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César, *Expansion* n°14, 1970  
Centre Pompidou Collection, Paris  
Musée national d'art moderne  
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## PRESS RELEASE

# CÉSAR THE RETROSPECTIVE

**13 DECEMBER 2017 – 26 MARCH 2018**

GALLERY 1, LEVEL 6

**This retrospective marks the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the artist's death. Famous by the age of 25, César enjoyed an artistic career of more than 50 years. He is, however, the last major figure among the Nouveaux Réalistes not to have been accorded a retrospective at the Centre Pompidou. Through more than a hundred pieces displayed in the largest of the Centre Pompidou's exhibition spaces – among them the most famous of his major works, as well as representatives of lesser-known series – this exhibition will offer an unprecedented overview of the career of one of the greatest sculptors of his time, in all its diversity and coherence.**

Born in Marseille in 1921, César began his artistic education there before attending the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris. In the French capital he met Alberto Giacometti, Germaine Richier and Pablo Picasso, among others, and frequented the artists of Saint-Germain-des-Prés and Montparnasse. He very quickly attracted attention with a distinctive personal technique, the welded iron of the human, animal and insect figures that gained him his first solo show, held at the Lucien Durand gallery in 1954. He soon found himself famous, his work exhibited in London and New York.

## INTELLIGENCE OF ACTION

Articulating his work in relation to both modernism and the classical tradition, César developed a practice based on what Pierre Restany called an opposition between “homo faber” and “homo ludens”. Playing on the tension between the assured mastery of the sculptor and the unknowability of the new, César astonished his public when at the turn of the 1960s he produced his first “Compressions”.

A cause of scandal when shown at the Salon de Mai, these were the first of a developing series that would come to an end only with the artist’s death in 1998. The “Compressions” represented one of the most radical moves in 20<sup>th</sup>-century sculpture; shown at both the Kassel Documenta and the Venice Biennale, they would inspire a host of artists, from the Frenchman Bertrand Lavier to the Americans Linda Benglis and Charles Ray.

## BOLDNESS IN MATERIALS

Guided by the accidental logic of his materials, the inventive César then made a dialectical move of sorts in developing his “Expansions”, informed by a principle opposed to that of the “Compressions”, squashed metal giving way to expanded polyurethane foam and other such materials which the artist might colour and polish, deploying his skills in a fashion more typical of Classical sculpture.

Like the welded iron pieces, the “Compressions” and “Expansions” were quickly recognised as foundational moments in modern sculpture. They would be followed by the “Casts” and the “Human Imprints”, which again brought a new dimension to the artist’s work. César’s use of a 3D pantograph to effect the enlargement of a cast of his own thumb for an exhibition on the theme of the hand prompted the development of a new aspect to his practice in the deliberate variation of scale and material – an innovation in the art of representation. The idea of self-portraiture would be a recurrent theme in his work.

## AN ARTIST OF HIS TIME

At the height of his fame at the turn of the 1970s, César was an emblematic representative of the art of his time. Associated with France’s New Realist movement organised around critic Pierre Restany since 1960, he showed all over the world, creating expansions in public at events that were equally performances. From Paris to São Paulo and from London to Milan, César allied the permanence of the Classical tradition with radical and inventive interventions, often spectacular and ephemeral.

Rejecting the shibboleths of both classics and moderns, he developed an original approach that mediated between the intensity of the often unpredictable experiment demanded by the art of his day and the wisdom of the long-term that came from the patient and laborious practice of assemblage.

## AN UNFLAGGING POWER OF INVENTION

The 1980s saw César create a good number of monumental sculptures, and at the end of the decade he was awarded the Japanese Praemium Imperiale. He was exhibiting all over the world, but official French institutions either ignored him or felt his time was past. Yet retrospectives at Marseille, the Jeu de Paume and the Fondation Cartier reminded the public of the crucial role he had played and of his continuing power of invention, and he would subsequently represent France at the Venice Biennale and enjoy retrospectives in Milan, Malmö, Mexico City and elsewhere.

Early champions such as France’s Otto Hahn, Pierre Restany, Daniel Abadie and Catherine Millet were succeeded by a new generation of critics from all over the globe who discovered his work anew, underlining its originality and highlighting the artist’s interest in the most diverse and most different of materials, from marble to chiffon, from iron to straw, from plastic to paper.

César appears today as an artist whose continual reinvention of his practice was guided by the logic of the materials he made his own. Both sombre and jovial – like his work, which both indicts industrial society and playfully transforms its materials – César was without a doubt one of the great sculptors of his age, one of those whose unmistakable works count among the icons of modernity.

## THE EXHIBITION

This retrospective has been conceived and organised by Bernard Blistène, Director of the Musée national d'art moderne, assisted by Bénédicte Ajac, Curatorial Officer at the Musée national d'art moderne, and Hervé Derouault, responsible for production. It will occupy a spacious gallery open onto the city of Paris, underlining the deep connection between César's work and the urban world.

Bringing together 130 pieces from all over the world, the exhibition will offer an unprecedented opportunity to view representative selections of some lesser-known series of works – the early welded iron pieces, the "Envelopments", the "Engagements", the "Champions" of 1986, created from crashed rally cars, or the "Suite milanaise" of 1998. It is organised thematically in terms of the major series into which the artist's work can be divided.

The exhibition design is marked by fluidity, so as to bring out both the monumental character of the works and the principles of seriality and repetition that undergird them. The characteristic duality of César's practice, simultaneously oriented to Classical and Modern, reflects a conflict not only in the artist but in the art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a whole, between the emancipation of the material, on the one hand, and the continuing draw of classical preoccupations, on the other.

## THE CATALOGUE

As well as Bernard Blistène's introduction, the catalogue will feature a number of new contributions, including an essay by Robert Storr and tributes by artists Bertrand Lavier and Charles Ray.

It will also include an anthology of critical texts by such authors as Douglas Cooper, Sam Hunter, Alain Jouffroy, Daniel Abadie, Otto Hahn, Pierre Restany, Catherine Millet and Philippe Sollers, together with an artist biography studded with quotations from César's unpublished writings.

# PRACTICAL INFORMATION

## PUBLIC ACCESS AND PRICING

**Centre Pompidou**  
75191 Paris cedex 04  
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**Hôtel de Ville, Rambuteau**

**Opening hours**  
Exhibitions open every day  
from 11 am to 9 pm  
except on Tuesday

**Price**  
€14  
**concessions: €11**  
Valid the same day for  
the musée national d'art moderne  
and all exhibitions  
Free admission for members  
of the Centre Pompidou  
(holders of the annual pass)

Admission to the Centre Pompidou  
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Those under 26\*, teachers and students  
at French art, drama, dance and music  
schools in France and members of the  
Maison des Artistes benefit from free  
admission to the museum and  
concessions for exhibitions.

Single tickets can be bought  
on [www.centrepompidou.fr](http://www.centrepompidou.fr)  
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You can find the entire programme  
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\*18-25-year-olds who are nationals of  
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States party to the European Economic  
Area agreement.

## AT THE SAME TIME AT THE CENTRE POMPIDOU

**LIU BOLIN**  
**GALERIE PARTY ACTE 2**  
9 SEPTEMBER 2017 - 8 JANUARY 2018  
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**THE MARCEL DUCHAMP PRIZE 2017**  
**THE NOMINATED ARTISTS**  
27 SEPTEMBER 2017 - 1<sup>ST</sup> JANUARY 2018  
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**ANDRÉ DERAÏN**  
**1904-1914**  
**THE RADICAL DECADE**  
4 OCTOBER 2017 - 29 JANUARY 2018  
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**COSMOPOLIS #1**  
**COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE**  
18 OCTOBER - 18 DECEMBER 2017  
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**RENZO PIANO AND RICHARD ROGERS**  
13 DECEMBER 2017 - 12 FEBRUARY 2018  
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## AT THE MUSEUM:

**NEW VISIT CIRCUIT OF THE MUSEUM  
AND A NEW DISPLAY FOR THE  
CONTEMPORARY COLLECTIONS**  
STARTING FROM 20 SEPTEMBER 2017  
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**INDIAN MODERNITIES**  
18 OCTOBER - 19 MARCH 2017  
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**MODERN COLLECTIONS**  
**1905-1965**  
**L'ŒIL ÉCOUTE (THE EYE LISTENS)**  
**A NEW SEQUENCE OF  
EXHIBITION-DOSSIERS**  
**WITHIN THE CIRCUIT OF THE  
MODERN COLLECTION:**  
**MUSIC AND THE VISUAL ARTS**  
UNTIL SPRING 2018  
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## CURATORS

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Musée national d'art moderne  
Centre de création industrielle

In collaboration with:  
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Musée national d'art moderne  
**Hervé Derouault**  
Production Manager  
Musée national d'art moderne

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