

Chambres d'Amis turns 40

In 1986, a group of Ghent residents opened their homes to 51 contemporary artists. With 'Chambres d'Amis', art moved from the museum into the private realm. The art trail offered artists, visitors and residents a rare opportunity to meet one another.

The idea of exhibiting contemporary art beyond the museum walls was widely discussed internationally, and caused quite a stir in the city itself, particularly among residents. The first part of this exhibition reflects on that moment. How did the project come about? What did the press make of it? And how did the residents react? These questions are explored in an archival installation that sheds light on 'Chambres d'Amis' from various perspectives.

The second part of this exhibition presents work by three artists – Heike Pallanca, Haim Steinbach and Susanne Kriemann – who took the artworks of 'Chambres d'Amis' as their starting point. How do you exhibit works created for a specific place outside the museum and bring them back within its walls?

PART 1

Chambres d'Amis: before, during, and after

An exhibition is more than a simple display of artworks. Behind every presentation lies a story of encounters, choices and collaborations. This was perhaps even more true of 'Chambres d'Amis', than of other exhibitions. Artists and residents got to know one another, visited the homes together, and discussed the spaces and the works. During the exhibition, visitors also joined the mix. A network of relationships emerged in which art, life and viewer intersected.

The press and critics questioned the concept. Should private homes be opened to the public? Did the art hold its own, or was the setting too dominant? Others saw new possibilities open up, and valued the direct encounter between art and everyday life. The first archive room collates these different experiences for each of the 51 artists. Interviews, newspaper articles and photographs reveal what happened before, during, and after the exhibition.

'Chambres d'Amis' was both an exhibition and an experiment: on the place of art, on the role of the museum, and on the relationship between artist, resident and visitor.

Compiled by Angela De Roover, Beth Lason and Luca-Ray Rogiers, former students at Ghent University, as a supplement to their Master's thesis 'Min of Meer Chambres d'Amis', supervisor Prof. Dr. Wouter Davidts.

The Ghent Art Summer of '86

During the summer of 1986, various events and exhibitions were organized: some complementing 'Chambres d'Amis', and others as a critical response. This room highlights three of the most significant satellite initiatives.

'Initiatief '86' was a large-scale art project by local arts associations, who lamented the limited presence of Belgian artists on the international art scene. They invited three internationally renowned curators: Kasper König, Jean-Hubert Martin and Gosse Oosterhof. Each curated an exhibition at St Peter's Abbey featuring exclusively Belgian artists. After some debate, Jan Hoet was appointed as a fourth curator. He selected key works from the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art, now S.M.A.K.

Alongside this was 'Initiatief d'Amis', held at the Vooruit Arts Centre, now VIERNULVIER, which at the time was renowned as a rebellious hotbed of art and culture. Seven artists took the lead in organizing the project, inviting around 45 Belgian artists to participate in an experimental mix of exhibitions, live acts and performances.

The most alternative, and perhaps the most critical, of these initiatives was 'Antichambre', organised in a vacant factory on the outskirts of Ghent. The project was conceived as a riposte to the selection process of 'Chambres d'Amis': artists could present their work at the site without any form of selection. This approach meant that the number of participating artists continued to grow throughout the project.

Compiled by Sofie Frederix as part of her doctoral research in Art History, Ghent University, supervisors Prof. Dr. Steven Jacobs and Prof. Dr. Wouter Davidts. With the support of the Flanders Research Foundation.

Le Décor et son Double: Public – Private

"Although the Herbert Foundation and S.M.A.K. each possess a unique and specific work, only by bringing them into relation with one another – in the imagination – can we truly understand them." – Daniel Buren

With 'Le Décor et son Double', Daniel Buren (b. 1938, France) pushed back against the 'Chambres d'Amis' concept of exhibiting art in private homes instead of in a museum. Alongside his installation in the guest room (le Décor) of art collectors Annick and Anton Herbert, he chose to create a double (son Double) for the museum. This took the form of a reconstruction of the original guest room, but where the white and deep pink stripes stop in one room, they start in the other.

Following discussions with the artist, the Herberts did not open their home to the general public during the exhibition, unlike the other participants. Visitors could see the double in the museum. After 'Chambres d'Amis' closed, the Herberts retained the artwork in their guest room. The museum component of 'Le Décor et son Double' was not preserved.

In 2011, the museum double was repeated with support from the Flemish Community. The City of Ghent and the Flemish Community purchased this reconstruction and gave it to S.M.A.K on a long-term loan.

Thus, in the case of 'Le Décor et son Double', three types of owners emerge: private collectors, a museum, and the government. The documentation in this room tells you more about this unique collaboration.

More about the artwork

Daniel Buren

Le Décor et son Double, 1986

Since 1965, Daniel Buren has worked with his signature pattern of 8.7 cm-wide vertical stripes. He describes this as his 'visual tool'. Buren deploys this motif not only in museums but also in the street, including on buildings and posters. To this day, he remains stubbornly resistant to the codes, norms, and values of the art world.

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For 'Chambres d'Amis', Buren applied his 'visual tool' to the guest room of art collectors Annick and Anton Herbert. However, he refused to leave the museum space entirely, which ran counter to the concept of the exhibition. Buren placed a reconstruction of the collectors' room in the museum, with one significant difference: where the white and deep pink stripes stop in one room, they start in the other. The Herberts retained Buren's intervention in their guest room. The museum reconstruction was not preserved, but was recreated in 2011 and incorporated into the S.M.A.K. collection.



Photo-souvenir: Daniel Buren, *Le Décor et son Double*, 1986/2011. Long-term loan from the Collection of the Flemish Community. Detail. Photo: Dirk Pauwels.



Photo-souvenir: Daniel Buren, *Le Décor et son Double*, work in situ, in *Chambres d'Amis*, Raas van Gaverestraat, Ghent, 1986. Detail. Photo: Attilio Maranzano

PART 2

From private sphere to museum

'Chambres d'Amis' received widespread acclaim, both nationally and internationally. The exhibition also had a significant impact on S.M.A.K.'s programming in the decades that followed. Since 1986, the museum has organized two further exhibitions outside its own walls. In 2000, 'Over the Edges' took over street corners in Ghent's city centre with works by international artists. In 2012, 'TRACK' invited artists to create work for less obvious locations across the city.

At the end of 'Chambres d'Amis', seventeen artworks entered the S.M.A.K. collection. The staff sometimes refer to this as the 'ghost collection'. The artists created these works for specific homes in Ghent, in close relation to their residents. They were never intended to be displayed in a museum. Which raises the question: how can we present these artworks in our exhibition galleries today?

We asked three artists to reflect on this issue. The first participated in 'Chambres d'Amis' (Heike Pallanca), the second in 'Over the Edges' (Haim Steinbach), and the third in 'TRACK' (Susanne Kriemann). Each has created a new installation based on a selection of artworks or archival material from 'Chambres d'Amis'.

Haim Steinbach

Display #111 – Chambres d'Amis: Daniel Buren, Joseph Kosuth, Jan Vercruysse , 2026

Haim Steinbach (b. 1944, Rehovot, Israel) selected three 'Chambres d'Amis' works from S.M.A.K.'s collection: 'Le Décor et son Double' by Daniel Buren, 'Zero & Not' by Joseph Kosuth, and 'Sans titre (Chambres d'Amis)' by Jan Vercruysse.

With an architectural reconstruction, Steinbach offers a fresh perspective on Jan Hoet's concept of the 'guest room' or 'chambre d'amis'. Using metal profiles, Steinbach designed a triangular framework in which he placed a replica of the bed from Annick and Anton Herbert's guest room. In doing so, he relocated the bed – which had previously also formed part of Daniel Buren's work – and placed it in dialogue with objects from Joseph Kosuth's and Jan Vercruysse's works.

Steinbach introduces a pillowcase on the bed, printed with Joseph Kosuth's crossed-out passage from Sigmund Freud's 'Psychopathology of Everyday Life' (1901). This references Kosuth's installation for 'Chambres d'Amis', in which he had a wall in a psychiatrist's house papered with a crossed-out fragment from Freud's text.

Steinbach is also displaying the work by Jan Vercruysse, originally created for an art student's room. Vercruysse's installation comprised a framed, black-and-white photograph and an empty black frame in the corner of the room, opposite the bed.

Haim Steinbach is one of the world's leading conceptual artists. Since the late 1970s, he has focused on the selection and arrangement of objects. These include artworks, everyday items, ethnographic finds and natural materials.

Susanne Kriemann

04261986 (*abbiamo aperto una finestra*), 2026

On 26 April 1986, the explosion of reactor 4 at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant caused the worst nuclear disaster in history. This event left a profound impression on Susanne Kriemann (b. 1972, Erlangen, Germany). The idea that something invisible can be harmful – such as the radioactive particulates released during a nuclear disaster – informed her conceptual work for this exhibition.

The work's title, '04261986 (*abbiamo aperto una finestra*)' (we have opened a window), refers both to the vulnerability involved in opening or closing a window in the aftermath of the nuclear accident, and to the work that Carla Accardi created for 'Chambres d'Amis' in 1986. Kriemann selected seventeen photographs from S.M.A.K.'s archive that were used in the run-up to the exhibition. They were intended to give the participating artists a preliminary idea of the spaces in which their works would be shown. Before redeveloping the enlarged photos, Kriemann sprinkled them with fine particulate matter that she collected in Ghent.

Kriemann displays the photographs alongside a series of objects. These are not original pieces or artworks from 1986, but they refer to details or elements from several works in 'Chambres d'Amis': linen, a bucket, a small bird, a table and chair, paint running down a wall... Like the photographs of empty interiors awaiting their artworks, these objects are 'waiting' to be recognized as art. Kriemann's installation creates a sense of anticipation. What preceded 'Chambres d'Amis'? What happened during it? And what do visitors and residents still remember of the 1986 exhibition?

Susanne Kriemann's work often begins with extensive archival and source research, with photography frequently serving as a starting point. She examines the representation of specific historical facts and events. Kriemann assembled this installation using images from 'Chambres d'Amis' (1986), thereby creating a kind of 'interstitial space' between past and future, private and public, and interior and artwork.

Heike Pallanca

Auftauchen, verschwinden... und wieder auftauchen, 2026

Heike Pallanca's (b. 1952, Düsseldorf, Germany) installation 'Auftauchen, verschwinden... und wieder auftauchen' (Appearing, disappearing... and reappearing), departs from 'Gleichheit broederlijkheid liberté' (Equality, fraternity, liberty) by Jef Geys, which is part of the S.M.A.K. collection. For the 1986 exhibition, Jef Geys placed doors against blind walls in several workers' homes in Ghent. In so doing, the doors lost their function as thresholds. One word from the French Revolution motto – liberty, equality, fraternity – was inscribed on each door. For Pallanca, this slogan remains highly relevant.

The themes of boundaries and the French Revolution continue in the work 'Erdbeben IX – Niemand weiß es' (Earthquake IX – Nobody Knows), which is made of mosaic tiles. The patterns carry multiple layers of meaning. The smaller form comprises the contours of earthquake-prone countries in the Americas (including the US, Mexico, Bolivia and Peru), shifted against and over one another. The larger form includes Eurasian countries (such as Italy, Turkey, Iran, China and Japan). Pallanca offers a glimpse of a distant future in which landmasses collide and form new supercontinents.

In the larger mosaic, the word 'STOP' is contradictory: after all, humans cannot halt seismic activity or slow geological processes. The mosaic seems to shake like an earthquake, throwing the word 'STOP' into doubt. This touches on the fundamental values of the French Revolution while also raising questions. Where do our ideals still count within increasingly autocratic systems? Are there places that have never experienced democratic social systems? And to what extent do people willingly accept borders, or must they be redrawn through violence? This brings us back to the doors that lead nowhere, and which therefore mark a boundary. Pallanca's photograph of a crack in S.M.A.K.'s storage depot also alludes to boundaries and geological fault lines.

On the shelves, Pallanca has displayed, among other things, installation views of her own contribution to 'Chambres d'Amis' in 1986, showing closed doors. She visually connects these to photographs of her recent work, in which a door appears that leads nowhere – a modern-day homage to Jef Geys' work.

Wall texts 'Chambres d'Amis turns 40'

Heike Pallanca works in a variety of media, including photography and installations, as well as various geological materials. Through these, she explores the archaeological traces and collective memory associated with specific places or events.

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