THE CONTEXT

Since the design in the 1960s of the La Défense business area to the west of Paris, artists, architects and engineers have been working together on the site, Architectural monuments, such as the Grande Arche and the CNIT building, create a dialogue with a number of works of art, some of which are emblematic of the artistic movements that came to the fore in the 20th century, including Surrealism, Abstraction, Kineticism, Conceptual Art and New Realism. The works were commissioned, then acquired, in a context during which architects sought to outdo one another, a period embodied by personalities like Jean Millier (President of EPAD, the body responsible for developing La Défense from 1969 to 1977, and President of the Pompidou cultural centre in Paris from 1977 to 1980), Germain Viatte (Curator of the national modern arts museum from 1975 to 1984), and Michel Moritz (architect in charge of the installation of the works).

THE PROJECT

Defacto organized a competition and entrusted the artistic enhancement project to the Frenak + Jullien Architectes. Defacto is keen to bring this unique cultural heritage to the fore by creating a truly federating identity for a heterogeneous collection, and making it both accessible and visible. The project reflects Defacto’s determination to turn the business area into a cultural destination for Grand Paris.

The intrinsic link between the works of art and the urban planning of La Défense forms the foundation of the collection, which is based on three main ideas:

- To identify the unusual nature of the works of art and the way they fit into their surroundings: fountains, ornamental ponds, ramps, walls, chimneys, steps... Many of the works at La Défense are elements of the urban planning just as the buildings are.

- To show that certain works belong to major modern and contemporary 20th-century artistic monuments.

- To enhance the intelligibility of the works of art in the immense space at La Défense, and to densify their presence by moving two major works to the centre: La Défense by Barrias, the original work that gave its name to the area, and After Olympia by Anthony Caro, one of the most recent acquisitions.

The power of the project stems from three major aspects:

- The creation of itineraries, the first along the main axis, others in the neighbouring areas:
  - on-site signage: name and title plaques are fixed into the ground, near each work. These slabs of white marble are engraved in black in three languages (French, English and Chinese), and provide information on the work, its location, and the artist. A system of arrows indicates other works nearby
  - enhancing the works at night: the works will be lit either per the artist’s original design or for the first time. The lighting will show works that were hitherto invisible at night and will reinvent the itineraries that are visible by day.

- Restoration: a restoration and preventive preservation programme has been devised to improve the overall approach to the works and facilitate their management. Defacto has entrusted this programme to qualified heritage restoration specialists.

- Cultural policy: this policy includes enhancing the artistic archives, creating publications, a dedicated website and studying new commissions for art work.

TIMETABLE

Summer 2015 to summer 2016:

- Name and title plaques will be placed close to each work of art:
  - October to November 2015: Grand Axe itinerary
  - November 2015 to February 2016: Neighbourhood itineraries

- Lighting the works of art:
  - From October through to the end of 2015: Grand Axe itinerary
  - Year 2016: Neighbourhood itineraries in co-ordination with the projects to “requalify” the public areas in the neighbourhoods

- Restoration:
  - June to December: Bassin and Signaux, After Olympia, La Défense, Le Pouce, Doubles lignes indéterminées, La Fontaine des Corolles
  - To be continued in 2016, with: Le Moretti, L’Araignée rouge...
Our ambition is to give Europe’s leading business area a new lease of life, at a time when international competition is rife. To that end, Defacto has introduced a policy of new services, notably for its first clients, the 400 companies on the site. We are developing a policy to welcome, accompany and listen to the people who use the site, whether they work or live there, or are students. We intend to improve the everyday living environment, to make it easier to go from one place to another, to rethink the public area and attribute more importance to greenery. The new look we want to give La Défense will necessarily have a strong cultural identity. We will achieve this with major events such as Paris La Défense changez de point de vue! or Été Defacto. Forme publique, a biennial urban furniture design show, launched by Defacto in 2011, put La Défense at the heart of current thinking on urban design. With the launch of Paris La Défense Art Collection, we are keen to enhance La Défense’s exceptional artistic heritage, which to date has never been brought into the spotlight.

For Patrick Devedjian, President of Defacto: “La Défense’s artistic heritage is a tremendous lever to attract people to the site. The investments made by Defacto bear witness to our desire to see this business area become a key Grand Paris cultural site, and a place where economic development and cultural policy can be of mutual benefit to each other.”
How can a viewpoint be shaped? Or, in other words, how can a space be turned into a landscape? There are only two possible answers to this question: either by representing it, or by marking a viewpoint from which it can be represented. Is this not the function of panoramic viewpoints, or belvederes – from the Italian belvedere – to give the space a structured shape or turn the space into a landscape? [...] Without them, there would literally be nothing to see: viewpoints not only provide an opportunity to see a landscape, they are prerequisites. [...] It is precisely this experience that the Pavillon des points de vues stages and makes possible. [...] And yet, Alain Bublex's Pavillon is not a belvedere, although it does also play this role: it's an inner space from which the visitor sees the outside. Made up of two spaces - a vestibule in which an installation will introduce visitors to the site they came to see and a room on a slightly higher plane from which a whole landscape is visible through a bay window that takes up a whole wall. The pavilion is like a large dark room. It's an instrument for seeing, an instrument used to entice the visitor's gaze.

Extracts from a text by Bastien Gallet, Construire un regard: le pavillon mobile d'Alain Bublex. The whole text can be consulted at the following address: www.ladefense.fr/bublex
À ces visiteurs curieux, invités à la déambulation, on leur propose un parcours de découverte, en empruntant la rue vers les quartiers ou en suivant l’itinéraire des parcs signalés par les dalles. La collection prend vie, évolue, se renouvelle. Venue de nombreuses œuvres d’artistes contemporains, cette collection est censée être initiale, se transformer et s’enrichir.

À ces visiteurs curieux, invités à la déambulation, on leur propose un parcours de découverte, en empruntant la rue vers les quartiers ou en suivant l’itinéraire des parcs signalés par les dalles. La collection prend vie, évolue, se renouvelle. Venue de nombreuses œuvres d’artistes contemporains, cette collection est censée être initiale, se transformer et s’enrichir.
Bassin, Panayotis Vassilakis, dit Takis

Panayotis Vassilakis, dit Takis
Bassin, 1988

At the head of the esplanade, forty-nine colored luminous heads flashing randomly stand on this large water surface. These frail sentinels are the work of the Greek sculptor Takis, fascinated with questions of energy. Since the 1950s he has sought to capture an invisible reality, a cosmic mystery that escapes us, using what he calls “signals.” This commission, discussed for this site since the early 1970s, is the artist’s first public monumental creation.

Raymond Moretti
Le Moretti, 1992

This monumental conduit used to ventilate the square’s subterranean works is covered with 642 reinforced plastic tubes, from two to thirty centimeters in diameter, in nineteen different hues. The graphic vitality, “this optical mixture” in the artist’s words, breaks with the surrounding austerity and reflects on the buildings. Painter, illustrator, sculptor, Moretti installed his workshop in the bowels of La Défense in 1973. He created several commissions for the public space.
Doubles lignes indéterminées, Bernar Venet
Bernar Venet

*Doubles lignes indéterminées*, 1988

A French conceptual artist residing in the United States, in the 1960s Venet was close to the New Realists such as César and Arman. Beginning in 1983, he created lines of steel, a central experimentation in his career. Whether single or double, like here, these monumental lines are “indeterminate,” the space they outline varies depending on the viewing angle. This ribbon of steel commissioned from the sculptor for La Défense in the late 1980s and specifically designed for the Michelet neighborhood, seems paradoxically flexible and light.
La Défonce, François Morellet
François Morellet
*La Défonce, 1990*

Représentant français de l’art minimaliste et cinétique depuis les années 1960 et connu pour ses installations lumineuses de néons, Morellet a conçu ici une sorte de parallélépipède englouti, un ensemble de poutres métalliques qui semblent s’enfoncer dans le sol et traverser le toit du Fonds national d’art contemporain, commanditaire de l’œuvre. Avec ironie, celui qui se qualifie de « rigoureux rigolard » se joue du nom comme de la verticalité de La Défense.

A French representative of minimalist and kinetic art since the 1960s and known for his luminous neon installations, here, Morellet has designed a sort of sunken parallelepiped rectangle, a set of metal beams that seem to sink into the ground and go through the roof of the French National Contemporary Art Fund which commissioned the work. Ironically, this man who considers himself a “rigorous joker” plays on La Défense’s name and verticality.
La Défense, Louis-Ernest Barrias

Louis-Ernest Barrias
*La Défense*, 1883

From around a hundred sculptors, including Auguste Rodin, Barrias won the competition in 1879 to commemorate Paris’ defense against the Prussians in 1870-71. This bronze allegory originally lined up with the Arc de Triomphe’s perspective at the center of a traffic circle now erased by urban development. Paris, represented by a woman wearing a National Guard uniform, is the proud standard-bearer. The young woman and the soldier at her feet embody the Parisian people’s heroic resistance. this sculpture, which is the only 19th century work on the esplanade, gave its name to the neighborhood.
Fontaine monumentale, Yaacov Agam
Éminent représentant de l’art cinétique, l’artiste israélien Agam propose ici une œuvre en perpétuel mouvement. Sa Fontaine monumentale s’étend sur deux niveaux : le gigantesque bassin recouvert d’émaux de Venise aux multiples nuances, équipé de soixante-six jets d’eau, se prolonge par un large déversoir. Agam conçoit une œuvre d’art totale, dotée d’une machinerie complexe, qui devient sonore lorsque la musique accompagne les jeux d’eau. Tout concourt à rendre l’œuvre vivante : la couleur, la lumière, le rythme de l’eau, et les illusions d’optique qui en résultent pour le passant.

Yaacov Agam
Fontaine monumentale, 1977

A distinguished representative of kinetic art, Israeli artist Agam here proposes a work in perpetual motion. His Fontaine monumentale (Monumental Fountain) stretches over two levels: the gigantic basin covered in Venetian enamels in a multitude of hues and equipped with sixty-six water jets is extended by a wide spillway. Agam has designed a comprehensive work of art, fitted with complex machinery, that becomes audible when music accompanies the water jets. Everything combines to make this a living work: color, light, the water’s rhythm, and the resulting optical illusions for passerby.
Araignée rouge, Alexander Calder
Le séjour à Paris de Calder, artiste américain, figure majeure de l’art moderne, est décisif pour son travail. Il intègre le groupe Abstraction-Création et s’oriente vers une double recherche : l’abstraction et le mouvement. Naissent ses fameux Mobiles, sculptures aériennes ainsi baptisées par Marcel Duchamp qui font de Calder un pionnier de l’art cinétique.

L’Araignée rouge, cousine du Flamingo de Chicago, commandée en 1974 pour La Défense, appartient quant à elle à la série des Stabiles. Ces sculptures monumentales faites de plaques de métal soudées et boulonnées, réalisées pour l’espace urbain, s’opposent par définition aux Mobiles.

Alexander Calder
Araignée rouge, 1974

A major figure in modern art, American artist Calder’s stay in Paris was decisive for his work. He joined the Abstraction-Creation group and oriented his research along two lines: abstraction and movement. This gave birth to his famous Mobiles, aerial sculptures named by Marcel Duchamp, making Calder a pioneer in kinetic art. The Araignée Rouge (Red Spider), cousin to the Flamingo in Chicago, ordered in 1974 for La Défense, belongs to the Stabiles series. These monumental sculptures created for urban spaces and made of welded and bolted metal plates contrast, by definition, with the Mobiles.
Personnages fantastiques, Joan Miró

Catalan painter and sculptor Miró took up residence in Paris in the early 1920s and maintained artistic and personal links to France throughout his life. The Personnages fantastiques (Figures), a pair of giant marionettes, is one of his last monumental works. Mischievous dialogue in primary colors, it is part of a series of large-scale sculptures created beginning in the 1960s. Commissioned for La Défense in 1976, this work, “homage to humor and life,” gave rise to some incomprehension when it was installed on the site. It is marked by the surrealist spirit, of which Miró was one of the freest and most inventive figures.
After Olympia, Anthony Caro
Anthony Caro

**After Olympia, 1991**

Following a decisive stay in the United States in 1959, this British sculptor, who had been Henry Moore’s assistant in his early years, turned towards abstraction and using industrial materials. He secured a major place for himself on the artistic stage, where he is now an eminent figure. In 1985, a trip to Greece, the cradle of statuary, oriented Caro’s work. After Olympia is inspired by the monumental gable on Zeus’ temple in Olympia. Over 20 meters long, After Olympia combines the strength and flexibility of folded metal. Previously exposed on the roof of the Metropolitan Museum in New York and at Trajan’s Market in Rome, the work was acquired for La Défense in 1991.
Le Pouce, César Baldaccini, dit César
Tel un obélisque, cet agrandissement monumental du moulage du pouce de César se dresse à 12 mètres de haut. C’est le plus grand des Pouces du sculpteur depuis le premier réalisé en 1965 qui ne mesurait que 40 centimètres. Désigné comme « nouveau réaliste » en 1960, César est connu pour son travail sur les objets courants de la société de consommation, qu’il assemble, compresse, agrandit, dans un esprit proche du pop art américain.

César Baldaccini, dit César
Le Pouce, 1994

Like an obelisk, this monumental enlargement of a mold of César’s thumb stands 12 meters high. It is the tallest of the sculptor’s Pouces since the first one created in 1965 which measured only 40 centimeters. Referred to as a New Realist in 1960, César is known for his work on common consumerist objects which he gathered, compressed, and enlarged in a spirit similar to American Pop Art.
Slat, Richard Serra
Richard Serra

Slat, 1985

An American artist, Serra is an incontrovertible figure of minimalist and monumental sculpture. He seems to defy the laws of gravity with Slat: five gigantic plates of raw steel are erected against each other. Viewers, always present in Serra’s works, are invited to walk through the installation for a physical experience. Commissioned in 1983 for La Défense, this work is part of a series of vertical sculptures emblematic of the artist, like Carnegie in Pittsburgh and Fulcrum in London.

Artiste américain, Serra est une figure incontournable de la sculpture minimaliste et monumentale. Il semble défier les lois de la gravité avec Slat: cinq gigantesques plaques d’acier brut sont érigées l’une contre l’autre. Le spectateur, toujours présent dans l’œuvre de Serra, est ici invité à traverser cette installation, à en faire l’expérience physique. Commandée en 1983 pour La Défense, cette œuvre s’inscrit dans la série des sculptures verticales emblématiques de l’artiste, comme Carnegie à Pittsburgh ou Fulcrum à Londres.
Signaux, Panayotis Vassilakis, dit Takis
These seventeen light signals were created using materials recovered from ships. In accordance with the desires of the Grande Arche’s architect, Johann Otto von Spreckelsen, they echo the Bassin’s (Pool) forty-nine electromagnetic masts, a work commissioned from Takis a few years earlier and located on the opposite end of the Grand Axe. The Greek sculptor here plays with the contrast between these fine flexible rods and the titanic Arche closing the perspective.