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A collection of essays and discussions around design for autumn 2021.

Discrete Contact

Words Felix Chabluk Smith

I first saw the Bourse de Commerce, really saw it, in April of this year, but by that point I had been living in Paris for more than six. I'd visited the Louvre of course, a minute or so stroll towards the river, and the Musée des Arts Decoratifs just down the street. I had seen shows at the Centre Pompidou, a few minutes to the east, and I had been, grudgingly, to the vast mall at Les Halles right next door many times when a trip to Muji was unavoidable. I'd even met friends after work at Iovine's pizzeria one bitingly cold winter's evening, almost directly opposite the Bourse's grand entrance, but still, I'd never seen it. It was just one more pile of haughtily beautiful pale Parisian stonework that my eyes slid over and my brain failed to register.

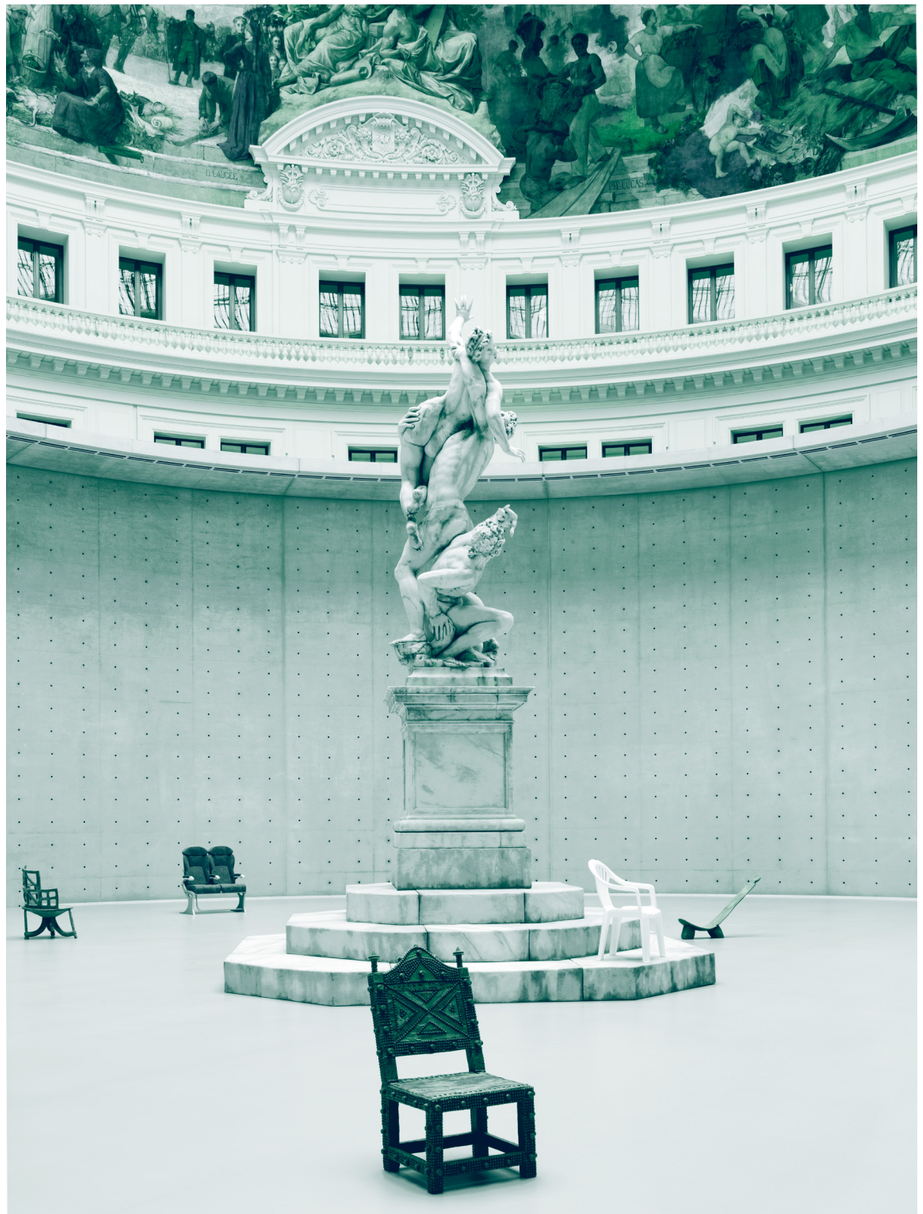


Image courtesy of Stefan Altenburger/Galerie Eva Presenhuber.

Then, deep into this spring's second nationwide lockdown, my taxi was alone on the road, gliding up the Rue de Louvre post-curfew. The pavements were empty and the restaurants and bars had been dark for months. But then the car slowed and, to my right, a deserted De Chirico piazza opened up, almost computer-generated in its perfection, with shadowy

"Very often, constraints generate beautiful things. Immediately after it was installed, we had a sense of a place, of enclosing and protecting people."

—Ronan Bouroullec

arcades and cobblestones framing an enormous pediment, twin pairs of Corinthian columns and a balcony worthy of a we-won-the-war wave.

Stretching back from this was a drum-like building, all sober pilasters, huge, dark-framed windows and delicate, goose-necked lamps. The stonework and iron were so immaculate that I had a split-second impression of time travel, as if the belle époque masons had just downed tools that morning. The light diffusing from the windows and doors was a strange cool-warm, bleached-bone grey; clean and reassuring in a very dark time. The building seemed on standby mode, sitting calmly, waiting, ready when we were.

In the 1570s, architect Jean Bullant began work on a Parisian house for Catherine de' Medici, not too far from the banks of the Seine. A lover of astrology, she had asked Bullant to add a tower from which the stars could be observed and the future could be predicted; she died before the decade was out. The property then passed through various aristocratic hands until the house was dismantled and the materials sold off to pay the debts of the last not-so-careful private owner, Victor Amadeus I, Prince of Carignano. The tower was saved, however, and purchased by the City of Paris, which commissioned Nicolas Le Camus de Mézières to build a grain exchange on the site in 1763.

A giant ring of a building with the Medici Tower at its outer rim, it originally had an open-air inner court that was later roofed in wood, because no one likes wet wheat. The iron and glass dome was added in the 1810s. The building was subsequently assigned to the Commodities Exchange in the mid-1880s and extensively remodelled at this time by Henri Blondel. Befitting its new status as a hub not only for buying and selling cereals but also sugar, alcohol, oil and rubber, vast murals were commissioned to celebrate the supremacy of France at the centre of global trade, wrapping around the inside of the building just below roof level.

In 2016, after falling into disuse, the building was offered by Paris's mayor Anne Hidalgo to François Pinault, the billionaire founder of the luxury fashion group Kering, and latterly a passionate collector of contemporary art having founded the Collection Pinault in 1999. He had initially attempted a museum for his collection in 2004 on the Île Seguin, in the suburbs west of Paris, designed by the Japanese architect Tadao Ando, yet this fell through after tortuous environmental and planning objections, and so he and Ando went to Venice. Pinault bought the 18th-century Palazzo Grassi in 2005, as one does, and a year later won a competition to redevelop the then-abandoned 16th-century customs house Punta della Dogana, which was inaugurated in 2009.

After the Palazzo Grassi and the Punta Della Dogana, the Bourse de Commerce is Pinault's third private museum under the Collection Pinault umbrella. Both historic Venetian buildings were transformed with Ando's radical, monastic politeness. "His architecture is silent," said Pinault of his attraction to Ando's work. "No artifice, no unnecessary details disturb his architectural gesture."

As I walked down the Rue de Louvre to visit the Bourse weeks later, Paris was unfurling like a leaf in spring. The strict lockdown measures that had been grinding on for months had started to lift. Café terraces were open and it was no longer mandatory to wear a mask in the streets, which were beginning to fill again with life. An undulating sliver of silver beckoned in the distance. I thought it was a huge tarpaulin, torn loose from a construction site, but no less beautiful for it. Instead, as I came closer, I saw it was a vast flag, one of several planted around the Bourse by Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec, who had been asked by Pinault to redesign the space surrounding the museum.

Originally consisting of a roadway and parking spaces, this area is now transformed. "I decided to put very basic stone on the ground, because I wanted to create the sensation that this square was already there, already existing for decades," says Ronan Bouroullec. "The first project we did involved a lot of trees, but M. Pinault considered that it would be too expensive to maintain." Instead, the brothers evolved their Ring benches into public furniture quite unlike anything they, or Paris, have done before. With the faintest echoes of Isamu Noguchi and Constantin Brâncuși, crisp satiny slices of gently curving, burnished-bronze pipe, and those liquid-like flags, emerge from great, black, rocklike lumps, the bronze supported either side by delicate metal struts.

They are for sitting on, for sunbathing on, for skateboarding along, but Bouroullec admits that "there were a lot of problems to solve. The first was that there is a road just in front of the Bourse, and it is very long and faces the museum. Terrorists could arrive with a car or a truck at almost 100km/h, and so we needed to find a way to stop this. The engineers did calculations and [our original designs] would not have been able to stop a truck. So we had to redesign it with 7cm bronze poles, and I think it is very beautiful like that. Very often, constraints generate beautiful things. Immediately after it was installed, we had a sense of a place, of enclosing and protecting people."

Despite the Bourse's pixel-perfect restoration and refurbishment, this is no sanitised, exclusionary public-private space; it is still Paris. A homeless man occupied one of the doorways next to the ticket office, and behind in the meadow-like space between the Bourse and the regenerated Les Halles leisure complex the grass was dotted with more rough sleepers, prone beneath the blossoming linden trees.

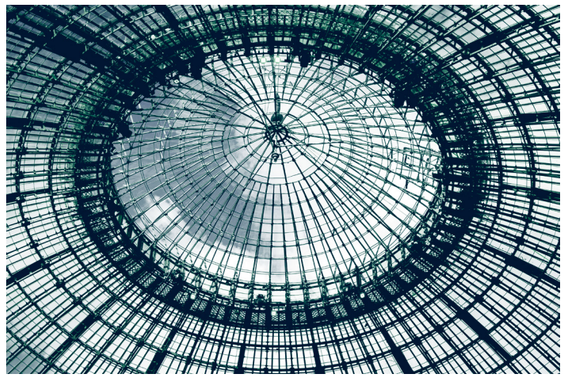
Inside the Bourse, Ando's intervention is remarkable. The classical interior is untouched, but within it sits a huge, poured-concrete cylinder, 9m high and 30m in diameter – less a piece of architecture and more an enormous art object in its own right. It seems like a precision-engineered readymade, originally destined for some other purpose far beyond our comprehension: a slice of a subterranean flood defence system, a particle collider, or a nuclear reactor core that just so happens to slot with serendipitous exactitude inside this giant Third Empire hatbox.

As Ando explains, he was "to revive the building, honouring the memory of the city inscribed in its walls, and slot another structure into its interior, inspired by the concept of Russian dolls. The idea was to design a lively space that would foster a dynamic dialogue between the new and the old, which is what a site dedicated to contemporary art should be. The architecture was to serve as the link between the threads of time, the past, present and future[…] The spatial layout of the Bourse de Commerce consists of concentric circles and is designed to create an intense and more subtle dialogue between new and old." Placing such an industrially alien component inside such an imposingly beautiful historical building is a perfect, brutal act of creation through desecration. Like a Fontana razor-slash, the gesture seems simple, thoughtless, and violent, but much like Fontana's sliced canvasses, such perfection in simplicity is only possible with immense skill, reflection and practice.

Computer modelling can only get you so far, and so "life-sized wooden prototypes were positioned in the central Rotunda to allow us to decide on the cylinder's optimum height and diameter," explain Lucie Niney and Thibault Marca, architects with the Paris-based agency NeM, who worked with Ando on the project and whose experience is documented in *La Bourse de Commerce. Le musée de la Collection Pinault à Paris*, a book published to celebrate the building's transformation. "After several work sessions[…] we finally decided on a height of nine metres to open up the transversal views and provide a complete panorama of the dome from the ground floor. The diameter of the cylinder was also modified in order to find the optimal distance – almost five metres – between the historic facade and the concrete wall." The cylinder not only works with the existing building physically, but the final dimensions are such that it visually slots into the Piranesian fantasy that surrounds it, with the cupola, the murals and the rows of upper windows and balconies seeming to cap the concrete perfectly.

The strict red tape that wraps and protects this monument historique meant that the fabric of the interior could not be altered, so as bracingly brutal as Ando's gesture is, it treads lightly. It reminded me of how I lower my voice when entering a hushed antiques shop, drawing my coat around me in case a swish of the hem knocks something askew.

The interior walls of the central hall that Ando's cylinder occupies were one of the few elements of the 1763 building kept by Blondel during his 1880s



Top: The concrete rotunda that Tadao Ando has installed in the Bourse de Commerce. Above: The Bourse's iron and glass dome. Right: One of the flags developed by Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec for the space surrounding the Bourse.

Images courtesy of Claire Lavabre/Studio Bouroullec and Marc Domage.

remodelling. At times the contact between the concrete of the 21st century and the limestone and plaster of the 18th is almost heartbreakingly bashful, seeming like the merest brush of fingertips across two and a half centuries. The slab-like bridges connecting the drum to the first- and second-floor galleries in the refurbished ring of the original building stop precisely 1cm short of the old stonework – more than enough of a gap to snap off an expensive stiletto – only making discrete contact beneath floor level for perhaps 30cm at the centre.

At ground level, the outside of the cylinder sits with less than a hand's width of clearance within the unusual raised lip of the original terrazzo floor that encircles the building's inner walls. Inside the cylinder, this raised terrazzo lip is replicated by Ando in a fine, ash-coloured cement, the forms politely mirroring each other on either side of the monolithic walls. The hidden metal core of this huge reinforced concrete form interlocks neatly with the building's 19th-century cast-iron floor structure.

For such a huge piece of architecture, the drum is remarkably changeable: in its centre it is calmly awe-inspiring; walking around the outside its bulk feels reassuring; and looking out of the original 18th-century inner windows on the second floor, across the central void, it is barely there at all, its concrete rim becoming just another balcony beyond the three-century-year-old glass. Because of its size, and the size of the building in which it sits, it is impossible to view it in its entirety.

I first saw it, or parts of it, immediately upon entering the Bourse. Framed by the woodwork of the grand old doors that surround the central space, the walls with their regular pattern of deep cylindrical holes from the casting process brought to mind the meditative repetition of Agnes Martin, or a Hirst spot painting put though an old Xerox machine. Yet before I could get to grips with the cylinder, I had to consider the carpets. The Bouroullecs were asked to furnish the interior of the Bourse in addition to the outside space, and they chose to put some rugs down. Even before you see a piece of art, you see the rugs, and their domesticating, calming effect is transformative. "It was important to receive people in a certain atmosphere," says Bouroullec, "a certain feeling that helps to enter into contemplation[…] It was very important to give to this place something which is very soft, [so that you are able] to go to sit somewhere, to come back, to be well, to be relaxed enough to view a painting."

In addition to the carpets and the sometimes-matching-sometimes-not upholstered benches that rest upon them, the Bouroullecs liberally scattered their Rope chairs about the galleries, creating a Rope bench to complement them. Upstairs, they also fitted out the restaurant with wrought-iron variations on their Officina furniture and handmade Alcove glassware, and hung lighting developed with Flos in the entrance hall and stairways. A deal-breaker for the Bouroullecs were the mass-production rights to anything they created for the Bourse. Nothing was exclusively Pinault's, except perhaps a tiny speck of blue. "In the restaurant, in the fabric on the walls, there is a bit of blue inside the grey," remembers Bouroullec. "We spent half an hour to discuss this blue – he wanted it stronger. And we had to redo the walls because [the fabric was] 10mm from the floor, and he thought 5mm looked better."

The Bouroullecs' interiors, the nubby textiles, twisted cords and undulating glass, add to what is an engagingly warm, textural experience. The only flat, uniform surfaces are the walls holding the art. Around these are aged oak, speckled terrazzo, and cloudy, unpainted plaster. The bag lockers and the leaflet stands are in a kind of mottled board that looks like porphyry rock. Even the wall-mounted information boards are printed on a fibrous, compressed substrate.

Within the central space, the drum becomes all-encompassing. The walls are like sheer cliff faces soaring up all around, but, with the cabinetry and plasterwork of the 19th-century interior visible through four huge portals, the concrete becomes as light as a theatrical drop-cloth, temporarily drawn across the distracting decoration. Inside I felt no sense of vertigo or confinement: with the mottled grey walls and the not-quite slate blue of the floor dully reflecting the light that filtered through the intricate fin-de-siècle spiderweb of the roof, the space had a hazy, misty calm to it.

At the very centre of the building, like the spindle around which it all revolves, is Urs Fischer's life-size replica of Giambologna's mannerist masterpiece *The Rape of the Sabine Woman*, surrounded by African thrones, a Monobloc lawn chair, an economy airline seat and an office chair. All of it is slowly melting away: giant candles, they were set alight at the opening of the Bourse, spattering the immaculate floor with hot wax, and will burn for the duration of *Ouverture*,

the space's inaugural exhibition. When I visited, the terrified woman held aloft by her kidnapper had already lost her right arm. The flame was guttering somewhere around her C5 vertebra and what remained of her face had been twisted downward by the weight of her anguished features, stalactites of marble-coloured wax hanging like Spanish moss from her shoulders.

Outside the cylinder, on the ground floor, a new space has been created between its outer facade and the inside of the original building. Named the Passage, in reference to the elegant 19th-century arcades that snake between the capital's boulevards, this circular corridor is intimate, cocooned between calm austere concrete on one side and elegant classical repetition on the other. Lining the original interior walls, between each huge arched doorway, are bijoux display cases in glass, oak and iron. Originally installed at the time of the Paris World Fair of 1889 and immaculately restored, they have become like 24 micro-galleries, occupied for the premiere exhibition by Bertrand Lavier. A mini retrospective of sorts, his vibrant and irreverent sculptures and interventions drawn from half a century of work – a crushed moped, a Disney-esque cactus sculpture, a car headlight embedded in an ancient column – fill the ornate vitrines.

The first- and second-floor galleries that surround Fischer's candles contain strange and sensitive pieces by Cindy Sherman, Claire Tabouret, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Marlene Dumas, Kerry James Marshall, Luc Tuymans, Antonio Oba and Peter Doig, all drawn from Pinault's personal collection, along with a suite of rooms on the ground floor with every David Hammons work the billionaire owns.

Writing that last paragraph gave me pause for thought. I remember that as I was walking through the second-floor galleries, lingering on the blotchy, bleeding Dumas works around me, I felt queasy and slightly outraged that one man could just reach out and scoop up all these beautiful things. Then there was a deep boom and a muffled cheer down in the rotunda as the Sabine woman's head finally fell off.

The Bourse de Commerce is Paris's second private museum of this kind, after the Frank Gehry-designed Fondation Louis Vuitton was opened in 2014 by Bernard Arnaud, LVMH chief executive and Pinault's business rival. As easy as it would be to compare and contrast the Bourse and the Fondation Louis Vuitton, the two are like chalk and cheese, and one is definitely cheesy. "Like a loud LV handbag a glitzy relative might bring you back from a duty-free splurge," wrote *The Guardian's* Oliver Wainwright of the Fondation Louis Vuitton upon its opening. Gehry's overly complicated crushed beetle of a building, Wainwright wrote, is "a brash monument to the fact that the country's richest man can get his own way".

Pinault himself diplomatically dismisses the constant use of the r-word when describing his relationship to Arnaud, but Jean-Jacques Aillagon, former French culture minister and the Pinault Collection's CEO, was more direct when quoted on *Artnet* in May 2021. "François Pinault didn't want to associate himself with the type of collectors that bear the name of a brand," he said. "He could have called it Fondation Gucci[…] but he wanted to distinguish his activity as an entrepreneur from his activity as a collector."

There seemed to be some slight hand-wringing at another major privately-funded museum opening in Paris in less than a decade, yet personally I feel far more comfortable with one man deciding to spend €165m on an art museum than the state doing so. Speaking as an art lover, I feel there are many more important things to spend that kind of cash on than art, particularly at this time. It's his money; if he wants to spend it, he can. It is also significant that Collection Pinault is just that – a collection overseen by a public limited company, not a foundation that could take advantage of significant tax breaks.

Additionally, state-run museums tend to move at a glacial pace, especially in France, making it difficult for them to purchase pieces of contemporary art. Prices inflate whilst debates drag on. As Pinault himself admitted, "only a madman like me can decide to buy them fast" – institutions like Collection Pinault, which are able to move quickly, can perhaps only come from the private sector. Such fast decision-making also means a museum can turn on a dime. In a *New York Times* piece from April 2019, which now feels blissfully unaware, we were told that "in late 2020, the Bourse and the Pompidou will team up for a dual-venue exhibition of a male artist whom Mr Pinault described as world-famous but declined to name."

In the intervening two years, reality has shifted seismically. Instead of a bombastic exhibition by a single male artist, manspreading across not one but two huge venues, we get a calming, questioning hang of lovely yet dark, delicate, bruised and battered works from a wide range of artists whom Pinault apparently adores, and has been collecting for years. Some are famous, others less so, and all deal richly yet quietly with family, race, gender, sexuality. If that exhausts you, after the tumult of the recent past and the strain of the present, they are also beautiful to look at.

Climbing up the staircases that spiral around the outside of Ando's cylinder, I reached the rim and suddenly I was on the bracing battlements of a citadel. The iron and glass roof soars above and the 19th-century murals demand your full attention.

Unlike at Tate Britain's Rex Whistler restaurant, there is no image of a Black boy being led by a leash at the Bourse (the mural containing this image, *The Expedition in Pursuit of Rare Meats*, was still being described by Tate as creating "the most amusing room in Europe" until as recently as 2020), but racist iconography nevertheless abounds, running the full gamut of grotesque colonial stereotypes. In the Americas section, a white woman in a pale-pink gown relaxes on a bale of cotton, shaded from the sun under a parasol held by her Black maid. In front, an Indigenous youth kneels to offer a parrot to entertain her, while behind her, ignored, two cowed slaves carry a log. A short distance away, her husband barters with a group of tribesmen, offering them a rifle and a basket of Western clothing.

In a brave, spiteful and stupid review of the Bourse for *Dezeen*, Aaron Betsky exasperatedly asked if "we really have to look at Black people serving and doing obeisance to their conquerors one more time, especially if it is in what is not a particularly good painting?" Yes, Mr Betsky, we do have to. The lie of the whole work, of noble natives from all corners of the globe calmly, sometimes joyously offering their cloth and carpets to pith-helmeted, white-jacketed Frenchmen, is as thin as the canvas it is painted on, but it shouldn't have been rolled up and forgotten about, as Betsky seems to suggest. Speaking to *The New York Times's* Roger Cohen, Pinault acknowledged that "some will criticize us and say it's shameful. We could have hidden the fresco – you can always hide something, that is cancel culture." Yet the work is there for all to see: conserved, not restored. No glory has been given back to it. There is clear horror in the mural's tastefully faded pastels and gentle jewel tones. The sombre form of Ando's structure, sat quietly but firmly beneath this colonial fantasy, shifts again, taking on the form of an abstract memorial. By engaging with the building and climbing the cylinder, you're forced up far closer to this relic than the original artists ever intended.

The circularity of the Bourse lends itself to a slow wander around rather than a linear path through, and there is something generous and gratifying about not being on the usual conveyor belt of gallery, gallery, café, gift shop, thanks and goodbye of most museums. A long while later, for instance, I was walking around the basement, trying to find the exit but not really wanting to leave, when I rounded a corner and came across a plate-glass window opening into some kind of powered-down engine room, with huge immobile wheels arcing out of the floor, slack drive belts and a wall of dials, their needles all at zero. On the wall next to the window was a you-are-here floorplan of the Bourse, the various floors and galleries neatly separated into hovering wireframe discs. I felt the whole place reconfiguring into a dormant Ridley Scott spaceship, embedded for hundreds of years in the Parisian soil, about to hum into life and lift off. Yet the engines through the window turned out to be remnants of an early-20th-century cooling plant for the Les Halles food market, just next door, discovered during the renovations and restored as another layer of history. This building is going nowhere, so grounded is it in both yesterday and today.

Betsky writes that the artists assembled in the collection are "critical, evocative, and in some cases powerful beyond any Gucci bauble the billionaire can sell us," yet there are no baubles for sale. Despite the COMMERCE carved into the stonework above the main entrance, there is almost nothing to buy. There is no mention whatsoever of any of the luxury brands that the Kering group owns, and the exit is not though the gift shop. The Bourse de Commerce is a deeply impressive, satisfying building, yet it is not an attempt at immortality by an egotistical billionaire and an ageing starchitect. It is not spectacular: it's not trying to be. It's better than that. From the loving restoration of the original building, through the delicacy of Ando's transformation, and the Bouroullecs' touch of human warmth, the whole project seems one of respectful, quiet modesty that is utterly lacking in cynicism.

Even the Pinault name is hard to find on the building, which doesn't actually belong to him anyway. All this work, the hundreds of millions of euros spent, is on a 50-year lease from the City of Paris, so the central cylinder is designed to be removable, just as any

Left: The Bouroullecs' Rope chair, installed in one of the gallery spaces. Below: Carpets and furniture that the designers have placed in the gallery to create a more domestic, relaxed atmosphere.

Images courtesy of Claire Lavabre/Studio Bouroullec.

renter takes down the shelves and fills in the holes on their way out. With generosity and without being morbid, Pinault and Ando at 84 and 79 respectively will be gone in 20 years. Fischer's giant candle will be gone in six months.

"When you design objects or furniture, you are designing something that is nomadic," muses Bouroullec when I ask him about the temporary nature of the project. "Everything we did for M. Pinault can be disassembled in two or three days. We keep in mind that there is the ability, the possibility, that things can change very quickly. I like this idea a lot. Especially in this period, 50 years seems to be centuries and centuries. I am 50 and, just maybe, in 50 years I will be there when they start to dismantle it. But I have no idea if this phantasm can exist for 50 years. I hope so, but this world is changing so fast."

It certainly makes you think. In 1978, for instance, the NASA scientist Donald J. Kessler proposed a theoretical future event, in which a collision occurs between two of the many pieces of space junk that orbit our planet. These two dead satellites or spent rocket boosters fragment, and these fragments, travelling at 10km/s and unfettered by the drag of gravity and atmosphere, hit other pieces of speeding trash, which fragment in turn. One collision triggers many more, cascading into chaos. At these speeds, nuts and bolts are 10 times faster than bullets; soon Earth is surrounded in a constant impenetrable cloud of machine gun fire. "We've reached a point where the collision rate between these larger objects, generating debris, is faster than it can be cleaned out by the natural environment," explained the now-retired Kessler in 2013. Jeff Bezos might like to claim that Blue Origin is "opening the promise of space to all", but by the time we're all ready to leave this spent rock, I'm not sure it will be possible, assuming there is even anyone left to press the launch button. I used to idly worry about the Sun expanding in 5bn years and turning Chartres Cathedral, the Pyramids of Giza, and anything else too large to fit into an evacuation ship into molten glass, before vaporising them all completely. I now idly worry about what will kill me first: wildfires, flash floods, another viral epidemic?

Since visiting the Bourse de Commerce, I've been thinking a lot about a scene in *Children of Men*. As Clive Owen's Theo, surrounded in the Ark of the Arts by what little fragments of human culture could be saved as society collapses, wonders, "A hundred years from now, there won't be one sad fuck left to look at any of this… what keeps you going?" If billionaires have to spend inconceivable amounts of money on things that do not reverse climate change, that do not bring about the end of world hunger, or put a roof over the head of that man huddled in a sleeping bag outside, then let it be this. Let it be beauty and intelligence and humility, today. **END**