

EJN Artistic Exchange Platform

5 April 2019, Handelsbeurs Library, Ghent - Belgium

Key Note address from Philippe van Cauteren, artistic director of S.M.A.K (Contemporary Art)

‘Highlights for a Future’ current exhibition celebrating 20 years of the museum being housed in the current building.

Philippe van Cauteren is a curator with internationally noted curatorships that include the Iraqi Pavilion in Venice Biennale called Incredible Beauty and the Triennale, My City My Studio, My City my Life. In an impressive and dynamic key note address, he told us of his specific approach to artists and art, his passion about and outspokenness on specific topics and alerted us to the synergy of his practice with the EJN: every month S.M.A.K presents one concert as part of an ongoing jazz series and musicians are encouraged to engage with the museum in a variety of ways.

Van Cauteren indicated that he has a ‘problem’ with his admiration of musical art because it is greater than his admiration for visual art, and as a result, music is a recurring element at S.M.A.K. His connection to music is close and Ornette Coleman’s albums inspired an exhibition called ‘Introduction’ – a project with eight performers, where no one knows what they’ll do – it just happens and takes as long as it should take, anything from 10 minutes to 3 hours and occurs throughout the museum. He noted that while he is enthusiastic about music and wants it in the museum, not everyone is positive about it.

The museum was founded in 1957 – an initiative of the citizens of Ghent – as an antidote to the museum of fine art in Ghent, which is currently located opposite S.M.A.K. S.M.A.K has been resident in the current building for 20 years, and in 2025 the museum will be able to house the permanent collection.

The surrounding city is very important at S.M.A.K - you visit the museum by leaving the museum. S.M.A.K is a counterbalance to what is happening outside.

S.M.A.K is both for and not for the art world, and it encourages young people aged between 8 – 16 years to be regular visitors.

Museum is word that has value and meaning – it is a fantastic word as it can be used everywhere, it can be anything (cf, Duchamp) and leads us to question what it is to be an artist.

Museum is like a body, it has two legs. One is the collection which incorporates 3000 pieces – the oldest is from the 1940s by Joseph Beuys and the most recent is from 2018. The other leg is the attitudes and vision of artists – and van Cauteren and the curators interview the artists understand what they do and to work out ways in which they can work together for long periods of time.

S.M.A.K is not a temple in which language is the obstacle. The museum likes doubt and likes to be part of a place – so everyday they bring together all elements and notions to make the museum exist in the form that it exists. They do not think about time frames but about operating in an international context.

Everything that is curated has a basis in social participation. S.M.A.K has a long-term relationship with a prison, where 25 sketch books contain work by prisoners, artists and others including aspiring artists/non-professional artists, but you cannot tell who has made each individual work. Education is another way in which the museum can demonstrate social inclusion, via the Centre for Learning & Work – which is a collaboration with youths who are not in school and also via a collaboration with people with alzheimer's.

These projects are not being sought out, they are organic, and are undertaken when appropriate and are definitely part of the core of the museum. They represent knowledge, tools, experience, that can activate activity in the city.

Van Caueren sees the 'museum' as a shelter for artists and artworks – a connection to the city and the place. To facilitate this intellectual engagement, S.M.A.K has a flexible and soft structure in order to humanise the place. As a curator he likes to bring 'issues' in to the museum and because Ghent is a small place, and S.M.A.K has a relatively small collection, it is possible to deal with issues and bring them to the fore.

One recent exhibition by the Swiss artist Christophe Bugge was challenging as the artist did not want to be present or to announce his four month-long exhibition - an unusual situation for a museum. This project included 13 refugees living in the museum, and the space was transformed into a 'youth hostel' for the duration of the 'exhibition'.

This exhibition highlighted the notion of art as 'not untouchable', artworks can die, they are not there for eternity and are a 'dialogue in doubt'.

Currently in S.M.A.K is an exhibition by the Brazilian artist Arthur Baum who creates disposable work that cannot be collected because it's ephemeral, so when he dies, the artworks die with him. The artworks are made from supermarket supplies such as coffee and refers to the fact that a museum is a place for all the senses not just the eyes. The works in, 'Highlights for a Future', are not ordered or structured – more like pin ball machine with things moving from place to place. And in spite of the fact that the artworks are ephemeral, it was noted that the artworks can be photographed and so there is a market in collecting the documentation of the work.

From 1999 there have been a range of events in the museum, not just music but a 'mille-fleur' of events around youth culture, responding to the works of artists, such as Sol Witt (4 – 5 evenings of concerts responding to the works), psychedelic, long term collaboration with festival in the park close to the museum, a project with American free jazz double bassist, multi-instrumentalist, poet and composer William Parker and all kinds of other events.

Why?

van Cauteren has a personal obsession with music and museums – a musician is freer than a visual artist and a musician has a different relationship with money and objects. He believes that music is an attitude – it is ephemeral so not there forever. S.M.A.K refuge where musicians feel at home and encourages musicians to respond to the ‘collection ‘ or the exhibitions for example.

He states that ‘S.M.A.K should be a refuge for free spirits’

He likens the museum to an accordion – it should be flexible to the needs of the creative artists – musical artists who perform there. As a result, he never willingly makes contracts with the artists and prefers a handshake. He often pays afterwards and / or agrees fee afterwards which emphasises the notion of trust, and he is also interested in surprise and flexibility – which is different to working with a visual artists, who have a more structured approach to work and exhibiting.

The motivation is to give the artists the possibility to fail. He sees the role of the curator as being like an archer – standing next to the artist and directing, suggesting, cajoling , helping so that things are feasible.

His aim is to inspire the people who come to the museum, where the museum is a membrane made (out of paper) between the artists and the spectator.

S.M.A.K is a machine against indifference.