

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

The 18th Lyon Biennale Has Room for Everything

Catherine Nichols’s exhibition draws on Walter Benjamin and Fluxus, assembling many magnificent works in a show that is ultimately too expansive for its own good

BY MAX ANDREWS | 05 OCT 26



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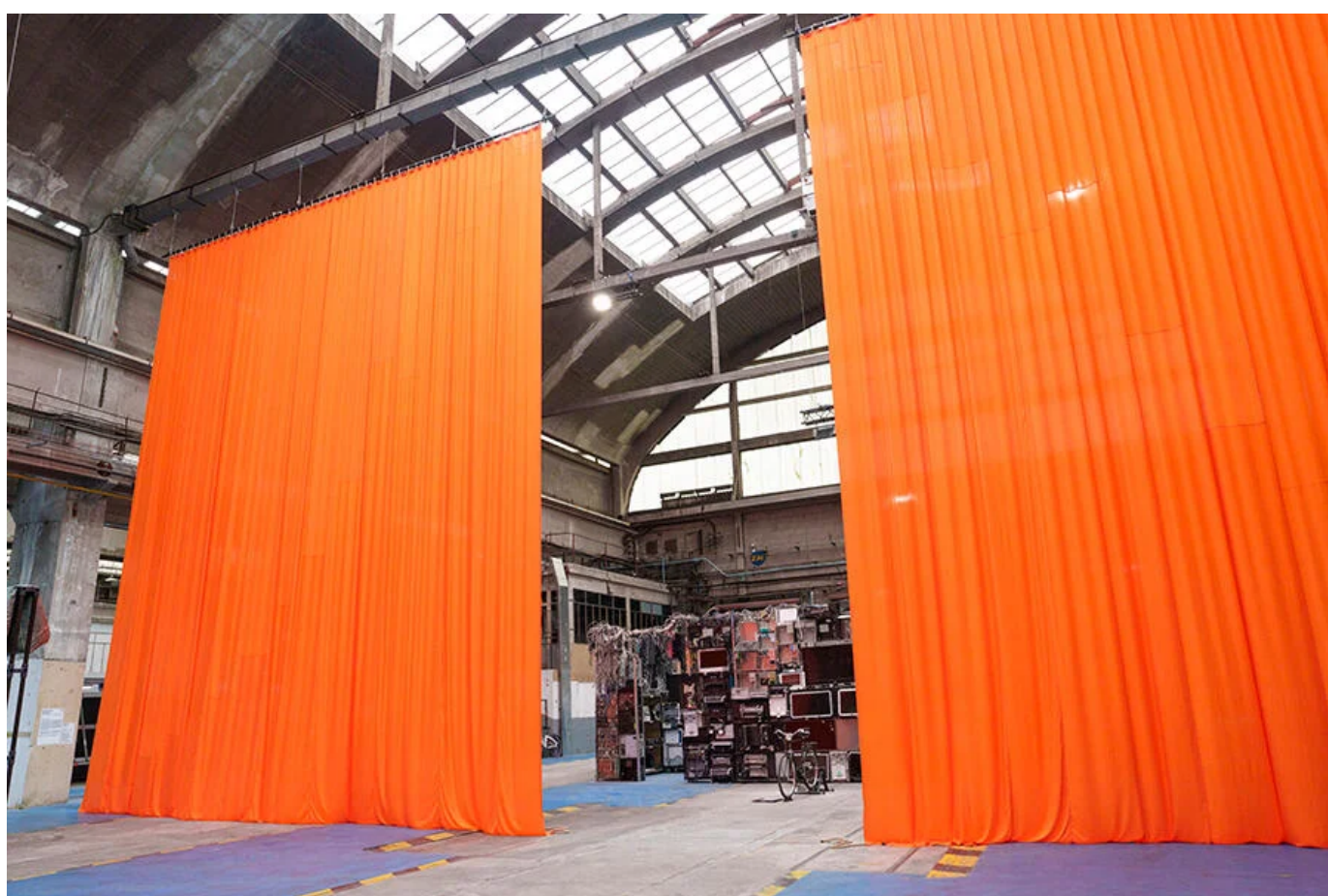
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The sound of gunshots ring out at the entrance to Les Grandes Locos, the volley so realistic you can almost smell the gunpowder. The former railway workshop is one of the three main venues for the 2026 Lyon Biennale, where Ashleigh Taupaki's eight-channel sound piece *The Usual Cries of Welcome* (2026) is installed, referencing a 1879 confrontation between Ngāti Hako people and European colonial surveyors in Ohinemuri, Aotearoa/New Zealand. The gunshots, a protocol of arrival at a Māori tribal council and a customary display of readiness for aggressive resistance, might have heralded a biennale convened as a gathering of kin, with artistic practice ready to take up arms. Curator Catherine Nichols brings thoughtfulness to the brief here. However, the breadth of the 119 artists' agendas allows this edition to drift into something ambient and effusive, which feels equivocal amid France's current political polarization.



Sriwhana Spong, *Voile-voilà*, 2026, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and the 18th Lyon Biennale

The lulling title, 'To pass from one dream to another', references Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* (1927–40), in which he suggests that every epoch 'dreams the one to follow.' Nichols draws a parallel between Lyon's *traboules* (clandestine passageways), with their embodiment of labour history and resistance, and the Parisian arcades that absorbed Benjamin. Her curatorial leitmotifs also reference the writings of Fluxus artist Robert Filliou, who proposed a 'poetical' rather than political economy where wit and imaginative exchange trump profit and power. Taking Filliou's mischief seriously is the most discerning of Nichols's perspectives, connecting resonant works that deal with debt, care, speculation and salvage.

At Les Grandes Locos, Sriwhana Spong's installation *Voile-voilà* (2026) comprises silk curtains from Lyon, dyed with the soft drink Fanta. Their diaphanous panels form a bar chart representing the value of the artist's pension fund over 16 years,

while their profile evokes a Candi Bentar, a Balinese split temple gate. Núria Güell's installation *Degenerate Political Art* (2026), designed as an art-fair-style booth, offers 'advice' on exploiting fiscal loopholes and sham philanthropy. Displayed in the booth for Prytanee LLC ART Gallery – a business Güell created and registered in Cuba, which is treated within the work as a tax haven – is a commissioned painting by Renaud Suanez based on a 2019 photograph of former French culture minister Jack Lang with sex trafficker and financier Jeffrey Epstein.



Renaud Suanez, *The Philanthropists*, 2026, oil on canvas, 1.8 × 1.2 m, from Núria Güell's *Degenerate Political Art*, 2026.
Courtesy: the artists and the 18th Lyon Biennale

At the Musée des Tissus, Florian Fouché's film *Philippe* (2020–22) follows the artist's father, in residential care after a stroke, as he gamely drives his electric wheelchair over the recumbent artist, who is partially covered with a lump of clay. Lucy Beech's magnificent film *Scavengers* (2026) at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Lyon (macLyon) cuts footage of griffon vultures soaring over southern France and congregating in a great rabble on a mountainside with vintage animations, a brooding soundtrack and a tender narrative of a father and son collecting carcasses to stock a feeding site for the once-endangered raptors.

Also at macLyon, Rangi Kipa presents extraordinary, intricate carved objects made from the teeth and bones of stranded whales, understood as gifts from the Māori god Tangaroa, whose customary salvage and care have been hard-won

rights in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Yet, in the context of the Biennale, it is unfortunate that the overriding atmospheric, spatial and economic curatorial themes derive from Frankfurt School philosophy and the French Fluxus movement.



Lucy Beech, *Scavengers*, 2026, film still. Courtesy: the artist and the 18th Lyon Biennale

The Biennale's 'poetic' economies and dream imagery too readily license seemingly anything that can be made to speak of redefining value or liminal states, whether between fact and fiction or life and death. The baffling inclusion of taxidermy owls and mummified Egyptian cats at macLyon is where the crepuscular conceit digresses into a cabinet of curiosities. For Benjamin, the dream is a condition of critique, not a vibe. Its urgency lies precisely in how it contains its own wake-up call. Despite reported funding travails, the biennale is expansive to a fault. But more jolts like Taupaki's explosive salvo are needed to keep dreams from curdling into nightmares.

The 18th Lyon Biennale takes place across various venues and runs until 13 December

Main image: Laia Estruch, CARRAU P1, CARRAU P2 and CARRAU P3, 2026, inflatable plastic structures, reinforcements, steel, straps and electric fan. Courtesy: the artist, Galería Ehrhardt Flórez, Madrid, and the 18th Lyon Biennale



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TAGS

17th Lyon Biennale EU reviews Sriwhana Spong