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Celebrating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Atypical Gallerist – In Conversation with Albert Baronian

Interviews

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Hesper Cane

When **Albert Baronian** opened his first gallery in his apartment in Brussels in **September 1973**, with improvised storage spaces in the kitchen, few would have guessed that would mark the beginning of one of Belgium's most highly acclaimed galleries. Regarding himself as an "atypical gallerist", Baronian navigated the art world instinctively, often implementing clever, novel modes instead of following traditions to blaze new trails.

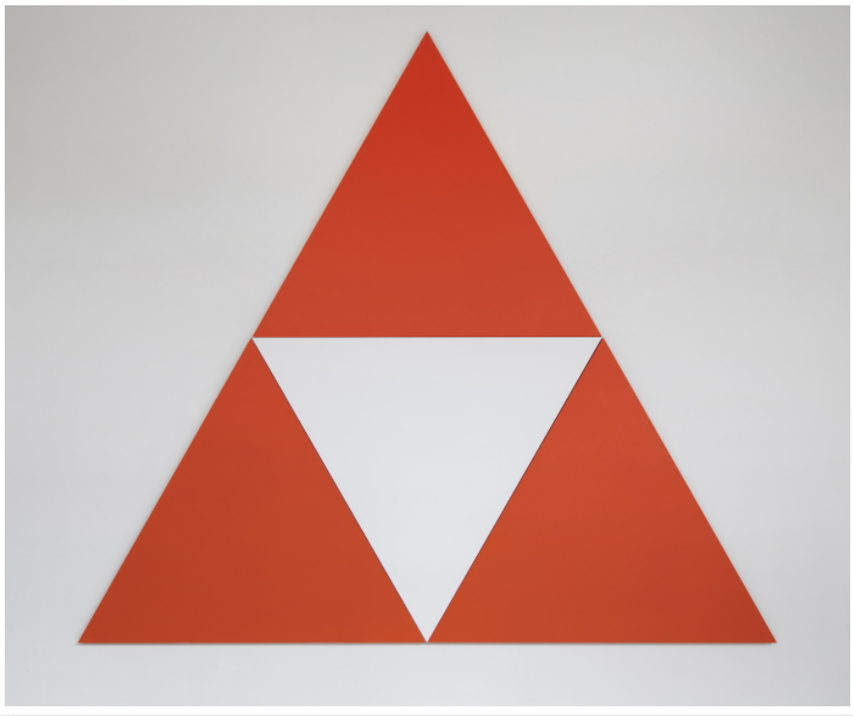
Sparked during his studies in London, Baronian's interest in art first surfaced in the field of journalism with an article on Gilbert & George published in Jean Clair's magazine *Art vivant* in 1971. Approaching the gallerist position almost entirely intuitively, Baronian showcased **avant-garde artists** whose work provoked and probed the status quo, often presenting them with the opportunity to exhibit for the first time. The gallery Baronian was among the first to showcase the work of leading European avant-garde movements, such as the French *Supports/Surfaces* and the Italian *Arte Povera*.

Underlining the importance of attaining an overview in **international terms**, Baronian governed the gallery and continues to do so with a delicate balance, including introducing the Belgian audience to local and international artists. The gallery remains devoted to presenting a program showcasing contemporary practices and pivotal artists and movements from the past five decades.

Simultaneously, Baronian sharply detected as essential to position the gallery in an international constellation and expand the local framework of the Brussels art scene. The gallery Baronian marked its art fair presence just a year after opening at the International Contemporary Art Fair (FIAC) in Paris in 1974. On the other hand, Baronian was instrumental in evolving t**he Brussels Contemporary Art Fair**, currently known as Art Brussels, during his tenure as president of the Association des Galeries d'Art Actuel de Belgique.

This year the gallery Baronian celebrates its **fiftieth anniversary** with the upcoming exhibition *Quinquagesimum* at the Fondation CAB **in Brussels**. Curated by the visionary gallerist, the show maps out five successful decades of one of the oldest active galleries in Belgium. Featuring work by **thirty artists**, including Lynda Benglis, Gilbert & George, Stanley Whitney, Richard Tuttle, and Gilberto Zorio, the exhibition highlights the artists Baronian deems significant in his development, aligning in parallel with the minimalist and conceptual focus of the Fondation CAB.

On the occasion of the anniversary, we talked with Albert Baronian about the qualities defining the atypical gallerist. In an exclusive Widewalls Interview, the renowned gallerist reflected on his beginnings, guiding principles, upcoming exhibition, and more.



Olivier Mosset – Raft, 2019

Intuition Over Strategy

Widewalls: Upon returning from London, you founded your first gallery in your apartment in Brussels in 1973. Could you take us back and tell us about the gallery's beginnings? What inspired you, and how did a gallery in a private flat function?

Albert Baronian: I didn't know what a gallery was; I didn't have a model; I just had a few addresses from close relations and acquaintances. As my first exhibitions progressed, the works piled up in my apartment, even in the kitchen: I realized then that to develop, I needed to move and find a large space.

Widewalls: Early on, the gallery focused on showcasing leading avant-garde artists, presenting some of them for the first time outside their native countries, such as the Supports/Surfaces movement. What was your vision behind the pioneering role of the gallery at this time?

AB: A conversation with Daniel Dezeuze made me realize what I should do and show and, above all, what I shouldn't show. At the

time, people were talking about "avant-garde" art and "avant-garde" galleries.

I realized that I had to show artists who were shaking things up and questioning things.

Widewalls: Many artists exhibited were largely unknown in Belgium but later achieved international acclaim and became household names, including artists such as Gilberto Zorio, Mario Merz, and Giuseppe Penone. What informed your choice of artists, and how did your exhibition strategy evolve?

AB: I didn't have a strategy (I hate that word), and I still don't have one. In the beginning, it was through encounters with artists led by others, but what motivated me was the fact of finding myself in front of a work that asked me questions, that I couldn't grasp and understand right away.

Mario Merz – Hagoromo, 1968

The Atypical Gallerist

Widewalls: Introducing the Belgian public to the Arte Povera movement also propelled the gallery to international success. How did this affect the gallery's trajectory and operation principles?

AB: It's important to place oneself in a broader context (Europe, the United States).

This encouraged me to travel and take part in the international fairs that were beginning to emerge.

Widewalls: Delta quickly evolved into Gallery Baronian, now regarded as one of the oldest galleries in Brussels. How would you describe this necessity to change the gallery's identity? What constitutes the concept of the "atypical gallerist"?

AB: A gallery must be linked to the identity of a personalizable individual. It is important not to follow the corridors traced by fashion, coteries, groups, associations, chapels, etc...

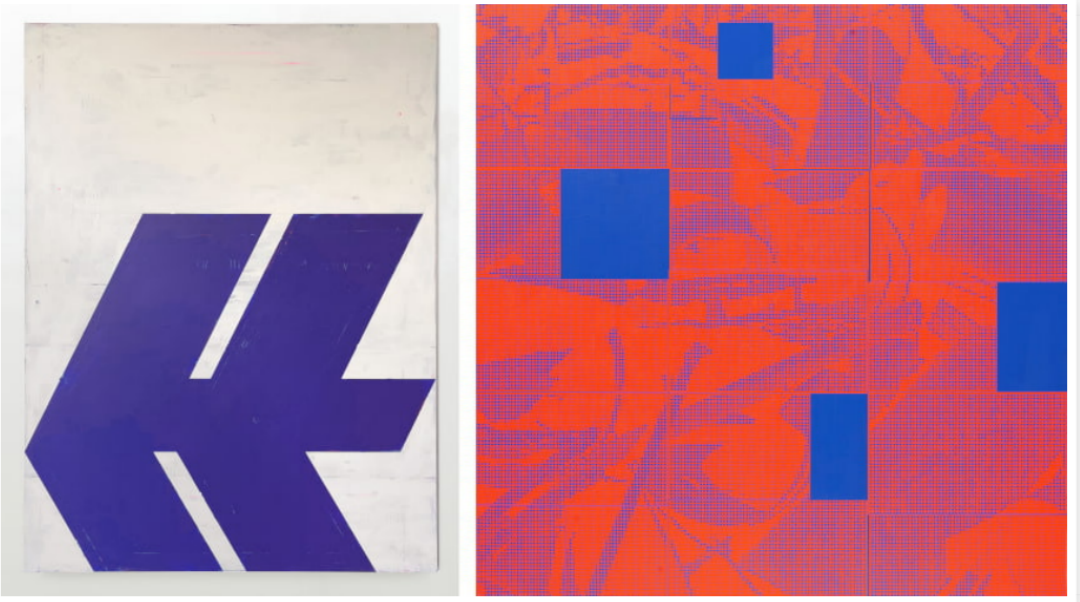
The gallery owner (this profession is a commitment) must be a straight shooter.

Widewalls: The trailblazing position of the gallery arose out of a post-1968 climate, witnessing the dematerialization of art and actively positioning itself at the forefront of the processes. How did you navigate this specific constellation concerning the market? What were the challenges of the market then, and how have the circumstances changed?

AB: Art is a cultural good that has also become (capitalism obliges)

an economic good.

Don't be fooled; I'm adapting; the market can continue to circulate the ideas conveyed by true artists, i.e., to work towards a better society.



Left: Alain Bilteresyt – Untitled 108-4, 2022 / **Right**: Yves Zurstrassen – 22.04.04 – VERMILLON ET BLEU, 2022

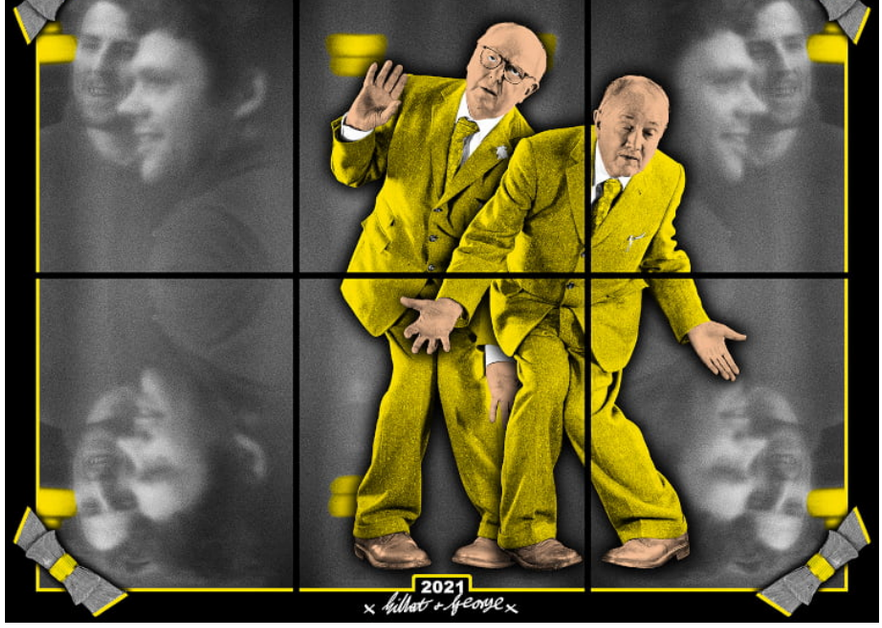
Quinquagesimum at the Foundation CAB

Widewalls: This September, you are celebrating your fiftieth anniversary as a gallerist with a group show at the Foundation CAB in Brussels featuring the works of artists you collaborated with or continue to work with. Could you tell us more about this momentous display?

AB: I wanted to mark the occasion and show artists I had shown before they had achieved success and fame (artists who are now represented by other, more powerful galleries). The choice was also based on the spirit of the place (Fondation CAB), so I'm not showing figurative works. I want to show artists, through the works they have chosen, who have been important to my development: all generations included.

Widewalls: The exhibition will feature artists you worked with in the past or continue to collaborate with, such as Gilbert & George, Lynda Benglis, and Bernd Lohaus. What were some of the memorable collaborations or the ones that made a significant impact on you?

AB: Artists like Merz and Zorio had an impact on me through our conversations - just like Dezeuze at the start of my career. It's important to think about the role of the gallerist in relation to the artist, in the history of art and its market.



Gilbert & George – MORN, 2021

Making Contrasts

Widewalls: With half a century in the business, you have demonstrated an evident talent to foretell success. Who are the artists we should keep an eye on today?

AB: I'm less assiduous in discovering new artists, I visit fewer studios than I used to, but I still take risks from time to time. For example, at the same time as the *Quinquagesimum* exhibition at the Fondation CAB and *Da Torino* (showing works by Griffa, Paolini & Zorio), I'm showing a very young artist (first solo show), Yann Bronder.

I enjoy making contrasts.

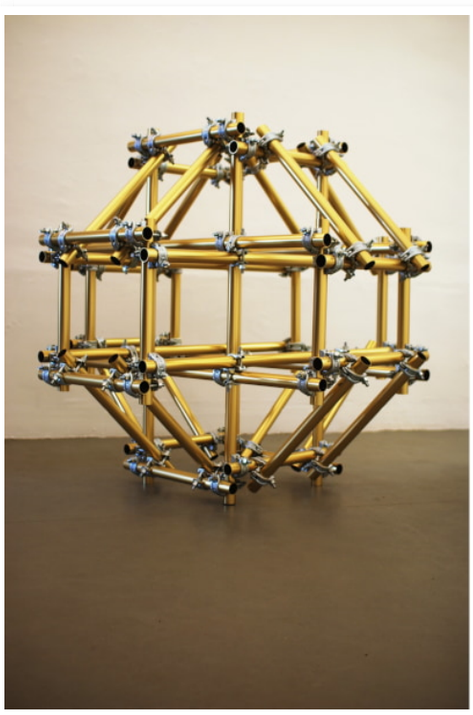
Also, in November, the gallery will be exhibiting a great artist of my generation, little shown but very important in art history and not commercial: Hamish Fulton.

Atypical gallerist!

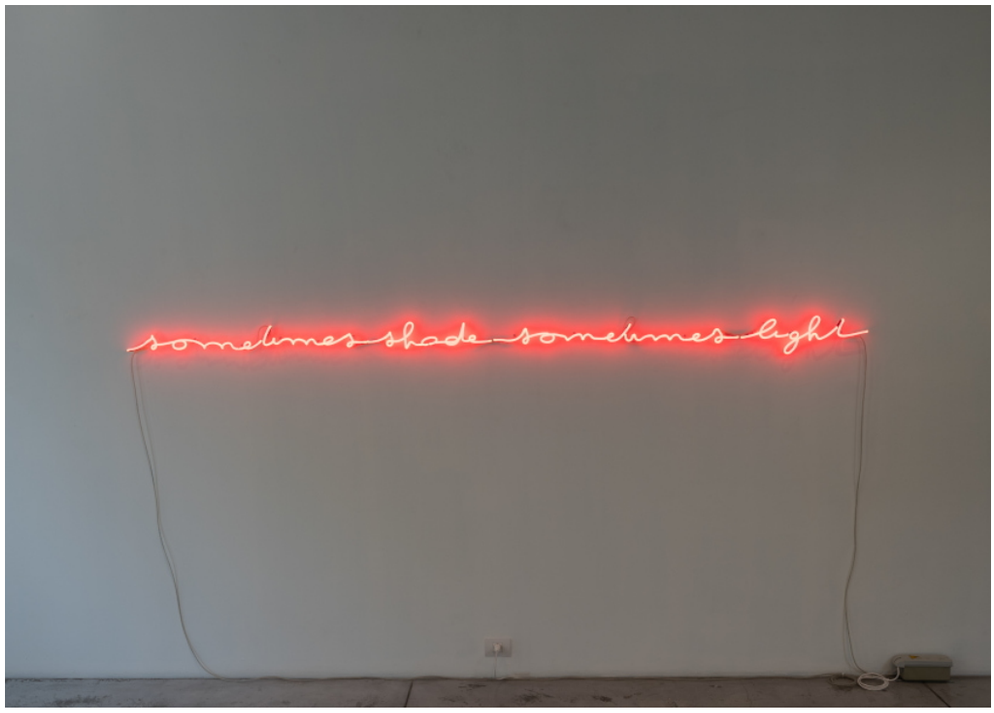
Widewalls: What is next for you? Could you reveal some future endeavors for you and the gallery?

AB: At 77, I'm no longer planning for the future.

Maybe, I'm thinking about my exit.



Left: Xavier Mary – Condensed Structure – gold version, 2009 / **Right**: Lionel Estève – Chant géologique, 2017



Marie José Burki– Sometimes shade sometimes light, 2017. Photo: Vincent Everarts

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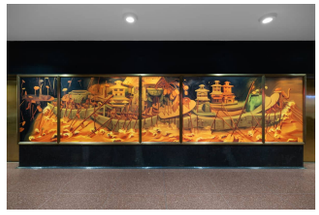

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