The Uses of Art: History

... the conference will assess the role of the institution and exhibition making in producing and speculating on history. The museum as both civic site and pedagogical device offers a unique space within which to formulate, mediate and challenge different historical positions and methodologies. At a time when the museum’s relationship to its public is being re-calibrated and society appears in the grips of a perpetu-al presentism institutions seem to offer a vital forum from which to present new models for approaching history.

The conference wants to read closely artworks [past and present] as well as concepts of exhibiting works of art that address a certain historical time and ask how and what they genuinely reveal and address, what reflections they open upon events past and present to create distinct notions, insights of what can be considered history insofar it is an ongoing, shifting and changing, an actualizing process, a dialog, a critical discussion of a present that understands itself as addressed, as meant by a past (as Walter Benjamin phrased it in his thoughts in “Der Begriff der Geschichte”).

The 3-days-conference is part of a EU-funded 5-year project called “The Uses of Art” initiated by the museum confedera-tion L’Internationale, which brings together six leading Euro-pean museums of modern and contemporary art: Moderna galerija (MG, Ljubljana, Slovenia); Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (MNCARS, Madrid, Spain); Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA, Barcelona, Spain); Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen (M HKA, Antwerp, Belgium), SALT (Istanbul and Ankara, Turkey) and Van Abbe-museum (VAM, Eindhoven, the Netherlands). L’Internationale is working together with complementary partners such as Stiftung Universität Hildesheim (UH, Hildesheim, Germa-ny), but also Grizedale Arts (GA, Coniston, United Kingdom), Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU, Liverpool, United Kingdom), and University College Ghent School of Arts (KASK, Ghent, Belgium).
The conference addresses the visual arts’ approach to “history” through the fields of art history, art practise and the role of the institution. Not so much focussing on the question of evidence, but on the question of how art visualizes (and therewith produces) notions, ideas, concepts and–equally important–sensual, bodily inquiries of history.

The conference wants to ask how artistic visualizations of events past and present create and reveal a sense of history that cannot be possibly reached by historiographical methods. This does not mean that art is illustrating history or historical events. It means to ask for (and carefully analyse) the genuine contribution of artefacts towards creating and visualizing the interwoven layers of time, their potential to reveal the strong connections of a given present towards multiple pasts, the denial of (progressive) timelines and the simultaneity of that which does not belong to the same time period, the anachronism and heterochronism, the reappearance of the “ghosts” or “phantoms” of–mistakenly overcome, mistakenly “closed cases” of “history” –as a vital [but mostly unaware] part of every present. Similarly, ...