

Alice Pfeiffer, "Beyond the Paris Limits, a Cutting Edge."
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Beyond the Paris Limits, a Cutting Edge

By ALICE PFEIFFER

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PARIS — Paris may be known as a city of art and romance, but its “banlieues,” or immediate suburbs, are frequently depicted as dangerous and riotous.



A capture from the 2008 video “Strangers in the Night.”

Yet some of these districts appear to be the next hotbed for up-and-coming artists. As art centers there flourish and offer cutting-edge exhibitions, more and more artists are based in or exhibit in the suburbs and ponder their relationship to Paris — offering a deep critique of the capital's supposedly insular attitude.

“4,000 square meters, with a concert hall, an exhibition space, an auditorium, a cinema and music studios is unheard of in Paris,” said Isabelle Le Normand about the art center Mains d'Oeuvres, where she is director of visual arts. The multidisciplinary space, which opened in 2001, is in Saint-Ouen, a rough working-class suburb north of Paris, near the sprawling Marché aux Puces, or flea market. Like many suburban art spaces, it operates primarily on public funds.

“The fact that people have to travel to get there means that greater effort has to be made to draw them,” said Ms. Le Normand. “If an exhibition is truly good, people will come, whatever the distance.”

Apart from the advantages suburbs may offer in terms of space, they also inspire the way art is produced and shown.

“Mains d'Oeuvres isn't and will never be Paris,” said Ms. Le Normand, who noted the towns' “independent mode of thinking, sheltered from market demand.” She added, “We must specifically respond to this distinct suburban context, rather than duplicate exhibitions in the same style as those in the galleries of the Marais,” a district of Paris.

As a case in point, Ms. Le Normand is co-organizer of a large, double exhibition between Mains d'Oeuvres and La Maison Populaire, which is based in the eastern suburb of Montreuil. Entitled “La Famille Farrell,” it will take place from September to December and will feature three originally Irish, and currently suburb-based multimedia-artist brothers: Seamus, Liam and Malachi Farrell. The show will mix machines, sound effects and hip-hop culture.

“The Farrell brothers' urban, explosive universe is connected to the social and political reality of today,” said Ms. Le Normand, adding that it “resonates with the purpose of both Mains d'Oeuvres and Maison Populaire: two places in the outskirts, fighting for an art that is contemporary, cutting-edge and easily accessible.”

Montrouge, a conservative middle-class town south of Paris, was one of the first suburbs to get Parisians to travel outside of the city and is one of the most established art centers. Last month, it held the 55th edition of its contemporary art festival, Le Salon de Montrouge, which annually presents a selection of newly discovered young artists. Its jury is composed of art figures like the auctioneer Pierre Cornette de Saint Cyr, who is also the director of the contemporary art museum at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris; Quentin Bajac, chief curator for the photography department of the Centre Pompidou; and the gallery owner Anne de Villepoix.

This year, the festival was held at La Fabrique, an old factory that stretches over 5,000 square meters, or about 54,000 square feet, and “offers a different dimension of time and space for artists to show their work, outside Parisian hyperactivity,” according to Jean-Loup Metton, the mayor of Montrouge.

“Until recently, the road around the city represented a symbolic frontier to many Parisians, one that separated them from unknown suburbs,” he added. “Yet today, one can observe a decentralization of Parisian cultural life.”

Unlike established Parisian galleries, art spaces in the suburbs are “more willing to take risks with unconfirmed young artists, probably because the audience isn’t the same as in Paris,” said the Nice-based artist Pierre Fisher, 26, who has shown several times at Mains d’Oeuvres and who was co-curator of a large group show at the space last year.

his movement beyond the périphérique, or the ring highway separating Paris from the suburbs, isn’t a trend as much as a necessity, said Olivier Cazin, an artist who attended the fine arts school of Cergy-Pontoise, north of the capital, and is now based in the suburb of Romainville. “It just happens that most the artists I know live in the banlieues, because Parisian rents are too expensive,” said Mr. Cazin, 34. It’s a dichotomy that is similar to that between Manhattan art establishments and edgy Brooklyn galleries in New York.

As a student in the late ’90s, Mr. Cazin, along with four classmates, formed the collective Bad Beuys Entertainment (a play on the name of the artist Joseph Beuys and the rapper P.Diddy’s music label “Bad Boys Entertainment”). Their work dealt specifically with the suburbs and issues concerning geographical outcasts. “When we were studying in Cergy, there was a feeling that everything happened in Paris and our suburb didn’t exist,” said Mr. Cazin. “We wanted to be proud of the banlieues, a way of saying ‘if the sky is the limit, the périphérique isn’t.’”

The collective exploited various aspects characteristic to some of those suburbs, like public housing projects and their clash with classical Parisian architecture. “Une petite histoire de l’urbanisme” (2005) was a film that mapped out the construction and history of these buildings; “Babyloneby_us” (2003) was a cardboard reproduction of a large housing project built in the suburb of Pré-Saint-Gervais.

Although the collective split up in 2007, the individual members continue to explore similar issues in their work: today, Mr. Cazin makes video art that questions various urban myths based on the notions of frontier and travel, which he shows at Mains d’Oeuvres as well as other similar spaces.

Despite their allegiance to the suburbs, many of the artists who work there still aspire to show work in Paris. While they don’t consider the city as innovative as the suburbs, being accepted at a gallery or museum show there can validate a career, they say.

Samir Ramdani, a 32-year-old artist born and raised in the tough suburbs of Rouen, is currently a resident in the Palais de Tokyo's program "Le Pavillon." But his work still centers on the same ideas, looking at Parisian suburbs and similarities among various segregated neighborhoods abroad.

One of his latest projects was a series of short films shot in the Compton suburb of Los Angeles, where he followed street dancers. "I could see they had a lot in common with young people from French suburbs, yet one cannot compare Compton to Saint Denis," said Mr. Ramdani, who insisted that his portrayal of suburbs does not have a political aim.

"The 'banlieue' isn't a theme in itself, but rather, a stage for my projects," he said. "It goes beyond the concept of the suburb — every city has to face the issue of exclusion."