

Artists Are Flocking to Paris's Suburbs, Thanks to a Program That Subsidizes Studios in Abandoned Buildings



POUSH exhibition space.
SHANTI ESCALANTE-DE MATTEI/ARTNEWS

On the outskirts of Paris this week, in the suburb of Aubervilliers, 250 artists opened their studios to the public for a program called **POUSH**, which began in 2020. The brainchild of Hervé Digne, the cofounder of the art production consultancy Manifesto, POUSH offers emerging artists heavily subsidized studio space by making deals with real estate developers who are holding onto enormous, abandoned buildings.

“At first, the landlords were skeptical,” said Digne, as we stood in the massive artistic compound. Its site was once a perfume factory, then a data center. “Artists in an abandoned building? They didn’t think it would go well.”

But Digne, who had experience with government officials and developers from his Manifesto work, eventually convinced a developer in the suburb of Clichy to offer the office tower to artists. In return, POUSH was have to cover utility costs and some taxes, and thus, POUSH was able to offer studio spaces to artists at a heavily reduced rate of about 10 to 13 euros per square meter a month. After two years, the developer in Clichy wanted the space back.

“We gave it back on time and in the same condition,” Digne said. It was important to him to set a good example so that the program could hopefully spawn similar schemes.

Digne began POUSH as a way to address two key issues he thought were facing artists: a lack of affordable studio space and an epidemic of loneliness. He thought to himself: “These artists leave school, and they begin a very intense period, often very alone. But what if they weren’t?”

Having opened during Covid, the space offered solidarity during an isolating and difficult time.

POUSH provides communal working spaces, but it also offers support in a variety of other ways. A cafe for residents was set up on site, and artists can receive legal aid and help producing artworks. Most importantly, perhaps, artists are able to access the networks that their colleagues and the POUSH organizers have developed over the years, making it a prime environment for those looking for gallery representation and institutional shows. Just a few weeks ago, POUSH artist Dhewadi Hadjab landed representation with one of France’s biggest galleries, Kamel Mennour.

Since POUSH was started two years ago, word of mouth about the program has spread, and artists have been eager to land a coveted spot. Juan Gugger, an Argentine artist who has lived in Paris for the past four years, immediately jumped at the opportunity to apply for a studio space when POUSH began taking applications for 90 additional artists once it moved into the bigger Aubervilliers space. Gugger has been in his new studio for two weeks.

“The community here is very different from a residency, where people come for two or three months and that’s it,” Gugger said. “People settle here, people want to do something amazing here.”

Thus far, Digne’s hope to give artists a richer community seems to be working.

“It’s easy to think to yourself, ‘This thing that you’re doing is crazy. What are you putting your energy and time into? It doesn’t make sense,’” said Gugger as guests observed his small drawings of Notre-Dame on fire. “But when you are with 200 people who are as crazy as you, you don’t have these thoughts anymore.”



POUSH comes at a time when Paris is experiencing a revitalization of its art scene. Yvannoe Krüger, the artistic director of Manifesto and POUSH, marveled at how much the city has changed.

“Twenty years ago I went to London to escape Paris, and nothing was happening here,” said Krüger.

Now, Krüger noted, the art scene is vital because more artists have begun living and working in the suburbs of Paris, a city whose class divisions have long been particularly pronounced. Long associated in the eyes of middle-class Parisians with poverty, violence, and immigrant communities, **the suburbs are now gentrifying.**

Parisians, Krüger said, were never keen to see its outskirts as a part of the city. “It’s as if you wouldn’t take advantage of Brooklyn because it’s not Manhattan,” he said. But now that that’s changing, Krüger is excited to be a part of the push to bring art to the suburbs.

As a part of the open studio programming, the POUSH team put together two exhibitions as well, “On Abstraction” and “Le Paysan, le chercheur et le croyant,” which Krüger curated. The show is 50 percent POUSH artists and 50 percent established artists, most of whom have won major prizes and exhibited at major Parisian institutions like the Pompidou, like Mircea Cantor and Edgar Sarin. Including the major artists is a way of connecting the POUSH artists with these established figures and their networks.

Plus, said Krüger, “It’s a way to get people to come to the suburbs.”