

# Stéphane Mandelbaum

Portrait

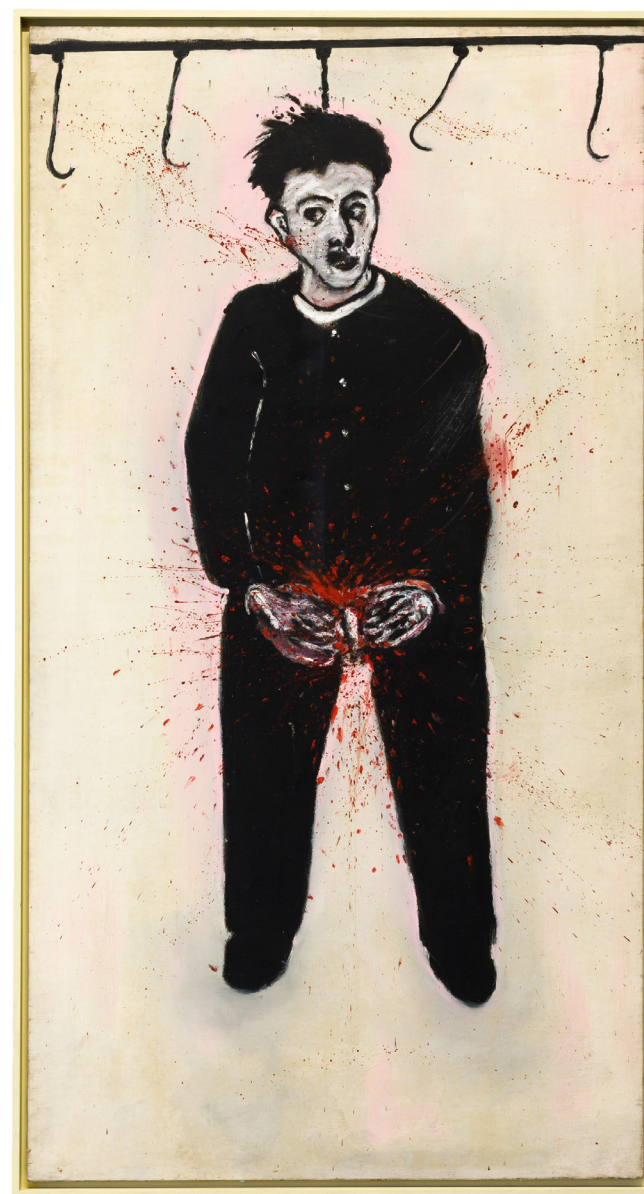
By Colin Lang

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# Force Majeure

What seemed barbaric for generations after Auschwitz was a source of perverse fascination for Stéphane Mandelbaum. His transgressions on the page spilled out into a life of crime. Obsessed with defacement in his work, Mandelbaum was murdered in a gruesome act of life imitating art.

Photo: Axel Schneider. Collection Dario Preszow



*Autoportrait au crochet, 1976*

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In one of the most brutal examples of life imitating art, Brussels-born Stéphane Mandelbaum (1961–86) met his sad end defaced, a condition that the artist captured with singular clarity and violence in the many works he created during his brief career. The facts of his existence are rather blurry, though his murder at the age of twenty-five is probably the most well-established detail. Having stolen and delivered what he believed to be an authentic painting by the Italian portraitist Amedeo Modigliani, himself no stranger to the visage, Mandelbaum's co-conspirators – thugs of the Brussels underworld who had so deeply fascinated the artist in his final years – crushed his skull, fired two shots into his body, and poured acid over his face. What was a nice Jewish boy doing mixed up with this crowd? And why, of all things, was the act of defacement and disfigurement the most powerful and recurrent trope in his art? The irony of this takes on mortal proportions, as it was Mandelbaum's fascination with the criminal underworld which led to his own undoing.

Mandelbaum was the middle son of a relatively well-known Jewish painter, Arié Mandelbaum, who is still alive and working today. The elder Mandelbaum was born in 1939, and one can only project what befell him during the early years of his life, following the German occupation of Belgium

in 1940. Even more speculative would be what exactly the father bequeathed to his son, though the artistic output serves as the most reliable gauge of the depth and perversity of this heritage. In addition to being his kin, Stéphane studied under his father and was his assistant from 1984–86, and the two even put on a show of their work at a maximum-security prison. The younger Mandelbaum was a wildly prolific drawer, and his collected output begins at the tender age of sixteen. And now, nearly forty years after his death, there remains an uncanny attraction to the intimacy, fragility, and ambivalence of this tragic figure.

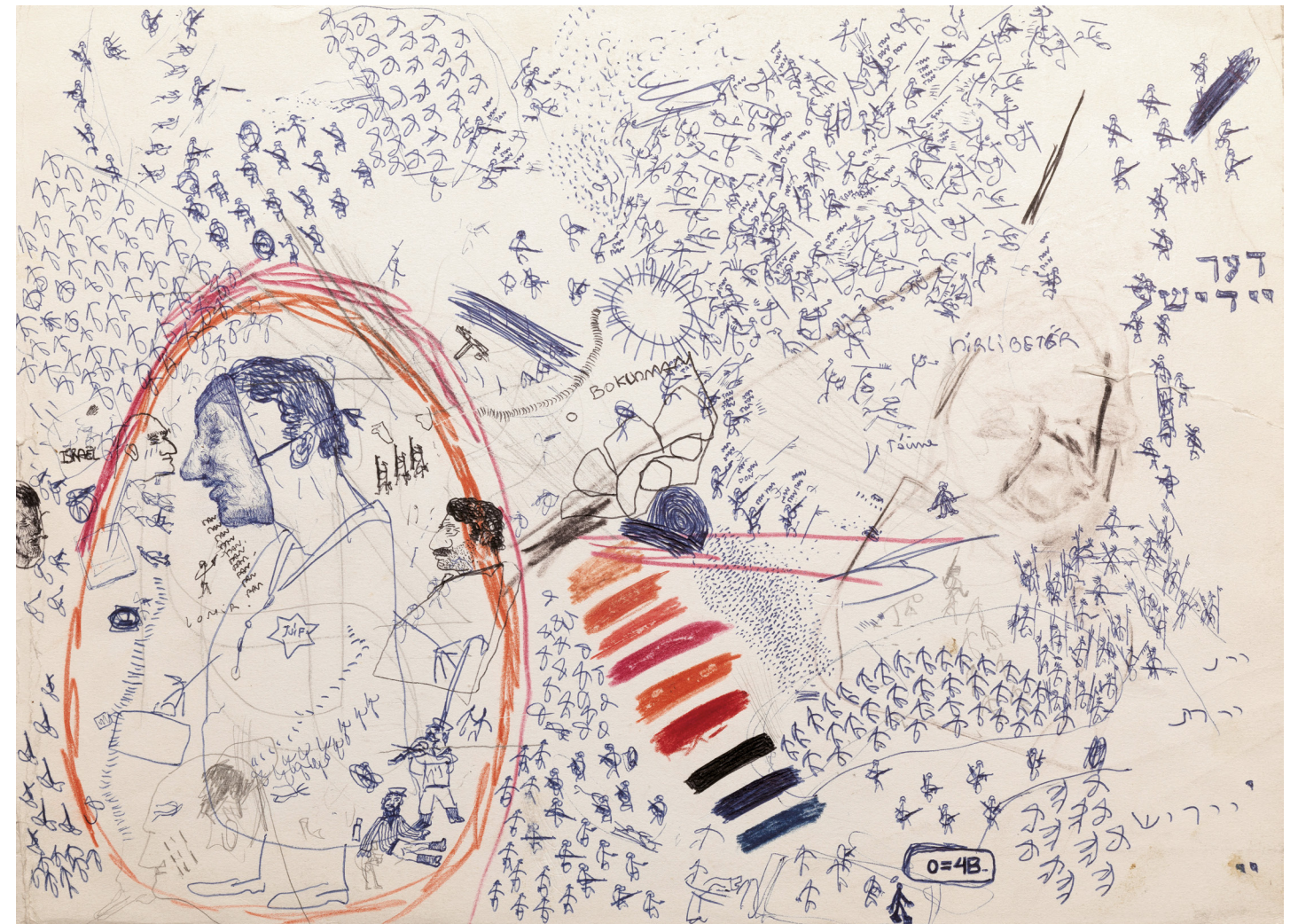
One potential answer lies in the parallel between the transgressive nature of the artist's works and the subversion of his normative life, getting mixed up with the criminal elements of Brussels. Despite many decades having passed since his death, no single cause has emerged to explain Mandelbaum's attraction to the seedy circles in which he involved himself. Many close to the artist have argued that it was a simple case of financial need, having had little success in his brief stint in the commercial art world. The more compelling reason is found in the evidence left behind by his drawings, themselves crime scenes of a certain kind, featuring the criminals and characters from the dregs of Brussels society, but something



*Saint Nicolas nazi*, c. 1979

Collection Arié Mandelbaum

Photo: Axel Schneider. Maurice Verbaet Collection Antwerpen



*Composition (figure au masque)*, c. 1980

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sedition occurs on a formal level, too. It is hard to discern if Mandelbaum ever really mingled with his subjects, or if they occur in the drawings as figures of desire, belonging to the fantasy of a life filled with perversion and transgression. There are no real classifiable "series" in his work, owed perhaps to the short span of his life, though some pronounced periods certainly exist. Mandelbaum was primarily interested in portraiture, even so,

from 1980–86, the format and focus of these images did experience some alteration. There are a few paintings from the early years, such as *Autoportrait* (1976), in which the artist captured his likeness as a long body wearing black hanging from a meat hook, his penis exploding in a miasma of blood, while his countenance is horror-stricken. Was he reliving his circumcision? (He was only fifteen when he painted it.) The penis as symbol will





*Bacon et frise, 1982*

Collection Paula Hauser, Brüssel

Private collection



*Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1980*

return with the same violence as his other preferred mark of designation, the nose. The palette of another oil work from this phase, *St. Nicolas nazi* (ca. 1978), takes its colours from the Nazi flag (black and red) and shows cardinals wearing swastika armbands sending three young men in shackles to prison, or more likely, a concentration camp. In the upper left corner of the work, there is a small portrait of the artist in a black frame, watching over the proceedings with consternation.

While Mandelbaum quickly abandoned the painted medium – whether due to paternal anxiety or perhaps something more practical remains open – these two obsessions, disfigurement, particularly of the nose, and the problematics of the penis remain constant throughout his known output. Around 1979–80, he began working on paper at a furious pace, creating portraits as well as newer productions he titled “Compositions”, like *Composition (Portrait of Bacon)* from 1980, executed in the year in which Mandelbaum was crowned the winner of a regional art competition. His preferred material

was an unusual one – ballpoint pen – something which a local paper covering the prize adeptly picked up on. The caption underneath a photo of the artist reads: “The unique characteristic of Stéphane is that he executes a majority of his works in bic.” These “Compositions” represent the *horror vacui* aesthetic of his drawing practice – pages were filled to their spatial limits with text, collaged elements, and faces, sometimes to the point of the complete annihilation of the white support.

Later portraits retain elements of collage and textual cacography, like *Kischmatoes* (1982), a likeness of the artist’s father with a small, collaged picture of a nude woman with an image of an SS soldier, haunting the patrimonial figure from the periphery. Yiddish text is written under the bust of Arié. Many who cannot read or understand the writing have assumed that it spells out the title of the work, but this is not correct. Read correctly, the Yiddish (and it is without question Yiddish, *not* Hebrew) says “*kis mir in tuches*”, followed by an exclamation point, meaning, “kiss my ass”. The



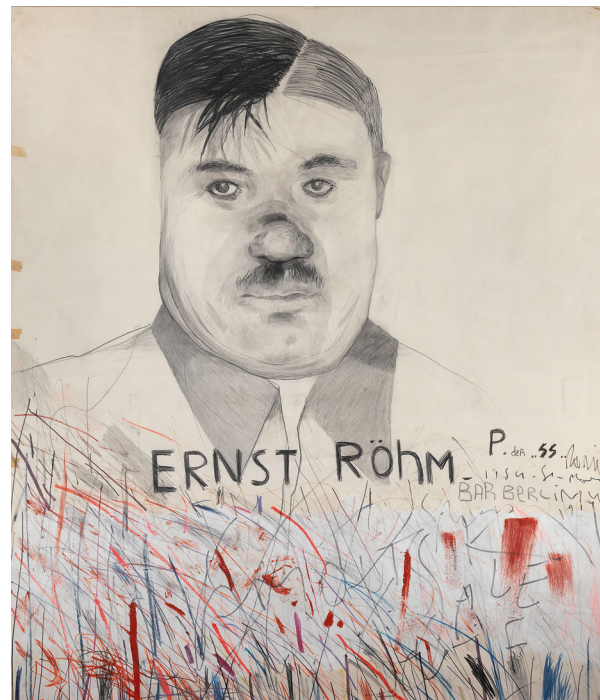
intended recipient of the insult is unclear. Was it Mandelbaum's father saying, "all you non-Yiddish readers can kiss my ass!" Or, more likely, the son's textual patricide beneath an otherwise straightforward portrait? There's just one problem though, which is that the artist misspelled the *kis* part, inserting a *vov* in the first word and not a *yud*: a "U" and not an "I", which would make it sound more like the German *Küss* (also meaning "kiss"). It gets even more confusing if it is translated into French (Mandelbaum's native tongue), with the verb *baiser*, which means both "to kiss" and "to fuck". There's occasional Hebrew text, like *kosher*, as well as Arabic, which in one drawing reads, *Kabbalah*, a mystical text central for Hasidic Jews, and many others (like Madonna, for example).

In these latest, smaller works of ball-point pen on paper, the palimpsestic character of the earlier portraits remains, but these also give way to larger, sometimes full-body figures with minimal textual intervention, mostly executed in pencil. These include drawings of Belgians of Congolese descent, like Mandelbaum's wife, Claudia, and can perhaps be read as a gesture of solidarity with those who were victimised during the Imperial Belgium Congo regime, holding a mirror to

the fate of those European Jews sent to death camps. This body of work is also where we encounter the shady characters of the Brussels underworld for the first time, like in *Portrait d'un con* (1984), another wordplay in which *con* means both someone stupid and a con, like a con artist. The freedom of the larger sheets of paper appears to have granted Mandelbaum adequate space to explore a sexual awakening and queer desire, such as in *L'Empire des Sens* (Empire of the Senses) from 1982. One of the few female characters in Mandelbaum's mostly male cosmos is captured in bed, apparently climaxing, mouth agape, eyes closed. There is even a rare moment where bodies actually meet – in *Pierre et José* (1985) two standing male characters are fucking, one stroking the erect penis of the other. It is a rare moment, a loving depiction of male genitalia: all pleasure, not a hint of pain.

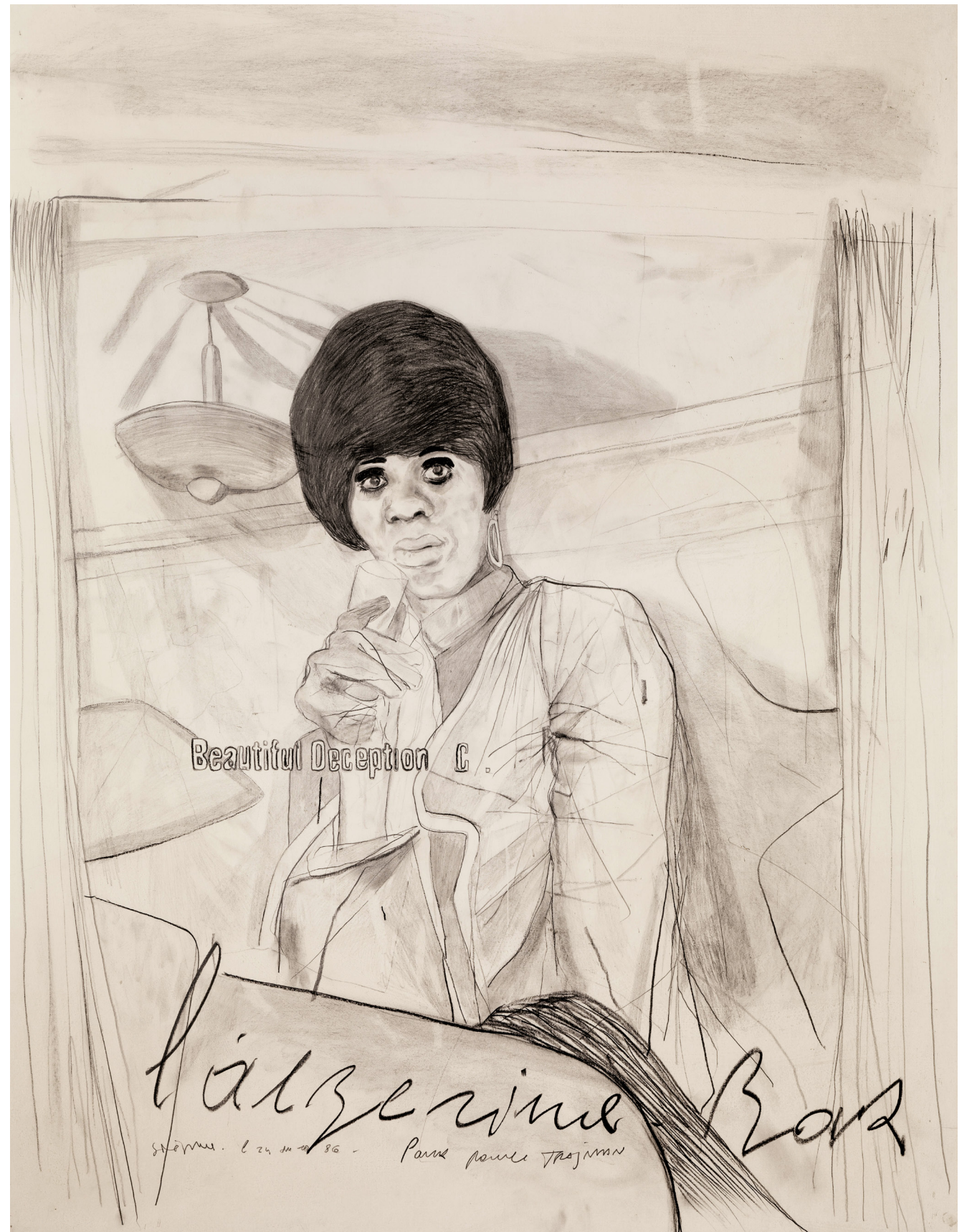
Mandelbaum's turn to crime around this period has cast a shadow on the artist, perhaps one he wanted to project. References to sex clubs, prostitution, and red light locales begin to emerge around 1984. We know that he travelled to the Congo in 1986 under the guise of meeting his wife's relatives when he proceeded to loot precious

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Ernst Röhm, c. 1981

Collection Lucien Bilinelli, Milan



Private collection, Paris

L'Alberine Bar (Beautiful Deception), 1986





*Kischmatoes! (Portrait d'Arié Mandelbaum), 1982*

Private collection, Brussels

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bronze sculptures and took them back to Brussels to be sold on the black market. Was this move toward crime a natural extension of Mandelbaum’s avowed, perverse mind, or was the promise of financial security and supporting his new wife and her child more determinant? If we believe the evidence in his drawings, the Jewish body was already a cliché, criminal, rogue, a site of violence, and racist projection. He is painfully aware of his post-Auschwitz existence, and the competing text, figures, and grotesquery of those body parts that governed antisemitic propaganda – in Yiddish slang, the *schnoz* (nose) and the *shmekel* (penis) – are as frazzled, obsessive, and neurotic, as anyone growing up as Mandelbaum did, could be. In what video material exists of Mandelbaum, his own body appears as anything but a mockery – well-toned and handsome, it is a model of perfection, which begs the question: What basis do these disfigurements, and for that matter, this life of crime, actually have in reality? By all accounts Mandelbaum was straight, but his fascination with Francis Bacon, Arthur Rimbaud, and Pier Paolo Pasolini

hint at something else, representing a measure of how far one could go to express this ur-violence against the Jewish body. In one portrait of Pasolini, there is a small inscription in Hebrew, *aba*, meaning “father”. Self-depiction was something as common to the law of the father as the shroud of looting and death in post-World War II Europe.

On a night in December 1986, Mandelbaum was thrust off this mortal coil with as much brutality as was depicted in the art to which he had devoted himself. Drawing is a form of autobiography, maybe for everyone, but especially for Mandelbaum. The final line of a text written by his fellow countryman, Paul de Man, “Autobiography as De-Facement” (1979), poignantly summarises the grotesquery of the artist’s death in the face of his art. “Autobiography veils a de-facement ... of which it is the cause.” The intimacy of drawing, that solitary endeavour, was for Mandelbaum akin to tearing the bandage off a wound, pustulating with fear and irreverence. To scratch this itch, he went deeper than any skin, any piece of paper could take him, at the risk of complete self-erasure.

STÉPHANE MANDELBAUM (\*1961, Brussels, died 1986, body recovered near Namur) was a Belgian-Jewish portraitist-turned-criminal. From 1976 to 1979 he attended the Académie des Beaux-Arts de Watermael-Boitsfort, later joining the École d’Art in Uccle, both in Brussels, where his father was director. In 1980, he was awarded first place in a competition organised by Crédit Communal de Belgique. While still alive, he participated in the group exhibitions “Neuf peintres juifs”, Cercle Ben Gurion, Brussels (1981); “Uccle-Veurne”, Galerie Hugo Godderis, Veurne (1981); and “Nouveau mouvement réaliste”, Galerie Rencontres, Brussels (1982). He was the subject of posthumous solo exhibitions at Centre Pompidou, Paris (2019); Galerie Zlotowski, Paris (2021); and MMK, Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt (2022).

COLIN LANG is a writer living in Berlin. He is currently working on “Germans: A Self-Help Guide”, and a gossip novel about the insidious forms of antisemitism in the Berlin art scene.