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The Palais de Tokyo has a history that alternates between occupation and abandonment. Originally built in the 1930s to house the Paris Art Fair, it has been used over the years as an exhibition space for contemporary art, national photography and cinema. The renovated and reconceived Palais de Tokyo officially reopened its doors on January 21st of this year. The hyped inauguration for the new state-supported institution was sanctioned by the Prime Minister of France, Lionel Jospin.

The space is directed by Jérôme Sans and Nicolas Bourriaud, critics/curators with complementary practices, who envision a new institutional form predicated on openness. Architects Jean-Philippe Vassal and Anne Lacaton share this vision; in fact they are known for their interest in space over built form, which is underscored by their admitted draw toward restricted-budget



projects that oblige them to build less. With the Palais, they have left the neo-classical exterior intact, while clearing the inside to make space. Ironically, the receding architecture has become a primary focus.

The Palais will host multidisciplinary projects by international artists, including some of the best known and some who are showing for the first time, which may expand our notions of art, but continues to signal an inclusive exclusivity. Some installations will be brief, lasting for a day or a week; others will be ongoing, with the potential to morph. It will undoubtedly be a site of constant motion and possibility, and hopefully it will maintain its risk-taking initiative.

Last summer, before its official opening, the Palais organized "Tokyorama," an exhibition of site-specific projects in the spaces around the building. It has also published two books: *Tokyobook 1*, which compiles responses to the question, "What are you looking for in an art institution in the 21st century?" and *Tokyobook 2*, which includes responses to the question, "What is the role of the artist today?" The opening event was a dense program of performances, music and ambient spaces, as well as installation, sculpture and wall art – a fantastic frenzy.

*Palais de Tokyo*

*Art + Musique + Mode + Débats + Rencontres + Performances + Restaurant + Librairie ... = Palais de Tokyo, site de création contemporaine*

**Palais de Tokyo** / Inauguration, showing Director Nicolas Bourriaud (far left); Prime Minister Lionel Jospin (centre); Director Jérôme Sans (with the Prime Minister); and Curator Marc Sanchez (far right)

## | Palais de Tokyo | A conversation between artists Nadine Norman and Sam Samore at the opening

**Sam:** It's an architectural wonder – so raw and open that it appears to be still in the process of becoming. Nothing about it points towards completion. Someone told me the architects, Jean-Philippe Vassal and Anne Lacaton, are known for their philosophy of “no architecture.”

**Nadine:** This building is a fine example. No matter where you're standing in the space you can see all the work together in its larger context. These holes in the walls that they've left unfilled by spackle – is it because the walls were damaged when the former covering was removed? This would suggest an archaeological undertaking, a peeling away of the layers (skins?) of past habitation, the various stratas of meaning. Matthew Ritchie's [US] ink scribbles directly respond to the architectural rawness, and can be found throughout the Palais in discreet places on the walls, like traces of prior civilizations.

**Sam:** This collaborative work by Michael Elmgreen [Denmark] and Ingrid Dragset [Norway] is a series of freestanding plaster walls that are crumpling to the floor, signaling the smashing of the architectural space. Are these walls the remains of the white cubes of the former Palais? In the current structure, you see exposed sheet rock – it's either left over from the building's previous incarnations or some new stuff that's been left unfinished, as if the architects changed their minds, turning the building in on itself as a celebration of transience.

The height of the large hall must be twenty metres, and the glass ceiling extends it even further, giving it an inside/outside relation. Beat Streuli's [Switzerland] enormous photo transparencies of people in the streets are inserted into windows almost the height of the building itself, running along Avenue du Président

Wilson. They are portraits of people looking at you – they seem in a good mood and bestow a stained-glass elegance. When you are inside the Palais and it is daylight outside, you can see the faces; vice versa at night. Wang Du [China, lives in Paris] has created an enormous wire-mesh trash can – seven metres high, filled with television monitors, magazines, newspapers – contemporary media, momentary trash. The Palais is like a new kind of train station, inhabited by the comings and goings of contemporary culture.

**Nadine:** The transitory feeling is all around. Even the bookstore, coat-check and café, the first areas you enter, are like an ongoing event, a live image of constant interaction.

**Sam:** It looks like the bookstore and coat-check area have been constructed under the spell of Cady Noland, with the chain-metal fence separating what's inside from what's outside. The coat-check function is celebrated as the coats and bags form another installation. It looks like the café will be the new hangout for artists and visitors, especially since the Palais is open till midnight. There's also an area for music and performance, DJs, dance. Perhaps they could add a health spa or at least a hot tub!

**Nadine:** Contemporary art institution becomes leisure centre? Well, I'm glad it hasn't quite come to that – art equals leisure.

[Later]

**Nadine:** We have been here for hours, and what amazes me is that I don't yet feel saturated, even though there is a lot to absorb. Maybe because this is the birth of a new kind of centre dedicated to

the creation of contemporary art, and we are in the midst of the first rupture of its virginity.

**Sam:** Perhaps then, we are testing something out without yet worrying about how it functions – like sex for the first time. It's not just a place to go and see art but a place to truly live in it and experience it. Many of the works involve some form of interaction, performance or engagement.

I notice that Michel Majerus [Luxembourg, lives in Germany] is showing a large painting with the words “Fuck the Artist” and “Burned Out” (the t is missing), which makes me think: fuck the artist because we don't need them? Because they need to be fucked over? They need fucking since sex is fun and we all need sex?

Downstairs, on the same level as the outdoor passage between the Palais and L'ARC (Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris), where the skate boarders hang out, is a work by Michael Lin [Taiwan]: floor paintings of flowers, with cushions all around. During the opening afternoon, Miss China Paris' dresses adorn women who serve tea with thin slices of ginger in tiny bowls. One can just sprawl out in a mass of bright, beautiful colours on the floor. Makes me think about western architectural practice and how nowadays, in the cities of the west, we have cool monochromes and titaniums that distance us. Here, we are drawn together like the petals of a flower.

**Nadine:** The floor painting may set a pattern and challenge for the other works to come. I wonder if the works painted directly on the walls and floor will be left in place when the show closes? With each new exhibition, remaining traces of

older works may influence the new work.

Did you notice the work by Navin Rawanchaikul [lives in Thailand and Japan] – giant mural paintings in the big hall on the main floor. One painting says, ART WORLD CRASHED in bright movie-poster colours – a fictional disaster movie scenario – from the ashes of the phoenix, we are reborn with a new Palais. And on the uppermost floor, spray-painted on the wall, ADD ELEGANCE TO YOUR POVERTY by Monica Bonvicini [Italy, lives in Berlin and Los Angeles]. Perhaps this is also commentary about the art world: its paradoxical relationship to cultural revolution and leisure-class living.

*Out of nowhere, two women dressed in variations of hot pink hand out round fuschia stickers – placing them on the backside of everyone's hand. We both think about the red dot that means “sold.”*

**Nadine:** Surasi Kusolwong's [Thailand] *La-la-la Minimal Mart (Welcome 1 Euro)*, for which he's known, is an installation of hundreds of objects on tables, for sale at designated market hours, each for one Euro. Thai-made kitsch objects in bright plastics. The stereo is booming to the beat of the Thai group, China Dolls. But the notion of exchange is inverted – the transposition of a Thai market into the western art centre, where you cannot buy the artwork



Palais de Tokyo / Opening, showing Beat Streuli's large photo transparencies

Palais de Tokyo / Opening, showing painting by Michel Majerus and fallen walls by Michael Dingwen and Ingrid Dragel

Palais de Tokyo / Opening, showing wall scribbling by Matthew Ritchie



as one entity. Rather, the public can purchase a fragment, and so the art becomes a functional object (and makes for a great gift); consumption becomes the work. After everything is sold, only the bright colours of the tables remain – abstract minimalist paintings.

**Sam:** There is a philosophy of casualness. Many artists have created places to inhabit. In *Le Salon*, the installation by Meschac Gaba [Bénin, Africa, lives in Amsterdam], you can lounge on chairs, play board games and eat tin-foil-wrapped pieces of chocolate in the shape of one-Euro coins. There is a grand piano that can be played and a television monitor with another artist's video. There's a coffee table with a glass top, and under the glass are coins from other countries – soon no longer currency? The melting of identities and borders.

**Nadine:** Diagonally across is *Island of an island*, an installation by Melik Ohanian [France]. It has several components: a raised floor made up of tiny lights that delineate an elegant floral mapping that we can walk on; three video projections on the wall, of Icelandic volcanic-island landscapes; and five spherical mirrors suspended from above that offer ideal views – a literally reflective perspective of merging territories and place. Another work, *Peripheral Communities*, is a mobile installation that moves around the Palais – a single video monitor on wheels with a number of headsets. The monitor shows a series of individuals rapping, and while their images alternate in sequential fragments, each rapper's voice may be heard in continuity on a headset. The work was produced by a partner of the Palais de Tokyo, the Caisse de Dépôts et Consignations – an independent organization that produces

and shows art. A sign of the support structure here and its dynamic.

**Sam:** In New York, former mayor Giuliani wanted to close down the Brooklyn Museum because one of its exhibitions offended his particular sensibilities. Here, in his inaugural speech today, the Prime Minister of France, Lionel Jospin, applauded the diversity of cultural viewpoints.

**Nadine:** The Palais feels different from other exhibiting centres. There are no new walls constructing rooms or delimiting the artists and their separate spheres of influence. The placement of works overlaps and nothing is isolated or shown in little white cubes. The casual philosophy and open structure are evident everywhere. I think we need to allow ourselves some time to see what the accumulation and evolution of exhibitions may bring, but it feels like a time to

celebrate Paris, long maligned as a "sleepy" city. Let's see what unravels.

*Palais de Tokyo, site de création contemporaine, 13, avenue du Président Wilson, 75116, Paris France. <[www.palaisdetokyo.co](http://www.palaisdetokyo.co)>*

*Nadine Norman is a visual artist based in Paris and Montreal. She recently exhibited work in "Tokyorama" at the Palais de Tokyo and has a solo exhibition at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal opening in November.*

*Sam Samore is a New-York-based visual artist. Recent solo exhibitions include: *Gorney Bravin + Lee*, New York; *galerie Gisela Capitain*, Cologne (both 2001); and *Casino Luxembourg* (2000). This year he will introduce new work at *galerie Anne de Villepoix*, Paris.*

Video stills courtesy Nadine Norman and Sam Samore