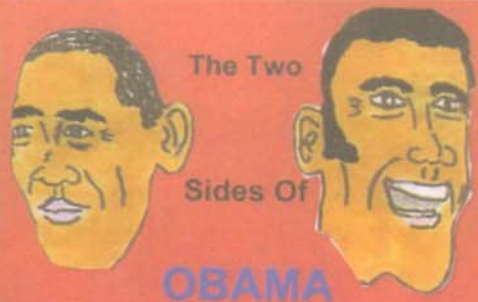


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A MAGAZINE ON CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

EUROPE €12, UK £8.5 JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2009



The Two

Sides Of

OBAMA

Featuring: The First Thing I Do, When I Get To D.C. (Is to jump n2 the Reflecting Pool)

IT'S FIERCE ALL EYES ON ME



The People Finally Seen
Through All The Bull

"IT'S
FIERCE!"



OBAMA



OBAMA

Bless It Be (the power of Unity)



OBAMA

Being the Newly
Elected President
Is Cool!

OBAMA!

*"NOT THE SAME
OL' SONG"*



But Coming
To Meet
Mingering Mike
Far Exceeds
Anything I
Ever Dreamed
Or Imagined



Weapon of Choice

SAINT-ÉTIENNE INTERNATIONAL DESIGN BIENNIAL

Design weeks, biennials, festivals, for cities trying to look onwards and upwards what do these kinds of events offer their residents and visitors? Saint-Étienne's International Design Biennial posed some valid design questions, but how substantial were the responses in view of the local city context?

Text by Virginio Briatore, images by Walter Bettens

There's something heroic about Saint-Étienne, and design is its secret weapon! To sum up: a small, decaying city of 180,000 inhabitants, formerly a centre of mining, heavy industry and home to France's biggest weapons factory, is seeking to revive itself and compete on the international scene. And to do so it has chosen to promote the light industry of design. At first sight the project would almost seem like insisting on the concept of Saint Étienne as a Métropole. But what 'métropole' are we talking about? The 40 cities with 500,000 residents that the Chinese government is thinking of building inland over the next 10 years to puncture the uncontrollable megalopolis on its coast?

FROM ARMS TO ARTS

There is nothing metropolitan about Saint-Étienne, apart from the new ideas developed by a team of courageous administrators and thinkers. My taxi driver admitted as much, though describing himself as a devotee of Chauvin. He said that before the Design Biennial the French city was known only to football fans and people in la grande distribution as the headquarters of Casino supermarkets. Born 10 years ago, from an idea of Jacques Bonnaval, then director of the small École des Beaux Arts, in six editions the Biennial has made a place for itself in the stressful calendar of design-oriented events. There are now more design weeks in cities around the world than weeks in the calendar! Over the years the Biennial has improved the aesthetics of its presentation while continuing to showcase designers and countries from the many Souths of the world. Here you'll find African, South American or Eastern European designers you'd be unlikely to meet at top-drawer design events. And, given that the last two editions have moved from nondescript trade fair pavilions to the former Manufactures d'Armes buildings, it is encouraging to think that the place where tanks used to be built until nine years ago is set to become the Cité du Design next year, designed by the LIN firm of Finn Geipel and Giulia Andi.

The fact that a major architectural competition, presented in June 2004, won by young designers from outside France, is now almost finished in all its astonishing complexity-simplicity is a valid example of how the public machinery of local and regional authorities and central government works in France.



DESIGN HEROINES

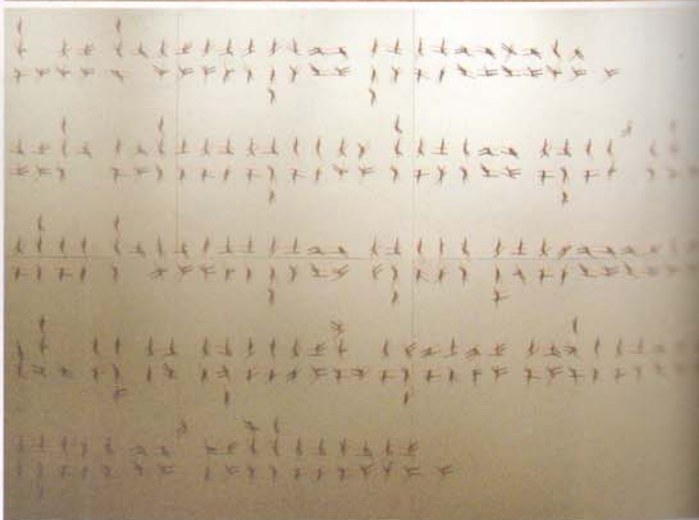
Another interesting phenomenon, which would hardly be worth mentioning except that it's so rare, is that, politicians apart, in the growth of Saint-Étienne as a centre of new signifiers in design a decisive role is being played by women. (On the day of the opening of the Biennial, 15 November 2008, the 20 powerful 'Big Gs' gathered in Washington and there were only two women among them.) They range from communication heroine Josyane Franc to Céline Savoye, who curated the first four editions; Chloé Heyraud, head of projects at the Cité du Design, and Elsa Francès, general manager of Cité du Design and curator of the last two editions of the Biennial.

Elsa Francès is informal and direct: if she's cold you see it, if she's thrilled she says so. She joined the Starck outfit in Paris in 1993 and then headed the Tim Thom research team at Thomson until 2004. Today this 42-year-old designer runs an organisational machine with 140 staff (80 permanent and 60 for the Biennial) and an annual budget of €8m, which is roughly divided between the Biennial and the School. She is driven by a clear aim. To produce design starting from the territory, as she herself explains: 'I sent off my CV to the Cité du Design because after many years of industrial strategies and products I wanted to work on projects that directly affected society, the city and the territory. This is precisely what we're doing in Saint-Étienne. Above all, today I believe that design means dealing with social changes, old people, transport, public green belts – with life, in a word. Here for example, there's an important tradition of businesses in the medical and pharmaceutical sector and we can experiment with modes of 'protection' for both people with problems and the elderly, with hospitals, social services, designers and businesses getting involved. Then with the Suguroku project we built an interplay of relationships and social solidarity through the technologies of the Internet, starting from the most isolated neighbourhoods, where the maps of the city and virtual maps overlap and people, from individuals to a community, meet first in the real world and then in the virtual one, or vice versa, because the big game of communication goes on even outside your window.'

Top and middle left:
Bernardaud exhibition at the Musée des Mines (Salle des Pendus)

Above:
Debra Solomon with her in-situ snack restaurant Lucky Mi Fortune Cooking on food and sustainability at City Eco Lab

Facing page:
The Observatory Tower, landmark of the Cité du Design and the D10, marking the 10 year anniversary of the Saint-Etienne International Design Biennial



Clockwise:
Impressions at City Eco Lab
 (curated by John Thackara)

Basic Instinct by Thibaut Allgayer,
 4 chairs memorising and
 emphasising seating conditions,
 from stretching the legs, crossing
 them, bending over and sitting in
 each other's lap

O'clock from Nadine Grenier, an
 installation consisting of 300 clock
 mechanisms, revealing a text twice
 a day at noon and midnight

Danny Venlet's **Cages aux Folles**,
 exhibited at La Belgique des Autres

LESS & MORE

The most spectacular project of this edition was City Eco Lab, curated by John Thackara, pioneer of design for eco-sustainability and director of Doors of Perception. Having moved from the Netherlands to the more sparsely populated Cevennes, he says he's happy to be working on local projects, naturally with global implications and ideas. His urban allotments, with a food network contained within a radius of 80km, water-bar and reflections on mobility were condensed into an effective slogan: 'Less stuff, more people.'

The opening of the Cité du Design is scheduled for a year from now. The site will include the School; various research laboratories developed with the businesses of the regional pole (the Region Rhones-Alpes has the second-biggest economy in France after the Paris Region); the médiathèque and exhibition spaces. In March the Ecole Supérieure d'Art et Design will move in with its 340 students and become the future engine of the town. The school is public, free, 80 per cent of the students are of French origin but young people from around the world can apply for selection.

CONTEMPORARY IDENTITY

Despite all the efforts in the search for an identity in the wide world of design, encountering the urban reality of Saint-Étienne can be a different experience. For a city that embraces design as a means of resurrection – crawling out of the dark mining pit – one could question where the contemporary pulse is. The new tramway line built a few years back interconnects the city's greyness and dullness. If Saint-Étienne has this feel of suburbia it's because it lacks this contemporary identity in terms of infrastructure and other essential elements. Visit the local bars, hotels and restaurants and it's provinciality that is on the menu. No matter if the local politicians are using expensive words like 'la Métropole de Saint-Etienne' in their speeches, big neighbour Lyon likes to mockingly nickname it as one of their suburbs. Maybe it's time to open these doors of perception and reach much further than the gates of the Cité du Design. #

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