

gaston BERTRAND  
81x65  
"LA CATHEDRALE .."  
1950  
N°90

# SETTING THE SCENE

*Richard Venlet's art in context*

Brussels-based artist Richard Venlet has developed a varied practice over the past quarter-century. A natural metamorphosis seems to have occurred during this time, from the exhibiting of his own work and arranging the context for that work, to concentrating on the context in regard to the positioning of works by others, and further onto designing the context as a work in itself. His approach, however, has remained the same throughout, assigning a meticulous attention to detail and applying a great deal of intuition. DAMN° spoke with the artist and surveyed his oeuvre.

SAM STEVERLYNCK  
IMAGES BY RICHARD VENLET EXCEPT WHERE MENTIONED OTHERWISE

Whether making works of his own, developing exhibition scenography for other artists, or realising architectural interventions, Richard Venlet's multi-faceted practice of the last 25 years has dealt with art, the presentation of art, and the way art is viewed by the spectator. Last year at the S.M.A.K. Museum of Contemporary Art in Ghent (Belgium), he made two different proposals illustrating the variety and – at the same time – the coherence of his oeuvre.

Some artists make objects; others go a step further and create an entire context, display, or environment for these. Like Australian-born Belgian Richard Venlet, whose practice constantly shifts between, art, architecture, and scenography design. "The first works I made at the end of the 1980s were autonomous objects", Venlet remembers. "When I started to make exhibitions, I always built scale models to determine the positioning of the works. In time, that aspect became so dominant that it was all-defining. Dealing with the exhibition space and the context of exhibiting took-on more and more importance. So I guess it was logical to begin creating the context myself." An important step in that development was a double

exhibition held in Brussels in 2005. One part took place at the Jan Mot gallery, the other at the nearby artist-run space Etablissement d'en face. At Jan Mot, Venlet created a cinema booth for one person, while at Etablissement he presented artefacts and artworks (Piranesi, René Daniels, Marcel Broodthaers, Ann Veronica Janssens, Richard Artschwager, et al) that he selected from various public and private collections. He didn't just display these works in a classical way, but created a particular setting. Through a hole in the gallery floor, you could descend a staircase into a sparsely lit room where the pieces were showcased. It felt like a closed chamber "where a hermit would hide his private collection", as the artist puts it. "It was an import project for me", says Venlet. "From then onwards, I often worked with existing collections or initiated projects with a curatorial dimension." Although he is quick to add: "I don't like the word 'curator'. It is more about creating a context to bring things together and activate collaborations with other people. It is like a stage or frame, but not in the literal sense of the word." When Philippe Van Caueren visited the exhibition in 2005, he was impressed by the way Venlet dealt with the notion



1



2



CIT.CIT.1 Image bank, 2005  
Gallery Jan Mot, Brussels

CIT.CIT.2 Platform & Treasury, 2005  
Etablissement d'en Face, Brussels



of the collection. Hence, when he became director of the S.M.A.K. in Ghent, he invited the artist to do 'something' with the museum's collection. That finally resulted in *Museum for a Small City* in 2013, an ambitious project on the crossroads between curating and exhibition design. The starting point was the S.M.A.K. collection and its archived history, whereas the title was linked to an eponymous, unrealised project by Mies van der Rohe. "When browsing on the Internet, I saw a picture of a drawing proposal that van der Rohe made for an imaginary museum in the 1950s. On the drawing, the building itself is reduced to almost nothing. There is just the suggestion of a floor and a supporting structure. It looks like an endless landscape in which he placed, by means of a collage, some artworks, like obstructing elements." One of the works depicted in van der Rohe's sketch is Picasso's *Guernica*. It reminded Venlet of Picasso's *Guernica in the Style of Jackson Pollock* (1980), a painting by Art & Language in the S.M.A.K. collection. Venlet borrowed the title of his exhibition from van der Rohe's proposal. He devised a kind of stage on which to show works from the collection in different constellations. The intervention consisted of a large floor surface covered in grey carpet tiles. It was one step higher than the museum floor and was assembled in a large grid pattern. It looked rather like a chessboard, with the works from

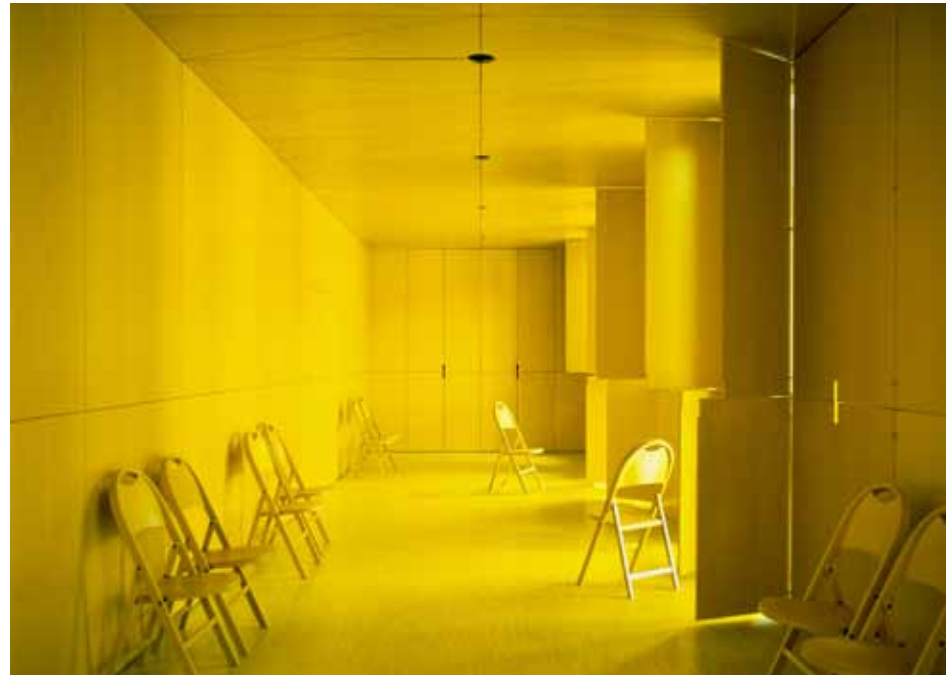


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Paramount Basics, 2002 (1)  
25th São Paulo Biennial

Open Room, 2006 (2)  
Monnikenheide, Zoersel, Belgium

SERTificate, 2014 (3)  
Gallery Estrany De La Mota, Barcelona



Chapel and Quiet Room, 2009 (1/2)  
AZ Groeninge, Kortrijk, Belgium

Facing page:  
Museum for a Small City, 2013 (3)  
S.M.A.K., Ghent, Belgium  
Photo © Dirk Pauwels

the collection functioning as pawns. “The constellation changed every two weeks – which required a big effort on the part of the museum. Works or archival documents were added, removed, or placed in other positions. The only permanent pieces were two ‘head’ sculptures by Franz West. They functioned like ghosts. Sometimes they felt like an audience, sometimes more like protagonists. It was a way to always have a ‘human’ presence on the platform. Another permanent element was the guard, who was also situated on the raised floor. The surrounding walls were not used. When we showed paintings, they were hung above the platform.” How did he select the works and define their position? “Partly intuitively or by following my personal interests, as I am not an art historian. I think that as an artist you look differently at art and have other selection criteria. It was also a bit trial-and-error. At a given moment, I placed *L’Homme qui Marche* (1984), a pedestal sculpture by Didier Vermeiren, next to a piece by Stanley Brouwn, an archive picture of André Cadere sitting on a pedestal, and a sculpture by Maurice Blaussyld. When I was installing these works, Jan Hoet dropped by. It was fascinating to see how he immediately analysed my selection in terms of standing still and walking. We had a very nice conversation.” The project summoned questions about the relevance of an art museum in a (small) city, and on how to deal with a collection and reactivate it. “It was also about including the tiny details and the underlying history. I was not working with big narratives but with the stories in the background that are at risk of being forgotten.”





BACK IN THE S.M.A.K.

A few months after the much talked about *Museum for a Small City*, Venlet was invited to the S.M.A.K. again. But this time for another task. Thirty-four years after Jan Hoet's iconic exhibition *Art in Europe after 1968*, he was asked to design the reconstruction of that show. It was a way to revive the groundbreaking exhibition and re-evaluate it through contemporary eyes. Venlet's proposal sprang from the show's original graphic identity, a triangle with a bright colour scheme. "I translated the historical graphic language into a triangular floor plan, superimposing it over the original ground-floor plan of the museum. Hence, it cuts the spaces into pieces; creating front sides, back areas, and main rooms. That monumental intervention makes you see parts of the museum in new ways. The most rewarding thing for me was that you could wander round in a familiar building and still be surprised. The circulation had changed completely." Though both projects are totally different and have another status – one clearly signed as an artist, the other as a stage designer working on a commission – there are striking similarities. "They both do something with the spectator. It is not a conscious strategy, but an observation I made afterwards. They try to involve the viewers or at least make them aware they are visiting an exhibition. That carpet for the *Museum of a Small City*, for example, changes your awareness. Your pace becomes slower and your steps are silenced. You are basically walking on a pedestal and standing eye-to-eye with the artworks. It is a small gesture, but it changes things a lot. The same goes for *Art in Europe after 1968*. You enter and leave the circuit through a small door, and follow another route. It is a completely different experience."

With his upcoming projects, Venlet continues to illustrate his ability to escape any kind of pigeonholing. Future commissions include work for the brand Maniera; the design of a crematorium in Ostend in collaboration with Office KGDS, architects; and art integration at a mortuary in AZ Groeninge (Kortrijk) and at the Mundaneum archive centre in Mons. <

Works on paper, drawings by choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker; scenography by Richard Venlet, at Bozar, Brussels, from 20 March to 17 May 2015. [bozar.be](http://bozar.be)

Exhibition: 6A ARCHITECTS / RICHARD VENLET; MANIERA 03 & 04, at Maison Wolfers (Architect: Henry Van de Velde), Brussels, in April 2015 (by invitation only), followed by a presentation in the Maniera showroom, opening 16 May 2015, on view by appointment thereafter until the end of June. [maniera.be](http://maniera.be)

Art in Europe after 1968, 2015  
S.M.A.K., Ghent, Belgium



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