

A gallery constructs its identity and history principally through its exhibitions – narratives and mythologies that express artistic visions and define a generation of artists. In conversation with Florence Bonnefous, co-founder and co-director of the **Air de Paris** gallery, Pierre-Alexandre Mateos and Charles Teyssou revisit the exhibition 'Les Ateliers du Paradise' held in Nice in August 1990. The show brought together the works of three artists who were present in the gallery space for the duration of the project: **Pierre Joseph, Philippe Parreno, and Philippe Perrin.**



Left to right: Philippe Parreno, Philippe Perrin, Pierre Joseph, Marion Lanoux and Amélie Darras. 'Les Ateliers du Paradise', Air de Paris, Nice, 1990. Photograph by Jean-Marc Pharisien, courtesy of Air de Paris, Romainville.

Pierre-Alexandre Mateos and Charles Teyssou: 'Les Ateliers du Paradise' marked the birth of the Air de Paris gallery. Could you tell us about what inspired you to stage an exhibition on the Côte d'Azur in the summer of 1990?

Florence Bonnefous: We found ourselves opening a gallery in Nice, which wasn't exactly our initial plan. I'd studied at the École du Magasin in Grenoble where I met not only Edouard Merino – with whom I later founded the gallery – but also a whole bunch of people whose careers were starting out. They were emerging artists, art critics like Nicolas Bourriaud and Éric Troncy, and future museum directors. It was a whole generation that came into its own in the south of France, between Grenoble and Nice. At some point in 1989, we decided to open a gallery and we found a space in Paris. The night before we were supposed to sign the lease, we went out to dinner to celebrate. And then, during dessert, we decided not to sign the lease but to head south instead. We wanted to escape from the center, escape from a milieu where, in our eyes, everything was already defined and obeyed principles that didn't excite us. After that epiphany, we decided to go to Nice.

We found a space, renovated it, and managed to get residencies at the Villa Arson for the artists we knew from the École du Magasin, namely, Philippe Perrin, Philippe Parreno, and Pierre Joseph. We did it with the idea of embarking on this project together. They proposed the project and came up with a list of specifications. 'Les Ateliers du Paradise' was a name that combined notions of work and partying as there was also a nightclub in Monaco called the Paradise. The three artists drew up a kind of wish list of all the things they wanted to have and to make, and very quickly they came to stay in Nice, before the gallery was even open.

'Les Ateliers du Paradise' seems, at least in hindsight, to be at once an exhibition and a manifesto – not in the sense of a political program, but an attitude to art, to artists, and to the art world. Was that something you had in mind when you were making the exhibition?

We wanted to stand out. That was the only thing we clearly perceived and expressed as a group. As for Edouard and me, we both had a connection to Fluxus ideas. I had it through my reading, and Edouard had it because his parents were among the closest friends of George Brecht and **Robert Filliou**, and patrons of their 'La cédille qui sourit' studio-shop in Villefranche-sur-Mer. That shop was home to a whole artistic scene, including **Dorothy Iannone**, who works with us now.



Installation view (entrance, room 1) of exhibition 'Les Ateliers du Paradise', Air de Paris, Nice, 1990. Photograph by François Fernandez, courtesy of Air de Paris, Romain

'Les ateliers du paradise' was the first of a series of iconic group exhibitions in the early 1990s. There was Éric Troncy's 'No Man's Time' at the Villa Arson in 1991, and later, Nicolas Bourriaud's 'Traffic' at the CAPC Museum of Contemporary Art in 1996. If you had to picture a genealogy of avant-gardes, on one side you might have the Fluxus branch, and that partly gives rise to relational aesthetics; the concept defined by Nicolas Bourriaud in 1998 where works of art are understood through the human relationships and social interactions they generate. 'Les ateliers du paradise' seems to stand in between, a kind of hybrid exhibition, at the limit between Fluxus, relational aesthetics, and perhaps even entertainment culture.

At the time, lots of people were talking about 'fun'. It was a notion that was everywhere in sports, especially extreme sports, video games, and the baby steps of virtual reality. There was even a little virtual technologies fair in Monaco back then where people were having their first go at VR headsets. But to come back to the idea of a family tree, some of the artists in 'Les ateliers du paradise' went on to take part in 'No Man's Time' and 'Traffic'.

'Les Ateliers du Paradise' was composed of multiple – often parodic – activities and situations. A key element of the exhibition was how transversal it was, how open it was to other disciplines. You could play sports there, cook a meal, and there was even an onsite linguist.

Some of the things were completely made up. The linguist is on the list, but there was never a linguist. There was a play between what really took place and what didn't. In the same way, sometimes we were open and sometimes we weren't, because we'd decided to go to the beach. We wanted to scramble the program. The program had a value in itself, the conceptual beauty of lists, but we had no problem casting it aside when we wanted to.



Left to right: Philippe Parrene, Ingrid Berthon Moline, Philippe Perrin, Edouard Marino, Ingrid Luche, Florence Bonnefous, Pierre Joseph. Rue de la Barillerie, Nice, in front of Air de Paris circa 1990 or 1991. Photograph by Helmut Newton, Collection Merino, Monaco, courtesy of Air de Paris, Romainville.

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One of the main ideas was to treat the exhibition as a film in progress. The artists spoke of the gallery as a cinematic space where viewers were transformed into actors. Philippe Parreno was interested in an art based upon time.

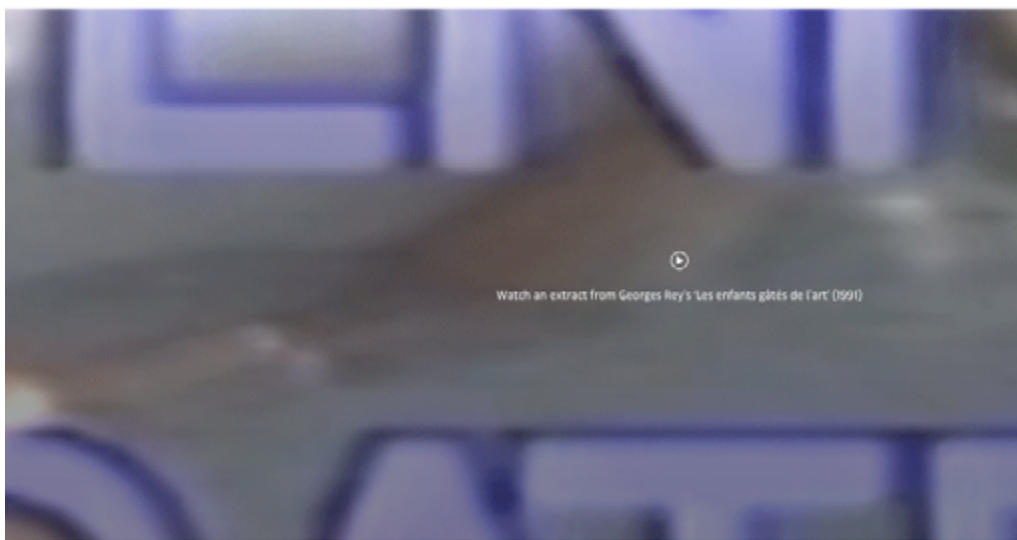
The artists defined the project as a film taking place in real time. And that allowed them to introduce a distinction between real time and the virtual time of video games. Instead of sending out paper invitations, they made a member card that also looked like a credit card. They also drew up a list of 500 words – a number that, at the time, stood for the vocabulary of the average French person. They had the same number of words, but not the same words. Then we embroidered them on colored t-shirts. Everyone who came into the gallery was assigned a role. I was a 'match,' Edouard was the 'good,' I think, and so on. In time, the viewers became fragments of a short story, a script that took shape in the gallery space.



'Les Ateliers du Paradise' exhibition, Air de Paris, Nice, 1990. Photograph by Raph Gatti, courtesy of Air de Paris, Romainville.

We see those ideas of virtual time and social games in Georges Rey's film *Les enfants gâtés de l'art*, from 1991. It's a kind of making-of documentary about the exhibition; like a reality TV series about the artists where they each play exaggerated versions of themselves.

Yes, that's true. The jacuzzi scene could almost be Loana in the first season of *Loft Story*. All in all, it's true the film was very much a continuation of the exhibition, and it was intentionally uninhibited and regressive.



Pour visionner cliquer ici

How was the exhibition received?

It was a hit. I have to say we were pretty good at PR. We sent out the first faxes and held a great big dinner on the beach. Nearly 100 people showed up for the opening. People would come to play the video games, try out the climbing wall (*Ozone Wall* by Philippe Parreno), or borrow an inflatable and go to the sea that was nearby. For one event, we went scuba diving in an art collector's pool where we held a meeting in sign language, which we didn't know very well. The exhibition was a theme park that championed the idea of a non-stop party, not just after cocktail hour. That's also how me met **Liam Gillick**, who drove all the way down from London with **Angela Bulloch** because he heard about the exhibition. Later, he joined the gallery – though we were never thought about it in those terms back then. Everything happened in an organic, intuitive way.