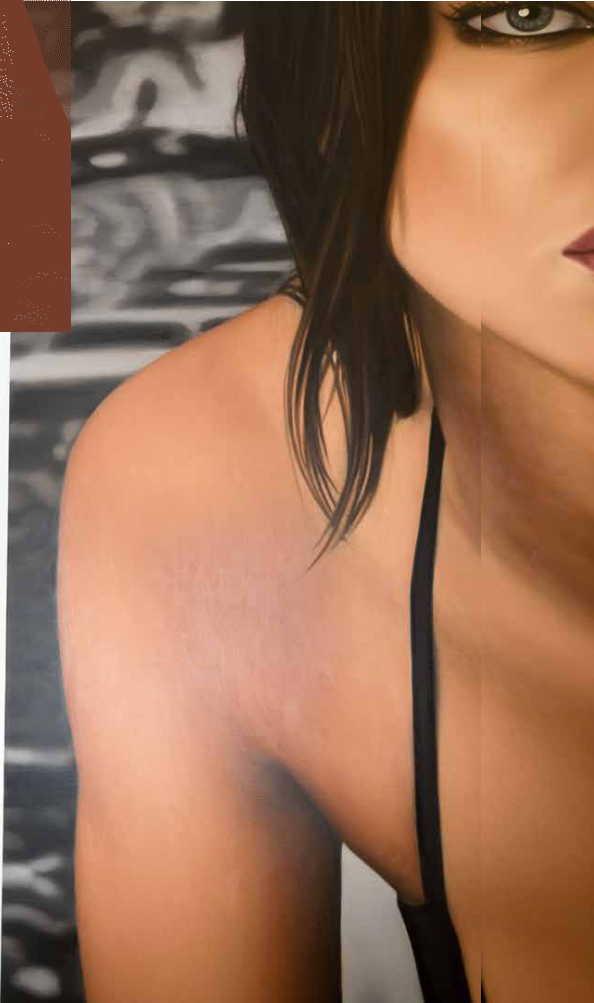


Purple Magazine: 'Eric Troncy', interview by Olivier Zahm and portrait by Pierre Even, Issue 24, F/W 2015



Curating has become a serious discipline: it can be studied at art schools and universities. At the beginning of the '90s, being a young curator meant nothing more than championing the new kind of artists that you believed in, according to your ability to detect and orchestrate ongoing changes in the chaotic postmodern world.

ÉRIC TRONCY was the first curator of this changing '90s art scene in France. More than two decades later, I consider him to be the best of my generation — a reference for what could be labeled a “curator-artist.” His curatorial concepts and choices are pushing the limits of how artworks can be presented, juxtaposed and connected — transforming a predictable group show into an artistic statement as well as a photogenic experience.

He is also a strongly opinionated art critic and the editor of *Frog*, my favorite art magazine in France.

**interview by OLIVIER ZAHM
portrait by PIERRE EVEN**

“The Sbell (Landscapes, Portraits & Shapes),” a show curated by ÉRIC TRONCY at Almine Rech Gallery, Paris, January - February, 2014, photo Olivier Zahm

JULIAN SCHNABEL, *The Day I Missed*, 1990, oil and gesso on tarpaulin, copyright Julian Schnabel

RICHARD PHILLIPS, *Adriana II*, 2012, oil on canvas, copyright Richard Phillips. Artworks courtesy of the artists and Almine Rech Gallery

OLIVIER ZAHM — *The first time I heard the name Éric Troncy was on the occasion of an exhibition in Geneva, “French Kiss.” People all around me in the milieu of young artists and critics in Paris were talking about it.*

ÉRIC TRONCY — It was really the first group exhibition to bear my name.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *How did your engagement with contemporary art begin?*

ÉRIC TRONCY — I grew up in Nevers, where there was a contemporary art association called APAC, founded by an academic named Yves Aupetitallot. After a while, Yves got fed up fighting City Hall just to get three-and-a-half francs of funding and threw in the towel. “I’m going to shut down the association,” he told me. And I said, “Oh no, you’re not. You’re not going to shut it down. I’m going to take it over! I’ll take charge!” There was nothing left — no premises, no nothing. So I took it over. It was nuts ... I found a garage next to my old high school, which is next to Sainte-Bernadette du Banlay, the architectural masterpiece of Paul Virilio and Claude Parent. And we transformed the garage into an exhibition hall. We put up drywall, making a pretty shoddy job of it, and then started doing exhibitions. That was toward the end of the 1980s, and “French Kiss” happened just after that.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *How?*

ÉRIC TRONCY — I have no memory of meeting Renate Cornu, the woman who ran the Halle Sud art center in Geneva. She took an interest and invited me to do an exhibition. That’s what started things off.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *That exhibition was a milestone for our generation of artists. It was the first one where the new generation gathered together under the kind of provocative title that you like to come up with.*

ÉRIC TRONCY — Especially since it had a subtitle. It was called “French Kiss: A Talk Show.” [Laughs] It goes to show how fascinated I already was at the time with TV.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *And before that, before your micro-art center in Nevers, before “French Kiss?”*

ÉRIC TRONCY — Without reconstructing the past, I’d say it all began with a well-oiled evening at Saint-Paul-de-Vence. I happened to be there one summer for the birthday of a friend, Nathalie Ergino, who was friends with Florence Bonnefous, of Air de Paris, and was attending the École du Magasin in Grenoble. We were at the villa of a guy called Pierre Dandine, who had a Raymond Loewy collection, and we had ourselves a truly wild birthday party. There, I met a bunch of people I didn’t know, like the artists Philippe Parreno, Philippe Perrin, Pierre Joseph, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, and so on, but also the young critic Nicolas Bourriaud and the future gallery owner Esther Schipper. We got monumentally smashed. I was meeting all these young people for the first time, and we just talked and talked about the stuff we were working on. And at evening’s end, we said to one another — we were all students — “We’re not going back to school, and we’re going to do our stuff in a big way.” So those of us who were in art school said to ourselves, “We’re going to do exhibitions. We’re going to be artists.” And I, who wanted to be an exhibition curator — I said, “Well, all right then. I’m going to take that place in Nevers. I’m going to do that.” Esther Schipper said to me, “I’m opening a gallery.” Florence and Édouard [Merino] said, “All right. We’re opening one, too.”

OLIVIER ZAHM — *So it was a — how shall I put it? — a concerted plot?*

ÉRIC TRONCY — A chance occurrence, an encounter, sheer chance.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *In Saint-Paul-de-Vence, which pops up again in the late 1980s.*

ÉRIC TRONCY — Yeah. Well, we weren’t exactly at [the historic hotel] La Colombe d’Or at the time.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *[Laughs] But you were nevertheless not far from the Maeght Foundation?*

ÉRIC TRONCY — Probably not.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *[Laughs] You’re on your guard.*

ÉRIC TRONCY — The foundation was an exotic place at the time, and, well, I didn’t do too well with such places back then. Above all, though, it was pretty fun. It was also the South of France, and the weather was beautiful. When you get down to it, though, we were living shit lives. [Laughs] Frankly, Olivier, we were living shit lives.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *It’s true. We were more often at Villa Arson than at La Colombe d’Or.*

ÉRIC TRONCY — Exactly. So, in short, that’s how I ended up doing that exhibition — or those exhibitions — at APAC in Nevers, and soon thereafter the “French Kiss” exhibition in Geneva.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *You’re not nostalgic for your mid-20s?*

ÉRIC TRONCY — No, because I turned 50 this year, and I read this marvelous line: “Fifty is just like 20, but with a credit card.” [Laughs] And, indeed, I don’t miss 25.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *Does that mean you’re starting over at 50?*

ÉRIC TRONCY — No. I’m not starting everything over again, because — you know how it is. You’re looking for the strength to go on!

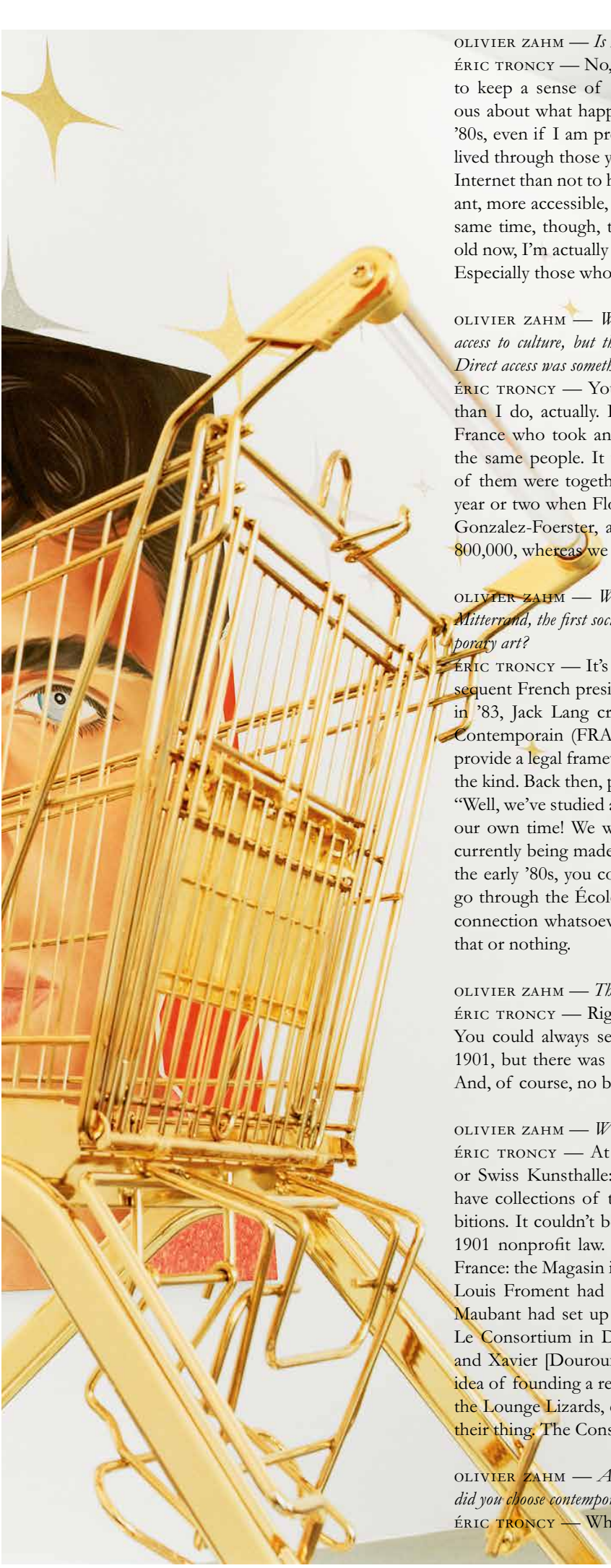


“Coollustre,” a show curated by ÉRIC TRONCY at Collection Lambert, Avignon, May - September, 2003, photo Pierre Even

SYLVIE FLEURY, ELA 75K, Go Pout, 2000, gold-plated supermarket trolley (24 carats and gilded with gold leaf), Plexiglas, mirror, and aluminum

RICHARD PHILLIPS, Portrait of God (after Richard Bernstein), 1998, oil on linen

STÉPHANE DAFFLON, AM 002, glitter, dimensions variable



OLIVIER ZAHM — *Is 50 not like a second youth?*

ÉRIC TRONCY — No, no. It's the same, in fact. As long as you manage to keep a sense of curiosity. Although it's difficult to remain curious about what happens. In any case, I'm not at all nostalgic for the '80s, even if I am pretty happy to have been born in '65 and to have lived through those years. For instance, it's certainly better to have the Internet than not to have it. In a way, the world is certainly more pleasant, more accessible, nicer to live in now than it was back then. At the same time, though, the '80s were fantastic. People who are 20 years old now, I'm actually not sure I envy them — not culturally or socially. Especially those who are throwing themselves into the art world.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *With the Internet, they have instant and extremely open access to culture, but through a media filter. It's not necessarily direct access. Direct access was something we sought out!*

ÉRIC TRONCY — You know, Olivier, you remember that stuff better than I do, actually. Back then, there were some 15 of us in all of France who took an interest in art. So by some point, we'd all met the same people. It was practically inevitable. Especially since most of them were together at the *École du Magasin*, during that famous year or two when Florence Bonnefous, Édouard Mérino, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, and Louise Neri were all there. Today there are 800,000, whereas we all stumbled upon one another.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *Would you say you're a child of Jack Lang and François Mitterrand, the first socialist government in France to open up culture to contemporary art?*

ÉRIC TRONCY — It's true that I admire François Mitterrand. No subsequent French president can hold a candle to him. Let's just say that in '83, Jack Lang created a *centre d'art* label [Fonds Régional d'Art Contemporain (FRAC), a regional subsidy for contemporary art] to provide a legal framework for initiatives that until then had nothing of the kind. Back then, people would graduate from the university saying, "Well, we've studied art history, but we're really interested in the art of our own time! We want to show it. We want to show the art that's currently being made, contemporary art. But how?" In the France of the early '80s, you couldn't. If you were interested in art, you had to go through the *École du Louvre* to become a curator. There was no connection whatsoever with the history of contemporary art. It was that or nothing.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *There was no legal or administrative framework.*

ÉRIC TRONCY — Right — no legal framework for contemporary art. You could always set up a nonprofit along the lines of the law of 1901, but there was no place for contemporary art in the museums. And, of course, no budget for subsidies.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *What model were people looking toward at the time?*

ÉRIC TRONCY — At the time, we were looking toward the German or Swiss *Kunsthalle*: in other words, toward art centers that didn't have collections of their own and were devoted exclusively to exhibitions. It couldn't be done in France, except through the unsuitable 1901 nonprofit law. There were only three or four major places in France: the *Magasin* in Grenoble, with its school; the CAPC that Jean-Louis Froment had set up in Bordeaux; the CAPC that Jean-Louis Maubant had set up in Villeurbanne, the *Nouveau Musée*; and then *Le Consortium* in Dijon, set up by my friends Franck [Gautherot] and Xavier [Douroux], two former punks who, after feeling out the idea of founding a record label and starting to produce an album with the *Lounge Lizards*, ended up deciding that the visual arts were more their thing. *The Consortium* dates back to 1977!

OLIVIER ZAHM — *And in the '70s, during your adolescence in Nevers, why did you choose contemporary art?*

ÉRIC TRONCY — Why did I get interested in art? First of all, because

I think the way I was raised predisposed me to it. And then because in Nevers I had a passing acquaintance with the artist Claude Lévêque, who was friends with my neighbor across the street. Claude Lévêque was in charge of the visual arts section of the Maison de la Culture in Nevers. He was in charge for three years, I think — for just the right three years. I was 16 at the time and had seen the Gina Pane, Rudolf Schwarzkogler, and Michel Journiac retrospectives. That's all it took.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *You saw exhibitions of these artists at the Maison de la Culture?*

ÉRIC TRONCY — Yes. People would squat whatever territory they could, and Nevers had an interesting Maison de la Culture. Claude had managed to squat the visual arts section and did some mind-blowing exhibitions there. I recall a performance by Michel Journiac, for example, where he carried a hunk of meat on a platter all around the hall, a hall tiled in slate, and set it down on the far side of a huge, black guillotine, several meters tall, that he'd had set up. It was a pretty fantastic time, actually. [Laughs] And I knew that's what I wanted to do. I wanted to be taught by Journiac, so in '83 I came to Paris to study visual arts with him. I enrolled in the visual arts program at Saint-Charles.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *Were there any exhibitions besides Journiac that made an impression on you when you were an adolescent?*

ÉRIC TRONCY — My uncle was on the Consortium board in Dijon, so I also saw a bunch of Consortium exhibitions when I was a kid. One that really struck me was a double exhibition by John Armleder and a guy whose name I'm going to try to remember and pronounce correctly: his name was probably Christoph Gossweiler. John Armleder had shown up empty-handed and made a sculpture out of stuff he found at the flea market. Christoph Gossweiler, meanwhile, was an employee of the Swiss rail company. He'd scavenge cans of paint from there, and, with the remnants at the bottom, he'd paint little rectangular plaques until the paint finally ran out. I said to myself, "Between Gossweiler's fussiness and Armleder's absolute caprice, there's got to be room for me, intellectually, in this business." [Laughs]

OLIVIER ZAHM — *And your studies?*

ÉRIC TRONCY — It wasn't long before I realized that the art history at the Sorbonne was terrible. My professors were maddeningly bad. This was in '83, '84. One day a student got up and said, "Sir, we read *artpress*, and it doesn't jibe with what you're telling us." [Laughs] So I said to myself, "Enough nonsense," and enrolled at the École du Louvre, where I had some terrific professors. I just took on everything at once: visual arts, art history, the École du Louvre. I tend to assume multiple posts, like a French politician.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *Was there a professor who was especially important to you?*

ÉRIC TRONCY — They all made an impression at the École du Louvre. But Serge Lemoine was an extraordinary guy. Very rigorous. You have to realize that, back in '86, the École du Louvre was essentially old ladies. And Serge Lemoine began his first course by showing a Mondrian. That was his big thing. He'd say, "Now, this — are we really sure it's art? Not too sure." Then he'd show a picture by Boucher, *Odalisque*, and say, "This, on the other hand, we're sure is art! See, even the frame tells us so." It was brilliant. There was another guy with extraordinary rigor, but a lot more whimsy as well, and that was Bernard Blistène. Blistène was very important for me, and we became pretty good pals. He quickly suggested I spend a year at the Pompidou Center, to be his assistant for a big exhibition: "L'Époque, la Mode, la Morale, la Passion."

OLIVIER ZAHM — *It's true; that exhibition left its mark in the mid-'80s.*

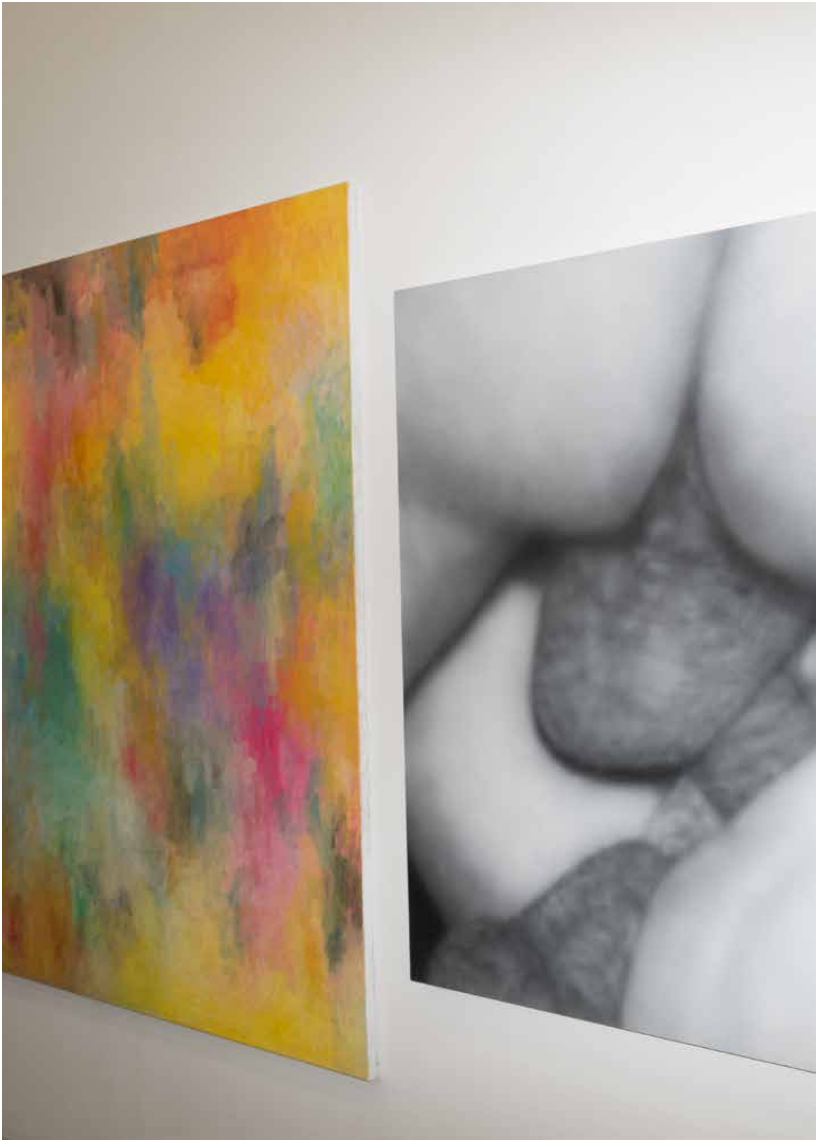
ÉRIC TRONCY — In '87. The exhibition covered 10 years of contemporary art: 1977 to 1987. It was great. I spent a year on it, and

"The Shell (Landscapes, Portraits & Shapes)," a show curated by ÉRIC TRONCY at Almine Rech Gallery, Paris, January - February, 2014, photo Olivier Zahm

JEAN-BAPTISTE BERNADET, *Untitled (Vetiver III)*, 2014, oil and cold wax on canvas, copyright Jean-Baptiste Bernadet

BETTY TOMPKINS, *Fuck Painting #50*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, copyright Betty Tompkins

ALAIN SÉCHAS, *Untitled 42*, 2012, oil on canvas, copyright Alain Séchas
Artworks courtesy of the artists and Almine Rech Gallery



I learned everything in that time. You save yourself years doing that. I saw and understood everything I needed to see and know about the institutional workings of a big exhibition. I spent every minute with the three curators: Bernard Blistène, Alfred Pacquement, and Catherine David. So, of course, I saw them every day. And I was allowed to attend curator meetings, which were held at the Pompidou Center. Back then the offices were still there, in a soundproof glass cage. There were the three curators having at one another: "You're putting that in there? Fine, then I'm putting this in here!"... And I kept my mouth shut, of course. I spoke just once, to say, "Look, you're doing a 10-year exhibition, '77 to '87. You really ought to have a Neo-Geo artist in there." Pacquement tells me, "Troncy, when you've got your own museum, then we'll ask for your opinion!" I shut my trap and continued to observe.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *So that's where you learned your trade!*

ÉRIC TRONCY — That's where I learned it, yes. I saw a lot of things, and there you go. And later on, well, I worked with Yves Aupetitallot at the Maison de la Culture in Saint-Étienne, where I also learned quite a bit. I did an exhibition there in the late '80s with Louise Lawler and John Knight. I was lucky enough to meet some pretty incredible artists early on.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *"L'Époque, la Mode, la Morale" — a Baudelairean title. It's become something of a program for you, that kind of exhibition!*

ÉRIC TRONCY — It's also thanks to Bernard Blistène that I discovered the Baudelairean option in art criticism. A critical approach that is, shall we say, very different from that of *October* and *artpress* and people like that, who are more theoretical as critics. A freer, more personal approach that gives rise to all manner of confrontations. Today, things are simpler. You have a conflict between two visions of art, and that's it. You've got one that looks at attendance figures and one that looks at the market. [Laughs] The public or the market. It's simpler.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *After these educational years, you decide to take over APAC and make it into your art center.*

ÉRIC TRONCY — It was pretty fun. We had no money, of course, but nothing was too expensive.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *Sure, but you were still inviting artists from just about everywhere.*

ÉRIC TRONCY — Yes. Back then, I did the first Thomas Ruff exhibition in France, in the late '80s. It was his first self-portrait. It was a big event for me that evidently escaped everyone else's notice.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *You didn't hesitate to introduce the young artists of our generation.*

ÉRIC TRONCY — No. I did exhibitions with my generation, your generation, our generation. I extended invitations to them all, from Pruitt and Early to Angela Bulloch, and on through Liam Gillick, Philippe Parreno, Pierre Joseph, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, and people whom we've now perhaps forgotten. Xavier Veilhan — we haven't forgotten him, though. But, at the same time, it was lightweight stuff — a little like putting together a rock band in your garage. I had a rock band as a teenager. What would you need to put one together? A bass, a guitar, a drum kit, a place to rehearse — a garage if possible — and some gigs. Well, it was the same thing. I had a place. Instead of a drum kit, I had a typewriter, a telephone line, etc.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *And you had a little production budget.*

ÉRIC TRONCY — A teeny little annual production budget. But it cost hardly anything back then to put on an exhibition. The French curator and director of Le Consortium in Dijon, Franck Gautherot, told me he'd done an exhibition with Carl Andre for a measly 2,000 francs



[approximately \$300]. You'd pay airfare, economy class, for an artist, and he'd be delighted to come. He'd sleep on your couch, and the thing would cost nothing to produce.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *It must be said that in my generation, you were the first to discover new interesting artists like Karen Kilimnik, Philippe Parreno, Pierre Joseph, among others, and presented them in shows.*

ÉRIC TRONCY — Oh, there was a little core of us. We all knew one another, as you know. And I had this miniscule place in the middle of France, before you were all invited to plan exhibitions all over the place. I had my little garage.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *What was the difference from the art movements of previous years?*

ÉRIC TRONCY — We were a sort of art gang. We had co-opted one another, and it was the first time, at least as far as I know, that the group wasn't national. All the movements we knew of before had a national basis: Supports/Surfaces, the New British Sculpture, Italy's Transavantgarde. Even the Young British Artists were, of course, all British. And then coalescing around me in the early '90s there were English artists, French artists, German artists, Carsten Höller, Americans like Félix Gonzales-Torres, Karen Kilimnick, etc.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *Do you think, as I do, that that was the last avant-garde?*

ÉRIC TRONCY — It was, as we now know, the last generation to address the history of art. In other words, it was their intention to extend the history of avant-garde movements. Today's young artists no longer address the history of art. They address the market. It's very different. It's not less good; it's just a different set of rules.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *The history of art is no longer the subject of art.*

ÉRIC TRONCY — No! It's just a source, a toolbox to take inspiration and ideas from. It's a keyboard shortcut. I have a theory, an analogy to the way fashion works. You know better than I do that when a new artistic director is appointed, there's always a period when he cites the DNA of the house or the brand. That means he can do any damned thing at all as long as at some point he relates it back to two or three somewhat recurring elements in the history of the house. It's the house DNA, so everything's fine. Nowadays, the history of art is the DNA of the house. Artists do whatever the hell they want, and then all of a sudden they stick in one or two things that relate to things we know. It's the DNA of the house, and they get away with it. New rules of the game. Amusing to watch and a bit ridiculous, I admit.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *From there, you've developed an intensive, steady, uninterrupted practice of putting on exhibitions. You are one of the few in our generation not to have thrown in the towel.*

ÉRIC TRONCY — Yes. I've always done exhibitions.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *And you're the last of my circle.*

ÉRIC TRONCY — Yeah, well, I still love it.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *Moreover, you've never stopped writing about art and you've created your own art magazine.*

ÉRIC TRONCY — Of course. Art magazines are too ugly. I had to do mine. [Laughs] I created three of them. I created *Documents* with Nicolas Bourriaud. Then I came up with a little intermediary publication called *49/3*, a review with no text, a collection of carefully selected images, a pre-Instagram review. And then *Frog*, with Stéphanie Moïsson.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *What's your approach to art criticism? You take, not an ironic tone, but one that's often mocking. You don't hesitate to take up very personal points of view.*

ÉRIC TRONCY — Yeah. It's just my way.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *You write about art a bit like a rock critic would write about music. Your thinking isn't strictly theoretical.*

ÉRIC TRONCY — Take a theoretical line on art nowadays? We've got to cut the crap. The artists don't warrant that. Again, they're playing by different rules, but they're not repulsive just because they're different.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *No. But you also came up with your own rules; nobody writes like you.*

ÉRIC TRONCY — I don't write in same way for *Frog* or for a fashion magazine like *Numéro*. But there's a consistent tone: the first person singular. My model is Anglo-Saxon art journalism. My absolute model is Peter Schjeldhal, and people who write art criticism out of a literary rather than a theoretical tradition. That's what I prefer to read, so that's what I prefer to write. And, frankly, you can clearly see what art's become over the past 15 years. It doesn't warrant anything different. And then there's the mythology that we build up and elaborate around the artist and his character. These days it's been taken incredibly far. The personality of the artist is 90% of the deal now, so we're not about to start talking about the work! [Laughs]

OLIVIER ZAHM — *The worst part of it isn't the articles in October; it's the imitators of what's become a rhetorical style.*

ÉRIC TRONCY — Precisely. That's why I alternately fall into fits of laughter and fits of despair when I read my email. Every day I see 400 press releases written in the *October* style, but about present-day works that don't warrant that at all, and by people who are clumsy with the vocabulary. The pretention of some of the texts today is preposterous.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *Let's talk about your magazine Frog. It's one of the loveliest contemporary-art magazines, I find, because there's a real flow to the texts, and a sense of layout and photography that just doesn't exist in the other art magazines. Art magazines haven't gotten past the stage of reproducing the artworks. But you have pictures taken; you have the exhibitions photographed.*

ÉRIC TRONCY — We produce all the magazine's photos. We take no photos from the museums or press agencies. The trick is, I do it all myself. We hired M/M, who are old friends of ours — and who, by the way, had already done the layout for *Documents* — to make a grid. I told them, "I want a car I can drive, and then I really never want to see you again." We produce our own photos first of all because it's damned boring to always see the same exhibition photos, and also because I think that seeing an exhibition and photographing an exhibition amount to critiquing the exhibition. Doing the magazine is a way for me to see the exhibition, and I do exhibitions for the same reason: to see them.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *What's the editorial angle at Frog?*

ÉRIC TRONCY — It's a magazine that takes the exhibition as a starting point and publishes only once or twice a year, as we like. So the exhibition has to have already taken place. Structurally, the magazine is exhibition reports, interviews around exhibitions, and exhibition photo montages. It's my obsession as a curator.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *How is the magazine evolving?*

ÉRIC TRONCY — For the past four years, it's been an art and architecture magazine, thanks to Antoine Espinasseau, an architect and photographer who does a lot of photo series for us and handles all the architectural material. It was my decision to open things up to architecture. As I saw it, art and architecture had things to say to each other. Anyway, the exhibition is just a starting point. What I tell the writers is, "Use the exhibition as a starting point to talk about something else," because that's what we do when we go see an exhibition. We see something, and then the mind starts working, goes off on a tangent.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *If you want to talk about architecture, you talk about a construction or a specific structure.*

ÉRIC TRONCY — Yes. That's the whole point of criticism. The thing has to be produced so that you can start discussing and evaluating it.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *You have a motto as a curator, a rather definitive one. You say: "I don't exhibit artists. I exhibit works of art."*

ÉRIC TRONCY — That sums up my thinking.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *And it's something you can call your own, although maybe Robert Nickas approached exhibitions similarly, with "Red," which had nothing but red works, and "1968," which had nothing but works made in 1968.*

ÉRIC TRONCY — Here we arrive at an important subject. Today, young people get their start doing "curatorial studies." If someone had told us back in the '90s that they were going to come up with a curriculum to train curators, we'd have laughed in his face. Well, today there are schools for that. I don't actually know what they're teaching these people. I'd love to be a ghost visitor to see what they're saying in those courses. The whole thing's a fraud, a huge scam. You can't learn to put on an exhibition. It's not possible. It's just not possible. You'd have to learn to be yourself. It just doesn't make sense. And also — it's funny — people today, since they don't want to stop and think, they have these sorts of stock phrases. They say, "Well, yeah, if we're talking curators, the great one is Harald Szeemann." In fact, Szeemann's exhibitions weren't all that interesting; they never really inspired us. Back then, in the early '90s, there was genuinely a little pool of spectacular young exhibition curators and art critics.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *They were spontaneous, too.*

ÉRIC TRONCY — You had the Americans, you had Bob Nickas, Collins and Milazzo, you had Christian Lee — incredible people, people who revolutionized the way exhibitions were done, far more than Harald Szeemann ever did. And in Britain you had all the exhibitions around the Young British Artists. Things were moving. You had exhibitions where Damien Hirst was curator, or Henry Bond — people like that, who were inventing a new language. It's not that we wanted to emulate those people, but we wanted to take part in that line of attack. Of course, when you say this today, nobody knows who they are anymore, which is pretty annoying. But that's where we came from.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *You've also spent a lot of time working in close quarters with the artists.*

ÉRIC TRONCY — For a while, I was working a lot with the artists, in something of a collegial spirit. The high point of all that was, of course, "No Man's Time." It was at the Centre National d'Art Contemporain, at Villa Arson, in Nice, and there were artist studios. We were able to spend almost a good month together, the 20 artists of the exhibition, Félix Gonzalez-Torres as well as Karen Kilimnik, and Philippe Parreno, and Allen Ruppersberg. We all lived together and produced the exhibition. I found it an interesting way to...

OLIVIER ZAHM — *Share in the conception of the exhibition?*

ÉRIC TRONCY — Yes, to share in the conception of the exhibition with the artists, even if it was more a theoretical sharing than a real one. In the end, it was me making the decisions. But there you have it. And then with the FRAC in Dijon in '96, I had the experience of doing the same exhibition twice. They were called "Surface de Réparation 1" and "Surface de Réparation 2." I was able to do the same exhibition twice with the same artists, once with the artists and then once without them. And the thing is, quite honestly, it was better when the artists had nothing to do with it. When you're doing a group exhibition, someone has to have a vision; the orchestra needs a conductor, even if the cellist is sublime.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *In the end, there are two things, two types of exhibitions. There are the exhibitions you've done that have served as milestones in the*

establishment of your generation, like "No Man's Time" and "French Kiss," or that you've done in a kind of collegial spirit, because things were developing.

ÉRIC TRONCY — Yes, that's true.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *And then there are the moments when you curate the shows without the artist and become the artist yourself, a curator-artist.*

ÉRIC TRONCY — Yes, precisely. In the late '90s it started to seem obvious to me that it was more pleasant to do group exhibitions without the artists.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *That's pretty radical, but it's well put. And so you advocate the "auteur exhibition," as one might advocate "auteur cinema." In other words, you assume full responsibility for the creation.*

ÉRIC TRONCY — The paternity, the responsibility, the creation. But I'm going to have to nuance your picture just a little bit. In '96, I found it was better to do group exhibitions without the artists, but this was partly because I had just gotten into Le Consortium, and knew that I'd get a chance to do monographic exhibitions with artists. When you organize a monographic exhibition, the artist makes all the decisions. It's the art center working for the artist. You have to listen to the artist's idea and do everything you can to make it happen under the best possible conditions.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *And you've conceived a multitude of monographic exhibitions: Yayoi Kusama, Don Brown, Juergen Teller, Rob Pruitt in 2001, Félix Gonzalez-Torres, Alain Séchas, etc. For almost 10 years, Le Consortium did nothing but monographic exhibitions.*

ÉRIC TRONCY — And it's great, fascinating to do. Or it was fascinating. Now it's just a nightmare. Not to toot my own horn, but on several occasions I've done the first exhibition in France of major artists.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *Why has it become more difficult these days?*

ÉRIC TRONCY — First of all, it costs a fortune. It's obscenely, grotesquely expensive. The insurance values are beyond the pale, as is the cost of the crates and the transport itself. A painting that's 10 years old, that's been exhibited in 30 places, has got no crate. You've always got to redo the crate, so you've got to pay for it. On top of that, you now have to deal with collectors because everything has already been sold. That was definitely not the case back in the day. And since everything's been sold, you've got to bow and scrape before the collectors. They demand that the artworks travel with bodyguards on the plane. It's senseless. It's nuts, and most of the time it's all for a bad painting. It's become very expensive and very complicated. But back in the day, it wasn't. It wasn't complicated at all. The way was open, and the artists were free. Nowadays, the artists don't even know where their works are on the planet or who owns them. It's frightening.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *How do you get around that?*

ÉRIC TRONCY — As it turns out, for a certain number of years now, I've been fascinated almost exclusively with painting. The group show I did recently at the Almine Rech gallery — I wouldn't have been able to do it at Le Consortium, for lack of transport funds and for lack of collector contacts. I wouldn't have had the budget to have the artworks brought in, and we wouldn't have gotten them because it so happens we had to use all of Almine Ruiz-Picasso's connections to secure certain loans from collectors, from the very galleries, from artists. Really, we wouldn't have been able to do it at Le Consortium.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *Those are harsh words for public institutions.*

ÉRIC TRONCY — And Beaubourg [the Pompidou Center] would have been worse. I say Beaubourg, but I could have mentioned any other such place. Impossible, or it would have taken three years.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *You're pretty pessimistic, or it's best to work with young, highly energetic artists, like, say, Oscar Tuazon.*

ÉRIC TRONCY — That's our current exhibition at Le Consortium, Oscar Tuazon, but that's been rather pleasant. It was a little like old times. Oscar came over for three weeks and built some things on site. But there were still two years of preliminary negotiations, and projects... The energy's not the same as it was in the '90s. It's a slog.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *Yet he's a young artist, in his prime.*

ÉRIC TRONCY — Yeah. I don't know what's going to become of all these young artists. I don't know if they'll become real artists someday.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *You think there's going to be a permanent turnover of young artists, who'll cast the ones who came right before them into oblivion — a bit like Instagram, where one image takes the place of another.*

ÉRIC TRONCY — I mean that when you saw Buren, say, in the early '90s, you were sure that Buren would still be around in 2000 and in 2010. It was his ambition, his trade, his plan. Whereas all the artists we're exhibiting now — I'm not sure they'll be around 10 years on, even the really, really good ones. What'll Joe Bradley be doing in 10 years? What'll Alex Israel be doing? I have no idea. And I'm speaking here of the artists I have the fewest reservations about.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *You say it's the final image of the exhibition that matters to you, but isn't there also an image at the root of your exhibition, an image rather than a concept or idea? And that it's this image that allows you to seek out artworks, select them, bring all the pieces together?*

ÉRIC TRONCY — It's a number of things. This is something I learned from Pierre Joseph, Philippe Parreno, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, in the early '90s. At the time, they were talking about something that to me seemed totally crazy. They talked about how photogenic an exhibition was. You have to step back into the spirit of the time. Exhibitions had to become images in their own right.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *Today, with Instagram, everything is an image, even relationships between people.*

ÉRIC TRONCY — Everything is an image. And an exhibition's photogenic quality is something those particular artists taught me pretty early to envisage. And it's held up over the years; it's just broadened in scope. Instagram, in fact, has taken the place of criticism. Certain exhibitions are made to be photographed; others are not. Although those I advocated for in the '90s didn't have that particular obsession. They had to do with an experience that was not purely visual, that had many other dimensions: emotional, relational, social, etc. Today all that seems extremely outmoded to me, and I take more pleasure in how photogenic an exhibition is.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *Your latest exhibition comprises nothing but paintings and revisits several painters, all the way back to Schnabel. It was unexpected.*

ÉRIC TRONCY — Yes, well ... Schnabel, if you will — he's rather extraordinary. Schnabel's paintings from the '90s are great. It's funny: they're even called "purple paintings." I did it for you, Olivier. That's why. It was a ploy to get a photo into the *Purple Diary* that I included Schnabel's purple paintings. [Laughs]

OLIVIER ZAHM — *You've also had us take another look at Bernard Buffet [Laughs].*

ÉRIC TRONCY — I've always thought it was important to look at Bernard Buffet. Whatever else one might say about him, he's an extremely interesting painter. I think it's in no way foolish to look at Schnabel's canvases from the '90s today, in an exhibition, alongside those of Joe Bradley.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *Why do you find the art of the '90s outmoded?*

ÉRIC TRONCY — Then it was a provocation to tell people, "The exhibition is: you come eat some Thai soup at the art center" — I'm speaking here of Rirkrit Tiravanija in the mid-'90s. "You're going to

do some rock climbing at the gallery" — these were pieces by Pierre Joseph with Ozone in '91. All that was a big provocation, and it was, of course, new, and it was therefore very seductive. Now that pure academicism has taken over, I've just lost interest. Me, I've always liked inventors and the avant-garde. So, it seems to me that these days painting is more honest. There's no ... there's no smoke, no explosions. There aren't any super-slick productions because, frankly, we're sick and tired of overproduced videos, with 30 cameras and the most expensive DPs. All that for what? Little exhibition films that most of the time can't hold a candle to what the filmmakers have done. Not to mention Kubrick. Painting seems more honest an exercise to me. Your gaze sees everything all at once. And you're grappling with a history — and a fairly specific history, to boot.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *There's no faking.*

ÉRIC TRONCY — What's more, today's artworks are, in a very obvious and acknowledged way, decorative and luxury items, and painting seems to me the most perverse version of that. When John Currin started making highly figurative paintings, in the '90s, with techniques that were referring back not to Dan Graham or Michael Heizer but to Rembrandt — well, that, of course, turns back into a provocation. Today, it's always much more disturbing to see a painting by John Currin than to see a shark in formaldehyde by Damien Hirst, where everyone says, "Ah, yes, I get it!"

OLIVIER ZAHM — *But should art necessarily be a provocation?*

ÉRIC TRONCY — Art is not made to shock. For me contemporary art is invention.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *But when there's no invention left, you turn back to the practice of painting. It's perhaps also a reaction on your part to the overdose of images — of photos, that is. A reaction against Instagram.*

ÉRIC TRONCY — No. I'm very much in favor of Instagram, but I observe that it has become the bellwether. In the past, an exhibition was either successful or not, and such-and-such exhibition would manage to generate a critical article in *Artforum*, or *Flash Art*. None of that means anything anymore. The question today is whether you got 30,000 likes on Instagram. If so, you can be pretty sure that the exhibition has achieved its objective. It's absurd.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *Your latest exhibition is a spiral. It has no beginning or end. All the paintings are displayed in very close proximity ... like a filmic sequence. What made you want to do that? Is it your cinematographic side?*

ÉRIC TRONCY — No. It was Tumblr. I'm pretty basic. I observe. Today, people learn art history on Tumblr, or look at exhibitions on Tumblr. So, I did a Tumblr in 3D. In other words, I put very little distance between the images, except that in this case it's paintings, and since they're not any old paintings and have such peculiar formats, you get that particular effect.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *It's very interesting because it's that effect that allows you to see the paintings.*

ÉRIC TRONCY — It allows you to see them in relation to others, which is what we always do.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *How was that received by the artists themselves?*

ÉRIC TRONCY — No artist has yet complained about the way I display his work. Artists are more keenly aware than anybody else that a piece needs to be confronted with different realities in order to achieve a somewhat less monotone existence.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *It needs to be reactivated.*

ÉRIC TRONCY — Yes — reactivated, disturbed, magnified, destabilized. It needs something to happen around it. The artists have always



"Weather Everything," a show curated by ÉRIC TRONCY at the Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst, Leipzig, August - November, 1998, photo H.-C.H. Schink.

KATHARINA FRITSCH, *Madonnenfigur / Madonna*, 1987, polyester and paint

HELMUT NEWTON, *Big Nude X and Big Nude XI: Verina, Nice*, 1993, gelatin silver print

Éric Troncy : [PURPLE DOCUMENT]

been more curious than anything else. And they're well aware that an exhibition is just four weeks; it isn't the end of the world.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *You also display very different artists, of widely separated generations, all together.*

ÉRIC TRONCY — I like mixing artists who've braved the torments of the avant-garde with artists of the present day, who generally feast on everything, in rather unappetizing ways. I do it precisely to make that reality plain. But it's not necessarily a criticism. It's an observation. Now, what can we do with that observation? You can say, "Things were better in my day." But they weren't. Things were just different. After all, it's normal for a sector of activity to evolve over 50 years. The music industry isn't the same as it was 50 years ago, in its workings or in its distribution channels. It's the same with art. The question is: What do we do with this new reality? Can we find a form of beauty and poetry, a sense of story, in this new reality?

OLIVIER ZAHM — *Do you have new ideas for exhibitions in mind?*

ÉRIC TRONCY — I do a group exhibition about every two years, sometimes spacing them out a little more. I have no idea if I'll even have the desire to do another one. At any rate, it always comes from me. The only time I was asked to do an exhibition was in fact "No Man's Time." Christian Bernard, the director of Villa Arson. It's never happened to me since. In other words, all the exhibitions I've done since then have been proposed by me. It's me who's gone out looking.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *Are you waiting for someone to give you, say, the Venice Art Biennale someday?*

ÉRIC TRONCY — Ah, no. That I wouldn't know how to do.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *Really?*

ÉRIC TRONCY — No. I really wouldn't know. It's colossal. I have no desire to take the wheel of an exhausting machine and then have 1% of my energy left over to do the exhibition. That's not at all what I aspire to. I want to do more radical, and therefore more confidential, things. And do them on a more modest scale.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *What's your take on the current situation in art?*

ÉRIC TRONCY — There are actually some pretty violent things going on these days. Resigning art critics, outraged collectors, an art market going mad. I'm not convinced things are on the right track. In the '90s, when we started doing things, we said, "This just isn't working. We've got to invent something new, something different." And today, if we decide that things aren't working, then we have to invent something new and different. It's not enough to say: "This isn't working."

END