

Culture



Far left, the opening of a collective exhibition at the Bugada & Cargnel gallery in Belleville in north-eastern Paris, and, left, the works of Wilfrid Almendra on show at the gallery; above, Marie Volgnier, an artist presenting her installation at the Marcel Aitz gallery in Belleville.



From left, Claudia Cargnel and Frédéric Bugada, owners of the Bugada & Cargnel gallery; a dinner given for the opening of Zenita Kemad's works at Loft 15, owned by Susanne Tarasiéve, in Belleville; one of Ms. Kemad's works; below, the Rue Louise Weiss in the 13th Arrondissement.



While the Rue Louise Weiss is declining, its spirit has left an imprint on the arts world.

Paris art scene's brand new beat

PARIS

The Rue Louise Weiss fades as new galleries set up shop in Belleville

BY TARA MULHOLLAND

The Rue Louise Weiss, an unprepossessing street in southeastern Paris that was the poster child for the city's 21st-century contemporary art scene, is drawing its last breath.

Where over a dozen galleries once clustered and exhibition openings attracted visitors in the thousands, only four galleries remain — with two of those, Praz-Delavallade and GB Agency, also quitting the neighborhood in the 13th Arrondissement this year for the centrally located Marais. Gentrification has not come to the area, which still fosters mainly low-income housing from the 1960s and sterile office buildings: The galleries arrived and departed, leaving as little trace as a footprint on the sand.

Meanwhile, the new neighborhood for the city's young contemporary arts scene, led by the Galerie Jocelyn Wolff and the Bugada & Cargnel gallery, has established itself over the past couple of years in the working-class Belleville district in northeastern Paris, with five new galleries opening there since last autumn and with a four-page spread last month in *Beaux Arts* magazine dedicated to the area as the city's "new seedling ground for young galleries."

So what happened? Is the Rue Louise Weiss a failed cultural initiative, where, as *Le Figaro* wrote in its annual review of the Paris art scene in November, gallery owners "became disenchanted and fled back to the heart of the capital"? Or did the street, despite its ephemerality, mark a genuinely important moment in the Paris arts scene, as it was said to be doing at its founding? Perhaps it was a little bit of both.

"It's an area that had a huge importance in the contemporary arts world in France," said Frédéric Bugada, co-owner of Bugada & Cargnel in Belleville. "It marked a generation of artists, a bit like

in the music world, at the end of the 1960s. I won't go so far as to say that it stopped us being ashamed of being French when it came to contemporary art, but it certainly gave us a reason to hope."

Rue Louise Weiss was set up as a radical experiment in 1997 by six young gallerists, who, hit by the economic slump of the early nineties, decided to swap the high rents of the established contemporary arts scene in the Marais for the 13th Arrondissement. The concept was simple: Collectors might be wary of leaving the Marais, but through the galleries' sheer force of numbers they would be forced to come to the new neighborhood.

Taking advantage of low rents being offered by Jacques Toubon, the former French culture minister who was mayor of the 13th Arrondissement at the time, the galleries AIP de Paris, Almine Rech, Art Concept, Jennifer Flay, Emmanuel Perrotin, Praz-Delavallade and Kréa set up a communal arts scene in a block belonging to the Ministry of Finance. They decided to share rent on communal premises, share invitation lists and hold joint exhibition openings.



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And it worked.

In the first few years, crowds of thousands turned up for the communal openings, the street became a beacon for contemporary art collectors and the area was held up as a sign of France's return to an art's scene long dominated by Britain and the United States.

"It was an extraordinary and very necessary development in the late 90s," said Jennifer Flay, the artistic director of the FIAC, the Paris-based international contemporary art fair and one of the original gallery owners on Rue Louise Weiss.

"It was something very vital and very dynamic that Paris hadn't seen for quite

some time."

For Bruno Delavallade of Praz-Delavallade, the Louise Weiss era also represented an important learning curve for the gallerists themselves. "When we moved down there we were all young galleries that were not that well known," he said. "By and large everyone took off — it allowed us all to grow up."

Indeed, with few exceptions, those young galleries have now become established names in the international contemporary arts scene. Louise Weiss alumni include the galleries Emmanuel Perrotin, Almine Rech and Art Concept, all of which have decamped to the Marais since their fortunes have risen.

While the area around the Rue Louise Weiss remains underdeveloped because of a combination of factors, including planned, but never realized, initiatives — like a new road linking the street with the French national library — the spirit of the project has nevertheless left an imprint on the arts world.

"It represented an attempt to try to make art exist in an area that's off the beaten track for the market," Daria de

Beauriva, a curator at the Palais de Tokyo, said by e-mail. "We can see something similar happening with Belleville." But, she added, Belleville is "a more natural place" for the gallery scene to develop because of the number of people in the arts world who already live there, and because its cheap bars, hip cafés and restaurants — all lacking on Rue Louise Weiss — make it "a lively and dynamic area."

And while the new generation of contemporary art galleries in Belleville operate independently, the sense of community in a quarter off the beaten gallery track is reminiscent of the Louise Weiss initiative.

Many of the galleries hold exhibition openings on the same day and some offer free maps of "Le Grand Belleville" with all its galleries, reinforcing this echo of a communal arts outpost.

"If there is so much talk about the east of Paris it's because there is a group of galleries there and they're supportive of each other," said Ms. Fray.

"I think that's rather a nice heritage."