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SPECIAL ISSUE

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Making Way for the Next FRENCH REVOLUTION

Nicholas Le Quesne learns how the new Palais de Tokyo plans to shake up the Parisian art scene

FOR THE URBAN TRAVELER IN THE year 2000, Paris is the land that time forgot. The city still trades on an image of Art Nouveau Métro signs, old-fashioned brasseries and high-kicking cancan girls at the Moulin Rouge. Fur-coated women still trail poodles past picturesque tramps on the sidewalks of its better neighborhoods. Its signature boulevards avoided the destruction of World War II, leaving a cityscape where—a few set pieces aside—there is little to remind you that the 20th century ever happened.

And yet, from the first Impressionist show in 1874 through to France's collapse in the face of the Blitzkrieg of 1940, Paris was synonymous with everything that counted as avant-garde in art. Its Montparnasse clique defined the cliché of the hell-raising artist on the margins of society, living—and occasionally dying—for his art. But Paris' sun set. Throughout the last half of the 20th century, New York towered over its Old World predecessor both as the world's leading art market and as the petri dish in which the spores of new art movements could grow. To add insult to injury, even the old enemy from across the Channel has effortlessly eclipsed Paris in recent years, as British artists like Damien Hirst, Rachel Whiteread and the Chapman brothers send shockwaves rumbling across the Atlantic from London to Brooklyn.

The French state—still omnipresent in the country's cultural sphere—has finally woken up to the situation. Although younger artists like Fabrice Hybert and Pierre Huyghe have been building international reputations, the lack of any Paris venue specifically dedicated to contempo-

rary art has left them all but homeless in the nation's capital. Last year, the Culture Ministry announced its decision to create a new exhibition center for young contemporary artists in Paris' Palais de Tokyo—site of the city's first modern art museum—that would be “capable of rivaling those on offer in other great capitals of art like London, Berlin, Amsterdam and New York.”

This self-styled “site for contemporary creation” will open to the public in autumn 2001. Work is under way to transform the Palais de Tokyo's cavernous ground floor into 3,000 sq m of exhibition space on a shoestring budget of \$2.2 million. And in a marked break with tradition, responsibility for the new venue has been given not



to some dyed-in-the-wool product of France's governing élite, but to a pair of thirty-something outsiders named Nicolas Bourriaud and Jérôme Sans.

Both men made names for themselves during the '90s as independent art critics and exhibition curators. “We're not civil servants,” says Sans. “It's a historic phenomenon for two free electrons like Nicolas and me to be named to head an institution like this.”

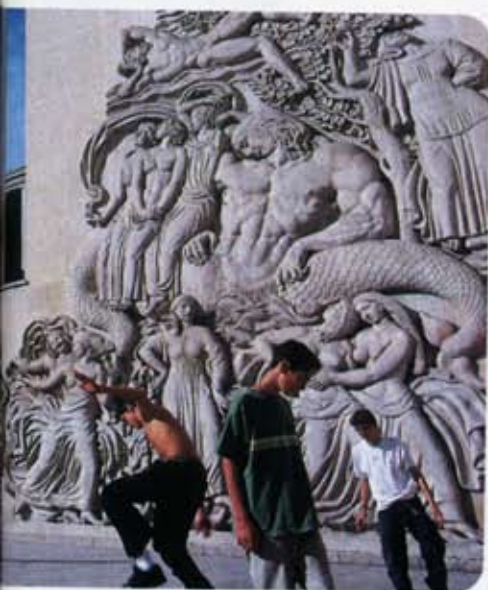
The innovation extends to its organization. Bourriaud and Sans have set up a private association that will run the new art center for its first three years. “You could say we're the franchise holders,” Bourriaud grins. The state provides them with the premises plus an annual subsidy of between



AVANT-GARDE

In a clear break with tradition, the directors of the Palais de Tokyo—Jérôme Sans, right, and Nicolas Bourriaud—don't come from the ranks of France's political élite but from the art world. The gallery will show a rapidly changing schedule of exhibitions by young artists, while the space itself will be unconventional, too: the building will have an open plan and lots of glass, as this artist's impression, right, shows





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\$1 million and \$1.3 million a year. "That won't cover all our needs," says Sans. "We'll have to top it up with private patronage and corporate sponsorship."

With private arts funding still often viewed as a dangerous American heresy, the new center's business model is a sign of changing times. That suits Bourriaud and Sans, who like to see their mission as shaking up a backward-looking French art establishment. "Paris has fallen behind on all fronts," says Bourriaud, "but over the past couple of years something's started to change. There's a new generation with open minds and an international outlook. They don't just think France is the best country in the world and there's no need to look at

what's happening elsewhere."

Paris also has the Centre Pompidou, of course. But ever since the Centre reopened in January after a two-year refit, the vocation of its National Museum of Modern Art has been looking vague. While its modern floor—spanning 1900 to 1960—has won unanimous praise, the contemporary floor is an amorphous mishmash. With concerts of post-rave electronic music and an exhibition organized by the trendy magazine *Purple*, the Centre has looked uneasy in its attempts to keep up with the zeitgeist. "This new center has come into being because of questions being asked about the Centre Pompidou," says Christophe Durand-Ruel, contemporary art specialist at Christie's in Paris. "If the

INSIDE OUT Once home to Paris' first modern art gallery, the Palais de Tokyo will again house contemporary art in the autumn of 2001

Pompidou wants to concentrate on 20th century art, it shouldn't be presenting very recent creations."

"The Centre Pompidou is a cruise liner and we're a yacht," says Sans. The Palais de Tokyo will be geared around fast reaction times, with programming changing monthly. The space alongside a bookshop, concept store, auditorium and café will be kept as open as possible, with different areas being used for different activities from month to month. To dovetail with the public's free time, opening hours will be a hip midday to midnight. And the curation will be resolutely multidisciplinary. "We want to fit in with the concerns of today's artists, who are looking beyond art to cinema, fashion, music and so on," says Bourriaud. "We aren't going to be limited to any one idea of art."

The pair hasn't yet announced any specific exhibitions for the Palais de Tokyo, but they won't include surefire crowd pleasers like the major Pop Art and Dubuffet retrospectives that the Pompidou has scheduled for 2001. With the new center reliant on private money, that could cause problems. "Private donations aren't tax deductible in France, so private capital comes exclusively from sponsorship," says Durand-Ruel. "And it's a lot riskier for a company to sponsor a young artist than a Picasso exhibit. It's not going to be easy."

Perhaps not. But all those hoping that the 21st century will leave a more lasting impact on Paris' cultural landscape than the 20th century did will be rooting for Sans and Bourriaud to succeed. ■



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