

## MY STORY / OUR STORY

**"You should know that long before that date—January 25th—I had already been married to art for many years."**

**But this story begins a few months before January 25, 1971.**

A friend of mine is getting married. The wedding ceremony takes place in a small castle. What am I doing? I am restless, pacing up and down with a drink in my hand, to the phone and back. I have a date with a field hockey girl named Tineke. I walk back when suddenly someone named Leonie appears in my environment. She tells me she studied medicine and is about to leave for Tunisia to work in some remote area.

**I respond, "That's not going to happen, you going to Tunisia."**

**"That's not going to happen?" she repeated. "Why not—are you deciding that for me?" I'm my own boss.**

"No, you're not going—at least not after going out with me. And after that, you won't *want* to go to Tunisia."

**"What an arrogant snob you are," she said.**

"Yes, but I'm saying it quite nicely, aren't I? Tell you what—I'll call you this week and we'll plan a date."

Leonie worked at the hospital in Sittard, so that's where I had to go. And yes, of course—she never went to Tunisia. Well, not until much later, on vacation... with me.

We knew it immediately.

She made one thing clear right away. **"Just so you know, I always want to work—and not just a little. I want to work very hard. That's non-negotiable."**

And I said, "Well, I've got something to share, too. I'm an art collector, and I decide for myself what I want to buy. That's not up to you. And it's not just ordinary art—a pretty picture on a wall. It has to be rough, it has to hurt. My name isn't Pijnenburg for nothing. My German teacher even used to call me '**Herr von Schmerzenburg**'."

We get married on Monday January 25, 1971. The celebration takes place at *De Hoefslag* in Helmond, where the Hoedemakers family once had a restaurant with mini-golf. On a wooden annex were dozens of upturned pots with holes in them, where hundreds of little birds fluttered in and out. In my mind, they flew with us, guiding us through life. The air was filled with cheerful chirping.

**And you must understand—at that time, a great shift was stirring in the world of art. Conceptual art reigned like a monarch. In short, the concept—the idea—was what mattered most. It was all about the abstract.**

### **Painting is totally out of fashion.**

Georg Immendorff, responding to Joseph Beuys' remark—"Who still makes paintings nowadays?"—On which Georg Immendorff created paints a rough painting. Across the entire red canvas, he paints a large black cross and Beuys' hat, with the words "**Hört auf zu malen**" ("Stop painting"), perhaps the very beginning of a revival of painting itself.

**Who still wants to hold a paintbrush and smell like paint anymore? Leonie—whom I also called Nientje—is no concept. She is flesh and blood. She would be my rock, my trusted companion. She gives me complete freedom to live out my madness.**

**The 1980s were wild years**—a time of renewed passion for painting, of painting with heart and fire, of forging new myths. **Neo-Expressionism**. Everything is wild in those days. There are the *Neue Wilden* from Germany. **Baselitz**, one of the early figures, lives in East Germany. He climbs over the Wall, fell headfirst—and from that day on, **he paints everything upside down. The art world is indeed turned upside down.** There is Reinier Fetting, and **Die Mülheimer Freiheit**, with artists like Walter Dahn and Georg Dikow, among others.

I used to often visit the **Riekje Swart** gallery at that time in Amsterdam. Riekje is an extraordinary woman—she has a nose for the newest of the new. She is thin and so light that once, when she had a bit too much to drink, I carry her up the narrow stairs and tuck her into bed. **She is color-blind and is not able to perceive depth. And yet her eye is infallible.** She mainly sells *Figuration Libre* from France, featuring artists like Robert Combas, who paints on large sheets of what was basically discarded cardboard. No frames around them—everything had to be raw and unfinished. I bought big works for as little as 500 guilders, barely 250 euros now.

At a certain moment, I heard Riekje whisper that a major new movement from New York was being introduced by someone named 'Yaki Kornblit'. They called themselves 'graffiti artists'.

Riekje even said, "**Well then, I suppose I'll lose you.**"

Of course, I am going to Yaki Kornblit's gallery on the Willemsparkweg. You had to go down a staircase, like entering some kind of underground. The sharp scent of fresh paint hits your nose. Large, unframed paintings are hang directly on the walls.

Yaki never used frames—collectors has to take care of that themselves. Besides, everything sold out immediately at the opening anyway.

More than once, **I go earlier than anyone else and buy everything—without knowing how I arrange to pay for everything. And honestly, I nearly wet my pants.**

## **Dondi White, Blade, Quik, Futura, Seen, Rammellzee.**

Letters, words—soft sprayers and hard liners, thin caps and fat caps—everything done with spray cans and felt-tip markers. New materials that had never been used like this before.

Never before had we seen Black artists assert themselves so boldly as artists.

They are minorities, descendants of slaves who have thrown off their chains and crowned themselves—just like Napoleon before them—proclaiming themselves as **Free Artists**.

No, they don't call themselves artists. They called themselves **KINGS**. They chose the trains as their canvases—inside and out. Trains as moving books.

Full-blown **battles** are being fought—who can create the most beautiful letters, who can invent new visual styles?

There are **Tags, Throw-ups, Pieces, Top-to-Bottoms, End-to-Ends, and Whole Cars** that snakes from underground to street level, leaving people completely bewildered.

### **“What the hell is going on?”**

*“Who is defacing and polluting our trains?”*

Many people feel unsafe—but some are amazed at the beauty they see.

**Meanwhile**, the Kings are constantly evolving new styles:

The **Tag style**—a quick motion in which the artist put their name down, nickname, often abbreviated, like *Taki 183, Noc 163, Julio 204*—often tied to a street address.

The **Bubble style** The **Block-letter style** The **3-Dimensional style**, are letters that can tumble and walk, suggesting depth. The **Wild Style**, packed with angles, cut-outs, and links that render the letters nearly unreadable. Even **computer-style** and **Gothic-style** lettering emerged.

The artists are in great danger because they have to work in the dead of night. At any moment, they might have to flee—if the police or cleaning crews showed up with threatening dogs on their heels.

Sometimes they are forced to jump onto the roofs of moving trains, and if they don't duck their heads in time when a tunnel approaches... *they could be decapitated.*

I'm not a drinker, but I got drunk on this art.

Not even so much because of the fabulous artworks themselves—but because of the *idea* behind them:

**THE RIGHT TO FREEDOM FOR EVERYONE – THE RIGHT TO BE AN**

**ARTIST**, *A right that, until then, had been reserved only for white people.*

It was Martin Luther King's worldwide cry: **“I HAVE A DREAM.”**

***Beethoven: All men shall be brothers spelen***

I am an advisor to the museum in Helmond and, in collaboration with Jan Bongaarts, we buy some beautiful works for the city's collection. At my request and sponsorship by 'Wim Kuijpers Installaties' we also make a loose-leaf catalogue with newly purchased works accompanied by my texts. And the very first catalog of **Rammellzee**, accompanied by a **one-man show** which later picked up by Frans Haks of the Groninger Museum. In Helmond, Jan Bongaarts was disgruntled for quite some time because Rammellzee had called him a '**knucklehead**'. *At the Groninger Museum, there is a huge turnout—at the opening alone, 3,000 people showed up, and they have to take paintings off the walls.*

Rammellzee may well have been the strangest, most bizarre, shamanistic, mythical artist of them all.

He returned—sent from the beyond, from *Bardo*—to deliver his message to humanity. He was a monk from the Middle Ages, from the Gothic era, and he saw that the language needed purification. **The language of the white man was corrupt.** He created **Garbage Gods**—deities revealed in costumes crafted from waste, like Pope Francis washing the feet of a prisoner not so long ago. He conjured **Letter Racers**, battling each other: good versus evil.

**(Rammellzee through early September at Palais de Tokyo in Paris)**

At home, together with my dearest Nientje, we organized exhibitions in our house. Many artists came through, and sometimes the entire house smelled of hash. By then, we had built up a colossal collection.

Looking back, I realize more and more how grateful I should be to have married such a wonderful woman as Leonie. **At the time, it was an impulsive act of absolute certainty.** Throughout our marriage, she always stood by me—generous to our children, generous to the artists. Always listening to the problems faced by artists, to the tensions that came with my role as chairman at Kunstzaal 't Meyhuis, and during my time as advisor to what is now called Museum Helmond. She never let me down. Thank you a thousand times over, Nientje.

I almost forgot to tell you that Nientje also has her own life. Indeed, she worked incredibly hard. In that time of the '70s it was made almost impossible for a woman to specialize in a medical field because of the extremely long working days. They were not assigned a place. She then always got the comment: '**Girl, girl, what are you going to do**'. Derogatory. In that time, men preferred to see the woman behind the counter.

When she finally chooses to become a school doctor, she studies social medicine for two years, then natural medicine and when **she decides by miraculous events** to study acupuncture for 8 years and a number of other short studies. Our house is specially renovated for her practice. She worked until her 75th birthday. Experienced a lot of physical discomfort: in 2009 the misery finally begins when she had a stroke, then two major heart operations, two broken hips, finally so severe heart failure that she could hardly breathe.

We traveled to Norway a year before her death for a painting by Rammellzee that we lent to the Kunsthall in Oslo. A year later in 2024 we went to the operetta 'Fledermaus' in Amsterdam two days before her death. She lived life for 200%. **Now back to art.**

Yaki Kornblit curated important and beautiful exhibitions, but he never spent a cent on producing quality books for the artists. Yaki made millions.

I created several beautiful catalogs, designed by top designer Swip Stolk. I'd often receive a canvas or two from the artist in return, but it was never a financial goldmine for me. Blade, Quik, and Koor all received special editions, and the double catalog *Blade/Quik*—commissioned by the Vendex Food Group under the directorship of Piet van Camp—was awarded in 1993 as one of the *Best Designed Dutch Books*, designed by Swip Stolk.

**In 1992**, I took on a major project: the definitive work '**COMING FROM THE SUBWAY – History and Development of a Controversial Movement.**' Over 300 pages filled with writings by authors, stories from artists, and full-color images.

But the book didn't come easily. I had secured the marketing director of Volvo as a sponsor for 50,000 guilders—but in return, I had to part with one of the most beautiful Dondi White canvases, measuring 200 by 300 centimeters.

There was great interest in the book.

According to a survey, it could have sold up to 100,000 copies.

But the financial crises between 1986 and 1995 threw a wrench in the plans. A Dutch, German, and French edition were released.

The English edition—which was arguably the most important—never came to be. There was a Dutch, German, and French edition. **The English one—by far the most important—never materialized, because the major publisher Abrahams refused to stick his neck out for what they called 'trash graffiti'.** After tremendous effort, we managed to just break even. And yet, it remains the most important book ever published on the history of graffiti art.

In the end, we just about broke even—but it became a book that has been recorded for history.

In 2009, designer Teun van de Wittenboer designed a terribly beautiful book of Blade and his works. It also contains a number of letters that Blade wrote to me. **Teun is also going to design the book that I am writing about Leonie and me.**

We've traveled halfway across the world with our graffiti collection: *Boymans Museum*, 1983 *Groninger Museum*, 1984—and many times after *New York*, *Boston*, *Museum Helmond*, 1984, *Louisiana Museum*, Humlebæk, Denmark 1985, *Leopold Hoesch Museum*, Düren, **RAMMELLZEE's first solo show at Museum Helmond and Groninger Museum, 1987**, Nassauischer Kunstverein, Wiesbaden and Heidelberg Museum, 1987 **MOCA Los Angeles, 2011 with Jeffrey Deitch**, *Musée National des Monuments*, Paris, 1991–1992  
In **1992 Groninger Museum: 'COMING FROM THE SUBWAY – History and Development of a Controversial Movement.'**

To be honest, I became quite exhausted by my graffiti years. Over the years, I've written so many letters—to museum directors, stakeholders, and artists—pleading the case for graffiti artists. There was still little understanding at the time. Yet following my letter to **the first Black mayor, David Dinkins**, graffiti artist Noc 167—who was struggling with addiction—was taken off the streets and given the proper care he needed. Sadly, I'm afraid this also came at the cost of his artistic practice.

You must understand: **the graffiti movement was the last true art movement of the twentieth century.** There are no more movements.

Now there are only **individuals**, drifting like islands in the cosmos..

And the individual has fragmented into **LGBTQIA2S+.**

The graffiti movement is still very much alive, but I would urge the artists to unite in groups that stand for a cause. The freedom they've been given could now be used for the benefit of a society that's on the verge of collapse. Today, in every domain, we need pioneers who can lead us toward new paths—**if we're to avoid downfall. Less Head and more Heart and empathy. That's what I would urge them to reflect on and to reignite the fight. Battles** for the sake of saving us all.



**In 2013**, I sold almost my entire collection to a Frenchman who said he would turn it into a museum. Immediately after the purchase, he began selling the works. That's just how it goes, much like with the proceeds from my children's drawing books—60,000 euros—which I donated to three organizations: **De Cacaofabriek, Stichting Batouri for Africa, and the Theo Driessen Institute**. None of the three ever informed me about what they did with the funds. Let this be a lesson to everyone. I should never have done it that way. One must always set **clear goals**—*together*—in mutual agreement.

**I got to know Phase 2 through Joe La Placa and Guillaume Galozzi.**

*It wasn't a typical encounter—they were young gallerists who stormed in here with tremendous flair and bravado. From Schiphol, they tore across the country in a taxi, heading for the Groninger Museum and the art collectors Wijnand Wildenberg and Henk Pijnenburg in Deurne.*

One of my last major acquisitions is a heavenly painting by Phase 2 in 2019, unearthed from the basement of Gallery KIS in Amsterdam. The canvas had spent years down there, gotten damp, and looked in poor shape. But when they called me and I went to see it, I immediately saw that it was an exceptionally beautiful piece. I would say it was *HEAVENLY*, sprayed in brilliant shades of blue.

*The story only became stranger. It turned out the work was no longer owned by the gallery's proprietor, but by a German man who traded in beauty and hairdressing scissors—because the gallery owner owed him money. After quite some time, the German called me and brought the painting to Deurne himself – and if sealing the deal with a wink from fate, gifted me a menacing toenail clipper on the side.*

The painting found its way to a small village south of Brussels, where it came under the care of restorator **Emily Goncalves**. Tucked away in her atelier, it waited—months passed in quiet restoration, layer by layer, breath by breath, until at last it reemerged transformed. Not merely cleaned or mended, but reborn. **Emily**, as it happens, was also the trusted restorer of the Belgian royal family.

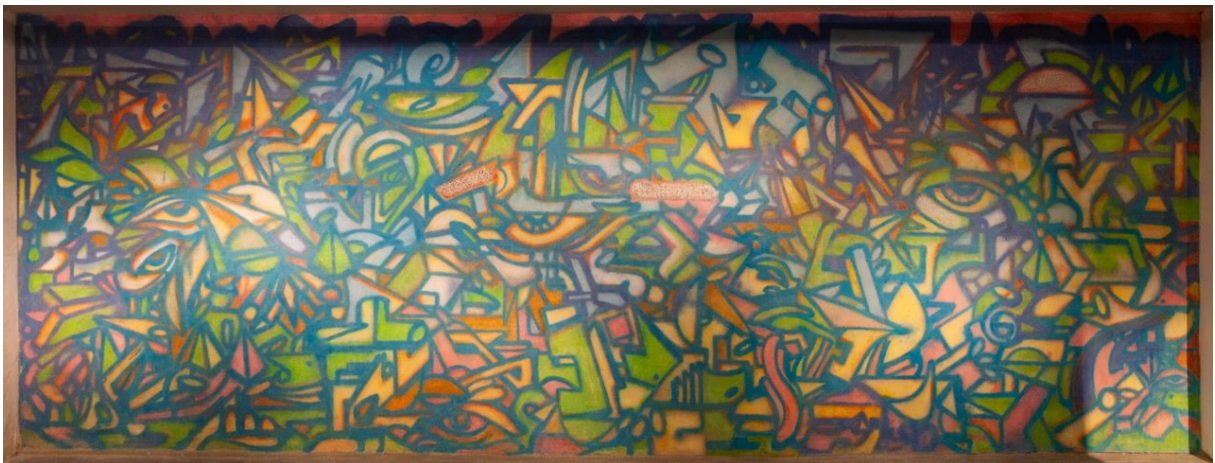




Phase 2, unt., canvas, 520x240, 1992

Soon after, November 2021, the work was loaned to the Groninger Museum, where it rejoined the public it had once been denied. And next year, it will continue its improbable journey, traveling to *the CARP Museum in Bordeaux* as part of the monumental Rammellzee exhibition.

Recently, with support from a grant of 35.000 euro by the City of Amsterdam, another work by Phase 2—painted directly onto the wall of Gallery KIS in 1992 —was brought back to life. Hidden for years beneath layers of white paint, it was carefully uncovered by the **renowned Italian restorer Antonio Rava**. What had long been thought lost was reborn. Nieuwsuur's broadcast on Friday, April 4th devoted considerable attention to this masterpiece by Phase 2.



**Phase 2** didn't call himself a graffiti artist, but a **WRITER, in all caps**. Phase 2 didn't call himself a graffiti artist. He insisted, in capital letters, that he was a *WRITER*. For him it was about the *HIT*—the bombing, the *PIECE*. His work wasn't decoration. It was declaration. His mission was to circulate his name, and you do that by writing it. Not to gain fame or fortune. Anonymity, for him, was essential to the development of the script. He spoke of writers who first moved underground (as Rammellzee would put it): monks composing books in the solitude of their cell), only to later emerge above ground, into the full glare of daylight.



**"Trendsetters, trend followers, innovators, the foot soldiers—entire legions, armed to the teeth, *ready to inflict artistic damage upon a system deaf and blind to our needs—all in the name of the Name.*"** He called his art **Impact Expressionism**.

The Heavenly Blue painting by Phase 2 has become deeply meaningful to me, as my dearest Leonie passed away on December 31st, 2024, while I lay close beside her. No moment was more sacred, or more intimate, than what came on December 31st, 2024. *Her last words were that I was the kindest man she could have wished for, and that I would go to the highest heaven. In the days that followed, she lay in repose in the large gallery space of our home. And there, behind her, hung the Heavenly Blue painting by Phase 2. It stood like a veil between earth and sky. As if it was watching. As if it was waiting.*

**You were—and are—my wonderful wife. And for your children, Deirdre and Brendan, your grandchildren Lieve and Teun, Alex Deirdre's husband, and Sem, Brendan's wife, you were a shining light. Thank you, my dearest Leonie.**

*I miss you, and I remember you every day and every minute.*

This too is part of a beautiful story.

This year I was at Art Rotterdam, where many galleries from home and abroad exhibited their artists. I had saved one gallery to visit last—**'Contemporary Cluster'** from Rome, which was set to present a show of Aaron van Erp's work in July.

When I finally arrived at their booth, I discovered a solo exhibition by **Lorenzo Montinaro**. The walls were adorned with marble sculptures engraved with texts—epitaphs. One of them, in white marble, read: ***RICORDO OGNI Giorno***—which translates from Italian as **'I remember you every day.'** You wonder: is it coincidence—or is something being given to you?



**It couldn't have been more perfect. I was deeply moved and purchased what would become my very last artwork.**

Leonie's most beloved song is 'Nessun Dorma' from Puccini's opera Turandot

*Nessun dorma.*

*No one shall sleep! No one shall sleep!  
Even you, oh Princess,  
in your cold room,  
look at the stars,  
that tremble with love  
and with hope.*

*But my secret is hidden within me,  
my name no one shall know.*

*On your lips I will speak it,  
when the light shines,  
and my kiss will break the silence,  
and make you mine.*

*(No one shall know his name...  
and we must, alas, die, die!)*

*Vanish, oh night!*

*Stars, fade away!*

*At dawn, I will triumph!*

*I will triumph! I will triumph!*

*ART WILL WIN !*

*LOVE WILL WIN !*