

Ordinary Peripheries

Jordi Ballesta, March 2012.

In November 2007, when I organized interviews with a number of photographers on their field practices and their relationship to places, landscapes, and territories, I met and questioned Emmanuel Pinard. Although, I knew his work very little apart from some images, I had heard him speak about Nc-Nca, about the Montesson plain and his photography. During November and the following February, the interviews took us from Tarbes to the Baie du Lazaret, from Brasilia to Marseille, but my questions, his answers, and our comments mainly dealt with his Ile-de-France based works. The *Paysages périphériques* (Peripheral Landscapes) and also the *Périphérie* (Peripheries) project, that he had just started, were at the heart of our discussions.

If I had not had the photo-geographic experience as a subject of study, I would probably have neglected this last series. While I had expected to explore his *Paysages* (Landscapes), my gaze shifted from the common, almost routine views that he had made in Pantin, Bobigny, Sarcelles or Cachan, towards the *Peripheries* series. The following text is the result of an attention to, a preoccupation with these images that I had not anticipated. In writing about them, they helped me understand how necessary it is to make ordinary in geographic photography.

Ordinary Peripheries is a slightly modified extract of a doctoral thesis that was finished in September 2011. Notwithstanding, I wrote the text mainly in the winter of 2009 and 2010 about photographs taken up to the end of 2008. Since then, Emmanuel Pinard has continued with *Peripheries*, just as with *Peripheral Landscapes*.

[...] In the field, the images in *Peripheral Landscapes* are developed in two stages. Emmanuel Pinard makes a preliminary search by eye, which leads to the selection of a landscape and framing of the image. He later returns to the site equipped with photographic equipment in order to match the shot to the image he had earlier established by eye. In the *Peripheries* series, the time of the scouting, framing and taking of the picture are combined. There is no need for a vehicle or the transportation of a large-format camera; Emmanuel Pinard walks through the city equipped with mid-format camera that he uses as a picture-taking prosthesis. The photographic device becomes an extension of the body and is minimally noticeable. The raised hand replaces the tripod. Physically as well as visually the two photographic projects contribute to an unmatched experience of Parisian geography.

In *Peripheries*, the mid-format camera is stowed in a bag. Until the end of the walk and the static observations of the photographer, it remains inaccessible. It is taken out only as the final part of a process, which is terminated by the taking of a photo. Similarly for *Peripheral Landscapes*, the large-format camera does not encumber Emmanuel Pinard in his scouting and framing stage; its use is delayed until the end of the geographic experience. However, its absence doesn't prevent it from powerfully influencing the activity of visual extraction done with the naked eye: "This tool involves constructing an image before taking it [...] the images existed before I went to take them with my large-

format camera" (1). The camera materializes the views onto a photographic support; it also enables him to imagine the content and the form.

In *Peripheries*, the medium-format is undeniably an instrument of photographic framing, but it has little influence on the physical and visual positions of the photographer. Emmanuel Pinard describes himself as surrounded by the real while the large-format camera separates him from the space he intends to photograph. For one of the two series, he places himself "inside"; for the other, he faces the real. In one case, he compares himself with the camera, "as if I was it," he says, but he refers to one that would literally be pan-oramic and would make multi-directional views. In the other, he withdraws behind the plate camera – the one he actually uses – and limits himself to the incompleteness of his visual frame. In this way, Emmanuel Pinard overlooks Bobigny in *Peripheral Landscapes*. In *Peripheries* however, he finds himself at a junction between two streets and the tramway. A single multi-mode position is represented in the same urban environment with similarly anonymous pedestrians except that in one of the images the photographer is facing the scene, while in the other he has put himself inside a place where he hopes to become one of the static elements.

Describing the intentions that led him to create the *Peripheries* series, Emmanuel Pinard explained that he was attempting to photograph ordinary terrains, in an ordinary way. The resulting sixteen images of this series, made between 2006 and 2008, are thus fashioned by an everyday experience of urban life in Ile-de-France, marked by an absence of surprise, a preference for routine, a lack of interest in the hitherto unseen. Without moving and waiting, waiting a long time until he finds the rhythm of the place and can integrate it (2), Pinard seeks to develop an endogenous gaze upon the photographed place which prevents him from producing the out of the ordinary, there where an ordinary Ile-de-France person would see the banal. The real circulates around him, to the extent that he doesn't go looking for landscapes detached from his everyday activities, but returns to the places that he uses and that have surrounded him for years, most often outside of any photographic intention.

"For some reason or another, I go somewhere outside of work hours and discover a place that interests me. I look at it and I return. It's a familiar habit because I live in these places that I happen upon, on a visit to the cinema, taking the children to sports competitions etc. The research for *Peripheries* is permanent, beyond the working day". Crossing the street, following the pavement, taking care at the junction, going to the shopping centre, returning to the car park, taking the bus, being in traffic and between constructed masses, the photographs of *Peripheries* convey an impression of banality that doesn't appear in the *Peripheral Landscapes* series. Even so, since 2004, whether using the large or the medium-format camera, facing the real or inside, these two series show the ordinary outskirts of Paris with more or less traffic and urban centres. Do these similarities provoke confusion and minimization of the impact of photo-geographic experiences in the final composition of the images? No. *Peripheral Landscapes* gives the sensation of a disengagement vis-a-vis a constantly moving anthropogenic world whether this be the middle of brownfield or wasteland, or, since Emmanuel Pinard has been turning towards the centres, standing back from and observing the urban scene. This feeling has nothing ordinary about it for an urban practitioner going about his daily business.

The ordinary and the landscape

It is probable that in all the geographic photography seen and qualified as landscape works, there resides a promise of amazement, disorientation and excess neglected by Emmanuel Pinard in *Peripheries*. Even when treating the ordinary and the common, it is rare that photographers don't go flushing out the visibilities that the repetitions of daily life have a tendency to relegate behind a veil of inattention. On the contrary, *Peripheries* represents urban spaces that regular frequenters of the Paris outskirts only allow a fleeting gaze to avoid them the boredom that concentrated observation of such banalities, seen day after day, would procure.

In an article entitled *Benjamin and Boredom* (3), Joe Moran writes that boredom is at the heart of the complex relation uniting daily life and modernity. Citing the ideas of Walter Benjamin, he confirms that boredom did not come from the linear time of modernity – the repetitiveness of factory work or the monotony of administrative time – but found its origin in the world of the street. The verb 'to bore' appeared, according to Benjamin, in the mid eighteenth century and 'boredom' only dates from the middle of the nineteenth century. In the street, between contemporary urbanism and the nineteenth century faubourg, Emmanuel Pinard does not only photograph the ordinarily urban.

With *Peripheries* he concentrates on the geographic routine and boredom, which manage to convey the daily usage of the Parisian periphery. When questioned on the reception of this series, Emmanuel Pinard referred to “very negative reactions”, to “real blockages”, “brutal protestations” and an “animosity” that he had not had to his “photographs of wasteland”. According to him, rather than coming from unaffected people, this rejection came from those frequenting the photographed sites and who most likely did not accept the representation of their banality. The images of *Peripheries* seem in fact to come from a levelling of the picturesque and a methodical avoidance of exoticism. Emmanuel Pinard doesn't stage-design the architectural heterogeneity of the Parisian suburbs. He doesn't enhance the chromatic and typographic accumulations of the signs nor accentuate the light contrasts that fragment the street and give rhythm to the façades. In these images there is neither an apparent desire for seduction, nor consequential polarities that hold the gaze where the daily repetitiveness only allows brief glimpses. Of course, some glamorize the monumentality of the tower blocks and low-rise housing projects whose forms are so imposing that their upper floors continue out of frame. But, further down, the routine continues with the circulation of cars, people walking on the pavements, pedestrian crossings, women pushing strollers, a Leclerc supermarket, an OptiCenter and Phone Univers shop, a chemist, a municipal health centre etc., without, it seems, Pinard drawing attention to any theatricality of every day life.

Continuing his article, Moran makes a detour via the images of *Boring Postcards*, which first appeared between the nineteen fifties and seventies in Great Britain, America and Germany, and were collated by Martin Parr in three separate volumes (4). In an attempt to conceptualize boredom, Moran identifies there a photographic subject matter that is kitsch, amusing, and thrilling. The ironic motivations of the collection, the celebration, page after page of an urban and architectural modernity which today is obsolete, seemed to add a kind of zest to the boredom it claimed. Ultimately in these postcards,

Moran retains the subversion and visual conventions that characterize the imagery of the picturesque and the spectacular. There are traces of a daily routine that are not usually noted. Despite the similarity between the ordinary scenes of post-war modernism that dominate the Boring Postcards (5) and Peripheries, punctuated by low and high rise blocks, shopping centres and anonymous passers by, it is significant that Parr's collection and Pinard's photographs provoke contrary impressions: rejection on the one hand; curiosity, even jubilation on the other. After the publication of the three volumes of boring postcards, there were numerous enthusiastic journalistic comments insisting on the strange fascination for the ordinary that the publications procure (6).

In the 1970s Boring Postcards could have been read like a catalogue of statements on urban modernity. Thirty years later, Parr first of all played with the outdatedness of the urbanist and architectural forms photographed and, secondly, with the historic offset which makes them exotic as compared with current conceptions of the city. His three volumes adhere to the idea of boredom, but they render it pleasant. In Peripheries, there is neither offset nor historic distancing that would encourage a curious easy rediscovery of the past banality of the Paris outskirts. In this series, Emmanuel Pinard makes the experience of proximity a reasoned hold in a reality that remains tangible on a daily basis and that he does not see as being disorientating. He waits, waits a long time, as he says, to become part of it, to the extent of conveying this well-trodden ordinary and perhaps reaching actual boredom.

When explaining his photographic series, Emmanuel Pinard does not associate himself with any particular school of thought, although his approach seems to have significant affinities with the work of Lewis Baltz, specifically with the New Topographics movement and more generally a documentary style (7). Apart from his photographic influences, his closeness to that which is common and his insistence on proximity also correspond with the philosophy of the ordinary that Emerson, Thoreau, Wittgenstein or Cavell developed theories on. Although she does not specifically handle the subject, reference to Sandra Laugier's writings can bring useful insight. In her article, "Emerson: penser l'ordinaire" (8) (Imagining the Ordinary), she writes that: "the ordinary as next, neighbour or domestic, allows the perception of a rapport with the world, not as a form of knowledge but as proximity" (9). In *L'ordinaire Transatlantique* (10) (**Transatlantic Ordinary**), she links the thinking of Wittgenstein, Thoreau and Emerson: "Everything is already there spread out before our eyes: the visible remains to be seen." She goes on to affirm, "the ordinary only exists in this specific difficulty of access to that which is just under our gaze and which we must learn to see" (11). She adds a quote by Foucault that, when slightly transformed, would be perfectly appropriate to explain the Peripheries photographic series:

"For a long time we have known that the role of philosophy is not to discover that which is hidden but to make visible that which is precisely visible, that is to say to make appear that which is near, that which is immediate, that which is so intimately linked to ourselves, that because of this we do not notice" (12).

If, until the mid 2000s, Peripheral Landscapes concentrated on urban empty spaces that, through relegation, become the blind spots of the Parisian agglomeration, since it was started, the intention of Peripheries was to "make visible that which is, precisely, visible", "to make apparent that which is close by". Emmanuel Pinard does not explain

this photographic capturing of the ordinary city, as it is experienced every day with the naked eye, either as an instrument of visual documentation or as a way of showing “the worrying strangeness of the ordinary”, which according to Laugier, is a theme that is as important to Thoreau and Wittgenstein as to Cavell. *Peripheries* recovers a search for proximity, not that of a locality that was previously rejected, but that which encourages the city-dweller to return day after day to the same places due to a virtual consubstantiality. By placing himself “inside” the ordinary city, Emmanuel Pinard avoids making views from the outside and distancing himself from routine locations, with which he is “intimately linked”. In this way, it would be difficult for *Peripheries* to be presented as a series of trophies celebrating a photographic hunt through urban enclaves that, despite their proximity, seem impenetrable to the outsider. In order to observe the ordinary, Emmanuel Pinard explains that it is necessary to be satisfied with one’s proximity and then patiently experience it, neither as competitive incursion, nor ephemeral excursion.

Peripheries comes close to boredom. It cultivates banality without ennobling it and the refusal of surprise and unexpectedness, to the point where a biased reading of the photographs could become unbearable. The series does not present the skill of a photographer able to appropriate a city, to recompose its spaces and explore its invisibilities. Its photographic quality does not rest on a unique and pioneering art of geographic selection. Four years after its commencement, it is difficult to view it as a visual archive that preserves urban forms, which are not in fact threatened, from oblivion. Nor, with sixteen photographs in total, between 2006 and 2009, is the series sufficiently complete to be of use as an inventory of the Parisian periphery. It does however, constitute an attempt at spatial assimilation, which is exemplary of geographic photography developed from the need to introduce a form of habit, from the need to domesticate the spatial visibilities and perpetuate the geographic experience by transplanting it onto a photographic support.

In *Transatlantic Ordinary*, Laugier affirms that “the search for the ordinary only makes sense as an echo - at the risk of scepticism - of the loss or distancing of the world” (13). She includes two quotes from Emerson that would sufficiently answer the scepticism generated by *Peripheries*, which either expresses itself by a sensation of boredom, a tendency to inattention, or by a refusal to see so many banalities photographed.

“I am not asking for the great, the remote, the romanesque; nor that which is made in Italy or Arabia; nor that which is Greek art or the poetry of provincial minstrels; I embrace the common, I explore the familiar, the lowly, I am at their feet.”

“Instead of the sublime and the beautiful, it is the near, the lowly, the common which have been explored and poeticized. That which had been neglectfully trampled on by those who equipped themselves for long journeys in far off countries, suddenly finds itself richer than the foreign lands” (14).

While Emmanuel Pinard doesn’t claim to refuse to travel and keep all his work within the limits of a familiar Ile de France urban area, he demonstrates in *Peripheries* that all geographic photography entails resistance to the attractions of the great, the remote, the sublime and the beautiful. Seeking out the sedentary in order to achieve a spatial familiarity, finding a photographic residence made from exploration followed by routine, lassitude and exhaustion to the point of wanting to leave, and finally

constraining oneself to stay or come back again: geographic photography cannot avoid these types of experience. It can motivate a departure, lead to geographic and aesthetic disorientations, participate in an overspill of the daily routine and a discovery of elsewhere, but it also implies remaining in a place, making the distant near and inhabiting it. In an attempt to free himself from aesthetic questions, the romanticism of wastelands and the attraction of the fringes, Emmanuel Pinard, abandoned the word 'landscape'. In effect, his desire to achieve the ordinary could not convince him to photograph landscapes while this spatiality is generally opposed to ideas of confinement, sedentariness and routine banality. He could however have incorporated the landscape element of *Peripheries* by referring to the documentary photographic style and geographic reflections of John B. Jackson and his successors. Their landscape does not come from amazement or disorientation, but from a descriptive attachment to movements, discontinuities and geographic complexities.

The fact remains that the incompatibility between *Peripheries* and landscape representation is less to do with the opposition of near and far as with the principle of geographic and aesthetic excess which this series is based on. The photo-geographic protocol stated by Emmanuel Pinard is thus consistent with Michel Collot's landscape-related thesis: "the landscape is not a pure object opposite which the subject can situate itself in a relationship of exteriority. It reveals itself in an experience where the subject and the object are inseparable, not only because the spatial object is constituted by the subject, but also because the subject in turn, finds itself surrounded by the space" (15). In *Peripheries*, the real surrounds the photographer who "puts [himself] inside".

Parallel to this, Jean-Marc Besse conceives landscape as "the event of the actual encounter between humans and the surrounding world" (16). In *Le Goût du Monde*, he explains that "landscape is not so much an object that can be captured through thought as a certain way of being in the world, an ambience, a certain very singular way of participating in the world's movement in a given place" (17). Using a similar logic, Emmanuel Pinard said that to be a part of the places, he had to find their rhythm, their movement and their life "which are those of the city". For all that, Jean-Marc Besse develops a concept of the landscape that does not exactly match the photo-geographic experience of *Peripheries*. Firstly, he understands the landscape experience "as an outing in the real, and more precisely as an exposure to the real" (18), whereas Emmanuel Pinard enters inside the real while avoiding his exposure to it, wanting to influence it as little as possible (19). Secondly, landscape according to Jean-Marc Besse "puts the subject outside himself" (20) and does not agree with the spatiality worked by Pinard, which, on the contrary, requires geographic definition and photographic restraint. Finally, the landscape of one "returns to the invisible part that resides in everything visible" while for the other, it is not about "discovering what is hidden, but revealing what is actually visible". In landscape there is "this power of overspill" which is not found at all in *Peripheries* and invites us to think about this series – the geographic experience it comes from and its photographic device – based on other spatialities, other issues. Even the concordance between the ordinary, which "cannot be conceptualized nor captured" (21) at the risk of "losing contact, the ordinary proximity of things", and an intrinsically uncapturable landscape, whose *raison d'être* is escape, is not enough to comprehend *Peripheries* as the culmination of a landscape-themed work. [...]

1. During our second meeting, Emmanuel Pinard continued the description of his photo-geographic practice. In referring to *Peripheral Landscapes*, he added: "When I go to get my large-format camera from the car, the image is already latent, before having been made. I know exactly where I will position the camera. There should not be any new information to interfere with the image, yet sometimes the image can exist but is photographed two months later".
2. Emmanuel Pinard, November 2007: "I don't move, I wait, I wait a long time and it is once I have found the rhythm of the place – places have a rhythm, movement, and life which are those of the city - that I am part of it".
3. Moran Joe, Benjamin and Boredom, in *Critical Quarterly*, Volume 45, Issue 1-2, p. 168-181.
4. Parr Martin, *Boring Postcards*, London, Phaidon, 2004, p. 176.
5. I refer to the English volume of *Boring Postcards*.
6. On the Phaidon internet page presenting the English volume of *Boring Postcards*, there is a compilation of rave reviews, the quantity of which suggests that they are not accidental but are probably representative of the general reception of the book: "They are, in their boringness, strangely beautiful. They are funny, nostalgic, and utterly eccentric. Their banality fascinates. Actually, they're not boring at all.' (Big Issue); 'Far from dull, Parr's book is a strangely compelling commentary on post-war British architecture, social life and identity.' (Independent on Sunday); 'A boring magical mystery tour round the British Isles ... Already influential as a record of British social history, the collection of postcards has been bequeathed by Martin Parr to the Victoria and Albert Museum.' (Kent Messenger) [...] ".
In <http://www.phaidon.com/store/photography/boring-postcards-9780714843902/>
7. Cf. in particular: Lugon Olivier, *Le style documentaire: D'August Sander à Walker Evans, 1920-1945*, Paris, Macula, 2001, p. 397.
8. Laugier Sandra, Emerson: penser l'ordinaire, in *Revue d'études américaines*, n°91, February 2002, pp. 43-60.
9. Ibid, p.44.
10. Laugier Sandra, *L'ordinaire transatlantique. De Concord à Chicago, en passant par Oxford*, in *L'homme*, n°187-188, 2008, pp. 169-199.
11. Ibid., p. 173 and 174.
12. Ibid., p. 173, citation extract from *La philosophie analytique de la politique*, Foucault Michel, *Dits et écrits*, pp. 540-541.
13. Ibid., p. 172.
14. Ibid., p. 170 and 171. Citations extracts from *The American Scholar* by Ralph W. Emerson and its translation published in *Revue Critique*, n°541-542, 1992.
15. Collot Michel, *Points de vue sur la perception du paysage* in Roger Alain, *La théorie du paysage en France*, Seyssel, Champ Vallon, 1995, p. 464. Citation p. 221.
16. Besse Jean-Marc, *Le goût du monde*, Arles, Actes Sud -ENSP, 2009, 232p. Citation p. 50.
17. Ibid, p.51.
18. Ibid, p.51.
19. Interview with Emmanuel Pinard, November 2007: "the fact I have a medium-format camera in my bag enables me to influence the flux of the real going on around me to a minimum".
20. In *Le goût du monde*, p.52.

21. In *L'ordinaire transatlantique*, p.174: "L'idée de domestication de la culture, de l'ordinaire comme voisin (next, neighbour) n'est pas l'idée de maîtrise du réel car l'ordinaire ne se conceptualise ni se saisit".