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EXHIBITION

PRESS KIT

EXHIBITION

January 15 → March 13, 2021

Gianni Pettena  
"Forgiven by Nature"

La Verrière x ISELP  
Brussels (Belgium)

"Matters of Concern |  
Matières à penser"

Curator  
Guillaume Désanges



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Gianni Pettena, *About Non-Conscious Architecture* (detail),  
1972–1973, photographic series, courtesy of the artist and  
Salle Principale, Paris © Studio Gianni Pettena

# PRESS RELEASE

For the sixth exhibition in the series “Matters of Concern | Matières à panser”, curator Guillaume Désanges presents “Forgiven by Nature”, a solo exhibition by Italian artist and architect **Gianni Pettena**, to be held at La Verrière – the Brussels art space of the Fondation d’entreprise Hermès – and ISELP\*, from January 15 to March 13, 2021.

“With his roots in the Florentine scene, Gianni Pettena is a leading member of the Radical Architecture movement (including groups such as Archizoom, Superstudio and UFO), founded in Italy in 1965 to rethink the foundational principles of architecture, and to critique their normalisation and dominance in practice. The movement sought to challenge the ‘imperative to build’, and to replace it with conceptual, artistic alternatives: free-thinking, imaginative new ways to live in the world. For Gianni Pettena, especially, this re-visioning of the principles of his discipline was expressed as a quest for the ‘primal roots’ of architecture, based on open and mindful observation of nature, both wild and tamed. At the beginning of the 1970s, his journeys through the deserts of the American south-west defined the bedrock of a personal output that was both concrete and reflective, material and ideal. This awareness of the ‘natural’ architectural potential of ecosystems untouched by Western industrialised culture gave rise to numerous solo and group projects, installations, actions, performances and designs, together with sculptures, films and texts, both theory-based and intuitive, some of which were realised, others not: the key elements of his uncategorisable, highly original work. As an architect who does not build, an artist who makes nothing, Pettena’s diverse practices are nonetheless underpinned by a coherent matrix of forms and concerns.”

Guillaume Désanges (extract, full text below)

## VISITOR INFORMATION

Exhibition open from January 15 to March 13, 2021

### **La Verrière**

50, boulevard de Waterloo  
1000 Brussels (Belgium)

Admission free, Tuesday to Saturday, noon to 6 p.m.  
Guided visit, Saturdays at 3 p.m.

### **ISELP**

31, boulevard de Waterloo  
1000 Brussels (Belgium)

Admission free, Tuesday to Saturday,  
11 a.m. to 6 p.m.



# ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

## “Forgiven by Nature”

With his roots in the Florentine scene, Gianni Pettena is a leading member of the Radical Architecture movement (including groups such as Archizoom, Superstudio and UFO), founded in Italy in 1965 to rethink the foundational principles of architecture, and to critique their normalisation and dominance in practice. The movement sought to challenge the “imperative to build”, and to replace it with conceptual, artistic alternatives: free-thinking, imaginative new ways to live in the world. For Gianni Pettena, especially, this re-visioning of the principles of his discipline was expressed as a quest for the “primal roots” of architecture, based on open and mindful observation of nature, both wild and tamed. At the beginning of the 1970s, his journeys through the deserts of the American south-west defined the bedrock of a personal output that was both concrete and reflective, material and ideal.

This awareness of the “natural” architectural potential of ecosystems untouched by Western industrialised culture gave rise to numerous solo and group projects, installations, actions, performances and designs, together with sculptures, films and texts, both theory-based and intuitive, some of which were realised, others not: the key elements of his uncategorisable, highly original work. As an architect who does not build, an artist who makes nothing, Pettena’s diverse practices are nonetheless underpinned by a coherent matrix of forms and concerns. From the perpetual metamorphosis of houses cased entirely in ice or earth to a wooden structure designed to catch tumbleweed (bowled along by the wind in the American desert) and thus form a gigantic “plant-building”; photographs of the landscape and vernacular buildings, titled “Unconscious architectures”; the displacement of an interior wall to “allow it to breathe”; a water tower disappearing beneath a living mail-coat of flowers, or a gallery completely covered in branches and foliage: each piece offers an unprecedented sensory and conceptual experience. Simple interventions alter reality, undermine our standardised vision of the world and turn established orders on their head, to propose fleeting, critical, utopian imagery in their place. Pettena’s is an “expanded” or “augmented” architectural practice, liberated and (above all) liberating, as it plies the open waters between activism, art and poetry.

As the latest guest artist in the season “Matters of Concern | Matières à panser” – his first solo exhibition in Belgium – Gianni Pettena presents a project in two parts. Under the glass roof of La Verrière, a selection of objects, models, photographs, drawings, documents, films and installations narrates the artist’s generous, hybrid practice and captures the essence of his rebellious, idealistic, playful work, its perennially witty, subversive yet emotional register. Part sensory experience, part documentary retrospective, the exhibition reactivates a selection of past works at scale, including the *Human Wall*<sup>1</sup>, a wall of clay imprinted with finger-marks that gradually disappear; and *Paesaggi della memoria*<sup>2</sup>, an idealised reconstitution of the mountain landscapes of his childhood.

Just a few metres from La Verrière, on the same side of Boulevard de Waterloo, in Brussels, a large installation fills the show-space at ISELP (Institut Supérieur pour l’Etude du Langage Plastique). *Paper (Midwestern Ocean)*<sup>3</sup> lines the galleries with strips of white paper to be cut with scissors by viewers, creating their own space and itinerary. Conceived as a shared experience for a US university conference in 1971, the immersive installation inverts our perception of architecture, making the interior of the building invisible, and facilitating its reappropriation by its anonymous users, independent of any external, predetermined concept. The piece is a critical examination of “architectural authority”, and a powerful, sensory encounter.

“Matters of concern | Matières à panser” is built around a conceptual ecology: the presentation of alternative practices that challenge dominant modes of production and explore the spiritual, political or therapeutic function of raw materials in art. From a curatorial standpoint, Gianni Pettena’s participation in the series quickly emerged as evident and necessary. Because there is properly an “ecology” of work and thought underpinning his emphasis on observation over production, attentive mindfulness over theory, gestures over objects, and precarity over immutability. Pettena’s relationship to the landscape – at the heart of his practice – is invariably furtive, discreet, expressed in projects that are often ephemeral, reversible, wholly documentary, or imagined. This cerebral architecture – though no less lacking in form, or seductiveness, or experienced physicality – offers an original way to rethink our need for new ways of relating to the living world, in art and elsewhere. Gianni Pettena’s work has close connections to a current of radical theory that sought to “liberate mankind from architectural construction” (Andrea Branzi).

But it also owes a subtle debt to the counterculture of the 1960s and early 1970s (the hippy movement, pacifism, utopianism), in which the environment was a central concern. As an early adopter of the need to “learn from nature” rather than tame it, his work may be viewed with hindsight as a pioneering critique of the effects of the Anthropocene, the often indelible trace of human presence and activity in modern ecosystems, of which architecture and urban planning are the visible emanation. But, beyond this critique – which is never a head-on confrontation –, Pettena’s work is characterised by its focus on learning, and the transmission of know-how between disciplines, cultures and the “kingdoms” of nature. His mineral or plant-based architectures express the symbolic connection between nature and culture, delegating their forms and outcomes to the wind, time and the seasons. Building is no longer an act of insulation from the surrounding scene, but a conductive gesture, conceived not as protection from the vagaries of the weather, but rather as an expression of indebtedness to them.

It is perhaps in his perpetual challenge to the hierarchies of traditional and technicist architectural practices, or the vernacular and the universal, even art and architecture *per se*, that Pettena’s work resonates most closely with the defining spirit of this season of exhibitions. Echoing the nomad lifestyles that have influenced him so strongly, Pettena has always viewed his career as quintessentially mobile, unfixed and slippery, adapting and transforming as the context requires. Artist, architect, teacher, theorist, he did not set out to accumulate his many functions, nor to pass from one to the next like some great demiurge, but rather to cultivate a constant ambiguity, to resist definition, eschew order and assignation. In his famous, seminal text *L’anarchitetto: Portrait of the artist as a young architect*<sup>4</sup>, Gianni Pettena defines himself as an “anarchitect” rather than an anti-architect – a fundamental distinction that points to a creative condition, a way of life, rather than a “status” as such.

We know how easy it is for a critique of a system to become another system, issuing judgements and prescriptions of its own. But Pettena’s gestures and experiences are never conclusive; projects are never based on clear propositions,



Gianni Pettena, *Ice House I*, 1971, installation, Minneapolis (United States), courtesy of the artist and Salle Principale, Paris © Studio Gianni Pettena

but invariably remain open to the viewer’s interpretation. Just as the original participants in the installation *Paper (Midwestern Ocean)* had to find their way through a forest of paper, so Pettena’s work as a whole is an invitation to find our own path through an ensemble of images, plans, filmed shots, and real or fictional situations, whose meaning is forever held in suspense. This refusal of a discursive or (literally) “edifying” position is more deeply rooted in an urge to defuse the charge of the dominant author/messenger, or rather to dissolve the maker/creator in the experience, like the physical disappearance of Pettena himself – so often staged in his performances, films or photographic projects, as we watch him evaporate on contact with water.

The only building Pettena has ever made is a kind of cabin-dwelling on the island of Elba. More than the making of the built structure, the work has been a personal and collective process evolving over an extended period of time, like a private journal, using recycled natural materials found in situ. The very presence of the house in Pettena’s life story – shattering his heroic status as the “architect who doesn’t build” – is itself a magnificent demonstration of how his critical practice, for all its radicality, does not relinquish making, but rather stakes a claim to alternative ways of making. In this sense, there is materiality and physicality, of a kind, in Pettena’s work. The approach is not so much anti-architectural as a self-reflexive means of living with, and in the practice of, architecture. In the same way, the artist’s relationship to the desert is not a negation of human culture, but a recognition that these spaces – inhabited against all odds – can engender new ways of living, based on the necessity of cohabitation with the unique topography of each place, a skill and an art that Western modernity has forgotten.



Gianni Pettena, *The Craft of the Architect*, 2002, performance, Maiano (Florence, Italy), courtesy of the artist and Salle Principale, Paris © Studio Gianni Pettena



Gianni Pettena, *My House on Elba*, 1978–2007, Viticcio (Elba Island), courtesy of the artist and Salle Principale, Paris © Studio Gianni Pettena



Gianni Pettena, *My House on Elba*, 1978–2007, Viticcio (Elba Island), courtesy of the artist and Salle Principale, Paris © Studio Gianni Pettena

“Matters of Concern | Matières à panser” is guided by a desire to listen to the ideas behind things, and to embrace a wider perspective on the world. This is what Gianni Pettena has always done and continues to do. His practice is “radical”, not in the contemporary sense of a specific finality or outlook, but (on the contrary) in the true, etymological sense: it is “rooted”. With the potential to sprout new growth, and new artistic genealogies.

Text by Guillaume Désanges

1. Gianni Pettena, *Human Wall*, 2012, installation, Federico Luger (FL Gallery), Milan.
2. Gianni Pettena, *Paesaggi della memoria*, 1987, installation, *Il ritorno dell'arte. Viaggio all'interno della dimensione mediterranea*, Castello di Otranto, (Lecce).
3. Gianni Pettena, *Paper (Midwestern Ocean)*, 1971, performance-installation, Minneapolis College of Art and Design, Minneapolis.
4. Gianni Pettena, *L'anarchitetto: Portrait of the artist as a young architect*, Guaraldi, 1973.

# GIANNI PETTENNA



Portrait of Gianni Pettena  
© Studio Gianni Pettena

## Biography

Gianni Pettena was born in Bolzano, Italy, in 1940. He lives and works in Fiesole, near Florence. He was a founding member of Radical Architecture, an Italian movement (together with Archizoom, Superstudio and UFO) that has had a lasting impact on architecture and design. Pettena brings a wider perspective to the practice of architecture, using conceptual art and rhetorical political discourse to analyse the transformation of public space. He has been an active player on the Italian architectural and design scene since his days as an architecture student in Florence, in the 1960s. Shortly after graduating, he was invited to work as artist in residence at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design in Minnesota, and subsequently at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City. His deep engagement with the philosophy of art, architecture and design has led him to teach at institutions including London's Architectural Association and California State University Florence's Architecture Program. His manifesto *L'anarchitetto: Portrait of the artist as a young architect*, published in 1973 (Guaraldi, Rimini), has influenced generations of artists and architects. In it, Pettena refuses to accept the established boundaries between disciplines and defines himself as an "anarchitect", for whom talking about architecture spotlights a creative condition that is predisposed to make architecture, but whose ultimate goal is engendering new ways of living. Pettena's work is notable for its distinctive matrix of tools and topics, including the use of language, the relationship to nature and context, the interface between reality and reproduction. Gianni Pettena is represented by the gallery Salle Principale in Paris (France) and the gallery Giovanni Bonelli in Milan (Italy).

## Selected recent solo and group exhibitions

- 2019**  
"Wearable chairs", performance, FIAC Hors les Murs, Paris (France).
- 2018**  
"Le permis de penser", Galerie Salle Principale, Paris (France).  
"MURALNOMAD", Le Quadrilatère, Beauvais (France).  
"Starting from the desert. Ecologies on the edge", Yinchuan Biennale, Museum of Contemporary Art, Yinchuan (China).  
"Writing the mountains", Biennale Gherdëina VI, Ortisei (Italy).
- 2017**  
"Gianni Pettena. About non-conscious architecture", Galleria Giovanni Bonelli, Milan (Italy).  
"INTÉRIEURS. Une œuvre chez moi. Imprisonment, Gianni Pettena", Collège Geneviève de Gaulle-Anthonioz, Les Bordes (France).  
"Architetture Naturali. Gianni Pettena", Kunst Meran-Merano Arte, Merano (Italy).
- 2016**  
"Gianni Pettena. Paper-Midwestern Ocean (1971–2016)", FRAC Lorraine, Metz (France).  
"Un Art pauvre", Centre Pompidou, Paris (France).  
"La ville au loin", FRAC Centre, Orléans (France).
- 2015**  
"Relief(s) – Designing the Horizon", FRAC Centre, Orléans (France).  
"Creativa Produzione. La Firenze e le avanguardie radicali. Progetti, azioni, super-visioni, oggetti extra", Le Murate. Progetti d'Art contemporain, Florence (Italy).  
"Allures", FRAC Centre, Orléans (France).
- 2014**  
"Architecture ondoyante", FRAC Lorraine, Metz (France).  
"Soleil politique. Il museo tra luce e ombra", Museion, Bolzano (Italy).  
"Beyond environment", Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, Los Angeles (USA).  
"Cheese, please", Centre des Monuments Nationaux, Château d'Oiron (France).

# PRESS IMAGES

Hi-def visuals are available for download at:  
[www.fondationdentreprisehermes.org/en/press-room](http://www.fondationdentreprisehermes.org/en/press-room)  
(password on request)



Gianni Pettena, *Human Wall*, 2012, installation, Federico Luger (FL Gallery), Milan (Italy), courtesy of the artist and Salle Principale, Paris © Antonio Maniscalco



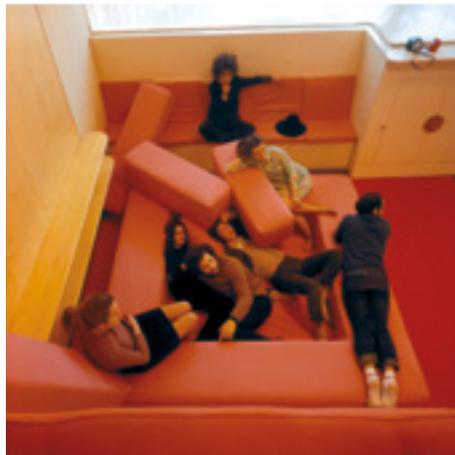
Gianni Pettena, *Paper (Midwestern Ocean)*, 1971, performance-installation, Minneapolis College of Art and Design, Minneapolis (United States), courtesy of the artist and Salle Principale, Paris © Studio Gianni Pettena



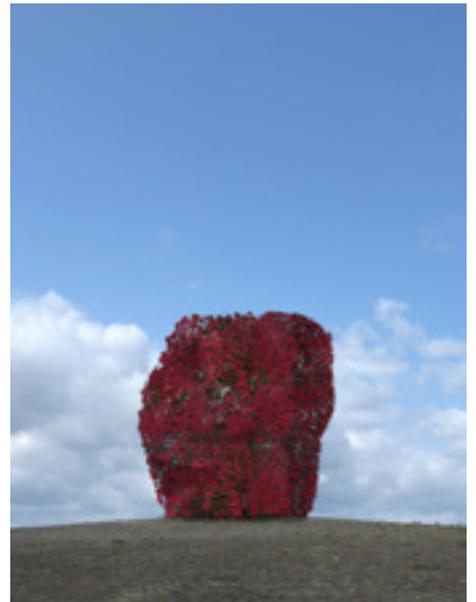
Gianni Pettena, *Paper*, 2017, Galleria Giovanni Bonelli, Milan (Italy), courtesy of the artist and Salle Principale, Paris © Laura Fantacuzzi



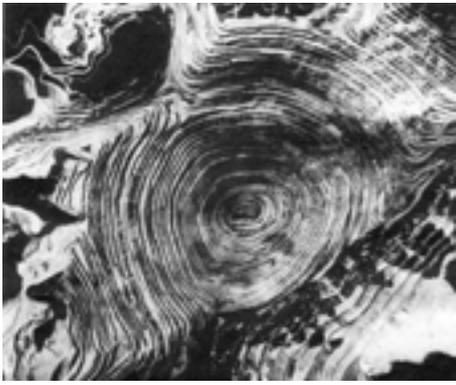
Gianni Pettena, *"Rumble" couch*, 1967, courtesy of the artist and Salle Principale, Paris © Aurelio Amendola



Gianni Pettena, *"Rumble" couch*, 1967, courtesy of the artist and Salle Principale, Paris © Aurelio Amendola



Gianni Pettena, *Architecture Forgiven by Nature*, 2017, permanent installation, Brufa (Perugia, Italy), courtesy of the artist and Salle Principale, Paris © Studio Gianni Pettena



Gianni Pettena, *About Non-Conscious Architecture*, 1972–1973, photographic series, courtesy of the artist and Salle Principale, Paris © Studio Gianni Pettena



Gianni Pettena, *About Non-Conscious Architecture*, 1972–1973, photographic series, courtesy of the artist and Salle Principale, Paris © Studio Gianni Pettena



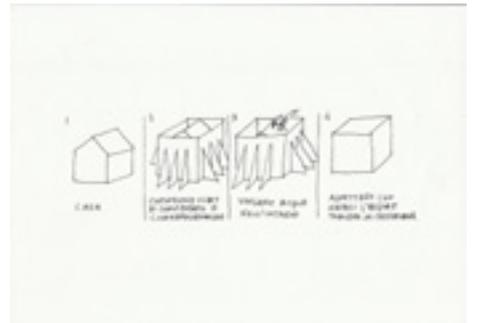
Gianni Pettena, *About Non-Conscious Architecture*, 1972–1973, photographic series, courtesy of the artist and Salle Principale, Paris © Studio Gianni Pettena



Gianni Pettena, *Ice House I*, 1971, installation, Minneapolis (United States), courtesy of the artist and Salle Principale, Paris © Studio Gianni Pettena



Gianni Pettena, *Ice House I*, 1971, installation, Minneapolis (United States), courtesy of the artist and Salle Principale, Paris © Studio Gianni Pettena



Gianni Pettena, *Project for Ice House II*, 1971, drawing, courtesy of the artist and Salle Principale, Paris © Studio Gianni Pettena



Gianni Pettena, *Clay House*, 1972, installation, Salt Lake City (Utah, United States), courtesy of the artist and Salle Principale, Paris © Studio Gianni Pettena



Gianni Pettena, *Clay House*, 1972, installation, Salt Lake City (Utah, United States), courtesy of the artist and Salle Principale, Paris © Studio Gianni Pettena



Gianni Pettena, *Landscapes of Memory*, 1987, installation, from the exhibition "The Return of Art. Journey into the Mediterranean Dimension", Castello Aragonese, Otranto (Lecce, Italy), courtesy of the artist and Salle Principale, Paris © Studio Gianni Pettena



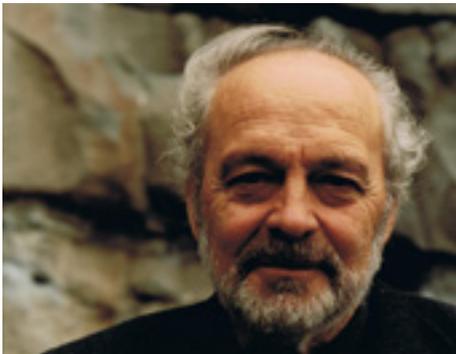
Gianni Pettena, *Architecture + Nature*, 2011, courtesy of the artist and Salle Principale, Paris © Studio Gianni Pettena



Gianni Pettena, *Breathing Architecture*, 2012–2013, courtesy of the artist and Salle Principale, Paris © Antonio Maniscalco



Gianni Pettena, *Breathing Architecture*, 2012–2013, courtesy of the artist and Salle Principale, Paris © Antonio Maniscalco



Portrait of Gianni Pettena  
© Studio Gianni Pettena



Portrait of Gianni Pettena  
© Studio Gianni Pettena

# “MATTERS OF CONCERN | MATIÈRES À PANSER”

## About the series

Launched by Guillaume Désanges at La Verrière in spring 2019, this series of exhibitions celebrates the resurgence of materiality in art, from an emerging symbolic, animist, ethnographical, fetishistic and therapeutic or magical perspective, as a critical alternative to the increasing dematerialisation of our dominant economic paradigm. Referencing “other” thinking and practice at the heart of contemporary society and beyond, the series focuses on modes of attention and curiosity that subtly undermine the accepted categories and disciplines of contemporary art.

“Matters of Concern | Matières à panser” is the third series of themed exhibitions presented at La Verrière, after “Des gestes de la pensée” (“Thought as gesture”, 2013–2016) and “Poésie balistique” (“Ballistic Poetry”, 2016–2019).



View of the exhibition “Matters of Concern | Matières à panser”, La Verrière, Brussels, 2019. © Isabelle Arthuis / Fondation d'entreprise Hermès

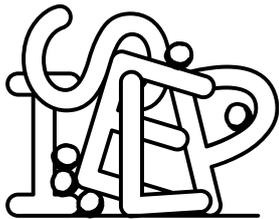
## Guillaume Désanges

Guillaume Désanges is an exhibition curator, art critic, and director of the independent production group Work Method. He develops exhibition projects and conferences worldwide. Recent projects include “Contre-Vents” (2019, Grand Café, Saint-Nazaire), “Spolia” (2018–2019, Grand Café, Saint-Nazaire), “L'Ennemi de mon ennemi” (2018, Palais de Tokyo, Paris), “L'Esprit français. Contre-cultures 1969–1989” (2017, la maison rouge, Paris), “Poésie balistique” (2016–2019, La Verrière, Brussels), “The Méthode Room” (2015, Chicago, USA), “Ma'aminim / Les Croyants” (2015, Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Saint-Denis & Tranzitdisplay, Prague, Czech Republic), “Curated Session #1: The Dora García files” (2014, Perez Art Museum, Miami, USA), “Une exposition universelle”, “section documentaire” (2013, Louvain-la-Neuve Biennale, Belgium) and “Amazing! Clever! Linguistic! An Adventure in Conceptual Art” (2013, Generali Foundation, Vienna, Austria).



Portrait of Guillaume Désanges  
© Isabelle Arthuis

# I SELP



An established Brussels institution for fifty years, I SELP (Institut Supérieur pour l'Etude du Langage Plastique) is an open forum for the contemporary arts, and an artistic and research hub dedicated to new thinking on emerging movements and forms in contemporary art. I SELP is conceived as an alternative, experimental space for dialogue between diverse artistic voices, languages and media. Its future-facing programme is open to a broad spectrum of research and forms: art history, the humanities and social science, "pure" science, literature, photography, painting, sculpture, drawing, video, film, installations, etc. I SELP presents work in multiple formats and spaces: exhibitions, lectures, a library, school workshops, podcasts, extra-mural visits, publications, residencies and more. I SELP is supported by the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, COCOF and Actiris.

## VISITOR INFORMATION

I SELP  
31, boulevard de Waterloo,  
1000 Bruxelles (Belgium)

Admission free, Tuesday to Saturday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Lecture tickets: €6/€4 (students under 26, teachers)

Admission free for I SELP members, job-seekers,  
and the under-18s, Article 27.

[www.iselp.be](http://www.iselp.be)

## LECTURE PROGRAMME

**Wednesday, February 10, 2021**

**6 p.m. to 7.30 p.m.**

**"A whole life. Education at the heart of the Superstudio architecture project"**

By Emmanuelle Chiappone-Piriou

Architect, architectural historian, exhibition curator:

"Superstudio Migrazioni" (CIVA)

**Wednesday, March 3, 2021**

**6 p.m. to 7.30 p.m.**

**"What Gianni Pettena teaches us"**

By Guillaume Désanges

Curator, La Verrière

**Wednesday, March 10, 2021**

**6 p.m. to 7.30 p.m.**

**"Radical – design. Italy 1965–75:  
the architecture of refusal"**

By Beatrice Lampariello

Architect, professor of the history of architecture,

UCLouvain, expert adviser for the exhibition

"Superstudio Migrazioni" (CIVA)



# NEWS HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE FONDATION D'ENTREPRISE HERMÈS

## EXHIBITIONS

### “Sables brûlants”

Opening soon

La Grande Place, Musée du cristal Saint-Louis,  
Saint-Louis-lès-Bitche (France)

### Cyprien Gaillard

Until January 17, 2021

Atelier Hermès, Seoul (Korea)

### Tam Ochiai

#### “Tapetum Lucidum”

January 21 → April 11, 2021

Le Forum, Tokyo (Japan)

## SKILLS ACADEMY 2021

### “Glass”

With programme director

Noé Duchaufour-Lawrance

### Public lectures

Saturday, January 23, 2021

The basics

Saturday, February 13, 2021

Glass: artisanship, art and industry

Saturday, March 13, 2021

Light and transparency I

Saturday, April 10, 2021

Light and transparency II

Saturday, May 1, 2021

Look further, see far, watch closely

Saturday May 29, 2021

A point of view...

Saturday June 26, 2021

Glass in tomorrow's world

## ARTISTS' RESIDENCIES 2020

Bérengère Hénin

at Maroquinerie de l'Allan

Enzo Mianes

at Holding Textile Hermès

Chloé Quenum

at the Cristallerie Saint-Louis

## NEW SETTINGS #10

Until July 3, 2021

Paris and the Paris region (France)

Cindy Van Acker

Ann Van den Broek

Clédat & Petitpierre

Marco da Silva Ferreira & Jorge Jácome

Vincent Dupont

Joris Lacoste, Ictus, Pierre-Yves Macé, Sébastien Roux

Euripides Laskaridis

Ariane Loze

Théo Mercier & Steven Michel

Meg Stuart

Cyril Teste

“Our gestures define us.” Our commitment to this unifying statement drives everything we do at the Fondation d’entreprise Hermès. Put another way, individual actions nurture growth and wellbeing for us all. The Foundation implements nine programmes to support our beneficiaries as they build tomorrow’s world – in creativity and the arts, the transmission of skills and know-how, the preservation of our planet, and social solidarity. Together, these actions reflect our fundamental aims: to cultivate shared intelligence, harness progress for the greater good, and enshrine humanitarian values at the heart of today’s society. Established in 2008, the Fondation d’entreprise Hermès is directed by Annick de Chaunac, and presided by Olivier Fournier.

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