Another vision of the suburbs

Jean-Christophe Bardot and Laurent Devisme

Île-de-France (Paris Region), 2008.

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Images of the urban fringes of French cities often tend either to condemn their ugliness or to revel in a strange fascination for these geometric spaces. Here, Laurent Devisme comments upon Jean-Christophe Bardot's photographs, and shows how they give a visible form to the imagined perceptions of these urban spaces.

Photography and the social sciences: peripheral perspectives

In partnership with the Paris-based photographers' collective Le Bar Floréal, *Metropolitics* is pleased to present a new series of articles that explores themes from a dual perspective: through the photographer's lens and from the standpoint of a researcher. In this paper, Jean-Christophe Bardot's images and Laurent Devisme's text examine Paris's outer suburbs from a different angle.

The series "En périféerie" (a play on the words "*périphérie*" and "*féerie*" that could be roughly translated as "On the fairytale fringes"), which focuses on new retail, business, leisure and residential spaces in metropolitan areas, was presented in 2012 at the Pavillon Carré de Baudouin in Paris as part of *VILLES*, a collective exhibition of work by photographers from Le Bar Floréal. This project, initiated in the Paris region, has been continued in north-western France.

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It is often said that the French suburbs – the *banlieues* – get a bad press; what is more rarely pointed out is that urban spaces in general are often portrayed in a poor light, even though certain links can be made between these two phenomena. In both cases, raising the issue of the media visibility and impact of images is a necessity for urban researchers. First, because it is important to highlight the ways in which media images are made in order to defuse their effects, which are as powerful as ever; it would, however, be something of a shortcut – and, for the most part, inaccurate – to insist upon a diametric opposition between representations and realities. The ideal and the material cannot be considered opposites, and "mental realities" are still realities that have practical consequences. From this idea, it follows that the imageability[1] of territories is to be taken seriously and not as some sort of overarching "big-picture" vision. The imageability of a space refers to its connotations, to the fact that it is always more than a surface on which to project, and an actant of social histories. Spaces are, in themselves, already inextricably values; and in determining this "alreadiness", images play a decisive role.

The sensibility of "the other city"

When Michel Lussault talks about a figurative urban crisis (Lussault 2007, p. 296), he does so in order to highlight, at the very least, a deficit, but often also negative images that form part of an "urbaphobia", the sources and consequences of which historians have already extensively analysed (Baubérot and Bourillon 2009; Salomon Cavin and Marchand 2011). It is a regular feature in the mass media: notable examples include the issue of weekly cultural magazine *Télérama* devoted to "La France moche" ("Ugly France", 13 February 2010), to which Éric Chauvier's work *Contre Télérama* (2011) was a reaction; and, as early as 1996, *Le Figaro* launched a four-part investigation (24 June 1996) titled "La laideur aux portes de la ville" ("Ugliness on the city's doorstep"). This has

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[1]   The word "imageability" is used here in a similar way to "representability".

provoked numerous reactions: over the past 15 years, a sometimes enchanted imagery of the city's edges has developed. The fascination for peripheral commercial spaces was palpable in the exhibition "L'autre ville. L'empire des signes" ("The Other City. The Empire of Signs"), organised by the French Institute of Architecture in 1997, which made use in particular of a semiological work on commercial signs, echoing the work of the same name by Roland Barthes. This exhibition was linked to the requirements of the call for research tenders on the theme of "La ville émergente" ("The Emerging City"). Although this period of urban research may seem distant, the importance of the aesthetic register in the debates that could be followed at the time must not be forgotten.

For example, Paul Chemetov proposed "an aesthetic that provides the cultural packaging of the merchandise" (*Urbanisme*, no. 298, 1998, p. 37), while Bruno Fortier was opposed to the generic city of Rem Koolhaas. Two other research media of the period ought also to be recalled. The first of these is issue no. 35 of the journal *TTS* (*Techniques, territoires et sociétés*), which re-examined the emerging city. Geneviève Dubois-Taine, then director of the programme of the "Ville émergente" programme at PUCA,[2] wrote: "While 90% or 95% of the population lives 'well' and pleasantly in their territories, this vast majority is absent from the literature, ignored even; their points of view are not revealed" (p. 200). Though the desire to work on contemporary territories is not confined to the outer suburbs, the stimulus for such work often comes from these areas because of the existence of "a certain number of urban settlements, not totally planned by local authorities, which meet with very strong support from residents. Shopping centres, multiplex cinemas, out-of-town business parks and leisure parks are favoured by users. (...) The territories of contemporary practices are systems of places chosen by residents to enable them to lead their lives as they see fit"(pp. 201 and 203).

The second research medium in question is very much a counterpoint to the first: in 1999, the journal *Esprit* published a special issue titled "Quand la ville se défait" ("When the city undoes itself") and taking as its starting point the observation of the "failure" of the socialising function of the city, replaced by forms of affinity-based urbanisation on the edges of cities that are concerned with protecting their own members rather than including those on the margins. "The classic European city was marked by the class struggle symbolised by the opposition of the Versaillais and the Communards during the Paris Commune. Today, the 'emerging city' is an island within an island; the *polis* has very little to do with *polemos*" (*Esprit*, November 1999, p. 86). This special edition shows just how much the imageability of periurban areas was a sensitive issue at the turn of the 21st century.

A mere 15 years on, few lessons have been learned from this crisis of figurability – as if the opposition between two "models" (the classic European city versus the emerging city) remains a valid framework, whereas it is in fact only (too) convenient! And yet the deployment of photographic images has become a considerable resource for those who seek to decipher urban areas.

The renaissance of territorial photography

Unprecedented in scale, this deployment is first of all that of aerial views of different territories (Monsaigeon 2013). "Double-clic", the quasi-character directed by Bruno Latour (2012), here plays its role and creates the illusion for the web user of almost universal accessibility to the planetary space: all it takes is to zoom in or navigate on *Google Street View* to actually be there. The popularity of the photographic work of Yann Arthus-Bertrand and even Alex MacLean is another testament to this phenomenon, which tends to induce a contemplative attitude and reinforce those aspects that appear to refer to an ecological awareness (Devisme 2013). In any case, this trend clearly calls for photography to return to a human scale. But how should it be framed? What should be highlighted?

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[2] PUCA – Plan urbanisme, construction, architecture – is an interministerial urban development, construction and architecture plan.

Indeed, we are contemporaries to the development of what is almost an editorial line with regard to periurban photography. While it is true that "interest in the urban peripheries is a constant features of the poetic and photographic study of vernacular since the 1930s, with all the ambiguities that this notion generates when it is applied similarly to traditional forms of rural housing and industrial building standards," says Jean-François Chevrier (2006, p. 123) regarding the importance of the territorial dimension in American photography. But more recently, since the Photographic Mission of the French spatial planning agency DATAR (Délégation interministérielle à l'aménagement du territoire et à l'attractivité régionale – Interministerial Delegation for Territorial Development and Regional Attractiveness) was initiated in the 1980s, the number of exhibitions and publications resulting from public commissions or the work of "independent" photographers has increased, resolutely putting urban issues on the agenda.

The urban fringes as a photographic genre?

The same patterns seemed to appear time and again, to such an extent that it was qualified – in a collective research project[3] – as the manifestation of a sort of academicism: grassy foregrounds and periurban skylines on the horizon; the omnipresence of exterior views and the absence of views inside housing; a focus on incongruity; the reproduction of identical objects portrayed as a recursive *mise en abyme*... Furthermore, a contemplative perspective was frequently used to create distance, as if to avoid bringing those who view these photos too close to what actually goes on in the urban fringes.

Our work led to the identification of a number of essential objects: the shopping centre, photographed from its outdoor spaces; infrastructure, viewed from the standpoint of its remains or in terms of spatial externalities; the suburban housing estate, stigmatised by the more or less standard and more or less tightly packed single-family homes, and sometimes even portrayed as a scale model full of little toy houses; industries and spaces dedicated to logistics that sometimes echo wastelands (alongside the planned spaces, there are certain indeterminate "outsider" spaces that are not included in future plans, and which consequently seem all the more to be vehicles of strangeness); and finally, the roundabout, that quintessential traffic management device, has also become a recurrent feature of periurban photography: often disproportionately dimensioned and the bearers of obsolete emblems of the towns and villages they dot, roundabouts have, in the space of a few years, gone from being the *punctum* to being the *studium* of many road layouts, to use Roland Barthes's terminology (1980).[4]

These themes can be identified in various series of photographs, and in particular those of André Merian ("The Statement"[5]), Isabelle Hayeur ("Excavations"[6]), Jürgen Nefzger ("Hexagone 1" and "Hexagone 2"[7]), Stéphane Couturier ("Landscaping"[8]), Marc Räder ("Scanscapes"[9]), Emmanuel Pinard ("Marne-la-Vallée" and "Périphérie"[10]) and Denis Darzacq ("Nu" and "Hyper"[11]) – a list of authors that is far from exhaustive and which should not mask important differences in terms of the approaches adopted. The point we seek to make here refers primarily to the relevance of using

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[3] We refer the reader to the first chapter of a work we edited a few years ago (Devisme 2008) called "Greetings from Suburbia". Contributors to this chapter include Arnaud Bertolotti, Anne Bossé and Guillaume Ertaud.

[4] In *Camera Lucida* (*La Chambre claire* in French), Barthes highlights the *punctum*, denoting a wound or poignant detail or meaningful anecdote in a photograph that attracts our attention, which interferes with the *studium*, denoting the overall interpretation of a photograph or its application to a thing, or a general involvement in a particular domain.

[5] http://documentsdartistes.org/artistes/merian/repro14.html.

[6] http://isabelle-hayeur.com/photos/excavations/index.html.

[7] *Hexagone. 1995-2001. 1. Le paysage fabriqué* and *Hexagone. 2000-2005. 2. Le paysage consommé* were published in France in 2006 by Éditions Füdo.

[8] http://www.stephanecouturier.fr/couturier/LS3.html.

[9] http://www.parrotta.de/artists/marc-raeder/10.shtml.

[10] http://www.emmanuelpinard.com.

[11] http://www.denis-darzacq.com/portfolios.htm#.

visual social-science practices that could create closer links between documentary photography and qualitative sociology closer together – two activities that share many qualities (Becker 2001), not least the fact that, in general, they allow for more detailed representations of territories.[12]

The urban fringes captured: between real and unreal

If we apply this approach to extracts from the series "En périféerie"[13] by Jean-Christophe Bardot (of Le Bar Floréal), what observations and interpretations can be made?

First, the space in these areas is more geometric, more optical. Periurban spaces are delimited by clean lines, indicating sites clearly and making crossings difficult.[14] In framing his pictures, the photographer even reveals a grid when overhead power lines are superimposed, obscuring the third dimension. This geometry emphasises another "quality" that permeates these photographs: order and tidiness. Here, nothing sticks out, creating spaces reminiscent of the kind of good-neighbour guidelines found at the entrances to many apartment blocks that discourage certain uses of spaces and emphasise codes of conduct – here as elsewhere, indeed, as this trend is by no means restricted to the outer suburbs! The geometric aspect is confirmed by the sharp shadows cast everywhere. We suspect that it is difficult to find shelter here (after all, who knows, a shelter could also be a possible den or a hiding place for a potential attacker). The heat is oppressive, even in a quiet little place like Le Bois-d'Arcy, in the far western suburbs of Paris, and the suggested atmosphere is redolent of certain scenes in *Dog Days*, Ulrich Seidl's 2001 film that takes place in an Austrian suburb crushed by the summer heat.

Second, the selection highlights a contrast of colours, which can also be found, of course, in work on strip malls and shopping centres, but which here instead focuses on the contrasts between the different materials used and in the boldness of signage. Materials are above all placed, rather than implanted, in their settings. There are no signs of anything being rooted into the ground here. The wood cladding has just been fitted, but it will soon be replaced; houses being built follow the *tabula rasa* principle; the terrace of the sushi bar, with its exposed aggregate concrete slabs (particularly resistant, it is true), will perhaps soon be a memory, as that even the temporary sales offices are already doomed to become wasteland. The idea of following the life cycle of building materials may be more promising.[15] Like some of the other photographic works mentioned above, Jean-Christophe Bardot's work deals in simulacrum and seriality. One picture, for instance, juxtaposes a fantasy suburban hedge-enclosed "farmstead" with its real-life counterpart, of which only the roof is visible. Here, we are in the same domain as the credits of the television series *Weeds*, which frame and re-frame the theme of reproduction and cloning (Bossé and Devisme 2011).

We can nevertheless identify, to a certain extent at least, where we are: we are in Île-de-France – the Paris region – one minute on the run-down concrete deck of a new town, barely able to tell the front of the place from the back... then, without transition, transported to the "edges" of the region, where there are new areas to be cleared and urbanised, unless the pioneer front is reversed, transforming it into a paradise lost covered by suddenly invasive vegetation. Indeed, the

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[12]   Furthermore, the joint consideration of photographers' and researchers' viewpoints is at the core of an ongoing project within the LAUA (Langages, actions urbaines, altérités – "Language, Urban Action, Otherness") research unit, called "Péri-ville invisible", in response to the invitation to tender launched by PUCA titled "Du périurbain à l'urbain".

[13]   A play on the words "*périphérie*" and "*féerie*" that could be approximately translated as "On the fairytale fringes".

[14]   This is evoked particularly well in a scene from the film *Le Grand Soir* (Benoît Delépine and Gustave Kerven, 2012), when the two main characters, brothers, cut straight through a housing estate, jumping over hedges and fences, even cutting right through the houses themselves without stopping, suggesting to the terrified residents as they pass though what might perhaps have existed there before the houses were built.

[15]   Take, for example, the work of Brussels-based collective Rotor, which in early 2013 exhibited a work in Montreal titled "Polyurethane", which seeks to trace the use of expanded foam in the construction industry and in public works (Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA), *ABC: MTL* exhibition).

relationship with nature is enlightening: nature is generally kept under control and, when it spills over, it is to threaten urbanisation, "regain its rightful place" in this wasteland of housing-estate sales offices. The artificialised face of nature *par excellence* is without doubt the "potted tree", the complete opposite of the open ground. But it is the last extract from "En périféerie" that seems both the most ordinary and the most intriguing. It forms less of a tableau than the others, probably partly because we can see the raindrops on the camera lens, and because the drizzle creates a blurred quality that contrasts with the previous images. The bottled gas stacked in columns at the supermarket petrol station appears as a synecdoche of the distant suburbs, of those spaces that have no connection to the power grid. It is all too easy to imagine, on the very same car park, a tanker preparing to tour the neighbourhood to fill up all the fuel tanks with ever cheaper heating oil before the winter comes... It is here that we find Deleuze, for whom "the imaginary is not the unreal, but rather the indistinguishability between the real and the unreal"(Deleuze 1990, p. 93).
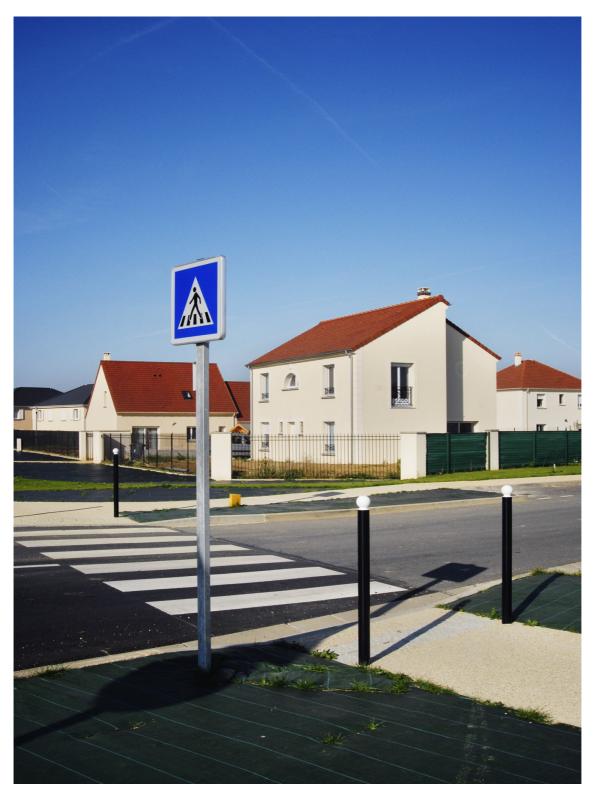
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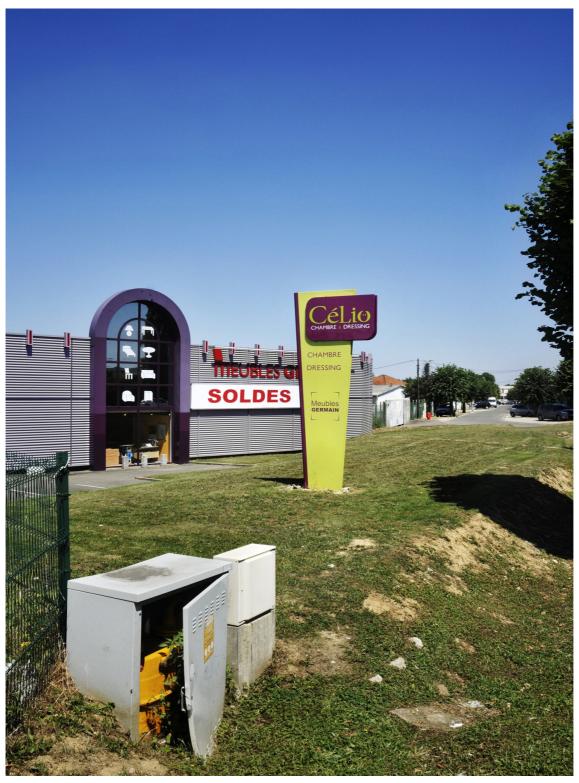
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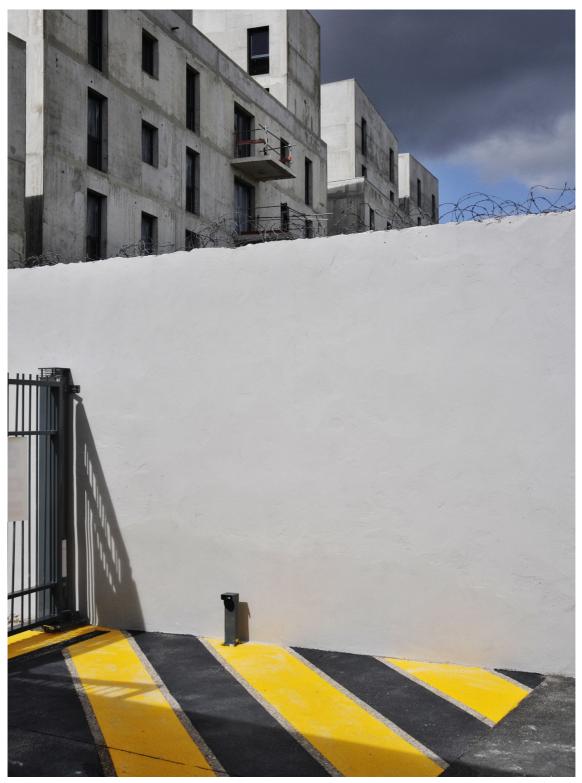Île-de-France, 2010.

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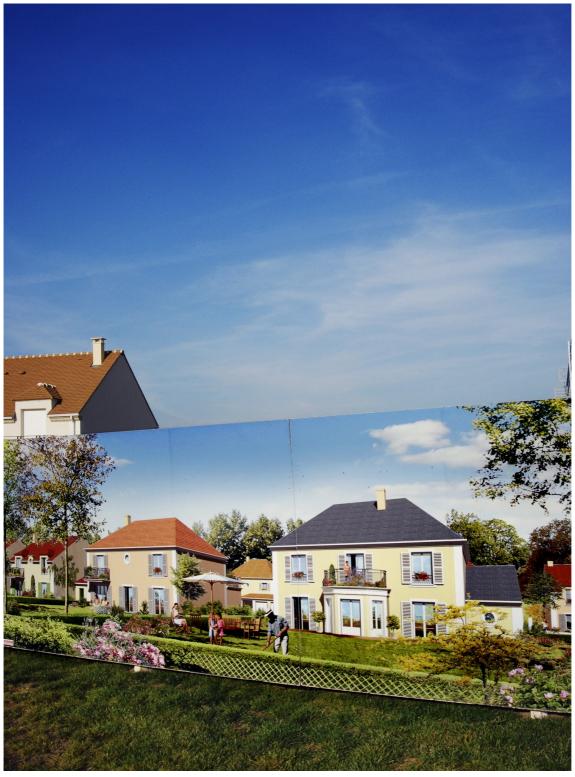Île-de-France, 2010.

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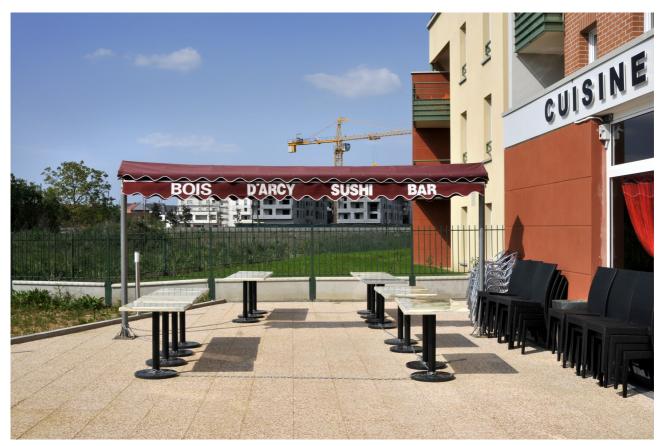
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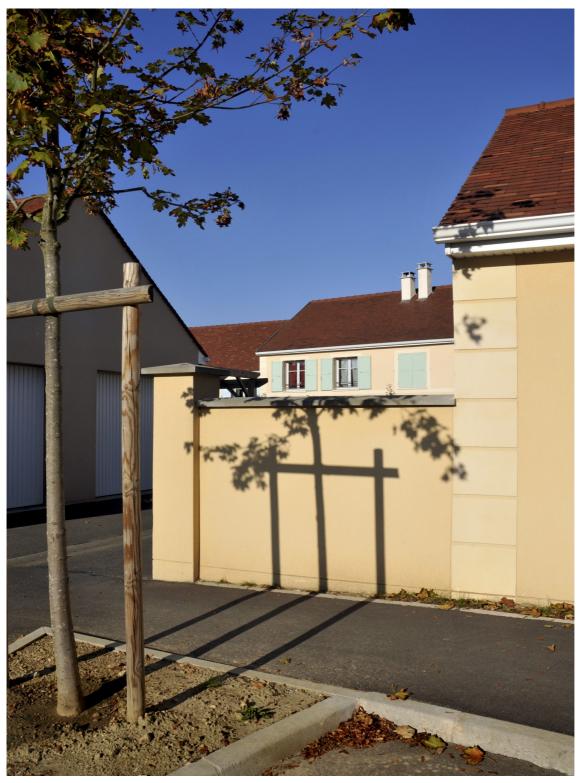
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Jean-Christophe Bardot is a photographer. He studies took him into the fields of architecture and the history of photography before embarking upon a career in images, via the theatre. He joined Le Bar Floréal in 2005. He lives in the Yvelines *département*, to the west of Paris. His interests include the transformations of urbanised territories and the lifestyles of the people who live in these spaces.

In 2008, he travelled to the Lorraine region, in the north-east of France, and in particular to former steelworking communities, where he photographed the new European development clusters that have been created nearby in France, Belgium and Luxembourg for the exhibition "Retour en Lorraine" ("Return to Lorraine"). After two years documenting the urban renewal of the Pierre Sémard neighbourhood of Saint-Denis, in the inner northern suburbs of Paris, he produced a series of photographs titled "Un hiver" ("A Winter") concerning the demolition of a block of flats. "Un hiver" was presented at the La Cambre Photography and Architecture Biennial in Brussels, and is currently touring as part of a collective exhibition called "Grands ensembles, 1960-2010" ("Housing Projects, 1960–2010") initiated by the French Ministry for Culture and Communication.

Together with fellow photographer Olivier Pasquiers, he is currently working on intangible cultural heritage and the ways in which this heritage is passed on, on behalf of the Fédération des écomusées et musées de société (French Federation of Ecomuseums and Folk Museums), for an exhibition in 2014. He also contributes to seminars for master's degree students at the École nationale supérieure d'architecture de Versailles (Versailles School of Architecture).

His photographs have recently featured in four collective published works: *Monmousseau, 2 automnes et 3 étés* (Le Bar Floréal, 2010), *Retour en Lorraine* (Trans Photographic Press, 2009), *Nous* (Le Bar Floréal, 2007) and *En Coulisses* (Le Bar Floréal, 2007).

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