
**“ICI ON SÈME”: A PHOTOGRAPHIC DEPICTION OF URBAN GARDENING
IN A BANLIEUE**

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ABSTRACT

Based on a photo-ethnography of gardening practices, this visual essay explores how photographs might be used to critically depict the gardening experience of a community project in a French banlieue. By situating the representations of people, spaces, and interactions I reflexively portrayed the experiences of the urban gardeners through engaged photographic activities. Concerned with the plastic and iconic representation of the local community, this photo essay brings the viewer into the sensitive environment of urban gardening.

KEYWORDS

Photography, ethnography, urban, representation, arts, aesthetics, gardening, France, banlieue, space

BIO

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In France, there are urban areas, often located on the periphery of major cities called *banlieues*. The areas are characterized by the presence of significant socio-economic and socio-spatial inequalities compared with the central cities they surround. These territories, frequently neglected by public institutions, host primarily low-income populations often with immigrant backgrounds.

The shape of these territories is variable. Generally speaking, they are characterized by a high density of social housing complexes. In France, Sarcelles is probably the symbol of this urban model. Located in the Val d'Oise department, 15 kilometers to the north of Paris, it consists of two major sectors: Sarcelles Village, to the north, a semi-rural, suburban area that is more wealthy than the local average, and the Grand Ensemble, located 3 kilometers to the south. This imposing urban complex was built between the 1950s and 1970s. It is part of the ‘villes nouvelles’ born in the post-war during the baby-boom period in a social context marked by the absence of adequate social housing in the major metropolises. To cope with what was called the ‘housing crisis’ (*crise du logement*), from the 1950s onwards, large housing complexes (*grands ensembles*) were built. These structures appeared as a solution to the lack of proper sanitary installations in the main metropolitan areas. They provided a rapid solution to the serious problems of overpopulation in the cities. Thanks to the *grands ensembles*, thousands of low-income dwellers were able for the first time to have access to new and spacious facilities with basic housing services such as running water, toilets, and heating.



PHOTO 1: The Grand Ensemble of Sarcelles under the snow.

If the rise of large housing projects redefined the morphology of French cities, it also redefined the relationship toward the low-income classes who lived in these new cities. Public opinion quickly blamed the *grands ensembles* for being the vectors of a dehumanizing and disruptive modernity.



PHOTO 2: Setting up of the first planters in the "vignes blanches" neighborhood within the Grand Ensemble.

Sarcelles is probably the city that better exemplifies this misguided public image in France. When it was built, this city was initially seen as a model of functional modernity. This initial avant-garde impression did not last very long. From the 1960s onwards, the emphasis was placed on the 'vices' derived from urban planning. One of the symbols of the mythology was the 'sarcellite', a pejorative neologism widely used during the 1960s to designate the supposed "pathology" that characterized the social life in the *grands ensembles*. This first image was followed by a second one that depicted Sarcelles as being the symbol of the marginalization, exclusion, and violence phenomena surrounding banlieues. In addition to the structural problems of segregation, impoverishment, and lack of public investment, there was also social stigmatization supported by media, film, and photographic narratives released over more than 60 years (Canteux 2004; Roth 2007).

In this context, I was interested in exploring the social construction of what I called an imagined community (*communauté imagée*) by investigating the visual materials and practices that were involved in the collective definition of this city (Leon-Quijano 2020). To this end, between 2015 and 2018, I undertook a photographic ethnography of urban experiences¹. Engaged as both an anthropologist and a photographer, I developed an ethnographic approach based on the creation and sharing of pictures as a way to rethink the place of the researcher in the field.

Following phenomenological and participatory approaches (Desjarlais 2019; Fattal 2020; Pink 2001), I undertook a critical representation of the daily experiences of the local community. Photography was certainly a way to establish a privileged relationship with the people I worked with, but beyond this socializing quality, photography allowed me to consider differently the relationship to the subjects of my photographs. Through a critical depiction of the spaces, interactions, and bodies of the participants, I wanted to contribute to the development of reflexive approach attentive to the plastic and narrative forms of representation of the participants in the field.

¹ As part of a doctoral research at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) (Leon-Quijano, 2020).



PHOTO 3: Abdel, one of the members of the Engraineurs.

Based on this double ethnographic (Cefai 2010) and photographic (Leon-Quijano 2019) commitment, I undertook a creative activity with the residents. As part of this, in January 2017, I met Emmanuel, a 32-year-old informatics worker living in Les Vignes Blanches, a popular neighborhood located in the very heart of the Grand Ensemble. With Anne-Claire, his wife, a 30-year-old teacher, they initiated a community project that aimed to change the use of the communal areas in their neighborhood.



PHOTO 4: Emmanuel distributes invitations in one of the housing complexes.

Emmanuel has lived in Sarcelles since his childhood. He experienced the spatial degradation of some municipal structures and is concerned with the lack of sharing spaces between neighbors. For this reason, he and Anne-Claire decided to create a collective garden called *Les Engraineurs*². The urban garden is located in the middle of the apartment blocks where they live:

Emmanuel: The idea of the Engraineurs is of course to grow fruits and vegetables, but the real purpose is to bring people together. I'm doing this to connect neighbors. I've been in this apartment for years and we realize that we don't talk too much to our neighbors. We're afraid of each other. The idea of the Engraineurs is to make a shared garden, everyone takes what they need but beyond that I want this to be a place to meet, to grow³.

This citizen initiative aims to offer a new activity to the inhabitants of these densely populated neighborhoods and to give a different image of the city, largely represented under the angle of ghettoization and violence.



Photo 5: Ici on sème. The garden is located in between three housing complexes. It is surrounded by social housing buildings.

Between January and February 2017, they arranged the containers, the wooden structures, and a geodesic greenhouse in the middle of the housing blocks. From the beginning, I photographed their activities. Sometimes I left my camera aside to give a hand for the installation of the materials. In this way, I quickly socialize with the habitués.

² This is a neologism that I translate as "The seeders".

³ The garden's slogan is "Ici on sème" (Here we sow). It is a word game: on s'aime and on sème, "we love each other" and "we sow".



PHOTO 6: Sarcelles.

Gardening requires a material, temporal, and moral investment on behalf of the organizers. Emmanuel, for example, makes rounds in the neighboring buildings to invite locals to join the events organized by the Engraineurs.



PHOTO 7: The Engraineurs work in the weeding of the garden.

These collective activities encourage new encounters between neighbors. The place previously underused by the residents rapidly became a sharing space. Moreover, the Engraineurs brought to the community a manual activity that is very little known in the neighborhood and that allows young people, in particular, to experience farming.



PHOTO 8: Geodesic orchard in the middle of the garden.

Furthermore, this citizen appropriation of the communal spaces drew the attention of media and local politicians. Some local media contribute to publicizing this initiative. At the same time, my photographic activity got more and more appreciated since I captured their daily life, but also since I shared my photos with them so that they could use them to communicate on social networks.

My photographic practice was in that sense accepted and solicited by the gardeners who regularly used my photographs in their communication supports.



PHOTO 9: The neighborhood of the Vignes Blanches.

Most of the time Emmanuel and Anne-Claire took care of the garden and once or twice a week other residents participate in the maintenance. This activity was followed by other events that made it possible for the residents to meet each other in greater numbers.



PHOTO 10: Construction of the geodesic orchard.

Space is the product of interrelations at different social scales (Massey 2005). This citizen initiative transformed the way the space of the garden was seen and experienced by the local community.



PHOTO 11: Meeting between neighbors close to the garden.

By taking over a territory that was previously neglected by the public institutions, the Engraineurs created a new way of experiencing and using the collective places.



PHOTO 12: Barbecue.

Barbecues, neighborhood parties, and movie screenings constituted a way to attract local people who do not spontaneously attend this project.



PHOTO 13: Community celebration.

This photographic ethnography aimed to raise awareness about the visual representation of these spaces and to propose new visualities about communities that have long been represented through the lens of marginality.



PHOTO 14: Youssouf, Engraineur.

Les Engraineurs aimed to show the agentivity of the inhabitants and the citizen appropriation of spaces considered violent and dangerous.



PHOTO 15: Visit of the deputy of the 7th district of Val d'Oise Dominique Da Silva (LREM) during a meeting organized by the Engraineurs.

The intention was to consider a critical representation of local dwellers and to propose new imagery in connection with the ordinary activities of the residents. This attempt to rethink the politics of visual representation in visual anthropology involves the creation of a critical narrative at the plastic and narrative dimension (Leon-Quijano 2021). For this purpose, I enquired into the ordinary activities of the local community, but also the discourses promoted by the people involved on social networks.

"Emmanuel: we want to show that it is not because we are in Sarcelles that we are barbarians. I want to show that we are seeds, that we will germinate, and that we will change the image of our neighborhood on a small scale [...] that's what we deserve."

Countering the collective image that portrays Sarcelles as a "concrete jungle" plagued by violence and drugs, the Engraineurs use visual materials as a way to counteract this negative image. For instance, showing their daily lives as gardeners in social networks was the best way to collectively reshape the imaged community⁴.

⁴ A broader analysis of the group's visual strategies on social networks is developed in the third chapter of my dissertation (Leon-Quijano 2020).



PHOTO 16: Young Engraineurs after gardening.

Conclusion

Based on a photo-ethnography of gardening practices, this visual essay explored how photographs might be used to critically depict the gardening experience of a community project in a French banlieue. By critically situating the representations of people, spaces, and interactions I reflexively portrayed the experiences of the urban gardeners. Through photographic creation, I proposed a disruptive iconography of the local community in the light of a previous hegemonic form of representation that disowns the capabilities of local actors. By examining the politics of photographic representation in visual anthropology, I intended to do critical research on the representation of communities considered as marginal (Bourgois & Schonberg, 2009; Fattal, 2020). To do this, I advocated for an iconography that highlights the capacity of local dwellers to occupy public spaces. Therefore, I defend the idea of a necessary photographic engagement that takes into account not only the description of the observed situations, but also the reflexive, sensory, and critical figuration of the lived experiences in the field.



PHOTO 17: The Engraineurs arrange the garden after an event with the neighbors.

Finally, this visual narrative is a valuable opportunity to expand existing photographic initiatives in anthropology such as *Writing With Light* (American Anthropological Association). By exploring new publishing practices, we can further reflect on the critical scope of photographic experiences in anthropology.

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