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The violent beauty of a banlieue wasteland garden

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Abstract Participatory arts can invite stormy and violent forms of participation when they are commissioned for sites where frustration, territorial control and pre-emptive self-defense involve practices of accepted street codes by those living within racialized, febrile territories. Through the case study of Aroma Home, a participatory art gardening project, in Paris's northern peripheries, I analyze instances of affective, symbolic, performative and territorial violence as non-normative political acts of participation. Examining the underlying contexts and logics that led to these incidents, I argue that the most insidious act of violence in the project was the creation of our invasive, extractive garden on a hitherto unclaimed and unidentified patch of 'free' public ground. In creating a new identity for this wasteland and defining its use, we effectively limited, and implicitly prescribed, modes of participation that were culturally alien to those we most wanted to involve.

Keywords Violence, suburbs, participatory arts, riot, urbanism, street codes

INTRODUCTION

In the Paris *banlieue*(*s*) (suburbs), participatory arts projects are commissioned by local authorities in effect to 'manage' public space through indirect forms of surveillance of the 'dis'-communities of peripheral urban zones. While participatory practices can demonstrate efficacy in forging community and place-attachment, they must often negotiate pre-existing social hierarchies, "street code" logics (Anderson, 1999), and "different games of getting by" used to survive the entangled challenges of "urban life at the extensions" (Simone, 2017).

Participatory arts cannot be discussed without scrutinizing their immediate contextual politics. The relational, place-making projects I lead with urban arts company Friches Théâtre Urbain are among those increasingly commissioned in the super-diverse, socioeconomically marginalized northern suburbs of Paris, in districts that have experienced continued urban regeneration since the early 2000s. Certain *banlieue* "zones" are periodically identified and prioritized by the centralized urban policy and funding program, Politique de la Ville, which originated in response to urban violence, proposing transversal programs to encourage integration, citizenship and *le vivre ensemble* (social harmony). Data on ethnicity are not collected in France, but the *banlieues* of Paris and other major French cities concentrate high immigrant populations and levels of youth unemployment. Mustafa Dikeç argues that their spatialized rather than community-specific urban policies, in conjunction with the "so-called 'securitarian ideology'" (2013, p.25) of successive French governments, have constituted and racially stigmatized the *banlieue* as a troublesome, "dangerous" space which, as a threat to national security and identity, needs to be controlled.

Media attention and political rhetoric centers on the violent rioting that has historically erupted in many *banlieues* in response to police *bavures* (blunders). But the daily acts of violence, and overtly racialized police aggressions in the suburbs, with discriminatory use of stop-and-search on young black or *maghrébin* (North African) men, are left to sociologists to document (Fassin, 2013; Truong,

2018). As informal social infrastructures evolving within these suburban geographies of conflict and territorial tension, participatory arts have a particular role to play in complementing these studies, particularly through documenting local resistance to our practice.

Our company's projects invite participation in theater, but also in collective and performative domestic actions of gardening or cooking, or the creation of street-corner lounges, snack-vans, or gardens on wastelands in *cités* (council estates) where convivial spaces are few and far between. We engage groups or individuals through long, slow 'infusions' into a *quartier* (neighborhood), during which we deliberately blur the boundaries between our role as artists and that of being a neighbor. This article's research, supported by our company's extensive archive of photographic and administrative documentation, combines autoethnography, ethnographic participant observation and quantitative data. My analysis, retroactively observing 'immersions' into what is now also my field of research, navigates Loïc Wacquant's distinction between participant observation and "observant participation" (2011, p. 87). In deconstructing a specific event, I draw on Jane Gallop's (2002) anecdotal theory of "the fertility of the specific as the site of productive thinking," in which an incident compels theory "to think where it has been forced to think" (p.138). The case study examined here is one of many disruptions of projects between 2007 and 2021, disruptions that have subsequently driven the direction of my research. My reflection on past incidents in which I was affectively involved implies that, as Gallop describes, "the narrating subject is temporally split; two narrative points of view interlace: what I experienced then and what I know now" (2002, p.105).

Town councils or inter-communalities that engage us rarely solicit public opinion or community input into arts governance at a project's inception; they commission participatory arts to repair or reinforce community and to enhance local public spaces from the institutional point of view, which I observe to be at the root of much disinterest or conflict on the ground. We are clearly identified as artist-outsiders by those who live locally. Our institutional affiliation assumed, we become *de facto* representatives on the street for the town council with some residents even supposing us to have a direct line of contact to the mayor. In socioeconomically fragile peripheries, residents often conflate state and local government policies which have seemingly abandoned them. The commonly overwhelming dissatisfaction with both levels of public policy makes it preferable for us, as visiting artists, to dissociate ourselves as much as we can from those who engage us. Although in public space, positioning ourselves as a wild card is an effective strategy for accessing reluctant or disengaged groups, this can makes us more vulnerable when difficult situations arise.

In the semi-public spaces of a *cité* refusal is the norm and instances of stormy reception – what Sruti Bala (2018, p. 21) has defined as "disruptive" or "unsolicited" gestures of participation – are common. Here, participation is the exception and usually the result of long negotiations and the gradual building of relationships based on trust. The use of public space in the *banlieue* is gendered, essentially male-dominated, and projects rarely unfold as we or our commissioners had imagined: our relational place-making functions not despite refusals and resistance, but with and through them. Violent rejection is frequent, should be anticipated, and shapes the aesthetic and direction of a project as much as any institutionally intended participation can. Although it is uncomfortable to be on the receiving end of it, violence is a type of response that merits reflection and interpretation, because its occurrence is not random. Conscious acts of resistance are an engagement with the participatory process, or with local citizen debate, and while I am wary of recuperating violent refusals into a project's "success", disruptive gestures in which not-joining-in becomes an affirmation of autonomy can find their place as part of an art project's dialogic *function*.

Focusing on those who violently rejected a project and analyzing moments of discomfort might have greater value for practitioners, researchers, or commissioning bodies than overly positive claims concerning participatory arts' capacities for impact. Such claims can do a disservice to the communities concerned, undermine the work's credibility (Jancovich and Stevenson, 2020), and

ultimately romanticize the field. The case study I focus on, Aroma Home (Villetaneuse, 2013–14),[1] was generally qualified as "successful" by neighbors, the municipality, and ourselves, and has already been the subject of adequately positive claims (see Haedicke, 2018). This article examines the flip side of the participation it engaged, and the uncomfortable, stormy side of its dialogic function.

AROMA HOME

In Villetaneuse, on the edge of what counts as urban, the council commissioned our company to devise a project that would diffuse an ongoing situation of violence on a new footbridge that had been built for a long-awaited tramway. With little function until the tramway was completed, the stylish new bridge was hardly used by residents, and had a blind spot in which women were repeatedly being mugged for their phones. Our proposal was Aroma Home, a highly visible caravan that popped up around the bridge and throughout the town on patches of scrubland left over from the tramway building works. The caravan was a theatrical base from which to tend to these liminal spaces, invite their existent biodiversity to resonate with the cultural diversity of the neighborhood, and actively plant them with aromatics as an indirect way of furnishing "eyes on the street" (Jacobs, 1961, p. 45).

Fig. 1. The Aroma Home caravan parked in proximity to the footbridge (2013), reproduced with permission from the author

Our weekly presence was, we assumed, one of kindly eccentricity. We invited people inside our tiny home to taste and smell aromatics, oils, and spices, working with tactilities, materialities, inhabitation, and atmosphere (Koch and Latham, 2012; Kazig, 2019) to create the affective conditions for relationship-building, civic engagement, and neighborhood action. The caravan's intimate atmosphere worked to liberate exchanges of anecdotes, recipes, and stories, as a preliminary to a collective planting up of the uncared-for verges with herbs in a gentle project of care and repair. As Emma Crane has remarked, however, in the context of examining racialized spaces of violence on

1 See Aroma Home project: https://friches.fr/creation/aroma-home/

the outskirts of Miami, "not everything needs tending, and not all situations are repairable" (2023, n.p.).

Initially our gardens around Villetaneuse were tiny, temporary, and discreet. But with the success of the project, one garden in particular invited permanence. It was on a wide-open space directly opposite the bridge we had been mandated to keep an eye on and, with a group of Malian families, it literally took root. The women came with small children and invited their friends. They planted Kenkeliba and melon seeds, while their children played or hunted for earthworms with us, but often they were content just to sit in the caravan and chat, watching us work through the window.

Fig. 2 Women working in the Aroma Home garden in 2013, reproduced with permission from the author

Fig. 3 Women chatting in the caravan in 2013, reproduced with permission from the author.

When the council invited us to continue the project for a second year, it seemed evident to develop this garden into something more permanent. To dig in. Seduced by our apparent local success, we forgot that all territories have multiple, overlapping power structures and grids that artists must dance, weave, or tread lightly through. We ended our first year by hosting a neighborhood party to announce the garden's continuation. We piled up hay bales, served chilli jam on toast, and installed a fresco on a wall, collaging recipes and stories shared by participants.

Fig. 4 & 5. The party at the end of the first year, reproduced with permission from Pascal Laurent

But as we cleared up late that night, a young man came to me and said, "If you don't dismantle this garden we will set fire to it and burn it to the ground." Angrily he explained that his association had been campaigning for years for a *city-stade* (a five-a-side football pitch surrounded by wire) to be built on the site. Planning oversight, or a lack of communication between council departments, meant that we had been cultivating a plot already earmarked for a long-overdue demand for sports facilities. As invaders without legitimacy, my company had jumped the queue for scarce amenities and funding and needed to get in line.

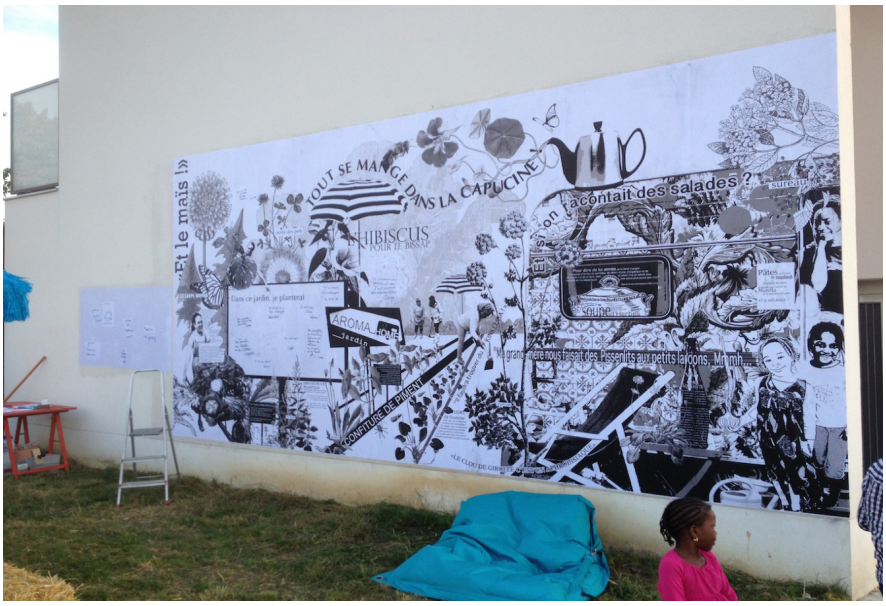

Fig. 6. The fresco "Tout se mange dans la capucine,"[2] reproduced with permission from the author

THE ANECDOTAL INCIDENT

That winter we dismantled our garden, the *city-stade*, referred to as "*le city*," was indeed built, and as spring came we started again on the adjoining hilly plot in the shade of a big pine tree. In spite of this difficult unforeseen workload, we welcomed the possible encounters between the Malian mothers and children and the (mostly male) footballers that our proximity to the new football pitch would allow.

But, from the moment we began setting up this new garden, we were and remained invaders, and we faced repeated disruptions. We would arrive to find plants and flowerbeds crushed by the wheels of bikes or scooters; our temporary tables, giant electric-cable reels begged off workmen on the building site, were rolled down the hill onto the street or found half way across the *cité*; the entire contents of our 1,000 liter water-butt were emptied onto the ground, creating a marshland and involving difficult renegotiations with the busy staff of the neighboring swimming pool for a refill.

Although the garden in no way encroached on their play area, the young teenagers from the *city-stade* regularly threw stones at us. Each evening as we cleared away our tools, usually once the Malian families had left, the boys launched persistent attacks. In many other projects, children have thrown stones or bits of wood at us as we packed up at the end of the day, the same young people who enjoyed our presence now throwing missiles from the bushes. Stopping us from leaving was a way of prolonging the pleasure – revenge for our departure, and equally thrilling – and they would return the week after, all smiles, any aggression completely forgotten. This violence could be seen as a sign of affection, Freud's *fort-da*, in which a child practices separation through pushing someone away and pulling them back.[3] There is a fine line, however, between an affective "violent acceptance" and violent refusal underpinned by a long-standing surplus of anger, which demands a different degree of attention.

2 Every part of a nasturtium is edible.
3 See fort/da in *Oxford Reference. (2024). A Dictionary of Critical Theory. Oxford University Press.*

One evening, someone took a multi-blade knife that, in our haste to leave without incident, we had carelessly left visible. Later, as our technician crossed the *cité* loaded with equipment for the municipal storage, he was intercepted by two teenagers who showed him the knife and offered to sell it back to him. When he refused to pay, they told him "they *might* return it to us the following week." The week after, we discovered an insect hotel had been ransacked, and hastened to repair it before the primary school children who had built it returned to see. As we gardened with a group of our regular eight to ten-year-olds, with two mothers sitting by the caravan, the two teenagers returned, with eight older friends as back-up, and lounged under the big pine tree. When they started throwing pine cones at us I went to sit with them and talk in order to defuse the situation. The boys were angry because "we had suggested they had stolen the knife." They told me they wanted a water fountain and benches around their *city-stade*. I asked if they might participate with us to build furniture for the garden. They continued to throw pine cones, and then stones at my colleagues. The two Malian women, who were also getting hit by the stones, left without word. Asking the boys to stop, I moved away to phone a youth mediator I hoped might be in the neighborhood, when two of the "back-up" teenagers approached me suddenly, asking "if I had called the cops," and excitably ordered me to leave or they would "burn the garden." They directed threats at our technician as we tried to pack our tools and bring our work to a close. While the majority of the group hung back, these two boys pinned me between the gate and the car, accused my colleague of "trying to be a smart alec," and one, seemingly playing a predefined role, slapped me twice very hard round the face, immediately challenging my (male) technician with, "Now what are you going to do?" We didn't respond except to say that we were leaving, and got into the car. An adult neighbor appeared and asked if we had a problem. I recognized him as the man who the year before had threatened to burn the garden if the *city-stade* was not built. I explained the situation and he exchanged a few words with the teenagers, but he left quickly, and missiles continued to rain down until we drove away.[4]

This kind of incident is not unique to the project in Villetaneuse, but here it was a direct result of our new proximity to the *city-stade*. It obliged us to interrupt the project, abandon our preferred wild-card strategy, affirm our relationship to the council, and request continued mediation support. I was asked to provide a detailed, written account of events, which I did, and to identify the boy who slapped me, which I refused to do. Youth workers and councillors took over, and their response was to oblige the whole group to help us garden as punishment. As this was the antithesis of a participatory project based on choice and cooperation, we changed our program. We brought bottles of juice and oranges for the footballers and organized barbecues for them in the garden. As dialogue slowly became possible, we responded to the young people's formulated demands. Instead of gardening, we built benches with the boys, installing them around their pitch so they would no longer have to sit on the ground to watch the football. I transmitted their request for a water fountain to the council, but it was refused. Only after we had spent weeks demonstrating our respect for their football through these negotiated exchanges did we invite them to help us garden, which a few of them would, sometimes, a little. Sherry Arnstein might relegate this to the bottom of her "ladder of participation" (1969) as manipulation, or coerced participation as a public relations exercise. I define it as minimal participation, because, more importantly, from then on the young people would sit in the garden before and after playing football, now identifying it as "theirs."

4 Description from an email (May 13, 2014) from myself, in response to our commissioners' request for details of the incident.

Fig. 7 and 8. Benches built with the young footballers, reproduced with permission from the author

ANALYZING DISRUPTIVE GESTURES

Our administrative archives permit a quantitative analysis of the project's disruptions to complement this anecdotal account. Our planning and budgets show that, over the spring and summer of 2014, we held thirteen weekly gardening days (out of fifteen planned) hosting groups and individuals, seven further days installing the terrain's hard infrastructure (with early morning starts in order to be alone), and ten days of technical or horticultural preparation in our company workshop. During twenty days on the terrain we experienced, or discovered the results of, a total of twenty-six disruptions, and we cancelled interventions for a fortnight to allow for mediation with the disruptive teenagers.

The most consistent stormy contributions to our collective garden were the regular displacement of the furniture, the emptying of the water-butt, and riding over the newly planted beds with mopeds or bicycles. Our responses included building semi-permanent seating with the other participants, installing a locked tap on the water-butt, repairing the insect hotel, and replanting the flower and vegetable beds as much as our budget allowed.

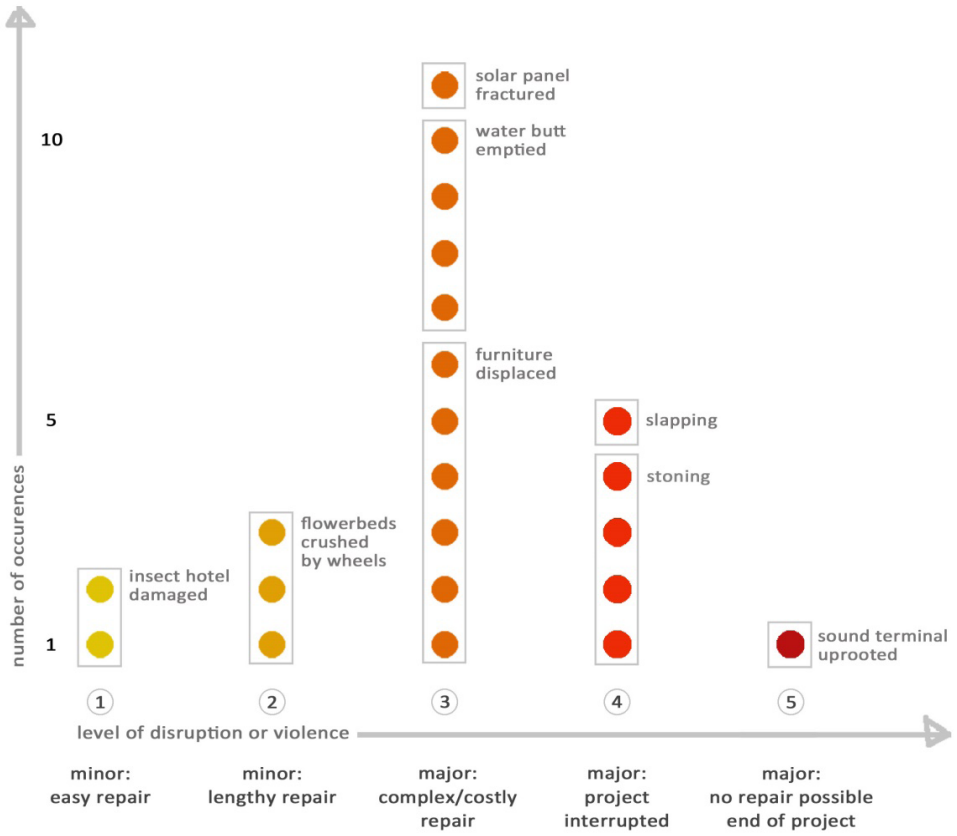

Table 1 Degree and frequency of disruptions during Aroma Home's second year (2014), reproduced with permission from the author

Some things could not be repaired. As the project drew to a close, we installed three colored metal totems which, if someone approached or pressed a button, diffused quiet soundscapes of neighbors' stories, anecdotes, past memories, and recent histories. Powered by solar panels, these sound terminals were bolted and sealed into concrete blocks buried deep in the ground. In a final gesture of refusal, some time after our project had finished, one of the terminals was wrenched from its concrete base and left mangled on the ground. We concluded that considerable effort, probably including a car and ropes, would have been needed to uproot the heavily secured totem.

Fig. 9. The uprooted totem, reproduced with permission from Pascal Laurent

VIOLENCE INTERPRETED

I was not party to all the mediation with the young people, so what follows is my situated understanding of what the violent rejections of our presence and the creation of the garden signified. In defining violence I include not only acts ("the use of physical force so as to injure, abuse, damage, or destroy"), but also the threat or display (a "great strength of feeling, as in language […] fervor," Merriam Webster, 2024; or "unlawful display of force, esp. such as tends to overawe or intimidate," Collins Dictionary, 2024).

The Aroma Home project, reinforcing Thompson's caution to artists about the ethical duty to be familiar with the contexts of our work, provides an example of pre-existing "competing discourses" (2009, p. 24) that radically changed the *meaning* of our project. The boys had campaigned for years for their football pitch. Our art garden, usurping the wasteland, was a competing cultural initiative over which they had not been consulted and which they did not want. Although we no longer constituted a threat, we had not shown respect on arriving into their *quartier*, and we needed to rebuild that respect slowly by abandoning our project to work on theirs, by making benches and holding juice bars and barbecues. Our arrival had negated their claims to the space, and stoked tension. Their violent responses effectively hijacked the project to redirect its aim, forcibly remolding our intervention's *violent intrusion* into a forum to discuss an unaddressed neighborhood issue.

Our project could and should have been focused from its outset on a real neighborhood need. The young people's disruption of the garden was a refusal of the unacceptable processes of the status quo with which they were continually confronted. Tina Campt (2019) urges that, faced with a system that renders you fundamentally illegible and unintelligible, negation can be "a generative and creative source of disorderly power to embrace the possibility of living otherwise" (n.p, section 3). This position is a vital starting point for considering dispossessed young people in the *banlieue* who lack local political representation or access to communal funds. When, as artists, we are engaged to create aesthetic embodiments of "living otherwise," we should not be surprised when

these are rejected as utopian or irrelevant to those we seek to involve. For these young people, excluded as they are from participating in cultural governance and decision-making, the definition of what matters is largely out of their hands and it was an absurdity to ask them to participate in a gardening project that they saw as part of a system rendering them illegible or unintelligible.

The disruptions were, equally, a refusal of the cultural and aesthetic codes of our "makeshift" art garden and a response to the arrival into a relatively insular majority Muslim, North and Sub-Saharan African neighborhood of a team of predominantly white outsider artists with the financial and material means to change the local landscape. Our project responded to the needs of the Malian mothers, for whom the garden was a comfortable place to spend time outside with their younger children (there were no playgrounds nearby); but a more sensitive territorial diagnosis on our part might have translated the young people's unintelligible need for "free, undefined space" into something less prescriptive than a garden. Discussions with the municipal parks and gardens team revealed that they too had experienced what they called "vandalism," but to a less targeted extent. The Cambridge Dictionary (2024) definition of vandalism is "any activity that is considered to be damaging or destroying something that was *good*," while Merriam Webster (2024) defines it as "the willful or malicious destruction or defacement of *property*" (both emphases my own). Fundamental to my analysis is my claim that the garden was not *good*, and that *whose property* the garden was, or was built on, was the question raised by the disruptive responses.

TERRITORIAL CONTROL: RACIALIZED NORMS AND STORMS

When young people are economically and socially immobile and restricted, the *quartier* and their own bodies become the sole properties over which they can exercise some physical control (Anderson, 1999; Truong, 2018). Although we had moved our garden, the boys' agenda was to reconquer an entangled territory of overlapping political projects: "soft surveillance" of public space by artists as an extension of the municipality, a local association pressurizing the council for a say in how that public space was used, and control by the self-appointed *grand frères* over the *cité's* social organization in reaction to their under-representation in local politics.[5] Hovering over this entanglement were the police, mandated to control all *banlieue cités* when aggressions multiply, but whose intervention we would never solicit without endangering ourselves or stirring up a neighborhood we had been commissioned to appease. The boys associated our presence with the quotidien surveillance they are subjected to – revealed in their asking "if I had called the cops." But we necessarily adhered to the "legal cynicism" (Heitmeyer et al., 2019, p.13) of a neighborhood that collectively avoids turning to the police – who are perceived as inadequate, unreliable and not on their side – while, problematically, we sought municipal protection when things got rough.

Performative violence as territorial control plays out through norms or codes of language and physical practices such as *le rodéo urbain* (inner-city motocross): joyriding by young men standing hands-free, usually without helmets, on souped-up *mobilettes* (mopeds) or motorbikes down streets, over lawns, pavements, or wastelands. *Le rodéo*, a male rite of initiation and defiance of authority (Lewkowicz, 2020), is also a performance and a display of ownership of public space. Younger kids train for this prowess by rodeo-ing on bicycles, rearing up and careering down the street on the bike's back wheel, before progressing to motorbikes. In Villetaneuse the rodeo-ing that squashed

5 *Grand frère* is an older man, exerting influence, order or morality on younger generations. Originally a social experiment by left-wing councils, following riots in 1981, to provide male role models from within a *quartier* that would speak the same 'language' as rebellious youth. Failure to achieve political representation after the 1983 'marche des beurs' led *grands frères* increasingly to invest in local associations. See: Beaud, S. & Masclet, O. (2006). Des "marcheurs" de 1983 aux "émeutiers" de 2005. Deux générations sociales d'enfants d'immigrés. *Annales. Histoire, sciences sociales*, *61*(4), 809–843.

the plants of our garden was "a critical form of participation" (Bala, 2018, p. 3), serving to remind us who "owned" the space.

Many young people in the *cité* are wise to the institutional agendas of managing or diffusing the identity of a *quartier* that are embedded within participatory projects of "care and repair" – and they don't want them. The little community (Redfield, 1969) of the neighborhood, defensively resistant to outside influence, operates to foster a specific type of social space, a *banlieue* iteration of Elijah Anderson's "staging areas" (1999, p. 78). These sites of confrontation and incitation are places of representation in which to present selfhood, but also to "present" the neighborhood. In the French *banlieue* these are the male-dominated *café* and its terrace*,* particular street corners or crossroads, or the *city-stade*. In Villetaneuse, the *city-stade* was an informal staging area whose norms we were impacting and changing through our presence. Previously, the wasteland had been a free and unobserved space beside a building site; we were neutralizing it, rendering it municipal, social, anodyne. It should have been a zone for the *city-stade* users to hang out, with edgy potential for display, a key territorial node next to the future tram-stop; we were drawing in families, mothers, and outsiders to the immediate *quartier*. It was becoming normalized, increasingly surveillable, prescribed.

In a collective re-establishment of the group's authority over their staging area, slapping me was a symbolic, theatrical public gesture of disregard and "payback" for our disrespect. While the transgression was "a posture," requiring "audacity of action and the aplomb of the solitary actor" (Hatzfeld, 2011, p. 91), its collective dimension was achieved by being witnessed by our technician and the boys' friends watching from behind the trees. Anderson (through field work in Philadelphia) has defined violent "street justice" involving prompt "payback" in retaliation for assault or disrespect as part of the "code of the street" (1999). He defines this code as a coping mechanism, a behavioral framework for negotiating respect and defending dignity for young men in volatile spatial circumstances in situations of perceived threat, when fragile self-esteem means that "there is an especially heightened concern about being disrespected" (p. 75-6). Testing this as a theoretical framework for youth violence in Germany, Pakistan, and South Africa, Heitmeyer et al. (2019) conclude that it transcends geographical location in "risky neighborhoods" with common features, shared by Villetaneuse, of poverty, joblessness, an entrenched drugs trade, deindustrialization, an underground economy, welfare dependency, and racial discrimination (p. 29). Within the local hierarchies of impoverished urban neighborhoods, a code of conduct regulated by the threat or use of violence is a route to gaining and maintaining respect as a form of social capital (Anderson, 1999, p. 66), and an accessible alternative status for those for whom academic achievement has been thwarted (Truong, 2018).

The violent reactions we experienced were examples of payback to secure respect and acknowledgment, within a context of repeated broken municipal engagements, disillusionment at a lack of political representation, long-term institutional abandonment, and the absence of cultural consultation.

RIOTOUS DIALOGUE

A growing body of research (Harsin 2015; Moulier Boutang 2005; Muchielli and Le Gouazou, 2005) works to redress the reductionist and culturally racist media attention given to the violent rioting that has erupted in angry response to police *bavures* (blunders) in the French *banlieues*.[6] Detailed

6 The main flashpoint for the 2005 riots was the death of Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré by electrocution after they ran away from police pursuit and hid in an electric transformer in Clichy-sous-Bois. It was later confirmed that they had done nothing wrong, but were fleeing out of fear. In 2023, riots spread after footage of the shooting of Nahel Merzouk through his car window by a police officer in Nanterre was diffused on social media.

observational accounts of the more nuanced interpersonal violence that can take place in a *cité,* however, are harder to find. The relatively minor violent transgressions in the Aroma Home project in 2014 were dalliances – our presence was a more interesting provocation than the project's intended content. The garden was not "burned to the ground" and the slapping, though painful, was a gesture of warning rather than intended to inflict serious physical harm. By 'dalliance,' I want to propose this as an exploration of violence, as yet without commitment, by a group of young teenagers whose direct cultural and political heritage was the rioting of 2005.

The reputation of a *quartier* is in part linked to its rumored potential for violent acts, a representation that can quickly become self-fulfilling through social media. After 2005, large parts of the population in the French cities' suburbs, while not condoning the rioters' violence toward property (burning cars or looting), empathized with the anger and moral justifications of its eruption, expressing solidarity with the rioters long afterwards (Marlière, 2007). The French *banlieues* materialize the gulf between the violence of daily racial injustices and the state's "peremptory egalitarian discourse" (Hatzfeld, 2011, p. 22). The riots were political events in the widest sense, whose message the state ignored, responding by implementing a three-month national emergency and failing to hold any independent inquiry, with no political lessons drawn (Fassin, 2013). The social (and policing) conditions in which the riots erupted remain unchanged, reflected in a repeat occurrence of widespread unrest in 2023.[7] For those excluded from wider political debate and with little local agency, violence is an immediate way of taking control in response to dispossession and disregard. Moulier Boutang (2005) argues that, in the rioting of 2005, the refusal to talk *was* the message, because "words that are spoken to you have to be merited. They suppose confidence, love and respect, not declarations of war" (p. 39).[8] Dipesh Chakrabarty (2002) identifies rioting as politics that happens in a different way, in lived life, just not "in its proper place" (p. 9), expanding politics beyond accepted categories. Violent rioting, seen to achieve political ends when it captures enough condemnation and attention, can "define the media agenda for a brief moment" (Truong, 2018, p.79). Noting the French word for riot to be *emeute* (from emotion), Clover (2016) defines rioting as the result of an emotional surplus, and, currently, as "the leading tactic in the repertoire of collective action" (pp. 1, 3). He argues that any reduction of riots to violence, abstracted from their causes, is a political counter-tactic.

While riotous acts are far removed from the minor aggressions we endured, these disruptive "unsolicited participation[s]" (Bala, p. 21) in Aroma Home effectively redefined the *project's* agenda. Reducing the young people's reaction to the garden as "vandalism" would be unjust, neutralizing and unwisely dismissive. The potential for repeated convulsive eruptions underlie all minor disruptions. These cataclysms respond to given flashpoints after innumerable violences that prescribe, limit, and frustrate the daily lives of those involved, feeding " '*la rage*' they feel" over the accumulation of multiple indignities (Mucchielli & Aït-Omar, 2007, p. 24). The boys' violent rejection of us perpetuated a long-held grudge against the councillors who had made them wait so long for the *city-stade*. The memory of an apparently anodyne garden that for a time usurped a space reserved for a football pitch will take its place on the list of slights remembered and grudges held by those who might one day respond with collective violence to more brutal violations of justice, as they did after the deaths of Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré, escaping from the police into a live electric generator in 2005, or Nahel Merzouk, shot by a police officer at point blank range in his car in 2023.

7 See note 6.

8 By 'war' he is referring to Nicolas Sarkozy's inflammatory labelling of suburban youth as *racaille* (scum) in a visit to Argenteuil as minister of the interior in 2005. This was widely accepted as a flashpoint leading up to the riots. See: "Politique, Dix ans après le 'On va vous débarrasser de la racaille' de Sarkozy." *Ouest France* (16.10.2015), https://www.ouest-france.fr/politique/dix-ans-apres-le-va-vous-debarrasser-de-la-racaille-de-sarkozy-3770713

A VIOLENT GARDEN

Fig. 10. The Aroma Home garden in 2014: flowerbeds, fixed and mobile furniture, colored sound totems, reproduced with permission from Pascal Laurent

In retrospect, what I see as the major violence was our garden. Not that it was an intentional declaration of war, but it became an active part of the boys' ongoing struggle because it was an invasion. Their disruptions revealed the insidious role our project played in the local disenfranchisement that accompanies much urban regeneration. A garden gives land value; but we can re-examine this particular garden as an act of violent extraction – the extraction of value from wasteland space – aligned with the value-system of the occupier. This was the violence. Our occupation was aesthetic, beautiful, local, friendly, but at its root was an uneven distribution of choice. To respond to our invitation to participate in gardening would have been to participate in the dismantling, the *fixing* of a hitherto unsettled resource, an unsettled territory. For this reflection to be reparative in ways that the project was not, these imbalances need to be recognised. In attempting to ease difference and become nodes of exchange and encounter, the new encounters afforded by participatory arts projects can crystallize difference and attract a violent response. On the shifting sites of urban transformation, violent responses force participatory arts practices to shift and adjust when grappling with the realities of how cultural initiatives might be lived and experienced by marginalized communities at a very local level**.**

CONCLUSION

Cinema's recent *banlieue* narratives[9] have gone some way to addressing and fleshing out the profound sense of injustice experienced by those living in "the second zone" (Truong, 2018, p.124). Such narratives can act to redress the political rhetoric of the *banlieue*(*s*) as places of mindless violence, "menacing spaces" that threaten both national cohesion and identity (Horvath, 2018, p.1). My intention here has been to demonstrate, through an embedded examination of a minor disruption, that violence can be a fine-tuned, comprehensible response to the circumscription of daily life in disenfranchised neighborhoods, even in the form of a supposedly inclusive participatory arts project. As participatory arts practitioners we habitually encounter entangled territories and competing narratives in the public spaces within which we operate. These are overlaid with intangible territorial grids, exclusionary gendered and racialized spaces, and micro-territories within *quartiers*, which make it difficult for different groups to cohabit, with one public tending to exclude another. Disruptive refusals involve *not* doing or *not* contributing, but they leave visible traces within the work and shape its form. Disruptive participations have a legitimacy that needs to be respected, worked with, and accommodated.

To return to Campt's identification of negation as generative – as a creative source of disorderly power to embrace the possibility of living otherwise – the boys' violent response was a political choice in defense of an apparently "unproductive" wasteland space. It was a protest at being overlooked and not consulted, when mutual codes of communication were lacking, when friendliness was seen as aggression, and artists presumed a willingness to exchange with compliant dialogue, and when the arrival of an unusual project, with unshared aesthetics that were difficult to identify or comprehend, was revealed to be an intrusion, or "unwelcome gift" (Nicholson, 2005, p. 37). The careful examination of moments where participation is not well received is critical to making better, more relevant work: it obliges rethinking any assumptions about being welcome. I want to suggest that these violent or stormy receptions of arts projects are justified when the reasons that give rise to them are carelessly or unavoidably embedded in the work we do. I also want to suggest that as a form of dissensus they are an important part of the dialogic nature of the participatory project. They refocus this work on what matters most to those who live "life at the extensions" (Simone, 2017), which includes spaces that are undefined, unattended to, free. Working with, around, and in response to what we *can* do, rather than what we might *like* to do in these contexts, defines an aesthetic of refusal – the aesthetic of what is possible. In the *banlieue,* the aesthetic of refusal is mobile and flexible. It anticipates reluctance, resistance, and violent rejection, and it works with those responses. Its contours are a collage of multiple interrupted forms, layered, muddied even in meaning, composed of short, unassuming and fragmented visitations rather than inhabitations. This is what we lost sight of, or chose not to remember, as we dug down into a non-negotiated permanent garden, and what took a sharp slap around the face to recall.

The garden is now just a hillock covered in daisies, the only trace of our passage three flourishing fruit trees that we planted, and a just-discernibly richer biodiversity than on neighboring plots. The tram, stopping every seven minutes, releases a regular human flow across the bridge, making it now a safer place. The *city-stade* continues to be a popular gathering point, although our wooden benches have long since disappeared, and have not been replaced with anything more durable.

9 Notably *Les Misérables* (2019) dir. by Ladj Ly, SRAB Films; *Divines* (2016) dir. by Houda Benyamina, Easy Tiger/ France 2 Cinema; and *Bande de Filles* dir. by Céline Sciamma, Studiocanal (2015 /2014).

Fig. 11. The garden site grown over (2022). On the left, a cherry tree we planted, to the right the city-stade, reproduced with permission from the author

Fig. 12. The footbridge, in constant use by tramway commuters (2022), reproduced with permission from the author

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