

Press release

November 20th, 2021
January 1st, 2022Opening
Saturday, November 20th
from 11am to 8pm

Section Africaine

Présence Panchounette

Présence Panchounette: The Preface to the Creolization of Contemporary Art

Even by today's standards, Présence Panchounette undoubtedly remains the most elusive yet explosive collective of French artists of the second half of the 20th century, their activity covering the period between 1968—a year marked by all manner of subversion—and 1990, when Nelson Mandela was finally liberated in South Africa. This association of malicious wrongdoers boasts twenty-two years of relentless attacks against the academic nature of the avant-garde, the bourgeois elitism of the contemporary art scene and even against themselves—going as far as practicing self-sabotage to avoid any form of appropriation of their ideas or political ambiguity.

Little is known of the collective's true history, yet the sulfurous odor left by their interventions, verging on intellectual terrorism, is still perceptible today. Many in the "art scene" claim to have known someone who knew Présence Panchounette. They were never at risk of becoming fashionable or being "accepted," these ideas were more the fire you play with if you want to get burned; the friction between sense and signs (whether through the use of duplication, camouflage or hybridization...) that they always enjoyed maintaining, up to and even beyond exhaustion: "The cacophony of signs that we had rather naively seen as a prelude to the advent of a classless society, was in fact the prelude to nothing at all, other than possibly postmodern eclecticism"—shouting out loud to whoever wanted to hear, that only failure can be considered as success.

With their unbridled taste for "décor" or more accurately the unavowed decorative syndrome that pervades contemporary art, we are indebted to the various members of Présence Panchounette for having unmasked this affliction in Daniel Buren's work, forty years before he laid claim to it himself.

Above and beyond their legendary status, today Présence Panchounette allows us a glimpse of an "oeuvre" in due form. It can be observed close-up, yet with the necessary distance to enable the diffusion of any poetic or political bombs—much of this due to the work carried out by Semiose in terms of the conservation, documentation and diffusion of their delirious catalog of works. There is little point in trying to distinguish between major and minor works from those, who long before museums or institutions, invited the minor arts to the table of the avant-garde, denouncing the systems of racial, economic or territorial domination that dominate our cultural consumption. The words *eclectic* or *parodic* miss the essential point of Présence Panchounette's oeuvre, which offers up a heretical vision with absolutely no regard for the rules of art.

Among the numerous threads to unwind and pathways to rediscover in the Panchounette pantheon, the "African Section" could not be more pertinent in terms of the current agenda of contemporary art. The works presented by Semiose in their fall 2021 exhibition are the result of experimentation, trips, affinities and collaborations experienced by various members of the collective on the African continent, which went as far as the creation of the Gabonese Section of Présence Panchounette in 1974. In the following years the group visited the whole of West and Sub-Saharan Africa from Senegal to Gabon in this spirit of

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creative migration. This overturning of the colonial/western vision of art, in favor of collaboration and encounters with artists, craftsmen and creators (without any hierarchical distinction) is viewed in a better light today, with our understanding of the globalized world and the contribution of post-colonial studies.

Whether in a knowingly modified painting from a studio in Conakry (the *Portrait Devise* series), a statuette-collage made up of radical juxtapositions and improbable assemblies, involving elements created by different artists thus brought to the fore by the Bordeaux collective, we always find this friction, the undermining of meanings and origins and the same delight in catch-all gestures. At the time they were produced, during the seventies up until the mid-eighties, these works discharged a rare and sometimes unwelcome energy that is still intact today, but which was prophetic back then. In 1986, the collective presented its (now mythic) exhibition *Banlieues Sud, Expressions D'Afrique* at the Labège CRAC, inciting a public reaction that fell somewhere between hilarity and shock. This exhibition prefigures in many respects *Les Magiciens de la terre*¹ (Pompidou Center, 1989) and featured collaborations with artists such as Kane Kwei (*La Villa des ancêtres* is shown as part of the current exhibition), Agbagli Kossi (for *Magicienne de l'eau*), Nicolas Damas (for *Disco Boy, Le Couple, Traffic, La Disquette de Youpougon*), Akpan (for *Le Couloir des Trophées*), Amidou Dossou (pour *Batékéés, Cogito Ero Sum, Cool Mamadou Coal*) ... All of whom, as a matter of fact, with the exception of Nicolas Dumas, were invited to participate in *Magiciens de la Terre*.

The title of the installation *Magicienne de l'eau*² (1987), also presented in the Semiose exhibition, seems all the more ironic, especially as it is principally made up of common plastic basins. As a symbol and everyday element of the African urban landscape, solemnly antithetical to the official context of art, these basins represent the anarcho-agitative version of Donald Judd's minimalist structures that are still shown in museums today, complete with their air of unselfconscious decorum. It's a reasonable bet that with the vibrant echo of these acts of interpretive interference, the exhibition will become part of the prehistory (or preface) of contemporary art in the era of its globalization, or even creolization.

Morad Montazami

Morad Montazami is an art historian, publisher and exhibition curator. After spending several years at the Tate Modern in London as Middle East and North African arts curator (2014-2019), he now directs the Zamân Books & Curating platform, which is dedicated to the study of Arab, African and Asian modernity. He was responsible for the exhibitions *Bagdad Mon Amour*, Institut des Cultures d'Islam, Paris, 2018 and *New Waves: Mohamed Melehi and the Casablanca Art School Archives*, The Mosaic Rooms, London/MACCAL, Marrakesh/Alsekal Arts Foundation, Dubai, 2019-2020. He is a member of the collective Globalization, Art et Prospective, attached to INHA (Paris) and regularly publishes in catalogs, collective works and various periodicals.

1 Translator's note: Sorcerers of the Earth.

2 Translator's note: Sorceress of Water