The Musée Maillol reopens with an exhibition by Ben

TOUT EST ART ? *
* IS EVERYTHING ART ? BEN AT THE MUSÉE MAILLOL

Ben takes possession of the newly reopened Musée Maillol for the first large-scale exhibition devoted to the artist in Paris. Bringing together over 200 artworks principally from the artist's own personal collection, as well as private collections, this retrospective, which features several previously unseen installations, provides the public with an insight into the multiple and complex facets of this iconoclastic, provocative and prolific artist, an advocate of the non-conformist and the alternative for over 50 years.

This exhibition devoted to Ben is part of a new programme of exhibitions put in place by Culturespaces at the Musée Maillol which will reopen its doors in September after 18 months of renovation work.

In the late 1950s, Benjamin Vautier (b. 1935) more widely known as Ben, declared: 'I sign everything'. This statement, corroborated by his images and actions, illustrates his belief that the world and indeed art, is a whole, and that everything constitutes art. Each phrase, however brief, reveals a meditation on important issues such as truth in art, the role of the artist in society and the relationship between art and life itself. His ‘écritures’ or written texts reflect his own personal questions and bear testimony to a critical spirit that is quick to question everyone and everything, including himself. Inspired by Marcel Duchamp’s ready-mades, Ben has systematically perpetuated the notion that a work of art is recognizable not by its material content, but by its signature alone.

Ben is unique for his combination of art, philosophy and the everyday. He was one of the first artists in Europe to take art into the streets. Beginning in 1959, with his famous ‘street actions’, which are as much everyday activities (waiting at a bus stop), as they are ‘eccentric’ or ‘whimsical’ (swimming fully-clothed from one end of Nice harbour to the other), he became one of the key actors in the Fluxus movement in Europe. An artist, performer, organizer, inventor of language and a pioneering thinker in the world of art, he is also known as one of the leading figures of the Nice School, closely connected to artists like Arman, Yves Klein and Martial Raysse. In the 1980s, he coined the name of the group that formed around Robert Combas in France—Figuration Libre (Free Figuration)—and which corresponds to the American movement of Bad Painting, spearheaded by Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat.

The exhibition: combining historical and contemporary works

The exhibition is arranged over two floors of the museum (the ground floor and first floor), combining historical and contemporary pieces. The scenography showcases the evolution of the artist’s work from his beginnings up to recent times.

The historical dimension of the exhibition, under the guidance of Andres Pardey, vice-director of the Musée Tinguely in Basel (Switzerland), presents the genesis of Ben’s career with a selection of some of his key works from 1958 to 1978. These works illustrate Ben’s search for an abstract formal language he could call his own and culminates in an ensemble of old and early ‘écritures’ or written texts. Ben then moved away from a purely formal experimentation, becoming more interested in content and meaning, through artworks that became increasingly conceptual. All of the scope of his artistic repertoire is presented in this part of the exhibition: attempts at lyrical abstraction, numerous ‘street actions’ from the 1960s onwards, highlights of the Fluxus movement in Nice, and appropriations, up until Ben’s musings as an art theorist and philosopher. All of this can be circumscribed to a rather limited time frame and constitutes the basis of his later work.

Press release I May 2016 I Is everything art ? Ben at the Musée Maillol
Exploring the chaos of life and revealing its inherent poetry, breaking down barriers and turning life into art, these are just some of the actions that punctuate the production of an artist who remains equally active and prolific, even today.

The second part of the exhibition opens the doors to the world of the artist with the presentation of some of his more contemporary installations. From his ‘small ideas’ to his ‘new écritures’, as well as his ‘mirrors’, ‘photography’, ‘time’ and ‘death’, Ben provides us with a kaleidoscopic overview of some of his most recent creations, and has even created new work specifically for the Musée Maillol. ‘Ben connecté’ reveals the interactive nature of his artwork, presenting this pioneering artist who expresses himself via the media of his own website, web radio, and newsletters, and through the immense archives he has amassed on both his own work and that of his artist friends.

Produced in collaboration with the Musée Tinguely of Basel, the exhibition Is everything art? Ben at the Musée Maillol was made possible thanks to the generous loan of works from the artist’s own personal collection and loans from longstanding private collectors.

The exhibition curator

The parts of the exhibition presenting Ben’s early work are curated by Andres Pardey. Ben has curated the contemporary section.


Ben is one of the major artists of the 20th century, known for his actions and paintings. His work can be seen as a reflection on art in its most essential or fundamental nature, and by focusing on the extraordinary aspects of the ordinary, he has succeeded in transforming life into a form of art. His work also embraces a wide variety of subjects including ethnicity, the ego and truth. Ben is incredibly popular thanks to his ‘écritures’ or written paintings, renowned for their impertinence and insight.

Ben, born Benjamin Vautier, is a French artist with Swiss roots, born on 18 July 1935, in Naples (Italy) to a mother of mixed Irish and Occitan heritage and a French-speaking Swiss father. He is the great grandson of the 19th century Swiss painter, Marc Louis Benjamin Vautier. He spent the first five years of his life in Naples. Following the outbreak of war in 1939, Ben and his mother travelled frequently: to Switzerland, Turkey, Egypt, and Italy, before finally settling in Nice in 1949. He studied at the École du Parc-Impérial and was a boarder at the Collège Stanislas (junior high school). His mother found him a job as a delivery boy at Le Nain bleu bookstore before buying him his very own stationery-bookstore.
Ben sold the store at the end of the 1950s and opened up a small boutique where he sold second-hand records. He transformed the shop front with a rather unusual display of knick-knacks. Hosting regular exhibitions, his store quickly became an important meeting spot for artists, and attracted many of the key figures of what would later become known as the Nice School: César, Arman, Martial Raysse, etc. Close to Yves Klein and seduced by Nouveau Réalisme (New Realism), Ben was convinced that ‘art should be new and create an effect of surprise’. At the beginning of the 1960s, many artists attempted to appropriate the world as a work of art. Ben autographed everything available to him: ‘holes, mysterious boxes, kicks, God, hens, etc.’, connecting art and life, and explaining that everything was art and that in art, everything was possible.

In 1965, he created an exhibition gallery of 3 m$^2$ on the mezzanine level of his shop which he called: ‘Ben doubts everything’. Here he exhibited the work of Biga, Aloooo, Venet, Maccaferrí, Serge III, Sarkis, Filliou, etc. At the start of the 1980s, following a year spent on a scholarship in Berlin, he made the acquaintance of a group of young artists that included Robert Combas, Hervé Di Rosa, François Boisrond, Rémi Blanchard, etc., a group he would christen Figuration Libre (Free Figuration).

An active figure in the contemporary art scene, Ben has always supported younger artists and expressed his views on current trends and movements, whether these are of a cultural, political, anthropological or artistic nature. These can be read in his regular and voluble newsletters.

Since 1975, he has lived and worked in the hills above Saint-Pancrace, near Nice. Ben’s work features in some of the world’s largest private and public art collections: notably MoMA New York, The Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, The Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney, the Museum Moderne Kunstdienc Kunst Stiftung Ludwig in Vienna, the LUHKA in Antwerp, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, the Solothurn Museum, the Musée national d’Art moderne de Paris and the Musée d’Art moderne et d’Art contemporain de Nice.

**Culturespaces, partner of the Musée Maillol**

The Musée Maillol and Culturespaces signed a partnership agreement in November 2015 concerning the management of the museum and its cultural programming. Culturespaces is in charge of the production, organization and communication of the museum’s temporary exhibitions, the welcome desk, ticket office and tours, as well as overseeing connected activities (bookstore-gift shop, café, receptions and events), etc.

In September, the Musée Maillol will reopen to the public, offering two temporary exhibitions per year, focusing on modern and contemporary art, following on in the tradition of the institution, founded by Dina Vierny.
Courage is what counts, 1987, 50 x 50 cm, acrylic on tray/board, Ben’s personal collection.

Beautiful or ugly? True or false? Yes or no? 2013, 130 x 162 cm, acrylic on canvas, Ben’s personal collection.

The target, pull, aim for the back (5 hits win a bottle), 1962, 81 x 50 x 13 cm, acrylic on mannequin, Ben’s personal collection.

To write is painting words, 2009, 50 x 61 cm, acrylic on canvas, Ben’s personal collection.

Suspended object and mystery box sculpture, 1958/1962, 105 x 60 x 50 cm, collage, Ben’s personal collection.

All about pretending to seduce, 2014, 80 x 80 cm, acrylic on canvas, Ben’s personal collection.
VISUALS AVAILABLE FOR THE PRESS

Banana, 1959, 93 x 72 cm, ink on paper, Ben’s personal collection.

Being, 1975, 60 x 73 cm, acrylic on canvas, Ben’s personal collection.

Action: destroying my artworks, 1961/1972, 75 x 75 cm, acrylic and photographs on wood, Ben’s personal collection.

If God is everywhere..., 1962, 18 x 30 cm, acrylic on object, Ben’s personal collection.

The Nice Fluxus Festival of Total Art and Behaviour, 1963, poster designed by Ben, print on paper, 30 x 46.5 cm, Ben’s personal collection.

Abstract form, 1958, 56 x 45 cm, ink on paper, Ben’s personal collection.
VISUALS AVAILABLE FOR THE PRESS

No posters allowed, 1959, 39.5 X 33.5 cm, acrylic oil on canvas, Ben’s personal collection.

Peace, 1959, 42 X 60 cm, oil on canvas, Ben’s personal collection.

The right/good milk, 1958/60, 36.5 x 50 cm, oil on canvas, Ben’s personal collection.

Part of everything to Ben – sign everything, 1961, photograph, Ben’s personal collection.

Art = Ben, 1963, 21.3 x 29.6 cm, acrylic on canvas, Jon and Joanne Hendricks Collection.

Sculptural object (folklore discs), 1963, 140 x 40 cm, objects on wood, Ben’s personal collection.
Musée Maillol
61 rue de Grenelle
75007 Paris
Tel : +33(0) 01 42 22 57 25
Metro : Rue du Bac, line 12.
Bus no. 63, 68, 69, 83 and 84.

Opening hours
The museum is open every day for the duration of its temporary exhibitions, from 10.30am to 6.30pm.
Late night opening on Fridays until 9.30pm.

Admission
Full fare : €12
Reduced fare : €10

Internet site
www.museemaillol.com

Press contact
Agence L’Art en direct
24 rue de Richelieu 75001 Paris
Tel : +33(0)1.55.35.25.10 - Mobile. : +33(0)6.88.89.17.72
Ingrid Cadoret - icadoret@artendirect.fr