



A studio complex offering space and support for artists beyond Paris' commercial galleries, POUISH is also helping expand the city's horizons, say director Yvannoé Kruger and three image-makers with ateliers in the project

POUSH it real good

Words by Sarah Moroz

On the face of it Paris is a haven for artists, boasting a plethora of institutions, galleries and fairs. But it can be a difficult city to negotiate without commercial gallery representation, and that presents a problem for those with emerging or more experimental practices. Luckily there are a few studio spaces offering support, including the discreet garden retreat of the Cité internationale des arts in Montmartre and its sister site along the Seine in the Marais, as well as the transformed former schools that became DOC! in the 19th arrondissement, or Artagon in the Pantin suburb. POUISH is another coveted initiative, providing ateliers for over 250 artists in a colossal 20,000-square metres location in Aubervilliers, north-east of central Paris.

'Le Grand Paris' – a project to expand into the wider Île-de-France region – is gradually getting established, swelling the dense cosmopolitan centre to create something more like a web. The systematic widening is establishing new points of reference, as more extensive public transport helps access new institutions and hubs in the art ecosystem. POUISH has always existed on the outskirts of central Paris. Now in its third location, it began in Saint-Denis in a former *orfèvrerie* (goldsmithery), then moved to Porte Pouchet, in the Porte de Clichy area, known not-so-glamorously for its cemetery and morgue.

The project is spearheaded by curator Yvannoé Kruger, who previously worked at the Palais de Tokyo; in addition to his role as artistic director for arts consulting business Manifesto, he is the director – and connective tissue – of POUISH. After securing the Clichy space he opened a call-out to artists and swiftly received applications, including from French art scene notables such as Jean-Marie Appriou, David Douard and Neil Beloufa. Those interested had to submit portfolios and undergo interviews and, once selected, were given long-term access to the space. That makes POUISH unusual, and covetable, because other Parisian studios often only guarantee space for three to nine months.

Even so, the Clichy venue got off to a tricky start. Opening in 2020, just one week before France's first lockdown, it was still installing new carpets when the order to isolate came through. Then in 2022 its lease ran out and hundreds of trucks – "like in *Mad Max: Fury Road*," Kruger jokes – moved materials to its current Aubervilliers home, which originally served as a perfume factory.

Artist support

POUSH is also unconventional because it provides artists with administrative and legal support, help that is nothing short of a blessing in bureaucratically minded France. "We teach the artists how to declare taxes, what status to have, how to recruit a studio manager or intern, how to go on maternity leave. We help them professionalise," Kruger says, as we chat in Galbi, the canteen/restaurant at POUISH. Galbi is one of several communal spaces in the studios, another being La Coupole – a "museum-ish" 2000-square metres space that hosts group shows, by artists from POUISH and beyond.

Kruger estimates that about 35 to 40 per cent of the artists presently resident in POUISH are international, something he takes as indicative of a wider cultural shift.



“People are here from New York and Berlin – people from here used to want to go there,” he remarks. “I think something is happening in Paris right now.”

Something is definitely happening in Paris right now. It is not just that there is an “El Dorado of spaces in the banlieue”, as Kruger puts it, a sense of possibility as the city expands beyond the périphérique ring road. “[Paris] was very late in crossing the périphérique, relative to places like London,” Kruger points out; he adds that this expansion is helping “abattre la ville musée”, or break down the preciousness of the city-as-museum. The institutional art players thrive in the centre, sure, but as horizons have modified, the city’s art panorama has shifted accordingly. It is better – and less snobby – for it.

Moreover, POUISH also has a gimlet-eyed capacity to distil what is going on in the French scene, reading as a microcosm of the wider va-et-vient (comings-and-goings), trends and concerns. It is a place for “observing things in the present tense: influences and techniques and ideas,” Kruger observes. POUISH’s population encompasses both early and mid-career artists, including those who have been featured at the Venice Biennale and won the BMW Art Makers prize, in addition to an emerging generation.

When it comes to photography, Kruger says the Parisian scene is “pretty experimental”, and some of the better-known image-makers in POUISH bear him out, including Lucile Boiron, Sabine Mirlesse, Dune Varela, Arash Hanaei and Lev Ilizirov. There is also what Kruger calls a “bureau de photographie”, 10 photographers unknown to each other before sharing a space.

A smaller shared studio houses two French photographers addressing women’s issues, Elea Jeanne Schmitter and Yaziamé. Both attended the alternative École Kourtrajmé’s Art et Images programme, overseen by French artist JR, who is known for his large-scale public interventions. For Schmitter too, a sense of scale is key. She creates big works as a means to subvert the invisibility of women’s bodies, and notes: “POUSH allows me to work in a large format, which I couldn’t store otherwise.”

She adds: “It helps to be able to propose studio visits – so you don’t show your work next to your laundry basket.” Schmitter’s current project examines the fraught relationship between sports-watching and domestic violence; that is to say, the peak in abuse that accompanies pumped-up spectacles.

Her studio mate and friend Yaziamé has examined women’s invisibility during the Algerian War via a personal and familial lens, using her mother’s camera to take photographs of her grandmother, who lived through the conflict. “Women’s roles ‘disappeared’ during the war, even though they fought too,” she notes. She is currently working on depicting bodily intimacy and the hardships of endometriosis (she herself was diagnosed very late), by way of a residency at Villa Medici. She is crafting one-off ceramic frames in which to place these images, their handmade idiosyncrasy reflecting the individual nature of “each woman and each pathology”.

Neighbourhood watch

Iranian-born, Paris-based artist Pooya Abbasian initially applied to POUISH with a portfolio on wild plants, but has since become attuned to banlieue sociopolitical geography. Translated as ‘suburbs’, banlieues are perhaps more akin to inner-city areas in UK cities, and suffer from similar deprivations; while cycling to his studio every day, Abbasian passed migrants, tents and police, and felt he had no choice but to integrate that reality into his work.

- 1 Exterior of POUISH in the Aubervilliers area of Paris.
- 2 POUISH’s gallery and meeting space La Coupole.
- 3 POUISH resident Elea Jeanne Schmitter in front of work from the series *40 ans, 70 kg*.

He began addressing head-on “ambiguous subjects such as cultural appropriation and gentrification”, the risks of expanding into the lower-income areas, a problem familiar to all large cities. Abbasian created a video of a logo featuring le 93 (the Seine-Saint-Denis postal code) in Gothic lettering, in a project called *A Slave to Trends*; he also ordered hoodies printed with 93 on the back.

Abbasian questions the ethics of artists moving into the banlieue. “We are helping gentrification,” he points out. “The prices get higher, then we have to move to the [next] suburb further away.” He notes that people talk about “good gentrification” – outsiders rendering humdrum locales more dynamic – but questions the benefits for existing locals. What are the codes of inhabiting a space unattractive to artists until space was explicitly built for them?

These issues can, of course, also be laid at POUISH’s door but Fondation Fiminco, in the neighbouring suburb of Romainville – where Abbasian has another residency – makes for an interesting comparison. Fondation Fiminco hosts commercial galleries and is aiming to become a cultural quarter contained from the wider area; POUISH strives to be inclusive, running educational activities that welcome locals and school kids, and maintaining a dialogue with a neighbourhood in which the big galleries and museums can feel remote (despite being a short metro ride away).

Abbasian does test prints in his studio at POUISH, and has recently been “painting with the light of the video projector” – printing long videos onto photo-sensitive paper, yielding abstract forms. “For many years, I was learning how to make a good photo,” he says. “I started to realise that I’m not satisfied with this ‘perfect composition’ anymore, so I decided to deconstruct everything I learned and make room for luck. That’s where the poetry starts to happen. I cannot control it, and I found that more interesting.” In 2024, his work was shown in the project space at the Maison Européenne de la Photographie.

At the time of our conversation, POUISH was at risk of losing its lease post-2024; the team is trying to cement the Aubervilliers space on a more permanent basis, but due to the uncertainty is also looking for other homes. “It is very stressful, for artists and administration alike,” says Kruger. Either way, POUISH will endure. Providing welcome support for artists, particularly those with less renown or more experimental practices, it is helping breathe life into Le Grand Paris. **BP**

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