

Introduction

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Extra muros. The museum flooding its own banks. Making permeable the borders between city and institution, between inside and outside, between public and private. The temporary site-specific projects the museum launched or co-organized during the past decades can be characterized in a number of ways, but every description will always set out from the same starting point: Chambres d'Amis, the extramural exhibition the museum organized in 1986, and for which artists from various countries were invited to intervene in private houses in the city of Ghent. The exhibition ruled like a gigantic search through the city, leaving tangible or intangible traces. Since then the museum has periodically organized events outside the museum, but in many ways Chambres d'Amis remains exemplary. It has become the standard to measure other events. However, that is not to say the basic concept is not open to change or cannot evolve. The contrary is proven with Over the Edges, a project that is essentially a continuation and extension of the concept of Chambres d'Amis. But there is one major difference: the maybe too intense or vivid private space has been replaced by the living room, the staircase or kitchen, finding a place of its own. What is highlighted now is the public space, which is injected with a new vitality by the more than fifty site-specific works of art throughout the city. This new dynamism springs from the corners of the streets of the city, corners which have become both an opening and a zone of transition. They mark a chance, bring us to arrest our steps. They are clearly articulated reference points which help us to orientate ourselves. Organizing an exhibition in a city with one or several museums is always a challenge. It is doubly challenging to organize a site-specific project in a city in which every building is a monument in itself, a sort of work of art. For this particular project will blur the borderline between private and public, hiding and revealing, architecture and urban development. Even more significant than this exploration of boundaries, is the almost experimental and experiential process with which the artists enquire into the functioning of art in the city. The museum thus questions itself as an institution and space where art is displayed. Instead of just being a sum of showrooms, it rather becomes an abode of contemplation, a place from which works of art part to confront places which generate new impulses.

Indeed, a painting or any work of art is not just an object, but also an active subject, interacting with its context, with life outside the walls of the museum. In the introduction to his collection of polemic essays, *Moderne Legende*, the Dutch art historian and writer Camille Van Winkel holds that museum and public space are no longer sharply distinguishable entities. "The

museum has become the mere culmination of the public sphere to which art is condemned, whether they like it or not.” Our own view is somewhat less radical. In our view, the museum is a place where a variety of artistic tendencies converge, both to affirm themselves and to question themselves. The museum is not terminal at the end of the line, but an instrument, a means to continue the enquiry into the function of art within a society which keeps changing rapidly. Over the Edges is in perfect harmony with these observations, because it creates a two-way traffic between the museum – an institution where art is conserved and shown to the public – and the city. A discussion is brought about between “new” art and old architecture, and new social networks are created, giving a fresh impetus to the interaction between the museum, the inhabitants of the city and everyday reality. Over the Edges is not a neat, smoothly finished project which we seek to realize some definite goal. It should be considered a process of communication and exchange. The project emphasizes openness and directness, immediacy and accessibility. The public/passers-by who stroll through the city is invited to provide an interpretation or meaning for every work he or she discovers by chance or consciously visits. The public does not need to experience the works as isolated human beings, but the encounter with the works can be shared, as they are embedded in a more general encounter with the environment of the city. Furthermore, as the works are scattered about the city, a new public may become sensitive to contemporary art. Those who till now did not dare to visit a museum, may suddenly, even involuntarily, be confronted with a work of art that has been integrated into the urban fabric. Reactions may range from appreciation to disapproval, but what is essential is that people talk and think about the works. The results can only be positive: the sensitivity to topical and visual themes will increase and the debate about contemporary art will no longer be reserved to specialists.

Yet the organization of events like these is not without danger. There is always the risk that the project becomes a perfectly trimmed, magnificent and popular show, witty and spectacular, but without content. Such a risk can only be avoided by carefully choosing artists who both appeal to the public and confront it with works of outstanding artistry, i.e. works which are not merely ornamental, but play along with the environment in the broadest sense of the word. The works of art which have been realized for Over the Edges elaborate on the verge of integration and contrast. Crafted into the urban environment, they artfully fuse with it, yet they retain their autonomy and particular character. They create a sort of stop-effect, i.e. they invite us to look, to interpret, to spend attention to corners and aspects of the city which may usually go unnoticed. Over the Edges will demonstrate that art is not only a motor – the eye, the invitation and confrontation – but also a catalyst which increases the rate of developments, but also that it can create pauses, temporary stops which allow us to sharpen our thinking.

But what about Charles V?, you may wonder. “How did this historic figure get involved in all this?” The answer to this question is multifaceted and maybe also ambiguous. Charles V was both a starting point and an open question. The historical character provides us with a reason and an ability to highlight the contemporary, the historical city, its history also provides the substrate of present-day reality. The present city bears the “imprint” of the historical city – past and present do not cease to interact. Rather than imagining history, we opted for an interactive and metamorphic approach. Not to celebrate Charles V in an extravagant manner, as this would merely imply sending information and pictures from A to B, but we opted for an interactive event which promotes the dialogue between artists and inhabitants of the city, between the city and the work of art which has found a place in it, between the present and the past. We hope that Over the Edges will elicit a broad range of emotions, from approval to disapproval, from provocations to positive responses – a range of emotions and diverse as those summoned by the deeds and personality of Charles V. In essence Over the Edges should be the starting point for the museum, the city and art alike from which to explore new potential, new possibilities, both abstract and concrete. The impact of the project will not be restricted to a few permanent artistic interventions. Over the Edges will doubtlessly radiate such intensity that it will continue to reverberate, even when the exhibition is finished. Maybe its vibrations will be invisible, subterranean, but of no less amplitude.