

'The image follows the sound, not the other way around'

Interview with Jef Cornelis about the first four episodes of *IJsbreker*

Koen Brams/Dirk Pültau: In the early 1980s, you created widely diverse productions for television. Het gedroomde boek, an evocation of Maurice Gilliams' *Vita Brevis*, was broadcast in 1980. In that same year, you did a documentary about the Belgian railway, called *De trein voorbij* (The train passed), a short documentary about Jean Brusselmans, as well as a film on the Interior trade fair. In 1981, you completed a broadcast about the Christian Democrat politician, Robert Houben. You also made films about the 'experimental' writers, Daniël Robberechts and Jacq Vogelaar. How do you explain this enormous diversity?

Jef Cornelis: The early 1980s was a time of transition, with major changes in Public Broadcasting. In 1981, we had a new General Director for Television, Bert Hermans. He succeeded Nic Bal when he retired. I believe Hermans had once been employed in the Edmond Leburton government, and he was in every way a socialist. With someone new in charge, it was a question of waiting to see how it would turn out.

K.B./D.P.: *How did it turn out?*

J.C.: The initial signs were not exactly favourable. I met Hermans at a reception. I was talking with colleagues when he came up to me and told me that under his directorship, I would not be getting the same opportunities I had previously enjoyed.

K.B./D.P.: *Had you expected anything of the kind?*

J.C.: Not at all. Fortunately, there would be better news to come.

K.B./D.P.: *How do you mean?*

J.C.: Joz van Liempt retired as head of the Art Affairs service. In the course of 1981, Hilda Verboven was appointed to succeed him. She took over on January 1, 1982.

K.B./D.P.: *Verboven was appointed by Hermans?*

J.C.: Yes, she was one of his close confidantes. Others had their sights on the job, but it was Verboven who got it. However you look at it, her appointment was not disadvantageous for me.

K.B./D.P.: *Why not?*

J.C.: Verboven made sweeping reforms to the Art Affairs service. She had a vision and she knew how to push it through, being nice when possible, not so nice if she had to be. She could work extremely hard and did not give up.

Verboven already had a fair list of accomplishments under her belt when she came to 'Kunst-Zaken' (Art Affairs with two capital A's). As a producer, she had completed several successful projects for the Youth department.

K.B./D.P.: *We spoke with Hilda Verboven. She confided that you sought her out even before she began as department head. Why did you do that?*

J.C.: I do not believe I was alone. There were several colleagues with me, if I remember correctly. I may have wanted to get an idea of who she was and what she stood for. That is certainly possible. I discovered in any case that she was familiar with my work. Better yet, I was in her good graces because of *Ge kent de weg en de taal* (You know the way and the language), a film about village life in Flanders, which I had made in 1976. I felt I could rely on her support and was not proved wrong. Verboven was not easily discouraged. She was not a bureaucrat and she was not a drinker, and that might be the most important of all.

K.B./D.P.: *Before Hilda Verboven took that position, you and several colleagues wrote up a list of demands. We found a document in the VRT (Flemish Radio and Television) archives that includes the following: 'From January 1, 1982, all programmes by the Art Affairs service will be completed by a "realisator" (programme maker), which is to say that in the spirit of the protocol, from that date forward, the "realisator" will also be the person to determine the form of the programme.'*

J.C.: That was not aimed specifically at Verboven. It was part of an overall debate taking place at a higher level than the various departments. The 'realisators' from the various departments had joined forces to come up with a collective list of conditions for the general statutes. The people who were actually making the programmes were always treated like trash. We felt that they had a job to do that was up alongside that of the producers and journalists. Those demands were about how we practiced our profession.

K.B./D.P.: *The discussion was ultimately about power.*

J.C.: Is it ever about anything else in this world?

K.B./D.P.: *Here is another quote: 'The distribution of the budget of the Art Affairs service will henceforth be decided by mutual negotiation between the producers and those making the programmes.'*

J.C.: Obviously! We wanted to be able to subscribe to the programme proposals. That had never happened before. Producers did whatever they wanted. We wanted to give

some meaning to the profession of 'realisator', of those actually making the programmes.

K.B./D.P.: *What was Verboven's position? She began as head of Art Affairs just when you were digging in with that resolute standpoint.*

J.C.: She realized that she could do nothing without us. She defended us.

Economizing

K.B./D.P.: *In 1982, the Public Broadcasting service was hit with a series of heavy budget reductions. The Art Affairs service also had to make sacrifices. The department had to reduce expenditure by 11 million Belgian francs, 25% of its entire budget.*

J.C.: Hilda Verboven had her hands full, but as I said, she knew how to deal with it. The budget cuts did not mean that she did not make serious choices - on the contrary. On her initiative, the entire profile of the Art Affairs department was taken on. Some of the people creating the programmes even had opportunities to make prestigious films. In 1983, I was able to convince Verboven to produce a documentary on the work of the Belgian architect, Charles Vandenhove, based on a script by Geert Bekaert.

K.B./D.P.: *As Public Broadcasting was facing major budget cuts, you managed to make a prestigious and expensive film about a French-speaking architect. That must have taken a big chunk of the Art Affairs budget.*

J.C.: It was moreover a film made in collaboration with an external director of photography, Michel Houssiau. That was not an obvious move, but I would not consider doing it without him. The camera work had to be done with extreme precision.

K.B./D.P.: *How did you convince Verboven to take on the production?*

J.C.: I drove with her to Liege, to Vandenhove's office and home. Afterwards, we all went out to eat at a restaurant. Things immediately clicked between Hilda and Charles's wife, Jeanne. Hilda was impressed by the qualities of Charles's architecture and understood my wanting to work with a director of photography. I have to add here that I also made films that she asked me to make. Do you think that I would make a film on *Europalia Greece* if I had not been pressured into it? Normally, I would refuse something like that. I did it because she asked me to. I even invited her along on a reconnaissance

trip to Greece. I rented a little 2-horsepower Citroën and we spent two weeks exploring the Peloponnesus.

K.B./D.P.: *Did you personally feel the effects of the budget cuts?*

J.C.: I always managed to get by. I never spent money when there was none to spend, but I was inventive in how I used what was available. I worked with video, for example, more than with film. Video could be edited at home, which meant that the editing did not have to be paid for. When you were shooting film, you had to work with external people, and those expenses had to be covered. I always, by the way, worked when everyone else was on holiday and the editing rooms were empty.

Television used to work the same way theatre did: the busiest period was around Christmas and New Year. By the end of June, there was no money left and all the broadcasts were reruns, including my films. I was also able to indicate what my own preferences were for the rebroadcasts.

K.B./D.P.: *After Hilda Verboven's appointment in 1982, there was not only a lot of palaver about major films like the one on Charles Vandenhove, but the whole Art Affairs programming policy was under debate.*

J.C.: And the people who actually made the programmes were there at the table! Hilda Verboven supported us. That much was clear. Together with her, we decided on the programmes for each year.

K.B./D.P.: *Archival documents show that as early as April, 1982, there were discussions about a programme on contemporary cultural life, which Art Affairs would eventually broadcast three times a week, after the news, and a biweekly culture programme, which ultimately became the live discussion programme, IJsbreker (Icebreaker).*

J.C.: Yes, there were new plans. Several of the old formats, including *Dag aan dag* (Day to day), *Puur cultuur* (Pure culture) and *Curriculum*, were discontinued. It was time for something new, but the newest thing of all was that we, those making the programmes, were actively involved in programming policy. Did you know that we were also involved in designing of the recording studio for the current events programme, *Kunstzaken*?

K.B./D.P.: *No, we did not.*

J.C.: That studio was designed by Bob Van Reeth. I furthermore convinced Verboven to include a photograph of Panamarenko and his mother in the standard visuals for the first year. I pushed that one through. 'Panama' had taken the photograph himself with a Polaroid. Panamarenko and his mother appeared on television three times a week. The idea was to use the image to introduce all the Art

Affairs broadcasts: at last, we had a face of our own! But that plan was scrapped. Only *Kunstzaken* and *IJsbreker* were actually introduced by the photograph of Panama and his mother.

K.B./D.P.: *It is unclear in the Art Affairs reports who actually came up with the idea for IJsbreker. In your opinion, who was the guiding spirit behind the programme?*

J.C.: *IJsbreker* was my idea, no one else's. I worked out a concept proposal for the project and defended it tooth and nail.

K.B./D.P.: *How did you come up with the idea?*

J.C.: I cannot reconstruct the exact history, but I do know that I had been brooding about a live programme for some time. I had done live television early in my career – the talk programme *Hedendaagse kerkbouw op een keerpunt* (Contemporary church architecture at a turning point) in 1968 and *The World Question Center*, with James Lee Byars in 1969. I was really pleased with it, but subsequent efforts were all nipped in the bud before they ever had a chance. I believe that, as much as possible, television should be made live. On the other hand, that means that the station takes major risks. When Verboven arrived, I saw an opportunity to do live television. The ultimate concept was simple: at different locations, I wanted to get people discussing a specific cultural subject. For each location, there would be cameramen and sound technicians working under a director. The material was all mixed live in the Brussels studio, where we also had invited guests.

K.B./D.P.: *Where did you get the nerve to do such a daring project?*

J.C.: I do not know. Do you know of anything else quite like it? I certainly do not. I wanted to do something completely different. Twenty years of doing the same thing drives you nuts. I wanted to break free of public broadcasting. I needed air. Television is always pushing, steering, guiding. I had had enough of that. I just wanted something to happen. At those two external locations, people could do whatever they wanted to do. Everyone had his own little 'station'. One here, another there, and one at the broadcasting station itself. The people at the different locations did not know one another. They did, of course, have the sound and the image, but there was that distance. That meant things would happen that were out of your control. Whoever took charge at those little 'stations' was the one who got on the air. Everything happened all at once and no one had control.

K.B./D.P.: *Going through the IJsbreker files, your name seldom appears. Rarely are any interventions of yours recorded in the meeting notes. Was that a strategy on your part?*

J.C.: When you work with other people on a production, you have to go about it differently than when you are just working on the visuals. I knew what I wanted. As long as that steamer was sailing in the right direction, I was satisfied. Is that a strategy? Yes, I guess it is.

An Art Show

K.B./D.P.: *On 13 April, 1982, Hilda Verboven sent a memorandum to Bert Hermans, outlining the programme proposals for 1983. She mentioned a disagreement about the 'biweekly total programme', and wrote, 'Different formulas were considered to give this series of programmes optimal opportunities, including either a show format or a magazine format, or a compromise solution. In order not to directly adopt the structure of Panorama or to fall back into a longer Dag aan Dag formula, it would be better, at least in my opinion, to create an 'art show'. That concept needs to motivate us towards total innovation and creativity, achieving an image and a style of our own. In the last few days, however, some of the programme makers have expressed objections to the 'show' formula. We therefore need to get together again, to reach a consensus and work together on building a project that has a chance. We cannot set off without agreement within the production team. I would therefore have liked a postponement before submitting the definitive plans and accounts.'* Do you remember what this dispute was about?

J.C.: I had called it a show - that is possible. I was in any case in support of that formula, and others were not. As to who they were - Ludo Bekkers perhaps? He did not like the risks that came with live television. Annie Declerck was probably not very enthusiastic either. They were more in support of the classic approach. My fellow programme makers were generally not all that keen. That meant that they would be 'obliged' to go along with somebody else's project. Time and again, I had to get down on my knees to bring people together. Jackie Claeys and Mark De Gees were happy to do it, I think. Stefaan Decostere had major doubts. But I immediately had the technicians on my side. They were attracted to the idea of making an ambitious project like that succeed. When you are involved with a big production, such as *IJsbreker*, it completely absorbs you. I am probably

somebody who regularly needs to be completely absorbed by something.

K.B./D.P.: *It is a complicated programme, with camera and sound crews at separate locations, radio links and live mixing. Was there a lot of deliberation?*

J.C.: There was in any case enough. It was a pleasure to work with such technicians as Frans Nonneman, Julien Vandepitte and John Derkinderen. I apparently get along better with ordinary people than the average director for Flemish Radio and Television...

K.B./D.P.: *On 14 October 1982, Hilda Verboven sent an assessment of the programme proposals for the Art Affairs service to Bert Hermans. That document indicates that there was still no decision about whether it would be in a magazine or a show format. The programme still had no name, although the first broadcast was scheduled for January, 1983.*

J.C.: Things often happened that way at the Public Broadcasting service. Problems only got resolved when there was no more time left.

K.B./D.P.: *How did you handle working that way?*

J.C.: The best thing is to use the way things happen to your own advantage. Otherwise you are just a bird waiting for the cat to pounce. At Flemish Radio and Television, I learned the virtue of patience. I certainly reaped the rewards. I had to wait, then grab my chance at the right moment. It was frustrating to see so much precious time being lost, but if I had stepped on the pedal, the entire project would have imploded.

K.B./D.P.: *There was another Art Affairs meeting on 9 November 1982. By that point, you were no longer discussing a biweekly programme, but a monthly programme.*

J.C.: That was one battle that I unfortunately lost. I expressly wanted a broadcasting rhythm of every two weeks, but it proved financially unfeasible.

K.B./D.P.: *There was still no name, nor was there a subject for the January broadcast, but the technical concept was more or less complete: 'The principle is the video room (specifically the Studio 3 direction room: selected as a decor because it is a real decor, including a workspace and two portable cameras, plus all the other lines coming in. There were also two external locations, each with a camera connected with the video room via radio link. These two external lines made the programme more active, a three-way system.'*

J.C.: The title was not so important. What was essential was that the technical concept was accepted by everyone. In reality, what it came down to was that none of the

directors could see what the others were doing. During that hour, everyone was doing their own thing.

K.B./D.P.: *The decor in the studio was remarkably simple. To quote another report: 'U-matic is installed behind the monitor rack. For three monitors in the studio: have a kind of wooden trellis made, covered with black velvet. (...) Have the windows of the direction room sealed off with cardboard.'* The decor was just cut-and-paste!

J.C.: That is true. We just stacked the monitors on top of one another, like boxes of washing detergent. There was a camera in front of them. At the time, there were no cutting techniques. I wanted to reveal the heart of what happened in television, the place where choices were made. It may well be true that that did not happen enough.

K.B./D.P.: *Where were you actually sitting?*

J.C.: You could not see me. I was next to the sound.

K.B./D.P.: *Why next to the sound?*

J.C.: That was where all the decisions were made. It may be television, where everything supposedly revolves around the image, but the sound is the most powerful signal. The image follows the sound, not the other way around.

K.B./D.P.: *On 18 November 1982, the Art Affairs service had an important visitor. No one less than Hubert Hermans came to check it out. In a report of that meeting, it appears that the General Director of Television felt 'that it must be possible to make art programmes that can reach prime time audiences'. About the technical aspects of Wolkbreuk (Break in the clouds) or IJsbreker – the name of the monthly live programme was still undecided – he was less optimistic: 'Mr. Hermans is afraid that the technical facilities will not be able to accomplish what people want to achieve.'*

J.C.: That is exactly what we did succeed in doing! Technically, *IJsbreker* hit the bull's-eye! It may be that the idea of doing a sample broadcast came up, but I do not remember. By the way, did you know how we finally decided on the title, *IJsbreker*? A lot of names were being bandied about: *Het Verweer* (The resistance), *De Galerie* (The gallery), *De Galerij* (The arcade), *Het Maailand* (The mowing field), *Het Gewoel* (The commotion)... At a certain point, I came up with *IJskelder* (Ice cellar). Then Mark De Geest said, *IJsbreker*. I replied, 'Done. We have now embarked.' The idea of an aquarium filled with ice and the toy icebreaker that began each of the programmes came from Jackie Claeys.

K.B./D.P.: *It is remarkable that Hilda Verboven communicates extensively with Bert Hermans, but far more*

sparingly with Jan Van der Straeten, her immediate superior, who was Cultural Director.

J.C.: The explanation for that is fairly obvious. Verboven and Van der Straeten were completely different personalities, and they came from two politically different families, hers socialist and his Catholic. Things went extremely smoothly between Hermans and Verboven. Their identical political preferences were only part of the reason. By the way, I sometimes had to glue back the pieces with Jan Van der Straeten.

The Reporters

K.B./D.P.: *In the weeks that followed the Director General's visit, the Art Affairs service was working at full throttle. Three reporters were being sought, two of whom would be working at the external locations. For the third position, the anchor or main reporter in the television studio, several candidates were mentioned, including Johan Thielemans, Toon Van Severen, Frans Boenders, Fred Braeckman, Bob De Groof...*

J.C.: I was absolutely against Bob De Groof. There was in fact quick consensus about the main reporter, the person in the Public Broadcasting studio. Everyone rallied behind the idea of asking William Van Laeken. The problem was that he was already committed to the news service. If Van Laeken was interested in presenting *IJsbreker*, we would have to get permission from higher up. Miraculously, that succeeded. There was less agreement about the other two reporters. Everybody had their own preferences. We decided to do screen tests with different candidates.

K.B./D.P.: *The candidates were Johanneke van Slooten, Myriam Ceriez, Ann Van der Wee, Emmanuelle De Schrevel, Marie-Pascale Gildemyn, Betty Mellaerts, Marijke Coornaert, Moni D'Haes, Marian Verstraeten and Liliane Dewachter.*

J.C.: They were all names suggested by at least one of the programme makers. Not all of those women actually did screen tests. I had suggested Johanneke van Slooten and Myriam Ceriez. Betty Mellaerts did not make it as anchor for the external locations, but she was later brought back as a presenter for *Kunstzaken*.

K.B./D.P.: *Myriam Ceriez had played Aunt Henriette in your film on Gilliams' Vita Brevis. How did you know Johanneke van Slooten, who was Dutch?*

J.C.: I think she had already worked for television. She was a friend of Jacq Vogelaar's. I may have met her through him.

K.B./D.P.: *She was ultimately the only one who came through the selection process. There would be yet another time-consuming procedure to find someone for the other location. Marianne Van Kerkhoven did the screen test and became the second reporter. Did you know Marianne Van Kerkhoven?*

J.C.: Yes, I knew her, but I had never sought contact with her. Together with Dirk Declair, I had once had a theatre company, back when we were just 17 or 18. I never completely lost my contacts with that little theatre world. I knew, for example, that Marianne was involved with the Beursschouwburg Werkgemeenschap and Het Trojaanse Paard. Political theatre of that kind was not my thing, but I had respect for her. When Marianne began working on *IJsbreker*, she came from Paris, where she had worked at the Théâtre Gérard Philippe. Annie Declerck may have suggested her. I was in any case for Marianne. It was already clear that because of the meagre time to prepare the first two broadcasts, we would not be able to work with the reporters. In the end, it turned out that we did not need any reporters at all. That much had become all too obvious to me during the test shoot.

K.B./D.P.: *How do you mean?*

J.C.: The test broadcast was on 5 January 1983, exactly two weeks before the first actual broadcast. The guests were impressive: Robbe De Hert, Willy Courteaux and Louis De Lentdecker. The theme was Maria Daneels and co-producing Flemish film with Flemish Radio and Television. Robbe De Hert was in the video room, Willy Courteaux in a garage and Louis De Lentdecker at the American Theatre. It was fantastic. After 20 minutes, I stopped everything. To my amazement, the formula worked without reporters. It was a dramatic conclusion, because Johanneke had just been recruited, and the selection procedure for the second position had not even been formally completed.

K.B./D.P.: *Why did you stop the test broadcast after such a short time?*

J.C.: I saw that it worked, and yes, it worked very well.

K.B./D.P.: *Too well?*

J.C.: It was instantly right up there - there were verbal fireworks between the two men. If the directors had gotten wind of that, *IJsbreker* might have been scrapped before it ever got on the air.

IJsbreker 1: Panamarenko

K.B./D.P.: *The Art Affairs meeting notes for 9 December 1982 make the first mention of a subject for the first IJsbreker programme: Panamarenko. That was only a month before the actual broadcast.*

J.C.: It was indeed short. We had to improvise. We had wasted a lot of time from April to December, but the broadcast on Panamarenko was a card we could still play.

K.B./D.P.: *Who was behind the idea of starting IJsbreker with a broadcast about Panamarenko?*

J.C.: That was my idea. It was simple, because I was able to convince Panama. At that time, he did not have the name that he does today. He told me that at that point, people were not exactly pounding the door to see his work. He was at a difficult point. He was back on the stage after the broadcast. He had been re-launched.

K.B./D.P.: *Was it difficult to get him to take part?*

J.C.: He needed time to think about it. He had a supporter in the video room at Flemish Radio and Television - the scientist and art collector, Charles Hirsch - but in Mechelen were two critics of his work, the scientific philosopher Herman Roelants and the publicist Georges Adé.

K.B./D.P.: *The press release for the first broadcast mentions Panamarenko's Aeromodeller, 'an airship that can be seen at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Ghent'. Why was the museum explicitly mentioned? That was not strictly necessary, was it?*

J.C.: The Aeromodeller was probably being shown there at the time.

K.B./D.P.: *How did you decide on inviting Georges Adé and Herman Roelants?*

J.C.: I came to know Georges during *De Nederlandse Dagen* (Dutch Days) in 1968, at the Brussels Centre for Fine Arts (Bozar). I had worked a lot with him in the early 1970s. He wrote the script for *Het gedroomde boek* (1980). He wanted to help me out. I had met Roelants during the wild 1970s.

K.B./D.P.: *Panamarenko was filmed at his home in the Biekorfstraat in Antwerp. Herman Roelants and Georges Adé sat on a sofa in Adé's house and Charles Hirsch was alone in the video room.*

J.C.: At one point, Georges and Herman became very uncomfortable. Charles Hirsch, an expert on motion mechanics, which Panamarenko saw as a kind of wonder of the world, was able to take on the whole situation.

K.B./D.P.: *Georges Adé and Herman Roelants kept asking Panamarenko questions he would not answer.*

J.C.: Never. He never answers.

K.B./D.P.: *But those questions were relevant.*

J.C.: You know you are wasting your time with Panama. He does not see or hear anything - he is completely involved in his own project.

K.B./D.P.: *At one point, someone says aloud, 'I do not think we are going to get an answer from Panamarenko.'*

J.C.: They let him off the hook too easily.

K.B./D.P.: *William Van Laeken is the invisible voice that talks it all together.*

J.C.: William was perfectly able to bring all the players in contact with one another, or play them against each other. The central position, 'the voice', was something that I always kept out of the visual image. It was the voice that made the presence of whomever was there. Viewers could see with their own eyes what I had already discovered: *IJsbreker* went perfectly without reporters at the external locations.

K.B./D.P.: *The Panamarenko broadcast was one of the better programmes in that first year, because there is effectively no mediation. No one has control, but there are all kinds of people trying to play with the medium.*

J.C.: I completely agree.

K.B./D.P.: *Behind the scenes in Mechelen, your reporter, Johanneke van Slooten, became aggravated. Why didn't you simply put an end to the structure with the external reporters?*

J.C.: That was not so easy to do. Everyone was convinced of the plan of working with reporters. You can only bring something like that up for discussion if it is clear that it does not work. There was no choice but to keep quiet and wait, wait, wait...

K.B./D.P.: *Looking back, what is your evaluation of the Panamarenko broadcast?*

J.C.: I felt that we were not there yet. The set at Adé's home did not work, because it was a sitting room. The situation was too comfortable for the speakers. The studio, in contrast, was a fleabag. Everything happened all at once, with everyone trying to save the situation. Save - that is the word.

K.B./D.P.: *How did Hilda Verboven evaluate that first episode?*

J.C.: At the time, everyone immediately started looking at the numbers of viewers and the ratings. The programme scored relatively well, about 350,000 viewers. That was a great relief for Hilda Verboven, because she had stuck her neck out.

K.B./D.P.: *This is the first time that you mention ratings.*

J.C.: If I need to, I can. When the second episode only drew half as many viewers, I set about finding some kind of billboard to attract people to the third broadcast. I knew how to get the ratings up or down. You do not have to study advanced mathematics to figure it out. With Panamarenko, I would reach an audience. It was that simple. That broadcast saved *IJsbreker*. Everyone had to keep their mouths shut. If it had not been a success, the programme would have been taken right off the air.

K.B./D.P.: *Wouldn't that be impossible? The proposal had been approved and there were already 11 broadcasts planned for 1983. IJsbreker was moreover not an expensive programme. The first broadcast only cost 136,000 Belgian Francs.*

J.C.: It is true that it was not expensive, but good ratings were actually very important. How had the General Director put it - that 'it had to be possible to make art programmes that reach prime time audiences'? *IJsbreker* can thank its two-year existence to the relatively high attention it drew from viewers.

IJsbreker 2: Culture in the Newspaper

K.B./D.P.: *The second IJsbreker broadcast was about the cultural sections of two Flemish newspapers, De Morgen and De Standaard.*

J.C.: I take responsibility for selecting the topic. I saw it as a good subject.

K.B./D.P.: *Why?*

J.C.: To get the experience. How do you piece together a broadcast like this? Is it starting to work, or not?

K.B./D.P.: *The specific motivation was the idea of expanding De Standaard der Letteren, their literary magazine, to three pages.*

J.C.: Yes, the editors of *De Standaard*, Guido Van Hoof and Gaston Durnez, were guests at the studio. It is a wonder that they showed their faces there... The *IJsbreker* broadcasts were *tableaux vivants*, family portraits. Sometimes they had that swing and sometimes they could bore you to death. It is inherent to the formula.

K.B./D.P.: *In the editorial room of De Morgen, in the Bagattenstraat in Ghent, were Paul Goossens, Bob Van de Voorde and Ronald Soetaert. At the library in Geel were several members of the library staff and readers: Manu Manderveld, Frits Geukens, Frans Ceusters and Willy Copmans. How did you decide to involve Geel? Was that because your family has roots there? Your grandparents lived in Geel.*

J.C.: No. I was in touch with Manu Manderveld through Georges Adé. Both had once studied for the priesthood in Mechelen. So had Herman Roelants, by the way.

K.B./D.P.: *What did you think of De Morgen at that time?*

J.C.: I think that *De Morgen* was dealing in scrap paper. It was not insignificant that we brought Paul Goossens into the spotlight. But I should have known...

K.B./D.P.: *What happened?*

J.C.: I was with him just a couple of hours before we went on the air. It was unbelievable.

K.B./D.P.: *Did you have to convince him?*

J.C.: I had to talk him into it. He wanted to back out! I did everything I could muster, and when he finally agreed, I had to return to Brussels.

K.B./D.P.: *Why did he want to back out?*

J.C.: He had thought up some reason or other. Do not ask me what it was. Those are the risks of live television.

K.B./D.P.: *In his introduction, William Van Laeken made an illusion to the risks: '...notwithstanding adventure and surprise, because this is a live broadcast, and if something goes wrong, you can take delight in it. We have a couple of Popeye films ready for you, just in case.'*

J.C.: We were always ready for anything, including the worst.

K.B./D.P.: *The broadcast was markedly short-tempered. William Van Laeken immediately brought the kettle to a boil by asking Goossens what he thought of De Standaard's cultural supplement. The editor-in-chief of De Morgen was more than happy to respond to the invitation. He felt that De Standaard der Letteren was too specialist, too academic and too conformist. In his own newspaper, he wanted to bring attention to literature, but through different, more supposedly accessible forms of culture, such as rock music. He defended popular trends. Goossens' argument was practically sophomoric, opportunistic, anti-elitist.*

J.C.: Do not forget what *De Standaard der Letteren*, which Guido Van Hoof directed, was like at that time.

Conservatives such as Libert Van der Kerken and André Demedts were thoroughly at home there. Van Hoof praised those writers to the skies. The *IJsbreker* programmes were snapshots, moments in time.

K.B./D.P.: *They do give a good impression of how people thought about art and culture at the beginning of the 1980s. In that sense, it is a unique record in time.*

J.C.: That was the idea.

K.B./D.P.: *The people from De Morgen were continually on the attack. They accused De Standaard of elitism. At first, Van Hoof and Durnez reacted ironically, but as*

time passed, they became cross. At one point, the editors from De Standaard say, 'At least we work without subsidies. We get by without taxpayer money.'

J.C.: *In IJsbreker, people could bring themselves back into the picture. There were people who did that, as well. The IJsbreker concept was: We will see how things go. We will see who is the cat and who is the mouse.*

K.B./D.P.: *The De Morgen editors did everything possible to get image and sound time. They hit De Standaard every chance they got. At one point, they even attacked their principles: relevant criticism could only come about if you supported a liberal, humanist vision. Gaston Durnez reacted as if he had been stung by a wasp. He called Soetaert's viewpoint 'journalistic heresy'.*

J.C.: *The fact that viewers knew that this was all happening live, right before their eyes, made it all even more interesting.*

K.B./D.P.: *Manu Manderveld, director of the library, who followed the debate, accused De Standaard of hiding away reviews of literature for young people on the women's pages, with fashion and food.*

J.C.: *The De Morgen editors then tried to get the readers in Geel onto their own bandwagon, but that certainly did not work. No one had any real control. I knew I could burn myself with that formula. Making something that you have no command of is damnably dangerous.*

K.B./D.P.: *William Van Laeken also kept poking the flames.*

J.C.: *That was his job. Unfortunately, people did not thank him for it. After the second IJsbreker broadcast, we were informed that we would no longer be able to call on him. He was pulled out by Karel Hemmerechts, Director of Information, overall head of the news services for both radio and television.*

K.B./D.P.: *Was that decision explained with a reference to Van Laekens interventions in IJsbreker 2?*

J.C.: *No, they were smart enough not to do that. We received a formal statement to the effect that it was inappropriate for a journalist working for the news service to appear on a culture programme. I still do not understand why it was such a drama. Was it because it was about politics? Or your philosophy of life? Whatever it was, I suddenly had a huge problem. I no longer had an anchorman!*

IJsbreker 3: Dwars-fluitend (Fluting)

K.B./D.P.: *In the third IJsbreker broadcast, Bob De Groof*

was 'the voice'. How did you find him?

J.C.: De Groof was not my choice at all. He was forced on me. I believe it was Ludo Bekkers who came up with the proposal of asking 'the most beautiful voice in Flanders'. I flatly refused, but it did not work.

K.B./D.P.: *What did you have against him?*

J.C.: Against De Groof, Piet Van Roe's right arm? I did not want to work with a broadcaster, but with a journalist, someone who could quickly and poignantly get people to confront each other. But no one was receptive to that argument. At a certain point, I threatened to back out of the programme. That certainly had the right effect.

K.B./D.P.: *What effect?*

J.C.: I was allowed to come up with a new name. That was no simple matter. I contacted several friends and acquaintances. Daniël Robberechts came up with the idea of approaching Pol Hoste. Pol was immediately enthusiastic about the proposal. He wanted to get out of education. I wanted someone who would support me and not shoot me in the back. I had already been through all that.

K.B./D.P.: *You did have to do IJsbreker 3, Dwars-fluitend (Playing the flute), with Bob De Groof.*

J.C.: That oily-slick voice - it gives me the creeps.

K.B./D.P.: *The third IJsbreker broadcast was the first with the two reporters, Johanneke van Slooten, who had already taken part in the first two programmes, and Marianne Van Kerkhoven, who had gotten some experience during the second IJsbreker. Johanneke van Slooten told us that she had come up with the idea of doing a programme on the baroque flute, or dwarsfluit. She was trained as an oboist.*

J.C.: It is very possible that Johanneke suggested that theme. It was also the first broadcast for which we set up shop in both Belgium and the Netherlands. It was an extremely expensive operation. Do you have any idea what the radio links cost? We did not have to budget for the Belgian links, but we did for the Dutch links.

K.B./D.P.: *Thijs van Leer was the guest in the studio. Barthold Kuijken was filmed at home in Gooik. In Amsterdam, there were several musicians at the IJsbreker cultural centre.*

J.C.: When we came up with the name, *IJsbreker*, we did not know that there was already a centre in Amsterdam with the same name. It was interesting that only three months later, we would be guests at that same centre.

K.B./D.P.: *The broadcast about the baroque flute was associated with current events, as Amsterdam was celebrating 'The Week of the flute'.*

J.C.: Do not forget that Thijs van Leer was incredibly popular. He sold hundreds of thousands of records. He was just what we needed. We had to do culture for prime time, remember?

K.B./D.P.: *At one point, the camera work is almost a parody. Van Leer comes onto the screen in a sexy pose, from the side, as if he were a pop star.*

J.C.: He WAS a pop star. Do you know what a fortune he made?

K.B./D.P.: *You juxtaposed Barthold Kuijken, a well-known proponent of historically authentic musical performances, with Thijs van Leer, who clearly preferred the popular approach, but at no time did it actually come to a dispute. The entire setup was geared towards conflict, but there was no tongue-lashing at all in this broadcast. Kuijken and Van Leer both refused to act in the previously intended scenario.*

J.C.: It was a very amiable discussion.

K.B./D.P.: *Marianne Van Kerkhoven asked Barthold all kinds of questions. One wonders what would have happened if she had not been there. Kuijken is patient man. He might have just sat there like a sphinx and said nothing at all.*

J.C.: That is very possible. That is why it is so important to have a good anchor, someone like Van Laeken.

K.B./D.P.: *There is only a single, minor hiccup. The chairman of 'The Week of the Flute' says to Thijs van Leer that his music does not evoke much emotion, when in fact it is emotion that he is trying to achieve.*

J.C.: That was the only pinprick. I wanted IJsbreker to take its own course. If everything went quiet, then that was what happened.

K.B./D.P.: *It was a very educational broadcast, in the conventional sense. You learned something about how performing music happens in practice, perhaps in a rather school-like fashion - the fact, for example, that Telemann's Fantasia was played successively by three different people...*

J.C.: That programme did well with the viewers. It reached 269,266 people and got a ranking of 3.6 out of 5.

IJsbreker 4: Art for Sale

K.B./D.P.: *In IJsbreker 4, Art for Sale, Pol Hoste takes the role of presenter for the first time, and he does it*

in exemplary fashion. One would not generally associate his voice with television or radio.

J.C.: That is the irony. Pol had previously done a test to qualify as a journalist for the public broadcasting service. He passed everything except the voice test.

K.B./D.P.: *And you expressly fished him out as 'the voice'?*

J.C.: I do not think that I knew then that he had tested for Flemish Radio and Television. The important thing was that I was satisfied with him as anchor for the programme. He did it very well and was always well prepared. He wrote everything out.

K.B./D.P.: *Art for Sale was another Belgian-Dutch broadcast. At Montevideo, on the Kattendijkdok in Antwerp, Marianne Van Kerkhoven talked with Paul De Vylder and Annie Gentils, the initiative behind Montevideo, amongst others. At De Meervaart, another cultural centre in Amsterdam, Johanneke van Slooten presents an art auction, led by the PvdA (Labour) politician, Marcel van Dam. In the studio, the guests are also a Dutchman and a Belgian: Wim van Krimpen and Jan Hoet.*

J.C.: The cast was very promising and the audience got what they bargained for.

K.B./D.P.: *In Antwerp, Montevideo is the central location. They were opening the group exhibition, Marchandises, with over fifty artists, from Fred Bervoets to Guillaume Bijl, from Jan Cox to Paul De Vylder. Why was this location selected?*

J.C.: The subject was practically self-evident. I needed spectacle, so where does an initiative like that come from and what does it do at that particular location?

K.B./D.P.: *At that point, Montevideo was in everyone's sights as an important alternative exhibition space.*

J.C.: Yes, there is no need to look any deeper than that. Putting something together with a little prospecting and not much to work with: *IJsbreker* was an attempt to make everybody keep their hands off and see what would happen.

K.B./D.P.: *Had you already seen exhibitions at Montevideo?*

J.C.: Yes, but I no longer have them in mind.

K.B./D.P.: *Marchandises was a large group exhibition with many local artists...*

J.C.: Yes. Guy Rombouts was a strong presence. Luc Deleu had also made a remarkable work. Annie had a lot to work with, but she always complained.

K.B./D.P.: *How was working at Montevideo?*

J.C.: Decidedly difficult. It was a space at the behest of water and wind, and there was no – or at least very

little – electricity with which to generate that live broadcast. At six o'clock in the evening, the electric mains blew out, 3 1/2 hours before we had to be on the air. An outside company had to come in and hurriedly patch together a new unit. That kind of thing happens when you want to do television live. At the moment itself, it was serious panic, but everything pulled together just in time.

K.B./D.P.: *Wim van Krimpen and Jan Hoet were guests in the studio.*

J.C.: Van Krimpen was somebody who could put together an exhibition with automobiles plucked from the street, as it were. He came from a trade background. He was good salesman.

K.B./D.P.: *As a gallery owner, he had been the initiative behind the art fair in Amsterdam, the KunstRai, in 1982. You could say that he was at that point the very incarnation of the art market in the Netherlands. We can understand why you cast him as opponent to the 'alternative' artists at Montevideo and De Meervaart.*

J.C.: He was quick to realize the kind of game in which he had landed himself. He was cautious when it came to it, but what he said was what he thought, undisguised. That is something that you could also expect from Jan Hoet, unlike someone like Jan Debbaut.

K.B./D.P.: *Had you selected them for that reason?*

J.C.: Yes. I felt that they had a lot in common. They were not afraid to stand up for what they believed in. Others would never have done that.

K.B./D.P.: *Did you already know that Jan Hoet was such a flamboyant character? Had you had experience with him?*

J.C.: I knew him. I had contact with him from the time he became a curator. I had asked him back in 1976 if I could use the Museum of Contemporary Art for my film, *De 10 schilderijen van Etienne Elias* (The ten paintings by Etienne Elias). Jan always said yes. He was the only one who never had problems with things like that.

K.B./D.P.: *What motivated you to ask him in an IJsbreker broadcast about alternative ways of bringing art to the people?*

J.C.: I wanted him to say something about what was happening at Montevideo.

K.B./D.P.: *Did you see a contrast between what Jan Hoet was doing as director of the museum in Ghent and the alternative art scene?*

J.C.: Jan still wanted to produce serious work at that point. I was less able to guess what Wim van Krimpen would be like, but it worked out well.

K.B./D.P.: *You were counting on a polarity between Montevideo and the Museum of Contemporary Art?*

J.C.: That was the idea. I wanted *IJsbreker* to function on its own. We had to keep our hands off. That was the whole idea.

K.B./D.P.: *As an analogy, did you see a kind of antithesis between Van Krimpen and the artists at De Meervaart in Amsterdam?*

J.C.: You can try to predict something like that, but there was never any guarantee of success.

K.B./D.P.: *Had you expected a clash between Van Krimpen and Hoet in the studio?*

J.C.: No. I saw immediately that they could get along well. There were more similarities in their characters than differences. The studio was the only safe place. In principle, nothing could go wrong. If one or more of the external locations were to go off the air, we could still always rely on the studio. For that reason, who was invited there was important.

K.B./D.P.: *How did you come into contact with Paul De Vylder, the spokesman for Montevideo?*

J.C.: There! On camera! At that point, all I knew was that he was a participant in *Marchandises*.

K.B./D.P.: *You did not have a hand in choosing the people who appeared on camera - all you did was select the location?*

J.C.: Exactly. Annie Gentils was simply cut off by Paul De Vylder.

K.B./D.P.: *What eventually happened was a collision between Paul De Vylder and Jan Hoet. Hoet had first said, 'When a work of art ends up in a museum, the impact on the public is stronger than on any other circuit.' To that, Paul De Vylder replied, 'The fact that the impact of a work of art is strongest in a museum - that is one of the most remarkable hypotheses that I have heard of late. So here I was thinking that people were doing everything possible to make museums more alive, and now I hear that the museum is the ultimate temple for an art cult.'*

J.C.: The game was clearly on track. The formula guaranteed the most unexpected skirmishes.

K.B./D.P.: *That was not Paul's only intervention. He held the floor continuously.*

J.C.: I kept yelling that he had to be cut off, but it did not happen! Paul De Vylder is amazingly strange in that broadcast. I think that broadcast of *IJsbreker*, about the Antwerp art scene, is one of the craziest. It was the intention in *IJsbreker* that people come out of their shells. In that broadcast, we at least succeeded in

doing that. Only then, with the fourth *IJsbreker*, did things begin to look the way they were meant to. Years later, I met Paul again, as friend and sparring partner for Lieven De Cauter and Bart Verschaffel during the *Container* broadcasts (1989).

K.B./D.P.: *How did you select De Meervaart as a location?*

J.C.: That was through Johanneke.

K.B./D.P.: *In De Meervaart, an alternative auction was taking place, where artists could sell their work without the intervention of the galleries. Marcel van Dam acted as one of the auction masters and animator. Did Johanneke van Slooten also select those artists: Joop van Meel, Wilbert Vaessen, Peter Giele, Liesbeth Pallesen, Alphons Freymuth and Peter van de Klashorst?*

J.C.: I think she probably did.

K.B./D.P.: *Johanneke van Slooten is very much in the picture, as she had been in the previous broadcast. She has a much greater presence than Marianne Van Kerkhoven. Van Slooten functions as an on-location moderator, while it should have been about the interaction between the three locations. In contrast, Marianne Van Kerkhoven presents one of the speakers and then involves the other two occasions.*

J.C.: Everyone was critical of Johanneke. She did not fit well in the group. Or do you think that Ludo Bekkers was supporting her?

K.B./D.P.: *At De Meervaart, she calmly begins interviewing a collector. It is boring. She had her own scenario and carried it out, unconcerned about what was happening at the other locations.*

J.C.: My problem was that the formula with the two reporters did not work. I had to find a way to change that, but it was still too early to be able to discuss it to my advantage. My own position at that point was not good.

K.B./D.P.: *Why not?*

J.C.: I did not work on the fifth *IJsbreker*, about the circus, or the sixth broadcast, about film. I was in Liege, making my film on Charles Vandenhove. I felt that anyone should be able to create *IJsbreker*, and I certainly did not want to miss my chance to do a film on Vandenhove's architecture.

K.B./D.P.: *You apparently had no difficulty moving from a live programme about popular culture to a film production that celebrates architecture with a capital A. How did you reconcile these two?*

J.C.: Do you think that is not possible? During my entire career, I had been accused of being unable to make something spectacular, that I was too dry and could not

reach audiences. At a certain point, you can see for yourself that you are going to take a new approach.

K.B./D.P.: *There are obviously very few makers of television who could create a low-threshold programme at the same time as a film about Charles Vandenhove.*

J.C.: The Vandenhove film was deadly serious, indeed, but you are more than welcome to know that I am also a big fan of the work of Jeff Koons.

K.B./D.P.: *After you finished Het raadsel van de sfinks (The mystery of the sphinx), the film about Charles Vandenhove, why did you return to the production team working on IJsbreker?*

J.C.: I was not happy with what my colleagues had made of it. The high expectations after the fourth broadcast were nowhere to be found. I did not want to do something big, for the spectacle value, but I did want to use - or misuse - the instrumentation that television offered. But first we had to get those reporters off the screen, because they were an obstacle to the success of *IJsbreker*.

to be continued...

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