WHAT HAS CHANGED

One out of three times when visitors wander into the exhibition space on rue Louis Vitet, they pause as they come back out and raise an inquisitive index finger, “So why is it called La Salle de bains [the Bathroom]?” One out of three times I start by saying I’m not responsible for the moniker and that stories about names are a veritable hub airport for flights of fancy, especially when the stories go back to the last century. If the visitors insist, I randomly trot out my two favorite tales. There is the one about the terry cloth towel that accidently fell into the little rectangular courtyard that was to become the outdoor space of La Salle de bains at its rue Saint-Jean address. Almost the same surface area as the interior space, the outdoor space was separated from it by a large plate glass window like a two-way screen featuring a film image of the exhibition inside. The second version is more exotic. It claims a modest kinship with The Kitchen, which was founded in 1971 by artists in New York and is still open today. Like lots of artist-run spaces, the motivation behind The Kitchen’s creation was the absence of venues for sharing progressive ideas and forms of art. On the fringe of museums and art institutions, The Kitchen offered unheard-of possibilities for experimenting with new mediums and formats like video art and performance.

The other day Olivier Vadrot confirmed by telephone that the real story has yet to be written. Not the one that recounts the bit of whimsy by which a venue dedicated to contemporary art came to be called “the bathroom,” but rather the history of how everything got started, how the site functioned, in what circumstances and conditions. It is because the birth of a project like La Salle de bains and the reasons for its survival are the result of a multitude of circumstances and conditions, and though these are specific to the story of each association, we often find the same trifecta at work, i.e., a venue, people who are motived (often artists), and the political will to provide financial assistance. The present publication doesn’t aim to lay out everything that has happened since the first show opened in July 1999; for that another book would have to be written. It would be a story told by several voices, each necessarily offering a different version of the facts. It would tell of group adventures and lone undertakings, and describe scenes of euphoria (when, for example, an artist says yes) but also weariness; it would touch on friendships and quarrels, devotion, calling into question, extraordinary experiences where it’s hard to believe the moving spirit behind it all is you and that it, the event, took place here in Lyon; it would describe as well, for pages and pages, a far less romantic reality made up of bookkeeping, spackling compound, social security statements, tidying up, reverse planning, layouts, shipping – the work of one or two people in other words – and therefore not a little dose of problem solving 101. Were they written down, at La Salle de bains or somewhere else, these narratives about an art project factory might then speak with what has been left behind for us, that is, the photographs and press releases that produce, when compiled in catalogues and on internet websites, the canonic image of a contemporary art venue.

Since 1999, a great deal has changed in the art world and the broader world generally, beginning with our relationship to things like art and reality, the body, truth – the importance given to the last-mentioned concept reflecting a political stance nowadays. At a time when so-called “independent” art venues are worrying about their future, the endless reworking of the very reasons they exist (from symposia to petitions) involves pooling their practices and other objective factors. On the phone Olivier told me that it would be better not to rewrite the myth. As I see it, there will always be something mysterious in what art makes us do without our standing to gain anything from it. In this regard then, we must once and for all cancel the bourgeois myth of a group of artists and art lovers building a gallery in order to fill their spare time. The project has always rested on gig workers and freelance or artist volunteers for whom time invested always means less money in their pockets at the end of the month. This is why the words below are intended as a faithful rendering of the story I was told over the phone.

“It all starts with the venue.” In this case, an unoccupied apartment on the ground floor of the public housing block where Olivier Vadrot lived. The architecture student negotiated a free lease and took over the place as a rehearsal studio with Pluzdank, the theater company founded by Gwenaël Morin. With Lionel Mazelaygue, another friend from school, the three young people lived out their passion for art, crisscrossing the region and neighboring Switzerland by car. Whereas work on the

new planned neighborhood called Cité internationale was nearing completion, Lyon was proving a bit slow compared with the wild years seen in the programing at Elac (the Contemporary Art Space of Lyon) and the Musée d'art contemporain of the late 1980s. Like other artists who were around back then, Vadrot described to me the shock that was the 1988 show "La couleur seule, l'expérience du monochrome" (Color Alone, the Experience of Monochrome), which included neon works by Dan Flavin, who had had an exhibition the year before (and would be, just for the period 1989-1992, followed by Robert Barry, Claudio Parmiggiani, Larry Bell, Louise Bourgeois, John Baldessari, and James Turrell). On the cusp of the 2000s under the influence of the "School of Grenoble,"[1] the trio of young enthusiasts were in search of exhibitions as experience and experiment, even at the risk of putting in hours on the road, which was typical for art lovers of the time. The future of La Salle de bains suddenly starting to come together when Lionel returned all excited from a Laurent Pariente show at the Le Creux de l'enfer art center.[2] The total installation transfigured the space of the former cutlery factory in a maze of plasterboard walls that were blurred by the chalky substance coating them. The three immediately took off, bound for Thiers to try to convince the artist to do a replay of his installation but in 30 m^2. It was to be their first "yes" with its accompanying adrenaline rush. A few months later, Pariente's *Untitled* opened in Lyon in a venue which, 25 years later, everybody in the art world remembers – while on the day it was inaugurated "nobody saw it." Pariente's maze-sculpture was a pretty ambitious production the three novice architects set up with relative ease. This first show proved a revelation that was to alter Lyon's art landscape in a lasting way. The three students had a growing awareness of the tool now in their hands that would allow them to meet artists they admired and put together with the latter exhibitions they would like to see. Impressed by how effective the small team was, DRAC's visual arts adviser Alain Rérat quickly put his trust in them by awarding their venue a substantial grant. The Region and the City followed suit, making it possible to create jobs welcoming the public and handling administrative tasks while leaving funds for both inviting artists and traveling to see new art.

It is hard not to fall into myth when a summary of the years that followed offers such a contrast with the present that we know. There were the new faces – the graphic designers Olivier Huz and Claire Moreux, and soon after the critic and curator Vincent Pécoil – who put a lot into the association with no concrete benefits in return. Programing took a more international and even more original turn with the first exhibitions in France of a number of foreign artists, an approach succeeding art directors tried to follow. The roster of guest artists would eventually boast recognized (or soon to be) names from the French art world – Xavier Veilhan, Delphine Coindet, Thomas Hirschhorn, Mrzyk & Moriceau, Delphine Reist – alongside foreign talents that include Jonathan Monk, Pae White, Wade Guyton, Svetlana Heger, and Olaf Nicolai. The first volume of the gallery's retrospective catalogue bears witness to these visual artists, as does the equally remarkable program put together by Jill Gasparina and Caroline Soyez-Petithomme starting in 2009 at the gallery's new home on rue Burdeau. What that volume fails to recapture is the emulation the shows were able to spark in an art world that was still fairly small and less professional. In those days, art center directors who met with the small La Salle de bains group – showing up at their institution unannounced – during their prospecting trips (to Geneva, Vassivière, Tours, Dijon) were often the founders of the venue, in other words, art lovers who were passionate enough to embark on the adventure of founding an institution. "Everybody turned out," Vadrot told me when he spoke about the show openings in the tiny space in Old Lyon, "including reporters." According to Vadrot, the size of the press review book each year ended up convincing the city council to vote for a grant considered out of proportion to the number of square meters involved. Yet the La Salle de bains phenomenon can be put down to that ideal ratio between a modest surface area, significant financial means, and volunteers who brought with them a high level of expertise and know-how.

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[1] Among the graduates of Grenoble's school of art in the early 1990s, Philippe Parreno, Pierrre Joseph, and Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster developed an approach to the exhibition as a medium in itself that was to leave an indelible mark on the history of art in France.

[2] Laurent Pariente, *L'expérience du vide et le lieu de l'intermédiaire*, 14 December 1997 - 1 March 1998; curated by Laurence Gateau.

In terms of history in light of the “venue” factor, what followed can be read in the exhibition documentation forming the content of the present catalogue as a series of breaks and variations on scale. At the request of the groups funding art activities at La Salle de bains, the association moved to rue Burdeau in 2009 and a bigger and more visible site, one that could host larger crowds and teaching initiatives. The idea was to give Lyon “its rue Louise-Weiss” (the radical experiment undertaken in 1997 by six young gallery owners in Paris) while in the city other collective venues mounted by artists were opening or proving viable, including Le Bleu du Ciel, La BF15, L’attrape-couleurs, Bikini, and Néon, located right where rue Burdeau begins, until its lease was canceled, unfortunately signaling the end of its activities. Like its Parisian model, Lyon’s “gallery street” never did manage to densify. Yet it wasn’t pressure from the real estate sector but the deteriorating state of the building that in 2014 pushed La Salle de bains out of a space belonging to the City, an address that likewise held a number of mythic exhibitions. During its homeless period, La Salle de bains was nevertheless readying a better future for itself. The “extramural” program run by Caroline Soyez-Petithomme made a show of strength by mounting multiple large-scale on-sight installations that young artists from Lyon still bring up in conversations with us to this day. There were the Scottish artist Lucy Skaer’s works on the lowest level of the Gallo-Roman Museum of Lyon-Fourvière (*Sticks and stones*, 2014), or the installation created by the Canadian Steve Bishop, who transformed part of IAC into a 1:1-scale model of a virtual space (*Noclip*, 2015). Caroline envisioned a third chapter for La Salle de bains as a “genuine” art center bearing the Culture Ministry’s seal of approval. Local politics didn’t pan out. In the spring of 2016, sensing that the future director of the space would be a true plural they or would not be at all, she brought together five of her Lyon friends and proposed submitting a new project to the board.

The project title SDB3 was suddenly coming up all the time in our conversations, dominating talk at our parties, bombarding our inboxes. The dossier consisted of an archive and the association’s statutes, nothing more. There was naturally a pile of things that La Salle de bains would eventually have to hurry up and move, but no more venue and of course no more money. Our only legacy was the story of the venue. We could reimagine the future in a radical way. For several months, on the sidelines of meetings in the offices where local politics gets done, Pierre-Olivier Arnaud, Elsa Audouin, Magalie Meunier, Armando Andrade Tudela, and I wrote manifestos and held endless discussions on how to do exhibitions that would make people want to show up as much as a concert does: so maybe we need to do something else? which maybe wouldn’t need a space for showing stuff but just for getting info about where it’s going to take place? why not on the sidewalk opposite? or along another meridien? We went over, one by one, all of the conventions connected with exhibitions that we blamed art venues for imitating, from public outreach to communications. The options that were inspiring us were both straightforward and nervy, like the webcam filming a Post-it continuously at the Point du Jour Theater, headed by Gwenaël at the time. We opted for outdoor advertising but relayed on social media before other cultural or activist info got pasted over our posters. We wondered about the conditions in which we hoped to work with artists and how those conditions could change our relationship to art, and the consequences that that might have on how the art would be perceived.

We still had to find a place, whether it was to serve as an exhibition space or a rear base. Thanks to Elsa, who knew everybody in the neighborhood, we came across a shop to let at 1 rue Louis Vitet, in Lyon’s 1st arrondissement. The rent was very low; we could even share it if the grants didn’t come through; and the space didn’t need work since it had already been a gallery devoted to street art (which, in 2016, sounded like nonsense). It was at this address then that we worked out the three “galleries” format, in other words three iterations that together form one exhibition, a way to extend the space by prolonging time. Such a venue wanted the right conditions for looking at, successively and just as attentively, diverse practices or departures from a reigning style within the same approach without one being a mere anecdote of another or its booster (as it is with publications, performances, or musical projects). The show would be a series of events, or a trio of episodes (with no reruns but always someone around to bring visitors up to speed on what happened earlier), a clearly laid out storyline, or a set of experiments whose meaning is obscure before they play out. What I am sure of is that this format offered both artists and us a stimulating framework for making art. Its main advantage was the fact that our work together did not come to an end at the show opening because there were two more exhibitions to go. It also occasioned a

practical reflection, an invitation to never take as obvious, as something given, the spatial and temporal context in which works of art are made public. All of that, moreover, in a singular space where a mirror, platform, and door (the latter added to accommodate a sculpture by Koenraad Dedobbeleer and replaced by a model made of steel that is itself a work of art left behind by Sophie Nys — *Niels [Belgisch rechts trekken]*, 2021), by dint of the time spent around them, have gone from décor to characters in their own right.

Taking over a space that was neither optimal for holding exhibitions nor adapted to hosting a large number of visitors wasn't the project; rather, it represented a limited field of possibilities that was quickly converted into one of opportunities to enter other contexts and discover new people and things. It began with Fabienne Audéoud, who wanted to include in her show (*Le bien*, 2016-2017) a performance-lecture that humorously analyzed the influence neoliberal semantics has had on the common idiom of contemporary art. We proposed relocating the audience to a corporate seminar room in the Ibis Hotel at the Perrach train station. The following month, Paul Elliman created a situation between La Salle de bains and the Billiards Academy on the other side of the street. That historic venue was now the scene of an intergenerational mobilization to protest its closing for the benefit of a major renovation project "bringing together culture and community" (which has yet to rise from its unshakable foundations on the bedrock of promises). Starting in 2017, we pursued, with Pierre-Olivier Arnaud, a program that focused on experiencing the modalities of exhibitions. The invited artists have taken us at our word when we suggested that "the artwork could occur elsewhere."[3] I am thinking of Florence Jung's project — the principle behind which rejects any image being included in this book – where the exhibition space was reduced to a 4 m^2 office in which a deliberately underinformed receptionist sent visitors throughout the city in quest of an artwork while any actual encounter with the piece was postponed each time. I am also thinking of Linus Bill + Adrien Horni, who proposed using part of our production budget to charter a bus and transport La Salle de bains visitors to the Canton of Bern to see a different art show that would stand in for "Gallery 2," celebrate together this one-day annexation, then take a dip in a lake and back home to Lyon. When I think about it, I tell myself that in just a few years that space of freedom has already shrunk, even if I doubt these whimsical inventions are known to the decision makers arguing for a reduction in the funds granted because "it always looks closed."

The aims that got jotted down on a napkin in 2016 include staying open 24/7 and other Fluxus ideas we are secretly hooked on. This yielded, for example, never-ending exhibitions that are like a record you can replay (Paul Elliman, *The Heralds — un appel et peut-être une réponse*, 2019); an image silkscreened on a cotton bag that can still be seen around town telling us from the occasional shoulder to keep on looking (Camila Oliveira Fairclough, *Everybody's looking for something*, 2019); and pieces of an installation dispersed to the homes of willing visitors to the show (Matthew Burbidge, *The Gaps in my Knowledge II*, 2020). In my mind, the Louis Vitet period is defined by the condensing of its space-time. The 90 dates marked on the calendar between 2017 and 2024 correspond to exhibitions, performances, and concerts, of course, but the last two years have also seen more and more Q&As, discussions, moments of experimentation. The increasing pace indicates the heightened need to join with others to live together in these space-time moments of freedom – if we all could squeeze in a bit, thank you.[4] With our invited artists, we were always playing with scale to create trompe-l'oeil effects, push walls this way and that, poke holes in the ceiling, gain exhibition space by commandeering the stockroom (having made the mistake of telling Owen Piper that we had begun renting storage space elsewhere), not show a mere selection but "all of the books" done by Erik van der Weijde, suggest underground spaces with miniatures only to transpose them to a white cube of colossal dimensions (Mathis Altmann, *Individuality*, 2023), fit four projects into one after announcing to the artists that we were ending the three-gallery program for financial reasons (Corentin Canesson, *Next One Is Real*, 2024), and set

[3] The expression is a reference to Jean-Marc Poinsot, *Quand l'œuvre a lieu : l'art exposé et ses récits autorisés*, Geneva, Musée d'art modern et contemporain; Villeurbanne, Institut d'art contemporain, 1999, and more generally our shared interest vis-à-vis the history of exhibitions.

[4] All of this activity was made possible thanks to the commitment of the people who do the coordinating of an art show's many working parts, namely Leïla Couradin, Éloïse Labie, Chloé Chambelland, and Agathe Chevallier. We are extremely grateful for their hard work.

up a nighttime residency inspired by the exhibition on view during the day (the decolonial debrief in Lucas Erin's show *Mawon Ciel*, 2024).

The artisans of this book hope that it makes known the state of mind in which things were done – very rigorously, that is, and a bit offhandedly, wherever it seemed important to make use of one or the other respectively. I hope it manages to get across, too, the joy and a strong belief in the possibilities that art and sharing art hold. But if the mood the book gives off is a bit more somber, that's because it is in synch with the present day. Since the early 2000s, we have been reading over and over that "alternative" venues no longer have anything that justifies that description, given how thoroughly they have become spaces for legitimating art and artists, as effective and codified as those located in the institutional and commercial system. It is a phenomenon, moreover, that has been accelerated by digital communications. People active in contemporary art recall like a distant memory their militant beginnings as if that start had been dissed by the generations coming after. Yet for several years now there have been many of us devoted volunteer "art workers" living our commitment as a form of activism. For we not only have to deal with tough times when it comes to budgets. We have to defend ideas every day. For example, we defend the idea that economic elitism is more responsible for economic exclusion than intellectuals are. Consequently, cultural industries and the entertainment market do not rhyme with democratization of art and knowledge. An association is a democratic invention created to improve the lives of citizens. And finally, in that sense, public monies disbursed to an association are not a favor. We also defend the idea according to which it is important that works of art be produced with the least number of commercial, communicational, or ideological constraints since we consider it likely that such works will be a part of the heritage we all share, and in doing that we are working for the future.

It is possible that this second volume of the catalogue reflects the image of a more "alternative" venue than the first. It's not a style but a positioning of circumstance that has led to our joining with partners like Le Sonic, L'Amicale du futur, monopole, and Le Lavoir public[5] rather than art institutions. The multiple allusions to a critique of neoliberal logics and the policies promoting them – already present in the exhibitions mounted by Jill Gasparina and Caroline Soyez-Petithomme – proved more aware. In this regard, current events caught up with us when Mathis Altmann's neon sign *wewon'twork* was on view in the spring of 2023, the height of the demonstrations against the proposed reforms to the national pension system. The fact that we never signed anything while working to make as few compromises as possible I see as a stance taken against the promotional tactics that are preferred nowadays. I think that remains the thing that best defines the specificity of the work done in venues that are called "alternative" rightly or wrongly. Indeed it's pointless to define them over against the market and institutions generally. The economic situation of the majority of public cultural venues is even less enviable while their ability to reject compromises is weaker.

I no longer can tell what the fear of institutionally selling out means; rather, I would like institutions to be inspired by our freedom to question the context in order to protect the priority of the art. This gets back to what Éric Troncy wrote in the first catalogue for La Salle de bains. In it he proposed replacing the adjective "alternative" by the concept of "an alternative" to situations that are dependent on measurable (as in accounting and counting up) results and press feedback, offering artists and audiences the chance to reconnect with art as something simple and human.[6] In truth, it's not so simple; less and less so. Whereas ten years ago Éric spoke about a form of resistance, several associative organizations that have held on over the years are now talking about survival. Nothing is forcing them to survive so nothing is condemning them to internalize assessment grids covering their actions. The other day one of my friends who heads an art center pointed out to me

[5] Le Sonic, a club famous for its program of rock music, is located on a barge moored on the right bank of the Saône. L'Amicale du futur is a socially conscious collective bar-restaurant where rallies are held around objects of class struggle. The studio space and collective exhibition venue monopole was founded by graduates of Lyon's École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts who are interested in the various movements fighting for artists' rights. Le Lavoir public or La Voir au Public is a venue devoted to live performance and music supported by a range of associations; its program and way of working reflect a deep commitment to ending discrimination in whatever form it takes.

[6] See Éric Troncy, *La Salle de bains depuis 1999*, p. 210.

that when there are no more venues, there will still be artists, “It’ll go on! We’ll just have to find another job.” La Salle de bains, consisting of a majority of volunteers, recently had an interesting experience. It put everything on hold, interrupted its program of exhibitions to bring together staff, the people who come out for its events, and actors in the field of art, all these individuals to think together out loud about what is happening to us and what we might expect ahead.[7] Along with the thoughts participants shared, which continue to work on us, our art space received during this time many expressions of appreciation recognizing what we do. One of these was a handwritten letter that was slipped under the door and has since been pinned up on a wall in the storage area at 1 rue Louis Vitet. It is signed by a student and ends this way, “For me, La Salle de bains is something necessary.” That is well worth any review in the press.

Julie Portier

Translation : John O’Toole

[7] *Comment ça va ?*, three public forums at La Salle de bains, June, 2023.