

2013

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Recommended Citation

O'Neill, Rosemary. "À Propos de Nice: Mapping a Regional / International Phenomenon for a National Stage." *Artl@s Bulletin* 2, no. 1 (2013): Article 6.

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À Propos de Nice: Mapping a Regional / International Phenomenon for a National Stage

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Abstract

This paper will examine the exhibition *À propos de Nice* catalogue (Centre Georges Pompidou, 1977) as a model of intertwining cords of regional, national, international and ethnic links in relation to the distinctive artistic practices in the region, which are firmly linked to geography and history of place. Thirty-five years after this publication, the choice of maps appears prescient on the part of Ben Vautier. With the locale's strong affiliation with Mediterranean culture, a history of cultural diversity, and a legacy of international tourism, the French Riviera is an exemplary case study of the complexities of defining this cultural space in relation to current national, transnational, and global models.

Résumé

Cet article étudie le catalogue de l'exposition *À propos de Nice* (Centre Georges Pompidou, 1977), dont Ben Vautier a notamment dessiné la couverture, comme un modèle d'entrelacs des liens régionaux, nationaux, internationaux et ethniques, en relation avec la production spécifique de la région Alpes-Maritimes fermement associée à sa géographie et son histoire. Trente-cinq ans après la publication, le choix des cartes par Ben paraît visionnaire. L'affiliation locale à la culture méditerranéenne, la diversité de l'histoire culturelle et l'héritage du tourisme international de la Riviera française en font un cas d'étude de la complexité à définir un espace culturel avec les modèles nationaux, transnationaux et globaux actuels.

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À propos de Nice was scheduled as the inaugural exhibition at the Musée National d'Art Moderne at the Centre Georges Pompidou in 1977. The much discussed building by the Italian-British architectural team of Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers with its external orientation and out of scale dimensions in relation to the Marais area on which it imposed itself presented a significant cultural challenge in post 1960s Paris. Following five years after the controversial exhibition "Douze Ans de l'Art Contemporain en France" held at the Grand Palais in 1972, when tensions between artists, critics, and a state appointed team of curators resulted in a highly politicized event and police intervention at the exhibition vernissage,⁸¹ the nearly five years that intervened before the inauguration of Centre Georges Pompidou can be characterized as one of politicized artists manifesting continued distrust of the state hand in shaping the critical reception of French contemporary art through government sanctioned exhibitions. Ben (as he is known) participated in the Grand Palais exhibition having just two months earlier placed one of his well-known *écritures* on the site of the future Centre Pompidou indicating that it was Ben, who held the first exhibition at the site as an independent intervention dated March 2, 1972 (Fig.1). So the choice by the Swedish curator Pontus Hulten, appointed founding director of the Musée National d'Art Moderne at the Centre Pompidou, to select Ben known as an advocate of regional cultures to design and write the catalogue detailing artistic activity along the French Riviera might suggest that this new national institution dedicated to modern and contemporary art signaled a declaration of support for a new approach to state run culture open to decentralization, a new-found commitment to diverse regional identities within France, and a belated acknowledgment of the local and international reputations of artists who emerged as a force along Côte d'Azur in the postwar era. This exhibition was nearly overshadowed by an emphasis on the building's architecture as

⁸¹ Reprinted in *Chroniques Niçoises: Genèse d'un Musée* (Nice: Musée d'Art Moderne et d'Art Contemporain de Nice; Direction des Musées de Nice Action Culturelle Municipale, 1991), 440.

statement of cultural transparency leaving the critical focus on the inaugural exhibition on the French Riviera to be considered as an academic exercise lacking the performative energies that characterized Nice in the 1960s⁸² or positioning the works as original, if not eccentric, in relation to their Parisian counterparts.⁸³ This paper will consider how Ben and Hulten conceived this exhibition, and how this new and controversial national institution positioned itself within a culturally diverse France and internationally by organizing *À Propos de Nice* as its opening exhibition statement.



Fig.1

Intervention by Ben Vautier at the site of the future Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, March 2, 1972.
Courtesy of the artist.

According to Hulten in the catalogue, the exhibition aimed to present a "new theoretical confrontation," which probes the relationship between Niçois contemporary artists and regional initiatives to revive a distinctive Mediterranean culture within the French nation.⁸⁴ The selection of the Côte d'Azur appears strategic given the region's status as a cultural center, its legacy as an international tourist destination especially appealing to Americans, its strong geographic

⁸² Jérôme Bindé, "Les Montparnos Fleurissent à Nice, mais ils exposent à Paris, au Centre Georges Pompidou, *Le Matin de Paris* (March 7, 1977), reprinted in *Chroniques Niçoises: Genèse d'un Musée, tome II* (Nice: Musée d'Art Moderne et d'Art Contemporain de Nice; Direction des Musées de Nice Action Culturelle Municipale, 2001), 75-76.

⁸³ Patrick de Haas, *Art Press International*, no. 7 (May 1977) reprinted in *Chroniques Niçoises: Genèse d'un Musée, tome II* (Nice: Musée d'Art Moderne et d'Art Contemporain de Nice; Direction des Musées de Nice Action Culturelle Municipale, 2001), 77.

⁸⁴ Pontus Hulten, "Préface," *À Propos de Nice* (Paris: Musée d'Art Moderne, 1977), 5.

reinforced the relationship between youth, imagination, and privileged geography, qualities that transformed the French Riviera's earlier association with retirement and retreat into a paradise for the young, fashionable, creative, and mobile "generation 60." Ben's central role as promoter of Niçois artists since the late 1950s, positioned him as a subjective insider, but not an uncritical one. And he questioned the institution's motives for selecting Nice writing: is it "to show what is happening outside of Paris or to reinforce the notion that little is happening beyond the capital?"⁹²

The title of the exhibition, *À propos de Nice* averted the debated issue of an identifiable "École de Nice," a perceived challenge to a weakened "École de Paris" already confronted by postwar American artistic hegemony during the same period. It also avoided sanctioning the contested umbrella designation for diverse artists from the Côte d'Azur, who were since associated with national and international groups: the Paris-centered and internationally regarded Nouveaux Réalistes (Yves Klein, Arman, Martial Raysse), international Fluxus with outlets in Nice and Villefranche, a region designation "Fluxus South" by New York based Fluxus promoter/designer George Macuinas, and artists in the circle of Claude Viallat at École des Arts Décoratif de Nice, soon known in relation to the Nice-Paris group Support-Surfaces. Instead, with this title, Ben evoked the landmark film, *À propos de Nice*, an innovative 1929 documentary essay realized by Jean Vigo on the subject of the region's tourist development, which visually critiqued the collisions of the region's inhabitants with cosmopolitan tourists and the incongruities of cultural difference, economic disparity, ethnic segregation, and theatricality, if not outright parody, of this international yet exceedingly local setting.

Norbert Hillaire has recently described the region as a site of passage, a cross road of cultures, which he characterized as a place of cultural unity and pluralism. Taking a socio-geographic perspective,

he credits tourism as the transformational dynamic that made a provincial region into a cosmopolitan and inter-cultural site.⁹³ Hillaire used the metaphor of wave and crest to illustrate the invention of the Côte d'Azur as a space where history and fashion intersect revealing "multiple temporalities."⁹⁴ He identified the postwar era as one where the region's protracted history synched with a concentrated moment of contemporary artistic activity producing a highpoint of pluralistic visual arts production.

In Ben's essay and chronology, his emphasized conceptual links among individual artists whose works manifest pluralist tendencies and how place factored into mitigating the artists' group affiliations through individual collaborations and local exhibitions enabling exchanges and cross-fertilization of ideas. The commonality Ben identified among this diverse group of thirty-plus artists was the aim to tackle "the real" in relation to the radical changes in postwar society, the material strategies for capturing a changed actuality, the importance of geographic and social means of appropriation, and performance interventions. This conceptual framework linked varied artistic trends and reinforced the importance of place. Ben outlined nearly a dozen subsets of artistic directions related to Nouveau Réalisme, Fluxus, and Supports-Surfaces, which he describes as having "repercussions on the national and international map." As a result of geographic rapport and collaborative tendencies, Nice is profiled as a place of artistic liberation and experimental autonomy where artists of diverse backgrounds, and even nationalities, engaged freely with the environment and its distinct character.

Most obviously, the Nouveaux Réalistes' appropriation of a new postwar reality most directly upheld the region's "place-myth"⁹⁵ in relation to structuring a new vision of classical space (Klein), responding to the artifacts of

⁹² Ben Vautier, "Prises de position par rapport au renouveau de la culture Occitane," *À Propos de Nice* (Paris: Musée d'Art Moderne, 1977), 39.

⁹³ Norbert Hillaire, *La Côte d'Azur après la Modernité* (Nice: Les Editions Ovadia, 2010), 18.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁹⁵ Rob Shields, *Places on the Margin: Alternative Geographies of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1991), 46-47.

historical memory (Arman), and appropriating the experiences of contemporary stereotypes of beach culture (Raysse). The First Festival of Nouveau Réalisme of July 1961 demonstrated ways to precipitate “hygiene of vision,” or the direct experience of contemporary reality without the need for artistic transcription.⁹⁶ This performance event held on the eve of Bastille Day evoked a mock-revolutionary turn away from the École de Paris and painting as a vehicle of expression. In keeping with a modernist historical dynamic, Ben described its “progressive denouement,” a fall into a decorative style, losing its critical provocation yet increasing its market recognition and the renown of the artists beyond the region.

Ben was linchpin of Fluxus in the region, and he took the readymade to an extreme through conceptual appropriation of life itself as art, inventoried by the artist from the most banal gesture to the grandiose signature of the Mediterranean horizon enacted as interventions often staged on and around the famed Promenade des Anglais, the beachfront walkway most often populated by summer tourists. Influenced by Marcel Duchamp and John Cage, Ben and Fluxus artists George Brecht and Robert Filliou, founders and operators of the art store La Cédille qui Sourit in Villefranche, situating Nice as a stop for New York and European artists, while Fluxus editions, exhibitions, and performance events were planned there for export. Locally, it was Ben’s promotional skills, Filliou’s interest in substituting artistic training with amateurism, and Brecht’s Cage-inspired musings on art as philosophical inquiry, which centered their social encounters in local cafes and other public venues.

In the catalogue section cited as “Les moments de la création à Nice”, Ben described how artists “located themselves” within the café culture of Nice. He devoted a full page to list and described key bistros that were regular meeting places. These cafés would often provide spaces for

cultural gatherings, as was the case with Le Provençe and Le Ballon d’Alsace where historian and art critic Jacques Lepage founded Le Club des Jeunes, an interdisciplinary association of writers, artists and musicians.⁹⁷ While Le Café de Turin was identified as the “most Occitan,” where a local and international cohort of artists associated with Fluxus regularly met.

Lepage’s contribution to the 1977 catalogue, “Creativity in Nice” began with a provocative question, “Isn’t Nice a cosmopolitan city, a bourgeois city, and colonial city par excellent?” Raising the complexity of the region’s status having been part of the House of Savoy until 1860 when it was annexed to France, its status as a destination for British and Russian aristocracy, and its cosmopolitanism, which grew over the course of the twentieth century, he notes that Nice is the only city outside of Paris with a list of prestigious museums dedicated to giants of French modernism, while “particularisms are written on the walls like an indigenous language.” He contends that Nice became a catalyst for artistic energy across the Occitan region of the Mediterranean, which resulted in a cultural turn toward provincial autonomy and a denunciation of the Parisian cultural system and art market. Instead, the dissemination of artists’ works occurred in local festivals and other venues that attest to “a sense of place.”⁹⁸

The most regionally connected artists were those associated in Claude Viallat’s circle at the École des Arts Décoratifs. Viallat brought pedagogical change to this staid academy (from which he was removed), and took up painting not in relation to stylistic innovation, despite its indebtedness to American formalist painting, but instead as a material and structure that was historically given. In the context of deconstruction theory and the discontent of the May’68 era, the dismantling of painting as a visual paradigm resulted in an

⁹⁶ Pierre Restany, “Festival of Nouveau Realism: Arman, César, Dufrêne, Hains, Klein, Martial Raysse, Rotella, Niki de Saint-Phalle, Speorri, Tinguely, Villeglé,” dated Paris, July 1961 (Nice: Galerie Muratore, July – September 1961). Arman Archives, New York.

⁹⁷ Arman (as quoted in *À propos de Nice*, 13) recalled discussing the relationship between ethnography and the history of Jazz. Nice was and remains an important venue for American Jazz. The historical Palais Lascaris, dedicated to music in the region, devotes a gallery space to Louis Armstrong and the legacy of American jazz in the region beginning in the aftermath of World War II.

⁹⁸ Jacques Lepage, “La créativité à Nice,” in *À Propos de Nice* (Paris: Musée d’Art Moderne, 1977), 11.

analytic approach to givens such as a recto/verso format and the artifice of logo-centric images in favor of working with and through materials often allowing the Mediterranean environment (sun, rain, wind, etc.) to impact stained or painted surfaces. The exhibition *Rencontres de Coaraze* (Coaraze Encounter) organized by Viallat and Lepage in July 1969 was precedent setting for an ad-hoc affiliation of artists. Lepage maintained that this was the first plein-air exhibition of the later named group Supports-Surfaces – “the village was entirely occupied by the works.”⁹⁹ Artists Daniel Dezeuze, Bernard Pagès, Patrick Saytour and Viallat staged their works throughout this provincial hamlet, one of thirteen locations along the ‘Route of Perched Villages’ on the outskirts of Nice, demonstrating how these presentations of their research on materials, forms, color and use of visual repetition produced sites of artistic and social exchange in relation to temporality and history. They aimed to challenge notions of artistic progress as an evolutionary and linear dynamic through use of repetitive surface markings and structural reversions that manifest diverse pictorial enunciations.¹⁰⁰ The following summer twelve ephemeral installations titled *Intérieur/Extérieur* were installed across the Mediterranean. Prioritizing mobility, systematic analysis and change in relation to repetition, the situation of works within diverse geographic and community spaces were positioned not as artworks but as open signs in relation to sites over the course of their temporal display. Artist Patrick Saytour listed incidents attesting to the expansion of meanings and material functions the works produced: children were disappointment when works used for a game were removed from a community square, volleyball players used works strung between trees for an impromptu game, a father and son re-arranged of works left behind into an obstacle course, and archeologists used canvases to cover digs.¹⁰¹ Saytour’s listing of these incidents testifies to the artists’ aim to imagine

how their installations could function within broader contexts, and to their ambitions for new concepts and practices within expansive geographic spaces and small communities. This exhibition of Mediterranean-based artists constituted a prelude to the formal organization of the Nice-Paris group Support-Surfaces, launched at ARC 1, the Musée national d’art moderne’s initiative to foster a space for artistic debate and contestation within the cultural institution and to test the museum’s limitations in relation to contemporary practices.

Seven years later, Ben’s initiated a debate in this catalogue about relationships which may exist between contemporary art and the revival of Occitan culture associated with that territory, its relevance for the artists, and unforeseen problems associated with recuperating an Occitan identity, one that crossed national borders along the Mediterranean from Italy to Spain. The artists’ responses were not uniformly positive. Artists in support of Occitan cultural revival most often cited multi-generational links to the province, use of Occitan language in family and social settings, economic disparity between provincial culture activities in contrast with Paris, and a legacy of linguistic imperialism in regional education. In Ben’s view expressed in this catalogue, regional autonomy was a necessary step to correct a sense of cultural inferiority outside of Paris, and he used the exhibition to make the case that regional culture is in fact a patrimony issue.

But several artists voiced concerns about this regional initiative citing the possibilities of rising xenophobia, and concerns with culture regression or regional separation. Arman, who had re-located to New York over a decade earlier, was most articulate in outlining these concerns. Other artists viewed these revivalist efforts as merely archeological exercises, if not insignificant altogether, noting that other means can be used to address the failures of French decentralization policies.

The exhibition catalogue also includes a map drafted by François Fontan showing the ethno-

⁹⁹ Jacques Lepage, as quoted in *Chroniques Niçoises*, 392.

¹⁰⁰ Daniel Dezeuze, “Extraits de ‘Coaraze 69’ ou la question des ‘lieux culturels,’” in Jean-Marc Poinot, *Supports Surfaces* (Paris: Limage 2, 1983), 44.

¹⁰¹ Patrick Saytour, “L’expérience consistait... Extrait du catalogue ‘Été 70,’” in Poinot, *Supports Surfaces*, 64-65.

linguistic organization of Europe (Fig.3), as well as several photographs of graffiti, most with the identifying pays d' "OC" mark (Fig.4). Despite the lack of consensus among artists concerning their affiliation with Occitan culture, Ben argued that the contemporary model of contemporary art was exclusionary and failed to account for the marginalization of certain geographic areas and he questioned the very notion of the contemporaneity insisting that the exclusion of traditional cultures diminished cultural richness, artificially limited, and screened contemporary artistic production to fit an evolutionary and homogenizing cultural drive.¹⁰²



Fig.3

François Fontan, *Map of European Ethnic Cultures*, Courtesy of Ben Vautier.

Nearly a decade prior to the exhibition *À Propos de Nice*, Fontan published *La Nation Occitane: ses frontières, ses régions* (1969). Ben would follow Fontan's program of introducing a platform based on a program of cultural pluralism and the need for socio-political unification. Fontan defined his vision in terms of an "international of ethnicities" situated within the context of the nation state.¹⁰³ A

¹⁰² Ben later wrote: "Ethnicism states the right of difference for all, the right to a sense of contemporaneity for all." Ben, *pour ou contre : une retrospective*, exhibition catalogue, Marseille: MAC Galeries Contemporaines des Musées de Marseille, July 14 - October 1, 1995, 60.

¹⁰³ François Fontan, *La Nation Occitane: ses frontières, ses régions* (Bagnols-sur-Cèze: Librairie occitane, 1969), 2.

critical aspect of his program was support for linguistic diversity, the "synthetic index of a nation," as well as the establishment of transnational regional networks based on autonomous federations of ethnicities.¹⁰⁴ Specific to Occitan culture, he defined in broad strokes the characteristics of a population spanning the Mediterranean from Italy to Catalonia as manifesting sociability and a spirit of independence, qualities that parallel Ben's conception of the art scene along the Côte d'Azur.



Fig.4

Graffiti, photograph. Photographer unidentified.

À propos de Nice was exhibited along with a second exhibition devoted to the works of Marcel Duchamp, which included key works from the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Hulten explained that the exhibition was a component of a two-year master plan to stage "two big ambitious thematic shows – *Paris/New York* and *Paris/Moscow*."¹⁰⁵ Noting that it was important to dedicate an exhibition to Duchamp since he was well known in New York but not in Paris – because "he left the country"¹⁰⁶ – Jean Clair writes in the catalogue that Duchamp's oeuvre is a major 20th-century contribution, which has been acknowledged in the U.S. but barely known in France.¹⁰⁷ While the director and curator are certainly understating Duchamp's renown in France, they aimed to re-introduce Duchamp as an

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Pontus Hulten, interview with Elizabeth Baker, "Beaubourg Preview," *Art in America*, January-February 1977, 100.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁰⁷ Jean Clair, *Marcel Duchamp*, exhibition catalogue (Paris: Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, January – May 1977), ix.

international French artist who challenged “monocular vision” and he produced a body of works that situated painting as an intellectual practice in relation to other disciplines. By pairing the Duchamp exhibition with *À propos de Nice*, Hulten enabled connections to be made between Duchamp and Nouveaux Réalisme and the readymade; Fluxus and concepts of attitude, comportment, and identity; and Supports-Surfaces with its challenge to monocular vision through dismantling painting as a logo-centric carrier of representations.

Hulten describes the Musée National d'Art Moderne as “open,” and as director, he “wanted to use the experience of the '60s – what one learned in those years”¹⁰⁸ to transform the museum into a critical space. Pierre Schneider's description of the Beaubourg as a “grand cultural surface” dedicated to contemporary art is indicative of a perceived need to re-think the museum's mission, and to acknowledge artists' lingering hostility toward cultural institutions in the post-'68 period.¹⁰⁹ Even more importantly, Schneider's description suggests that France now sees itself as a more complex, but still unified force open to internationalism (*Marcel Duchamp*) and the regionalism (*À propos de Nice*). The Musée d'Art Moderne reasserted Paris' claim as the center of contemporary art and the European art market in relation to an international axis.¹¹⁰ Instead of resisting the market, Paris wanted to expand its role in the market, and the state sponsorship of FIAC [International Fair of Contemporary Art] in 1976 just two months before the inauguration of the Centre Pompidou complex, made clear its intent to intervene when the Minister of Culture opened up the Grand Palais to this commercial art fair. The advertising acknowledged the preeminent role of New York over the previous thirty-year period, but also optimistically saw an opportunity given “the rediscovery of artists of quality who had been overlooked during the period of “American explosion,” and those who

had successfully “assimilated the American lesson.”¹¹¹ While Paris in the 1960s resisted the internationalism of the art market and the expanding roles of galleries and museums, the autonomy and entrepreneurialism of artists in Nice connected them with provincial culture and a cultural network that was international, especially with New York and Los Angeles.

On the occasion of the 1991 inauguration of the Musée d'Art Moderne et d'Art Contemporain in Nice, director Claude Fournet described the city as the model of cultural and historical pastiche, its success linked to its geographic beauty and its attraction to artists and tourists.¹¹² As a model of future cities of leisure and culture, Nice emerged from the 1960s having shaped a distinctive art scene, which captured the complexities and directions of a rapidly changing historical moment. Ben's emphasis on performance, film and photography, and installations are today's mediums of choice on the global art circuit. Yet, artistic decentralization and geographic autonomy have remained elusive goals and the generation of new localities remains subject to networks operating from within global cultural capitals. As the 2009 exhibition *Terre Natale* (Native Land) at the Fondation Cartier demonstrated, autonomous regional cultures have all but succumbed to delocalization, and one example highlighted in this exhibition was the decline of Occitan language and culture along the Mediterranean coast.¹¹³ Ben's choice of a map for the exhibition cover was discerning. *À propos de Nice* framed a thirty-year chapter in French contemporary art, and with it a history of confronting a capital re-asserting itself as “a central station of decentralization,” the very model of Malraux's cultural policy.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 54.

¹¹² Fournet, “Chroniques Niçoises: Genèse d'un Musée,” *Chroniques Niçoises: Genèse d'un Musée* (Nice: Musée d'Art Moderne et d'Art Contemporain de Nice; Direction des Musées de Nice Action Culturelle Municipale, 1991), 15.

¹¹³ Raymond Depardon and Paul Virilio, *Native Land – Stop Eject* (Paris: Fondation Cartier, 2008), 8-9.

¹⁰⁸ Hulten, “*Beaubourg Preview*,” 100.

¹⁰⁹ Pierre Schneider, as quoted in Marmer, “Waiting for Gloire: Beaubourg Opens in Paris,” 53.

¹¹⁰ Marmer, “Waiting for Gloire: Beaubourg Opens in Paris,” 53.