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BORDER CROSSING FROM PARIS TO SAINT-OUEN

Karen O'Rourke

On its way north toward the Normandy coast, the Seine river loops back and forth lazily after leaving Paris. Saint-Ouen sits between the first loop and the orbital road that separates Paris from its immediate suburbs. In the seventeenth century, it was the site of market gardens—where vegetables were grown to be sold at Les Halles in Paris—as well as a holiday resort for nobles and aristocrats. Renamed Bains-sur-Seine during the Revolution, it was an ideal place for a picnic.

In the early afternoon of December 12, 2009, I joined a group of pedestrians at the corner of the rue Francis Garnier (which was named after the nineteenth-century explorer and naval officer) and the Boulevard Bessières¹ to walk with artist Marie Preston from Paris to Saint-Ouen following the old railway line. The route had been drawn beforehand on a map: “Walking close to the railway line of the docks, we’ll leave Paris as we imagine walking through the tunnel under the fortifications. Then little by little we leave the transparent world of bureaucratic architecture to make our way through a silent, industrial desert until the river rises ahead.”²

The weather was cloudy and cold. About twenty participants had come, snugly wrapped: hats, scarves, gloves, and parkas—all forces mustered to keep the sharp wind at bay. We snaked along in a line of twosomes and threesomes, less an invading army than a class on a field trip. The most comfortable way to drift is with a group, when someone else leads the way. No decisions to make, no paths to find. From time to time the berets and beanies, the furry hoods, and the occasional trapper hat would cluster around Marie or one of the city spokespeople to hear about projects in the works. Marie Preston walked with us, among us, as if she had just come along for a stroll.

In the nineteenth century, the towns north of Paris saw the emergence of powerful chemical and metallurgical industries following the inauguration of the docks on the Seine in 1830. In 1862, the railway link connecting the riverbank to the Petite Ceinture (“Little Belt”) railway completed the metamorphosis of Saint-Ouen into an

¹ One of the “Boulevards of the Marshals” that encircle Paris and are named after Napoleonic-era marshals.

² Marie Preston, “Le raccordement (Paris-Saint-Ouen): balade par Marie Preston,” accessed

October 31, 2018: <https://web.archive.org/web/20110827045041/http://www.mainsdoeuvres.org:80/article740.html>.

All translations in the text by the author.

industrial town. For nearly a century, it attracted successive waves of immigrants who came to work in the machine tool factories, chemical works, and automotive plants. After the 1970s, when most of the factories had closed, the whole area was earmarked for a vast urban renewal project that began with the construction of a sports stadium in nearby Saint-Denis.

Today, local politicians aim to recast Saint-Ouen as a model of sustainable development. The town is in the process of transforming the former industrial zone of the Docks into a mixed-use city district, structured around a landscaped park—which opened in 2013—and the redevelopment of the banks of the Seine. The new Docklands will cover a quarter of the city's surface area and provide “an exemplary neighborhood life, innovative in terms of urban and environmental quality, functional and social diversity.... It stands out as an eco-district by the deployment of an urban heating network running on 75% renewable energy and a pneumatic garbage collection network, shared public parking lots, an alternative rainwater management system and energy-saving buildings.”³

All of this, as the project website refrains from mentioning, is being built on contaminated land near a waste combustion facility.⁴ Like the better-known flea market, the Syctom plant is a landmark in Saint-Ouen. It was here in 2003 that the artist duo HeHe conceived their project *Nuage vert* (Green Cloud), a powerful green laser beam that colors the fluctuating contour of vapor spewing forth from the incinerator.⁵ Their project was never realized in Saint-Ouen: it was too

³ Sequano Aménagement, “Eco-quartier des docks de Saint-Ouen,” accessed August 6, 2018: <http://www.sequano.fr/portfolio/ecoquartier-des-docks/>.

⁴ “This project is contested by some of the Audoniens, despite the city’s great efforts to mimic a public consultation. Indeed, there are plans to build residential housing on old polluted industrial sites, near an incinerator whose toxic fumes are potentially dangerous for health.” “Saint-Ouen (Seine-Saint-Denis),” accessed August 6, 2018: http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint-Ouen_%28Seine-Saint-Denis%29.

⁵ “The project was conceived in 2003, whilst living in the suburbs of Paris, Saint-Ouen, looking out

of the window onto a wonderfully dystopian view of a waste incinerator. The vapour emissions from this chimney were an incredible sight in the urban skyline, producing huge rolling cumulus clouds night and day, which needed highlighting. One night, while speculating on ways to colour it and dreaming up strategies for achieving this end, the wind changed direction and the cloud headed in the direction of home. This terrifying change led to an investigation about the more utilitarian function of the ‘cloud factory,’ and the sociological dimension of the project began to unfold.” Helen Evans, “Nuage Vert,” accessed July 14, 2018: <http://hehe.org.free.fr/hehe/texte/nv/>. The project was finally realized in Finland.

controversial. Officials preferred to cultivate a public image more in keeping with their goal of reinventing the down-and-out suburb as a well-heeled eco-district that attracts investors. Today, the twenty-eight-year-old plant is undergoing a metamorphosis: plans involve “softening” its facade with “transparencies, metal structures and planted terraces,” while the industrial site will “benefit from a dry treatment of incineration fumes, allowing a better capture of pollutants and a considerable reduction of the plume coming out of the chimney.”⁶ The makeover is set for 2021. In the meantime, the first residents of the new Docks had barely moved in when they started complaining about odors from the plant.⁷

The Walk

The walk we took along the railway line resembled what artist Allan Kaprow called in 1967 “the Guided Tour or Pied Piper kind of Happening”: “A selected group of people is led through the countryside or around a city, through buildings, backyards, parks and shops. They observe things, are given instructions, are lectured to, discover things happening to them. In this mode, the intended focus upon a mixture of the commonplace and the fantastic makes the journey a modern equivalent to Dante’s spiritual one.”⁸ In Marie Preston’s walks, however, the artist is neither guide nor Pied Piper. She sets up the tour, but may or may not choose the itinerary. Like an ethnographer conducting fieldwork, she often lets local “informants” choose what to show her, creating situations as well as objects.

The focus on a transitional zone at a time when the whole area was being transformed did lend our journey an archetypal quality. The post and lintel gateway framing a parking lot looked like it belonged on a movie set—a relic of earlier fortifications?—as did the graffitied

⁶ See the Syctom website: <http://projet-saintouen-syctom.fr/le-projet/decouvrir-le-projet>.

⁷ “They are very noticeable in summer and on Sundays.... [D]epending on the winds, the smell can spread to the whole neighborhood as far as Vieux Saint-Ouen.” Florian Niget, “Saint-Ouen: L’usine d’incinération gênera moins ses voisins,” *Le Parisien*, October 10, 2017: <http://www.leparisien.fr/saint-ouen-93400/saint-ouen-l-usine-d-incineration-genera-moins-ses-voisins-10-10-2017-7322328.php>.

⁸ Allan Kaprow, “Pinpointing Happenings,” in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. J. Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003 [1993]), 86–87.

bridge and the old rail tracks overgrown with weeds. Other sites that caught my eye included an “integration village” of caravans set up in 2008 on a vacant lot on the rue de Clichy as temporary housing for nineteen selected Roma families, while they looked for jobs and more permanent living quarters. In 2015, the city evicted the remaining families to launch the urban development project of the Docks.

Le raccordement (The Railway Connection)

Some artists’ walks are self-sufficient artworks on their own. This one was not. Preston saw it as a “first collaborative exploration” that would “nourish a work in progress about the railway line and the layers of stories it activates.”⁹ A preparatory sketch? An experiment with live material? Later she followed more or less the same itinerary to make a short video with Nada Cherkaoui, a ninth-grader at the school in Saint-Ouen where Marie spent a year as an artist in residence. The video, *Le raccordement (The Railway Connection, 2009–2011)*, was screened in January 2011 as part of her solo show *Fruiter*¹⁰ at Mains d’Oeuvres, a nonprofit art space in Saint-Ouen.

For the artist, this film is the final, “exhibitible” form of our walk. It retains highlights of the itinerary and develops themes such as the urban transformation at work which, in destroying the immediate past, fuels nostalgia and resistance, and the experimentation of methods of investigation—exploring the old railway line on foot, producing an artwork collaboratively...

It is part of a larger project reflecting on the notions of abundance and production: “At the beginning of our century, the idealization of nature that led to the principle of mimesis has turned into an idealization of the natural process. Today, we need to reflect on the accumulation generated by our societies of ‘abundance’ whose model is the production of nature.”¹¹ The show *Fruiter* (“to give fruit”) incites the

⁹ Preston, “Le raccordement.”

¹⁰ The show exhibits research dealing with the notion of abundance, carried out between 2008 and 2010.” *Fruiter*, Exhibition catalogue, February 18–March 27, 2011.

¹¹ Press release issued by Mains d’oeuvres, accessed

October 31, 2018: <https://www.paperblog.fr/3967442/marie-preston/>. The epigraph quotes Hans Arp: “We do not want to copy nature. We do not want to reproduce, we want to produce. We want to produce as a plant that produces a fruit, and not to reproduce.”

audience “to think about the issue of ‘production’ in works conceived through a collaborative activity—in the sense of working together or alongside.”¹²

Eden Expropriated

The film begins with a blank screen. We hear people talking, gears shifting, motors idling. Suddenly a pair of glass doors slides open to reveal a discount store crowded with racks of shopping bags, padded ski jackets, cooking utensils. The camera moves up and down the aisles. Customers make their way between shelves lined with coffee makers and stemmed glasses. Plumber’s helpers sit next to a stack of pink and green plastic potties with eyes and paws. Pop music plays in the background. Just outside, the camera lingers over a sign:

GRAND FINALE BEFORE EXPROPRIATION
 UNBEATABLE PRICES SLAUGHTERED
 EDEN EXTENSION
 UNTIL [whited out]
 From 40 to 70% cheaper than cheap!
 Price tags reflect reductions

As the “subjective camera” moves down a narrow sidewalk, cars pass only inches away on the cobblestone street. The wall on the left becomes an iron fence. Behind it, we can see the railway line below. The camera pans left to reveal the former railway path overgrown with weeds; the opposite wall is painted with colorful tags. Above it is another fence and a street that runs parallel to the one we are on. Cutting to a perpendicular view of the tracks, the camera zooms into a tunnel: a good place for the film’s title. Fade into a rack of shopping carts in front of the Eden.

¹² Press release. As Marie notes in the catalogue, the term “Fruiter” initially meant “to give fruit” (*Dictionnaire historique de la langue française*, 1872).



Marie Preston, *Le Raccordement*, 2009–2011, video color, sound, 21'39'', made with Nada Cherkaoui. Video stills.

The Border

Construction workers in reflector jackets busy themselves around a deep gash dug into the street. One carries a shovel, another pushes a wheelbarrow. They call to each other over the noise of traffic. Just behind them, a bus pulls up at a red light, the LED sign in its window circulating its itinerary. The bus, also called the Petite Ceinture, moves around Paris from one gate to the next: Porte de la Villette, Porte de Clichy, Porte de Clignancourt, Porte de Champerret. These names are often the only trace left of the fortifications that once enclosed the city.

Passing under the Boulevard Périphérique, the beltway that cuts between the city of Paris and its suburbs, the camera stops at a car wash. We look through the soapy windshield to see a woman hosing down the vehicle we are in. The camera crosscuts from inside to outside and back inside. In the journal she kept during the filming, Marie notes, “We might also think that the border area begins with the car wash. A bit of cleaning up before the cynical transparency of business.”¹³

Rush hour traffic in the early evening, seen from upper-floor windows of a high-rise apartment building. It’s still light outside, but the headlights of cars are on. We hear snippets of the evening news. The media had just revealed the Servier scandal, prompting the pharmaceutical firm to take two of its diabetes drugs off the market after they were linked to severe heart damage. Company executives had apparently known about these side effects for years but did not stop production. Zoom in on the Sacré-Coeur church in Montmartre. Sacred Heart indeed.

The Railway Path

We see a young woman, Nada, moving along the train tracks with a camera cradled in her two hands—the camera filming her then cuts to a patch of grass trampled underfoot. The camera moves horizontally to reveal the shuttered façade of a café, Chez Pierre, then continues along the sidewalk past lots populated

¹³ Marie Preston, in a journal shared with the author—a text file called “Nada.”

with Roma caravans, boarded-up factories, and warehouses. A fence bears the sign *non au boulevard*. Cut to the Seine river, looking out the side window of a car.

The other woman, Marie, is standing in front of the incineration plant. The camera zooms in and out, moves back, cuts to a view from the apartment window we saw earlier; at the top of a tower, the camera tilts, making the building appear to move up and down. In her journal, Marie wrote, “[Nada] returned with images of the factory taken from her home. She talks about the two red eyes she saw as a child from her bed by the window, two eyes of a reassuring monster.”¹⁴

The camera follows Marie as she walks on the riverbank: tiny birds swim, a rowboat slides by, followed by a small motorboat. The film ends in a walk along the former railway line, the sound of branches crackling underfoot, alternating between the two points of view.

A Poetics of Relations

Marie Preston is interested in exploring paths used in earlier times, detecting boundaries and borders separating one place from another. In a previous film, *Un pointillé sur une carte* (A Dotted Line on a Map, 2007), the off-screen voice of architect Rémy Viard notes that cities used to have limits—such as fortifications or gates—separating them from the surrounding countryside. Now, the individual towns surrounding Paris have been absorbed into a shapeless urban sprawl, separated only by a dotted line on a map (or a road sign). Yet, as Nada told Marie, she never goes to Paris. Indeed, unless their jobs require it, Parisians and suburbanites don’t often venture into each other’s territory. For them, the border, although invisible, is insuperable. Sometimes it takes an outsider to reveal it.

So Near, So Far

Both the walk and the film are part of a contemporary tradition in which artists, writers, filmmakers, photographers, and social scientists observe their immediate surroundings, focus on phenomena that are

¹⁴ Preston, “Nada.”

close at hand, making unfamiliar again what appears all too familiar: the city sidewalk (Jane Jacobs), the urban square (Georges Perec), or the subway (Marc Augé). In the early 1990s, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and his colleagues interviewed people in suburban housing projects for their seminal study of the contemporary zeitgeist, *La misère du monde* (*The Weight of the World*).¹⁵ Artists use some of the tools of ethnographers, sociologists, or journalists but their approach is different; it can be summed up in the French expression *un pas de côté*, a step to the side. They sidestep disciplinary methodologies to invent their own hybrid forms. Sometimes this is akin to reinventing the wheel, often it means oscillating between two or more approaches.

For the month-long trip through the Paris suburbs recounted in *Roissy-Express*, Parisian writer François Maspero and photographer Anaïk Frantz played at being tourists: “They would contemplate the landscapes ... look for traces of the past.... They would try to grasp the geography of the places and the people: look at their faces. Who were the people that had lived there? How had they lived, loved, worked, suffered? Who was living there today?”¹⁶ Maspero, a journalist, wrote that he had spent more time exploring China than Parisian suburbs only miles from his home. So here he set about describing places like the Debussy, a block-like building half a kilometer long, part of the housing project in La Courneuve called “Les 4000” (for its 4,000 apartments). When it was built right after World War II, it held hope for the immigrant workers living in the insalubrious slums surrounding Paris: there, they would have electricity, indoor plumbing, and heating. By the early 1980s, everyone agreed that huge, concrete fortresses like the Debussy were ugly and alienating. They began calling the tiny apartments “rabbit cages” and “prison cells.” The elevators were permanently out of order, trash littered the stairways, drug dealers in the entrances prevented children from playing out front. No one could possibly be happy living there. Yet when urban planners decided to blow up the Debussy to make way for new residences, local administrations just moved the inhabitants a bit farther away,

¹⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, ed., *La misère du monde* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1993). This passage is borrowed from my book *Walking and Mapping: Artists as Cartographers* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 68.

¹⁶ François Maspero, *Les passagers du Roissy-Express* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, coll. Points, 2004 [1990]), 20.

to similar buildings in similar housing projects, similarly neglected. Uprooted, the children of the Debussy could only mourn the only home they had ever known.¹⁷

As I write, the Eden in Marie Preston's film has undoubtedly long since shuttered. Did the owner open a shop in another neighborhood? What about the customers? It is difficult for a stranger to feel nostalgic about such a generic store with its shoddy merchandise but, like the Debussy, it may have become a paradise of sorts to those who have lost it—and not only because they now have to take the subway simply to buy a screwdriver.

Collaborative Art

Preston's specialty is making art with non-artists—people who don't identify as artists. She argues for a "poetics of relations."¹⁸ Her sculptures, photographs, and videos are the result of activities carried out collaboratively; their job is to give the relationship a visible form. As she puts it, "The sculpture acquires a symbolic efficacy during the collaborative activity insofar as the symbolism is born of shared imagination.... Creating the relation [by walking with people or asking them to sculpt] generates the symbolic dimension."¹⁹

In a similar spirit, Rick Lowe, the instigator of Houston's Project Row Houses (1993–),²⁰ says he deliberately takes on projects he can't do alone in order to involve other people: "One sure way to engage people is to find something bigger than you are, beyond your capacity, and it forces you to build some kind of relationship to others to move the project forward."²¹ The symbolic dimension to Project Row Houses occurs, for example, when five of the renovated houses are turned into temporary residences for young mothers.

¹⁷ Maspero, *Les passagers*, 196–97.

¹⁸ Edouard Glissant, quoted in Marie Preston, "Du divers à la relation: Formes d'expérience." Phd Diss., Université Paris 1, 2008.

¹⁹ Marie Preston, "L'objet fort de la collaboration," *Mecca Nouement* (Créteil: Le Credac, 2011).

²⁰ Beginning in 1993, a group of African-American artists led by Rick Lowe, with the help of volun-

teers from all over the city, renovated twenty-two dilapidated shotgun houses in Houston's Third Ward, turning them into exhibition spaces, studios, and temporary housing. The result has engaged both outsiders and people from the neighborhood in an ongoing, collective artwork.

Marie Preston's projects are more modest in scope—she calls them “experiences.” They combine research (understanding “how an intersubjective relationship is created and developed”), with action (building one “by favoring dialogical procedures”). Creating a relationship was one of her objectives in making the film *Le Raccordement* with Nada. On days when Marie didn’t do projects with the art classes, she could be found working in her studio overlooking the courtyard. Students were always welcome. One morning Nada came rushing in: “She wants us to do something together,” wrote Marie in her journal. “She wants to process materials. She wants to work without being distracted. I thought it over. I suggested that she work with me on the realization of a film about a railway line linking Paris to Saint-Ouen, Saint-Ouen to Paris, the railway line of the docks. I told her that this project would take time. I showed her the maps.”²² The film they made together is characterized by baton-passing. Marie and Nada took turns filming, both appear in the film but never at the same time. This allows crosscutting in scenes like the car wash. Sometimes the result looks awkward to an outside viewer. At one point we see Marie walking with the camera; suddenly she is moving in the opposite direction: “The jump cut attests to the ongoing work and its temporality.”²³ So it was incorporated into the final work. “What does it mean for a teenager to go in search of the foundation of her city? She never goes to Paris, but realizes on foot, while walking, that we are already there. What does it mean for me? What does it mean to walk and film together? What does it mean to ask her to take the camera?”²⁴

This art derived from walking uses ordinary objects and processes to create experiences for us to reflect on. It is purposefully modest. Yet despite—or through—its simplicity, it can provoke a cascade of effects, both for participants and later viewers. Nancy Holt believes this to be a characteristic of art: “Works of art tend to be focal points and centers of energy that other people spin off of; and that’s because works of art have no other reason for existence. They are not there for any functional reason, so they get right to the heart of things.”²⁵

²¹ Rick Lowe, interviewed in Tom Finkelppearl, *What We Made* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 134.

²² Preston, “Nada.”

²³ Preston, “Nada.”

²⁴ Preston, “Nada.”

²⁵ Nancy Holt quoted in Dorothy Shinn, *Partially Buried Woodshed*, catalogue (Kent: Kent State University School of Art, 1990).

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Buchillustration zu Friedrich Ludwig von Sckells «Methode, in der Natur zu zeichnen», 1818/1825.