwerp to buy parts for auto repairs at their car dealership. Once in a while, I was allowed to join them, and we'd go out for waffles and some shopping. I enjoyed shopping with my mother, because she loved beautiful clothes like I did. She wouldn't have minded that my sense of style became more and more extravagant over time.

That only started when I was eleven or twelve, when I was sent off to boarding school in Lier, a town 15 kilometers [roughly 9 miles] away. Because of the dealership, my parents simply didn't have time for me. I hated it, I really hated it. I didn't feel at home there at all. While other boys wore shorts, liked soccer, and were busy bullying each other, there were luckily three girls in my class I was closer to. In those days, I created a bubble around myself in order to survive. I kept myself occupied with my diaries, drawing, and watching TV – my favorite was *Top Pop* on Dutch television. It was the early '70s. I was fascinated by glam rock and its extreme characters like Alice Cooper and Gary Glitter, Mud, and especially David Bowie. I must have been thirteen, and Bowie was a revelation to me. It gave me strength to see that someone could express themselves in that way. He made me bigger and stronger than I was, and eventually convinced me to go for it too. At fifteen, I wore 18-centimeter [7-inch] platform shoes and bell-bottoms, which was really extreme at that boarding school. My parents didn't mind. On the contrary, they were proud of me. I absolutely hadn't come out yet, but it was obvious something was going on with me. No one brought it up, though. I took drawing lessons on the weekends in Lier, but those were strictly academic – still lifes, portraits – which I did enjoy. And then, once I got my moped, I left boarding school. I could just ride back and forth to Lier instead.

I wasn't sure what I wanted to do after high school. I loved clothes and fashion, of course, but I had no idea. I wanted to be an architect, or a jewelry designer. I didn't even know that fashion de-

signers existed; Belgium didn't have any well-known examples at all. My parents knew a few people at Bartsons, a raincoat manufacturer in [nearby] Heist-op-den-Berg, who had told them a future in fashion was a possibility. Meanwhile, I had looked into the requirements for the architecture entrance exam, but I wasn't very good at math and physics, so that wasn't an option. And making jewelry seemed too fiddly for me. What opened my eyes in the end was an article in *Avenue*, the only glossy magazine in the Dutch-speaking world that I absolutely loved. The supplement for Flanders featured a report on the fashion department at the Antwerp Fashion Academy and interviews with the two senior lecturers, Mary Prijot and Marthe Van Leemput. I was completely hooked.

In the meantime, dig into your imagination and turn on the radio. It's 1974. David Bowie's Diamond Dogs has just been released. The album includes the hit "Rebel Rebel." The cover was designed by Belgian artist Guy Peellaert, whose style was influenced by psychedelia and pop art. "Rebel Rebel" was a remnant of Bowie's Ziggy Stardust musicals and his final glam rock single. The song lyrics famously play with gender ambiguity, portraying a mother unsure where her child fits within a boy-girl binary.

I picture Walter on his stomach on his bed, nose-deep in the magazine, swaying his legs, his platform shoes swishing back and forth. His mother brings her golden boy a cup of tea. But Walter isn't the only one reading the article at that moment. Dirk Van Saene and Marina Yee would also catch a spark from that same piece. And Marina would tell Martin Margiela all about it. Statues should be dedicated to Avenue, and to Agnes Adriaenssen, who wrote the article. Without that promotional push, the Six would never have come together.

"With Your Feet in the Clouds" appeared in the Belgian edition of Avenue in July 1975. According to the journalist, it was the right time to become a fashion designer. The world needed it, especially Belgium. To avert the decline of the Belgian textile industry, threatening to cost hundreds of thousands of people their jobs, there was a need for creativity. And the place to be for young fashion talent was the Antwerp Fashion Academy. The fact that it was run by a woman still living in the past didn't appear to affect matters. In the article, Mary Prijot is introduced as a character in a Russian novel, with "an expressionist face with dark, passionate eyes set above deep

violet shadows, under an ash-blonde quiff laced with elegant strands of silver. A low, husky voice, a remarkable combination of realism and idealism.”

I went to the open house to see the end-of-year runway show, which was still quite unpolished, but I thought, this is what I want. Everyone was drawing, sewing. It may have been old-fashioned, but it was still a revelation – to learn that fashion designer was a profession, something you could study. So I registered for the entrance exam.

It didn't go the way I'd hoped. I showed up for the exam in 10-centimeter [4-inch] heels, and I could tell from the look in Mary 'Coco Chanel' Prijot's eyes that she thought I looked bizarre. Threatening, even. I didn't fit her mold of prim and proper equestrian girls whose greatest ambition was to design their own wedding dress. And my style of drawing was not how she felt a fashion designer should draw.

It was 1975, and I started out with a preparatory year. I had come straight from the countryside to Antwerp, to the Academy. It was a major clash, but also a major discovery, which turned out to be a godsend for me. All the disciplines were grouped together. I ended up in a class of sculptors and painters, and it was Bowie who would create a bridge to a man to whom I owe so much. Artist Narcisse Tordoir came to teach an introductory lesson to the class I was in. And I had a box of materials with pictures of Bowie stuck all over it. That really was our connection: David Bowie. I went on to become good friends with Narcisse and his girlfriend Bruna [Hautman]. Her chic punk look would make her a bit of a style icon for all six of us.

In one of our conversations, Dries described Bruna as an intriguing presence with eyes like black holes, jet-black eyebrows that seemed to extend all the way to her ears, and black lips, always.

During the day I would draw and at night I'd go out. Narcisse and Bruna introduced me to Cinderella's Ballroom, where the punk scene would go out in frayed jeans and tight leather jackets. In the dimly lit basement, they would pogo to the Sex Pistols. Coming from Lier, I had clearly arrived in the big wide world.

The following year, in 1976, I officially started my studies in the

fashion and theater costume department. It was a class of four people, where I especially clicked with a shy boy by the name of Martin Margiela. We were both crazy about fashion; it was the most important thing in our lives. We encouraged each other to learn everything there was to know about fashion. We devoured *Uomo Vogue*, *Avenue*, and *Viva*, and we'd go shopping in Milan and Florence for new outfits for the school's open house events. We took odd jobs to earn money to buy clothes. I painted at my parents' house and I worked weekends at Lieve Bols's boutique, Poor Millionaire, which sold the most extravagant novelties *du jour* out of London. It was the punk era, but Martin and I were "couture punk." A plastic jacket by Fiorucci, leather pants by Versace. And by then I'd also gotten to know Ronald Stoops, who ran a second-hand shop in The Hague and would come to Antwerp all the time to see his girlfriend. He made clothes, pants that he sewed himself, made out of plastic. He was a good-looking guy, someone you were drawn to do things with. He would later become one of my models, and my photographer too.

Martin and I would always hang out together; there weren't very many students. A few years ahead of us was Phara Van den Broeck, who was very talented and really left an impression on us. She would be the first of us to land a job abroad, at Versace, which gave us the confidence that even we Belgians could make it internationally.

Martin and I went out a lot in Antwerp. Valentino was a gay club where people mainly came to disco dance and flirt. At school, I was already developing my own style. I knew that color was my thing; that much was obvious, even in my earliest drawings. My style was a bit futuristic, experimental, which was obvious too. By then, my wardrobe was less extreme, much less glam rock, since that had become a bit *passé*. Suddenly Versace and Armani were there, the first wave out of Italy, like a breath of fresh air. Then came the French designers, Mugler, Montana, and then another wave of Japanese designers. That happened later, but from that moment on, fashion continued to wash over us in waves. It was incredibly exciting, everything was always new. They were all independent designers with their own unique statements. We didn't pay much attention to politics, but our attention to fashion was obsessive.

Martin was a nice guy. He was still grappling a bit with his iden-

tity, though mine was clear-cut: boys. I wasn't attracted to Martin, and I couldn't be what he needed, even though we would share a hotel room when we traveled. At times he would talk about his girlfriend, Marina, who was repeating her final year at Sint-Lucas in [the province of] Limburg, and determined to follow him to Antwerp. And I got to know his cousin Josiane Margiela and her friend Inge Grognard, who would often do odd jobs for us. Inge would go on to play an important role in our lives as a makeup artist, since fashion wasn't only about the clothes. She was the only one who fully understood us.

Martin and I took evening classes in photography and put together our own fashion shoots for school assignments. Inge Grognard took care of makeup, and she and Josiane were our models. Eventually, we took them to Cinderella, which was more of an artistic space than a fashion scene. People there dressed to the extreme, which is partly what made it such an important place.

Our first year was focused on doing and studying. We paid attention to what was happening in Milan and Paris, but it wasn't anything we were made aware of in the program. We had to discover it for ourselves. We studied costume history in that first year, which I found incredibly fascinating. The year flew by. Through my artist friends Narcisse and Bruna, I sensed a fresh wind beginning to blow. New initiatives were popping up like mushrooms all around us. In Antwerp, the DIY mentality coming out of the punk scene waged a war against the official Rubens Year [celebrating the artist's 400th birthday], which was generously subsidized and sponsored. It was a clash between the old world and the new. Today's Place was founded in Coppenolstraat, a narrow street between Antwerp's academy and the Stadswaag entertainment district. It hosted exhibitions and performances, and on the weekends it was a bar and a discotheque. Former students of the Academy were rebelling against the conservative and individualistic art education they'd received there. They were looking for synergy and challenging conformity.

In that summer of 1977, I went to documenta for the first time with Narcisse and Bruna. There was a focus on social themes, human rights, the Cold War, and the relationship between art and politics. Performances in public spaces. I saw work by Joseph Beuys, Marina Abramović, Nam June Paik.

At one point, I'm not even sure why, I decided to do a performance of my own. I called it *Red Rabbit Virility*. Perhaps it unconsciously stemmed from the trauma of the little rabbit I had crushed to death as a boy. I did a sort of performance where I created a series of images with two real rabbits and a dead rabbit too. I used a self-timer in the spray booth of my parents' Citroën repair shop. It was a very odd setting, surrounded by all that plastic, in red light, but I loved experimentation. I did everything myself, including the make-up; it was a total concept. At a certain point, Narcisse saw the slides and said they'd be great to project at Today's Place. I agreed, but not without a lot of stress, since I didn't exactly feel like an artist. I wasn't aspiring to become one either – I was still involved in fashion.

After the projection at Today's Place, I was suddenly faced with difficult questions that I was not at all prepared for. I simply replied, "No comment." But it had become clear to me that you can use design and fashion to move people – even if anti-fashion was a better word in retrospect. You can use them to express personal and collective identity at the same time.

I don't know who I would have become without Today's Place. I learned how to set things into motion with limited resources and a lot of ambition. It's where I learned freedom, freedom to create your own future.

At the end of the summer of '77, I eyed the incoming batch of fashion students with suspicion. We had no idea that so much new energy was about to come in. That, and the love of my life.

MARINA

Marina's studio is in the center of Antwerp and doubles as her living room. It resembles a painting by 'Le Douanier' Rousseau: a jungle with no hierarchy, no center, leaving everything equally important. It's covered in photos and objects, the curtains are made of coats, anything can be a work of art, there are mannequins draped in the clothes she's working on. In the middle of the space is a wooden cube – a small area that contains her collection pieces.

Let's begin at art school, at Sint-Lucas in Hasselt. Since my parents were always moving, I showed up at that [high] school as a newcomer out of nowhere. And then I was in Martin Margiela's class. He looked over at me and we just clicked in an instant.

It comes as a surprise, to ask Marina about her life and have the name Martin Margiela come up in the first few sentences. I understand the designer is important to her, but for him to be such a huge presence in her life...

That boy was fascinated. I probably had a bigger mouth than everyone else and I wasn't a hippie kid, one of those art hippie kids. So I showed up quite differently. I wore black eyeliner and had strong opinions about everything. I had Martin mesmerized. At last, a change from those silly kids in their clogs. I was very playful back then, I think. Like a wild horse. I was fourteen or fifteen. And he was so uptight, you know. We became best friends, we were always together.

I want to interrupt her and ask her to talk about herself, separate from him. About Congo, where she lived as a child, or about her relationship with her Chinese grandfather. It's Marina I want to see, but Martin just so happens to be entwined with her. He is the story of her life.

I started to make my own clothes back then. I had this home-made corduroy skirt, wide, black, high-waisted. I wore it with my mom's French boots, black eyes, wild hair, and as for the rest... I don't even know what I was wearing on top. I was carrying a wicker basket, so that didn't make any sense. I've always done that. Anyway, it was a mix of hippie and anti-hippie, my own style. Bourgeois, chic,