

## Press Release

August 31  
October 5, 2024

Opening  
Saturday, August 31  
from 11am to 8pm

# *Présence Panchounette* *surréaliste ? Mon œil !* **Présence Panchounette**

“Pursuit of experience is thus the vital thing:  
Reason will always follow along—its phosphorescent  
blindfold covering its eyes.”  
André Breton, *Crise de l'objet* (1936)

“Everything is the same as it was before!”

Really? For the passers-by in November 1968, it would have seemed reasonable to ponder this provocative graffiti—seemingly *Présence Panchounette*'s very first manifestation—just as it is for us today, faced with the symbolically critical objects produced by the Bordeaux collective officially active between 1969 and 1990.

If everything is the same as it was before, it appears that life has not been affected by art, and in particular by the undermining efforts put into practice by the so-called historic avant-gardes: Dada (founded in Zurich in 1917) and Surrealism (established in Paris in 1924) thus have in no way reshaped our relationship with the world? And yet the serial shockwaves inspired by the Comte de Lautréamont's chance juxtaposition of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table, evidently led to these subsequent collisions between words and objects caught in acts of humorous complicity, that we might describe as “chounettes.” When all is said and done, somewhere between Zurich, Paris and Bordeaux, we may have at least gained an even sharper, ever more mocking awareness of the bitter-sweet victory of the avant-gardists who have time and again shaped our oh-so-refined tastes... and not much more.

Against the backdrop of the student and worker uprisings in May & June 1968 and the ultra-politicized 1970s, *Présence Panchounette* interpreted and absorbed the Situationist message concerning the avant-garde in its own way. “Dadaism wanted to suppress art without realizing it,” while “Surrealism wanted to realize art without suppressing it,”<sup>1</sup> as Guy Debord (1931-1994) summed it up. Far from dismissing Dada and Surrealism, we should examine the consequences of their respective historical deadends. For the Situationist theorist, Guy Debord, who positioned himself closer to the Surrealist views of Paul Nougé<sup>2</sup> and Marcel Mariën,<sup>3</sup> the solution is clear: “Go beyond art.”

While the Parisian Surrealist group disbanded in 1969, followed by the Situationist International in 1972, *Présence Panchounette* established its own critical, insolent and down-to-earth definition of post artistic creation. The collective, who ironically identified themselves as avant-garde, developed a discourse of all-inclusivity (“pan” in Greek meaning “all” or “everything”) while at the same time aiming below the belt, at the level of the “choune,” a vulgar slang expression designating the female genitalia, in use in the South of France. To this, they added an amusing, semiotic detail: “Etymologically a ‘chounette’ is a little ‘choune,’ transforming its original coarse meaning into one of affection.”<sup>4</sup> (1990) To achieve the grandiose notion of going beyond art, the derisive option chosen was thus one of gentle vulgarity, while the extremely serious 1970s saw the development of the B.M.P.T.<sup>5</sup> group, Supports/Surfaces, Art & Language and

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deliberately sacrificial body art. The artists of the period being somewhat averse to the legacy of Surrealism, after André Breton's (1896-1966) *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924) and the Lettrist International periodical *Potlatch* (1954-1957), it took an act of daring to continue the practice of listing tutelary figures. Rather than producing statements such as "Swift is Surrealist in malice" or "Sade is Surrealist in sadism,"<sup>6</sup> the Bordeaux-based collective for whom "everything is fine," pointed out to their prospective readers that "Charles Manson is Panchounette in fear. Georges Bataille is Panchounette in photos. Le Sâr Peladan is Panchounette on the cover. Sophie Rostopchine is Panchounette in illustrations. Jean Lorrain is Panchounette in vocabulary and grammar. Jules Verne is Panchounette in sexuality."<sup>7</sup>

Since "plagiarism is necessary,"<sup>8</sup> there was no reason to refrain from pillaging the treasure troves of the avant-garde born in 1924. Moreover, the second issue of *La Révolution Surréaliste*<sup>9</sup> was undeniably "chounette," featuring a reproduction of a scarecrow, photographed in a garden, with the caption: "French art, early 20th century." When *Présence Panchounette*'s excursions into the suburbs of Bordeaux lent artistic status to fake wells made from tires, miniature windmills and garden gnomes, they were simply following on from the Surrealist experiments of the 1920s: "French art, late 1970s." And furthermore, it's not unreasonable to consider the Bordeaux collective as neighbors of the sulfurous Pierre Molinier (1900-1976), who at one time was associated with the activities of André Breton, Benjamin Péret (1899-1959) and their friends. Yet *Présence Panchounette* no longer believed in the emancipating virtues of eroticism, whether veiled, as suggested by Breton (*L'Amour Fou*, 1937), or unveiled and misappropriated, as used in the Situationist montages. After half a century of aesthetic transfigurations, to what extent is the symbolic act of acknowledging an art object capable of reaching such a degree of incandescence that it elicits feelings of embarrassment or disquiet for the viewer? Have we become completely blasé? According to *Présence Panchounette*, under certain conditions, the potential of bad taste remains stimulating due to its capacity of preserving a certain sense of surprise: "The thing that's intolerable concerning vulgarity is its innocence"<sup>10</sup> the collective maintains.

Once this innocence is extracted from the milieu of its emergence and transferred into the world of art, vulgarity is no longer perceived as simply naively decorative. It even opens up the possibility of a fresh critique of the order of things, or even a new *Crisis of the Object* (André Breton). Wallpaper with rustic brick or cinderblock patterns was perhaps the most progressive step forward in this process of demystification, as the consumer society of the 1980s began to ubiquitously promote a way of life and a world completely redefined by the benchmark of good taste known as design.

It's worth reminding ourselves that Max Ernst came up with the frottage [rubbing] technique after observing and capturing the grain of worn wooden flooring in an inn in Brittany. A few decades later, *Présence Panchounette* raised their eyes from the floor, and glancing at a kitsch barometer, began to focus on the wall. How does one escape the pitfalls of the decorative? Perhaps by simply fully immersing yourself in it. And so, where do we find ourselves now? The same as before? Our sense of humor has become more robust. No mean feat in these times of uncertainty.

"Change life" stated Rimbaud. "Transform the world" suggested Karl Marx. Surrealism never lost sight of these two imperatives. "Et tout a fini dans le décor,"<sup>11</sup> *Présence Panchounette* would have added.

Jérôme Duwa

1. *La Société du Spectacle*, VII, §.191, 1967.
2. Paul Nougé (1895-1967) was a Belgian poet as well as one of the instigators and theorists of Surrealism in Belgium.
3. Marcel Mariën (1920-1993) was a Belgian Surrealist writer, poet, essayist, editor, photographer, filmmaker and creator of collages and unusual objects. He was the editor of the review *Les Lèvres Nues* (1953-1975).
4. *Présence Panchounette*, CAPC, Bordeaux, 2011, p. 79.
5. B.M.P.T. is the acronym given to a group of artists: Daniel Buren, Olivier Mosset, Michel Parmentier and Niele Toroni, created in 1966 and disbanded in December 1967.
6. André Breton, *Manifeste du Surréalisme*, 1924.
7. *Présence Panchounette*, op. cit, p. 11.
8. Guy Debord, *La Société du Spectacle*, VIII, §.207, 1967.
9. Dated 15 January 1925.
10. *Présence Panchounette*, op. cit, p. 83.
11. "Finir dans le décor" has a double meaning in French, which would give this phrase the meaning "And it all ended up as an accident".

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