

The Clichy Lesson

Here and over there : introduction to a place of attention

Why imagine a local and international cultural site here? This is the starting point for the encounter I've been invited to participate in at the beginning of this month of July, 2020 in Clichy-Montfermeil. It's not a question put out into the ether for the pleasure of reflection. It is quite concrete and participates in the prefiguration of a new cultural center, the definitive site of the Ateliers Médicis, which is due to open its doors in 2025. And the "here" in question designates this space at the intersection of two towns in the Seine-Saint-Denis: Clichy-sous-bois and Montfermeil, where in 2024 one of the stations on the new Line 16 of the Grand Paris Express will be operational. In the same place where a few years ago the famous Utrillo Tower (a 13-storey tower block built in the 1970s and demolished in 2017) pointed up at the sky and the emblematic housing projects Les Bosquets and La Forestière rubbed shoulders. Landscapes of tower blocks and low rises that became fodder for journalists eager to create news content, the scenes of inexhaustible, delusional scenarios for television pundits who equate idle pub talk with philosophical canon. So this is what we're talking about, one of the nerve centers of a gigantic construction project which has precipitated a mad rush towards the *Est parisien* (eastern suburbs of Paris) that has a feeling of the conquest of the American West, with the feverish arrival of trains, smoke, Olympic flames, and all the hucksters and vendors of miracle remedies traveling in their electric carts amid clouds of dust. The cranes are at work, the bulldozers have cleared out the area, everything is spanking new as the lethal question resounds: "Why imagine a local and international cultural site here?"

Questions are important. We must be as careful with questions as we are with answers. And I would even say that the answers can wait, that they should wait. Let's begin with the principle that our agendas are delayed, our emergencies different. If we're thinking about the same questions, we're not thinking about them at the same time or from the same perspective, the same history written in the same body.

Instead of answering, I would say that we must learn to sit with the questions, to stay in the confusion and trouble of the questions. In other words, not to shut them down, but to welcome the doubts and conflicts provoked by radical transformations, not to force alliances, nor absorb the bodies that resist and refuse to be spoken of in a language that is not their own, not to fabricate forced families and communities. To accept not being able to recognize easily what is already present – because what is already present has not left many visible traces once the filthy rubble of the past has been taken away. What is already there doesn't have a familiar and reassuring face, it doesn't have a cool and soothing hand. What is already there is not a resource waiting for its masters to discover its form, so it can rise up into the sky of knowledge.

Staying in the trouble can mean building a place of attention, a place where we can feel (things) together – both with allies and with those who are not, who cannot be allies in this “here” and this “now: the desired and the undesired. To feel what is already there and thereby break the violent bedrock of all conquest: the idea that the world one walks on is a *terra nullius* (Latin “nobody's land/unclaimed territory”), the conviction that there is nothing here, or so little, not enough at any rate. That there are not already places, forms of life, imagination, and questions. That everything begins now, in a “now” snatched out of a dark past and from (primary) matters we couldn't hold on to.

A question doesn't always have an audible and pronounced form. It is too often from the perspective of a capacity to articulate a discourse that we judge good questions and separate them from what is only disorder and noise. On one side reason and on the other haphazard mess, muddle, and the clamor of savages. And yet, in the History of France in particular, important questions, questions that emancipate, have often emerged without warning, in a language we didn't recognize. And then we asked the people who were arriving on the scene what they wanted. As if this shattering eruption on the scene had no message, no meaning, in and of itself. Some presences asked questions, just by their manner of being there; these are troubling and excessive presences who do not speak when they should, or as they should. Presences that interrupt the flow of tranquil history, a history that ignores its own conditions and violence and that discovers them written on faces, on skin, in muscles, in smiles and words, like the dark part of an archive suddenly brought to life. Those who have barely anything, who have only known how to run without accumulating anything at all for themselves, those who have seen their lives fall into the vortex of cranes, those who haven't been able to catch their breath in unbreathable air, who haven't been able to assemble together, those who live lives in a scattered diaspora, carry within themselves phantom landscapes. All this is what make *here* a very particular local place and an unclear and hazy international one. They are (primary) matters that it is impossible to extract, impossible to transform into forms of knowledge, into – cultural – objects. Fugitive, unpronounceable matters.

We have to admit, the *banlieue(s)* present(s) questions in a very particular manner. We must understand how to pay attention to them without always trying to translate them. This attention I speak of is part of a particular category of care, it is a way of letting oneself be affected by what happens, what creates trouble, discord, displacement. What is called doing politics today – and culture participates in this – is this obsessive exercise in translation that wants everything to be intelligible for a specific body, a specific eye, ear, or hand. For everything to be brought to this body and participate in the augmentation of the value of this body, which never for an instant imagines that anyone could someday ask a question without its permission, without its presence, and that this question not be about this body at all.

Let us take note: the existence of a cultural site should always be conceived of based on the idea of care for what it is *not*, for what escapes it, its margins, the environment it does not absorb and which is not a resource at its disposal, but rather the shelter for, the terrain and flesh of a multitude of possible places – and possible places to come – and in which we could live, speak, think, and invent in relation with this cultural site, but also autonomously. We could then say that it is a question of looking out for the conditions of the cultural place and for the climate it creates for other places and other lives – and to ask ourselves if it creates an air that is breathable.

Welcoming in something that is not the self and does not come towards one is a particularly difficult exercise for a society obsessed with security, control and profitability, a society that demands **pacification** and proudly ignores what “over there” costs and what is required “here”. For, to get back to our starting point, the “here” in the question “Why imagine a local and international cultural site here?” is a very specific “here”; it is (in fact) an “over there”. The *banlieue* has always been the “over there” of the cultural institution’s “here”, in other words the space into which is poured and applied the violence that has been chased away from this obvious “here”, this *us* that tolerates no debate, no form of explanation. From this space where we recognize ourselves towards the space where we don’t recognize ourselves. It is therefore more productive to say, “Why imagine a local and international cultural site ‘over there?’” Because this new formulation has the advantage of revealing another question: who is speaking? For if we want to think in the presence of minority bodies and subaltern imaginations, it is then necessary to signify the situation of enunciation. Who speaks and for whom one speaks, about whom one speaks and in the service of whom? By formulating the “over there” – which clearly recalls the famous *Outre mers* (French Overseas Territories and Departments) and perhaps suggests a haunting of the infamous colonial period - we at least open up the possibility of considering different manners of appreciating the “here”, its qualities and (primary) matters, its risks and costs. How much it costs and who will take on the cost of transforming an “over there” into a “here”? Naming the “over there” as “here”, means stating that one has the power to feel at home everywhere; it also perhaps means refusing to negotiate the climate the place to come will produce and the space necessary to be able to breathe and to live in that climate and its environs.

There is thus a place of attention to be imagined with those are going to share in and produce this here, each in their own way. On one side those who have forged their sensitivity based on this here as a place for discharging violence, a place of banishment, those who have had to live undesirable and dangerous lives, for they were lived at the margins of a secure space, they were the markers of a border, the signals indicating the limits of a livable space. Projections of horror and signals of fire. And on the other side those who have decided to turn the over there that was one reviled, seedy, shitty, not completely compatible with the noblest cultural gestures, into a here. And who will have to lose something in order to gain something else, to shrug off old habits and musty reflexes, maybe even professional identities, and learn to negotiate with their body(ies) the climate and environment in which everyone will be able to breathe. The fact that the *banlieue* is a vibrant over there offers us the chance to avoid turning it into a here that repeats and replies to the phantasms and certitudes of an institution and a whole ensemble of cultural habits that aim to gather all of society at the foot of a single body, a body that imagines itself to be generous as long as it is the center of attention, but which noisily whines if it is not the first guest to be invited to the party.

It seems very difficult to me from my position to answer the question of “why”. Do we really have a choice? But I think it is necessary to engage the “how” at the center of this preliminary question, while hoping that maybe, somewhere, this “how” – for whom, with whom? – will produce another “why” than the one that discourages us in advance and empties us of all hope. And so I ask this to begin: “How can we build over there a local and international site in a breathable climate?”

This intervention was written on the occasion of the Atelier Médicis 2025 seminar, which was held from July 7 – 10, 2020 at Clichy-Montfermeil.