

Global Hip Hop Studies
Volume 3 Numbers 1 & 2

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https://doi.org/10.1386/ghhs_00069_5

MEDIA AND EVENT REVIEWS

HIP-HOP 360: GLOIRE À L'ART DE RUE, CURATED BY FRANÇOIS GAUTRET

Cité de la Musique – Philharmonie de Paris, 221 avenue Jean-Jaurès, 75019 Paris, France, December 2021–July 2022

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In an unprecedented event, the Philharmonie de Paris presented *Hip-Hop 360: Gloire à l'art de rue*, an exhibition dedicated to hip hop culture and its history in France. On display from December 2021 to July 2022, the exhibition was highly anticipated as a large-scale event housed in one of the country's most prestigious musical cultural centres. Encompassing a broad swath of French hip hop culture and a 40-year multifaceted movement including music, dance, graphic arts, photography, fashion and video, *Hip-Hop 360* offered a dynamic interactive aesthetic experience, foregrounding a collaborative approach that incorporated the 'participation of the actors of the movement'. It was accompanied by cultural and scientific events, including a symposium entitled *Cultures Hip Hop: Creation, Legitimation, Patrimonialisation* organized by the Philharmonie de Paris and the fourth European Hiphop Studies Network meeting entitled *Pantheon: Hip-Hop's Global Pathways to Cultural 'Legitimacy'*. As these scientific events underlined, the exhibition further responded to legitimate concerns associated with a 'cultural heritage' ethos, especially as it addressed a culture that public and private institutions often ignore, caricature or scorn. Did *Hip-Hop 360: Gloire à l'art de rue* meet the challenge?

Spread across a roughly 700 m² space, the exhibition was divided into two main sections which were structured into several thematic sub-spaces: a room dedicated to the history of radio; an alcove displaying emblematic vinyl record sleeves from the 1980s and 1990s; a video projection room; a dance cypher space; a reconstructed portion of a graffitied subway train, among others.

The first section, organized chronologically, explored the many aspects of French hip hop via a combination of extant vintage documents including high-quality photographs, posters and event flyers, record sleeves and other significant historical artefacts. Here, the initial stages about the appropriation and incorporation of hip hop culture in Paris in the 1980s were on display, emphasizing a series of national firsts and involving concerts and radio and television broadcasting. This included a profile of the highly influential 1982 New York City Rap Tour, the first international tour of pioneering hip hop musicians, dancers and graffiti artists from New York, which visited several French cities. Additional attention was granted to the first ever televised hip hop show, *HIP HOP*, hosted by the French hip hop icon DJ Sidney on France's TF1 network in 1984. Sophie Bramly, a co-creator of *HIP HOP* and influential photo documentarian of hip hop's nascent era, was also featured; she later went on to create the TV programme *Yo!*, the first European hip hop show to be broadcast on MTV Europe in 1987. Also recognized was the influential radio programme *Le Deenastyle*, airing on Radio Nova in 1988–89. This programme, hosted by the renowned DJ Dee Nasty, focused primarily on the Parisian rap scene and helped launch the career of many prominent French rap artists of the 1990s (NTM, Assassin, MC Solaar, Ministère AMER) and also featured the then influential Lionel D, Nec + Ultra, Iron & Shooz, EJM and M.Widi.

Hip hop's spatial zones were also represented. They included the emblematic dance places of the 1980s (The Grange aux Belles, the Globo) where aspiring dancers could hear and move to hip hop. The exhibition also staged the so-called 'terrain vague La Chapelle', a wasteland located in Paris between Stalingrad and La Chappelle metro stations, where a small bunch of hip hop enthusiasts regularly met. Finally, it recalled the 1980s go-to record and fashion shopping destination, Ticaret, also in the area adjacent to the Stalingrad metro.

Multimedia devices allowed attendees to go beyond a purely visual and static perception: audio headsets offered sound immersion and there were additional projections of contemporaneous broadcasts in a '1980s living room'.

Numerous photographs in this section of the exhibition portrayed US and French artists (involving all hip hop elements) posed together, providing evidence that, even in its formative stages, French hip hop had quickly established a collaborative relationship with its American counterparts and, moreover, was also already developing distinctly French characteristics and home-grown celebrities.

It was, however, in the second section that the exhibition's interactive and scenographic ambitions emerged most profoundly. Organized into four sub-spaces, it was arranged around a vast rotunda offering a 360-degree projection and a sound system of remarkable quality. Truly immersive in scale, this '360 space' featured massive concert video clips as well as dance, human beat-boxing or turntablism performances, and archival photos projected onto the encircling walls. In one visual effect highlighting breaking performances, the images turned to the rotunda's floor; this design presented close-ups of the breakers' footwork, windmills and power moves in a manner that not only suggested the original performance spaces, but also the mythical hip hop performance frame, the *cypher*. Indeed, the space's central floor projection and the room's encircling shape inspired the attendees to physically position themselves into a cypher around the visual images of the breakers, shifting their status from a viewing audience into enlivened and embodied dancers who interacted with the movements on the surrounding projection.

The four peripheral spaces were not to be outdone as several offered interactive options that were more or less successful. In one space, a station offered a quiz designed to test attendees' knowledge of French rap; another space foregrounding graffiti and tagging allowed exhibition patrons to make their mark on a glass surface; the basic fundamentals of sampling and beatmaking were the focus of another space. Only the space displaying hip hop style and fashion (clothes and accessories) did not offer an interactive option.

While the exhibition was quite extensive in terms of hip hop music, it was essentially limited to the 'heroic' period of the 1980s in terms of fashion, tagging, graffiti and hip hop dance. It, thus, reproduced a rather conventional representation of hip hop as a coherent and homogeneous multidisciplinary movement and as a culture essentially centred on rap music in the decades that followed. Similarly, the narrative choices favoured a mainland French and rather Parisian vision of hip hop culture. Thus, we learn little about the locales outside the immediate Paris region (with the welcome exception of Marseille, which is well-represented thanks to the work of photographer Jean-Pierre Maéro) where this culture is also deeply rooted. Nor are the transnational links – between the United States and France, of course, but also between France and the Caribbean, African and European worlds – adequately illuminated. The only departure from this very Franco-French narrative emerged in the portrayal of the close ties that evolved between New York and Paris specifically, which were highlighted in the exhibition's first room and which emphasized the crucial French contributions of such key players (such as Jean Georgakarakos and Bernard Zekrito, founders of the influential Celluloid Records label) in the birth of a global hip hop culture.

This is to suggest that *Hip-Hop 360* did not subvert the framework of the esteemed national musical and museum institution La Philharmonie institution that hosted it, nor did it revise the now conventional historiography of the cultural movement. The narrative it set was essentially national and centralist, with a focus on music and places, times and figures that have become established in the hip hop movement. It also favoured an aestheticization of the past, as the catalogue of the exhibition also demonstrates. Sober, original by its work on the qualities of paper and remarkable by its layout, it focuses on established figures, highlighted by art photographs or brief interviews. Finally, the narrative of the exhibition avoided the major conflicts that have marked hip hop's history, including side-stepping the most obvious political tensions that contemporary hip hop is still confronts (debates over authenticity, racism, sexism, prosecution, mediatic stigmatization and economic exploitation). The only nuance to this observation is that the concert performances chosen for Room 360 highlighted eminently political tracks by Diam ('Marine'), Ideal J ('Hardcore') or Lala & Ce ('Wet [Drippin']').

But the exhibition drew, for French hip hop, all the symbolic benefit that a place like La Philharmonie can offer and it met its stated objective: 'to glorify street art', a motto cleverly borrowed from the Marseille rap group Fonky Family. *Hip-Hop 360* had the merit of imposing at the heart of a major national cultural institution the grand narrative of French hip hop, which has stabilized over the last ten years. This grand narrative is based on an unprecedented patrimonial dynamic, which focuses primarily on a few pioneering actors of hip hop culture in the 1980s and on the successful rap artists of the following decades.

It is perhaps no coincidence that François Gautret was the curator of the exhibition, assisted by Vincent Piolet. A hip hop dancer, Gautret has

1. <https://www.rstyle.fr/>. Accessed 18 December 2022.

previously curated exhibitions with more modest scope, such as *Terrains les lieux mythiques du Hip Hop à Paris* (2016) and *MEMO (La Mémoire du Hip Hop)* (2018) through his arts and culture promotion agency RStyle.¹ Piolet is the author of the well-received 2015 book *Regarde ta jeunesse dans les yeux: La naissance du hip-hop français (1980–90)*, the source and inspiration for a successful TV series *Le Monde de demain*, broadcast in 2022. They both relied on the work of many talented photographers (Yoshi Omori, Willy Vainqueur, David Delaplace, Martine Barrat among them) whose works documented the early years of hip hop and were published or broadcast in the years prior to the exhibition or accompanied it in a new way. Photographers Maï Lucas and Sophie Bramly each published books featuring their rich and detailed photos in tandem with the debut of *Hip-Hop 360*.

As an expansive and immersive event, the exhibition was replete with nuance and detail, from the graffiti covered vitrines and cases in which documents were displayed to the spectacular walls of vinyl records, boom boxes and mixtapes. The exhibition thus succeeded in combining narrative and aesthetic appeal, playful devices and emotional force. It further succeeded in conveying hip hop's cultural sensibilities. The spirited and joyous eclecticism of the second section, full of winks and nudges, contrasted somewhat with the more solemn style of the first, which was devoted exclusively to the 1980s and French hip hop's period of incubation that can also be conceived as a 'heroic' era that is key in the authentication of hip hop in France. The entire *Hip-Hop 360* exhibition, however, exuded an atmosphere of aesthetic and cultural density capable of seducing enthusiasts, regardless of their generation or their preferred art form(s), and arguably confusing the more dilettante onlookers with a certain carefully curated opacity.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Karim Hammou is research fellow at the CNRS, member of the team CSU at the Centre for Sociological and Political Research of Paris (CRESPPA) and co-editor with M. Sonnette-Manouguian of *40 ans de musiques hip-hop en France (40 Years of Hip-Hop Music in France)*, Presses de Sciences po, 2022). His current research agenda deals with the history of racialization in French popular music, the sociology of power relationships in cultural industries and the logics of musical classifications.

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