

THE MAC VAL: A Museum of Contemporary Art in the Suburbs



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Abstract

The MAC VAL, a museum of contemporary art located in the suburbs of Paris, is a bold project of cultural decentralisation and dissemination of contemporary art to a wide audience. A political as well as an artistic project, the circumstances of its birth have left a lasting mark on its existence. How can these two wills be articulated and find their right balance? After examining this history and its particularities, the study focuses on the analysis of the project itself, in the shadow of Paris and its prestigious sites. We will then question the identity that the museum wishes to claim and the nature of the targeted public: those who are potentially tempted and those who will have to be attracted by a more precise policy. This will be the object of the study of the mediation setup to respond to this last challenge. The political, economic, social, and cultural stakes of the project pose different problems that this museum must face. Does the museum live up to its ambitions?

Keywords: audiences, contemporary art, mediation, museum, project, visit, visitors

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Introduction

The Departmental Museum of Contemporary Art (MAC VAL) in Vitry-sur-Seine opened its doors to the public in 2005. The creation of this museum, whose construction began in 2002, is the culmination of a wider project that began in 1982. It is the first museum of contemporary art in France to be established in the suburbs, southeast of Paris, whereas there are two similar museums in Paris.

The project was initiated by the General Council¹ of Val de Marne, a department bordering Paris where the commune of Vitry-sur-Seine is located. The General Council of Val de Marne has had an explicit cultural policy for a long time. This policy has been carried out by Michel Germa², president of the General Council (1976-2001), Éliane Hulot, vice president in charge of culture (1985-2008), and Anne Dahlström (1998-2007), deputy director general of the Pôle-Éducation-Culture services of the Val-de-Marne department.

The creation of a museum of contemporary art in a suburban context illustrates a cultural voluntarism that feeds on the cultural policy of the French Communist Party, which made culture an instrument of emancipation and framing of the working class. According to Michel Germa, this policy is 'a social work in coherence with the policy of the department of the Val de Marne, in general'.

Methodology

The study focuses on the historical conditions of realisation of the museum project under study and the mediation tools it put in place, both as regards technical mediation (such as audio guides) and human mediation. Given its relatively recent realisation, if viewed from a historical perspective (less than 50 years), it seemed necessary to return to its establishment and early days. For an account of this period, the publications of the museum curator, Alexia Fabre, who was appointed in 1998 and was in charge of the museum until 2022, proved a valuable source.

In general, the study is based on two types of sources:

- (1) Meetings with members of the museum staff:

¹ The General Council (now called the Departmental Council) is the deliberative assembly of the department as a territorial collective body. It is formed by departmental councillors. They are elected by direct universal suffrage for six years. This council is responsible for solidarity, social cohesion, education, planning and transport, as well as sports and culture. Its cultural competence concerns the creation and management of loan libraries, archives, museums and heritage protection.

² Michel Germa is from Vitry, the son of a horticultural worker and a laundry worker, himself a printing worker. He remained president of the Departmental Council until 2001.

- Pauline Cortinovis, in charge of educational actions and partnerships
 - Annabel Bernardon, in charge of cultural and educational projects
 - Céline Latil, head of the Documentation Centre
 - Aurélie Roy, assistant manager of the Documentation Centre
 - Irène Burkel, in charge of accessibility at MAC VAL
 - Marie Castaing, in charge of the photo library
- (2) the study of the numerous written or audiovisual documents available in the museum's documentation centre. Special attention was paid to the documents concerning the genesis of the project, the construction of the museum after an architectural competition, its openness to the public, as well as the different actions put in place for various target audiences.

Context

A project such as MAC/VAL requires political, social and financial conditions conducive to its realisation. In what follows, these conditions are outlined in chronological order:

- In the initial phase of the Popular Front (1936-1938), the French Communist Party laid the groundwork for a cultural policy in France. Having a unitary understanding of the culture common to all, this policy tried to bridge the gap between 'people and culture' by democratising access to it.
- The first French Ministry of Cultural Affairs was created in 1959. The first Minister of Culture was André Malraux, who held this position for ten years.
- During the 1960s, the French Communist Party launched a programme for a democratic government of popular union, in which five chapters out of 21 were devoted to cultural questions and proposals for cultural development. The aims were to spare culture from the influence of business, to democratise the modern means of information, to decentralise culture through local communities, cultural associations and workers' councils, as well as to open culture to children and youth. Culture, referred to as 'the accumulated treasure of human creations', was to be shared by all. The defence and promotion of national uniqueness in the cultural field were also important points in this programme.
- In 1982, the socialist government's law on decentralisation defined a new distribution of competences between the state and the territorial communities. The municipalities were defined as responsible for lending libraries, conservatories and municipal museums. In turn, the departments were to be in charge of the construction, maintenance, and equipment, as well as the financing of the colleges. They were also responsible for the central lending libraries, and for the management and maintenance of departmental archives and museums. Finally, the regions were to take care of the organisation and funding of the regional museums, and conservation and development of regional archives.
- The Department of Val de Marne's General Council was led by communist-elected officials from 1976 to 2021. In this department, Vitry-sur-Seine has been a communist commune since 1925. From 1982, the General Council of the Val de Marne has put into practice a set of policy measures in favour of culture. It created the first departmental cultural service, whose main mission has been to support contemporary creation in the fields of dance,

theatre, literature, cinema, and the visual arts.

- The Val de Marne is known as a department that welcomes artists. Vitry sur Seine has had a contemporary art gallery since the late 1960s. Arcueil, Cachan, Ivry, Villejuif (communes of the same department) have welcomed foreign refugee artists, as well as Parisian and other French artists who have found larger studios there than in Paris. Such support for creators is also reflected in the acquisition of works, first from artists staying in the department, then from artists working in Paris or elsewhere in France. This policy was set up by Raoul-Jean Moulin, art critic for the *Lettres Françaises* and then for the daily *l'Humanité*. Thus, a fund and a collection of contemporary art were constituted.
- In 1990, the General Council decided to create a tool for the encounter between the collection and the population. It wondered about the form of this tool and finally opted for a museum. In 1991, the Ripault and Duhart agency (architects) won the competition for the museum's design. The General Council and its president, Michel Germa, then asked for the state's support, which was made conditional on the recruitment of a curator and the drafting of a scientific and cultural project.
- In 1998, the position of museum curator was created, and Alexia Fabre was recruited. The museum was then included in the 2000-2006 State-Region Plan contract. The state and the region contributed half of the construction budget, which amounted to 37 million euros. The state also supported the acquisition policy through the Regional Museum Acquisition Fund (FRAM), as well as the museum's cultural action policy, computerisation, digitisation and publications. Alexia Fabre, previously the director of the museum in Gap (a town in the south-east of France), was entrusted with the direction of the MAC VAL, inaugurated in 2005, until 2022.

Four threads run through the cultural policy the museum was inaugurated on:

- A global conception of the individual and cultural needs in our society.
- A specific place attached to artistic creation, which cannot be reduced to any other human activity and requires the attention and support of public authorities at all levels.
- The search for forms of intervention towards the people of Val-de-Marne who do not have access to culture because of the social conditions of their context.
- The incitement to dialogue, cooperation and reflection with the various partners involved in departmental cultural action: artists, cultural and association leaders, teachers and educators, researchers, local authorities, and workers' councils.

What is it about?

The museum, as a scientific and cultural project (in its 1998 version), attempted to answer the following fundamental questions:

- Why establish a new museum of contemporary art, just five kilometres away from the Beaubourg National Museum of Contemporary Art and the Paris Museum of Modern Art?
- Why establish it in a disadvantaged suburb and for which audience?
- What is the purpose of the museum's collection?

First, it was necessary to specify the purpose of the collection. It was defined as collecting the

works of the art scene in France from the 1950s to the present day, thus distinguishing itself from other museums that deal with art in France but are embedded in a more international context. It was also a question related to the socio-geographical situation of this new facility, given the generally elitist character of contemporary art, or at least the image that the uninformed public had of it. Furthermore, it was about creating the accompanying tools that would bring the public closer to the works and the artists.

However, during the initial seven years of the museum's existence, a large part of the project was devoted to its architectural aspects, which had already been largely elaborated by the time the curator was recruited.

In the meantime, new questions were added to the initial ones. They revolved around the issue of the extent to which a museum of contemporary art can succeed in resolving the tensions arising between 'memory preservation', public appeal, and democratisation of culture. In brief, the questions posed in this phase of the project were:

- Can the museum serve as a vector of social integration in its context?
- Is the democratisation of culture by means of a museum possible?
- Is the MAC VAL based on a utopia, or is it a functional project?
- Can MAC VAL succeed in restoring the concept of democratisation of culture? What does it put in place to achieve its goals? Can we talk about this project as a concept?

The second scientific and cultural project around MAC VAL was produced in 2007. It took up a good part of the objectives stated in the previous phase. It has also benefitted from the experience of the museum's operation over the previous two years and no longer addressed its architectural aspect.

At the MAC VAL, the classic missions of a museum (to conserve, exhibit, research and animate) were articulated around a certain idea of culture, summarised in the project as follows: 'The MAC VAL is a humanist vision of culture³'. The result was an emphasis on encounters: 'Encounters are at the heart of the MAC VAL project: a singular collection that bears witness to a strong commitment to the inhabitants and that participates in the identity of the territory⁴'. The museum was thus conceived as a tool for the encounter between the collection and the public.

In concrete terms, the museology choices illustrated these intentions. The collection could not be exhibited in its entirety. It was therefore to be exhibited according to thematic choices and the museum's display would be renewed each year. There would also be temporary exhibitions.

The MAC VAL's policy was to consider the museum as a public service: it was to be accessible to all but also demanding for all. A policy of excellence was in place, according to which the study of the collection and transmission of knowledge was to be rigorous and coherent. The different departments of the museum were invited to work collectively to move towards true cultural democratisation. The intentions of curator Alexia Fabre were clear: local success and

³ Projet scientifique et culturel, MAC VAL, février 2007, p.1

⁴ Ibid., p.1

international visibility for the museum.

How do we do it? Implementation and mediation

In this case, the implementation of the museum's mission began with the architectural design of the building, its location in the city, and its practical and cultural accessibility.

5.1. The museum: building, garden, equipment

The building, made of sober materials (wood, concrete), fits into the urban environment that surrounds it. With its immense bay windows, it is open to its environment. Nevertheless, its size (13,000 m²) remains imposing.

The garden, which is associated with the museum, is conceived both as a place to exhibit artwork and sculptures) and as a place of enjoyment, a link between the museum and the city. The garden is open at the same hours as the department's public parks and therefore has longer opening hours than the museum. The building was designed as a meeting place.



Overall view of the MAC VAL - Photo©David Merle

In addition to the exhibition spaces and the storerooms, there are educational workshops, a documentation centre, and an auditorium. The museum also includes artists' residences (two residential studios).

Documentation centre

The documentation centre is open to all. It contains an important documentary collection, focused on 20th-century art and particularly on the French art scene from the 1950s to the present day. The centre also has an audiovisual collection as well as a collection of artists' books. In the spring, many young people come to the centre to study for their baccalaureate. This is a sign of the visibility of the museum and the possibility of appropriation by the inhabitants of the territory.

Auditorium

The 150-seat auditorium is designed as a multidisciplinary venue where conferences, video screenings, meetings, and shows take place. The program echoes the museum's exhibitions and current events.

In addition, the museum hosted a bookstore, which is now closed. And it also hosts a restaurant/café whose cook can also run taste tours of the museum.



**View of the garden, work by Alain Séchas and children
Photo © Philippe Lebruman**

Partnerships

The museum has established numerous partnerships, including those with:

- Fonds Régional d'Art Contemporain [Regional Fund of Contemporary Art] (FRAC) Île-de-France. This partnership makes possible the circulation of artworks.
- The TRAM⁵ network. This partnership secures territorial anchoring and strong visibility at the regional level.
- The cultural and social structures of the department (hospitals, schools, neighbourhood committees, prisons, theatres, and art centres. This partnership serves to form sustainable links and coherent projects.
- The national education system. This partnership makes possible personalised visits during educational projects and training courses. There is a relay teacher within the team whose knowledge of educational programs is very useful for the development of documents, visits, and workshops.
- The Federation of Social Centres.
- Federations of Popular Education.

5.2. Audience policy and accessibility

a. Pricing policies

Pricing is consistent with the rule demanding accessibility and democratisation of culture. The possession of an entrance ticket (currently €5) entitles the holder to free participation in guided tours. Tickets for seniors are half price (€2.50). There are also annual subscriptions at affordable prices (€15). Young people under the age of 26, students, job seekers, and disabled adults are entitled to free admission. For a significant part of the visitors, the entrance and mediation are thus free.

b. Schedules and frequency

Apart from free visits, there are also MAC VAL's fixed tours (VF), which take place on days off. On Wednesdays (when there is no school) and weekends, they start at 3 or 4 p.m. These time slots can be dedicated to leisure activities. They are therefore aimed at a varied public: couples, young people, seniors, teachers, etc. Each week, four types of visits are offered:

- PVC: Visit of the Collections, Wednesday, 3 p.m.
- VIP: Unexpected Visit to Share, Saturday, 4 p.m.
- VVF: Family Visit, Sunday, 4 p.m.
- Babies at MAC VAL programme takes place once a month and is intended for children 8-36 months old and their parents.

There are also other types of visits, such as sensory visits (oral or tactile), gestures and tastes. These visits take place about once a month.

c. Targeting

The scientific and cultural project advocates the mixing of audiences, insofar as the visits are conducive to meetings between different audiences. In their wish to allow for diversity as well as break down barriers between different groups of people, the teams have placed great

⁵ TRAM is an association that has connected for forty years places engaged in the production and dissemination of contemporary art in Île-de-France. Today, its 33 members testify to the vitality and richness of artistic creation in the region. Art centres and schools, museums, artists' collectives, and foundations carry out complementary actions of production, dissemination, collection, teaching, mediation, publishing, and amateur practices.

importance on the accessibility of the venue, the training of staff and, above all, the creation of mediations adapted to different disabilities. The museum invites external speakers with sensory deficiencies to lead these tours while maintaining the presence of a mediator providing a scientific perspective on the works. This is the realisation of the goal of achieving quality, non-stigmatising mediation. There are no 'ghetto visits' for disabled people. Moreover, the tours are open to all audiences, disabled or not. But some segmentation is still necessary, as it would be utopian to think that the same visit could welcome children, the blind and the deaf.

The MAC VAL designs and runs workshops and encounters for so-called 'impeded' audiences: children, hospitalised adults, but also elderly people in homes who are unable to travel, and prisoners.

5.3. Desacralising contemporary art

Contemporary art is often considered hermetic, even elitist. It is thus misunderstood. Some museums are aware of this image of contemporary art. There was thus a reflection with the aim of finding 'desecrating mediations.' The mediation is not a means to propagate knowledge but a means to create a relationship between the visitors and the artistic spaces. This is why the MAC VAL's visitors' team has come up with a new form of guided tour, which does not take the form of an academic discourse but consists of a discussion between mediator and visitor.

a. Other ways of access to contemporary art

The study of human mediation for individual adult audiences has led to different types of 'offbeat' mediation.

Sensorial mediation

The MAC VAL has developed sensory visits that call upon different senses. Initially, these visits were designed as visits adapted to handicapped audiences (visually impaired, hard of hearing), but in a desire to break down the barriers between audiences, they were open to any visitor wishing to understand contemporary art differently. A blind storyteller and writer contributed greatly to the creation of the tactile and narrated visits she hosted; the gestural visits were supervised by a deaf actor and the tasty visits were animated by a chef. Indeed, visits designed for disabled audiences also allow for renewed mediation for other audiences.

Reflecting on how to make contemporary art accessible to these audiences allows us to reflect on how to make it accessible to any audience. These sensory visits take a distance from the scientific discourse to offer a more sensitive look. The tactile and narrated mediation takes a literary look at works of art and invites the imagination. The MAC VAL team started with the observation that it was impossible to touch the works and did not want to create tactile models. So she thought about creating analogies between sound and look.



**Museum night 2022 - Multi-sensory visit
Photo © Martin Argyroglo**

Gestural mediation offers no discourse and simply invites the visitor to observe and build their own interpretation. The idea of a visit in sign language has not been ruled out and, since 2016, a visit in LSF has been proposed in order to offer people practicing this language more detailed visits. Finally, the taste tour offers the spectator an atypical experience to create links between contemporary creation and cuisine.

Transdisciplinary mediation

These sensory tours, but also other tour formats, call upon other disciplines outside the field of art history and visual arts: literature, cooking, magic, dance, psychoanalysis, etc. The list of disciplines called upon cannot be exhaustive, as it is constantly renewed according to the temporary exhibitions. The MAC VAL also invites speakers from outside the field of art history to come and comment on the works. This approach is, of course, in line with their desire to offer different perspectives. During a tasting tour, the MAC VAL invited, in addition to the chef, a psychoanalyst to come and discuss with the visitors. This visit thus offered two original access points to contemporary art. The exhibition *Émoi & Moi* (Excitement & Me) questioned the notion of introspection and lent itself well to this psychoanalytical look. The cultural managers seem sensitive to the confrontation of art with other disciplines, being able to enrich its comprehension by proposing new doors of access. The multiplicity of ways of access joins the will to vary the public. Audiences with very varied knowledge and interests may be more sensitive to one or other of the shifted mediations. These offbeat mediations are, in general, attractive because of their playful dimension.

Offbeat vocabulary

Finally, several of the proposed tours use a deliberately offbeat vocabulary that also allows a different approach to art. The MAC VAL's scientific and cultural project states that 'the tone of these encounters, based on a respect for the works and a scientific requirement, is often offbeat and mischievous. This is now the museum's trademark'. In the case of the gustatory visit led by a cook and a psychoanalyst, the vocabulary used was far from the usual mediation discourse. The cook invited the public to 'listen to flavours', or to 'eat a slice of yourself'. The MAC VAL uses acronyms to name its visits. They are playful and offbeat because they refer to popular culture: VVF (*Village Vacances Famille*, as chain of campsites translates into *Visite à Voir en Famille*, Visit to Family Show), VIP (*Very Important Person* translates into *Visite Inattendue à Partager*, Unexpected Visit to Share), and PVC (i.e., plastic material translates into *Parcours Visite des Collections*, Tour of the Collections). This terminology seems to be a first means of attracting a broad public and of dedramatising contemporary art considered hermetic.

b. Desacralisation and non-entertainment

The mediations mentioned above are playful in their approach. They are not complicated, but they are still very cultivated and rich in references. Even if the mediators choose to opt for an offbeat mediation, the subject matter is no less scholarly; it is accessible but cultured. The MAC VAL's scientific and cultural project bears witness to this notion: 'a culture accessible to all, but a demanding culture for all'. This means that an offbeat approach does not prevent visitors from reaching the history of art; it does not overly popularise or lead to 'dumping down the discourse'. On the other hand, when we talk about offbeat tours or even offbeat vocabulary, we must not forget that these tours open a new perspective on contemporary art and raise awareness of other disciplines.

The cultural services do not try to entertain by proposing entertainment-related mediations.

It is more a question of desacralising culture by using new formulas likely to attract a large public. The museum world is sometimes hostile to such proposals and is afraid of sinking into entertainment, but some places are taking the gamble.

c. Accompanying the visitor

The desacralisation of contemporary art is not only carried out by means of these shifted visits; more traditional mediation is also used to reassure the visitor. Through dialogue, whether in the case of individual mediation or in an unincorporated group, the mediator takes note of the expectations, the degree of familiarity, and the questions of the visitors. Thus, the content of the mediation can be adapted. The mediations develop a desacralising approach but nevertheless have a scientific dimension. In other words, there is no risk of overly popularising the subject and falling into entertainment. As the MAC VAL is recognised on the contemporary art scene, it is obvious that it has an image of quality to preserve. It therefore tries to propose alternative solutions likely, on the one hand, to attract a wider public and, on the other hand, to make this art understandable and interesting, as well as to allow the spectator the right to construct his or her own view. Finally, the more traditional mediation also allows us to unpack contemporary art through the interaction and adaptation of discourse.

5.4. Flexibility of human mediation

a. A renewed mediation

The mediation of contemporary art is constantly evolving for different reasons. On the one hand, apart from the permanent collections, temporary exhibitions constitute the core of visits, and their regular renewal requires rethinking mediation. On the other hand, mediation is reactivated and recreated at each visit, not only by the renewal of the participants but also by the freedom granted to the mediator and the variety of approaches. Coherent themes and approaches to exhibition issues are validated in agreement with the exhibition curator. Then, everyone can implement the visit with their tools and their sensitivity. In both cases, the mediator is not alone in the design of mediation; he or she is accompanied by the participants, who thereby also check the very principles of mediation.

b. Interaction

Interaction also appears to be an essential aspect of mediation that was highlighted during the interviews or observed during the visits. It is not a matter of placing oneself in a vertical transmission register. This is in line with the pedagogical dimension (in the initial sense) that we mentioned earlier. It is a question of leading the visitor to construct his or her reasoning through dialogue.

During a visit to the MAC VAL, for example, the interaction sought by the mediator is not necessarily effective; visitors do not dare or do not want to participate.

Interaction with visitors allows us to respond to their expectations and questions, but also to create a climate of trust that encourages the visitor to feel at ease. For example, during the taste tour at the MAC VAL, the visitors were rather reserved at the beginning. Very quickly, a dialogue was established, allowing each participant to express themselves freely. However, the limits of the theory must be stressed. For a variety of reasons (crowded visit, shyness, etc.), it is sometimes difficult to get visitors to interact. On this subject, Alexia Fabre writes: 'The situation of silence in front of the works is frequent. The public does not feel empowered to give its point of view, to express itself'.

c. *Plurality of the glances*

Still in this idea of creating a space for dialogue and accompanying the visitor in the construction of his or her reflection, the cultural managers also insist on the notion of a plurality of views. At MAC VAL, the visits are perceived as moments of encounter, of crossing of views, and of diversity. This notion of plurality of perspectives can be understood in different ways.

The plurality of perspectives can be perceived in the mediators' discourses. Mediators are free to conceive their visit itinerary and to propose a reading of the works, which can be in connection with their personal interests. They choose the works in front of which they stop (but nothing is definitive) and create their visit and their commentary according to the reactions of the visitors. It is therefore not the same tour, and there is no obligation issued by the management, the head of department... Mediators have complete freedom!



Heritage Days 2012 - Visit in front of Gilles Barbier's work 'La révolution à l'envers' (The revolution in reverse). Photo © Didier Adam

A mediation format designed by the MAC VAL illustrates these plural views. When they find that several mediators have 'very different points of view', they set up a visit in the form of a *battle*. Apart from the playful dimension, this visit format has the advantage of showing freedom of speech and the right to formulate one's own interpretation. According to the audience team, there is no single truth, and it is the intersection of all these discourses that is valid at a given moment.

On the other hand, the presence of external speakers also testifies to this plurality of views. Inviting non-specialists to come and take a different look at the works opens up new ways of accessing contemporary art. As we have seen previously, these mediations allow us to unpack contemporary art through a shifted approach, but they also illustrate the possibility – the right – to carry a different glance. These visits perhaps try to leave the contemporary art of its hermetic and elitist image, the meaning and interpretation of which would be reserved for a circle of initiates.

Challenges, achievements, impacts

Like the other museums, MAC VAL is faced on the one hand with the injunction to open up more and more to new audiences, on the other hand with competition from private operators often endowed with superior financial means without having the same mission constraints. A tension ensues due to the contradiction between the museum's classical missions, to preserve, animate, transmit and a new task, namely to communicate to attract new audiences. Hence the risk of adopting an entrepreneurial logic: to gain new audiences through digital and playful devices and to generate new revenues. We find the neoliberal fantasy of a self-sustaining culture. We thus move from culture-transmission to culture-communication. While attendance at France's museums increased between 2002 and 2019, the percentage of people aged 15 and over increased from 28% in 1973 to 29% in 2018. In addition, social disparities

among museum-goers have continued to grow. This is a limit of cultural democratisation policies.

Faced with this challenge, the MAC VAL team directed mediation toward greater public participation. It is a reconfiguration of cultural practices inspired by the Declaration of Cultural Rights, known as the Fribourg Declaration (2007).

- Since January 2020, the MAC VAL has initiated a collaborative project in which local residents decipher and comment on the museum's works in their native language in order to give voice to the cultural diversity of the territory. This resulted in multilingual audio guides: Italian, Malagasy, Lingala and Brazilian Portuguese.
- During the second lockdown, the *Compagnie du 8e jour* (The Eighth Day Company), a theatre company based in Fontenay-sous-Bois (commune of the Val de Marne department), conducted a collective work based on the MAC VAL exhibition *Le vent se lève* (The Wind is Rising). The participants were invited to interpret the works and to relate them to their readings (press, comics, poetry, fiction, tales, scientific or ecofeminist essays) as well as to their own perceptions of the current ecological, health and human crises. In its projects, the *Compagnie du 8e jour* encourages encounters between people of very different ages and social backgrounds, with a focus on audiences who are far from cultural facilities and artistic practices. Thus, women from the *Maison de la famille* (Le Plessis-Tréville in the same department), patients and caregivers from the *Centre Hospitalier des Murets* (hospital center in Fontenay-sous-Bois), and adults attending an Emmaüs day care centre (Ivry-sur-Seine) shared their points of view and collectively invented forms (from November 2020 to June 2021).
- During the reorganisation of the museum's collection, the artist Gabriel Hernandez invited the reception staff to speak in front of the visitors; each one recounted a work of their choice from the museum's collection that they had come into contact with in the course of their work as receptionists and supervisors for past exhibitions.
- In the form of workshops and meetings, artist Nicolas Floc'h invited the participants (middle school students, teachers and departmental agents) to imagine collective proposals that can meet their needs and desires in order to modify community life within these places dedicated to public service. The *Grand Troc* (great barter) project is therefore, above all, artistic, political and collective. The expressed desires are shaped by the construction of objects made of recycled wood and recycled materials on a scale of 1. Each object is listed and co-signed by Nicolas Floc'h and the group concerned. The whole is then exhibited and proposed to the barter, that is to say that any visitor wishing to acquire an object must barter it against the real object, given then to the group having realised it (project realised in 2015).

A special mention should be made concerning the schoolchildren. Youth is a popular audience and remains the most important work for the MAC VAL team. The person responsible for education and young audiences explains that initiatives are multiplied to encourage a young audience to come and discover the works of the museum. All schools (kindergartens, middle schools, and high schools) in Val-de-Marne are invited to come to the museum; for students in middle schools, transportation is the subject of a charge by the Departmental Council. The idea is to try to bring art closer to children's lives by creating moments of exchange with the

speakers. Different paths have been devised so that each child, according to his or her age group, can 'experiment' with contemporary art.

- 'The kindergarten mill'
- The children are brought, for the first time, to apprehend the monumental space of the museum. The approach of the works is envisaged a second time through modes of visits that question the way of seeing, of telling, of circulating in front of them.
- 'The surprise factory of the primary school'
- The surprise visits propose modes of visits invented and renewed, associating and experimentation in the workshop.
- The 'middle school special'
- Based on one or more works from the collection and temporary exhibitions, tours offer an approach to contemporary creation, focusing on the crossroads between disciplines, artistic practices, and thought processes, whether they belong to the literary, historical, scientific, or philosophical fields.
- High school and higher education
Pupils from general and vocational high schools, as well as students, are welcomed to the museum according to the options and specialties of their courses. The history of contemporary art is considered through a thematic approach that opens up literary, cinematographic or performing arts practices. The workshops offered encourage the contextualisation of works through historical, theoretical and aesthetic extension.

Beyond these typical courses, modulation is possible. It is based on the request of some teachers who, after having worked with their pupils and students, wish, in partnership with the MAC VAL, to broaden their field of knowledge. The MAC VAL educational team then prepares a special, more unique visit. This is notably the case for 'the commentary in question' where the colleges Molière in Ivry, Delattre in Le Perreux, Casanova in Vitry-sur-Seine, and Berlioz High School in Vincennes had the project to open a continuous dialogue with the students based on a simple questioning of the work and the (supposed) need for its commentary and its different forms (descriptive, fictional, humorous, literary) generated by the artist's own practice. The students are invited to create!

Conclusion

The MAC VAL is a particularly interesting example of an explicit cultural policy, leading to a concrete realisation in accordance with the initial intentions. In addition to the support of the Departmental Council (funding, employer), the fact that the director was appointed even before the museum was built and the duration of her mandate (24 years) have largely contributed to this achievement. Although it is a departmental museum, the MAC VAL's aura goes far beyond the borders of France. Its audience is not limited to graduates and financially well-off senior citizens. The MAC VAL is a realised utopia. The communists in power in the Val de Marne department have tried to implement culture for all. After many reflections, the MAC VAL was born. It is the implementation of a political project. The original political project was intended for the inhabitants of Val-de-Marne. Now, the museum has gone beyond its territory without forgetting it. The museum is aimed at the general public, at people who are not familiar with contemporary art.

Like any organisation, the MAC VAL is evolving. The appointment of a new director and the change of political orientation of the Departmental Council will not be without effect on its possible new orientation.

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