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Interrupting a Legacy of Hatred:
Friches Théâtre Urbain's *Lieu Commun*

In a violent clash between rival gangs from Asnières and Gennevilliers in the banlieue north of Paris, a fifteen-year old boy was killed at the metro station Les Courtilles, the last stop on Line 13. Revenge attacks began the next day. Security was heightened with hundreds of police patrolling the area; however, city officials and residents alike realized the need for radically different strategies to halt an escalation of violence. Within weeks of the hostilities, the mayors of Asnières and Gennevilliers commissioned Sarah Harper, Artistic Director of Friches Théâtre Urbain, a street theatre company in Paris, to develop a community-based art-making project that would augment attempts by the youth workers and others to defuse the volatile situation (Bureau 2011). In the resulting multi-faceted project, lasting twenty months, Harper developed innovative approaches to collaborative art-making resulting in vibrant ephemeral public art that repeatedly interrupted the legacy of hatred between Asnières and Gennevilliers. Beginning the slow process of collaboration with symbolic links between the residents of the two towns rather than face-to-face contact, she pioneered an approach that eased the way for more profound activist cooperation. The co-created public art took the form of elaborate, often mobile, performance installations that began to replace the narrative of conflict that had become customary for Asnières and Gennevilliers with an opposing narrative of cooperation, both depicted in the art product and practiced in the art-making. Community collaboration in the creation of this ephemeral public art played a significant role not only in changing the character of the confrontational and often dangerous public space of the metro station, but also in altering attitudes of both residents and city officials toward the potential for art to foster co-operation and active citizenship.

Art historian Patricia Phillips tackles the question of a possible causal relationship between public art and active citizenship when she argues that public life is no longer defined by what people share, but rather by its pluralities and unpredictability. Public art intervenes in that shape-shifting landscape by 'provid[ing] a visual language to express and explore the dynamic, temporal conditions of the collective' (1992, 297). It makes visible the vibrant relationship between creative processes, geographic site and citizens who stop to look and comment, and thus public art 'has the potential to provide new insights on the relationship of aesthetic ideas to an ongoing renewal of public life' (Phillips, 1999, 9). Phillips dismisses the notion that public art is just art in public spaces and insists that "it is public because of the kinds of questions it chooses to ask or address'. (1992, 298). Public art, she insists, thrives on exchange, disagreement, even volatility, and contrary to official goals, it must not seek consensus. When it no longer delights, angers and confuses; when it no longer creates dialogue and debate, it has ceased fulfilling its potential as

an aesthetic democratic practice. One way to keep public art vibrant, argues Phillips, is to reject the privileging of permanence in favour of ephemerality:

the temporary in public art is not about an absence of commitment or involvement, but about an intensification and enrichment of the conception of the public. The public is diverse, variable, volatile, controversial; and it has its origins in the private lives of all citizens [...]. A conceptualization of the idea of time in public art is a prerequisite for a public life that enables inspired change. (1992, 304)

The many, varied performance installations in Harper's project from *Espaces Rêvés*, the initial intervention in the weeks following the killing, to the more fully developed multi-faceted series of workshops and performative events in *Lieu Commun*, create this disruptive temporary public art. By foregrounding art over mediation, Harper's strong artistic vision ensured the art's powerful aesthetic presence would not be lost in its concomitant social work. As a result, the public art created not *for*, but *with* the residents from both Asnières and Gennevilliers interrupted the legacy of hatred as it slowly began to change the character of a site of the metro station and to encourage public participation in democratic discourse about the kind of place in which they wanted to live.

Background events

Asnières and Gennevilliers are side-by-side, separated only by Boulevard Pierre de Coubertin, a four-lane avenue that acts as a veritable frontier. A long-standing animosity, perhaps with its origins in drug trafficking in the 1970s, persists between generations of inhabitants of the two towns (or communes). Contrary to official expectations of creating a shared public space, the 2008 opening of the metro station, Les Courtilles, spanning the boundary between Asnières and Gennevilliers, seemed to crystalize territorial tensions between the rival gangs as the station, with its two-story glass walls and surrounding plaza, became the locus for the escalating conflict. Eleven-year old Kenza, a nearby resident, explained, 'The problems came with the opening of the metro. It's a war to know who the station belongs to' (Asnières-Gennevilliers 2012).¹

On Saturday night, the 12th of March, 2011, some youth from Hauts d' Asnières ventured into the territory around Les Courtilles belonging to a rival gang from Le Luth in Gennevilliers. In the ensuing fight between gangs, Samy, a resident of Asnières, was stabbed in the chest and died the next day. 'It was an accident, but he had to know it was dangerous. He shouldn't have come into Gennevilliers. It's not his territory,' claimed a teen-ager from Gennevilliers (Gabizon 2011). Revenge attacks began the next day when a twenty-two-year old man from Gennevilliers was beaten and stabbed in the same neighbourhood, and on Monday, a high school student was attacked and

¹ This and all subsequent translations from French are my own.

hit with a metal pipe. Later that day, a silent march for Samy had to be disbanded because of the rising tensions. After another fifteen-year old boy was stabbed in the back with a screwdriver near the metro station during yet another gang fight on Tuesday, the mayors of Asnières and Gennevilliers established a curfew was set to begin on Wednesday evening. Hundreds of police descended on the area; however, residents and city officials realized that increased police presence alone would never be a long-term solution.

The violent events in March 2011 acted as a wake-up call, or an 'electric shock' as *Le Parisien* called it (Asnières-Gennevilliers 2012), to the area's residents and politicians, and they sought solutions to the increasingly belligerent hostilities between the two communes played out so passionately by the rival gangs. Just days after the killing, local rappers and videographers created eulogies to Samy, and in the next few weeks, parents, social workers and city officials tried to organize parties and excursions to encourage the youth of Asnières and Gennevilliers to come together, but without much success. Each of these prosperous communes has a large residential area of low-income highrises that were built as separate enclaves for migrant workers in the mid-twentieth century. These areas (or 'poverty traps'²) are plagued by unemployment, high population density, poverty, ethnic tensions and repeated failures of urban policies, yet the similarities of place, particularly in terms of lack of opportunity, seem to exacerbate the need of many youth from Asnières and Gennevilliers to reinforce their differences of identity. For these fourteen to twenty-year olds, feelings of self-worth and agency are closely tied to where they live.³ The unsuccessful attempts to organize shared activities and social events by parents and social workers after Samy's death revealed not only the levels of misunderstanding, fear and mistrust between the groups, but also the prevalent assumption among the youth that those participating in the joint events were traitors to their own local community.

The city officials turned to Sarah Harper who had worked effectively with inhabitants of Asnières and Gennevilliers that she literally met on the street in an earlier project, *Witness/N14*.⁴ In that project, she walked the N14 that connected Paris and Rouen before the construction of the motorway, seeking to establish links between disassociated and displaced communities along the route. For her, the people she met along the way were the heart of the artistic process and the core of the creation that took the form of a series of walking performance events in three different sites from 2008 to 2010. The second event of *Witness/N14, Au-delà du périph* (15-18 October 2009) focused to a large extent on the two communes. In Asnières, Harper had worked with a range of local inhabitants to develop a community-written

² See Sachs, 2005.

³ Helen Nicholson claims: "Location does play a central part in narratives of identity, and how people feel about where they live, where they feel they belong and their daily social interactions is an important factor in their psychological well-being" (2005, 84).

⁴ For a detailed analysis of *Witness/N14*, see Haedicke 2013, 149-75.

and performed docu-fiction film, *Au Port des Quatre Routes*, that revealed how urban renewal projects were decimating their commune. It was shown in a container just down the street from the metro station, Les Courtilles. And in Gennevilliers, she had created an exhibition and slam poetry event, *Slamotavail*, with the workers at the Snecma factory. But Harper understood that this type of juxtaposition of artistic activities in Asnières and Gennevilliers, so effective in *Witness/N14*, had the potential to encourage competition between inhabitants of the two towns and so be counter-productive in this new project.⁵ To lessen tensions, some form of collaboration between residents of Asnières and Gennevilliers had to be devised.

Espaces Rêvés

When Harper and her collaborator, photographer Juliette Dieudonné, began to develop *Espaces Rêvés*,⁶ the initial stage of the project (May to July 2011), they were very aware that, unlike *Witness/N14*, this project was commissioned by city officials, and they understood that many residents of the two communes, young and old, saw them as ‘outsiders’ and as part of the problem of failed social policies. Before anything else, the artists had to win the trust of the local inhabitants, or at least their tolerance. *Witness/N14* certainly opened many doors among local neighbourhood leaders and associations, but the disengaged youth were harder to reach. So the artists decided just to *be* in the towns as much as possible. Rather than arriving with a cultural project all worked out, the artists began by establishing a frequent and non-threatening presence. Harper again decided to work only with residents who volunteered for the project, with people she met on the street or in community centers. She chose not to work directly with the hostile teens from Asnières and Gennevilliers either by partnering with mediators to develop workshops addressing the animosity among gang members or by trying to get them to interact through art-based activities.

With *Espaces Rêvés*, Harper and Dieudonné sought simply to propose an alternative identity for the plaza in front of Les Courtilles metro station: from a site of symbolic barricades between the two towns into a site of symbolic links between residents of Asnières and Gennevilliers. In the plaza in front of the metro station, they set up comfortable chairs and a table for conversation: *un lieu des rencontres*. This temporary open-air parlor offered an informal place to exchange stories, ideas and activities with the artists who asked simple questions about places that the residents liked in their neighborhoods and things they enjoyed doing. At this early stage, the exchanges occurred primarily between the artists and one or two residents at a time from one or the other commune. Unless already acquaintances, the locals of the two towns rarely shared space at the table, but the artists shared photographs and stories

⁵ Most of the information about *Lieu Commun* in this essay comes from my attendance at its multiple events and workshops, but also from many informal conversations with Sarah Harper over several months.

⁶ See <http://www.friches.fr/projets/espaces-reves> for further information and photographs.

back and forth between inhabitants of Asnières and Gennevilliers and thus initiated a curiosity in the 'other'. And the residents of both towns were intrigued at the suggestion that their faces and words symbolically 'crossed the border'.

Harper quickly realized that the people who stopped to chat saw the artists' interventions as joyful breaks in the routine: for the adults, moments to share a coffee and a story and, for the youth, opportunities to perform their skills as rapper, breakdancer or skate-boarder. These early participants had little inclination to dwell on the troubles of *les banlieues*, and it became clear to the artists that this project needed to capitalize on the joy around the table if it were to interrupt the legacy of hatred and violence between the two towns and, in so doing, create a space for amity and dialogue to emerge. That is not to say that the very real and ever-present hostility was glossed over, but instead of relying on a direct approach addressing the tensions, Harper and Dieudonné chose to help willing participants create an alternative identity for this site so decisively associated with antagonism, even if only for an hour. 'Participation in the joyful' argues James Thompson, 'is part of a dream of a "beautiful" future, in the sense that it becomes an inspirational force. Far from being a diversion, it acts to make visible a better world' (2011, 2). And it was a possible 'better world' that Harper and Dieudonné made visible through the *lieu des rencontres* and the community-initiated art activities that spontaneously emerged there.

Inspired by the popularity of these conversations and mini-performances around the table at Les Courtilles, the artists proposed a participatory public art installation on the square in front of the metro station that celebrated the ephemeral moments of joy. On 2 July 2011, elected officials and well over one hundred residents of the two towns gathered for the unusual day of food and festivity. A large mural designed as a collage of photographs, sketches and anecdotes collected in the many conversations covered much of the tall glass facade of Les Courtilles. This temporary public art both imagined a revised narrative for the towns in which collaboration was possible and actually developed a collaborative creation although not yet based on face-to-face contact as it linked Asnières and Gennevilliers through images that blurred the boundaries and hostilities. While not yet a reality on the street, this 'harmony' was visible in the art, and the mural was displayed for three months without being defaced or inciting more violence. To enable those who attended the event to take a sense of partnership away with them, Harper created an imaginative map of the two towns, designed from drawings, words and photographs of the residents of Asnières and Gennevilliers. Hundreds were given away.⁷ Streets and town boundaries were replaced by a tree-like network emanating from an encircled 'M', representing Les Courtilles, in the center. The tree's branches sprouted shared ideas for an ideal quartier and the roots spread into a not-yet-fully-expressed dream for the future. For many gang members however, the site-specific event and the public art mural and map acted as

⁷ See <http://www.friches.fr/projets/espaces-reves> for a photograph of the map.

provocative challenges to the status quo of hostility. Site-specific art creates a 'reciprocity between art work and site [that] change[s] the identity of each, blurring the boundaries between them, and pave[s] the way for art's participation in wider cultural and social practices', argues art historian Rosalynn Deutsche (1996, 61). The gang youth who felt the metro station 'belonged' to them seemed to sense the power of the art to alter the site and engage people in dialogue. Their antagonism and aggression to that emerging shift in the metro station's identity from locus of conflict to locus of collaboration began to surface in the next stage of the project.

Espaces Rêvés experimented with collective ways to bridge difference through art without forcing face-to-face encounters before the participants were ready. The project, involving well over one hundred people,⁸ offered a hitherto unexplored mode of expression for the inhabitants' anger, frustrations and hopes in the artworks and contributed to the realization, albeit provisionally, of a shared, harmonious public space. By superimposing an imagined site of an amicable future on the locational site of the present-day animosity, this public art created a palimpsest of opposing visions of the metro station, and, by extension, the future of Asnières and Gennevilliers. One way to understand the potential for efficacy of such a palimpsest is to look at Jacques Rancière's concept of collage that, he explains, 'mixes the strangeness of the aesthetic experience with the becoming-life of art and the becoming-art of ordinary life. Collage ... can be seen as evidence of the hidden link between two apparently opposed worlds' (2006, 84). For Rancière, collage is necessarily political because its *détournement*⁹, its reassembling of ordinary objects and locations, hovers at the spatio-temporal point of tension where a comfortable comprehension of a logical reality coexists with an unsettling disorientation caused by an unfamiliar possibility. Thus collage often 'takes the form of a shock, which reveals one world hidden beneath another' (2006, 87). This shock causes a disruption in 'the relationship between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable', a rupture that overturns expectations and 'resists signification' (2004, 63). The startling public art collages in the mural and maps in *Espaces Rêvés* troubled the status quo of aggression by making visible very different

⁸ Participants were not counted during this brief initial project, but Harper estimates that close to two hundred people were involved in the project, including conversations at the table and preparing for the final event.

⁹ *Détournement* is a Situationist strategy that uses disorientation and defamiliarization to propel an individual into a sense of confusion and uncertainty that, in turn, causes an altered view and understanding of the situation. The Situationists argued that the way to achieve societal transformation is to change how one sees the world in which he or she lives. *Détournement* initiates that process of revision by reassembling ordinary, recognizable images into new and startling creations. It does not rely on unique or original ideas or images, but rather re-uses familiar elements from daily life to modify their meaning.

possible futures and by enabling partnerships among those not yet ready for face-to-face encounters, but fascinated by tangible symbolic links.

The site-specificity of this public art was key to its success not only because the artwork grew out of its relationship to the current identity of Les Courtilles and the people who used the site, but also because it overturned, at least temporarily, prevalent perceptions of the site as a locus of conflict, primarily between rival gangs but spreading out to town residents at large. This act of contradicting the accepted narrative of endless animosity through collective art-making slowly enabled the local populations to develop a confidence that the social order could be changed. Such interventionist public art acts as ‘a practice that constitutes a public, by engaging people in political discussion or by entering a political struggle.... Art that is “public” participates in, or creates, a political space and is itself a space where we assume political identities’ (1996, 288-9), claims Deutsche. The art practice challenged the site’s identity as hostile and dangerous with an experience of Les Courtilles as a place where healing could start. And that shift, experienced viscerally, encouraged those who enjoyed the event to rethink their identities as passive bystanders to the violence and instead to imagine ways to end it. A path to active citizenship began to appear. The efficacy of that shift was certainly felt by the gang members whose belligerence in the early weeks of the next stage of the project confirmed that they believed in the power of the art to alter the site. The success of *Espaces Rêvés* led the officials of Asnières and Gennevilliers to commission Harper to develop the project further.

Lieu Commun

For the next year (October 2011 to December 2012), the initial encounters and interventions tested in *Espaces Rêvés* deepened and expanded as the artists listened to people in Asnières and Gennevilliers, and what they heard determined the many varied subsequent forms of communal art-based activities and public art in *Lieu Commun*.¹⁰ As before, Harper did not engage directly with the gang members, but instead focused on establishing collaborations between younger children from the two communes as well as their parents through a range of art-based activities. She still did not work with pre-selected groups, but only with those who came to the project voluntarily. Gradually, the excitement the participants felt about their achievements began to *surround* the gangs with a very different energy.

The starting point for *Lieu Commun* remained the locational site of Les Courtilles metro station, but the artists branched out into the neighborhoods

¹⁰ See <http://www.friches.fr/projets/lieu-commun> for more information and photographs. In addition, Fiches Théâtre Urbain has kept an ongoing blog on the project. See http://lieucommun92.wordpress.com/?blogsub=confirming#blog_subscription-2.

in Asnières and Gennevilliers, sketching locations as they sat on street corners, watching football practices and impromptu sports activities, taking photographs, and chatting with everyone who was willing. The artists listened to frequent complaints that the quartier lacked places to sit and chat and so decided to expand their single whimsical metro station *lieu des rencontres* in *Espaces Rêvés* into an itinerant, communal conversation place. The result was a ‘camion-snack’, an ice cream and snack van that created a ludic pop-up café in various unexpected public spaces near where the people lived, often residential areas dominated by unwelcoming highrises and deserted by shops and eating places (‘food deserts’).

Harper acquired an old dilapidated van and asked the children and adolescents to help renovate, equip and decorate it. The building of the van, lasting several weeks, was a key to establishing metaphoric links between youth from both towns as different groups worked on the van when it was parked on street corners in their neighborhoods.¹¹ Working with specialists, the children learned how to use power tools to fit windows, create cupboards, and rebuild the interior and exterior of the van. Each subsequent group had to build on what the preceding group had done; they could not dismantle it. The final task was painting the van with a design developed by the children and adolescents. Just as with the building, artwork created in one town could not be painted over by the youth of the other town, but rather, it had to be incorporated into the developing design. Under the guidance of a graffiti artist, art created in one town became part of the art of the rival town, and thus a symbolic link developed between the hostile communities as they *collaborated* on a project. Even though the shared space was symbolic, a ‘dialogue’ started between youthful participants from Asnières and Gennevilliers.



Fig. 1: Le Camion-Snack in Asnières, November 2012. Photograph by author.

¹¹ See the video, ‘L’Atelier Bricolage Camion Snake’ on the renovation of the van, <http://www.friches.fr/projets/lieu-commun>.

This art-based dialogue, unimaginable a few weeks before, began to diminish the impermeability of the frontier between the two towns and to establish metaphoric *lieux des rencontres*, communal meeting spaces without fixed locations that offered possibilities for lessening tensions. Although the teenagers remained aloof, the younger adolescents began to question the legitimacy of the turf war. As eleven-year old El Mehdi said, 'It's crazy. Between them and us is only a street' (Asnières-Gennevilliers 2012).

Once ready, the vividly decorated van parked in various locations in the towns, opened its large window, set out colorful café tables and chairs, and 'sold' hot chocolate, crepes, ice cream, popcorn and other snacks. The local youth would vie with each other to see who could help prepare and serve the snacks. Other activities, initiated by the artists, often 'popped up' around the camion-snack: open-air films, open-mike sessions, music performed by local inhabitants, slam poetry sessions, DJ-ing, or public outdoor photography studios. The camion-snack with its art-based interventions and conversations offered a welcome respite from daily routines. Since it moved from one town to the other, it began to forge symbolic links among residents. Although its impact in encouraging cooperation between the two towns is impossible to measure, it is clear that several hundred inhabitants from children and their mothers to young professionals, drug dealers and gang members visited the pop-up café or participated in some positive way to one or more of the activities of *Lieu Commun*.

The whimsically painted van, the homey outdoor café, and the diverse artistic activities created temporary public art that was mobile and fleeting. As it penetrated into the neighborhoods, it troubled the status quo of familiar locations and developed a politicized dramaturgy relying on practices that reconfigured social spaces and so stimulated debate, most often embodied in activities. The van's arrival in a neighborhood blurred the lines between art and politics by intervening 'in the visible and sayable' (Rancière, 2010, 37). Rancière links art and politics through their participation in determining and often reconfiguring what is seen, heard, and understood about the contemporary situation. Both art and politics disrupt a sense of stability by proposing innovative understandings of the social environment: 'politics and art, [...] construct "fictions", that is to say material rearrangements of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and what is said, between what is done and what can be done' (2004, 63). While many simply enjoyed the friendliness around the camion-snack and the free art activities, others recognized the link between the community art and socio-political impact. Neighborhood leaders often conferred with Harper on where the van should go next to defuse tensions. And, alternatively, the gangs' sense of the potential for social change that the camion-snack represented was evident in their need to establish their authority over the place and 'grant permission' for the artists to be there. Soon after the van parked and began to set up, gang

members would arrive to get coffees. They would then take the tables and chairs down the street to set up an alternative café and leave the local residents to stand. Harper understood that her responses would determine whether they would 'allow' her to stay. Rather than demanding their co-operation, she asked them how many chairs and tables they needed for their café. From then on, she brought enough for the camion-snack to have two café patios. A few gang members still felt that the camion-snack was too intrusive and responded with aggression, including rock throwing and surrounding the van to shake it forcefully with the artists and sometimes local children inside, but as these incidents became less and less frequent, it became clear that the gangs of each town had granted permission to the artists to be there. The camion-snack soon developed a following, and its unexpected arrival in a different neighborhood each week became an event and a place of debate, negotiation and future plans.

In order to strengthen the symbolic collaboration started with the camion-snack, the artists suggested additional projects. Artists and residents together designed and wrote three editions of *Lieu Commun: Le Journal* (one journal representing both towns) in which people of various ages from Asnières and Gennevilliers wrote stories, poetry or 'graffiti', created sketches and cartoons, or placed photographs and news announcements. The free journal was distributed at the metro station and other residential locations in Asnières and Gennevilliers. The youth created podcasts for a 'web radio' show that grew out of the interviews they conducted with 'sidewalk microphones' where they asked residents and other pedestrians what they thought of their quartier. Symbolic links between rival communities were also made through sports as photographs of a team's practice in one town were displayed on a table at the practice of a team from the other town. One activity called 'Lettres Croisés' grew out of a wistful comment made by a young boy: 'It would be better if we could remember when we played together rather than when we beat each other up' (<http://www.friches.fr/projets/lieu-commun>). Harper, with the help of local youth workers, set up pen-pals between children from Asnières and children from Gennevilliers whom they had never met. The letters they wrote to each other about their interests and concerns were surprisingly frank and forthcoming. In July 2012, after several months of correspondence, the children met face-to-face at a picnic organized by Harper and the youth workers. It was hosted by one of the community centers in Gennevilliers who invited the children from Asnières as guests: a truly unique event. Soon after this event, the children 'published' their letters in a book. Each activity would grow from a previous one as the artists and community participants learned together what worked best, thus creating what Grant H. Kester calls 'conversation pieces' in which the 'artists have adopted a performative process-based approach. They are "context-providers" rather than "content-providers"' (2004, 1). Using this dialogic aesthetic practice in *Lieu Commun*, artists and residents to

learned from and were inspired by each other. The *art* here was the emerging ability to collaborate in community art-making processes.¹²

Welcome to our Home, the final public event of *Lieu Commun* on the first of December 2012, represented the very real collaboration in the planning, preparation, set up and running of the event by over one hundred inhabitants from the towns.¹³ Not surprisingly, it took place in and around the metro station, Les Courtilles. To make the art created by the many participants in small workshops visible to a larger public was important to all involved as it thrust their artwork into the public sphere and its small acts of resistance to the legacy of hatred into public discourse. This final community art-making event of *Lieu Commun* quite visibly reframed the locational space of the metro station so that it was defined by its possibilities, by its Deleuzian “becoming” that did not transform it into something that already exists, but into something not previously imagined. The metro station became a safe place depicted through its comfortable home-away-from-home aesthetic that encouraged conversation and shared experiences across barriers that had separated the towns and thus encouraged a sense of well-being and hope.

This festive day was celebratory certainly, but it was much more. Of course, it gave credence to the decision of the city officials to fund the project, and the mayors of Asnières and Gennevilliers marked the occasion with speeches and the first stitches of the ceremonial sewing of a large ripped tablecloth to enable it to become a ‘communal table’ on which were served pitchers of hot chocolate from the camion-snack. But the public event also represented subversive acts that played around the official acts, such as when the town residents removed and re-sewed the mayors’ stitches creating not only the communal table, but also a new ‘road’ connecting Asnières and Gennevilliers, thus metaphorically replacing the boulevard frontier with an object of beauty and a beautiful vision of a possible future. The day-long event created artistic pockets of resistance that intervened in what Rancière calls the ‘distribution of the sensible’ through a reconfiguration of the visible, the sayable and the thinkable. Seeming to echo Rancière, Patricia Phillips asserts that ‘[s]eeing, believing, knowing, making, and performing are the structures for the formation of public values and civic cultures’ (2003, 123). These ideas were visible in the transformation of the non-place outside the metro station, often the site of gang fights, into a complex ludic space for conversation, sharing of food, and joyful play. The camion-snack was parked just outside the metro station and surrounded by a ‘tropical lawn’ of white astro-turf, lawn chairs with blankets and turquoise grass umbrellas.

¹² Suzanne Lacy labelled this kind of ‘political and social activity... distinguished by its aesthetic sensibility... “new genre public art”’ (1995: 19) as a way to highlight its collaboration between artist and audience participants.

¹³ See <http://www.friches.fr/projets/lieu-commun> for photographs from the event.



Fig. 2: The Tropical Lawn in *Welcome to our Home*, 1 December 2012 at Les Courtilles metro station. Photograph by author.

Through the bar window that used to frame the artists and residents who chose to serve snacks in their neighborhood on a particular day, videos of the camion-snack's interventions in the two towns played. The new pop-up café, just next to the camion-snack, was a much larger series of booths and tables set up by community members who shared their favorite ethnically diverse dishes.



Fig. 3: The food booths in *Welcome to our Home*, 1 December at Les Courtilles metro station. Photograph by author.

The metro station itself was also made quite beautiful with huge stained glass window-like murals of the town residents and art-making activities visible from inside

and out. Like the outdoor space that had become a communal kitchen, corners inside the station looked like a living room with cardboard couches covered with graffiti and standing lamps or a bedroom with an open wardrobe displaying sports clothing, trophies and photographs. Children from the two towns who had become pen-pals read aloud from their letters, and on a side table near one of the cardboard sofas, visitors could read the pen-pal letters in their published book. A sideboard for the three editions of the street journal, *Lieu Commun: Le Journal*, was against a side wall, and a pigeon-hole bookcase was filled with three-dimensional scenes of what the inhabitants loved about where they lived, created by the youth of the two towns.



Fig. 4: Pigeon-hole bookcase with three-dimensional scenes of what the inhabitants loved about where they lived. *Welcome to our Home*, 1 December 2012 at Les Courtilles metro station. Photograph by author.

With Fred Tusch, a famous comedian acting as master of ceremony, it was hard to end the day and yet its very ephemerality contributed to its potential for efficacy as its surprise and unpredictability in what seemed an ordinary location heightened its aesthetic and political impact.

Phillips asks, 'Can public art offer experiences that shape insights on public life—the human condition?... What can public art reveal about the art/human dimension, public life and democratic culture, and the space of transactions and transformations?' (2003: 123, 132). Cultural theorist Malcolm Miles seems to suggest answers to Phillips' questions when he explains that public art initiates a collision of responses to the artwork itself and to the surrounding city. Miles explores how art in public spaces creates two opposing spaces simultaneously experienced by the public: an aesthetic space (that represents a space of art and art appreciation) and a lived space that represents 'the space around bodies of city dwellers... replete with values, personal associations, appropriations, exclusions and invitations, and the shared and disputed issues of the public realm' (1997: 59). The 'aesthetic space' encourages an individual to assume the role of detached observer whereas the 'lived space'

encourages some form of physical, social or emotional engagement. While the aesthetic space promotes the policy of democratization of the arts through its emphasis on accessibility, the lived space represents a 'form of street life, a means to articulate the implicit values of a city when its users occupy the place of determining what the city is. [...] it produces social processes rather than objects' (1997: 59). Public spaces are 'never successfully colonized as an art space' (1997: 15), insists Miles, so the experience of public art is an experience of inhabiting opposing spaces simultaneously, but that very paradox is what initiates participation in democratic practices as the viewer's actions have reality in both the aesthetic and the lived spaces. That occupation of contrasting spaces was evident in *Welcome to our Home* in its superimposition of an intimate private space of the *home* on a public non-place of the metro station that was still running its trains. Commuters and guests to the *home* mingled. The space was complicated further as Dieudonné set up a photographic studio in the center of the station. Here, people could be photographed as someone else, somewhere else, and then their 'performed' photograph was immediately projected onto a large screen, visible throughout the station. The hostile metro station had not only become homey, but also whimsical. Yet that joy also highlighted the important questions asked through the co-created public art about a better future for the towns and active citizenship.

While the joint funding from Asnières and Gennevilliers for *Lieu Commun* ended with this final event, officials from Gennevilliers responded to residents' demands to commission Harper to work on a year-long performance-based project in 2013 with youth, adults and old-age pensioners of Le Luth as a way to continue the gains made in *Lieu Commun*. The demands by the inhabitants of Gennevilliers and their ability to influence public policy certainly demonstrate their sense of empowerment as they tested being active citizens. In the resulting *Shakespeare au Luth!*,¹⁴ Harper used words and actions around the themes of instability and turbulence in Shakespeare's works to explore obliquely the tensions of Gennevilliers. Through Shakespeare's intense examples of hatred, antagonism and revenge, the participants were able to 'perform' rivalries that were both recognizable and extreme in the safe environment of art and to create imagined exit points from the accumulating tensions by drawing on lived and imagined experience. The distance created by performance and by words of Shakespeare, translated not only into French but into 'street' French by the youth (street vernacular, slam poetry and rap of Gennevilliers), seemed to give permission for emotional extremes to be tested and understood by participants. *Blood Will Have Blood*, the final production in January 2014, performed by an intergenerational cast of local inhabitants, was a collage of Shakespearean scenes of violence, not surprisingly beginning with the Capulet-Montague 'gang fight' from *Romeo and Juliet*. As soon as *Shakespeare au Luth!* finished, the residents and officials in Gennevilliers asked Harper

¹⁴ See <http://www.friches.fr/projets/shakespeare-au-luth>.

to continue her work with the town's youth and adults. *We are Going to Mars!*, from September 2014 to March 2016, tries to imagine alternative societies and a common future by developing the first French team to establish residence on Mars made up of the residents of Gennevilliers.¹⁵

The success of *Lieu Commun* and the subsequent projects comes primarily from the innovative approaches to collaboration that result in co-created public art that subtly writes narratives of resistance to the status quo of hatred between Asnières and Gennevilliers and enables residents to rehearse active citizenship. Harper's original strategies, while certainly not eradicating all the long-held animosity between the towns' inhabitants, have interrupted the hatred so violently played out in Samy's killing. Art-making alone cannot heal social ills produced by decades of poverty, lack of opportunity, discrimination and governmental neglect; however, such community-based art-making projects working alongside engaged city officials willing to improve social services and urban policies can make a difference. Since *Lieu Commun*, the children and adults of the two towns see working together as the norm, and gang fights in the disputed metro station have all but ended. *Lieu Commun* and its subsequent projects have intervened in the status quo of Asnières and Gennevilliers, and the active citizen-artists have started to revise the narrative of animosity.

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¹⁵ See <http://www.friches.fr/projets/we-are-going-to-mars-> .

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