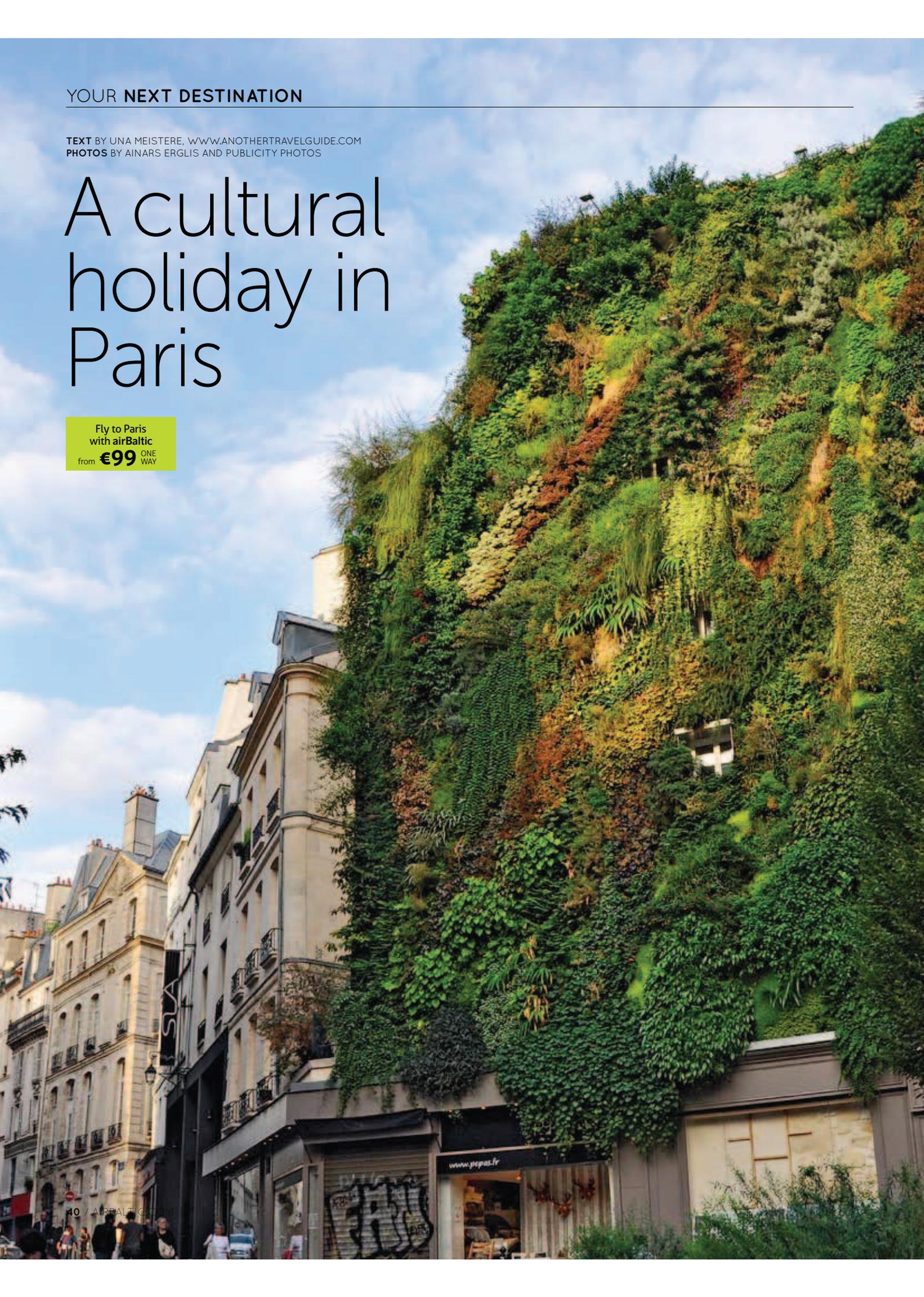


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A cultural holiday in Paris

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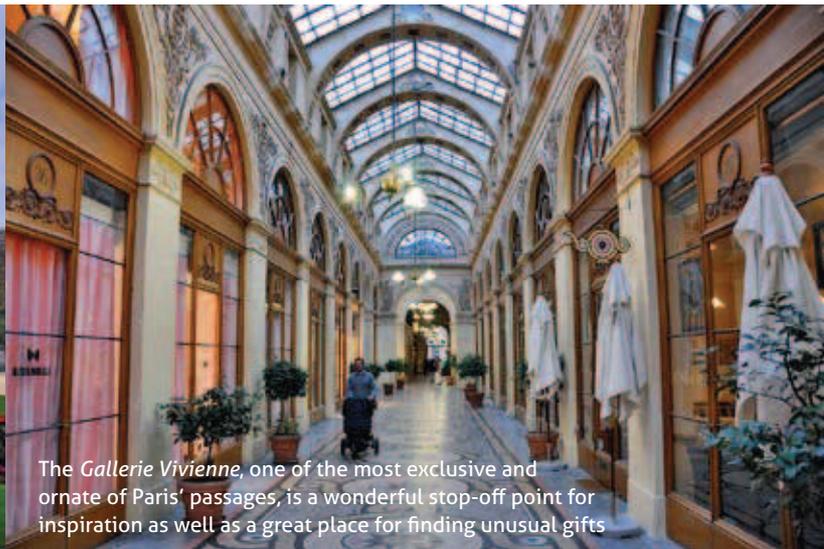
"In Paris we live as if in a dream. We know nothing of reality, of the economic crisis and so on, even though we really are going through a crisis, and a very serious one at that. Wandering through the streets of Paris, you see restaurants full of people every day, even on Mondays and Tuesdays. And it's not just tourists, but locals as well. We are supposedly all in the same boat, but we don't even realise what's happening, not even here at home in France. It feels like there's a glass dome covering Paris," says Alain Bisotti, author of the popular *Hôtels Paris Rive Gauche* blog. With a green scarf casually worn over his grey jacket, Bisotti looks like a typical Parisian...at least the way we usually imagine they look.

We have met in the recently reconstructed *Hôtel du Panthéon*, which is the perfect embodiment of the myth of a "glass dome" over Paris. It is a hotel that immediately transports you into that mythological "city of eternal celebration". Its 35 rooms are like a hymn to legendary French women: passionate, venerated, free and independent. It is also a hymn to their no less passionate and stormy love affairs. Like the majority of Paris' old buildings, the hallways of the *Hôtel du Panthéon* are small and narrow, making the trip to your pocket-sized bohemian-style room with a large suitcase a veritable journey back in time.

One whole floor of the hotel is devoted to the love affair between Edith Piaf and French boxer Marcel Cerdan. They were together for just under a year before Cerdan died in an airplane crash, but the relationship has been immortalised in countless photographs and later in Claude Lelouch's film *Edith et Marcel*. Far from banal, the 1950s-style interior contains no direct reminiscences of the couple (such as the famous photos of the two of them happily together), only two stylised punching bags on the wall and general photographs of couples in love on the streets of 1950s Paris, calling to mind the bliss of Edith and Marcel. The photo series is titled *Days of Happiness*.



Paris' legendary fashion museum, the *Musée Galliera*, opened this September after an extensive reconstruction



The *Galerie Vivienne*, one of the most exclusive and ornate of Paris' passages, is a wonderful stop-off point for inspiration as well as a great place for finding unusual gifts

Another floor of the *Hôtel du Panthéon* is devoted to the legendary 19th-century courtesans known as *cocottes* – women whose business was wealthy men. Drowning in red velvet and with a bathtub in one corner, the rooms resemble a fishnet stocking. The bedside table even holds a typical object of a courtesan's "work room", namely, a small box of napkins, while the window provides a view of that necropolis of men, the *Panthéon*. Say what you will, but the owners of the hotel have a good sense of humour. Seeing that the *Hotel Les Grands Hommes* is just nearby, they must have decided that this area has enough glorification of the male.

The impressive *Panthéon* – 110 metres long, 84 metres wide and 83 metres tall – is a building shrouded in passion. Inspired by the Pantheon in Rome, the construction of the Neoclassical-style building began in 1757 and lasted 35 years. It was originally planned as a church, but the final phase of construction coincided with the French Revolution and the revolutionaries decided not to create a temple to any god, but instead a temple to outstanding men who had served the nation. The inscription above the entrance reads *Aux Grands Hommes La Patrie Reconnaissante* (To the great men, the grateful homeland) and the structure is the final resting place of such great men as Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Jean-Paul Marat, Victor Hugo and Émile Zola.

Only two women – Nobel Prize-winner Marie Curie and Sophie Berthelot, both scientists – lie among the 74 people interred in the famous mausoleum. Moreover, it is rumoured that Berthelot was included only because she flatly refused to be buried apart from her husband, Marcellin Berthelot. Needless to say, the *Panthéon* has been the object of many a feminist protest. The latest was at the beginning of 2013, after which French president François Hollande declared that the discriminatory situation should be righted and even issued a public poll to decide which women deserve to be honoured by being interred in the *Panthéon*. At the same time, he admitted that the roots of gender inequality stretch far back into French history, because women were almost nonexistent in French public life at the time when only men were being interred in the *Panthéon*. In fact, French women did not even have the right to vote until 1944, with France being one of the last countries in Western Europe to introduce women's suffrage. Switzerland did so even later, giving women the right to vote in 1971.

As George Sand, whose love affair with French poet and playwright Alfred de Musset is also played out in one of the floors of the *Hôtel du Panthéon*, once wrote: "Life resembles a novel more often than novels resemble life." Perhaps this feeling of the "glass dome" that Bisotti describes is why most of us enjoy returning again and again to Paris. The city is the citadel of romanticism, and upon approaching it we close our eyes at the ugly concrete apartment buildings in various surrounding neighbourhoods and pretend to not see them, as if they were a part of a completely different city, a city not associated with the "true" Paris...at least not the Paris that exists in our dreams and imaginations.

In this sense we should express gratitude to common sense, which did not allow the utopia of the modernist architect and designer Le Corbusier to be realised. Namely, he had proposed to sweep away the Neoclassical-style Haussmann-era buildings of central Paris and replace them with huge blocks of concrete buildings that were ten times higher than anything existing at the time. If Le Corbusier's vision had come to fruition, then the "eternal celebration" illusion of Paris, where the air smells differently and steps have a completely different rhythm, would have been lost to us forever. It doesn't matter that this illusion has nothing in common with the real Paris.

A trip to Paris is like a journey to find the hidden essence of inspiration inside a crystal vessel. In addition, no other European city is able to enclose this essence in such a beautiful wrapping. Maybe that's why – no matter how stereotypical it sounds – there's no better destination for a cultural holiday than Paris.

The sculptor of fashion

Culturally speaking, this autumn is particularly generous in Paris. One of the city's gems of historical architecture, the *Musée Galliera* (or, the fashion museum), has opened its doors again in September following four years of reconstruction. The ornate Renaissance-style building was built in the late 19th century as a home for the private art collection of Marie Brignole-Sale, the Duchess of Galliera. Construction was finished only after the duchess' death, in 1894, although she had bequeathed the property to the city shortly before she died. Her only wish had been that the building serve for the display of sculptures.



The Centre Pompidou is hosting the first retrospective of French contemporary artist Pierre Huyghe



Once an old Parisian port warehouse, today Les Docks is an epicentre of fashion and design

Life, however, takes unexpected turns. Following several changes of ownership, the *Galliera Palace* finally became a fashion museum in 1977. The museum has now already been reconstructed twice, although its history actually reaches back to 1907, when the French historian and collector Maurice Leloir established the *Société de l'Histoire du Costume* and agreed in 1920 to donate his own collection of 2000 garments and accessories to the city of Paris with the condition that it would open a museum of fashion.

Today, the museum has more than 90,000 objects in its collection representing the best of three centuries of fashion. In a way, the museum's re-opening exhibition, featuring the work of one of the most loved contemporary designers, the Tunisian-born genius Azzedine Alaïa, is a tribute to the original wishes of the duchess. Alaïa studied sculpture at art school in Tunis and became a true architect of fashion, a perfectionist whose clothes contain a feeling for the body that is difficult to describe in words.

Alaïa is now 73 years old and has been living in Paris for 54 years. Among his clients are many first ladies, Greta Garbo and all the top supermodels. In fact, models have been known to

work for Alaïa for free, receiving a dress in place of a fee. This is understandable, because the designer's clothing is like an ode to perfection, something that is almost impossible to find nowadays. This absolute ideal of beauty in the form of a dress also adds to the "glass dome" feeling of Paris. Alaïa's creations feel timeless – they seem to have no past, no future, and are immune to short-lived fads. As Olivier Saillard, director of the *Musée Galliera*, said in an interview with the fashion journal *WWD*, "An Alaïa garment is like an *Hermès* handbag. He makes clothes that endure."

Unlike other designers, who in their roles as creative directors have become more like managers than *couturiers*, Alaïa still creates his own patterns and sews his own samples to ensure that each seam is located exactly where he has intended. It has been said that his hands have a brain of their own. Not only are the seams and fabric of his creations perfect, but the whole garment surrounds and fits the body like a second skin, highlighting its most ideal form.

Stressing Alaïa's perfectionism, the museum's exhibition contains no photographs or videos of fashion shows, as is common in other retrospectives of designers' work. The exhibition contains

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Le Passage du Chantier features one of the oldest little cobblestone streets in Paris



Chez Prune, the local bobo (bourgeois-bohemian) HQ in Paris' trendy Canal St-Martin neighbourhood

Humans have so often chased nature away from cities, but Blanc's gardens are bringing it back

only garments and nothing else to distract the visitor's attention. The mannequins also have no heads and are made of almost transparent plastic, thereby highlighting the form of the garments.

The Alaïa exhibition is located in two halls: the *Musée Galliera* and the Matisse Gallery of the *Musée de l'Art Moderne* (Museum of Modern Art) across the street. His clothes stand next to such legendary works of art as Matisse's *The Unfinished Dance* and *The Dance of Paris* as well as 20 paintings by Daniel Buren that are exhibited in the same hall. This is definitely one of the most emotional parts of the exhibition, because none of these three luminaries reigns superior or overshadows the others. It is a symbiosis of three geniuses that lifts fashion design to a pedestal that few are able to achieve today.

An alchemist of vertical gardening

Coinciding with the exhibition is the opening of Alaïa's second store in Paris, located at 5 rue de Marignan, a small side street

near Avenue Montaigne, Paris' famous artery of luxury. Although the store is in an ornate 18th-century building, its interior reflects a futuristic minimalism. The ceiling lamps, designed by British industrial designer Marc Newson, look like gigantic lifebuoys, and the giant chain chandelier by American artist Kris Ruhs stretches from the first floor all the way up to the fourth floor of the white marble stairwell.

The white walls of the store and the manner in which the clothing is displayed create a feeling that is more like an art gallery than a classic clothing store. The first floor, which features footwear and accessories, provides access to the small courtyard, where a verdant vertical garden covers one wall of the building like a lush forest. Only the windows remain unplanted, like eyes in a sea of green. The creator of this garden is none other than the founder of the vertical garden trend, botanist Patrick Blanc.

Another of Blanc's walls, *Oasis d'Aboukir*, has just been finished at the corner of the Rue d'Aboukir and Rue des Petits Carreaux. From a very young age, Blanc has been fascinated by vertical gardens and plants accustomed to growing on vertical surfaces, such as cliffs, waterfalls and caves, and that do not require soil in the traditional sense. He patented his vertical garden concept and created his first vertical garden for the *Pershing Hall* hotel in Paris, designed by recently deceased French designer Andrée Putnam. The idea snowballed and Blanc has since created many similar projects, both on his own and in collaboration with well-known architects such as Jean Nouvel and *Herzog & de Meuron*. Over 30 of his projects

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Le Perchoir bar/restaurant is this moment's place "to see and be seen"

can be seen in Paris alone, including the vertical garden at the *Quai Branly* museum of ancient civilisations.

"Do plants really need soil? No, they don't. Soil is merely nothing more than a mechanical support. Only water and the many minerals dissolved in it are essential to plants, together with light and carbon dioxide to conduct photosynthesis," explains Blanc, the alchemist of vertical gardens. His creations are actually quite like an *Alaïa* dress in that they serve as a second skin to a surface. In addition to plants, each of Blanc's gardens also contains a metal frame, a layer of PVC and then a layer of felt. The non-rotting felt allows the plants' roots to stretch across and through it, never actually touching the wall of the building. The thermal effect produced by the garden lowers the building's energy consumption, protecting it from the cold in the winter and acting as a natural air conditioner in the summer. In addition, the leaves, roots and microorganisms within the plants form an ecosystem that actually cleans and improves the surrounding air. Humans have so often chased nature away from cities, but Blanc's gardens are bringing it back.

The *Oasis d'Aboukir* garden, located on a formerly blank concrete building façade marred by graffiti, is 25 metres high and has 7600 plants representing 237 different species. Arranged in diagonal waves, the plants seem to reach for the sun. The wide stone bench-like border in the small square next to the green wall is almost always full of people gazing at the garden. Like a wonderful oasis...and the air here smells like a tropical garden, too. When the wind

rustles the plants, the vertical green carpet seems to come alive and begin breathing.

Robert Wilson at the Louvre

The Pierre Huyghe retrospective exhibition at the *Centre Pompidou* – the first time such a broad exposition of this artist's work has been displayed in France – also calls to mind the relationship between humans and nature. Huyghe's art balances on the border between fantasy and reality, constantly challenging our generally accepted ideas and notions about the world. Living things (crabs, bees, spiders and much more) are integral "inhabitants" of his art and have been placed there by Huyghe as actors in his plays. In one sense, the artist determines the rules of the game, but in another sense he allows his subjects absolute freedom to just be.

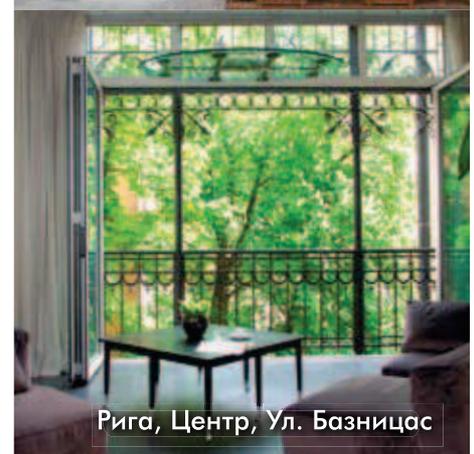
Huyghe's exhibitions resemble a surreal dream in which everything is in continual flux and nothing stays the same from one moment to the next. His exhibitions create a light euphoria of emotions in the viewer, similar to dizziness, making one wander like a child looking for adventure, not unlike *Alice in Wonderland*. Water that falls from the ceiling like a waterfall...and then turns into smoke. A pile of pink sand without borders that slowly spreads across the room. A light installation that follows people's movements as they control the lights by remote control, like in a computer game. A woman lounging on a concrete pedestal (*Untitled*, 2012), except that her head is a swarm of bees that constantly changes shape as the bees move around – apparent chaos that is actually the flawless order of the world of bees.



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