

# Axel Vervoordt's Kanaal

by Sarah Schug

Gallerist, collector, interior designer, antique dealer, curator, architect – Axel Vervoordt, born in Antwerp in 1947, is almost impossible to pigeonhole. Together with his wife May and his sons Dick and Boris, he has built a veritable family empire over the last five decades, moving between the realms of contemporary art, design, architecture and antiques.

**AXEL VERVOORDT:**  
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Anish Kapoor, at the  
Edge of the World  
© Jan Liègeois.





Kazuo Shiraga, Suiju, 1985, Axel & May Vervoordt Foundation, Kanaal © Laziz Hamani.



Kanaal, Karnak © Laziz Hamani.

**SARAH SCHUG:** Since his very first project in the late 60s - the extraordinarily respectful and authentic restoration of 16 Renaissance houses in Antwerp known as the Vlaeykensgang - Axel Vervoordt has built a distinct reputation that extends far beyond the borders of his home country. Superstars such as Sting, Robert De Niro or Kanye West rely on his exquisite taste and expertise to furnish and decorate their homes.

In 2017, the Vervoordt clan inaugurated what easily might be the pinnacle of its decades-long engagement in the arts, and a lasting monument to its legacy: a 55,000 square meters big cultural and residential complex on a former industrial site 20 minutes east of Antwerp. At the outskirts of the unassuming Flemish town of Wijnegem, right on the banks of the Albert canal, they've erected an art and design oasis featuring 98 apartments, 30 offices, as well as restoration and furniture workshops, a restaurant, the Vervoordt company's offices hosting a staff of over 100 people, an auditorium, and, most importantly, numerous exhibition spaces and permanent installations by internationally celebrated artists.

It doesn't come as a surprise then that the massively ambitious project has taken more than 15 years to complete. Since acquiring the site in 1998, the Vervoordt family had been working relentlessly on making their vision of "an authentic cultural and residential island amidst a wealth of art and nature", as they describe it, a reality.

In collaboration with Belgian architects Stéphane Beel, Coussée & Goris and Bogdan & Van Broeck, French landscape designer Michel Desvigne and Japanese architect Tatsu Miki, the Vervoordts transformed the former factory grounds into a stunning architectural gem, skilfully marrying old and new. Brick constructions from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, formerly the home of a gin factory, stand side by side with gigantic silos, relics of the malting company that took over the distillery site in the

1950s, as well as brand new buildings— a diverse but nevertheless harmonious medley of architectural styles and languages, driven by the intention to not only keep the character of the original structure, but to reinforce it. Everything is framed by the green surroundings, a peaceful park-like environment with wild vegetation, courtyards, and small pathways. No cars are allowed on site.

The restrained architectural approach with plenty of bare concrete offers a stunning backdrop for art. In total, the various exhibition spaces at Kanaal comprise no less than 4,000 square meters. The Axel Vervoordt Gallery, founded in 2011 and formerly located in the center of Antwerp, extends over three spaces, each with its own individual atmosphere, light and architecture. Further exhibition rooms throughout the 'village' permanently host pieces of the carefully curated collection of the Axel & May Vervoordt foundation, known not only for its focus on the Zero and Gutai movements, but also for a few pieces of mega art.

One of them is British-Indian artist Anish Kapoor's 'At the Edge of the World', which not only impresses with its size: high above a circular concrete room, into which grain for malt production was once pumped from container ships, a monumental, seemingly infinite red-pigmented dome seems to float, in an awe-inspiring play with time and space. For Axel Vervoordt, the location and the artwork were made for each other, and he describes it as Kanaal's "beating heart, something that can lift up everything else." It was the first piece installed in the complex back in 2000, the founding block of the project. It's also a place of stillness and contemplation, with an almost sacred feel – an atmosphere that is present throughout the entire Kanaal complex. Fittingly, the old factory chapel has been kept and restored, and now hosts 'Red Shift', a major work by James Turrell from 1995, one of the American artist's iconic light pieces that effortlessly preserves the spiritual character of the space. It is not unheard of for Vervoordt to come and meditate here from time to time.







Per Kirkeby, Nordhorn, unrealised work, Axel Vervoordt Gallery, 2019 © Joris Cerstiaens.



James Turrell, Red Shift © Jan Liègeois.

In keeping with the theme, a concrete-grey hall of columns, once built to support the silos storing grain in the former malting house, now carries the name Karnak, a nod to the Egyptian temple on the Nile renowned for its rows of pillars. Fittingly, it hosts sculptures of the first Zen Buddhist monks dating back to the era between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries. They're juxtaposed with large-scale stone globes hand-carved by Thai monks as an act of meditation, that are traditionally placed in front of temples.

In the neighbouring building, pieces by Gutai master Kazuo Shiraga and works by representatives of the Zero movement such as Otto Piene and Jef Verheyen are arranged around an extremely rare wooden Buddha of Chinese origin from the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. The dark, sombre labyrinth feels like an underground treasure chamber. A sharp contrast to the light, airy spaces of the Axel Vervoordt Gallery, where the focus is on contemporary art: in the Escher room, located in a former warehouse and named after the Dutch graphic artist, a team of workers is putting together a monumental, walk-in brick sculpture by Per Kirkeby that has never been shown before. "We were introduced to the Kirkeby Estate by the curator Jill Silverman van Coenegrachts, and were lucky that they were willing to open their archives. It is all based on sketches", explains Anne-Sophie Dusselier of the Vervoordt company. As is typical for the Danish artist, the piece is built with local bricks.

"The spirit that reigns here is so inspiring", says Belgian jewellery designer Catherine Rochtus, who set up her workshop and store on the Kanaal grounds. Interestingly, one of the brooches on sale was inspired by an exhibition of the work of Otto Boll at Kanaal. Her working method, characterized by traditional craftsmanship and the use of precious materials such as gold, silver, bronze and sapphire, is heavily influenced by Japanese philosophy. A coincidence? Maybe. But it definitely fits in perfectly with Axel Vervoordt's strong affinity for Japan, which can also be felt in the restaurant on site, K, which offers Japanese cuisine.

A few footsteps away, following a path through the surrounding park where a man is walking his dog, works by performance icon Marina Abramovic, Kimsooja, Tatsua Miyajima and others have been placed at the foot of several converted grain silos. Visiting Kanaal may feel like an out-of-this-world experience, but it is certainly not elitist. Kanaal is freely accessible and open to everyone who wants to experience its serenity, art, and architecture. Axel Vervoordt, the mastermind behind it all, sums it up like this: "In these hectic times, we need a space where we can enjoy a balanced and exhilarating life to the full. Kanaal was conceived as a source of relaxation and energy, of inspiration and reflection."