Spectacles Plastiques:
Reconstruction and the Debates on the “Synthesis of the Arts”
in France, 1944-1962

by

Nicola Pezolet

M.A., Art History
Laval University, 2008
B.A. Art History
Laval University, 2005

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Signature of the author: __________________________

Certified by: __________________________

Accepted by: __________________________
Dissertation Committee

Caroline Ann Jones, Professor of Art History (dissertation supervisor)
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Mark Jarzombek, Professor of the History of Architecture
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Romy Golan, Professor of Art History
City University of New York Graduate Centre

Larry Busbea, Assistant Professor of Art History
University of Arizona
Abstract


By Nicola Pezolet

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My dissertation examines the collaborative efforts of different individuals and groups – such as Le Corbusier, the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles, Groupe Espace, and the Internationale Situationniste – which advocated a “synthesis of the arts” in the time period that corresponds to the Liberation until the beginning of the Fifth Republic. I consider a wide range of archival sources and projects, from the collective decoration of permanent buildings to temporary installations in galleries by way of outdoors art exhibitions and theatrical performances, many of which were sponsored by Eugène Claudius-Petit and the newly founded French Ministry of Reconstruction and Urbanism. The “synthesis of the arts” discourse was more than a faint humanist echo of the Wagnerian model of the Gesamtkunstwerk, or “total work of art”; it was one of the primary routes along which the cultural and political conflicts of French modernization and governmentality were discussed. My study locates the “synthesis of the arts” amidst the effort to renovate a universalizing discourse linked to modernist art, on the one hand, and a nascent welfare state notion of public space (and its correlative rhetoric of beauty, hygiene, functionality, and accessibility), on the other. As such, the postwar synthesis discourse not only reflected but directly participated in the development and expansion of the French “cultural state”. Rather than showing this discourse as unitary, the dissertation explores its complex and sometimes contradictory dimensions by analyzing the political and social connotations of three different categories: a heroic model, associated with the figure of Le Corbusier; a bureaucratic model, developed by Groupe Espace (1951-1956); and an oppositional model, deployed by Asger Jorn, Pinot-Gallizio, and others who became associated with the Situationists (1954-1962). Case studies include Le Corbusier’s Usine Claude et Duval in Saint-Dié and Unité d’Habitation in Marseille, Bernard Zehrfuss and Félix Del Marle’s Régie Nationale Renault factory complex in Flins, Michel Ragon and Jacques Polieri’s first Festival d’Art d’Avant-Garde, and Cobra and Situationists environments such as the Architects’ House and the Cavern of Anti-Matter.

Thesis supervisor: Caroline Ann Jones
Title: Professor of Art History
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Introduction

OVERVIEW

In the years following the end of World War II, France went through concerted State-led efforts toward reconstruction, seeking to modernize its national infrastructures and economy via the Plan Monnet and the Marshall Plan. The country also saw a simultaneous fragmentation and proliferation of artistic discourses, particularly in the Parisian metropolis, as artists and intellectuals broke their isolation or returned from exile.¹ My doctoral dissertation, entitled Spectacles Plastiques: Reconstruction and the Debates on the “Synthesis of the Arts” in France, 1944-1962, is the first socio-cultural study to focus specifically on the collaborative efforts of several different groups based in France that participated directly in the postwar recovery efforts by advocating a “synthèse des arts”.

Starting in 1944, many deliberated as to the correct artistic approach to engage with the new social, cultural and economic realities brought on by the postwar reconstruction. New art galleries appeared on the scene, or re-opened their doors after closing during the war. Different periodicals emerged, as well as political columns in newspapers and

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magazines. These offered new opportunities and tribunes to artists and critics, who were competing tirelessly with each other for symbolic recognition and hegemony. As art historian Serge Guilbaut notes, critics were “writing from politicized newspapers” and “were defending and trying to impose different aesthetics according to their political vision.” Questions relating to individual expression versus collective meaning, as well as to “realism” versus “abstraction”, became particularly heated. These expressions were interpreted differently and disputed by different critics and gallery owners to serve opposing ideologies and political ambitions. In spite of the extreme differences of opinions on the valence of each label expressed on the left and the right, many discourses were shaped by a larger vision of post-fascist cultural regeneration and political reform. This fed into a pre-existing “synthesis” trope, and brought the broader issue of modern art’s place in society – and of the role of the French government in postwar cultural affairs strongly into view. These were now matters of public concern across political factions. Indeed, different artistic group formations vied for hegemony at a moment when artistic debates, political ideology and an administrative changing of the guard were closely intertwined. Much of these debates, also, had direct bearing on the architectural discipline.

The goal of the ameliorative “synthesis of the arts” discourse, as it was promoted at the time, may be summarized as the attempt to bring together visual artists, architects and designers to actively work together to temper the perceived negative side effects of urban redevelopments and to combat “alienation” in the rapid proliferation of highly

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technocratic postwar reconstruction. The common denominator of these groups, such as the Association pour une Synthèse des Arts Plastiques, founded in 1949, and later Groupe Espace, founded in 1951, was to make the built environment more humane and to give everyday spaces a sense of harmony and visual consistency. Most of its promoters championed modern art as socially relevant and in tune with the demands of a technologically advanced, industrial society oriented towards public welfare. In the immediate postwar years, because of the boom in the building industry, there were many opportunities for such collaborative practices, but only limited funding from developers and the government. Consequently, these groups (to which contributed prominent figures such as the architect and artist Le Corbusier, the editor and sculptor André Bloc, and the multidisciplinary technological artist Nicolas Schöffer, amongst others) attempted to raise public awareness, via widely-circulating journals such as Art d'Àujourd'hui, on the feasibility and the purported necessity of commissioning modern artists and architects to participate to the reconstruction efforts. These groups, whose internal structure resembled that of bureaucracies, resorted to various types of strategies and frequently went outside of the established art galleries and publications in their attempt to create new publics, as well as to gain recognition and financial support. The members of Groupe Espace, for instance, frequently organized public conferences and events. They exhibited at the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles, an annual show dedicated to showing various tendencies of non-figurative art, and also presented their work in parks, construction sites and petit-bourgeois fairs like the Salon des Arts Ménagers, an extremely popular yearly event dedicated to technical innovation in household technology. Similarly, these artists and architects contributed articles to mainstream publications such as Elle, which ran articles on the importance of having an artfully organized and colourful home. Although the
number of actual realizations by such groups remained limited, the proponents of the “synthesis of the arts” nevertheless spurred a wide set of proposals and even the construction of buildings that are today considered to be emblematic of the reconstruction period. Raoul Dautry, a French technocrat, and especially Eugène Claudius-Petit, a former resistance fighter turned government official (both of whom were appointed by Charles de Gaulle as heads of the Ministère de la Reconstruction et de l’Urbanisme, MRU), indeed paid heed to the call for a “synthesis of the arts” debates and offered actual State commissions to artists. Le Corbusier’s Unité d’Habitation in Marseilles (better known as the Cité Radieuse), one of the best examples of a successful “synthesis of the arts” (although it was designed primarily by one man) was funded by Claudius-Petit during his tenure at the MRU. Similarly, the large polychrome complex built for the nationalized car manufacturer Renault in Flins near Paris was funded by the MRU, and designed by the architect Bernard Zehrfuss and the modern artist Felix Del Marle, two members of Groupe Espace and key theorists of the “synthèse des arts”.

Image 1. Minister of Reconstruction Eugène Claudius-Petit (left), Le Corbusier (center) and French actor/war veteran Jean-Pierre Aumont (right) on the construction site of the Unité d’Habitation in Marseilles, 1950s. Fondation Le Corbusier.
The “synthesis of the arts”, then, was not a strictly artistic matter, quite the contrary. It must be mapped onto a wider set of discourses on social, political and economic development that emerged during the reconstruction. My project locates the “synthesis of the arts” squarely amidst the effort to renovate a universalizing discourse linked to modernist art, on the one hand, and a welfare state notion of public space (and its correlative rhetoric of beauty, hygiene, functionality, and accessibility), on the other. The dissertation proposes that the “synthesis of the arts” was one of the primary routes along which the cultural and political conflicts of French modernization were discussed, and argues that it helped produce some of the political and aesthetic change driving the major developments in postwar society. I argue that the resurgence of interest in modern art within institutions that built social housing, factories, and cultural centers had less to do with the further expansion of abstract art into three-dimensional space, though that is often how it is still viewed today, than with a gradually increasing cultural capital associated with modernism and, simultaneously, with the increasing confidence, on the part of artists, builders and administrators, in culture’s meta-political role in the reconstruction context. Adherents of the “synthesis of the arts”, following up on some of the themes defined in the context of pre-war avant-garde groups like De Stijl and also within the Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne (CIAM), claimed that modern art, precisely because of its aversion to overt political message, might serve to mitigate the confrontational politics of the radical right and radical left that had emerged in the wake of the Vichy regime. The “synthesis of the arts”, following Le Corbusier’s patriotic call for a new “épopée plastique”, was to help heal the country and restore the past grandeur of France.
However, this affirmative discourse met with many critical detractors, who saw it as a falsely redemptive alibi for a new ruling class. Amongst these critics was the Danish artist Asger Jorn, who appropriated the call for new artistic collaborations and attempted to give such collaboration an oppositional role in society. Jorn, formerly a collaborator of Le Corbusier and Fernand Léger who went on to contribute to leftwing avant-garde groups such as Cobra and the Internationale Situationniste, instead re-conceived of the “synthesis of the arts” not as a way to restore social order and visual harmony, but as a path to disrupt capitalist society and to develop radically participative forms of popular creation between “free artists” and everyday people.

Instead of focusing solely on how specific artists or architects participated in the physical rebuilding of France, I want to consider reconstruction as a broader phenomenon that encompassed many disciplines at the same time. My goal is to analyze the ideology and aspects of the intellectual history of the French après-guerre. The relevance of my study is precisely the attempt to bring together different kinds of voices — not only those of artists, architects, and cultural critics, but also political activists, urban planners, state bureaucrats, mainstream journalists — and see how they entered directly into a productive dialogue with one another and participated in what we could call reconstruction culture. My dissertation will therefore detail the specific social and cultural contexts these various group formations incorporated into the production of their art and their buildings. I will employ several avenues of inquiry, investigating issues such as the postwar French intellectual climate, urban development and architectural projects, political debates, art exhibitions, discussions on the social relevance of modernism — all of which surface, directly and indirectly, within my case studies. Instead of approaching the “synthesis of
the arts” via the monographic treatment, as it has been done in the past, I have chosen to compare a larger sample of practitioners through a specific set of themes. By doing so, I want to highlight their interconnectivity and their participation in broader debates on architecture and public space.

HISTORIOGRAPHY AND RESEARCH PROGRAM

It is important to articulate our research project in the current scholarship on postwar art and architecture in France, in general, and on the “synthesis of the arts”, more specifically. Postwar survey studies of the “synthesis of the arts”, such as Paul Damaz’s *Art in European Architecture/Synthèse des Arts*, published in 1956, are very valuable to our contemporary understanding of this discourse, but as part of what is here being examined. Damaz is a world-traveled architect and critic from Portugal. He studied at the École Spéciale d’Architecture and the Sorbonne in Paris, and then relocated to New York when he joined Wallace K. Harrison and the design staff of the United Nations Planning Commission in 1947. He was one of the figures who did the most to popularize the “synthesis of the arts” discourse as well as to document its various international realizations. Damaz’ books, his notes and his photographs, now archived at the Smithsonian, have been helpful in understanding this discourse and to identify specific

3 Paul Damaz, *Art in European Architecture/Synthèse des Arts*, New York: Reinhold, 1956. This book was prefaced by Le Corbusier. Damaz also published another anthology, which discusses the influence of these debates in Latin America. See Paul F. Damaz, *Art in Latin American Architecture*, New York: Reinhold, 1963. This second book was prefaced by the Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer. Damaz, who died in 2008, did not publish other books besides these two, but frequently wrote in mainstream magazines and established a successful architectural practice, as well as a career as an educator in New York.

4 This book, distributed by the New York-based commercial publisher Reinhold, circulated internationally, much more so than any of the journals associated strongly with the “synthesis of the arts”, such as *Art d’Aujourd’hui*. According to the library database WorldCat, Damaz’s book is found in hundreds of North American, South American, as well as in European libraries and museums.
case studies. His work, published simultaneously in French and English, captures well the unbridled enthusiasm of the postwar period for these state-sponsored unifying projects. As such, they are precious historical documents. However, his books were meant to actively promote specific kinds of collaborations between architects, painters, sculptors, and stained glass designers (very much like the magazine Art d’Aujourd’hui, edited by his friend André Bloc).

In a richly illustrated section titled “The Lesson of History”, Damaz makes his case: all great cultures pursued the “synthesis” between architecture and the visual and performing arts. Thus, “synthesis” is not at all specific to Western modernity, even less so to the post-World War II period. On the contrary, argues Damaz, “a brief glance at the past shows us how complete and deliberate was the ‘synthesis of the arts’ in every great period of architecture.”\(^5\) One needs only think of Medieval churches, where various rituals that involved music, dance and the burning of incenses were routinely performed to activate the spectator’s sensorium, or of the richly decorated Baroque cathedrals, in which counter-Reformation architects and decorators sought to create theatrical effects through the dynamic combination of mural paintings, sculptures and stained glass. Damaz even goes as far as the Transvaal (now South Africa) to show communal houses with very sculptural shapes and “primitive” mural paintings covering entire facades. This transhistorical discourse on history – which in some ways reminds us of André Malraux’s contemporary advocacy of “museums without walls” – now appears dated and certainly problematic.\(^6\) First, Damaz’s operative criticism conflates heterogeneous times and places

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and looks back to the past simply to give credence to his contemporary program: “Art must once again be put in touch with the man in the street and placed in our city squares, where disorder and bad taste predominate.” 7 Secondly, its reformist optimism in the redemptive power of art bypasses immediate political questions; failing to take into consideration their contexts of production and dissemination, Damaz constructs modern art and architecture as essentially and necessarily progressive and turned into a panacea for industrial society’s ills. 8 Thirdly, and most significantly for this study, artists who openly criticized Le Corbusier and Groupe Espace, such as Jorn and the Situationists, are also conveniently omitted from Damaz’s narrative.

Damaz’s ameliorative and universalist discourse, shared by many others gravitating around André Bloc and Le Corbusier, is a symptom of the ongoing attempt to restoring Europe’s prominence and international hegemony after being tarnished by the war. Damaz is thus a data point in my study, not its origin. Moving against this type of operative criticism, my first tasks will be (a) to map the emergence and consolidation of the discourse on the “synthesis of the arts” in France by analyzing its interactions with the transformations of the political life of this country; (b) to position it, albeit briefly, in relation to its immediate artistic and architectural precedents during the first half of the

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7 Paul Damaz, Art in European Architecture, p. 35. I here use the famous expression “operative criticism”, theorized by Manfredo Tafuri. In Teorie e Storia dell’Architettura, Bari: Laterza, 1968, he warned against “operative criticism,” which he defined as “an analysis of architecture (...) that has at its objective the planning of a precise poetical tendency, anticipated in its structure and derived from historical analyses programmatically distorted and finalized.”

8 Along with Paul Damaz, the author that is perhaps better known in the modernist historiography for his advocacy of a new cultural synthesis between art and architecture – which was to harmonize the rift between “thinking and feeling,” reason and emotion – is the Swiss art historian Sigfried Giedion, who published the seminal Space, Time and Architecture in 1941 and Mechanization Takes Command in 1948. Even though most of his books were not widely read in France until the 1970s, his ideas were shared, under a variety of forms, by a great variety of artists and intellectuals involved in the debates on the synthesis of the arts in France and elsewhere in Europe.
twentieth century; and (c) to discriminate between various types of strategies proposed to
attain such a synthesis. It is also a way to avoid depicting the end of the Occupation as a
totally radical departure from the preceding decades. As I will argue, the semi-
autonomous field of artistic and architectural production interacts with socio-economic
and political changes in a complex and fluid manner. As we will see, the time of war
continued old discussions within newly created networks that would shape the way
debates unfolded in the following years.

Over the past ten years or so, the number of studies and exhibitions on mid-century
European art, architecture and design has increased exponentially. The level of
sophistication and critical rigor has also greatly improved as scholars have gained
historical distance and hindsight, as well as new forms of archival access. There are
nevertheless some persistent shortcomings in the way that researchers present and
conceptually organize the cultural production of that period. First, despite the great
contributions of social and intellectual history to the study of 19th and early 20th century
modernism, there is still a clear tendency to privilege the study of supposedly exemplary
postwar artists and architects, who successfully promoted themselves.9 Many studies also
tend to emphasize how prescient individuals and groups have been successful in shaping
the contemporary scene and even anticipated some of the postmodernist debates of the
1980s and 90s.10

9 A good case in point is Yves Klein, whose work is inextricably linked to the artist's self-fashioning
and to his further promotion by the art critic Pierre Restany. Similarly, in architecture history, Le
Corbusier is the focus of hundreds of books and articles, many of which use Le Corbusier's self-constructed
biography, cultivated by his posthumous Fondation Le Corbusier, as their primary interpretive framework.
10 The London-based Independent Group, whose pragmatic anti-humanism, media-savvyness and
affirmative engagement with capitalist mass-culture have made it a favoured topic of study in recent
decades, as it is seen as prefiguring our neo-liberal moment. See, amongst many studies and articles, David
Secondly, while it is widely recognized that there was, after World War II, an "efflorescence of abstract art in France, a nation previously hostile to such paradigmatic modernism", French cultural debates are often narrowly cast in formal terms as one between different groups of artists, gallery owners and critics defending geometric abstraction (such as the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles) and those defending so-called lyrical or gestural abstraction (École de Paris), both competing for the "style de l'époque". This often makes the debates seem like chapel wars between insiders, and failed to take into account the dynamic ways artists engaged with the more general context of the time.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, in both art and architecture history, there persists a deep-seated fascination with the purported rupture provoked by the historical avant-garde in the first decades of the twentieth century. Although the scope of art history has greatly diversified and expanded over the past decades, partly under the pressure of competing approaches such as social, visual and cultural studies, the discipline frequently "reaffirms its vested interests in the European avant-gardes of the early twentieth-century, emphasizing above all the heroic, breakthrough achievements (...) in order to draw out illuminating lessons as to the transformative power of art." The historical avant-garde must necessarily fail, but it does so heroically, almost tragically, and hence commands our respect – this is exactly what Renato Poggioli, in a now famous study, calls the "agonism

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of the avant-garde.”\textsuperscript{13} This is also the way of narrating the history of modernist abstraction of, for example, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, who played an important role in introducing German literary critic Peter Bürger’s \textit{Theorie der Avantgarde}\textsuperscript{14} into Anglo-American circles. In his contribution to the influential anthology \textit{Reconstructing Modernism}, Buchloh describes how the Soviet Constructivist avant-garde was depoliticized under the impetus of formalist critics in the postwar years.\textsuperscript{15} In contrast to the art of the 1920s, at a time when art seemed more self-reflexive, critical and deeply intertwined with great political upheavals such as the Soviet Revolution, the art of the reconstruction period seems pale in comparison. It is often dismissed as formally derivative, and as politically tame.

In that context, the groups promoting the “synthesis of the arts”, especially its more earnest humanist dimensions, have been mostly ignored by contemporary historians. If they generally tend to favour youthful, vanguardist innovation, then it is normal that art historians and critics would be somewhat reluctant to discuss at length the work of many of the protagonists involved in the “synthesis” debates who, by the 1950s, had either passed their creative peak (Sonia Delaunay, Fernand Léger, etc.), achieved a fairly high level of consecration, or were second or third generation modernists who, in spite of their polemical energies, were rather insignificant to the development of new artistic forms (Félix Del Marle and Jean Gorin were peripheral and somewhat belated adopters of Neo-Plasticism, for example).

\textsuperscript{14} Peter Bürger, \textit{Theorie der Avantgarde}, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974.
Notable exceptions include the scholarly work of Joan Ockman, Christopher Pearson, Romy Golan and Larry Busbea. In a probative historical survey, Joan Ockman outlines the emergence of the "synthesis of the arts" in the interwar years, its postwar efflorescence as a heroic, high-minded modernist project, and its slow descent into base commercialism. 16 Rather than focusing solely on Le Corbusier's circles, Ockman also shows the discontinuities in the "synthesis" discourse by bringing in Asger Jorn's dissenting voice to the debate, something chapter 3 of this dissertation does as well. Similarly, Romy Golan, in the last chapter of her recent book Muralnomad, which traces a critical history of wall painting and photomuralism in France and Italy, offers an excellent discussion of the Le Corbusier and André Bloc's fascination with the "Major Arts", and how it was challenged by Rayner Banham and the British Independent Group as a kind of outdated faith in modernism's redemptive power.17 Christopher Pearson, while he generally praises UNESCO's humanism and its attempt to promote the synthesis of modern art and architecture, describes the various projects anthologized in Damaz's books as a gradual path towards inconsequence.18 While I generally agree with these assessments on the failure of the "synthesis" discourse, it should not obscure the fact that the "synthesis of the arts" reached many its stated goals and was totally connected to the development of the French "État culturel". As I will argue, the contemporary French


“cultural state”, that is, the interventionist, centralized state with an extremely prominent role in funding, producing and managing various cultural products via festivals and other sponsored events, is still with us today.\(^{19}\) The increasing popularity of the notion of the architect-artist, also, could be seen as very significant heirs to this discourse. As such, Larry Busbea’s *Topologies: The Urban Utopia in France*, although it is focused on a slightly later time period, was particularly influential on my own research, as it includes a cogent discussion of the influence of the 1950s “synthesis of the arts” discourse on the promoters of spatial urbanism in France, notably members of the Groupe International d’Architecture Prospective, founded by Michel Ragon. Busbea’s work is particularly valuable to my study, in that it shows in very tangible ways the links uniting artists, plasticians and architects involved in these utopian projects to many French sociologists, government officials, planners and bureaucrats.\(^{20}\) Busbea’s description of the networks that connected integrative architects and technocratic planners, such as Nicolas Schöffer, as forming a kind of “Gaulliste avant-garde” is offers some useful keys to understand the later development of the French cultural state.

Perhaps the one group included in the dissertation that is better documented and the object of many recent studies is the Internationale Situationniste. However, much of the literature is focused on the figure of Guy Debord and on the IS’s political radicalism and

\(^{19}\) There is a growing number of essays and historical studies on cultural policies in France. In his influential *L’État culturel, essai sur une religion moderne*, Paris: Fallois, 1992, Marc Fumaroli has set out to criticize the increasingly prominent role played by the French state in cultural affairs. Recent studies take a more historically situated point of view, such as Pascal Ory, *La belle illusion: Culture et politique sous le signe du Front Populaire, 1935-1938*, Paris: Plon, 1994 as well as Vincent Dubois, *La politique culturelle: Genèse d’une catégorie d’intervention publique*, Paris: Bellin, 1999. However, these studies do not take into consideration the “synthesis of the arts” discourse at all; however, as I intend to show, such a discourse played an important role in anticipating some of the practices that emerged in the 1960s and later.

its deployment of subversive strategies like dérive and détournement (in his recent anthology of Situationist texts, Tom McDonough confine the Lettrists and the Situationnists’ artistic and architectural proposals to a mere “interlude”). The IS has drawn comparison to, for example, Nouveau Réalisme, but a lesser amount of attention have been devoted to the figures most closely involved with the “synthesis of the arts” discourse, such as Jorn, Giuseppe Gallizio and Constant.21

In the French academic context, the studies on the “synthesis of the arts” have been conducted mostly by the art historians Serge Lemoine, Domitille D’Orgeval and Corine Girieud. While their surveys are extremely precious and meticulous in their attention to biographical and archival details, they are often narrowly focused on individual artists or publications, and as a result are more often factual than interpretive. It should also be noted that a couple of French architects associated with the “synthesis” discourse have received recent attention because of the ongoing contemporary enthusiasm for neo-modernism and architecture-sculpture. This is the case, for example, of the curatorial work of Frédéric Migayrou, who currently works at the Musée d’Art Moderne in Paris. Migayrou’s essays on architects such as André Bloc and Claude Parent, two key members of the Groupe Espace, were published in superbly illustrated catalogues and are very creative in their interpretations, which borrow from contemporary philosophy. However, they are not historical in scope, but constitute more of an attempt to create a poetic lineage of avant-garde French architecture, from Le Corbusier to Jean Nouvel and Bernard Tschumi (in that sense, Migayrou’s critical work is inextricably linked to his work to valorize the specific collections that he was hired to promote at the MAM, and

previously at the FRAC Centre, where he also worked as a curator).  

This dissertation, rather than posit an original radical impulse – which invariably gets debased or coopted – hopes instead to show the contradictory ways modern art was repoliticized under a different set of conditions in the postwar years. It resists both sweeping, operative criticism and the monographic approach and tries to bracket these normative attitudes. By its very nature, the “synthesis of the arts” was meant to be a project in which cultural producers partially renounced their quest for artistic individuality to subordinate their efforts to a collective project within an institutional context. For the Groupe Espace – and this what caused their separation from Le Corbusier’s heroic, individualist discourse – it was not about reinventing the language of abstract art, but making that language available to mass audiences by turning it into part of everyday experience at work and at home. Their explicit aim was to gain effective institutional support to be able to enact change in the way buildings and cities are organized: the support of consecrated modernist artists and architects, in both symbolic and practical terms, was therefore more than welcomed. As such, it can help us better understand the transformations of the French cultural field, and the way exhibitions and publications reshaped the contemporary debates. Hence, instead of focusing attention on extolling the cultural and aesthetic legacies of heroic individuals or assessing professed successes and failures, I am more interested to position art and architecture’s role in the social and cultural history of the 1940s and 50s and to triangulate many different contemporaneous practices that tried to give shape to public space in the context of

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European postwar reconstruction and the development of the French welfare state.

The dissertation follows a tripartite division that corresponds to an historical periodization. Chapter 1 examines the mid-century efforts of Le Corbusier, an aging architect trying to find a new place for himself in a rapidly changing political landscape, in advocating a "synthesis of the major arts". I start specifically with Le Corbusier because no other figure is more associated, directly and indirectly, in France and abroad, with the "synthesis of the arts" in the postwar years. Le Corbusier was not only involved in the discourse of synthesis as an active protagonist, participating in conferences and exhibitions around the world and writing illustrated essays, prefaces and manifestos that were eventually published in different languages, but he also collaborated with numerous groups and acted as a symbolic reference point for many other artists and critics. Renowned as an accomplished architect, designer and urban critic (as well as a painter and sculptor, although his reception as a modern artist was more timid), Le Corbusier embodied the persistent myth of the "Renaissance man" capable of successfully navigating different social milieus and seamlessly integrating his different creative activities. As such, he garnered much media attention (in both the professional and the popular press) and was frequently referred to, in the immediate postwar years, as a positive role model by the Reconstruction bureaucrats, such as Dautry and Claudius-Petit, who were calling for nothing short of a "French Renaissance". But as many younger artists, architects and critics were at pains to define their own generation’s identity in the second half of the 1950s, he became a "repoussoir" (given this importance, his reception will be further dealt with in chapters 2 and 3). Precisely because his public persona and his buildings were such prominent, recognizable and polarizing symbols, his
roles in postwar architectural culture deserve further historical scrutiny and contextualization at the onset of this study.

If this first chapter is partly monographic, my goal here is not to reinforce Le Corbusier’s already canonical status. Neither do I want to look at his advocacy of a “synthesis of the arts” as a way to decrypt his authorial design process, one that underwent several phases and that consistently blurred disciplinary boundaries. While such studies – starting with Stanislaus von Moos' 1968 Le Corbusier: Elemente einer Synthese, and followed by Christopher Pearson’s 1995 doctoral dissertation – are extremely useful in providing specific details about the different stages of Le Corbusier’s life and artistic practices, their sharp focus on his personal evolution sometimes falls short in describing the wider context in France at the time. As von Moos suggested in 2009 regarding the question of Le Corbusier and the “synthesis of the arts” upon the publication of an expanded version of his now classic book: “A differently focused vision of the situation is perhaps now needed, a vision that takes into account the context of history”.

I first outline some of Le Corbusier’s work in the first half of the twentieth century, as it relates to previous notions of a “synthesis of the arts”. I chose to do this as a way to avoid depicting the end of the Occupation as a totally radical departure from the preceding

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decades. Indeed, the time of war continued old discussions within newly created networks that would shape the way debates unfolded in the following years, something that is particularly true for Le Corbusier’s career. In an attempt to flesh out this historical and ideological context, I focus here on how Le Corbusier functioned as a part of the complex and overdetermined artistic, architectural and political networks that existed at the time. Indeed, his call for a “synthesis of the arts” helps us understand not just Le Corbusier as artist-architect; it helps us make intelligible some of the aesthetic, urban, political, and institutional operations of the time. In other words, the “synthesis” impulse that manifests itself in the postwar years is not just the product of an internal development of Le Corbusier’s career: it reveals broader socio-cultural changes, at a time when art and architecture became central to nation building and modernization. Indeed, the postwar synthesis discourse not only reflects but directly participates in the increasingly high cultural capital attributed by the authorities to modern art and architecture. Modernism moves from a relatively fringe phenomenon in the 20s and becomes more mainstream and a tool for cultural legitimization and governmentality. It is also the moment when the French nation-state, via bureaucracies like the MRU, starts to increasingly value and even champion modern art and architecture as integral to its attempt to reposition itself as modern, progressive and as beyond the usual divides of left and right. Although has been going on for some time, at least since the Front Populaire, the difference with the postwar is that there is a general symbolic changing of the guard, which left a certain amount of space for new discourses to come through and for careers to be redefined. The necessary physical reconstruction also offered many opportunities to “materialize” a set of ideas into built projects. In the first chapter, my case studies include Le Corbusier’s Usine Claude et Duval in Saint-Dié, his Unité d’Habitation in Marseilles, as well as the ill-fated attempt to
create a public exhibition under the theme of the “synthesis of the arts”, which was supposed to be held on a vacant lot near Porte Maillot in Paris in 1950 (organized jointly with André Bloc and a handful of French artists and bureaucrats under the auspices of the Association pour une Synthèse des Arts Plastiques and the MRU).

The objective of chapter 2 is to address the role of Le Corbusier’s most obvious inheritors – Groupe Espace – and the role their exhibitions and publications played – both directly and indirectly – in some of the modernizing reforms enacted by the French cultural authorities in the Reconstruction efforts of the 1940s and 50s. I look specifically at the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles, which initiated a series of exhibitions in 1947, coordinated by the critic Fredo Sidès, which brought together abstract artists from various tendencies in defending the role that abstract, non-objective art should play in postwar society. Once exhibited, some of these artists in turn became members of Bloc’s Groupe Espace. Unlike Le Corbusier, who minimized the agency of everyday people and did not award authorship to other artists beside himself in his built projects, Bloc and his followers at Groupe Espace were hoping to create a bureaucratic organization that could potentially enact political reforms as well as manage public works – an agency that would make possible a “synthesis of the arts” on a much broader social scale. I will proceed to look at the institutional structure of Groupe Espace, addressing how it navigated, via its different activities, some of the period’s highly polarized aesthetic and political discussions. Special attention will be devoted to the group’s early annual art exhibitions and polychromy projects, particularly to Félix Del Marle’s work with Bernard Zehrfuss for the Régie Nationale Renault in Flins. Groupe Espace’s exhibitions, which were more eclectic in nature, will be contrasted to Del Marle’s more totalizing approach to synthesis via his
“polychromies architecturales.” Finally, I consider the consequence of the departure of politician and bureaucrat Eugène Claudius-Petit from the MRU and from his role as honorary president of Groupe Espace. With Claudius-Petit’s departure, many artists sought new directions. Among them was the French-Hungarian artist Nicolas Schöffer, a member of Groupe Espace who stayed active with the group but who took a different direction in the second half of the 1950s. By examining Schöffer, we can follow the emergence of a more interactive form of “synthesis of the arts” via his privately-funded technological experiments and gadgets.  

Chapter 3 addresses the work of artists who were directly critical of the discourse on the “synthesis of the arts” as it had developed through the 1940s and 50s. Focusing on a number of philosophers and artists, the chapter begins with Danish artist Asger Jorn, who had been one of Le Corbusier’s collaborators at the Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux in 1937 during the Front Populaire. Jorn became, via his numerous publications, another internationally recognized promoter of a “synthesis of the arts”. However, unlike his former mentor, or the members of Groupe Espace, Jorn came to envision collaborative practices between artists, architects and everyday people as a form of critique of

25 In the 1940s, Nicolas Schöffer was at the tail end of many modernist movements, first surrealism, then abstract geometric abstraction. However, starting in 1950s until the early 80s, Schöffer’s technological-kinetic turn was a great success. His work was shown in prominent galleries and discussed in extremely popular newspapers and magazines like L’Express and he garnered many commissions from corporations and fashion designers. However, quickly thereafter, he dropped out of sight: his monumental technological experiments appeared totally outdated by the increasing presence of electronics in everyday life. Similarly, the formal strategies of “op artists”, once deemed radical, appear quaint compared to today’s advertising strategies. In art history, there is a kind of inverted economy: success in the present is often equated with a lack of depth and therefore a very limited posterity. Alternatively, being an avant-garde artist or an “artiste maudit”, i.e. someone who refuses worldly compromises, is often a sure fire condition to posthumous celebration. This phenomenon is described particularly well by Pierre Bourdieu in his book Les Règles de l’art: Genèse et structure du champ littéraire, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1992. Nathalie Heinich’s description of the “artistic elite” also aptly describes the way historians and critics champion so-called avant-garde artists, held as oppositional figures to bourgeois complacency, descendant of the bohemians. See: Nathalie Heinich, L’Élite artiste: Excellence et singularité en régime démocratique, Paris: Gallimard, 2003.
bourgeois capitalism and as a path towards a truly socialist democracy. According to Jorn, whose goal was to rally “free artists” against the established cultural and political forces in place, the postwar reconstruction efforts offered the possibility to rethink society and to establish the basis of a radical participatory culture. This critique would broaden throughout the late 1950s and even anticipated the student protests of 1968.

Collaborative practices, for Jorn and for his allies in the Cobra group, the Movement International pour un Bauhaus Imaginiste (MIBI) and the Internationale Lettriste (IL, later to become the Internationale Situationniste, IS, in 1957), were part of a broader discussion regarding the place of modern artists amidst the unprecedented technological and environmental changes brought about by the postwar capitalist transformation of society. While Jorn’s aesthetic writings are contradictory and deal with a myriad of subjects and operate simultaneously on different registers and often with cross-purposes, the chapter focuses on Jorn’s critique of functionalism and his critical notion of a “synthesis of the arts,” which underlined the MIBI’s and the IS’s program for democratic artistic education and ludic technological experimentation. I also look at Jorn’s critique of the Festival d’Art d’Avant-Garde held at the Unité d’Habitation in Marseille, a two weeks event co-organized by Michel Ragon and Jacques Polieri. This Festival formed a more performative and event-based dialogue between various art forms (including painting, architecture, dance, music, poetry). In concluding the dissertation, the work of Jorn’s comrades Constant Nieuwenhuys, Guy Debord, and Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio play a determinative role. With particular focus on the 1959 installation known as the “Caverne de l’Anti-Matière,” the conclusion will examine how these artists materialized tangible examples of a more “oppositional” type of synthesis of the arts.
With these three chapters, which will see how these different artists and architects, as well as other cultural and political figures, overlapped with one another at key moments, we will hopefully show a more complete picture of the discourse on the “synthesis of the arts”, as part of the broader postwar reconstruction culture, than has ever been done before. With this rich history of the interface between state-funded reconstruction and synthetic artistic aspirations to be “environmental,” I also hope to show that postwar art and architecture did not passively reflect political and cultural changes: they actively shaped the emergence and consolidation of what is often referred to as the French “État culturel”. Finally, it will also allow us to think critically about our contemporary moment, and address how the “cultural State”, which was so stringently criticized by Jorn, Debord and the Situationists as a form of artistic policing, in many ways managed to absorb both the ameliorative and oppositional dimensions of the “synthesis of the arts” discourse.

26 Many more projects could indeed have been studied in the dissertation. For example, I’ve consciously decided to exclude from my study various commissions for churches or for religious centers, even if many of the architects and artists discussed in my dissertation were directly involved in such projects, especially at the request of the Catholic Church and Père Marie-Alain Couturier. Le Corbusier’s chapel in Ronchamp and his convent in La Tourette are very well known examples. Fernand Léger, Henri Matisse, and other prominent modernist painters were also commissioned for mural paintings inside of churches, such as Maurice Novarina’s Église Notre-Dame-de-Toute-Grâce du Plateau d’Assy. In the 1960s, André Bloc, Claude Parent and Nicolas Schöffer also designed models for churches, inspired by their experiment in “architecture-sculpture”. Even Dutch members of the Situationist International accepted a commission to build a church, which led to their prompt exclusion by Debord and the group’s directing committee. Part of the reason why artists and architects were so interested in such religious projects had to do with the greater degree of creative freedom allowed by the Church, then undergoing an identity crisis, as its attempted to redefine its social mission and to liberalize its theology (culminating with the Second Vatican Council in the first half of the 1960s). In order to do justice to the development of sacred art and architecture in France, one would have to pay careful attention to church history and to the specificity of its rituals and symbols, and many other factors. One would also have to assess the development of modernist-inflected modernist architecture in the interwar years, such as Auguste Perret’s Notre-Dame du Raincy church near Paris. Such a research project, while it would be very rewarding and relevant, deserves a separate study from this one.
Redemptive Synthesis:
Le Corbusier and Postwar Reconstruction Culture

L’harmonie, ce mot magique des béatitudes est un mot de synthèse et c’est le mot de demain.

Le Corbusier, 1950

INTRODUCTION

The first part of this chapter offers a brief intellectual genealogy of Le Corbusier’s cultural aesthetics and his ideas for engaging art, industry and the modern public (ideas that he developed in large part in the 1920s and 30s with his friend, the painter Fernand Léger, but which should also be linked to his formative years in Switzerland and in Germany). I go on to outline the realignments of Le Corbusier’s architectural, urban and artistic production under the Vichy regime with which he collaborated for eighteen months. I then analyze how Le Corbusier, following the end of the war, successfully diverted public attention away from his Vichy days by putting forward a persuasive (if extremely self-centered) humanist agenda of which the “synthesis of the arts” discourse was key. Rather than posit a radical break, as many scholars implicitly do, between Le Corbusier’s prewar/authoritarian and postwar/humanist activities, I wish to show the very significant continuities that link them. I consider Le Corbusier’s participation to the reconstruction efforts going on in France, via the journal Volontés and the Ministère de la
Reconstruction et de l'Urbanisme (MRU), with his designs for different public buildings, in particular the Claude et Duval factory in Saint-Dié and his famous Unité d'Habitation in Marseilles (I will also allude to the Chapelle Notre-Dame-du-Haut in Ronchamp). I continue with a discussion of his joint attempt with André Bloc and the members of the Association pour une Synthèse des Arts Plastiques to build a contemporary arts museum near Porte Maillot in Paris as another attempt at a redemptive “synthèse des arts majeurs”. This project, ambiguously couched in both nationalist and internationalist rhetoric, did not materialize and led to conflicts between the different collaborators, but nevertheless set the terms for similar projects in future years (especially inside of André Bloc’s Groupe Espace). All of these projects were based on Le Corbusier’s newly minted system of measurement relying on mathematics and the proportion of the human body – the so-called Modulor – a purportedly universal system that would allegedly restore unity to the body politic. With these different case studies, the specific role that the Modulor and the redemptive “synthesis of the arts” played in Le Corbusier’s postwar career comes to light, as he was trying to heal the traumas of the war and, on a more personal level, to find a new place for himself in the cultural field. His renewed emphasis on the aesthetization of daily life, as well as his long-standing commitment to orderliness, class collaboration, and discipline, made his ideas appealing to segments of the postwar political class in France, one that felt deeply threatened by the erosion of French prestige and the perceived rise in American influence. These are the paradoxes in Le Corbusier’s practice, one inextricably associated with universalist, modernist humanism and, at the very same time, one dedicated to the nationalist, authoritarian, bureaucratized and technocratic realm of postwar reconstruction culture in France.
A BRIEF GENEALOGY:
ON LE CORBUSIER'S JARGON OF SYNTHESIS

Although it is most commonly associated with his involvement in postwar architectural culture, the notion of a “synthesis of the major arts”, as part of a larger program of social reform, has a longstanding presence in Le Corbusier’s work, albeit under different guises. The word “synthèse” is indeed absolutely central to his thinking, not only as it relates to art and aesthetics, but about modernity more generally. In order to understand the articulation of the “synthesis of the arts” in his texts published shortly after the Libération, and how Le Corbusier’s position stands in relations to similar projects at that time, it is relevant to briefly retrace its emergence in the previous decades, going back to the young Charles-Édouard Jeanneret’s formative years when he gradually worked out his notion of modernism in relation to different authors, practitioners and currents of thought.27

Jeanneret did not study at a Beaux-Arts school, but at the regional “arts and crafts” school in his hometown of La-Chaux-de-Fonds in the Jura region of Switzerland, led at the time by Charles L’Éplattenier.28 His initial training, starting in 1902, was as a decorator of watchcases, but he went on to specialize in architecture. Like many other such schools in Europe at the time, the École d’Art de La-Chaux-de-Fonds was influenced, via publications, by educational and design reforms brought on by Art Nouveau and its curriculum, echoing the teachings of nineteenth century thinkers such as Owen Jones, William Morris, and John Ruskin. These designers and theorists

27 As it is customary in Le Corbusier scholarship, I will refer to him by his given name, Charles-Édouard Jeanneret, when discussing his activities prior to 1920, which is when he started to adopt his famous moniker, inspired by the name of a distant family relative.
28 For a well-documented discussion of the school and L’Éplattenier and Jeanneret’s roles there, see the exhibition catalogue La Chaux-de-Fonds et Jeanneret avant Le Corbusier, La-Chaux-de-Fonds: Musée des Beaux Arts, 1987.
championed a kind of medievalist handicraft revival in the midst of Britain’s intensive industrialization. They also encouraged artists to reject academic ideals of beauty and composition and to instead turn to “nature” as a model of purposeful unity. Jeanneret was very aware, via the school’s library, of Owen Jones’s Grammar of Ornament, a widely circulated pattern-design book, which had an influence on some of his early watchcase projects, as well as on one of his first architectural commissions, the Villa Fallet (a Swiss countryside house built in 1905 by some of the students and the instructors of the École d’Art for a local watchmaker and entrepreneur). The Villa Fallet is a project characterized by its use of the Jura’s flora, in particular the pine tree, as a source of inspiration for the decorative, geometrized and carefully laid out woodwork relief sculptures found on the outside and inside of the house (the “sapin”, or pinetree, motif was to become emblematic of La-Chaux-de-Fonds’ regional brand of Art Nouveau).

As accurately noted by the art historian Christopher Pearson regarding this particular project, Jeanneret participated in the creation of an iconographically uniform environment, linking both the natural and man-made worlds. According to Pearson, “the

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specific function of works of applied art (...) was not to exist as objects for detached aesthetic contemplation, but to act as signifiers for a wider realm of shared experience” (i.e. the particular climate, natural formations and building traditions of the Jura region). More importantly, the “role assigned to works of art-in-architecture as public witnesses of a common social bond was to reappear in Le Corbusier’s oeuvre”. Already at this very early stage of his career, marked by a communitarian type of practice which he would largely come to reject as he became Le Corbusier, Jeanneret was aiming to synthesize art, architecture and nature into a conceptual totality and to offer his services to elite patrons.

Around the same time that he was involved in the Villa Fallet project, Jeanneret read an aesthetic treatise by the French architect Henry Provensal that made a long-lasting impression on his thinking on architecture and art’s roles in modern society: L’Art de Demain: Vers l’Harmonie Intégrale. Mired in nineteenth century idealist notions of world history as that of the Spirit, Provensal’s ideas are centered on architecture’s redemptive role as “le premier des arts majeurs” for its capacity to synthesize other art forms (painting and sculpture) and unite life’s “dialectical opposites” (nature and man, spirit and matter, science and art, etc.). Provensal’s book also argues that the dawn of an “integrally harmonious” age led by an elite community of artists-scientists is eminent – an

31 Pearson, Integration of Art and Architecture in the Work of Le Corbusier, p. 46.
authoritarian and “metapolitical” position that would often be championed by Le Corbusier in the following decades. Provensal, at the end of the chapter “Esprit”, thus summarises the role of the artist of tomorrow, who was to address himself only to the elite of society: “Ce sera donc dans la masse évoluée que l’artiste devra semer le bon grain, afin que cette élite intellectuelle, toute imprégnée de la haute signification de la vérité, reportant cette activité sur la collectivité, la fasse admettre et respecter.”

Provensal, a disciple of the French Beaux-Arts architect Julien Guadet, is also the author of L’Habitation salubre et à bon marché, a book published four years after L’Art de Demain and dedicated to the issues of affordable housing and public hygiene – air circulation, heating, etc. The book contained abundant discussions of the technical requirements of modern housing, and featured technical diagrams, such as this cross-section showing the heating and ventilation of a large tenement. Even if his vision of the art of architecture as “l’expression cubique harmonieuse de la pensée”, as he defined it in

33 Provensal, L’Art de Demain, p. 89.
L’Art de Demain, was certainly idealist and utopian, Provensal was also concerned with the same kind of practical matters that would come to occupy Le Corbusier with his different public buildings and city schemes sponsored by private patrons and government agencies.

Another milestone in Jeanneret’s intellectual development is Les Grands Initiés, which he received as a parting gift from his master L’Eplattenier. Its author, Édouard Schuré, was the figure most responsible for familiarizing the French public with Richard Wagner, which provides an interesting connecting link between Le Corbusier’s thinking on art and the early twentieth-century reinterpretations of the Germanic notion of Gesamtkunstwerk.34 Other writings related to music and the Wagnerian theater that appealed to Jeanneret were those of Adolphe Appia, the Swiss decorator and metteur-en-scène who sought, with the musician Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, to reform the scenography of Wagner’s musical dramas by making it more unified and abstract, in tune with Appia’s ideas on geometry and “musical gymnastics”.35 As architectural historian Jan de Heer observed, Jeanneret’s reading of Appia’s Die Musik und die Inszenierung and his visit to the Jaques-Dalcroze’s institute in Hellerau near Dresden would have a significant impact on his notion of “promenade architecturale”, that similarly connects the succession of

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34 Paul V. Turner, “The Beginnings of Le Corbusier’s Education,” pp. 214-224. See also: Édouard Schuré, Les Grands Initiés: Rama-Krishna-Hermès-Moïse-Orphée-Pythagore-Platon-Jésus, Paris: Librairie Académique Didier Perrin, 1921 (originally published in 1889). Jeanneret was interested in particular by the section of Les Grands Initiés dedicated to Pythagoras, which sparked his interest in mathematics. It is also important to point out that Jeanneret was very aware of Wagner’s theatrical work, having seen all of his musical dramas in an allegorical setting during his stay in Vienna in 1907-08.

architectonic forms to a musical symphony. Le Corbusier, however, would generalize its original theatrical setting to the architecture of everyday life.36

Before permanently leaving his Alpine hometown for Paris, Jeanneret pursued technical training, which he got from the Frères Perret (whose technologically savvy architectural firm specialized in reinforced concrete, a material that would be associated with Le Corbusier for decades). In 1910, Jeanneret was commissioned by L'Eplattenier, who was trying to expand his school's curriculum, to go on a trip to gather different types of documents in preparation for his student thesis titled Étude sur le mouvement décoratif en Allemagne. Jeanneret worked for weeks in Behrens’ office in Berlin, at the very same time as two young architects that would eventually become directors of the Bauhaus, Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius. Behrens provides further connection between Jeanneret and the idea of the “total work of art”. Although he is better known today as the chief architect and designer for the multinational corporation Allgemeine Elektricitäts-Gesellschaft (AEG), Behrens was a key member of the Kunstgewerbe reform movements in Germany, more specifically the Deutscher Werkbund group, founded in 1907 in Munich. Behrens was also an avid reader of idealist and romantic philosophy, and a promoter of the theater as a “total work of art”. The protagonists involved in the reform movements in turn-of-the-century Germany felt, along with the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, that they lived in a fragmented, incoherent and artless civilization. As Stanford Anderson explained, one of the perceived negative characteristics of such a civilization “were revealed in a divorce of the artist from society, and the dominance of

easel painting and independent sculpture, meant for isolated contemplation in a laboratory atmosphere of museums and salons." 37 Accordingly, building a “pervasive and significant environment was considered to be a higher calling than producing individual works which have no social role.” 38

Figure 6. Charles-Édouard Jeanneret. Front cover of Étude sur le Mouvement d’Art Décoratif en Allemagne, La-Chaux-de-Fonds: Imprimerie Haefeli et Cie, 1912. Figure 7. Interior view of Peter Behrens’ Hamburg Vestibule of the German Section of the International Exhibition of Decorative Arts, Turin, 1902.

Notable examples of Behrens’ turn-of-the-century attempts to build such “significant environments” are his own house, built for the 1901 exhibition of the Darmstadt Artists’ Colony, or his lavish decoration of the vestibule of the German Section of the International Exhibition of Decorative Arts in Turin in 1902, in which visitors could see a decorated cover of Behrens’ design for Also sprach Zarathustra.


Although he gradually moved away from such theatrical and ornamented displays in favor of monumental, industrial architecture, Behrens’ ambition of forming a Nietzchean, cultural elite capable of raising the aesthetic quality of life for the masses through the transformation of both private and public spaces stayed with him and were certainly appealing to the young Jeanneret, who was under the spell of Provensal’s similarly articulated idealist and technocratic principles. An element that would become increasingly important following Jeanneret’s training in France and Germany and then his “voyage d’Orient” (that took him to see the vernacular architecture and the great monuments of Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey) was that the modern artist-architect must engage directly with industry, and not remain limited to the marginalized world of regional crafts. In his thesis, published in 1912 upon his return, as well as in a pamphlet published by the École d’Art in 1914, he directly echoed the tenets of the industrially-minded German Kunstgewerber. In his pamphlet Un Mouvement d’Art à la Chaux-de-Fonds, for which he solicited contributions from Behrens, Hector Guimard and others, Jeanneret theorized that propaganda directed towards manufacturers and industrialists to raise the “beauty” of everyday objects would not only redeem the ills of rapid modernization, it would also come to mitigate the confrontational nature of politics:

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40 Jeanneret was also enthusiastic about Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, which he began to read in 1911 and which, scholars argue, exalted his sense of being a misunderstood and isolated genius as well as his feeling as someone endowed with a prophetic social mission. Turner’s aforementioned article discusses Jeanneret’s interest in Nietzsche, as well as Ivan Zaknic, “Le Corbusier’s Epiphany on Mount Athos,” Journal of Architectural Education, vol. 43, no. 4 (Summer 1990), pp. 27-36.

41 Jeanneret’s diaries and impressions during his long trip were eventually published as Le Corbusier, Voyage d’Orient, Paris: Les Éditions Forces Vives, 1966.
La ‘Nouvelle Section’ s’est donc fixé un but essentiellement pratique. Par un enseignement méthodique bien compris ainsi que par une grande productif d’art décoratif, elle espère regagner le temps perdu et faire œuvre de propagande dans les milieux industriels, manufacturiers, et commerciaux. Cet effort doit être bienfaisant au point de vue économique ; de plus, il contribuera à nous donner des choses coutumières (demeures, mobiliers, broderies, bibelots, etc.) plus en rapport avec nos besoins et nos goûts et nous apporter plus de beauté.\textsuperscript{42}

Jeanneret’s newfound interest in modern industry and art as the sites for cultural reform was further refined by his encounters with Parisian avant-garde circles, especially with the painter Amédée Ozenfant, with whom he would found a post-Cubist art movement, Purism, and contribute to the modernist little magazine \textit{L’Esprit Nouveau} directed by the poet and critic Paul Dermée. This new phase in his career, during which he would eventually change his name to Le Corbusier (after the name of a distant family relative), would lead him to totally reject some of his earlier projects due to their over-emphasis on communitarian craftsmanship and naturalistic ornamentation and to instead embrace the machinist “Zeitgeist”, purportedly characterized by order, collectivity, and technological progress. Ornament, understood as “applied decoration”, was cast aside as a thing of the past, a point made even stronger in the pages of \textit{L’Esprit Nouveau} by the publication of the first French translation of Adolf Loos’ famous vitriolic essay from 1908 “Ornament und Verbrechen”. Similarly, Le Corbusier, as he would come into his own, would also cast aside the medievalist teamwork spirit of his La-Chaux-de-Fonds years as outdated. In practical terms, the young architect would engage in World War I reconstruction efforts going on in Europe through the creation of a standardized and integrated building system

\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Un Mouvement d’Art à la Chaux-de-Fonds. À propos de la Nouvelle Section de l’École d’Art, La Chaux-de-Fonds: Imprimerie Georges Dubois, 1914, p. 8. See also his thesis: Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, \textit{Étude sur le Mouvement d’Art Décoratif en Allemagne, La-Chaux-de-Fonds: Imprimerie Haefeli et Cie, 1912.}
dependent on reinforced concrete, the so-called Maison Dom-ino (1914), as well as with various technocratic city schemes. Although these efforts were kept relatively separate from his artistic endeavors (he was known as Le Corbusier as an architect and planner, but he signed his paintings under his given name Jeanneret until much later, in order to mark this distinction), Le Corbusier was similarly concerned with promoting a kind of moral reconstruction via modern art after World War I. In the book they co-authored in 1918, Après le cubisme, often considered to be the theoretical manifesto of Purism and one of the main publications of the “rappel à l’ordre” going on in France, Jeanneret and Ozenfant would wholeheartedly celebrate the collective pride instilled by the machine: “Cette fierté collective remplace l’antique esprit de l’artisan en l’élevant à des idées plus générales. Cette transformation nous paraît un progrès; elle est l’un des facteurs importants de la vie moderne. L’évolution actuelle du travail conduit par l’utile à la synthèse et à l’ordre.” 43 Similarly, the editorial of the opening issue of L’Esprit Nouveau, published in Paris in 1920, proclaimed a new era of material and spiritual synthesis: “Il y a un Esprit Nouveau: c’est un esprit de construction et de synthèse guidé par une conception claire. Quoi qu’en pense, il anime, aujourd’hui, la plus grande partie de l’activité humaine.” 44

Despite his public disavowal of his formative years as a regional Art Nouveau decorator imbued by idealist and Wagnerian rhetoric (his student projects were indeed carefully omitted from the first volume of his otherwise comprehensive Oeuvres complètes⁴⁵), we can see that Le Corbusier continued to be concerned, during his most intense engagement with avant-garde circles, by some of the very same issues, namely, the need to restore a sense of order to society via art and architecture. Hence, this should not overshadow the extremely important role that the ideas he was exposed to in those years had on his later development.

THE PUBLIC AND THE PLASTICIEN

Although they were, for a long time, thought of as being white (in part because of their reproduction as black and white photographs in magazines and modernist history books), it is now clear that all of Le Corbusier’s built projects of the 1920s and 30s in fact featured

⁴⁵ Beatriz Colomina has also pointed out that the Villa Schwob was airbrushed to make it more in line with his first modernist villas. Beatriz Colomina, “Le Corbusier und die Fotografie,” in Stanislaus von Moos, ed., Le Corbusier und die Industrie, 1920-1925, Berlin: Ernst und Sohn, 1987, p. 38.
a complex array of other colors, which served ornamental and functional roles.\textsuperscript{46} Artistic debates also played a key role in Le Corbusier's development. One of the most comprehensive case of Le Corbusier's use of polychromy was for his 1924 design of the Cité Frugès in Pessac, a housing estate near Bordeaux in the south of France, where he used different colors such as green, light blue and burnt sienna to differentiate the façade of his buildings and to establish visual connections with the trees, the sky and the land (hence blurring the inside and outside, creating a kind of continuum between architecture and the natural world). Le Corbusier's holistic ideas on architectural polychromy during that time developed also out of his active engagement with other modern artists. He was aware, for instance, of the work of the Dutch abstract painter and essayist Piet Mondrian, whose work he saw exhibited at Léonce Rosenberg's Parisian gallery L'Effort Moderne in 1920.\textsuperscript{47} More importantly, he developed a close relationship to the French artist Fernand Léger, who was trained as an architect in Normandy and who was developing ideas on color as a way to vitalize modernist architecture's otherwise stark, mechanistic forms. Léger famously declared that color is nothing short of a vital necessity: “Prenons le problème à son point de départ: besoin de couleur. L’homme aime la couleur, a horreur du vide et du mur nu.”\textsuperscript{48} The polychrome villas and pavilions built by Le Corbusier in Europe at that time did feature artworks, often paintings made by himself, or by his close


\textsuperscript{47} Mondrian’s brochure \textit{Le Néo-Plasticisme}, Paris: Galerie L’Effort Moderne, 1920, which was published by Rosenberg at the time of the exhibition, introduced the French public to De Stijl principles and would become extremely important for other artists such as Félix Del Marle and Jean Gorin, whom will discussed further in chapter 2. In the case of Le Corbusier, perhaps because he saw the guru-like Mondrian as a competitor, he never really became close to him or fully embraced his ideas, but did discuss them in a dialogue with Léger.

collaborator Ozenfant and later on by Léger. The Villa La Roche-Jeanneret (1920-1925) featured an exhibition space that presented a wide array of modern artworks, mostly Cubist and post-Cubist paintings, which Le Corbusier encouraged Mr. Raoul La Roche to purchase at a Parisian auction. A sculpture by Jacob Lipchitz would also be sited in front of Le Corbusier’s Pavilion de l’Esprit Nouveau, presented at the Exposition des Arts Décoratifs in 1925. However, as Joan Ockman explained, while Le Corbusier was definitely interested in showing his own artworks in his building and thought that color had the potential to serve expressive and compositional roles in modern architecture, “he viewed the prospect of interventions by other artists in his architecture warily” (an aversion that extended to the creativity of the users of his buildings that, as we will see, he was never really willing or able to overcome). The works shown in most of his built projects normally featured simplified lines and pastel color schemes that were meant to echo that of the architecture (and some of Jeanneret’s still lives seem to be set in modernist interiors, as in the case of the Nature morte à la pile d’assiettes et au livre, 1920) – but they were not fully integrated or “synthesized” to their architectural setting and would remain stand-alone works meant for detached aesthetic contemplation.

Le Corbusier would eventually move beyond the picture frame and engage in the creation of large, expressionistic and sexualized murals in the 1930s, for instance when he painted over, without her prior consent, the white walls of Eileen Gray’s modernist villa E-1027 in Cap Martin, adding his own modernist “odalisques”. If properly “synthesizing”, these were nonetheless done in the relatively private setting of a friend’s

house and were not meant for mass display.\footnote{50} It is only in the second half of the 1930s that Le Corbusier – in part because of his muralistic experiment in the Badovici-Grey house, and in part because of the influence of Léger – that he would start to produce wall paintings and photomurals. Léger was culturally very active while the coalition government of the Front Populaire was in power. Indeed, the painter would engage with wall-sized painting and photomurals as strategies to reach a mass-audience. In those years, Léger, who sympathized with socialist and communist groups (although he would only officially join the Communist Party in 1945), was also hoping to set up vast collaborations between artists and designers to create colorful, semi-figurative, didactic murals that would render art more democratically accessible to the mass public.\footnote{51} The artist opened a workshop in Paris, named L'Atelier d'Art Contemporain, which attracted young artists eager to work in a collaborative setting. One of these was a young Danish painter, Asger Jørgensen (later known as Asger Jorn), who came to Paris in 1936 and who ended up working with Léger and the Chilean artist Roberto Matta on murals presented inside of Le Corbusier's 1500 square-meters, tent-like propaganda pavilion dedicated to modernist urbanism and technology: the Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux.


\footnote{51}{For a discussion of Le Corbusier and Léger's engagement with photomurals, wall-sized paintings and tapestries during those days, see: Romy Golan, Muralnomad: The Paradox of Wall Painting, Europe, 1927-1957, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.}
The Pavilion opened amidst the 1937 Paris World Exposition. Unlike its 1926 predecessor, the Pavilion des Temps Nouveaux was not focused solely on promoting the magazine L’Esprit Nouveau, but of showing more broadly the new technological possibilities of the modern age, specifically of the different new means of transportation that transformed the way cities are organized, hence the name “Temps Nouveaux”.

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With his involvement with Léger at the 1937 World Exposition, an event that regularly featured all sorts of urban spectacles and fireworks displays to dazzle the public, Le Corbusier allowed a little bit more leeway to his collaborators than he did before. Indeed, in his eclectic Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux, which was dubbed a temporary “musée d’éducation populaire,” industrial objects such as plane propellers were shown to the public alongside large murals of aerial photographs, didactic photomontages, urban maps and children’s drawings, accompanied with slogans about a new era of solidarity and cooperation. Other artworks by modern artists, such as a large cardboard sculpture by Henri Laurens, were also included in the display. At that time, Le Corbusier met some of France’s prominent leftist figures such as the Minister of Education Jean Zay and the Secretary General of the French Communist Party Maurice Thorez. However, Le Corbusier’s politics were far from those in power, or even from those of his friend Léger. Despite his temporary openness to a more direct form of collaboration and the cooperative sloganeering inside the Pavilion, Le Corbusier’s sympathies lay with authoritarian rightwing factions that were hoping to dislodge the French socialist government and to establish a corporatist State run by a technocratic elite (a prospect to which he seemed to have been favorably inclined since at least his reading of Provensal’s utopian book L’Art de Demain). Sensitive to the power in play, Le Corbusier did collaborate with the editorial positions of the magazines Plans and Préludes, radical publications that discussed some of the themes that were to become central to Maréchal Pétain’s Révolution Nationale, namely, a supposed “synthesis” between left and right,

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53 Many other colorized photographs of these urban spectacles are presented in a special issue of the popular magazine L’Illustration, no. 4928 (August 1937).
54 Several of his texts for these journals would be included in Le Corbusier, La Ville Radieuse, Boulogne: Éditions de l’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui, 1935.
between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, aiming at the formation of a modern-day Saint-Simonian technocracy led by engineers and polytechnicians. These journals’ hybrid nationalistic and vitalist ideologies critiqued so-called bourgeois decadence, putting forward in its place an organicist rhetoric that was supposedly aimed at the regeneration of France’s body politic and edged toward fascism. Le Corbusier, like his Plans colleagues Dr. Pierre Winter and François de Pierrefeu, were largely opposed to liberal democracy, deemed to be ineffective, and even accepted eugenics and violent political action as viable solutions to the country’s problems.

In the 1930s, Le Corbusier also developed contacts with André Bloc, the editor of the modernist magazine L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui since 1931 and the chairman of L’Union pour l’Art since 1936, a loose collective hoping to foster the conditions for collaborative practices between an elite of artists and architects. Before going further about the Union pour l’Art, it is important to highlight some key moments of its founder personal trajectory. Trained as an engineer at the prestigious École Centrale des Arts et Manufactures in the 1920s, André Bloc started his professional career working as an administrator in a professional trade union for rubber manufacturers. He soon after became the editor of a small trade magazine published by the Syndicat du Caoutchouc,

titled La Revue du Caoutchouc. Via his early publishing and professional activities in the building industry, he became acquainted with several notable architects of those years, including Auguste Perret and Le Corbusier. According to the art historian Corinne Girieud, these architects may well have encouraged him to launch a magazine dedicated specifically to the cause of modern architecture. In 1930, Bloc started such a journal, along with his colleague Pierre Vago: L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui.

Figure 14. Cover of L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui, no. 1 (November 1930).

L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui, which started off very modestly, quickly developed a large national and international readership. It was one of the first journals to give extensive coverage to modernist architecture and planning, offering to its readers richly illustrated articles including floor plans, technical specifications and high quality photographs. While L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui was definitely forward thinking, it was not a vanguardist journal, the way contemporary periodicals like L'Esprit Nouveau or L'Architecture

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Vivante were. Indeed, Bloc's magazine, rather than present architecture as an avant-garde art form, was moderate in tone and was very concerned with pragmatic issues that pertained to the architectural profession, as well as to engineering and urbanism. Already, in the pages of the early issues of L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui, we can perceive Bloc's aims: productivity, efficiency, social welfare.

![Figure 15. Monograph on André Lurçat's Groupe Scolaire de Villejuif, Paris: Éditions de l'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui, 1934. Figure 16. North façade of Lurçat's Groupe Scolaire.](image)

Directly contiguous to Bloc's pragmatic outlook of architecture was his desire to make modern artists increasingly involved in building projects. In the 1930s, many commissions discussed in Bloc's journal featured architecturally integrated artworks. These were mostly public sculptures or mural paintings, placed as decoration in the interstitial parts of buildings. A notable example of such decorative projects can be found in André Lurçat's Groupe Scolaire de l'Avenue Karl Marx in Villejuif, a public school located in a "banlieue" a few kilometers south of Paris. Bloc's publishing house, Éditions de l'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui, published an entire monograph on this specific project, commissioned by the local municipal authorities. Although André Lurçat's campus, made

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of the quintessentially modernist materials (concrete, steel and glass), is itself very stark and austere, showing very proudly its various modern appliances “as found” (to use an expression later cherished by the English Brutalists), its harsh modernism was somewhat tempered by carefully sited artistic interventions. The architect, whose older sibling, Jean Lurçat, was a well-known French artist, chose to commission his brother, as well as other plasticiens, to decorate some common areas of the campus in order to avoid visual monotony. One such intervention was a small relief sculpture by the sculptor Henri Laurens, showing a nude woman and the outline of a star, at the entrance of the kindergarten class, where parents would leave their children in the morning and meet them in the afternoon.

Figure 17. Entrance of the kindergarten class in Lurçat’s Groupe Scolaire in Villejuif. Figure 18. Untitled relief sculpture by Henri Laurens found near the kindergarten entrance, 1934.

Jean Lurçat also decorated the school’s cafeteria with a florid mural pattern meant to visually echo the various trees planted in the vicinity of the school, visible through the large strip windows. These works were placed strategically in areas where large groups of people would congregate, hereby allowing them to see these artworks, albeit in passing. Typically, these decorative works, as well as several others included in built projects from that period discussed in the pages of L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui, were not abstract.
Although they were modern, they were rather decorative and somewhat classicizing renditions of works in the spirit of blue chip artists like Picasso or Matisse.

In 1936, following the election of the Front Populaire, the leftist coalition government eager to promote educational reforms and a so-called “democratization of culture”\textsuperscript{59}, Bloc would push his support for such collaborative projects further, co-founding the Union pour l’Art.\textsuperscript{60} His role was as general secretary. Unfortunately, the exact nature and extent of the activities of this informal group are unclear because large portions of Bloc’s personal archives were destroyed, as were those of the early years of L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui (whose office on Rue de Bartholdi in Boulogne-sur-Seine was the same as the Union pour l’Art).\textsuperscript{61} From the published sources, however, we notice that many of the group’s contributors were extremely prominent and somewhat left leaning figures of the French art and architecture scenes of the time: artists such as Picasso, Matisse and Léger, as well as architects and planners such as Tony Garnier and André Lurçat. Almost all of them had some kind of collaborative experience in the 1930s, mostly via the activities of

\textsuperscript{59} As the cultural historian Pascal Ory explained, it is under the Front Populaire and also under Vichy that many government cultural policies more commonly associated with the postwar period were in fact put in place, such as the attempt to develop theater troops outside of Paris (the so-called “décéntralisation théâtrale”). It is also in the 1930s that witnessed the founding of the Musée d’Art Moderne de la ville de Paris, the opening of several film clubs, the creation of a Domaine musical, and the development of associations such as Peuple et Culture et Travail et Culture. See: Pascal Ory, \textit{La belle illusion: Culture et politique sous le signe du Front Populaire, 1935-1938}, Paris: Plon, 1994. See also: Vincent Dubois, \textit{La politique culturelle: Genèse d’une catégorie d’intervention publique}, Paris: Bellin, 1999.

\textsuperscript{60} According to L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui, the leadership of the Union pour l’Art is as follows: Président: Auguste Perret, vice-présidents, Le Corbusier, Aristide Maillol, Henri Matisse, secrétaires généraux: André Bloc, Pierre Vago, secrétaires adjoints: Ossip Zadkine, André Lhote, trésorier: André Hermant, contrôleurs aux comptes, Jacques Debat-Ponsant, Fernand Léger. See: “Union pour l’art,” L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui, vol. 7, no. 6 (June 1936), p. 79.

\textsuperscript{61} According to Ann Koll, “the magazine suffered numerous financial difficulties and during the German occupation was shut down and plundered, thereby losing all of its documents and library.” Ann Koll, \textit{The Synthesis of the Arts in the Context of Post-World War II: A Study of Le Corbusier’s Ideas and His Porte Maillot Pavilion}, Phd dissertation, CUNY Graduate Center, p. 224.
another group, the Union des Artistes Modernes, founded in 1929 by the architect and set designer Robert Mallet-Stevens.\(^{62}\)

The Union pour l’Art, as a network, seemed to be mostly symbolic. It is quite likely that many of the artists listed by Bloc in L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui did not participate actively in the group, but were distant sympathizers. It is also quite probable that André Bloc’s stated goals for the Union pour l’Art, published in L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui, were not only in competition with the more Art Déco-oriented Union des Artistes Modernes, but in direct response to the cultural initiatives of French politicians, namely Marius Roustan\(^ {63}\), Jean Zay\(^ {64}\) and Georges Huisman\(^ {65}\) (although Bloc does not name them directly). Indeed, these different French government officials proposed in 1936 – the very same year the Union pour l’Art was founded – to make sure that 1,5% of the budget of each new building commissioned by the French State would be allocated to the integration of artworks to architecture. While these government initiatives did not materialize and were to resurface only in the postwar years (at which point the budget would be reduced to 1%), Jean Zay nevertheless attempted to apply this law to new educational buildings under the supervision of the Ministère de l’Éducation et des Beaux-Arts. In his study of the history of the bureaucratic measure now known as “le 1%”, the art historian Yves Aguilar explains that Zay’s original plans were devised specifically to

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\(^{63}\) Roustan was Ministre de l’Éducation Nationale in the government of Fernand Bouisson and Pierre Laval, and was formerly sous-secrétaire d’État à l’Hygiène.

\(^{64}\) Zay, a Radical, was then Ministre de l’Éducation Nationale et des Beaux-Arts. He was appointed by the Socialist Léon Blum.

\(^{65}\) Huisman was the director general of the Beaux-Arts under the Édouard Daladier government.
put artists affected by the economic depression ("en chômage") back to work, a task that would prove to be particularly daunting:

L'idée de Jean Zay était de confier la décoration des immeubles de l'instruction publique à des artistes en chômage. Étant donné le mode de production artistique, le flou de la catégorie socio-professionnelle, les critères de l'activité ou du chômage de l'artiste, vivant souvent d'un "vrai" métier, il est vraisemblable que l'idée aurait été difficile à appliquer.66

According to Bloc, the goal of the Union pour l'Art was not to involve the common man in artistic matters or to simply send unemployed artists back to work. Rather, it was to be a kind of lobby for elite artists and architects hoping to change the way monies are spent in order to develop allegedly more ambitious and "harmonious" artistic projects:

"L'Union pour l'Art devra se montrer très réservée dans les admissions et implacable dans les jurys. Il ne s'agit pas de créer une société chargée d'assurer du travail aux artistes chômeurs, mais d'établir une harmonie féconde entre des arts qui s'ignorent trop souvent."67 Bloc further clarified that artists, if they were to collaborate with architects, had to remain in their right place: "Tous les artistes comprennent que l'architecte doit être le maître de l'œuvre. Il en porte toute la responsabilité. C'est à lui de choisir les collaborateurs, peintres ou sculpteurs qui paraissent devoir le mieux s'adapter à ses conceptions."68 Bloc included several photographs with his article, showing the kind of realizations he was hoping for (and the ones he wanted to avoid). These were all done by members who had already joined the Union pour l'Art.

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67 "Union pour l'art," L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui, vol. 7, no. 6 (June 1936), p. 79.
68 "Union pour l'art," L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui, vol. 7, no. 6 (June 1936), p. 79. My emphasis.
For instance, a photo shows Le Corbusier’s 1926 Pavilion de l’Esprit Nouveau, in front of which was sited a sculpture by Jacques Lipchitz. Another is of Auguste Perret’s famous Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris, which featured on its façade several figurative bas-reliefs by the artist Antoine Bourdelle.69 Finally, one photo is included as a kind of cautionary tale. It shows a standalone sculpture by Bourdelle, the same artist who collaborated with Perret. The caption reads: “Quand Bourdelle eut l’imprudence de vouloir être à la fois l’architecte et le sculpteur, il fut inférieur à lui-même (...)” This normative practice of comparing a “good” versus a “bad” integration of art to architecture would recur in many of Bloc’s later publications (including Art d’Aujourd’hui in the postwar).

69 Perret’s theater also contained, on the inside, a decorated cupola by Maurice Denis and walls paintings done by different artists showing scenes from famous plays, most notably Antoine Vuillard.
Although L’Union pour l’Art officially aimed at the harmonization of modern life via the introduction of art in public space, it should also be understood as a somewhat self-serving attempt by member artists to produce the right context for lucrative commissions from private and government authorities. Admission to the Union was difficult: artists had to be sponsored by no less than five current members. Upon admission, younger artists were surely hoping that their efforts would be rewarded via some kind of contract. This explains the group’s efforts to show at the third Exposition de l’Habitation, a petit-bourgeois fair of household designs and furniture organized by the Salon des Arts Ménagers in 1936 at the Grand Palais. One Union member, Charlotte Perriand – an architect and furniture designer who worked in Le Corbusier’s office for several years – presented a vast selection of her “affordable” line of furniture alongside modern artworks. Many other members had their eyes on state commissions amidst the preparation for the World Exposition, which was to open a year later in 1937. Many Union artists would be involved in this international event: while Le Corbusier was working on his Pavilion des Temps Nouveaux, Picasso was painting Guernica for the

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70 See the exhibition catalogue Charlotte Perriand, Paris: Centre George Pompidou, 2005.
Spanish Pavilion. Bloc declared that by having artists present at these events, the Union pour l’Art was directly contributing to “le prestige de l’art français.”

Le Corbusier would officially rally Bloc’s group to further his own ideas and career: his statements regarding a potential “synthesis of the arts”, written prior to joining the group, are characterized by the notion that the architect is the only discerning figure capable of choosing how art is to be included in a building, an opinion Bloc would adopt as well in those years. Le Corbusier’s discourse was rooted in the elitist notion that the modern architect is a commissioner and synthesizing designer. It is indeed clear in his articles and speeches written in the mid-1930s that Le Corbusier was not interested in developing a truly democratic form of artistic collaboration, or even to set up pragmatic guidelines for how such collaboration could come about (despite what the expression “synthesis” may imply). For him, as for his intellectual mentor Provensal, architecture is the foremost of the “major arts”, and is the totalizing culmination of any creative endeavour. In 1935, in his article “Sainte alliance des arts majeurs ou Le grand art en gésine”, Le Corbusier writes: “L’architecture est, à elle seule, un événement plastique total. L’architecture, à elle seule, est un support de lyrisme total. Une pensée totale peut être exprimée par l’architecture seule. L’architecture se suffit à elle-même.”

Another key text of this period is the speech pronounced in 1937 at the Royal Academy in Rome, right around the same time as the Paris World Exposition. The speech was subsequently published as a brochure under the title Les tendances de l’architecture rationaliste en rapport avec la collaboration de la peinture et de la sculpture. In this speech, Le Corbusier would express his

\[\text{Le Corbusier, } \text{"Sainte alliance des arts majeurs ou Le grand art en gésine," La Bête Noire (July 1\textsuperscript{st}, 1935), n/p. Emphasis added.}\]
reservations about the work of mediocre painters that could contaminate modern architecture's cultural high ground. Only the “grand peintre” who is “worthy” of architecture could be called in for “synthetic” experiments:

Il n’est nul besoin de peintres pour l’architecture. Il serait néfaste d’y faire crier des peintres moyens ou médiocres. J’aime mieux admettre que les conditions seront exceptionnelles, où le grand peintre digne de l’architecture sera chargé de mission.\textsuperscript{72}

For Le Corbusier, modern architecture, because of its innovative technical structure (free plan, free façade, etc.) was deemed to be productive of new types of spatial and living arrangements that could be enhanced through carefully measured coloristic and artistic interventions. But from his point of view, it seems like a “synthesis of the arts” is only ever worthy if high visual arts become integrated to the architecture of a universalist “plasticien” truly familiar with all artistic media and hence capable of generating so-called ineffable spatial emotions. This is precisely his point in a later essay, titled “L’Espace indiscible”, which again posits architecture as the master narrative of synthesis:

“L’architecture, la sculpture et la peinture sont spécifiquement dépendantes de l’espace, attachées à la nécessité de gérer l’espace, chacun par des moyens appropriés. Ce qui sera dit ici d’essentiel, c’est que la clef de l’émotion esthétique est une fonction spatiale.”\textsuperscript{73}

Furthermore, painting and sculpture, the two other “major arts”, could only be included at specific points inside or outside of a building, which he calls “lieux mathématiques” (mathematic here is probably meant to be understood as reasonable, or at least approved by Le Corbusier himself). These nodes for potential synthesis, described as organisms that


\textsuperscript{73} Le Corbusier, “Espace Indiscible,” L’Architecture, no. 7 (February 1953), p. 233.
are “palpitants, exacts, efficaces, simples, harmonieux, à effluves lointains, à ondes irradiantes”\textsuperscript{74} are not described in any specific architectural terms and remain purposely vague. The only clarification made by Le Corbusier is that they are not the traditional sites for sculptures from classical or Beaux-Arts traditions (“ni métope, ni tympan, ni porche”) – such architecture, for Le Corbusier, has been forever rendered obsolete by the “Cubist revolution” at the turn of the century. The idea that Cubism’s attack on perspectival modes of representation created the conditions for a liberation from historicism and a path towards modern architecture was, by then, entering the mainstream of modernist historiography, from Sigfried Giedion to Henry-Russell Hitchcock by way of Alfred Barr.\textsuperscript{75} Le Corbusier admits that there are moments when modern architecture may need to serve an educational role hence the use of didactic photomontages in the Pavilion at the World Exposition, but this is singled out as an exception whose literalness should not be emulated.

Towards the end of his speech, Le Corbusier, reacting to the current economic situation, also mentions that the “20,000 unemployed artists” ought to liberate their creative potential and be “thrown into life”, but declares in the very next sentence “il y a place pour l’esprit, pas pour la bêtise”, which again shows how suspicious he was of the masses’ actual creative potential. The public is not invited to intervene in the synthesis process, but to be directed by a strong leader, both spiritual and pragmatic, echoing some of the

\textsuperscript{74} Le Corbusier, Les tendances de l’architecture rationaliste, p. 12.

“dirigiste” tenets of the day. In the process, they would somehow delight in the “laws of architecture” and the rules of the architect, the sublime proportions and the appropriate colors chosen by this discerning authority. Obviously, Le Corbusier’s diatribes would leave a lot of question open for debate: Who is to decide who is a “great painter”? What are the verifiable criteria to determine the “mathematical nodes” within a building? etc. These questions would never be fully resolved, and Le Corbusier’s self-centered attitude would rapidly become a major point of contention in the postwar years with his colleagues participating in modernist organizations. It would also create debates, propelling different artists and architects to follow different trajectories, including André Bloc.

FROM COLLABORATIONIST TO POSTWAR RECONSTRUCTOR

The Front Populaire government collapsed only a few months after the World Exposition. The invasion of Poland by Germany in 1939 marked France’s entrance into World War II: the French military could not hold up for very long against the Nazi move through the Maginot Line, and was defeated in June 1940. Maréchal Philippe Pétain, a World War I veteran and a long-time fascist sympathizer, was installed as the country’s paternalist leader, marking the dissolution of France’s Third Republic and the installation of a collaborationist regime with Hitler’s Germany. Le Corbusier’s positions during World War II are still obscured by his successful public reinvention in the postwar years.

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77 For more biographical details on Le Corbusier’s collaboration with the Vichy government, see chapters 34 and 35 of Nicholas Fox Weber’s biography Le Corbusier: A Life, New York: Knopf, 2008, pp. 410-455. Le Corbusier’s open celebration of Pétain and his anti-Semitic sentiments and ambivalent feelings towards Hitler, which he expressed in his private correspondence, have also been the center of recent controversy, following the decision of the Swiss bank UBS to use his image in one of its ad campaign. See:
However, a few scholars have now documented and firmly established that, more than simply having distant sympathies with the authoritarian right and going through a period of forced introspection during the war, Le Corbusier was a direct affiliate, along with several of his colleagues at Plans and Préludes, to Pétain’s regime. After the fall of the Third Republic to Nazi Germany in 1940, Le Corbusier remained in France. He was not under any immediate physical threat and therefore did not go into exile (as most of the Surrealists or his leftist friend Léger had to do, for instance). On the contrary, he thought that he could work his way into the new political system. In a later interview, Le Corbusier remembers:

Nous avons su qu’à Londres, un Général de Gaulle (...) a lancé un appel pour poursuivre la guerre. Enfin, un peu de courage. Mais pour moi, mon rôle est ici, dans le pays. Je ne veux et ne puis quitter la France après cette défaite. Je dois me battre là où je pense qu’il est nécessaire pour mettre le domaine bâti sur son véritable terrain.78

As Mary McLeod has shown in her remarkable study of Le Corbusier’s politics during the Vichy regime, he petitioned many different government officials to receive a position as urban planner in Pétain’s government, which he eventually got in January 1941.79 His major commission was to work on the master plan for the urban development of Algiers, a city still part of France’s North African colonial empire. Le Corbusier was also very conscious of the dire necessities of life during wartime. Shortly after the beginning of the

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79 "After receiving positive responses from Jean Picard, a minister of industrial production and labor, and Meaux, the deputy commissioner of unemployment, Le Corbusier gained, through the assistance of Peyrouton, the minister of interior and former governor general of Algeria, a temporary appointment in January 1941.” See: Mary McLeod, “Urbanism and Utopia,” p. 384. Le Corbusier would be part of short-lived committees, such as the Comité d’Étude du Bâtiment, and partake, with other technocrats, to the Comité des Études Préparatoires d’Urbanisme.
Vichy regime, he devised a particular type of makeshift housing scheme, the “Constructions Murondins”, which were to address the needs of the numerous communities that were displaced by the bombardments.

Le Corbusier presented this building type in a short pamphlet sponsored by the Vichy government, which he dedicated to the Jeunesse de France (or Youth of France, a Boys Scouts-like organization). Although essentially technical in its scope, Le Corbusier’s pamphlet nevertheless contains much of the same regionalist, ruralizing rhetoric widely prevalent under Pétain’s regime. The makeshift houses whose components are walls ("murs") of logs ("rondins") “peut être construite sur place avec des matériaux non-ouvrés trouvés sur place: de la terra, du sable, des bois de forêt, des branches, des fagots, des mottes de gazon”. Young men were to cooperate and build with natural materials in order to rediscover folk knowledge and to revitalize the rural areas. This was the path, argued Le Corbusier, to heal the wounded nation and to instill vigor and discipline among the young. Yet the idea he was developing in the 1930s about the vitalization of

81 Le Corbusier, letter to the Compagnons de France, 25 September, 1940 (Fondation Le Corbusier, document B1-1-57, p. 1.)
architecture through artistic polychromy in folkloric woodcraft was not lost. He wrote letters to members of the Compagnons de France, the fascist youth group founded by Henri Dhavernas in 1940. After describing how to construct makeshift Maisons Murondins, he says: “Le lait de chaux [whitewash] sera la parure de joie. Sur le lait de chaux, les grandes couleurs – le rouge, le bleu, le jaune, le vert, le brun, permettront l’éclosion d’une peinture murale éclatante. Vous demanderez des conseils au peintre Fernand Léger.” Artistic polychromy, once again, is described as a source of regeneration and “joie de vivre”, but in this particular context, his call for whiteness and joyous colors amidst total warfare and aerial bombings seemed totally out of touch with reality – as did recommending that fascist youth emulate the exiled leftist, Léger.

According to McLeod, a key element of Le Corbusier’s ideology during the Vichy days, which is not altogether different from the one he would adopt in the postwar years, was that the government ought to institute a corporation of architects, a self-regulating professional guild that would establish a new elite, the masters of works, akin to the medieval master builders: “These men, simultaneously humanist, architect and engineer, would carry out massive housing and urban reconstruction projects following a master plan.” Le Corbusier’s proposals to the government did have an audience, but because of the highly hierarchical structure in place, it did not stir any significant changes within the existing political system. This lead Le Corbusier to be increasingly disengaged with the Vichy hardliners – simply because they did not allow him the more prominent place he

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desired. As we will see, however, even if he did disengage himself from Vichy’s bureaucracy, many of the very same themes he was discussing during these days – the longing for a past unity, the call for plans to revitalize man’s relationship to art and to nature, the need for a strong cultural leader to lead society, and the strategic appeals to patriotic sympathies – would frequently recur in the immediate postwar context.

An opportunity arose immediately, on November 21, 1944, only three months after the Liberation of Paris. Le Corbusier received a letter from Michel Collinet, a left-wing syndicalist and a member of a group named Ceux de la Résistance (CDR, one of the eight branches of the Conseil National de la Résistance, CNR). Collinet had previously met Le Corbusier during the Occupation in Vezelay during the summer of 1942 (the two men apparently had a discussion about modern architecture and cubism). The architect obviously made a lasting impression on Collinet, since he wrote to Le Corbusier two years later, offering him a full-page column in a new weekly publication titled Volontés De Ceux de la Résistance, dedicated to politics, economics and literature. Volontés’ format was directly inspired by the journal Les Lettres Françaises, founded clandestinely in France during the Occupation by Résistance members Jacques Decour and Jean Paulhan, which published many prominent leftist activists such as Louis Aragon. The editors of Volontés seem to have had a selective understanding of Le Corbusier’s politics, remembering him perhaps only for his work during the Front Populaire, or for his brief stint in Stalinist Moscow. Others may have altogether ignored his role during the war,

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84 A member of this group published an important, albeit highly partial book on the history of the Résistance in France: Henri Picard, Ceux de la Résistance, Nevers: Éditions Chassaing, 1947.
for immediately after Vichy’s collapse, the architect would become very careful to conceal the fact that he had been appointed as urban planner to Pétain’s government. The master plan for Vichy-era Algiers, which occupied him for months, would be left out of the postwar volumes of his otherwise comprehensive Oeuvres complètes. His omission sometimes even turned into outright misinformation. For instance, in a short book published to promote his Unité d’Habitation in Marseille, the architect purposely mischaracterized his wartime experience. He set himself up as an (a)political outsider to appeal to postwar sympathies: “Durant l’occupation (1940-1944), je n’ai pas reçu commande du moindre centimètre carré de dessin pour la reconstruction des villes, des fermes, des maisons. Aucun travail d’architecture: ni église, ni mairie, ni musée, ni quoi que ce soit. Mon nom était honni.”

Figure 25. Title page of the weekly journal Volontés de Ceux de la Résistance upon the Libération, May 9, 1945.

Figure 26. Le Corbusier, “Aux approches d’une synthèse,” Volontés, 8 August, 1945.

In a letter he wrote to Le Corbusier to offer him the opportunity to contribute to the journal, Collinet outlined in general terms his ideas for the Reconstruction:

\[ \text{C’est donc à titre multiple qu’il [Volontés] doit s’intéresser aux graves problèmes qui se posent au sujet de la} \]

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86 Le Corbusier, L’Unité d’habitation de Marseille, Mulhouse: Le Point, 1950, p. 4.
reconstruction du pays. L'heure des architectes et des urbanistes est venue et nous pensons qu'il y a une occasion unique en France pour que nos villes et nos villages soient reconstruits, non suivant le plaisir de quelques particuliers plus riches en argent qu'en idées, mais d'après les conceptions d'ensemble adaptées à toutes les exigences de la vie moderne. Vos travaux et vos conceptions sociales devraient vous désigner parmi les premiers reconstructeurs de ce pays.87

Sensing an opportunity to shape a nascent cultural and political movement that attributed importance foremost to the creation of an elite “rich in ideas” and capable of reshaping modern life, Le Corbusier agreed to contribute to the new journal. His article “Vers l'unité” would position the issue of the “synthesis of the arts” as central to postwar life and would be subsequently republished in his Oeuvres complètes and translated to different languages as a stand-alone manifesto. However, it is relevant to think about it in its original publication context, more specifically, in relation to other of Le Corbusier’s articles and to the ideas of the authors published in that same journal. Bernard Malan, editor in chief of Volontés, argued that “happiness for all” should be the one and only guiding principle for social reform in France. He thus describes the “synthetic” cultural mission of the journal:

C'est une véritable synthèse que nous avons à tisser, et dans laquelle toutes les branches de la civilisation seraient enfin gouvernées par un même et unique principe, celui du plus grand bonheur de tous. … viser à rendre les hommes heureux et, le plus possible, à concrétiser en somme dans le réel cette poursuite du “souverain bien” dont l'origine remonte au Miracle Grec, et à laquelle les conquérants militaires imposent de si dramatiques retardements.88

87 Michel Collinet, letter to Le Corbusier, 21 November, 1944 (Fondation Le Corbusier, document A-3-3-1, p. 1.)
Other people who published in Volontés, such as the architect Gerald Hanning (who also worked in Le Corbusier’s office), looked at the Reconstruction as the great opportunity to rid France of the Beaux-Arts system, which he dismissed as outdated. In “Problème de l’académisme et dans l’enseignement des Beaux-Arts”, Hanning writes:

Nous voulons pouvoir l’affronter et la réaliser dans l’esprit nouveau, conformément aux doctrines qui la situent si magnifiquement. Et nous voulons la réaliser en possession d’une Esthétique, d’une Plastique et d’une Technicité que nous avons encore à acquérir, et que l’École des Beaux Arts est incapable de nous donner.

Le Corbusier’s “Vers l’unité” featured a reproduction of a painting by his friend Fernand Léger. Like Hanning, Le Corbusier railed against historicism, so popular during the Popular Front, directly appealing to a rebuilding patriotism:

Synthèse des arts majeurs : architecture, sculpture et peinture, synthèse intéressant l’édifice communautaire aussi bien que le logis du particulier, synthèse qui doit être considérée comme un véritable devoir à accomplir envers le pays, en cette période de si prodigieuse libération des arts majeurs... Un retentissement international en résultera, ainsi qu’une floraison magistrale de l’art français.

What is striking here is Le Corbusier’s use of liberatory rhetoric in his call to unite the major arts. The “synthesis of the arts” was to be found at all architectural scales – from the house to the city – and was now nothing short of a duty to the country and a path

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89 This may also be a reason why the journal was so keen on being associated with Le Corbusier’s modernism, who was an internationally recognized symbol of anti-Beaux Arts sentiments, especially since his rejection of the Palais des Nations competition in Geneva in 1927.


towards an international recognition of French art. The last point regarding the international recognition of this alleged “floraison magistrale de l’art français” is perhaps the most telling one. We must remember that, at that time, Le Corbusier, like many French politicians, administrators and intellectuals, on both the left and the right, was very aware of the increasingly hegemonic role that the victorious United States was playing in the postwar political landscape. Le Corbusier’s mixed impressions of his first trip to America during the Great Depression years were published, somewhat provocatively, under the subtitle Voyage au pays des timides.92 He did not really speak English, and he was wary of the fact that English, rather than French, was becoming the unifying language at CIAM meetings, a situation that may have precipitated his departure from the organization in 1955. Despite his anxieties about the Francophones giving way to the Anglophones, Le Corbusier believed that the situation was not inevitable and France’s role as the cultural métropole could be reclaimed. Le Corbusier’s view was that a “synthesis of the major arts”, under his direct creative leadership, was to be a pre-emptive strike towards the reclamation of France’s international supremacy and rationalist-humanist tradition, and a way to counter debased, American-style consumer culture (which was soon to be fully introduced in France through the Marshall Plan).93 In direct conjunction to that discourse on the integration of modern art to architecture as a way to assert France’s “flourishing art”, Le Corbusier was also developing a system of

proportion and measurement that would have a direct bearing on his reconstructive
discourse: the Modulor.\textsuperscript{94}

**MODULOR MAN: RESTORING THE BODY POLITIC**

One of the constant preoccupations throughout Le Corbusier’s career was to make his
architectural and artistic propositions appear reasonable, therefore socially desirable and
inevitable. Le Corbusier’s frequent references to geometry and mathematics should be
understood in this context. During his Purist days, he wrote extensively on the ideal
Platonic volumes (the cube, the sphere, etc.) and devised the so-called “tracés régulateurs”
as a system of measurement based on the right angle and the golden ratio used to visually
organize his buildings and his paintings.\textsuperscript{95}

\textbf{Figure 27.} Le Corbusier, diagram showing the “tracés régulateurs” over his 1916 villa in Vers une Architecture,
\textit{Paris: Crès/Collection l’Esprit Nouveau, 1923. Figure 28.} Le Corbusier, diagram showing primary geometric solids
found in historical buildings, in Vers une Architecture, 1923.

By following strict compositional rules, Le Corbusier argued in Vers une Architecture, a
building would become pleasing to the eye (the so-called “reasonable” of the senses) and

\textsuperscript{94} Le Corbusier, \textit{Le Modulor I}, Boulogne-sur-Seine: Éditions L’Architecture
d’Aujourd’hui/ASCORAL, 1950; Le Corbusier, \textit{Le Modulor II}, Boulogne-sur-Seine: Éditions

\textsuperscript{95} It is now well established that Le Corbusier’s ideas on mathematics, in those days, derived largely
from his reading of Matila Ghyka’s \textit{Esthétique des proportions dans la nature et dans les arts}, Paris:
Gallimard, 1927. His use of regulating lines to rationalize the façade of his buildings also bear the imprint of
Heinrich Wölflin’s use of such lines to analyze the composition of paintings in his \textit{Kunstgeschichtliche
would give a sense of satisfaction to the beholder’s mind, otherwise bombarded by the
chaos of modern life: “L’obligation de l’ordre. Le tracé régulateur est une assurance
c Tahle contre l’arbitraire. Il procure la satisfaction de l’esprit.”96 His system, which he constantly
avoided referring to as a recipe, which would have made it somewhat trivial and
interchangeable for any other recipe, was further reinforced by his use of architectural
polychromy, which would allow to differentiate the walls of a building visually and also to
create dynamic light and shadow effects. Although he gradually abandoned this particular
proportional system as Purism fizzled out like most “rappel à l’ordre” movements, Le
Corbusier continued to be concerned with finding an alternative, and even more
comprehensive system of measurement and proportion. This new system, which he
started to develop in 1943 with his colleagues Elisa Maillart and Gerald Hanning, would
be called the Modulor. As succinctly explained by the art historian Simon Reynolds, Le
Corbusier was critical of the dominant measuring systems – the foot-and-inch and the
metric systems – and attempted to synthesize them with his allegedly universalist Modulor
(a neologism that is meant to sound like “module” and “nombre d’or”). While he praised
“the foot-and-inch for being heir to the historical tradition of grounding measurements in
the proportions of the human body and therefore true to our bodily experience,” he
ultimately rejected it as cumbersome. The metric system, on the other hand, was deemed
more convenient, yet “inhuman and having no relation to the human body at all.”97 The
Modulor was, argued Le Corbusier in his first book on the same name published in 1950,
a way to synthesize these two systems.98 In preliminary sketches and diagrams referring

97 Simon Reynolds, Le Corbusier and the Concept of the Self, New Haven: Yale University Press,
98 See: Le Corbusier, Le Modulor I, Boulogne-sur-Seine: Editions L’Architecture
d’Aujourd’hui/ASCORAL, 1950.
back to Leonardo Da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man, Le Corbusier shows a muscular male figure, which he shows as measuring 1m83 (reaching up to 2m10 while holding a hand up in the air) standing next to two strings of measurement in red and blue. Based on the body’s position, different calculations and ratios derived from the Fibonacci series and its relationship to $\Phi$ (Phi) are noted next to him to offer different proportions that can be used in the design of things at every possible scale.

According to Le Corbusier, this system could be used by anybody, from architects to visual artists, graphic designer, even engineers and city planners. From the outset, this totalizing system, needless to say, was highly problematic and reductive, as it posits the male figure as the only truly universal one and as the source of a mysterious, sublime, mathematical beauty.99

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The Modulor project could be seen, following Colin Rowe’s classic essay\(^{100}\), as an expression of Le Corbusier’s ongoing humanistic fascination with numbers (a fascination that was also at the center of the Italian Renaissance). It could also be reclaimed as an honorable attempt at restoring architectural metaphysics and anthropocentrism against modernist instrumental reason, as phenomenologists would attempt to do in the 1990s.\(^{101}\)

It must be remembered, however, that, in its original historical context, the Modulor was a direct response to the kinds of standardized measurements being implemented by the technocratic Association Frangaise de Normalisation (AFNOR), a French national organization that held meetings in the 1940s to redefine its normalization policies during wartime scarcity. To his great displeasure, Le Corbusier was not invited to these events, which led him to develop an allegedly superior system. The Modulor was quickly patented and he went on to export it worldwide through publications, speaking engagements, and building projects. It is therefore linked to his ongoing attempt to reassert his own international prominence and, more significantly, to create a new type of consensual society based on universally valid laws.\(^{102}\) Le Corbusier’s position is therefore, I would argue, not so much a critique of instrumental reason as a further engagement with it, as it attempted to rationalize and make universally legitimate the ergonomic production of objects and spaces through the Modulor.

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\(^{102}\) The implementation of the metric system by the International Metric Commission in the second half of the nineteenth century was itself a matter of international diplomacy and politics. See: Jean-Jacques Salomon, “The Internationale of Science,” Science Studies, vol. 1, no. 1 (January 1971), pp. 23-42.
The “origin story” of the Modulor is, in itself, extremely revealing. According to Le Corbusier’s narrative, found in the first volume of Le Modulor, his breakthrough in finding a correct mathematical solution to the question of Modulor, which he had been working on for months, took place in between France and America, on board a military boat, the Vernon S. Hood, which he boarded on a diplomatic mission with the future Minister of Reconstruction, Eugène Claudius-Petit. Whether it is true or not, this narrative propelled his “règle d’or” as an all-encompassing, reconstructive and a conciliatory tool between France, America and the rest of the world in the militarized postwar context. Another interesting point is that the measure of the man (no woman was ever represented in his drawings) was originally 1m60, which Le Corbusier eventually increased to 1m83, apparently to fit the height of an average American, showing the architect’s desire to export his work to the New World. The first of two Modulor books came out in English in 1951 and were a huge hit, selling thousand of copies.

Regardless of its faulty calculations and its pseudo-scientific universalism (neither Le Corbusier, Maillart nor Hanning had a very strong grasp on mathematics103), the Modulor came to serve a multiplicity of legitimizing functions for Le Corbusier and his modernist followers attempting to reclaim man’s lost unity after the destruction of the war.104 By basing himself on the human body, Le Corbusier was also attempting to


104 One amongst many interesting appropriations of the Modulor in the postwar years was by French designers who felt threatened by the increasingly fast cycles of fashion à l’Américaine. The Modulor is indeed referred to favorably by the young designers of the ARP firm (Atelier de Recherche Plastique, founded by Pierre Guarich, Joseph-André Motte and Pierre Mortier) who produced office furniture in the early 1950s. In a two-page ad spread illustrated with the Modulor diagram that Le Corbusier kept in his archive (perhaps for inclusion in the unpublished third volume of Le Modulor?), the Meuble Minvielles are
position himself as somehow beyond politics. This was a recurrent theme in his writings at the time. In his response to the questionnaire distributed at the postwar CIAM meeting held in Bridgewater in 1947, where the “synthesis of the arts” was a major topic of discussion, Le Corbusier would try to place some distance between himself and the concept of “peuple”, as it had become so associated with both the far-right and far-left ideologies with which he had flirted in the last decades. Instead, Le Corbusier refers to “les hommes” as the public that would benefit from the “miracle” of precisely modulated art and architecture:


Finally, it is important to point out that Le Corbusier’s system also acted as a kind of market positioning, the goal of which is to maintain the relevance of the modern architect and of Le Corbusier as the master of the (non-American) Modulor. It would indeed become central to the conception and the visual organization of many of his postwar built projects: ratios of the technical structures, interior decoration and design, exhibition

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spaces, and even to the graphic organization of the special issue of L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui titled “Unité” dedicated to Le Corbusier’s career and to the “synthesis of the arts”. It would become an integral part of the Le Corbusier’s brand name.

Figure 31. Cover of the special issue of L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui titled “Unité”, dedicated to Le Corbusier, 1948. Figure 32. Front cover of Art d’Aujourd’hui, no. 1 (June 1949), showing Le Corbusier’s Villa in Poissy, and an unnamed sculpture by André Bloc and a mural by Victor Vasarely. Figure 33. Le Corbusier, Le Modulor I, Paris: Éditions de l’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui, 1950.

The first person who helped Le Corbusier spread the Modulor was André Bloc. ¹⁰⁶

Having worked with him at the Union pour l’Art, Bloc indeed published several articles on and by the architect. In 1948, L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui dedicated an entire issue to Le Corbusier, titled Unité, which was placed under the theme of the “synthèse des arts majeurs”. Bloc’s publishing house, Éditions de l’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui, was also responsible for the diffusion of the first edition of Le Corbusier’s Le Modulor. Following the Liberation, Bloc returned to Paris, very keen on reestablishing L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui as a professional tribune to promote modernist architecture and planning.

¹⁰⁶ Unlike Le Corbusier, who chose to join the Vichy government, the war years were far more difficult for Bloc. Because of his Jewish origins, André Bloc (né Bloch) had to flee Paris and the occupied northern territories during Pétain’s fascist administration. His publishing activities with L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui were therefore interrupted in 1940: the magazine’s offices were ransacked and Bloc lost most of his working documents. He took refuge near Biot, a small village overlooking the Mediterranean in the southeast of France. He was not completely isolated, as many other modernist artists took refuge there during the war (it had already been a destination of his friend Fernand Léger for years — Biot is also where the posthumous Musée Fernand Léger is currently located.). It is also during the war years that Bloc started to develop his talents as an artist, working primarily as a sculptor and as a painter, exploring different abstract modernist styles somewhat indiscriminately.
amidst the far-reaching reconstruction efforts. Re-initiating publication initially proved to be complicated since there was a shortage of funds and materials resources, as they were being routed towards the bombed out areas of France. Nevertheless, his magazine having built a strong international readership and an enviable reputation as a progressive magazine during the Front Populaire, Bloc managed to secure state funding in 1945 from the enthusiastic Claudius-Petit, who championed the project at the Chambre des Députés. Bloc knew the minister via Le Corbusier: Claudius-Petit, a Catholic, a woodworker and a trade unionist who became a resistance fighter during the war, had known Le Corbusier since 1937. He befriended him at a conference on urbanism in Lyon. Claudius-Petit, because of his role in the Resistance in Algiers, was appointed by De Gaulle as a government official in charge of the issue of housing.

Figure 34. Photograph of Eugène Claudius-Petit speaking to the French resistance government at the Assemblée Consultative, Algiers, 1944.
Although it remained formally independent, *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, which had a very wide circulation in France and internationally, quickly became a relay between architects, designers and the French bureaucrats associated with the newly founded Ministère de la Reconstruction et de l'Urbanisme. The fact that Claudius-Petit, actively involved in the Reconstruction efforts, supported the project is made clear not only in the fact that he was invited to contribute articles, but also by virtue of the themes discussed in the journal, many of them key to the Reconstruction ministry. For example, the second issue of the postwar run of *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* was titled “Solutions d’Urgence” and was dedicated to architectural prefabrication, a pressing issue in the context of housing shortages and material scarcity in France. The questions were rendered international; the issue contained several examples of projects from the USA and Japan, as well as experiments by the French engineer Jean Prouvé.

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But for Bloc, as for Claudius-Petit, the Reconstruction was not to be strictly technical and material. It also had very important cultural dimensions. In 1945, they began to place it under the banner of the “synthesis of the major arts,” following their friend Le Corbusier (although, as we will see, they came to understand such “synthesis” differently). Building directly on his work at L’Union pour l’Art and also on his new experiences as an artist, Bloc would proclaim in the columns of L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui that architects must become artists (or at least, form teams with them) in order to avoid the excesses of a merely technocratic reconstruction. In other words, modern art had to act as a kind of compensatory mechanism to architecture: it had to elevate the debased functionalism, which was spreading through postwar projects because of the extremely dire economic situation. In Bloc’s discourse, artists trained to work with architects would not be totally autonomous, but they would help introduce elements of free formal experimentation to building, hence redeeming and elevating the social role of the architect to that of a cultural figure, not simply a technician. Bloc: “L’orchestration harmonieuse et pure des arts plastiques n’est pas possible dans tous les cas, mais elle est souhaitable. Un architecte qui ignorait les données essentielles des arts contemporains ne serait jamais qu’un simple technicien de la construction.”

This supposedly socially-minded critique of a debased type of functionalism through collaboration would become a recurrent theme throughout the 1940s and 50s in the neo-Corbusian circles associated with the idea of a “synthesis of the arts”. According to the critic Paul Damaz, a close collaborator of Bloc:

Today, architects are more and more conscious of their social responsibilities, and many of them have concentrated on the problems of town planning, prefabrication and housing – but the role of the architect is not merely a technical one. He has other duties. As a man of vision, he

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must interpret the feelings and desires of his fellow men; above all, he should help them to express their personality and defend their human dignity against the psychology of a mass-production society.109

THE DAWN OF A "FRENCH RENAISSANCE"?

Le Corbusier’s first major involvement in postwar French reconstruction, and his chance to apply his ideas on the Modulor-driven “synthesis of the arts” would come in 1944 in Saint-Dié-des-Vosges, a small town of about 15,000 inhabitants located in the Lorraine region of France. Like other occupied cities, Saint-Dié was devastated by the departing German forces at the very end of World War II. In late November 1944, as the Allied forces were progressing deeper into Western Europe, the Nazis purposely razed two thirds of the town, setting fire to houses, civic buildings and factories. Reports indicate that as many as 10,500 people lost their home in the process.110 In December 1944, surely aware of the new building opportunities arising in this area, Le Corbusier wrote to his friend Jean-Jacques Duval, an industrialist who owned a family owned textile factory that produced undergarments in Saint-Dié, offering him his professional services. The two men developed an active correspondence, which offers useful information about Le Corbusier’s personal and political ambitions in this immediate postwar context.111 Duval rapidly came forward to Le Corbusier, asking him to come up with a plan for the reconstruction of his town. After some feigned reticence, the architect eventually

111 The entire correspondence related to Duval is available at the Fondation Le Corbusier. The most significant portions of it, as well as Duval’s recollections of his collaboration with Le Corbusier, were published in Jean-Jacques Duval, Le Corbusier, l’écorce et la fleur, Paris: Éditions du Linteau, 2006.
acquiesced, declaring that Saint-Dié ought to be rebuilt as a “cité linéaire industrielle,” an urban scheme which he had been developing in recent years and which he would present in different articles for Volontés, such as “Aux approches d’une synthèse.” Le Corbusier’s ideas were further developed in the CIAM/ASCORAL-sponsored book Les trois établissements humains. Le Corbusier’s scheme was primarily a reinterpretation of Arturo Soria y Mata’s famous “Ciudad Lineal” project of 1886. He was also under the influence of the experiments by the Tennessee Valley Authority (which Le Corbusier discovered while he was in the United States for the first time in 1935) and by the “disurbanist” Soviet architects Nikolay Alexandrovich Milyutin and Mikhail Okhitovich (contemporaneous to his time spent in Moscow for the Centrosoyus project). This “linear industrial city” would become one of his most important preoccupations in the postwar years. Le Corbusier would summarize the plan as aligned to the different type of transportation systems on land, water and rail. It would also be a city developed in proximity to nature, meaning water and trees. However, unlike postwar suburban developments in the United States, it would not be strictly dependant on the automobile:

La cité linéaire industrielle permet de prévoir les meilleures conditions les lieux de l’installation de l’industrie, de déterminer les unités de grandeur conforme de chaque établissement industriel, de lui donner un plan organique sans rebroussement ni confusion, de rattacher la vie domestique des ouvriers et du personnel à des lieux parfaitement organisés pour l’habitation, relativement très rapprochés et permettant le contact à pied, sans véhicule mécanique.112

In this type of suburban settlement, the “usine verte”, which would allegedly replace the “usine noire” of the first, soot-ridden machine age, would be given a prominent place. It

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is described by Le Corbusier, like the overall city scheme, in organicist terms: “[L’usine verte] réinstalle à nouveau autour du travail les conditions de nature. Soleil, espace, verdure apportent ici, comme dans les quartiers de résidence, les influences cosmiques, la réponse aux pulsation du poumon, la vertu de l’air, ainsi que la présence de ce milieu nature qui présida à la longue et minutieuse élaboration de l’être humain.”

Le Corbusier argued relentlessly that buildings harmonized by the universalist Modulor and cities rebuilt according to his principles would be a synthesis of both liberal and collectivist models. Both were to be beacons of modernity and even serve as a model to the Americans. Referring to himself in the third person, he writes to Duval: “Je suis persuadé que Saint-Dié bâti par Le Corbusier, serait une manifestation touristique d’envergure, et les gens y viendraient d’Amérique. Ceci dit sans forfanterie.” Despite his false modesty, it is clear that Le Corbusier thought of himself as the key figure capable of reasserting France’s leadership role in cultural, artistic and urban affairs and certainly

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114 Duval, Le Corbusier: l’écorce et la fleur, p. 89.
hoped to be perceived as such by the governmental authorities. He made similar claims to Raoul Dautry, a technocrat and the first minister in charge of the Ministère de la Reconstruction et de l'Urbanisme appointed by De Gaulle (Claudius-Petit's precursor and foremost competitor).\textsuperscript{115} Le Corbusier first wrote to the head of the MRU in late December 1944, around the same time as he was re-establishing contact with Duval. In a long letter addressed to minister Dautry, Le Corbusier reasserted his merits as a “docteur honoris causa” in mathematics\textsuperscript{116} and presented himself as world-famous speaker who had been dealing with urban issues for decades – leaving out his now embarrassing involvement as an urban consultant for the Vichy government. He pleaded with the minister that he should pay special attention to Saint-Dié, because of the magnitude of the problems that the town was facing. He also argued that the town was particularly interesting because of its social cohesion: “industries, tourisme, commerces en pleine activité, au début d’un essor intéressant, d’où la présence d’un corps social parfaitement harmonisé, ouvriers, cadres, patrons…”\textsuperscript{117} Le Corbusier argued that he, rather than the architect Jacques André, appointed by the MRU, was a better suited candidate to oversee the reconstruction of Saint-Dié, because he had friendly ties with Duval (a mover and shaker whose influence, loyalty and moral quality Le Corbusier praised to the minister). Le Corbusier also promoted his contacts in other milieus that would allow him to unite patrons, trade unions and the local church around a common goal. Dautry agreed that Le Corbusier be allowed to present his “linear industrial city” plan to the townspeople, alongside those of Jacques André. When his ideas were opposed by the local leftist

\textsuperscript{115} For an extensive discussion of Dautry’s career as technocrat for the French State, see: Rémi Baudouï, Raoul Dautry, 1880-1951: Le technocrate de la République, Paris, Balland, 1992.

\textsuperscript{116} Le Corbusier did receive this honorary title from Zürich Universität in 1929.

\textsuperscript{117} Duval, Le Corbusier: l’écorce et la fleur, p. 89.
opposition, Le Corbusier derided the communists and trade unionists as “des simples gens” who did not understand urbanism and deplored their attitude as “retardataire”.118 In fact, many within the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) and the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) expressed their hope that the reconstruction efforts going on in different French towns would be the initiative of working people themselves, through their own militant organizations, rather than patrician capitalists acting on their behalf, however benevolently. Le Corbusier did not pay much attention to their grievances, and mentioned to Dautry that his Parisian friend Paul Sébillot (a painter, writer and ethnographer who was also a prominent member of the PCF and of the CGT) as a staunch partisans of the CIAM-sponsored Chartre d’Athènes119 should be brought in to rein in the small-town people.120 He even wrote that the local clergy was on the side of the modernists: “L’Évêque, qui a désiré me voir m’a fait une déclaration de principe préliminaire qui est celle-ci: Je suis d’avis qu’une époque n’a le droit de bâtir qu’avec les matériaux et les techniques qui lui sont propres.”121 Even if the tone of his correspondence with Dautry was self-aggrandizing, Le Corbusier nevertheless attempted to present himself as a part of a larger team, mentioning the name of his close associates and the many experts and professionals involved in his Atelier des Bâtisseurs (ATBAT)

118 As pointedly noted by Kristin Ross, in reference to Henri Lefebvre’s critique of French technocratic rhetoric: “The ideology of technocracy as mature rationality divides the world into two: those ‘in the know’ are adults, and everyone else is a child. It thus defines all social opposition as ‘immature’ (...).” Ross, Fast Cars, Clean Bodies, p. 179.
120 In Sur les Quatre Routes, Le Corbusier suggests that his work as an urbanist is apolitical, however, in the very next sentence, he says that the masses should not be able to decide on urban issues, only the chiefs – yet another indicator of the contempt the architect had for democratic processes: “Je n’ai jamais fait de politique, étant pris entièrement dans le torrent de l’urbanisme; les politiques sont incohérentes dans l’urbanisme [...]. La politique est de la discussion; l’urbanisme, de l’action en préparation. Je ne suis pas partisan de faire voter par la masse sur des questions dont la décision appartient aux chefs.” Le Corbusier, Sur les Quatre Routes, Paris: Denoël/Gonthier, 1970, p. 280. My emphasis.
121 Duval, Le Corbusier: l’écorce et la fleur, p. 90.
group, going so far as to present his office as a “coopérative”, hereby tapping, once again, into the prevalent ideology that France, following the Liberation, was initiating a “third way” beyond capitalism and socialism and a new era of teamwork, reconciliation and social consensus across political factions.\textsuperscript{122}

\textbf{Figure 40.} Le Corbusier, Model of the master plan for Saint-Dié, 1945. \textbf{Figure 41.} Le Corbusier/Pierre Wogenscky, Plan of the Saint-Dié city centre, 1945. Fondation Le Corbusier.

The shape of the urban scheme for a reconstructed Saint-Dié, and the way Le Corbusier would come to describe his project, offers some interesting connections to his idea of a “synthesis of the arts” and to the cultural preoccupations of bureaucrats like Eugène Claudius-Petit. After the Liberation, Claudius-Petit was enthusiastically declaring, in the first post-World War II issue of \textit{L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui}, to which he was asked to contribute by the editor André Bloc, that it was time for a “French Renaissance”. “\textit{La France se doit à elle-même, pour retrouver sa vraie grandeur,}” declared Petit, “\textit{de donner au monde, le style de notre société. Comme au temps des cathédrales, avant de rayonner,}”

c'est sur notre sol que nous devons inscrire les marques de notre génie.” Claudius used similar references in his speech at the Assemblée Consultative Provisoire in May 1945, where he presented his vision for a comprehensive planning reform of the country:

Pour tout dire, il s'agit, par cette réforme, d’assurer la réussite de la “renaissance française” [...] Ou bien la France recommencera son passé, reconstituera un musée en toc [...] ou bien la France continuera sa tradition. Sa tradition? Elle est de tenir compte des événements, de tenir compte des possibilités nouvelles, de tenir compte des matières nouvelles, et de construire des villes jeunes, où l’homme sera réconcilié avec la nature.

Such patriotic ideas on the Reconstruction as the harbinger of a “Renaissance”, in which artists and architects would play a crucial role alongside technocratic leaders in restoring France’s past tradition and grandeur, had wide currency at the time. The tenth PCF congress, held in 1945 under the leadership of Maurice Thorez, was indeed placed under the theme of the “Renaissance française”.

The communist party was then benefiting from immense public sympathies because of its crucial role in the Resistance and some of its members occupied key governmental powers. It is in this context that the expression was taken up by postwar leftist magazines such as Les Lettres Françaises. For instance, the writer and preservationist Georges Pillement writes in the March 21, 1945 issue that architecture must be repositioned as the first of the major arts and extend its aesthetic

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124 Journal officiel de la République française. Débats de l’Assemblée Consultative Provisoire (séance du lundi, 5 mai 1945), pp. 284-297. For a better sense of the different voices being heard in these governmental debates, including Dautry’s, see also the previous séance: Journal officiel de la République française. Débats de l’Assemblée Consultative Provisoire (séance du vendredi, 2 mai 1945). Claudius-Petit’s speech was also printed as “Vers la cité de notre temps,” Volontés (21 March 1945), n/p.

reach to all spheres of urban planning. He also called for a new type of architect, inspired by the 18th century French “surintendent des bâtiments”, who would have wide reach to preserve historic landmarks and to construct new modern infrastructures:

La France nouvelle se doit de présider à une renaissance d’un art qui doit être le premier de tous. Pour cela il convient de ne plus confier à un architecte un seul édifice, mais toute une rue, toute une place, tous les ensembles d’une ville. C’est ainsi seulement que nos grands architectes pourront donner leur mesure, c’est ainsi seulement que des villes comme Caen ou encore Rouen pourront compenser les pertes inestimables qu’elles ont subies. (...) Un homme qui saura grouper autour de lui tous les architectes de talent prêt à collaborer à cette œuvre de rénovation, qui leur insufflera l’ardeur dont il sera animé, qui contrôlera et guidera leur travaux, unifiera leurs tendances et donnera à l’architecture, grâce à cette reconstruction de notre pays dévasté, le style qui lui manque.126

This fantasy of a “French Renaissance” shared by progressive intellectuals, artists, and technocrats127, could, in many ways, be linked to the “résistencialisme” prevalent in France. “Résistencialisme” is a neologism created by the historian Henry Rousso.128 It is meant to designate the political myth constructed largely by the Christian-Democrats, the Gaullists and the Communists in circles of power after the war that France, as a whole, overwhelmingly resisted the Occupation. In the Communist scenario, the working class resistance takes center stage, while in the Gaulliste narrative, it is the great Général who provided the heroic driving force. In reality, however, the majority of French were

127 It also had significant echoes within the more progressive elements of the Catholic church, such as Père Marie-Alain Couturier, who commissioned figurative modern artists like Jean Lurçat, Fernand Léger, Henri Matisse and others to decorate churches such as Notre-Dame-de-Toute-Grâce du plateau d’Assy, and who commissioned Le Corbusier to rebuild a chapel in Ronchamp.
supportive, directly and indirectly, to Pétain’s regime. Political differences were therefore
downplayed and instead, appeals were made to the idea of an intrinsically progressive
French nation and to the redemptive powers of art and culture. Le Corbusier presented
himself as beyond politics, a view that was reinforced by people who obviously knew of
his role under Vichy: he could certainly be understood as participating in this pervasive
amnesiac mindset, and not a mere product of his opportunism.

With this in mind, I think we can start to look at some of Le Corbusier’s art in a different
and more critical light. Take one of the lithographs of his lavish Le Poème de l’Angle
Droit, published as a large volume in 1955. Le Corbusier presents the motif of two
interlacing hands touching each other. It is described as a symbol of the necessary
reconciliation of the opposing “left” and “right”:

\[
\begin{align*}
& J'ai pens\'e que deux mains \\
& et leurs doigts entrecrois\'\text{\^e}s \\
& expriment cette droite et \\
& cette gauche impitoyablement \\
& solides \\text{\& si n\'\^ecessairement} \\
& \text{\& concilier.} \\
& \text{Seule possibilit\'e de survie}
\end{align*}
\]
While it is reasonable to read this image as a symptom of an inevitable “mellowing-out process” associated with Le Corbusier’s increasing old age and with “his attempt to reassert a unified identity after a long career spent in the relentless reinvention of his public image”\textsuperscript{130}, I think it may be even more meaningfully linked to the prevailing social, political, and historical situation in France. The link does not seem that far fetched: after all, the color scheme chosen by the extremely visually conscious Le Corbusier for the cover of the Poème is none other than that of the tricolore flag of France, and the words in the middle of the cover, divided in five separate lines, bear a direct resemblance to that of the “croix de lorraine”, the symbol of the French Resistance and, by that time, of Gaullist political parties (such as the Rassemblement du Peuple Français, or the Mouvement Républicain Populaire).

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.8\textwidth]{flag.png}
\caption{Flag of the France Libre. Figure 45. Documents of the French Résistance showing De Gaulle and the Croix de Lorraine, 1944.}
\end{figure}

Le Corbusier’s poem should, of course, not be taken as a direct and simple illustration of a specific political ideology: Le Corbusier’s poem is far too metaphysical and Gaullism far too contradictory to be fully reduced to a left-right centrism. Nevertheless, I would argue that it is important to pay attention to how his poem – which echoes directly his discourse

\textsuperscript{130} Pearson, Integration of Art and Architecture in the Work of Le Corbusier, p. 332.
on the “synthesis of the arts” and the “French Renaissance” as conciliatory tools to create a restored public sphere—reflect broader political and cultural discourses in postwar France, more specifically the notion that a union of left and right was the road to survival and redemption. It is indeed central to the Gaulliste humanist myth that for France to rid itself of its internal contradictions and to have a prominent role internationally, it had to be led by powerful leaders, be unified by centralizing government forces and by strong institutions and cultural leaders. This is the political alibi that France, as a colonial power, and that Le Corbusier, as an architect with grand artistic ambitions for the country, tried to uphold.

Thus we can see how the stage was set for an equation of synthesis, centrism, and elite leadership. Le Corbusier was very keen, with his postwar urban proposals (none of which would come to fruition on a broad scale, at least in France), on becoming the strong man of the “French Renaissance”. His comprehensive urban project in Saint-Dié reconciles architecture and culture with a natural environment as central to the reconstruction of France’s postwar identity. The town’s functional necessities, such as the major highways and the rebuilt manufactures, were zoned on the outskirts. The north-south axis was to be a cultural procession and devised specifically for pedestrians. As they would head north on the main street from the south bank of the Meurthe river towards the historic city center and the Romanesque church, citizens would be greeted by different monuments dispersed through a large open urban space: a tall, multi-functional administrative and civic building, a community center, numerous cafés, a space for tourists to buy crafts from
local artisans\textsuperscript{131} and a very prominent helicoidally shaped museum, based on Le Corbusier’s decades-old proposal for a “musée à croissance illimitée”. Le Corbusier started working on the “unlimited growth museum”, a square-shaped labyrinth which could be expanded by the addition of standardized elements, in the 1920s and came up with several models, plans and sketches for it in the 1930s, including a series for the project construction of a national contemporary art museum he sent to Christian Zervos, editor of the magazine Cahiers d’Art. He also developed this project further under Vichy. The projects never materialized as such, but it became a recurrent motif in many of Le Corbusier’s urban projects, including the exhibition project for a “synthesis of the arts” at Porte Maillot (discussed later in this chapter). The different multi-story “unités d’habitation” were interspersed throughout the town, never too far away from the center, and the architect also made sure that plenty of other spaces would be allowed for pedestrians and for cyclists, who could take in the daily pleasures and hygienic benefits of the numerous “espaces verts”. In his working documents, Saint-Dié is often referred to by Le Corbusier as “une authentique communauté industrielle” and as a place of “échanges culturels”. The architect even goes so far as to describe its rebuilt center as a “redécouverte d’un véritable centre civique analogue à la place St-Marc de Venise”, referring to the great late medieval Venetian piazza. Via Sigfried Giedion, such ideas on the redeemed cultural city center were to become a central concern of the CIAM meeting in Hoddesdon in 1951. Le Corbusier would indeed promote the idea of the center of

\textsuperscript{131} As Charissa Nannette Terranova notes about crafts and tourism in France at this point in time: “Although threatened by the forces of standardization, rationalization, and commodification coming out of the capital of the country, it would inevitably be through tourism and, later, urbanization that the French regions would maintain their important hold both materially and as part of the nation and psychologically as part of the French ‘collective memory’.” Charissa Nannette Terranova, French State Vernacular, p. 23.
cities as “a meeting place of the arts” in the conference’s proceedings, published under the organicist title The Heart of the City. Towards the Humanisation of Urban Life.132

Following his plan to convince the Americans of the great soundness of his postwar urban vision and the vitality of France’s renewed cultural life, Le Corbusier, thanks to funding he received from the direction of the Ministère des Affaires Étrangères (then led by the socialist and former French Premier Ministre Léon Blum133), traveled to America in 1945 alongside the politician and technocrat Claudius-Petit to participate in an experts committee for the United Nations building project in New York City. This mission was also part of the French government’s efforts to secure money for the reconstruction. Le Corbusier used that opportunity to promote the Modulor and to organize various exhibitions of his work. At the same time, Claudius-Petit and Blum would try to show France’s great modern ambitions by showcasing the work of Le Corbusier. Enlarged versions of the plans for Saint-Dié were shown on Modulor-sized panels at the I.C.A. in Boston (the main section of the exhibition was titled “Architecture and Painting Have Forms in Common”) and at the Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis (under the theme Le Corbusier: Architect, Painter, Writer).134 These visually eclectic exhibitions (that blended Le Corbusier’s paintings, architectural models, paintings, plans and photographs), unlike

133 In the August 23, 1945 issue of Jeunesse, Hebdomadaire des Jeunesses Socialistes, Léon Blum published “La Cité Future,” a plea for a new form of planning in which he fully endorses Le Corbusier.
134 For a more detailed description of Le Corbusier’s exhibitions throughout these decades, see the exhibition catalogue: Emmanuel Guigon, ed., Le Corbusier Expose, Besançon: Musée des Beaux-Arts et d’Archéologie, 2011. The exhibition catalogue of the I.C.A. show, which presents Le Corbusier as “synthesizer,” was published as Le Corbusier: New World of Space, Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1948.
the one organized by Hitchcock and Johnson at MoMA in 1932, were not aimed at
codifying modern architecture as a style, but were rather promoting an individual – Le
Corbusier’s reconstructive spatial vision and, at the same time, the image of Le Corbusier
himself as simultaneously an artist and an architect. Further articles on Saint-Dié were
published in the English-speaking magazine Architectural Record135 and the architect
made references to his artistic and urban reform projects in a speaking engagement at the
New School for Social Research in New York City. In a letter to his friend Duval,
Corbusier mentioned how Saint-Dié was perceived by his American audience as “un
symbole de l’étape de la Renaissance française.”136

Back in France, because of the extremely dire economic situation and delays in acquiring
much needed material resources, governmental and local reconstruction efforts were
makeshift and ad hoc, at best. Le Corbusier’s urban proposal left Dautry indifferent and
was finally rejected by the local community associations on January 31, 1946.137 To Le
Corbusier’s great scorn, the so-called “simples gens” used their democratic right to vote to
counter his grand urban vision, which they deemed to be too monumental and out of
scale with the urban reality of Saint-Dié.138 The comments regarding Le Corbusier’s plan

Published in French previously as Le Corbusier, “Un plan pour Saint-Dié,” L’Homme et l’architecture, no.
5-6 (November-December 1945), pp. 39-44.
136 Le Corbusier, letter to Jean-Jacques Duval, July 25, 1946 (Fondation Le Corbusier, document Q3-1-6, p. 1.)
138 For a more detailed discussion of this particular debate, see: Vincent Bradel, “Le Corbusier et
Saint-Dié: Les termes du débat,” in Jean-Yves Andrieux and Fabienne Chevallier, eds., Reception of
architecture of the modern movement: image, usage, heritage, Saint-Étienne: Université de Saint-Étienne,
2005, pp. 365-370. Today, contrary to the original view of Le Corbusier’s Saint-Dié as an objectionable
proposition, some French critics look back at this project as a proto-“green”/“sustainable” type of urban
development, because of the emphasis on mid-high density housing close to workplaces and the
construction of many roads for pedestrians and cyclists. See: Frédérique Mongel, “Trop en avance sur son
made by the mayor of Saint-Dié, Jules Évrat, are again indicative of pervasive French anxieties vis-à-vis America in regards to cultural and urban affairs. The plan, according to the mayor, was rejected because it was a mere caricature of a city of the New World: “Il ne répond pas aux aspirations de la majorité des habitants et à leur voeu le plus cher qui est de retrouver leur gentille petite ville de province et non la caricature d’une grande cité du Nouveau Monde.”

Regardless of the central government’s indifference or Le Corbusier’s defeat in the local political arena, the Saint-Dié manufacturer Jean-Jacques Duval was very keen on maintaining his professional association with his friend Le Corbusier, and even commissioned him in 1946 to rebuild the family’s factory. Even if it may appear, upon first impression, as just one among many functionalist postwar factories, and not as overtly “artistic” as Le Corbusier’s sculptural Ronchamp Chapel, his Usine Paul et Duval in Saint-Dié, listed on the UNESCO World’s Heritage Site list since the late 1980s, is arguably one of the most relevant built examples of his attempt at a redemptive “synthesis of the arts”. It is also one of the first major projects in which Le Corbusier tried to implement his humanist Modulor principles.

As with the Unité d’Habitation in Marseille, the Usine now stands as a single fragment of his rejected urban vision for a “cité linéaire industrielle”. These two projects, a factory and a standardized mass-housing complex, are particularly interesting to this discussion.

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139 Letter to the Mayor of Saint-Dié, Gaston Colnat, dated 3-12-45, quoted in Bradel, “Le Corbusier et Saint-Dié,” p. 367. The modernist historian and critic Sigfried Giedion, commenting on Le Corbusier’s failed project in Saint-Dié, shared the architect’s high-minded attitude, as he later declared: “this is but one more example of the tragic gulf that still exists between the creative solutions and the postwar judgments of politicians and administrators.” Sigfried Giedion, Architecture, You and Me: The Diary of a Development, Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 1958.
on postwar France, since they are materialized symbols of French reconstruction and modernization. Duval was one of the forty local industrialists whose manufacturing plants had been burned down by the Nazis in 1944. After he received funding from the Dommages de Guerre, the department of the MRU in charge of reimbursing victims of the war, he and his father chose to commission Le Corbusier to build their new “bonneterie” (which produced ladies undergarments), sited about fifty meters away from the town’s historic church. Duval expressed publicly his hope that the factory would be more than simply economical and functional. Like Le Corbusier’s larger urban vision, it was to be a manifestation of great cultural modernity, a generator of symbolic meanings appropriate for a humane place of work, a place where the profits of the owner would be totally compatible with the sense of wellbeing and aesthetic satisfaction of the docile employees. Le Corbusier would also choose the moniker “green factory” presented in Les trois établissements humains, to underline the purportedly organic connection of the factory to its natural surrounding and the benefits of sun and air to the workers. The objectives of the board of directors were thus described by Duval:

- rendre cette usine la plus fonctionnelle possible ;
- ne pas dépasser le budget de reconstruction allouée par les Dommages de guerre ;
- donner à la totalité du personnel employé les meilleures conditions de travail mais aussi des satisfactions esthétiques.

Even if Le Corbusier had been a staunch promoter of a machine aesthetic for years, he had only limited experience with building an actual factory. The only other factory commission he had received was in 1940, when he was asked by the French military to build a munitions factory complex near Aubusson. Interestingly, Le Corbusier used the same exact name to describe both projects: “green factory” – which shows how the
qualifier “green” had a very ambivalent and potentially deceptive meaning. It did not matter how much actual destruction to the ecological world the factory’s production would entail. What counted as “green” to the architect was mainly how well sited it would be in relationship to nature and how bosky its vistas would be for the employees and the workers. Hence, Le Corbusier’s work for the military complicates any wishful description of his practice as a sign of ecological or sustainable architecture.

The Usine Claude et Duval meets its basic functional requirements quite well and was completed, according to its owner, under budget. With the use of concrete pilotis to elevate the building, a typical Corbusian solution since the 1920s, a large area in front of the building was left open for circulation. Le Corbusier, having thought of this factory as part of a broader mid-level density urban scheme, assumed the workers would either walk
or bike to work, and left areas for bike storage near the factory’s main entrance. The factory’s general production cycle was relatively simple: the raw material, textile, was first levered to the third floor, and then gradually processed down to the second floor (the workshops) and to the first floors (the stocking area). The administrators would work on the upper floors in spacious office areas with movable partitions. Many air ducts were included in the overall design in order to control the factory’s temperature and to propel dust out of the building, while large window panels were employed on every side to bring in sunlight and illuminate the work areas, as well as to offer carefully framed natural “panoramas” to the employees.

Figure 49. Façade of the Usine Claude et Duval showing the brise-soleil, Saint-Dié. Photograph by Olivier Martin-Gambier. 2005. Figure 50. Portico of the Usine Claude et Duval. Photograph by Olivier Martin-Gambier. 2005.

An innovative and immediately recognizable aspect of the façade are the reinforced concrete brises-soleil (on all sides except north-west), which Le Corbusier offsets 20 cm away from the façade to avoid glare and overheating, in accordance with the orientation of the sun at different times of the day. The pattern of the brise-soleil, according to Le Corbusier, was carefully organized and proportioned according to Modulor-derived calculations.140

What is truly significant for our discussion of the “synthesis of the arts” in this rare built example is the strategic way Le Corbusier handled specific architectonic details and included polychrome and decorative elements. It was indeed essential, in his view and Duval’s, to elevate industrial labor to something more, to something aesthetically pleasing, almost spiritual. Duval’s testimony, as well as Le Corbusier’s correspondence, are filled with such elevating cultural references. Duval describes entering the factory as stepping into a cloister to the glory of work, while Le Corbusier promotes his “Renaissance” factory to his patron as “un petit chef-d’oeuvre d’esprit florentin”\textsuperscript{141}.

While it is made primarily of reinforced concrete, the Corbusian material par excellence in those years, the factory’s façade also includes wood and glass. Several outside walls were covered with aged, rough, pinkish sandstone rocks which were fragments of the previous, burned out Duval factory. This deliberately staged material contrast between the natural, the technological and the historical, made visible to the onlookers, is fully homogenized in a new, totally modernized organicist whole, as if perfectly sutured to its urban setting (right around the same time, Le Corbusier would use part of the old Notre-Dame-du-Haut chapel to build his own sculptural monument in Ronchamp). In this case, rather than using these fragments as an opportunity to reflect on the destruction of the war, or the historicity of the building itself, Le Corbusier fits them together perfectly as part of the promise that modernization, guided by architecture, would overcome all obstacles.\textsuperscript{142}

\textsuperscript{141} Duval, Le Corbusier: l’écorce et la fleur, p. 144.
\textsuperscript{142} As Kristin Ross eloquently argued about French modernization in those years, which seems fitting to quote here: “Modernization promises a perfect reconciliation of past and future in an endless present, a
The other key aesthetic choice is the overall polychrome scheme. The palette chosen—red, yellow, light green, and blue—is more elementary and more vivid than the pastels of Le Corbusier’s Purist villas. Polychromy was determined according to two principles. The first was somewhat pragmatic, in determining colors for different types of appliances and pipes: red for fire-prevention material, green for air ducts, yellow for electricity and blue for water conduits. For the other architectonic elements of the factory—the walls, partitions and ceilings—Le Corbusier, according to Duval’s testimony, came on site with various color samples which he would hold up in the air to choose which colors were to

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They are also the same colors used to differentiate the different zones in his Saint-Dié master plan, perhaps as a distant echo of his original plan for a comprehensive reform of the town. It should also be pointed out that such a visual differentiation of functional elements via color (heating pipes, doors, etc.) has precedents in German functionalist architecture, for instance, Bruno Taut’s ideas on polychromy expressed in his richly illustrated book Ein Wohnhaus: Mit 104 Photos und 72 Zeichnungen, einer Farbenaufnahme und einer Farbenzusammstellung, Stuttgart: W. Keller, 1927. It also follows the common color codes used in industries to avoid confusion and accidents, a system that was formalized in the postwar years.
be placed where (an idiosyncratic practice that is consistent with his previous attempts, described by the architectural historian Van Heer, to choose where to put colors on site after the building was almost fully completed and as part of an intuitive and embodied "promenade architecturale").144

Figure 54. Workshop on the second floor of the Usine Claude et Duval. Photograph by Olivier Martin-Gambler, 2005. Figure 55. Service staircase and fire station inside the Usine Claude et Duval. Photograph by Olivier Martin-Gambler, 2005.

Here, polychromy, as hailed in his 1937 speech Les tendances de l'architecture rationaliste en rapport avec la collaboration de la peinture et de la sculpture, served a reconstructive, functional, even didactic role (as opposed to mural painting, which would have made a wall metaphorically "explode"). It also served as a way to create a sense of visual direction to the users of the building. Other notable artistic elements of the Duval factory are the white, green and yellow square tiles interspersed in a chequered pattern on the wall of the penthouse on the roof terrace. Here, the employees could take a break and look at the town and the mountains nearby (in his Oeuvres Complètes, there is a drawing

144 Van Heer points out: “The way in which Le Corbusier realized the distribution of colours in a building deviates completely from the way in which the design of the building appeared on the drawing table. The physical presence of the architect and the direct visibility of the architecture were the most important instruments in the determination of the colour.” Also, “To Le Corbusier, architecture is a question of the body, with the caveat that although the gestures and movements are linked to, dictated by and handle the architectonic forms, aesthetic appreciation occurs via the eye. It is exclusively due to the stimulation via the eye that the sensation of the beauty of architecture arises.” Van Heer, The Architectonic Colour, p. 120.
for a distinctively Corbusian biomorphic sculpture to be put nearby in a loggia of the
terrace, to be seen in front of an aperture opening onto the natural landscape, but this
project seems to have never materialized). According to Duval: "C’est à la main que Le
Corbusier va confier la finition de certains détails, montrant la sensibilité et
l’irremplaçable savoir faire d’un bon maçon".

Le Corbusier insisted that the construction workers used small pointing trowels, the
quintessential tool of masons, to apply the joints of the walls and to apply the mortar wall
in order to leave visual evidence of their manual labour (a kind of finishing touch that
reminds us of Jeanneret’s training in La-Chaux-de-Fonds). With this mural
arrangement, caught somewhere between applied decoration and geometrical patterning
and placed in a recreational area where white collar middle-managers and blue collar

145 Le Corbusier allowed for a photograph of this specific detail to be included in Paul Damaz’ famous
anthology Art in European Architecture, which suggests that he probably considered it to be one of the
most significant ones.
147 Although, in this case, there is something of a reversal of John Ruskin’s proposition. According to
Ruskin’s Seven Lamps of Architecture, the sign of the hand’s imperfection in carved ornament is a sign of
the full integration of design and execution prior to the division of labor, and appears as democratic. In this
case, however, the worker is following an architect’s strict orders; the trace of the hand is more a staged
presence where the architect is trying to conceal capitalist fragmentation of tasks by making it appear fully
integrated and humanized. For a discussion of Le Corbusier’s interest in Ruskin, see: Mary Patricia May
workers would gather and mingle, Le Corbusier sought to harmonize landscape and architecture, craftsmanship and industry, the order of the pattern and the radiant joy of polychrome tiles.

Le Corbusier incorporated other artworks on the inside of the Duval factory, including greyscale photomurals in the hall of the management offices on the top floor. Gone was the populist imagery of his brief stint with the Popular Front – instead the work of the universal architect-plasticien takes center stage. Two of them are enlarged Purist still lifes from the 1920s, while the other one is a sketch of the Corbusian “open hand”. The omnipresent “open hand” in this phase of Le Corbusier’s career (now the symbol of his posthumous Fondation Le Corbusier and a large monument in the landscape of Chandigarh, India) was to reappear as a small relief sculpture next to the front door of the factory, hence visible to all the employees coming into work every morning.

According to the architect, it is meant to symbolize a process of giving and of receiving, in other words, a symbol of generosity and sharing. It also is, in his self-created mythology, a symbol spurred from his “inner anxieties” about how men often turn into enemies. Whether or not his anxieties were caused by the war, the fratricidal postwar purges or because of possible uprisings in France (which remained a distinct possibly years after the Libération) is unclear. In the context of this factory and of Le Corbusier’s work during the Reconstruction, it could certainly be interpreted as a humanist symbol, standing for the purportedly benevolent hand of the architect-plasticien, reaching out as a mediating

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figure between the capitalist owner and his employees. The hand, which supposes, in Le
Corbusier’s terms, a mutual and equal relationship between people, could also be seen as
a timely symbol of class collaboration (in an interview conducted in the 1960s, Le
Corbusier mentions how it was often received as an anti-communist symbol).¹⁴⁹

![Figure 58. Photomural of Le Corbusier's 1923 Nature morte aux nombreux objets in the office of J.J. Duval in the Usine Claude et Duval, Saint-Dié. Photograph by Olivier Martin-Gambler, 2005.](image1)

![Figure 59. Front entrance of the Usine Claude et Duval, showing Le Corbusier's Open Hand relief sculpture fixed onto a historic piece of sidewalk. Photograph by Olivier Martin-Gambler, 2005.](image2)

Another deliberately staged sign of the architect’s hegemonizing presence is the human-
scaled Modulor panel in one of the administrative offices. It is, in fact, an enlarged
photograph of one of the Modulor men on the façade of the Unité d’Habitation in

Marseille (a project which Le Corbusier was working on at the same time that we will turn to in a moment). The Modulor man, the muscular male figure holding up his hand in the air seen in the diagrams, is inscribed in a panel of concrete cast in wood on the construction site. It is positioned next to a movable chalkboard partition used during business meetings. Once again, it does not act so much as a framed, standalone photograph for detached aesthetic contemplation, but is rather fully integrated to the building, acting as a didactic reminder that all of Le Corbusier’s art and architecture, in Saint-Dié as in Marseilles as in Bogota, were purportedly responsive to the human scale and to universal human needs. Its status as a photograph also seems to suggest how the Modulor was, like the photographic medium, infinitely reproducible.

Despite all the optimistic talk by the architect and the client about a “French Renaissance”, some of the themes championed here, in particular those of the happy cooperation between workers and their boss, were eerily reminiscent of the paternalist ideas prevalent under Pétain’s National Revolution.¹⁵⁰ A case in point is an article

published in the January 1946 issue of the journal *L'Organisation à la française: Cahiers de la Compagnie d'ingénieurs en organisation*, written by the engineer, businessman, World War I veteran and Vichy collaborationist Colonel Émile Rimailho (which Le Corbusier himself read and annotated while he was working on the Usine Claude et Duval). Rimailho’s “L’acceuil de l’usine” describes the typical, gloomy working conditions in factories, and offers a plea for a communal, friendly and aesthetically pleasing factory led by a benevolent employer, the same kinds of words Le Corbusier himself would use to describe his “green factory” to Dautry of the MRU. The Colonel goes on:

Nos Entreprises éprouvent, certes, des difficultés exceptionnelles, mais chaque jour, de par notre profession même, nous pouvons constater les efforts qui multiplient, un peu partout, les Entreprises de toute nature et de toute importance, également soucieuses de progrès. À tous les degrés de la hiérarchie, nous y rencontrerons des hommes dont l’incontestable valeur, professionnelle et humaine, doit faire les précieux agents de notre Reconstruction.151

It must be remembered that the idea of developing a mediatory, third-way “à la française”, one led by technically proficient and morally upstanding agents was common to both De Gaulle’s postwar liberatory rhetoric and Vichy.152 Colonel Rimailho’s seemingly benevolent rhetoric, which appealed to Le Corbusier’s elitist worldview and which was totally compatible with Duval’s ambitions for his family business, indeed

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152 The name of Rimailho’s 1943 book *Organisation “à la française”*, Bordeaux: Delmas, 1943, published under Vichy, was the subtitle of the magazine published in the postwar years to which Le Corbusier subscribed. As Amdur argued: “Vichy’s National Revolution (…) endured well into the Liberation era, in part because their appeal bridged usual partisan divisions.” Kathryn E. Amdu, “Paternalism, Productivism, Collaborationism,” p. 138.
carries with it the heavy burden of authoritarian politics, namely, the need for a State-led, corporatist ordering of the body politic.\footnote{This aestheticizing discourse of modernization – one that posits an organic and non-alienated form of industrial production and a pacified type of labor organization that condemns any type of trade unionist militancy as “retardaire” – was perhaps nowhere as developed as in Germany. As Anson Rabinbach has shown, “under National Socialism, aesthetics and politics were integrated not only in mass festivals and public architecture, but in the sphere of production as well.” A case in point is the Amt Schönheit der Arbeit’s attempt to “radically transform both the interior and exterior landscape of the German industrial plant” by the use of glass in factories, as well as by the introduction of lawns and gardens in the factory’s surroundings – ideas strikingly similar to those proposed by the Le Corbusier for his “usines vertes”. See Anson Rabinbach, “The Aesthetics of Production Under the Third Reich,” Journal of Contemporary History, no. 11 (1976), pp. 43-74. Note also that there were several exchanges between French and Nazi industrialists, business leaders and party officials prior to and during the World War II occupation. For instance, Oliver Dard et al., eds., L’Occupation, l’État français et les entreprises, Paris: Association pour le Développement de l’Histoire Économique, 2000.} This is certainly not to say that the Claude et Duval factory was in and of itself a direct manifestation of a fascist or corporatist mindset, simply because Le Corbusier was interested in these ideas. Recent historical scholarship has also shown how the dichotomy of “résistant” versus “collaborateur” is very much a grey area for commercial business practices during and immediately after the war.\footnote{For his call to make the Unité d’Habitation a national prototype for mass production, see this article published in a widely-circulating professional journal: Le Corbusier, “L’habitation moderne,” Population, vol. 3, no. 3 (1948), pp. 417-440.} But these very ambiguities should act as a firm reminder that Le Corbusier’s public call for “green factories” (which were military in origin) as well as for a restored, universal (i.e. male) body were certainly not self-reflexive about the recent political past and may have much more sinister and duplicitous connections to previous authoritarian discourses than historians have so far been willing to admit.

Like the Usine Claude et Duval in Saint-Dié, the Unité d’Habitation in Marseille is a built fragment of a larger urban scheme: the Unité, as building type, was originally destined to become a standardized housing type in Le Corbusier’s postwar cities.\footnote{For instance, Oliver Dard et al., eds., L’Occupation, l’État français et les entreprises, Paris: Association pour le Développement de l’Histoire Économique, 2000.} However, only a few were ever built, specifically in Marseille, Nantes, Paris, Briey-en-
Forêt, Berlin and Firminy). As part of the “linear industrial city”, the urban model based on liberal and collectivist models, the Unité was supposed to harmonize intimacy and collectivity, spirituality and worldly enjoyment. The one in Marseille was not commissioned by a private investor, but by Dautry and the MRU (the Ministry would be taken over by Claudius-Petit prior to the Unité’s completion in 1952, so the latter would supervise the end of the project and would give a speech at the inauguration). It is, by far, one of the better known projects by Le Corbusier, one that continues to spark fascination, emulation and controversy even to this day. Since the history of the Unité d’Habitation is very well documented already, unlike the Usine Claude et Duval, it will suffice here to give a basic overview of the project and to focus on raising the key points regarding its relationship to Le Corbusier’s synthesis discourse.

The Unité d’Habitation in Marseilles is a large housing complex on pilotis built of reinforced concrete. It contains 337 standardized apartment units (of 23 different types, depending on family size), as well as communal areas, a kindergarten, a rooftop terrace and small businesses on the middle floors. It features glass windows on each side to let natural light in; the building is oriented east-west and features a large, Modulor-proportioned brise-soleil to avoid glare and overheating (potentially a major concern in the south of France). The façade is distinctive because of its overall polychrome scheme.

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156 The range of formal and ideological influence on this particular Le Corbusier building type are as ideologically and temporally disparate as that of his broader urban vision: religious architecture (Tuscan and Cistercian monasteries), French Beaux-Art technocratic architecture (Tony Garnier’s Cité Industrielle), nineteenth utopian architecture (Charles Fourier’s Phalanstère and Jean-Baptiste Godin’s Familistère) and Soviet communal apartments (Mosei Ginsburg’s Narkomfin in Moscow). See: Kenneth Frampton, Le Corbusier, London: Thames and Hudson, 2001, p. 150-151.

similar in color to the polychromy in Saint-Dié. When seen from a certain distance, the
Unité looks somewhat like a monolithic bloc (hence its reductive comparison, in the
following decades, as a boring postwar “grand ensemble”).

![Figure 62. Outside view of Le Corbusier’s Unité d’Habitation, Marseille, 1950s. Figure 63. Hallway showing the various colored doors inside of the Unité d’Habitation in Marseille, present day.](image)

However, upon closer inspection and when looked at a diagonal angle, it creates a strong
visual effect and a feeling of rhythm since each recessed window sill is coloured alternately
in red, blue, yellow or green. The polychromy extends to the interior of the building,
where doors are each painted a different color from their neighbors. Multicolored lights
were also used in the interior passageways. According to the architect, the consistency of
the polychromy was guaranteed by the use of standardized color samples produced by the
French paint company Matroil.

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158 Jean-Claude Carrère, “La polychromie extérieure dans l’Unité d’Habitation de Marseille,”
Couleur (1979), pp. 36-38.
Although the Unité is primarily residential, Le Corbusier had planned to concentrate different social functions inside of the building. Small businesses were opened so that the inhabitants could go buy provisions and other daily necessities. Because it was like a self-contained small town with inner streets, it would come to be known as the Cité Radieuse (after his plan for a Ville Radieuse, 1935, although Le Corbusier never referred to it as such). Le Corbusier instead preferred to describe the Unité as an experimental “laboratory” for modernizing domestic life. Each individual apartment unit had two floors, and would feature some of the more modern, American amenities that were being gradually introduced into the French household during the Reconstruction (private bathroom, electric oven, double kitchen sink, garbage disposal, ice box, etc. were built in directly). Each domestic unit, as in all the other areas of the Unité, was regulated by the ergonomic Modulor measurements. A lot of storage areas were planned by the architect inside each apartment to clear up some space, and each unit originally came with simple and efficient pieces of furniture by the designer Charlotte Perriand (a former Union pour l’Art member with whom Le Corbusier had been collaborating for years).

In many of the promotional photographs (such as those included in the Oeuvres complètes, or seen in postwar architectural magazines), the apartments are already decorated. The choice of objects are particularly interesting, as they show, once again, the architect’s hegemonizing presence as “plasticien”. They are indeed part of the Corbusian imaginary, especially these objects that the architect would describe as “objets à réaction poétique”, i.e. natural formations such as sea shells, whose forms, highly ordered yet natural, are supposed to be catalysts for man’s imagination. In many postwar photographs, the life inside the apartment units is the stage of modern domestic bliss after
the war: mothers enjoying the amenities of the new kitchen, teenagers busy doing their homework, or children playing on the floors. The architect included areas for the users to express their creativity by placing movable, wall-sized blackboards in these interiors. However, these were only placed in the children’s area, since children were the only ones, in the modernist ethos, who could legitimately write on the wall without being degenerate.

Figure 64. Children’s room in the Unité d’Habitation in Marseille, featuring a black board and seashells. Figure 65. Adult room in the Unité d’Habitation. Images taken from Le Corbusier, L’Unité d’Habitation de Marseille Mulhouse: Le Point, 1950.

The Unité d’Habitation is another very representative example of Le Corbusier’s synthetic, modernizing vision. As with the Usine Claude et Duval, Le Corbusier’s creative presence is felt via the distinctive polychrome scheme, and by the inclusion of the five large Modulor relief panels that were arranged near the main entrance to promote his reconstructive vision of the healthy body in nature, presented continuously to the inhabitants and the citizen of Marseille. But the pièce de résistance is really the roof terrace, a small concrete garden overlooking the Mediterranean landscape. This is where, Le Corbusier says, “la synthèse de la nature et de l’architecture” occurs. Indeed, the artist wished to elevate the building to something more than mere functionalism: once again, synthesis was to be a conceptual totality of art and architecture, nature and culture. Take,
for instance, the three air ducts coming out on the roof terrace. Rather than allowing their mechanical structures to stick out as is, they are surrounded by a concrete shell that gives the functional appliance the look of a biomorphic sculpture à la Hans Arp, one that is juxtaposed to a small, geometrical staircase (very evocative of Adolphe Appia's dramatic and elementarist sketches for neo-Wagnerian set designs known as “Espace Rythmiques”, that Jeanneret discovered as a young man when he met Heinrich Tessenow, Appia and Jaques-Dalcroze in Hellerau, Germany). Such choices make walking around the roof a complex spatial experience, with different levels and vistas.

Figure 66. Photographs of the roof terrace of the Unité d’Habitation in Marseille, published in Paul Damaz, Art in European Architecture/Synthèse des Arts. New York: Reinhold, 1957. Figure 67. Adolphe Appia, Espace Rythmique, sketch for set design, 1909.

Other details relevant to our discussion include the small biomorphic concrete sculpture on the floor of the roof terrace that was meant to be used as a seating or play area (and whose shape was very similar to that of the surrounding mountains). Also, a mural made of ceramic tiles disposed in a herringbone pattern on mortar, akin to the one placed on the roof terrace in Saint-Dié, covers a blank wall to avoid visual monotony (Le Corbusier, in his Oeuvres complètes, explains how he had to go out of his way to convince the French State to let him hire a “cimentier” that would follow his direct orders to accommodate such attention to details). Finally, the roof terrace features a small painting studio encased in glass that overlooks the surrounding natural landscape.
The roof terrace’s unique arrangement of functional and aesthetic elements, and its
dramatic, almost theatrical deployment of sculptural forms and colors under natural light,
would become the object of countless photographs, some of which were included in Paul
Damaz’ famous anthology Art in European Architecture/Synthèse des Arts. According to
Damaz’s caption next to a series of photos of the Unité: “The borderline between
sculpture and architecture is hard to tell in the free forms on the roof of Le Corbusier’s
apartment building in Marseille.” In Damaz’ book, the attention is to the building as an
artistic form, without much human presence except for that of children, that are hardly
visible because of the building’s towering presence. But in many other photographs, such
as those of the Swiss photographer René Burri of the Magnum firm, the rooftop terrace is
mostly the stage for the kindergarten classes. Children become the focus of attention, as
they are seen playing and dancing, under the supervision of adults, near the small
swimming pool and sculptures. These photos participate in the lyrical humanism so
prevalent in French photography at the time (Willy Ronis and Robert Doisneau come to
mind). They were instrumental in constructing the Unité as a stern but poetic teacher of the new postwar subject.159

Although Le Corbusier was concerned with resolving specific urban and social problems with this type of housing scheme, he also definitely deemed it to be a building of great aesthetic value for the artistic community at large. For example, he chose to include a photograph of himself with Pablo Picasso during the Spanish artist’s visit at the construction site in Marseille as a frontispiece to the fifth tome of this Oeuvres complètes. As we have seen, already in 1937 in Rome and again in his article “Vers l’Unité” published in Volontés, Le Corbusier was indeed making favourable references to how Cubism had prepared the condition for a new synthesis between art and architecture, as it offered new ways of seeing the world. Surely to make his ideas seem more credible and to gain symbolic capital by proxy, Le Corbusier frequently wrote letters to the co-inventor

159 During its construction, the Unité d’Habitation was the subject of frequent attacks in the press because of what many perceived as its overly aggressive modernist forms, and many working class citizens of Marseille dislodged by the war refused to go live there, hence, the “community” of the Unité had a lot more professionals and “jeunes cadres” than the MRU anticipated.
of Cubism, now one of the best known artists in France, inviting him to join the CIAM-sponsored Assemblée de Construteurs pour une Rénovation Architecturale (ASCORAL) group and frequently inviting him to come see his work so they could be seen together by a large group of people and be photographed for promotional purposes.160

One would be hard pressed to deny that the Le Corbusier found innovative ways to manage formal, spatial and technological problems with his different postwar buildings. But his discourse on the “synthesis of the arts”, as a manifestation of a broader postwar attempt to create a cultural reconstruction for France worthy of a “Renaissance”, was extremely problematic. After Vichy, much rested on the hope that France would be able to reclaim its position in world affairs, its collaborationist guilt disappearing with the emergence of a new culture that, though fully modern, was supposed to be grounded in uniquely French humanist sensibilities and beyond the usual divide between left and right, individuality and collectivity. One of the problems with this idea was that Vichy’s

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160 Picasso visited for the first time the Unité in August 1949. He visited with a very large group of architecture students, and the two artists were photographed together for Le Corbusier’s promotional purposes. Although only one photo is reproduced in the Oeuvres complètes, there are several unused ones at the Fondation Le Corbusier (documents starting with L4-2). Le Corbusier sent another invitation letter a few years later, but Picasso did not make it. See authorization letter to Pablo Picasso for a visit at the Unité d’Habitation construction site, Paris, May 21 1952. (Fondation Le Corbusier, document E2-19-38).
National Revolution itself was predicated on similar assumptions, and that much of its cultural and political actors would remain in positions of power after the war (including at the MRU). Le Corbusier was just one among many. Le Corbusier’s postwar appeals to organicism, patriotic sympathies and a “French Renaissance” had very dangerous antecedents indeed. Just a few years before he started to contribute to the résistencialiste paper Volontés and to proclaim his Unité d’Habitation as the salvation to the problems of modern domesticity, Le Corbusier was writing in Destin de Paris, a booklet published in the “Préludes” collection that featured Maréchal Pétain’s speeches, Walter Darré’s racist essays and a motley group of other fascist authors. As he wrote there: “Le problème du logis n’est pas un problème secondaire. Il est à la clé même de la renaissance de la famille et de la renaissance de l’esprit, à la de la renaissance de la nation.”

The reception of Le Corbusier’s building was highly ambivalent, and will be discussed further along. On the one hand, shortly after its completion in the early 1950s, the Unité d’Habitation would become a formidable symbol of France’s new found modernity, and would even be chosen as the site for the first Festival d’Art d’Avant-Garde organized in 1956 by Michel Ragon and Jacques Polieri. Le Corbusier’s entire building would be turned into a “dispositif scénique” for choreographed dance routines, kinetic sculptures

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162 Le Corbusier, Destin de Paris, Clermont-Ferrand: Editions Sorlot, 1941, p. 60. My emphasis. Le Corbusier’s relationship to eugenics, via his right-wing affiliates at Plans and Préludes, is complex and exceed by far the limit of this chapter. For an excellent discussion of this topic, see: Fabiola López-Durán, Eugenics in the Garden: Architecture, Medicine, and Landscape from France to Latin America in the Early Twentieth Century, PhD dissertation, MIT, 2009, pp. 186-248.
and the display of abstract paintings. Simultaneously, the Unité would be singled out as a form of totalitarian and repressive architecture by the members of the Internationale Lettriste. Le Corbusier’s buildings, as well as his call for a “synthesis of the arts” were, indeed, Janus-faced – they were marked by a kind of joyful optimism, yet at the same time they were fully complicit with a technocratic and authoritarian reordering of society, much like other reconstruction efforts, discussed in the next chapters.

EXHIBITING SYNTHESIS: THE PORTE MAILLOT EXPERIMENT

As seen in many of his urban schemes, such as in his “linear industrial city”, Le Corbusier has been thinking about creating a large museum or exhibition space where various art forms would be brought together into an epic synthesis. Around 1950, in parallel to his work in Marseilles, his hopes to launch such a vast art exhibition in Paris became even more pressing. A few months after the foundation of his magazine Art d’Aujourd’hui, Bloc agreed to work with Le Corbusier to create a group to make such a project possible: the Association pour une Synthèse des Arts Plastiques. The Association’s first meeting took place in October 1949 at the very same place where the Union pour l’Art had organized an exhibition thirteen years prior: at the Grand Palais, Salle du Conseil du Salon des Arts Ménagers. In some ways, the postwar project picked off where the Union had left off. According to official documents, Bloc and Le Corbusier’s Association envisioned publishing texts on modern art and organizing exhibitions that would introduce art to a broader public – crucially, by being inserted into specific architectural settings. As the group’s founding document explains:

L’association dite ASSOCIATION POUR UNE SYNTHÈSE DES ARTS PLASTIQUES

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Unlike other Salons, Bloc and Le Corbusier were not dogmatically attached to abstraction, and were offering their support to many modern figurative artists. This was an attractive position to take, synthesizing the politics between a still fractious socialist realism and universalist abstract art. They named Henri Matisse as the Association’s honorary president, a symbolic role to attract public interest, as Matisse was, along with the Communist Picasso, by far one of France’s better-known artists. The group announced its first project: to organize a large exhibition of contemporary artworks on a vacant lot somewhere in Paris in order to promote a “synthèse des arts majeurs.” Although they considered various sites throughout the French capital, they quickly settled on a vacated lot at Porte Maillot, near the Bois de Boulogne, where the exhibition would be planned primarily by Le Corbusier. In her doctoral dissertation, the architectural historian Ann Koll offers a detailed description of the Porte Maillot project and its various technical aspects. Based on her useful analysis, as well as additional archival and administrative documents now at the Fondation Le Corbusier and the information published in volume 5 of Le Corbusier’s Oeuvre Complète, we can retrace the key elements of the exhibition, as it relates to the broader issue of the “synthesis of the arts”.

The plans for the Association’s exhibition at Porte Maillot were left entirely up to Le Corbusier (who worked on the plans “pro bono”, hoping to be reimbursed). This intense involvement by the architect can be explained by the fact that, for decades, Le Corbusier had hoped to develop such a vast exhibition project. By creating the architectural framework for the exhibition itself, Le Corbusier could hope to activate his own dream and to exert direct control over the exhibition’s contents and general orientation. This project had notable precedents in his oeuvre. As previously mentioned, the architect had made sketches in the 1920s for an organicist “unlimited growth museum”, sending it to Christian Zervos of the magazine Cahier d’Art in 1931, hoping a museum project based on his original design could be built in Paris, utilizing inexpensive standardized industrial elements (poles, cables, and moveable wall partitions), which were adaptable and easily replaced. This project for a vast art museum did not materialize, but nevertheless, Le Corbusier continued to explore his ideas further, hoping to apply some of them at the World Exposition of 1937. He devised a scheme for a permanent Centre d’Esthétique Contemporaine for the Exposition, drawing sketches and plans. In the drawings of the proposed showrooms, the architect chose to represent the museum as filled with his own paintings and sculptures, or at least with works extremely close to his own style in those...
days. On one of the walls of his imagined museum is a large scale mural, evocative of Le Corbusier’s recurrent odalisques, such as the one incised into the walls of Eileen Gray’s E-1027. The sculptures shown in his drawings are also very similar in style to his work. This particular project, which would have cost the French State millions of Francs to build, was again rejected by the authorities, but the ideas continued.

Figure 73. Le Corbusier, sketch showing an aerial view of the Centre d’esthétique contemporaine, Paris, France, 1937. Figure 74. Sketch of one of the show rooms of the Centre d’esthétique contemporaine, 1937.

The architect had no qualms about pitching this museum concept to the collaborationist Vichy government. In a working document written in 1943, Le Corbusier expressed his hope to develop a didactic museum in which visitors would see, through an architectural promenade, the gradual “rapprochement” of art and architecture towards a new unity: “N’est-il pas souhaitable que ces dernières décades, si illustres et intenses, laissent un témoignages pertinents? Le premier de ces témoignages pourrait être un lot d’œuvres plastiques éminemment représentatives qui constitueraient le noyau des futures collections.”

Le Corbusier continues: “Le problème à résoudre pour faire bien comprendre l’art contemporain consiste à dérouler devant le visiteur les étapes du mouvement d’art moderne dans un ordre éloquent et à réserver, pour le futur, des

espaces suffisant à illustrer l'iminente période de synthèse qui s'annonce: les arts plastiques et l'architecture se rejoignant dans l'unité.” Once again, it is up to the heroic architect-plastician to guide the public and to mold their understanding of the great world to come.

The museum planned by Le Corbusier in 1943, in which the history of modern art is linked to the modernity of the French “cultural state”, was to show artworks on both the inside and the outside, in covered rooms and parks designed by the architect: “Le musée étendrait ses manifestations aussi bien au dehors qu’au dedans des bâtiments, dans les jardins ou même la peine nature (...)” Once again, Le Corbusier was framing his project as a grand architectural synthesis not only of the arts, but of technology, nature and culture. He also suggested in his working documents that this museum be composed primarily of artworks from the holdings of Raoul La Roche. La Roche was the wealthy Swiss banker and art collector who commissioned Le Corbusier for the famous Villa La Roche on Rue du Docteur Blanche in Paris, where were shown various Cubist and post-Cubist works (including several of Le Corbusier’s own Purist paintings).

166 Documents J1-5-8, describing “la création, à Paris, d’un musée de la connaissance de l’art contemporain”, 1943, n/p. Fondation Le Corbusier.
Most of La Roche’s artworks were bought – at Le Corbusier’s direct encouragement – at the Uhde and Kahnweiler auctions, between 1921 and 1923, when the famous German art merchants were being tried for “dommage de guerre” by the French authorities. Hence, in all of the museums imagined by Le Corbusier between 1920 until the Second World War, the artworks shown would be either by Le Corbusier himself, or “retour à l’ordre” works chosen by the architect and his acolyte Amédée Ozenfant.
Many of the ideas that Le Corbusier developed under the Front Populaire and then under the Vichy governments would be recuperated after the war, as in the Porte Maillot project. The “museum of unlimited growth” would indeed be featured prominently in several site plans for Porte Maillot. This new exhibition space, intended to offer a long procession through a series of exhibition spaces linked together by ramps. The meander form was also intended to blur the boundaries between inside and outside. A series of movable tents shaped like umbrellas made in a post and cable system (to be co-designed by Le Corbusier and the engineer Jean Prouvé) would also be dispersed throughout the site in order to accommodate various temporary outdoor exhibitions. The design of the exhibition was meant to be movable and exportable. As Le Corbusier explains, regarding the project’s structure: “Ce type de parasol ou de parapluie métallique pouvait être adopté comme abri type tant à Milan qu'à Berlin, qu'à Londres, New York, etc.”

Even though the museum would function at different scales, Le Corbusier argued that the measurements for each room were all harmonized by his newly minted Modulor system, a further guarantee of the project’s exportability to other continents: “Par l'emploi du Modulor, les panneaux consacrés aux manifestations picturales pouvaient revêtir toutes les formes et dimensions imaginables. Démontés ensuite, ils étaient reconstitués dans d'autres expositions à l'étranger organisées sur des bases semblables.”

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As was the case in all the previous projects (most notably the Centre d’Esthétique Contemporaine of 1937), Le Corbusier’s various preliminary sketches for Porte Maillot – many of which are reproduced in his Oeuvres Complètes – show the exhibition as entirely dominated by his own art, or by distinctively Corbusian “objets à réaction poétique” (such as sea shells, also shown in many of the interiors of his built projects like the Unité d’Habitation). For example, one sketch shows the recurrent “main ouverte”, while another one is very similar to his Sculpture, which he would exhibit in 1953 at his solo show at the Musée d’Art Moderne in Paris.

Figure 78. Le Corbusier, photomontage of the exhibition space at Porte Maillot, 1950. Fondation Le Corbusier.

Figure 79 and figure 80. Le Corbusier, preliminary sketches of the exhibition spaces inside and outside of the “Art et Architecture” exhibition at Porte Maillot, in Oeuvres Complètes, vol. 5 Figure 81. Le Corbusier standing next to his Sculpture, wood and iron, at the Musée d’Art Moderne, Paris, 1953.
The most difficult task for the Association was to secure money for this vast project. In a letter addressed to the Finance Minister Maurice Petsche (an elected official representing the Parti paysan d’union sociale, a pro-rural, corporatist party), the Association attempted to receive 10 million Francs. Their strategy was to appeal to the Minister’s patriotic sympathies, describing the Porte Maillot exhibition project as a great “harvest” that could yield great returns to the country (a point that Le Corbusier had already made in his essay published in Volonté):


Other official applications for the project were sent by the Association to other government institutions, such as the Ministère de la Reconstruction et de l’Urbanisme, the Ministère d’Éducation Nationale, the Affaires Étrangères and UNESCO. As with Le Corbusier’s other exhibitions, such as the one organized at the ICA in Boston for example, this project was promoted to the authorities as a way to assert France’s exceptional leading role in cultural affairs, using the method of the synthesis of modern art and architecture and planning, via the individual figure of Le Corbusier, as a way to heighten the cultural impact of the Reconstruction and to heal the country’s wounded pride.

¹⁷⁰ Documents J1-5-56, described as “Note complémentaire à l’attention bienveillante de Mr. Le Ministre des Finances,” 1950, Fondation Le Corbusier.
However, fellow members of the Association, as well as potential funders, were becoming concerned by the overly prominent role played by Le Corbusier himself. Koll is correct when she mentions that Le Corbusier, even in the postwar years, was totally attached to an elitist tradition (derived, as we have seen, from Provensal’s ideas on the architect as a master “synthesizer” of the “major arts”) and was merely utilizing patriotic and populist concepts to further his own career. Le Corbusier, in spite of his eventual references to “workshops” to be included in his project, which suggested that there could potentially be reciprocal exchanges between artists, architects and the public, was never really committed to having everyday people be democratically involved in the project. Even when he sent a list of possible artists collaborators to his friend and fellow Association member Raoul Simon, each of whom was an extremely famous artist or architect in his own right (such as Alberto Giacometti and Max Bill), Le Corbusier described them reductively as “des hommes de main,” suggesting that they would be mere henchmen who would carry on tasks fixed by him.

These various concerns, as well as a tense political situation in France, quickly led to a financial impasse. Although the project was backed politically and financially by Claudius-Petit and the MRU, which offered a sizeable four million Francs, the other agencies listed were somehow doubtful about the actual impact that such a costly project

would have. The exhibition, as envisioned by Le Corbusier's drawings and notes, was extremely vague about the actual social interactions that would occur within the exhibition's walls, which made it a harder sell for the government. Because of these uncertainties, and the growing resentment around Le Corbusier's self-centered and somewhat authoritarian disposition, the deadline fixed by the MRU went by and this first ambitious synthesis exhibition project never came to pass.

Despite the initial failure of the Porte Maillot project, Le Corbusier would stay totally committed to his exhibition design concepts. Over the next few years, he would continue to pitch them, with slight variations, to other national and international authorities, particularly UNESCO, hoping to eventually secure funding and achieve his own vision of a "synthesis of the arts".\textsuperscript{174} Le Corbusier maintained his relationship to Claudius-Petit, even after his departure from the MRU (Claudius would commission the architect to design different buildings for the town of Firminy-Vert, where he was elected as mayor). Although elements of the original Porte Maillot design would reappear in some of his subsequent buildings (for example in his museum project for Chandigarh, India, as well as for an arts center in Switzerland), the collective exhibition project imagined during the French Reconstruction was never realized. Le Corbusier would quickly part ways with Bloc; the Association pour une Synthèse des Arts Plastiques disbanded in 1950.

According to various notes, Le Corbusier held Bloc personally responsible for the failure of the project. Although he did not formally attack or blame Le Corbusier, Bloc seemed to have been exasperated by the architect's attitude (the two men stopped exchanging...\footnote{\textsuperscript{174} For a specific discussion of Le Corbusier's involvement with UNESCO's architectural and cultural initiatives in postwar Paris, see: Christopher Pearson, \textit{Designing UNESCO: Art, Architecture and International Politics at Mid-Century}, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010, pp. 71-112.}
letters in 1950). It is in the immediate aftermath of this failed project that Bloc would launch a new collaborative project: Groupe Espace, which will be the focus of chapter 2.
Il faut faciliter la tâche de l'Autorité.
Architectes, peintres et sculpteurs doivent songer, dès à présent, à organiser la tâche commune.

Témoignages pour l'art abstrait, 1952.

INTRODUCTION

The objective for this chapter is to address the role played by Groupe Espace, a large collaborative group of artists, architects, designers, critics and administrators founded in 1951. Their exhibitions and publications – both directly and indirectly – engaged in some of the modernizing reforms enacted by the French cultural authorities in the Reconstruction efforts of the 1940s and 50s. As I examine in this first section, Groupe Espace was itself formed from the members of the Association pour une Synthèse des Arts Plastiques (discussed in chapter 1) and the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles (a series of exhibitions, instigated in 1947, which brought together artists from various tendencies in defending the role that abstract art should play in postwar society). I also consider the productive failure of the Porte Maillot project, which directly led Bloc to collaborate with the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles and then to found Groupe Espace, as a way to outline some of the notable differences between the approaches to a “synthesis of the arts” laid
out by Le Corbusier, Bloc and others, while also confirming the potential value of the
trope itself. Unlike Le Corbusier, who denied agency to everyday people or to artists
other than himself in his built projects, Bloc and his followers at Groupe Espace were
hoping to create a bureaucratic organization that could potentially enact political
reforms, which would make possible a “synthesis of the arts” on a much broader scale.
The institutional structure of Groupe Espace and its navigation via different activities of
some of the period’s highly polarized discussions, will be closely analyzed in this chapter.
Special attention will be devoted to the group’s exhibitions and decorative projects,
particularly to artist Félix Del Marle’s work with architect Bernard Zehrfuss for the car
manufacturer Renault in Flins. Groupe Espace’s exhibitions, which were eclectic in
nature, will be contrasted to Del Marle’s more totalizing approach to synthesis via his
“polychromies architecturales.” Finally, I will address how the departure of Eugène
Claudius-Petit from the MRU and from his role as Groupe Espace’s honorary president,
marked the rapid demise of the group and led artists, notably the French-Hungarian
artist Nicolas Schöffer, to seek a more interactive form of “synthesis of the arts” via his
privately-funded technological experiments and gadgets.

Rather than a comprehensive overview of the aesthetic and political debates of the time,
this chapter asserts that the quarrels on realism and abstraction’s socio-political relevance
played a formative role on the development of the postwar reconstruction discourse on
the “synthesis of the arts” in architectural and artistic circles. For the likes of Bloc and Del
Marle, the “synthesis of the arts,” understood as the deployment of abstract artworks to
activate architectural and urban space – going beyond easel painting and autonomous
sculpture – was a way of bridging abstract art and postwar society. Visual artists, by
working in professional teams with fellow “plasticiens” and architects, could potentially be made part of projects that were aimed at prefiguring a more integrated society. In other words, by being made accessible in purportedly public space, such as in mass housing complexes, factories, or parks, abstract art was seen by such proponents of a “synthesis of the arts” to participate directly in the transformation and reformation of society towards greater welfare. Such a “synthesis” was also understood as lying beyond the usual divides between conservative rightwing politics (associated as it was with a nationalist celebration of the “École de Paris” and its attachment to traditional art production175) and the communist left (linked, in postwar France, with a championing of figurative depictions of the working class and its struggles). Hence, “synthesis” was about more than “the arts” per se. Synthesis became a kind of palliative alibi, a moderate reformism for postwar unification and centrist, participating directly in the development and consolidation of the French cultural state’s modernization efforts. Groupe Espace was indeed promoting, to use an expression I borrow from the anthropologist Paul Rabinow, a type of “middling modernism.” Against Le Corbusier’s attempt to become the postwar’s great architecte-plasticien who would heroically synthesize the arts, culture, technology and nature into a conceptual totality, Groupe Espace developed a collective, albeit piecemeal discourse inspired by that of administrators and experts, redefining modern art in terms of spatial management, efficiency, progress, universalism and social welfare.176


176 Rabinow describes “middling modernism”, “‘middling’ in opposition to the ‘high’ modernism of genius à la Le Corbusier” as proceeding from the twin imperatives of industrialization and welfare in an attempt to regulate society, understood as an object of knowledge and reform, through art and science. Although Rabinow uses this expression in relation to French urban planning practices, I will argue that it can be meaningfully expanded to include the “synthesis of the arts” initiatives of Groupe Espace, as they
NEW REALITIES: POLITICS AND ABSTRACT ART AT MID-CENTURY

As sketched out above, Groupe Espace was founded in 1951 to bring together members of two groups: the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles (f. 1947) and the Association pour une Synthèse des Arts Plastiques (f. 1949). The Salon des Réalités Nouvelles was one of the major catalysts for the artistic debates that would develop in France in the 1940s and later in the 50s. Co-founded by Frédé Sidès (an art critic who organized a major retrospective of abstract artworks titled “Réalités Nouvelles” in 1939 at the Parisian Galerie Charpentier), as well as by the abstract artists Auguste Herbin and Félix Del Marle,177 the Salon was mostly composed of former sympathizers of the Paris-based Abstraction Création group. Founded in interwar Paris in 1931 (also by Herbin and by another abstract artist, Georges Vantongerloo), Abstraction Création’s explicit aim was to federate various little magazines dedicated to abstract art — such as Cercle et Carré and Art Concret — and to give them a common platform.178


178 Abstraction Création used many expressions interchangeably to describe abstract art precisely because it brought together various factions. For instance, “art concret” is an expression originally coined by the Dutch artist Theo van Doesburg and later popularized by the Swiss artist Max Bill. Van Doesburg describes his approach not as abstract, but as more tangibly real and concrete, as it was supposedly a direct materialization of the creative spirit using elementary means. To quote Van Doesburg: “Peinture concrète et non abstraite, parce que rien n’est plus concret, plus réel qu’une ligne, qu’une couleur, qu’une surface. C’est la concrétisation de l’esprit créateur.” See: Theo Van Doesburg, “commentaires sur la base de la peinture concrète,” Art concret (April 1930), n/p. In the postwar French context, however, expressions such as “art abstrait,” “art non-figuratif,” “art non-objectif,” or “art concret” were often used interchangeably.
Many artists shown in the pages of these journals, such as the Bauhaus alumni Max Bill and László Moholy-Nagy, veered towards geometrical abstraction, which they saw as an index of technological rationality. Others, such as Alexander Calder and Hans Arp, embraced a more playful, organic, and biomorphic idiom. To quote the art critic Michel Seuphor, editor of Cercle et Carré, their common exploration of elementary pictorial means and biomorphic and geometrical shapes was an attempt to capture the totality of the real. The circle and the square were “l’emblème le plus simple de la totalité des choses. Le monde rationnel et le monde sensoriel (...) la géométrie rectiligne et la.
géométrie curviligne." As these groups merged in the 1930s, the Abstraction Création group grew up to over 400 members. It published a richly illustrated magazine under the name Abstraction Création Art Non Figuratif, which was staunchly opposed to Surrealism’s left-leaning political positions and to its followers’ championing of pictorial “automatisme” as the subversive and irrational expression of the unconscious. The journal’s definition of abstract art, outlined in different editorials, was broad: it was very eclectic and politically vague, perhaps to accommodate the fact that it had such a large membership base and to avoid alienating potential buyers (much fewer in the 1930s than in the postwar years). Modernism was described mostly in terms of rationality, freedom of experimentation, and of the autonomous plays of colors, lines, planes, and textured surfaces.

Some of the group’s members did call for a more rationally organized and collectivist society, but without ever clearly specifying how this political transformation should come about. According to Jean Gorin, a prominent French exponent of Piet Mondrian’s Néo-Plasticisme and a member of Abstraction Création’s directing committee:

La nouvelle plastique constructiviste n’est pas individualiste, ce n’est pas une plastique de tour d’ivoire, comme on serait tenté de le supposer au premier abord. Cette nouvelle plastique, au contraire, a ses bases profondément enracinées dans la nouvelle époque que nous vivons, époque de grands bouleversements économiques et sociaux, règne de la science, du collectivisme, de l’universalisme (...), dans la période tragique de l’évolution que nous traversons maintenant, encoré dominée par l’individualisme et l’anarchie, la nouvelle plastique est contrainte de se manifester sous forme d’objets, tableaux ou sculptures, en

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180 On Surrealism, automatism and abstract art in the 1930s, see: Steven Harris, Surrealist Art and Thought in the 1930’s: Art, Politics and the Psyche, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
attendant un état social permettant son développement complet dans la vie. 181

Abstraction Création also defended abstract art as a truly international language; the group itself contained members from all over the world. According to an editorial published in 1933, the group proclaimed, against the prevalent nationalisms rising in Western Europe: “Toute tentative de limiter les efforts artistiques selon des considérations de races, d’idéologie ou de nationalités est odieuse.” 182

The Salon des Réalités Nouvelles, like its interwar predecessor, retained an inclusive view of abstract art, using cosmopolitanism, on the one hand, and the rejection of naturalism and figuration, on the other, as their federating principles. Gestural painting co-existed peacefully with strict geometrical compositions within its exhibitions. The group started in 1947 to publish a self-titled journal, in which artists were invited to show their works and to express succinctly their artistic views. In order to position itself as the culmination of a series of avant-garde movements, and to situate the group in relation to the burgeoning American art market, the editors of Réalités Nouvelles published in 1948, a kind of modernist genealogical tree, surely inspired by the one figuring on the cover of Alfred Barr’s famous 1936 MoMA exhibition catalogue Cubism and Abstract Art. 183 Alfred Barr’s diagram, filled with lines that connect disparate movements, purportedly showed the evolution of modern art and architecture as a grand succession of movements, starting in the 1890s up until 1936 (the year of his exhibition). The one published twelve years

later by the Réalités Nouvelles group carried some significant similarities, as well as notable differences indicative of the preoccupations and anxieties in France’s cultural field after the war.

![Diagram showing the evolution of modern art](image)

**Figure 86.** Cover of the exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art*, Museum of Modern Art, 1936. Museum of Modern Art, New York. **Figure 87.** Cover of the *Réalités Nouvelles*, no. 1, 1947. **Figure 88.** Diagram showing the evolution of modern art, published in *Réalités Nouvelles*, no. 2, 1948.

In the French rendition, the succession of movements was represented with a series of intersecting diagonal lines somewhat reminiscent of a futurist linocut. The development is moving upwards, as if each movement were following the other in order to reach its zenith at the Réalités Nouvelles, placed triumphantly at the top. Although the modernist predecessors shown in both graphics are the same (Impressionism, followed by Fauvism, Expressionism, Cubism, and then Constructivism), the 1948 version includes several French post-Cubist micro-movements omitted by Barr, such as Orphisme and Rayonisme, doubtless to represent the importance of Robert and Sonya Delaunay for the Parisian scene.\(^{184}\) Non-Western art is also completely omitted in the French diagram.

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\(^{184}\) Their works were often shown at the group’s shows. Sonya Delaunay was also very involved in several other postwar groups, including Groupe Espace, using her influence to promote her own work and that of her late husband, who passed away in 1941.
perhaps to signal the group’s aversion to Surrealism’s ongoing fascination with the folk art of Oceania and Africa.

Although the Soviet avant-garde is represented in both diagrams, its most explicitly politicized and militant offshoots, such as Productivism, are left out – Constructivism is instead linked to the formalist works of Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner, who left the USSR and were then living in the USA and in France, respectively.185 The very choice of the expression “réalités nouvelles” should also be seen as a favorable allusion to Gabo and Pevsner’s famous “Realistic Manifesto” (1920). In this widely circulated text, the Soviet artists rejected previous realistic figurative conventions (painting as an illusionistic “window”, sculpture as mass), which they deemed to be accidental and outdated: “The line is only an accidental trace that humans leave on objects. It has no connection to essential life and to the permanent structure of things.” On the other hand, non-figurative art – art to be seen dynamically and from different angles in space – is described as capturing and shaping the very essence of the real. As such, abstract artworks were to be the building blocks of a new society: Gabo and Pevsner famously called for art to follow man “at the workbench, at the office, at work, at rest, and at leisure (…) at home and on the road.”186 However, it should be noted that Gabo and Pevsner rejected the militant Marxism of many Soviet Productivists, who similarly called for art to become part of everyday life. This more centrist position, which Pevsner defended in France, was

certainly attractive to many postwar artists, who were hoping to break free from the hegemony of the Communist Party.

Also interesting to note is that the Réalités Nouvelles diagram refers to several art exhibitions, but not to Barr’s seminal 1936 show Cubism and Abstract Art. Rather, the only American institution referred to is the Museum of Non-Objective Painting (to become the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum shortly thereafter). All the other galleries and exhibitions referred to are French—so although the group claimed to be internationally relevant, its cosmopolitanism was framed largely through the French métropole. These omissions certainly suggest that the group was in direct competition with the budding American art establishment in claiming to be the rightful postwar inheritor of modernism’s heroic phase. Finally, the French diagram does not make any reference to architecture, focusing entirely on the other “major arts,” namely painting and sculpture. However, the jagged lines represented in the background are somewhat evocative of a great towering edifice. As we will see later on, several key figures who participated to the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles, such as Del Marle and Gorin, aspired to use architecture as a synthesizer of the arts.
The Salon des Réalités Nouvelles hoped to respond to the new conditions of the day and to the mounting criticism, on the left and the right, that art was increasingly divorced from everyday people. Abstract art, in particular, was typically dubbed as formalist, meaning that it was reserved for an elite. This issue was indeed absolutely central to the French artistic debates of the immediate postwar years. In 1945, the critic, curator and anti-fascist activist Gaston Diehl, founder of the Mouvement des Amis de l’Art, a group dedicated to the promotion of modern art, published his book Les Problèmes de la Peinture.\textsuperscript{187} In this widely circulated book, which contained several photographic reproductions of modernist artworks, as well as numerous interviews with prominent artists of the day, the theme of painting’s social relevance, or lack thereof, was the recurrent leitmotif. For Diehl, it was morally imperative, amidst the reconstruction efforts, for modern artists to break their isolation and to get involved in collective public

art projects, a theme that several members of the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles would take up as well:

Devant l’ampleur des tâches qu’offrira demain la reconstruction de la France, devant cette possibilité presque unique dans l’histoire de redonner à la peinture murale sa place légitime et prépondérante, les artistes comprendront-ils leur devoir – car ils ont aussi des devoirs – ? Sauront-ils s’intégrer moralement et non pas seulement par la speculation, dans une collectivité dont ils font partie bon gré mal gré.188

For years, Salon des Réalités Nouvelles founder Félix Del Marle had been defending abstract art as ushering in a new type of collective society. Del Marle experimented with different avant-garde styles (Futurism, Surrealism, etc.) at different points in his career, but one artist was particularly influential on his development: the non-objective painter Piet Mondrian. Via his paintings, reliefs, sculptures, and architectural renderings, as well as his publishing activities as editor of the little magazine Vouloir: Revue Mensuelle d’Esthétique Néo-Plastique189, Del Marle would indeed play a key role in spreading the Dutch artist’s ideas to French audiences during the interwar years.190 Like many of his

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188 Gaston Diehl, ed., Les Problèmes de la Peinture, p. 348. Other books published around the same time that deals with these issues include the anthology Pour ou contre l’art abstrait? Paris: Les Amis de l’Art, 1947.

189 Vouloir was a little magazine, largely forgotten today, edited in Lille in the 1920s by Del Marle and a few other collaborators. See the exhibition catalogue: Sylvie Férey, Vouloir, Lille, 1925. Le Cateau-Cambrésis: Musée Matisse, 2004. Del Marle, similarly to Jean Gorin, would start to defend the Soviet avant-garde. This interest in Constructivism emerged following a trip to the Bauhaus in Dessau, where he met several artists and architects (and where Hannes Meyer, a staunch Communist, was director), after which he published an article in an issue of his magazine Vouloir titled “Vers un art prolétaire.” Del Marle would come describe the art and architecture of Tatlin, El Lissitzky and the Vesnin brothers as the product of a new collectivist spirit. This enthusiasm for the Soviet Union’s politics, however, would be extremely short lived. See: Félix Del Marle, “Vers un art prolétaire,” Vouloir, no. 22 (June 1926).

190 Mondrian had introduced the expression “néo-plasticisme” with his brochure Le Néo-Plasticisme: Principe Général de l’Équivalence Plastique, Paris: Galerie L’Effort Moderne, 1920. Although he agreed to contribute to Vouloir, Mondrian often disagreed with Del Marle’s views and resented his use of the expression “esthétique néo-plastique”. For more in-depth discussions of Mondrian’s reception in France, see: Yve-Alain Bois, “Mondrian and the Theory of Architecture,” Assemblage, no. 4 (October 1987), pp. 102-130; Yve-Alain Bois, “Mondrian en France, sa contribution à Vouloir, sa correspondance avec Del
contemporaries, Del Marle was, during World War II, in a state of forced seclusion, going through a period of spiritual and religious introspection. However, after the Liberation, which he met with a great sense of enthusiasm, Del Marle had renewed hopes in Neo- Plasticism's ambitions to unite art and life (his singular reception of Mondrian will be discussed further along in this chapter). Based on his credentials as an early adopter of abstraction in the 1920s and on his friendship with Herbin, Del Marle was elected as the secretary general and vice-president of the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles and helped organize the group’s first exhibitions.

According to the art historian Dominique Viéville, the first Salon des Réalités Nouvelles exhibition, co-organized by Del Marle, was held in 1947 at the Palais des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris. It showed no less than 146 different artists from three different continents and a total of 384 works. The exhibition served as a kind of bridge between the postwar and prewar modernist scenes (as their diagram attempted to do as well). Indeed, the first postwar Salons exhibited a panorama of artists from the “heroic” interwar years, some of which were exhibited at Galerie Charpentier in 1939 (such as Jean Arp, Sophie Taeuber, Sonia and Robert Delaunay, César Domela, Otto Freundlich, Jean Gorin, Auguste Herbin, Wassily Kandinsky, Alberto Magnelli, Piet Mondrian, Antoine Pevsner, and Theo van Doesburg) as well as several of their younger postwar followers. The group’s exhibition was incredibly vast and eclectic. Hence, the core members of the groups felt the need to publish a text to outline their objectives. A questionnaire was

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191 For a factual survey of the key moments of Del Marle’s life, see: Domitille D’Orgeval, Félix Del Marle, Grenoble: Musée de Grenoble, 2000.
circulated amongst the Salon members, leading to the publication, in the second issue of
their journal Réalités Nouvelles, of an official manifesto. Co-written by Del Marle and
Herbin, the manifesto’s foremost objective was to define, once again, what is “abstract
art.” The group thus defined it as “non-figurative” and “non-objective”:

Qu’est-ce que l’Art abstrait non-figuratif et non-objectif ?
Sans lien avec le monde des apparences extérieures, c’est,
pour la peinture, un certain plan ou espace animé par des
lignes, des formes, des surfaces, des couleurs, dans leurs
rapports réciproques et, pour la sculpture, un certain
volume animé par des plans, des pleins, des vides, exaltant
la lumière.194

This definition of abstraction echoed the ones found in Gabo and Pevsner’s manifesto, as
well as in the interwar years in Abstraction Création Art Non Figuratif. However, even if
abstract art is described as without link to the world of exterior appearances, and only
follows the “lois essentielles de l’art plastique,” hereby suggesting that it is self-referential,
this does not mean that it is purely autonomous or devoid of any political significance. On
the contrary, much of the Réalités Nouvelles manifesto was a direct response to the
attacks of the Parti Communiste Français, then under the influence of “zhdanovshchina”,
the Marxist cultural doctrine of socialist realism outlined by the Soviet politician Andrei
Zhdanov. In the 1940s and 50s, the cultural representatives of the Party, using tribunes
such as Les Lettres françaises, had launched attacks against abstract art, described as a

193 According to the art historian Domitille D’Orgeval, who is now in charge of the Salon des Réalités
Nouvelles’s archives, the unsigned manifesto was most likely written by Del Marle and Auguste Herbin,
citing a letter written by Herbin sent to the collector and art amateur Frédo Sidès in September 1948.
194 “Premier manifeste du Salon des Réalités Nouvelles,” pamphlet (1948), n/p.
195 For a study of these aesthetic and political debates, see: Antoine Baudin, Le réalisme socialiste
soviétique de la période jdanovienne, Bern: P. Lang, 1997. Zhdanov’s writings were collected in French as
also Serge Guilbaut’s classic How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism,
form of “l’art pour l’art” unintelligible to the masses.\textsuperscript{196} Jean Marcenac, a French poet and critic affiliated with the PCF, would describe modernist abstraction as the symptoms of modern society’s decline: “Art abstrait, art brut, art non figuratif, art formel, tout cela portait la marque d’une déchéance qui n’était pas seulement celle de la peinture mais celle d’une société qui, n’ayant envie de rien voir, n’ayant plus rien à dire, craignant la vérité, fuyant la réalité, prenait ses plaisirs à un joli silence et accrochait sur son mur le non-dire en couleur.”\textsuperscript{197} Against such “decadent” art, Maurice Fougeron, a painter affiliated with the PCF, showed his infamous Parisiennes au Marché at the Salon d’Automne of 1948. His painting, a rather crude depiction of poor working-class women and mothers counting their loose change at a fish stall, sparked intense debates in the French press, but was defended by his fellow Party members. Maurice Thorez, secretary general of the PCF, stood firmly behind this so-called “nouveau réalisme français”\textsuperscript{198}: “Au formalisme des peintres pour qui l’art commence là où le tableau n’a pas de contenu, nous avons opposé un art qui s’inspirerait du réalisme socialiste et serait compris par la classe ouvrière, un art qui aiderait la classe ouvrière dans sa lutte libératrice.”\textsuperscript{199}

\textsuperscript{196} Such attacks on abstraction by the communist left already started in the 1930s, as Aragon and others engaged in an intense debate known as the “querelle du réalisme,” in which the former Surrealist disavowed his youthful experimentalism and embraced the figurative representation of working class struggles. See Aragon, \textit{Pour un réalisme socialiste}, Paris: Denoël et Steele, 1935. See also: Aragon et al., \textit{La Querelle du réalisme. Deux débats organisés par l’Association des peintres et sculpteurs de la Maison de la culture}, Paris: Éditions sociales internationales/Collection Commune, 1936. On the complex history of socialist realism in France, see the special issue of \textit{Sociétés & Représentations}, vol. 1, no. 15 (2003).

\textsuperscript{197} Of course, nuances were not so important to Marcenac, as Art Brut was not a form of “abstract” art, but an umbrella term to designate the overwhelmingly figurative art produced by people outside of the art establishment (art naïf, the art of the insane, etc.) See: Jean Dubuffet/Compagnie de l’Art Brut, \textit{L’Art brut préféré aux arts culturels}, Paris: Galerie René Drouin, 1949.

\textsuperscript{198} “Nouveau réalisme français” is the way that the French Communists artists and intellectuals would describe their own artistic approach – not to be confused, of course, with Yves Klein and Pierre Restany’s performative advocacy of “Nouveau Réalisme,” launched much later at an exhibition of French and Swiss artists in Milan in 1960. For a critical discussion of the performative aspects of Klein’s “nouveau réalisme”, see: Kaira M. Cabañas, “Yves Klein’s Performative Realism,” \textit{Grey Room}, no. 31 (Spring 2008), pp. 6-31.

In this context of deep suspicion of abstract art, anonymous tracts were distributed at one of the first Salon des Réalités Nouvelles exhibition, asking visitors to avoid succumbing to the lure of abstract art, described as an art for phonies, “tripoteurs” (meaning unscrupulous investors), pedants, and snobs. As a counter-strike, the Réalités Nouvelles group, via Del Marle and Herbin’s manifesto, declared:

Contrairement à ce qu’il était permis d’espérer, le Parti Communiste, sans raisons valables, a cru bon de prendre une position d’hostilité contre l’Art abstrait non-objectif. Sans appuyer sur la contradiction de cette attitude avec celle de ses premiers dirigeants, nous persistons à considérer que toute démagogie en art engendre infailliblement l’idolâtrie qui conduit à l’esclavage et nous revendiquons plus que jamais la liberté d’expression, la réalisation d’un art que nous considérons comme le plus humain, comme le plus apte à élargir, approfondir la conscience de l’Homme, contribuant ainsi à sa libération, tant sur le plan matériel que sur le plan spirituel.200

Responding to the remonstrations of the PCF, the manifesto of the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles argued that abstract art was the “most human” of the arts. In other words, because of its lack of overt messages and reliance on the use of simple forms and color fields, abstract art was deemed to be a free, universal, democratic and cross-cultural

200 “Premier manifeste du Salon des Réalités Nouvelles,” pamphlet (1948), n/p.
human language, which could be distributed and experienced in public space. Its purported humanism was not the doctrine of classical, secular education in the Western humanities, sometimes called “liberal humanism,” but one rooted in a type of organicist discourse. Neo-constructivist artists contributing to the Salon, such as Moholy-Nagy, would indeed make the case in his 1947 book The New Vision that the phenomenological encounter with abstract art was a “biological function.” Such art was therefore not removed from life processes, or reserved for an elite of collectors, but could be at the center of an expanded, new reality, as the human masses would instinctively understand abstract forms, regardless of class or national origins. In this context, abstraction became a purported “third way” between individualism and collectivism – it would certainly prove appealing to many artists who were hoping to find a voice between PCF-sponsored realism and the heroization of the individual in American abstract expressionism and French informel.

Despite the party’s continuing attacks, the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles was largely successful in making its case: its membership grew steadily, it retained several of its progressive members and even led others to disband from the official communist organizations. Indeed, contributors to the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles, such as Jean Gorin, continued to be committed to the communist cause, while fully embracing abstract as a meaningful continuation of the experiments of the Soviet avant-garde,

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personified in France by artists like Antoine Pevsner. Similarly, progressive art critics sympathetic to abstraction, such as Léon Degand, who was initially an important contributor to the journal Les Lettres Françaises, would cease to publish there as the editorial committee began to be strictly aligned with the PCF’s socialist realist directives. Degand would nevertheless continue to defend the social relevance of abstraction in several articles, and promote the need for economic support for artists.203

THE BEGINNINGS OF GROUPE ESPACE

If many French artists deemed that abstract art was not simply formalist and had a potential role to play in the transformation of postwar society, the strategic way to make such art accessible to a broader public beyond the walls of traditional exhibition spaces would become more fully articulated via the numerous activities sponsored by André Bloc. Indeed, Bloc’s Association pour une Synthèse des Arts Plastiques, which he co-founded in 1949, and his journal Art d’Aujourd’hui founded the same year, had similar aims to the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles, although it had more direct connections to the architecture and urban planning worlds, as well as to figures in the political alleys of power. Following the failure of the Porte Maillot project and his falling out with Le Corbusier, Bloc was already looking to launch another group dedicated to the “synthesis of the arts” but, this time, with new allies. Needless to say that the falling out with Le Corbusier, a controversial yet still highly prominent figure, left a big gap in Bloc’s network. This situation led him to develop new connections or renew contacts with other

203 Léon Degand, “La Situation sociale et économique de l’artiste,” Art d’Aujourd’hui, no. 8 (December 1953), pp. 17-18. Degand would also publish a critique of a speech by the PCF leader Maurice Thorez in Art d’Aujourd’hui, no. 6 (January 1950).
artists and architects. It is in this context that Bloc initiated contacts with Félix Del Marle and the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles. In contrast to the failed Association pour une Synthèse des Arts Plastiques, by 1950, the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles was gaining momentum: its membership was steadily increasing, its promoters were culturally visible and its exhibitions were widely discussed in the artistic and popular press. Already in 1949, Del Marle had expressed interest in collaborating with André Bloc’s new journal Art d’Aujourd’hui and was invited by the editor to publish articles on Mondrian.204 In a letter written on the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles letterhead addressed to Bloc and dated July 29, 1949, Del Marle declared that artists concerned with a “synthesis of the arts” should put in practice Mondrian’s principles on a disciplined distribution of color in space, which he considered of the utmost importance for the Reconstruction. Del Marle criticized Le Corbusier’s forays into polychromy as a mere “sensorial fantasy”:

(...) il faut envisager la couleur dans l’architecture si l’on ne veut pas tomber dans une fantaisie sensorielle, dont la facilité, le manque de base, de discipline ficherait tout par terre, et très vite. C’est ce qui est arrivé, en Hollande, en Allemagne, à Pessac, il y a quelques années. Aujourd’hui, fort des expériences passées, nous sommes prêts. 205

As his own relationship with Le Corbusier was turning sour, Bloc grew even closer to Del Marle and began to exhibit his own work at the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles. As a follow-up to the Porte Maillot project, Del Marle chose to dedicate an entire room to the issue of modern architecture and the “synthesis of the arts” at the sixth and seventh Salons des

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204 See the special issue of Art d’Aujourd’hui, no. 5 (December 1949), which contains articles on Mondrian and Néo-Plasticisme written by Del Marle, Jean Gorin, and by the critic Michel Seuphor.  
205 Félix Del Marle, letter to André Bloc, dated July 29, 1949, n/p. Archives Art d’Aujourd’hui, Bibliotheque Kandinsky, Centre Georges Pompidou. Del Marle’s allusions to Holland, Germany and Pessac refer implicitly to De Stijl architectural experiments (such as Gerrit Rietveld’s Schröder house in Utrecht), the Weissenhofsiedlung exhibition in Stuttgart, and Le Corbusier’s Frugès housing estate near Bordeaux.
Réalités Nouvelles exhibitions, held in June 1950 and July 1951. Although these exhibitions were much smaller and far more conventional than the one planned by Bloc and Le Corbusier, it nevertheless offered them a platform to expose some of their ideas and to reach out to many postwar abstract artists concerned with the insertion of art into architectural and urban settings. Several artists were invited to be in these exhibitions: in addition to Bloc and Del Marle, who showed their polychrome sculptures, other notable abstract works were shown, including those by Jean Gorin, Claude Servanes, Nicolas Schöffer, Georges Folmer, Nicolaas Warb, Aagaard Anderseen, as well as models by the architects Jean-Claude Mazet and Pierre-Martin Guéret.

Figure 93. Pages showing different works exhibited in the Salle Espace from Réalités Nouvelles, no. 5, 1951.

In an article published in the journal Arts, the art critic Pierre Descargues dubbed the room dedicated to the issue of the “synthesis of the arts” at the 1950 Salon des Réalités Nouvelles as “Salle Espace”. By using this expression, the critic meant to underline the shared concern by the various artists present to use abstract artworks not as self-contained forms for detached aesthetic contemplation, but as objects capable of modulating their...
surrounding environment. These works, which were shown somewhat traditionally on small white wooden pedestals, were to be appreciated not as stand alone sculptural objects, but as future spatial constructions on a much bigger scale. Many of the works on display and their models would be built using mostly industrial materials (such as the new wartime plastics, Plexiglas and Lucite), further suggesting their future expansion into modern architecture. This can be seen in part as the abstract artists’ riposte to Le Corbusier’s longstanding figurative “humanization” of modern architecture. As early as 1948, Del Marle had already made calls for abstract art and modern technologies to conquer space:

Libérée totalement grâce aux conquêtes de l’art abstrait, cette tendance – qui n’est pas encore baptisée – s’est échappée des plans strictement picturaux, sculpturaux, etc. pour arriver à une technique utilisant les matériaux les plus modernes. Elle va vers une conquête de l’Espace par une expression concrète équilibrée à une conception plastique abstraite. Elle est parallèle aux recherches scientifiques (rayons X, ondes, etc.) qui s’attaquent l’opacité de la matière.207

But these goals were loftier than what was ultimately achieved. The surviving photographs of the “Salle Espace” show not a visually integrated environment, suggesting a future synthesis at the architectural and urban scale, but a bric-à-brac of works in different, vaguely constructivist styles grouped together haphazardly, isolated on pedestals or in frames, as solitary works of art.

An article published in a French paper also described the visitors as somewhat bewildered in front of these constructions; one photograph shows a young women puzzlingly over one of the oversized asymmetrical constructions looming in the very small exhibition room. The eclecticism and the lack of true interrelation of the works on display of practically all the exhibitions dedicated to the “synthesis of the arts” would continue to be an issue for many, who saw it as a sign of the failure of the project to carry a strong message to the public.

In October 1951, a few months after the seventh Salon des Réalités Nouvelles, Bloc and Del Marle chose to start a new group, borrowing the moniker chosen by the critic Descargues: Groupe Espace. Using their respective contacts at L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui, Art d'Aujourd'hui, the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles and the Ministère de la Reconstruction et de l'Urbanisme, Bloc and Del Marle brought together a large group of prominent cultural figures of the postwar French scene – significantly minus Le
Corbusier, who never joined, as he held Bloc to be personally responsible for the failure of the Porte Maillot project. The signatories, grouped under the categories of “architectes”, “constructeurs” and “plasticiens”, offered a collective manifesto: “Le Groupe Espace”. The manifesto, which was eventually reproduced in Bloc’s magazines, was first distributed as a flyer and plastered on walls in the streets of Paris, positioning itself as a political tract addressing the urban masses. However, the text had a palpably different tone from the more agonistic manifestoes of the interwar avant-gardes: it was a pragmatic outline of the future activities planned by the group. The group’s stated goals, in its manifesto, were to “préparer les conditions d’une collaboration effectives des architectes, peintres, sculpteurs, plasticiens et d’organiser, par la pratique, l’harmonieux développement des activités humaines.”
Le Groupe Espace

La dissolution des arts plastiques : peinture, sculpture, architecture, est un fait déplorable mais indéniable. Les artistes, les critiques et le public, que les écoles les plus renommées pour répondre aux besoins du monde moderne, de notre vie courante, apparaissent à nouveau, comme des audaces inutiles.

Cependant, un groupe s’est formé en France pour aborder cette tâche difficile de synthèse, sans laquelle aucune civilisation ne peut être conservée à l’absence.

Des conditions favorables sont venues permettre aux expositions de la renaissance d’ériger dans une phase délicate. Les architectes, qui ont été chargés des travaux eux-mêmes, ont compris qu’ils pourraient utiliser associé à leurs études, d’autres plastiques. Ensemble ils viennent de dégager un manifeste où ils exposent leurs principes. Les artistes, qui ont envie d’exprimer spécialement sur les nouveaux problèmes, ont été invités à se réunir. Les premières séances, groupées par la mélodie, se constituent que le début d’un réunion.

L’idée est née de lui et elle fait son chemin. En FRANCE et en ITALIE, on note les premières réalisations. La Tchécoslovaquie de MILAN, venue de quelle faunique intelligente peuvent collaborer les architectes et les plasticiens.

Le groupe Groupe Espace, réuni constitue en Association, ne sera pas une chapelle. Sa mission ne chercheront pas une publicité personnelle, mais aborderont, avec l’humilité qui s’attache à des réalisations artistiques, les rois qui s’attache à des réalisations fondamentales.

Manifeste

Pour le dégager définitivement des confusions survivantes refusant d’être le moyen du public, qu’un grand nombre de publics. Les architectes, les architectes et les plasticiens souffrent de la philosophie, de la philosophie et de la philosophie.

Ils préconisent

- L’usage de moyens nouveaux et modernes dans le domaine de l’architecture.
- L’utilisation de matériaux modernes dans la construction des bâtiments.
- L’ouverture des espaces publics.
- La réunion de l’art et de la technologie.

Ils constatent

- Que les matériaux modernes ont permis de construire des bâtiments plus modernes.
- Que l’ouverture des espaces publics a permis de créer des bâtiments plus ouverts.
- Que la réunion de l’art et de la technologie a permis de créer des bâtiments plus esthétiques.

Ils proposent

- La création d’un nouveau style d’architecture.
- La création d’un nouveau style de construction.
- La création d’un nouveau style de réunion.

Ils réclament

- Pour l’harmonie de développement, de toutes les activités humaines.
- Pour le progrès fondamental de la plastique.

Les signatures des architectes et des plasticiens sont de :

ARCHITECTES : André Gheerbrant, Jean de la Fontaine, Jean Giobbe, Pierre Guizot, Guérandier.


CONSTRUCTEURS : René Lalou, Paul Echelle, Jean Prouvé.


Figure 96. Manifesto of Groupe Espace, reprinted in Art d’Aujourd’hui, no. 8 (October 1951).
The official documents of the first Groupe Espace meeting, held in October 1951 (shortly after the mass distribution of the group’s manifesto) are extremely revealing of the ambitions and bureaucratic structure of this particular group. The first Assemblée Générale Constitutive was held under the honorary presidency of MRU Minister Claudius-Petit and was supervised by Bloc. Because Claudius-Petit was one of the few politicians who approved of Bloc’s previous quest for a “synthesis of the arts” during the Porte Maillot exhibition project, Bloc wanted to keep him involved in his new endeavors.

During his initial address to the group, Bloc decried, once again, the fragmentation of artists, architects and planners. By claiming the “présence fondamentale de la plastique” in contemporary life, the group described itself as pursuing nothing short of a civilizing mission. The group also expressed its ambition to found Espace outposts in other countries, as well as in France’s outre-mer colonies.

As positive examples of postwar realizations, Bloc mentions the Milan Triennial and the work of the Italian firm Olivetti – the enlightened paternalist capitalist company par excellence. Bloc described Olivetti’s various projects, many of which were built in Ivrea outside Turin, as “étudiées plastiquement depuis les plans d’urbanisme d’une cité industrielle moderne qu’elle a créée jusqu’aux formes plastiques des machines à écrire

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209 As Larry Busbea has noted, the word “plastique” or “plasticité” are recurrent in postwar French art and architectural criticism, but these terms are particularly vague. Busbea, however, provides some useful clarifications, as he describes the work of Schöffer, Vasarely and others as an expansion of the “synthesis of the arts” discourse to a more integrative approach. This expansion involves, argues Busbea, “an enlargement from the architectural object to the city as a whole; (...) the conception of a work that was synthetic increasingly giving way to one of plastic spectacle in a more totalizing sense; and, on a more conceptual level, a move away from the consideration of the purely sensual aspects of the plastic interaction of art and architecture toward a search for deeper structures that united these activities as well as disparate others.” See: Larry Busbea, Topologies: The Urban Utopia in France, 1960-1970, Cambridge, Ma: MIT Press, 2007, p. 174.
construite dans ses usines.”210 One of the other key points made by Bloc in his speech is that artists must be involved at every level and at the outset of any project, a lesson learned from the shortcomings of the avant-garde of the 1920s — and a lesson he also learned from the recent failure of the project with Le Corbusier, where the architect simply dominated the exhibition:

Depuis, il est apparu de façon constante, que les divers essais donnaient des résultats médiocres ou malheureux, parce que les artistes, peintres et sculpteurs étaient appelés trop tard à participer aux travaux et, seulement dans quelques rares circonstances. Il importe qu’il soit fait appel aux plasticiens dès les premières études, au moment du choix des solutions. 211

With such a lofty goal in mind, the group set itself the task of engaging with an extremely wide range of cultural activities, which would each be addressed by a specific “commission” or “bureau”. Although it was not uncommon for previous modernist and avant-garde groups to structure themselves in a somewhat bureaucratic manner and to keep detailed archives212, Groupe Espace took that to a whole new level. The artist Sonya Delaunay was named secretary and kept meticulous notes of the various meetings. The abstract artist Edgard Pillet was first named “ministre de la propagande” by the group and would be in charge of promoting the group and approaching potential clients. The group also voted that each commission would be composed of at least an architect, a


212 See, for example, Sven Spieker’s insightful The Big Archive: Art from Bureaucracy, Cambridge, Ma: MIT Press, 2008.
painter and a sculptor. The first commission was to be concerned with the study of urban planning and “plan-masses”. Other commissions set up by Bloc and the members at the initial meeting include “la préparation des fêtes et expositions” (exhibition design and public fairs), “la plastique appliquée aux objets” (object design, led by Nicolas Schöffer), a “commission des dimensions” (concerned with the scale and proportions of the interior design of buildings). Finally, a commission was created by Félix Del Marle: the “commission de la couleur”, specializing in architectural polychromy. This last commission, explained Del Marle, was not merely about mural painting, but about getting artists to work together with industrial designers and with specialists in the therapeutic and psychological effects of color in space:

Del Marle s’attache à définir la Commission de la couleur. Pour résoudre ces problèmes, le peintre doit être averti de la thérapeutique de la couleur, les radiations contrôlées, etc... Il ne s’agit pas de transposer la peinture de chevalet sur des surfaces murales ou en façade. Les équipes de cette commission de la couleur devront comprendre des ingénieurs spécialisés et des coloristes.

From the archival documents, it seems that Groupe Espace’s various commissions were set up primarily to offer networking opportunities and to make the group seem more credible to the statesmen and to industrialists, who would presumably be commissioning their artistic and political reforms. But such networking came at a hefty financial cost to its members. From the very first meeting, a kind of “tithing” measure was put to a vote, something Bloc had also put in place within the Union pour l’Art. It was agreed that

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213 The “plan-masses” is a term frequently used in French architectural criticism. It refers to the ground plan of a large project, showing the different buildings and the common areas between them.

214 Document #10575, fonds Delaunay/Groupe Espace, Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1951, p. 4. My emphasis. At a later group meeting, held one year later, even more commissions would be added to the already lengthy list: an architectural commission (presided by the architect Jean George) and a “groupe jeune” (led by the soon to be famous architect Claude Parent).
members who received commissions had to voluntarily give up a percentage of their honoraries to the group. The original proposal by Marcel Roux, an affiliate of Claudius-Petit who was Joint-Chief of the cabinet of the MRU, was 33% – a figure lowered to 10%, at the initiative of the engineer Bernard Lafaille, who acted as the group’s treasurer. Although it is unclear what the monies were to be used for, they presumably went in part to funding Bloc’s journal, as well as to organizing group exhibitions and social gatherings.

FAST CARS, COLORFUL FACTORIES:
DEL MARLE’S ARCHITECTURAL POLYCHROMY FOR RENAULT IN FLINS

Groupe Espace was, at least initially, successful in getting some of its members monies from very prominent patrons. In 1952, Espace architect Bernard Zehrfuss was offered with Del Marle a multimillion Francs contract to design a new complex for the car manufacturer Renault (a project co-financed by the French State via the MRU). This became one of the most comprehensive realizations of the group on the French territory. Before discussing the specifics of the project itself, as well as the nature of the collaboration between the architect and the artist, it is important to point out some key contextual elements regarding Renault’s history, as this will allow us to better understand why the company chose to align itself with figures associated with a purportedly redemptive type of “synthesis of the arts”.

The car manufacturer Renault, a family business founded in 1899 by the brothers Louis, Marcel, and Fernand Renault, was one of the companies that brought major innovations to the French automotive industry. The company played a key role in the French popular imagination via its car exhibitions at various industrial trade fairs attended by the masses
(such as the annual Salons de l'Automobile) and also because of its creative advertising.

During World War I, Renault became inextricably connected to the French State and to its military institutions, converting some of its car factories to produce bombshells and hiring a great number of unskilled workers for production groups organized by Taylorist principles. Renault’s assembly lines were also used to produce trucks and FT-17 tanks, which ultimately played a key role in France’s military victory against Germany in 1918. After the wartime push, strikes occurred and Renault conceded to social welfare reforms, such as shorter working hours, but these were very low in comparison to what its workers were asking for. Renault was fiscally and politically conservative, exerting extreme forms of surveillance and control of its workforce and affiliating itself in the 1920s and 30s with nationalist far-right groups such as L'Action Française. During this period, the Renault upper echelons hired militants from extremist groups such as the Organisation secrète d'action révolutionnaire nationale (OSARN, most commonly referred to by journalists as La Cagoule, meaning The Cowl) to exact violent actions against leftist strikers at Renault factories. Many of these repressive corporate tactics eventually became public, as the company was put on trial in 1939. The politically charged case was extensively documented in the French press at the time (in particular in the Communist paper L’Humanité).
Then came the Second World War. Afraid that he would lose his company following the armistice with Germany, signed in June 1940, Louis Renault agreed to turn over some of his facilities to the Nazis in exchange for shared governance. At the very same time, Renault executive François Lehideux was appointed by Maréchal Pétain as the Délégué à l'Équipement National and later as the Secrétaire d'État à la Production Industrielle. The extent of Renault’s actual participation in the Vichy administration is still a matter of public debate today. While Laurent Dingli, an historian close to the Renault family, rejects the idea that there was collaboration of any kind, most historians agree that the company, like many others, celebrated the fall of the leftist Front Populaire and saw the opportunity of working with the Vichy and Nazi authorities as a better situation for corporate capitalism.

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215 François Lehideux was named Directeur général of the company, in large part because he was married to Louis Renault’s niece. He was also a member of the fascist L’Action Française group.

216 For example, see the biography written by Louis Renault’s grand son in law, Laurent Dingli, Louis Renault, Paris: Flammarion, 2000.

In Renault’s case, it is indisputable that the company built thousands of trucks and other forms of military equipment for the occupier. This would certainly help explain why the maps showing the most heavily bombed areas of France during the war show Boulogne-Billancourt where most of the company’s plants were located, as a prime Allied bombing target. A now famous photograph also shows Hitler and Hermann Göring with Louis Renault at a car fair held in Berlin, confirming that the company’s leader had direct contacts with the Nazis.

Following the Liberation in 1944, Renault was targeted as a prime symbol of France’s collaborationist policies during the war. Without the capacity to determine the precise extent of Renault’s collaboration, postwar French authorities, composed primarily of Gaullists and Communists, found in Louis Renault a convenient scapegoat. Although few

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CEOs were put on trial, Renault himself was singled out, because of his reputation for opportunism and his prominence in the French popular media. In January 1945, the Renault company was expropriated, nationalized and transformed into a “régie nationale” by the French government. Louis Renault was sent to prison, where he died shortly afterwards after being supposedly beat up by guards. On a symbolic level, these trials allowed the Gaullists to show France, now aligned with the Allies, as “purified” of its recent collaborationist past. For France’s Communist supporters, the trial and imprisonment allowed them a public form of revenge against a boss who had repressed so many strikes and reputedly arranged for union organizers to be killed. Yet, despite the symbolic and cathartic effects this trial may have had for both the left and the right, there were significant continuities between the Vichy administration and postwar reconstruction efforts. Renault’s trial, which was widely discussed in the French press, created the impression that the postwar reforms and house cleanings were going to be far reaching, but as many historians have shown, the majority of Vichy sympathizers retained their government or managerial positions. Under the Fourth Republic, France continued much of its authoritarian “corporatiste” policies, albeit in a more toned-down manner.

218 Jean-Paul Thévenet, Louis Renault: histoire d’une tragédie et d’une nationalisation, Paris: Londreys, 1985. Many others involved at Renault, such as Lehideux, got away without being sent to prison, and went on to work for other car manufacturers. It is also well known that other far-right activists in the 1930s, such as François Miterrand, remained involved in French politics, but on the socialist side. See, amongst many other studies: Richard Golsan, Vichy’s Afterlife: History and Counterhistory in Postwar France, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000.

219 “Le programme de la Résistance et l’application qui en fut faite à la Libération purent bien se donner l’air d’être inspirés uniquement par des valeurs morales en rupture totale avec celle de l’Occupation, il n’empêche que le ‘néo-capitalisme social’ du discours de Bayeux [De Gaulle] fut façonné par les exigences de la Reconstruction. C’est en cela qu’il se rapprocha, sinon s’inspira, de l’organisation économique du régime de Vichy. La doctrine corporatiste, qui inspire ce dernier, rejettait elle aussi le capitalisme libéral comme le communisme, semblable sur ce point au Gaullisme.” For more on these symbolic ruptures, structural continuities and attempt to find a “third way”, see: Pierre Naville et al., L’État entrepreneur: le cas de la Régie Renault, Paris: Anthropos, 1971, p. 52.
Following the nationalization and Louis Renault's trial, the new Régie Renault was in dire need of a public image makeover. It is in this context that they made several administrative changes and approached Groupe Espace to help create a more progressive image to the company. The first step in redeeming the company’s image was to put in place a new director. Pierre Lefaucheux, a World War I veteran, former Résistance fighter, and staunch Gaulliste, was officially appointed as CEO in March 1945.\textsuperscript{220} In addition to repairing the older factories at Boulogne-Billancourt, Raoul Dautry and the MRU pressed Lefaucheux to gradually decentralize the nationalized company’s facilities.\textsuperscript{221} This new policy, argued the MRU, would allow developing and modernizing other suburban areas of the French territory, using funds allocated by the Plan Monnet and the Marshall Plan, the economic recovery plans put specifically in place in 1945 and 1947 by the French and American governments to rebuild public infrastructures and to steer France away from Soviet influence.

\textbf{Figure 100.} Official company portrait of Pierre Lefaucheux, first postwar CEO of the Régie Renault. \textbf{Figure 101.} Renault workers on strike, Boulogne-Billancourt, 1947.


\textsuperscript{221} Letter from Raoul Dautry, Ministre de la Reconstruction et de l’Urbanisme, to Marcel Paul, Ministre de la Production Industrielle, dated June 6 1945, quoted in Christine Desmoulins, Bernard Zehrfuss, Paris: Infolio, 2008, p. 44.
Because of the high stakes in these early Cold War years, Renault's workforce was one of the most militant and organized in France. The government was particularly concerned by unrest at these nationalized factories. Despite the optimistic and benevolent talk by the post-Vichy Renault administration, the living conditions of workers continued to be extremely dire and rationing continued for years after the war ended because significant portions of the transportation system were destroyed. Many grass roots union organizers were actively mobilizing workers to undermine American interference in French industrial planning, pressing workers to ask for more social benefits, higher salaries and better working conditions. Violent upheavals emerged in the partially rebuilt Renault factories in Boulogne-Billancourt in April 1947, leading to further strikes in several other sectors of the French economy (mining, banking, etc.)\textsuperscript{222} Threatened by these strikes and by acts of industrial sabotage, Renault management coerced their workers back to work and the French government called a decree to temporarily exclude the pro-strike PCF from the government ranks, leading to further outcries on the left. Arguing that insurrection was at hand, the government passed a law in December 1947, requiring Renault and other employees on strike to go back to work.

Following these violent clashes, union militancy (via the Confédération Générale du Travail, CGT), continued to grow within the Régie Renault’s ranks. However, the company was hoping to prevent further unrest not only by direct surveillance and control, but also through raising the material and aesthetic quality of life of its workers through specific incentives and reforms. Indeed, the nationalized Renault became committed to

building newer, more effective and allegedly more beautiful factories in Flins, a suburb not very far from Paris. It is exactly in this context that Renault and the MRU approached Groupe Espace. Claudius-Petit of the MRU, also Groupe Espace’s honorary president, was put in charge as administrator of this project. Against the fortress-like structure of the industrial plants in Boulogne-Billancourt, Claudius-Petit asked Lefaucheux: “Faites-nous une belle usine et surtout protégez le cadre naturel.”223 The MRU and the Renault’s purported concern with industry being beautifully integrated into the environment, as well as their appeal to members of Groupe Espace who championed a “synthesis of the arts”, are inextricably linked. They form a conscious attempt to create a new, more progressive identity for the postwar company.

It is via Claudius-Petit, who held a dual role as MRU administrator of the project and as Groupe Espace honorary president, that the commission to build new factories in Flins was offered to a fellow member, Bernard Zehrfuss. Zehrfuss, a former Prix de Rome winner had, by the 1950s, abandoned Beaux-Arts historicism and embraced mid-century International Style architecture, which he infused with a strong sense of formal composition and a programmatic attention to functional requirements and to ergonomics. Zehrfuss drew up a vast industrial campus plan for the company, which he dubbed, in typically Corbusian terminology, as “usines vertes.”224 The new factories would be located near a highway and the Seine River, hereby connecting them, via land

223 Letter from Claudius-Petit to Lefaucheux, quoted in Christine Desmoulins, Bernard Zehrfuss, p. 44.

224 Although the process of “greening,” meaning to purposely (and often deceptively) make a town, a company, or a brand seem to be environmentally friendly, is typically viewed as a contemporary corporate responses to the various ecological movements, which gained momentum in the 1970s, it was already common practice in postwar reconstruction, notably by Claudius-Petit in Firminy, where he was elected mayor in 1953. Claudius-Petit would indeed name, after Le Corbusier, the new urban developments in the town “Firminy-Vert.” This deserves further inquiry.
and water, to the adjacent regions. The site, a large rectangle measuring 1.8 kilometers, was divided up according to its different functions (the production lines, the workshops, the administrative offices and the industrial sheds). The engineer Jean Prouvé was brought in for the structural engineering of the warehouses and sheds, as well as for much of the furniture design within the corporate offices.

Figure 102. Bernard Zehrfuss, plan-masse of the Renault factories in Flins, 1951. Figure 103. Promotional article on the housing estate developed in Elisabethville, near Paris, during the interwar years.

The company was hoping to secure the support of its workers by offering space in nearby affordable housing complexes featuring modern amenities of consumption: toward this end, Renault and the MRU purchased plots of land in Élisabethville, a garden-city near Flins that had been first developed in the 1930s. Zehrfuss would also be put in charge of designing new low-rise tenements on pilotis for Renault workers. The new housing blocs would also be conveniently located near a beach and wooded areas about 40 minutes away, ideal spots for employees to spend some of their “temps libre” during the weekends or possibly their “vacances” during the summer.
Unlike Le Corbusier, who would personally choose the colors applied on the inside and the outside of his buildings, Zehrfuss left this task entirely up to Del Marle, head of Groupe Espace’s “color commission,” and to his colleague, the artist Claude Servannes. In Del Marle’s view, color in space worked at three different scales: “ou avec l’objet gratuit se suffisant à lui-même, ou avec l’objet fonctionnaliste à destination utilitaire et immédiate, ou enfin avec l’architecture.”

While he was consistently limited to the object stage in his exhibitions at the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles, where he showed his sculptures and his architectural models, this new project with Zehrfuss would allow Del Marle to attain the two higher levels: functional objects and finally, actual buildings.

Del Marle thus finally had an opportunity to apply on a grand scale his notion of “polychromie architecturale,” which he developed initially out of his engagement with Mondrian’s Néo-Plasticisme. In 1951, Del Marle asked Bloc to publish in Art d’Aujourd’hui the 1927 Mondrian French essay “Le Home – La Rue – La Cité”, which originally appeared in the little magazine Vouloir, as a tribute to his former mentor. In this particular essay, Mondrian discusses the dawn of a new utopian, collective era.

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order to supersede the material and spiritual conditions of the day, described as
disharmonious and individualistic, Mondrian pleaded for the reign of a new collective
aesthetic: Neo-Plasticism. Mondrian had developed his ideas in previous essays and
manifestos, as well as through his activities as a painter, making countless abstract
compositions in which “pure lines” (horizontal and vertical) and “pure colors” (red, blue,
yellow) and “non colors” (white, black and grey) were deployed in a rectangular grid
format. The intersections of these simple geometrical elements, argued Mondrian, were
there to symbolize an ideal, plastic beauty in tune with the relational harmonies of the
cosmos (which the artist largely understood in spiritual terms inherited from Dutch
Theosophy). As a kind of prefiguration of such a utopian new world, Mondrian placed
several of his abstract compositions throughout his little apartment/studio on Rue du
Départ in Paris. Various photographs of Mondrian’s monastic living space have now
become emblematic of the artist’s ongoing concern for the distribution of his abstract
compositions to counter the perceived threats of life in the big city.

227 It is well documented that much of Mondrian’s ideas derived from his intense engagement with
Theosophy, especially the writings of the Dutch writer Mathieu Hubertus Josephus Schoenmaekers. For a
more general discussion of this topic, see the work of Carel Blotkamp, “Annunciation of the New
Mysticism: Dutch Symbolism and Early Abstraction,” The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985,
Del Marle’s selection of “Le Home – La Rue – La Cité” for reprinting in Art d’Aujourd’hui was significant, since it marks one of the first serious attempts at a formulation of the social relevance of Mondrian’s artistic principles. Indeed, as the title indicates, it marks a programmatic desire on the part of the artist to move from abstract easel painting to real, tridimensional, social space: from the interior of the home, towards the street, reaching finally the city as a whole. Simplified geometry and polychromy, as they extended beyond the picture frame, were to play a central role in the total reorganization of public space and to the creation of “beautiful” and “healthy” cities.

Une esthétique nouvelle est née de la peinture néo-plastique. On peut dans la réalisation de certains intérieurs, dans la construction de quelques édifices, libérés de la Tradition, voir apparaître l’Esprit nouveau, il est alors possible d’y découvrir les nouvelles lois qui ont été créées. Ces lois bouleversent l’ancienne conception architecturale, déjà purifiée et simplifiée, pour une grande partie, et par les nouvelles exigences du nouveau matériel, etc. et par les efforts hardis de différents architectes.\textsuperscript{228}

Unlike his previous texts and manifestos, published in the Dutch language avant-garde magazine De Stijl, this essay in French approaches the issue in explicitly architectural and urbanistic terms. Indeed, it is with this text, illustrated with previously unpublished drawings, such as a polychrome interior for a private patron (in particular the “Salon of Mrs. B... in Dresden”) that Mondrian moves the discussion from painting to architecture and urbanism. Mondrian himself never managed to create architecturally integrated works, such as the one planned for Mrs. Beinart, outside of his studio space. One of his closest followers in France, Jean Gorin, was also limited to decorating à la De Stijl his studio space in Nort-sur-Erdre and remained confined to making sculptural reliefs, as well as architectural and urbanistic proposals on papers. Some other followers, however, did succeed in making modest architectural realizations. 229

Figure 107. Cornelis van Eesteren, Axonometric from below, Winkelgalerij shopping mall, The Hague, 1924, architectural drawing and collage with colorization by Theo van Doesburg, 1924. Figure 108. Theo van Doesburg, polychrome scheme for the flower room inside of Robert Mallet-Stevens’ Villa Noailles, Hyères, 1927.

For example, Theo van Doesburg, co-founder of the De Stijl journal, developed a strong interest in Mondrian’s architectural ideas. Van Doesburg would retain much of Mondrian’s distinctive emphasis on simple geometry and primary colors, although he

would gradually break away from his restrictive notion that only horizontal and vertical lines could be used. Van Doesburg even included diagonals, hereby launching a new approach, which he dubbed “élémentarisme”. Through his encounter with the Dutch architect Cornelis Van Eesteren, Van Doesburg would add color to several axonometric drawings produced by his architect colleague, showing the possibilities of a volumetric expansion of color planes in tridimensional space (such as in his coloration of Van Eesteren’s drawing of a prospective shopping mall in The Hague). Like Mondrian, Van Doesburg would apply his ideas in his own house, located in Meudon, outside Paris.

Finally, he received, in 1927, a modest commission to devise a small polychrome scheme for the flower room inside of the modernist villa designed by Robert Mallet-Stevens for the aristocrats Charles, vicomte de Noailles and his wife Marie-Laure de Noailles in Hyères, near the Côte d’Azur. This small success led to Van Doesburg’s most ambitious architectural project, the 1929 Aubette project in Strasbourg, done in collaboration with the artists Hans Arp and his wife Sophie Taeuber. Until the postwar years, L’Aubette would become the largest application of principles inspired by Néo-Plasticisme and Élémentarisme in a public building.

Figure 109. Theo van Doesburg, Hans Arp and Sophie Taeuber-Arp, polychrome scheme for the film room of the Café de L’Aubette, Strasbourg, 1929.
Van Doesburg, Arp and Taeuber did not design the building itself: the café was merely an annex by the architects Paul and André Horn added onto a classical building by Jean-François Blondel from the 1770s. The 1929 annex, intended as a little modernist café, offered to its patrons different amenities, such as a restaurant, a bar, a billiard room, a dance hall and a film room. The artists were brought in by the architects late in the project to do the decoration: they chose to use primary colors, which were applied to interconnecting diagonal planes and elementalist shapes. Unfortunately, the locals did not enjoy the stark colors, and the space was gradually altered with more traditional decorations and patterns, until the original project became unrecognizable.230

![Figure 110. Félix Del Marie, “La Couleur dans l’Espace,” Art d’Aujourd’hui, no. 5 (May 1951), p. 11 showing architectural proposals by Theo van Doesburg (Amsterdam University), Piet Mondrian (Salon de Madame B...) and a polychrome sculpture by George Folmer.](image)

230 The building was gradually restored to a state much closer to the original design in the 1980s and 90s. For a detailed analysis and for extensive visual documentation of the original and restoration projects, see: Emmanuel Guignon, Hans van der Werf and Mariet Willinge, De Aubette of de kleur in de architectuur. Een ontwerp van Hans Arp, Sophie Taeuber-Arp en Theo van Doesburg, Rotterdam: 010, 2006.
After the war, Del Marle, along with his friend Jean Gorin and Michel Seuphor, who also collaborated on the little magazine Vouloir in the 1920s, were keen on popularizing such misunderstood projects. They also attempted to give Neo-Plasticism a much broader relevance in the reconstruction efforts, both in France and in its colonies. Previously limited to proposals on paper, to small architectural models, or to the decoration of small upper class interiors and artists' studios, it was time, argued Del Marle, for artists and architects to launch more ambitious projects that would go beyond L'Aubette's somewhat limited success. In his essay “La couleur dans l'espace”, published in Art d'Aujourd'hui, Del Marle reproduced several interwar projects by Van Doesburg and Mondrian, and tried to describe Neo-Plasticism as a genuine attempt to make art part of everyday life.

Against the realist paintings with socialist themes and images that were being championed by the communist left, Del Marle argued that the truly social painting is “architectured color” (la couleur architecturée). The distribution of color in space, which would be experienced simultaneously by people in that space, would affect humans at the biological and somatic levels. This was the way to resolve the antinomies between the particular and the universal. It was also the path to follow to discipline and to master the sensory experiences of city dwellers. “[La couleur] devenue à la fois Abstraite et Concrète, Individuelle et Universelle, elle est en outre la plus ‘grave’ des manifestations picturales de notre époque, et requiert l'attention de tous ceux qui se préoccupent de l'Homme et de ses futures – et sans doute prochaines – conditions d'existence”. Del Marle also thought of his ideas on architectural polychromy as totally rational and therefore applicable

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231 Richly illustrated articles on Van Doesburg and L'Aubette were published in Art d'aujourd'hui, no. 8 (December 1953). This critical reappraisal of the artist was also strong in Holland: De Stijl was also rediscovered and given a new social relevance in the context of Dutch reconstruction efforts via the journal Structure. See: Jonneke Jobse, De Stijl Continued: The Journal Structure (1958-1964), An Artists' Debate. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2005.

anywhere in the world, a vision mired in the assumptions of France’s role as a civilizing power (a view that Rabinow aptly describes as “technocosmopolitanism”).

In 1947, a few years prior to the Renault project, Del Marle submitted to the architects Paul Herbé and Jean Le Couteur – later to become members of Groupe Espace and of the MRU – a colored version he had made of the city center plan that they had designed as part of a French government’s attempt to develop the capital of Bamako in “Soudan Français” (now Mali). Del Marle describes his color scheme for the colony as totally functional: blue, described as “therapeutic”, would control the proliferation of bugs, red would be used to dynamize and to “stimulate” the psychological life of the people in the business district, while yellow, described as a “stabilizer”, would slow down life in the adjacent living areas. In other words, the artist would use colors to insure productivity and stability in France d’outre-mer. For polychromy was not just a formal attribute: it was a form of social control as well. Del Marle’s goal, like those of urban planners and colonial administrators, “was the transformation of the historical-natural milieu into a

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productive and peaceful environment. In this, its modernity was normative, its norms were modern.”

Closer to home, Del Marle’s collaboration with Zehrfuss and Servannes in Flins would give the artist his first opportunity to apply some of his ideas on a grand scale. In a document written to the Renault administration, Del Marle described his ambitious project:

Il ne s’agit plus d’une polychromie ornementale, décorative, à base sensorielle, qui s’harmonisait avec les styles des siècles révolus, mais bien d’une polychromie architecturale, née des plus récentes évolutions de la peinture et de l’architecture moderne, caractérisées sur un rationalisme, signe flagrant de notre époque. Cette nouvelle conception de la polychromie, étroitement liée à l’architecture des

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235 Paul Rabinow, “France in Morocco: Technopolitanism and Middling Modernism,” Assemblage, no. 17 (April 1992), p. 54. Although Mali would become fully independent only in 1960, there were already several parliamentary and popular uprisings in favor of independence and African autonomy in the 1940s and 50s.
volumes, soutient celle-ci, l’accompagne, l’exalte par des
costitutes, ou la neutralise en partie, mais toujours en
fonction de l’architecture, afin de sauvegarder l’Unité de
l’œuvre. La rigueur rationnelle de cette nouvelle
polychromie ne peut avoir aucun point commun avec la
fantaisie qui caractérise la polychromie ‘ornementale’.\footnote{This letter was eventually published as an article in L’Actualité Artistique Internationale (August 1952).}

If Del Marle dismisses “ornamental polychromies”, which are based on a narrow idea of
sensual play (a typically modernist condemnation of applied ornamentation as useless), he
argues that the ordering of the human sensorium is central to his project for
“architectural polychromy”. Indeed, as he did in Bamako, Del Marle frequently alludes
to what he takes to be the functional, psychological and therapeutic qualities of colors.\footnote{It is known that Del Marle visited the Bauhaus and the Weissenhofsiedlung, so he may have come
across Bruno Taut’s and Paul Scheerbart’s writings that deal with color. He may well have been aware of
the writings of anthroposophist Rudolf Steiner, who influenced many modern architects. However, it is
unclear what Del Marle’s exact scientific or medical sources were as far as his understand of the therapeutic
effects of colors. He may well have been reading vulgarization articles on so-called “chromotherapy,” which
would become popular at mid-century. This deserves further inquiry.}

Color itself would be industrialized and systematized: it was no longer hand painted by
the artist or diffused by stained glass windows or crystals, but applied by technicians using
spray paint pistols. In a document he wrote while working in Flins, Del Marle explains:

La couleur est ici envisagée d’abord et avant tout sous un
angle fonctionnel. Elle doit épouser, se soumettre et
soutenir la raison d’être du Lieu: les rythmes successifs de
l’Activité, aider et intensifier le rendement, par: une facilité
visuelle de l’ordre des opérations reposant sur les tropismes
simples des couleurs; une adaptation des vibrations colorées
aux rythmes plus ou moins accélérés des appareils et à leur
qualité calorimétriques une ambiance claire et gaie du lieu
de travail, rendant celui-ci plus agréable donc moins
fatigant et favorisant le rendement.\footnote{Félix Del Marle, “Notes brèves concernant l’organisation de la couleur à l’intérieur des ateliers de
l’usine de Flins,” Archives Lucy Del Marle, Pont-sur-Sambre, n/p. Reprinted in F. Del Marle: la
polychromie dans l’espace, 1945-1952, p. 117.}

Several drawings addressed by Del Marle to Servannes also show the artist’s concern for
the effect of specific colors on the human bodily organism. One sketch by Del Marle, for
instance, shows the reaction of the use of the color red on the metabolism and circulatory
system of workers working on the assembly lines. Much of the Renault workplace
would continue to be organized in a series of assembly lines following strict Taylorist
principles, as the company hired an increasing number of women and immigrants with
no engineering background. As Anson Rabinbach explains, “Taylorism rigidly separated
knowledge from action by transforming the sentient knowledge of the worker into a
formalized procedure monopolized by management, and depriving the worker of
authority over the work process.” Total polychromy within the factory, argued Del
Marle, would not challenge such separation of knowledge from action, but would serve,
in the interests of management, to alleviate some of the well-known negative side effects of
authoritarian industrial organization, such as workers’ fatigue and boredom.

![Figure 113. Photograph of women working on an assembly in the Renault factory in Flins. Figure 114. Félix Del Marle, sketches showing the impact of the color red on the organism of Renault workers, 1951.](image)

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239 In many treatises, going back to Ancient times, the encounter with red-colored light has been
associated with increased blood flow in humans. It also has been associated with medicinal properties,
notably in 1896 by Edwin D. Babbitt in his famous The Principles of Light and Color, New Hyde Park,
Effects of Visible and Near Infrared Light in Humans,” in Paolo U. Giacomoni, ed. Biophysical and
214.

240 Anson Rabinbach, “The Biopolitics of Work,” in Agnes Heller and Sonja Puntscher Rieermann,
Colors would also be used by Del Marle to differentiate separate functions inside of a building. In an article published in an industrial trade journal, Del Marle's collaborator Servannes explains that each color was given a precise meaning, a process dubbed as "signalisation chromatique":

Le jaune indique le danger, l'orange le mouvement, le bleu incite à la prudence, le verte signale les postes de secours, tandis que le rouge est exclusivement réservé au matériel d’incendie. Si le problème de sécurité ne peut être entièrement résolu par la couleur, il est certain que l’état d’alerte qu’elle suscite n’en est pas moins un facteur important dans la diminution des accidents. 241

Outside of the factories’ walls, Del Marle used only the three primary colors to create a visual rhythm for the different façades and to tie the different buildings together, thereby creating a visual sense of regularity and "community". For the housing colony in nearby Elisabethville, Servannes, in reference to his work with Del Marle, would once again describe his use of colors in largely ergonomic terms. Primary colors juxtaposed together in each building’s façade dominated by the horizontal line was supposed to have a

calming effect on the workers: “Au contraire d’un lieu de travail où la verticalité des lignes s’imposait, l’organisation picturale de la cité est imprégnée surtout d’une horizontalité d’expression, source de calme et de repos.”

Del Marle also used various primary colors on a water tower and on the façade of the tenements to avoid visual monotony of the repetitive pattern created by the square windows. The grid of the façade, created by the regularly spaced windows, would indeed be dynamized by their colored frames and by the colored awnings. The awnings, once pulled down, would become a colored square on a white background. Seen from a distance, the buildings’ façades begin to look like an unpredictable and changeable Mondrian painting, a visual effect surely researched by Del Marle.

Figure 117. Félix Del Marle, elevation of a standard unit in the Renault housing colony in Elisabethville, architectural drawing, 1951. Figure 118. Slide of a façade of a 5-story unit in the Renault housing colony in Elisabethville, 1950s.

Renault’s facilities in Flins became, according to several promotional documents produced by the company, a “vitrine sociale”. In other words, it was to become a showcase to promote the company’s productivity and its conscientiousness towards its workers. Its factories (where Renault started to massively produce the Renault 4CV, a small automobile, which would soon become a best-seller in postwar France) and its

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Elisabethville housing (where hundreds of Renault employees found a new home) were frequently shown as incontestable signs of the company's postwar success story – both financial and social. Following the official opening ceremony of the plants in 1952, dignitaries and State officials were frequently invited by the French government to visit Flins. The French authorities were indeed very keen on taking dignitaries and visiting heads of State to show the great strides towards increased productivity made by French manufacturers during the Reconstruction. Notable visitors include Emperor Haile Sélassié I of Ethiopia in 1954, followed by the Queen of England Elizabeth II in 1957, Princess Grace of Monaco (who, according to reports, insisted on offering a glass of champagne to the workers) and even the Soviet Premier Nikita Khruschev in 1959 (who wrote in the factory's guestbook “si votre usine est à vendre, je suis preneur”). These visits were very ceremonious: using Flins' modern and colorful factories as their backdrop, different parades were extensively photographed and discussed in the French press, and became emblematic of the country's attempt to promote its economic recovery plan. The “synthesis of the arts”, hence, was welcomed by both the left and the right as an active part of the postwar miracle.

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While many contemporary art historians, such as Domitille D’Orgeval, insist on describing Del Marle as Mondrian’s greatest postwar follower, because of his ongoing reliance on the artist’s ideas to legitimize his own artistic and architectural projects, the comparison seems rather superficial.\(^{244}\) In Del Marle’s “architectural polychromies,” there is no longer any ambition to use color as a path to spiritual enlightenment and elevation, as was the case in Mondrian’s interwar proposals. In fact, Del Marle’s scheme is much more a type of spatial conditioning: color is deployed to orient and to discipline the movements of the workers and city-dwellers. The artist-polychromist, in tandem with the modern architect, act to insure workers’ safety, their productivity and the reduction of fatigue. Indeed, it seems that all of Mondrian’s ideas about collectivity and harmony, in Del Marle’s projects, totally lost their liberatory and utopian implications.\(^{245}\) Rather, they

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\(^{245}\) The idea that Del Marle was an exemplary disciple of Mondrian goes all the way back to the 1950s. However, a discerning critic at *Art d’Aujourd’hui*, Julian Alvard, noted the discrepancy between the middling modernism of Del Marle’s polychromy projects and Mondrian’s ideas: “On ne peut vraiment pas dire que les idées de Mondrian ont triomphé. L’architecture actuelle est aux antipodes de la notion de ‘rapports purs’. Et on est bien obligé de constater qu’aucun artiste, peintre, sculpteur ou architecte, n’a pu faire passer dans la réalité le sentiment esthétique de Mondrian. Tous ceux qui ont tenté un effort, n’ont pas attaqué la difficulté de front. Il aurait fallu, en effet, ou que le peintre devint maître absolu de l’architecture.
became fully intertwined with contemporary state-corporate discourses on ergonomics and scientific management, functioning as a type of cosmetic rehabilitation for postwar reconstruction projects: in other words, middling modernism. In this context, Del Marle’s totalizing use of “architectured color”, which called for the union of the individual and the collective, can be seen as totally compatible with Renault’s project to pacify its labor force through aesthetic satisfaction and material comfort. In purportedly elevating the workers’ “qualité de vie” via the functional distribution of colors, the workers were thought to become more efficient. Indeed, despite its seemingly benevolent intentions, the company was embracing this “synthesis of the arts” not only to redeem its corporate image, but also to elevate its industrial productivity.

A SOCIAL SERVICE?

Del Marle never saw the Renault complex finished, as he died of cancer in 1952 only a few months prior to the completion of the project. Art d’Aujourd’hui would pay a tribute to the late artist, releasing some of his previously unpublished writings, which were grouped together by Pierre Revoil under the title “La couleur au service de l’homme”. No longer the grandiose and patriotic “plastic epic” (“épopée plastique”) of Le Corbusier, Groupe Espace’s notion of a “synthesis of the arts” had become much more of a pragmatic, technical and didactic discourse. We can notice in the pages of Art d’Aujourd’hui a palpable discursive shift around 1954, as the discourse on the “synthesis

[j’insiste sur le mot absolu], ou que l’architecte se convertit entièrement à la peinture. La possibilité d’un compromis entre le peintre et l’architecte est par nature incompatible avec la notion de ‘rapports purs’.” Julien Alvard, “L’Espace cubiste,” Art d’aujourd’hui, no. 3-4 (May-June 1953), p. 47.
of the arts" starts to be championed as a humane kind of "social service". As André Bloc declared, regarding his group's aims: "Pour rendre aux arts plastiques toute leur valeur humaine, il faut rétablir le contact avec le public, avec les foules. Pour que l'artiste puisse avoir une action sociale, il faut que son rôle soit élargi par la présence permanente de ses œuvres dans toutes les formes d'activité." Léon Degand, in an issue of Art d'Aujourd'hui would also plea for the reform of existing cultural institutions (such as museums, schools, etc.) in order to raise awareness of the general public as it relates to artistic matters, and would encourage the authorities to give more paid commissions to artists as a way to improve their living conditions.

These ideas started to gain many adherents and broader currency in the cultural field of the mid-1950s. Groupe Espace would start to organize studio visits, as well as to set up public conferences by artists and architects. Edgard Pillet and Jean Dewasne would open a so-called Atelier de l'Art Abstrait, where artists and the public where invited to come and learn about modern art and its synthesis to architecture. Groupe Espace would also publish, either in Art d'Aujourd'hui or in anthologies (such as Témoignages pour l'art abstrait) synoptic articles that explain contemporary artistic and cultural events in relation to their broader historical context. The mural painter Antoine Fasani, a member of

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247 The choice of this particular expression seems to reflect, albeit indirectly, some of the postwar administrative changes brought on by the installation of the welfare State. In France, the expression "service social" refers to the different legislative policies and organizations in charge of various matters, such as aid to the poor, education, prevention of diseases, etc. While it was originally referred to as "assistance publique," it would come to be known as "service social" in the 20th century, and there would be a proliferation of such organizations in the postwar years.

248 André Bloc, quoted in Paul Damaz, Art in European Architecture/Synthèse des Arts, p. 34. My emphasis.


Groupe Espace’s color commission, would also publish an entire guidebook dedicated to wall painting. Although prefaced by Le Corbusier, Fasani’s Éléments de Peinture Murale: Pour une Technique Rationnelle de la Peinture is totally different in spirit from the architect’s heroic synthesis. It reads more like a techno-scientific compendium destined for young artists and architects, explaining the history of mural art and polychromy, how to mix pigments, how to create color contrasts, the material properties of different types of surfaces, etc.

Figure 121. Title page and table of contents of Antoine Fasani’s Éléments de Peinture Murale: Pour une Technique Rationnelle de la Peinture (préface de Le Corbusier). Paris: Bordas, 1951.

This new emphasis on the “synthesis of the arts” as a pragmatic social service rather than humanizing ideal, one that needs to be addressed by artists and technicians, is particularly evident in the richly illustrated special issue of Art d’Aujourd’hui “Synthèse des Arts”, edited by the art critic Roger Bordier in 1954. Under the title “L’art est un service social,” Bordier chose to include several photographs of the recently completed Flins project, as well as a handful of other of its kind, recently realized by Espace members.
Such success was infectious. Following the Flins project, Zehrfuss received other commissions leading to similar collaborations with other artists, notably Edgard Pillet, who created a vast color scheme for Zehrfuss’ Mame factory in Tours. The Mame printing factory, which produced missals (hand held catholic prayer books used at Mass), is also presented in the journal as a prime symbol of more humane working conditions because of its inclusion of large, colorful murals. Pillet’s polychrome scheme, unlike Del Marle’s call for total dispersion of color inside and outside of a building, took the form of a series of large abstract murals, as well as a series of painted columns. Inside of the workshops, the artist and a few collaborators hand painted several large wall-sized biomorphic compositions in green, purple, yellow and blue. These colors were deemed to have beneficial effects on the workers. In an interview published in a short promotional document produced by Art d’Aujourd’hui, which Pillet sent to the critic Paul Damaz, the artist used the same kind of psychophysiological rhetoric as Del Marle, describing the totalizing color scheme as making the workshop seem larger and more breathable: “Dans le cadre d’une architecture très volontaire et de conception rationnelle, je me suis donné
pour tâche d’animer, d’agrémerter, de rendre ‘respirable’ à des ouvriers imprimeurs et relieurs, un cubage d’air ayant tendance à provoquer, par ses dimensions et la grandeur de ses proportions, une sorte de complexe de ‘petitesse’.”

Other socially minded, collaborative projects by Groupe Espace members include architect Paul Nelson’s Hôpital Mémorial France-États Unis in Saint-Lô, Normandy. This hospital, financed in part by the United States government aid program as reparation for its aerial bombings of this area of France in 1944, was one of the largest and most modern of its kind (Nelson, who was born in the USA but who worked mostly in France, was very familiar with the advances in medical technology in his home country). Built in glass and concrete and filed with cutting edge equipment, the facilities were to provide different medical services, including psychiatric help, to the local population. Nelson explains how he was hoping to use natural light, as well as the application of bright colors, to complement medical technology and to help cure the

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252 Normandy was the most heavily bombed area of France. According to historical studies, up to 77% of Saint-Lô was destroyed. See: La France de la Quatrième République, tome 1. L’ardeur et la nécessité (1944-1952), Paris: Le Seuil, 1980, p. 33. See also: George W. Kyte, “War Damage and the Problems of Reconstruction in France, 1940-1945,” Pacific Historical Review, vol. 15, no. 4 (December 1946), pp. 417-426.
patients and restore a sense of joy. In an interview in a local Saint-Lô paper, Nelson described these ambitions to the public:

Depuis longtemps, je voulais faire des chambres de malades colorées. Le visiteur du malade doit le voir avec le maximum d'optimisme. Dans une chambre grise ou blanche, un malade est comme un cadavre. Pourquoi ne pas colorer, me suis-je dit, le mur devant lequel repose le malade: cela lui donnera bien meilleure mine. Et quand il pourra se lever, il verra la couleur qui palpait derrière lui et il en sera revigoré. On m'a permis à Saint-Lô de réaliser mon idée.253

In his initial design, Nelson's plan to use color was not to be limited to the large interior hallways and to the patients' rooms. Nelson commissioned fellow Espace member Fernand Léger to develop a polychrome scheme for the façade, in similar colors to the ones found on the inside. A photograph of an original maquette shows the different wings of the hospital, with several large rectangular areas colored in yellow, blue, red and orange, a scheme chosen by Léger, in collaboration with the architect.

Like Pillet in the Maine factory, Léger did not apply colors to differentiate specific functions (what Servannes called "chromatic signalization"), but placed them somewhat

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autonomously from the contours of the building. Like the architect, he surely thought of these bright colors as serving a healing function, but at the broader societal level. The construction of the Saint-Lô hospital, because of lagging finances, dragged on for a decade and Léger died before the completion in 1956. The outside polychromy project was not fully realized, and Léger's intervention would ultimately be reduced to a monumental figurative ceramic mural in the peristyle to honor the peaceful relationship between France and America.

Another project discussed in Art d'Aujourd'hui is the Maison de la Tunisie at the Cité Internationale Universitaire de Paris, a commission given to the Groupe Espace architect Jean Sebag and completed in 1953. This building also featured a polychrome scheme and the inclusion of artworks within its communal areas. These were commissioned from fellow members of the French branch of Groupe Espace: the interior polychrome scheme was designed by Sonya Delaunay, who also devised large tapestries for the Grand Salon, characterized by their colorful, hard edge geometrical patterns. The engineer Jean Prouvé, once again on the team, would design, along with Charlotte Perriand, the
furniture, such as chairs and bookshelves, for the common areas and the 126 student rooms.

The project was commissioned at a time when Tunisia was still a French colony. The goal of the architect and the artists was therefore not to assert Tunisian identity, unlike other national houses built at the Cité Universitaire around those years. Many buildings on campus used art works, decorative motifs or detailing from their home country to signal non-French identity (such as the Maison du Mexique, with its large wall relief showing Maya iconography, the Maison du Cambodge, with its prominent monkey statues and its Khmer architectural details, or the Maison du Maroc, with its stylized tiles and arabesque design work). Instead, the Maison de la Tunisie stood as a symbol of the French educational institution’s attempt to use modern art and architecture as signs of progress and as tools in its universalist attempt to integrate all of France’s population, including those from the colonies.

254 Such attempts at asserting a building’s national identity via regional motifs were frequently mocked in Art d’Aujourd’hui, in particular by Pierre Guégen in his article “Anti-synthèse,” Art d’Aujourd’hui, no. 4-5 (May-June 1954). Roger Bordier would also criticize the work of local Venezuelan artists who worked with members of Groupe Espace at the City University in Caracas as simply derivative of the work of the French masters. See: “Caracas,” Art d’aujourd’hui, no. 1 (February 1954), pp. 28-29. This confirms the French-centric worldview of many proponents of the “synthesis of the arts.” The relationship of Groupe Espace to non-European countries, such as Latin America and Japan, still deserves further inquiry.
Groupe Espace’s call for architectural polychromy, as part of their broader discourse on the “synthesis of the arts,” would not be limited to large architectural commissions or artistic monuments such as the ones mentioned above, nor would it be discussed strictly in specialized journals. This discourse would also find its way into the quintessential postwar “presse féminine.” For instance, the architect Claude Parent, leader of Groupe Espace’s youth group, along with the architect Ionel Schein, would publish photographs of models of some of their polychrome houses in the French middle-class magazine Elle in 1953 and 1955. Just as polychromy served as the blueprint for joyful and efficient workplaces, hospitals and student housing complexes, it would serve as a promise of domestic happiness for the young cadres and petit bourgeois who wished to live in France’s suburbs. The names chosen for the houses were earnest to the point of being almost comical: Maison Heureuse, Maison de la Hardiesse, Maison d’Actualité, Maison de la Tradition. Sponsored by Elle, Schein and Parent would build a large furnished prototype of the Maison Heureuse, which was shown at the 1955 Salon des Arts.

For a study of postwar publications such as Elle, France Femme and Marie-Claire, which were very widely read by postwar French women, see: Evelyne Sullerot, La presse féminine, Paris: Armand Collin, 1983.
Menagers. A year later, Schein would also build a prototype for a Maison Tout en Plastique, hoping to show to the attendees of the Salon des Arts Ménagers that new, colorful homes could be prefabricated by extensively using plastic, the popular industrial material made readily available to consumers after the war.

In a text co-written by Parent and Schein, titled “Essai pour un habitat individuel évolutif”, the two Groupe Espace members described their new type of modern individual house as attentive to plasticity and to the so-called “human scale.” Colorful living arrangements would directly contribute to man’s “education plastique” from the comfort of his own home:

Rompant avec le romantisme et le fonctionnalisme, nous apportons à l’habitat, respect du corps humain, souci de l’échelle humaine, exaltation de l’esprit de l’homme.

According to the Cité de l’Architecture archives, the project for the Maison Heureuse was co-sponsored by the Ministère du Logement et de la Reconstruction (MLR, related to the MRU). Also, two houses were built, one of which was in Combes-la-Ville. Parent would collaborate with Elle magazine again in 1957: he designed the façade of their exhibition pavilion at the 1957 Foire de Paris, in front of which was sited a large abstract sculpture by Berto Lardera.

These types of privately sponsored domestic projects are exactly contemporaneous to Monsanto’s House of the Future in Disneyland in California, as well as Peter and Alison Smithson’s now famous House of the Future shown at the Daily Mail Ideal Home exhibition in London. See: Beatriz Colomina, “Unbreathed Air,” Grey Room, no. 15 (Spring 2004), pp. 28-59.
Contrairement à tout un contexte historique de l'architecture (grande composition) l'homme ne fera plus l'essentiel de son éducation plastique à l'extérieur (civilisation grecque, égyptienne, du Moyen Âge, de la Renaissance) et civilisation actuelle de la rue, mais depuis l'intérieur dans le cadre même de son logis. Cette auto-éducation plastique redonne de la valeur à l'homme en tant qu'individu et harmonise aussi ses gestes, ses pensées, ses formes avec la collectivité, sa vérité, ses impératifs. 258

Such “evolutive houses” were not only presented as signs of the self-assured, non-ostentatious good taste of the owners (unlike the attempt to revive past styles or copy regionalist motifs) but, more importantly, they were allegedly based on positive values of efficiency, hygiene and comfort – middling modernist values par excellence. 259 A few years later, Nicolas Schöffer would devise a life-size prototype for a new type of domestic environment. Presented at the 1955 Salon des Travaux Publics held in Paris, Schöffer’s Maison à Cloisons Invisibles – funded by the Dutch electronics corporation Philips and the French industrial materials manufacturer Saint-Gobain – was visited by as many as 20,000 visitors. Much like Schein and Parent’s projects, Schöffer was attempting to use color to organize the interior space of the house. But with this small-scale home design, Schöffer sought to create an interactive and participatory domestic environment by going beyond decorative arts and mural painting (the then favored means to integrate art to architecture). He instead explored the potential of artificial colored lights, sounds and heating to create what he would describe as a liberating “aesthetic conditioning” of the human inhabitants of the domestic space. In a promotional document published by

259 In his famous book Le Système des Objets, Jean Baudrillard would cogently describe this process whereby middling modernist values were transposed to the family home in the postwar years. Indeed, Baudrillard rightly describes the new housekeeping ideal as less and less moral, as it was earlier in the twentieth century, but was expanding into a broader discourse on communication, flexibility and functionality. Jean Baudrillard, Le système des objets, Paris: Gallimard, 1968, p. 41. See also: Kristin Ross, “Hygiene and Modernization,” in Fast Cars, Clean Bodies, pp. 71-122.
Philips, the part of the house basking in redish tones is described as “hot” and active, while the other part in blueish tones is described as “temperate” and relaxing. This would insure that the children would be allowed to play in the active, red area while the parents could rest in the blue area. This technique, also used to discipline zoo animals, could be applied, argued Schöffer, to regulate the life of a human household. Indeed, by using different types of lights and by adjusting different levels of heat, Schöffer argued that distinctive ambiances could be created within the fully open floor plan and that the house would both respond to and direct specific psychological and biological needs of the inhabitants.\textsuperscript{260} Schöffer’s distinctively techno-utopian emphasis on free participation and spatial fluidity was, in fact, directly concomitant with corporate and government efforts to promote discipline, i.e. hygienist values and the self-regulation and normalization of both the human body and of the body politic in France during the Reconstruction.

\textbf{Figure 134.} Nicolas Schöffer, plan of the “house with invisible partitions”, 1955. \textbf{Figure 135.} Photograph of a partition between the temperate and hot zones of Nicolas Schöffer’s “house with invisible partitions”, 1955.

We can perceive, once again, Groupe Espace's ongoing attempt to distill middling modernist values, presented as guarantees of social harmony and welfare, throughout different social strata, including to the burgeoning middle-class market with aspirations to private home ownership. Although Parent, Schein and Schöffler hoped that, via prefabrication, their houses would be affordable by large segments of the population, much of their built work would be reserved to affluent clients and to some of their close friends. Parent would indeed collaborate to the design of André Bloc's private house in Meudon (the Maison Bloc was reproduced in the pages of Art d'Aujourd'hui), where the artist designed abstract murals and showed his private art collection. Not surprisingly, Bordier included the Maison Bloc in his special issue of Art d'Aujourd'hui dedicated to the “synthesis of the arts”. Other notable built projects by Parent and Schein were erected in affluent towns in the Ile-de-France, such as Rueil-Malmaison in Hauts-de-Seine.

Dissentions

The discourse on the “synthesis of the arts”, which momentarily coalesced around the notion of art as type of social service that would reach a broader public, would soon be contested from within the group's ranks, and also from outside. A series of factors contributed to these dissentions. The most important was surely Claudius-Petit's departure from his position as the head of the MRU – Pierre Courant replaced him in 1953. His successor did not have links with Bloc or to Groupe Espace. With Claudius-Petit gone, the group lost its most important pipeline to the French political establishment, thereby reducing considerably the number of well-funded architectural
commissions given to its members (the group’s membership had increased to over 150, precisely because of its initial success in securing public monies). In a recent interview with the art historian Corinne Girieud, architect Claude Parent admitted how much of an adverse effect Claudius-Petit’s departure from the MRU had on the productivity of the group: “[Claudius-Petit] donnait des commandes aux architectes et aux artistes qui faisaient parti du Groupe Espace. Il jouait le jeu d’aider les artistes. Du jour où ce ministre a dû arrêter la politique, ça a été plus dur.”

Ameliorating this loss, the 1% law for the integration of art to architecture, modeled on the initiative by Jean Zay from 1936, was reinstated by the Education Nationale in May 1951. Although it was originally limited to educational buildings, this measure would extend to other kinds of buildings. The measure consistently gained ground and developed in size, regularity and importance. While seemingly tailor-made for Groupe Espace, the law actually led to public commissions being distributed in a more decentralized and less predictable manner. No longer was one minister in charge of implementing artistic projects integrated to buildings. Instead, several small committees whose membership would vary were responsible, making it hard for one group to lobby

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the government). To Groupe Espace’s dismay, commissions were frequently given to more traditional, figurative artists, quite often to figures who had gone through the Beaux-Arts training system, which eventually led the editor of Aujourd’hui: Art et Architecture (the new name of Art d’Aujourd’hui since 1955) to criticize the measure as ineffective and mediocre.264

As a way to attract commissions and receive new sources of funding, members of Groupe Espace would go back to organizing and participating in exhibitions, as they had done at the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles. The group would also organize a series of group shows, which were held outdoors in somewhat non-traditional sites. Various group documents kept in the Sonya Delaunay archives describe three exhibitions: one held in 1953 on a construction site for a Jean Ginsberg luxury apartment building at 19 Rue du Docteur Blanche in Paris, one in a park in 1954 in Léger and Bloc’s Mediterranean resort town of Biot, and finally another one in 1955 in a national park in Saint-Cloud, as part of the Première Exposition Internationale des Matériaux et Equipements du Bâtiment et des Travaux publics.265

264 See the unsigned editorial “Le Un pour cent aux artistes,” Aujourd’hui: Art et Architecture, no. 5 (November 1955), p. 3. There were instances of realizations by modernist artists, such as Henri Matisse, who designed a remarkable abstract stained glass for a kindergarten in Le Cateau-Cambrésis, completed in 1955, but these were by far the exception in the early years of the measure.

265 Some members of Groupe Espace would also elect to show their work outside of the country, notably at the French national pavilion of the 1952 and the 1954 Milan Triennial (the latter event was under the themes of “prefabrication” and “industrial design”, and was organized by Ernesto Nathan Rogers). See: Piero Dorazio, “La Triennale de Milan: les premières réalisations architecturales,” Art d’aujourd’hui, no. 2 (January 1952), pp. 23-27. See also: La memoria et il futuro. I Congresso Internazionale dell’Industrial Design, Triennale di Milano, 1954, Milan: Skira, 2001.
There are no known photographs remaining of the exhibition on Rue du Docteur Blanche, but archival documents describe the different steps taken in preparation for the event. The main reason behind this first exhibition was to secure funding to cover the group’s operations and to launch a competition to decide who would get to decorate Jean Ginsberg’s new luxury apartment building in the posh neighborhood of Auteuil in Paris (in particular the rooftop, the lobby, and the water fountain to be placed in the front yard). During the month long exhibition, a large group emblem was on display to attract pedestrians and onlookers. Works shown outside were covered to avoid being rained on, so temporary shelters and displays were created using industrial materials (Bloc insisted that these industrial materials be shown “brut” and not be concealed). The group also hired a lighting contractor to turn the building into a kind of urban spectacle, again to attract attention: “L’ambiance féérique sera composée par un dispositif important de projecteurs puissants qui illumineront les façades principales du bâtiment majeur ainsi que les grands arbres de la cour intérieure, des lampes à atmosphère de mercure.
exciteront le vert du feuillage." The front desk, typically used to welcome and to announce visitors, would be turned into a paying station (visitors were charged an undisclosed sum of money to see the works in the back court). The artworks would be under constant surveillance by hired guards. Different proposals for the contest would be published in Art d'Aujourd'hui a month after the exhibition started: according to the article, abstract murals were commissioned from an artist named Andersen, while the water fountain commission went to Bloc. Except for Bloc's sculpture, sited prominently at street level, all the other art works were ultimately not to be seen by the public, but only by the tenants of the apartment. This situation came well short of the group's stated ambition to reach out to a broader segment of the population. In many ways, this type of project was not so much a social service, but art as a type of conspicuous consumption.

Figure 138. André Bloc, sculpture sited in the pool in front of Jean Ginsberg’s apartment building on Rue du Docteur Blanche, Auteuil, Paris.

Notes from the preparatory meeting for the Paris exhibition held on Rue du Docteur Blanche, dated May 1933, Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Centre George Pompidou, n/p.
Jean Ginsberg would build several other such upper-middle-class buildings, all of which featured rather pedestrian, middle-of-the road modernist artworks (some of which of Ginsberg’s own design), which the architect used to promote the status symbol of the tenants. To wit, this promotional photograph of a lushly dressed female model parading in front of a kitschy pop photomural showing Rodin sculptures in the lobby of Ginsberg’s apartment building on Rue Rodin in Paris. This photograph is somewhat reminiscent of Cecil Beaton’s famous photographs of female models posing in front of Jackson Pollock’s large abstract paintings in 1951.

The second Groupe Espace exhibition, titled “Architectures, Formes, Couleurs”, was held a year later in Biot, where the group exhibited “en plein air” several sculptures, mosaics, ceramics and stained glass windows. Once again, architectural models were on display, as well as several somewhat decorative abstract artworks made using industrial materials – the eclectic display showed movable murals that could potentially be included in future buildings. The overall design retained some concepts of the Porte Maillot
exhibition project, but on a much smaller scale. A notable work shown in Biot was André Bloc’s sculpture, pictured in the bottom left corner of the page in the September 1954 issue of *Art d’Aujourd’hui*. The middle of Bloc’s biomorphic sculpture left a space for visitors to sit on (in many ways, this sculpture anticipates Bloc’s later “Sculpture Habitacles” of the 1960s, which were hollowed out sculptural constructions made with primitive vaulting techniques and plaster-covered brickwork into which visitors could literally enter).

**Figure 1.41.** Photographs of the Espace exhibition in Biot from *Art d’Aujourd’hui*, no. 6 (September 1954).

With the increasingly odd and eclectic look of the group’s allegedly “synthetic” exhibitions, and the fragmentary practical results of these two shows, various voices began to be heard within the ranks, criticizing the group’s lack of real effectiveness. The meeting held on November 29, 1955 seems to have been particularly tense. Claude Parent declared his concern about the decreasing number of commissions: “Pourquoi les clients ne s’adressent-il pas directement au Groupe Espace?” Other younger artists started to express doubts as well. By that time, some of the group’s most prominent members, notably Fernand Léger and Félix Del Marle, had passed away, which left both a void and a space for junior artists to step up. For instance, in a group report, it is written that Nicolas Schöffer and Victor Vasarely were vocal about a key point: “celui de ne pas se
sentir convaincants vis-à-vis de l’architecte et de ne pas pouvoir lui prouver, de façon tangible, ce que les artistes peuvent faire.”²⁶⁷

*Figure 142. Pages from *Aujourd’hui: Art et Architecture*, no. 4 (September 1955) showing works, including Schöffer’s cybernetic tower (far left), from the recent Groupe Espace exhibition in Saint-Cloud.

The year 1955 corresponds to the moment when Schöffer would abandon painting and traditional sculpture precisely because these media did not have the agency he wished they had. Instead, he would try to fully connect his artistic production with electronic technology and cybernetics, considered to be the harbingers of a more interactive and integrated society. The exhibition *Le Mouvement*, held in 1955 at Galerie Denise René, would be a key moment in Schöffer’s full transition towards what he called "spatiodynamisme", as was the exhibition in Saint-Cloud, where he showed his first cybernetic tower, measuring over 50 meters, which moved in reaction to environmental stimuli.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁷ Minutes of the November 29, 1955 meeting of Groupe Espace, n/p. Fonds Delaunay/Groupe Espace, Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Centre Georges Pompidou.

Beyond the very pragmatic concerns of its members, these different comments make clear that the group was slowing down and increasingly out of touch with some of its previous stated aims. It was also becoming increasingly evident to many members within Groupe Espace, especially André Bloc, that art exhibitions were fundamentally limited in their capacity to bring about a true “synthesis of the arts”, even if held outside of traditional galleries. Although they offered interesting networking opportunities for artists and attracted media attention, the mere accumulation of polychrome sculptures or movable murals, albeit abstract geometrical works suggesting their future insertion in an urban setting, was in no way different than what conventional art galleries and museums were doing. Some critics and artists associated with the group also refused to become mere technicians, hoping to retain a larger measure of autonomy. In an interview published in Témoignages pour l’Art Abstrait, the critic Julien Alvard had already warned that the group’s forays into ergonomics and polychromy would be stifling to the artists’ creative potential, to the point where it could betray their very raison d’être:

Mais lorsqu’on cherche à utiliser la peinture ou l’architecture pour harmoniser des locaux de travail en vue d’une amélioration du rendement et du bien-être des travailleurs, lorsqu’on s’efforce de répandre leurs vertus psychologiques, peut-on vraiment dire que l’on fait appel à l’art ? (...) Les arts ne sont pas faits pour la relaxation psychique ou physique non plus que pour la psychothérapie. L’art est un autre monde (...). Il n’est en rien un ornement, il n’a rien à voir avec le bien-être matériel, le confort intellectuel (Dieu nous préserve des robinets d’eau tiède). (...) Faire entrer l’art abstrait dans la vie en lui demandant de prolonger les bienfaits de la technique, ce serait tout simplement jeter le manche après la cognée et le ranger dans les accessoires de l’ingéniosité actuelle.269

This kind of controversy led to André Bloc to quit the group early in 1956, to everybody’s surprise. An emergency meeting was held in March 1956 to replace the group’s leader. Jean Gorin, perhaps hoping to be elected, criticized the group for not being committed enough to architectural polychromy as had been done in Flins: it was the only way, the artist argued, to achieve a true “synthesis of the arts” and an effective transformation of modern society. Indeed, following the exhibition in Saint-Cloud and after Bloc’s departure, Gorin would loudly proclaim his disapproval: the group, Gorin argued, had ceased to be committed to enforcing the more totalizing polychrome aesthetic program of the late Del Marle. To express his dissatisfaction officially, Gorin distributed an open letter to the rest of the group, titled “La synthèse des arts majeurs est-elle possible?” in which he declared, in reference to the exhibitions of the past few years:

Les manifestations du Groupe Espace n’ont malheureusement pas jusqu’à présent été d’accord ni avec les principes de son promoteur, ni avec ceux exposés dans son manifeste. Il se suffit pas, en effet, de faire un “tableau de chevalet” sur des plaques de fibro-ciment et de planter ces plaques dans la nature pour en faire des œuvres spatiales, pas plus qu’on ne fait de Polychromie Architecturale en faisant ce même tableau de chevalet à grande échelle sur des murs ni de la ‘synthèse des arts’ en ‘réunissant’ des œuvres d’art un ensemble architectural.

According to Domitille D’Orgeval, Bloc announced to the group that he was leaving for “personal reasons”. However, some of his essays published around that time suggest he was increasingly suspicious of a possibility of a synthesis of the arts, amidst the rise of “tachisme”. See: André Bloc, “La peinture est-elle dans une situation critique?” Aujourd’hui: Art et architecture, no. 6 (January 1956), p. 5.

Jean Gorin, “La synthèse des arts majeurs est-elle possible? Un problème brûlant de l’architecture moderne. Lettre ouverte au Groupe Espace,” type-written letter, 1956, n/p. Dossier Jean Gorin, Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Centre George Pompidou. Underlying Gorin’s statement was perhaps his disappointment in seeing projects for a “synthesis of the arts” more and more in the context of luxurious private houses and apartment buildings, as well as in commercial fairs, rather than more working-class spaces, such as public schools and factories. After all, Gorin remained attached, via his life-long attachment to the Constructivist avant-garde, to the communist project, and saw Del Marle’s project in Flins as a genuine attempt to make art part of the life of working people, not only rich patrons (although, as I have tried to show, Del Marle’s work was fully duplicitous with management’s attempt to exert control over its workers). Gorin would later build neo-Constructivist sculptures in public schools funded by the 1% law (such as his 1980 Construction Spatio-Temporelle Émanant de la Pyramide no. 10: Hommage à Maurice Allemand, sited in front of the Collège Albert-Camus in Genlis, Côte d’Or) precisely because of his ongoing commitment to the constructivist idiom as an art supposedly for the masses.
Perhaps because he did not receive much of an answer to his question from his fellow members, Gorin would quit the group in protestation shortly afterwards, as did Bernard Zehrfuss and Claude Servannes. The group nominally stayed active, but there was a sharp drop in the group’s internal documentation, suggesting that no more meetings were being held. Nevertheless, as we will see in chapter 3, many artists associated with the group, notably Nicolas Schöffer, would launch a more technologically savvy version of a “synthesis of the arts”, which would lead to further debates in artistic and architectural circles. The issue of a “synthesis of the arts” would also be taken up by other critics previously unaffiliated with Bloc, notably Michel Ragon at the Festival d’Art d’Avant-Garde held in 1956.
Onward with a world where art has been truly liberated, not just as utilitarian, applied art but as a creative phenomenon having its own existential, social function. Let Lautréamont’s words: “L’art doit être fait par tous” become a reality!

Asger Jorn, 1946.

INTRODUCTION

In the face of Le Corbusier’s patriotic call for a “plastic epic” and Groupe Espace’s high-minded reformist ambitions to use the “synthesis of the arts” as a “civilizing mission” on behalf of the French cultural state, a certain number of artists felt it was urgent to recover a conception of democratic, collaborative practices that entailed not universal access to “high culture” as a palliative, but opposition to the political forces in place. Chapter 3 focuses on one such figure and his allies: Asger Jorn. Jorn would indeed develop as an artist and a theorist largely through his critical engagement with Le Corbusier’s ideas, to which he was exposed in the 1930s during his formative stay in Paris. More than a mere “anxiety of influence”, Jorn’s relationship to Le Corbusier bears witness to the shared desire of other postwar artists to give the “synthesis of the arts” not an affirmative role, but an oppositional role, in the reconstruction efforts. On behalf of artists worldwide, and
with a clear sense of urgency, Jorn asked his readers in his essay “Against Functionalism”:
“Can we retain freedom and experimental desire under the new historical conditions?”

Therefore, this chapter will consider how Jorn searched for kindred spirits in different avant-garde groups and collaboratively developed theories and projects to counter the voice of Le Corbusier and his acolytes. Jorn’s critique was precisely that because most approaches to the “synthesis of the arts” entailed a universalist rhetoric of beautification, functionality, humanism and accessibility, they also performed a conservative political function: they limited artistic freedom and helped to confer a kind of legitimacy to the political forces in Europe and thereby ignored the social conflicts and the very real inequalities that the modernization efforts were actually producing. His project, as well as that of the various artists in the group to which he participated in, such as Cobra and the Movement Internationale pour un Bauhaus Imaginiste (MIBI), was to install a more egalitarian, communitarian system. Jorn further argued that artistic means similar to the ones used by their opponents could be appropriated “from below” in order to create counter-spaces, which would create feelings of estrangement to incite people to break up existing liberal, socio-economic conditions, only to replace them with a new (utopian) system conceived as a new form of ludic communism. Such contributions will help us to see how the “synthesis of the arts” debates were far more contradictory than it may seem from the strategic debates between the individualist Le Corbusier and the more reformist Groupe Espace.

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THE DISSIDENT CORBUSIAN

Born in 1913 in Silkeborg, Denmark, Asger Oluf Jørgensen was brought up in a strict, religious family. He was the son of a schoolteacher and a fundamentalist pastor who was the leader of an evangelical movement in the Danish Church known as the Indre Mission (Inner Mission). Following the death of his father when he was a young teenager, Jorn quickly moved away from conservative religious orthodoxy and became active in politics. Indeed, as early as the 1930s, Jorn’s understanding of the role of art was inextricable from his left-wing political engagement and from his desire to develop collective forms of cultural creation linked to an emancipatory project of popular education. Having joined the communist movement in his early twenties following his encounter with the Danish trade unionist Christian Christensen, Jorn chose to publish some of his first figurative woodcuts and lithographs, evocative of the expressionistic graphic work of Georg Grosz and Edvard Munch, in small leftist magazines, supporting local labor struggles. In 1935 he also produced a large socialist mural on paper, shown at a mardi gras fair held at the Vinthers Seminarium in his hometown of Silkeborg. Despite Silkeborg’s isolation from the major artistic debates of the day, Jorn nevertheless managed to meet with artists and architects in Copenhagen who had connections to the European avant-garde via the Bauhaus. Jorn met with two alumni, the architect and communist militant Edvard Heiberg and the painter Vilhelm Bjerke Petersen.

Bjerke Petersen, a former pupil of Vassily Kandinsky in Dessau, and a founding member of the 1930s Danish modernist journal Konkretion, is the author of Symboler i Abstrakt

273 Some of Jorn’s first published graphic works can be found in Per Hofman Hansen, ed., Bibliografi over Asger Jorns skrifter/A bibliography of Asger Jorn’s writings, Silkeborg: Silkeborg Kunstmuseum, 1988, pp. 50-53.
Kunst (Symbols in Abstract Art), a small, illustrated book, which Jorn owned. The 1933 book was directly modeled after the didactic “Bauhaus books” of Kandinsky and Paul Klee and examined the emergence of various cultural symbols in abstract art forms. It also introduced the Surrealist practice of automatism to a Scandinavian audience. It is through his readings of this book, journals like Linien (The Line), and such personal encounters and testimonies, that Jorn developed his singular understanding of the Bauhaus.

Based on the information available to him in Denmark, Jorn envisioned this school as a community opposed to bourgeois values, dedicated simultaneously to theoretical and collective artistic experimentation between different media, the development of alternative lifestyles, and political activism. Jorn also thought of the Bauhaus as an internationalist network that fostered the conditions for a vast cross-pollination of

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274 Vilhelm Bjerke Petersen, Symboler i Abstrakt Kunst, Copenhagen: Illums Bogafdeling, 1933. The Bauhausbücher was a series of illustrated books published in Munich between 1925 and 1929 by modernist artists and architects affiliated with the school. Bjerke Petersen’s similarly conceived book was long out of print; Jorn wanted to republish it as an Imaginist Bauhaus book, but the project failed. It was later re-issued in Danish in the 1970s via the efforts of the art historian and Jorn biographer Troels Andersen and the Silkeborg Kunstmuseum (now Museum Jorn).
progressive artistic tendencies and pedagogical methods, as the school welcomed educators, artists and craftsmen from diverse countries and backgrounds.

Figure 145. Walter Gropius' Program of the State Bauhaus in Weimar and Lyonel Feininger's Cathedral, woodcut, 1919. Figure 146. Iwao Yamawaki, The Attack on the Bauhaus, photomontage, 1932.

Jorn was always already imagining the Bauhaus as a multifaceted experimental artistic and crafts center, as opposed to a technocratic, market-oriented trade school that fostered collaboration among architects, abstract artists, and product designers in order to achieve a mass distribution of the amenities of consumption. As Walter Gropius proclaimed in the original Bauhaus manifesto, published in 1919, architects and artists had to break their mutual isolation and unite in the construction of a new type of egalitarian society (represented by a woodcut by Lyonel Feininger, often referred to as the "Cathedral of Socialism"):

Let us then create a new guild of craftsmen without the class distinctions that raise an arrogant barrier between craftsman and artist! Together let us desire, conceive, and create the new structure of the future, which will embrace architecture and sculpture and painting in one unity and

\[275\] For instance, Jorn never mentions the productivist Swiss artist and architect Hannes Meyer, second director of the Bauhaus and the figure most associated with a more techno-scientific functionalism. This may be due to the fact that, for years after the school closed down, only very limited documentation on the history of the Bauhaus was available to the public, a situation which was partially remedied years later by the publication of archival material in Hans Maria Wingler, ed., Das Bauhaus, 1919-1933. Weimar Dessau Berlin, Cologne: Bramsche, 1962.
which will one day rise toward heaven from the hands of a million workers like the crystal symbol of a new faith.\textsuperscript{276}

When Jorn chose to abandon his job as a schoolteacher and left Denmark to devote himself fully to becoming an artist in the fall of 1936, he was three years too late, for the Bauhaus, to his great disappointment, had already been closed down by the Nazis. Still hoping to work under the tutelage of Kandinsky, Jorn left for Paris, where the Russian artist was living after fleeing Nazi Germany. Since the aging Kandinsky was no longer accepting pupils, Jorn chose to attend Fernand Léger’s Académie d’Art Contemporain instead (where young artists from various other countries were also enrolled). Jorn was sympathetic to Léger’s populism and bon vivant manner, describing the artist, who wore blue-collar clothes and cap in his studio, as very keen on having frequent visitors and listening to their ideas “regardless of whether the interlocutor is a fellow artist or a worker from a Renault factory.”\textsuperscript{277}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure147.png}
\caption{Photograph of Fernand Léger working on the stage of the 1924 science-fiction film L’Inhumaine by Marcel L’Herbier, published in Variété, 1930. Figure 148. Fernand Léger, La Parade, gouache on paper, 1936.}
\end{figure}


\textsuperscript{277} Jorn, “New Painting New Architecture: Fernand Léger and Le Corbusier,” (1938) in Fraternité Avant Tout, p. 35. Léger seemed to have had leftist sympathies back in the 1930s, but he would only join the PCF after the Second World War.
In the years Jorn was in Paris, Léger's work was oriented towards mural painting and towards polychromy. As discussed in chapter 1, in the 1920s Léger wrote several texts in French avant-garde periodicals and exhibition catalogues in which he described the use of color as the key to vitalize the rectangular walls of stark modernist buildings. Later in the 1930s, amidst the enthusiasm for the Popular Front government and as a response to the authoritarian use that far-right-wing groups were making of mass spectacles throughout Europe, Léger also called, at the early CIAM meetings, for the development of colourful and festive urban pageants that would make modern art an integral part of the daily life of working-class people. Some of his ideas made their way into the subject matter of several of his paintings, as in his gouache La Parade, 1936. Léger declared emphatically: “La couleur est une nécessité vitale. C'est une matière indispensable à la vie, comme l'eau et le feu. On ne peut concevoir l'existence des hommes sans une ambiance colorée.”

Having worked as a mural painter before in Silkeborg, and deeming that modern cities had to be energized via colorful decorations, Jorn fully supported Léger's call to go beyond easel painting and to erect murals in public settings.

Jorn’s first collaborative work with Léger and the Académie students, including the artist Pierre Wemaère (with whom he would stay friend for his entire life) was for the mural Le transport des forces (Power Transmission). Léger's wall-sized painting (5 by 10 meters) showed the encounter of natural and technical worlds, “depicting a mountainous and verdant environment crossed by a rainbow and framed by the shimmering metallic

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structure of a hydroelectric station”. It was prepared for the lobby of the Palais de la Découverte, a then-recently opened museum of science designed by the Beaux-Arts architect Albert-Félix-Théophile Thomas in Paris. While the style of this building was very traditional, the large mural offered to the museum visitors a powerful image of the progress of science and technology in the transformation of the French countryside.

Shortly after the mural’s completion, Léger would introduce Jorn to his long-time friend, the architect and artist Le Corbusier, with whom he had collaborated for over a decade. Le Corbusier commissioned Jorn to produce another mural, titled Les Moissons (The Harvest Season), for the large, tent-like, temporary structure known as the Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux, a part of the 1937 Paris World Exposition (this mural was based on a drawing by two young students of poet, critic and teacher Pierre Guéguen, which Jorn was asked to enlarge to the size of 50 square meters). Next to the different painted murals, Le Corbusier’s pavilion featured a dizzying array of didactic wall-sized propaganda photomontages proclaiming a new era of solidarity, and social and

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technological progress across France’s urban and rural areas. The sight and sounds of Le Corbusier’s crowded pavilion had a lasting impact on Jorn’s imagination and the artist would frequently refer back to this event as extremely important in his personal development as an artist and as a cultural critic.

Figure 151. Room inside of Le Corbusier’s Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux, 1937. Figure 152. Asger Jorn, Les Moissons, mural painting based on children’s drawings inside of Le Corbusier’s Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux, 1937.

As the political situation was becoming increasingly tense and a large-scale armed conflict was looming between Popular Front France and Nazi Germany (the two countries were already fighting a proxy war in Republican Spain), Jorn returned to Denmark in 1938. He would look back on his experience at the Académie d’Art Contemporain and the Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux as formative, although he would gradually try to free himself from the ideas and practices of his first mentors. In a series of critical essays published in the 1940s, starting with “Ansigt til ansigt” (Face to Face), which appeared in the student architecture journal A5, Jorn raised serious doubts about Léger’s understanding of mural painting and staged architectural polychromy as largely

subservient to decisions made by authoritative architects. Commenting on Léger’s words, Jorn writes: “United discipline, along with the acceptance of mutual concessions and restraints, must be worked into all three art forms. This, of course, is nothing but a fraud by which Léger seeks to deceive both himself and all other artists.”283 Although he admired his anti-Beaux-Arts polemics and his visionary attitude to planning, Jorn was equally critical of Le Corbusier, denouncing his authoritarianism, his technocratic zeal and his self-serving view of artistic collaboration, which allowed little freedom to the artists he commissioned to produce murals or public sculptures within his buildings (in Jorn’s Les Moissons, it meant reproducing previously existing children’s drawing, rather than coming up with his own mural design). Jorn would become deeply suspicious of what he saw as Le Corbusier’s disciplinarian and centralizing views, which defined human aspirations largely in terms of social order and material comfort. Jorn also declared that it was unacceptable that modern architects like Le Corbusier were still “completely unable to alter their basic view that artistic creation must be subordinate to architectural practice.”284 Already in the 1930s, tensions emerged as to who should be responsible for synthesizing the arts. For Jorn, it was always up to the artists to lead the way, as he held that they had a greater degree of freedom: unlike architects, who are largely subservient to financial and structural limitations, artists have more formal autonomy. Therefore, the task at hand was to extend that autonomy to the world of architecture and city planning in order to create a new type of society. Rather than make art architectural, as Le Corbusier would have it, Jorn wanted to make architecture

283 Jorn, “Face to Face,” (1944) in Fraternité Avant Tout, p. 75.

To show his opposition to the idea of architecture as the master narrative of the “synthesis of the arts”, Jorn would sign his numerous critical essays under the moniker “the painter Asger Jørgensen”. This may also have to do with the fact the Le Corbusier could never learn to pronounce his name, calling him “le peintre Asgaer”.

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artistic. This reversal in the synthesis discourse, as it had developed so far, is the key to understand Jorn’s later development.

As Jorn was gradually formulating what would become his multifaceted critical theory of modern art and architecture, he would look back much more favorably on what he saw as the leading revolutionary avant-garde movement of those years: Surrealism. He argued that, having “liberated artistic creation from the cold, clammy, and deadening embrace of aestheticism,” Surrealism has made it “possible to achieve truly vital and liberated art forms.” Shortly before his return to Denmark, Jorn would visit the vast Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme held at the Galerie des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1938. The dimly lit, cavern-like scenography of the exhibition – in which mannequins and Parisian street signs were jumbled together with Surrealist objects, sculptures, paintings, and collages in order to disorient the visitors – allowed him to envision the possibility of a radically non-utilitarian architecture. The exhibition is indeed described, in Jorn’s recollections, as the prefiguration of a future society liberated from the bourgeois ethos.

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285 Jorn, “Face to Face,” in Fraternité Avant Tout, p. 71.
championed by Le Corbusier and his supporters.\textsuperscript{286} As he explained in his article “Face to Face”:

In the same period as Le Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux, the Surrealists in Paris were creating interiors that offered a completely different perspective with regard to spatial development. Where architects were calling for light, they pronounced murk and gloom; where open space was proclaimed, they answered with labyrinths, impenetrability, hollows. Where planning was proposed, they answered with the hazardous. If utilization was praised, they defended the useless.\textsuperscript{287}

During his first stay in Paris, Jorn had no doubt become familiar with Surrealist writings on art and architecture, primarily those published in Minotaure. These numerous essays were very critical of modernist principles of proportion, material sublimation, and machinist technical refinement.

\textbf{Figure 154.} Cover by André Derain for Minotaure, no. 3-4, 1933. \textbf{Figure 155.} Photographs by Brassai of architectural details by Hector Guimard in Salvador Dalí’s “De la beauté terrifiante et comestible de l’architecture Modern’ style,” Minotaure, no. 3-4, 1933.


\textsuperscript{287} Jorn, “Face to Face,” in Fraternité Avant Tout, p. 77.
The Surrealists, in their appreciation of architecture, as of art in general, celebrated precisely what technocratic modernity tried to repress as useless – the decorative, the uncanny, the archaic, the outdated, the visionary. In one 1935 essay, André Breton criticized harshly Le Corbusier’s Pavillon Suisse at the Cité Internationale Universitaire de Paris, completed that same year, as a “construction qui répond extérieurement à toutes les conditions de rationalité et de sécheresse ces dernières années exigibles.” On the other hand, Breton praised the bodily and dream-like qualities of the folk architecture of postman Ferdinand Cheval, whose Palais Idéal in Hauverives he visited on a pilgrimage with other Surrealists in 1931. Similarly, in a 1933 issue of Minotaure, Salvador Dalí tried to recover the legacies of turn of the century Art Nouveau architecture, such as Hector Guimard’s richly ornamented metro stations in Paris (numerous photographs by Brassai were included in Dalí’s article, which showed several plant-like details from Guimard’s constructions). Dalí also acclaimed the architecture of his Catalan countryman Antoni Gaudi, describing Gaudi’s naturalistic ornamentation as “beautifully terrifying and edible,” in the hallucinatory terms of his “paranoiac-critical method.”


290 Salvador Dalí, “De la beauté terrifiant et comestible de l’architecture Modern’ style,” Minotaure, no. 3-4 (1933), pp. 69-76. Jorn would eventually include a photograph of the Casa Mila in his 1943 essay “On the artistic potential inherent within architecture”.

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automatisme du goût,” which appeared in the same issue. Using Freudo-Marxian terminology, Tzara described the need to subvert bourgeois normalcy by a rediscovery of the elemental powers of nature and the regenerative force of “primitive” and folk architecture, such as huts and igloos, with their “feminine bodily cavities.”

The most significant Surrealist influence on Jorn’s thinking on art and architecture, however, was Roberto Matta. The two became lifelong friends in Paris, where the young Chilean artist was employed as a draughtsman in Le Corbusier’s studio and worked at the Spanish Pavilion at the same time as Jorn was working on murals for the Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux. Like Jorn, Matta rapidly became estranged from Le Corbusier’s views. In 1938 he published, with the help of poet Georges Hugnet, the essay “Mathématique sensible – architecture du temps” (Sensible Mathematics – Architecture of Time), in which he laid out, without ever naming him directly, his critique of Le Corbusier’s fascination with the notion of formal harmony and his reliance on right-angle geometry.

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291 Tristan Tzara, “D’un certain automatisme du goût,” Minotaure, no. 3-4 (1933), p. 84.
to legitimize his architectural proposals. Matta called for a new architecture that would stimulate man’s sensory organs, and where interiors would become user-controlled, constantly shifting and atmospheric. Blurring the boundaries between inside and outside, between the body and its surrounding space, such living arrangements, Matta suggested, would free the human body from the stifling discipline imposed by work. Matta:

Très apéritifs et de profils moulés, avancent les meubles qui déroulent d’inattendus espaces, cédant, se pliant, s’arrondissant comme une marche dans l’eau, jusqu’à un livre qui, de miroir en miroir, reflète ses images en un parcours informulable qui dessine un espace nouveau, architectural, habitable. Ce serait un mobilier qui déchargerait le corps de tout son passé à l’angle droit de fauteuil, qui délaissant l’origine du style de ses prédecesseurs, s’ouvrirait au coude, à la nuque, épousant des mouvements infinis selon l’organe à rendre conscient de l’intensité de la vie.

To illustrate his ideas, the artist included a small drawing-collage showing a vast, labyrinthine multistory apartment space filled with biomorphic, inflatable furniture. Like Breton and his Surrealist comrades, Matta also paid tribute to the Facteur Cheval’s Palais Idéal, which he visited in 1939, the same year he published his essay.

Jorn’s interest in the synthesis of art and architecture via collective decoration would also extend well beyond the scope of organic ornamentation. In these texts, Jorn no doubt perceived the desire to transform architecture into a kind of populist experimental art. This new understanding of a possible synthesis of art architecture, as in postman Cheval’s

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292 Roberto Matta, “Mathématique sensible – architecture du temps,” Minotaure, no. 11 (1938), p. 43. The expression “sensible mathematics” was an appropriation of the expression used by Le Corbusier in Vers une Architecture, Paris: Éditions Crès/Collection de L’Esprit Nouveau, 1923 to describe his reliance on geometrical “tracés régulateurs”, inspired by those discussed by Heinrich Wölflin in his study of classical and baroque paintings, to harmonize the façade of his modernist villas.

palace or in Matta’s project, was not framed as a kind of experimentation for
experimentation’s sake, or as a mere attempt at beautification through organic forms, but
as the way towards the establishment of society in which the creativity of everyday people
is welcomed and where everyone is invited to transform streets, gardens and houses into
exuberant environments. What attracted Jorn to Surrealism was its politicized view of
aesthetics and its desire to revolutionize life’s praxis through art; for Breton and his
followers like Matta, the collective liberation of the psyche and of human desires from
bourgeois norms, which emphasized rational self-control and productive work, was the
path towards establishing a new, more progressive polity. Indeed, as did the Surrealists,
Jorn firmly rejected the Sachlicht, machinist aesthetic and the cult of efficiency as
subservient to a repressive worldview in which humans are coerced into working to make
a living (Breton famously proclaimed, in his 1928 novel Nadja: “Rien ne sert d’être vivant
le temps qu’on travaille.”294) Communism, for Jorn, was precisely about creating the
conditions of a ludic society in which artists are no longer specialized individuals, but are
part of a large public community of free creators. As Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels
famously declared in The German Ideology (a text co-authored in 1845-46 but first
published in 1932, right around the time Jorn became a member of the Danish
Communist Party): “In a communist society there are no painters but only people who
engage in painting among other activities.”295 For Jorn, then, a vast collaboration of
creative persons who would transform and decorate their everyday spaces was a way to
create a participatory and collective culture. This was his chosen synthesis — totally unlike

1928.
295 This book is in Jorn’s library and is frequently referenced and quoted in his writings. See: Karl
Marx and Friedrich Engels, The German Ideology (1936). Available online:

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Le Corbusier’s desire, shared by his “planiste” colleagues, to install a more orderly society guided by strong artistic, architectural and political leaders.

**RESISTANCE, POSTWAR SURREALISM AND THE COBRA GROUP**

Throughout the war years, during which he participated in the Danish anti-Nazi underground resistance via the Helhesten (Hell horse) group (which published a journal of the same name), Jorn attempted to further disseminate the Surrealists’ ideas in Scandinavia. Other members of Helhesten included the artists Ejler Bille, Henry Heerup, Egill Jacobsen, Carl-Henning Pedersen and the archaeologist P.V. Glob. Although the occupation of Denmark by Nazi forces deeply troubled him, Jorn seemed to have been optimistic about the coming victory of the Allies, looking ahead to reconstruction when a vast, active, and democratic collaboration among everyday people, professional and amateur artists, and architects. Paraphrasing one of Lautréamont’s maxims popularized by the Surrealists, Jorn enthused that society would let “‘L’art doit être fait par tous’ become a reality! It is the only sound basis on which a truly democratic and creative artistic constituency can be founded.”


He published several more polemical essays (in design magazines and student journals such as *Dansk Kunsthaandværk, Arkitekten, Byggmästaren,* and...
Forum) in which he further refined his Surrealist-inflected critique of Le Corbusier and showed his interest in the collective creation of “organic spaces” using natural forms in diverse artistic and decorative media (an idea he took up largely from his reading of Minotaure). Jorn was also immersed in a series of books by the Swedish historian of architecture Erik Lundberg published in the 1940s: Arkitekturens Formspråk: studier över arkitekturens konstnärliga värden i deras historiska utveckling (The Formal Language of Architecture: Studies on the Artistic Values of Architecture in Their Historical Development). The different volumes of Arkitekturens Formspråk were generously illustrated and contained extensive discussions of biological and decorative forms recurrent in architecture throughout different countries and time periods. It is largely through this series of books that Jorn, using a dichotomy he inherited from Friedrich Nietzsche’s 1872 Die Geburt der Tragödie, framed his discussion of art and architectural history as a constant struggle between the people’s desire to uphold an unruly, organic, collectivist Dionysian “attitude to life” against the orderly, repressive, geometrical and individualist Apollonian ethos of the ruling classes.

In his essays, Jorn followed Lundberg’s and the Surrealists’ creative use of photography. For example, in “Levend Ornament” (Living Ornament), an essay which argued that natural dynamism, observable everywhere down to the molecular stage, is the very basis of architectural form, he juxtaposed plant images by the German photographer Karl Blossfeldt with Gothic, Rococo, and Jugendstil architectural details, here echoing Walter Benjamin’s insight that “Blossfeldt, with his astonishing plant photographs, reveals the

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298 Erik Lundberg, Arkitekturens Formspråk: studier över arkitekturens konstnärliga värden i deras historiska utveckling, Stockholm: Nordisk rotogravyr, 1945-1961. (10 volumes.)
forms of ancient columns in a horse willow, a bishop's crosier in the ostrich fern, totem poles in tenfold enlargements of chestnut and maple shoots, and gothic tracery in the fuller's thistle."299

Figure 158. Title page showing a graphic representation of a radium atom and detail of plant photographs by Karl Blossfeldt juxtaposed to architectural ornaments in Asger Jorn's "Levend Ornament," Forum. Maandblad voor architectuur en gebonden kunsten, 1949.

In a richly illustrated text published back in 1941 in the Helhesten journal, titled “Intime banaliteter” (Intimate Banalities), Jorn embraced once again all forms of popular expression “repressed” by high modernist architects and also by the cultural officials of Italian Fascism and German National-Socialism. Unlike the Viennese architect Adolf Loos, who famously “criminalized” modern man’s urge to decorate as a form of degenerative regression300 (a theme taken up, although in much more racially charged terms, in the famous 1937 Nazi exhibition Entartete Kunst), Jorn celebrated everything


folk art – tattoos, urban graffiti, mass-produced kitsch paintings and popular poems and songs. For Jorn, “it is important to emphasize that the foundation of art is precisely the commonplace, the simple and cheap which turns out to be our most precious, most indispensable possessions.” Creativity, in Jorn’s theory, is not something sacred or reserved for an elite of highly educated individuals, but comes “from “below”, that is “something that pervades human life and involves ordinary objects of everyday existence.” Also, in Jorn’s view of a future synthesis, architecture had to lose its status as the highest of the so-called “major arts”: “We do not recognize the existence of Architecture. There are only houses and sculptures. (...) The Cologne Cathedral is a hollow, magical sculpture with a purely psychological purpose. A beer mug is architecture.” To make his point, the various illustrations chosen by Jorn in “Intimate Banalities” would blur the boundaries between “high” and “low”. For instance, various tattoo designs are placed side by side with academic-style genre paintings, a still from the 1933 movie King Kong, and the famous angels of Raphael’s Sistine Madonna.

Shortly after the end of the war, the Helhesten group disbanded. In 1945, Jorn first traveled to the Tunisian island of Djerba, and then chose to settle back in Paris with his family. Following his first one-man show in the French capital, Jorn hoped to develop a new network of contacts. It is there that he met with several artists and intellectuals who converged in Paris and who shared his aspiration to give Surrealism a new relevance amidst the reconstruction efforts. Jorn, based on his role in the armed communist resistance in Denmark, was drawn to the francophone Surréalisme Révolutionnaire group, composed mostly of young artists and intellectuals who had remained in occupied France and in Belgium during the war. These artists and poets, such as Noël Arnaud and Christian Dotremont, had worked closely with the local underground branches of the Communist Party and bravely criticized the Vichy regime in their clandestine journal La Main à Plume, risking their life doing so. Unlike these younger, lesser-known artists-activists, most of the older Surrealists like Breton and Max Ernst fled to the Americas.

304 Jorn, having returned to Paris, was living in indigent conditions, surviving through sparse food rations, as did many of his artist friends that joined him to found the Cobra group in 1948.

during the war. Upon his return to France in 1946 from a difficult exile in Canada and
the United States and an inspiring trip to the Caribbean with the writer and
anthropologist Pierre Mabille, Breton became once again one of the most prominent
figures in the Parisian cultural field. He was surrounded by old-time companions like the
poet Benjamin Péret and managed to attract a few newcomers to his entourage. In a text
titled “Rupture inaugurale”, published in June 1947 in conjunction with the exhibition Le
Surréalisme en 1947, Breton expressed his total rejection of the Communist Party (which
he previously supported in the 1920s and 30s). From that point onwards, Breton
intervened episodically in the columns of leftist journals like Combat but focused a greater
deal of attention on writing poetry and art criticism. Breton’s rejection of the PCF and his
new found enthusiasm for pre-modern sciences, magic and the occult were perceived by
many younger artists involved in the Communist-led Resistance, such as Arnaud and
Jorn, as a sign of his withdrawal from urgent political matters and as a kind of
obscurantism. Hence, the Surréalisme Révolutionnaire group published a virulent tract
titled La cause est entendue, in which they declared that “l’investigation de l’irrationnel
ne doit jamais de séparer de la connaissance rationnelle du monde.”
306 This tract was
followed shortly thereafter by a manifesto in which the young dissident Surrealists
emphasized their overall revolutionary goal: “la recherche surréaliste ne peut être conçue
qu’au contact de la réalité sociale et pour une mise en pratique révolutionnaire.”

In November 1948, following the Conférence Internationale du Centre de
Documentation sur l’Art d’Avant-garde, organized in Paris by Noël Arnaud and other
members of the Surréalisme Révolutionnaire group, Jorn co-signed at the Café Notre-

306 “La cause est entendue,” Surréaliste-Révolutionnaire leaflet, n/p. Scan of the original printed
leaflet available online: http://www.andrebreton.fr/fr/item/?GCOI=56600100560650#. Accessed June 3,
2012.
Dame in Paris a short text along with the painters Constant, Karel Appel, and Corneille, as well as with poets Christian Dotremont and Joseph Noiret. This text marked the dawn of the avant-garde group Cobra: Internationale des Artistes Expérimetaux. In their first statement, the founding Cobra members once again expressed their opposition to the non-Communist political stance embraced by Breton and his followers, but were also very critical of the overly theoretical bent taken by most of the Parisian exponents of Surrealism, including their friend Noël Arnaud. As their text made clear: "Il y a entre l'art expérimental et la 'vie parisienne' une sorte d'incompatibilité dont les Parisiens ne se rendent pas souvent compte." Against this strong intellectualizing tendency and the preeminence generally accorded to ideas emerging from the French capital, Cobra favored free collective experimentation, a dialectical materialist understanding of science, art and culture, and the study of regional and popular, folk art. The group also welcomed the idea of a vast crosspollination of artistic experimentation across different media, inviting children and everyday people to participate to the group's activities. Writers were to become painters, painters to become sculptors, architects to become poets. Cobra emphasized the importance of de-skilling and de-specialization in order to achieve a

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307 The moniker of the group, as it is well known, not only refers to the dangerous snake, but comes from the initials of the three capitals from which the original group members were from: COpenhagen, BRussels and Amsterdam. Although the group never formally had "members", it had numerous sympathizers and collaborators from various countries, which include, on top of the signatory of the group's manifesto, Carhl-Henning Pedersen, Egill Jacobsen, Henry Heerup, Else Allfelt, Sonja Ferlov, Erik Thommesen, Erik Ortvold, Mogens Balle, Eljer Bille (from Denmark); Pierre Alechinsky, Reinhold D'Haese, Luc Zangrie (from Belgium); Svavar Gudnason (from Iceland), Aldo van Eyck, Anton Rooskens, Eugene Brands, Lucebert, Lotti van der Gaag, Theo Wolvecamp, Jan Nieuwenhuys (from the Netherlands), Shinkichi Tajiro (from the United States, but of Japanese and Dutch ancestry), Stephen Gilbert and William Gear (from the United Kingdom), Karl Otto Goetz (from Germany), Ernest Mancoba (from South Africa) and Max Walter Svanberg (from Sweden).

308 Hence their conscious decision to call themselves an "internationale" of artists, in reference to the famous revolutionary working-class organizations and to the popular left-wing anthem by Eugène Pottier "L'Internationale", adopted since the 19th century by socialists, communists and anarchists alike.

liberating synthesis of the arts.

From the outset, the majority of the members of Cobra were intentionally trying to negotiate a place between naturalistic figuration, on the one hand, and purely abstract art, on the other. The group saw these two tendencies as two sides of the same coin: those artistic methods restricted art to either form without content or content without form.

Indeed, while Cobra continued to express their public support for the communist cause, they scorned the socialist realist painters championed in official communist party journals such as Les lettres françaises, as well as the older generation of Surrealists. In his inaugural “Discours aux Pingouins”, published in the first issue of Cobra, Jorn attacked the extremely slick and polished appearance of many postwar Surrealist paintings, which were inspired by the pseudo-automatist “dreamscapes” of Salvador Dalí, Yves Tanguy and René Magritte. In a text titled “Les formes conçues comme langage” published in the second issue of the Cobra journal, Jorn continued his critique, referring this time to André Fougeron’s naturalistic depictions of working people (in particular in his award-winning painting Parisiennes au marché, 1946, discussed in chapter 2). Jorn declared: “nous ne pouvons que très accidentellement nous identifier à une pauvre femme qui achète un poisson.” In other words, socialist realism was deemed to be ineffective and backward-looking in its attempt to revive illusionistic painterly means, albeit for contemporary leftwing political propaganda. Also, against the increasing popularity of ordered, geometrical, constructive art as a redemptive panacea promoted by Galerie

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Asger Jorn, “Les formes conçues comme langage,” Cobra, no. 2 (1949), n/p. Jorn’s critique extends beyond Fougeron’s work, and was meant to attack the more general tendency of communist painters following Zhdanov’s call for socialist realist art to copy 19th century social realism à la Gustave Courbet and Soviet painters like Ilya Repin. See also the critique of socialist-realism as a top-down directive by party officials by his fellow Cobra member, Christian Dotremont, “Le ‘réalisme socialiste’ contre la révolution,” Cobra brochure (1950), n/p.
Denise René and the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles, which they saw a kind of atrophy of reason, all the Cobra members defended ludic, childlike spontaneity. In a programmatic text for one of the early issues of Cobra, Constant boldly proclaimed that it is “notre désir qui fait la révolution”. In other words, the task for revolutionary artists is not so much to create figurative images that depict either noble workers or the repressive nature of the imperialist and capitalist nation states and try to incite revolt (as realist socialist painters would attempt to do, as would more modern painters like Picasso, with such works as his controversial Massacre en Corée, 1951), but to create archetypal, distorted, improvisatory images that would somehow reveal and unleash the sources of creative energy inherent in the people, but which has been repressed by class society. In a manifesto published in the Dutch journal Reflex, Constant further argued:

Une peinture n’est pas un assemblage de lignes et de couleurs, elle est un animal, une nuit, un cri, un être humain, et tout cela à la fois. L’objectivité et la mentalité bourgeoise ont réduit l’œuvre picturale aux éléments physiques dont elle est faite. Mais l’imagination créatrice aspire à se reconnaître dans chaque forme (...) à établir de nouveaux rapports avec la réalité sur le pouvoir de suggestion qui se dégage de toute forme, naturelle ou artificielle (...) Ce pouvoir de suggestion est illimité, et l’on peut dire que, après une période où l’art visuel ne représentait RIEN, nous sommes entrés dans une phase où il représente TOUT.311

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Similarly to Helhesten, the Cobra journal, which was published irregularly, combined articles and illustrations of children’s and folk art, tribal artwork, ancient Scandinavian art, cinema, cartoons, modern art and poetry. One modern painter who was often celebrated for his exuberant, colorful style and for his interest in children and popular art was the Catalan Joan Miró (according to Constant, it was at a Miró exhibition that he met Jorn for the first time). As Karen Kurczynski has shown, these various works were seen as a tribute to creativity conceived in primitivist terms as precultural, and were perceived to be truly international and collective. The point is not the artists’ interest in children and folk art per se, but that they considered it to embody a critical challenge to the dominance of instrumental reason. They also saw it as often the product of unprompted, instinctive collaboration. This idealization of a pre-cultural form of creativity, although naive and utopian at times, was deliberately defined in critical opposition to what philosophers and social theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno described right around the same time as “technological reason”, which tends to abolish all spontaneous, decorative, archaic and so-called useless activity in capitalist society. The group’s painters and poets would frequently paint together on the same canvas or piece of paper, each leaving a distinctive trace of their creative process, as in


313 In this sense, the Cobra group’s celebration of the so-called “primitive” was close to Jean Dubuffet’s contemporary exhibitions of outsider art, via his Compagnie de l’Art Brut (of which Jorn was a long time member). However, Cobra’s project was more collective and less focused on individual creators. On the similarities and differences between these movements, see: Michel Ragon, “Dubuffet et Cobra,” Opus International, no. 82 (1981), p. 34. See also Michel Draguet, “Jean Dubuffet et ses amitiés belges,” Cahiers du Musée National d’Art Moderne, no. 77 (2001), pp. 71–79. For a fuller discussion of Cobra and the question of primitivism, see: Karen Kurczynski and Nicola Pezolet, “Primitive, Humanism and Ambivalence: Cobra and post-Cobra,” Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics, no. 59-60 (Spring/Autumn 2011), pp. 282-302.

this Cobra modification, a painting filled with child-like creatures produced jointly by Jorn, Constant, Appel and Corneille in 1949. If there is a kind of synthesis in Cobra artworks, it is never through an attempt at formal unification. On the contrary, collaborative Cobra works are distinctive in their extremely disjunctive and inchoate appearance. Different pictorial styles clash with one another in a kind of frenzied visual turmoil, something completely at odds with the overarching desire for formal control and clarification of the Neo-Plasticist and the Purist artists. Synthetic artistic collaboration, for the Cobra group, is not equated with harmonization, but with the primordial liberation of creativity, with all of the incongruities that such an attempt entails.

Throughout the 1940s, Jorn remained firmly attached and frequently referred to a broadly defined notion of a synthesis of the arts. As it developed out of his engagement with Le Corbusier’s ideas, the Danish artist continued to frame the debate as one that pertained to the radical transformation of society and to the critique of individualistic artistic production. Indeed, for him, synthesis is always attached to a conscious transformation of the existing capitalist relations of production. His references to synthesis, when discussing art, architecture or city planning, continued to be always
couched in Marxist phraseology. For example, in his 1948 essay “Dreams and Reality,” Jorn proclaimed that “dialectical materialism’s interpretation of urbanism and planning is based on synthesis, the overall unity of things.” For Jorn and many of the group’s members, Le Corbusier would often stand in as the default personification of the cult of instrumental reason and as the rejection of spontaneity and collective creation, not to mention the use of architecture as an expression of authoritarian power (hence his famous motto: “architecture ou révolution; on peut éviter la révolution”). As he joined Cobra, Jorn continued to be very vocal against the notion of “major arts”, embraced by Le Corbusier in his postwar call for a “synthesis of the major arts” (most notably in his Volonté essay). He derided such a notion as part of a stifling and elitist tradition (the notion of architecture as the highest of the “major arts” is indeed an academic one, and upheld by G. W. F. Hegel in his Ästhetik). In fact, much of the Cobra group’s collaborative efforts would precisely be to expand what was considered to be legitimate art; their synthesis would come to embrace so-called “minor” art forms. As Jorn declared in a 1947 essay “Homes for the People or Concrete Castles in the Air,” pushing even further his previous essay “Intimate Banalities”:

this elitist process of selection, this belief that certain designated proportions of scale can be deemed to be “pleasing,” whilst all that which lies outside is deemed to be “displeasing,” is simply a means to establish and maintain an artistic aristocracy, and aristocracy that has created a unique divide between “noble” art and the banal “fake art,” which is left to mere commoners. (...) Today, this elitist way of thinking is no longer a living, creative phenomenon within our culture. It survives as a cold, romantic dream of a former golden age.

316 Jorn, “Homes for the People or Concrete Castles in the Air,” in Fraternité Avant Tout, p. 139.

The title of the essay is a reference to Marx and Engels’ 1848 Communist Manifesto, in which they describe “utopian socialism” à la Charles Fourier as an attempt to build “castles in the air”.

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Although he does not refer to it directly, Jorn may well be alluding here to Le Corbusier’s newly minted Modulor proportion system and to his fantasy, shared by centrist bureaucrats like Claudius-Petit, that the reconstruction was bringing about a “French Renaissance.” In the same essay, Jorn again criticizes Le Corbusier’s recent advocacy of the (male) body as the key to harmonizing architecture and society as deeply problematic:

The human body contains no perfect right angles, and in nature as a whole they are only found where the laws of gravity dictate their need – the law which all living things seek to conquer; just as the architect must seek to overcome it. Moreover, if the architect cannot prevail against the tyranny of the perfect line and right angle; well, he has failed to master modern techniques. Of course, architects must have the skill to come up with any kind of angle or line – curvy, curved, bent, zigzag, wavy, etc., that we might wish to have or behold.317

Despite Jorn’s enthusiasm for new collective forms of action and his frenzied publishing activities within the Cobra group, the postwar material and economic situation was dire, foreclosing the immediate possibility of launching an ambitious architectural project. Indeed, despite Jorn’s hope that he and his comrades could conceive “giant polychrome sculptures with tower block dimensions, arising from an innovative collaboration between architects and visual artists,”318 architecture took a back seat to poetry and painting within Cobra.319 Also, Jorn’s hope that a “more complete kind of socialist democracy” would emerge in Europe was proving to be misbegotten, as the American occupying forces gradually launched their vast plans for the liberal-capitalist reconstruction (in France via the Plan Monet and throughout Western Europe via the Marshall Plan) and

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317 Jorn, “Homes for the People or Concrete Castles in the Air,” in Fraternité Avant Tout, p. 148.
318 Jorn, “Homes for the People or Concrete Castles in the Air,” in Fraternité Avant Tout, p. 145.
319 With the notable exceptions of an illustrated essay, with a mock Corbusian title, attacking modern architecture and city planning by Michel Colle, “Vers une architecture symbolique,” Cobra, no. 1 (December 1948), pp. 22-23.
the Soviet Union installed repressive state-capitalist governments throughout Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, Jorn and his collaborators eventually launched an artistic collaboration in 1949 in Bregnerød, a small town 30 kilometers north of Copenhagen, where they were invited by a couple of students to decorate a house owned by the architecture department of the University of Copenhagen.

Jorn had undertaken a similar project during the war with members of the Helhesten group, decorating his youngest child's kindergarten classroom using tempera paint, but his new experiment, in a spirit of total anti-specialization and deskilling, would be even bolder, as they decorated with vandalistic fervor almost every square inch of the inside of the simple brick and masonry home. Walls, ceilings, windows, doors, even everyday objects, were covered boldly and colorfully with strange creatures and written inscriptions and poems. Jorn painted over one of the walls of the living room. Over the adjacent
hearth Stephen Gilbert painted a mural that mimicked the unpredictable and flickering movement of the fire underneath. In his essay “Om Vägmnåleriets Möjligeter” (The Inherent Potential of Mural Painting, 1952), Jorn insists that, unlike the work of commercial mural artists, or his former mentor Léger (who was by then involved in the modernization of Catholic “art sacré” in France, along with Henri Matisse, Jean Lurçat, and Jean Bazaine), all of the decorative-vandalistic work conducted by the Cobra group was done in a spirit of total financial and ideological independence.320 “We were able to paint exactly whatever we wanted, and in the way we wanted, without having to put up with the mind-numbing censorial policy that necessarily accompanies paid projects.”

No less importantly, “the paintings were executed using the kind of inexpensive techniques which ensure that they will not remain in place for all eternity,” thereby making a statement against the prevalent idea of a “new monumentality.”322 This approach, Jorn declared, was truly based on “communal fellowship and mutual freedom.”323 It should be noted that Jorn’s refusal to accept paid commissions and his uncompromising enthusiasm for free collective experimentation cost him dearly, as it caused him to live in extreme poverty during nearly a decade. He barely made enough to sustain his family, via the help of friends and the occasional sale of his paintings. As a result, he often went through periods of sickness and malnutrition, leading to his hospitalization in 1953.324

324 The critic Michel Ragon describes in powerful terms the extreme financial conditions of many postwar artists, including Jorn, in D’une berge à l’autre. Pour mémoire 1943-1953, Paris: Albin Michel,
In his earlier recollection of the event, the poet Christian Dotremont was in total agreement with Jorn, celebrating the independence felt by the artists, poets and visitors, describing their spontaneous process of appropriating the house in terms of “rêverie” and “material imagination.” Aside from the actual decorating, the Cobra members shared communal experiences — wandering through the adjacent forests, cutting wood for the fireplace, cooking. This opened the doors to a new type of community, in which each individual contribution would be preserved while also being meaningfully connected to the whole, thereby allowing art to have a transformative role in everyday life.

Communitarian socialism was not to be dismissed as a totally utopian horizon, but as a way of life that could be experienced here and now.

Unlike Le Corbusier’s notion of a “synthesis of the arts,” in which artists are essentially employed to reproduce the architect’s master’s plan and dissolve within it, each Cobra members’ contribution was autonomous and distinctive from the others. The traces of


Such terms were inspired by their fascination with the works on the elements—fire, water, air, and the earth—by the French philosopher and phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard, which were frequently discussed within the Cobra circle. Gaston Bachelard is the only philosopher who contributed to the Cobra journal (a one-page essay taken from a book on the practice of engraving). See: Gaston Bachelard, “Notes d’un philosophe pour un graveur,” Cobra, no. 6 (1950). Jorn and him were close friends and he even painted his portrait in 1960.

“En gros peut-on révéler que les deux-cinquièmes du temps furent réservés au rêve, un cinquième à la coupe du bois, à l’actionnement de la pompe, à la réalisation et à l’absorption des repas, un cinquième à un vagabondage prétendument touristique, un cinquième à l’action, à la discussion, à la délibération expérimentale — mais à quoi bon parler américain? C’est au sein même du rêve, c’est en coupant du bois, c’est au sein même de la réalisation et de l’absorption des repas, c’est en agitant le pouce sur les routes, c’est au sein de la forêt, c’est en ayant l’air de rien au grand air du Danemark que Cobra a travaillé pour Cobra à Bregnerød, parce que l’art expérimental est de la vie quotidienne, parce que la vie quotidienne est de l’art expérimental.” Christian Dotremont, “Les grandes choses,” Le Petit Cobra, no. 2 (1949), p. 5. My emphasis. The reference to “la vie quotidienne” is surely a favorable allusion to ex-Surrealist Henri Lefebvre’s first volume of his Critique de la vie quotidienne, which Dotremont and many other Cobra artists read following its publication. See: Henri Lefebvre, Critique de la vie quotidienne, Paris: L’Arche, 1947.
each different creative process were left clearly visible, and artists frequently wrote their name, as a sign of their passing presence. Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of "being singular-plural" here helps to make sense of this practice (and of other collaborative works like the "modifications" and "peintures-mots," as it describes in cogent terms the mutual inseparability of subjective expression and collectivism.  

Following the sojourn in Bregnerød, other members of Cobra organized similar visits elsewhere in Europe. For example, during a trip to Silkeborg in Denmark in 1949, Karel Appel, Constant, Corneille, their children, as well as other members of the Dutch Experimental Group and local townspeople, painted numerous murals, which crudely depict sexualized, ideographic creatures, on the walls of artist Erik Nyholm's farmhouse. Parallel to these collaborative decoration projects, the Cobra group also organized several conventional shows in art galleries and museums. Their major exhibitions in Amsterdam in 1949 and in Liège in 1951 involved many more artists – some from the Scandinavian artist group Host, some international sympathizers of Surrealism, and some from other artistic contexts. These art exhibitions led to an increasing popularity in the specialized artistic press, as well as to a growing number of sales for their paintings, books and sculptures. Several Paris-based critics, such as Michel Ragon and Charles Estienne, would indeed come to champion the Cobra group in the very capital from which the artists had set out their manifesto's attack from within.

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327 See Jean-Luc Nancy, Étre singulier pluriel, Paris: Gallilée, 1996. This book was brought to my attention by Karen Kurczynski in her talk "Jorn's Aarhus Murals and the Question of Collective Expression," (unpublished conference paper, University of Alberta, 2009), p. 10. As Kurczynski explains, Nancy attempts to replace the notion of individual expression with the idea of the "singular voice". Whereas the liberal notion of the "individual" implies a false distinction between inner and outer and denies the mobility of subject positions permeated by the external world, the singular voice identifies subjectivity as something constantly creating itself in dialogue with others, in a community.
NEW DIRECTIONS AFTER COBRA

In 1951, just as the Cobra group was becoming officially recognized by critics and curators, two key founding members, Jorn and Dotremont, became severely ill (they were both suffering from tuberculosis), which led the group to disband shortly thereafter. The Cobra group’s activities, which only lasted for about three years, were as intense as they were short-lived. The dissolution quickly led the artists to question what direction to take next. Some Cobra members like Karel Appel and Corneille seem to have readily consented to Cobra’s growing commercial and critical success – they continued relatively comfortably to produce (and to sell increasingly expensively) pictorial and sculptural
works in the same kind of gestural style for the next decades.\textsuperscript{328} As the 1950s rolled on, Appel quickly became very popular as a public artist. For instance, he accepted a commission to produce a vast mural, titled \textit{Encounter with Spring}, to be installed in the cafeteria of the \textbf{UNESCO} complex, designed by Marcel Breuer, Bernard Zehrfuss and Pier Luigi Nervi in Paris.\textsuperscript{329} Appel had already produced several murals in houses and public buildings, besides his project in Erik Nyholm’s farmhouse in Silkeborg in 1949. To better appreciate how his work changed in a relatively short period of time, as did the popular perception of Cobra art, it is relevant to compare the \textbf{UNESCO} wall painting to others produced just a few years before. Take, for instance, the mural for the cafeteria of the Amsterdam City Hall, \textit{Questioning Children} (1949). This is a semi-figurative composition, in which emerge what seem to be several masked figures with pitch black eyes (figures inspired, according to the artist, by the unsettling look of starving children he witnessed and sketched in Germany after the end of the Second World War).\textsuperscript{330} Although far less aggressive than many other Cobra paintings, the mural inspired protest among the civil servants. The resulting scandal in the right-wing Dutch press led to its subsequent removal by the local authorities and became something of a “cause célèbre” for the advocates of experimental art in Holland.\textsuperscript{331}

\textsuperscript{328} The reification of Cobra experimentation into a pictorial style was later harshly criticized by the Situationists, including Jorn and Constant, in “Ce que sont les amis de Cobra and ce qu’ils représentent,” \textit{Internationale situationniste}, no. 2 (December 1958), pp. 4–6.


On the other hand, Appel’s *Encounter with Spring*, in which various biomorphic color fields of thick impasto interact in an intertwining, rhythmic pattern meant to evoke seasonal rebirth, was not at all met with such resistance. Indeed, the integration of Appel’s vividly colorful painting to the crowded public space inside of this high modernist building was part and parcel of UNESCO’s cultural agenda. Several other parts of the complex featured many such murals by an international panorama of modernists from Europe and of Latin America. As Romy Golan remarks, almost all of these works consciously evaded overt political iconography and were imbued, in their choice of titles and deployment of free-flowing forms, with a kind of “benign cosmic symbolism.” The careful juxtaposition between the artists’ expressive compositions to the architects’ highly functional organization of space, in more ways than one, echo UNESCO’s humanist and internationalist discourse about establishing a harmonious continuity between different cultures, as well as resolving antagonisms through the reunion of spirituality and rationality, culture and nature, technocracy and the fine arts. No longer a form of public provocation or a purported critique of postwar return to normalcy, this example of post-

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Cobra public art, in these kinds of specific institutional contexts, participated in the very same liberal humanism that the group set out to critique a few years before in their embrace of outsider art forms.³³³

Unlike Appel, Constant was much more critical of Cobra’s posthumous popularity in the 1950s and hoped to continue the group’s critique of postwar society. In order to do so, he aspired to develop original projects that would offer an alternative to postwar modernist architecture and go beyond expressionistic, gestural primitivism as a reified, commercially viable style. Having previously criticized, in the pages of Cobra, geometrical abstract art as aesthetically stifling, Constant chose to abandon expressionist painting and sculpture altogether, in order to refashion himself as an experimental architect and designer. As he grew closer to ETHZ graduate Aldo Van Eyck (the Dutch architect and modern art collector who organized the scenography of the two major Cobra exhibitions in Amsterdam and in Liège), Constant started to produce several architectural models, inspired by Neo-Plasticist ideas on the distribution of color in public space.³³⁴ In 1952, Constant and Van Eyck organized a small show at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and they published a short manifesto, titled Voor een Spatiaal Colorisme (Towards a Spatial Colorism), which was printed alongside a series of abstract lithographs. Constant and Van Eyck’s ideas on “spatial colorism”, which set out to enrich the abstract,


³³⁴ The Netherlands, a country that, since the 1890s, had a strong tradition of “gemeenschapkunst” (community art, also referred to as “monumentale kunst”, or monumental art – a tradition revisited by De Stijl and other avant-garde groups that tried to create new publics for modern art by using wall painting and stained glass).
geometrical forms of modern architecture with the embodied experience of color in space, were markedly different in tone from Constant’s expressionistic work during his Cobra days. Nevertheless, the two men thought of color as a disruptive force to the banality of functional architecture. Indeed, unlike the French Neo-Plasticist artist Félix Del Marle, who envisioned his polychromies at Renault as a way towards the pacification of society and a regulation of the senses to increase industrial productivity, Constant and Van Eyck saw “spatial colorism” as a way to develop new perceptual habits and plastic effects, which would allow for richer sensual experiences. In other words, rather than be submit to a pre-conceived architectural program, the use of color was meant to disrupt the ordering and disciplining of architectural forms. According to their manifesto, published in 1953: “Spatial colorism elevates the schematic form to physical form and is for this reason an indispensable expressive factor in the human creation of space in the broadest sense of total human settlement.”\textsuperscript{335} Constant and Van Eyck further argued that their goal was not the “amalgamation of architecture and painting, as in the baroque,” but a higher order synthesis, a three-dimensional reality that surpasses both architecture and painting. They sought “a practical program and in which color and space are inconceivable one without the other,” hence accomplishing a synthesis of architecture and art.

Following his small show in Amsterdam with Van Eyck, Constant began to create a series of horizontal sculptures to be seen not as artworks, but as potentially achievable architectural-urban proposals. These were inspired directly by Van Eyck’s models for the numerous playgrounds he built in Amsterdam throughout the 1940s and 50s. Van Eyck’s design program, stimulated by some of the ideas being discussed at the postwar CIAM congresses in Bergamo and Bridgewater, was centered on the idea that the playgrounds, as interstitial public spaces, should introduce abstract art to young children and strive to revitalize a broader sense of community. While he shared the Cobra members’ fascination with children’s innocence and spontaneity, Van Eyck held that the role of the architect is to create the conditions for creativity to flourish, rather than to build structures and murals that mimic children’s art. For Van Eyck, then, the collaborative decorations done in Bregnerød and Silkeborg by the Cobra members may have been interesting as standalone artistic projects, but could hardly be generalized on a broader, urban scale. Hence, in his playgrounds, the architect made the conscious decision to avoid any elements that would, for instance, resemble children drawings or animals – it
was up to the child and their parents to project their own fantasies and play scenarios
onto the abstract objects in front of them. For some of his projects, Van Eyck would also
commission abstract artists, such as Joost Van Roojen, to create abstract patterns on the
peripheral walls of the playgrounds. In the mid-1950s, Constant came to adopt a similar
point of view and developed a whole series of models, inspired by Van Eyck’s
playgrounds, Alberto Giacometti’s board games, Soviet constructivism and biomorphic
abstraction.

Figure 171. Constant, Play space, architectural model, wood and metal, 1956.

Figure 172. Photograph taken in 1956 of the Zeedijk playground, Amsterdam, designed by Aldo Van Eyck, with the
abstract artist Joost Van Roojen.

Most of these architectural models were filled with simple objects, intended to be built of
cement or metal tubing, meant to be economical and easy to standardize. Such objects
could also serve multiple functional purposes and were meant to inspire ludic creativity.
For instance, the steel climbing arches seen in Constant’s Play Space (1956) could
alternatively serve as a tunnel, a bridge, a venue and a gymnastic apparatus. Also, some
of the round concrete elements could serve as stepping-stones, or as a cluster of informal benches.

Aside from these un-built architectural models (which served as the basis of his later New Babylon project), Constant also began to work for department stores and public fairs to put forth his ideas on architectural design. For example, he was involved in a small-scale project with the famous modernist architect Gerrit Rietveld (a member of the De Stijl group in the 1920s who was introduced to him by Van Eyck) named the “1954 Color Plan”, held at the luxurious De Bijenkorf department store in Amsterdam. The goal of this exhibition in a commercial setting was to develop new “ideas for living” (a project not unlike the colorful display Claude Parent would organize for Elle at the Salon des Arts Ménagers a few years later, or Nicolas Schöffer with his Maison à Cloisons Invisibles at the Salon International des Travaux Publics et du Bâtiment).

Figure 173. Constant and Gerrit Rietveld, The 1954 Color Plan exhibition, De Bijenkorf department store, Amsterdam, 1954.

Constant and Rietveld were asked to furnish an imagined dwelling with a small surface area of 48 square meters, intended for a family with two children. While Rietveld was
concerned with the optimal spaciousness via the combination of the activities of sleeping, relaxing, cooking and eating, Constant was charged with the color scheme. Although Constant accepted to work in such a commercial setting, hoping to reach a wider audience by doing so, this meant a radically decreased amount of creative freedom. However, he never abandoned his role as something of an agent provocateur. Unlike the works produced by members of Groupe Espace at commercial fairs, Constant’s use of color was frequently aggressive, and was surely meant to visually disturb the supposedly blissful, domestic backdrop. According to a critic working at the Dutch magazine Goed Wonen, the colors chosen by Constant were “intrusive” blue, “screaming” orange and “dismal” black, which apparently stood in stark contrast to Rietveld’s “cheerful freshness.”

Following his one-time collaboration with Rietveld, Constant went to Paris and chose to approach other artists who shared his ambitions to enact a synthesis of the arts and to create new types of social environments. In 1954, he befriended Groupe Espace members Nicolas Schöffer and Claude Parent, whom he surely read about in the magazine Art d’Aujourd’hui. Via his encounter with Schöffer, who by 1954 was totally committed to the notion of spatiodynamism (discussed in chapter 2), Constant came to have increasingly technophilic ambitions and began to see his previous artistic collaborations as having very limited potential since they failed to engage with new electronic technologies being introduced in Europe at the time. Constant and Schöffer engaged in spirited

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337 The Art d’Aujourd’hui archive at the Centre Pompidou contains letters and photographs addressed by Constant to André Bloc, which strongly suggests that Constant was an avid reader of the magazine.
discussions and, along with the British artist Stephen Gilbert (a former Cobra member who participated in the Cobra event in Bregnerød), as well as the architect Claude Parent, the musician Pierre Henry, the choreographer Maurice Béjart, the electronics engineer Jacques Bureau (who worked for the Philips company) and Dr. Paul Sivadon (a psychiatrist working in different mental institution), they co-founded the Neovision group. Very few documents and works produced by the Neovision group survived. It seems like it was Schöffer who personally wrote one unpublished manifesto, on which he received comments from the other members of the small group. In the original typewritten document, kept in Schöffer's personal archives, it is clear that the general goal of Neovision was in many ways similar to the redemptive, technocratic program of Groupe Espace, that is, “la suppression de l'anarchie actuelle dans le domaine plastique et la réalisation des conditions d'une synthèse totale et réelle.”

Despite its obscurity, this manifesto marked something of a new direction for the discourse on the synthesis of the arts, as it foregrounds the role that electronic technology and cybernetics should play in creating new architectural environments that would be responsive to the needs and desires of users. Also, as Hervé Vanel notes, it marks the beginning of Schöffer's lifelong attempt to work directly with artists and specialists typically not included in Groupe Espace projects, such as music composers, engineers, and doctors in order “to improve the technical efficiency of his art” and “in order to have its beneficial effect on society sanctioned by an authority.” This type of collaboration

in which the artist becomes a kind of master-programmer, an idea which Schöffer had been preaching since the publication of his 1954 book *Le Spatiodynamisme*, signaled a new form of social conditioning via "plasticity" that would reorder man's senses, in particular his vision, and make them adapted to the present-day conditions. Based on Schöffer's ideas, Constant produced, along with Stephen Gilbert, some sketches of structures, which hover between architecture and sculpture, titled *Neovision House*. In Gilbert's rendering of the western façade, the welded, space-frame house is seen with different movable colored partitions, which suggest a more interactive and adaptable type of domestic environment.

![Figure 174. Stephen Gilbert, House Neovision, architectural drawing, 1955.](image)

**JORN AND THE IMAGINIST BAUHAUS**

After the end of Cobra, Jorn continued to be very preoccupied by the question of architecture, very much like his Dutch counterpart Constant. However, he never fully abandoned his enthusiasm for outsider art, nor did he choose to reject gestural
expressionism as his privileged modes of action. Jorn’s hopes of doing more than decorating already finished buildings via the creation of “organic” architecture, as well as his interest in the history of the Bauhaus, were momentarily renewed by his encounter with Max Bill in the fall of 1953. Also, Jorn continued to paint in the same style as he did before, but sought to expand the scope of his collaborative projects and to begin a career as an educator. After his stay in a sanatorium in Denmark, he and his family moved to a retreat house in Switzerland.

When the Jorns arrived in Chésières, Switzerland, Bill, then age 45 and living in nearby Zurich, was at the height of his critical and commercial success, not only as an artist but also as an industrial designer. At the Milan Triennial held in 1951, Bill was crowned with the Grand Prix for his numerous design achievements after the war. He had also just received the first prize for sculpture at the São Paulo Biennial for his Tripartite Unit (1947-48): the stainless steel sculpture showed the artist’s strong interest in the sculptural properties of industrial materials, as well as in topology and the continuous surface of the Möbius strip. For the previous few years, Bill had been actively involved in the founding of a new school in West Germany. In 1946 the Geschwister Scholl Stiftung, an anti-fascist

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341 Bill had been actively involved in the debates regarding the physical reconstruction of Europe. See his widely circulated textbook: Bill, Wiederaufbau, Zurich: Verlag für Architektur AG, 1945.
foundation supported by the American authorities in West Germany, opened a
progressive school, the Ulmer Volkshochschule (Ulm Folk School), to honor the memory
of Hans and Sophie Scholl, two members of the progressive Weisse Rose (White Rose)
group who were executed in Munich in 1943 by the Nazis. Receiving financial and
political support from John J. McCloy, the American ambassador in Berlin, the
foundation was allowed to transform this little regional public school into an international
technical university. In 1950 Bill was singled out by the foundation as a prime candidate
to supervise this ambitious and politically charged project.342 Focused on his commercial
design practice with his wife in neutral Switzerland during the war, Bill had kept his
political slate clean of both fascist and communist affiliations — unlike a great number of
architects and designers trained at the Bauhaus who either went to work in the Soviet
Union or had compromised with the German authorities during the 1930s and 40s. The
Foundation intended to assert the blooming of a democratic spirit amidst the rubble of
German militarism. Bill, who was to act as director, was also commissioned to design the
school’s campus. He proposed the name Hochschule für Gestaltung, salvaging the subtitle
of Walter Gropius’s Bauhaus in Dessau.343

Prior to the official opening ceremony, Bill ran promotional articles in the architectural
press featuring a sketch of the future campus to attract potential members, using the

343 In the 1950s, Bill was very involved in the popularization of the ideas of certain Bauhaus masters, via numerous publications and introductions to books such as: Vassily Kandinsky, Über das Geistige in der Kunst, mit einer Einführung von Max Bill, Bern: Benteli, 1953; Kandinsky, Punkt und Linie zu Fläche: Beitrag zur Analyse der malerischen Elemente, mit einer Einführung von Max Bill, Bern: Benteli, 1953; Bill, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Milan: Il Balcone, 1955.
interwar Bauhaus as a symbol of postwar reconstruction. In the British *Architects’ Year Book* he boldly proclaimed:

> Experienced artists and theoreticians, young men and women with bold, alert and eager minds, will be invited to Ulm: some to teach or to pursue their experimental work, others to learn from these. But we are confident that all who come to us will be imbued with the same wholehearted ambition of joining co-operatively in a great and disinterested endeavour. I hope we shall not disappoint the hopes that have been placed in us and be able to establish a new international home for the old Bauhaus ideals, where the youth of all nations can find a propitious environment for the free development of its creative faculties.  

Jorn reacted with great interest to the article after reading Bill’s enthusiastic call, in part because he wanted to develop new collaborations and also because he was in dire need of employment. Jorn understood that the opening of this new Bauhaus would be based directly on the model of the Volkshochschule, or “folk high school”. He held such alternative schools, which were dedicated to community education (and which were known in Denmark as folkhøjskoler), in high esteem, unlike the Kunstgewerbeschule, or arts and crafts school, or the technische Hochschule, the professional technical school, which were both oriented towards preparing students for the capitalist market.

Introduced in Scandinavia in the nineteenth century by Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig, folk high schools typically offered free, short-term courses to working people in various creative fields, such as painting, handicrafts, and creative writing, as well as in philosophy and theology. Since they did not offer professional degrees and were run by volunteer community members, folk schools were typically open to experimental projects

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and teaching methods that focused on hands-on learning. These were the perfect conditions, Jorn thought, for the development of a new school dedicated to the creation of democratic collaborations among artists, architects, and everyday people, which he had hoped for since leaving Léger’s academy. This was his opportunity, also, to enact a “synthesis of the arts” on a much broader scale.

Jorn wrote a letter to Bill in order to learn more about the project and to inquire about the role of art at Ulm, hoping to secure a job as a lecturer and as an artist in residence. Bill responded by sending him a promotional brochure but quickly clarified that “arts are understood differently here than at the old Bauhaus.” Jorn responded, in a second letter, to which he attached issues of the illustrated magazine Cobra and offered to develop a collaboration between the “free artists” and the new school in Ulm. Clearly Jorn hoped to create a folk high school of the type that emerged at the Bauhaus in Weimar when Walter Gropius invited the revolutionary Expressionist artists of the Novembergruppe (November Group) and the Arbeitstrat für Kunst (Workers’ Council for Art). Jorn also hoped that, with a stable base, he could develop cooperative projects like the one in Bregnerød — but over the course of several months instead of a few days.

However, Jorn’s second proposal was met with patronizing comments from Bill regarding Cobra’s lack of originality, and finally by a firm negative:

> In Ulm, we consider the arts as the foundation of all the things we make here. But by “art” we do not understand any kind of “self-expression”, but rather objective (wirklich) art. We do not agree with most of what the Cobra group or

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346 Un-published letter from Bill to Jorn (dated 1-12-1953), Jorn Museum archives, Silkeborg. My translation.
similar groups do, because these experiments have, in our opinion, already been done and superseded a long time ago. In Ulm, we will deal with much more extreme, new, and generally more current questions of design (Gestaltung). 347

In other words, the Ulm school had abandoned the model of the folk high school and did not intend to preoccupy itself with painting and sculpture (even under their various abstract guises) in its curriculum. Instead, courses such as industrial design and architecture, which were introduced to the Bauhaus once it moved to Dessau, were to be offered, complemented by new technocratic courses on political science, sociology, mass media communication, and eventually semiotics. Seeing that any debate about teaching art was moot, Bill wished to end the discussion with Jorn. 348 He then proposed to help Jorn find a job at an art academy in Germany (suggesting the Hochschule für bildende Kunste in Hamburg, where certain abstract painters, such as Willi Baumeister, had been employed as a teacher). Because of his negative sentiments towards art academies, and since he was after more than a salaried position, Jorn rejected Bill’s help.

“Wirklich Kunst”, as mentioned in Bill’s letter to Jorn, should be understood as “gute Form” or good design, a modernist concept Bill had been promoting via different public conferences and a travelling exhibition of the same name sponsored by the Swiss Werkbund since 1949. Gute Form, as described by Bill, was the search for a “valid

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348 Despite Jorn’s characterization in Pour la Forme, Bill may not have been altogether opposed to the idea of having visual artists in Ulm, since he drew artists’ studios in his early sketches of the HfG campus. However, in one of his letters to Jorn, Bill argued, somewhat mysteriously, that painters at the Bauhaus were like “flies with the disease of painting” and that they were largely responsible for the school’s demise. Un-published letter from Bill to Jorn (dated 9-5-55), Jorn Museum archives, Silkeborg. My translation.
gestalt” or “essential simplicity.”\(^{349}\) Within the reconstruction context, Bill declared that the goal of the artistically inclined designer was to produce objects that were aesthetically harmonious, economical, and therefore socially more responsible. One of Bill’s earnest slogans was: “good because at once beautiful and practical.”\(^{350}\) In his essay “Continuity and Change” Bill argued that approaching design in this way would mean that “consumer goods” would be elevated to the status of “cultural goods”: “That is the route by which art can leave its ivory tower and return to life – no longer a substitute for life, but as an integral, supporting part of it.”\(^{351}\) As Paul Betts explains, what was at stake in Bill’s program for the HfG was the reeducation of the German youth through “the rehabilitation of the damaged authority of science and rationality.” Against the “corrosive effects of Nazi irrationalism” and rampant “American commercialism,” “good design” was to bridge the perceived antagonism between “technical civilization” and “German Kultur.”\(^{352}\) In many ways, Bill’s position was totally opposed to the drive towards stylization prevalent in circles associated with the synthesis of the arts, as it contradicted his desire to produce stripped down, seemingly artless, objective (Sachlicht) everyday objects.

Underlying Bill’s notion of gute Form, rooted in the moralizing rhetoric of the Werkbund, is the deterministic idea that rationally planned environments necessarily help create rational social behaviours.\(^{353}\) In its reformist attempt to create a democratic and


\(^{350}\) Bill, “The Bauhaus Ideas from Weimar to Ulm,” p. 29.

\(^{351}\) Bill, “Continuity and Change,” in Form, Function, Beauty = Gestalt, p. 80.


\(^{353}\) See: Paul Betts, The Authority of Everyday Objects: A Cultural History of West German Industrial
transparent public sphere, Bill’s call for gute Form was received with enthusiasm by the new federal government and the pro-American authorities as a much-awaited antidote to the Blut und Boden ideology of the National Socialists. Bill and others at the HfG embraced the newly expanded consumer class as the agent and the destination of this “good design,” which led them to focus first and foremost on the production of household items, and then on a variety of objects for everyday use in offices, industrial production, and scientific research laboratories.

Frustrated by what he saw as exclusionary and doctrinaire views, Jorn declared in another letter to Bill that if the HfG did not wish to cooperate with the “free artists,” he and his allies would set up an “Imaginary Bauhaus” to fight the school’s usurpation of the Bauhaus “idea”; Jorn soon received legal threats from Bill about abusing a copyrighted name. The “Imaginary Bauhaus,” which first seems only to have been one of Jorn’s many plays on words, then became the reason for him to contact old friends and potential allies. As he circulated a proposal to flood the HfG’s mailboxes with letters he would design announcing the birth of a new “Imaginary Bauhaus,” he realized it would be more interesting to set up an actual encounter between several of the “free artists.” The people he first reached out to were essentially from the Cobra constellation: aside from his former collaborators Pierre Alechinsky and Karel Appel, let’s note Édouard Jaguer and the members of his group Phases, art critics René Renne and Claude Serbanne, associated with the review Cahiers du Sud, two people associated with the Imaginisterna group of Malmö, Karl Otto Götz and Anders Österlin, the painter Pierre Wemaêre, and as well as two of his Surrealist friends from the Americas, Roberto Matta and Wifredo
Lam. Another new ally was the Italian painter Enrico Baj. While visiting Baj’s house in the fall of 1954, Jorn discovered a leaflet written in French, Potlatch, the theoretical organ of the Internationale Lettriste (IL). Jorn wrote to the group in Paris and immediately came in contact with a person who would become his close friend for the rest of his life, Guy-Ernest Debord.

Although he was not a painter and he was much younger than Jorn, Debord (born in 1931) shared many of Jorn’s aesthetic and political concerns, as he was developing a critique of postwar society and attempting to re-assess the legacies of Surrealism. Debord was briefly involved in Isidore Isou’s Lettriste group, which he quit in 1952 to found his own revolutionary group, the IL (to which we will return to in a moment).

In the spring of 1954, Jorn accepted Enrico Baj’s proposal to move from Switzerland to a small Italian village where such Imaginist Bauhaus encounters could take place: Albisola. Jorn moved into a small house, which he immediately started to decorate, à la Schwitters’s Merzbau, with sculptures, broken tiles, and found objects. In 1957, he bought a plot of land, which he set out to convert into a labyrinthine garden – what Debord would come to refer as “architecte sauvage” (wild architecture). See: Jorn, Le jardin d’Albisola Turin: Edizioni d’Arte Fratelli Pozzo, 1974.

The critical re-evaluation of the role of crafts and small-scale production, especially ceramic and tapestry, greatly inspired Jorn’s thinking at the time. He became so fascinated by the Futurists’ production of folk-inspired ephemera in their attempt to constantly renovate culture that he organized, in September 1956, as part of the ongoing Congress of Free Artists, an international exhibition called Mostra Ceramiche Futuriste (Exhibition of Futurist Ceramics) in Alba. On Jorn’s interest in second Futurism, see: Karen Kurczynski and Nicola Pezolet, “Primitivism, Humanism, and Ambivalence: Cobra and Post-Cobra,” Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics, no. 59-60 (Spring/Autumn 2011), pp. 294-298.

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Mazzotti offered that the first Imaginist encounter take place in Albisola from July to August 1954. It was at this Incontro internazionale della ceramica (International ceramics encounter) that a tentative platform was laid down and that the group recognized itself as an “imaginist” Bauhaus. Interestingly, Jorn created and distributed stationary to the group’s members (several addresses around the world were included in the hope of extending the network of “free artists”) with the heading Mouvement International pour un Bauhaus Imaginiste Contre un Bauhaus Imaginaire.

**Figure 178.** Asger Jorn working at the Mazzotti ceramic factory, Albisola, 1954. **Figure 179.** Jorn, Roberto Matta and Pippo Pescio at the Mazzotti ceramic factory, Albisola, August 1954.

**Figure 180.** Asger Jorn, Imaginist Bauhaus letterhead, 1954.
They held that the Ulm school was the “imaginary” Bauhaus, for it had rejected experimental artists from its walls. The word “imaginist”, I would argue, is connected to Jorn’s ongoing fascination with the power that artistic images can have in provoking and enriching man’ capacity to envision a different world. It also carried the idea that architecture is not simply functional, but that it should always act as a kind of image by its synthesis to mural paintings and other types of decorations. Architecture, more than a machine for living in, had to also trigger the fancy of people. 356

At the encounter, thanks to Mazzotti’s offer of his industrial ovens, the group, composed of artists, local people, and children, collaboratively produced dozens of richly decorated ceramics, as well as clay sculptures, which were subsequently exhibited outdoors in Albisola. 357 The works produced were done in a spirit of anti-specialization, unlike most postwar artistic ceramic production, which were often done by hired artisan women. Even if the very first experience of the MIBI managed to gather internationally famous artists and poets in Albisola, Jorn was not satisfied with its almost exclusively local success. He suggested presenting the group’s collective efforts at the Tenth Milan Triennial, where Max Bill and Groupe Espace were also showing at the time. It was primarily a strategic move. With the help of Mazzotti and Fontana, he was able to associate the new group with a widely attended event, which afforded him the chance both to position the group within the field of architecture and design, to make statements about the synthesis of the arts and, perhaps more importantly, to publicly confront Max Bill, who was

356 Jorn discussed this neologism briefly with Pierre Alechinsky and Édouard Jaguer: it could be both a reference to the name of the Swedish Expressionist group Imaginisterna (which briefly collaborated with the Cobra group) and a neologism created by Jorn to designate what he conceived as the group’s exploration of “material imagination” (the expression is Gaston Bachelard’s). See: Asger Jorn/Pierre Alechinsky, Lettres à plus jeune, Paris: L’Échoppe, 1998, pp. 42-43 and Édouard Jaguer, Cobra au coeur du XXème siècle, Paris: Galilée, 1997, pp. 67-68.

scheduled to give the keynote address. The topic of the day was the social relevance of industrial design amidst the reconstruction efforts in Western European nation-states via the Marshall Plan.\textsuperscript{358} Bill delivered a high-minded speech, titled “Industrial Design in Society,” in which he repeated his plea for the mass production of simple, harmoniously designed, and functionally integrated everyday objects. Following his unsuccessful correspondence, Jorn could finally respond to Bill publicly by reading his vitriolic pamphlet “Contre le fonctionnalisme” (Against Functionalism). Adopting once again the point of view of the “free artist,” Jorn attacked Bill’s conception of “good design” as aesthetically conservative, based as it was “on classical philosophy and logic.” Against Bill’s compensatory classicism and “academic” view of abstract art, it was time, Jorn argued, to reimagine the Bauhaus as a truly collaborative project and to arrive at a new, relativistic, and dynamic conception of form. Such was the goal of the recently founded Imaginist Bauhaus, whose small-scale ceramic production was shown within the exhibition space of the Triennial. At the very same time, Jorn was also involved in the production of large tapestries with Pierre Wemaère, the artist he met while he was working with Léger. Jorn and Wemaère’s long tapestries, like the ceramics made by the Imaginists, were once again thought of as works to be inserted in an architectural setting in order to provoke the imagination and to offer a glimpse of non-alienated creative labor.

\textsuperscript{358} Bill and Jorn’s speeches were given at the First international congress of industrial design, a series of conferences organized by Ernesto Nathan Rogers held at the Teatro Dell’Arte al Parco as part of the ongoing Triennial. For a comprehensive discussion of the event, see: La memoria et il futuro. I Congresso Internazionale dell’Industrial Design, Triennale di Milano, 1954, Milan: Skira, 2001. On Bill and the Italian design world, see: Roberto Fabbri, Max Bill in Italia. Lo spazio logico dell’architettura, Milan: Bruno Mondadori Editore, 2011.
Fascinated by the ideas of nature’s vital dynamism and of physical relativity, Jorn developed his concepts of counter-functionalism and of the synthesis of the arts as about unpredictability and transience, of asymmetry between form and function. Jorn would make these ideas the paradigmatic sites for reflection upon the nature of art’s evolution and its role in modern societies. Through his unconventional understanding of physics, more specifically of Niels Bohr’s theories, Jorn further suggested that asymmetry and relativity were to become the fundamentals of a new artistic research program.

Asymmetry between art and architecture, their spatial rapprochement in a kind of disjunctive union via tapestries and ceramics, would become a powerful movement, a force that would animate society and therefore facilitate revolutionary change.

THE “FREE ARTISTS” VS THE AVANT-GARDE FESTIVAL

By the mid-1950s, Jorn’s thinking on the synthesis of art, architecture, design and technology would be once again enriched by his renewed friendship with Constant, and with his encounter with an unusual pharmacist he met in the Italian town of Alba:
Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio. Jorn met Gallizio in a café in Alba, a town not too far from Albisola (where Jorn owned a house) in 1953 and became very close collaborators until Gallizio’s death in the 1960s. Gallizio was already fifty when he met Jorn, who introduced him to painting. Prior to that time Gallizio had held different jobs as a professional scientist and pharmacist, most of which were critical of the conservative scientific establishment of his time. After graduating in 1923 from the Facoltà di Chimica e Farmacia (Faculty of Chemistry and Pharmacy) of the University of Turin, Gallizio served in the military. He was mobilized during World War II, first serving as a pharmaceutical doctor. After his own pharmacy closed, Gallizio started to conduct innovative experiments with herbal medicine and aromatherapy using oenological perfumes. He then joined the antifascist partisans in the Alps, working for the Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale (Committee of National Liberation, or CLN, the group in which he started his political career as a Communist activist, eventually getting elected at the Alba comune). After the war, he continued to experiment with herbal perfumes, first teaching at the University of Turin, then founding an experimental laboratory near the Institute of Agriculture of Alba. His interest in herbs and flowers, which was essentially medicinal, soon became ecological. For instance, Gallizio hoped to cultivate lavender, juniper, and licorice as a way to diversify the environment of the Langhe, a hilly area to the southwest of the river Tanaro close to Alba. Gallizio also practiced archeology in Italy in the early 1950s, during which time he published an essay about his various finds from the Neolithic period. “What motivated his research,” explains the art historian Maria Teresa Roberto, “was the hope that he would one day identify an original spatial unity, the archetype of the cave dwellings that functioned as shelter, habitation and burial.
place." Jorn was also very interested in archaeology and folk architecture, having worked with the Danish archeologist P.V. Glob during his days with the Helhesten group.

Jorn also shared Gallizio’s fascination with scientific theorizing; since his days with the Surréalistes Révolutionnaires, Jorn continued to believe that the investigation of the irrational must never be separated from a rational understanding of the world.

Figure 183. Photograph of Giuseppe Gallizio working in a laboratory during his student days in Turin, c. 1923.

In 1954, following the ceramic encounter, Gallizio joined the MIBI and started to work together frantically with Jorn in his Alba country house, which they renamed the “experimental laboratory”. Having been rejected by Bill, Jorn was still hoping to open an alternative, experimental center for “free artists”. Different from both the secretive “big science” laboratories emerging in Europe (such as CERN, the European Organization for Nuclear Research, one of the first such laboratories, established in Geneva in 1954) and the more inward-looking artist studios, their laboratory was used as a meeting place to talk about science, technology and art, as well as to offer a space for popular education. The Imaginists tried to partake in the edification of a new public sphere by offering to the

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laboratory's numerous visitors the image of an “antiworld,” a scientific term cherished by Gallizio, which he casually borrowed from the work of the Italian physicist Francesco Pannaria. The chaotic and playfully decorated interior of the laboratory, Gallizio thought, could train guests in new perceptual habits and create new subjectivities adapted to a communitarian political system (the opposite, or “antiworld,” of capitalism). In the laboratory, Gallizio proclaimed that he and his friends were keeping alive a primordial spirit of communalism. Jorn, Gallizio, Gallizio’s his son Giorgio (also known as Giors Melanotte), their friend Piero Simondo, and their assistant Glauco Wuerich discussed scientific theories, especially chemistry and quantum physics, along with aesthetics, philosophy, and politics. They called the collaborative paintings they produced in the laboratory, which were used mostly to decorate the walls, “peintures d’ensemble” (ensemble paintings, surely in reference to improvisatory jazz ensembles). As they had done at Mazzotti’s ceramic factory, they encourage local people and children to join them, to see their work on display, and to freely learn about Gallizio’s “anti-economic” experiments, supposedly the products of “pure working solidarity.” Occasionally joined by other artists from France, Italy or elsewhere around the world, they worked collectively to produce a vast quantity of abstract-gestural paintings sometimes several meters in length in which they combined industrial and organic materials such as sand, oil paint, resins, metal filings, feathers, and egg shells. The materials used to produce the collaborative “peinture d’ensemble”, which were either bought at hardware stores or were scrap objects found near the laboratory, were unconventional. Their decision should

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be seen as a conscious attack on the use of auratic artistic materials. It was also a critique of the notion of “high” or “major” art, as preached by Le Corbusier and his followers. Much like the Surrealists, who used trinkets, found objects and natural formations in their art, the members of the Laboratory were hoping to appropriate whatever was at hand in order to make a point about the potential creative transformation of the everyday.

During the summer of 1956, Gallizio and Jorn co-organized a follow-up to the ceramics encounter, the Congresso Mondiale degli Artisti Liberi (World Congress of Free Artists) in Alba, an event to which different groups of artists were invited. As was previously the case for the Cobra and Imaginist gatherings in which Jorn participated, this event was as much an occasion to share ideas and make public statements as to produce art collectively in a playful context. The members of the MIBI (Jorn and Gallizio) and of the Internationale Lettriste (only Gil J. Wolman attended) made speeches at the Alba city hall, where Gallizio was an elected official. Before joining Jorn in Italy, Constant sent him a letter, in which he declared: “What I have in mind when I propose to collaborate with you is to counter the functionalist tendency. (...) You know me well enough to know that I’ve always opposed such a tendency, but I am enough of a realist to know not to combat functionalism without a conception of a similar order. That is what Cobra lacked.” 362 In other words, Constant was hoping to develop a more comprehensive type of synthesis of the arts, one that would go beyond the experiments in Bregnerod and that could potentially act as a counter-discourse to the one championed by Le Corbusier and Groupe Espace.

In agreement with Constant, Jorn and the group continued to express their desire for collaborative artistic practices. They chose another target to voice their critique of postwar art, architecture and design; rather than attack Max Bill and the HfG as they had done before (since the Swiss artist-architect had left his job in Ulm), the Congress strategically targeted the Festival d’Art d’Avant-Garde, a large exhibition curated by the critic Michel Ragon and the “metteur en scène” Jacques Polieri and held at Le Corbusier’s Unité d’Habitation in Marseilles.

Figure 184. Photograph of Constant, Wolman, Gallizio, Simondo, Jorn and other guests at the World Congress of Free Artists, Alba, summer 1956.

Figure 185. Detail of a promotional poster for the first Festival de l’Art d’Avant-Garde, August 1956.
According to the art historian Michel Corvin, the Festival was initially planned by Polieri, who was the first to contact Le Corbusier. During the preparation phase in 1953, the architect met with the playwright at his Paris apartment with some of the future participants, in particular the École de Paris painter Jean-Michel Atlan. Le Corbusier was apparently eager to associate himself with the emerging generation of artists; not only did he accept to associate his building to the event, but he also gave them contact information to Marseilles bankers and to some political figures, including members of Claudius-Petit and François Mitterand’s center-left political party, the Union démocratique et socialiste de la Résistance (UDSR). These contacts were very useful to Polieri, who managed to gather sufficient financial funds and political capital to move forward. Later on, a few letters were sent to Le Corbusier by the organizers, to which he did not respond.

The Festival was about appropriating an architectural project symbolic of the reconstruction of France: the site was to become an active participant to the ongoing artistic manifestation. Polieri was swayed by the building’s integration of various social functions, and was especially taken by Le Corbusier’s roof terrace, which he saw as a ludic space filled with biomorphic and geometric sculptural monuments:

Ce toit est occupé de toute une série d’équipement collectifs tels que la salle des fêtes dans laquelle peuvent se réunir en certaines occasions les habitants de l’immeuble, un restaurant, une école maternelle agrémentée elle-même d’une piscine peu profonde et d’une cour de récréation, un dispositif en plein air, à quoi s’ajoutent cheminée d’aérations et tours d’ascenseurs. Ces divers services donne

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364 Probably because the organizers did not ask him to take more of an active role in the event itself, Le Corbusier never replied to the letters himself, leaving this task to his close collaborator André Wogensky. Le Corbusier also never attended the event in Marseilles (nor in Nantes in 1958 or in Paris in 1960), probably to show his resentment.
son caractère propre à l'édifice, non seulement dans la mesure où ils occupent un espace qui d'habitude inutilisé,
mais aussi parce qu'ils couronnent sa silhouette d'une sorte d'ensemble de sculptures monumentales.365

Since he was more involved in the theater world and did not have very many contacts in the art world, Polieri delegated the curatorial tasks to the art and architecture critic Michel Ragon. Ragon, the author of one of the very first monographs on abstract art (titled L’aventure de l’art abstrait, published in 1956366) was in charge of choosing the painters and sculptors invited to this event, while Polieri was responsible for choosing the different dramatists who would be asked to stage plays. More than a mere backdrop, Le Corbusier’s Unité was to act as a stage that could unite the arts. In different promotional documents, the building is referred to as a “dispositif scénique,” suggesting that it was an active participant in the performative deployment of the event. In an interview published in the newspaper Combat, Ragon presented the project as “une synthèse de tous les arts d’avant-garde en un seul et unique lieu,” hereby tapping into the synthesis discourse popularized by Le Corbusier and Bloc’s magazine Art d’Aujourd’hui.367 Furthermore, Ragon argued, there is a direct bond between modern art and modern architecture. In a statement regarding the first Festival d’Art d’Avant-Garde published in his book Le livre de l’architecture moderne, the critic would describe Le Corbusier’s Unité d’Habitation as a kind of mediator between artists and the general public, going so far as to suggest that

367 Although some members of Groupe Espace were invited to the Festival, such as Schöffer, Bloc was not part of this event. According to the testimonies heard at the Colloque Michel Ragon held at the Institut National d’Histoire de l’Art in Paris in June 2011, the two men were not on friendly terms. Nevertheless, Bloc would be invited to give a talk four years later at the third Festival de l’Art d’Avant-Garde in Paris in 1960. Polieri would also be invited to edit a thematic issue of Aujourd’hui: Art et Architecture (no. 17) on “spectacles.” As for Jorn, he was a very close friend with Ragon since 1945, having met him in Paris, but he nevertheless had no qualms about attacking his event to make a point about his own notion of collaboration between “free” artists.
the inhabitants of the Unité were less shocked by modern art than the general population, as their daily environment had prepared them for such advanced cultural productions:

L'architecture moderne fait comprendre l'art moderne. Le décalage entre le public et les arts actuels provient en partie de ce que le public voit des œuvres du XXe siècle alors qu'il vit toujours comme au Moyen Age (ou presque). Ainsi, lorsque nous avons présenté une exposition d'art abstrait à Marseille, l'été 1956, sur la terrasse de l'Unité d'Habitation Le Corbusier, les habitants ont été beaucoup moins choqués que les visiteurs par les tableaux exposés. Ils étaient déjà habitués à vivre dans leur siècle. 368

After months of preparation and interviews in the media, the Festival de l'Art d'Avant-Garde finally took place between August 4 to August 14, 1956 (only a few weeks after the Congress of Free Artists). The program was very eclectic: it included speeches, ballet, music, and film screenings (mostly experimental films were screened at different times during the event, such as shorts by the British-Canadian animator Norman McLaren). Since the event went on for only two weeks, it allowed the two main organizers to create original encounters between many different artistic media. This is something that was never done on such a scale by the members of Groupe Espace, who were often limited to the inclusion of individual sculptures, color schemes or wall paintings in new buildings. At the Festival, paintings and sculptures were dispersed throughout the entire building (both inside and outside of the Unité) and plays were staged on top of Le Corbusier's concrete-garden rooftop. Because of its simple geometry, specific areas of the rooftop, such as the large square next to a staircase (which is inspired by Adolphe Appia's Wagnerian

scenography, as discussed in chapter 1), allowed to foreground the works on display, as well as the various dance routines.

Figure 186. Unknown visitor standing near a red monochrome by Yves Klein and a mobile sculpture by Jean Tinguely. Figure 187. Paintings by Jean-Michel Allan and Pierre Soulages exhibited in the space underneath the concrete pilotis of Le Corbusier’s Unité d’Habitation, Festival d’Art d’Avant-Garde, Marseilles, 1956.

Most of the paintings chosen by Ragon were by artists from the postwar (or second) “École de Paris,” such as Pierre Soulages, Nicolas De Stael, Hans Hartung, and Serge Poliakof. These works on canvas were meant to be seen in a dynamic fashion by the visitors and the inhabitants, as they were distributed in transit areas like the Unité’s hallways and also outside, in the hollow space where the pilotis are. As for the many of the sculptural works chosen by the critic, such as Martha Pan’s Le Teck and Nicolas Schöffer’s kinetic sculpture CYSP 1, most of them were later included in the ballets choreographed by Maurice Béjart. Pan’s Le Teck, a 1,40 x 2,40 m mobile wood sculpture, could be opened up and folded in different directions. In a photograph showing the final dramatic scene of the ballet, the dancer Michèle Seigneuret is seen lying down on the sculpture, as if about to get devoured by the giant jaw. Contemporary critics, such as Jean Laurent at Dimanche Matin, underlined in his review the sexualized nature of the dance, describing the tension between the bare-chested male dancer (Béjart) and the
female protagonist. Laurent would also describe the sculpture as a kind of uncanny, hunter-like creature. An orchestra was asked to play on the rooftop during the performance, hence creating a kind of dialogue between dance, sculpture, music and the architectural setting.

Similarly, in another performance, Tonia Barri and Marie-Claire Carrié, wearing tight fitting leotards in primary color (red, blue, yellow), danced around Schöffer’s environmentally perceptive CYSP 1. Because Schöffer’s sculpture had several movable colored partitions that could be pushed or pulled by the artists or the spectators, or that

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would also react to a gust of wind, the technological sculpture appeared to be fully interactive. Also, CYSP 1 was furnished with a microphone that recorded ambient sounds and caused the electronic brain installed by a Philips engineer to create noises based on environmental stimuli. Sounds also activated the sculpture’s rotary motor, which made the colorful metal sculpture gyrate. Schöffer’s kinetic art and his adoption of technological innovations to create original works of art paralleled the development of “musique concrete,” a type of music which developed via French State funding and which was made possible by the developments of microphones and the commercial availability of the magnetic tape recorder. Pioneered by the Parisian electronic engineer and radio broadcaster Pierre Schaeffer under Vichy, the emphasis was placed on the importance of play and improvisation in the creation of music and on the use of environmental sounds. Certain “musique concrète” artists, such as Henry Sauget and Pierre Henry, were also present at the Festival. According to Polieri, it was essential that contemporary theater troops include such dynamic artworks and experimental music to express the dynamism of life in contemporary society. Similarly, critics at Art d’Aujourd’hui saw Schöffer’s sculpture as bravely leading the way to mass spectacles in which humans would be fully intertwined with machines: “La culture spatiodynamique et cybernétique sera la première réalisation qui permettra, dans un spectacle, de remplacer l’homme par une œuvre d’art abstraite, agissant de sa propre initiative grâce à l’électronique.”


371 “La sculpture spatiodynamique et cybernétique,” Aujourd’hui: art et architecture, no. 6 (January 1956), p. 27.
What is most distinctive about the choices made by the Festival’s curators is how heterogeneous the art works and performances are; there is very little consistency in the choices made by Ragon, except perhaps for his own personal preference for the École de Paris and the broader popularity of these artists at the time. In the official catalogue, the reason used to back the decision to include these works rather than others is rather vague: they are presented as works expressing the contemporary cultural Zeitgeist ("des œuvres qui expriment au mieux notre temps"). The word avant-garde is never really defined or theorized by Ragon or Polieri, and was essentially used for promotional purposes. Even if an artist like Yves Klein was consciously revisiting the legacies of the historical avant-garde with his red monochrome (which can be traced back to the work of artists of the Soviet avant-garde such as Malevich and Rodchenko), his work appears to be totally decontextualized. 372

The reaction of Jorn and the other members of the Congress of Free Artists against their chosen target was extremely virulent. In his speech, titled “Trop tard, vieux pères” (which was delivered in Alba but which was never published, and that is now kept in the archives of the Jorn Museum in Silkeborg), Jorn describes the older generation of artists and architects like Le Corbusier, Pablo Picasso, Walter Gropius and even Erwin Piscator as old clowns:

Après avoir soigneusement évité une collaboration au respect réciproque tout sa vie avec ses collègues et amis artistes (comme Fernand Léger), il [Le Corbusier] invite

pour le 4 août 1956 à bras ouverts tout le bazar artistique imaginable et inimaginable à une fête démonstrative sur sa toiture à Marseille. CA NE COLLE PAS, C'EST TROP TARD POUR VOUS ET TROP TÔT POUR NOUS. Voilà la situation. Nous sommes pour la spontanéité mais nous n'allaons pas spontanément en tôle.\textsuperscript{373}

Jorn’s focus on Le Corbusier as the instigator was somewhat misguided, as he was not very involved in the organization of the Festival at all. Nevertheless, Jorn saw this as a last gasp attempt by Le Corbusier to turn himself into a heroic figure that would recoup the type of collaborative practices he has been calling for during the last decades, only for the benefit of “les patrons.” Jorn continues:

La dialectique inévitable de l’évolution nous oblige de nous opposer carrément aux manifestations comme celle qui va se dérouler sur le toit de la Cité Radieuse. Nous sommes contre l’urbanisation de l’art libre et la standardisation de l’invention par ce que nous sommes pour un urbanisme vivant et révolutionnant. Nous sommes contre les patrons, dans l’art libre. (...) Un art patroné n’a jamais un autre but que de servir les patrons.\textsuperscript{374}

Jorn’s reference to a new type of “living and revolutionary urbanism” clearly reflects the involvement of the Internationale Lettriste with the Congress of Free Artists. In their bulletin Potlatch, the members of the IL have been frequently singling out Le Corbusier’s architecture as repressive and complicit in the government’s attempt to discipline the unruly working classes by offering them material satisfaction, but not emotional liberation. In his 1953 essay “Formulaire pour un urbanisme nouveau”, the Lettrist Gilles Ivain (the alias of Debord’s close friend Ivan Chetcheglov) famously decried that “entre

\textsuperscript{373} Asger Jorn, “Trop tard, vieux pères,” unpublished handwritten manuscript, 1956, n/p. Museum Jorn archives, Silkeborg. Jorn’s use of the word “tôle” is an interesting one, as “aller en tôle” means going to prison, and the word “tôle” itself means corrugated metal, hereby suggesting that one of the postwar modernist materials par excellence is synonymous with repression.

l’amour et le vide-ordure automatique la jeunesse de tous les pays a fait son choix et préfère le vide-ordure.” After 1954, several more articles were published, criticizing Le Corbusier’s housing projects, which had been funded by the MRU as a response to the housing shortage going on in France. Rather than see the Unité as a great beacon of modernity, as Claudius-Petit, Ragon and Polieri did, the Lettristes saw it as a modernist “taudis”, which concentrated commerce and living, therefore depriving (or at least significantly limiting) workers of their freedom to move and dwell in the city. According to the IL member André-Franck Conord:

Dans le cadre des campagnes de politique sociale de ces dernières années, la construction de taudis pour parer à la crise du logement se poursuit fébrilement. On ne peut qu’admirer l’ingéniosité de nos ministres et de nos architectes urbanistes [MRU]. Pour éviter toute rupture d’harmonie, ils ont mis au point quelques taudis types, dont les plans servent aux quatre coins de France.

As a response to Le Corbusier’s postwar urban visions (that is, his “cité linéaire industrielle”, which he had been promoting since Vichy and in which workers are mostly grouped together in large housing units), the Lettristes were calling for urban drifting, or “dérive”, as well as the study of various urban environments, known as “psychogéographie”. They also called for the construction of spontaneous and transitory living experiences (often under the intoxicating influence of alcohol) in urban space to counter the routine of everyday events. Many of the group’s ideas were theorized by Gil Wolman and Debord in the Belgian journal Les Lèvres Nues.

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375 Although written in 1952-53, this text was only published in Internationale Situationniste, no. 1 (June 1958).
376 André-Franck Conord, “Construction de taudis,” Potlatch, no. 3 (July 6 1954), n/p.
377 See: Guy Debord, “Théorie de la dérive,” Les Lèvres Nues, no. 9 (November 1956). The ideas of the IL and later of the IS on urban dérive and psychogeography have been the topic of numerous studies, the most relevant of which are Simon Sadler, The Situationist City, Cambridge, Ma: MIT Press, 1998;
Jorn and the “free artists” were also opposed to the prominent role that the French state played in such a project, which they described as a form of cultural “policing.” Although it was not a direct State initiative, several French bureaucrats were indeed eager to reap the symbolic capital of being associated with the Festival. It was especially attractive for the centrist government to support such a vast artistic event held at a recently completed building funded by the MRU. Indeed, this event received extensive funding from the French government. In an official document, the Festival de l’Art d’Avant-Garde lists the support of the Ministre de l’Éducation Nationale (André Billieres), the Secrétaire d’État aux Arts et Lettres (Jacques Bordeneuve), the Secrétaire d’État à la Reconstruction (Bernard Chochoy), the Deputé Maire de Marseille et Ministre de la France d’Outre-Mer (Gaston Defferre), the Préfet des Bouches-du-Rhône (Raymond Haas-Picard), the Président de la Chambre de Commerce (Pierre Keller) and of an “ancient ministre” (none other than Eugène Claudius-Petit, who had by then left his position at the MRU).

Echoing Ragon’s ideas, Bernard Chochoy, a socialist Senator, formerly Secrétaire d’État à l’Industrie and now Secrétaire d’État à la Reconstruction et au Logement in the Guy Mollet government, described in an official letter, dated 6 July, 1956, Le Corbusier’s Unité as “une solution d’avant-garde de l’habitat”. Therefore, argued Chochoy, it was only natural that “peinture, sculpture, théâtre, musique, films vont se rencontrer pour souligner les volumes de cette œuvre aux proportions majestueuses, et lui donner tout sa valeur culturelle et sociale”.378 It is precisely this attempt to create the impression of a seamless continuity between modernizing government projects and avant-garde art and architecture that would become the defining characteristics of the postwar “cultural State”.

It is also important to point out that the Festival de l’Art d’Avant-Garde in Marseille was followed by two others, held at the second and third of Le Corbusier’s Unités d’Habitations built in France (in Nantes in 1958 and in Paris in 1960). Indeed, I would argue that this series of events, organized around the biennial format, mark the beginning of what would become known as the “exception culturelle française” and to the full emergence of the French “cultural State.”379 It is right around this time that the French State would start to create more and more legislative and financial forms of sponsorships, especially for festivals (which would become, following André Malraux’s appointment by Charles De Gaulle as the Ministre de la Culture in 1959, as eclectically modern as they were frequent). The nationalistic notion of “exception culturelle” means that France,

because of its supposedly exceptional role in world culture, should attempt to resist the onslaught of debased, American art and industry by multiplying manifestations and festivals showcasing French-based artists (compared to other countries, France is the country with the most regional artistic and film festivals in the whole world, a reality that persists to this day). This series of Festival also marks the beginning of a long process of acceptance of modern art, whereby the expression “avant-garde” became routinized and ubiquitous, used by critics and administrators to describe any new artistic project, regardless of its underlying critical and political ambitions.380 By the end of the 1950s, the French State would indeed become much more inclusive of art works and pageants in urban space (a process that reached its high point during Jack Lang’s tenure as Ministre de la Culture et de la Communication under François Mitterand in the 1980s). It also signals an expansion of the notion of “synthesis of the arts” from one about the decoration of public buildings to a more event-based type of program, whereby artists are shown together in non-museum settings.

The Congress of Free Artists was amongst those who criticized the French “cultural State”. On behalf of the Congress members, Jorn, Debord and Wolman issued a boycott order, which was published in Potlatch, as well as distributed as a leaflet around Paris and was mailed to different journalists. In his response to the Festival, the Lettrist Wolman emphasized the necessity to continue collaborative practices to transform everyday environments, beyond the art world: “Quelque crédit que la bourgeoisie veuille aujourd’hui accorder à des tentatives artistiques fragmentaires, ou délibérément

rétrogrades, la création ne peut être maintenant qu’une synthèse qui tend à la construction intégrale d’une atmosphère, d’un style de vie.”

For the Free Artists, the goal was to fight the “police” (an expression used rather broadly by the Lettrists and later the Situationists to refer to artists and cultural figures deemed to be too close to the reigning political authorities) not by some kind of inner withdrawal, but by the subversive appropriation of the same artistic and technological means being used by the proponents of a “synthesis.” Even Constant, who previously supported Schöffer by joining the Neovision group, showed his opposition to the Avant-Garde Festival and started to reframe his utopian urban project, which became known as New Babylon a few months later, as one about the empowerment of everyday people. The stakes were raised: it was now time for the “free artists” to create their own type of synthesis of the arts, one that would combat the fragmentary nature of the Avant-Garde Festival and its cooptation by the forces in power.

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382 While he was staying in Italy with Gallizio, Constant encountered a group of local gypsies (Zingari) living on a deserted strip of land. Years after the end of the war, most of them were living in extreme poverty and were often victims of police repression, which lead Constant to question some of his recent technophilia and commercial endeavors and to start to develop his critical New Babylon project. Although New Babylon is megastructural in its aesthetic and ambitions, it nevertheless foregrounds the importance of the appropriation of technological means “from below”, rather than the top-down technocratic planning preached by the middling modernists of Groupe Espace. On Constant and the gypsies, see: Kurczynski and Pezolet, “Primitivism, Humanism and Ambivalence: Cobra and post-Cobra,” Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics, no. 59-60 (Spring/Autumn 2011), pp. 282-302 and Tom McDonough, “Metastructure: Experimental Utopia and Traumatic Memory in Constant’s New Babylon,” Grey Room, no. 33 (Fall 2008), pp. 84-95.
Coda

Shortly the 1956 Congress of Free Artists, Guy Debord and Asger Jorn were hoping to forge a closer bond between different radical groups in order to form a new cultural avant-garde. In July 1957, many of the artists who attended the Congress came together again and attended a conference in the small Italian town of Coscio d’Arroschia. During this event, Debord, his wife Michèle Bernstein, Jorn, Gallizio, and others finally accepted to merge their different groups, hereby forming the Internationale Situationniste (IS).383

According to the group’s manifesto written by Debord, titled Rapport sur la construction de situations et sur les conditions de l’organisation et de l’action de la tendance situationniste internationale,384 this new group would allegedly supersede previous artistic movements and bring a new revolutionary movement to the frontlines. In its initial phase, which spans from 1957 to 1959, the IS would once again try to give collaborative practices and the “synthesis of the arts” an oppositional role in postwar culture. This “coda” describes the group’s last gasp efforts at reaching such a “synthesis” via their Cavern of Antimatter, an event during which they covered the entire surface of the fashionable Galerie Drouin in Paris with Gallizio’s industrial paintings and turned the art space into a synesthetic environment. After a close analysis of the project, I will show how many members, particularly Debord, came to realize that, given the current historical situation, it was now impossible to subvert society via such artistic means. It was indeed

383 The three groups that merged to become the IS are the MIBI, the IL and the so-called “London Psychogeographic Committee,” which only had one member, Ralph Rumney, an artist from Britain.
384 Internationale Situationniste, Rapport sur la construction de situations et sur les conditions de l’organisation et de l’action de la tendance situationniste international, Paris: Internationale Situationniste, 1957. This text was written entirely by Debord.
becoming increasingly clear that the art market and the French “cultural state” were incredibly resilient in absorbing such avant-garde practices, which led to the devolvement of their oppositional role into a kind of spectacle. In conclusion, I will briefly analyze how the “synthesis of the arts” discourse became more and more coopted by cultural institutions, and how Debord and the Situationists remained committed to developing a critique of spectacular capitalism, but from a different point of view than the one of “synthesis” that they had embraced so far.

Figure 194. Photograph of Giuseppe Gallizio, Ralph Rumney, Elena Verrone, Michèle Bernstein, Guy Debord, Asger Jorn and Piero Simondo, Coscio d’Arosio, 1957. Figure 195. Situationist pamphlet, Rapport sur la Construction de Situations, 1957.

THE SITUATIONIST CAVERN OF ANTI-MATTER

The invention of “industrial painting” was a gradual process. Starting in 1956, the informal collective of artists led by Jorn and the Congress of Free Artists produced several abstract paintings near Gallizio’s house. Working outdoors using instruments such as brushes, bottles, funnels, or agricultural sprayers, the artists worked in close proximity to one another, passing the paintings from hand to hand, either mocking or emulating workers exchanging pieces of equipment on an assembly line. At this time, in 1956,
Gallizio first used the expression “industrial painting” in his diary, perhaps as a joke, to describe the group’s artistic process. The paintings were in fact individual pieces on canvas and were mostly handmade, produced in a similar spirit to the ones previously conceived in the laboratory (peintures d’ensemble, discussed in chapter 3).

This collaborative effort led shortly afterward to a show at the Politeama Corino in Turin where the paintings were exhibited to the local public, along with a long blank canvas with graffiti-like inscriptions by the Lettrist Wolman that proclaimed that “toutes les toiles sont garanties ‘coton pur’”. This dadaistic comment seems to suggest that the canvas is worth more than the painting itself, a reversal of traditional economic value of artwork. The Lettrists had also attempted to devaluate the value of art by promoting as “propaganda” their small collages, known as “métagraphies influentielles”, made mostly from scraps of what Benedict Anderson has aptly called “print capitalism”.

At the Coscio d’Aroschia conference, Debord would look at Gallizio’s collective laboratory project as an essential part of the nascent situationist movement. However, Debord argued, it needed to be given a more specific direction. In his report, Debord declared:
Nous devons présenter partout une alternative révolutionnaire à la culture dominante; coordonner toutes les recherches qui se font en ce moment sans perspective d'ensemble; amener, par la critique et la propagande, les plus avancés des artistes et des intellectuels de tous les pays à prendre contact avec nous en vue d'une action commune.\footnote{Internationale Situationniste, Rapport sur la construction de situations et sur les conditions de l'organisation et de l'action de la tendance situationniste international, Paris: Internationale Situationniste, 1957, n/p.}

At this point, the young Debord was hoping to “synthesize” the contributions of two major avant-garde movements of the twentieth century, Dadaism and Surrealism, into a single, unitary movement. Whereas the Dada movement, with its ready-mades and its extreme forms of public provocations, destroyed art’s aura without realizing art’s full potential, Surrealism had pushed art’s potential to its limits, without destroying its privileged status in society. According to Debord, this failure to simultaneously destroy and to realize art was what caused both Dada and Surrealism to be coopted by the bourgeoisie, meaning by the ruling class. The Situationists, declared their manifesto, would do both at the same time: art, as a separate category, would be negated by the “creation of situations” disruptive of everyday life. By fusing art into life, the avant-garde would reach its stated goal to reorganize life’s praxis on a liberating, artistic basis.\footnote{On Debord’s critical reading of Dada and Surrealism, see: Trevor Stark, The Supersession and Realization of Art: Guy Debord Between Art and Politics, MA thesis, McGill University, 2008. See also: Tom McDonough, “Ideology and the Situationist Utopia,” in Tom McDonough, ed., Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents, Cambridge, Ma: MIT Press, 2002.}

After the first situationist conference, the experiments with industrial painting continued, as did Debord and Gallizio’s theorizing of it. At this point, Debord began to think of them as part of the Situationist program. The main difference is that the artists would produce one long roll of painting instead of several small canvases on a mock assembly
line—this, thought the situationists, would allow to distribute art on a much broader scale. The exact way that Gallizio, Melanotte, and Wuerich produced the first roll—measuring 68 meters long by 75 centimeters wide—is not fully documented. Several images of the inside of the laboratory exist, and pictures of their equipment were reproduced in the situationist monograph on Gallizio published by La Bibliothèque d’Alexandrie in 1960. However, as noted by the critic Sandro Ricaldone, the photograph of the hand-activated printing table allegedly used to make “industrial paintings” does not faithfully represent the instruments that were actually used. The extremely long rolls, despite the intentionally ambiguous word industrial, were hastily produced using elementary, mostly handheld tools, just like the works shown at the Turin show in 1956. For instance, in almost all of the known photographs of the laboratory, Gallizio and the other artists are seen holding traditional studio implements such as brushes and trowels. Gallizio also mentions in a 1963 Italian documentary devoted to his work that the laboratory is “practically a workshop” and that the tools he uses are “of a certain coarseness.” As for the machines seen in the photographs of the laboratory, they played only secondary roles. Based on the available information, we can safely say that Gallizio and his comrades likely placed a long strip of canvas (or populit, an inexpensive composite material, made of wool and algae, that was popular for commercial uses in postwar Italy) on wood structures and plastered it with liquid chemical resins. Then, using brushes or rudimentary agricultural sprayers, they would cover it with herbal perfumes, explosive powders, and color pigments. Finally, the paintings were left to dry next to the cellar’s radiator. The gradual chemical reactions—those processes that filled the

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laboratory with dangerous emanations that had to be removed using extractor fans—
created extraordinarily vivid abstract painterly effects that were on rare occasions painted
over by the artists. For instance, they occasionally added semi-figurative elements such as
symbols or crude drawings that were somewhat evocative of the hand traces and
drawings of animals found in the famous prehistoric caverns at Altamira in 1879 and
Lascaux in 1940 (these drawings were also referenced by surrealist and abstract
expressionist artists). On frequent occasions when the artists left the laboratory to paint
the rolls outside, nature “became a partner in the unpredictable creative process, where a
gust of wind would deposit all sorts of debris onto the wet, sticky surfaces.”388

The experimental laboratory’s structures, however scarce and rudimentary these were in
practice, afforded Gallizio and Jorn a semipermanent site within which to create new
networks for artists and nonprofessionals to meet in order to produce industrial paintings,
which required an organized, collective endeavor. On the other hand, the evocation of
the cavern was a key metaphor for Gallizio’s ongoing research in art and archeology: the
cavern is a unitary spatial setting and an imaginary symbol of humanity’s communal
creative impulse. As for Gallizio’s laboratory experiments, despite their pseudoscientific
appearance, they should not be considered as completely irrationalist or “primitivist.”
They were engaged in the search for a holistic rationality that would allow for the greater
understanding of unexpected relationships and chance configurations, as well as for
ecological concerns. This new rationality, which Gallizio liked to call “ignoranza critica”
critical ignorance) would also account for dreams and creative mistakes that make up a

388 Frances Stracey, “Pinot-Gallizio’s ‘Industrial Painting’: Towards a Surplus of Life,” Oxford Art
vast part of history and of daily life. In one of his undated diary entries, probably from 1958, Gallizio writes:

Artistic science
1st notebook industrial painting technique
galaxies anti-galaxies
citizen of the anti-world
The principle of exchange in art
“Communicating vessels”

Gallizio’s so-called industrial techniques were not only intimately connected to André Breton’s theory of objective chance, they were a thoughtful reinterpretation of the aleatory and improvisational techniques based on automatism (such as Óscar Domínguez’s décalcomanies, Wolfgang Paalen’s fumages, or Max Ernst’s frottages, which all sought to express the human unconscious and the unpredictability of nature through material practices involving simple tools). The fundamental difference, however, lies in Gallizio and the laboratory members’ decision to produce quantitatively, or, to use their own words, in an anti-economical, inflationary manner. As he and his assistants became more proficient with their techniques and equipment, the group started to rapidly produce hundreds of meters of industrial paintings, which made it possible to use them to decorate buildings. The small “assembly line” of artists required to produce the rolls (as seen in photographs of the Congress of Free Artists and of the experimental laboratory) also reenacts on a larger scale the famous surrealist game of “cadavre exquis,” whereby different parts of an artwork are produced by different hands more or less oblivious to what the others had previously done. Such types of performative surrealist collaborations,

389 Gallizio, “Undated manuscript, ca. 1958,” in Pinot Gallizio: Il Laboratorio, p. 34. The quotation marks are in the original, as is the emphasis.
390 While it would exceed the limits of this chapter, it would be interesting to further explore how the Situationist’s ideas of inflationary artistic production could possibly be connected to the economic ideas of Georges Bataille who, in La Part Maudite, Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1949, developed a provocative theory of “expenditure”.

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argues Hal Foster, were bound up with social mechanization, but instead of trying to “cancel” it they are dialectically critical of it. Indeed, the collaborations “evaded the conscious control of the individual artist,” but they also consciously “mocked the rationalized order of mass production.” Much like its surrealist predecessor, industrial paintings were “critical perversions of the assembly line—a form of automatism that parodies the world of automatization.”391 (In Jorn’s 1958 book Pour la forme, such a parody is made explicit when the author juxtaposes an untitled painting by Matta that represents a kind of mechanical “bachelor machine” with a photograph of a worker on an automated assembly line.) In that sense, the group’s practices could be read as a critique of the architectural polychromies of artists like Del Marle and Schöffer, which did not seek to subvert the assembly line or the domestic household, but to make them even more functional and integrated.

Figure 198. Giuseppe Pinot Gallizio and his son working in the experimental laboratory, 1958. Figure 199. Asger Jorn, page showing a Matta painting and a worker on an assembly line from Pour la Forme: Ébauche d’une Méthodologie des Arts, Paris: Internationale Situationniste, 1958.

In producing quantitatively and by systematically applying chance operations, Gallizio and the Situationists sought to break the illusory antinomy between chance and order,

individual and mass-produced objects, rationality and irrationality. Instead of merely valorizing the bizarre, as many of the surrealists and neo-dadaists did by producing singular objects that often idealized the concepts of chance and formal irregularity, Gallizio hoped to theorize and enact a synthetic, constructive artistic production. As the Situationists declared in their journal: “Au stade où nous parvenons maintenant, qui est celui de l’expérimentation de nouvelles constructions collectives, de nouvelles synthèses, il n’est plus temps de combattre les valeurs du vieux monde par un refus néo-dadaïste.”

Industrial painting was, in a sense, complicit with mechanization and commodity culture (the long strips of canvas were meant to be sold by the meter to galleries and collectors), but at the same time it registered resistant forms of bodily authenticity and autonomy in a world of increased repetition and regularity. The traces applied by the artists, such as the various fingerprints found on the rolls, seem to suggest the importance of the hand in any mechanical process of production. As Asger Jorn, referring to the work of Gallizio, argued in those years, man always remains the living and vivifying center of all the techniques that he invents: no machine can diminish the importance of the hand and of the most primitive tools that it uses without at the same time diminishing the importance of man himself. The artists also opposed the laws regarding intellectual property, as it limited man’s creative potential. In his diary, Gallizio frequently describes his opposition to patents and to corporate sponsorships: “Perhaps the machine is the only instrument

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qualified to create that is inflationary and industrial and therefore based on the anti-patent; the new industrial culture will only be ‘Made by the People,’ or it will not be.”

At the time that the second issue of Internationale situationniste came out in December 1958, Debord was, along with his wife Michèle Bernstein, taking an active part in the organization of Gallizio’s exhibition of industrial paintings at René Drouin’s fashionable gallery on Rue Visconti in the neighborhood of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. The main difference of this new exhibition (compared to the more traditional ones previously held at the Bar La Méthode owned by Debord and Bernstein, as well as at the Notizie and Van de Loo galleries in Italy and West Germany) was the Situationists’ decision to cover the entire gallery space—whose white walls were normally adorned with paintings by artists such as Jean Dubuffet and Wifredo Lam—with 145 meters of “industrial paintings.” Indeed, Debord and Bernstein pushed the owner to allow them to “détourn” the gallery and convert it into a synesthetic environment in which different artistic media converged.

![Figure 200. Façade of the Galerie Drouin, Rue de Visconti, Paris, 1950s. Figure 201. Giuseppe Gallizio, René Drouin, a hired model and guests visiting the opening of the Caverne de l’Anti-Matière, Paris, 1959.](image)

In a letter to Gallizio, Debord meticulously describes the different steps that would lead to the exhibition:

1) Fabrication de rouleaux de peinture industrielle (sur telline) destinées à couvrir tous les murs de la galerie Drouin – dont je vais incessamment relever le plan et les mesures exactes.

2) Fabrication d’un rouleau de carta dipinta industrialmente, destiné à être découpé en morceaux égaux, pliés en deux et vendus le jour de ton vernissage dans la galerie Drouin et dans tout le quartier intellectuel alentour, par des crieurs de journaux professionnels, vendant 20 francs chaque morceau de la ‘dernière édition de Pinot Gallizio.’

3) Fabrication de grands panneaux de popolit couverts de résines, de fer et de toutes les matières nouvelles dont tu nous as montré des expériences ici.


5) Préparation d’un nouvel apéritif (à mon avis d’une série de 3 ou 4 entre lesquels il serait bon d’amener Drouin à faire lui-même le choix).

6) Achat urgent de la musique utile.395

According to the Situationists, the rolls of industrial paintings were to be presented less as art objects than as technological products used to “create situations” disruptive of everyday life. Yet, the paintings remained mostly confined to traditional art market spaces and networks, in particular private galleries, despite Bernstein’s previous claims that Gallizio’s sales take place preferably outdoors, in small shops and large department stores.396 In the event, the gallery space literally submerged the visitors and even extended to the street (Debord suggests that incenses were burned on the sidewalk on Rue de Visconti). By penetrating into this synesthetic dark cave, one could see the walls entirely covered by colorful abstract shapes and also hear the ambient sounds of Walter Olmo and Gege Cocito’s modified Theremin making feedback noises as the visitors moved.

396 Michele Bernstein, “Elogio di Pinot-Gallizio,” in Gerard Bérreby, Textes et documents situationnistes, Paris : Allia, 2006, p. 65. However, in his correspondence with Drouin, Gallizio made frequent mentions of potentially covering parts of Paris with his “industrial paintings” – a kind of uncanny prefiguration of the performances by Christo.
around the gallery. The visitor could also smell the powerful stench of recently dried paint mixed with herbal perfumes, incense, and various balsams, or drink the aperitif devised by the Italian scientist, a likely reference to Yves Klein’s exhibition *Le Vide* (The Void), held in April 1958 at the Galerie Iris Clert, where blue cocktails were served and where the gallery walls were “sensitized” by “the artist’s mere presence.” According to the descriptions, the event was a total work of work, as it mobilized different artistic media to disrupt the visitors’ spatial experience.

Gallizio chose the title “Cavern of Antimatter” to underline both the ambiguity of the site and its immediate connection to surrealism: the synesthetic gallery space evoked a postapocalyptic ruin, a prehistoric grotto, and a theoretical physics lair. The Cavern—in its delirious mix of technological fervor and primitivist anxieties—was an uncanny space. It blurred life and death, vital regeneration and industrial reification, utopian art and commodity culture. It therefore precludes any one-sided reading of it as either Cold War nuclear angst, or a nostalgic longing for a lost golden age. In Gallizio’s writing, destruction is always the precondition for construction: “My paintings/continuous destruction/ the only way to construct the gesture.” On the invitation card, Gallizio proclaimed that the energies emanating from the ground and the ceiling of this synesthetic environment were, like “matter” and “antimatter,” to collide with one another. However, instead of producing a burst of destructive electromagnetic energy called “annihilation radiation,” as the actual theory of antimatter then had it, this

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imaginary collision was supposed to create a regenerative provisional reality, a primitive
cavern that the artist allegedly called the “uterus of the world.” The models who
paraded at the opening are presented by the male demiurge both as figures of
regeneration after destruction and as provocative and sexually charged subjects used to
advertise art commodities for sale. Indeed, the “significant by-product of this space of
annihilation” was supposed to be “the creation of a provisional subjectivity presented in
the feminine”—specifically as models who were naked but for long strips of industrial
painting and who wandered around the gallery. Used as clothing, the industrial
paintings tried to renegotiate the traditional boundaries between architecture and the
human body. The body kinetics increased the dynamic effect of the painterly composition
on the walls. The psychological effects of the colorful industrial paintings could, according
to the Italian situationist, be extended to all realms of life. While the presence of industrial
paintings were used to unsettle the visitors, the admixture of sights, sounds, and smells
also carried the possibility to create more intense emotional and sensorial experiences that
are not common under the increasingly hygienist postwar culture. This is, I would argue,
what makes this project relevant: rather than project an idyllic past or a glowing
technological future, it presented the present as fraught with contradictions and carrying
within it the potential to liberate human subjects from their alienating conditions under
capitalism.

While I could not find the original source of this quote in the anthology of his writings, Gallizio
was first cited as alluding to the cavern as “the uterus of the world” in Libero Andreotti, “Introduction: The
Gallizio’s use of that expression is also discussed in Frances Stracey, “The Caves of Gallizio and
Hirschhorn,” October, no. 116 (Spring 2006), p. 44. In fact, the person who first used that metaphor may
have been the art historian Francesco Poli, and not Gallizio himself. See Francesco Poli, Pinot Gallizio

Whereas Debord tried to organize the event primarily as a way to critique postwar modernist notions of the “synthesis of the arts” and especially to attack the surrealists on their privileged ground (the art market), Gallizio and Jorn had an altogether different understanding. As mentioned before, Jorn’s views continued well into the postwar to be influenced first and foremost by surrealist theories of architecture. If indeed he referred to the regenerative Cavern using highly gendered metaphors—that is, as evocative of lost primal states and of sexual plenitude—Gallizio was most likely favorably alluding to the utopian psychoanalytic theorizations of architecture by Tzara and Matta published in the review Minotaure in the 1930s, to which Jorn introduced him. These Surrealists imagined that for people to supersede their alienated state under capitalism, they must rediscover the “intra-uterine space,” the curvilinear, biomorphic, libidinal, and soft forms that were repressed, to quote Breton, by the “castrating” ideology of modernism. The reference to the theory of antimatter, first theorized by Paul Adrien Maurice Dirac in 1928, seems to be another favorable allusion to the work of Salvador Dalí, who in 1959 published his “Anti-matter Manifesto,” in which he discussed a major turn in his artistic practice. After his surrealist period, during which he felt himself successful in visually translating Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic model to create “the iconography of the interior, the world of the marvelous,” Dalí, in paintings like The Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory of 1952, looked to Werner Heisenberg, one of the founders of quantum mechanics, in order to unravel new mysteries: “Today the exterior world—that of physics—has transcended the one of psychology. . . . It is with pi-mesons and the most gelatinous and indeterminate neutrinos that I want to paint the beauty of the angels and
of reality." Gallizio enthusiastically wrote in his personal diary that he hoped to pick up where these surrealist projects left off. His objective, formulated as a series of aphorisms, suggested moving away from theory toward "rêver les yeux ouverts" (daydreaming), or constructing and living out new passions in reality.

Largely because of Gallizio’s overly enthusiastic attitude toward these surrealist ideas (in particular those of Dalí, whom Debord considered politically unconscionable), Debord’s advocacy of industrial painting proved to be short-lived. In fact, soon after the Cavern event, which was a commercial and critical success, Debord excluded Gallizio and all the other members of the Italian experimental laboratory from the IS (shortly afterwards, Jorn and Constant left the group in polite protest, and began to pursue several new artistic endeavors). The official reason was that they did not sever all ties to the art market and were being “co-opted” by the authorities—a rather strange excuse, considering that Debord co-organized the Cavern event and was encouraging Gallizio, only a few months before, to sell “quite expensively” his industrial paintings to the American Carnegie Institute. Beyond these “official” and somewhat self-serving reasons, which may well partially conceal personal tensions and intellectual ambitions, is surely Debord’s gradual realization of the impossibility of superseding surrealism through so-called technological means, as well as the extreme difficulty of enacting social change through synthetic projects. Industrial painting seemed like an exciting field of research at first, but as the Cavern event confirmed, it quickly became just another form of collectible art unable to

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401 Salvador Dalí, "Anti-matter Manifesto," in Haim Finkelstein, ed., The Collected Writings of Salvador Dalí, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 366. This text was originally published in English in the catalog for an exhibition that took place at the Carstairs Gallery, New York, from December 1958 to January 1959—only a few months before the Cavern exhibition.


disrupt everyday events beyond the gallery space or to achieve a broader synthesis of the arts. The fact that the paintings were produced in vast quantities did not produce any kind of “inflation” on the art market as the Situationists had hoped. Indeed, Gallizio’s rolls became popular almost instantly and were bought by prominent collectors such as Michel Tapié, Peggy Guggenheim, and Willem Sandberg. Around the same time as the Cavern exhibition, similar types of artistic performances began to be produced in Western Europe and Japan. Just one month after the Cavern of Antimatter show, the neosurrealist exhibition Eros opened at the Galerie Daniel Cordier in Paris. The gallery was entirely redecorated in such a way as to evoke an uncanny and uterine passageway—a similar tactic to the one used by Gallizio at Drouin’s gallery. Right around that time, Jean Tinguely, Yves Klein, and Piero Manzoni also achieved an extreme vogue with their neo-dada performances challenging traditional notions of artistic production and exhibition by proposing aesthetic experiences in public space. It is also in 1959 that the French Yves Klein would be brought in to decorate the Gelsenkirchen Opera House, a formidable “synthesis of the arts” project in collaboration with the German architect Werner Ruhnau (a project which participated to the Gaullist diplomatic attempt at a “rapprochement” between the two former belligerent countries).404

Nicolas Schöffer’s popularity would also grow considerably, as he was getting frequent invitations to artistic events throughout Europe. The “synthesis of the arts”, to which Schöffer began to refer to as the “integration of the arts” by the 1960s, was becoming a truly profitable venture, as he continued to receive more and more private and corporate

sponsorships to build art installations (such as his various spatiodynamic/cybernetic sculptures) and for techno-environments (such as corporate offices and nightclubs). One such cybernetic sculpture was built according to the specifications set by Schöffer and the Philips corporation around 1959 in the city of Liège.

Figure 202. Promotional pamphlet for Nicolas Schöffer's cybernetic tower in Liège, 1960.

As the Situationists declared ironically, regarding Schöffer's success: “mille intégrations, à travers l'Europe, qui s'entr'intègrent dans les biennales de partout qui deviennent des Himalaya de l'intégration.” Against this spectacularization of art and technology at state-sponsored events, the Situationists hinted at the potential destruction of Schöffer's new sculpture in Liège by the striking workers of Belgium as a revolutionary and ludic act:

D'ailleurs le gang de l'électronique, au moins depuis cet été, nous offre à Liège une tour spatio-dynamique haute de 52 mètres pour le spectacle Forme et Lumière de l'habituel Nicolas Schöffer, qui disposera cette fois de “70 brasseurs de lumière” pour projeter des fresques abstraites en couleur sur un écran géant de 1500 mètres carrés, avec musique apparentée. Ce bel effort s'intégnera-t-il, comme il l'espère “à la vie de la cité”? On ne pourra en juger qu'au prochain mouvement de grève en Belgique, puisque la dernière fois

que les travailleurs ont eu la possibilité de s'exprimer à Liège, le 6 janvier, cette Tour Schöffer n'existait pas encore, et c'est l'installation du journal La Meuse qu'ils sont venus détruire. 406

To Debord, who was then beginning to engage with the writings of the radical philosophers Henri Lefebvre (author of the the Critique de la Vie Quotidienne) and Cornelius Castoriadis, of the journal Socialisme ou Barbarie), it was now clear that the “artistic avant-garde,” which once served an oppositional role in culture, was becoming fully integrated to postwar life as a form of spectacle. 407 Although published later, I would argue that much of Debord’s thinking of the “society of the spectacle” grew out of his acute understanding of the rapid cooptation of synthetic artistic innovations by the “cultural state.” In his 1967 book La Société du Spectacle, Debord would indeed come to analyze the “spectaculaire diffus.” This “diffuse spectacle” describes how liberal capitalist nation-states like France used the mass-media, advertising as well as seemingly benevolent and democratic cultural initiatives to secure the consent of its subjects and to blur the boundaries between the left and the right. This elusive type of modern propaganda, which is far less coercive and monolithic than the so-called “spectaculaire concentré” of totalitarian states (Nazi Germany, Stalinist USSR, etc.), was nevertheless a powerful tool to control people, as they often did not realize that such propaganda was even taking place. Like its concentrated counter-part, this “diffuse spectacle” projected “une image d’unification heureuse.” 408 The only way to undermine the spectacle was not through artistic means, however synthetic, but through the formulation of new critical theories, which could lead workers could take power. Artistic questions were therefore postponed


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to an undetermined, post-revolutionnary future, or at least until May 68. This led directly to Debord’s falling out with Jorn and Constant, who quit the IS in protest, as they refused to abandon their artistic production as a key to their critique of society.

CONCLUSION

As this dissertation hoped to make clear, through a history and an analysis of a few significant realizations by Le Corbusier and the members of Groupe Espace, the discourse on the “synthesis of the arts” constituted a meeting place where the State and various cultural agents could develop specific types of expertise for regulating of various social fields (the workplace, the home, etc.) Rather than offering an exhaustive panorama of their projects, I have rather chosen to focus on key moments when such meetings were most evident. As shown in the close analysis of the Renault project, postwar abstract art and modern architecture were fully engaged with broader societal changes resulting from Reconstruction – a view that is at odds with the notion that postwar abstract art was depoliticized or individualistic, compared to its “heroic”, vanguardist phase in the 1920s. That reductive view, which often uses the so-called divide between the historic and neo-avant-garde, indeed occludes the more differentiated reception of modern art and architecture in postwar Europe. Acknowledging that the conditions for the reception and production of modern art had significantly changed after World War II, the “synthesis” trope shows that it was no less relevant than before. If many of the artists grouped around the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles and Groupe Espace were not working towards the establishment of a proletarian, collectivist society, as was the case for the Constructivists in 1920s Russia, they were still fully engaged in social transformation. They were linked
to the development of the capitalist welfare state and the French “état culturel”, which were the product of a postwar compromise between the left and the right. It is specific to the French situation that modern artists became totally intertwined with many reconstruction projects, as was the case in Flins or in Marseilles. Groupe Espace’s numerous attempts at a “synthesis of the arts”, as well as its many pronouncements, came to play a variety of legitimizing functions. Particularly in its collaboration with the MRU, the group benefited from State funding and in turn, the group was helping the French cultural state assert its own modernity. This use of art as a kind of panacea to society’s problems is precisely what caused the Situationists to attempt to reposition the “synthesis of the arts” as an oppositonal discourse, a project which they did not manage to do, as their negative critique quickly became fashionable.

While many historians interpret the demise of Groupe Espace and other such groups as a sign of the “synthesis of the arts” discourse’s failure to achieve its lofty goals, it should not obscure the fact that many of its precepts made their way into the mainstream. Indeed, the French “cultural state”, which expanded greatly following the foundation of the Ministère de la Culture in 1959, absorbed many ideas developed by Le Corbusier and Groupe Espace in tandem with the bureaucrats of the MRU regarding the redemptive place of art in public space. According to official French government documents, there was not a decline of “synthesis of the arts” type projects, but a steady increase of architecturally integrated artworks, culminating in 1968.
By promoting such projects, the Ministre de la Culture et de la Communication Jean-Philippe Lecat (Malraux’s successor) enthused that “la couleur s’emparera de nos murs, la rue retrouvera un air de fête et nos villes leur vrai sens, celui de notre vie, celle des hommes et des femmes d’aujourd’hui.” Lecat further argued that public art had a social role “redonnant à la Ville le sens de son identité, la fonction de l’art ne se limitant pas à l’espace privilégié des musées.” If the “cultural state” officials continued to see such art as having a redemptive function, it is therefore no coincidence that so many were built amidst the protests of the 1960s. Indeed, hundreds of projects such as murals or sculptures, many by former Groupe Espace members, decorate campuses and public squares around the country. Even the critical ideas of the early Situationists regarding the role of avant-garde art to the transformation of everyday life are now being used by the

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French State to promote its national museum of modern art, the Centre Georges-Pompidou. On the façade of this high-tech building, a recent poster showing the former head of state trumps: “L’art doit discuter, doit contester, doit protester.” Precisely because the “synthesis” trope continued to have an impact in the following decades, even to this day, it was necessary to study its postwar emergence and its consolidation at mid-century.
INTRODUCTION

**Figure 1.** Minister of Reconstruction Eugène Claudius-Petit (left), Le Corbusier (center) and French actor/war veteran Jean-Pierre Aumont (right) on the construction site of the Unité d'Habitation in Marseilles, 1950s. Fondation Le Corbusier.

CHAPTER 1

**Figure 2.** Charles-Édouard Jeanneret, Study for the southeast façade of the Villa Fallet, pencil and watercolor on tinted paper, c. 1905.

**Figure 3.** Photograph of exterior of the Villa Fallet, 1905.

**Figure 4.** Title page of the chapter on the “major arts” of Henry Provensal, L'Art de Demain: Vers l'Harmonie Intégrale, Paris: Librairie Académique Didier Perrin, 1904.

**Figure 5.** Illustration from Henry Provensal, L'habitation salubre et bon marché, Paris: Charles Schmid, 1908.

**Figure 6.** Charles-Édouard Jeanneret. Front cover of Étude sur le Mouvement d'Art Décoratif en Allemagne, La-Chaux-de-Fonds: Imprimerie Haefeli et Cie, 1912.

**Figure 7.** Interior view of Peter Behrens' Hamburg Vestibule of the German Section of the International Exhibition of Decorative Arts, Turin, 1902.

**Figure 8.** Charles-Édouard Jeanneret, Nature morte à la pile d'assiettes et au livre, oil on canvas, 1920.

**Figure 9.** Interior view of the living room of the Pavillon de L'Esprit Nouveau, 1926.

**Figure 10.** Exterior view of the Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux, Paris, 1937.

**Figure 11.** Photograph of Asger Jørgensen's mural-sized enlargement of children’s drawing inside the Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux, from Le Corbusier, Des Canons, des Munitions? Merci, des logis s.v.p., Boulogne: L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui, 1938.

**Figure 12.** Colorized postcard showing the Eiffel Tower during a firework display, International Exposition, Paris, 1937.
Figure 13. Colorized postcard showing the Soviet Pavilion, International Exposition, Paris, 1937.

Figure 14. Cover of L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui, no. 1 (November 1930).


Figure 16. North façade of Lurçat’s Groupe Scolaire.

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