Il Palazzo del Popolo


Left over from a prewar expo, Paris’s Palais de Tokyo at last has a permanent use, home to one of the Europe’s most vital new contemporary arts centers. Pierre Restany, its President, reports.

Fotografia di/Photography by Philippe Ruault
Il Palais de Tokyo a Parigi rappresenta un successo senza precedenti. Nella sua storia, il museo ha cambiato più volte il suo aspetto, sempre con lo scopo di rinnovarsi e adeguarsi ai tempi. La strategia adottata per la conversione del vecchio Palais de Tokyo è stata una completa riapertura del museo, senza avvalersi di finanziamenti pubblici. L'iniziativa è stata vista come un modo per mostrare la struttura originaria del palazzo.

La strategia di conversione non è stata priva di controverse. Alcuni hanno criticato l'intervento per aver interessato uno spazio che avrebbe potuto essere utilizzato per altri progetti più ambiziosi. Tuttavia, la strategia è stata vista come un modo per sostenere il centro culturale locale e promuovere la wzglęre dello spazio su una base privata.

La conversione del Palais de Tokyo è stata vista come un modo per sostenere l'arte contemporanea e promuovere la creatività locale. L'obiettivo è stato quello di creare uno spazio che sia adatto alle esigenze di un museo moderno e contemporaneo.
La giapponese Yui Ja Yamaide invitava i bambini a colorare un immenso disegno murale; a loro disposizione c'era tutto il necessario, colori, gelatine, matite colorate. Le colline di terra di Paola Pivi, destinate a eventuali spettacoli, sembravano ancora più sporcoraggianti: il gigantesco cestino per la carta e l'idea controtipo di Wang Du ai semplici: come felice emblematico della comunicazione rapida. E a dire il vero proprio di comunicazione rapida si tratta: il Palais de Tokyo propone una molteplicità di situazioni interattive, semplici da manipolare e a cui è facile aderire. Il pavimento dell'ingresso laterale è rivestito da una pittura decorativa di Taiwan, mentre le foto di Kay Hassan ranciono l'atmosfera di una strada di un township di Johannesburg e quella di Naomi Fischer si preparano a fare concorrenza a Cindy Sherman. Dagli audiolaboratori ai giochi video d'ogni tipo, fino alle proiezioni islandesi di Melik Ohanian, nessuna sollecitazione mentale o sensoriale è trascurata in questo bazar caravanserail: qui sarebbe perfettamente a suo agio un incantatore di serpenti nella piazza Dienna a Fiera di Marakeb. Ancora una volta siamo nel regno della comunicazione veloce e dei messaggi interattivi, in ogni caso ben lontani dall'ambiente elitaro e compassato delle gallerie vuote o dei musei deserti. Quel l'arte regna come un padrone di casa ospite e conviviale. La parola è a tutti quanti, e molti hanno voglia di parlare. Da fronte alla fanzine di scambi e di incontri, si capisce che il Palais de Tokyo sta rispondendo a una domanda diffusa di cultura globale. Tutte le discipline e tutte le speranze sono permessi, in una Parigi che sembra finalmente strapparsi dalle pannellone di una scena da molto tempo stagnante e di routine.

The People's Palace: In its new incarnation as a creative workshop for the arts, the Palais de Tokyo was officially opened by French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin in January. This level of official recognition for one of the most unusual and innovative arts initiatives currently underway anywhere in the world undoubtedly had something to do with an impending election campaign. But it also emphasized government awareness of the potential of a permanent workshop for multimedia experimentation in the arts in the cultural landscape of France. The Palais de Tokyo, open from midday until midnight, is aimed squarely at a young audience. And the programme aims to allow art to learn from other disciplines, such as design, cinema, literature, fashion and above all music— which, from rap to techno, dominates the evening programme. Admission was free during the first week, and the Palais de Tokyo was invaded by curious crowds. Almost 20,000 people poured in, lingering happily on comfortable chairs and sofas among baroque pedestal tables designed by a Bonnard artist while waiting for the opening of Surrisi Kusowong's Thai supermarket or admiring Navin Rawanchaikul's reworking of Veronese's monumental Marriage of Cain, in which the original biblical figures have been replaced by a host of 20th-century art stars, from Picasso and Duchamp to Klein, Warhol and Gilbert & George. Meanwhile, Frank Scuilli offered his biography in a large-scale comic strip, a process of self-promotion that seemed to go down very well with Joopin. Yun'Ja Yamaide invited children to colour in an immense mural drawing, with felt pens, charcoal and crayons available. A shooting range by Paola Pivi, designed with potential sports fans in mind, looked more off-putting, while the giant paper and video-monitor basket by Wang Du made itself felt as the emblematic fetish of instant communication. The Palais de Tokyo occupies an imposingly monumental Art Deco wing of one of the
pavilions built for the 1937 World’s Fair between Avenue du Président Wilson and the Seine. After the war the building housed the Musée Nationale d'Art Moderne until it was transferred to the Centre Georges Pompidou. Several subsequent attempts to find a new use for it were abandoned before the Ministry for Culture finally handed over the space to the Association du Palais de Tokyo. The association’s role is to guarantee the independence of the new institution and support its programme.

The venue is the cost of the upkeep of the site and employs the staff, while programming is financed by a network of private sponsors, a formula designed to encourage the development of a new platform for creative exchange in the art world with both an international and a specifically French character. Nicolas Bourriaud and Jérôme Sans have been appointed joint directors for an initial three-year period with a dynamic and all-encompassing vision of what a centre for contemporary art can be. Bourriaud is a brilliant theoretical aesthete who has concentrated on a conceptual approach to the programme as a whole, while Sans, a curator with wide international experience, has a more directly practical and managerial role. They bring to the Palais de Tokyo a knowledge of the international art world that is supple, very extensive and open-minded. The space they have to work with includes a spacious glazed area, three lateral rooms and a large bay on the ground floor, together with a variety of other spaces on different floor levels. The space, designed by the architects Anne Locatelli and Jean-Philippe Vassal, may be characterized as a study in the economics of architecture. Their work is all but invisible, the antithesis of signature architecture; finishes are raw and interventions are blunt and direct. They have turned the west wing of the Palais de Tokyo, closed since 1995, into a place that can be used in the freest possible way by both the public and artists. By restoring the original logic of the spaces, the architects have made the most of the building’s physical qualities, avoiding the danger of an over-specific internal layout. The interior offers generously proportioned, impressive spaces and an abundance of natural light. They allow for both group and solo shows to be held simultaneously, enabling diverse personalities to display their work side by side without being fused into an anonymous ensemble. This high level of flexibility allows the place to play its role as a live workshop of contemporary creativity to the full. The programme offers a rich diversity of formats: four months for major exhibitions in the glazed area and one month for ‘module’ projects consisting of pieces by young artists. All of these formulas will permit rapid reactions to artistic developments as well as offer more spontaneous events. The suppleness of this programme keeps the whole system on its toes, ready to respond to progress in a dynamic way. The side entrance floor was covered with a Taiwanese decorative painting, and photographs by Kay Hassan re-created the street atmosphere of a Johannesburg township. An accumulation of brand-new household utensils by Subodh Gupta conjured up images of what might be mistaken for an exotic branch of Woolworths. From the audio lab to a variety of video games, or to Malik Okharia’s Icelandic projections, no mental or sensorial stimulus is forgotten in this caravanserai and bazaar, where a snake charmer from DJerna el Fins Square in Marrakech would feel perfectly at home. It’s a setting as far from the elitist and sedate scene of empty galleries and deserted museums as is possible to imagine. Art at the Palais de Tokyo is hospitable and convivial. Anybody can take the floor, and a lot of people are eager to speak. All risks and all horse are permitted in a Palais that seems to have torn itself free from the long stagnation of the Parisian arts scene.