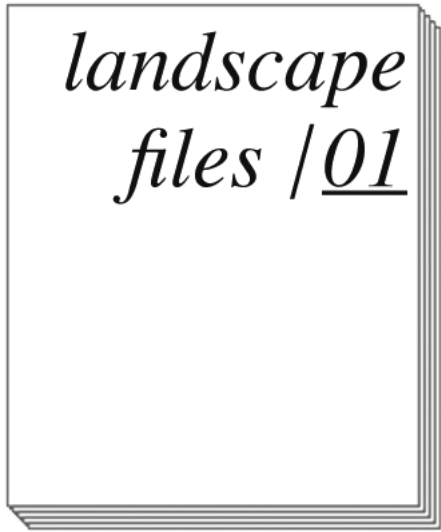


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Erica Overmeer
New Territory

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A beautifully printed and in a bright orange cloth hand-bound publication. The publication of Sarcelles Landscape, a documentation of the landscape in the outskirts (banlieue) of Paris, near Sarcelles.

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Erica Overmeer
Sarcelles Landscape



New Territory / Sarcelles

Sarcelles is France's first Ville Nouvelle, or new town. It was built in the early 1960s in the Paris banlieue. It is a small place and yet it reflects all the major questions and dilemmas of modern society and, with its inspirational, visionary design, the challenges and conflicts of modern urbanism in a suburban context.

Sarcelles was built as an independent, autonomous centre, in a rural environment, yet closely linked to Paris, as a relief and alternative for urgent housing shortage due to the big urban turnarounds and urban remodelling that was happening in the Paris of the sixties. The surrounding landscape was intended to form an integral part of the city's (Sarcelles) layout and is a fundamental element of its urban conception.

Large housing blocks alternate with wide green spaces, small parks, sports facilities, broad vistas, recreational areas, school playgrounds and a (securely fenced) Jewish kindergarten. There is a local hospital, adjacent to a waste combustion plant, and huge parking lots, which give way to open spaces with no apparent use, which are scattered with squatted, improvised allotments and overshadowed by looming high-voltage electricity pylons and more parking spaces.

Everything is interconnected by dirt roads and crisscrossed by trails formed by force of habit rather than design, and strewn with large boulders, concrete blocks and building rubble, which appears to have been dumped at random. The area is enclosed by the suburban railway that connects Charles de Gaulle Airport in Roissy with Paris' Gare du Nord. The low-flying planes from the airport circle over-

head. Big skies and always at any time of the day, a kind of hazy light that is always good for taking pictures, are in all directions being cut up by a complex pattern of high-voltage power lines.

This formally planned infrastructure has been superimposed upon and modified by multiple layers of informal use. It is also an area where, over time, mostly immigrants have settled and it now accommodates a multifaceted, eclectic community with extremely diverse ethnic, and cultural origins. This is a dense, multi-layered environment with an ambiguous and diffuse identity – and a public space that has been formed and transformed by differing needs and approaches to landscape and social environment.

It is this great amalgam of social attitudes that attracted me to Sarcelles in the first place, but it also makes Sarcelles a tense and unpredictable place, and susceptible to scenes of social and territorial conflict, most clearly manifest in recurring adolescent feuds and disputes of various kinds. Against this backdrop, I repeatedly observed children intensely engaged in aggressive games and sham fights – gesticulating, being verbally abusive, and simulating threatening postures, individually or in groups; re-enacting and / or anticipating a reality taking place around them.

New Territory is a documentary fiction based on these observations. Set in an open area adjacent to a fenced sporting compound, one of many local, nonspecific transit areas, it depicts a young immigrant boy walking, lost in thought, while playfully and serenely balancing a wooden stick in his hands. Although the gesture is playful and innocent, it also

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**demonstrates and anticipates the implicit possibility
and potential need for adolescent self-assertion and
self-defence should the situation demand it in an
area with a diffuse territorial identity.**

**See also: Paris, Paris, Sarcelles (3 vol.) O Book
Publisher, 2001**

‘...I like the sight of landscape in use...’

Frank Bascombe in *The Lay of the Land* by Richard Ford (Knopf Publishers, NY, 2006)

At the edge of an area where landscape dissolves into parking lots and anonymous playgrounds, to finally give way to low-rise buildings, stands an aggrieved-looking orthodox Jewish boy. Dressed in all the trappings of his religion, poking at a low fire that is smouldering amongst some big, scattered boulders at the edge of a vast parking lot, he is burning unknown things, before disappearing in an indeterminate direction, weaving between the parked cars. Meanwhile, a gang of black teenaged moped riders are revving their bikes and racing down the path that crosses my view, from left to right and back again, between the indistinct school grounds nestled somewhere in the landscape and the far end of the parking lot, where a group of young men are gathered around a parked car, with all its doors open, gesturing wildly and screaming at each other in high-pitched voices over the sound-track of Arabic rap blaring from their car radio.

A few hundred meters of trails through the undergrowth leads to the next parking lot, a sandy plot bordered by concrete park benches beneath low trees, overshadowed by looming high voltage electricity pylons, and where wide-legged Turkish men sit with chessboards between their knees, spending their afternoons playing chess and boules on the lot, and where, at the close of the day, Mathilda from Haiti sets up her deep fat-fryer on an improvised terrace and serves her spicy fried chicken wings to her mostly Creole drive-by clientele.

A black off-duty police officer walking his dog warns

me of ‘dangerous’ men who might hassle me and perhaps even steal my camera. A scary-looking youngster with a shaven head, wearing a grey combat outfit, is walking an even meaner looking dog. He follows my gaze into the landscape, and makes a friendly inquiry as to exactly what I’m doing there ‘filming the landscape’ with this old-fashioned camera; then he wishes me good luck with my endeavours.

Two young friends from African origin who are spending their after school hours in their elder brother’s bar, follow me around and, excited about my presence in their neighbourhood, offer to help me at any time with anything I might need, whatever it might be. And last but not least a lonely black boy walks in splendid isolation, apparently unaware of his surroundings, lost in soliloquy, jabbing his right arm out in front of him all the while, his clenched fist and two extended fingers simulating a pistol, threatening some invisible adversary.

Over and over, people pop up, passing in and out of sight, engaged in a great variety of tasks and with intentions entirely their own, each with their own individual sense of purpose, unknown to me; all somehow using and occupying this apparently ‘neutral’ space in their personal manner, and inadvertently shaping my perception of their surroundings by their very presence and use of the space.

An elderly Maghreb man and his grandson are walking back and forth, carrying large plastic bottles filled with water from an unknown source, to irrigate their tiny patch of squatted ground, somewhere in the midst of this landscape, concealed behind the next bush. In front of me, a couple with a jerry can

begin tapping water – illegally – from an improvised tap connected to a well, hidden by a heavy lid and a large stone so nobody would see it.

Suddenly a man in a small white truck parks next to me, gets out and starts shovelling sand into the back of his car until a police car shows up a few minutes later to check the man's ID and ask me what I'm doing there too. They think it's okay, as long I don't take any pictures of small children. A woman comes wandering by and asks me if I've seen her son – she wants to bring him lunch. He drives a white car. And yes I'd noticed the white car a moment before – he must be somewhere around, I just saw him heading in the direction of the dump. After a while the woman comes back and thanks me for finding her son.

Then William, a huge man with a broad light brown face from Guadeloupe, another former French colony. He observes me from a distance before his curiosity finally compels him to talk to me. Having lived in Sarcelles for twenty-five years, he was practically born there and as a former rugby player, is now the boss of the Sarcelles 'Maison du Rugby', a modest concrete pavilion in the middle of the green fields which are, in fact, rugby grounds, and I'd thought I'd been observing football fields.

It's around noon and while I'm talking to William, behind our backs, all kinds of large and small, bright red firefighters' vehicles start arriving and park neatly in a row along the edge of next broad green field, overshadowed by another cluster of towering high voltage electricity pylons. Young athletic men dressed in dark blue trainers climb out of the vehicles, joking and happily chatting, and split them-

selves up in two teams to start a soccer match.

Large boulders, concrete blocks and building site debris have apparently been scattered about at random but in fact are strategically placed, on squares, at junctions, and points where dirt roads and parking lots melt into patches of green, to prevent travellers' cars from entering and occupying the area and setting up their improvised camps, as they seem to be doing everywhere where boulders or other barricades haven't been put in place in time to prevent their arrival. During his lunch break a short black man of unknown origins, working on a nearby construction site, and dressed in bright red overalls, stretches out to sleep on the warm boulders, which are broad enough to hold his tiny body.

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Erica Overmeer
Landscape Files

Landscape Files
On Landscape and Territory

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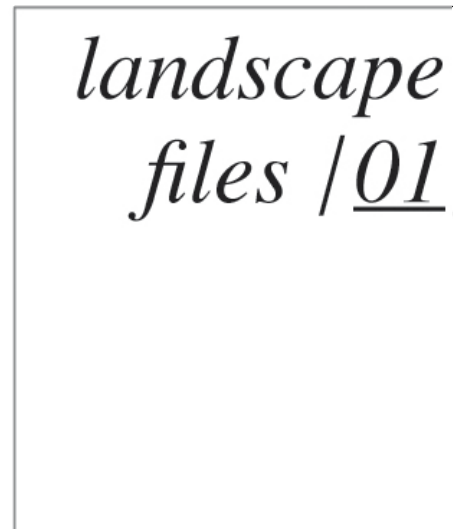
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Erica Overmeer
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Based on clippings from international newspapers, Landscape Files deals with manifestations of contemporary territorial conflict and the landscape as shaped by social constellations today, as depicted in the international press in recent years.

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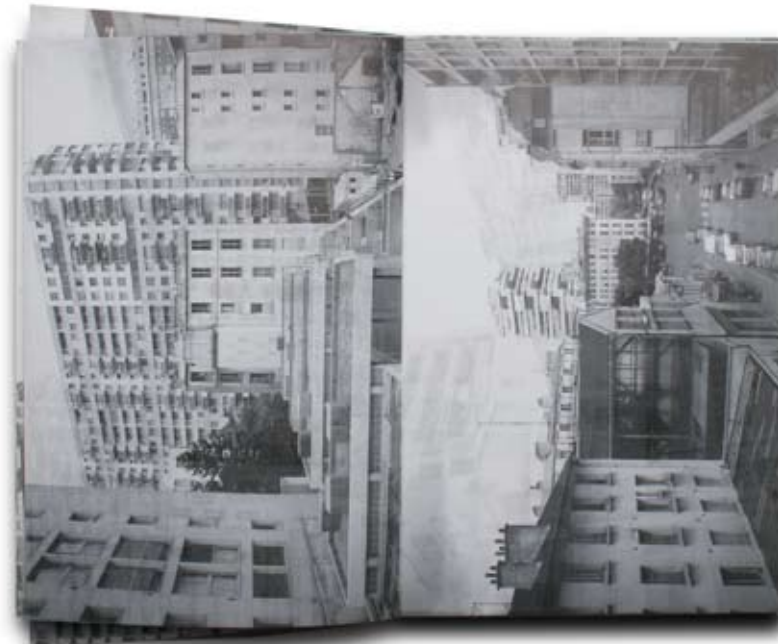
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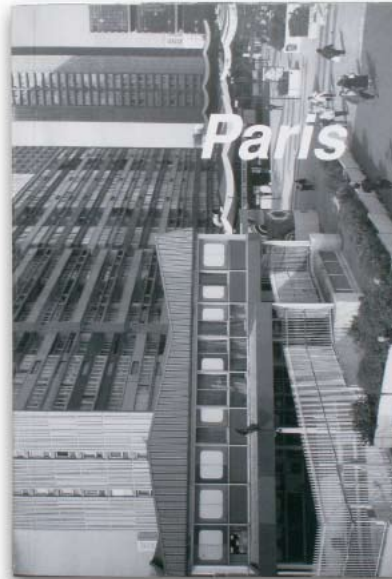
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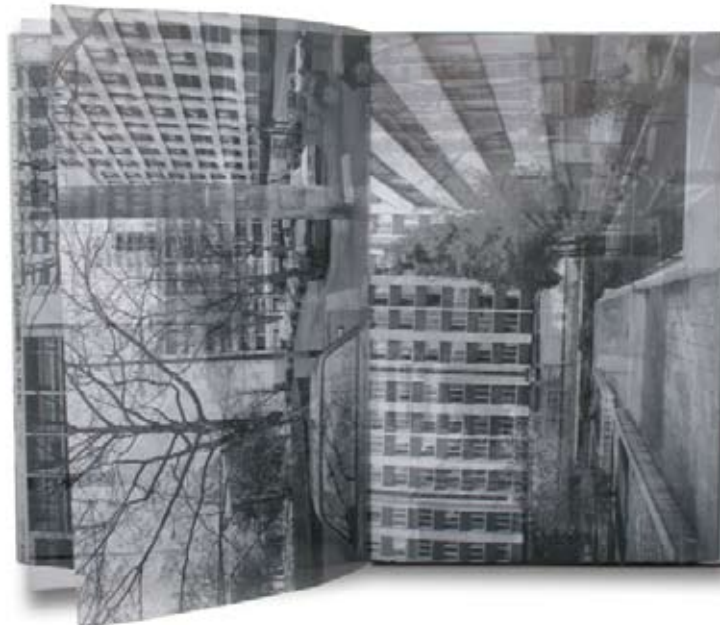
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