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Re-Branding Post 1945 Paris: Exhibiting Powers and Contemporary Art

Elisabeth Tiso

“...it seems fair to suggest than Haussmann’s traumatic destruction and reconstruction of Paris opened up the possibility of seeing the city itself as a work of art, as a self-conscious metaphoric space responsive to the historical currents of an era. And just as “all history and all mythology” converged here, so did goods and people from all over the globe, transforming this city into a “cosmopolis”, where the world ...was every place co-present.”

Shelley Rice.
Parisian Views

Contemporary art has assumed an ever-increasing role in re-branding Paris, France’s flagship capital, as a cutting edge, technological, innovative and competitive global city. For centuries, France has used the arts and culture to claim supremacy in the world, whether colonial or local, with Paris as the ultimate ‘brand.’ Post-World War II Paris however, saw this brand diminished, as claims to artistic supremacy were replaced by New York (Guilbaut, 1965-1995). In an effort to regain some relevancy Paris, and by extension France, under the direction of its current mayor, Bertrand Delanoë, has begun the process of re-branding through an aggressive promotion of contemporary art. This paper will examine how this goal has been achieved through various steps taken by the French Government to expand contemporary art’s role and profile in the entire city, focusing primarily on the renovation of the important historical *Grand Palais*, the re-cycling of industrial buildings on the outer edges of the city for contemporary projects and the sponsoring of impressive temporary exhibitions that envelop and expand the entire metropolis. Finally, the promotion and redefinition of French art from pieces produced by artists with French nationality to any art produced in French territory significantly globalizes French art’s scope. Through contemporary art, Paris aspires to be a global transnational site of

spectacle, a leading locus for art to be exhibited and consumed.

In order to be a global city, scholars generally contend that an urban center has to satisfy certain criteria: a command and control center in the International Political Economy such as large numbers of corporate headquarters, banks, financial markets and national/international economic/political institutions, and a large population. These global urban centers must also produce a large share of the global culture and tourism industries, of which the visual arts comprise a significant part. Fulfilling these requirements with its contemporary art scene, France can aspire to assume global leadership and to become an interlocutor for global concerns and interests.

Historically the French government has consistently played a large role in the arts—to a much greater extent than the United States—with the state serving as a major, if not the most important, patron, promoter and arbiter of art. Whereas in the United States the tendency tends to be largely *laissez faire* and to let the private, commercial sector foster the contemporary art world, in France contemporary art belongs to the nation and expresses the national identity. As art historian Catherine Millet points out, the appointment of André Malraux to Minister of Culture by President De Gaulle in 1959 “signifiait qu’en France, la culture, [est] devenue affaire d’État” (Millet, 13) and political scientist Jean Caune states, “En faisant de la culture un objet de sa politique, l’État français se donnait, dans les années soixante, un nouveau moyen d’assurer la cohésion nationale”(Caune). With French national interests, identity and cohesion so intertwined with their arts, keeping Paris’s image grand became of paramount importance.

The image of Paris however, is not a modern one. Paris is architecturally defined by its rich nineteenth-century past and is grounded in the Baroque, Grand Manner of that century thus re-branding Paris for as a modern metropolis has been challenging. Few significant modern developments have risen in its historic center and the few that have such as *Les Halles* (1977) or the *Tour Montparnasse* (1972) have not been successful. *Montparnasse* in particular—with its black tower and cement base consistent with

Le Corbusier's tower in the park ideas—was considered a failure; it is removed from street life and the fabric of the rest of the city with its suburban style above-and-below ground mall. Aesthetically moreover, its 689 foot aggressive black-glass profile intrudes on and overpowers the historic five story height skyline of the rest of the city. Other European cities have been able to integrate newer buildings into its landscape more successfully, including London, France's closest competitor. London however, had the dubious benefit of being heavily destroyed during WWII and thus had more opportunities to build with impunity in its historical center.¹

Paris has been slow to modernize and has not substantially expanded its physical boundaries since Haussmann in the 1850s; strict laws governing new construction and preservation laws in its historic center, restrict new development and architectural growth. In an innovative move, however, Paris has chosen to renovate and recycle monuments, factories and morgues into cutting-edge contemporary art spaces rather than build new structures. In the last five years alone, it has renovated major sites such as the *Grand Palais* as well as colossal spaces in the outer neighborhoods that include *Centquatre*, and *La Fabrique in Montrouge*, for the main purpose of accommodating a litany of ever larger, cutting edge, contemporary art exhibits, salons and fairs.

Indisputably, the most successful of these renovations has been the *Grand Palais*. In the competitive global art world of exhibitions and exhibiting powers, the *Grand Palais des Champs-Élysées*, located at the bottom of the avenue, functions as a fulcrum and has been crucial in repositioning Paris's contemporary art ambitions. Designated a National Gallery by Malraux in 1966, after many years of meticulous and costly restoration, it reopened in 2003 and aspires to regain some of the importance it had in the last century. An august and magnificent beaux-arts exhibition hall with a formidable and vast glass and steel shed roof, it was constructed for the Universal Exposition of 1900 which, at the time, attracted up to fifty million visitors in seven months (Ory, 15). (Figure 1)

As a critical space for French contemporary art, the *Grand*

Palais is a central symbol of power, pride and importance: “un site emblématique du patrimoine français. [...] dès ses origines le lieu



Figure 1. *The Grand Palais* built in 1900. Image copyright Elisabeth Tiso, 2008. Editors’ note: In the printed version of this journal, the figures are in black and white.

par excellence de l’avant-garde et de l’innovation” (*Le Grand Palais*, 1). With the French flag proudly flying above its glass domes, the building symbolically aims to conflate the greatness of France’s national past with its future. As a temporary exhibition space *la grande nef*—which comprises 13,500 of the *Grand Palais*’s 72,000 square meters of usable space and whose interior heights range between 35 and 45 meters—is able to exhibit larger and vaster works than the *Beaubourg*, the *Palais de Tokyo*, or the *Musée d’art moderne*, the other primary spaces dedicated to contemporary art in the historic center (*Le Grand Palais*, 18). Significantly, the *Grand Palais* also hosts various art fairs, making it both a commercial and non-commercial venue, an ethos that aligns itself with the trajectory of the current art world. As a for-profit art exhibition locus, it aims to aid Paris specifically and France generally regain market-share

lost to London and to the commercial contemporary art behemoth of New York. Events such as the *Foire internationale d'art contemporain* (FIAC), (Figures 2-3) promote the economic might of France, merging commercial and political-national interests under the large roof of the *Grand Palais*.

By placing cutting-edge art works in central historical locations, moreover, FIAC with the collaboration of the city of Paris, redefines those spaces, attracting the international press necessary



Figure 2. FIAC 2008 at the *Grand Palais*. Image copyright Elisabeth Tiso, 2008.

for a global city and drawing international art collectors and curators as well as businesses that wish to be associated with these forefront cultural events and products. *Grand Palais* exhibitions like the FIAC or *La Force de L'Art* emanate and often work in tandem with outdoor sculpture displays, installation programs or contemporary art events in spaces on the outer areas of the city. The placement of contemporary works like that of Richard Serra, Alexandre Mir (Figures 4-5), or events like the *Nuit Blanche* on temporary schedules



Figure 3. FIAC, 2008, interior of the *Grand Palais*. Image copyright Elisabeth Tiso, 2008.

reinforce feelings of change and innovation, expunging the image of a static city. By placing contemporary sculptures, installations, and video in parks and plazas, the city of Paris, and the French government, are “accessorizing” and transforming the older grand public parks and edifices with the contemporary.

One of the most successful and innovative exhibits, produced in 2008 by the French government in collaboration with the French foreign ministry, was *Dans la Nuit, des Images* meant to celebrate the close of the cultural season of Europe and France’s chairmanship of the European parliament. French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner and Minister of Culture and Communication Christine Albanel, hailed the exhibit as a space “where state-of-the-art technology and contemporary artistic creation converge” (*Dans la nuit, des images*). The goal of the exhibit was to join artists from all over Europe, presenting the modernity of today with the modernity of the nineteenth-century. The *Grand Palais* was transformed into a gigantic kaleidoscope, its interior filled with the projections, films, and sounds of an impressive 120 video and new media artists.



Figure 4. Richard Serra's *Clara Clara* in the Tuileries Gardens. Image copyright Elisabeth Tiso, 2008.



Figure 5. FIAC 2008, Tuileries gardens. Inflatable plane by Dutch artist Alexander Mir and bathtub by unknown artist in the foreground. Image copyright Elisabeth Tiso, 2008.

The exterior of the building was illuminated from dusk until two am for five days between Christmas and New Year's Day by the work of the Finnish artist Charles Sandison. Comprised of words and expressions taken from the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and projected against the façade, Sandison's work was an almost blinding flurry of letters that at once reinforced and dematerialized the monumental edifice. (Figure 6) Through his "manifesto," especially designed for the occasion, "he gives a dynamic visibility to a text that is only relevant as long as it is in use" reads the guide to the exhibit. The promotion of technologically and aesthetically innovative media by the French art establishment and government is significant as it promotes the nation as harbinger, and in the vanguard, of innovation.

Dans la Nuit's predecessor is *Nuit Blanche*, a hugely successful all-night event conceived by Christophe Girard in 2002 and launched by Paris' mayor Bertrand Delanoë, that took art to the



Figure 6. *Dans la nuit, des images*, Charles Sandison's manifesto *Proclamation Solemne*, 2008, illuminates the *Grand Palais's* façade at night. Photo: Collection Grand Palais, François Tomasi. Image reprinted with permission.

“streets.” As *Maire Adjoint Chargé de la Culture*, Girard created an artistic nocturnal ‘parcours’ dedicated to contemporary art. A now annual event, it takes place all over Paris—in parks, churches, subways, and theaters as well as in adjoining municipal communities. This year the spectacle’s 8th edition will again be citywide:

From well-known and shared places, such as the Parc des Buttes-Chaumont [in the nineteenth arrondissement], Luxembourg gardens... places of worship such as Saint Eustache, Notre-Dame,... the Great Mosque... to the Théâtre de la Ville... all will open their doors to contemporary art all night... From the historical center to the new breeding grounds for creation... Arcueil, Auberville, Clichy-la Garenne, Nanterre... *Nuit Blanche* will again be an integral part of Paris City Hall’s drive to give culture a greater place in the city. (*Nuit Blanche* press release) (Figure 7)



Figure 7. *Nuit Blanche* 2009 Parisian zones. Map from *Nuit Blanche* website.

This taking art to the “streets” recalls André Malraux and his *Maison de la Culture*’s earlier ambitions to democratize art. Specifically, André Malraux founded the *Maison de la Culture* in 1961 to bring culture to the poorer regions and provinces of France and was meant to unify the nation through culture (Lebovics, 109-131). More flexible than Malraux’s *Maisons* of the 60s that were based on the eponymous Soviet model and were meant to democratize art and bring art to the masses, and more in-line with Soviet agitprop trains, *Nuit Blanche* delivers art to the Parisian neighborhoods of all classes. While the unpopular *Maisons de la Culture* were discontinued in 1968, these current unabashedly capitalist contemporary events successfully draw record crowds. *Nuit Blanche* includes works by dozens of renowned international and local artists such as Doug Aiken, Janet Cardiff, or Sarki, who all present their work in non-art institution, urban venues. This influx of art talent last year attracted 1,500,000 people including members of the international art world, making the event one of many international networking events that gallery owners, private dealers, collectors, artists and art lovers feel compelled to attend (*Nuit Blanche* web site). *Nuit Blanche* has become such a success that other cities from Berlin, Brussels, Madrid and Rome are now hosting similar events (*Mairie de Paris* official site 2010).

In recent history France’s efforts to regain relevance in the contemporary art world germinated in 1967 with the founding of the *Centre National d’Art Contemporain* (CNAC). Pompidou, who is credited with inaugurating France’s era of contemporary art mass-consumption with the founding of the Pompidou Center (1977) in the ‘blighted’ area of the eleventh *arrondissement* began the practice of rehabilitating and revitalizing economically depressed areas with the arts. While again it was Malraux who had aspired to a similar mass art movement: “Le décret du 24 Juillet 1959 qui fixe les missions du ministère est clair: ‘assurer la plus vaste audience à notre patrimoine culturel’” (Caune), it was Pompidou who successfully brought contemporary art into the forefront of the battle for cultural supremacy.

Importantly, Pompidou also initiated the seminal exhibition, entitled *1960-1972, Douze ans d'art contemporain en France* held at the *Grand Palais*—prior to its closing in 1972—that helped redefine contemporary art for Paris. *1960-1972, Douze ans d'art contemporain en France* was the first effort to centralize, promote and rehabilitate France's contemporary art scene. It aimed to survey the most representative art trends in France from 1960 to 1972 and, according to its catalogue, at the behest of the French Prime Minister Pompidou, attempted to modernize the French art world and redefine it as international. In the preface, the 'commissaire' of the exhibit, François Mathey, laments how contemporary art is dead in France and lost to the "grand public." Mathey goes on to argue that the exposition's avant-garde spirit responds to Pompidou's request for "une grande exposition réunissant une sélection d'oeuvres de tous les principaux peintres et sculpteurs vivants qui habitent et travaillent en France, qu'il soient Français ou qu'ils aient pressément cherché dans notre pays le milieu approprié pour leur art" (*1960-1972, douze ans d'art contemporain en France*, 11). Both the exhibit and Pompidou's request crucially redefine French art as that produced by any living artist living in the territory of France; it is not limited to pieces produced by artists of French nationality. This transnational-global, universalizing claim through the redefinition of French art manages in one sweep to greatly expand France's control over global artists and art. The 1972 show was a disaster, due to political protests and artists' refusals to participate, stymieing the efforts by the government to redefine and reposition France as a global player in the arts. However, its goal of inclusiveness was a turning point and was to have a great influence at the turn of our millennium where these early ambitions have been realized.

The contemporary heir to *Douze ans d'art contemporain en France* is the triennial exhibit *La Force de L'Art*, began in 2006 to showcase the best and most representative contemporary French art. (Figure 8) It is organized by the French Ministry of Culture and Communications, the *Délégation aux arts plastiques*, the *Centre National d'art plastique* (CNAP) and the *Grand Palais*. In the for-

ward to the catalogue of its 2009 second run, Olivier Keappelin, *Délégué aux arts plastiques*, returns to the definition of French art, asking, “Qu’est-ce que l’art français?” His answer to this question, “Une confrontation vivante entre toutes les formes de la création en France [...] l’ouverture aux cultures multiples qui font de notre pays un foyer de création pour les artistes de toute origine,” reaffirms the globalizing definition of French art promoted in the earlier exhibit *Douze ans d’art contemporain en France (La Force de l’Art* Press catalogue, 9). *La Force de l’Art* is, according to the catalogue entry by Christine Albanel, “the great national and international encounter devoted to what is current in art in France. It is an event showcasing ...the creative output of the French and foreign artists who have



Figure 8. *La Force de l’Art*, 2008 at the Grand Palais. “Arch of Triumph” by Mircea Cantor. In the foreground the Romanian artist’s gilded version of a typical Romanian farmer’s gate built to ward-off evil. Image copyright Elisabeth Tiso, 2008.

chosen our country to live, create and teach” (*La Force de l’Art* Press catalogue, 1). *La Force de l’Art* finally succeeds in redefining French art and ferments Paris as a global city home to global artists,

reclaiming some of its past glory. By boasting a multi-national art community, France regains its status as a global city.

To accommodate the demands of an international community's ambitions, Paris has renovated two vast exhibition halls, both located on the periphery of the historic center: the *Espace Centquatre* (104), 2008, located on the rue Aubervilliers in the thirteenth *arrondissement* and *La Fabrique* in *Montrouge*, 2009. A former municipal morgue of 39,000 square meters, *Centquatre* is the large type of space found in New York at PS1 in Queens, or in England at the Tate Gallery in Liverpool. *Centquatre*, like *Nuit Blanche*, was created under the auspices of Bertrand Delanoë, mayor of Paris, who in an urban revitalization program decided to renovate the former funereal parlor for the arts. Inaugurated in 2008 with Slick, an offshoot of FIAC, *Centquatre* focuses on exhibiting a younger roster of artists and espouses an international program. It declared itself to be a "lieu où la dynamique artistique bouscule les frontières entre les arts et les publics" (*Centquatre* Press release). The space of *La Fabrique* is located in *Montrouge*, a small town on the southern periphery of Paris to be incorporated into Sarkozy's Grand Paris. (Figure 9) *La Fabrique*, a former factory of 4,000 square meters located in the city's "industrial wasteland," held the 2009 *Salon d'Art Contemporain* and is currently hosting the Biennial of Young European Creators. The *Salon* was held in tandem with *La Force de l'Art* at the *Grand Palais*, with artists having work in both spaces, making a stop to both venues compulsory and linking the center with the periphery. The *Salon* at *Montrouge's La Fabrique*, dedicated exclusively to emerging artists, is more aggressive at showing younger and more diverse artists, attempting to reflect the predominantly immigrant demographics of that neighborhood. The exhibitions radiate out from the *Grand Palais* to *La Fabrique* or to *Centquatre* (104) as with *Nuit Blanche*, moving the center to farther-out municipalities and neighborhoods, thereby using the arts to link the new with the old and the center and the periphery of the city.

Incorporating contemporary art into the fabric of the whole city—not just the historic center—parallels French President

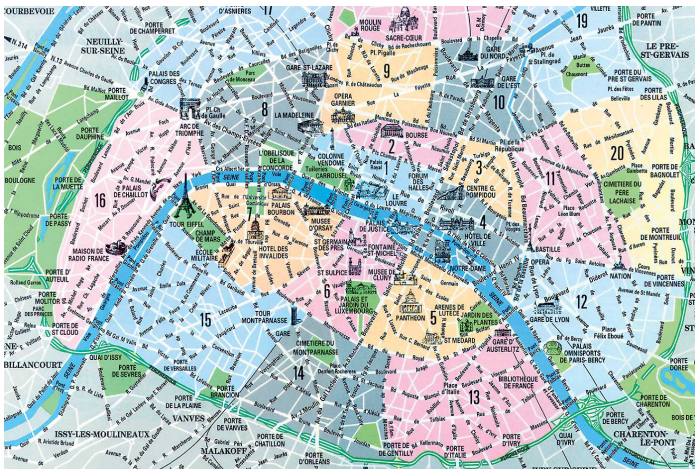


Figure 9. Map of Paris. The green line marks the *périphérique*. *Montrouge* is located in the south, slightly beyond the *Porte d'Orléans*. Map Plan de Paris.

Sarkozy's new urban plan for a Grand Paris and is reminiscent of the Greater London Authorities Plan of 2000.² Sarkozy similarly, but also reminiscent of Napoleon III and Baron Haussmann, would like to expand Paris beyond its *périphérique* motorway which now works as a boundary, dividing the *banlieue* from the city's center. Most of these *banlieues* were traditionally communist and the locus of recent riots.³ The *banlieue*, in some ways, parallel Malraux's neglected "provinces." According to Jean Casau,

Le 13 mars 1966, lors de l'inauguration de la Maison de la culture d'Amiens, Malraux concluait son discours par l'apostrophe: 'Et, si vous le voulez, je vous dis que vous tentez une des plus belles choses qu'on ait tentées en France, parce qu'alors, avant dix ans, ce mot hideux de Province aura cessé d'exister en France. Dix ans plus tard, la 'province' avait cessé d'être un 'désert culturel.' (Casau)

Under Sarkozy's plan, the *banlieue* would be joined to the powerful historic center politically and geographically as they now are thematically through the use of contemporary art. Sarkozy has commissioned ten architects—backed by teams of planners, engineers, sociologists and even philosophers—and has given them six months to come up with novel ideas for expanding the city, focusing primarily on greater transport and economic links between the areas. The expansion of the city's boundaries would augment Paris's population, making it more commensurate with that of other great global cities like London and New York. Art would pave the way between center and periphery making the cohesion of society through culture complete.

Over the last years through the expansion of contemporary art into the fabric of all of Paris, the city has reasserted itself as a global art player and successfully worked to re-brand itself as a contemporary city. Contemporary art frames and reshapes the image of Paris and of France by re-branding past glories like the *Grand Palais* into venues of the future. The ever-increasing international nature of Paris's art community promotes the city and helps re-brand it from a local power to a global one. Finally, the new venues and contemporary art events in locations emanating from the center expands Paris. Less traumatic than Haussmann and Napoleon III's modernizing efforts in Paris in the 1850s—but not less ambitious—France's current leadership's project for a future Grand Paris harnesses the flexibility of the art spectacle, the impermanence of temporary exhibit-manifestations and contemporary art events whether staged *en plein air* or in one of the refurbished industrial halls. Great civilizations create great art, and France, through re-branding with the help of contemporary art, aims to stay great.

Notes

¹ The Abercrombie plan of 1944 allowed for greenbelts and new towns to be added to the historic center. The Greater London Authority (2000) saw the organized enlargement of the city through a centralized planning agency. For more information on London's urban development and the

Greater London Authority, and its predecessors the London County Council and Greater London Council see <http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk> or <http://www.london.gov.uk>.

² This recent plan further centralized the power and administration of the thirty-two boroughs that make up greater London into the hands of the Mayor of London. For more information on the Greater London Authorities Plan, see www.london.gov.uk/priorities/planning.

³ The violent riots of 2005 began in the poor *banlieue* of Clichy-sous-Bois east of Paris with the death of a teenager, and quickly spread to other housing projects throughout the Ile-de-France and the rest of the country's large urban areas. Hundreds of cars were burnt, one man killed and property damaged causing the New York Times to call it "one of the most serious challenges to governmental authority here in nearly 40 years" (Smith). The French state declared a state of emergency on November 8, 2005. For more information, see Craig S. Smith, "First Death is Reported In Paris Riots as Arson Increases," *New York Times* Nov. 7, 2005.

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