

COMMONING AND SITE-SPECIFIC ENVIRONMENTAL PERFORMANCE IN MARSEILLE

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ABSTRACT

Given that our current environmental crisis is, as Amitav Ghosh argues, “in every way a collective predicament”, a critical question for discussions of the ecological impact of the arts is their role in fostering the kinds of collaborative forms of action called for to address environmental challenges. Such discussions include Baz Kershaw’s criticism of the anti-ecological “production of spectators” by theatres, and Brian Kulick’s more recent argument that theatre generates moments of collective attentiveness that might contribute to collaboration beyond the performance event. Here, drawing on recent scholarship on the commons and commoning, we examine site-specific environmentally-focused performances in which the collaborative engagement of non-artist participants was a central part of the creative work. All set in social and environmental interstitial sites, these works constitute a mode of performance that integrates social collaboration and environmental aims and grounds these within an urban social framework extending beyond the time of the performance event. We examine the key aesthetic strategies employed in addressing the specific social and historical context of Marseille, and we look to identify the most important factors shaping their contributions to the city as a site of collaborative approaches to environmental issues.

KEYWORDS

Site-Specific, Commons, Marseille, Performance, Environment

RÉSUMÉ

Si notre crise environnementale actuelle est, comme Amitav Ghosh le constate, « dans tous les sens une problématique collective », une des questions essentielles de l’impact écologique de l’art porte sur son rôle dans la promotion des modes d’action collaboratifs nécessaires face aux défis environnementaux. De telles discussions comprennent la critique de Baz Kershaw sur la « production de spectateurs » anti-écologique des théâtres, et le constat récent de Brian Kulick que le théâtre génère des moments d’attention collective qui pourraient contribuer à des collaborations au-delà du spectacle lui-même. En nous appuyant sur des recherches récentes sur les biens communs et la mise en commun, nous examinons des performances in situ axées sur l’environnement dans lesquelles l’engagement collaboratif des participants non-artistes a été une partie centrale de l’activité créatrice. Toutes réalisées dans des espaces socialement et environnementalement interstitiels, ces œuvres intègrent collaboration sociale et buts environnementaux ancrés dans un cadre social qui dépasse le moment même de la performance. Nous examinons les stratégies esthétiques clés employées en fonction du contexte social et historique de Marseille et nous cherchons à identifier les facteurs les plus importants susceptibles d’influer sur leurs contributions à la ville comme site d’approches collaboratives des questions environnementales.

MOTS-CLÉS

In Situ, Commun, Marseille, Performance, Environnement

COMMONING AND SITE-SPECIFIC ENVIRONMENTAL PERFORMANCE IN MARSEILLE

Brian Kulick's recent book about "theatre in a time of climate crisis" draws on a central argument of Amitav Ghosh in the latter's wide-ranging and trenchant critique of our current environmental complacency. At "exactly the time when it has become clear that global warming is in every sense a collective predicament, humanity finds itself in the thrall of a dominant culture in which the idea of the collective has been exiled from politics, economics, and literature alike" (Ghosh, 2016: 80). In *Staging the End of the World*, Kulick argues for the dramatic canon's value in exploring conflicts between the individual and society, as well as theatre's ability to generate – through the shared performance experience itself – moments of "collective attentiveness" (Kulick, 2024: 10) that might contribute to more collaborative modes of engagement with the environment. At the same time, scholars in the growing field of ecodramaturgy and theatre ecology have noted the profligate use of resources that the making of theatrical artifice has historically commanded, and the complicity of theatre (especially, modern-Western theatre) in furthering an anthropocentric, individualistic, passive-consumeristic, and ecologically insensitive worldview.^[1] While artists work to address such concerns, critical voices have raised important issues, as

with Baz Kershaw's assertion that theatres' primary business – "the production of spectators" – is profoundly anti-ecological: "spectatorship as such, even though there may be many versions of it, historically is probably a major part of the theatre's contribution to the environmental crisis" (Kershaw, 2007a: 117).^[2]

Here, we consider site-specific environmentally-focused performances in which the collaborative engagement of spectators who were also participants, along with more specialized artists, was a central part of the creative work. We draw on recent scholarship on the commons ("a resource ... that is not privately owned and is available for use by a community or the wider public", OED) that focuses on the active process of "commoning".^[3] The verb has the advantage

← [1] See, e.g, Woynarski (2020), Sermon (2017), Arons / May (2012), and Kershaw (2007b).

[2] Kershaw (2003: 603) joins a longstanding concern with problematic aspects of spectatorship in "today's docile audiences" to the environmental humanities critique of a "landscape" perspective on the natural world. In Kershaw's view, this perspective creates spectators that, as Lisa Woynarski (2015: 70) has stated, "look upon the landscape as a separate object, instead of viewing themselves as acting within it.". Woynarski (2015: 86) notes Kershaw's interest in the type of space "created by new paradigms of performance ecology that may break down binaries between performer/spectator 'to produce participants in ecologically responsive action which recognises and embraces complexity in the agency of environments'" (Kershaw 2007b: 317).

[3] This scholarship builds on Garrett Hardin's "The Tragedy of the Commons" (1968) and Elinor Ostrom's critiques that won her the 2009 Nobel Prize in Economics. A focus on "commoning" (Linebaugh, 2008) has served analyses of modes of social mobilization "beyond market and state" (Bollier and Helfrich, 2013) and highlighted the "collective and non-commodified" (Harvey, 2012) nature of commons work, including within urban occupation movements (Susser, 2017). "Commoning" scholarship has proposed a broader conceptual framework integrating social and environmental justice concerns (Kashwan 2021), with two themes especially pertinent here: 1) a focus on sites of "latent" (Tsing, 2015) or "incipient" (Morgen and Erickson, 2017) commoning, and 2) attention to urban settings, with "cities being key sites both of neoliberal enclosure and of contemporary social movements that practice commoning" (Bodirsky, 2023: 1).

of directing attention away from resource-management and toward the social relations engendered through commons work. In this perspective, commons are “important social resources that bind people together in a place for a common purpose” (Sandström *et al.*, 2017: 509-510). Katharina Bodirsky notes that recent “new commons” initiatives are “defined less by the particular resource they use than by specific social relations of ‘commoning’: relatively open, egalitarian, and democratic relations of co-production and co-use by a community of “commoners” (Bodirsky, 2023: 1). What unites the works considered here is not their challenge to transform spectatorship into activist participation (although this is important to one case) but rather a mode of site-specific performance that integrates social collaboration and environmental aims and grounds these within a social framework extending beyond the time of the performance event.

The endeavors we examine have commonalities with community-based initiatives and urban walks studied elsewhere (see, for example, Hae-dicke, 2012: 149-175, and 2021: 102-106). We are especially concerned here with how each work cultivated a collective and environmentally-sensitive perspective on natural settings in ways that anchored macro-level environmental concerns in a specific local site. Here, we examine these works with two principal concerns in mind. First, in light of cities’ role as a critical site for addressing climate change and other environmental challenges, we examine the specific social and historical context of Marseille: to what extent do these works rely on and contribute to traditions of environmental arts initiatives in the city? Second, what are the key aesthetic strategies employed by these artists? By what means do they propose collaborative perspectives on the environment in the specific social conditions of Marseille? What factors have been most important in shaping their contributions to the city as a site of collaborative approaches to environmental issues?

MARSEILLE A PATCHWORK OF BORDER ZONES BETWEEN CITY AND NATURE

In many ways, Marseille and the larger PACA (Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur) region constitute one of the more polluted and polluting parts of France. But Marseille’s history and social composition have also made it a place where certain connections between social and environmental urban challenges are especially visible, and where innovative responses are taking shape. Discussing the city’s distinctive post-industrial trajectory, Baptiste Lanaspèze (director of the Marseille-based environmentally-themed publishing house Wildproject) has asked “Is Marseille falling behind the overdeveloped world – or in the lead toward the ecological society of the future?” (Lanaspèze, 2021). One important feature of the city is its patchwork quality – both in socio-economic terms – poverty widely diffused with pockets of poverty juxtaposed with wealthier ones – and with regard to the built and natural environments. This has created an urban setting comprised of many interstitial border zones. Environmental scientists Guiot, Mazurek, and Curt refer to Marseille as a kind of “urban laboratory of the relations between city and nature”.^[4] There, “hidden within the very center of its urban fabric lies a multitude of friches^[5] and interstitial areas including public parks and private or public gardens” (Mazurek, 2021: paragraph 42).

^[4] They cite the use of this phrase in the *Petit Atlas d'une Ville-Nature* (Barthélémy *et al.*, 2017).

^[5] “Friche” in agriculture refers to a fallow field. An urban friche is “an industrial wasteland” (Collins). Because of their importance in Marseille, the *Petit Atlas d'une Ville Nature* provides a typology of “vegetal” friches with three categories: agricultural, former industrial sites, and infrastructural “microfriches” that are part of residential or transportation centers (Barthélémy *et al.*, 2017: 85).

Marseille is also a place where the public nature of urban space has been contested. Sociologist Michel Peraldi argues that privatization was the central theme of former mayor Jean-Claude Gaudin's 25-year tenure (1995-2020), while geographer Élisabeth Dorier draws attention to the steep rise in gated communities – a kind of Marseille “privatopia” (Peraldi and Samson, 2020; Dorier, 2023). Dorier shows how gated communities not only remove certain areas from public use; they make schools less accessible and public transportation routes longer, thereby exacerbating inequalities. In this context, Marseille's border areas are also sites of creative tension and ambiguity where issues of how space is to be used, and by whom, are in play.

These developments provide a broader socio-political context for artists who choose to work in interstitial spaces precisely because of their dynamic potential. The Collectif SAFI (“Senses, Audacity, Fantasy, and Imagination”) speaking of its ambulatory work, states that

these interstitial spaces, on the edges, on the margins, on the sides... constitute in fact, through their intrinsic qualities, territories especially propitious for “redeploying the conditions of reconstructing a true sensitivity to the Other”. (Mathieu et al., 2019: 38; citing Amphoux, 2003)

Such groups are part of a broader current of work at the intersection of art and ecology in France and beyond (see Sermon, 2021) that views our environmental crisis as a crisis of sensibility – one that calls for creative work that heightens sensitivity and awareness of the place of humans in the natural world (Latour, 2022; Zhong, 2015). Theatre scholar Julie Sermon has argued that the arts can operate as “cognitive prostheses”, “augmenting our perceptions, making us sensitive to things that we would not otherwise notice...” (Sermon, 2023). The works considered here propose new perspectives and modes of interaction

with the physical environment and look to recast residents' experiences in parts of the city that are interstitial both in terms of human/nature relations and in terms of public/private use of urban space.

ART IN PUBLIC SPACE IN MARSEILLE

Marseille has a history of artistic interest in, and public support for, public space performance as a genre (often designated *théâtre de rue* or *arts de la rue*). More broadly speaking, as Susan Haedicke has pointed out in her study of contemporary street arts, developments in France from the mid-twentieth century onward have provided a supportive framework for artists working in outdoor public settings. French cultural policy initiatives of arts decentralization and democratization, oriented toward increasing access and engagement, evolved from making high art broadly available, to more directly seeking out and eliciting creative input from what was sometimes called the “non-public” – potential audience members not availing themselves of what flagship institutions were offering. Influenced in part by a generation of artists who from the late 1960s onwards had regularly and literally been taking to the streets for both political activism and arts iconoclasm, street arts initiatives have become prominent, still often associated with transgression or irreverence but also becoming increasingly professionalized and gaining legitimacy as public, and publicly supported, art (Haedicke, 2012: 22-43; see also Calder, 2019: 24-33). Starting in 2010 the French state established the institutions officially designated as “National Centers for street arts and public space” (there are now thirteen); prominent examples include the International Festival of street theatre in Aurillac (founded in 1986), as well as Lieux publics, a presenting organization (founded in 1983) which became based in Marseille from 1990 onwards.

The founder of Lieux publics, Michel Crespin, sometimes called the “Pope of arts de la rue,” also started the Aurillac festival; and Lieux publics contributed to a distinctive footprint for street arts in Marseille. That company, along with the street theatre troupe Générík Vapeur, initiated the creation of the Cité des Arts de la Rue, a venue that began development in the 1990s and opened in 2013. The Cité houses 11 organizations, including FAI-AR (Formation supérieure d’art en espace public), the first center of higher education in Europe devoted to arts creation in public space. The Cité draws on public funding at the national and regional levels but this has also been a priority of municipal cultural policy. Reflecting on her twenty-five years of experience in the city’s Minister of Culture’s office in a 2020 interview with the authors of this article, Cathy Berbon described what she saw as Marseille’s distinctiveness: “We have been able to highlight a singularity – in terms of arts creation – by devoting a major part of our support to the arts of the street.”

Described on its official website as “An ecosystem dedicated to street arts and to public space,” the Cité has supported arts initiatives like the ones we will discuss here; for example, the Collectif SAFI has worked with the Bureau des Guides, who have an office at the Cité. And further, beyond the prominent, large institution and its founders is a long-established field of independent, local arts organizations including Théâtre de la Mer (founded 1981) and SAFI (2001), deeply connected to the part of Marseille that is often called the “northern neighborhoods” (see below) – the area where the Cité also stands – and to communities residing there. Indeed, with Théâtre de la Mer, it was engagement with neighborhood groups that led to projects with an artistic and political focus on performance in public spaces and then eventually on green space and humans within nature.

THE BALADE URBAINE OF THE THÉÂTRE DE LA MER

This article grows out of fieldwork on the public outreach work of theaters in Marseille (Ingram, 2021; Ingram, 2022; Free and Ingram, 2023). Summer ethnographic research between 2007 and 2022 included participation in collaborative, neighborhood-centered, site-specific works, and interviews with artists, administrators, and neighborhood residents. Early contact with one company (the Théâtre de la Mer) led to special attention to the 13th and 14th *arrondissements* (districts). These districts (along with the 15th and 16th) are often referred to as the “northern neighborhoods” in contradistinction to the wealthier south. Home to many residents of immigrant descent, there is a strong tradition of neighborhood activism, especially in the Grand Saint Barthélémy (Baby-Collin and Mourlane, 2011) where the Théâtre de la Mer began. Our research has addressed the political dimensions of artistic appropriations of urban space, including the environmentally-focused activism considered here.

In 2014, we were in Frais-Vallon, a housing development and neighborhood in the 13th district to participate in an urban walk organized by the Théâtre de la Mer. Frais-Vallon is a neighborhood composed of 14 low-cost housing buildings (HLM), the first of which were built between 1962 and 1964. Today, the neighborhood includes many residents of North African and Comorian heritage. Journalist Benoît Gilles has noted that, “Here, everything belongs to the landlord HMP, from the hill (la colline) to the avenue, including the 14 buildings and the public spaces” (Gilles, 2022). HMP is Habitat Marseille Provence, a social housing company directly affiliated with local government.^[6]

The performance happened primarily on the Colline, a large wooded hill, on undeveloped land on the fringes of the residential block. A good example of Marseille's border zones, the Colline sits between roads that are the boundary between the low-income neighborhood of the housing development and a much more affluent area alongside it. In 2014, the movement across socio-economic zones was our main interest, but this work is also interesting for its integration of social and environmental aims. One goal, theatre director Frédérique Fuzibet told us, was for Frais-Vallon residents to feel more comfortable, both in the natural physical environment of the Colline and in the affluent neighborhood nearby. The Colline belongs legally to Habitat Marseille Provence but this organization has a public dimension and how the Colline is to be used has been left largely up to residents. Given its use for drug sales and use, one aim of the Balade was to redefine the site through encouraging new perspectives on, and heightened sensitivity, to the natural environment.

The event consisted of a six-hour long, wandering procession with many stops throughout for rest and for participants to witness brief, planned performance interventions that ranged from choreographed dances to improvised lectures. In the morning, about 75 participants gathered at the foot of the Colline. Five artists and administrators from Théâtre de la Mer were joined by members of the Compagnie Geneviève Sorin, a modern dance troupe. Besides the professional artists, event leaders included a group of women residents of Frais-Vallon with whom Fuzibet had worked to plan the day, and who presented their own creative work and interacted with audience members along the way. There were also two groups of local middle

← [6] In 2008, HMP became a Public Housing Office (Office Public de l'Habitat, Etablissement Public à Caractère Industriel et Commercial) of the city of Marseille and is now overseen by the Aix-Marseille Provence Métropole ("Qui sommes nous", 2024).

school children and their teachers; the students had learned about the ecology of the green space and studied nature-themed poetic texts. These groups were joined by staff from social services offices at Frais-Vallon; residents of Frais-Vallon beyond the central set of planners; and some people from outside these immediate circles (such as another company of local artists, the researchers from the USA, and occasional passers-by).

The performance started in the *cité* itself and then moved to the Colline. As the procession unfolded, it provided many different views of the surrounding greenspace of the neighborhood and the city beyond. One of the first stops was for refreshing drinks that the women from the neighborhood had made from plants gathered on the Colline. Other performances included actors from the professional theatre company and the audience being up close and personal with the natural landscape. In a spontaneous intervention, one of the actors audibly expressed her concern about whether there might be snakes in the thicket where she was going to sit and perform a poem.

In another scene, children from a local middle school sat in trees and performed poems. Another set of texts were poems written and performed by women of Frais-Vallon, following a workshop process led by the theatre company's director. While on the hill, we were surrounded by green space and in the trees but we were also offered views of the local neighborhood mediated by the natural environment of the Colline. One striking vista was presented when a member of the dance company danced capoeira on a retaining wall between a road and a cliff. This part of the Balade highlighted the theme of interstitiality – of in-betweenness and navigating a path between two places. One of the final stops was an unplanned one, as a woman from the more affluent neighborhood stopped members



BALADE URBAINE, FRAIS VALLON.

of the Balade to ask, somewhat critically, what was going on with the mildly disorderly procession of 70 people walking through the alleyway between gated homes. Without a hitch, the director of the Frais-Vallon Cultural Center split off to explain the event to the lady, as the group paused and then ambled forward again when the conversation politely concluded.

Such fortuitous interactions were part of the point of the event. In the Balade there was an emphasis on claiming as common space both the green environment and the surrounding urban and peri-urban neighborhood next to the *cité*. This act of appropriating urban space in the service of neighborhood associations and institutions draws on a long-term engagement with neighborhood residents by the Théâtre de la Mer. These artists manipulate time, aspects of the physical environment, and interactions with residents – these interactions (not just between the actors but with audience members as well throughout) constitute in fact the principal medium of the work. Seemingly ephemeral, works like this Balade Urbaine connect institutions, associations, artists, and residents over time so that part of what is performed is this broad network of mutual support – an important resource, especially for people newly arrived at the city. In this way, theatre artists support a kind of social infrastructure that provides not only arts opportunities to underserved communities but also linkages across a broad range of non-institutional groups and actors. Although they did not use the term, the Théâtre de la Mer’s work could be considered “commoning”, in the sense intended by recent scholarship emphasizing the broader social relations engendered through collaboration around a common resource.

YES, WE CANNE! AND THE WEEK OF NATURE AND COMMON RESOURCES

A second example of an arts initiative integrating commons-oriented and nature-centered work in an interstitial area is Yes, We Canne!, an all-day workshop by the SAFI Collective centered on the bamboo-like reed (*canne de Provence*) at the Foresta Park in northern Marseille. This workshop was part of a week-long series of events “Nature and Common Resources” created in 2021 by the Zef Theatre, which has two sites, both in the northern neighborhoods. The Zef website described their goals in 2022:

Throughout the year, many in the northern neighborhoods of Marseille work actively to address diverse environmental issues. The “Nature and Common Resources” Week is a moment dedicated to collaboration and cooperation among organizers and activists in the arts, education and social services to propose to the public: performances, guided walks, and workshops on the themes of landscape, cooking, gardening, and flora and fauna. An entire territory goes green in order to imagine, transform, and reappropriate natural urban sites that are part of our daily lives so that we can make of them sites of communication and coming together, sites of festivities and conviviality, true communities of practice in order to make – of public space – a common resource [un bien commun]. (“Nature et biens communs”, 2021–2022)

Activities included the performance by Sofia Teillet (*De La Sexualité des Orchidées*) and another by David Wahl (*Histoires de fouilles*). There was also a tour of urban gardens near the Kallisté neighborhood – and walks highlighting the natural landscape and residents in the neighborhoods that participants encountered along the way.

SAFI is part of the Bureau of Guides, a group that created the extensive set of trails (the GR 2013) that highlighted Marseille's natural environment during the 2013 European Capital of Culture year, and they were instrumental in ensuring that the northern neighborhoods be included in the GR 2013. SAFI's walks encourage people to see the urban landscape differently, as with the maps they created to help a neighborhood association ("Women in Action") create a community garden. The trails on the map highlighted flora and fauna but also sites important in local history such as the grocery store of Monsieur Tir, a neighborhood resident whose store became an important social center in an area that has a history of extensive and committed activism on behalf of the residents of the 14th district.

Yes, We canne! took place at Foresta Park, an undeveloped natural site of almost 50 acres located between the extensive Grand Littoral shopping mall and the port warehouses in the 15th district. In 2016, the site's owner, the Résilience company, provided a temporary occupation agreement to the Yes We Camp association to create a third space for recreation and nature-centered activities. In 2022, the Foresta association of local residents assumed leadership. At the time of writing, Foresta remains in a kind of limbo. While the city expressed interest in buying the site in 2024, it has been used since then to dump gravel and other refuse. It is described as "a possible future metropolitan park" on the Bureau des Guides website ("Foresta", 2024).

The goal of Yes We Canne! was to encourage another perspective on this reed often considered an invasive species.^[7] Much of the day was devoted to learning how to use this reed to create structures and to weave but collaboration and getting to know other participants

^[7] SAFI's work with canne de Provence has continued but the name is now "Renouer avec la canne" ("reconnecting with canne").



YES, WE CANNE!, FORESTA.

were also priorities. There were around 15 participants (some joined and others dropped out throughout the day) in addition to the two SAFI leaders, Dalila Ladjal and Stéphane Brisset. The event began at a wooden table outside the Gare Franche site of the Zef Theatre. From there Dalila Ladjal led the group to a nearby field of canne plants. She described the life cycle of the plant and then led the group on a long walk to the Foresta site that led across hills with sweeping views of the city. At Foresta, the group had a picnic lunch around an outdoor table. After lunch, participants were led into a jungle-like overgrowth of canne and cut down around 20-30 stalks. These were carried back to the central Foresta site, where participants learned how to split the stalks and make twine and strips that could be used for weaving and crafting objects such as tables and mats.

The day's activities were part of a much longer project centered on canne and biodiversity that included workshops with schoolchildren and culminated in an interactive talk by a botanist at the Salim Hatubou library in the Plan d'Aou neighborhood. The botanist emphasized a theme important to the workshop: a criticism of how certain kinds of plants are defined as invasive and rejected as foreign. She made an explicit link between this view of the natural environment and the view of foreign people as invasive in anti-immigrant and xenophobic discourse.

SAFI contributes to a broad network of commoning initiatives in Marseille, site for the 2021 "Assemblée des communs" (an annual meeting of city-based organizations centered on creating new commons).^[8] This includes its contributions to the COMAC, the Marseille Collective for food and commons.^[9] A recent project is a Bureau des Guides series of events "En-Quête de Terres" that included participation with a host of Marseillais associations and institutional partners.^[10] Describing "En-Quête de Terres" (suggesting both "In search of

lands" and "research on lands"), organizers state "we will not find meaning in our daily life if we do not make ourselves sensitive to the relations and interdependencies in which we live" ("En-Quête", 2024).

SAFI's work exemplifies what Bodirsky sees as a key feature of new commoning initiatives: efforts to "enact postcapitalist relations to nature that are nonexploitative and recognizant of multispecies connections" (Bodirsky, 2023: 1). The latter is evident in their commitment to urban walks and plant gathering in "in-between spaces, spaces between city and nature", with plant-gathering presented as a way of "re-enchanting, reactivating, and returning to public attention the relations one can have with our landscapes... a possible way of knowing the world"^[11] (Stasi, *et al.*, 2021). They also focus on commoning, as seen in a 2023 interview (Astier / el Bajnoui, 2023) in which Dalila Ladjal described a recent urban walk: "We try to walk across landscapes sufficiently varied to allow people to engage with complex questions, questions of rights... to whom does this land belong? How should we act to live on it in common?" As with Yes, We Canne!, the integration of social and environmental concerns is central to SAFI's work.

← [8] The local branch of this national organization is Foncièrement Commun (<https://antennemarseillaise.assembleedescommuns.cc/qui-sommes-nous>).

← [9] The COMAC is comprised of around thirty institutional members, including – in addition to the Bureau des Guides, many other associations devoted to collaborative responses to food and environmental issues such as the Cité de l'Agriculture and the fast-food restaurant food bank L'Après-M.

← [10] These include the Cité de l'Agriculture, the third place site the Tour-Sainte, the Capri Farm, the association Terre de partage et d'entraide, the COMAC, the Sols vivants Terres fertiles Collective, l'Après M, the Atelier paysan, the Jardins de Julien, the paysan.ne.s de Sainte-Marthe, l'APHM and the MUCÉM museum.

[11] As part of its exhibit on the Mediterranean diet, the Mucem museum displayed the map created by SAFI that highlights the flora of Marseille: <https://collectifsafi.com/carte-des-lieux-de-recolte-a-marseille/>.

“LET’S SAVE MIRAMAR” AND THE GREAT DISARRANGEMENT

The third work considered here is a protest parade called “the Great Dis-arrangement”. The goal was to mobilize support for an association called “Let’s Save Miramar” and its experience is a common-sounding success story of sorts. Miramar is a property near L’Estaque, a village geographically separate but part of the city of Marseille. Miramar was bequeathed to the city by Jules Cantini following his death in 1916 and intended for public use in perpetuity. But increasingly, after 2010, the area was used for truck traffic and industrial containers, whereas local residents used it as an informal park and a pathway allowing easier and safer circulation. In 2019, some residents discovered that Miramar had been sold in 2011 to a container company. They created an association (“Let’s Save Miramar”) and staged events such as a visitation by the ghost of Jules Cantini (reminding elected officials of the terms of his bequest). In 2021, when trees started being cut down, some residents resisted, and through the stewardship of the local arts center L’Harmonie de l’Estaque, they organized an event to enlist public support.

The name “the Great Disarrangement” echoes “The Great Derangement” – Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh’s book about climate change as existential danger and crisis of imagination in the arts and politics. “Let’s Save Miramar” brought together schools, artists, and neighborhood associations in order to – as did the SAFI Collective maps – redefine the urban landscape in ways that integrate awareness of its rich environmental and socio-cultural qualities.

In a 2021 report, association leader Julie DeMuer stated that

with the preservation of the green space of Miramar and its surrounding area, what is truly at stake is the respectful development of the social and physical environment – a process in which every contribution no matter how small participates in engagements to fight global warming and the impoverishment of biodiversity, and to gain greater recognition of our cultural rights as citizens, parents or neighbors to define the spaces where we live. This involves first and foremost the quality of life in our neighborhoods and new ways to balance activities, natural species, and habitats.^[12]

The Great Dis-Arrangement paraded through L’Estaque and stopped at locations where arts groups from L’Estaque performed, such as a theatre – the “Agency for Imaginary Travel”, where the Le Kèr Matoya singers performed songs from La Réunion. The parade then made its way to the Miramar property where events took place under the watchful eye of a security guard. At Miramar, participants sang and played instruments. There was also a picnic nearby – off the Miramar property – with posters hung up that described the history of the site and the plants growing on it. There was also a hanging painting on which participants were encouraged to write a message to the owner of the property expressing what they appreciated about Miramar. Throughout, the social and environmental goals of the project were interrelated. As Sauvons Miramar organizer Julie Demuer stated in an email shortly after the event,

Playing with agility on private and yet collective spaces, we continue in this way our search for the common, for the preservation of the living and for an ensemble of neighbors both active and in solidarity.^[13]

[12] <https://www.hoteldunord.coop/author/julie/page/2/>.

[13] Personal email, 07/01/2022.



One might consider the Miramar property prior to 2019 as a kind of “latent” commons, to use Anna Tsing’s phrase. These are sites where one might find “not-yet-articulated common agendas” across the boundaries separating human and nonhuman parts of the environment (Tsing, 2015). As part of her proposal for “an alternative politics of more-than-human entanglements,” Tsing describes latent commons as “entanglements that might be mobilized in common cause. Because collaboration is always with us, we can maneuver within its possibilities. We will need a politics with the strength of diverse and shifting coalitions – and not just for humans.” (Tsing, 2015: 135). For Tsing, in the absence of progress-oriented myths of the past in our current climate emergency “at the end of the world”, we need to find those sites, unnoticed and undeveloped, where collaborative strategies for addressing the challenges of the future might be found.

In the end, “Let’s Save Miramar” succeeded in getting the Aix-Marseille-Provence Métropole to change the intercommunal local urbanism plan (PLUI) so that a Category 1 EVP (Protected Green Space) was created. In addition to other protections, this prevents it from being developed and from having new buildings constructed. There is a public garden and the association distributed a calendar to enlist volunteers for watering and other tasks. They continue to hold picnics and other gatherings there. In addition, the group’s success has prompted invitations to events centered on similar initiatives to discuss strategies and goals. This has fostered broader city-wide collaboration and partnerships, as with the association GERM^[14] (Gestion écologique et renaturation des milieux, or Ecological management and renaturation of environments) which has helped with advice about how to best take care of the soil and biodiversity at Miramar.^[15]

CONCLUSION

In their aesthetic strategies, the artists considered here propose their own approaches to the challenge of developing new modes of collaboration on environmental issues. Each initiative took shape within the specific socio-historical context of Marseille but the attention to commoning has helped to highlight concerns in community-based and environmentally-focused art more generally.

The first is the long-term frame for these initiatives. Beyond the time and space of the performances proper, the works considered here sustain networks of collaboration that involve participants in enduring partnerships within and beyond the city. As Victoria Hunter (2019: 189-195) emphasizes in research on site-specific dance in public parks and squares, work on the commons often faces the ever-present threat of enclosure – these are sites of contention. Ensuring sustainable models for public resource management is an ongoing challenge, addressed in some cases by initiatives integrating tourism and commons work (Canévet, 2024). Whether through activism, interrogation, or exploration, the artists considered here, in their aesthetic strategies, focus on interstitial sites where communal benefits and responsibilities are valued and tested, and questions involving the public use of urban space are ambiguous and

← [14] Online GERM is described as including ecologists, urbanists, engineers, and nature lovers working “with a powerful desire to cooperate with residents and act together for our common spaces and for living things (le vivant)”. (<https://www.helloasso.com/associations/germ-gestion-ecologique-et-renaturation-des-milieux>)

← [15] Sauvons Miramar organizer Julie Demuer described these connections in May of 2023, noting that a network of local actors including schools and arts institutions would be involved in determining how the property will be used: “That seems to us a good strategy for continuing to foster collective practices in a way that is both concerted and collectively determined.”

not clearly defined. These arts initiatives redefine ambiguous sites by proposing experiential models integrating social and environmental aims, goals that echo other recent “commoning” initiatives (Bodirsky, 2023: 13-18).

These models direct attention to the boundaries often drawn between nature and culture and in this way subvert conventional understandings of the “urban” as a realm opposed to and distinct from the natural world. As Woynarski (2015: 179) has noted,

With the rapid growth of urban areas, it is important to start to rethink the framing of the city as solely the domain of the human-built momentum of culture (and therefore separate from nature). Considering the urban as an assemblage of human and more than-human vibrant and dynamic relationships may help to reposition concepts of growth and development towards sustainable or ecological urbanism.

The arts initiatives considered here contribute to efforts to transform our thinking about the place of human agency in the broader natural world – away from humans as “spectators” of the landscape – by providing models for creative engagement with interstitial nature/culture zones, thereby both establishing collaborative modes of action on environmental issues and highlighting possibilities for a more sustainable future.

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