

# SEANKELLY

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'Collection Study III: Art in Europe after 1968', exhibition view

There we were: a damp shrivel of critics tramping along a rainy beach in the Belgian town of Ostend, hoping for an epiphany. We were on our way to see the artist Kris Martin's newly commissioned *Altar* (2014), part of 'The Sea. A Tribute to Jan Hoet', a citywide project that grew out of an exhibition, 'The Sea', which the Belgian curator Jan Hoet was working on when he died in February 2014. In his last days, Hoet handed the project over to Mu.ZEE's director, Philip Van den Bossche, and a small team of curators, who assembled a show of over 200 works in the museum and site-specific installations across town. As we approached Martin's sculpture, a metal frame planted in the sand resolved into a shape resembling the *Ghent Altarpiece* (1432), Hubert and Jan Van Eyck's Northern Renaissance masterpiece. Martin's empty structure looked like a derelict billboard facing and framing the sea, out of which the pictorial content – so vital to the history of art in this Flemish region – had been dropped in favour of a view of nature itself. But the sacred tenor of the altarpiece remained, in spite of the disclaimer Martin gave us: 'I am a believer but I don't bother anyone with that.'

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Some 60 kilometres away, in the exhibition 'Collection Study III: Art in Europe after 1968' at S.M.A.K. in Ghent, Hans Haacke's *We Believe in the Power of the Creative Imagination* (1980) also quoted the famous altarpiece. Hoet originally commissioned Haacke's work for his seminal exhibition 'Art in Europe after 1968', first shown in 1980 at Ghent's St Peter's Abbey. The S.M.A.K. show is an in-depth analysis and partial reconstruction of Hoet's original. Haacke's version of the Van Eyck brothers' allegory consists of a flag and several framed posters that exposed the connection between the 1980 FN-Browning Prize for Creativity and its sponsors, the Fabrique Nationale Herstal S.A. (FN). This Belgian arms manufacturer sold its wares to countries with tarnished human rights records – including both sides of the Biafran Civil War and the apartheid government in South Africa – and continues to operate today. Haacke's research also revealed FN's illustrious stakeholders to include the Belgian royal family and the Vatican, and the artist's message about the insidious business dealings that generate cash for art still resonates.



*Kris Martin, Altar, 2014, steel 3.4 x 4.4 m*

The versatility of the Ghent Altarpiece, which has lent its iconic form to works addressing greatly divergent belief systems, echoes the maverick figure of Hoet himself: curator, boxer and, according to a press release for his 1992 Documenta 9, once voted one of Belgium's top ten sexiest men. Notwithstanding such trivialities, the exhibition at

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S.M.A.K. – a museum Hoet founded in 1999 – showcases his commitment to curatorial experimentation and discourse, and to commissioning for the museum's collection. Subsequent to the 1980 exhibition, Hoet commissioned and bought not only Haacke's work, but also Joseph Beuys's *Wirtschaftswerte* (Economic Values, 1980), Art & Language's *Picasso's Guernica in the Style of Jackson Pollock* (1980) and Barry Flanagan's *Untitled (Sculpture)* (1980). Hoet was the figurehead of 'Art in Europe after 1968', but the project itself was put together by a committee of curators who selected a group of artists, who subsequently invited another group of artists. The current exhibition was designed by artist Richard Venlet, who neatly mapped the triangular shape of the 1980 poster onto the museum's current floor plan, creating an intriguing architectural homage to the original that can be felt before it is fully understood. The triangle's sharp corners and diagonal or truncated walls give the exhibition an unexpected dynamic, emulating the sense of discovery that Hoet's original would have offered.

In the complementary tribute show at Mu.ZEE, it seems that the curators had brought together any work they could think of relating to the sea, in an idiosyncratic hang which sprawls through adjoining galleries without a clear sense of purpose or direction. Conceptual works such as two 16mm films by Marcel Broodthaers, based on found images of the sea, and his *Grande casserole de moules* (Large Pot of Mussels, 1966) sit cheek by jowl with historic paintings like Gustave Courbet's *La Vague* (The Wave, 1869) and J.M.W. Turner's *Three Seascapes* (c. 1827) to highlight a shared romanticism and fascination with the maritime sublime. In adjoining galleries, the show's logic is more eccentric, with Paul Thek's triptych *Life is Like a Bowl of Cherries* (1971) opposite Etel Adnan's seascape *Untitled* (2000) and Silke Otto-Knapp's silvery sea view *Frontcloth (Mondaufgang)* (2011). The wide selection also included works of personal significance to Hoet, such as Luc Tuymans's *The Spirit of St. Louis* (1988), which Hoet bought on the spot when he first met Tuymans in the late 1980s; or *Océanie, la mer* (Oceania, the Sea, 1946–47), a silkscreen by Henri Matisse that once belonged to Hoet's father.

In town, Bill Viola's *The Arc of Ascent* (1992), a black and white video Hoet commissioned for Documenta 9, is shown in a derelict cinema. Predating Viola's conversion to digital video, this tall, narrow projection, which originally had to be installed by stacking three projectors, shows a man slowly falling head first into water. The characteristic visual effect of 'creeping' – a texture particular to degraded video or images blown up beyond their resolution – gives the work a dark, shimmering and ominous feel. If 'The Sea' as a whole feels like a chaotic conversation with an absent interlocutor, rollicking from one century to the next and across all media, it is also tinged with

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the anxious need not to leave anything out of such a generous tribute to Hoet, whose individualism always infused his boundless energy and imagination.