

Article

Kris Martin: Altar/Altering Perspectives

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Abstract: Kris Martin: *Altar/Altering Perspectives* Flemish artist Kris Martin's work exists in relationship to the city of Ghent and his reflection on that city's medieval past. His pieces that implicitly engage with the *Ghent Altarpiece* by Hubert and Jan van Eyck question the position of human beings in both physical and subjective relationships to works of art. They invite viewers, particularly residents of Ghent, to participate in a new narrative of Ghent, one that is framed, sometimes literally, by the layers of Romanesque and Gothic art and architecture and the symbolism and visual language of Flemish Christianity. They reveal his baroque interest in bringing together tradition and a contemporary conceptual ideology and fall somewhere between the theatricality of the carnival and the artificiality of the spectacle. While a few pieces pointedly reference a Flemish Catholic ideology, the medieval manipulation of the public and the direct iconography are missing. Through his manipulation of scale and placement in non-traditional locations, the pieces are open to new readings beyond the emotive and didactic. But, much in the tradition of the Northern Renaissance, they engage the viewer intellectually and ask for introspection.

Keywords: conceptual art; medieval art; *Ghent Altarpiece*; Ghent; readymade

1. Introduction

In 2010, Flemish artist Kris Martin designed a cross for Sint-Baaf's (Fr. St. Bavo's), Ghent's famous cathedral. At just over 4' tall (130 cm), it is placed on the flagpole at the top of a gothic tower that rises 370' (113 m) above Sint-Baafsplein, the public square that surrounds the cathedral. The highly polished stainless-steel cross captures the Flemish sun, making it visible to residents and visitors to the city. Martin designed this cross specifically with Ghent in mind. Instead of arms spread in the traditional position of the martyred Christ, each end of the horizontal bar is folded inward, resembling the human figure of Christ seemingly covering his eyes. In an interview with the newspaper *Het Nieuwsblad*, Martin observed that, during the annual Ghent Festival (*Gentse Feesten*)—a theater and music festival where roughly two million people descend upon the small city for ten days of joyful anarchy each July—his Christ conveys: "Do it; I will not watch."

Martin's crucifix atop Sint-Baafs draws attention to the cathedral, which houses Hubert and Jan van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece* (1432). This paper examines Martin's work in relationship to the city of Ghent and his reflection on that city's medieval past through contemporary interrogations of the *Ghent Altarpiece*. His pieces question the position of human beings in both physical and subjective relationships to this familiar and famous work of art. Gentenaars, residents of Ghent, are often the primary audience. Their relationships to their city and the place of Sint-Baafs are central to much of Martin's work. His pieces invite viewers to participate in a new narrative of Ghent, one that is framed, sometimes literally, by the layers of Romanesque and Gothic art and architecture and the symbolism and visual language of Flemish Christianity. They reveal his baroque interest in bringing together tradition and a contemporary conceptual ideology and fall somewhere between the theatricality of the carnival and the artificiality of the spectacle. Martin's pieces are transformative and often very playful. While a few pieces pointedly reference a Flemish Catholic ideology, the medieval influence on the public and the direct iconography are missing. Through his



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manipulation of scale and placement in non-traditional locations, the pieces are open to new readings beyond the emotive and didactic. But, much in the tradition of the Northern Renaissance, they engage the viewer intellectually and ask for introspection.

2. Sint-Baafs and the Lamb of God

In 2014, Martin created *Altar*, a scale copy of the 11' × 15' frame of the *Ghent Altarpiece*, known in Flemish as *The Lamb of God (Het Lams God)*. The altarpiece was commissioned by Jodocus Vijd, warden of the Church of St. John and assistant burgomeister of Ghent, and his wife Lysbette Borluut for the Vijd family chantry chapel. The ability of Vijd and Borluut to commission such a large piece is indicative, in the fifteenth-century in Europe, of an increase in trade and banking resulting in the rise of prominent bourgeois culture. The financial success mirrored the nobility regarding the ability to commission artwork for public places that underscored not only their piety but their disposable income. The patrons position themselves in these religious pieces, albeit outside the central panels that portray a spiritual event. As the patrons of the piece, Vijd and Borluut are visible on two of the larger-than-life-sized panels of the closed altarpiece. Above the donors are four additional panels; the larger two depict the Virgin Mary and the Angel Gabriel of the Annunciation. Additionally, the altarpieces increasingly included accurate city views as vignettes in the larger piece, which promoted a civic pride in the community. These fifteenth-century altarpieces were also the first to include the secular world in the spiritual. In the *Ghent Altarpiece*, the panel near to the Angel Gabriel provides a view of Ghent, an essential component in the relationship between the altarpiece, Vijd and Borluut, and Gentenaars.

The moment the *Ghent Altarpiece* was unveiled to the public, on 6 May 1432, it became an object of pilgrimage for artists and was viewed by an untold number of visitors. Moreover, van Eyck's use of oil paint provided a level of detail that was unprecedented. At the time of its conception, the altarpiece represented a new artistic vision in which the idealization of the medieval tradition gave way to an exacting observation of nature and un-idealized human representation. The atmospheric perspective pulled viewers into an expansive and exotic landscape, taking them on a mystical journey to other places and locales, blurring the distinction between real life and the frame of a fantasy landscape.

The altarpiece continues to bring tourists to the city of Ghent, serving as an almost singular identifier. Sponsored by the Getty Foundation, an intense restoration from 2010 to 2017 was organized by Belgium's Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK/IRPA) and took place at the Museum of Fine Arts Ghent (MSK). The finished outer panels were returned to Sint-Baafs in 2016; the inner panels, including that of the Mystic Lamb, were completed in 2017. The restoration itself was a local and international event. Visitors to Ghent could view the process on weekends and holidays when the restorers were not present. The restorers also explained their process through monthly tours and talks. Special exhibitions and educational programs were held at the Provincial Cultural Center in Caermersklooster, housed in a former Carmelite Monastery from the eighteenth century. Flemish schools and universities created curricula around the project. The, at the time, innovative website "Closer to Van Eyck: Rediscovering the *Ghent Altarpiece*" was largely supported by the Getty Museum, which allows users to zoom into individual sections of the panels. The altarpiece has an intriguing history as well: it was dismantled and hidden on two separate occasions to protect it from iconoclasts and Calvinists; it was taken to Paris as a war trophy in the eighteenth century; in 1934, two panels, 'The Just Judges' and 'John the Baptist,' were stolen. The 'John the Baptist' panel was returned anonymously, but 'The Just Judges' remains lost, replaced by a reproduction. Upon its return home to Ghent after its seizure by the Nazis during the Second World War, it was welcomed home like a king by the ecstatic Gentenaars, who lined the street as a Guard of Honor.

3. Altar

Kris Martin celebrated this fêted symbol as a sign of the city's endurance by casting *Altar* in raw steel, leaving it to oxidize, forming a warm and textured patina (Figure 1).

This is in contrast to the efforts to preserve the original frame and panels of the altarpiece in Sint-Baafs. Martin underscores the transience of the human experience in the materiality of *Altar*, which is mirrored in the changing landscape of the Flemish shore. (It was treated after oxidization to prevent disintegration.) As a result, *Altar* is ephemeral in some ways, permanent in others. The ambiguity between static and dynamic is integral to the piece. The identity of the *Ghent Altarpiece* as an object attached to a specific site and the recent restoration to return its original physical properties of 1432 are undermined in Martin's piece, which facilitates a new form of engagement with Ghent's, and Flanders', prized possession.



Figure 1. Kris Martin, *Altar*, 2014 (Oostende, Belgium). Steel image courtesy of SMAK (The Municipal Museum of Contemporary Art).

Altar was originally conceived for the 2014 exhibition *The Sea (De Zee)*, held in Oostende, a small seaside town in Flanders. Martin was conscious of the implications of the *Ghent Altarpiece* within Flanders and for Flemish history. But, *Altar* was developed specifically for the late curator Jan Hoet (1936–2014). Hoet, referred to as the “Pope of Art”, was curator of Documenta IX and founder of SMAK in Ghent. He served as a mentor and promotor for Martin while the artist was still in school and was instrumental in presenting art as an accessible commodity in Belgian creative practice and creating a dialogue between the past and the present in a country that is rich in artistic history. In 2013, Hoet, along with co-curator Phillip Van den Bossche from Mu.ZEE, the museum in Oostende specializing in Belgian art from 1830 to the present, initiated an exhibition titled *The Sea*. After Hoet's death in 2014, the exhibit was renamed *The Sea: A Tribute to Jan Hoet (The Sea-salut d'honneur Jan Hoet)* and opened later that same year. Works of art were borrowed from SMAK's collection, and artists with whom Hoet had previously worked were asked to contribute a new piece as an homage to him as a citywide project. Van den Bossche, and a small team of curators, assembled a show of over two hundred works in Mu.ZEE and at site-specific installations throughout Oostende. For example, Vaast Colson's *Atop the Capstan*, which played a recording of Hoet's voice rigged up to an accordion, was installed inside the Thermae Palace, projecting Hoet over sand and sea.

Other locations included Leopoldpark, Ensor House, the railway station, the Church of the Capuchins, and on the beach. *Altar* was installed on the beach (Figure 1). The decision to scatter the pieces throughout Oostende rather than centralized at Mu.ZEE reflected Hoet's ground-breaking installations that pushed art beyond the walls of SMAK and into the city of Ghent during the 1990s.

For those familiar with Hoet's work, and that would be a surprisingly large percentage of the Flemish public, *Altar*, created as a dedication to the Pope of Flanders, would have been a natural conflation of curator with saint. In 2018, in an interview with Canvas.be, a Belgian television channel, Martin noted that "Jan was crazy about the Lamb of God, just like me and many others. When I was still living in Ghent, not a week went by without a visit to the Mystic Lamb, which was an inexhaustible source of inspiration [for me] as it was also for Jan." Jan Hoet shared his name with the Vijd chapel dedicated to St. John in a church built on the foundations of a medieval chapel to St. John the Baptist, traces of which are still discernable in the crypt of Sint-Baaf's. This connection was not lost on the public nor the curator himself. *Altar* was also, in large part, a nod to the contemporary art exhibition *Sint-Jan*, curated by Hoet and Martin, held at Sint-Baaf's in 2012. In exchange for the cross atop the cathedral, Martin was provided access to an exhibition by church Canon Ludo Collin, an opportunity he turned over to Hoet, leading to the *Sint-Jan* exhibition.

In conjunction with *The Sea*, the exhibition *Collection Study III: Art in Europe after 1968* was held at SMAK in Ghent. *Collection Study III* was also dedicated to Hoet but arranged after, and in reaction to, his death. The original *Art in Europe after 1968* was organized by Hoet in 1980 and served to inaugurate Hoet's dedication to installing contemporary work throughout the city of Ghent. It was held in Ghent's St. Peter's Abbey, creating a precedent for Hoet's later interventions in moving art outside the walls of the traditional museum.

Art in Europe after 1968 was the first time that European art was viewed in relationship to American Minimal Art. *Collection Study II: Art in Europe after 1968* was not simply a re-enactment of the earlier exhibition but served as a critical reflection of a crucial period in the history of the museum as it expanded its collection, establishing itself as a major research location under Hoet's direction. The curator, Richard Venlet, following the ideology of Hoet himself, examined how and in what context art is presented and how this plays a part in determining the viewer's experience. The exhibition questioned the very architecture of viewing, which forged a strong connection to Hoet's vision of an exhibition dedicated to the sea and Martin's *Altar*.

Hans Haacke's *We Believe in the Power of the Creative Imagination* was included in *Collection Study III: Art in Europe after 1968* (Figure 2). Commissioned by Hoet in 1980, Haacke's polyptych utilized the *Ghent Altarpiece* as its foundation and exposed the connection between the 1980 FN Browning Prize for Creativity and its sponsors, the Fabrique Nationale Herstal SA (FN). FN, a Belgian arms manufacturer in Liege, sold its products to countries with deplorable human rights records, which included both sides fighting in the Biafran Civil War and the apartheid government in South Africa. Significant for Belgium was that the Belgian royal family was a stakeholder in FN. As Ntongela Masilela points out, in his analysis of Haacke's work in relation to South Africa, "in light of the humanistic tradition within which the *Ghent Altarpiece* is generally seen—particularly its connection to Burckhardt's notion of 'discovering' the material world—Haacke's anti-altar art becomes a shocking inversion upon closer scrutiny" (Masilela n.d.).

Thus, Kris Martin's choice of the *Ghent Altarpiece* brings together the history of Ghent, references to Belgium's dubious international relations, and the specter of Hoet over Ghent and much of Flanders. *Altar* also underscores much of what informs Martin's own work—the specificities of space, site, and place. He considers himself a conceptual artist with many of his sculptures, both large and small in scale, acting as interventions and critiques of time, history, and the transience of human existence.¹ In *Altar*, Martin uses a frame, the frame of art history, as a sign for art. In this, he pays homage to Lorraine O'Grady's 1983 performance *Art Is. . .* (Figure 3). In O'Grady's piece, a 9' × 15' gold frame—the same dimensions as Martin's *Altar*—mounted on a float—framed everything it passed along Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard during Harlem's African American Day parade as art: "That's right, that's what art is, We're the art!"



Figure 2. Hans Haacke, *We Believe in the Power of the Creative Imagination*, 1980. Mixed media. Image courtesy of SMAK (The Municipal Museum of Contemporary Art).



Figure 3. Lorraine O'Grady, *Art Is...*, 1983. Creative Commons-licensed image.

While O'Grady's intentions were to make conceptual art accessible to the Black residents of Harlem, the overriding concept was that, as people were being framed, they were being acknowledged as art themselves (Grix 2018). *Altar* speaks to the diversity of ways a singular piece can be connected to seemingly disparate projects and ideological goals of public art. For Martin, it is how we look—how the look is guided or the view is framed—not necessarily a treatise on the role of art in a public space, although this shapes how Martin's work is perceived. In both O'Grady's piece and Martin's *Altar*, the frame is

not a limited zone but contiguous with the real world, which underscores the goals of Van Eyck's *Altarpiece* in Ghent.

The view through the panels is not static. *Altar* serves to both underscore as well as undermine the idea of Renaissance directed looking; in Martin's frames, the view in each panel is both fixed and kinetic. Martin's *Altar* consists of only the central steel frame; he did not reproduce the twelve folding panels. The piece effectively circumvents the Van Eyck singular intentions, enabling a multiplicity of viewpoints. The frame becomes interactive. The pictorial content—so vital to the history of art in this Flemish region—is dropped in favor of a view of nature itself, but not just any nature scene; it is decidedly a Flemish view. On the one side, the participants gaze to the sea; on the other, they look to the Thermae Palace Hotel, a former luxury hotel opened in 1933 (Figure 3).

Through *Altar*, the viewers are not simply an audience for the ever-changing sea and the Thermae Palace Hotel but also serve as participants in the public mourning of Hoet, a twenty-first century icon of Flanders. For *The Sea*, the participating artists came from a variety of countries and media to honor Jan Hoet. Although it seemed that the only requirement to be included in *The Sea* was to have a piece that in some manner addressed the sea, the participating artists contributed to a rather profound cross-general dialogue. On the beach and in the Mu.ZEE, *Altar* interacted with pieces from Marlene Dumas, John Baldessari, Carl Andre, Marc Chagall, Gustave Courbet, Hanne Darboven, Luc Tuymens, and, Flanders' favorite artist, Marcel Broodthaers and his infamous *Grande casserole de moules* (*Large Pot of Mussels*) from 1966.

In *Frieze Review*, a critic commented the following:

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 the anxious need not to leave anything out of such a generous tribute to Hoet, whose individualism always infused his boundless energy and imagination. (*The Sea* 2015)

The Sea also spoke to the work in *Collection Study III: Art in Europe after 1968*, particularly between *Altar* and Haacke's *We Believe in the Power of the Creative Imagination*. Through *Altar*, Martin's engagement between past and present, public and private echoed Hoet's interests in bringing a seemingly little-understood conceptual art practice into the intimate spaces of Gentenaars' homes and churches and the familiar spaces of the market squares. While Oostende seems to be an arbitrary choice for *Altar*, far removed from Ghent the city and the icon to which it refers, Oostende, and its neighboring Nieuwpoort to the west, is a vacation destination for many in Flanders (and Belgium as a whole). An exhibition on the Oostende beach was destined to be seen by a much larger and diverse Belgian audience than if it were held in Ghent. At Oostende, *Altar* was immediately recognized, and the open frame engaged audiences with one another and with the artwork itself. The formality assigned to the *Ghent Altarpiece*, and altarpieces in general, was destabilized by its sheer accessibility. In Oostende, visitors climbed the frame, hung from the steel bars, and posed for photographs, inserting themselves in the history of the altarpiece and with medieval Flemish history, which many tourists still associate with the region (see Figure 3).

For *The Sea*, Martin used the frames of *Altar* to make the common a bit more exotic in contrast to the frames of the *Ghent Altarpiece*, which made the exotic available for fifteenth-century Gentenaars. It was this element that intrigued Cecilia Alemani, Director and Chief Curator of High Line Art for the High Line in New York City. After seeing *Altar* in Oostende, she commissioned Martin to create a second iteration of *Altar* for "Panorama", a public art exhibition on the High Line, the urban park that runs from 34th Street to Gansevoort Street in the West Village parallel to the Hudson River. Alemani asked that *Altar* be installed facing the Hudson. Martin and members of his studio wanted it to face the city in light of the framing devices that were already built into the High Line experience. The park frames views of the Hudson River, New Jersey, the crosstown streets toward Fifth Avenue, and the docks at the north end at 34th Street. At the south end is the Whitney Museum on Gansevoort Street. The views here are of the Meatpacking District, with buildings ranging

from the 19th to the 21st centuries, many topped with the ubiquitous New York City water towers. The windows of the 2009 Chelsea Nouvel (by Jean Nouvel) were specifically designed to function, from within the interior, as picture frames for the city. Other projects followed suit, including Ennead Architects' Standard Hotel (2009), Zaha Hadid's futuristic 520 W. 28th Street (2017), and many additional smaller residential buildings. During a recent performance of the *Mile-Long Opera: A biography of 7 o'clock* (October 2018), windows of the buildings along the park, including those in the Standard Hotel, were utilized as frames for performance artists participating in the opera.

Looking at the High Line via Google Earth, Martin's studio located two spots: the top of the viewing platform at 10th Avenue and overlooking 22nd Street facing east. Installed at 22nd Street, *Altar* framed the banality of a New York city street. Martin's oxidized frame also echoed the industrial history of the former train tracks upon which the park is built and recalled the steel frame of an old pier along the Hudson River at roughly 11th Street (Figure 4). In an exhibition dedicated to public art, *Altar* served as a cultural intervention designed to enhance visitor experience of public space (Cushing and Pennings 2017).

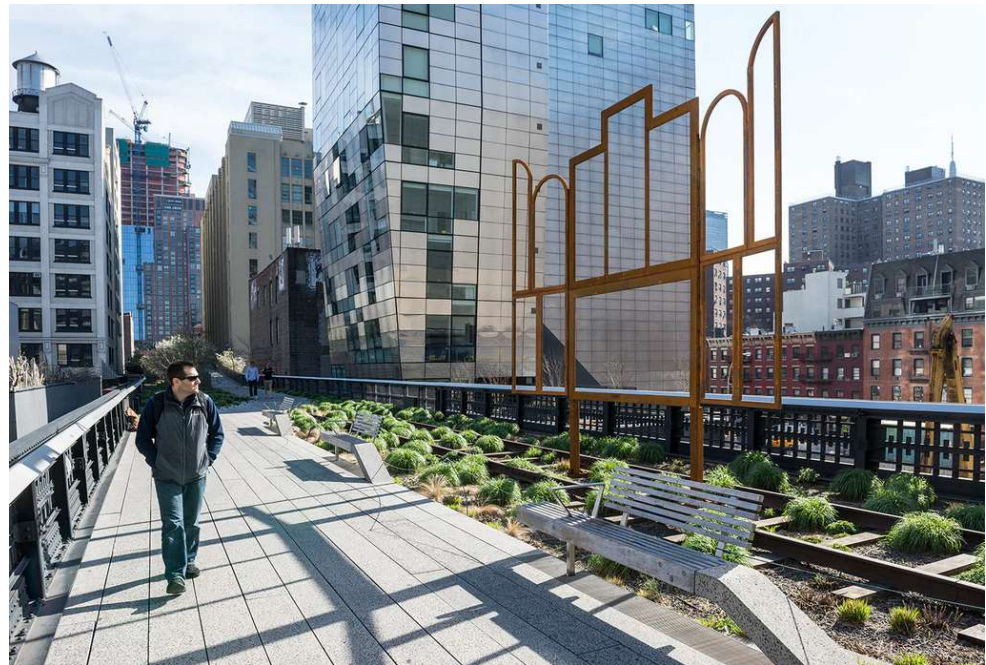


Figure 4. Kris Martin, *Altar*, 2015, at W. 24th Street. Photograph by Debra Flanders Cushing.

Martin's manufactured frame is juxtaposed against the deliberate but seemingly wild plantings along the High Line. Both the *Ghent Altarpiece* and *Altar* underscore a human-made landscape. The view, through Martin's frame, was decidedly more common for residents of New York City but exotic for tourists on the High Line. Here, *Altar* participated in an ongoing dialogue between the High Line and the city. In its inception, the park was not designed for introspection but for the outward gaze. *Altar* underscored New York City as a constant presence in visitor experience and directed the attention of jaded New Yorkers to their home city. On the High Line, *Altar* worked in tandem with the 10th Avenue Square, a small amphitheater that offers panoramic views of the west side of the city and, specifically, of 10th Avenue, which still retains much of the gritty nuance of 1980s New York City (Figure 5). This view captures the hustle and bustle of the city, making visitors feel connected to the activity of the city while perched above. *Altar*, like the 10th Avenue Square, is a place where art and urban life intersect.



Figure 5. 10th Avenue Square, High Line, New York City. Creative Commons-licensed image.

The movement of ideas, objects, and materials across space inherently carries with it a transformation of meaning. Artists use mobility to question how meanings change when context shifts. This transformation is not only about the meaning of the art itself but also about the shifting nature of how we perceive identity through cultural referents. Like the *Ghent Altarpiece*, *Altar* has the ability to perform as a focal point for reflection, contemplation, and connection to something greater than ourselves.

As only a frame, in Oostende, *Altar* served as a proxy for Jan Hoet, providing a relationship between the residents of Flanders and Hoet's legacy. On the High Line, *Altar* became an agent through which viewers choose to perceive specifics in the expansive view of the Chelsea neighborhood as art. *Altar* also recalls David Smith's *Hudson River Landscape* (1951) as we project our own individualized experiences and the expanded definition of landscape through Smith and Martin's frames. Keeping in line with the goals of the High Line, Kris Martin's *Altar* transforms the perception of *what* is art but, because of the frame, underscores that what is being seen *is* art.

In 2020, *Altar*, was installed in Ghent outside the main portal of Sint-Baafs (Figure 6). It was part of a larger exhibition of three artists whose works were also inspired by the *Ghent Altarpiece*: Martin, Lies Caeyers (b.), and Sophie Kuijken (b.). Here, at this particular site, *Altar* underscores a key element in Anthony Smith's development of localized identity. *Altar* frames the familiar topography of Ghent when looking out from the portal of Sint-Baafs (Osborne 1992). It also serves to frame Sint-Baafs itself, the container of the *Ghent Altarpiece* in which the city is depicted.

The exhibition at Sint-Baafs coincided with 'EXIT', a solo exhibition of Martin's work at SMAK. In turn, SMAK organized Martin's exhibition at the same time as Ghent was celebrating OMG! Van Eyck was here, a city-wide event celebrating the completed restoration of the *Ghent Altarpiece*, and an exhibition at Ghent's Museum of Fine Arts titled 'Van Eyck: An Optical Revolution'. 'EXIT' at SMAK, a museum founded by Han Hoet, and *Altar* at Sint-Baafs linked the two sites through the larger-than-life personality of Hoet and the larger-than-life presence of the Van Eyck *Altarpiece*. The connection between these spaces underscores "a vast symbolic vocabulary and ability to subvert perception and prove to their audience that nothing is quite as it seems" (Lloyd-Smith 2022).

In 'EXIT', Martin showed *Eve and Adam* (2019), a facsimile of the pair taken from the interior of Van Eyck's *Altarpiece* (Figure 7). Jan Van Eyck placed the two in niches—the only figures not under the blue sky of the natural world. While they appear trapped within this sculptural frame, Van Eyck alludes to their redemption as Adam's right foot extends beyond this space. Martin further liberates them from the confines of the niche. He crops them to just below the collarbone, creating a portrait-like image, which seems to float on a plain gray-tone rectangular background. We see them up close and personal, which emphasizes their humanity. *Eve and Adam* is hung at eye level. We do not look up at this pair

in contrast to how we engage with them when standing below the altarpiece in Sint-Baafs, hung as it would have been presented to the public in the Vijd Chapel during the fifteenth century. In the *Ghent Altarpiece*, they essentially face one another, from opposite sides of the interior panels, as they both gaze toward the base of the throne upon which God the Father sits in the central panel. This, in turn, directs our gaze to the lamb of God just below, placed on the altar of sacrifice and redemption. The sight lines create an upside-down triangle, linking Adam, Eve, God, and the sacrificial lamb. Martin disrupts this closed loop. Since the pair are hung at eye level, at first glance, it appears as if we, as viewers, have an intimate engagement with these first humans. But, while viewers look directly at them, Eve and Adam do not look back. Eve gazes down to the left and Adam to the right, toward an unknown focal point. The title, *Eve and Adam*, mirrors this placement as well as disrupts the traditional way we refer to the pair—Adam before Eve. Eve and Adam do not look down to the Lamb of God as the source of humanity's redemption but outward to the real world. Although Eve and Adam are scale replicas of Van Eyck, because of the hanging, they appear larger than Van Eyck intended. Martin's *Eve and Adam* performs a new, almost secular role beyond a traditional Christian didacticism.



Figure 6. Kris Martin, *Altar*, 2014. Installed outside Sint-Baafs, 2020. Image courtesy of SMAK (The Municipal Museum of Contemporary Art).



Figure 7. Kris Martin, *Eve and Adam*, 2019. Image courtesy of SMAK (The Municipal Museum of Contemporary Art). Photographs mounted between Plexiglass.

4. ?Do Geese See God?

Eve and Adam was created for Martin's solo exhibition, “?Do Geese See God?”, a collaboration with the Sean Kelly art gallery in New York City and Sint-Baaf's in Ghent. The gallery described this venture as an “artistic intervention” in these two distinct venues. The name of the exhibit, a palindrome, emphasizes the commonality and disparity of the objects in the gallery and the cathedral. The idea of mirroring, both literally and conceptually, conflates the sacred and the secular. Each artwork at Sint-Baafs will be duplicated, albeit with small changes, at Sean Kelly. For example, in the cathedral, *Solitary* asks the viewers to search for a ring hidden in one of the interior columns. At the gallery, the ring is embedded in a rock.

The palindrome of the title underscores these parallel spaces and artworks but also serves as a commentary on religion itself. “There is a herd instinct with geese”, Martin notes (Harris 2019), and that mentality is often ascribed to Western religions. Our world and the heavenly are, according to Kabbalah mysticism, believed to be palindromic. They are mirrors of one another, and what occurs on Earth has an effect on God, which is then reflected back down to humanity. In the cathedral, Martin replaced the *Just Judges* panel, currently represented by a reproduction, with a mirror (Figure 8). This site-specific addition changes visitors' perception. Instead of passive viewers, the mirror changes the visitors into participants, possibly implicating them as the judges.

And do geese see God? How can anyone or thing see the Divine? Does He, as in the *Ghent Altarpiece*, take the form designed by human imagination? Or is He simply a reflection of our own form? Martin asks these questions of us in the objects installed in the exhibit. In *Idiot XLIV* (2016), a 17th century statue of the crucified Christ hangs on a white wall devoid of any of the context of the cathedral. But, Martin places a funnel on His head—another of his readymades. This piece questions why some funnel their actions through the teachings of Christ.



Figure 8. Kris Martin, *Just Judges*, 2019. Sint-Baafs Cathedral. Mirror. Photograph by Christophe Vander Eecken.

5. Conclusions

According to Martin, his works are “invitations for the viewer to reflect”, pushing viewers to look beyond their immediate recognition of the object before them. In the deliberate placements of *Altar*, the piece rearranged the existing perspectives of the familiar, proposing new ways of seeing, or encouraging viewers to become mindful of new experiences and relationships. The piece’s spatial mobility alters the meaning, reflecting and interrogating different cultural landscapes. *Altar* itself, through the oxidation of the metal, leaves traces of its age and usage—the marks of its previous iterations. In essence, *Altar* and the altarpieces are not static; they are dynamic, living expressions of our desires, hopes, and reverence for the mysteries of life. Through them, we can access moments of transcendence, grounding, and transformation—altering how we experience both the sacred and the everyday. In “?Do Geese See God?”, Martin continued his ongoing investigation of the human experience and individual and collective spiritual beliefs. The dual exhibition continued his explorations of the collapse of the Gothic and the contemporary. In his work, Martin investigates appropriation and intervention. He makes use of the Duchampian readymade and the conceptualists interested in the shifting meaning of object and objecthood. Every piece is an invitation to the viewer to reflect on the individual experience within that of the collective—that of the city of Ghent.

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Note

¹ Interview with personnel from Martin’s studio, 2015.

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