

L'esprit français

Countercultures, 1969-1989

A thematic group exhibition by curators Guillaume Désanges and François Piron.

From Narrative Figuration to the hardcore graphics of Bazooka, from Les Editions Champ Libre to the first «radios libres» (a form of pirate radio), from Hara-Kiri to Bérurier Noir, the exhibition looks at the formation of a critical, irreverent, dissenting «French spirit» by proposing a multitude of crossovers and affinities. Through some sixty artists and over seven hundred works and documents, spanning newspapers, flyers, posters, and extracts from films, videos and television shows, it purposely looks to other creative «genres» than those generally in the spotlight of contemporary art. It is an opportunity to show rarely-seen pieces, such as notebooks from the Dziga Vertov Group (formed by Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin), a monumental sculpture by Raymonde Arcier, and Henri and Marinette Cueco's «school books», and to commission original works from Kiki Picasso (*Il n'y a pas de raison de laisser le blanc, le bleu et le rouge à ces cons de français*, 2016-2017), Jean-Jacques Lebel (*L'Internationale Hallucinex*, 1970-2017) and Claude Lévêque (*Conte cruel de la jeunesse*, 1987-2017).

France as a country doesn't like itself, yet invariably sees itself at the centre of a self-reflexive, self-celebrating cultural model. A generation was shaped by the ideas thrown into the ring by May '68, which advocated every kind of freedom - political, social, aesthetic freedom to live as one pleased; meanwhile, the country remained in what amounted to a political *status quo*. This situation would have a lasting impact on different countercultures, liberation movements or protest movements and, without realising, give rise to new forms of avant-gardism whereby popular culture such as film, rock music, comics, journalism, television and graffiti influenced the more traditional cultural productions of literature, philosophy, contemporary art and the theatre. They produced an indefinable nebula of autonomous practices that came and went between these different fields, demonstrating a singular «French spirit» made up of idealism and nihilism, caustic humour and eroticism, darkness and hedonism. A distinct brand of humour appeared to permeate the fringes of French

society, from the emergence of a «youth movement» - irreverent, arrogant and politically ambiguous, one that grew up in the shadows of Guy Debord's «society of the spectacle» - to the crisis that monopolised political thinking from Giscard to Mitterrand.

Working within this diachronic («the French spirit») and synchronic (1969-1989) framework, the exhibition seeks to pinpoint an impossible identity by exploring its cultural backroads and alternative branches (from which, paradoxically, an excellence recognised beyond French borders grew). Emphasis is therefore on deviant figures, anti-heroes and creators from outside accepted history, because they were either too marginal or too mainstream.

Themes of sexualities, militancy, dandyism and violence run through the exhibition, which is structured as chapters. The focus of these chapters includes alternative education and sabotage of the French identity, but also the influence of Marquis de Sade on certain radical practices. Alternative means of production and diffusion in the media and the press, ongoing protestatory violence and its equally brutal repression contributed to a darkening social landscape against a backdrop of crisis, growing mass unemployment, segregation, and the soulless, tightly wound housing projects that became a catalyst for social malaise.

This original and subjective mapping of very different personalities takes in every type of creative expression - plastic arts (Lea Lublin, Pierre Molinier, Pierre Klossowski, Michel Journiac, Claude Lévêque, Daniel Pommereulle, Jacques Monory, Françoise Janicot...), comics and illustration (Roland Topor, Olivia Clavel, Kiki Picasso, Pascal Doury...), literature and thinking (Félix Guattari, Guy Hocquenghem...), music (Marie-France, Serge Gainsbourg, Bérurier Noir...), theatre (Copi, Jean-Louis Costes...), film and video (Carole Roussopoulos, Jean-Claude Averty, Paul Vecchiali, Jean-Pierre Bouyxou...) - and also explores important sites such as La Borde psychiatric clinic, La Grande Borne housing projects, Les Halles shopping mall and the Palace nightclub. In France, it's just a short step from counterculture to subculture, and many of the artists shown deliberately and openly chose not to go towards art but nonetheless stayed close, sometimes very close, as though to tap into it without having to conform to it. Others, within this field, never strayed from ways

that «weren't the done thing»: figuration, caricature, ethnography, political militancy. These aesthetic dissidences are all forms of resistance to a formal order of things, and which restore diversity to a rather colourless history of French art. The purpose of this invocation of once marginalised ideas and practices is to shed a non-nostalgic light on cultural mutations, but also bring a certain form of energy back to life.

1— Chronology and soundtrack

The exhibition opens with a timeline of events, subjectively chosen by the curators, within society, politics, culture or the arts. All took place between 1969 and 1989 and were landmarks in the history of counterculture in France. They are shown against a soundtrack of music from that period.

2— The Patio

Revolutionary slogans were spray-painted across buildings in May 68. In the years after, in the midst of an increasingly forceful and violent police crackdown, they went underground and onto the walls of the Métro. Throughout the winter of 1968 and the spring of 1969, the artist, poet and activist Jean-Jacques Lebel took his camera into the Paris transport system to photograph slogans and graffitied advertising that corresponded to his idea of art as a "part of life", addressing each individual directly with a critical message against "the capitalist culture industry and its ideological merchandise", and calling for "creative pleasure by all."

First printed with *L'Internationale Hallucinex*, "a magazine-flyer to be destroyed" published in 1970 by Le Soleil Noir, these graffiti return to their original dimensions in an installation produced for the exhibition.

3— TEACHER DOESN'T LIKE IT WHEN...

Comic strips came of age in the decade between 1970 and 1980. They were no longer just for children, while at the same time childhood offered a haven for adults. Many of the protagonists of counterculture produced works for adults as well as children, going back and forth between the two. Pierre Desproges was a contributor at *Charlie Hebdo* before presenting the nonsensical children's show, *La Minute*

Nécessaire de Monsieur Cyclopède; Roland Topor is remembered as much for *Téléchat*, a news show for kids hosted by puppets, as for his screen adaptation of the life and work of the Marquis de Sade (*Marquis*, shown later in the exhibition); Professor Choron co-founded *Hara Kiri* and *Charlie Hebdo*, and launched *Grodada*, a monthly magazine for children; Alain Le Saux, artistic director of Champ Libre, a publishing company, put his impertinence and sense of irony to use in the 1980s illustrating books in which kids try to educate their parents. The illustrations, cartoons, TV shows, comic books, board games and other items assembled here have several levels: humorous, satirical, absurd, offbeat, they can be enjoyed by adults and children alike.

4— FIRE AWAY!

Here's an idea: what if France's "beloved liberty" didn't actually exist, wasn't even a dot on the horizon; what if it were just a hypothesis to be experienced in the present tense, a hypothesis whose boundaries need to be pushed at all times? From Serge Gainsbourg's reggae rendition of the French national anthem to feminists laying a wreath at the Arc de Triomphe in memory of the unknown soldier's wife; from the front pages of *Hara Kiri* to artists protesting against the "Pompidou exhibition" of 1972, counterculture delighted in challenging the symbols of power. Politics, the army and the church were countermodels as much as substrates on which a critical mindset could grow. There is indeed a fundamental tendency in France to criticise rather than celebrate. Protest is never-ending, never enough, intransigent almost. Instead of trying to build alternatives to the dominant model, it seeks to exercise a kind of self-nourishing, self-sufficient "critical function". This malefic, insolent poltergeist, shooting down everything in its path, deliberately defies censure and includes its very self in its negativity. The seeds of this opposition – more ironic than idealistic – were sown in the slogans of May '68 and continued to grow throughout the '70s and into the dark days of the 1980s.

5— FORBIDDEN/TOLERATED

The emancipatory movements that emerged following May '68 – feminism in particular – brought about increased awareness of instances of domination and the

unequal balance of power that existed across institutions, both in the social space and in private/domestic space. What May '68 had revealed about work-related alienation existed in any institution whose purpose was to separate certain types of people from society, such as asylums and prisons. The La Borde clinic, directed by Jean Oury and Félix Guattari since the early 1950s and which practised François Tosquelles' method of institutional psychotherapy, became the epicentre of a movement to rethink "care" institutions. By extension, feminist and homosexual militants denounced domination and the allocation of both gender-based and social roles, patriarchy, and the normativity of social structures.

The context was ripe; the educational system in particular was taken to task and numerous essays on and, more to the point, against the prevailing pedagogy were published. From Fernand Oury's denunciation of the "school-barracks" to Jules Celma writing his *Journal d'un éducastreur*, a wave of books described the need to free children from the repressive nature of the school system. Not only did "school stink", to quote the cover of a 1973 issue of *Actuel*, it was also at the centre of libertarian protest and sparked a redefinition of the child as an individual. New questions were brought out into the open; a child's expression of desire and fantasy was one. The age of consent was another and became a matter of public debate in the wake of the Gabrielle Russier affair. The Malassis art cooperative retraced this tragic story in a series of paintings.

Childhood was a refuge in a disenchanted world and for a counterculture saturated by politics. This explains why, from the 1980s, so many dissenting artists and authors of the 1970s, such as the illustrator Alain Le Saux, would turn to children's books as a protected territory, ideally suited to a more gentle subversion of conventions and genres.

6— GOOD SEX ILLUSTRATED

For a few fertile years in the early '70s, sexual liberation movements became a melting pot for political affinities and aesthetic preferences. Heirs to May '68's theoretical pairing of freedom and Marxism, they sought to make a direct connection between the body and social issues. Sexuality, desire and politics were the

watchwords of a new morality which, rooted in homosexual and feminist issues, contested society's patriarchal foundations and traditional models of the family. Militants from the women's liberation movement (without capitals) were the first to welcome gays into their midst (Front Homosexuel d'Action Révolutionnaire/Homosexual Front for Revolutionary Action, and its lesbian breakaway movement, Les Gouines Rouges/The Red Dykes, a women-only movement in response to "phallocracy" within the FHAR itself) in a common battle against male chauvinism.

Never short of a paradox, France proclaims equality as one of its founding principles, but much of this was window-dressing, left in the hands of an increasingly conservative society. When the body becomes the centre of protest, the question of sexual desire can no longer be ignored, including its more murky areas, gender role reversal and ultimate limits. The sensuality of thought was put to the test, rigorous and unflinching even in its contradictions.

7— SORDID SENTIMENTAL

The legal battle that followed the publication, in the 1950s, of the complete works of the Marquis de Sade ensured that, from a blind spot, Sade became a central element of countercultures in the next decades. Many took Sade "seriously" and made him a countermodel, the epitome of antisocial, antihumanist individualism; an "anti-philosopher" of the Enlightenment casting cold light on the savagery of modern times. His radical atheism, the connection he made between mind and body, his problematisation of the notion of infinite liberty, and most of all his denunciation of the hypocrisy that underpinned laws and society put Sade at the heart of critical thinking of the 1970s. His spirit could be felt in the transgressive demands not for the right to exist within society, but to tear down its standards in order to live. This dovetailing of cruelty and jubilation could be found in the singular artistic practices that went against the grain of current trends: Clovis Trouille's joyfully erotic anti-clerical paintings, Pierre Molinier's autoerotic fantasies or Pierre Klossowski's obsessive drawings. Less directly, Sade's influence is felt in Daniel Pommereulle's material violence, ORLAN's Madonnas, and even in the drawings of Philippe Bailly (T5dur), catalogues of morbid perversions, or the radical, desperate art of Jean-Louis Costes. As France turned to the symbols of its Revolution, now pacified in celebration

of its two-hundredth anniversary in 1989, Sade remained beyond reach, the "sudden abyss" described by Annie Le Brun, a rampart to prevent the last dregs of May 68's subversive spirit from being absorbed.

8— DANCING ON RUINS

Towards the middle of the 1970s, when economic crisis and mass unemployment had rendered several of May '68's key slogans null and void (starting with the Situationist movement's famous injunction "Never work") and the epitome of French-style modernity was its young, but very old school, president, a change of mood began to emerge. It marked the end of idealistic expectations as they gave way to the double paradox of proclaimed nihilism and festive despair. And the diagnosis was this: the patient had a fever, in every sense of the word – both ecstatic and sickly. This unexpected reaction to the doom and gloom fed on darkness, both spiritual and physical. More out of insolence than joy, an enlightened French youth rejected politics, substituting dance floors for debating floors. Crossovers between underground and mainstream produced icons who delighted in overstepping these boundaries (the likes of Marie France, Alain Pacadis and Pierre et Gilles). Was Paris still burning? Yes – but this time with lights and sequins, from the decadent parties at Le Palace and La Main Bleue to dazzling ads, video clips and the kitsch, baroque style of the trendsetters. A forerunner of the post-modern power-dressing of the '80s now began to emerge into the daylight (or rather into the dusk); an updated dandyism exhibiting a falsely naïve, if not downright cynical, superficiality. Because the only way to deal with despair was to be beautiful, creative, artistic, egotistical – and brainless. No doubt France, whose influence had been on the wane since the early 20th century, would find this emerging crisis the perfect setting in which to polish its deadpan irony, in a state of despair but still wanting instant gratification. A motley mix of dark superficiality; futile but still refined, and with an all-or-nothing attitude to pleasure.

9— DIAGONAL PARALLELS

After May '68 "failed", in strictly political terms, countercultures shifted their sights. Rather than attack the system, they sought to extricate themselves from it and find

alternative means to pursue their resistance. The usual strategy was to take a sideways step which, in the early '70s, often meant joining a commune or even abandoning the city in favour of a (frequently brief) rural idyll, in an attempt to express resistance through self-sufficiency. The need to foster such deliberately dissident, marginal stances was heightened by the fact that centralism, the structural counterpart of France's intangible universalism, was extending into its territory. This "do-it-yourself" attitude was illustrated by the unprecedented wave of publications in every sphere of society: students, conscientious objectors, prisoners, doctors, psychiatrists, patients, artists, women and homosexuals formed networks through which they wrote, printed, stapled, dispatched and swapped leaflets and handouts – frequently home-made – with an irrepressible desire to express themselves and share their thoughts.

Whereas 1968's flyers still had the rigidity of diligently typed minutes, the underground publications of the 1970s borrowed the colours, illustrations and creative layouts of the American free press. Subject matter was no longer confined to a single area, instead mixing politics with art, poetry, ecology, education, sexuality, etc. They circulated through alternative networks: bookstores, shops, squats or by post. Not all were underground – many were centrally located such as Les Halles, a cavity at the heart of Paris and a hotbed of 1970s counterculture prior to redevelopment as a shopping mall.

10— COLD CUTS

1960s housing projects and the "new town" policy, alongside more experimental programmes such as those by the architect Émile Aillaud in Pantin (Cité Courtillières, completed in 1964) and Grigny (La Grande Borne, completed in 1971), reshaped the French landscape. But during the economic crisis of the 1970s, these "modern" suburbs, built to accompany the earlier industrial boom, gradually went from a feeling of hope to one of menace and from utopia to dystopia, creating a sinister image that mirrored the mood of the country as a whole. The particular architecture of these housing projects crystallised critical opinion while at the same time fostering – even fascinating – a fertile popular imagination that alternative cultures were quick to appropriate: an apocalyptic view of de-humanised spaces, of inner-city boredom and

isolation against a backdrop of fear, crisis and repression. A post-modern aesthetic portrayed this drabness, confinement and alienation in allegorical form. Paintings by Gilles Aillaud (son of Émile), Jacques Monory and Peter Klasen operated a shift in protestation from narrative figuration towards cruel, prospectless, ice-cold minimalism.

Violence spread: at the same time as certain ex-libertarian Maoists grew more radical, and as incidents of police violence, murder and gangland killings increased, an "anti-cop" sentiment took hold of the public psyche. To the point that Jacques Mesrine, public enemy n°1, was voted France's best-loved personality in a 1978 poll. His fight for the abolition of high-security wings, alongside the strikes, protests and riots that shook French jails in the early 1970s, relayed by the Groupe d'Information sur les Prisons, revealed the intolerable conditions inside the country's prisons.

Michel Journiac's *Piège pour une exécution capitale* (1971) offered a chilling manifesto against the death penalty. High-security wings and the death penalty were not abolished until 1981, under Justice Minister Robert Badinter.

11— INNER VIOLENCE

In a specially commissioned work, Kiki Picasso, a member of Bazooka, looks back at some of the significant events that took place in France during this twenty-one-year period and reprises them in large-format collages. "France is afraid", as a television newsreader put it. More to the point, France was overheating. Heroin, disillusionment and self-hatred contributed to a tense atmosphere in which young people quickly went from peace and love to punk aggression. This abrupt change in ideology was perhaps less about the arrival of a new generation and more a sign that countercultures had reached the end of the diplomatic road. The talking is over, the shooting begins. The pervading fascination with violent motifs in the broadest sense of the term (fighting, prison, terrorism, crude pornography, psychiatry) was picked up by a prolific graphic movement, led by groups such as Bazooka and Elles sont de sortie whose graphzines took comics into an angry, adult age. Their provoking images turned their back on the more idealistic political agenda of their elders; their format deliberately harked back to the visual codes of totalitarianism and advertising in a kind of critical mimicry. Their schoolboy gravitas inspired an "alternative" wave of

feverish French punk which in the 1980s, with Bérurier Noir as its spearhead, crisply and intelligently set youth alight with its hymns to the darkness of the world. The group's *Conte cruel de la jeunesse* provides the soundtrack to Claude Lévêque's installation, conceived in 1987 and produced for the first time here. It's the morning after the night before, a sobered-up look at one hell of a party...