

# STEFAN VERVOORT

## OF HOTELS, THEATERS, AND ISLANDS: RAYMOND BARION'S ISOMETRIC PAINTINGS

There is no such thing as either man or nature now, only a process that produces the one within the other and couples the machines together. Producing-machines, desiring-machines everywhere, schizophrenic machines, all of species life: the self and the non-self, outside and inside, no longer have any meaning whatsoever.

– Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps death and death alone, the reversibility of death, belongs to a higher order than the code.

– Jean Baudrillard<sup>2</sup>

'We seem to be entering an era of paper architecture,' proclaimed the editorial of the Dutch architecture journal *O*, if somewhat warily, in winter 1984.<sup>3</sup> Given the increased consonance of postmodern art and architecture, the editors called for an exploration of those practices that 'experiment with common conceptions of ... architecture and urban planning,' be it through 'architectural production and design, painting and sculpture, or writing and analysis.' On the cover of the magazine, a rich isometric landscape, painted by the Dutch artist Raymond Barion, voiced their intention: it heralded work that traversed art and architecture, reflecting upon the limits and conventions of both fields at once. Barion's work featured extensively in the issue, which contained an interview with the artist and a review of a 1981 exhibition catalogue published on the occasion of his solo exhibition at the Department of Architecture and Engineering of Delft University.<sup>4</sup> Still, the cover of *O* also betrayed the awkward epistemological claims placed upon the work. As the journal's subtitle read, the primary aim was to recuperate these paintings for 'architectural design, research, and education', or more overtly still, 'to render Barion's work productive for research into architecture.' If interdisciplinarity thus was hailed at first, this approach soon morphed into its opposite, engaging one side of the equation – architecture – solely.

Up until today, all but one of Barion's solo exhibitions and presentations took place in architectural departments, faculties, or institutions.<sup>5</sup> As a consequence, the scant reception of his work is colored by an entwined open-mindedness and conservatism that applauds the work's hybridity, yet mostly favors its pertinence to the field of architecture or antagonist schemes of disciplinarity.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, Barion never fails to stress the artistic – and then especially painterly – address of his work. Asked by interviewers Rob van der Bijl and Erik Pasveer about his preoccupation with architecture, he wryly notes that 'architecture is included in my canvasses simply since we live in an architectonic space,' stating twice, for the record, that he is 'actually a landscape painter.'<sup>7</sup> He references precursors like Francis Bacon or Cézanne, and underscores the aesthetic experience as constitutive of his work. Acquainted with the deskilling and the radical reformation of authorship introduced by Duchamp and developed in the 1960s and 1970s, he also acknowledges the conceptual and historical contradiction of being a painter in and after the 1980s: 'my isometric images are for bench workers,' he remarks ironically, for 'they mobilize a zero degree of technique ... something that could be done in kindergarten, so to say.'<sup>8</sup> Aside from the reference to architecture, then, the image on the cover of *O* also testified to a distinct historical episode in painting and art in general.

To discern the conceptual and aesthetic complexity of Barion's paintings, I would like to propose a dialogical, "third" mode of approach. Such a "third" path, as Michel Serres has argued, not only continuously negotiates the claims of art and architecture, but also delineates a mode of knowledge production that hovers in-between two distinct epistemological fields.<sup>9</sup> This text discusses three such "third" motifs: hotels, theatres, and islands. Deliberately put in the plural, the motifs trace how architectural culture and post-conceptual painterly strategies traverse Barion's practice, and thus, how referential meaning to the fields of art and architecture is constantly suspended. Most importantly, the motifs feed into Barion's main inquiry: how to think outside an overarching, all-inclusive, and in fact interiorized, space of capitalism. While Barion's work at times may come across as apocalyptic, his answer to this question is first and foremost a militant one, incorporating critical distance as an ultimate horizon.

### HOTELS

In August 1980 Raymond Barion travelled to the United States: he visited Philadelphia, Boston and Washington, and roamed the island of Manhattan, New York. In this last stop on the journey, he experienced for the first time what had been (or in fact still was) the epicenter of modern culture in the 1920s and 30s, the breeding ground of Pop and Minimal Art in the 1960s, and the urban and architectural translation – as well as the lingering stagnation in the face of the 1973 oil crisis – of unbridled capitalism. He recounts how he was dazzled by the electric signs and billboards on Time Square, and deeply affected by the sheer size and generic structure of the metropolis.<sup>10</sup> In 1983, as his wife worked as intern in the offices of influential architect Peter Eisenman, Barion returned to the city. He explored Eisenman's offices for some three months, met with the *crème* of North-American postmodern architectural culture – like Eisenman, John Hejduk, and Jeffrey Kipnis – and attended openings and dinners. The then-emerging art critic for the journal *Art in America*, Hal Foster, toured him around the local galleries. Now, Manhattan proved not only a collection of tantalizing skyscrapers mushroomed from the belly of capitalism, but the nucleus of artistic and architectural postmodernism as well. Set on channeling these experiences into what was hitherto a strictly sculptural body of work, in 1980, Barion bought an airbrush kit in Manhattan, travelled back home, and decisively started painting.

Named *Hotel* (1980), Barion's first painting depicts an undulating landscape of interconnecting sheets and cardboard-like clouds that announce a "skyscraper-machine" made up from deconstructed, and then recomposed, architectural parts. Set on a plinth that arises from a sea or a lake, the structure extends from ground to sky in a predominantly vertical rhythm composed out of three sections: a transparent and/or reflecting lift on the right, a thick and mirroring curtain wall on the left, and colorfully stacked floors in the middle. This middle section is compartmented in turn: a wave of letter keys identified A to Y shows at the bottom; a series of cyan organisms driven by a large piston and a crankshaft, and a striped awning and a magenta, arcade-like structure near the middle; and a clamped-on truss structure clad with a pixelated billboard of a lying nude on top (but only, the artist stresses, when seen from afar). The structure is appended with brimming, slightly over-sprayed letters HOTEL. 'Through that word at the exterior, the feeling of something "immense" arises,' the artist muses mysteriously, 'something that one can "enter", a hotel.'<sup>11</sup> Still, entering Barion's hotel seems out of the question: its lift is not attached to the structure, entries or exists are missing, and the letter-machine seems designed for disconcerting, if not downright disquieting, purposes. In fact, the structure constitutes not a building but a mere accumulation of surfaces, a conglomerated mass of depthless façades that are completely flat, much like the cardboard clouds and mock-up terrain surrounding them.

In his 1984 article 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late-Capitalism' Fredric Jameson famously recounts the experience of entering the lobby of John Portman's Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles. Embellished with mirror-clad escalators and elevators as well as with a miniature lake in the centre of the lobby, the Bonaventure constitutes an intoxicating and hallucinogenic environment. 'The Bonaventure aspires to being a total space, a complete world, a kind of miniature city,' Jameson wrote, which 'ought not to have entrances at all, since the entryway is always the seam that links the building to the rest of the city that surrounds it.'<sup>12</sup> Arrested in a spatial and temporal vacuum, the hotel for Jameson impedes all physical

and cognitive orientation, immersing the subject in a totalized, synesthetic experience. Much in a similar way, Barion's *Hotel* conveys the cultural condition encountered in America at the onset of the 1980s: here, too, time is 'brought to rest', and various aesthetic components in the work could be held to anticipate Jameson's analysis.<sup>13</sup> Still, to fully align the two would be a mistake: *Hotel* is no interior and its aim is not to disorient. The work does not proclaim a spatial immersion or enclosure, nor does it impede us from taking position in a fragmented and disintegrated world. On the contrary, even. In *Hotel*, space is not fractured or directionless, but unitary and uniform. Space constitutes an interminable visual field, upheld by the grid-based organization, which extends diagonally throughout the composition. Emerging from the landscape and transfigured into the axonometric plinth, the grid inaugurates a boundless terrain that consumes and eludes us, incorporates and holds us at a distance. More specifically, this continuity arises specifically through isometric projection. It is the order of the isometric projection that governs the totalizing composition of the image, and which, as Yve-Alain Bois has noted, aims 'not so much to render infinity or the illusion of infinity visible (that is impossible) as to make it thinkable.'<sup>14</sup> Isometric projection conveys a cognitive or psychological sense of boundlessness, not a visual one. By transforming a fixed and hierarchical perspective into a multitude of even, parallel points-of-view, it imagines rather than depicts an all-inclusive universe – a universe that, in *Hotel*, goes up all the way to, and eventually over, the edges of the canvas.

In this sense, the cultural condition evoked by Barion's work only obliquely relates to Jameson's. All elements common to their work – the transposition of essence by surface, the sultriness of spectacle, the reproduction in mirror-clad façades, the uprootedness of lifts and rotating apparatuses, the sensual affectivity evoked in flickering billboards – here first and foremost stage an all-over imaginary, recalling the totalizing environments and technological hubs of late-modern architectural projects like Superstudio's *Life*, *Supersurface* (1972) and Haus-Rucker-Co's *Palmtree Island* (1971), rather than the mirror plays of the 1980s. Indeed, the phantasmatic aesthetic of architectural luminaries such as Manfred Orner has greatly influenced Barion: the notion of "technological nature", grid-based spatial organization, and machine-based architecture are ominously present in the work and its preparatory collages and drawings. Yet the most explicit (and productive) reference would probably be that other hallmark of postmodern architectural writing, Rem Koolhaas's *Delirious New York* (1978). Building on the urban history of a city that 'knows no external escape ... only interior pleasures,' Koolhaas's book delineates the overall coalescence, and thus the eclipse, of oppositional concepts and categories in Manhattan.<sup>15</sup> The publicly staged spectacle of the Otis lift is described an intertwining of pleasure and fear; the 24-hour possibility of bathing in Luna Park, Coney Island coalesces day and night in an 'electric city'; and the cinematic machine of Radio City Music Hall combines nature and culture in technically and chemically induced sunrises and sunsets going round the clock. For Koolhaas, these examples demonstrate the way in which 'Manhattanism' obliterates difference both as a conceptual and aesthetic category. Manhattan deliriously suspends 'control and de-control', 'creation and destruction', so as to incorporate and effectively neutralize all viewpoints and ideologies. 'The Metropolis is an addictive machine, from which there is no escape, unless it offers that, too...' he wrote as a conclusion – and this potential escape, this overturning of the system from the inside, is what the revisiting of capitalist history, and the mirroring of this history in design principles, of *Delirious New York* seems to be all about.<sup>16</sup>

Taking hints from Koolhaas's book – which the artist received from Jeffrey Kippnis at Eisenman's offices in New York, in January 1984 – Barion's aesthetic is also 'delirious'. The vertical composition of *Hotel*, a part of which evokes 'sphinx-like figures' for one author, dialogues with Koolhaas's *Hotel Sphinx* project (1975-76), while a field of rotated staircases-turned-trees-and-oil riggings positioned in a desolate, lunar landscape in *Oase* (Luna) (1981) hints at Luna Park, Coney Island as described by the Dutch architect.<sup>17</sup> These works and many others following them evoke artificially and hermetically sealed-off worlds. They tell of cognitive universes that disquietingly conflate the real and artificial, nature and culture, or life and death, all the while psychologically luring in the viewer through linguistic plays and suggestive markers. In this smooth and continuous landscape there are no rifts in the sand, no breaks in the sensuousness of the surface, no escape whatsoever. The question is: what is Barion's position vis-à-vis this all-encompassing regime? Does he subscribe to the evacuation of difference noted by Koolhaas, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and Jean Baudrillard alike? Or does his work suggest alternatives that obstruct the tantalizing mixture of capital, machines, and desire?

## THEATRES

Enlarged in format – from 200 x 160 cm to a striking 280 x 200 cm – and injected with historical subject matter, *Theatre*, made in 1981, suggests a provisional answer. In the painting's lower left corner, a canopy and a series of cyan organisms reveal indebtedness to the mirror plays and architectural shapes of *Hotel*, now posited against a desert backdrop. From there, the gaze veers towards the centre of the work: a quasi-Roman amphitheatre, adorned with classicist columns of stacked-up police caps, holds on its upper ring two large searchlights that illuminate the orchestra and an analytical drawing in the lower part of the structure. In and by them, divergent categories seemingly merge into one: the transparency of the analytical drawing and opacity of the blinding lights; the fleetingness of the deconstructed theatre and its centralized, radial policing; and, more generally, the conventions of architectural representations and those of landscape painting. *Theatre*, Barion has commented, stages 'the evacuation of the event, the vacuousness and substitutability of things,' adding that, for him, 'mainly the searchlights are important.'<sup>18</sup> At first sight, this reversibility of objects and concepts, the depletion of aesthetic categories and conceptual formations, is what is being staged in the theatre.

But, then again: not entirely. For the lights also announce a disruptive or at least discrepant detail hovering over and above them, namely, a section of Guarini's San Lorenzo church in Turin, one of the most famous and beautiful Baroque churches known today. The church is laden with a referential density, a gravitas that substitutes the superficiality and illegibility detectable in the rest of the painting for historical and cultural weight. Most importantly, the San Lorenzo stand-in tears apart the viewing experience. While the common perspective of the isometric landscape is top down, the church is seen bottom up, adhering to the logic of the pictorial field while effectively "flipping it". The church introduces a fold in the boundless imaginary of isometric painting, destabilizing the aesthetic experience and distorting the cognitive projection of the viewer. As such, in *Theatre*, boundlessness is corrupted by a 'hyperventilation of the gaze,' to use R. Sierksma's terms, an oscillation of the interpretation that turns the painting either illegible (like the crossing point of the searchlights) or allows its categories to grow apart and to be inspected in their separateness (like the individuation of pictorial elements as exemplified by the "upturning" of the San Lorenzo figure).<sup>19</sup> Using a simple artifice, these different interpretational modes introduce a rift in the all-consuming universe, working both within and against the dominant isometric order.

This 'hyperventilation of the gaze' has been traced in Barion's reception, yet the way in which it reverberates with painterly practices of the 1980s hitherto has gone unnoticed. Especially in Germany, where visual artists again took up painting – sometimes in a reactionary way, sometimes interestingly incorporating the legacy and structural shifts of conceptual art – the production and public reception of painting was expanded through lecture-performances and publications, new forms of media and technology, and spatial installation. Thomas Bayrle's *Stadt/Tapete* (1981) and *Auto* (1983-85), for instance, align painterly production to the mass production and urbanization processes of postwar Germany, but also effectuate such processes in the pictorial field, undermining illusionism through what Jean Baudrillard termed 'miniaturization'.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Thomas Huber's *Rede über die Sintflut* (1982), *Zur Perspektive* (1983), or *Die Aggregatzustände des Bildes* (1986) incorporate the viewing process in depictions of the painting's spatial installation, analytical schemes of vision, or allegories of the image, thus staging and simultaneously disturbing the pictorial experience. And in Thomas Schütte's *Plan XXX* (1981) or *Ein Stück mit 12 Aufzügen* (1987), the viewer is coaxed to enter the image only to find himself already represented there. Each in their own manner, these paintings problematize the mimetic contract of representational painting after conceptual art. They make ambiguous the aesthetic experience through formal, discursive, or linguistic play, formulating a spectatorial address that is not unlike the conditional or provisional "stay" at a hotel (hence Barion's comment that his paintings 'do not lodge, nor embed the viewer,' and hence the ominous incorporation of hotels, motels, and vacation resorts in painterly practices around that time). Put differently, as the mimetic contract between work and viewer was foreclosed in and by the self-conscious aesthetic constructs of conceptual art, by the 1980s, the task for

painting and art at large was to "rethink representation".<sup>21</sup>

Clearly, Barion's affinity to these peers is strong. Not only has the artist invited several of the aforementioned peers to his class at the School of Fine Art and Design St.Joost, Breda – Bayrle, Huber, and A.R. Penck among them – but his paintings equally resonate with the themes and tropes addressed in their work.<sup>22</sup> In *Aqua* (1982), for instance, the historical and conceptual contradiction of "painting" after conceptual art gives way to an isometric water theme park much along the lines of Huber's writings.<sup>23</sup> Split between an ellipsoidal pictorial field and a bare, monochrome canvas, the work balances between figure (ellipse) and ground (canvas), between viewing and "reading" the work (in the Latin word *AQUA*), and between two (historical) modes of painting alike: illusion and immanence, figuration and abstraction. In placing the viewing process centre stage and contaminating this same process while doing so, the work reflects its own pictorial constitution similar to Thomas Schütte's *Hauptstadt II* series (1984) and linguistic banner *PRO STATUS QUO* (1981).

Barion's radical critique of vision and visualization reoccurs in *Projector* (1983) and *Arena* (1982). In the former work, an old camera transforms into a Stasi-like building that towers over the landscape and which is appended with cryptic signs, streetlights, and a crypt-like entrance at the bottom. The tower projects (or entraps) an empty, spectral image upon (or from) the world, channeling and neutralizing vision. In the latter painting, a photographic lens is transformed in an arena that is draped in a capillary type of marble and appended with the Latin phrase 'a posse ad esse (non valet illatio)' – freely translated: 'a mere possibility of existence (doesn't make things real)'. It depicts the final scene of Bizet's opera *Carmen*, in which the protagonist's lover is killed, at the very same moment as the bull, outside the arena, thus staging these murders in and next to the photographic apparatus. In this sense, both paintings incorporate and rework the notion of the camera as a deadly trap; they critique, much along the lines of Guy Debord's and Walter Benjamin's writings, the degradation of subjectivity and the waning of aura under the conditions of modern technology. Photography and cinema not only equal death, but they also obscure other and perhaps more pregnant forms of violence taking place outside the medium – for instance, in the deathbed at the bottom of the tower, or the murder taking place at the entrance of the stadium. These paintings thus explore how painting, even if dominated by newer media, can still reflect upon processes and technologies of visualization. They elaborate a vision on painting as intrinsically critical of the aesthetic experience, right at a time when painting itself – for the umpteenth time in recent history – was publicly declared "dead".

In *Theatre*, too, death lurks around the corner: it hides in the technology of the searchlights that withdraw a potentially maleficent act from sight, and more generally, in the reversibility and symbolical demise of categories and oppositions. Still, *Theatre* remains among the more optimistic of Barion's works. Next to the arena, a blue-skied and palm-treed oasis radiates a sense of hope, even of utopia, in a zone detached both from the horizon and the isometric field. Contrasting the evocations of death in *Arena* and *Projector*, this peripheral event points to something like an escape route, a flaw within the obliterating order of the isometric that is not necessarily based on any 'hyperventilation of the gaze'. The island, that is, points to a more general or theoretical position hiding within Barion's work: an overhauling or disruption not only of the aesthetic code, but of any regime in general. It traces how and on what conditions the topos of difference operates, whether on a political, critical, or disciplinary level.

#### ISLANDS

Enter *Maginot* (1982). This large-sized and impressive landscape tells again – and most explicitly – of a dominant isometric order, now suggesting a near-totalization of the pictorial field by stretching across to the upper rim of the canvas. The isometry has seemingly transformed into a topological mold, bending and stretching as to grasp more matter within its artificial grid. In that grid, a number of zones or islands are occupied: a plantation of trees and a stencil of a burned piece of vegetal land on the upper and lower left, and a large technological structure that resembles a fortified production plant or an underground military apparatus on the right. Equipped with entrances, staircases, and arrows and numbers, this last island particularly captures the eye, as it is flanked by another field of small, yellow rods, and superposed with a sign-like stencil that depicts a framed tree catching fire. To point out: this last sign is the only aesthetic component that refuses the isometric order. Unlike its serial appearance in *Landscape (Mattresses)* (1982), it here defines something of a zone of exceptionality, a part of the image that forcefully pulls out from the pictorial field, much like the oasis in *Theatre*.

The sign, of course, rephrases the historical fate of the Maginot line as a warning. Named after the French Minister of War André Maginot, this fortification system aimed to safeguard the Franco-German border in the 1930s, only to passively feed into the growth of the Third Reich, and end up defeating its purpose. By constructing and retreating behind a military bulwark – which oversaw all but the Northern borderlines in Belgium, where the German army invaded in 1940, conquering France a mere six weeks later – the French internalized and made possible the looming threat of a new world war, rendering the Maginot Line a symbol for any strategy that people think will prove effective, but instead fails miserably.<sup>24</sup> With trees turning into atomic mushroom clouds, rods posing as anti-aircraft obstacles, and underground bulwarks morphing into large-scale concentration camps (some fortifications taken over by the Germans were effectively turned into factories), such failure haunts *Maginot* and the daunting preparatory sketches for the painting, too. Defense strategies are turned into proxies of death and warfare, as heads with gas masks and gas-blowing chimneys speak of the fear upon which these systems were predicated. In this sense, the sign cautions for a nascent atomic catastrophe, a nuclear eclipse that will wash away everything and force all into bunkers, to which no resistance is conceivable. Not surprisingly, such apocalyptic imagery also found their way into the visual arts of 1980s Germany, as the NATO Double Track decision paradoxically aimed to enforce the reduction of atomic weapons through the placement of mid-range nuclear missiles in various sites in Europe.

But *Maginot* also speaks of a more general failure. As islands become prisons and utopias turn into labor and concentration camps, the work investigates the potential depletion of all types of resistance. It investigates how defensible spaces reverse into their own nightmare, and at the same time, warns against such reversibility. In his book *Utopia's Ghost*, architecture historian Reinhold Martin traces a similar reversal of critical strategies in 'the normalization of utopian exceptionality.' Drawing from authors and practitioners as varied as Louis Marin, Giorgio Agamben, and Peter Eisenman, Martin shows how both the practice and conceptual framework of postmodern architecture surreptitiously coalesced utopia and camp by turning public housing projects into gated communities, and by normalizing these reversals in guidelines and protocols. 'This is exactly what Marin means when he describes Disneyland as a "degenerate utopia",' Martin writes, 'in which the inside-outside oscillation of Utopia proper – its complex, ambivalent, and in a sense still negative relation with the world – is frozen into a fixed representation: in a word, myth. (...) As biopolitics begins its work of normalization, modernity's two poles are forced together; Utopia and camp align, and the no-man's-land that separates them is displaced.'<sup>25</sup> For the author, postmodern architecture (and postmodern culture in general) actively unthought utopia: it foreclosed the possibility for critique first by introducing, and then by accepting, a total and apocalyptic reversibility of things. Instead, the utopian motif of the island requires the active and continuous unhinging of categories like positive and negative, outside and inside. It necessitates that we think through how each island is simultaneously tied to and uncoupled from the world, intrinsically suspended in an unstable and transformative way. As such, Martin concludes his first chapter by reminding us that 'an island is never simply an island' – or that utopia is annihilated when it is considered a simple, static representation. And this last lesson may well serve as a motto for Raymond Barion, too.<sup>26</sup>

For islands, I believe, shape the core of Barion's work. In each painting separately and in the work as a whole, a topology of islands is explored. There are literal islands, like the décor for Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* by Karl Friedrich Schinkel, or the sovereign oasis in *Theatre*. There are architectural islands, like the stand-alone buildings or structures of *Oase (Luna)*, *Piramide* (1983), or *Tempel* (1983). And there are more abstract

islands or islands-as-boundaries, like the fields in Maginot and the geometric mises en abyme in Carpet I and II (both 1986), or the neon offset of the canvas that defines an island within the expansive pictorial field of *Hotel*. In preparatory collages and drawings, too, zones-within-worlds and fields-within-territories abound: a sketch dated 17 November 1980 shows a mise en abyme of different zones and frames, each of them attributed a different type and convention of visualization (from two point perspective in the center to axonometric and then isometric projection towards the edges); another sketch shows how different zones of an isometric order contain separate architectural elements and are individuated into islands. Even in Barion's production process, the island returns, as his works are built up from distinct, island-like parts, each of which is brought on canvas only when the rest of the work is covered for protection. 'I do not build a work following a harmonious principle,' the artist has noted, 'for I can't even see what I am doing as most of the work is covered in newspapers. (...) Only when the newspapers come off, you can see whether it works or not. In the latter case, tough luck.'<sup>27</sup> In this sense, Barion not only depicts islands but incorporates them as a mode of painterly production as well.

Like a catalogue of potential utopian spaces, these iterations and evocations of islands allegorize how difference – aesthetic, political, or disciplinary difference – operates. They shape finger exercises in the island-based creation of an outside "within" an overarching and often-isometric order. But most importantly, Barion's work acknowledges that such utopian zones potentially turn bad. Balancing between frivolity and the uncanny, optimistic Neo-Geo painting and cataclysmic cruelty à la Francis Bacon, his paintings work through the fatal consequences that the normalization of utopian logic, and thus, the neutralization of difference, brings about. Thus the vibrant architectural island of *Hotel* transforms into a death machine comparable to the torture apparatus in Franz Kafka's *The Penal Colony* or the menacing typewriter in Konrad Klapheck's 1955 painting *Schreibmaschine* (two references dear to Barion); and the defensible bulwerk of Maginot becomes an apparatus supportive of fascist ideology and mass murder. In a similar vein, the heart of the geometric islands in Carpet II hides not utopia but the mythical ferryman Charon, who accompanies the deceased across the river Styx but now is impeded from doing so, arrested in a frozen or petrified state. Indeed, death looms within these islands, whether in a literal or more symbolical way. The work implies that such death only is reversed when we remain conscious of the dialogical link between inside and outside, good and bad, utopia and camp – and thus, when these categories both come together and are disentangled.

And if we take this lesson at heart, the premise upon which this text started may finally be unpacked. For Barion references art and architecture not in any naïve or empirical way; rather, he consciously and strategically deploys such references as to keep the work – and its aesthetic and theoretical insights – open. His practice dialogically connects to and simultaneously keeps at a distance the fields of art and architecture, as a way to build in a utopian type of exceptionality. Put differently, his practice as a whole could be considered something of an island, an enclave or a bifurcation that negotiates the formal conventions, aesthetic modes of production, and the latent discourse of two distinct disciplines, and which does so with extreme consistency. Only when we acknowledge this hovering, this rich and complex oscillation, the questions and challenges posed by his work may start to be disclosed.

This essay was commissioned to architectural theorist Stefaan Vervoort, for a publication on Raymond Barion which is planned for the end of 2014. Extra City and O.C.A.M. present a limited edition of a preparatory drawing of the painting 'Hotel'. Proceeds go towards financing the publication.

<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze en Félix Guattari, *L'anti-Œdipe. Capitalisme et schizophrénie* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1972). Here taken from the English translation *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (New York: Viking Press, 1977), p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *L'échange symbolique et la mort* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976). Here taken from the English translation *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 1993), p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Rob van der Bijl, Erik Pasveer, et al., 'Redaktioneel', *O*, no. 6 (1984), p. 1. This and all following quotes from the journal *O* are the author's translation.

<sup>4</sup> See: R. Sierksma (ed.), *Machinale metamorfosen: catalogus bij het werk van Raymond Barion* (ex. cat., Bouwkunde Delft, 1983).

<sup>5</sup> Solo shows in architectural institutions and venues include: 'Machinale Metamorfosen', Ald. Bouwkunde, TH Delft, 1983; 'Isometrische Landschappen', Studium General, TH Eindhoven, 1984; 'De mens een Machine', Universiteit Tilburg, 1984. The solo exhibition at the International Cultural Center (I.C.C.), Antwerp, in 1987, and a group show at Freidus/Ordover Gallery, New York, in 1984, form exceptions to the rule.

<sup>6</sup> 'If one speaks of a development and expansion of architectural analysis with the help of comparison to art and literature, of the utmost importance is the difference between architecture and architecture.' Rob van der Bijl, 'Kunst en architectuur: een bespreking van een analyse', *O*, no. 6 (1984), p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> Raymond Barion, as cited in: Rob van der Bijl & Erik Pasveer, 'Kunst van Raymond Barion', *O*, no. 6 (1984), p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>9</sup> See: Michel Serres, *Le Tiers-Instruit* (Paris: François Bourin, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> Raymond Barion, interview with the author, Antwerp, 27 January 2014. This and all following quotes from this interview are the author's translation.

<sup>11</sup> Barion, as cited in: Van der Bijl and Pasveer, 'Kunst van Raymond Barion', p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review*, no. 146 (1984), p. 82. 'It is in the realm of architecture ... that modifications in aesthetic production are most dramatically visible.' Jameson illuminates Barion's choice for this subject matter, since 'architecture is the closest constitutively to the economic.' See: Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', p. 2 & p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Raymond Barion, preparatory sketch, 1980. Raymond Barion archives, Antwerp.

<sup>14</sup> Yve-Alain Bois, 'Metamorphosis of Axonometry', *Daidalos*, no. 1 (1981), p. 43. Similarly, Sierksma argues that Barion's work speaks of a 'wide, open, coordinate-free space', and that his paintings convey "mental" space, only flat for the eye.' See: R. Sierksma, 'Uitwegen', in: *Machinale Metamorfosen*, p. 38, p. 17 (author's translation).

<sup>15</sup> Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York* (New York: Rizzoli 1994), p. 177. The book originally was published in 1978; quotes are taken from the second edition.

<sup>16</sup> While considering *Delirious New York* 'a fantastic book', Barion would not concur with this analysis: 'What Koolhaas shows in his book, is a capitalist bachelor machine. I think this differs from what Lyotard says about Duchamp, namely that bachelor machines reverse power – they are machines of reversal. Koolhaas, on the contrary, takes on a conservative attitude. What he speaks of is not revolutionary; it aligns with existing power structures. ... What Koolhaas does, Hollywood, too, has to offer.' Barion, interview with the author, Antwerp, 27 January 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Sierksma, 'Uitwegen', p. 35.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14. Barion adds: 'Up until 1960, painting aims to construct continuity between the space of the viewer and the perspectival space of the canvas. (...) Instead of a conglomeration of codified signs, the canvas seems a simple window, or at least, seen from one viewpoint. In my "isometric" canvases, the viewer always seems positioned correctly, but nevertheless is in the wrong position. The eye is directed across the whole surface of the painting. The viewer no longer is anywhere. The nice thing is that, given the enormous height of a building – like in the work *Projector* – the viewer simultaneously looks against, and down upon, the structure. In the switch of the gaze from up to down (or reverse), an "near-dimensional" change occurs.' Barion, as cited in: Van der Bijl and Pasveer, 'Kunst van Raymond Barion', p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> See: Jean Baudrillard *Simulacres et simulation* (Paris: Cahiers Gallilée, 1980).

<sup>21</sup> Hence the title of Brian Wallis's seminal reader in postmodern art, *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984). For a similar argument, see: Louis Marin, 'Representation and Simulation', in *On Representation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 309-319.

<sup>22</sup> Raymond Barion, interview with the author, 23 December 2013, offices O.C.A.M., Antwerp (author's translation).

<sup>23</sup> In several texts accompanying his paintings, Huber describes the image as a water surface that self-consciously reflects the viewer's gaze while displaying an illusionary depth. See, for instance: Thomas Huber, *Rede in der Schule* (Cologne: Vista Point Verlag, 1986).

<sup>24</sup> See: Judith M. Hughes, *To the Maginot Line. The Politics of French Military Preparation in the 1920's* (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>25</sup> Reinhold Martin, *Utopia's Ghost: Architecture and Postmodernism*, Again (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), pp. 24-25. One must credit Sierksma for making a similar argument as early as 1981: 'In all these cases, the metamorphosis of the predefined meaning of an image with two ambiguous characteristics becomes visible. As such, a metamorphosis is a bifurcation, each of both elements of which shapes a dissimulating mirror for the other: there is no third, synthesizing instance.' Sierksma, 'Uitwegen', p. 39.

<sup>26</sup> Barion: 'If you look at things correctly, the whole world starts to resemble a concentration camp. Agamben's text *Homo Sacer* tells of a new condition that has arisen, and which is both medial and global. It has something of a free haven, a space where anything goes. Consider the fact that we cozily watch television every evening while people are killed in Syria. These things all take place simultaneously, in one and the same medium as it were. That is a terrifying thought.' Asked about the retrospective repercussions of this insight for older work, Barion answers: 'Yes, if I look back on things now, I guess that was the point of departure.' Barion, interview with the author, 27 January 2014, Antwerp.

<sup>27</sup> Barion, as cited in: Van der Bijl and Pasveer, 'Kunst van Raymond Barion', p. 6.