An interview with Jennifer Flay, Director of FIAC

Part 2, Auckland to Paris 1980 - 2003

by Pauline Autet

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Installing a work by Jean-Michel Alberola at the Biennale de Paris, shortly after her arrival in Paris to work for Galerie Daniel Templon in 1985. Photo courtesy Jennifer Flay.



With Felix Gonzalez Torres on couch installation works by Franz West, at MOCA in L.A. Circa 1994. Photo courtesy Jennifer Flay.



Working at Galerie Catherine Issert in the early 1980's. Artwork by Ben Vautier. Photo courtesy Jennifer Flay.



After major car accident in 1999, Flay with a solid neck brace sitting at her gallery booth at Art Basel with a work by Alain Séchas. Photo courtesy Jennifer Flay.

The New Zealand-born gallerist Jennifer Flay has lived in France for 36 years, initially arriving with a French government scholarship to pursue her studies of Art History at the University of Nice. Today, Flay is the internationally renowned Director of Paris' contemporary art fair FIAC.

This chapter of the interview looks back at Flay's journey to France in the 1980's and her introduction to the art gallery world; learning on the job in Parisian galleries Daniel Templon and Ghislaine Hussenot, dinners with artists Christian Boltanski and Annette Messager and eventually opening her own gallery despite hostile market conditions in 1991.

Following a major car accident in 1999 which left her suffering from cervical and cranial injuries, Flay had made the difficult decision to close down her gallery in 2003. The same year, a friend put her name forward to take the direction of FIAC, which was struggling at the time. To read about about the revival of FIAC since Flay took the helm 13 years ago and the prestigious place it occupies in the French capital today, see Part 1 – FIAC years 2003-2016.

PAULINE AUTET Can you remember how your passion for the arts began? Were you exposed to art history at school while growing up in Auckland or did it come later?

JENNIFER FLAY I was interested in culture generally speaking, but I grew up in a family that wasn't particularly orientated towards the arts. My mother was a nurse, my uncle was a doctor, my aunty was a chemist—it was a very different type of orientation. What I consider to be my first encounter with sculpture occurred when I was very young, three or four years old. My father who was a tailor by trade was still making mens' suits at home and I have a vivid recollection of what seemed like a forest of Stockman mannequins, seen from below because I was a little girl. I wasn't allowed to touch them of course, but I was fascinated by the forms created by draped cloths, the different layers of padding and stiffening with big tacking stitches the way tailors used to work. They were anthropomorphic and very sculptural and certainly contributed to my taste for clothing, the history of clothing and costume in general.

Both my parents encouraged my creative side when I was young. Dad helped me make the clothes I "designed", providing me with the materials, patterns, technical advice and practical help whether or not my inventions were really "wearable". My mother was particularly attentive to my attraction for the visual arts. Although they were unusual in our family context, I was lucky to grow up in an environment in which my inclinations were encouraged.

I remember that at school in New Zealand when you're eight or nine, you are required to complete some research projects that you choose the subject of. My first one was on dogs, all races of dogs because of course I had to get to the bottom of the subject. The second one was on Picasso and my parents and school teacher were surprised at my choice and the passion I was developing for art. It has remained with me ever since.

PA So you chose to study Art History at the University of Auckland.

JF I think that parts of your personality are innate, while others are learnt—I really feel that this is something that has been part of me forever. I was a very good performer at school, I passed all the exams at least one year before you were supposed to sit them, always with top marks. I could have gone to University with a bursary when I was 16 but felt that I was too young. Also I was an orphan of my mother who died when I was 14. So I continued school and sat Scholarship exams in three subjects; Art History, History and English Literature and did very well. In my first year of University I took Ancient History, History, Art History...although I let my father believe it was a Law Intermediate until the end of the first year because I knew he would be more comfortable with that. I was also doing a degree in French in parallel but I have to say I wasn't very good at it!



Flay working at Galerie Catherine Issert in early 1980's, with (behind) a work by Costa.



Jennifer Flay on the rue de Bretagne, Paris, near her rue Debelleyme gallery in the 1990's.

PA What made you go to France to continue your Art History studies at postgraduate level?

JF It was Tony Green, Professor of Art History at the University of Auckland and specialist of the French artist Nicolas Poussin, who encouraged me to go overseas to do my doctorate. Then one day, French art historian Michel Sanouillet, major international Dada expert, visited Auckland to deliver two conference papers in the Art History department; one on the Dada spirit and the other on Marcel Duchamp. I went to both of course and was utterly fascinated, particularly because he had actually met and frequented most of the Dada figures he was referencing and was able to describe and project what the Dada spirit was about, which is so difficult to put into words.

PA Why did you chose to study in Nice when you were awarded a French Government bursary and left New Zealand in 1980?

JF I chose to study with Michel Sanouillet, the Dada professor, and he was teaching in the multidisciplinary Centre du 20e siècle of the University in Nice. There was actually no art history department there! I thought that culture was evenly spread all over France but in Nice there wasn't even a library to speak of. But in the end, Nice was really important for me as it led me to subjects like art sociology, communication studies, and thinking about the way art circulates within a society—the educational, cultural and sociological factors which influence the way it is perceived and apprehended. These interests have remained with me ever since. And I love Nice, even more so since July [terrorist attack]…



PA I remember you saying in a previous interview that when you saw the French 'all disciplines' scholarship advertised in your University Department, you wondered if Art History was included.

JF Yes because Art History is kind of marginal! To be honest, at that point I saw myself quite comfortably teaching Art History at the University in Auckland. A whole other aspect of my personality would have remained undiscovered to me but I would

have been thrilled to teach! I still occasionally think that I could go back to it and have had incursions—the book I published on Christian Boltanski for example, is a real piece of university work (Catalogue - Books, Printed Matter, Ephemera 1966-1991, 1992). But my career led me to other places.

PA What were your impressions of the French art scene when you arrived in the 1980's? How has it changed in the 36 years that you have lived and worked in France?

JF It's changed tremendously. I remember very clearly a dinner in the '80's in Malakoff (suburb outside Paris) with Christian Boltanski, Annette Messager and others, Sophie Calle was probably there too because they all lived in the same housing complex. I remember them saying 'we're French, no one is interested in French art anyway, we just get on with our work and nobody cares.' It's true that at that point, although they exhibited frequently in Europe, none of them had had exhibitions in the United States for example. They were not really international artists in the true sense. For me it was incredibly surprising because France, seen from New Zealand, seemed like a beacon for culture and art but once here, I realised how much France had been affected by the transfer of the art centre to the United States in the post-war period.

France also suffered from an insidious guilt syndrome inherited, I believe, from the events and circumstances of the Second World War—this topic has only started to be explored in recent years. There was a kind of natural defeatism that still exists in France and in the French art world, but it has changed a little bit, notably thanks to the work of a generation of artists, critics and gallerists that emerged in the '90's. My generation—Emmanuel Perrotin, Air de Paris, Almine Rech—was working actively and very consciously to break down these models. And our artists were too: Philippe Parreno with Air de Paris, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster with me and Pierre Hughe too, who was a 'free electron' at that point. Artists were really getting on with their work, being French or not wasn't the issue. Actually I was always very proud that my gallery

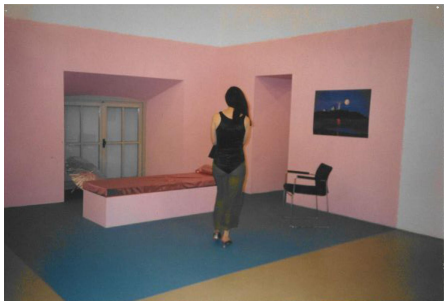
was Paris-based. It was so cool to see my crates return to the gallery stamped 'Jennifer Flay – Paris.'



Jennifer Flay photographed by Christian Boltanski, circa 1994.



With work by Cathy de Monchaux at Galerie Jennifer Flay, rue Debelleyme, Paris, 1992.



Flay with an installation work by Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster at the Castillo di Rivoli, Turin. Photo by the artist, early 1990's.



With Claude Pompidou, Flay's gallery booth, FIAC 1994. Painting by Lisa Milroy.



Flay's gallery booth at ARCO art fair Madrid, talking with then French Minister of Culture, Catherine Trautmann. Works by Xavier Veilhan and Alain Séchas, mid 1990's.



Galerie Jennifer Flay, 2nd floor, 7 rue Debelleyme. Curtain work by Felix Gonzalez-Torres floating into the wind, 1992. Photo courtesy Jennifer Flay.

PA It's while you lived and studied in Nice that you were introduced to dealer galleries and your first professional experience was working for Catherine Issert, in the nearby town Saint-Paul-de-Vence. Then in 1985, you moved to Paris. Why?

JF I moved because I'm a big city girl, I come from Auckland! When I lived in Nice I went to Paris and Berlin frequently to source first hand material for my university work. I have a lot of admiration for regional initiatives and wholly support them of course, but I didn't see myself making my career there. It was a natural move to come to live in Paris because it is the centre of activity in France. In 1985 I was asked to work for Daniel Templon's gallery in Paris, who was representing artists like Roy Lichtenstein, Lawrence Weiner, Carl Andre, Richard Serra, Peter Halley, Bruce Nauman and later Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat. He needed someone who could take on the role of what is today's called a gallery director; a native English speaker that had a solid background in art history, a working knowledge of the contemporary art world, who could speak—and more particularly write—French and English and who could discuss art thoughtfully with the gallery artists in their native language.

PA Did you find it difficult to settle in Paris?

JF No I was speaking fairly fluent French at that point and I didn't feel like a total foreigner anymore. But I went through an ordeal with my legal papers when, in 1985, I was expelled and asked to leave France within 40 days because my visa ran out. I spent a year without any papers whatsoever, underground so to speak but I didn't hide, I went to work every day. Friends were trying to find a solution, one even suggested a 'marriage blanc,' such an upsetting idea to me. I was desperately unhappy because at that point I really felt that France was where I was going to live and work, I was very committed to what I had undertaken and couldn't imagine having to abandon it.

Eventually, on the suggestion of a friend, I made an appointment at the Ministry of Culture. I had nothing to lose. I met with Claude Mollard, right hand man of Jack Lang, the French Minister of Culture at the time. It was definitely the most impressive and scary thing I had ever done in my life to that point. They asked me what I had done up until then and why it mattered so much to me to remain living and working in France. After about an hour

Mollard said ‘Je vais m’occuper de votre cas’—I’ll deal with your case. It was the first time that I considered myself as a case but it was better to be a case than completely off the books. Jack Lang wrote a very laudatory letter about me to Georgina Dufoix, Minister of Social Affairs, which I remember to this day. On the letterhead, he had crossed out ‘Madame la Ministre, chère collègue’ and hand wrote with blue ink ‘Chère Georgina’ and at the bottom he put a line through the formal greetings and wrote ‘Je compte beaucoup sur toi. Jack.’ After being illegal for a year, I eventually received a derogation and got my working papers.

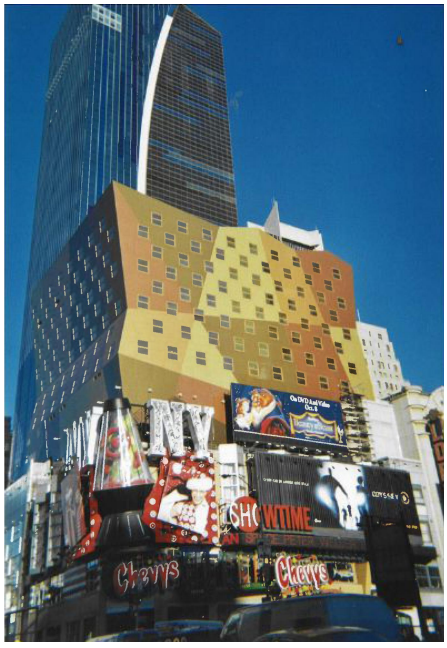
When I received the Légion d’Honneur in 2015, I slipped into my speech that I had been expelled—even if no one actually put me on a plane home. I did have to fight for my desire,—and not ‘right’ as I was a foreigner—to live and work here and I'm very grateful that I was lucky enough to meet people who were sensitive to my situation and ready to listen. I have since had the opportunity to thank both Claude Mollard and Jack Lang for the role they played in enabling me to pursue my chosen path.



In front of her gallery, rue Louise Weiss during renovation work, 1997.



In her gallery booth at FIAC in the Grand Palais, 1993. Works by Willie Doherty, Karen Kiliminik, Christian Marclay, Matthew McCaslin, Jean-Luc Blanc.



New York in the 1990's. Photo by Jennifer Flay.

PA In 1987 you started working for another gallerist in Paris, Ghislaine Hussenot.

JF Yes. Shortly after I switched galleries there was quite an important stock market crash (October ‘87), and money poured into the art market almost immediately. It was the beginning of the mini-boom which led to the crash of 1990. Ghislaine had just ended her partnership with Chantal Crousel and needed somebody in the gallery that was also going to support her in discussing the programme, putting the shows together and working on the Christian Boltanski’s retrospective that was going to be traveling to the United States. I had the task of putting some order into Christian's archives and trying to establish a chronology, as the majority of the works weren’t catalogued at the time—it was a great challenge.

The market was picking up in a big way as I said and there was some very interesting work coming out of Germany – we showed Thomas Ruff and Andreas Gursky very, very early on in a group show and Isa Genzken who was still a young artist. We showed Mike Kelley, Jeff Wall, Franz West… It was an exciting time! We were a well respected gallery, did great shows and worked with some of the best artists of the times. Working in those galleries was like an apprenticeship for me.

PA And finally in 1991 you opened your own gallery in Paris, rue Debelleyme in the Marais.

JF Yes people wondered why I opened a gallery just after the crash of 1990 but I believe that when someone opens a gallery, it’s out of personal necessity. You get to a point where you need to say something and you will manage the market circumstances whatever they are, you’ll adapt your business model to cater to them. In 1991 I was at a point where I needed to put myself up alongside the artists that I believed in and wanted to show, and just do it. I’d always been very marked by Édouard Manet saying ‘One has to be of one’s time.’



At her gallery booth, with Caroline Bourgeois, Art Basel 1996.



At her gallery booth at the Chicago Art Fair with Claude Closky, May 1996. Works by Willie Doherty (left) and Claude Closky (right).



With artist Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, 1996.



After major car accident in 1999, Flay with a solid neck brace sitting at her gallery booth at Art Basel with a work by Alain Séchas.



Recovering from a major car accident in 1999, Flay operated her gallery from a chaise longue. Here with Japanese artist Rei Naito and gallery assistant Benedicte Chenu and artwork by Xavier Veilhan.



With the work by Claude Closky *+ 1* shown in the solo exhibition of the artist, *Yiyi* November 2000, Galerie Jennifer Flay, rue Louise Weiss.

PA How did you raise capital to open the gallery?

JF I didn't have any money so I raised capital by selling artworks that were given to me by artists. That's also how the gallery survived in the initial years because it was a very difficult market context. I can't say that it's the most exciting thing I've done in my life anymore because FIAC is really exciting too but the gallery was my life—so much of my life that it was me—for 13 years. I was making my own choices and I was extremely happy doing what I was doing. It was such a formative time for me, intellectually and on a human level too.

I worked very closely with important artists such as Felix Gonzalez-Torres, John Currin, Karen Kilimnik, Christian Marclay and Zoe Leonard and with some French artists who I considered to be very important as well such as Claude Closky who's not well known but I think his work is very important, Xavier Veilhan, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster and the Belgian Ann-Veronica Janssens and Michel François. My gallery was one of the galleries that really mattered in Paris. Obviously that's what I was working to achieve, I wanted to make a difference, I wanted to make a mark. When I look back I wonder how it happened – how did the girl with no family background in the arts and from 6-7 generations of New Zealanders on both sides of the family, end up here. I didn't know anybody in the Northern hemisphere when I came here and now!

And in Part 1...

Find out about the revival of FIAC since Jennifer Flay took the helm 13 years ago and the prestigious place it occupies in the French capital today, in Part 1 – FIAC years 2003-2016.

Biographies



Pauline Autet is an independent editor, curator and project manager. Based in Paris since 2016, Pauline founded Contemporary HUM in collaboration with other art professionals from Aotearoa New Zealand based in Europe and beyond. She previously worked at City Gallery Wellington, 30upstairs Gallery and co-founded the nomadic gallery Elbowroom. Following her experience as attendant of the New Zealand pavilion at the Venice Biennale for Simon Denny's *Secret Power* exhibition in 2015, she thought something could be done to bridge the gap between Aotearoa and the wider art world and developed HUM. Since 2016 she has worked with the Aotearoa and French art scenes concurrently. She is in charge of the editorial platform *TextWork*, initiated by the Fondation Pernod Ricard and in collaboration with the French Ministry of Culture. She is also Executive Director of Trampoline, a non-profit initiative created by a group of private organisations in France to support and raise the international profile of artists from the French art scene.

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