

SCENE/SEEN

A Biennial Blooms Where It's Planted



Aurélie Lepatre/La Salle de Bains

"Each and Every One of You, 2004," by the American artist Alan McCollum, showing at the alternative arts space la Salle de Bains in Lyon.

By COLINE MILLIARD
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Nestled on the confluence of the Rhône and the Saône rivers, Lyon is chiefly known for gastronomy and silk, but over the past couple of decades it has emerged as a prime destination for contemporary art. The city's growth as an art draw is largely thanks to its dynamic [contemporary art museum](#) — since 1984 it has organized more than 100 exhibitions by artists like James Turrell, Georg Baselitz and John Baldessari — and its contemporary art biennial, founded in 1991. On Thursday, the international art world descended en masse to celebrate the opening of the city's 11th biennial, titled "Une Terrible Beauté est Née" (A Terrible Beauty Is Born), after W.B Yeats's 1916 poem "Easter."

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In the run-up to the biennial, art organizations in the region strove to ensure everything was pitch perfect. "Everybody is making an effort with their exhibition program," said Anne Giffon-Selle, president of the [Adele](#) network, which encompasses 32 contemporary art venues in the Rhône-Alpes region. "There's a real sense of motivation."

That the Lyon biennial, which runs through Dec. 31, has grown to be a critically acclaimed and popular powerhouse — the last edition saw 165,000 visitors in three months — is largely due to the determination of

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Cadu d'Oliveira, collection of the artist and Biennale de Lyon

"Gala Chickens, 2004," by the Brazilian artist Laura Lima is one of the works showing at this year's Lyon biennial, "Une Terrible Beauté est Née."

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Aurélie Leplatre/La Salle de Bains

A view of the exhibition "Mon Plaisir ... Votre Travail ..." by the artist Steven Claydon at the Salle de Bains.

Thierry Raspail, its founding artistic director and the first director of the city's contemporary art museum.

"Not everything is born out of the biennial," he said a few weeks ago during a conversation in the Place des Terreaux, designed by Daniel Buren, at the heart of the manicured city center. "It only complements an ongoing effort. Lyon has a very important cultural tradition. It's a conventional city, but it's wealthy, and it doesn't scorn culture."

The Lyon biennial does have local and national political support, but the consistently high quality of its exhibitions, which have showcased artists ranging from Mike Kelley to Agnes Varda and Larry Clark, owes a lot to its curatorial setup.

Mr. Raspail curated the first edition in 1991 and since then has been artistic director for all the biennials, working closely with well-known and respected guest

curators. Former Lyon biennial curators include Harald Szeemann, Jean-Hubert Martin, Nicolas Bourriaud and Hans Ulrich Obrist.

"My role is to create a space of freedom" for the curators, said Mr. Raspail.

Although there are occasional grumbles from local art professionals about Mr. Raspail's extended reign, even his detractors admit that the biennial has a sense of continuity rarely found in similar events.

"A Terrible Beauty" is the brainchild of Victoria Noorthoorn, an Argentine curator from Buenos Aires. Her edition of the biennial, which mixes historical figures such as John Cage and Alberto Giacometti with younger artists like Laura Lima and Laurent Montaron, is, she wrote in her presentation, anchored in the imagination's liberating potential.

Somewhat contentiously, the line from Yeats appears stripped from its political content — the evocation of the Easter Rising, an Irish upheaval against British rule — and is used to epitomize the idea that oppositions can be creative.

Although the biennial's main exhibition doesn't feature any Lyon-based artists, it both fosters and is enriched by artistic initiatives in the area. More than 90 of these are officially associated with it through its "Résonance" program, a marketing strategy that, since 2003, uses the biennial's visibility to promote ambitious programming in the region. "When I arrived in Lyon," Mr. Raspail said, "I was told: If you don't work with the local scene, forget it. Now Résonance and Veduta are crucial components of the biennial."

First held in 2007, the Veduta program presents contemporary art outside of its usual framework and to a population not necessarily familiar with it.

One of its initiatives, Cube Blanc, is a tongue-in-cheek comment on the modernist ideal of the white cube exhibition space. Installed at the foot of the high-rises in the suburban town of Décines-Charpieu, the temporary structure will display works selected from the collection of the Musée d'Art Contemporain de Lyon by a group of inhabitants who also will be responsible for all the other aspects of the show, including the visits and the security.

Attached since its inception to the contemporary art museum, the biennial is the most visible part of a healthy museum scene in the region, but it is not alone. Other major landmarks include the [Institut d'art contemporain](#) in Villeurbanne, an eastern suburb,



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and the contemporary arts center [Le Magasin](#) in Grenoble, about 100 kilometers, or 60 miles, southeast of Lyon, and the [Musée d'Art Moderne](#) in St-Étienne, about 60 kilometers southwest, both founded in the late 1980s.

Lyon also has its reputed École des Beaux-Arts and living in Lyon hasn't prevented artists like Alain Bublex and Marc Desgrandchamps from pursuing international careers. But most of the younger artists, including the promising duo Lamarche-Ovize and Bettina Samson, tend to leave.

According to the Lyon-based artist Nicolas Garait-Leavenworth, "the problem isn't just Lyon," but is the overall decline in importance of France in the contemporary art world. "Paris is less and less of an important art center," he said, "and therefore the whole of France ends up at the periphery."

This month Mr. Garait-Leavenworth is showing a photographic installation at [La Salle de Bains](#), a nonprofit association on rue Burdeau in Lyon's First Arrondissement. He described the piece as a "literary mashup," combining hundreds of images as well as films snippets and performances.

La Salle de Bains, though small and in chronic economic peril, is a landmark of the city's art scene. "Here artists can experiment and try out new exhibition formats," said Caroline Soyez-Petithomme, the volunteer artistic director of the organization together with Jill Gasparina.

The rue Burdeau spearheads the politically backed transformation of the Croix-Rousse slope, a neighborhood that, until a few years ago, was plagued with social problems. A world heritage site, like the rest of the city's historical center, the Croix-Rousse used to be Lyon's colline qui travaille (hill that works), in opposition to Fourvière, which, topped by a monumental basilica, was the colline qui prie (hill that prays). In the 19th century, the Croix-Rousse was mainly occupied by the canuts, Lyon's silk weavers, its high-ceilinged buildings designed to accommodate their huge looms.

Today the steep streets are quickly turning into a Boho stronghold, and commercial and nonprofit galleries have mushroomed, sometimes creating uneasy juxtapositions. "The cohabitation is not always easy," said Julie Rodriguez-Malti, director of the nonprofit organization [Néon](#). "Even if we all talk about contemporary art, we don't necessarily have the same point of view."

Like most French cities outside Paris, Lyon lacks a dynamic art market. But in recent years individual dealers have taken things into their own hands. Championed by the [Olivier Houg Galerie](#), [Docks Art Fair](#), which is about to open its third edition, provides a commercial platform for French and international dealers during the biennial's opening days, capitalizing on its visibility.

"There are many art collectors in the region," said Patricia Houg, the fair's director, who added that 80 percent of the sales in the fair's first two editions were to local buyers.

"Now the challenge is to become emancipated from the biennial. It's great that the fair accompanies it, but we also need to think about another event, happening without the biennial, and with its own identity."

Along with the Galerie Georges Verney-Carron, the Olivier Houg Galerie is among the first galleries to settle in the former industrial zone of the confluence — the meeting point of the Rhône with the Saône — an area that is being redeveloped. The zone has benefited greatly from the hype brought by the relocation of the biennial's main exhibition to the former sugar warehouse, the Sucrière, in 2003.

"I went there because the idea of the confluence was already taking shape," Mr. Raspail said, alluding to the political forces that have been pushing the confluence project since

the mid-1990s. But for many people, the biennial is what put this neglected neighborhood on the map. “Going to the Sucrière made us look at this part of town afresh,” said Nathalie Ergino, director of the Institut d’art contemporain in Villeurbanne.

“I arrived in Lyon a long time ago planning to stay for two years, and I’m still here now,” said Mr. Raspail, who is from Grenoble. “I might be a militant old fool, but I have the feeling that, perhaps, and very modestly, we’ve helped develop the city’s relationship to art.”

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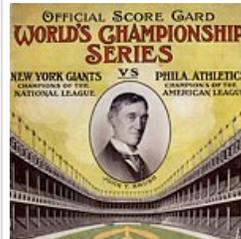
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