

An anti-museum in bourgeois Paris

By Brent Gregston



The Palais de Tokyo comes back to life with a vast triennial art exhibit

The Palais de Tokyo in Paris has reopened to the public with a vast triennial exhibition of contemporary art and the ambition to be an “anti-museum.” More than an art space, the new Palais is a vortex dug deep into the *haut* heart of right bank Paris. Without warning, it funnels the visitor deep underground all the way to Avenue President Wilson on the river Seine. Inside it is unplastered and unpainted, half concrete cathedral, half construction site. “Nothing is perfectly clean, nothing is perfectly painted on purpose,” explains the head of the new Palais, Jean de Loisy. “It’s all in favor of creativity.”

The triennial show, “Intense

Proximity (an anthology of the near and the far),” is a journey into the depths of this new space, all 22,000 square meters of it. The Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor (he is director of the Haus der Kunst in Munich) has filled the Palais with the work of over 100 artists and borrowed from the methods of ethnographers like Claude Levi-Strauss to launch an artistic exploration of the self in a globalized world, one in which there is ever less distance between near and far.

“Fear Eats the Soul,” a spray-painted mural by Rirkrit Tiravanija, is the first thing we see. Hanging from the ceiling near the entrance is a massive

structure of scrap metal and dust, “The Blind Leading the Blind,” a work evoking “unidentifiable ruins,” according to Belgian artist Peter Buggenhout. Though the lines are quickly blurred across four floors, there are themes like identity, territory and the other, featuring Stone with Hair, literally a stone with African-American hair glued to it, retrieved by artist David Hammons from a Harlem barbershop. Not all of the artists are contemporary. There is a silent film made in 1928 by French writer André Gide about a trip to the Congo; Walker Evans’ African Negro Art Portfolio (photographs from MoMA’s 1935 exhibition “African Negro Art”); and ‘30s drawings and photographs from Levi-Strauss.



Beyond the ground floor begins the labyrinth of steep staircases and long ramps, mezzanines and shafts, side rooms and sub-basements.

There are works about slavery, colonialism, warfare, revolution, terrorism and racial stereotypes. Some of them are deeply seductive, such as the film of French artist Lili Reynaud-Dewar blacking up her body and dancing around her sculptures in homage to Josephine Baker. Other works are “interventions” on the building. Julien Salaud, for example, drawing inspiration from the Lascaux caves, created a “Grotte Stellaire” (Stellar Cave), in which luminescent string depicts a group of deer in various states of motion on the ceiling of a former projection room.

“Death of a King” is the inexplicable title of another site-specific work, a brightly painted double skateboard ramp by Ulla von Brandenburg. Death is also the theme of “Touching

Reality,” by Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn, the most difficult work to look at – two fingers, as on an iPad, enlarging and reducing images of corpses and mutilated war victims. Next door is the most whimsical of the installations, Annette Messager’s “Motion-Emotion,” consisting of an entire room of dresses, fabrics and dolls stirring in a breeze powered by electric fans. According to the catalog, they are symbolic of life, in which “everything is moving, changing, deforming, transforming, from birth to death.”

“It was a huge space to fill, the biggest scale I could ever work on,” says German artist Maria Loboda. Her ornamental “Walldrawing,” inspired by the Wiener Werkstaette, intentionally uses toxic paint – Schweinfurter green, Naples yellow, Prussian blue – that is loaded with arsenic, cyanide, mercury and lead, suggesting there is something inherently dangerous about art.

"Art is poisonous," says Jean Loisy. So be it.

