

Research Plan
Individual Reflection

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Interiors, Buildings, Cities,
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Museum as urban space

Individual Statement | Dagna Dembiecka

During the last couple of months, I was delving into ideas of not only how to exhibit art, but also what a museum means in contemporary society as an institution engaging broadly with the public. What is the role and purpose of museum institutions in contemporary society? What architectural form would be ideal for such a typology? And simply: what is a good museum?

M HKA in Antwerp has an interesting history, having its roots in an anti-institutional approach reaching further than the 1980s when it opened in its current form. Being described as “Kunsthalle with a collection” in its beginnings continues to claim their experimental approach to the notion of a museum institution. M HKA wants to both mark its importance within museum institutions and continue its anti-museum approach. It is also clear that public outreach is an important element for the organization. Therefore, the aspect of a museum as an accessible urban space could potentially become a leading notion of the project.

Centre Pompidou

In recent decades museums became not only places to contemplate art, but also places to hang out, work or even shop. The case studies conducted by our studio during the last two months prove that the museum typology in recent decades started resembling a versatile, vibrant public space rather than a monothematic institution that just showcases its collection. A very illustrative example of an institution radically oriented towards the public is Centre Pompidou in Paris. Designed by Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano in a hi-tech style, Pompidou opened its doors to the public in 1977. Since half of the plot was given to the vast public outdoor space (Fig.1), the building had to be tall enough to fit around 75 000 square meters of functional space.¹ From the vast program of the museum, the permanent collection of the Musée national d'art moderne takes only 12,210 square meters. 5 900 square meters are devoted to temporary exhibitions, whereas the rest of the space is taken by a huge public library (Fig.2), cafes, bookstore, performance theatre, conference room and screening rooms.²



Fig.1 Interior view of public library fully accessible to everyone, 1977. source: atlasofplaces.com/architecture/centre-pompidou/, photo by Bernard Vincent



Fig.2 View on the Piazza and entrance to Centre Pompidou. source: <https://www.atlasofplaces.com/architecture/centre-pompidou/>

Museum Inside The Telephone Network

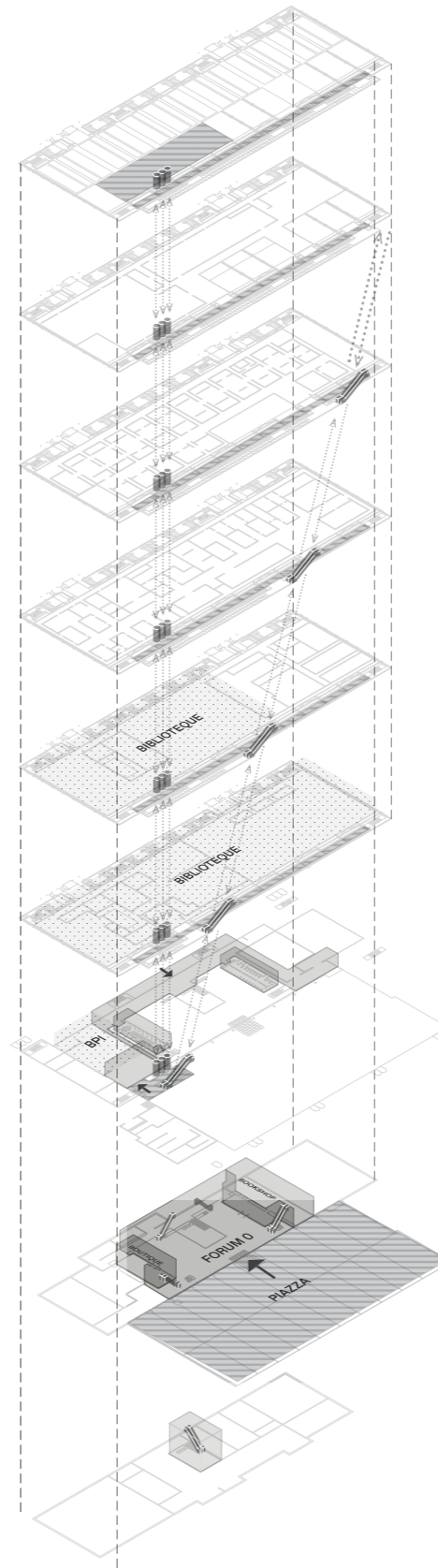
Museums as a public spaces paradoxically gained even more significance during COVID-19 times (from 2020) when it became apparent more clearly than ever before that art can be accessed online as well.³ This caused a certain detachment of art content from the place where it is exhibited. Art is not the only reason to visit the museum anymore since the content can be accessed through different channels. Although I don't believe that looking at art online can replace a physical visit to the art space, I could see potential and a certain freedom to experiment with the form of architectural spaces of museums, so they can serve more purposes than exhibiting art. Nonetheless, the idea to divest museums of physicality didn't start just in recent years. In 1991, the experimental exhibition “The Museum Inside The Telephone Network” took place. The visitor could use the buttons of the phone to create melody, listen to sound art pieces, download artworks on their computer or receive them by fax as well as

1 <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/en/collection/our-building>

2 Ibid.

3 Levin, Rachel B. “Museums Brought Art to Your Smartphone. Are Digital Exhibits Here to Stay?” USC News, July 22, 2021. <https://news.usc.edu/trojan-family/virtual-art-museum-tours-exhibitions-after-covid-pandemic/>.

listen to some live performances.⁴ Such an interesting choice to exhibit art was an attempt to widen the horizons of cyberspaces. However, it also questioned the traditional notion of a museum as a physical



4 ICC: Intercommunication'91 “the museum inside the telephone network”. (n.d.). Retrieved November 9, 2022, <https://www.ntticc.or.jp/en/exhibitions/1991/intercommunication-91-the-museum-inside-the-telephone-network/>

space and opened possibilities for speculation about what the actual museum building can be. As a result of liberating them from purely exhibiting function, museums as public spaces become extensions of the city, forums to discuss, learn, play, spend time and educate themselves. They have the potential to actively become part of the urban fabric.

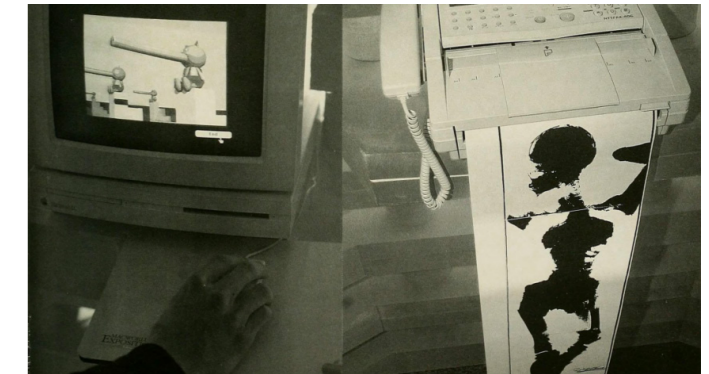
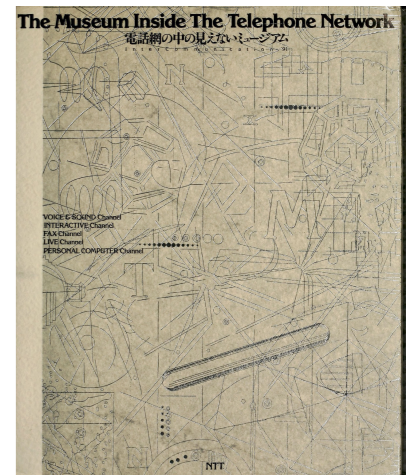


Fig.3 (above): “The Museum Inside The Telephone Network” exhibition, 1991 source: openculture.com

Fig. 4 (on the right): “The Museum Inside The Telephone Network” exhibition, 1991 source: openculture.com

Fig.5 (on the left): analysis of publicly accessible components of Centre Pompidou. The accessible amenities include the rooftop, public library, forum which includes the cafe, bookstore, ticket office.



Dichotomic Nature of the M HKA Institution

There is a fundamental contradiction in the M HKA's intentions. As a young contemporary art institution, it seems to understand that more is expected now from a museum. Its initial anti-museum approach is still visible in the current narration of the institution. However, as a world-level museum, it also needs appropriate architecture to mark its presence in the Belgian art world as well as to host its constantly growing collection. Therefore, there comes an interesting question: how to soften the institutional character of a new building of M HKA? In my opinion, the dichotomic nature of this institution allows for a certain level of creative speculation about the shape of the future cultural institution. I believe that challenging the notion of traditional institutions and imagining how the building could function in a wider urban context are interesting questions that I would like to start with.

Walter Swennen *Spatial Ensemble*

Walter Swennen (1946) is a Belgian painter that works and lives in Brussels. Formerly a poet interested in psychoanalysis, became a painter in 1980s. He believes in total autonomy of the artwork and its existence as a three-dimensional objects. Swennen takes inspiration in the everyday life and he emphasizes clearly the distinction between the act of painting and the picture - which belong to a different universes.

In my proposal of the Walter Swennen spatial ensemble, I delved into exploring the idea of a painting being a sculptural object. According to correalist beliefs of Frederick Kiesler, the paintings (or other pieces of art) inhabit the space and are creating a specific relation to it.¹ Treating paintings as objects rather than flat pictures allows to engage a special relationship between the viewer and the painting, but also helps the viewer to acknowledge and appreciate the spatial qualities of the exhibition room. The two rooms house the whole collection of the museum. The rooms, connected with enfilade, differ from each other in proportions and size. As Barbara Coutinho and Ana Tostoes argue in their article "The Role Of Architecture In An Engaging And Meaningful Experience Of The Physical Exhibition", the reason for visiting an exhibition is no longer due to a desire to see a specific artwork, but rather to experience a presence of a self in a specific, significant space. Therefore, simple benches in both rooms serve not only as a place to sit and spend time, but also to exhibit the artwork. Furniture and exhibition backgrounds blend with each other, creating a potential public space.



Fig. 7 (above):
References: Peggy Guggenheim seated on a Correalist rocker, Surrealist Gallery, Art of This Century, New York, c. 1942.

Fig. 8 (below):
References: Display by Franco Albini for the exhibition "Scipione e del Bianco e Nero", Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan, 1941
©Fondazione Franco Albini

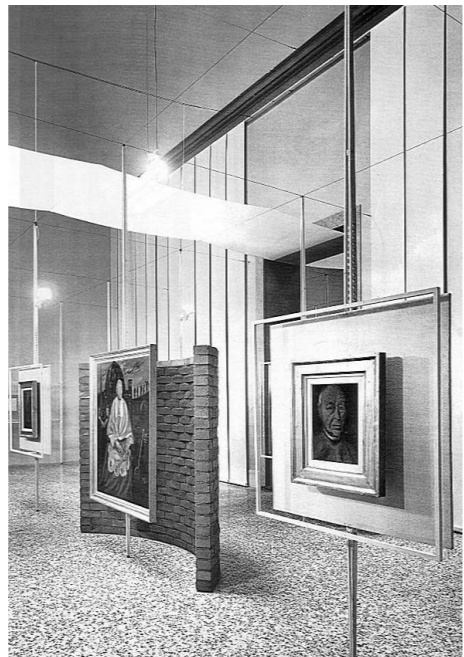


Fig. 6 (above):
References: Exhibition 'Experimental Group' (Cobra), designed by Aldo van Eyck, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1949.
Photo Stedelijk Museum



1 "Frederick Kiesler's Correalism in Contemporary Art." Designblog RSS, October 17, 2017. <https://designblog.rietveldacademie.nl/?p=64207>.

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