ALMINE RECH

Future is now

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In the 1970s, when the term ‘contemporary art’ was just emerging, the only institutions devoted to it were also the most important: Le CAPC in Bordeaux (1973), Le centre national et de culture Georges Pompidou in Paris (1977), Le Nouveau Musée in Villeurbanne (1978).

At the same time, a number of art magazines, some of which are still active today, are devoted to criticising and supporting contemporary art. And it was in this as yet undeveloped context that Le Parvis, a ‘cultural development centre’, was founded in 1974, with its atypical (art and consumption) and cross-disciplinary (theatre, cinema, visual arts) dimension, making it one of the pioneering figures in the regional and national cultural and artistic landscape.

In its early days, however, and for the next ten years or so, Le Parvis, which did not have a dedicated visual arts team, was content to hold exhibitions in collaboration with major cultural establishments (CAPC, Centre Georges Pompidou, etc.), albeit prestigious ones, or to give ‘carte blanche’ to the most prominent magazines of the day (Artpress). From the outset, Le Parvis exhibited a number of the leading artists of the day.

But in the 1980s, things changed. Under the impetus of Jack Lang, then Minister of Culture, and his adviser Claude Mollard, the artistic landscape in France changed radically! In a powerful move towards cultural decentralisation, a host of FRACs and contemporary art centres were set up across the country, run by professional teams, to promote an art form and ecosystem that was in the process of being invented.

At Le Parvis, the first commissioned exhibitions really got underway in the late 80s under the direction of Brigitte Rambaud, followed by Jean-Claude Schenkel in 1990. At the time, the art centre had no walls, and works were exhibited on removable picture rails fitted with rods to avoid holes.

There was no audience policy either, so there was no mediation... The work of art is self-sufficient, we think. It was this last decade of the millennium that became the high point of this atypical space, whose exhibition gallery ended up becoming a ‘contemporary art centre’ over the years. From 1989 to 2012, this art centre was divided into two spaces, one in Tarbes and the other in Pau, enabling exhibitions to be held in different locations and regions.

Jean-Claude Schenkel initiated the first sustained art centre project, with a regular and frequent programme. During his tenure, major artists and exhibitions were presented, including those devoted to Henri Bassmadjian, Jacques Vieille, Claude Lévêque, Dorothée Selz, Philippe Horatala, Patrick Raynaud and Bernard Quesniaux. During its 3-year tenure (1990-1992), Le Parvis also produced its first collaborations with the two emerging local Fonds Régionaux d'Art Contemporain: the Frac Aquitaine and the Frac Midi-Pyrénées, as well as two major off-site exhibition projects at the Jardin Massey in Tarbes, featuring in situ works by Andy Goldsworthy and Marinette Cuceco, two major figures in Land Art.

But at the turn of the 90s, and more specifically in 1993, Sylvie Froux, who worked at the Fondation Cartier in Paris, took over the reins of the Parvis contemporary art centre. Under her direction, the centre really took off! A woman of strength and passion, Sylvie Froux is part of the generation that invented everything! As a curator, she takes a back seat to reserve the glory for the artists she exhibits. No lines, no personalisation of the exhibition. Just a great deal of freedom that she knew how to exploit for the better.

From 1993 to 2001, a whole generation of artists, now among the most renowned, exhibited at Le Parvis.
These included exhibitions by Claude Closky, Franck Scurti, Xavier Veilhan, Pierre Joseph and Philippe Parreno, Angela Bullock, Erik Dietman, Gloria Friedmann, John M. Armleder, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Ange Leccia and Pierrick Sorin; the Arte Povera exhibition, with works by Mario Merz, Giovanni Anselmo, Gilberto Zorio and Pino Pascali; and the Children's Pavilion, with works by Dan Graham and Jeff Wall. The cream of contemporary art, past and present, was on show at Parvis.

And the momentum has been building ever since!

In 2002, Odile Biec, who succeeded her, undertook a major project in the field of video art with the creation of the ‘vidéokiosque’ in Pau, where video creations are presented to the general and specialist public, including the production of a film that she commissioned from Claude Closky. There have also been a number of outstanding exhibitions and installations at both venues, including works by Véronique Joumard, Jean-Luc Verna, Anita Molinero, Absalon, Mounir Fatmi, Alain Declercq and Djamel Tatah, to name but a few.

Not to mention the curatorial work, which she has entrusted to the renowned art critic and exhibition curator Hou Hanru.
Odile Biec is also developing an international programme focusing on southern cultures (the Mediterranean, the Orient, South America), with exhibitions by Lida Abdul, Mounir Fatmi, Yaëlle Bartana, Régina Jose Galindo, Elias Haïm, Jean-François Boclé and Enrica Borghi. She was also concerned about the presence of women artists in her programme, a commitment that was not widely shared at the time. She left Le Parvis in 2009 to take over as director of ESAD Pyrénées Pau-Tarbes.

She was succeeded by Magali Gentet as director of the contemporary art centre. She has confirmed and strengthened Le Parvis' position as one of the leading art centres in the south of France, nationally and even internationally. For example, several artists have held an exhibition at Le Parvis at the same time as, or just before, being selected for the prestigious Venice Biennale.

In 2014, Magali Gentet was responsible for a major change at Le Parvis, moving into new facilities. This has enabled her to mount some landmark exhibitions, including one by Michel Blazy for the reopening. She has also opened up a new area of programming, with collective, forward-looking themed exhibitions on social issues such as gender and the ecological and cultural transition, as well as programming and cultural activities linked to the performing arts and cinema. Today, under his direction, the contemporary art centre has been awarded the CACIN (Centre d'Art Contemporain d'Intérêt National) label by the French government. It's a distinction that Le Parvis shares with the artists who have exhibited there, the many people who visit it, the staff and, of course, all the successive directors. In 50 years, Le Parvis has welcomed over 600 artists and staged just over 260 exhibitions in Tarbes and Pau, both inside and outside the walls. Not to mention all the artistic residency projects that have been developed in the area! So what do these 50 years of creative work at Le Parvis have to tell us?

Firstly, that this selection of 50 artists could have been quite different, given the remarkable quality of the artistic programmes produced over these 5 decades, which have often been perfectly clear.

The exhibitions of Velikovic, Jacques Monory, Gerard Gasiorowki, Cueco, Gérard Fromanger, Zao-Wou Ki and André Marfaing in the 1970s will come to mind. Diane Arbus, Peter Klasen, Bernad Dufour, Alain Alquier, Peter Saint Clair, David Mach and Philippe Cazal in the 80s. The late Ben, of course, who died as we were writing these pages. For the 90s, Claude Lévêque, Miguel Egaña, Noël Dolla, Nils Udo, Stéphane Magnin, Rolino Gaspari, Patrick Tosani, Musée Khômbol, Paul Devautour and his pseudonyms, Hubert Duprat, Carlos Cusnir, Ouka Lélé, Bernard Frize, Gloria Friedmann, Patrick Tosani, Florence Paradeis, Philippe Durand... the list is so long! The new millennium began with Pierrick Sorrin, Christoph Draeger, Orlan, Véronique Joumard, Micha Laury, Elisabeth Creuseveur, Alain Lestié, Anita Molinero, Francis Baudevin, Thierry Lagala, Enrica Borghi, Pascal Lièvre, Mrzyk & Moriceau, Renée Levi, Christelle Familliari, Guillaume Poulain, Adrian Schiess... and a few more women artists in the 2000s.

From 2010 to the present day, we've also seen the first 4-hand exhibition by Hippolythe Hentgen, the immersive photographic work of Italian duo Botto & Bruno, and the work conceived as a living space by the Chapuisat brothers. The vibrant Myriam Mechita, Honoré d'O and his pipes, John Cornu's minimalist design approach. Céline Cléron and her archaeology of the senses, Claire Tabouret in her Californian debut. Jean-Xavier Renaud's hallucinatory and sometimes comical paintings. The earthy sculpture of Rachel Labastie, Mehdi Georges Lahlou and his post-colonial research And once again, this is just a selection of the artists who have produced a monograph at Le Parvis!

In other words, we're not even mentioning the many interesting group exhibitions that have taken place there over the last 50 years!

The choice of artists for this exhibition was not an easy one, and was made by the art centre team, while also drawing on the memories, interests and testimonies of our loyal audiences. Together, we considered the interest that each of us has in the universe of the artists selected, as well as their trajectories in the history of contemporary art and, above all, the way in which they have transformed, re-enchanted, moved, transcended and revisited our relationship with the world... Over the past 50 years, it has been interesting to see how the productions, workings, interests and processes of artists and institutions have evolved and changed. And, as a result, that of the artistic trajectories which, recognised today, were sometimes ‘born’ at Le Parvis... or almost. We therefore decided to use our photographic archives to evoke the memory and history of the venue, by creating a wall of images in the art centre featuring photographs from the exhibitions of each of the 50 artists invited, in order to relate them to their current work or, at least, to their post-exhibition work. A video forming an archival panorama of 204 exhibitions held at Le Parvis is also presented in this space.

'Future is now' is therefore conceived in a format that is retrospective (the archives), current (the works) and, in a way, forward-looking in that each work always sets out a future. It is also transgenerational, evolving without hierarchy across forms and time. All the different media are represented here, as are the five decades when, for example, the oldest exhibition considered for this project is by a local artist, the great Hyperrealist painter Bruno Schmeltz, who exhibited here in 1978! The last exhibition, by Ulla von Brandenburg, dates back to 2024.

This anniversary exhibition has been conceived for the artists, the public and the team as a great celebration, a joyful hodgepodge, an exhibition of memory and future, generous and energising, recalling the rich history of Le Parvis, but also and above all the pleasures, the emotions, the questions, the beauty, the closeness, the transformations, the reinventions, the intensities generated by the works of the artists selected.

Curator: Magali Gentet