

# ROMAN SIGNER

EN

## PROJET POUR UN JARDIN

From October 29, 2016 to April 2, 2017

Middelheim Museum



“The work of Roman Signer evinces rare qualities: a Franciscan austerity, an almost shocking simplicity of form, a gentle but consistent illustration of natural principles, ideas that are, although bound by the laws of nature, weightless – yet simultaneously, despite their playful lightness, serious and weighty.”

– Alois Hengartner

# ROMAN SIGNER

## PROJET POUR UN JARDIN

The Middelheim Museum welcomes the Swiss artist Roman Signer (b. 1938), from October 29, 2016 to April 2, 2017. His solo exhibition PROJET POUR UN JARDIN (PROJECT FOR A GARDEN) promises to be an interesting opportunity to become (re)acquainted with this sculptor whose work combines poetry, science and action in a truly unique manner.

The sculptures of Roman Signer are the results, ‘the traces’, of various actions which the artist has been carrying out for decades. His tools? Natural elements such as water, earth, air or fire and a few well-chosen attributes. The main components of his work are time and space.

The artist will surprise us with two actions, one will be performed during the opening of the exhibition, the other is a new permanent work in which visitors can actively participate. The works of Roman Signer are presented in different locations throughout the museum.

The new publication *Projet pour un jardin*, which coincides with the exhibition, will be presented during the opening. The book pays a lot of attention to Roman Signer’s work in the Middelheim Museum, as well as his overall oeuvre.

## Perfect match

Roman Signer was a guest at the Middelheim Museum before. The first collaboration dates from 2012, when the Middelheim Museum was going through major transformations. One of the highlights was the purchase of three new works. One of them was Signer's *Bidon Bleu* (2012). Recently, *Piaggio* (2013) and the video of his action *Start* (2014) were included in the exhibition *POM' PO PON PO PON PON POM PON* (2015).

PROJET POUR UN JARDIN makes a connection between the work Roman Signer created, then and now, in collaboration with the Middelheim Museum and provides more insight into the idiosyncratic oeuvre the artist has produced in the last 40 years. This exhibition also draws a connection between Roman Signer's international career and his close ties with his home city St. Gallen in Switzerland. 'Jardin' (garden) refers to something domestic, something homely, something familiar. For Signer, this is St. Gallen and its natural environment that is so ubiquitous in his work and life.

In the Middelheim Museum, time and the surroundings – the ever-changing light, the changing seasons, the relationship between the landscape and the art presented in it – play a more intense role than in other museums. It is a given every artist is confronted with, but not every artist makes deliberate use of it. In Roman Signer's case, time and the natural environment lie at the core of his oeuvre. In this respect, this artist is perfectly at home in our sculpture park.

## The Source

*"An echo in the forest sounds different than voices in a cave. Sand rustles in a different way than leaves. Something as ephemeral and temporal as sound is sufficient for him to evoke the scope of an event."*

– (Ludmilla Vachtova on how acoustic associations stimulate the enterprising spirit of the young Signer)

His whole life, Roman Signer has been fascinated with the imposing nature of the Alpine region in which he was born and still lives. Going to school was not really his thing, but he was extremely fascinated with physics. In addition, he had – and has – a lively imagination. His nickname in school was 'Roman, the dreamer'. He started to experiment with the laws of physics, and increasingly more in the open air. Near the river next to his house or in the workshop of his grandfather's nearby. To this day, the natural environment is very important to him. He is utterly homebound. Since 1971, he lives and works in St. Gallen, on a stone's throw from his native village of Appenzell.

## Time sculpture

*"The sudden explosion after the long smoldering of a wick. Or something that explodes in a flash. A change of being, in a sudden burst of power, I find greatly fascinating. That is a time sculpture."*

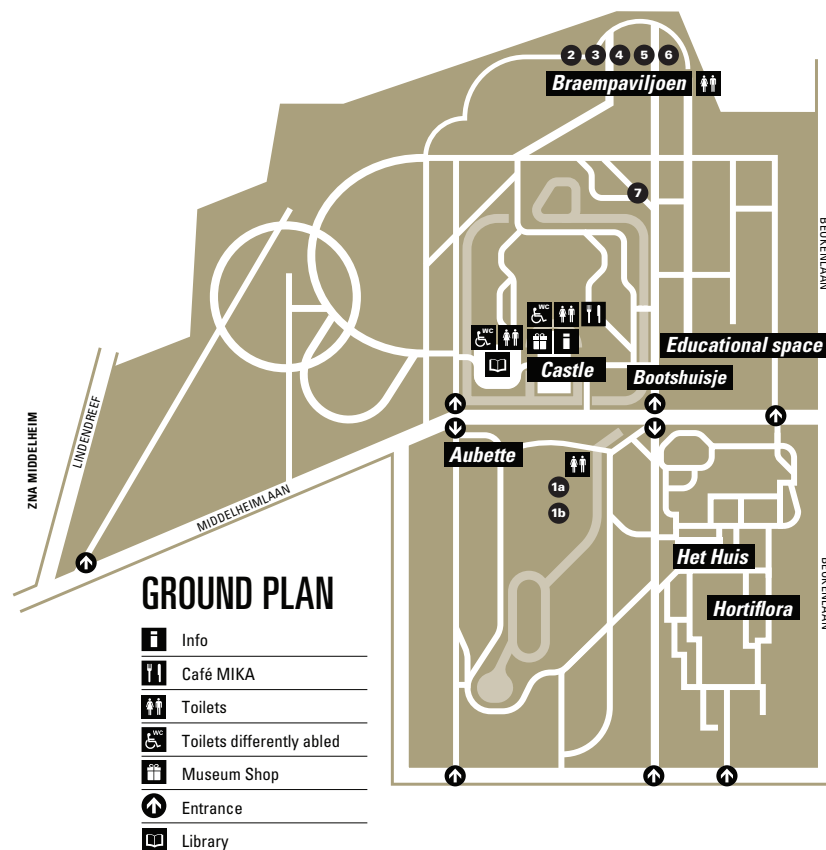
– Roman Signer

Roman Signer is not a sculptor in the classical sense of the term. He describes himself as *"someone who wants to solve three-dimensional problems"*. Fact is that, with the 'actions' he has been carrying out for decades now, he has broadened the definition of sculpture. He has enriched it with the dimensions of 'time and space'.

What fascinates the artist most is a change in 'being'. In Signer's work, at any given time, something is about to happen, is happening, or has just happened. He invariably follows the same, three-stage structure. First there is the basic form, which already contains the potential of change. Each project contains a moment of tension, a moment where time seems to stand still, before the action unfolds (Signer prefers the word 'action' over the term 'performance' because he feels the latter is linked to theater. Signer does not see himself as an actor, but rather as 'the man who lights the fuse.'). The action is often driven by a burst of power, of energy.

That action, often set in motion by the artist, is the impetus for the change that occurs during the course of the action. The 'trace', the residue of the action, is the material work of art. That 'trace' may be permanent or fleeting. Roman Signer calls it a time sculpture: the transformation of materials under the influence of time and energy.

## The works



# A renewed acquaintance with Bidon Bleu (2012)

**1a** May 26, 2012. The renewed Middelheim Museum reopens with a bang, and this in a quite literal sense. Not the bang of fireworks, but an action by Roman Signer. On that day, he presents *Bidon Bleu*, an action that left a 'trace' as a permanent work of art in the Middelheim Museum to this day. Monumental as it is, it is hard to ignore.

*Bidon Bleu* is a good example of a time sculpture. The work forms part of a series of interventions in which the artist shoots objects into the open space by means of a ramp. During the action on May 26, the artist pushes a blue barrel filled with water off of a fifteen-meter high ramp. The vessel bursts open against the rear wall of a concrete structure. The action stops, the water evaporates. What remains is a trace: the result of the action, frozen in time. A lasting memory of the action for those who witnessed it, a trace that will stir the imagination of future visitors.

Movement and static moments, past and future: Signer does not see them as opposites but rather as aspects of a single work. Since the phases are clearly defined and their order unchanging, the process can be repeated mentally and hence also be experienced in our imagination. In this way, the work compels the viewer to follow its trajectory from the physical to the conceptual.



2012 Bidon Bleu – Videostill, photo Aleksandra Signer

8

## Second track

**1b** In a small space a little further down, there is an ongoing screening of the 'second track' of *Bidon Bleu*, the filmed recording of the action. Images are an important element in the oeuvre of Roman Signer. He uses film and photography to record his actions, particularly of sculptures whose existence is limited in time, or which are realized without the presence of an audience.

Since 1975, he has been recording his actions in photographs and on Super 8 film. Until 1993 he made these recordings himself, since then, his wife Aleksandra Signer has manned the camera. All the ideas for the actions are Roman's, the editing of the recordings, however, is handled by both Roman and Aleksandra.



2012 Bidon Bleu – Videostill, photo Aleksandra Signer

### **1a** Bidon Bleu, 2012

concrete, steel  
1500 cm × 600 cm × 3700 cm  
Collection Middelheim Museum



2012 Bidon Bleu – Videostill, photo Aleksandra Signer

9

## Time/Space

Throughout his oeuvre, Roman Signer deals with time in very different ways: *Action with a Fuse* (1989), in which a burning wick connects his birthplace Appenzell with his current hometown of St. Gallen twenty kilometers away, lasts 35 days. At Documenta 8 (1987), it only took a few seconds to transform a minimalist sculpture of 300 piles, each consisting of 1,000 sheets of paper, into a swirling cloud of shredded paper. The work *Vitesse: 2000 mètres/seconde* (1992) presents quite literally a tremendous acceleration.

Since his works are often time and motion-bound, they also tend to expand in a spatial sense. His actions literally fill a workshop, a museum, a field, a volcano ... Or the distance from one village to the next, as in *Action with a Fuse*. Sequence, simultaneity, duration, immediacy, continuity, persistence and rhythm: all are aspects used by Roman Signer in the elaboration of his images.



1989 Action with a fuse – Super8 Filmstill Roman Signer



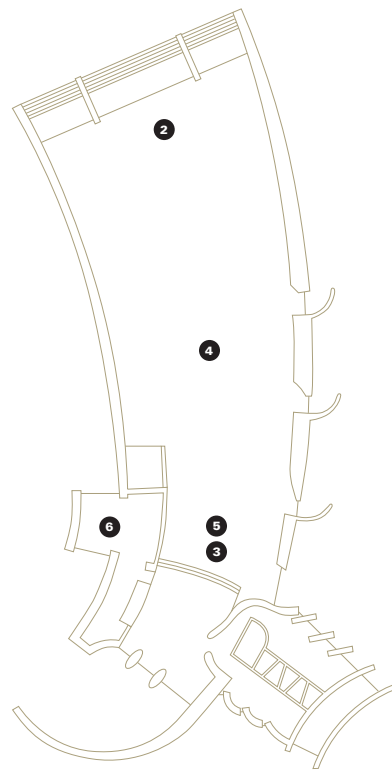
1992 Vitesse – photo Jacques Sidler



1987 Documenta 8, Aktion – Filmstill TV

10

## Action in the Braem Pavilion



During the festive opening of PROJET POUR UN JARDIN, on Saturday, October 29, 2016, Roman Signer conducted the action *Wer hat Angst für Rot, Gelb und Blau? Ja, ich habe Angst!* If you failed to witness this action, you can visit the time sculpture exposed in the Braem Pavilion for the duration the exhibition. **2** As well as the realization of the action recorded on film. **3**

Also presented in the Braem Pavilion is the result of the action *Spuren* (2016) **4** as a temporary space-filling installation. Signer conducted this action in the Middelheim Museum in preparation for his solo show, without an audience. (see movie: **5**) This work as well, contains elements that are characteristic of the oeuvre of the artist. It is also deeply rooted in his Swiss living and working environment and his childhood memories and fascinations: a limitless source of ideas for new creations.

2016 Pendel – Videostill Aleksandra Signer



11

Presented in the small, front left space of the Braem Pavilion, is a recording of *Pendulum* (2016), an action which the artist originally performed on June 22, 2016, on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the Swiss Institute Contemporary Art in New York. **6**

*"Simplicity of form does not mean simplicity of experience"*

– Robert Morris

In addition to natural elements such as earth, fire, air or water, there are a number of objects which Roman Signer continues to use throughout his oeuvre: tables, stools, beds, wooden balls, blue barrels, balloons ... Also on his list of favorite props: plastic ribbon, paint, paper, a fan ... And then there are the 'means of transport': bicycles, an aircraft, skis, a miniature helicopter, a scooter, a kayak ... The objects he continues to use in ever-changing combinations, have over the course of his career undergone a careful selection.

*"I choose my material like a poet chooses his words. But I'm not a poet: so I search for another way to say what I want. Smoke goes with water, water with explosives, or with iron or rubber. It's a never-ending conversation."*

– Roman Signer

*'Of Franciscan simplicity'*: That is how Signer's sober use of materials is sometimes described. Fact is that Signer manages to mold this limited number of materials into an often poetic universe that, in all its simplicity, continues to amaze the viewer.

His sober choice of materials stands in stark contrast with the imaginative elaboration of his projects. It produces an idiosyncratic oeuvre that never gives in to trends or aesthetic expectations.

*"There is no cheap playing to the gallery, no tricks, no pandering to the taste of the moment. There is just an honest quest and an unstoppable urge to create."*

– Alois Hengartner

**'Wer hat Angst für Rot, Gelb und Blau? Ja, ich habe Angst!', 2016 ②**

wood, paint

90 cm × 200 cm

Action for the exhibition

PROJET POUR UN JARDIN (2016)

**Video of the action 'Wer hat Angst für Rot, Gelb und Blau? Ja, ich habe Angst!', 2016 ③**

Video: Aleksandra Signer

Part of the exhibition

PROJET POUR UN JARDIN (2016)

**Spuren, (2016) ④**

sand, mixed media

200 cm × ca. 700 cm × ca. 2000 cm

Action for the exhibition

PROJET POUR UN JARDIN (2016)

**Video of the action 'Spuren', 2016 ⑤**

Video: Aleksandra Signer

Part of the exhibition

PROJET POUR UN JARDIN (2016)

**Video of the action 'Pendulum', 2016 ⑥**

Studio St. Gallen, 2016

Video: Aleksandra Signer

HD, duration 3'00"

Part of the exhibition

PROJET POUR UN JARDIN (2016)

## New artwork created specifically for the museum: Projet pour un jardin (2016)

7 *Projet pour un jardin* is not only the name of the exhibition and the catalog of the exhibition, it is also the title of a new work Roman Signer has designed especially for the Middelheim collection.

*Projet pour un jardin* looks like a detail of a maze and evokes, when viewed from above, memories of the zigzag silhouette of *Spuren* (2016), the temporary installation that is on view in the Braem Pavilion during the exhibition. Both works 'meander', a reference to water and the very present river Sitter from Signer's youth.

In this work it is not the artist, but rather the visitor who is the main subject of the experiment. Visitors can follow the course of the work on their own. Once inside the work – especially when seen from above – it appears as if the visitors' heads have been separated from their torsos. Taller people will perhaps have to bend their knees somewhat (since the work was designed on the basis of the artist's own shoulder height). Not as a lesson in humility - in Signer's work there is no place for power or domination - but possibly as a symbolic reference to "the separation of the head from the body" as a way of disconnecting the emotional from the rational.

In this new project, the time starts running every time someone enters the course. This results in another form of time perception: the personal, physical experience. Every visitor makes an impression on reality according to their height and shoe size. In this respect, both the works from the collection, *Bidon Bleu* and *Projet pour un jardin*, complement each other beautifully. *Projet pour un jardin*, as such, functions as a connecting conceptual element between *Bidon Bleu*, the park and this solo exhibition.

### **Projet pour un jardin, 2016** 7

Steel

140 cm × 800 cm × 400 cm

Collection Middelheim Museum

14

## Roman Signer — background

The career of Roman Signer starts in the early 70s, when he carries out investigations with almost scientific precision into the properties of natural elements like water, fire, earth, and air. Water is perhaps the most often recurring element in Signer's work. That fascination has never left the artist, who grew up on the shore of the river Sitter. One of his first actions was *Power of Rain* (1974), in which the force of water is used to burst a plaster block. Signer articulates the sculptural quality of water.

From 1975 onward, explosives will further inspire Signer's research into the effects of natural forces like gravity, friction, shrinkage or expansion. Since that time, he uses explosions to set objects in motion or change their shape.



1974 *Power of Rain*  
– photo Roman Signer

*"To me, an explosion is a kind of mental liberation. First there is the tension, then the fear, and then the liberation."*

– Roman Signer

Sculpture, in Signer's case, is a modular system of rules and contingencies. There are no 'failures', as these often lead to new ideas. Signer can and will never fully control the extent of the transformation. He lets the forces of nature do their work, and simply steers them.

*"The explosion changes something. One form becomes another. I show movement, processes."*

– Roman Signer

Risk and danger form part of Signer's performance, but are never an end in itself. Depending on the expectations of the viewer – or on

15



what he or she thinks is meaningful, or not – they often preclude a poetic interpretation of his work.

*"It is sometimes hard when you only see one work. One needs to see several of them to make the connection. I don't like to explain everything. There should be some mystery. People can be so impatient. Instead of exploring things for themselves, everything needs to be explained to them. And then they're quickly off to the next thing. Like at a fair."*

– Roman Signer

## Absurd like life

At times, the alleged 'high show content' of Signer's actions stands in the way of an objective interpretation of his work.

*"I am sometimes compared to Buster Keaton. If that comparison is going to be made, then rather Keaton than Charlie Chaplin. Buster Keaton has a certain sadness about him. What I do is not funny at all. I don't laugh in my movies. The audience laughs, perhaps because it feels liberating in the face of something that is actually terrible."*

– Roman Signer

Signer does however appreciate the absurdism of the Dadaists. Which he clearly demonstrates in *Cap with Rocket* (1983), in which a rocket pulls a cap off of the artist's head. Although his actions are not functional, his oeuvre evinces a great interest in the reality that lies outside of the art world. His actions, without function but also not entirely without danger, can also be read as symbols or metaphors of an existential questioning.



1983 Cap with Rocket  
– photo Ernst Schär

*"I have to confront the impermanent. Maybe it is because I'm sensitive to tragedy, to the absurd, to the futility and meaninglessness we as humans create."*

– Roman Signer

However, in small ways, he manages to put something in motion, something one can broadly reflect upon, something anyone can connect his or her story to.

**"It is not enough for a sculpture to just merely stand in a museum"**

– Robert Morris

*What I am doing is not minimalism or Conceptualism, though I am a child of those times. But I don't want to be connected to any '-ism'. I seek my own way, even if the contemporary intellectual currents do affect me."*

– Roman Signer

The exhibition 'Live in your Head: When Attitude Becomes Form' (Bern Kunsthalle, 1969) is an eye-opener for the young Signer. Curator **Harald Szeeman** writes history with this radical exhibition. In the 1960s, Szeeman was the advocate of the new art, which emerged from an 'inner attitude' (as evident in Conceptualism, Land Art, American post-Minimalism and Italian Arte Povera): the process of creation is more important than the 'end product'. Szeeman was not a fan of an exclusive art for the happy few. He transformed the Kunsthalle in a giant artist's studio, with room for workshops and discussions.

During that period, Signer is mainly interested in American artists because he feels their approach is more experimental and open-minded than that of their European counterparts. Especially

the work of **Robert Morris** (USA, 1931) invites reflection. In the 60s, Morris was one of the key figures of American **Minimalism**. He reduces art to geometric shapes and attaches great importance to the interaction between artwork and viewer. Just like Signer, he explores notions such as 'contingency', 'temporality' and 'ephemerality'. Both artists make important contributions to the tradition of Process Art, which focuses on the creative process and concepts such as 'change' and 'transition'.

**Säntis und Bodensee** (1975), a collaboration between Roman Signer and Bernard Tagwerker (Switzerland, 1942), was Signer's first major landscape project. The work consists of 65 large balloons, each 150 cm in diameter, which take off from Lake Constance and together form the outline of Mount Säntis. Two icons of the Eastern Swiss landscape are in this way temporarily united. There are links with American **Land Art**, in which the artist shapes/distorts nature, bestowing, in this way, new meaning upon the landscape. Signer, however, highly homebound, does not seek inspiration – as Land Art artists often do – on the other side of the world, but in his immediate environment. In this respect, his work is also autobiographical.

Roman Signer's oeuvre as a whole is also reminiscent of the work of the naturalist **Alexander von Humboldt** (1769-1859) and his ideal: the fusion of art and science, in which the essence of nature is mixed with the importance of art.

*"In Roman Signer's work, basic human experiences are transformed through processes into sculptures. This direct, immediate transformation makes his work unique."*

– Roland Wäspe

## Biography

Roman Signer (b. 1938) was born in Appenzell, Switzerland, and has lived and worked in St. Gallen, Switzerland since 1971. He studied from 1966 to 1971 at the Schule für Gestaltung in Zurich and Lucerne and at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, where he met his wife Aleksandra. His work has been present for more than thirty years now in galleries and museums in Europe, North America and Asia

and was selected for prestigious art events like the Venice Biennale, Documenta 8 in Kassel and Skulptur Projekte Münster. Over the past 40 years, he has participated in hundreds of solo and group projects, including Documenta 8, Skulptur Projekte Münster and the Swiss Pavilion of the 48th Venice Biennale. His work is included in important collections, from Tasmania to Mexico (Kunsthau Zug alone owns more than ninety works of his). He has also created a number of works for the public space, especially in Switzerland, such as *Tisch* (2008, Appenzell), *Koffer* and *Drei Farbkanonen* (both in Zurich, 2007). Although his work is shown around the world, he has a special connection with the Kunstmuseum St. Gallen. There, in his backyard, can be found a significant part of his oeuvre.



2007 Drei Farbkanonen  
– photo Daniel Ammann

Curators: Sara Weyns en Pieter Boons  
Text: Tin Vancutsem

This exhibition is accompanied by a **publication** in English, Dutch and French, with texts by Gerhard Mack, Sara Weyns, Pieter Boons and Cees Nooteboom. Available in the museum shop in the castle.

During your visit, **additional online information** will be provided on your smartphone: There is free Wi-Fi everywhere in the museum park!

Select the network ‘\_Antwerp Free WI-Fi’ and log in with your email address and password.

- Download the Middelheim app from the App Store or Google Play.
- Go to the Middelheim app and from Images select the artwork *Bidon Bleu*. Here you will find photos of the construction of the work, the performance from 2012 and commentary by the artist on *Bidon Bleu*.
- On YouTube you will find pictures of actions and archival footage of (the work of) Roman Signer. The TRACKS ARTE/ARTE TV broadcast on Roman Signer (9:33) gives an overview of the actions of the artist, with commentary by him.
- Also interesting: a movie (3:30) by the Kunstmuseum St. Gallen about Roman Signer.

## Public services

**Intro movie** in the entry hall of the castle, Dutch-English, also viewable on the museum site and on the video channel ARTtube.be

**Free guided tours for individual visitors**, without reservation, in Dutch, on Sunday afternoon (2nd Sunday of the month): November 13, December 11, 2016 and January 8, February 12, March 12, 2017, from 2 to 4 p.m. We provide 1 guide for adults and 1 guide for families with children from 6 to 12 years.

**Tours and/or creative workshops for groups (adults, young people, children, also for schools) upon request**, in Dutch, French, English, German, Spanish, and Italian.

75 € for a two-hour guided tour, 15 persons per guide, max. 4 guides at the same time.

85 € for a two-hour workshop, 15 persons per guide, max. 3 guides at the same time.

Reservation:

Visit Antwerpen – **T** 03 232 01 03 – **E** tickets@visitantwerpen.be

# PRACTICAL INFORMATION

## Middelheim Museum

Middelheimlaan 61

2020 Antwerpen

**T** 03 288 33 60

**F** 03 288 33 99

**E** middelheimmuseum@

stad.antwerpen.be

www.middelheimmuseum.be

## PUBLIC AND EDUCATIONAL SERVICE

Greet Stappaerts

**T** 03 288 33 79

**E** greet.stappaerts

@stad.antwerpen.be

Bard Neeus

**T** 03 288 33 76

**E** bard.neeus

@stad.antwerpen.be

## ACCESSIBILITY

free use of electric cart upon reservation.

## OPENING HOURS

From October to March: 10 – 17 hrs,

April and September: 10 – 19 hrs,

May and August: 10-20 hrs,

June and July: 10 – 12 hrs.

Visitors are welcome up to a half hour before closing time.

Please make your way to the exit in good time: the gates are closed punctually!

## CLOSING DAYS

Closed on Mondays (open on Easter Monday and Whit Monday)

Closed on November 1, December 25, January 1, May 1, Ascension Day

## ADMISSION

Free

## RESERVATIONS

Reservation is required at least three weeks in advance. Payment should be made ten days before the visit.

Free cancellation up to ten days before the day of the visit.

Our guides will be waiting for you at the reception desk in the castle.

## Tours for groups (adults, young people, children)

Visit Antwerpen

**T** 03 232 01 03

**E** tickets@visitantwerpen.be

A one-time € 5 administration fee is charged for each reservation. In case of late cancellation the entire administration fee will be charged. Administration fees are paid by the customer.

## HOLIDAY WORKSHOPS in Dutch

Are you the active kind? Then you're in luck! Every school holiday, young artists can take part in fun activities in various Antwerp museums.

www.vakantieateliers.be

## EXTRA

**New: Middelheim App:** information in Dutch (and from February 1, 2017 also in English) on the history of the museum and its collection, with additional information for young people and children, free to download, at home or in the museum, on your own smartphone, via App Store or via GooglePlay

Available at the reception desk in the castle:

**Audio guide** with information on the works in Dutch/English/French/German, € 3 (free upon presentation of your NMBS train ticket)

**Free map of the park**, indicating the top works and the most remarkable trees

**Muzzé-cases** for a thematic exploration of the sculpture park and the permanent collection, free of charge, for 6-12-year olds and their escorts

## MUSEUMSHOP

Want a reminder of your visit or surprise someone with a super gift? In the museum shop, you'll find art books, greeting cards and fun gadgets.

## MIKA MUSEUMCAFE

**E** info@mi-ka.be

www.mi-ka.be

## DOCUMENTATION CENTRE

The Documentation center is open by appointment. Admission is free upon presentation of your identity card.

**T** 03 288 33 64 of

**E** middelheimmuseum\_bibliotheek@stad.antwerpen.be

## WIFI

Free WIFI in the whole museum. Select the network ' \_Antwerp Free WI-Fi' and log in with your email address and password.

## VOLG ONS VIA

 facebook.com/middelheimmuseum

 twitter@middelheim

 instagram.com/middelheimmuseum

EXPERIMENT/ HEDEND  
KUNST/THEATER/JAZZ/AC  
KLASSIEKE MUZIEK/POEZIE  
DESIGN/FOTOGRAFIE/DANS  
OUDE MUZIEK/LITERATUUR  
OPERA/ARCHITECTUUR/  
FILOSOFIE/FILMMUZIEK/  
GESCHIEDENIS/ERFGOED/G  
HEDENDAAGSE MUZIEK/FES  
POLITIEK/ECONOMIE/WOR  
PERFORMANCE/SOCIOLOF  
CHANSO SOUNDSC

**Klara. Blijf verwonderd.**

The Middelheim Museum enjoys the support of Middelheim Promotors and Ackermans & van Haaren, Argo Law, BASF, BNP Paribas Fortis, CMB, Cordeel, Delen Private Bank, Deloitte, Deme, EY, Grant Thornton, Hubo, inno.com, KBC, Leasinvest Real Estate, Port of Antwerp, SipWell, Soudal, Vanbreda Risk & Benefits.

[www.middelheimmuseum.be](http://www.middelheimmuseum.be)  
**+32 (0)3 288 33 60**

 art

 Klara



Vlaanderen  
verbeelding werkt