

## REFLECTION P3/P4

### CONTEMPORARY ART MUSEUM PROJECT FOR THE NEW MUHKA

The focal point of this graduation project revolves around the design and implementation of a new structure for the Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerp (MHKA) in the Flemish region of Belgium. Founded in 1985, this public institution is set for relocation to the site of the forthcoming demolition of the Court of Appeal in the Zuid district of the city, situated adjacent to the historic docks. Aligned to its multifaceted role as a publicly funded institution the project has to bridge the governmental desire to establish it as an international Flemish museum without losing its identity and origins in the ICC. The brief presents a complex array of contrasting notions that demand careful consideration and thoughtful resolution in a physical embodiment that will transform the city's skyline.

Thus, the new building investigates an approach that challenges the common formality and rigidity of art institutions without neglecting the required technical specifications of a museum. As a result, it questions how social, cultural and economical dynamics can interlace the principles of the modern museum that cater to the handling of art, in order to cater to the contemporary art museum and foster public spaces for social interaction.

#### ***The institution***

*What does a contemporary anti museum look like?*

The roots of the institution can be traced back to the antimuseum principles established by the ICC, inextricably linking it to the anti-art movement that emerged during the first half of the 20th century. While the term "anti-museum" may suggest a complete rejection of traditional museum qualities, it is essential to recognize that anti art only gains meaning in relation to what was previously considered art, just as the antimuseum finds its significance within the context of what

was previously deemed a museum. As aptly expressed by Willem Sandberg<sup>1</sup>, the inherent nature of anti art is to persist as art, thus rendering the inevitable nature of the antimuseum as its continuation as a museum. In this light, the New MHKA can be viewed as an opposition to the modern museum and its underlying principles, particularly those associated with the concept of the white cube.

At first glance, the minimalistic unmaterial interior space of the modern museum are merely devoted to the technology of aesthetics<sup>2</sup>. However this superficial simplicity conceals a complex interplay of economic, social, and cultural dynamics. Questions surrounding race, community, social outreach, public space, and diversity inevitably find their way into the supposedly neutral white cube. The very premise of inclusion through neutrality, which has characterized the conceptualization of the white cube, is what is primarily challenged by the contemporary gallery and particularly by one rooted in the anti museum. The museum no longer caters primarily to art, it becomes an exploration of what the institution can accomplish in terms of its social agency and its role as a public space

MHKA's approach to art extends well beyond mere curation and preservation; it revolves around the notion of social outreach and the pivotal role it plays within the community. Consequently, the institution has endeavored to enhance accessibility to art through initiatives such as digital open archives, publication of materials, and the provision of free exhibition spaces. However, the current physical space of the museum lacks the necessary architectural flexibility to fully embody their profound aspiration to foster social interaction. This longing for enhanced social engagement is clearly evident in the programmatic demands outlined in the project brief, particularly the request for approximately 4,000 square meters of forum-based spaces.

### ***The VMHK and the forum***

*What do you go to a museum for?*

Research into the ideology of the forum space within a museum was conducted through the physical recreation of eight precedent studies. Specifically, our group focused on reproducing the forum space from the 2013 FRAC in Dunkirk (Fig. 1). This museum serves as an exemplar for merging the essential characteristics of the white cube for art display with a more public and industrial space, establishing an intriguing relationship with the city through the preservation and

1. Willem Sandberg, *The Anti Museum, an Anthology of Writings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 391, essay title: "Museum as Habitat."

2. B. O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

adaptability of the former boat warehouse (Fig. 2). The existing structure provides a large open space that is not only part of the museum but also integrates with the public spaces of the city. It accommodates art installations and public events, and as such, it can be physically connected to or separated from the gallery spaces while maintaining visual continuity. The forum space within this heritage structure can be seen as a replication of its concept. With its double height and visual connection to the upper levels, it embodies the qualities that a contemporary art museum should strive for: flexibility, accessibility, and opportunities for the public to engage with art in a manner distinct from the white cube ideology.

Likewise, the proposed forum space for the VMHK (Virtual Museum of Contemporary Art) aims to serve as both an area for art display and social interaction. Positioned on the ground floor, the main forum space establishes a strong connection to the surrounding streets of the site. It is a double-height area that features a reading room with publications from MHKA (Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp) and a café, alongside a dedicated room for art display in its vicinity. This space is envisioned as an extension of the exhibition areas, offering



Fig 1. Forum model of FRAC Dunkirk by Lacaton and Vassal

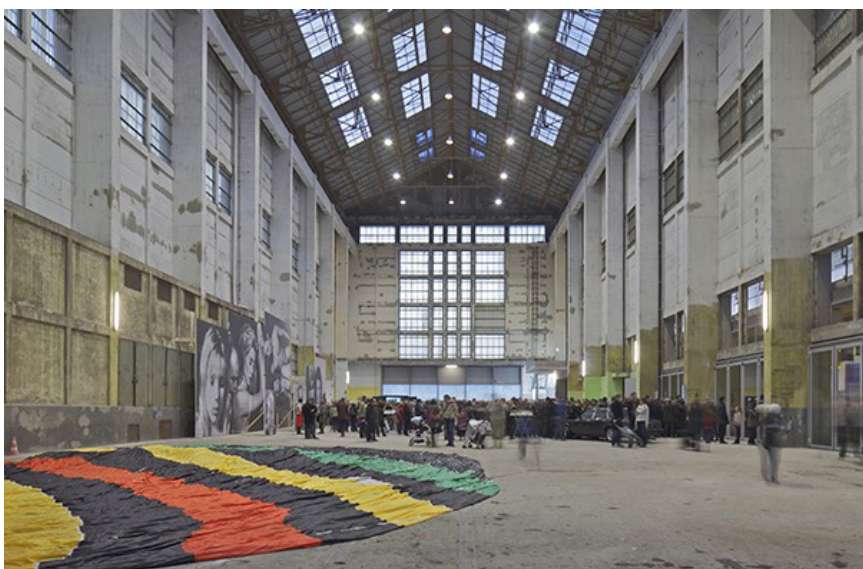


Fig 2. Photograph of old warehouse- FRAC Dunkirk by Lacaton and Vassal

flexibility to host events, public functions, and large-scale art installations. Additionally, the project challenges the distinct separation suggested by the brief between the collection, exhibition, and forum. Instead, it conceives the collection as an integral element of the forum and vice versa.

Consequently, the permanent collection is made accessible and free within the new building, playing a pivotal role in visitors' vertical movement. It becomes a destination in itself or a space one can pass through while en route to other public areas such as the library, café, or temporary exhibitions. This approach aims to align with MHKA's curatorial philosophy while simultaneously reinforcing the significance of the Flemish museum's collection throughout the entirety of the building.

The visitors' experience is intricately tied to the movement through the building, as the design embraces a carefully balanced interplay of axiality and obliqueness. This deliberate combination engenders a captivating tension between the inclination to dwell within a particular space and the alluring invitation to continue exploring the building's unfolding possibilities. It is within this narrative that a harmonious fusion of domestic scale and materiality intertwines with a raw industriality, resulting in an environment that is both inviting and stimulating.



Fig 2. Photograph of model. Proposed gallery space for Marlene Dumas.

The incorporation of flexible systems for art display further enhances the dynamic nature of the museum. Notably, the exploration of a gallery space by the esteemed artist Marlene Dumas (Fig. 3) has contributed to the development of one such system. This integration of innovative display mechanisms creates an environment that not only accommodates the evolving needs of the artworks but also establishes an engaging and transformative encounter for the visitors.

### ***The future of the contemporary museum***

#### *Personal outakes*

As an individual who has always immersed myself in the experience of museums, this past year has brought about a shift in how I perceive gallery spaces. Questions surrounding conservation and its intricate connection to power have taken center stage.

Some of these questions delve into the realm of historiography: Who assumes the role of curator for the displayed artworks? Why is a particular piece deemed significant enough to be preserved? Who holds the reins of narrative control? And how do we strike a balance between the voice of the architecture and the agency of curation?

However, it is the socio-political inquiries that have gained prominence in my thoughts. What contributions does the institution make to the community? Who are the benefactors supporting these spaces? Where does the paywall intersect? How accessible are these spaces? And most importantly, who is the museum truly serving?

Consequently, my present personal standpoint leans towards envisioning the future of the contemporary museum as one driven by social agency. These spaces ought to not only value and engage in the curation and display of art but transcend those boundaries. They should strive to shift away from the glorification surrounding these artifacts, thus integrating art with the fabric of everyday activities rather than concealing it within hermetically sealed white cube.

In doing so, museums can be spaces that foster inclusivity, accessibility, and a renewed sense of relevance. The galleries become a dynamic platform, embracing diverse voices, forging connections with communities, and igniting conversations that extend far beyond the confines of traditional art display.