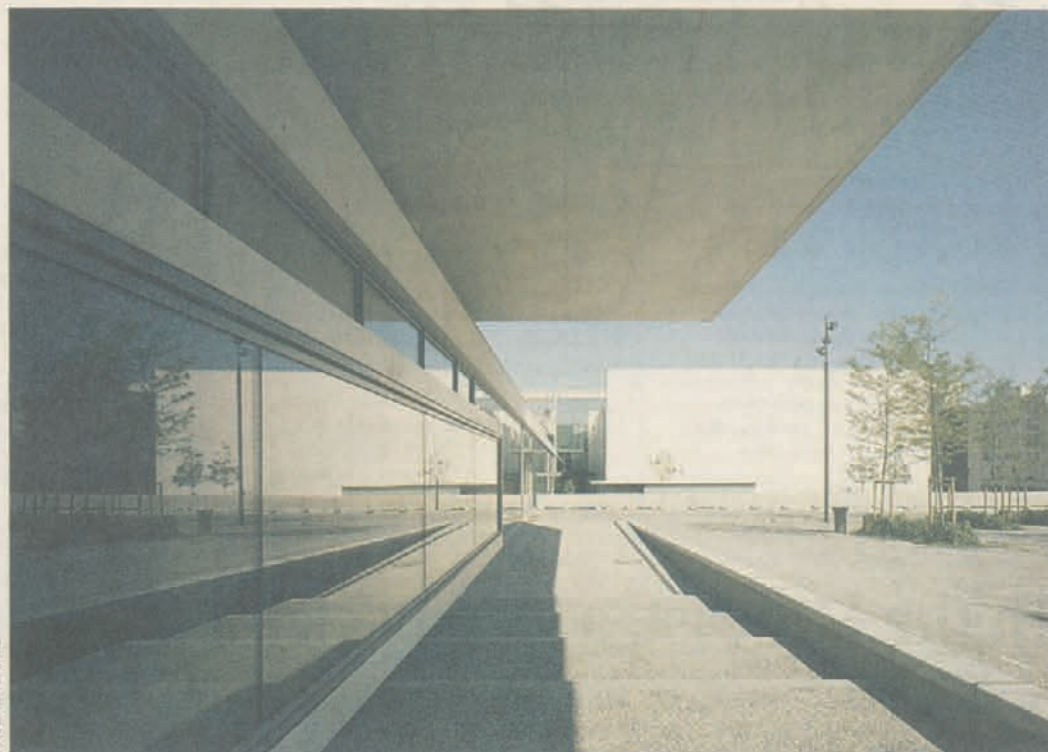


# Eye on Art

'Eye on Art' is a monthly series that explores cutting-edge trends in the world of museums, taking a behind-the-scenes look at the people and places shaping art's perception and value



PAULINE TURMEL

MAC/VAL's horizontal lines and neutral concrete were conceived by the architect Jacques Ripault to create a feeling of serenity.



Franck Scurti's "Enseigne Presse" is part of MAC/VAL's permanent collection.

Contemporary art | MAC/VAL

## A new home for French art created since 1950

Creating a bright spot amid the gray-beige landscape of blocky modern apartment buildings in Vitry-sur-Seine, just outside Paris, is a towering sculpture in red, white and blue set in the middle of a traffic circle.

The sculpture, immediately recognizable as the work of one of France's best-known contemporary artists, Jean Dubuffet, stands in front of something new in the French landscape: a full-fledged contemporary art museum located off the beaten track of France's cultural byways.

MAC/VAL (Contemporary Art Museum of the Val-de-Marne) stands only four miles (six kilometers) from the southern edge of Paris, but a world away from the capital's well-known art museums. Paris has long been the focal point of artistic activity in a country that has often admired the idea of decentralization in theory, yet has historically been less apt to put it into practice.

Since MAC/VAL opened on Nov. 18, observers have weighed its chances for success and wondered if its local community will support it. And will Parisians and tourists make the long trek by metro and bus to visit a museum located so close to Paris, they wonder, when the city is already chock-full of artistic treasures?

While it is too early to answer these questions definitively, there are signs that MAC/VAL has found a mission that reflects its unique context. "We can't fight the Parisian museums," says MAC/VAL's 38-year-old curator, Alexia Fabre. Instead, the museum has chosen to define its own artistic territory by showing only work dating from 1950 to the present by French artists or foreign artists working in France.

Some French art experts congratulate MAC/VAL on this approach. Yves Aupetitallot is the director of the Magasin, a national contemporary art center in Grenoble (just reopened after renovation), another product of the French decentralization process, which began in the 1980s. MAC/VAL's strong identity, he says, will contribute to its chances of success. "They have carved out a niche for themselves," he observes.

Antoine de Galbert, founder and director of a new Paris contemporary art space, the Maison Rouge/Fondation Antoine de Galbert, is less convinced. "It makes no sense to me to buy work just because the artist is French, but perhaps they are right," he says. "It could provide a counterweight, a sort of critique of the market:

'We're not showing Jeff Koons or Damien Hirst because we're showing Jacques Monory.'" (The subject of MAC/VAL's first temporary show, running until Feb. 19.)

While de Galbert hopes MAC/VAL will succeed, he thinks that its viability will depend on its ability to attract locals. "If it's just a ship in the middle of the ocean, it serves no purpose," he says.

### A wider setting

Well aware of these concerns, MAC/VAL is seeking to differentiate itself from the Paris art scene and reach out to the local population by playing an educational role and becoming a community center of sorts, complete with a cinema showing documentaries on art, a research library, a bookstore, a restaurant, workshop/residences for visiting artists and a large garden.

"We have a strong educational focus," says Fabre. "We want to create a link with the public."

Community | Widening art's circle

## Presenting culture as a right, not a privilege

Vitry-sur-Seine's new MAC/VAL museum did not spring fully formed from the head of the Val-de-Marne department's local council. The process that led to its creation began in 1982, when Michel Germa, then-president of the departmental council, used some of the national funds earmarked for decentralization to finance the acquisition of works of contemporary art.

Over the years, the works acquired were exhibited in government buildings, schools and hospitals. Eventually, the idea of creating a museum of contemporary art was proposed. In 1996, an architectural competition was launched, and construction finally began in 2003. Half of the cost of €37 million (\$44 million) was financed by the national and regional governments, and the other half by the department.

At the museum's inaugural ceremony

in November, Germa's successor, Christian Favier, proclaimed that "culture is a right, not a privilege," adding that "culture cannot be reduced to a formulaic product."

MAC/VAL's building was not designed to attract visitors with its spectacular architecture, like the Bilbao Guggenheim and some other new museums being built around the world. Its architect, Jacques Ripault, sought a feeling of "serenity" in a building created to show off the works of art displayed, rather than its own forms. With its horizontal lines and neutral concrete surfaces, the museum sits quietly and inconspic-

uously amid the modern architecture of Vitry-sur-Seine.

The light-filled rooms of varying shapes and sizes offer views of many of the artworks from different perspectives. A large part of the 4,000 square meters (43,055 square feet) of exhibition space is devoted to showing 150 of the museum's 1,000-piece permanent collection. This exhibition will change once a year to give the public a chance to see different works.

The impressive collection of French artists and artists working in France includes pieces by Jean Dubuffet, César, Arman, Christian Boltanski, Orlan, Pierre

those numbers. During the first two weeks of January, 54 percent of visitors were local residents, 25 percent were from Paris and 15 percent were from the French provinces.

While that is too short a period to be representative, the figures indicate that the local community is taking an interest in the museum. Evelyn Rabardel, the Val-de-Marne departmental council's vice president in charge of culture, says that MAC/VAL has already become a source of pride for Vitry's residents. "Normally, they go to Paris to see art," she says, "but now they see Parisians coming here." ■

Soulages, Takis, Raymond Hains, Annette Messager, Bernard Rancillac and Martial Raysse.

Each of MAC/VAL's temporary exhibitions will focus on one artist, who will be given carte blanche to design the scenography. "We wanted to give the artists the time and space to express themselves," says Alexia Fabre, the museum's chief curator. This freedom was appreciated by Jacques Monory, the subject of the first show, who created a spiral-shaped exhibition space for his paintings, influenced by U.S. detective novels. The next show will feature Claude Lévêque (March 23-June 18). ■

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