SELF-GUIDING BOOKLET

ENGLISH VERSION

FRAC

GRAND LARGE — HAUTS-DE-FRANCE

3

CLAUDE
COURTECUISSE

Claude Courtecuisse was trained in design, and later became interested in sculpture and photography. He belonged to the first acquisition committee that acquired works for the FRAC Grand Large collection (FRAC Nord Pas de Calais at the time). He was engaged with the building and opening of the FRAC, developing a specific interest in the concept of design. Thanks to Claude Courtecuisse and numerous worthy successors, FRAC Grand Large owns a wealthy public collection of international design dating back from the 1960's. Claude Courtecuisse started his career as an independant Designer, working in collaboration with the most famous editors. His pieces explore the diversity of materials made available by industrialization's progress.

Through his work, he renewed the use of tubular structures introduced by the Bauhaus in the 1920's and brought them back in fashion towards the end of the 1960's. He was a pioneer of cardboard furniture, and also designed coffee tables, chairs and seats for children as well as colourfull wall decorations in collaboration with Agnès Courtecuisse. Solea, his famous chair designed in 1971, is a technical revolution. Made from a mold injected with plastic, the design allowed for wide scale production and was available in a variety of colours . The chair is also stackable. Sold in stores such as Le Printemps or Prisunic in the 1960's (Prisunic was a popular French store chain created in 1931), his furniture and lamps became popular with a large audience.

Nevertheless, from the 1970's, Claude Courtecuisse decided to stop working within industrial constraints. He began writing books about the theory of design, worked on art installations in natural lands-capes and created commissioned works. His works started revealing an interest in the concept of Object and its social use.

Rather than going towards innovation, he focused on a more modest goal : repurposing. To him, innovation was Modernity's utopia. Courtecuisse used ordinary objects, trinkets, or scraps of different materials, stacked them together into a precarious and original way in order to take photographies of them.
His series create a specific visual rythm, bringing about a sense of burlesque in still life art.

The playful perspectives and the transparency of his sculptures and drawings testify of the freedom of his tone of expression. For the first time, design and assemblage of objects come together in order to explore the world from a poetic and social viewpoint.

This exhibition was presented at le FRAC after a previous exhibition, « Détours d'objets, exposition-atelier pour le jeune public », at the Centre Pompidou in 2007, in collaboration with loans from La Piscine – Musée d'art et d'industrie André Diligent as well as the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris. In partnership with Lille Métropole 2020 - Capitale Mondiale du Design. Fabien Delbarre Gallerie 9 in Lille, simultaneously presents « Claude Courtecuisse – Dessins » from October 2 to 31 2020.

BIOGRAPHY

A graduate of the Ecole des Art Appliqués (1957) and the Ecole Normale Supérieure, Cachan (1962), Claude Courtecuisse began his career as an independant designer. In 1970, he began teaching at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Lille and was the director from 1987 to 1989. During these two years, Courtecuisse also became a member of the Comité Technique d'Aquisition (Acquisition Committee) of the FRAC Grand Large. He was General Inspector to Artistic Teachings in the Ministère de la Culture (Cultural Ministry) until 1992. Simultaneously, he gave lectures and was the pedagogical adviser to the Ecole Camondo, a private Architecture and Interieur design school in Paris (1988-2007). He was also a senior lecturer at the Olivier de Serre School, Paris and E.N.S Cachan between 1994 and 2001.

MODERN AND POETIC CAIRNS*
FROM ORDINARY OBJECTS

*Artificial pile of stones or rocks, often found along hiking trails to pinpoint a specific viewpoint or landscape.

Entering Claude Courtecuisse's exhibition means coming into the world of a unique artist. All types of artmaking are explored here : design, photography, drawing and sculpture. At the heart of this abundant universe is the concept of objects from daily life or ordinary objects that drive the vocabulary of his art. The vast number of photographs give evidence of the predominant status given to objects by the artist. The public is immersed in a familiar and yet confusing atmosphere thanks to the diversity of settings, manipulations and reinterpretations of objects. Claude Courtecuisse is indeed playful! He displays new sculptural shapes and vertical accumulations of objects in his serial constructions.

Behind the structure of the square format photography, invariably displaying 35 images, daily routine seems to be shaped and transformed into a joyful mess that finds a precarious balance. Plastic cups become colourful scuptures, plastic toys and memorabilia invade the world on a huge scale and colanders and pans produce quirky metal cairns.
Even Lenin has a dedicated place in the artist's reinvention of the day-to-day. Daily life seems to come from a new imagination. Behind the colour and shape variations, the artist is determined to bewitch our daily lives and offers a genuine look on what we thought we knew. Poetry is all around us, waiting to be caught and appreciated.

PLASTIC IS FANTASTIC !

The 1960's are prosperous years for the French economy and industry. In a mutating country, society as a whole is being reshaped. Plastic, then a new material, is put under the spotlight of technical and industrial innovation. From the most basic objects to the most ambitious architectural projects, new methods of production experiment with plastic towards a more diverse industrial horizon. Plastic becomes a « hit material », used at the time without moderation and without ecological consideration.
Claude Courtecuisse's first design pieces naturally blend into this optimistic context. His work confers a new way of thinking about our urban lifestyles. Time for youth and novelty!

In 1968, a revolutionary year in France, Courtecuisse designs *Mercurio*, redefining the concept of the seat in many ways.
The injected plastic shell of this seat enables a curvier aesthetic, parting with a traditional seat's forms.
This new method allowed for industrial scale production. While undeniably a success, *Mercurio* will undergo a second version, this time using another new production technique: thermoforming.
Apollo, the fireside chair, materializes the idea of an open and inclusive design, inviting the most modest households to join in the adventure of modernity.

Made of synthetic leather and chrome-plated steel, its simple style combined with easy storage possibilities led Apollo to be featured in the Prisunic catalogue, which was at the time a major reference for contemporary and affordable design. (*Prisunic* was a popular French store chain created in 1931. The last store closed down in 2003.)

NEVER BORED WITH CARDBOARD !

In 1967, Courtecuisse undertakes a crazy project: using cardboard as the prime material of a design piece.
What does cardboard represent to the collective subconscious?
It epitomizes the notion of ephemeral, poverty, not aesthetically pleasing. It's used to protect rather than being protected. Cardboard has unexpected qualities but has often been overlooked even though it's omnipresent in our lives.

Indeed, its lightweightness and fragility become an asset.
By interlocking cardboard slabs, Claude Courtecuisse created something new in the structure. It can resist strong pressure and keep its inherent lightness at the same time.
Another key quality is the production cost of cardboard, which is so low that it can be manufactured at affordable prices.
Last but not least is the aesthetic. How does one accentuate the shape of such a material? The artist is mostly showcasing the assembly method by creating a raw ensemble.
In order to underline the modernity of the work, long strips of colours have been added. They create a visual identity and visual coherence to the whole collection.

In association with these last pieces, the *Lampe Cube* (1970) sheds light on Courtecuisse's interest in modern forms.
The accumulation of wires under plexiglass is a clear reference to Arman's work with the accumulation of objects in the 1960's. His collaboration with Agnès Courtecuisse for their multiples has paved the way for cardboard to enter the realm of Art.

THE ADVENTURE OF DRAWING

Claude Courtecuisse's drawings, dating back to the 1980's, are a reminder of his primary interest in technical drawing going back to his classical training years at the Ecole des Arts Appliqués in Paris. His drawing practice is a fundamental element in the way he gives form to his ideas, as well as his ability to follow the strict laws of geometry and physics. However, the artist's abundant imagination and eagerness to break the rules that he knows so well, confront and disrupt the work.

This is how Courtecuisse measures up to the French and Italian Renaissance's masters. Indeed, his strong knowledge of painting of that time allows him to play with and select architectural elements from the Renaissance's famous paintings in order to submit them to his own rules and the law of axonometric perspective.
This method demands precision and technical abilities: the different segments that create the objects are transcribed in a new direction in order create the illusion of volume.

Claude Courtecuisse works with surprising dimensions.
The transfer onto plexiglass turns these architectural objects into ghosts from the past coming back to life.
The same process is applied to ordinary objects : their gigantic dimension is a provocation to "high culture". The drawings that copy his stacks of objects contrast with the three dimensional pieces. Facing majestic arenas, temples and other buildings symbolising power, the accumulation of juicers, cups and saucers appears as equal. The reality of daily life is idealised and propelled into a collective psyche just as Rafaello or Da Vinci's works have been.

LIGHTNESS AND GRAVITY

Courtecuisse's sculpture series evokes the artist's sensitivity for experimenting with material and his natural taste for design, which are the driving forces of his creativity.
His sculptures play with a very colourful aesthetic as a reminder of Ettore Sottsass' « Memphis » movement. Design takes a new direction, with unprecedented outbursts of colour and lines.

The decorative aspect of the « flexibles » underlines the artist's work about stability and balance. These considerations are essential in his design as well as his sculpting process, and influence his other works, like his photography series.

These works were commissioned by the city of Orylet Herouville-Saint-Clair in the 1990's. Courtecuisse set out to rediscover the urban landscape, which led him to create mobile pieces that challenge our perception of public spaces and play with mathematic laws. The artist reveals his mastery of classical training, which can be seen in these subtle pieces. With these smaller versions, Courtecuisse proves that "even lightness is subject to gravity."

THE ADVENTURE OF MODERNITY

The collection of chairs *Monobloc Soléa* perfectly illustrates Courtecuisse's take on the "Trente Glorieuses" (literally the "Glorious Thirty", referring to the time between the 1950s and the end of the 1970s). It was a time of prosperity for France, marked by a strong determination to embrace modernity, and domestic, urban and rural transformation.

Monobloc Solea epitomizes Courtecuisse's eagerness for new production methods by introducing a new form of seat and a technological revolution with the process of thermoforming. Unlike his previous work made of injected plastic, thermoforming make the procedure lighter and results in more rapid production. The futuristic look of the piece, playing with full and empty spaces punctuated by grooves is entirely dependent on this manufacturing process. The original aesthetic of the chair comes from the moulding process of the seat and the way the material is formed in a vacuum.

This technological prowess was remarked upon at the 1971 Salon des artists *décorateurs* (Decorative Artists Show).
The furniture manufacturer Steiner, anticipating the future, naturally includes *Soléa* in their collection of products showcasing plastic and modern forms.
The television industry also shows an interest in Steiner's catalogue featuring *Unibloc I*, a piece by Roger Landault, in the science fiction show Cosmos 99.

SHADOW AND LIGHT

In the darkness of the exhibition room, like a ghost, is cast the shadow of actor Terence Stamp. A seat is in the room; its lines are also ghost-like. Like a déjà-vu, we put the pieces together.
The structure recalls *Mercurio* (1968) however, splashes of bright colours contrast with the general look of the seat.
Looking closely, the printed elements act as reminders of the notion of stability.

The chair *Theorema* (1968) becomes projection screen as well as subject of experimentation, like a visual testimony of change. The object establishes new rules by breaking the boundaries between art and design.
Terence Stamp's face evokes the ephebic character he played in the film *Theoreme* by Pier Paolo Pasolini – a strong character that questions a bourgeois Italian family at the dawn of the social class revolution of 1968.

Unable to be labelled because it is unique, *Theorema* embodies the diversity of Claude Courtecuisse's references in the field of design, and his intense reflections on past and future realities.
He also plays with immateriality in his plexiglass towers, which become light interfaces that materialize as fragilely balanced sculptures, reminding us of Courtecuisse's axonometric drawings from the 1990's as well as his stacks of ordinary objects.
Between light and shadow, surrounded by imaginative architecture and artworks, such as the seat, the ordinary object turns into a memory of the past, an embodiment of the present, and finally, the certainty of a utopian future where imagination seems to have found a favourable setting.