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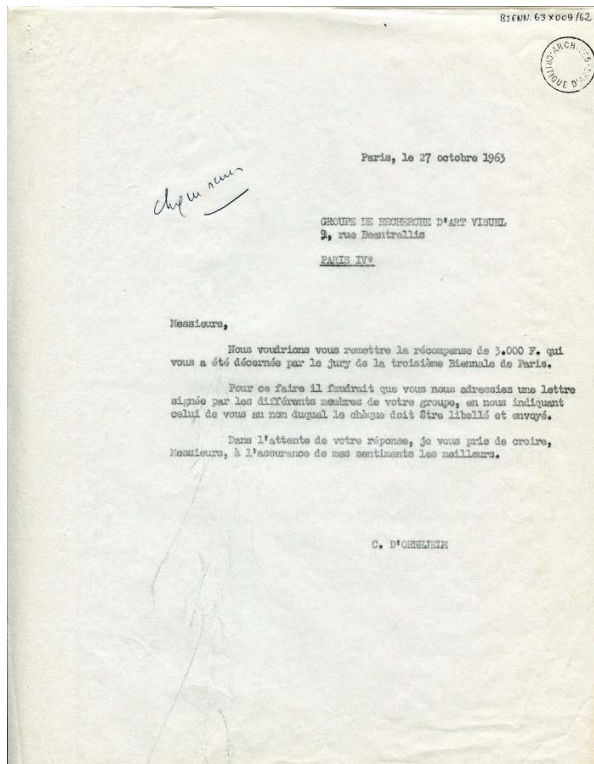
Translation : Simon Pleasance

EDITOR'S NOTE

Translated from the French by Simon Pleasance

- 1 Fifty years after the production of the *Labyrinth*, the GRAV's first collective work, for the Third Paris Biennale (28 September-3 November 1963), going back over historical documents helps us to re-situate the specific context of one of the most emblematic collective works of the 1960s in France.

Letter from the Biennale de Paris to the GRAV, 27 october 1963, Biennale de Paris Collection – Archives de la critique d'art



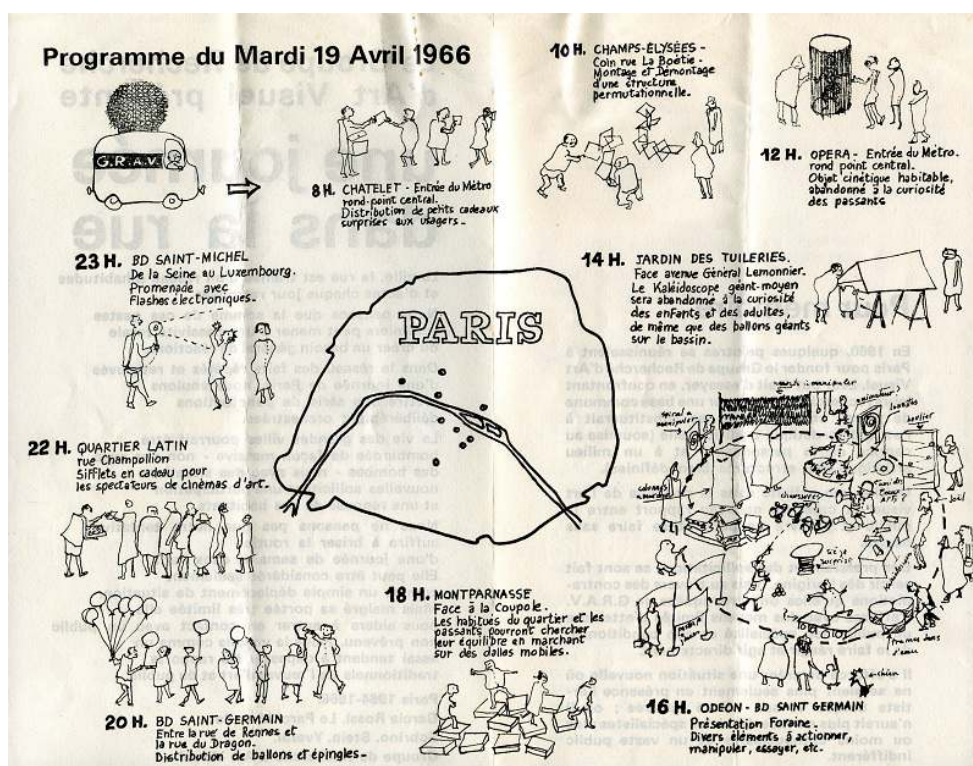
- 2 As is illustrated by the reconstruction of this group's same *Labyrinth* in the exhibition *Dynamo : un siècle de lumière et de mouvement dans l'art 1913-2013* (Grand Palais, 10 April-22 July 2013), the right circumstances are today convened to do justice to an artwork which marked its day. On view in the Biennale section "Travaux d'équipe/Team Works", and awarded first prize for the section,² the piece is formed by a set of "seven successive cells" which are "altogether experimental", aimed at subjecting the public to a series of perceptive, physical and participatory stimulations. In a short note produced by the GRAV, we can read about the degree to which the "experimental" nature of the presentation was sought after, "in order to heighten the importance given to audience participation".³ These forms of participation were explained in the Third Biennale catalogue, ranging from a "visual activation" to a "voluntary active participation". It is also underscored in the tract *Assez de mystifications/Enough with Mystification*, which the GRAV handed out during the exhibition: "Our labyrinth is just an initial experiment deliberately aimed at the elimination of the difference existing between the spectator and the work.[...] We want to get the spectator to participate. We want him to be aware of his participation. [...] It is forbidden not to participate. It is forbidden not to touch. It is forbidden not to break".⁴ As attested to by Susana Garcia-Rossi, this idea was displayed at the entrance to the *Labyrinth*, thus: "Entrez - Cassez/Enter - Break".

Games Room © Studio Le Parc



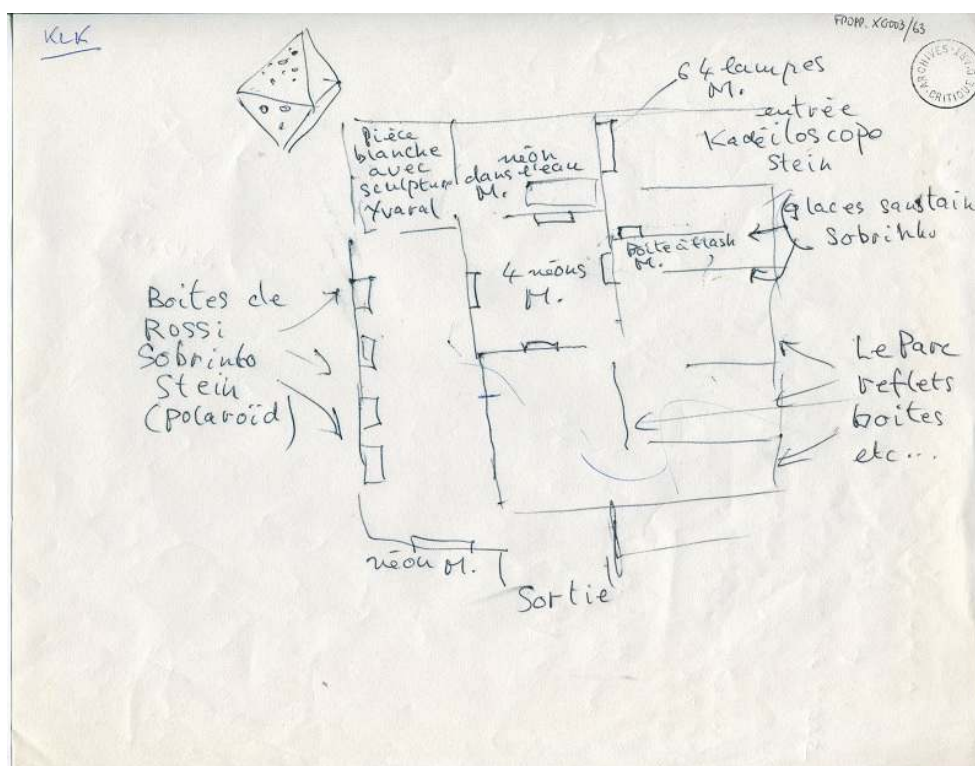
- ³ This audacity is inconceivable these days, so much has spectator behaviour changed, as illustrated by Julio Le Parc's recent show at the Palais de Tokyo (27 February-13 April 2013). In 1963, the group railed against their denigration by the press of the day, which consisted in seeing these works as mere toys,⁵ and duly explained its artistic stance. Participation is not, in the end of the day, a form of entertainment, but should permit the consciousness of a participatory democracy. In a note by Frank Popper⁶ after an exchange with Yvaral, the issue of playful participation was briefly brought up. Yvaral talked of an "ambiguous displacement" which risked "leading to weariness", even though it might also encourage political action. This ambiguity crops up in certain writings which the theoretician Frank Popper published from the mid-1960s on about the group: "the 'creator' is done away with and the work is simply regarded as a pretext meant to provoke the movement and activity of the 'consumer', it has no avowed aesthetic intention".⁷ This, incidentally, is what Julio Le Parc makes a point of saying in a recent interview⁸ when he mentions *Une Journée dans la rue/A Day in the Street* (1966): "We didn't take art into the street, as has been said."⁹ The experimental character¹⁰ of the visual proposition and the structural openness towards the public intervention were also part of the research undertaken by the Nouvelle Tendance movement, in which the GRAV played an active part: "Art, by the way, does not interest as such. For us it is a way of obtaining visual sensation, an apparatus that highlights your gifts. Everyone is gifted, everyone can become a partner. And it will be perfect if the work makes you forget about the picture, the 'work of art'".¹¹ Questioning the status of the work of art was nothing exceptional in the 1960s, and conveyed a desire to be freed from power structures. The GRAV artists were nevertheless aware of the inherent contradiction of wanting to transgress art by means of art.

« Une Journée dans la rue », Tuesday 19 april 1966, Pierre Restany Collection – Archives de la critique d'art



- 4 The exhortation to playfully participate, beyond and away from networks earmarked for contemplation, makes it possible to use the art object as a vehicle. This latter not only ushers in action, but it also endows it with a time-frame. For the GRAV, the use of labyrinths and games rooms permitted an activation involving the whole body, over and above visual stimulation caused by instability. It questioned the position, and even the positioning of everyone in society. It is evident that Situationist theses influenced art movements in Paris and circulated through meetings and exchanges.¹² Groups were not hermetically isolated, and artists rubbed shoulders in cafés, studios and galleries. Keen to put research in the forefront, the GRAV naturally invited artists and critics¹³ to their premises in Rue Beaubert in order to broaden exchanges¹⁴ to other artistic positions.¹⁵
- 5 The GRAV produced some ten labyrinths,¹⁶ circuits and games rooms. The instructions for them were somewhat vague; even if the work produced for the Fourth Paris Biennale (1965) was explicitly titled *Proposition for a Games Rooms/ Active Audience Participation*, the counterpart for the London gallery Indica added a question mark to the proposition.¹⁷ While participation in the exhibition *Kunst Licht Kunst* at Eindhoven in 1966 took the form of a labyrinth of light, a plan of which is conserved in the archives of the project's joint organizer, Frank Popper, participation in the exhibition *Art cinétique à Paris/Lumière et mouvement*, held one year later at the City of Paris Museum of Modern Art, favoured a much less restricting circuit calling for a physical awareness rather than perception.

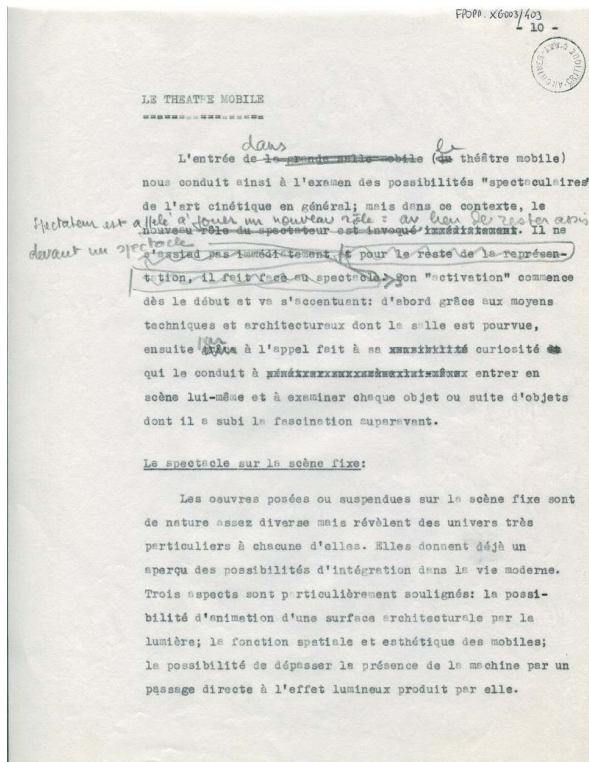
Drawing/plan, of the exhibition *Kunst Licht Kunst*, Eindhoven, 1966, Frank Popper Collection – Archives de la critique d'art



- 6 In his essay on instability, Arnauld Pierre underlined this physical articulation: “As such, this installation is in itself a behaviourist manifesto: it turns behaviour into a fully-fledged perceptive activity, exercised with regard to the features of the space—it being understood that the space which the *Parcours à volume variable* makes it possible to become aware of is a physical and perceptive framework which moves, with the body taking the measure of it, as it walks about.”¹⁸ In 1968, Frank Popper invited the GRAV to take part in another exhibition, organized at the Maison de la Culture in Grenoble, proposing that a collective work be made for the occasion. What is more, the initially suggested sub-title¹⁹ referred to this dimension: *Cinétisme environnemental spectacle: le problème des groupes*. Here, the GRAV devised a project with the Italian gruppo N²⁰ and gruppo T in the ring-shaped revolving theatre that visitors walked round, which would in the end by split into two parts. For GRAV’s share, this circuit was made up of obstacles “to be negotiated (crossed)—rings”, “climbed” and “avoided. Removed”, and handled. The GRAV “wanted the proposition not to be limited to the moving ring, but for the whole space to be invaded in such a way that the notion of spectacle should totally disappear from that situation.”²¹ According to Frank Popper, it was “the disappearance of the work” which mattered to the group, “[...] audience participation must be clearly differentiated—freed—from all conditioning. Urgent: wild participation.”²² The exhibition, which planned a very comprehensive cultural programme, had to close in the end after just a week because of the events of May ’68. The Maison de la Culture was regarded not as a place for citizens, but as a place of political power, Frank Popper recalls. A brochure, in the archives, attests to the argument of the Maison de la Culture’s employees and precisely reflects the climate of the day. The activation which the GRAV was so keen on found a popular echo, which would finally be fatal for the group: “Our last project for making spectators in the street participate and wake up had been programmed for May ’68.[...]”

The competition of 'amateurs' was fatal for us, the programme did not take place, and the group broke up at the end of 1968."²³ (François Morellet).

Typescript with notes « Le Théâtre mobile », by Frank Popper (1/34 pages), Frank Popper Collection – Archives de la critique d'art



NOTES

1. Archives de la critique d'art, Biennale de Paris collection, BIENN.63X009/9
2. Letter from the Biennale organizers to the GRAV of 27 October 1963, Archives de la critique d'art, Biennale de Paris collection, BIENN.63X009/62
3. Note, Archives de la critique d'art, Biennale de Paris collection, BIENN.63X009/8
4. Tract *Assez de mystifications*, October 1963, Archives Julio Le Parc, Cachan, reproduced in the catalogue *GRAV: stratégies de participation, 1960/1968* (7 June-6 September 1998), Grenoble: Magasin, centre national des arts plastiques, 1998, p. 126
5. The tract *Assez de mystifications* was written in particular as a reaction to an article by Pierre Faucheux, found in the Le Parc archives at Cachan. As early as 1955, the press referred to "toys" to typify the works shown in the exhibition *Le Mouvement* at the Galerie Denise René: "[...] at the Galerie Denise René a few artists are exhibiting small works [...] that I would describe as toys rather than works of art..." (Georges Limbour, "Jouets et œuvres d'art", *L'Observateur*, 5 May 1955). This comparison became recurrent and could be read up until May '68, at the GRAV's last major show in France: the exhibition *Cinétisme, spectacle, environnement* "seems a bit like a Luna

Park in the year 2000" (Archives de la critique d'art, Frank Popper collection). The installation proposed by Julio Le Parc at the 1966 Venice Biennale thus had the name *Luna Park*.

6. Archives de la critique d'art, Frank Popper collection, FPOPP.XT141/148

7. Frank Popper, "Mouvement virtuel et mouvement réel dans l'art d'aujourd'hui", catalogue *Art et Mouvement*, exhibition at the Tel Aviv museum, May-June 1965, s.p., Archives Le Parc, Cachan.

8. Interview published in the catalogue *Mouvement, lumière, participation : GRAV 1960-1968*, Rennes : Musée des beaux-arts ; Galerie Art & Essai, 2013.

9. Cf. Anne Tronche, *L'Art des années 1960 : chroniques d'une scène parisienne*, Paris : Hazan 2012, p. 468 : "By going out into the street, the group showed its desire not to reserve artistic events just for specialists, but to engage in a direct and living communication with the public for a transformation of the environment, whose social determination and political content were perceptible".

10. Cf. Molnar, François. Morellet, François. "Pour un art abstrait progressif", *Nove tendencije, galerija suvremene umjetnosti*, August-September 1963, unpublished : "What do we mean by experimental art?"

11. Gerstner, Karl. "Qu'est-ce que la Nouvelle Tendance", in the catalogue *Propositions visuelles du mouvement international/ Nouvelle Tendance*, Paris : Musée des arts décoratifs, April-May 1964, unpublished. (Archives de la critique d'art, Frank Popper collection). In 1964, the GRAV turned the invitation to take part in the exhibition at the Musée des arts décoratifs into a manifesto exhibition of the Nouvelle Tendance movement, in which Julio Le Parc, among others, was very involved. In a letter from Enzo Mari, the Italian groups also protested against "the GRAV's centralizing policy" and spoke out against their "takeover" of the project. (Letter of 22 October 1963, Le Parc archives, Cachan)

12. Interview between the author and François Morellet, published in the catalogue *Mouvement, lumière, participation : GRAV 1960-1968*, op. cit.

13. Frank Popper recalls meeting the group in 1962 in their studio "as a 'research student' looking for information to finish his thesis" and not as a critic. His quest and their exchanges could only have interested the group. Cf. Popper, Frank. *Ecrire sur l'art : de l'art optique à l'art virtuel*, Paris : L'Harmattan, 2007, p. 16-17

14. An exchange also attested to by their involvement in Nouvelle Tendance. In an exchange with the author, Alberto Biasi had already emphasized as much in recalling the participation of Germano Celant at some Nouvelle Tendance meetings. It was in particular Enzo Mari, Julio Le Parc, Matko Mestrovic and Gerhard von Graevenitz who took charge of coordinating the Nouvelle Tendance meetings and exhibitions, forming and the strengthening the GRAV's international network in Europe.

15. Let us mention here just the intrinsic links with the Nouveaux Réalistes artists, especially through Jean Tinguely and Daniel Spoerri. Cf. Popper, Frank. "Les groupes artistiques, la création collective et l'activation du spectateur", in the catalogue *GRAV : stratégies de participation, 1960/1968*, op. cit., p. 8-15

16. Although the Labyrinth produced by the GRAV was not explicitly inspired by the *Dylaby* exhibition, organized in 1962 at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam by Daniel Spoerri and Pontus Hultén, it is easy to note similar concerns to encourage the spectator to participate through a physical involvement as much as a playful encouragement.

17. Frank Popper collection, brochure with a list of works, titled *Propositions pour une salle de jeux ?*

18. Pierre, Arnauld. "De l'instabilité. Perception visuelle/corporelle de l'espace dans l'environnement cinétique", in *Les Cahiers du MNAM*, n°78, winter 2001-2002, p. 54

19. Manuscript of Frank Popper's introductory essay, Archives de la critique d'art, Frank Popper collection, FPOPP.XG063/398

20. The gruppo N quickly withdrew from the project.

21. Note by Frank Popper of 11.12.1968, FPOPP.XG063/ 144

22. *Ibid.*, p. 144-145

23. Lemoine, Serge. *François Morellet*, Paris : Flammarion, 1996