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# RENÉ.. DANIELS

Fragments from an Unfinished Novel

WIELS

## Introduction

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René Daniëls was born in Eindhoven in 1950 where he still lives and works. Although his career has been relatively short – the result of a stroke in 1987 – it is widely recognized today that he was an essential contributor to the evolution of contemporary art. Daniëls' first pictorial researches are marked by his love of punk music, and they exude a similarly non-conformist energy and attitude, which he combines in original ways with literary and formal references.

From the start, Daniëls did not hesitate to experiment with different pictorial styles, a trait that quickly made his work stand out. Despite this diversity, some motifs do return – albeit under always-shifting forms and following a dream-like logic (here a brush becomes a cigarette, there a hat becomes a chimney) – and construct a poetic universe that gives free rein to multiple interpretations. As a lover of poetry and literature, writing and language play an essential role in his work and reinforce the ambiguity of his paintings. His titles offer a perfect example: Daniëls juggles different languages, creates wordplays, and coins neologisms; he explores the links between words and images in ways that contrast to the approach favoured by conceptual art, which assumes clear communication.

Early in his career, Daniëls' work gained quick recognition and was shown in the major exhibitions of his generation: *Westkunst* in Cologne (1981), Documenta VII in Kassel, and *Zeitgeist* in Berlin (both in 1982). Towards the end of 1983, Daniëls went to New York for a residency at the art centre P.S.1, and it was during his stay there that he started to work with Metro Pictures gallery, at the time an incubator for artists who are regarded as reference points today. This early success did not keep Daniëls from regarding the art world with a critical eye and from depicting it with biting humour in his work. His self-reflexive paintings abound with references to the academic system, to art critics, to the unbridled pursuit of success. Starting in 1984, the spectacularization of art in the form of the exhibition became a favourite subject, one captured in a motif – often described as a bowtie – that is repeated in a number of his compositions.

Late in 1987, a stroke brought his career to an abrupt halt. The works and archives found in his studio in the wake of the stroke are now part of the René Daniëls Foundation, housed at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven. They are the starting point of this exhibition, which retraces the unique trajectory of an artist who so profoundly influenced the way we look at art in general, and at painting in particular. Daniëls began painting and drawing again about ten years ago and some of the work produced in the past decade is included in this show.