

Sculpture as Social Gesture

Philip Metten's convivial creations

Many of Philip Metten's best friends are musicians. Aside from providing him with the inspiration gained by regularly listening to the finest tunes, these associations have stimulated the artist to make interactive sculptural works that embrace the public – much like music does, in fact. Through a range of architectonic projects which nonetheless still retain the definition of sculpture, the drawings, models, and autonomous works he delights in making in his studio are nourished. Metten somehow manages to balance his working methods with his output, and to interweave sculpture with sociability – normally a contrary combination. His is a fulfilling odyssey.

SAM STEVERLYNCK
PHOTOS BY JAN KEMPENAEERS, © PHILIP METTEN

Whether it is a café or a gallery or the scenography for an exhibition that he configures, Belgian artist Philip Metten is a sculptor first and foremost. Though not a traditional one, certainly. Rather, he breaks open his works to provide platforms for social interaction.

DAMN°: How did you make the transition from creating autonomous sculptures to fashioning architectural environments?

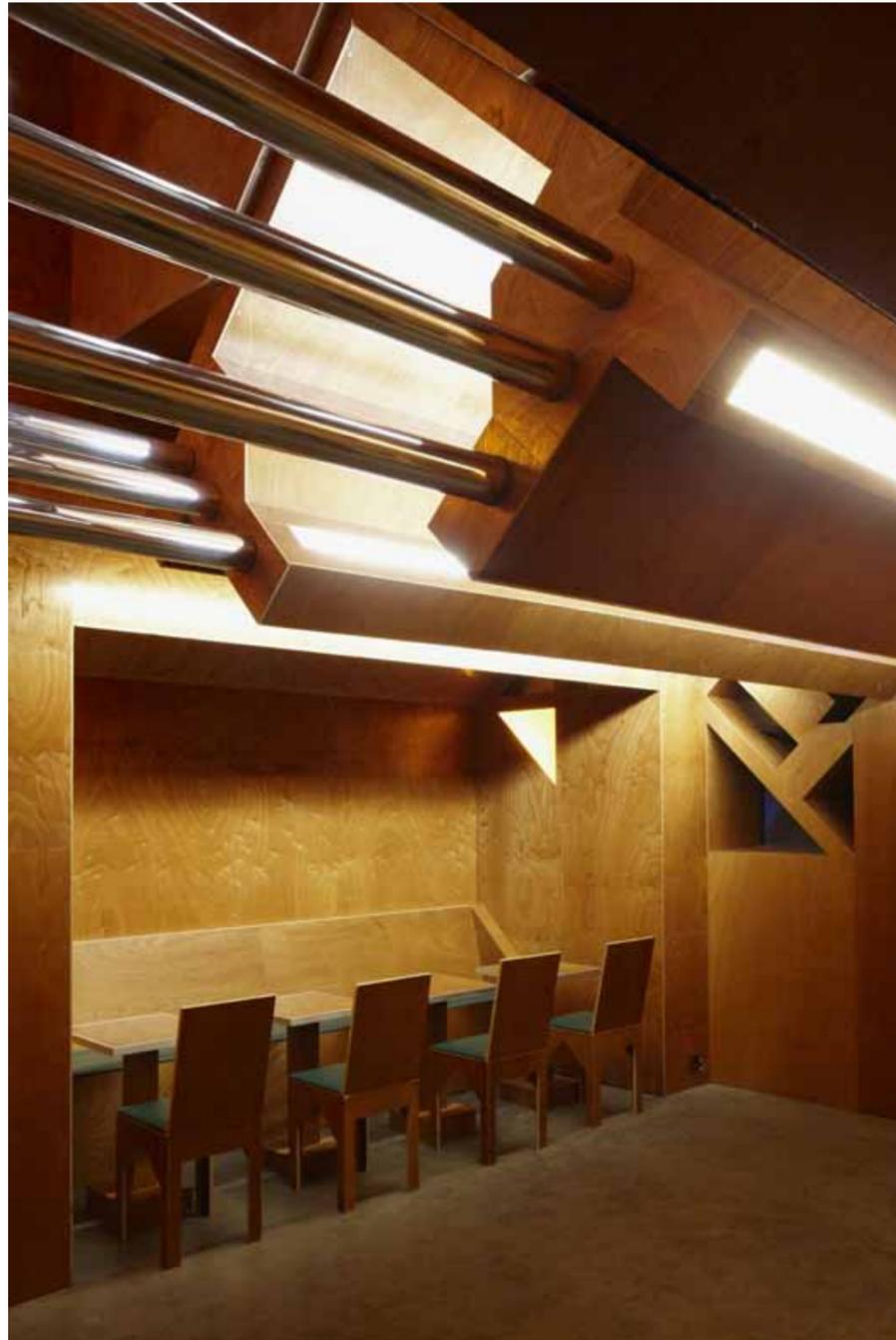
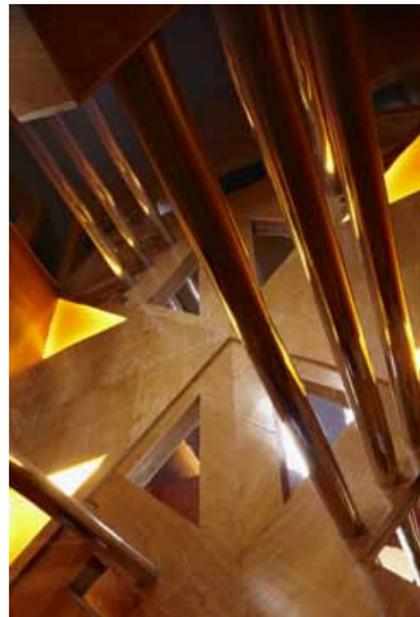
Philip Metten: All the sculptures and architectural installations I make start from collages and drawings. I work with an archive of cuttings and forms, which I then put together in an intuitive way. I've been making autonomous sculptures for years. At a given moment I wanted to escape the isolation of my studio. As I have lots of friends who are musicians, like Tim Vanhamel (Evil Superstars, Millionaire, Eagles of Death Metal), I thought: How can I involve them in my work? I then started approaching sculpture as a platform for other people. Having been invited to do a solo show at S.M.A.K. in Ghent in 2006, I made a monumental sculpture consisting of two layers. Incorporated on the ground floor was a black box pro-

jection room featuring a movie by Toon Aerts. The upper floor was used for performances during the opening. I wanted other people – both friends and visitors – to activate my sculptures. This is in great contrast with the distance normally imposed between viewers and classic sculptures.

DAMN°: So you opened up your sculpture, as you also did for the scenography in the exhibition *The Corner Show* at Extra City in Antwerp?

PM: That one consisted of different aspects: it served as the scenography of a group show; a new, permanent entrance; and – in a second phase – a bookshop and a desk. As I am a sculptor and not a scenographer, I wanted to make a sculpture that would be generous toward the curators (Wouter Davidts and Mihnea Mircan) and the invited artists, and that had a function. I started with the idea of a box of bricks in which the different volumes would be distributed throughout the space. These forms were used to display the artworks but at the same time were minimal sculptures in their own right.





Bar, St Paulusplaats, Antwerp, 2013

DAMN°: This was a commission, so you had less freedom than in your own projects. Did that bother you? PM: No, you always have restrictions, whether it is in regard to programme, size, or budget. I like the idea of having restrictions, as these also offer opportunities. That was the case with my design for the façade of the Kai Matsumiya gallery in New York, as well, with its specific measurements and context. Architects have to follow an entire programme, whereas artists mostly do what they want. But even when it's up to me, I set myself limitations.

DAMN°: Tell us more about your intervention at Kai Matsumiya. PM: I was invited for a solo show and given complete freedom. I started wondering: What is a gallery? Just as with my intervention at Extra City I had asked myself what exhibition scenography is, or what a café is for Bar. I always begin by thoroughly researching the history of the specific typology. Research is very important to me, as I am also teaching sculpture at the KASK School of Arts in Ghent, which is a crucial part of my artistic practice. As this was a gallery, it

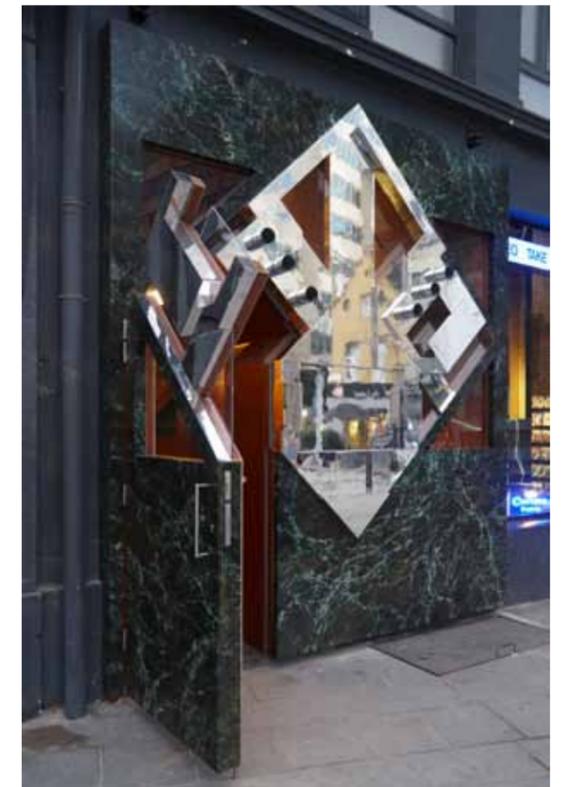
made sense to present a sculpture. I didn't want it to be something displayed only inside the building but in the upper front part of the space as well, at which point it would start functioning as a façade. As the gallery faces the street, I decided to place the sculpture on the threshold, on the border between outside and inside. It created an interesting interaction in which the wider context of the neighbourhood – the Lower East Side – was also addressed.

DAMN°: What will happen with the sculpture afterwards? PM: At this moment, it is part of the gallery and will be there for the subsequent exhibitions. I find the question of preservation interesting, because this is not a permanent work. The façade will stay in place

until it is worn out. It can then be restored or destroyed. I am curious as to how the work will evolve in future. The sculpture is in constant evolution.

DAMN°: Your most visited realisation so far is Bar, the transformation of an existing café in Antwerp's red light district that existed for nearly seven months, a kind of Gesamtkunstwerk for which you also designed the furniture.

PM: Yes, indeed. I saw it as an autonomous sculpture functioning as a bar and not as the decoration of a bar. Because people also needed to be able to sit down, I had to think of furniture. It didn't make sense to use the existing furniture, so I decided to make it myself, as part of the sculpture.



153. Stanton, 2015
Kai Matsumiya contemporary arts space, New York / A reconfiguration of the gallery's vitrine / For his first solo show in North America, the artist intervened on both sides of the windowpane of what used to be a Wu-Tang Clan merchandising shop – the logo of the infamous hip-hop band is still visible on the roller shutter.

Bar, St Paulusplaats, Antwerp, 2013

DAMN°: One can recognise several references: Adolf Loos's American Bar in Vienna, Japanese architecture, post-apocalyptic cinema, ...

PM: There is definitely a filmic element. I worked in a video rental shop for years. Cinema influences me. As does the fact that my family owned a construction company, where I worked as a teenager. The bar felt like a film set. As a spectator – or visitor, if you like – you could see the backside of the construction from the counter. So the entire illusion of a permanent setting was shattered. The visitors were almost like actors in a film set.

DAMN°: Besides these architectural projects, do you still make autonomous sculptures?

PM: Yes, that is very important to me. The architectural projects require a completely different dynamic than the work in the studio. It is more communicative and social. When I work with people, I want to work alone and the other way round. This constant balance between the two is crucial. But what is even more vital is that the drawings, models, and sculptures I make in my studio nurture my architectural projects. I need one to do the other. Both practices are constantly feeding one another.



DAMN°: What are you working on right now?

PM: On the design of a new restaurant in Antwerp for Klaas Janzoons (dEUS). I am designing the façade, interior, furniture, and inner garden. This time it's not a temporary structure but a permanent one. It is meant to open sometime in 2016. <

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