

on the ground

PARIS JEFF RIAN

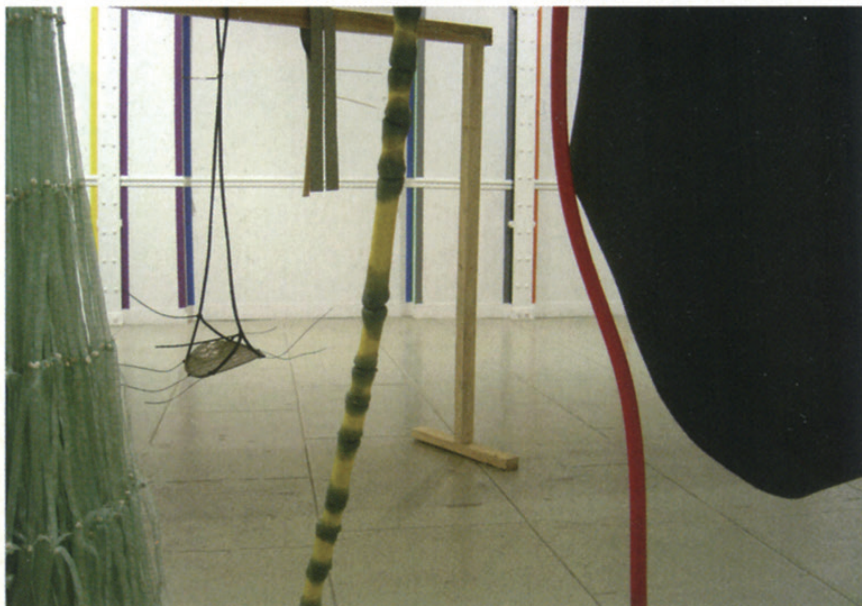
LAST NOVEMBER FRIENDS SOPHIE DUBOSC, JONATHAN LOPPIN, AND Jeanne Truong put together a group show in an abandoned commercial building that a friend had squatted on Impasse Saint-Claude, a blind alley in the Marais. Taking advantage of the French law entitling everyone to a roof overhead, they cleaned the space, painted its walls, hooked up heat and electricity, and named it L'Impasse. The November exhibition was the first of four held on the second floor of the three-story building, in which they featured the work of more than sixty mostly young, unknown artists, as well as a few more familiar ones with an affinity for alternative efforts, like Fabrice Hybert and Claude Lévêque. The buzz grew with each exhibition, and for a time it seemed the space could be made legal. But success drew the attention of the building's owners, who promptly called the authorities: Police arrived with battering rams on August 10, 2004, giving the sleeping squatters fifteen minutes to clear out. Despite the venue's brief run, the young curators stirred up a lot of interest in a very short time and without institutional or financial support—leading one critic to call L'Impasse the highest-level alternative space he'd seen in years.

L'Impasse wasn't alone. During the past year alternative spaces like The Store, a converted retail shop, and La Galeru, a miniscule space operating in a former shoe-repair store in a Paris suburb, have gained prominence, and struggling, makeshift, sometimes inconsistent new galleries like Eva Hober, Jocelyn Wolff, and Atelier Cardenas Bellanger have lately been showing young artists, including some seen at L'Impasse. The latter

galleries even had stands at the FIAC art fair's recently established Future Quake pavilion in October, next door to what seemed, by comparison, the staid, all-too-familiar parents' pavilion. What's emerging in Paris is a fresh generation of artists, curators, and galleries.

DURING THE PAST YEAR ALTERNATIVE SPACES LIKE THE STORE, A CONVERTED SHOP, AND LA GALERU, A MINISCULE SPACE OPERATING IN A FORMER SHOE-REPAIR STORE IN A PARIS SUBURB, HAVE GAINED NEW PROMINENCE.

In a recent conversation, Baptiste Debombourg, a former Ecole des Beaux Arts student who showed at The Store and participated in L'Impasse's first exhibition, suggested to me that his peers are trying to escape the cultural dominance of the baby-boom generation, their greater numbers, and their conceptual art practices. Boomers were the first to grow up with TV; they showed sophisticated versions of Pop art in abandoned factories renovated by postmodern architects; they glorified loft living, museum stores, classic rock, MTV, art fairs, glossy magazines—and a designer lifestyle that this generation can no longer afford. In France, Boomers, with few exceptions, abandoned painting and drawing, and as professors they hardly bother to teach these media anymore.



FROM THE YOUNGER PERSPECTIVE, SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS IS A GIVEN, AND ART IS MADE WITH A BEUYSIAN ESPRIT DE CORPS: EVERYONE CAN BE AN ARTIST, AND ART CAN BE ANY KIND OF OBJECT OR FORM.

A middle generation—Douglas Coupland's Gen-Xers—created political correctness and installation art; they used personal computers to make amateur magazines and allied art with fashion. In France, the strongest manifestation of this generation—the youngest generation's older siblings, so to speak—has been the Palais de Tokyo, a nationally funded pseudosquat whose unfinished interior looks like a construction site and is regularly redecorated with international scatter art along with videos and photographs of every stripe. Neither a museum nor a squat, the Palais de Tokyo's identity remains unclear, particularly to a new generation of artists and curators suspicious of the one that came before them.

Many of this younger generation of artists were the Boomers' students. They grew up in a world of computers, camcorders, and an evolution in graphic communication that combined drawing and coloring with mouse clicks and screen images. And so they experiment with every conceivable medium and process but are criticized by Boomers for their *misérabiliste* mix of materials and styles; for not caring enough about history—or the end of history, in Boomer parlance; and for being too commercially oriented.

But to get a truer sense of the work appearing in these spaces, consider the examples of Debombourg and Olivier Soulerin, two artists from the emerging generation. At The Store, Debombourg presented *Code Articles*, 2004, an inexpensive bookshelf, cabinet, table, and chairs that he hammered to pieces, then painstakingly glued back together, enough to be usable. The title comes from France's penal code and the work suggestively expresses a pathetic fallacy, borne from the found objects' debilitating scars resulting from severe trauma inflicted upon them. In 2002, Soulerin (now with Atelier Cardenas Bellanger) repainted the interior and exterior of La Galeru, transforming the four-foot-

wide sidewalk gallery into a cartoon for his piece +/-°. At L'Impasse, Soulerin was among eleven painters chosen for the exhibition "Exercices," which examined what might be construed as the formal limits of painting. Soulerin set a wooden lattice into a wall at baseboard level, like an extremely low drop ceiling, then painted the wall and lattice in institutional green so that viewers could step directly into the "painting." Debombourg and Soulerin did use affordable materials. But what really seems to be happening is that these artists (and a lot of others) are exploring materials, concepts, and styles of every conceivable variety, from handicrafts to high art—whatever that means anymore. (French art schools, almost across the board, are dropping "Beaux" in preference for "Ecole des Arts," meaning all the "arts," especially design.)

As for the new generation's commercialism, it is based on survival, not consumerism. They can barely afford studio apartments. Nor is financial support as available in the current political climate, with devastating budget cuts to regional art centers and public collections (which had proliferated across France in the 1980s). They can't even picture an artist's life the same way their parents did: working alone in a loft, trying to advance art history, maybe with a patron offering a stipend. From the younger perspective, social consciousness is a given, and art is made with a Beuysian esprit de corps: Everyone can be an artist, and art can be any kind of object or form. It doesn't require historical or critical pedigree. It can be any material or style. These kids aren't interested in readymades, making the familiar strange, deconstruction theory, or political correctness. They're interested in creating a psychokinetic response, using available means befitting contexts as divergent as squats, sidewalks, makeshift galleries, a curator's theme show. They're interested in every kind of graphic art and in making what Carlos Cardenas of Atelier Cardenas Bellanger calls "process-oriented objects"—using materials of every conceivable type they can afford—which, of course, they're hoping their parents' generation will be buying. □

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