

Clearing the Parisian air. At the Air de Paris gallery, everything runs smoothly, but nothing seems to unfold as it does elsewhere.

EDOUARD MERINO -
AIR DE PARIS GALLERIST

Interview by SYLVAIN MENÉTREY.

A little like those objects reappropriated by François Curlet, on display there as I put pen to paper. The dense and eclectic programming rolls out its steadfast and unrelenting protest against artistic conventions. Cheerful and relaxed, a haiku composer and meteorite collector, Edouard Merino, cofounder with Florence Bonnefous of this Parisian gallery with strong identity, is the anathema of those well-groomed gallery owners who, Ipad ready, favour contemporary art fairs. And while their colleagues have progressively deserted the Louise Weiss street, which, as a result, has reverted back to the nearly provincial drowsiness of the 13th arrondissement, the duet seems, for better or for worse, to be part of the furniture. Born in Nice, in 1990 - just «after the orgy» as Baudrillard put it - as the art market was hit by

a recession, as Aids pursued its punishing onslaught and utopias had lost their appeal, Air de Paris guided the emergence of a new French artistic scene that expanded the exhibition format and redefined the place of the spectator. Edouard Merino recalls his path as a committed gallery owner while several exhibitions plunge us back into this transitional era.

Sylvain Menétrey **Pierre Huyghe, Philippe Parreno and Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster have each enjoyed major exhibitions over the last few years in Paris, while Stéphanie Moisdon curated the 1984-1999, The Decade exhibition at Centre Pompidou Metz in 2014. How do you perceive this re-emergence of the art scene of the 1990s of which you were a key figure?**

Edouard Merino I thoroughly enjoyed Stéphanie's exhibition. She showcased many works from the gallery, in addition to a few pieces from my own collection. I would say that justice has finally been meted out. Indeed we have come home to our artists. Apart from Parreno, whose career began early, we had to struggle to get those new artistic forms accepted. We strived to maintain a radical position throughout those years. You have to drive it home, over and over again. Perhaps the Louise Weiss exodus compelled us to take things one step further, to plot our course.

Sylvain **You stood at the epicentre of the 90s scene that brought together artists such as Philippe Parreno and Pierre Joseph as well as curators such as Eric Troncy and Nicolas Bourriaud. How did this gang take shape?**

Edouard We met with Florence while studying mediation and cu-

rating at the Ecole du Magasin in Grenoble. 5 to 8 students were selected each year. We were supposed to spend one year there, become involved in life at the Magasin, find internships and organize an exhibition in that venue. We arrived amidst chaos as the director had just died during an exhibition visit. As a result, we had to manage alone. At the time, Grenoble led a progressive policy. Early on, it had set up a community arts centre and youth club that was very active. Social classes mingled in high schools. The Fine Arts school played the role of relay inasmuch as its director had the sense to invite artists who were active in the arts to teach, such as Jean-Luc Vilmouth, Ange Leccia or Patrick Tosani. Fine arts students could intern at the Magasin or assist the artists showing there. Those bridges enabled us to meet Dominique Gonzalez Foerster, Philippe Parreno, Bernard Joisten and Pierre Joseph who studied at the Fine Arts school. Beyond the bonds of friendship we forged, we related to their work.

Sylvain **How was this new guard perceived at the time?**

Edouard It was hard to have Nike trainers or nunchakus acknowledged as worthy art forms whereas modern figurative art and other stuff like this dominated the institutional realm. The new artistic practices we were promoting were frowned upon as "surfer art." To flee French conservatism, we knew we had to connect with people abroad. Liam Gillick came all the way from England by car to see our first exhibition in Nice. I then became friendly with Carsten Höller. These artists enabled our small group to take on an international dimension.

Sylvain **You grew up alongside a generation of artists whom you have remained loyal to and you**

smelling art from the 90s

now represent several more mature artists and, conversely, very few young ones. Why is that?

Edouard We do show works by young artists, yet indeed, to my own surprise, over the last few years we have set our sights on older artists. It's a question of chance, even though I reject the cult of youth, which reminds me of movies in which the pretty young hot actress enjoys a short-lived run. We discovered Guy de Cointet's posthumous work thanks to Paul McCarthy whom Jean de Loisy had introduced us to. Uncle Paul's stories opened the doors to the Los Angeles scene, which is brimming with amazing unknowns. Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley were fascinated by Cointet. Florence undertook a remarkable investigative work in the manner of a private detective to trace his path, uncover his notebooks. The Jef Geys collaboration also stems from a stroke of luck. He's a super complicated guy who doesn't want to do shows, who often loses his temper, but with us, perhaps because we are a little different, everything went fine. I met Dorothy Iannone as a child since my parents were art enthusiasts. My father was close to some Fluxus artists such as George Brecht and had rubbed shoulders with him. We were



put in touch by art historian Yves Brochard a few years back. Since I had met her as a youngster, it made the connexion easier. She plays the part of our nana. Then you have the works of her mother, Sarah Pucci, but in her case, you leave the senior category to enter the super-senior! She would make Americana, those objects somewhere between ex-votos and heavily decorated cakes, that she would give her daughter on the occasion of her birthdays or her openings. Each time, she would send her one of those love objects. Hence in effect, we specialize in seniors.

We may even be entitled to State allowances!

Sylvain **In Nice too, you met many people.**

Edouard Even if, looking back, one gets a sense of an artistic abundance in Nice, since New Realism, Supports/Surfaces and Fluxus were established there, in truth, the support these artists enjoyed was nearly non-existent. We had also elected to live in that town since, having grown up in Monaco, I was familiar with the South, and also because we wanted to try out an alternative to Parisian centralism, which as we later realized wasn't necessarily a great idea. Several inhabitants of Grenoble followed suit. Les Ateliers du Paradise, our maiden exhibition, with Pierre Joseph, Philippe Parreno and Philippe Perrin, was a testament to the resettlement of a bunch of friends.

Sylvain **Looking back, this exhibition can be seen as a manifesto. Elements such as storytelling, the collective, audience engagement and the desacralised works of art, that were to lie**

at the heart of your later programming, were already hatching there.

Edouard The exhibition involved all the issues that would come to concern us later. The title referred to the Paradise, a Monaco night-club. The invitations resembled VIP member cards, on which the words "card for extras" were printed out. Printed t-shirts had been produced adorned with words such as "fire", "devil" or "preservative." During the opening each spectator could wear a t-shirt. He or she could then become the character in a fiction. It so happens that the filmmaker Marion Vernoux had written a short script based on those characters and the elements that took up the gallery such as gymnastics props, a video game console and the fantastical decorations created by the artists. We designed the gallery like a film production company. We wanted to give the artists the means to make their desires come true.

Sylvain Despite this amazing start, you decided to move to Paris.

Edouard We were confronted by the fact that, in Nice, except during the summer, there aren't many people, and people who visit the French Riviera don't necessarily want to visit galleries. We were forced to admit that Nice was no LA. This outlying situation compelled us to set up a burdensome logistical organization to transport the works. We were also far from the decision-making centres, such as CNAP (the French national centre for visual arts) commissions, which we were answerable to. Following a drifter period in Paris, we partnered with other galleries seeking venues that were more suited to their activity. We decided to merge our mailing lists, to pool our forces, to share everything, and the Louise Weiss street experienced that oft

recounted buzz. And now, we're the only ones left there...

Sylvain Do you intend to stay?

Edouard We will eventually leave. By dint of hanging on, we seem backward. I don't really have faith in the word of God according to which those who come first will be the last. But it's hard to find an appropriate venue in Paris.

Sylvain Don't you yearn after a Grand Paris project encompassing galleries? A multi-centred Paris, with a Beaubourg-like impact replicated around suburban art centres: would that not constitute an ideal outcome?

Edouard Quite a few people would be willing to launch a second Louise Weiss. By uniting, one can generate a flow of visitors, even though Parisians nowadays tend to shun art galleries. Why not in the suburbs? We would need to convince art collectors to travel further out. Maybe we could set up a partnership with Riva in order to transport visitors on the Seine, with a female captain decked out in white and wearing a cap. But distance remains a major hindrance. The Ropac venue in Pantin and Gagosian's space in Le Bourget only serve as annexes, they aren't actual galleries.

Sylvain Isn't a collective will lacking, like the one that presided over your establishment in Louise Weiss?

Edouard Several galleries are currently facing issues similar to ours. They need storage space, alternative spaces, larger venues, or simply wish to begin a new adventure. Air de Paris will surprise you!

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