

Claudia Barbieri, « Expérience Pommery », [Paris Update.com](http://ParisUpdate.com), 27 novembre 2013.

Expérience Pommery

- 

Details

Published on Wednesday, 27 November 2013 00:00

Written by Claudia Barbieri

Underground Art in Champagne Country



“Maintenant/Now” (1997), by Stéphane Calais in the stairway leading to the cavernous cellars. Photo: © Fred Laures

In the soft chalk of the hill beneath Reims, the Roman Gauls burrowed a honeycomb of mines, extracting the stone for a range of uses, from construction to medicine. Oddly shaped, like enormous bottles with narrow necks and broad bottoms, the chalk pits, or *crayères*, were used by later generations to store real bottles – the sparkling wine of the surrounding Champagne countryside. In the past decade, some have found yet another use, as strangely appropriate exhibition spaces for contemporary art.

The Pommery Champagne house first started putting on art shows called “Expérience Pommery” in some of its *crayères* 11 years ago. Visitors pass from art cellar to art cellar, linked by a labyrinth of dimly lit tunnels lined with racks of aging bottles. For lovers of the good life, it is a rich experience, mixing ancient and modern, dark and light, silence and sudden bursts of sound – and everywhere, Champagne.

An easily accessible 45-minute train ride from Paris, it is an experience that has boosted the Pommery estate into the top rank of local tourist attractions, making it the most visited site in the whole Champagne-Ardenne region after Reims Cathedral. The possibility of combining culture with a tasting of Pommery Brut does not diminish the attraction.

In past years, the shows have been curated by leading figures of the contemporary art scene, including, in 2007, the French abstract sculptor Daniel Buren, best known for his candy-stick

columns in the courtyard of the Palais Royal in Paris. This year, Florence Derieux, director of a local public art fund, the Fonds Régional d'Art Contemporain, has curated an “art voyage” titled “L’Odyssey” in homage to the Homeric epic.

In the entrance lobby to the cellars, a Daniel Firman upside-down elephant (yet another; see [“Happy Birthday Galerie Perrotin”](#)) balances on its trunk, left over from last year’s exhibition – not quite Cerberus guarding the underworld, but near enough.

As visitors descend the long stone staircase leading to the cellars, they are accompanied by an installation by the French artist Stéphane Calais consisting of 36 paper lampshades that light up and change color according to modulations in the tone of 36 prerecorded voices reciting a poem about a friend’s suicide by Dennis Cooper.

In the cellars themselves, the exhibition traces a path past 70 pieces by cutting-edge international artists, among them two giant video works by Lisa Oppenheim of moving clouds, strangely disorienting in the confined underground space, and a site-specific work by the German artist Lothar Hempel in which actors play out a surreal mise en scène in one of the chalk pits.

This being the 30th anniversary of the creation of the French regional art funds by then-President François Mitterrand in 1983, Derieux has celebrated by extending the show to include 30 pieces from her fund’s collection, displayed aboveground in the Pommery showrooms.

Also aboveground is a monumental work by American artist Chris Burden, “The Spirit of the Grape,” a representation of the Champagne vineyards in sculpted polyurethane foam, wood, stones, earth and, oddly, thyme. One hates to think what the bubbly produced on this terroir would taste like.

[Claudia Barbieri](#)

[Domaine Pommery](#): 5, place Général Gouraud, 51100 Reims. Tel. 03 26 61 62 56. Reservation recommended. Open daily, 10am-6pm. €17 admission for guided tour on Saturday & Sunday, followed by a glass of Pommery Brut Royal. Through June 30. www.vrankenpommery.fr

Click [here](#) to read all of this week’s **new articles** on the Paris Update home page.

[More reviews of Paris art shows.](#)

Reader reaction: Click [here](#) to respond to this article (your response may be published on this page and is subject to editing).

Please support Paris Update by ordering books from Paris Update’s Amazon store at no extra cost. Click on your preferred Amazon location: [U.K.](#), [France](#), [U.S.](#)