Gaïté Lyrique: a theater for digital arts

A design report from Paris by Ivo Bonacorsi

In this historic theater, Manuelle Gautrand has inaugurated an enormous ductile and rhizomatic space.

An event-packed opening in early March saw the historic rebirth of the Gaîté Lyrique in the centre of Paris after a long restoration project and several disastrous management experiences which kept it closed for two decades. A splendid Italian-style theatre, a jewel of Parisian cultural life, and the temple of light theatre in the Second Empire, it had hosted Diaghilev's Russian ballets and the utopias of Jean Vilar's Theatre National Populaire. There were fears that this splendid project could be overshadowed by its brand-new technology, which would focus disproportionately on entertainment, "dumbing down" the 10,000 square metres permanently dedicated to the cutting-edge research of Ars electronica. Moreover, the transition was made possible with a huge public and private financial outlay. Almost half the total annual budget for the management of the Gaïte Lyrique comes from the City of Paris—4.5 million Euros out of a total of 9.5 million.
Now, the task of new director Jérôme Delorm as is filled with complex questions, perhaps the same ones hanging over the city’s other cultural spaces. To cite another example, after an important renovation, 104, the oldest municipal funeral home in the city bordering Auber Villiers, has now become a big-box events space.

On March 2nd, 2011, La Gaîté Lyrique opened in the heart of Paris to provide an intersection between technology, art and the public. La Gaîté Lyrique explores digital culture in all its shapes and forms: music, graphic art, video games, film, theatre, dance, fashion, design and architecture. The 7-floor, 9,700 m² building has been completely reinvented by architect Manuelle Gautrand. Photo © Vincent Fillon.
Could the City of Design follow the same fate? The design of the new Gaîté Lyrique emphasized production, providing it with flexible spaces, theatres and studios with cutting-edge equipment thus transforming it into a world-renowned venue for digital production. The space's agenda is already dense with events dedicated to creative and practices that are, at the moment and at least on paper, highly appealing and marked by a kind of classicism. From Brian Eno to John Hassell for electronic music, to the German-influenced Rimini Protokoll collective, to the British United Visual Artists who were the space's pride during the opening-day ceremonies after having played the same role in such European festivals such Linz, Eindhoven, Berlin and London. It will be up to the artists and their audiences to give meaning to a deliberately ductile space that lends itself to all kinds of interactive practices, from the playful to the very serious.

The resource centre offers visitors, free of admission, keys to a better understanding of the new means of communications and the many artistic movements in this all-digital age. The resource center builds physical and digital collections all year long.
A visit to the website, a flip through the magazine or a look at the products in the online boutique is enough to understand this. In terms of future planning, ensuring return attendance and exploring the possibility of privatizing the space will likely be its winning points. Fundamentally, rental for cultural events is the secret to the success of many twenty-first century cultural projects. Many other activities that are more profitable than art projects already guarantee the survival of many cultural spaces in Paris—like the Palais de Tokyo—after their early media success and subsequent proliferation of boutiques, cafes and restaurants.

It must also be taken into account that digital culture is inextricably anchored to the future of cultural destinations. After all, the apparition of a huge video-game hall is no longer that troublesome. A festival entitled 2062 is scheduled in the near future; it will be devoted to the aspects of digital creativity that could transform our daily life over the next fifty years. A program of events focused on skate culture is the key to anchoring an audience of children and young people.

The French duo I Could Never Be A Dancer, in residence at la Gaîté lyrique, have created a novel performance for the opening. In conjunction with the UVA circuit, a series of daily performances leads visitors to discover the various features of la Gaîté lyrique by inviting them to individual experiences that follow the principles of gameplay. Photo © Vincent Fillon.

Like the mascot of the Gaïte Lyrique—a masked penguin emerging from the theatre with a block of “cold technology” that spreads exponentially around the world—the whole does not remain simply a promise but that, as in its launch animation, all may sooner or later invest in and appropriate the cultural rhizomatic line sprouting from what will be the near future of the Gaïté, tout court.

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Little mobile units, called “éclaireuses” are devoted to the artists or to the public, to invention, to presentation: they make it possible to build then “un-build” a number of sets in the venue. Photo © Vincent Fillon.

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Ma nue lle Gautran, born in 1961, established his agency in 1991 and over the past 20 years has designed numerous buildings in a variety of domains, both public and private: cultural facilities, office buildings, commercial spaces. It was the “C42”, Citroën’s flagship showroom on the Champs-Elysées in Paris, in 2007, which catapulted him to fame in France and abroad. Besides la Gaîté Llyrique, he is presently working on several important buildings such as the Musée d’Art Moderne, d’Art contemporain et d’Art Brut in Lille, the Cité des Affaires at Saint-Étienne and the “Origami” office complex on the avenue de Friedland at Paris.

La Gaîté Llyrique invited the collective UVA (UnitedVisualArtists) for its opening and puts the entire building at its disposal. They transform it into a veritable instrument. Visitors play with light, image and sound directly through their movements. Photo © Vincent Fillon.
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More 10 March 2011, Gaîté Lyrique, I Could Never Be A Dancer, Jérôme Delormas, Manuelle Gautrand, Palais de Tokyo, United Visual Artists

1,000 square meters adjustable on two levels with a screening wall of 20m x 4m were devoted to exhibition space. Photo © Philippe Ruault.
Il fattore

Non è solo una questione di Conoscenza, non è solo una questione di Cultura, non è solo una questione di Creatività, non è solo una questione di Coincidenza, è una questione di Cristalplant.

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