

stories from what>

what what is what>? a space, place, wunderkammer, wonderland, somewhere, nowhere, everywhere, where fantasy, intuition, play, joy, colours, fabrics, the haptic, visuality, tactility, people, things meet each other. Where people and things are welcome... Where Alices come to play and wonder. Let your imagination run free...

where what> could be situated anywhere. *what> meeting space for visual culture* was based in Leuven due to local cultural policies. City politics have changed, the building has been torn down but the memories remain and are shifting into other contexts, projects,...

context 1 de kunstbank

what> is a project of de kunstbank. Our organisation was based in Leuven until the end of 2006. We then moved to Brussels. As a non profit organization, we focus on several things: on promoting visual culture - contemporary art in particular- through gallery education and exhibition projects; on enhancing cultural participation through participatory (art) projects and on (visual) knowledge production through shared research practices. Some of the exhibition projects are mobile and travel to Flemish schools, accompanied by our collaborators who hold workshops there for one or two weeks. Other initiatives such as the participatory projects take place in a specific context: for that sort of projects we prefer to collaborate with partner- organisations like Leren Ondernemen, an organization dedicated to eradicating poverty and social disadvantage.

context 2 cultural politics in Flanders¹

At the end of the 1990's, there were great shifts in Flemish and local culture policy: a phenomenon called "city marketing" arose and cultural heritage was recognized as a valuable domain. In Leuven, with its 90,000 inhabitants plus 30,000 students, there was also a desire to raise the city's profile in the regional landscape. Culture, art and heritage seemed the right track to pursue. During the same period the Flemish government issued a decree that established a regional and local policy concerning cultural heritage. Extra funding was made available and these decisions led to the establishment of heritage cells in every community.

context 3 the city and its cultural policy

In spite of being heavily bombed during the First and Second World Wars, the medieval centre of Leuven, with its late Gothic town hall, many churches, two beguinages, and many university college buildings, was well preserved. The university library, thanks to numerous American and European donations, was rebuilt after the Second World War. In addition to the university, several breweries played an important role in the prestige of the city. Today the multinational Stella Artois (InBev) is still prominent in Leuven.

Some of Leuven's cultural players found that the existing museum was not attractive enough and wanted to find more space for contemporary art. The city museum, a former bourgeois townhouse with a historic garden, was located adjacent to the former art academy and municipal library. It seemed ideal to renovate the site and create a new complex where there would be space for modern art. In order to give this project for the museum site an appropriate profile, external advisers were consulted. The internationally renowned curator Jan Hoet was hired as a consultant by the city in 2001. In his final report he sketched the situation in Leuven: under "existing potential" he mentioned the rich medieval patrimonium, the university and several initiatives in contemporary art, including the Leuven biennial. Herman Labro, artistic director and one of the founders of the de kunstbank, had served as curator in the second edition of the Leuven biennial in 2000. His highly original selection of artists, works of art, and locations was well received by both press and public. Jan Hoet specifically mentioned de kunstbank in his report as a unique resource due to Herman Labro's commitment to the biennial and the great expertise of de kunstbank in relation to art education. He recommended a close partnership between the museum site and de kunstbank.

Aside from a few top pieces, Leuven's art collections – including the Vanderkelen-Mertens museum's collection were considered as heterogeneous and second rate. Therefore it seemed optimal to anchor the museum site project in a wider societal context and to create an "ambiente" in which "high" art and daily life could interact with one another; an environment in which the public would feel comfortable and which would link the inside and the outside of the museum site with one another.

Hoet linked this concept of "art as "ambiente"" with the idea of the "room". The site consisted of many buildings. The museum's holdings– in his eyes a kind of Cabinet of curiosities – consisted of paintings and sculptures but also valuable furniture, decorative objects and porcelain china from various styles and periods. The "room" model made it possible to invite contemporary artists like John M. Armleder who has affinity for this theme. "The museum site must become the focus of critical discussions and conversations, and must constantly generate new inspiration and initiatives." Two poles had to be considered here, which he for convenience called the "creative" pole and the "conserving" pole. "On the one hand, there is creation, which flows out of our current thinking about now and the

¹We speak about Flanders and Flemish cultural politics. The political situation in Belgium is complex: some areas, such as culture and education, fall entirely under the separate communities' competence, that is, Flanders or Wallonia; other areas like health care, fall under the federal level. Attitudes and trends in culture and education differ greatly on either side of the language border.

future. On the other hand is the necessity to reflect about how we deal with the past – archiving? cultivating?” Finally the question of public access and outreach had to be considered.

This report was widely circulated, eagerly read and constituted the beginning of cooperation between the city of Leuven and de kunstbank. Saïd el Khadraoui, the young city alderman of culture at that time, rose to the challenge: de kunstbank was invited to participate in the discussions and was asked to formulate an experimental and innovative way to involve the public in the museum site. The old municipal library, which would be eventually demolished (all but its facade was deemed unusable) was considered a suitable location for this experiment, and it was here that what>, a meeting place for visual culture was born.

about what>

what> explores the at times familiar, at times bewildering surface world of visual culture. Classical art from the collection of the city museum, from the university or from private collections, as well as contemporary art, pieces of cultural heritage from the city archives, design work, photography, video, comics, popular culture, fashion and media can be a part. what> is a meeting space, a place where people and things meet and where intercultural dialogues take place with residents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, students, tourists, ... through an exchange of experiences and ideas, what> encourages different ways of looking at, interpreting and creating images.

some facts

what> interpreted public access and outreach literally as involving the public, working with citizens. There were eight exhibition projects that took place from 2002 to 2006. Together with the French artist Franck Bragigand the space was transformed each time into a new painting in which the visitor could literally walk around. Most of the exhibitions had an open theme, such as places, people, or things, and consisted of many concrete and separate projects. The exhibitions were never finished; projects were continually added and ideas changed, not only during but also after the opening night. People could make suggestions and inspire future projects with their stories, associations and ideas. In the summer “in betweens” were held: exhibitions that looked forward as well as backward, and left room for playful experiments.

The exhibitions were produced by cooperation of many actors: the other institutions on the site – the Vanderkelen-Mertens museum and the heritage cell, professional and amateur artists, members of institutions and organizations in Leuven, citizens, visitors, and more. It was a reflection of the (cultural) abundance of the city, its citizens, museums and organizations. This four-year project welcomed a total of 59.600 visitors.

what> two people> popular> people>>>

A case study will clarify what a what> exhibition looked like. A select overview of some of the projects and activities follows.

In what> two, we displayed silk screens by Andy Warhol, the pop art superstar: his “Marilyn Monroe” series, “Flowers” and even a “Saint Apollonia”. Warhol’s heirs were welcomed, used and further explored: “popular culture”, “we the people”, and “everyone famous” were the initial themes of this exhibit.

Artist Franck Bragigand used primary colours for his painting: red, yellow, and blue. The painting encompassed approximately 15 projects.

From the municipal collection came several late Gothic sculptures. Saint Catherine kept Warhol’s Saint Apollonia company; here and there were statues of Christ on the Cold Stone, a popular medieval genre that was mass produced at that time in local workshops. The current female curator and her secretary both provided commentary to the portraits of the founding fathers of the city museum: the scientific commentary was contrasted by the anecdotal.

Several projects allowed people to experience Warhol’s renowned “15 minutes of fame”. Spinosh, a popular brass band which includes older gentlemen who sing in local dialect, experienced a comeback thanks to their performance at what>. Their photographs were part of the exhibition.

Flyers and advertisements in the local newspaper invited young people to be models in the show “Idriz Jossa goes pop” by the fashion designer of the same name during the opening night of the exhibition. For “Blue eyes”, a project by René Kantor, young girls were approached that evening, professionally made-up with blue eye shadow and photographed with a Polaroid camera. The results were presented a few hours later as a mini exhibit in the what> gallery. The well known Mr. Alain Extravaganza and another drag queen put on their Sunday best. Visitors could choose to have their photograph taken with them during a special session by a professional photographer.

Children from a local school showed their project “exceptionally famous”. On opening night they appeared dressed as VIPs and their own famous alter ego. Alongside pop stars and Olympic athletes were famous inventors, writers, and artists as well. With professional assistance, they produced their own magazine covers and gave an interview to a well known journalist. During the exhibition it was possible to listen to the interviews on headphones and see their magazine covers. Enormous black and white portraits of them as themselves in poses of their choosing, were

displayed on the windows. Some of them were so frequently recognized that in the end, they became tired of being famous.

Flyers invited participants to become Marilyn Monroe themselves in a Monroe Special during the finissage. Mainly young women responded but a feminine looking young man also participated. One woman came in an ornate Marilyn costume and paraded the whole evening in the gallery and up and down the street. Monroe films were screened the entire evening and a debate was organized between a well known film critic and a director: one a devoted fan, the other a Monroe detractor.

Photographs of the various projects appeared later in many exhibitions.

The serial aspect of Warhol's silk screens and the medieval sculptures repeated itself in a project by the Spit, a social employer and recycling centre for used goods. A collection of painted chests of drawers from the 1950's played a prominent role in this. The result of a joint project between artist Franck Bragigand, the Spit, and what> was that several Spit employees worked with Bragigand in a creative workshop and designed a special collection for each exhibit. For what> two, they were inspired by Warhol's silk screens.

The idea to give Ingrid Betancourt, former Columbian presidential candidate and hostage, a place in what> two came through a meeting with a local activist. She was touched by Betancourt's book, "Anger in the heart", and founded a local support committee with two friends. We wanted to support their commitment to a brave contemporary heroine, as a counterpoint to the medieval female martyrs, even though we knew little about the situation in Colombia.² We invited them to set up activities during the exhibition; during one of these activities some of Betancourt's supporters from Belgium and France came to visit. At the time we were silk screening *pancartes* with a portrait of Betancourt as an icon on them. The national head of the support committees pointed out that this was a delicate situation: there were so many other hostages in Columbia, and people were upset there that the European press was only interested in Betancourt. Even though we were proud of the *pancartes*, he had a point: from this came the idea to write the names of all the hostages on the facade of the building and on the *pancartes*. The performative actions left a great impression on those who worked the next few days writing down all the names as well as passers by and visitors. Word got out to people with Latin American roots in Brussels and Antwerp, who came to see it. They were surprised and touched by the attention for and the solidarity with the suffering of simple people and victims in their home countries.

The protest march the support committee wanted to organize, was forbidden. The city alderman did not want what> to involve itself with "political activities". The specially made banner, upon which the women had let themselves be photographed in brassieres, dyed in the colours of the Colombian flag³, was not permitted to be hung over the street. Instead we organized a mini march: we cut photographs out of people holding the *pancartes* and displayed them in the exhibit. The *pancartes* were later used by the support committees in demonstrations and other activities. When the police tried to forbid them, the activists used the argument that it was art, which helped.

communities

what> succeeded in creating temporary new communities. The hosts and hostesses played a crucial role in this. They succeeded in making people feel welcome as visitors. As long as it felt "right", they gave information, listened to impressions and associations, offered coffee or water. At the same time we worked with a wide variety of existing communities: social projects, schools, institutions, young people united by sport or lifestyle, the Academy of "Leives" (academy for local dialect), and so on. We always pursued a healthy social and generational mix. In order to connect with the local communities, we regularly published articles in the local free weekly newspaper, distributed flyers and worked with the local television station.

Conflicting interests

Inherent to this experiment were many challenges and conflicts of interest. For example, authorship issues concerning the work produced during the cooperation between Franck Bragigand and the Spit seemed obvious in the beginning. The Spit employees assisted in the workshop with his monochrome collections. These were exposed in an artistic context or developed for the design label Droog Design (Amsterdam). It soon became more complex: in the Spit collections for what>, they were able to participate in the selection of colours and they began to experiment on their own, painting and accentuating details. Franck Bragigand found this difficult and even threatening. The symbolic-economic question became an issue. For the artist these were works of art that could also be used in a practical way as a chair or a cupboard. For all parties it was also important that the items would in the end be sold at democratic prices in the recycling centre's store and at what>. For the people at the Spit it was difficult to reconcile the idea that, depending on the context, the same cupboard could vary widely in price.

Some choices were difficult for the artists and other participants to accept. We did not provide unequivocal references to authors of works (we refused to hang name plates as in a classic museum context) and "the individuals and interest

² Latin American is barely covered by the Dutch language press and at that time Betancourt was not well known (only her spectacular liberation was front page news).

³ play on words: they named their organisation "Leuvens comité de soutien". Soutien in French means support and is also part of the word soutien-gorge which means brassiere.

groups that wanted to get involved in what> had to tolerate one another in their process of gaining visibility, as well as in their respective claims for a specific space. This is how the project made the public negotiation of fairly contradictory interests and articulations possible, thereby materializing the claim associated with the concept of culture often referred to as 'third space'.⁴

what> played with levels of representation. Placing objects in another context created shifts in meaning. "The peculiar and singular arrangement of things between other things, of objects, furniture pieces, fragments, texts, quotations, art works: the quoting of behaviour modes as performative acts (the subject always has only a performative status, it enacts itself), letting different referential systems simultaneously be hinted at; in a playfully-serious way. Art alongside balls of wool, alongside fragments of the everyday, professional photographers alongside amateurs, models alongside girls, female political resistance fighters alongside three women. Through the arrangements they change their texts. Where is the meaning in this? It originates in the middle, in between things."⁵

Although we wanted to create an open space where things could happen, choices were not made arbitrary and we did not accept every proposal. We found the aesthetic component for instance very important. Starting with what> two, we shared the curatorship and not only did we negotiate with potential participants but also with each other. In many meetings we tried to motivate our choices as well as we could.

The fact that everyone was welcome also created problems. Some preferred the "right" audience. A spontaneous crochet project that attracted many disadvantaged people, was especially and sharply criticized, not only by a certain "cultural elite", but also by politicians who were, officially, proponents of socialist theory and social inclusion.

end of the museum site

At the outset we had a positive and constructive relationship with the curator of the museum. The other player at the site, the heritage cell, was populated by a young, inexperienced staff who were sceptical about their own mission. They found our proposals too complicated and the spontaneous nature of what> too difficult and chaotic.

Things soon became more complex. The city planned to hire an "intendant" for the museum site. The curator of the museum felt threatened and started a new campaign to reform the museum site into one new museum with her as its director. She began to lobby to reduce what>'s mission to the museum interests. The fact that what> attracted many more visitors also created jealousy and suspicion and played an important role in the conflicts. Despite many constructive attempts, this led to a breach.

Some concepts and projects were taken over and produced by the museum and heritage cell after 2006, a practice that Carmen Mörsch often sees happen with small innovative projects in these neoliberal times.⁶ Officially, what> has disappeared: in reports on the historical perspective of the city of Leuven's cultural policy as well as on official websites, what> is never mentioned.

to be continued elsewhere

what> meeting space for visual culture does not physically exist in Leuven anymore, but the what> spirit live on. The strategies, energy, results have moved on with us to our new location in Brussels. We continue to welcome fantasy, intuition, joy, colours, fabrics, the haptic, visuality, tactility, people and things. And we will continue to inspire play, wonder and imagination. To be continued...

⁴Mörsch, Carmen, The Shift of Vocabularies. In-between Pragmatism and Deconstruction in Aufsätze zum Wandel kultureller Handlungsweisen (Hg.) Dominika Szope/ Pius Freiburghaus/ Charles und Agnes Voegelé Stiftung, 2005. Mörsch refers to the article of Homi Bhaba, ...

⁵idem

⁶ For an analysis of *what>* with Gilles Deleuze see Sturm, Eva: "Gilles Deleuze and Eva Sturm and What>". In: *What>* (Ed.) (2005): in between, Leuven.