ALMINE RECH

Exposition générale

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'Exposition Générale' traces forty years of contemporary art at the Fondation Cartier through a collection shaped over the course of its programming. By reactivating the social, cultural, and architectural heritage of its building and its openness to the city, it sketches an alternative cartography of contemporary art and, through its new architectural design conceived by Jean Nouvel, inaugurates a renewed approach to exhibition-making.

A New Cartography of Contemporary Creation

Reflecting the institution’s history, its programming, and its openness to the world in all its diversity, the Fondation Cartier Collection retraces forty years of international contemporary creation. 'Exposition Générale' presents the foundational pillars of this unique heritage through emblematic works and selected fragments from exhibitions that have shaped its program since its founding in 1984. It unfolds the living character of a collection that, throughout its history, has been built through the exhibition itself.

Structured around four major thematic currents running through the Collection, 'Exposition Générale' showcases the diversity of artistic commitments embraced by the institution. It opens with an architectural laboratory (*Machines of Architecture*), where models, drawings, fragments, and installations reveal—through a dialogue with the urban environment—a plurality of approaches and critical appropriations of architecture. Composing a reinvented cityscape, these forms stand alongside living worlds that invite visitors to question the role of the institution in preserving endangered ecosystems and the limits of anthropocentrism (*Being Nature*).

The exhibition also explores creation as a space of experimentation and boundary-crossing, demonstrating how new porous exchanges between art, craft, and design renew artistic languages (*Making Things*). Finally, it brings together artistic practices that blend technology, fiction, and scientific knowledge, outlining new ways of reading and inhabiting the world (*A Real World*).

On the periphery of these thematic constellations, adjacent presentations reveal the trajectories and individual or collaborative approaches of key artists in the collection.

Weaving together forms and human and non-human cultures, techniques, and practices freed from the traditional hierarchy of the fine arts, 'Exposition Générale' sketches a new cartography of contemporary creation: an alternative to the encyclopedic museum model that reimagines the role of the institution as a public space for experimentation and the production of new knowledge.

Reconnecting with the Modernity of the Building

'Exposition Générale' borrows its title from the exhibitions organized by the Grands Magasins du Louvre starting in the late 19th century, inside the Haussmann-era building later to be occupied by the Fondation Cartier—constructed for the first Paris Exposition Universelle in 1855. Throughout its history, the building has continually reinvented itself as an exhibition space, revealing a deep continuity between its successive metamorphoses and the spatial devices that accompanied them. Its evolution illustrates a genuine scenographic history that reflects shifting customs and modern uses of architecture: initially conceived as the Grand Hôtel (c. 1855–1880) to accommodate visitors to the Exposition Universelle, it gradually transformed into a department store (1880–1977), turning its salons into halls of commercial display—true “merchant palaces” visited “just as one goes to a museum.”

This vocation continued with the Louvre des Antiquaires (1977–2018), whose spatial layout—composed of rows of boutiques linked by long corridors—created a continuous sequence of vitrines where exhibitions of objects and decorative arts were regularly held. Bringing together objects and goods from all horizons, these events contributed to broadening the cultural field, circulating new forms of knowledge, and democratizing material culture and artifacts in the 19th century — a history that resonates today with the philosophy of the Collection.

The spatial design of 'Exposition Générale', conceived by the studio Formafantasma, makes the exhibition device itself visible and reactivates the social and experimental dimension of the “Expositions Générales” and other commercial displays that accompanied the evolution of museum practices. Formafantasma imagines a three-dimensional apparatus in dialogue with the building’s dynamic architecture, exploiting its varied viewpoints and heights. The textile supports—modular fabric structures mounted on aluminum profiles and containing their own lighting system—guide visitors among the artworks and the exhibition signage.

By extending into the city, 'Exposition Générale' embraces—beyond its own building—the architectural heritage of its new urban environment: Place du Palais-Royal and the Galerie Valois, a former underground passage connecting the metro to the department stores, host artistic interventions that project the exhibition’s key themes onto an urban scale. From October 2025 to February 2026, a series of drawings by Andrea Branzi illustrating his 2008 project for Greater Paris, developed in collaboration with the Italian architect Stefano Boeri, will be presented in the Galerie de Valois.

By emphasizing its porosity with the city and the public realm, the Fondation Cartier reaffirms its Parisian roots and transforms the exhibition into a space for the collective production of narratives, knowledge, and forms, fully engaged with its contemporary moment.