

galerie dohyanglee

LA FORÊT PENSANTE

A solo exhibition of the works of **Laurent Mareschal**
October 12th - November 16th 2024

With the support for the galleries / exhibition of  Centre national des arts plastiques
(National Centre for Visual Arts).

Porte de Vincennes
23rd September 2024

La Forêt Pensante (The Thinking Forest) was the nickname given to the University of Vincennes, located in the heart of the wood of the same name in eastern Paris, from 1968 to 1980. In the aftermath of May 68, in order to keep the revolutionaries away from the historic centre of Paris and the Sorbonne, the De Gaulle government decided to build a new university that was both experimental and revolutionary in its operation, but also in its aims.

A popular university open to non-graduates, workers and foreigners, with no age limit. A university where lectures are replaced by debate, criticism, exchange and conversation, and which includes a crèche (nursery) so that parents can continue to attend classes.

This university, new in its experimentation, was characterized by the freedom given to students and to the left-wing political movements of the post-May 1968 period, as well as a great deal of political effervescence.

In 1980, President Giscard d'Estaing ordered that the university centre be demolished. Muzzled and then destroyed by public opinion, the revolutionary left-wing university created by a run-down right-wing government was closed by order of the Ministry against the wishes of those working there and the students. Not a trace of the site remains today. The revolutionary symbol inherited from May 68 has disappeared. It is still known today as the lost university.

This political, historical reminder is important, and it's not for nothing that Laurent Mareschal has chosen the nickname given to the University of Vincennes as the title for his new exhibition. What we need to remember above all is the speed with which the political power in place acted to displace and/or silence the revolutionary voices that rose up, too many and too loud, against it.

At the entrance to the gallery, behind a window, like an acronym announcing what is to come, hangs an eponymous work made of green neon letters : **Bureau d'Échange**. We are invited to share our ideas and understand what's going on within these walls.

Not far away, on the floor behind the illuminated lettering at the back of the gallery, a charcoal-coloured cloth is spread out with wooden pegs on top. This is not a game board, but a message in Braille. Arranged like the raised signs of writing for the blind, their composition translates Fénelon's famous letter to King Louis XIV in 1694, urging him to listen to his people and hear their troubles, or risk succumbing to a 'revolution' himself.

If the message of this **Letter to the Blind** is deaf to those who look at the work without understanding Braille, as deaf as Louis XIV in his time, it was no less a harbinger at the time of the upheavals to come in 1789. And while Fénelon's words may have been prophetic for France, the work is at least as much a harbinger of the rest of the exhibition.

Just before descending the stairs to the rest of the exhibition, a black-and-white photographic montage appears. A large, walled university building, with a sheet hanging from one of the windows, tagged 'No to closure.' While this is of course a view of the University of Vincennes, we see it here as if it had survived and we were observing it through the prism of our times, when France is led, as it was then, by a particularly right-wing and conservative, not to say refractory, government.

It is hard not to draw a parallel between monarchical France, overthrown by revolution, and an authoritarian government that has no regard for the results of the ballot box, as if, like Fénelon's letter to the king, popular demands that go unheeded by the government can only end up in revolution. All the more so when the video piece in the same room, **United AI**, mounted as a communication object, urges the publishers of artificial intelligence to take responsibility for and stop systematically exploiting the sentimental misery of their customers.

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Even more than with Braille, the following works use coded languages. And while these signs are silent until we play them, they carry messages that are much stronger than they appear to be.

Alabama, based on John Coltrane's piece of the same name, composed in 1963 after a racist attack by the Ku Klux Klan on a church in Alabama, which killed four girls, as a work made of hair. This piece uses the score of the song that served the cause and the conquest of African-American civil rights in the United States. White nails act as notes on the score, and the braided strands of hair link them together as if the piece were being played by an instrument of silent memory, in which the melancholy and the pent-up anger that preside over it are particularly moving.

At the back of the room, a long bar code made up of the lead of pencils, entitled **Mine de rien**, is another graphic code, this time referring to a phrase by the author Henry David Thoreau and his seminal book *Civil Disobedience*. Next to it sits a large, colourful, abstract calendar for the year 2023, entirely handmade in felt-tip pen, tracing the timetable of a mid-career visual artist. The lack of free time is glaringly obvious. It's a real-life experience... Further on, three music boxes entitled **You'd Better Start Early** play jingles from Windows, McDonalds and Apple. Irony is never far off.

From the next room comes the sound of the video work **Des Nouilles Encore** (More Noodles). A unionist operetta for two female opera singers and a harpist, set to Offenbach's *Barcarole*. The lyrics openly criticize the pension reform that was recently rammed through the National Assembly by using the 49.3 Article. However, the least ambiguous piece of work in this entire Thinking Forest will surely remain the megaphone turned against the wall. A vehicle for inaudible and incomprehensible demands, it lives up to its name: **Parler aux murs** (Talking to Walls).

Everything could be summed up here. No matter how hard the voices of the people try to be heard, no one listens. Worse still, these voices are silenced by radical political action, sometimes more than authoritarian. The demand then becomes a fight.

The struggle of an artist who, in graphic codes normally reserved for sales and efficiency, transmits voices of defiance and ideas of civil disobedience.

Léo Marin
Translated in English by Emmelene Landon

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