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11. Speculative Spaces in Grand Paris: Reading JR in Clichy-sous-Bois and Montfermeil

Gillian Jein

Abstract

This chapter engages with the spatial politics of aesthetics in the Parisian suburbs of Clichy-sous-Bois and Montfermeil. It examines how JR's street art brings into view the lines of tension informing neighbourhood change. Firstly, the chapter explores how urban aesthetics have become important to gentrification analysis and looks at the commodification of socially engaged aesthetic practices via the "creative cities" ethos. In the subsequent sections, the chapter introduces a relational reading of JR's artistic practice in "Clichy-Montfermeil." The central questions guiding the enquiries are as follows: What can street art tell us about the antagonisms shaping processes of speculation in these towns? What can its aesthetic presence reveal about shifts in spatial imaginaries that are disarticulating the banlieues as "deviant," "no-go zone" to rearticulate them "as a hunting ground for seasoned investors" (Clerima 2019)?

Keywords: Grand Paris; Clichy-sous-Bois; street art; speculation; agonism

The problem in the banlieue is that they don't look at us with the right kind of eyes.

– Dieth cited in Sterlé 2017

The image itself is, in fact, a weapon.

– Thompson 2015: 32

In February 2018, an article appeared in *New Statesman* wherein a journalist described his trip to the "least-visited neighbourhood" of Paris (Newens 2018).

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Framed as an attempt to access “real Paris,” “surely,” he proclaimed, “the most authentically Parisian part of the city must be the part least tainted by tourism: a place where no visitor ever goes” (Newens 2018)? In April of the same year, this quest for “authenticity” found echoes on the travel blog *Culture Trip*. Again, the journalist pronounced her “odyssey” to dodge Paris’s tourist traps and brave “the darkest corners of Paris” by venturing to “the city’s least-visited neighbourhood” (Cuttle 2018). In both cases, this “darkest corner” referred to Clichy-sous-Bois, a banlieue or suburban town of 30,000 inhabitants situated 15 kilometres east of central Paris, in the department of Seine-Saint-Denis. These journalists equate “authenticity” with two geo-historical features of Clichy-sous-Bois. The first is its geographical marginality. At the time of these articles’ publication, the town remained notoriously “enclaved,” underserved by Parisian transport networks, without train line, metro, major autoroute, or tramline. Irregular bus services meant it took up to 90 minutes to travel those 15 kilometres. The second reason is this neighbourhood’s historic role in the civil riots that erupted on 27 October 2005 in the town’s high-rise social housing estate, la Chêne Pointu. The violence, catalyzed by the death of two local teenage boys, Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré, spread to disadvantaged suburbs across France prompting the government to declare a state of national emergency. The deaths of Zyed and Bouna, of Mauritian and Tunisian descent, became symbolic of the profound economic, social, and racial inequalities confronting those living on the post-industrial margins of France. Depending on the politics of observers, the events were interpreted as evidence of the threat these neighbourhoods posed to the Republic, or as signs of the Republic’s abandonment of its poorest and postcolonial populations (Koff and Duprez 2009). Thus, given its problematic position within the annals of recent French history, what can the marginalized and stigmatized neighbourhood of Clichy-sous-Bois tell us about gentrification?

First, let us consider that these journalists’ journeys are remarkable *not* because they are unusual – this kind of “dark tourism” and “off the beaten track” journeying is an increasingly mundane travel practice. Rather, their writing performs as discursive symptom of a vast state-led infrastructural urban project, “Grand Paris,” that is rearticulating the social imaginaries of Seine-Saint-Denis. This department forms a significant prong in the government’s metropolitan programme, which has been working to reframe the centre-periphery imaginaries of the banlieues’ relationship to central Paris. This Haussmannian-scale regeneration programme, first mooted by Nicolas Sarkozy in 2007, undergirds infrastructural ambition with an aesthetics of cultural and architectural “rehabilitation,” and draws

closely on the rhetoric of Richard Florida's "creative cities" model (Florida 2002) to alter the spatial imaginaries of this former "no-go" zone (De Vries 2015). Thus, despite their claims to novelty, these press articles are by no means isolated cultural artefacts. Rather they form an Anglophone extension to Grand Paris' discursive armoury of publications, manifestos, cultural organizations, festivals, tours, and artistic interventions that over the past fifteen years have been working to rearticulate Paris' peripheral territories.

In this chapter, I engage with this shift in spatial imaginaries through the lens of aesthetic practice in Clichy-sous-Bois and the neighbouring town of Montfermeil, and more particularly through a relational reading of two street art exhibitions by renowned "photographeur" JR. Given the early stages of these territories' infrastructural regeneration, this is an attempt to explore gentrification *avant la lettre*, implicating aesthetic practice in one of gentrification's pre-emptive signs: speculation. While "speculation" commonly refers to anticipating land values or debt financing, the word's etymological roots connect it to ways of looking. Derived from the Latin *specer* (to look), before its financial connotations, we find "looking closely," "contemplation," "observation," and "rapt attention" (*Online Etymological Dictionary*): a prescient reminder of the role that looking and, by extension, the aesthetic, play in the determination of value and visibility – the social processes of making people and places visible or invisible (Foster 1988). To pay attention to spatial discursivity is to approach place not as some settled, steady ground, but rather as a speculative site. It is, furthermore, to argue that how places and people are made visible, and how marginal communities make themselves visible are political questions. This is to reframe the old issue of "what do images look like, what do they say?" to place emphasis on the image's relationality and ask, instead, "what do images look at?" – what kinds of pasts are they concerned with, what futures do they speculate? – and, "what can images do?" – what kinds of actions do images promote, what tensions do they reveal?

In the Grand Paris context, this kind of approach allows us to engage critically with this new metropolitan urbanism's discourses of "creativity," "authenticity," and "integration," and to explore the ways art and design practices can be at once resistive to, but also complicit in, corporate and state-led placemaking practices. This has two implications. First, it suggests we take seriously the role of cultural production in contributing to the meaning, experience, and value of the built environment. Second, it requires us to abandon any transcendentalist interpretive framework separating aesthetics from political or social life, and instead, following

Jacques Rancière, to emphasize what might be termed, “the spatial politics of aesthetics” (Rancière 2004).

This chapter engages with the spatial politics of aesthetics in Clichy-sous-Bois and Montfermeil by examining how street art, through its site-specific aesthetic, brings into view the lines of tension informing neighbourhood change. Read here as a site-specific intervention whose meaning evolves in temporal concert with political and historical conditions, street art provides a means to grasp how artistic practices operate within existing hegemonic power structures that (re)configure urban social space (Mouffe 2013: 79). The chapter is underpinned by Chantal Mouffe’s theoretical notion of agonism, which emphasizes antagonism between competing points of view as necessary to the political life of democratic societies, and lines of tension as crucial to the development of equitable alternatives within neoliberalism’s profit priorities. Mouffe’s agonism affords us a position from which to theorize street art as a productively tension-filled procedure, remarkable for how it brings into view the conflicts attendant in neighbourhood regeneration.

Bringing to light tensions in meaning over place is to approach gentrification as a spectrum of interrelated processes, evidenced by paying attention to the situated aesthetics of cultural practices in neighbourhoods over time. Thus, in a first section, this chapter explores how urban aesthetics have become important to gentrification analysis and looks at the commodification of socially engaged aesthetic practices via the “creative cities” ethos. This is significant in the case of Clichy-sous-Bois and Montfermeil, where culture-led redevelopment is prevalent, and where the trauma of the recent past is rearticulated through Republican planning discourse. In the sections that follow, the chapter introduces a relational reading of JR’s street art in Clichy-Montfermeil. A relational framework analyzes JR’s images as multi-valent sites of meaning, examining the visual substance of the singular image as well as its implication in other aesthetic and infrastructural procedures. The central questions guiding these enquiries are as follows: What can street art tell us about the antagonisms shaping processes of speculation in Clichy-sous-Bois and Montfermeil? What can its aesthetic presence reveal about shifts in spatial imaginaries that are disarticulating the banlieue as “deviant,” “no-go zone” to rearticulate it “as a hunting ground for seasoned investors” (Clerima 2019)? Reading these images in relation to territorial shifts, I explore then how JR’s “photograffs” articulate a response to these banlieues’ evolving regimes of visibility, creating a line of tension straddling resistive and normative dimensions, and bringing into view gentrification as an agonistic process within Grand Paris.

Thinking Agonistic Urbanism, Rethinking Artistic Practice

In gentrification literature, aesthetics has long been a means to identify signs of land appropriation by one class and the consequent displacement of another. The middle class's reappropriation and revalorization of London's working-class housing stock was essential to Ruth Glass's original concept (Glass 1964). If Glass focused on demographic change, Sharon Zukin's theorization of the "aesthetic mode of production" in New York demonstrated how artistic communities create urban value, predicating capital accumulation on processes of cultural consumption (Zukin 1982). David Ley broadens Zukin's perspective through deployment of Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the "cultural field," or cultural production's imbrication in the power dynamics of society. Ley analyzes the coincidence of economic and cultural capital in gentrification, what he terms "the cultural code of gentrification," which exists as a "field of relationships, practices, and historical traces" (Ley 2003: 3532). Ley's reading eschews traditional art historical interpretations of value, positioning the artwork instead within a "historical space of genres, techniques and patterns of recognition" where it circulates amidst an assemblage of social power relations (Ley 2003: 2542). Ley's work demonstrates the socio-cultural production of land values, and raises awareness of western cities' growing economic investiture in cultural capital from the 1960s onwards. In this reading, under capitalist market forces, the valorization of space through aesthetic procedures implicates even activist artistic practices in neighbourhood commodification through aestheticization, so that "the edge becomes the new centre" (Ley 2003: 2541). However, while Ley attends to the role of aesthetics in gentrification, his case studies from the late sixties and seventies invite us to extend this timeline to address the post-Fordist expansion of regeneration schemes advocating creativity as part of land revalorization procedures.

We need, then, to address the influence of Florida's "creative cities" agenda and its reorientation of creativity to neoliberal strategies for city regeneration. This reorientation is highly relevant in the French case. While Grand Paris extends the scale of Florida's focus through its ambition to reassert Paris's hegemony on the world stage, his thesis coheres with the programme's emphasis on generating new "cultural geographies" (Senate 2010) for economic sustainability. It also speaks to the French state's collaboration with global advertising and private investment firms, and the promotion of alternative tourism as well as innovation and creativity poles in Seine-Saint-Denis.

Florida famously describes creativity as the "defining feature of economic life" in post-Fordist societies, an essential component to ensuring

the economic growth of cities in an increasingly competitive global context (Florida 2002: 21). In this scenario, cities are engaged in a “talent war” and must adapt their urban landscapes, creating flexible, aesthetically trendy, and culturally diverse environments to attract this new aspirational, flexible, “cool,” and tolerant “creative class.” Crucially, unlike the yuppies of the eighties, creatives (broadly understood by Florida to include anybody from tech giants to local musicians) are unmotivated by corporate incentives. Rather than money, their priorities are grounded in a search for urban stimulation, authenticity, diversity. Openness and tolerance are key to creating this class’ preferred progressive environment and enhancing urban attractiveness, so that these qualities become affective instruments for the “redevelopment and gentrification [of] distressed urban neighbourhoods” (Florida and Gates 2003: 131). From Florida’s perspective, gentrification constitutes an emancipatory mechanism for downgraded localities, with creativity rescuing the city from post-industrial degradation. This diminished angle, of course, fails to attend to the trauma that state-organized gentrification can bring through processes such as forced eviction, relocation and the displacement of long-established, often marginalized communities (Peck 2005). Furthermore, this marketization of creativity not only commodifies land, but marginality itself. The “edge” is aestheticized, delocalized so as to circulate in a globalized creative economy.

The creative cities agenda, then, calls into question the possibility for aesthetic practices to act as meaningful forms of resistance to neoliberal urbanism. As Mouffe asks, “Once the centrality of the cultural terrain [to capital] is acknowledged, how can cultural and artistic practices contribute to the counter-hegemonic challenge to neo-liberal hegemony?” (Mouffe 2013: 91). In a politico-historical context where “creativity” becomes another instrument in the corporate planning toolbox, the critical aesthetic gesture risks being recuperated and neutralized. However, we might frame this question in another way and ask what such recuperations can tell us about how speculation works in specific contexts. What needs to occur before gentrification can take place? Can street art tell us less straightforward, more antagonistic tales about the experience of urban governance?

Re-Visioning the “Violent Neighbourhood”

JR is one of the most prolific and well-known street artists working today, but, before his rise to fame, his first illegal exhibition “Portrait of a Generation” took place in Clichy-sous-Bois and Montfermeil. JR’s practice is defined

by large-format, black-and-white photographs that are pasted onto walls, roads, and myriad other architectural forms in rural or urban locations; a technique that has become known as “photo-graffiti.” Much of the work involves engagement with local communities. The artist achieved mainstream attention when a photograff from “Portrait of a Generation,” namely “Ladj Braquage,” was featured in Tate Modern’s break-through exhibition, “Street Art,” in 2008, signposting the art world’s institutional acceptance of the form. JR gained global recognition in 2011, when he won the TED prize of \$100,000. While much press coverage of the artist (Day 2010; Jaeglé 2019) praises the artist’s aesthetic infiltration of marginal, often “invisible” places, it is also clear that his participatory ethos is consistent with the generalized aesthetic shift in the early 2000s towards localized, co-creative forms of practice. Before achieving notoriety, however, JR began as a *tagueur* (graffiti writer), and his first experiment with the large-scale photograff format took Clichy-sous-Bois and Montfermeil as its substance and site. Indeed, before turning to examine in close-up JR’s debut photograff, “Ladj Braquage” (2004), it can be noted that the artist has consistently returned to these suburban terrains (Jardonné 2017b). His ballet *Les Bosquets* (a collaboration with the New York City Ballet) was filmed here in 2015, and other recent collaborations with filmmaker Ladj Ly suggest that this site has been formative in the artist’s concern to “capture the spirits of individuals who normally go unseen” (JR 2011).

It is not only those unseen, but also the challenge to normative regimes determining visibility or invisibility, that characterizes much of JR’s portraiture. In “Ladj Braquage” (Figure 11.1), produced when the artist was 18, we see an iconic example of how aesthetics might disarticulate normative ways of seeing the banlieues at the turn of the century. The image shows a tall, black man who appears to be pointing a machine gun directly outwards at the viewer. The young man is face forward, his gaze fixed on the viewer, chin down, weapon barrel pointing directly at us. In the background, stands a group of five black boys, also staring at us, some with their hands in their pockets, while two make hip-hop gestures. The walls behind are covered in graffiti. At a glance, the composition, the confrontational gaze, and the gun confirm global media stereotypes of delinquent youth, of aggression, hostility, and the latency of violence.

These visual tropes speak, then, to another set of images: the visual regime of the “ghetto” – a regime that for Clichy-sous-Bois and Montfermeil is articulated in relation to a particular set of historical and spatial circumstances and which can be traced to the emergence of a discursive imaginary associating the banlieues with delinquency and deprivation since the early

Figure 11.1: 28 Millimeters, Portrait of a Generation, Pasting of Ladj Ly by JR, Montfermeil, Les Bosquets, 2004 © JR.

1980s in France (Dikeç 2007). The discourse circulated widely in the local, national, and, later, international press, and was at best patriarchal, at worst rampantly racist (Body-Gendrot 2010). This developed in response to the economic crisis of the seventies, a rise in anti-immigrant sentiment and a succession of laws to curb migration and citizenship for foreigners resident in France (Hargreaves 2015). This socio-spatial marginalization is politically complex and bound up with France's unwillingness to acknowledge either the slow violence of postcolonial trauma, or the limits of its national model of citizenship where the realities of religious and ethnic diversity now stretch the tenability of "the one and indivisible Republic." These complex cultural realities became spatialized in Seine-Saint-Denis, previously the heart of Paris' industrial economy, where post-industrialization and decolonization resulted in high concentrations of poverty, foreign-born populations and those of immigrant descent. These social tensions become intensely visible during the riots of 2005, when hundreds of journalists descended on Clichy-sous-Bois and Montfermeil, transmitting spectacular footage of burning vehicles, heavily armed riot police and hooded adolescents expressing years of invisible rage. These images bring the question of semiotic violence to the fore, and a clear visual rhetoric emerges within the bank of imagery ordering the representation of the incidents globally, and influencing representations of urban rioting more generally.

One image in particular, by photographer Eric Travers, achieved iconic status appearing repeatedly in the media, not only to illustrate the actual events, but also other unrelated stories. A Google image search throws up 3,370,000,000 results for this image, ranging from its appearance in the *Guardian* for a story covering the 2012 French presidential election; in 2013 on a website “Egalité et réconciliation” [Equality & Reconciliation] calling for riots as a means of governance; on a Swedish forum to discuss immigrant riots in 2017; and on a far-right French website, “Riposte Laïque” [Secular Retaliation] in 2019 (Chrisafis 2012; Egalité et réconciliation 2013; Lussay 2019). Crucially this image’s iconography is manufactured using a long-range lens, and built around a silhouetted, faceless figure. On the one hand, this facelessness works to de-individualize, to generalize, to render figurative a certain body of violence, what we might term “the rioting body.” An abstraction, these hooded, silhouetted bodies are totemic. The rioting body relegates the other to the sub-human, so that personhood is never recognized. Thus, in conventional understandings of the face as the site of communication, the possibility of recognition or reciprocity with the viewer seems to be denied from the outset. Here, the camera aestheticizes violence and a media gaze emerges, a gaze predicated upon hierarchical modes of distribution whereby those who look are never made available for scrutiny, where the viewer is never implicated in violence’s unfolding. Simultaneously, the camera’s abstraction of the body enables a kind of blank monstrosity to emerge. The person is creatured, removed from normative landscapes of identification. In the 2005 context, JR’s ghetto tropes recall therefore the media’s spectres of threat. This is the first reading.

However, if we take a second look at “Ladj Braquage,” we must grasp the viscosity of this violence from another angle – that of the *banlieusard* [inhabitant of the peripheries] – and at another level, whereby violence becomes less a spectacular and sudden “event,” and instead something characterized by processes more structural and slow. For Ladj is not holding a gun at all, of course, but a video camera. With this realization, the status of the image shifts, and rather than “ghetto,” a reflexive space comes into view. The double take and the presence of the camera heighten the viewer’s consciousness of photography as act, bringing into awareness the produced nature of the visual. Secondly, this appropriation of violent tropes is a comment on the violence of photographic images. The camera-gun invites this association, recalling Paul Virilio’s theorization of the camera as a vision machine, a technological perpetrator of symbolic violence, whose interface enables the distantiation of actual violence (Virilio 1988). JR effectively acknowledges the camera’s violence, but in this image, the 28 millimetre

lens posits the face as an alternative mode of subjectivity; this aggression is self-conscious, dramatized, performed, a deliberate playacting. The image resonates with the media's visual order to better jam or short-circuit the transparency of that order. In so doing, it attributes consciousness of the media gaze to the photo's subject, as well as suggesting that subject's agency as they turn the visual regime on its head.

This image encourages a return to the media's violent protagonists, and from the perspective of the rioters, it becomes clear that facelessness is a choice. The hood is an apparatus to evade capture, and a collective statement. We recall here that for Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari "the face is a politics" (Deleuze and Guattari 1980: 222) – an alignment of hegemonic attributes (whiteness, symmetry, visibility) that designate which faces are acceptable or unacceptable. The face, to appropriate Mouffe's explicitly political vocabulary, exists within a regime of vision, one which for our context consists in stereotypes or invisibility, people divested to a series of normative reductions (Mouffe 2013). In "Ladj Braquage," therefore, the camera is made doubly visible. It is a media weapon – that which frames and forces into category – but also an arm to be reappropriated, opening onto a reflexive questioning around who makes whom visible and how. In this space of enquiry, we are alerted to the possibility that hegemonic visibility can be contested, the camera's point-blank range suggesting the counter-capture of the media gaze, a cultural kidnapping of visual weaponry. Indeed, Slavoj Žižek in his analysis of the 2005 violence, points to visibility as the rioters' critical purpose:

The riots were simply a direct effort to gain *visibility*. A social group which, although part of France and composed of French citizens, saw itself as excluded from the political and social space proper wanted to render its presence palpable to the general public [...] They found themselves on the other side of the wall which separates the visible from the invisible part of the republican social space. (Žižek 2008: 77)

Seen thus, JR's photograff becomes iconic of violence not as a singular event, but as a slow, structurally embedded, and, finally, agency-driven process that must be considered in duration and in relation to the hegemonic visual sphere. A reflexive resistance is at work here, then, bringing these banlieues into view as a territory of real fictions, articulated over time, and where violence and visibility, where lighting fires and framing shots, are imbricated each in the ontological existence of the other. In this schema, street art becomes an evidently powerful site for the articulation of ideological

struggle, for the fight to be recognized, to participate, where people, as Raymond Williams eloquently puts it, might “writ[e] themselves into the land” (Williams [1958] 1989: 4).

Rearticulating the Banlieues

Where “Portrait of a Generation” writes the banlieues’ struggle into the land, however, urban policy since the early 2000s has sought to erase signs of the postcolonial and postindustrial trauma impacting these towns. Since 2003, both municipalities of Clichy-sous-Bois and Montfermeil have been subject to intensive state-led urban policies aiming to use regeneration not only to address social inequalities but to address the fractured identity of the Republican capital that became even more urgent post-2005. Before turning to JR’s 2017 mural, it is important for our relational reading to outline how the Grand Paris programme affects these towns, and more specifically how questions of planning intersect with those of visuality.

First, both towns and their department figure prominently in the parliamentary debates on Grand Paris since 2010 (Projet de loi 2010). Of the 61 sites designated for redevelopment across the Ile-de-France, 24 of these are in Seine-Saint-Denis. Line 16 of the new Grand Paris Express metro infrastructure will unite towns in the department. Second, the mayor of Clichy-sous-Bois, Olivier Klein, has been appointed to a vice-presidential role on the Grand Paris Métropole planning committee. Impetus for completion of these projects has been driven by the success of Paris’s bid to host the 2024 Olympic Games, which will see the Olympic village housed in Saint Denis and other sites spread across the department. This has ensured large-scale private investment and the unusually swift implementation of planning projects. Property developers and investment companies have seized the opportunity to be involved in “the biggest urban real estate and infrastructure project in continental Europe since Baron Haussmann” (Mirabaud Group 2018), with over €30 billion invested in operations. Private investment coupled with state debt is speculation-driven, based on projections of growth around the 68 new metro stations, while Seine-Saint-Denis will provide new housing for an over-extended urban core, where property prices in central Paris now reach over €10,000 per square metre (Hasse 2019). One consultation anticipates new housing in the extended metropolitan area to yield €7.2 billion of private investment in coming years (Moutarde 2019). The revalorization of land, the provision of mobility infrastructures to attract

private investment and the substantial upgrading of suburban cultural amenities are all, therefore, central to the implementation of the new urban morphologies of Grand Paris.

Attractivity is intimately bound up in questions regarding the visibility of Clichy-sous-Bois and Montfermeil. To attract investors, it has been essential for the towns to counteract images of violence and marginality crystallized by the media's iconographies. Jérôme Bouvier, a journalist and long-time advocate for Clichy-sous-Bois, recognized the reciprocity of image and investment during the riots:

I was fascinated by the question of mediatization because there were 450 journalists on site, 80 television channels. In Clichy, I saw things I had only observed before in Sarajevo or Kabul [...] I said to Claude Dilain [then mayor of Clichy-sous-Bois]: [...] "For 20 years, Clichy-sous-Bois will symbolize a place where kids in hoods burned cars. That image is more destructive than any others, you'll never manage to convince investors to come here. People will carry that image with them." (cited in Vivant 2018: 111)

The architectural aesthetics of these towns' regeneration has been defined by attempts to erase that image. Processes of demolition, displacement, and reconstruction have seen state and EU investment of over €600 million, with a further €450 million earmarked for ongoing projects.

Thus far, this has involved the demolition of the high-rise housing estates of Les Bosquets (5000 inhabitants, Montfermeil) and Les Forestières (510 apartments, Clichy-sous-Bois), the latter now the bull-dozed terrain for the new metro station, "Clichy-Montfermeil" scheduled to open in 2024. On 14 December 2019, the T4 tramway came into operation. While new mobility and housing infrastructures enhance attractivity, they have also been responsible for the expulsion of thousands of vulnerable families from their homes. Signs of disquiet are visible in a neon pink graffiti reading "Les Forestières" on the wall facing onto the metro's building site, a ghostly reminder of the estate's existence. The process of speculation in Clichy-sous-Bois and Montfermeil is thus defined by an aesthetics of demolition and displacement. However, eradicating symbols of violence, but also sites of community and memory, is of course highly problematic. For example, the voices of the 1500 inhabitants displaced when their homes were demolished remain silent. While in other regenerating towns, many municipalities have sponsored aesthetic initiatives to preserve the heritage of the neighbourhoods affected by renovation, in Clichy-sous-Bois and

Montfermeil, such memorial work is rare despite an increasing creative presence (Vivant 2018).

Other key architectural symbols of degradation, such as the thirteen-storey office block, the Utrillo Tower (Montfermeil), and the housing estate of La Chêne Pointu (6000 inhabitants, Clichy-sous-Bois), have been or are scheduled for imminent demolition. The Utrillo Tower, constructed in 1970 during the office-building boom, was purchased by the state in 2011 and torn down in 2017. Preparations for demolition of La Chêne Pointu, where the violence of 2005 originated, are underway at the time of writing, with the state and municipality investing over €450 million in the project. Under the remit of Grand Paris, private investment for a new multi-use centre, "Centr'Halles au plateau," has been secured, with a shopping mall, 1422m² of private accommodation, businesses, and plots for urban agriculture. Another project on the site of a former gypsum quarry, "Un belvédère métropolitain," will erect new private residences as well as a park and agro-cultural amenities (orchards, apiaries, and goat pastures) (Société du Grand Paris 2017). Both projects are due for completion in 2025. Cumulatively, while incomplete, these projects have contributed to an increase in speculation and an unheard-of rise of 6.6% in real estate values over the past five years (Villamy 2019).

Alongside infrastructural and architectural reorganization, culture has been a driving force in laying the foundation to attract investors. The first phase of a flagship, globally oriented, arts centre, The Ateliers Médicis, has been built on the site of the former Les Forestières estate. Phase two of this project will begin upon completion of the metro, with a permanent building erected on the Utrillo Tower site. The Ateliers Médicis is modelled on the prestigious Villa Médicis in Rome, the French Academy and traditional training ground for French artists since its foundation by Louis XIV in 1666. In its current guise, it is housed in a modern wooden building, its balconies overlooking the neighbouring equestrian centre and lower Clichy. The Ateliers Médicis have been central to configuring a visual and artistic identity for Grand Paris, commissioning an annual photographic competition, "Regards du Grand Paris," as well as facilitating Ladj Ly's Kourtrajmé cinema school, and most recently an ambitious summer festival, first held in 2019. This festival engaged French as well as international artists and the curators work closely with other flagship cultural enterprises, such as the Magasins Généraux in Pantin (the cultural wing of global advertising agency BETC) while their activities are promoted extensively by Enlarge your Paris – an "alternative" tourist operation that has proven fundamental in curating Grand Paris' cultural identity. As the centre's organizers state,

"The Ateliers Médicis, the name symbolic of the hope of a (new) renaissance, is placing its faith in the liberating power of culture" (Encore Heureux et al. 2018: 289). If Ateliers Médicis' cultural provision and prestige is important to changing the image of Clichy-sous-Bois, their statement that culture equates to liberation is less than straightforward within the new urban context that seeks to optimize land values. For these strategies are unpinned by policies of "mixité" [mixing], or the redistribution of class and, as Renaud Epstein points out, race, to encourage the return of middle-class, white "native French" families to the towns (see Epstein 2013). Ateliers Médicis is therefore imbricated in the cultural politics of mixity; by choosing a remote area for its site, and in conjunction with new infrastructures, this project is set to reorient the geographical centres of French contemporary art, and aims to attract audiences and practitioners from central Paris and the rest of the world to the area.

For Olivier Klein, cultural provision is a first step to enticing business investment. As Klein says, "one cannot simply decree the existence of a town centre, it will take time to attract large brands and robust commercial enterprises" (Ruggeri 2019: 5). Given the time-scales for the Grand Paris Express and the demolition-reconstruction of La Chêne Pointu, "a significant cultural programme" (Ruggeri 2019: 5) is key in rearranging the town's visibility into a more productive form, rearticulating the image of Clichy-sous-Bois from "a place where kids in hoods burned cars" to a space ripe for seasoned investors. While these processes are ongoing, the role of cultural production in this scenario is highly agonistic.

On the one hand, cultural co-practice and engagement with inhabitants has been important in bringing to light and dealing with the riots' trauma, as well as to resisting stereotypes and stigmatization. On the other hand, however, these projects are players within a much broader metropolitan agenda which seeks to instrumentalize culture's resistive revalorization of the area so as to enhance economic speculation. This is to say that art's production of an alternative identity for Clichy-sous-Bois now aligns, in the light of Grand Paris, with speculation-driven planning agendas. Where they differ of course is in their intended beneficiaries. Ateliers Médicis is concerned to reach "out to inhabitants – especially young people – who feel society has turned its back on them (Encore Heureux et al. 2018: 289). But this creative labour forms part too of "biopolitical capitalism" (Mouffe 2013: 18), assisting in reordering bodies and places so they might yield more profitable results. Thus, culture's resistive reworking of territorial aesthetics is inseparable from, and indeed necessary to, capitalist requirements for "attractivity."

Complicating Resistance or the Violence of Inclusion

It is within this new speculative landscape that we return to JR's latest intervention in Clichy-sous-Bois and Montfermeil. Of course, in addition to a drastically transformed urban fabric, the cultural status of street art and the artist himself have dramatically shifted. Where "Portrait of a Generation" was illegal, and JR sued by Montfermeil's mayor, Xavier Lemoine, JR is now firmly part of the cultural establishment. A 100 foot-high Ladj Braquage has towered over Londoners at Tate Modern (2008). JR's prints now sell for up to \$60,000 (Sotheby's 2018). The Louvre pyramid has been pasted to disappear (2016). Robert de Niro has co-produced and starred in JR's film *Ellis* (2015) and JR has co-directed *Visages Villages* (2017) with New Wave auteur Agnès Varda. The man in Ladj Braquage, Ladj Ly, has also become a world-renowned filmmaker with the release in 2019 of *Les Misérables*, a feature film set in Montfermeil, which won the Jury Prize at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival and was nominated for Best International Feature at the 92nd Academy Awards (Obsenson 2020). Street art too has become part of the French Republic's iconographic apparatus. In 2018, Emmanuel Macron commissioned Franco-British street artist, Ysuel Digan, to redesign Marianne, the allegorical goddess of Liberty and symbol of the Republic. Throughout Seine-Saint-Denis, street art is now part of many aestheticization projects, as an interim on building site hoardings or part of larger renovation projects such as the Magasins Généraux in Pantin, now a rapidly gentrifying suburb, and more permanent spaces dedicated to alternative tourism, such as the "Street Art Avenue" running along the Canal Saint Denis.

Such is the contextual background, therefore, when we come to focus on JR's 2017 mural, "Chronicles of Clichy-Montfermeil," a 150 m² black-and-white pasting of over 750 portraits of participants from the towns. The mural was exhibited in 2017 at the Paris museum of contemporary art, the Palais de Tokyo, before being relocated to avenue Jean Moulin, the road which links both towns. JR approached locals, passers-by, and neighbourhood officials asking them to pose alone or in groups, emphasizing the participatory, co-creative aspect of the production, with each person invited to adopt a stance they felt best represented them. Their photographs were taken against a green screen before being collaged together, into collective, themed arrangements decided by the artist. In what follows, I focus on this mural's representation of history and its visual imbrication with Republican aesthetic references as a means to grasp the tensions it brings to light.

As the word "chronicles" suggests, this mural presents a visual historical account of Clichy-Montfermeil in time, taking 2005 as its starting point.

The temporality of the image is highly complex, with references to the past, present, and future layered atop one another. Significantly, the violence of 2005 is not set apart. While largely situated towards the bottom centre of the mural, the bodies and back-drop segue into other sections, so while present, “the event” remains a relatively small part of the overall composition. Here, smoke, fire, and bodies in dynamic motion form the backdrop to a number of significant, front-facing, full-body figures. These include an older, bearded Ladj Ly adopting the now-iconic pose from “Ladj Braquage,” staring down the barrel of the camera-gun. Other young men from the 2004-2006 series “Portrait of a Generation” (of which “Ladj Braquage” formed a part) also make an appearance, their older selves mimicking the poses from that series. In addition, the figure of Bouna Traoré’s older brother (Figure 11.2) appears in this grouping, crouching forward, his hands covering both ears as though to block out the turbulence behind. These referential vignettes activate a series of visual echoes, resonances of earlier aesthetic-political disturbances. In its orchestration of these echoes, the work creates a memory knot whose chain of visual references ricochets back and forth between images to resist closure. Significantly, unlike the individual portraits of 2004-2006, these full-length figures are flanked on all sides by dozens more anonymous faces and figures, insurgents – some hooded, others with their arms outstretched in a lobbing motion – and riot police – cyborg-like, their faces hidden behind helmets and tinted face shields. Here then the events of 2005 become, quite literally, multifaceted, with faces on both sides represented, the lines of definition between “victim” and “perpetrator” blurred in the visual noise, which, rather than blame, suggests chaos, loss, and the singularity of the events which have marked the neighbourhood.

The critical gesture of the mural at this point lies in its inscription of this past into the present and future of Clichy-Montfermeil. In this temporal and multi-faceted complexity, it stands out, for official recognition has been largely restricted to commemoration of Bouna’s and Zyed’s tragic deaths. In this mural, it is violence itself – its disruption, energy, self-awareness and justification – that is memorialized, just as the duration and porosity of that violence is suggested via the blending of these figures into the black-and-white, accumulative aesthetic of the panorama overall. And, while there are references to the past, the mural’s temporal layers are richly suggestive of the everyday lives of inhabitants. We see a group of teenage girls and boys taking selfies, men and women in lively conversation, women pushing prams, drug dealers, prize-fighting boxers, café owners, social workers, town councillors, dancers, fire fighters, bin men. This is a portrait of community groups undertaking ordinary activities in an ethnically

Figure 11.2: Clichy-Montfermeil Chronicles, Mural detail at Montfermeil, France, 2017 © JR.

diverse neighbourhood, with people from North and West African, White and Jewish origin present. There are also visible signs of religious affiliation, with Muslim women wearing hijabs – a controversial gesture in France, where “ostentatious” religious signs are technically forbidden in public spaces. On the mural’s top tier, we find references to the future; construction workers in hard hats, a group of young kids, backs to the camera, standing atop a roof, looking into the distance towards a shiny new building to the right. In a more inclusive mode of framing, JR moves the focus away from the young, aggressive men of “Portrait of a Generation” to embrace the multiplicities of community life.

However, if this mural’s photographic portraits are highly realist, their compositional arrangement evokes a more allegorical treatment, and it is here that tensions emerge between the celebration of a community for itself and the suggestion of that community’s inclusion in existing urban

hegemonies and a consensual Republican vision. “Allegory,” which refers to “the description of one thing under the image of another” (*Online Etymological Dictionary*), becomes apparent when we examine the directional rhythms of gesture, gaze and grouping, and recognize these figural references to the neo-classical and Romantic paintings of the early French Republics.

Indeed the mural’s dynamism derives from its arrangement in a series of vertical thrusts, highly reminiscent of Jacques-Louis David’s (1748-1825) monumental paintings. Notably, “The Intervention of the Sabine Women” (1799), David’s representation of warring bodies, energetic outstretched arms, and, ultimately, a nation fatigued by war resonates with JR’s figural gestures and Bouna’s brother’s expressed desire for quiet. Similarly, David’s depiction of the French Republic’s founding moment, “Oath of the Tennis Court” (1791), finds resonance in JR’s compositional arrangement of a prominent group of children in football uniforms. Like David’s composition, a central figure, in this case the football coach, stands at the group’s centre, his arm raised, index finger pointing skyward. The children are arranged in a pyramidal structure around him, their gaze skyward, the vertical thrust of their bodies’ configuration consistent with David’s neoclassical convergence of diagonals. This structural correspondence is echoed thematically, for if David suggests that this oath is central to the regeneration of the French nation, here too the suggestion is that the children of the banlieues are key to the nation’s future. Here, and in other similarly arranged groupings, the gaze trails off to the middle-distance – perhaps to some future outside the frame.

This reading is confirmed and complicated by the mural’s most obvious inter-medial reference, that of Eugène Delacroix’s “Liberty Leading the People” (1830). As well as the composition, JR’s statement that he drew inspiration for this mural from Mexican muralist Diego Rivera (1886-1957), who also drew on Delacroix’s famous allegory in his painting, “Communards” (1928), reinforces this point. Like Delacroix, JR uses a number of pyramidal groupings to organize the upper sections of the mural, giving the impression of groups, and providing balance and rhythm to the dramatic collision of bodies below. The allegorical figure of Liberty is echoed to the left of the mural by the figure of young girl, held aloft by her peers, arm outstretched as she holds a taper with which to light an electric street lamp, forming a right diagonal (Figure 11.3). To her left, beneath, a boy stretches his arm towards her, while he is flanked by a girl whose arm faces downwards to form a seamless diagonal line. Their arms’ line is mirrored by the tiered arrangement of street lamps behind them which shed light downwards to the crowd below. The convergence of these diagonals forms an apex, while the clear anachronism of the girl’s taper to turn on an electric lamp

Figure 11.3: Clichy-Montfermeil Chronicles, Mural detail at Montfermeil, France, 2017 © JR.

reinforces the allegorical reference to the Romantic painting, suggesting a link to Paris' denomination as the "City of Lights," and the lamplighters of the past. Other artefacts, such as the old-fashioned fire hose beneath, suggest the metonymical thread here, while the combination of bodies below this scene are all reminiscent of Delacroix's depiction of the barricades, and justification for the revolution of 1830. Furthermore, in the same way that Delacroix's figural Liberty controversially combined realistic mimesis with allegory, here photographic realism is tempered by the metonymical gestures of the girl, suggesting her as a contemporary incarnation of Liberty, her black skin and braided hair suggesting a racially diverse Republic.

However, the presence of Republican iconography is tension-filled, both from the perspective of ideological multi-culturalism and given the new neoliberal metropolitan context. Traditionally, the French Republican model is based on the association of equal citizens, a universalism based on the

rights of individuals inspired by Enlightenment ideals and the political imagination of the French Revolution. Historically, this involved a conscious project of erasing cultural and linguistic differences. In today's terms it can be seen in the Republican refusal to acknowledge multiculturalism or to recognize any form of "particularism." Furthermore, if JR's posits a multiracial Republic, this mural does not suggest a deviation from existing power structures. Rather it might posit that the riots of 2005 now form part of the memory bank of Republican iconography, so that the aestheticization of violence can be seen to reinforce the political legitimacy of the Republican tradition. This is buttressed by the presence of Xavier Lemoine, the figure wearing a Republican sash, mayor of Montfermeil and vice-president of the right-wing Christian Democratic Party. Lemoine has been unambiguous in his advocacy of linguistic and cultural assimilation in public as well as private spaces, and sees the growing Islamic population as catastrophic to the existence of the Republic. Republican hegemonies are reinforced by the presence of Olivier Klein, mayor of Clichy-sous-Bois, while the presence of a woman holding a pamphlet advertising the Grand Paris Express alludes to the neighbourhood's imminent reconnection to the capital.

In addition to the mural's internal features, the unveiling and promotion of this piece are problematic from the point of view of a straightforwardly resistive politics. For, having seen the work in the Palais de Tokyo, then President, François Hollande, requested that he inaugurate the mural's installation in Clichy-sous-Bois. Thus, the piece was erected as a permanent installation opened by Hollande in March 2017 to a large crowd of inhabitants and visitors (including JR, Ladj Ly and *La Haine* director Matthieu Kasso-vitz), where he announced that it would be included in the "patrimoine;" a special designation for cultural artefacts deemed part of French national heritage (Jardonnnet 2017a). In his speech, the President's hopeful message acknowledged past trauma, but ultimately emphasized the transformative effects of regeneration and the identification of this community with the Republican nation, declaring dramatically, "You are France" (Agence France Presse 2017).

Given the ways JR's mural reconfigures the myths of Republican ideology, it is here that the question of "integration" and whether or not we are simply returned to a version of the "One and Indivisible" French Republic emerges. JR's *Chronicles* complicates the narrative of 2005, suggesting the imbrication of these events in the history of French social revolt, and their significance, therefore, in terms of the future history of the nation. Creating an artwork out of the banlieue itself in order to problematize such political visual regimes, the riots are reconfigured for cultural and collective memory. There is a

triple tension here, then, between governmental impulses to demolish the material symbols of past trauma, loss, and violence; a desire to recuperate the past by reframing it in terms of Republican traditions of revolt; and the suggestion that the future can bring the banlieues' complexities into consensual line with Republican universalism.

Conclusion

Paying attention to the banlieues' discursive and aesthetic rearticulation since the emergence of Grand Paris in 2007 requires us to see in this planning programme not only an economic model of neoliberal urbanism, but also an ideological project that speaks to neoliberalism's intersection with national Republican values. Designed to revolutionize the borders between Paris and its peripheries, Grand Paris, in the words of its political architect Sarkozy, has the intention to "put an end to the banlieues, so as to integrate them with Paris" (Sarkozy cited in Jaigu 2009). The rhetoric here speaks not only to territorial integration, but to the symbolic coherence of the nation. For "Paris" is also a symbolic territory synonymous with the central state, whereby the reorganization of place is a means through which to maintain the hegemony of the Republic. As Sophie Gonick shows, Parisian planning practices have long used infrastructures to circulate not only goods and services, but bodies and power, "radiat[ing] power outwards, creating collective identity in a nation [...] marked profoundly by regional [and, we might add, transnational] differences" (Gonick 2011: 33). And Grand Paris is also an ideological project, framed within a discourse of national integration and, from there, the restoration of France's global influence.

The regeneration of Clichy-sous-Bois and Montfermeil is thus implicated in the success of a much larger-scale project to ensure national cohesion and Paris' global competitiveness. Christian Blanc, the minister responsible for drafting the earliest iteration of Grand Paris in 2010 describes the state's vision that Grand Paris become "a political and economic world centre [...] a cultural, scientific, and educational hearth whose influence extends to the entire world" (Project de Loi 2010: 1). As secretary general Gilles Castore (AMIF) states, Grand Paris concerns "the whole of France" (Projet de Loi 2010), while one of the project architects, Christian de Portzamparc, describes Grand Paris as a "blueprint for civilization" (Projet de Loi 2010: 12). Grand Paris, therefore, poses a new and distinctive phase of development for the post-industrial, racially diverse suburbs. Its emphasis on supply-side production prompts us to question the limits of aesthetic resistance and

particularly traditionally “underground” modes of sub-cultural expression. Grand Paris effectively promotes the “alternative” to enhance economic value, while politically the “alternative” becomes a means to express the mythologies of Republican consensus.

Thus, while socially-engaged art practices have been crucial in advancing action in the field of identity politics, in an era where socially liberal agendas are instrumentalized for fiscally and ideologically conservative ends, we must retrace our steps to look at the evolution in meaning as art on the street becomes enmeshed in the new value chain of creativity. More specifically, as a form that originated on the margins of social production, but which has evolved into a mainstream urban phenomenon, forming part of gentrification aesthetics, the tensions apparent in JR’s “Chronicles of Clichy-Montfermeil” problematize the dualism of “emancipatory” (Caulfield 1989; Florida 2002) or “revanchist” (Smith 1996) interpretations of gentrification. Indeed, street art is compelling for its insinuation of antagonism between positions into the urban fabric – for its desire to alter the violence of visual tropes surrounding a community. But its collaboration with planning requires that violence’s distancing into history and mythologies that would refuse that community’s complex cultural pluralism. Rather than “emancipation” or “revanchism” – that is, speculation and gentrification as a “good” or “bad” thing – discussing neighbourhood change through street art’s politico-aesthetics requires us to acknowledge the knotty antagonisms that emerge when “underground” aesthetics intersect with hegemonic urban regimes, signalling the presence of what we might term an “agonistic urbanism.”

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