

Exhibit guide

OCCUPYING PARIS: 1968 AND THE SPACES OF PROTEST



occupying PARIS:

1968 and the Spaces of Protest

Curators:

Mary D. Lewis

*Robert Walton Goelet Professor of French History
and CES Resident Faculty
Harvard University*

Jan Kubasiewicz
Professor of Design

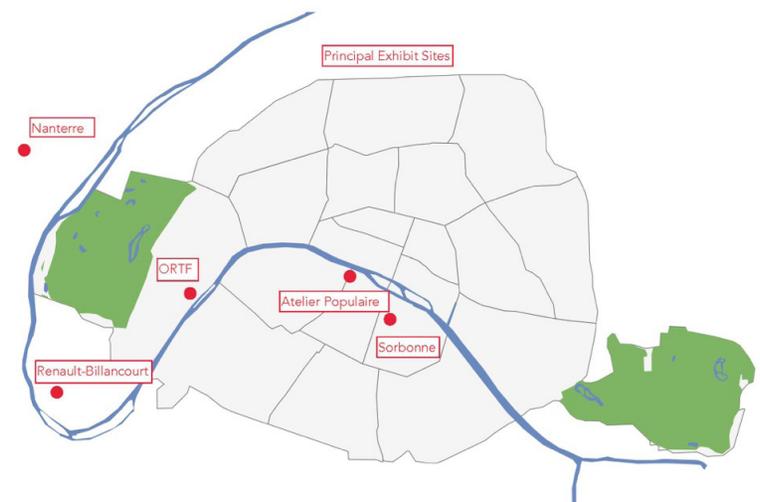
Massachusetts College of Art and Design

Bettina Burch
Curatorial Assistant

Additional curatorial assistance was provided by:

Julia Bunte-Mein
Harvard Class of 2020

To give the fullest impression of the way art occupied Parisian public space in the spring of 1968, this exhibit keeps commentary on the walls to a minimum. Instead, we invite you to follow along with this guide. Our journey begins just west of Paris, in the rapidly modernizing suburb of Nanterre where student protests catalyzed several weeks of unrest in Paris and throughout France more generally. We then follow the Seine River against its current to the Renault factory at Boulogne-Billancourt, the Office de Radiodiffusion-Télévision Française (ORTF, headquarters of the French broadcasting service), the École des Beaux Arts, rebranded the Atelier Populaire (People's Workshop), where our posters were produced, to arrive finally at the Latin Quarter and the Sorbonne. There, after evacuation of the university by the police, the protests spill out into the streets. Since the subway (RATP) is on strike and many streets are barricaded, we suggest that you walk.



Unless otherwise indicated, all posters and postcards in the exhibition are reproduced from the originals in the Ludlow-Santo Domingo Library May 1968 Paris Protest Collection (FB9.A100.968p), Houghton Library, Harvard

Atelier Populaire



These images depict the Atelier Populaire (People's Workshop) where students designed and produced the protest posters that canvassed the streets of Paris during the turbulent spring of 1968.

In May 1968, France is only a generation removed from occupation by Nazi Germany.

When state police took over factory floors and university halls in response to student and worker protests, they conjured up memories of military occupation from just a generation earlier. But when protestors used "occupation" as their own strategy, they refashioned the term as an act of resistance, a stance mirrored in contemporary movements such as "Occupy Wall Street."

A1. 1945 1968

This poster introduces a leitmotif of the May movement: The critique of contemporary state authority via analogy to a wartime past.

Student unrest begins at Nanterre, where a new University of Paris campus opens next to a shantytown.

In 1964, with the college-age population exploding, the University of Paris opened a new campus in Nanterre, just west of the city. Today, the campus is best known as the place where clashes between students over the activities of an anti-Vietnam War organization called the "March 22 Movement" led authorities to suspend classes indefinitely on May 2, thereby catalyzing the May movement.

But the suburb was also the site of sprawling bidonvilles, or shantytowns, where immigrant workers – mostly from France's former empire in North Africa – lived without running water, gas, or electricity. Built right next to the shantytowns, the new campus afforded students ample opportunity to observe the confluence of French imperialism and capitalism in their own backyard and encouraged activists to incorporate immigrant justice into their vision of a new society.

B1. Au bout de la rue, un bidonville

(At the end of the street, a shantytown)

This poster establishes the movement's solidarity with immigrant workers, decrying their "poverty wages" and housing conditions ("no fixed address").

B2. 22 mars Nanterre

(March 22 Nanterre)

Timeline of key events, beginning with the foundation of the March 22 Movement, a student anti-Vietnam War organization.

B3. Student Demonstration, Université de Paris, Nanterre

May 2, 1968

© Elie Kagan/BDIC

B4. "La Folie" Shantytown, Nanterre, with new construction behind

1971

© Monique Hervo/BDIC

B5. "La Folie" Shantytown, Nanterre

1967 or 1968

Note the number 180 to mark the shanty's address.

© Monique Hervo/BDIC

B6. Close-up of shantytown and new construction

Note the mud and standing water.

© Monique Hervo/BDIC

B7. Family posing in front of their shanty in Nanterre

c. 1960

© Monique Hervo/BDIC

B8. Nanterre shantytown

© Associated Press

B9. Frontières = Répression

(Borders = Repression)

B10. Halte à l'expulsion de nos camarades étrangers

(Stop the deportation of our foreign comrades)

B11. Travailleurs Unis, Français, Immigrés

(French, Foreign Workers United)

Strikes begin at Renault-Billancourt, the largest car factory in Europe.

Just upriver from Nanterre, Renault's Billancourt Factory employed some 31,000 workers, more than 20 percent of whom were immigrants, churning out car after car of the economy models that helped revolutionize automobile consumption in postwar France. On May 13, following a night of violent clashes between students and police near the Sorbonne, Renault participated in a 24-hour solidarity strike. Within three days, Renault workers began strikes and factory-floor occupations that endured over a month. The factory became one of the key nodes in a movement that ultimately involved strikes among some 9-10 million workers and up to 600,000 students across France, with Renault-Billancourt workers not voting to return to work until June 17. Several of the posters in this section refer to this continued resistance at Renault factories in Billancourt and Flins (25 miles west of Paris).

C1. Autour de la Résistance Prolétarienne dans l'Usine Occupée Vers la Victoire du Peuple

(With the Proletarian Resistance in the Occupied Factory, Toward the Victory of the People)

Note the language of occupation and resistance reminiscent of the Second World War.

C2. Soutien aux Usines Occupées Pour La Victoire du Peuple

(Solidarity with the Occupied Factories for the Victory of the People), early June 1968.

C3. La Lutte Continue

(The Struggle Continues)

C4. Occupation des Usines

(Factory Occupations)

C5. La Détente S'Amorce

(Détente Begins)

June 7 or 8, 1968

The image and text likely refer to efforts by a massive (5,000-strong) police force to encourage workers at Renault-Flins to accept "détente" and return to work.

C6. Tous Unis Camarades Jusqu'à la Victoire

(All Comrades United Until Victory)

The ORTF, France's state-run broadcaster, first airs official news, then joins the strike.

The Office de Radiodiffusion-Télévision Française (ORTF) was the home of French state-controlled radio and television. While government ownership of the airwaves was not unusual in postwar Europe, forced edits of a story regarding the student unrest helped motivate some ORTF employees to join the students on strike. As support for the strike broadened, the stations resorted increasingly to pre-recorded shows, while maintaining tight control over the nightly news. The disjuncture between the official accounts on the two state-run national radio stations when compared to in-depth reporting from the barricades by stations operating out of Luxembourg and Germany fueled accusations of state censorship, with posters depicting the ORTF as the mouthpiece (or worse) of the state police and President de Gaulle.

D1. ORTF

This poster simultaneously pokes fun at President de Gaulle and the modernist building that served as the ORTF headquarters, by figuring it as a toilet on which de Gaulle sits.

D2. View of Maison de le Radio from the Eiffel Tower

Aerial view of ORTF's headquarters in the Maison de la Radio

Photo by Gérard Ducher

D3. La voix de son maître

(His master's voice)

This poster plays on RCA's trademark slogan by making de Gaulle the "master." This poster likely dates from shortly after de Gaulle's televised speech on May 24.



E7. Mai 68. Début d'une lutte prolongée
(Mai 68. Beginning of an extended struggle)



F8. Trop tard CRS, le mouvement n'a pas de temple
(Too late, CRS, the movement has no temple)

D4. De Gaulle addresses the nation

Photo of de Gaulle's national address on May 24, 1968, with viewers gathered around in a pharmacy to watch.

© Associated Press

D5. Information libre à l'ORTF

(Independent news at the ORTF)

Note that the hand-drawn antennae here are in the shape of the Lorraine Cross, the symbol of the Gaullist resistance during the Second World War.

D6. L'intox vient à domicile

(Toxic propaganda invades the home)

As in D5, the television antennae here are in the shape of the Lorraine Cross, the Gaullist symbol.

D7. La police vous parle tous les soirs à 20h

(The police speak to you every night at 8 pm)

National television news was broadcast nightly at 8 pm. This poster likely dates from May 25, 1968, the day after de Gaulle's televised broadcast to the nation.

Students at the "People's Workshop" print posters 24/7 – the social media of their day.

On May 15, students at the École des Beaux Arts renamed their school the "Ex-Fine Arts Academy" and founded an "Atelier Populaire," or "People's Workshop" in its place. Ceasing normal studies, they began printing posters day and night. The fruits of their labor make up the bulk of the materials for this exhibit. Well after much of the unrest elsewhere had died down, the Atelier students insisted that "the struggle continues" and persisted in producing posters. When police arrived in late June, the students simply moved their operations elsewhere, retaliating with a poster that mocked the police for "parading around" the Beaux Arts school, while the students were busy plastering the streets with posters. This notion – that the movement was mobile and thus could not be contained – became commonplace among activists.

E1. La police s'affiche aux Beaux-Arts. Les Beaux Arts affichent dans la rue

(The police take up posts at the Beaux-Arts. The Beaux-Arts takes its posters to the street)

Late June 1968

E2-E6. Philippe Vermès Photos

Johan Kugelberg Collection of Paris Mai 1968 Student Revolutionary Artifacts, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

E7. Mai 68. Début d'une lutte prolongée

(Mai 68. Beginning of an extended struggle)

From the Sorbonne to the street. Police repression drives students into the streets. Clashes take on a military hue.

The flagship of the University of Paris, the Sorbonne was the site of some of the most violent clashes between students and police, as authorities closed, reopened, and reclosed the university. When authorities evacuated the campus, students tried to force open doors to the university, and the Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité (CRS or state police) used concussion grenades, batons, and tear gas in an effort to disperse the demonstrators. In reaction, the banished students built barricades and donned helmets and face masks, turning the streets of Paris into urban guerrilla battlegrounds. As with the People's Workshop, the Sorbonne here is figured as a moveable feast. The CRS might occupy it but "the movement has no temple."

F1. Jean-Paul Sartre addressing a student-occupied Sorbonne

May 20, 1968

© Associated Press

F2. Student-occupied auditorium at Sorbonne

May 20, 1968

© Associated Press

F3. Police massing the Sorbonne entrance

May 3, 1968

© Elie Kagan/BDIC

F4. Police evacuating the Sorbonne courtyard

May 3, 1968

Note the police wagon.

© Elie Kagan/BDIC

F5. Student putting up poster of Ernesto "Che" Guevara

May 14, 1968

© Elie Kagan/BDIC

F6. Student putting up poster of Leon Trotsky

May 14, 1968

© Elie Kagan/BDIC

F7. Students trying to break into the Sorbonne

May 20, 1968

© Associated Press

F8. Trop tard CRS, le mouvement n'a pas de temple

(Too late, CRS, the movement has no temple)

F9. Nous sommes tous indésirables

(We are all undesirables)

The term "indésirables" was used much the way we might speak of

“illegal aliens” today. Taking inspiration from an iconic photo of student activist Daniel Cohn-Bendit laughing in the face of a riot policeman, this poster plays on his status as the French-born child of German Jewish refugees. Cohn-Bendit lacked formal French citizenship, a fact that was used to block his reentry after he visited Germany, prompting this and similar posters.

F10. Banished from the Sorbonne, Daniel Cohn-Bendit addresses a crowd outside
May 9, 1968
© Elie Kagan/BDIC

F11. CRS and students clash
May 6, 1968
© Associated Press

F12. Student throwing a paving stone at a line of police
May 23, 1968
© Associated Press

F13. Aerial photo of blockaded street, rue Gay-Lussac
From *Liaisons. Le magazine de la prefecture de police*. Hors-série (Mai 2008), p. 29. Harvard University Libraries, DC420.M35 2008

F14. Police with shields amid tear gas, near the Sorbonne
May 6, 1968
© Associated Press

F15. Cars as barricades
May 10, 1968
Photo by Jean-Jacques Levy
© Associated Press

F16. Car barricades at night
No photographer attributed.
Johan Kugelberg Collection of Paris Mai 1968 Student Revolutionary Artifacts, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

F17. SS
This poster compares the CRS to the Nazi SS

F18. Injured student lying in street
early May 1968
© Associated Press

F19. Line of CRS preparing for clashes with students
May 21, 1968
© Associated Press

F20. Student-constructed barricades
No photographer attributed.

Johan Kugelberg Collection of Paris Mai 1968 Student Revolutionary Artifacts, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

F21. Students in combat gear, protecting against projectiles and tear gas
No photographer attributed.

Johan Kugelberg Collection of Paris Mai 1968 Student Revolutionary Artifacts, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

F22. Massive demonstration outside the Gare de Lyon
May 24, 1968
© Associated Press

F23. Appel aux juifs et aux arabes. Le gouvernement vous intoxique.
(Call to Jews and Arabs. Government propaganda contaminates you)
This and similar giant tracts testified to the effort to foster alliances across different groups.

Atelier-produced postcards circulate “memes” from the posters to those unable to see them in person.

The May 1968 movement was an early illustration of the potency of what we now call social media. Every morning, Parisians awoke to new posters that Atelier students had plastered in the streets overnight, often responding directly to the day's events. Graffiti was everywhere. Tracts and flyers circulated. And the Atelier also produced postcards, circulating protest memes well beyond Paris.

G1. Atelier Populaire
Photo by Philippe Vermès
Johan Kugelberg Collection of Paris Mai 1968 Student Revolutionary Artifacts, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

G2. La lutte continue
(The struggle continues)

G3. Reverse side of postcard

G4. De Gaulle as a television, with the two state radio stations on his arms

G5. La chienlit c'est lui!
(The chaos is him!)
This image of de Gaulle in his famous arms-up speaking stance is also a play on words. De Gaulle had used the word “chienlit” (roughly translating as “chaos” but also sounding like “chie en lit” or shit in bed) to describe the movement, only to have the Atelier turn it around on him with this postcard and an identical poster.

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose?

Collective action did not bring down the Gaullist state. But it left a mark that long outlasted the writing on the wall.

H1. Background Image: Photo of posters on wall in the Rue de Seine, Paris
June 1968
Photo by Claude Dityvon, used by special permission of Christiane Dityvon and the Université d'Angers-Saint Serge.

H2. De Gaulle est parti. L'état bourgeois demeure
(De Gaulle is gone. The bourgeois state remains)
FB9.A100.968p2, Houghton Library, Harvard University

Atelier Wall

Philippe Vermès, Photo of the Atelier Wall.
Johan Kugelberg Collection of Paris Mai 1968 Student Revolutionary Artifacts, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

RATP tiendra

The RATP will hold. RATP stands for the Régie Autonome des Transports Parisiens, the agency that runs the subway. This poster refers to the expectation that the subway strike will continue.

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<http://frenchculturalcenter.org/>
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27 Kirkland Street
Cambridge, MA 02138
617.495.4303

ces@fas.harvard.edu
ces.fas.harvard.edu