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Thematic Cluster: The book, the museum and the child (2)

Dossier thématique : Le livre, le musée, l'enfant
(2) Dirigé par Ivanne RIALLAND



“Art-y-es-tu?” MAMCO’s collection of children’s picture books: “*I didn’t want to mediate art.*”

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Abstract

Contrary to most of the children's publications that have been created by museums, the collection "Art y-es-tu?" (*Art are you there?*), co-published from 2001 to 2006 by the Educational Unit at MAMCO (Geneva's Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art) and the publisher Quiquandquoi, does not feature MAMCO artwork, nor does it employ art mediation techniques. Rather, it offers "artist books for children." These original books by contemporary artists form a singular museum project at MAMCO, an institute which has sought to desanctify the museum, making it instead a vitalizing force, rather than a preservation space for stable, permanent artistic heritage. In this context, the "Art y-es-tu?" collection makes a twofold transition. Concerning children, it attempts to offer a different set of codes than what children usually see portrayed in children's books. When it comes to the artists themselves, this new approach invites artists to take a step toward children, while giving the artists free rein within the collection, thus permitting them to remain focused on their personal research. In doing so, the artists are challenged to question the presence of childhood within their own artwork.

Keywords:

children's picture book; artist book; museum; contemporary art; MAMCO

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“Art-y-es-tu?” MAMCO’s collection of children’s picture books: “I didn’t want to mediate art.”¹

by Cécile VERGEZ-SANS

“Art-y-es-tu?” Upon first encountering this Genevese collection of contemporary artists’ children’s books, co-published by MAMCO and the publishing house Quiquandquoi, we were immediately struck by the mischievous collection title, *Art are you there?*, which takes the form of a question, and resonates with the French nursery rhyme “Loup y-es-tu” (*Wolf are you there*).

Our curiosity was also piqued by a surprising statement made by the book collection’s director and founder, Claude-Hubert Tatot, who defined the books in the form of a refusal: “I didn’t want to mediate art.” Such a statement might seem paradoxical, given that it refers to a collection created under the aegis of the Educational Unit of Geneva’s Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art.²

While the titles of children’s art book collections produced by museums often seem chosen in reference to the museum’s canon to validate the institution (such as “My little Louvre”), and while these titles frequently highlight the canonical culture’s adaptation to a young audience, (such as “ABC Musée du Louvre” and “Le petit ami du Louvre”³),

1 The author warmly thanks the collection director, Claude-Hubert Tatot, for their fruitful and cordial exchanges in Geneva, as well as the collection participants and artists, for their passionate generosity during the interviews. She also warmly thanks Ivanne Rialland for inviting her to participate in this volume.

2 MAMCO, the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, opened its doors in Geneva in 1994. It was conceived of and directed by Christian Bernard until 2016. Bernard, after teaching literature and philosophy and working for the Ministry of Culture in the early 1980s, directed the Villa Arson in Nice (1985-1993). MAMCO’s Educational Unit was a decentralized unit within of the Swiss Department of Public Education, directed by Claude-Hubert Tatot from its opening (1996) until its closure in 2004, for administrative and financial reasons. Since 2003, Claude-Hubert Tatot has also taught at HEAD (Haute École d’Art et de Design de Genève); between 2005 and 2007, he was in charge of the project “School and Culture” for the visual education sector of the primary school. Jean-Marie Antenen, graphic designer and publisher, founded the children’s publishing house Quiquandquoi in 2001. He has contributed as editor to the magazine *Hors Cadre(s)*, created in 2007 and published by Atelier du poisson soluble. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotations here have been taken from interviews we conducted with the editors and artists of the collection in May 2022 (Tatot) and September 2022 (Antenen; Bernard; Graumann; Kohler; Lesueur).

3 *Mon petit Louvre*: a book by Violaine Bouvet-Lanselle and Marie Sellier, published in 2001 by the Réunion des Musées Nationaux. It’s the first volume in the “Mon petit ...” collection, which includes, for example, *Mon petit Orsay*, *Mon petit Chuny*, etc. *ABC Musée du Louvre*: a work directed by Nathalie Brunet, co-published by the Réunion des Musées Nationaux and Jean-Claude Lattès, 1990. *Le Petit Ami du Louvre*, volumes 1 and 2: a series by author Guillaume

the Genevese collection, on the other hand, published between 2001 and 2006, begins by asking a question. As an integral element of the collection, the title directs its inquiry toward the idea of investigation, delving into what constitutes “art” or could constitute “art,” rather than simply giving access to works already consecrated by the institution. This seemingly playful question requires all of our attention: to whom is it truly addressed? To the child reader? To the artist author? To the museum publisher? To answer this question, we must examine the volumes in this collection, in an attempt to understand how the context around the work, the artist, the institution, the child, and the book are expressed and positioned. This examination is all the more important, given that the title’s capacity for provocation has been reinforced, in a way, by the equally impertinent (almost caustic) statement made by its director, who qualifies the collection in reverse, through a negative. We wished to seize this opportunity by beginning, first and foremost, to identify what the collection *is* through what it is *not*.

A Practice of Distancing

The published collection includes twelve works, by Hervé Graumann, Michel Huelin, and Tony Morgan in 2001; John Armleder, Le Gentil Garçon, and Jean-Luc Verna in 2002; Philippe Mayaux, Annette Messenger, and Vincent Kohler in 2003; Claude Lévêque in 2004; and Jean-Luc Blanc and Natacha Lesueur in 2006.⁴ All were invited, not to create art books or books about art, but “artist books for children.” This fact is mentioned discreetly on the back cover, next to the collection title—a collection that is not composed of precious works, or biographies of painters, or collectors’ items for bibliophiles. Each of the 21-by-29-cm volumes has adopted a modest look, in a French format traditionally affiliated with that of the comic strip.⁵ This “borrowing of an ordinary book’s form” (Moeglin-Delcroix, 73) is specifically identified by Anne Moeglin-Delcroix as one of the hallmarks of artist books since the 1960s. For Claude-Hubert Tatot, such a choice involved the desire to find a “form without inhibitions, yet one that’s also familiar and friendly.” This, he indicates, is what prompted his choice of matt papering, which allows for comfortable reading, especially in the evening, a ritual time in childhood for bedtime stories.

So, these are artists’ artworks, but not MAMCO’s artwork. Where other children’s art books produced by museums typically offer (under multiple forms) a discovery of works presented in the establishment’s collections, with an eye on distribution, valorization, education, and the construction of a “museum attachment” (Rialland, 2023), here the link to the museum seems to be executed quite differently, and flexibly. When look-

Kazerouni and illustrator Giulia D’Anna Lupo, co-published by Éditions du Musée du Louvre, the Société des Amis du Louvre, and Gulf Stream Éditeur in 2013 (vol. 1) and 2016 (vol. 2). The blurb for volume 2 states, “10 masterpieces from the Louvre explained to children [...] enabling them to discover or rediscover major cultural pieces of world heritage.”

4 See the corpus and reproductions of the covers and pages of the *infra* collection’s works. In the interest of a wider distribution, some works have translated paratextual notes and text, resulting in bilingual editions.

5 Each of these books costs between 13 and 14 euros. Only Natacha Lesueur’s book, of the same dimensions, adopts an Italian format.

ing, for example, at John Armleder's dripping paint, Claude Lévêque's stuffed animals, Annette Messager's photographs of grimacing children, and so on, the child-reader does not come face-to-face with a reproduced piece from MAMCO's collections, but rather looks directly at an original work, a book created by the artist specifically for the child and for this publication. Admittedly, almost all of these artists have had their work exhibited at MAMCO—they “corresponded with what we were exhibiting,” says Christian Bernard—and some of the artists' other works were acquired by the Museum. But the books' publication dates did not align with the museum's current events; they were not art books made to accompany the museum “event” as exhibition catalogs⁶ do today, for example. An exhibition featuring Tony Morgan's artwork was held at MAMCO in 2003, for example, though his picture book was published in 2001; Philippe Mayaux's work could be viewed in 2002, yet his children's book was published in 2003.

The mode of each artist's presence within the museum varies as well: while John Armleder has had designated spaces in MAMCO to implement his creative projects since the time of the institute's founding, *Le Gentil Garçon* has never been exhibited at MAMCO during these years. According to Jean-Marie Antenen, publisher of *Quiquandquoi*, the decision not to align the publications with MAMCO exhibitions also created the possibility for the books to expand far beyond the museum's sphere of influence. Perhaps the idea here also involved putting some distance between the project and the typical sanctification of museum institutions. Christian Bernard was convinced, at any rate, of the need to think of contemporary art museums like a problematic object, while designing his overarching project for MAMCO: “The condition of the contemporary art museum lies in its general incompatibility with its objective, for this objective is multiple, shifting, often elusive, sometimes impossible to exhibit” (Bernard, “Une entreprise infinie,” Bernard, Faure, et al., 47).

We can look at the collection with a similar perspective: publications were released in sets of three, which, as Claude-Hubert Tatot explains, brought together a well-known artist, an older artist who'd already had a long career (though not necessarily experience working with books), and a young artist just beginning their career, such as Vincent Kohler in 2003. Likewise, the museum's presence on the volume was made to be as discreet and objective as possible: neither logo nor any mention of MAMCO can be found in the pages of the picture book, except in an oblique way, via a reference to the Educational Unit (*Cellule pédagogique* in French) found on the book cover beside the publisher's name. And indeed, administratively speaking, the collection is linked to the museum via the Educational Unit. This department (directed by Claude-Hubert Tatot), which was operational from 1994 to 2005, aimed to create links between teachers and the contemporary culture at MAMCO. It was housed within the museum yet remained financially independent.⁷ This collection of children's books also had a singular position within the museum itself,

6 Christian Bernard specifies that he followed the collection's progress from a distance, as MAMCO gave the collection director the opportunity to see works, meet artists being displayed or in residence, and make contacts. “Art y-es-tu?” is the only children's collection produced by MAMCO, whose editorial production typically leans toward books on art theory and history, as well as artists' personal writing.

7 Within the Educational Unit, Claude-Hubert Tatot was paid by the Département de l'Instruction Publique; the budget for the collection was a specified one.

insofar as its creation, initiated and directed by Claude-Hubert Tatot, had been desired by MAMCO director, Christian Bernard,⁸ both a man of museums and a man of books, and moreover, a strong believer in the unmistakable, critical link *between* the two: “I believe there are two major spaces in human existence, the library and the museum.”⁹ On one condition, we might add: that of inventing a link between the book and the museum which goes beyond reproducing the artwork.

This act of distancing the collection from the museum was also a departure for the Education Unit when compared with its usual projects. While Claude-Hubert Tatot had a rich background in art mediation within various institutions including the Unit,¹⁰ both the collection director and MAMCO director—even the publisher Jean-Marie Antenen, were united in their growing wariness of the status quo. They felt a certain skepticism regarding the effectiveness of traditional museum mediation activities, which, in the words of Christian Bernard, were often reduced to leisure activities without any real attempt at art production. Furthermore, they shared the concern of not wanting to “teach” contemporary art in these books. In fact, these works refrain from offering the reader any didactic element; there is no explanatory back cover, nor biographical elements about the author, apart from information on the context of the particular creation. These artworks-turned-books confront the reader directly with straightforward elements: a title, the artist’s name, a sequence of images, and textual elements (in six of the twelve books). Such a choice was not at first self-evident—those with a bias against contemporary art often denounce its abstruse nature—and provoked criticism from members of the Educational Unit in particular. Perhaps the decision was fueled by the conviction, as Christian Bernard expressed, that a visit to the museum is not replaceable,¹¹ and that consequently, the link between museum-art-book must manifest differently. For Claude-Hubert Tatot, their vision did not involve reiterating what Sophie Curtil accomplished with her Pompidou collection “L’Art en jeu,” even if it was a success. Besides, such an approach would have doubtlessly been less relevant in this context of contemporary art. Sophie Curtil herself, when creating her collection, made a key distinction “between living and dead artists... for a very simple reason: books about art are not books *of* art, which artists should make without constraints. If we wanted to make a book about a living artist, first we’d have to consult with the artist: how would they regard their own work? [This would likely call into question] the collection’s entire identity.” Consequently, she made a choice with “Art en jeu” to “familiarize children with artworks considered to be part of our heritage” (Curtil, 1994, 80).

8 Indicated by Claud-Hubert Tatot, interview *op.cit.*

9 Christian Bernard, remarks collected by L.W., *Le Temps*, 2 March 2012.

10 For example, he was in charge of educational activities for school audiences at the Musée de Brou, in Bourg-en-Bresse, starting at the end of the 1980s, then was assistant to the Director of the Carré d’Art in Nîmes, and in charge specifically of working on welcoming young and handicapped audiences, before assuming the direction of the Educational Unit between 1996 and 2004 at the Department of Public Instruction and Contemporary Art Building of Geneva, where he oversaw the training of teachers and the design of pedagogical tools, with the support of a council of teachers.

11 Christian Bernard: “I have always believed that nothing can replace a visit to the museum. The works have a specific materiality, a format, a thickness, a variability in light, sometimes a smell.” *La Tribune de Genève*, remarks collected by Estèbe, 21 November 2015.

With the “Art y-es-tu?” collection on the other hand, not only was the desire to work with living artists present from the beginning, but the very choice of the artists marks another attempt at shifting away from tradition. Indeed, Claude-Hubert Tatot did not wish to select contemporary creators whose work had a seemingly obvious relationship to child readers, or who had already worked with children. For this reason, he explains, a Niki de Saint Phalle would not find a place in the collection because the “playful” dimension of her work created an almost oversimplified link to the world of childhood. He preferred to give other artists free rein, or “*carte blanche*,” with their book creations. Vincent Kohler, author of the volume *Bricopolis*, agrees that this opportunity was truly open-ended, entirely up to him to interpret as he wished,¹² and that at the time of the project he had neither experience nor knowledge of publishing a children’s book.¹³ According to Claude-Hubert Tatot, however, members of the Educational Unit would have preferred the books to be made by illustrators (in which case, the artists’ work would have been mediated via forms and styles of drawings that conform more with the realm of children’s books). The collection director, at the other end of the spectrum, has stated that he wished to solicit artists whose works were not only lacking in familiarity, but which seemed to be as distanced as possible from the child. The artwork of Philippe Mayaux, who would create *Gataca, un livre que tu peux colorier* (“Gataca, a book you can color”), particularly interested Claude-Hubert Tatot, for its “gritty subject matter mixed with an erotic dimension, a major departure compared to typical visions of childhood.” Indeed, it is possible to appreciate this initial distance by immersing oneself in the artist’s paintings, which play with themes of kitsch, immature humor, hybridization, and derision; these themes are equally present in his glistening, phallic ice cream cones (*Glacé équivoque avec doigts*, 1994), his erectile mushrooms (*Le Transporteur*, 1995), or even in his skull, which has a cigarette hanging from its mouth, and sits atop the haunting inscription “*Vou mé reconnéssé?*” (*Vou mé reconnéssé?*, 1994). Art critic Marc-Olivier Walher also notes the corrosive force of this piece, feeling the need to qualify it as a break with the cultural values and references from childhood: “It’s ugly [...]. No, really, it’s not at all pretty [...] pretty nightmarish [...]. It’s the story of *Winnie the Pooh* teleported into a remake of *The Return of the Living Dead*” (Landeau et al., 15).

This distancing can be found among other projects and artworks. We might speak of it in reference to John Armleder’s artistic language, which—while being fueled by multiple theoretical interrogations and extremely heterogeneous forms, from gestural collective performances, to installations, sculptures, and paintings, is contrasted with an abstract piece¹⁴—a form of language notably absent in children’s books. Alternatively, this initial distancing sought by Claude-Hubert Tatot could also take the form of disconcerting images. For example, it might crop up in the photographic work of Natacha Lesueur, which features parts

12 Like other artists from the collection, he specifies that the only limits that had been indicated to him were: “No sex, no violence, no religion,” and that he had only been given the blank book as a mock-up and the first volumes of the collection. Claude-Hubert Tatot indicates that he refused however one of the images proposed by Le Gentil Garçon, for his *Super ABC*, which the artist confirms: “Zo-B-boy, who was originally set to conclude the book with a raised middle finger, was banished.” (Le Gentil Garçon, 2011, 174.)

13 An experience shared by the other artists we spoke with, including Hervé Graumann and Natacha Lesueur.

14 In 1984, for example, he organized an exhibition entitled *Peinture abstraite*.

of female bodies covered with food, such as her series of heads entirely covered with things like jellied vegetables and fish, created at the end of the 1990s.¹⁵ MAMCO emphasized this distancing effect when presenting her exhibition in 2011, speaking of it as such: “The world of Natacha Lesueur is far from being as tidy as an image: here we often encounter an inner violence.”¹⁶ With all that in mind, we must ask: do these *carte blanche* artworks, while seen as a departure from convention, also keep the child at a distance?

Toward the Child Reader

While each artist book takes a singular approach, when taken together they weave ties that pull the child closer. Several artists chose to situate their work on a form of common ground. For instance, some picture books are reminiscent of games and toys: Vincent Kohler uses robots and mechanics; Claude Lévêque works with stuffed animals; Jean-Luc Verna draws dolls. Others, at the heart of their works, encourage childhood gestures: Natacha Lesueur places drawings in vegetable puree, for the pleasure of making improbable, mysterious mixtures of materials, while John Armleder uses colors of all kinds. Then there’s *Le Gentil Garçon* with his boxes of felt pens arranged on the flyleaves, and Hervé Graumann’s tree leaf cut-outs, Annette Messenger’s photos of grimacing children, and the green plastic joystick on Michel Huelin’s book with its layered composition, reminiscent of computer games. Incidentally, Claude-Hubert Tatot has mentioned that Michel Huelin worked on this picture book with his son. Meanwhile, in Tony Morgan’s book *Face à face*, which tells the story of the town of Noirbourg through text and painting, everything is black up until a baby with a completely empty white face is born; initially Morgan had envisioned this as a book made exclusively for his son. This act of addressing the child can be executed through the very mode upon which the book functions: the game. Annette Messenger, for instance, wished to include palindromes; Philippe Mayaux offers “A book you can color,” *Le Gentil Garçon* closes his picture book with a series of coded messages that must be deciphered by the reader. In mischievously titling his mixed materials photograph book *L’Ornithorynque, la Mangouste et les Trois Canards* (“The Platypus, the Mongoose and the three Ducks”), John Armleder seems to be inviting the child reader to identify—amidst a chaotic scene of shaving cream, egg yolks, body paint, and other gelled textures—the aforementioned animal companions, much in the manner of the books “I Spy with My Little Eye.”

15 The series *Untitled* was exhibited at the Galerie Fotohof in Salzburg in 1998 (Davila, 55-67).

16 “Natacha Lesueur, *Je suis née, etc.* »: MAMCO record (unsigned), <https://archive.mamco.ch/collections/archives.html>, accessed on 20 July 2022.



Ill. 1 John Armleder. *L'Ornithorynque, la mangouste et les trois canards*. Genève : Quiquandquoi éditions, Art y es-tu ?, 2002, onzième double page (album non paginé).

This sort of title, which plays with the codes of children's books by replacing the traditional animal heroes with unusual animal species, demonstrates how an artist's attempt to reach toward the realm of childhood is also one that seeks to awaken the critical eye of young readers.

Essentially, the idea is for these creators to distance themselves from the commercialized market targeting children, and from a sweet, overly-sentimental vision of an idealized childhood.¹⁷ Michel Huelin stages a series of rules and regulations characteristic of certain educational attitudes ("Don't spin in circles," and "Don't spit in the soup" ...) which his images ironically overturn. ("Don't spin in circles" for example, is echoed by a circle of peas on a solid purple background which leads the curious reader, upon turning the page, to a new spinning planet.) *Le Gentil Garçon* offers an alphabet book of anti-superheroes, including "Biglor," and "Terrrrriblor," "Urticor," alongside "Les Quatre Hystériques," and "Pétoman." In Philippe Mayaux's book, we're invited to color a series of creatures we may recognize from children's paraphernalia, characters from fairy tales and contemporary myths. When readers comes to a page with a Teddy Bear waiting to be colored, they find an unexpected army of teddy bears, with frozen smiles and empty stares, who march in unison to a military rhythm. His Santa Claus, apparently unchanged and debonair, is surrounded by small stars in the shape of the McDonald's logo. The head of the Warner

17 Here, one's tempted to recall François Ruy-Vidal's stance on art, defended at the end of the 1970s with his famous declaration, "There is no children's art, there is simply art," as well as Christian Bruel's proposals in the "Sourire qui mord" and the collective "Pour un autre merveilleux."

Bros canary, Tweety Bird, has been hybridized with a mermaid tail. As for Jean-Luc Verna's "dolls," the pink baby clothes on the guards ironically underline just how much they differ from dolls marketed for children. Here, there's no smiling and well-combed plastic figure, but rather, somewhat troubling creatures who occasionally crop up (such as "The commando doll," with its pointed boots and metallic bra), alongside purely tragic silhouettes (such as the one on the cover—a defeated, cross-eyed female face with dripping makeup). These many representations allow dark emotions to creep in, an altogether unusual feature for a children's book. The envisioned collection, which went beyond the collection that ended up being published, would continue in the same vein. In 2000, Wim Delvoye, author of the work "Cloaca," the "shit machine" which had caused some controversy¹⁸ from the get-go, was another one of the artists solicited for the collection. He created a photographic picture book mock-up model for the publishers (entitled *Comment tuer Barbie?*, or "How to kill Barbie?") centering on the famous figurine, or rather, on her dismantling: the double-page spread depicted a destroyed, disassembled, and randomly reassembled Barbie.¹⁹ These various artists who endeavored to approach the child reader in a new and different manner also seem to have been motivated by a desire to adopt an attitude that wasn't overbearing. Several artists, we note, chose to mimic gestures common among children: to cut vegetable leaves, Hervé Graumann used the exact same tools as a child would (and as his own children did), choosing to do so deliberately and jubilantly.²⁰

Vincent Kohler decided on the idea of working with very few objects (things like cardboard and bits of pipe turned upside-down on the ground...), while Le Gentil Garçon's objective involved spotlighting clumsy, imperfect gestures, like a doodle made with a felt-tipped pen (the "Supergribouillepen") instead of making a more impressive drawing from a technical standpoint. Similarly, Natacha Lesueur's photographs of vegetable puree landscapes, with their surface irregularities, seem to bear the still-fresh trace of the spatula that would have sculpted them—in fact, we can glimpse a bit of the handle surreptitiously appear in action, on the eleventh double-page. The presence of details like this one encourages readers to take these books-turned-artworks not only at face-value, but as an ongoing process of creation and fabrication, even as an invitation to enter the factory. Such is the case of Philippe Mayaux's coloring pages, as well as *Bricopolis*, which allows readers to see, little by little, bits of a city appear as a drawing on a wall made by mechanical robots. Sometimes the text also conveys this invitation. Take for instance Tony Morgan: "They blanched, pale with fear, when they discovered [...] that their baby had only a big blank for a face. A blank as white as a sheet of paper, where no one had jotted even a dash."

Should these invitations to create be compared to collections of activity books offered by museums (such as *Fais comme Duchamp*, or the recent *Crée avec Georgia O'Keeffe*, published by the Centre Pompidou²¹)? Two particular viewpoints will shed light on the

18 Nicolas Julliard, "Cloaca, provocation d'apprenti Frankenstein ou pièce maîtresse de l'art contemporain?" *Le Temps*, 30 August 2001, <https://www.letemps.ch/culture/cloaca-provocation-dapprenti-frankensteinou-piece-maitresse-lart-contemporain>, accessed on 19 August 2022.

19 This according to Claude-Hubert Tatot and Jean-Marie Antenen. On the legal advice of lawyers, the editors had to give up the project, despite their interest in it, for fear of having to face a lawsuit from Mattel.

20 Interview with Hervé Graumann, *op.cit.*

21 Anne Weiss, *Fais comme Duchamp, cahier d'activités*, Paris, Éditions du Centre Pompidou,

different ways in which these collections position themselves, that of the reader, to whom the message is addressed, and that of the artist. On one hand, these books contain no explicit, didactic message of the kind offered by a third-person voice, as was customary in the historical activity books of Père Castor.²² Whatever didactic awakening the reader may experience comes exclusively from the work itself, and from its fiction: the artist does not reveal her hand, nor does she place a picture frame inside the book. This potential awakening—made possible by the choice of quotidian techniques and an emphasis on fabrication in the spirit of Francis Ponge, who stated, “I am a provoker”²³—remains unresolved and unimposing.²⁴ On the other hand, while in activity books the artist is taken for a model to imitate, the artist here becomes a discreet presence (with simply his or her name mentioned on the cover), sidelined in order to make way for the reader’s encounter with the artwork. A photograph of Claude Lévêque does appear on his book’s back cover, but far from being a solemn portrait, it appears ironically held in the beak of one of the picture book’s characters, a stuffed duck. Thus, the artist has been integrated or absorbed into the picture book’s fiction. Similarly effective is the derisory and distanced tone taken in regard to Le Gentil Garçon’s artistic ego, as seen in the artist’s pseudonym, which, moreover, is written on the front cover in a clumsy cursive scrawl.²⁵

Looking at this approach to art, we can see links forming between MAMCO and these artist books for children. The originality of the museum’s aim, as conceived by its director Christian Bernard, and the singularity of this collection’s goals, established by Claude-Hubert Tatot, begin to resonate. For Christian Bernard, in fact, the idea from the outset was to conceive of a “reverse” place, “against [the] dominant museum ideology”

2014 ; Marina Muun (ill.), *Crée avec Georgia O’Keeffe*, Paris, Éditions du Centre Pompidou, 2021. Concerning the second book, the publisher’s website states, “Author and illustrator Marina Muun guides us into the artist’s world and invites us to create our own artwork.” <https://editions.centrepompidou.fr/fr/enfants/cree-avec-georgia-okeeffe-jeunesse/2457.html>, accessed 2 August 2022.

22 Take, for example, this advice from “Père Castor” addressing children at the opening of the volume *Ribambelles*: “Look at the images in this picture book and ... follow their lead. But be careful, these pictures are only examples! It’s up to you to find paper to cut out. To begin your apprenticeship, use newspaper or wrapping paper.” (*Ribambelles*, images by Nathalie Parain, [introductory text]. Édition des Amis du Père Castor (Facsimile of the 1st edition published by Flammarion in 1932), Meuzac, 2004, p. 2-3.

23 Francis Ponge, « Je suis un suscitateur », in Jean-Marie Gleize (dir.), *Cahier de l’Herne Francis Ponge*. Paris : Le Livre de poche, 1986, p. 17-18.

24 The rules and regulations that punctuate the pages of Michel Huelin’s picture book, *Pas permis*, close with the phrase, “Make your own way,” while the book itself is subtitled, “Or the Art of Following Your Own Ideas.”

25 We might note that his whole artistic approach depends on this distancing in relation to the over-valuation of art figures and spaces. At the time of his first actions *in situ*, he wanders through a museum of fine art, inside the mask of a giant toy head, like a playmobile, with a clownish smile (this silhouette can be found twice in the picture book). At the time of these performances (*Délits de sale gueule*), his presence became controversial in certain places, where he was told, “One does not laugh in a museum, it is like a church.” (Le Gentil Garçon, 2011, 88). Similarly, John Armleder attempts to question the omnipotence of the artist from very different points of departure, by integrating collective actions into his work, and by implementing the practice of transference when the artwork reaches completion (Parvu et al., 24-99).

which would have used this collection as a place for advertising its aims, with the theme of “acquire, preserve, show.” On the contrary, he wished to situate his reflection on museums “from the point of view of its visitor” (Bernard, “Une entreprise infinie,” Bernard, Faure, et al., 42-43). From there, the museum’s modes of exhibition were intended above all “to desanctify and de-hierarchize the artworks, or in other words, to offer an uninitiated, casual, anti-authoritarian, non-normative museum,” mixing “well-known artists and young artists, historical pieces and emerging works” (Bernard, “Une entreprise infinie,” Bernard, Faure, et al., 44-45). Moreover, the idea involved coming up with modest methods for presenting the artwork, promoting “direct comprehension and quasi-domestic visits” (Bernard, “Une entreprise infinie,” Bernard, Faure, et al., 44). The modes in which the visitor can appropriate the artwork certainly echo the conception of “Art y-es-tu,” in terms of the collection’s aim, its editorial form, and its choice of artists. Quite a number of resonating methods contributed to this shared objective of reaching out as far as possible to reach the child reader (or visitor), to “emancipate” them, as expressed by the collection director, who states: “I was saved by art. It was a matter of giving back.”

Thus we can gauge the audacity and common threads of a project intended to reach children. Yet what made this collection singular was its twofold invitation: an invitation to the child to experience a contemporary work, and an invitation to an artist to produce a work for the child. This double polarity was also MAMCO’s objective; Christian Bernard suggests that the artist is “the first actor and the first recipient of the museum” (Bernard, “Une entreprise infinie,” Bernard, Faure, et al., 46). Taking this context into account, we might then ask, why solicit these artists—the museum’s first recipients—for a project that is very far from their artistic practices? And why did some of these solicited artists agree to engage in such a project when, as Hervé Graumann points out, doing so might risk a type of devaluation in the eyes of some of the contemporary art milieu?²⁶

From Infancy to Artwork

Analyzing the children’s books created for the collection reveals first of all that they don’t always perfectly tie in with the rest of the work. Some links are obvious: a few of the artists revive their previous art as images in their picture books, such as Annette Messager, whose grimacing children are present, for example, in the installation *Faire parade* (ARC, Paris’ Museum of Modern Art, 1994-1995), in which they emerge at the end of metallic spikes thrust into twisting black nets, as well as in *Les Gants-Grimaces* (Collection FRAC-Corse, 1997) where the same photographs are inserted in suspended mittens with colored pencils for fingers. The link may also be tied to certain protocol surrounding the art’s fabrication. When John Armleder spoke to the collection director over the phone to inform him of his children’s book title, namely, *L’Ornithorynque, la Mangouste et les Trois Canards*, (despite not having even begun to create it at this point), he followed the same protocol he’d used for his other works: giving the commissioners a title for his work well in advance of its ex-

26 Claude-Hubert Tatot admits said that several solicited artists refused his project proposal. Interview, *op. cit.*

istence, a title with no apparent connection to what he'd later present.²⁷ In this same way, he chose a fabrication process for this book, paint drippings, a process which he'd initiated in the 1980s and continued to use, and which was for him, moreover, a strong, suggestive gesture representing his theoretical reflection on art transference:

In a series of works [...] the *Pour Paintings* [...], this process can even become the main assertion of the canvas. Letting various colors, varnishes, and collected chemicals run from the top of the canvas, Armleder only controls the general effect of the mixture and its formal structure" (Bovier (ed.), 2005, 137).

Clearly, this theoretical context surrounding the issue of artistic transfer is all the more relevant a backdrop to this picture book, since it can be connected to the issue of transmission toward the child, a passing of the reins.

For others, while the book project, with its images and techniques, is different from the rest of their work, they seem to have been motivated by common issues. Take the work of Hervé Graumann, who since the 1990s has been investigating ways to modify real surfaces and make cutouts and reassemblies, in which he likes to work on "an aesthetic form of disappearance." Compared to a work like *12 surfaces équivalentes* (1989), in which twelve green forms were cut out and glued to a flat surface, the picture book's cut-outs of vegetal leaves could constitute a sort of counter-form (disappearance/appearance).

²⁷ Christian Bernard: "He had projected titles that he kept reserved up until the end of his days, just waiting for the works to be made. He had lists ready. His work involved choosing an unlikely title that would create a kind of distortion between what we see and what we would like to understand and what the title does not offer to explain" ("Interview with V. Mavridorakis", Parvu et al., 88).



Ill. 2 Hervé Graumann. *CitiZens*. Genève : Quiquandquoi éditions, Art y es-tu ?, 2001, sixième double page (album non paginé).

In fact, this book project became a way for the museum and the collection director to “ask these artists a question that was not one they were typically asked,” as Christian Bernard put it, all while creating a system (the purpose behind the *carte blanche* authorization) which would allow the artists to “remain fully immersed in their vision.” Almost like a sort of internal shift.

What did this system offer the participating artists? In addition to the possibility of addressing the child as a *different* reader of their work,²⁸ it gave them a chance within their personal research to return to the “question of childhood”—to the evasive presence of childhood in their works, or else the potential of imbuing an element of childhood into their work. This setup thus created the possibility of tapping into a new aspect of their own work. During this same time period in the 2000s, the CAPC, Bordeaux’s contemporary art museum, had begun questioning the importance of childhood within the sphere of contemporary art through an exhibition entitled *Présumés innocents* (Bernadac (dir.)). Recalling the historical origins of the links between childhood and creation since the beginning of modern art, curator Marie-Laure Bernadac paid particular attention to an invasion of childhood objects in works from the contemporary period, as well as to the emergence of childhood as a “method” for artists to take advantage of. Such a modus

28 Hervé Graumann insists that he was particularly interested in a completely different perspective, that of the child taking in his work through a gaze that is, if not innocent, at least totally unused to the codes and prejudices of the contemporary art world.

operandi was likened to Georges Didi-Huberman's analyses of Bataille, who saw the use of childhood in work as "a tool which concerns a theoretical decision [...] like the will to return, to 'see an image being born,' and thus to raise 'the issue of the source, the origin of creation'" (Bernadac (ed.), 13-14). In the same way, this collection makes us think that the museum also participates in reflecting on this issue, not in an analytical, existent way, as seen at the CAPC (through its exhibited artworks and commission), but in a manner that is both anticipatory and active (such as inviting artists to create in line with this query).

Soliciting Annette Messenger meant soliciting an artist whose works were populated with abandoned toys, forgotten stuffed animals, not to mention the lone figure of Pinocchio, works which, from the beginning of Messenger's first published picture book collections in the 1970s, particularly *Mes dessins d'enfant* (Picture Book Collection no. 5) and *Les Enfants aux yeux rayés* (Picture Book Collection n°3), provided "an occasion to recapture and listen to a state of childhood," according to one critic (Grenier, 20). Yet not all links to this issue of childhood are enchanted ones, as suggested by the art piece involving an assembly of photographs of real children whose eyes have been violently crossed out with a pen. Some of the artist's works in the collection are particularly unenchanted, even violently problematic; take for instance an installation by Claude Lévêque: a reconstructed bed identical to his child's that has a hole puncturing the wooden headboard, as if perforated by a bullet (*Un trou dans la tête*).

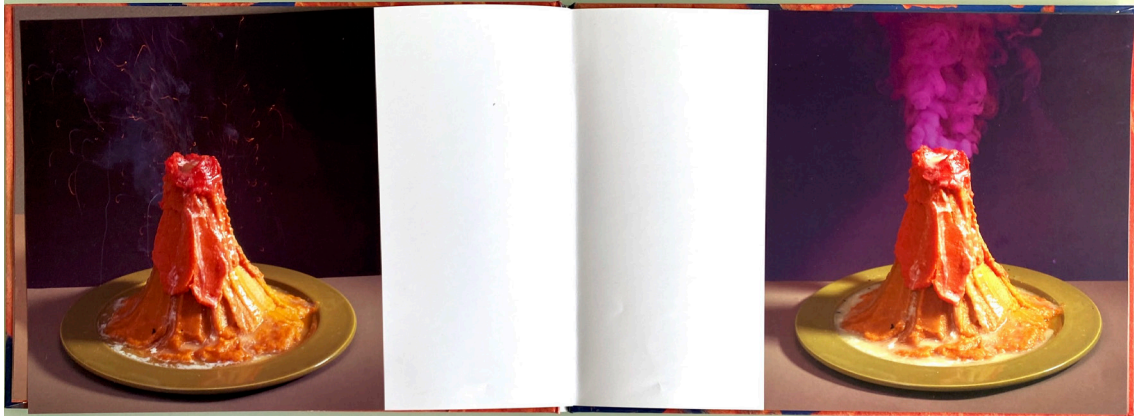
The genesis of a children's book was a very difficult, even painful one for the artist Jean-Luc Verna, as Claude-Hubert Tatot testifies. By suggesting that Verna work on dolls, the collection director immediately discerned the stakes most crucial to the artist at the heart of the project, stakes which then met with other questions of distortion, otherness, and artificiality, equally relevant to the body as these themes are to his drawing techniques, involving transportation, tracing, photocopying, and transcription, from one medium to another.²⁹ On the second double page, we find a drawing of the doll who "scribbled on its shoes," who has borrowed the face of Jean-Luc Verna, so that the artist is looking at us while holding in his hand the colored pencil with which he just finished coloring. This, then, is a picture book which, from one doll to the next, allows images of oneself to emerge. We might see it as the manifestation of this statement made by the artist: "All drawings are self-portraits."³⁰

For others, returning to the theme of childhood seemed rather to offer the opportunity to reread and a re-evaluate their artistic approach. When Natacha Lesueur ironically reveals her vegetable puree landscapes, she reconnects with her very first works at the Villa Arson, with the same food, though now in another form. The personal notes she made prior to beginning work on the book reveal, among other common threads, the weaving in of her own biographical experience: a landscape she flew over in an airplane ("as if discovering, to borrow an image from Bataille, a small bird with its throat slit by a bird of prey") and its subsequent connection to the rest of her work ("I had this predatory image in my mind already, with the mouth-beans series"). Consequently, Natacha Lesueur

29 Jean-Luc Verna: "My rough sketches are never shown, they go through a whole series [...] of makeovers," "À propos de *Paramour* », interview collected by Julien Blanpied on 3 February 2012, MACVAL, <https://vimeo.com/44032336>, accessed on 2 April 2022.

30 *Ibid.*

could make a detour, rereading her own work from another focal point, since, contrary to artwork made “for adults,” in her children’s book the body was absent: “The relationship between body-landscape and landscape-body can function in both directions [...] These vegetable puree landscapes fulfilled my desire to see nature as a *mirror image* of the body.”



Ill. 3 Natacha Lesueur. *Purée paysage*. Genève : Quiquandquoi éditions, Art y es-tu ?, 2006, sixième double page (album non paginé).

What provided an opportunity for some artists to link to older work, revisit it, or reconnect with it, provided for others an opportunity to fertilize upcoming work. Vincent Kohler, for example, indicates that he realized, years after publishing *Bricopolis*, that many elements in the picture book had reappeared in his later works, such as the image of lifting floorboards, motorized pieces, even the ants and the mouse-pebble, a small character in his book who becomes a sculpture. It is as if the book had expanded into his subsequent “adult” artwork. Beyond this transfusion of elements from one work to others is, more broadly, the artist’s new understanding of having this particular focus within his work. The idea developed in the book, he points out, of “creating a fairy world from very few materials has informed my artwork for years after.” We might attribute this inspiration to the fertile possibilities inherent in the collection’s proposal, for artists to create a shifted terrain, a peripheral or even secondary zone (due to the lack of credit given to children’s books) in unknown territory: several artists acknowledge their complete lack of familiarity with this publishing field at the time of creating their book, and some, such as Vincent Kohler, even consider their ignorance to have been an asset, since it established the possibility to create freely.



Ill. 4 Vincent Kohler. *Bricopolis*. Genève : Quiquandquoi éditions, Art y es-tu ?, 2003, onzième double page (album non paginé).

The artists thus might consider the collection's dedication to fabricating these books over a long period something of an awakening, made possible via the museum and collection director's permanent revitalization of the works. It is from this perspective that we believe we should understand the exhibition displaying Claude-Hubert Tatot's collection at the Villa Bernasconi in 2002. In the bedrooms and salons of a Genevese villa, these artists were invited to present something "related to" the books they had created. The idea behind the exhibition was not to simply show originals or the artists' sketches and notebooks, but to dare the artists once again to enter unfamiliar terrain, and to see, collectively now, how their artworks might play and replay off of each other. Jean-Luc Verna decided on transferring his work to the wall; Le Gentil Garçon went with the same idea as before (using his "Supergribouillepen," a felt-tip drawing made without lifting a hand), but now applied it to create very different images; John Armleder offered to display works that were not paint drippings, as he had done in the picture book, but rather to make a gesture that would create a link between the collection's artists and the venue, by creating a tapestry for the walls. The exhibition acted as a new invitation to experiment, a new building block to add to the collection. Thus, a book collection sparked by museum exhibitions turned back from the books to the exhibition space once more.

The museum's creation of such a collection constitutes, from the artists' point of view, a project that goes far beyond the goals of distributing their artwork. It serves to make the museum a force of theoretical inquiry (addressing both the public and the artists), in asking the twofold question about their artworks' relation toward the child and about child-

hood within their work. This line of inquiry should be put into perspective in relation to MAMCO's overall approach: the museum actually organized its exhibition cycles around proposed issues (the cycle that kicked off its opening, for example, in 1994, was entitled "Rudiments d'un musée possible") and invited artists to design museum spaces for their work based on themes and issues evoked by the museum.³¹ The "Art y-es-tu?" collection thus participated in constructing a museum process, one engaged in permanently revitalizing the artwork, as was the case elsewhere in the museum—in the exhibition sequences, in Christian Bernard's reimplementation of certain exhibitions, in re-performances,³² etc. We might consider this collection of books, therefore, to be an active and ongoing extension of MAMCO.

"Art y-es-tu?" A Question Addressed to Multiple Recipients

This collection, with its modest appearance and its second-place position compared to the rest of the artists' work, or else a secondary one (and perhaps precisely for this reason), opens a fertile transition space, both for children and the artists. Here children are invited to discover a different set of images and narratives, multiple contemporary practices (installations, materials, fabrics, etc.), the playful experience of deep-diving into an artist's work, and even the possibility of critically distancing themselves from certain clichés of childhood culture. The artists, meanwhile, enjoy the space that a picture book provides, which is both that of a book and that of an unfamiliar territory. They're given the opportunity, in a roundabout way, to come and touch a nodal point of the creation, to reexamine the question of childhood through the complex and fertile links made by their own works. One of the strengths of this publishing project is moreover the unique relationship that the collection director was able to make with MAMCO. Here the museum has a discreet presence; the project's source does not spring from patrimonial authority. In a subtle manner, this publishing collection seems linked to the "spirit of the place." It brings a new approach to children's books, involving the relationship to art and artists, an approach developed through Christian Bernard's innovative museum project. Yet in doing so, it also expands MAMCO by opening a new space for research and artwork. Furthermore, the positioning of this publishing project seems to accurately coincide with the identity of MAMCO.

The question "Art y-es-tu?" seems therefore to be a shared question, asked to children, to all readers, to artists, and to the museum itself. More than that, it is here, within

31 In 1994, Christian Bernard asked a series of artists to design what their ideal final exhibition room might be for MAMCO (Bernard, "Interview with V. Mavridorakis," Parvu et al).

32 In 2001, for example, someone proposed "new museum hangings in which the museum would take fragmented bits of older exhibitions since 1994 and repurpose them in an original way" (Bovier (ed.), 2017, 343). In 2018, eight students from the Haute École de Design de Genève proposed, under the direction of Émilie Parendeau, a new rendition of performances by the Écart group (1969-1982), founded in Geneva in 1969 around J. Armleder (<https://www.hesge.ch/head/evnement/2018/performances-ecart-au-mamco>, accessed on 26 August 2022).

this very question, that the encounter between artists and children takes place, at the heart of these books. Or more precisely still, it is above all in the space that this question breaks open where artists and children are able to come together. Thus, to conclude without truly concluding, perhaps it is now our turn to break open this collection of children's artist books, beginning by rewriting the well-known nursery rhyme hidden in its title: "Art y-es-tu?", "Enfant m'entends-tu?", "Enfance, viens-tu?", "Musée, relances-tu?" ("Art are you there?" "Child, do you hear me?" "Childhood, are you coming?" "Museum, can you repeat?")

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