

Arthur Crestani
Plaine de France

an ongoing project since 2018

Plaine de France

The department of *Seine-Saint-Denis* occupies a place of its own among contemporary French mythologies.

With the exception of Paris, it is difficult to argue that any other place in France holds greater cultural, social and political significance than this part of the Paris region. The 93, as it is commonly known, came into administrative existence in 1968, when the suburban department of the Seine was split into three distinct entities. The 'red belt' of communist town halls circling Paris was then fragmented and its influence diluted. The 93 was conceded by the Gaullist (right-wing) power to the Communist Party, while the rest of the Paris region leaned to the right.

Rich of a 200 year-old urban and industrial history which saw it rise to prominence, then suffer a long and cruel decline towards the end of the 20th century, the department presents a complex urban fabric juxtaposing low density neighborhoods with postindustrial spaces and massive post-war residential complexes.

Its proximity to Paris, and its connection to the infrastructure network of the region, ensures the 93 plays a key role at the metropolitan level. Home to working class and immigrant families that make up the lower-skilled labor force, it has long been a vital cog in the functioning of the region, its inhabitants commuting across to keep the urban machine running.

However high unemployment rates, social, racial and spatial segregation and a post-colonial policing of housing and security issues have contributed to the making of a nightmarish vision of the 93. Commonly misrepresented as a ghetto plagued with drug trafficking and Islamic fundamentalism, the Seine-Saint-Denis is

France's distorting mirror, a screen on which the country projects its deepest insecurities.

To break through to the other side of the mirror, is to learn to see the whole gamut of a complex urban history, rich of past utopias, working class heritage, and a renewed sense of the potentials of space.

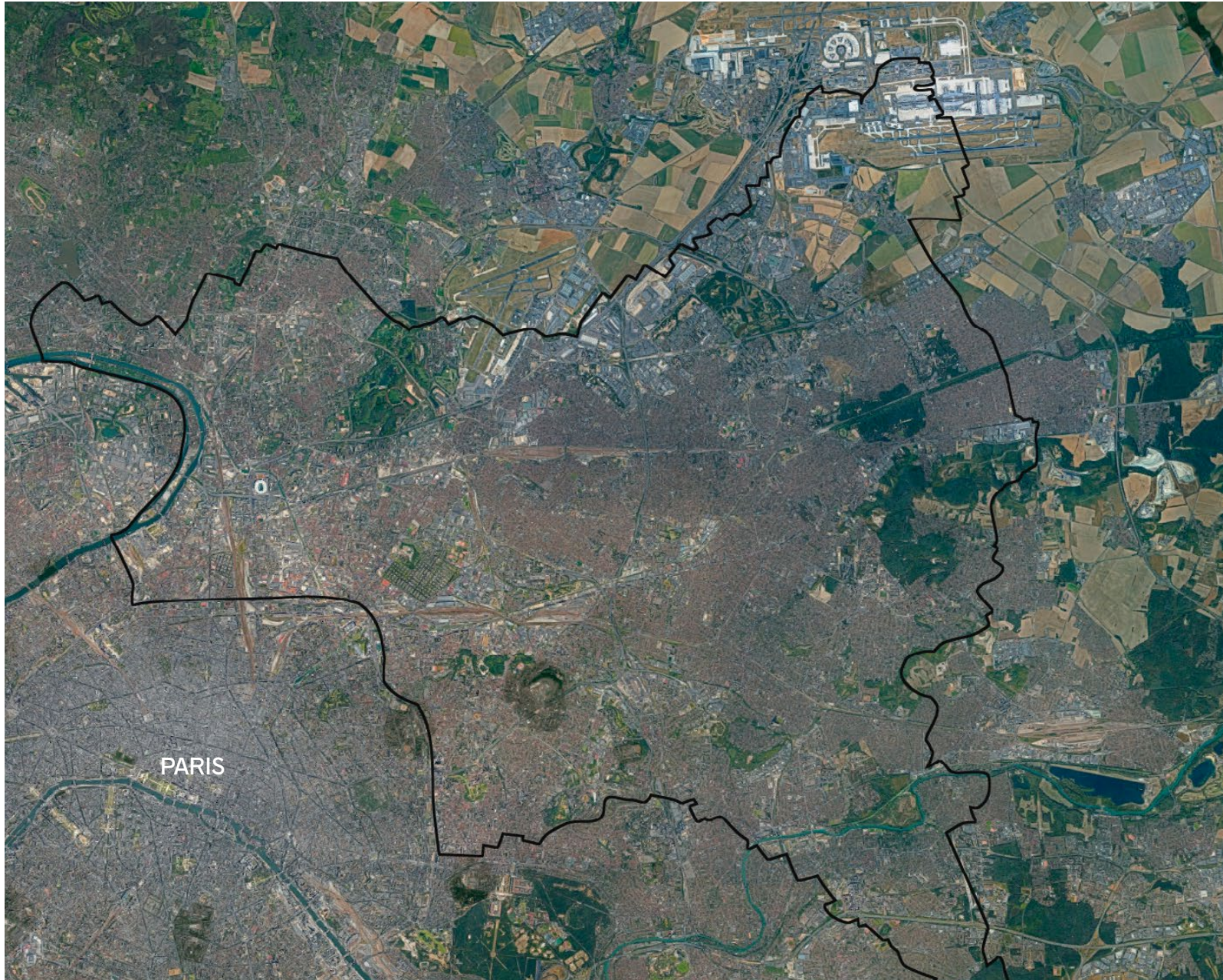
Since 2018, I have been walking across the Seine-Saint-Denis, driven by chance and intuition, while forming a mental map of the urban puzzle. First drawn to symbols and signs, I started seeing places as a code, and visual irruptions as metaphors of the plasticity of the 93. If there was a sense of possibility, past and present, it was to be seen in the freedom of forms encountered, from the collective to the individual spaces. Yet it was clear that the current drive of development and speculation in the lead-up to the 2024 Olympics brought along a transformation of urban space into capitalist decor, and a renewed violence through separation and exclusion.

The growing intimacy of my relationship to the place, since setting up my studio in and later moving to Saint-Denis, one of the historical centers of the 93, slowly gave way to a more poetic and sensitive approach, one less focused on signs of impending urban doom, and a more nuanced way of seeing. The urban critique has taken a back step in favor of playfulness and tenderness, nostalgia for past futures, and an openness to multiple interpretations. This ongoing project, set to run until 2024, attempts to draw ties between places and people not as remote as one may think.



Cassini Map (1747-1789) of the Paris region - extract.

Most of the cities that form the current department of Seine-Saint-Denis can be seen on the map, from St-Ouen, St-Denis (where the kings of the French monarchy were crowned and buried) and Epinay in the West, to Montreuil and Noisy-le-Grand in the South, to Roissy and Tremblay in the North-East.



Satellite view (2021) of the Seine-Saint-Denis, at the same scale as the Cassini Map.

The department comprises the Northern and Eastern suburbs of Paris.

Its post-industrial and residential fabric is crossed over by highways and railtracks, which give a sense of direction yet fragment the urban space.

The Plaine de France, after which the project is called, designates the plain that extends from Saint-Denis in the North of Paris (see the white circle of the Stade de France) to beyond the Roissy Airport in the North of the photograph. This former agricultural plain was exceptionally fertile and gave its name to the country.

Large-scale urbanization took over agricultural land in the 1950s and 1960s in order to solve the housing crisis that had been a recurrent issue in and around Paris. Almost all of the department's land has been heavily transformed since.



Saint-Denis, January 2021



Gallo-Roman archeological excavation site, Bobigny, June 2019



Bagnolet, April 2021



Aulnay-sous-Bois, May 2021



Pantin, September 2020



Saint-Denis, June 2018



Aubervilliers, May 2020



Tom in Saint-Denis, April 2021



Clichy-sous-Bois, June 2021



Reny in Aubervilliers, June 2020



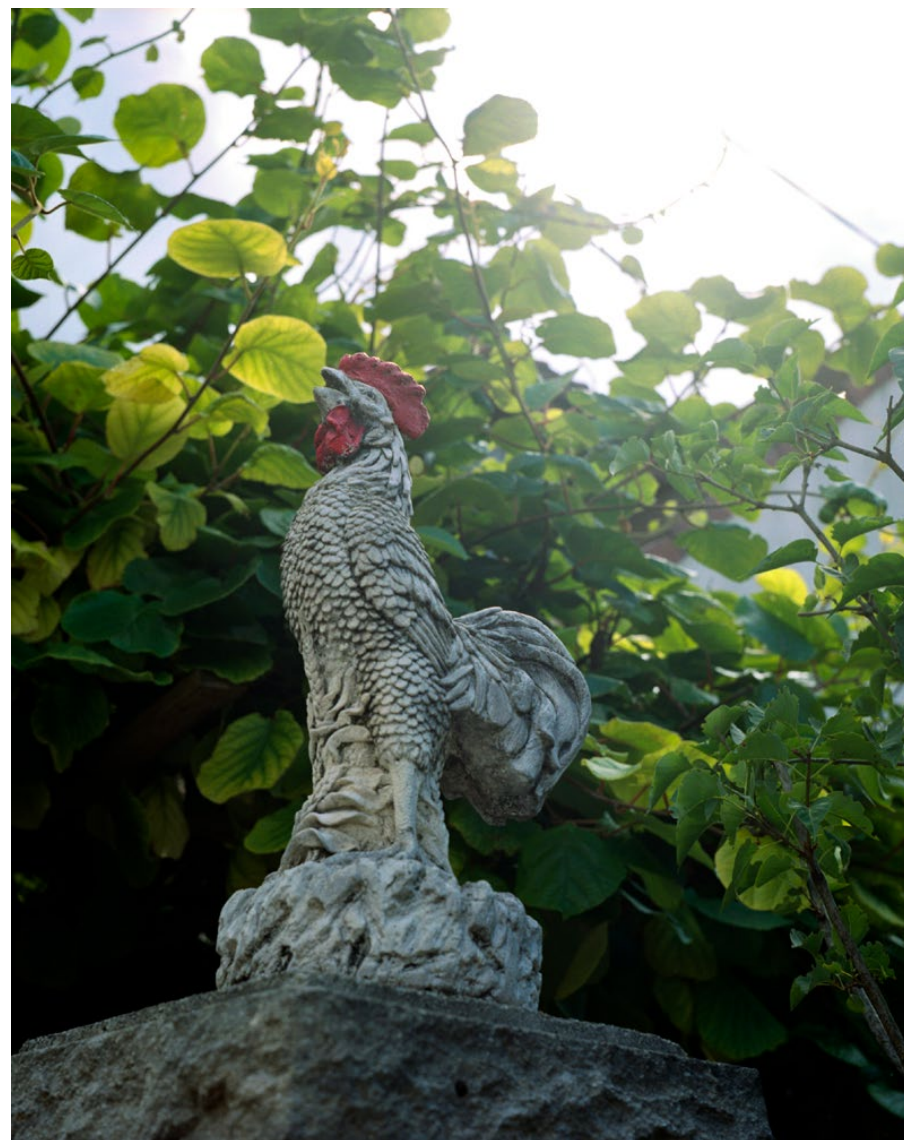
Under the A86 Highway, La Courneuve, August 2018



Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, March 2021



Paris VIII University, Saint-Denis, May 2018



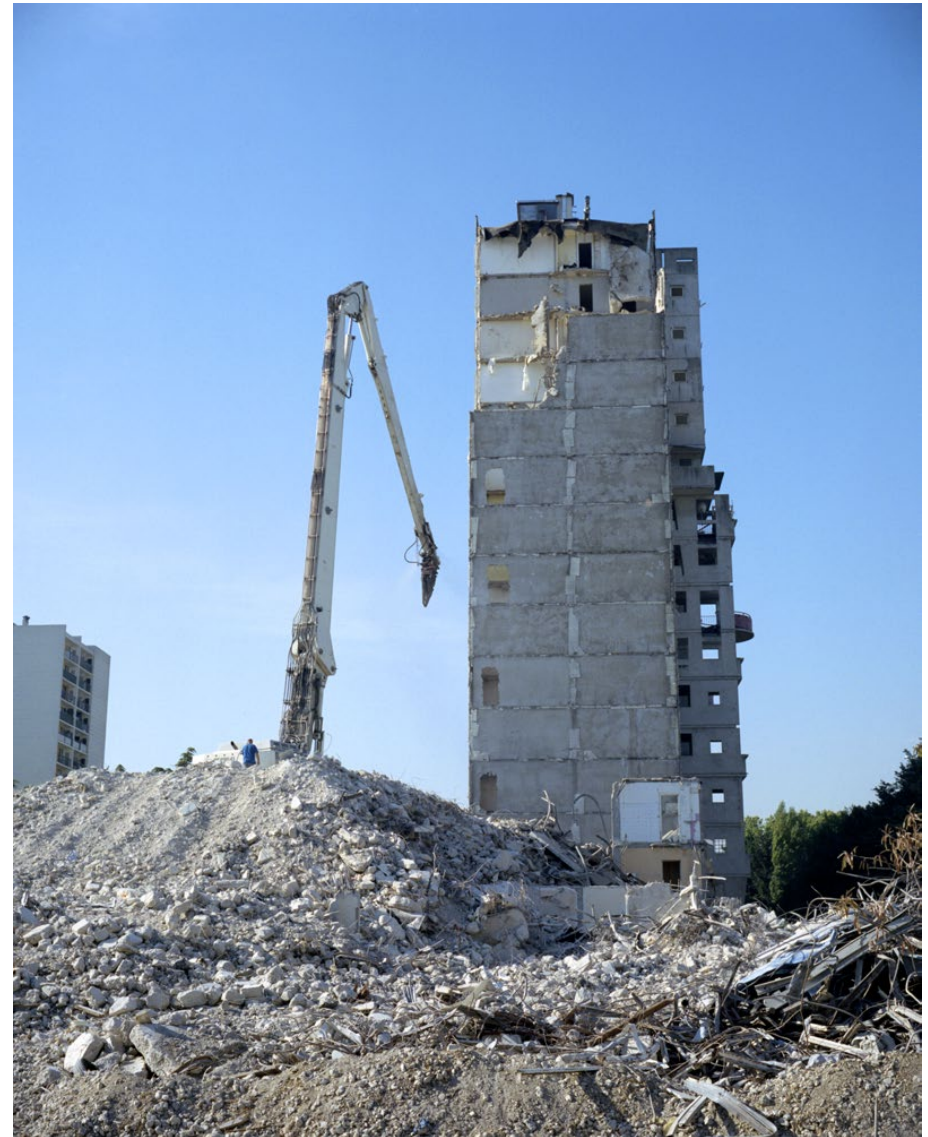
Le Bourget, May 2020



Le Blanc-Mesnil, May 2020



Aubervilliers, June 2020



La Courneuve, August 2020



Saint-Denis, May 2020



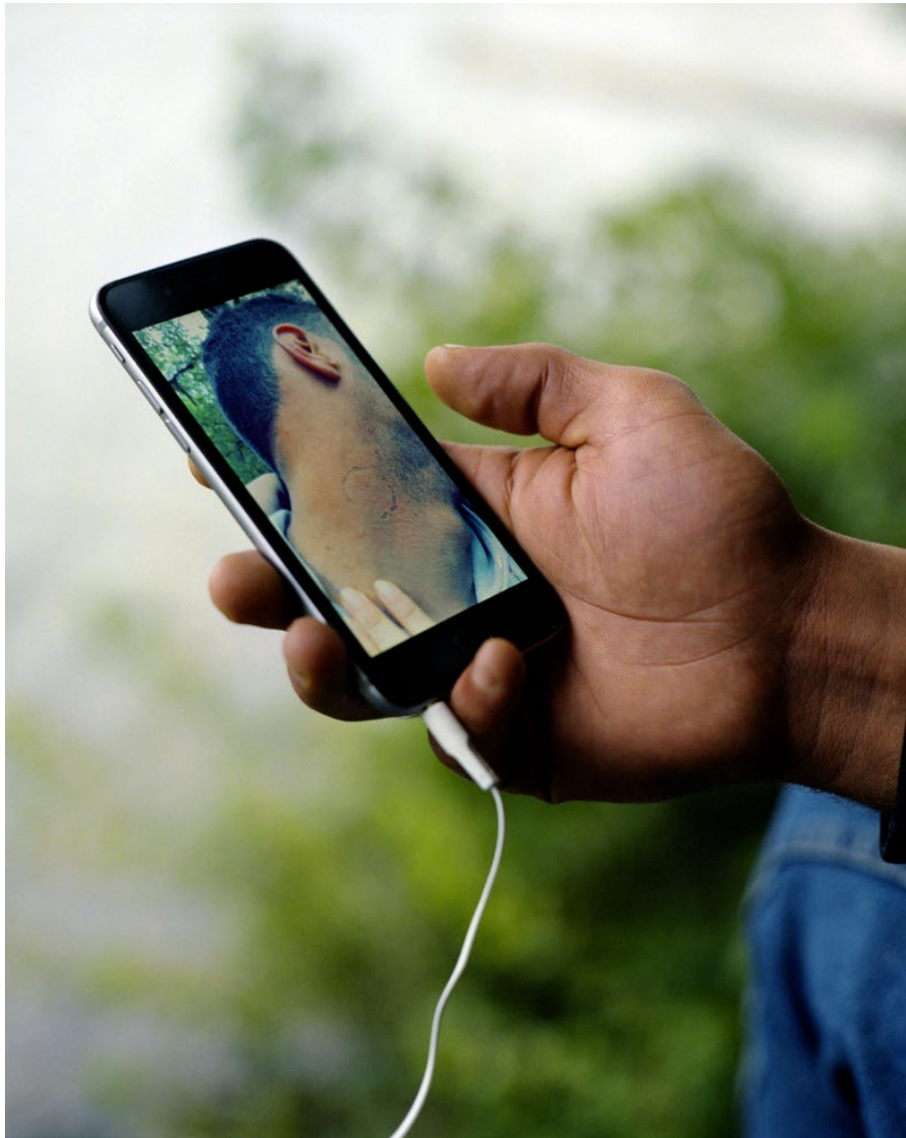
Noisy-le-Sec, May 2020



Saint-Denis, April 2018



National Archives, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, June 2018



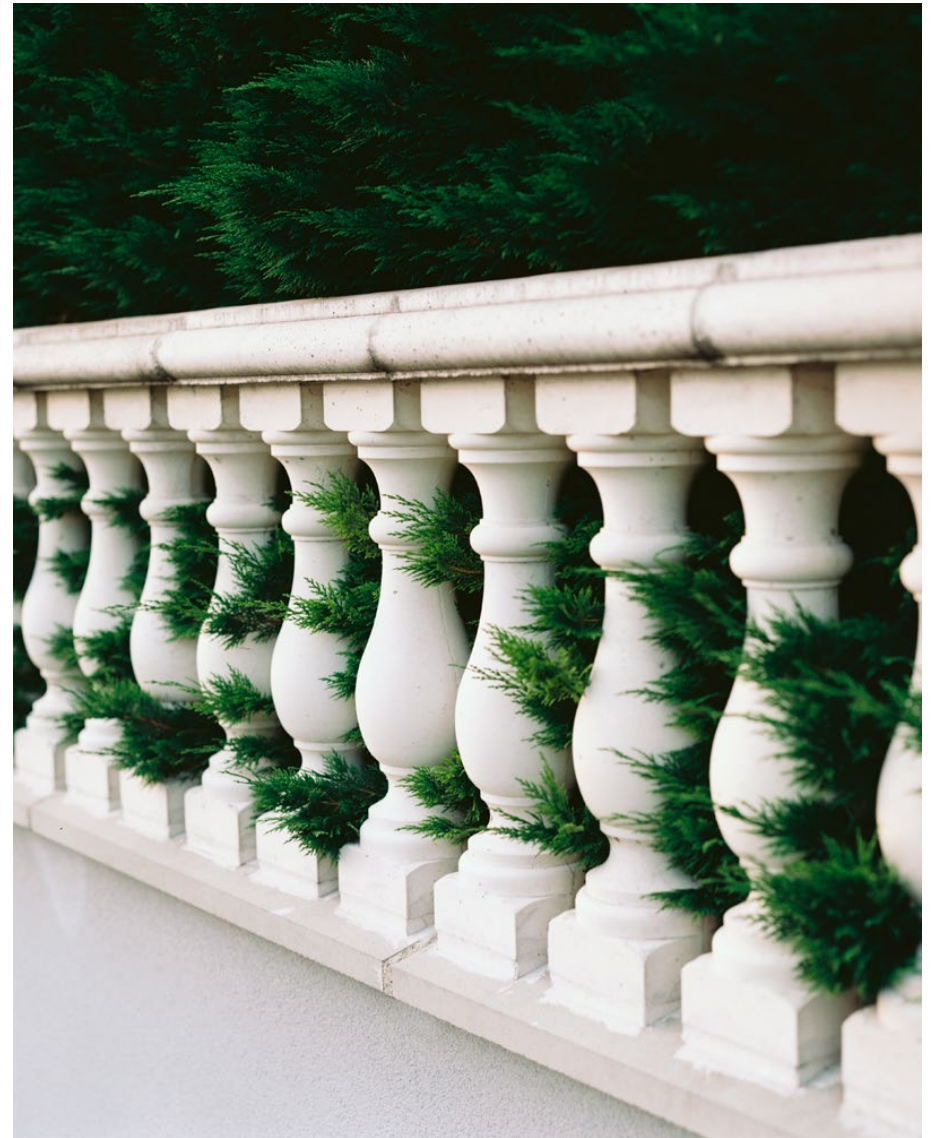
Nabil's Hand, L'Île Saint-Denis, September 2019



Villetaneuse, March 2021



Bobigny, June 2021



Drancy, June 2021



Jorgen in L'Île Saint-Denis, September 2019



Aubervilliers, May 2020



Joelle in La Courneuve, August 2020



La Courneuve, May 2020



Television Studios in la Plaine Saint-Denis, September 2018



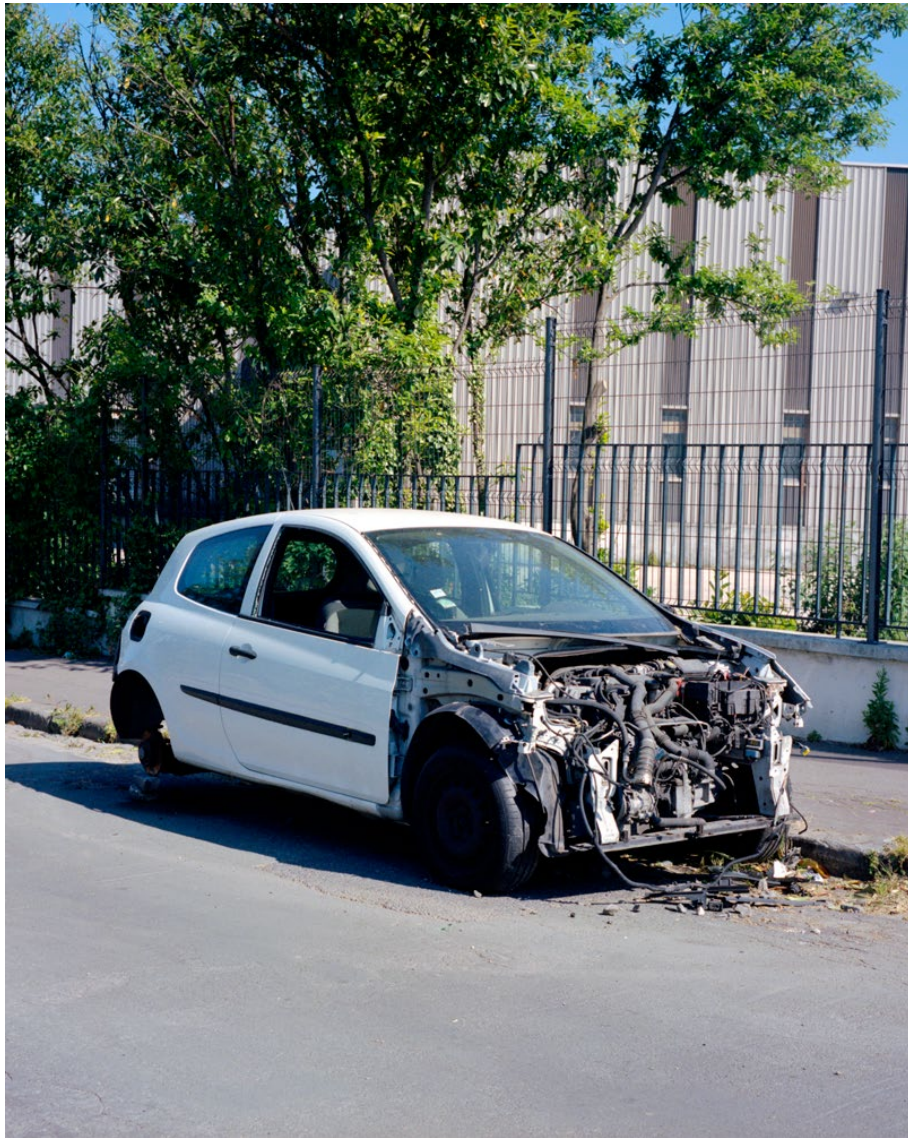
Noisy-le-Sec, May 2020



Aubervilliers, May 2020



La Courneuve, May 2020



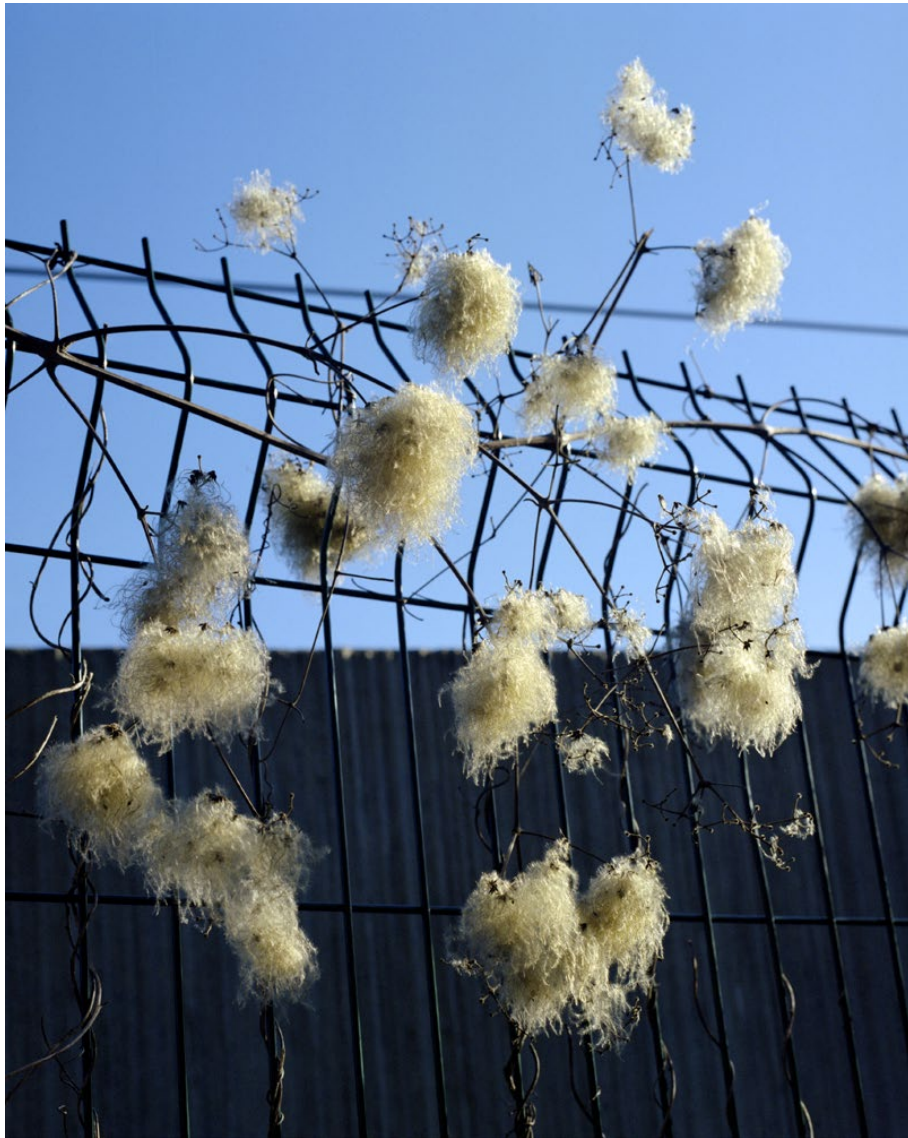
Le Bourget, May 2020



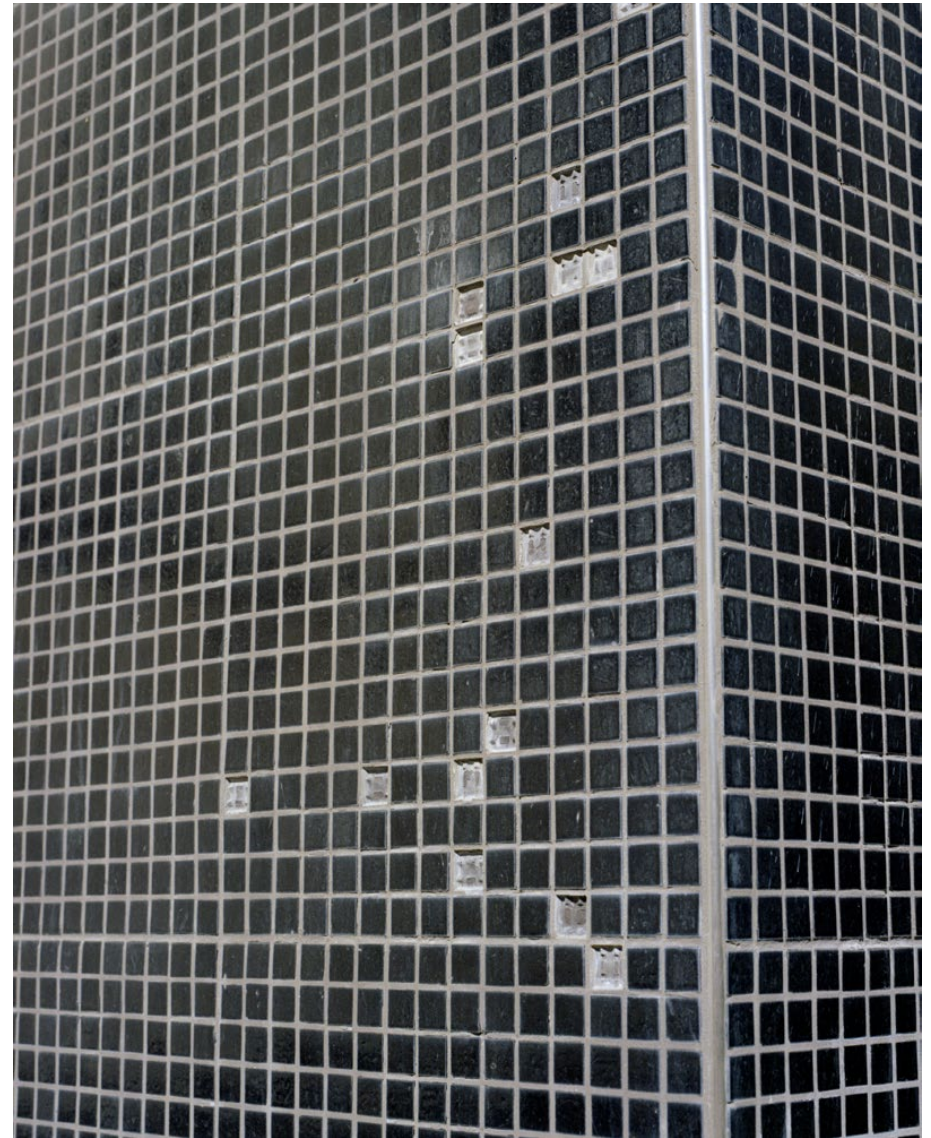
Aubervilliers, April 2018



Hamza et Greg in La Courneuve, August 2020



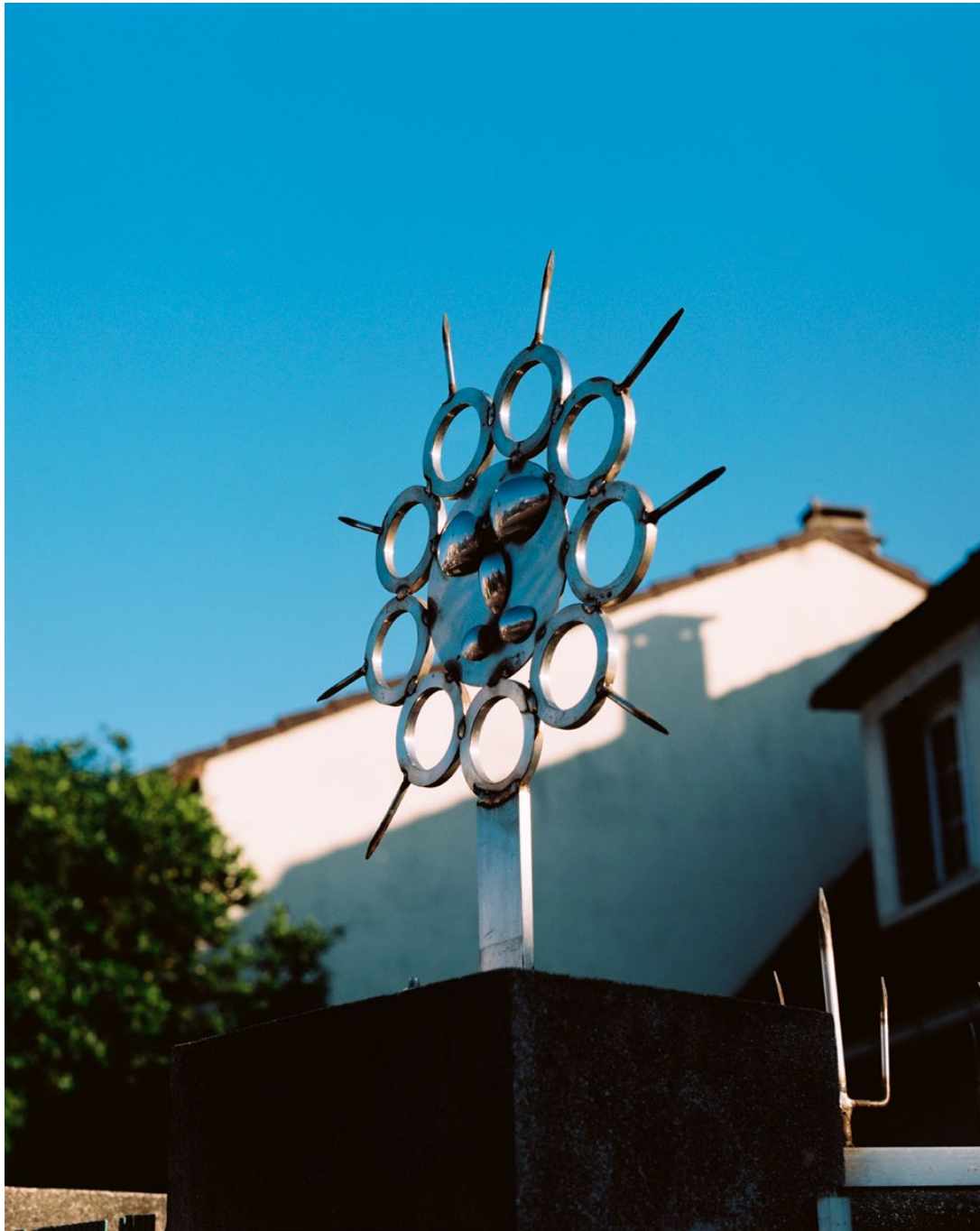
Montmagny, March 2021



Villetaneuse, March 2021



Youssra in Aubervilliers, June 2020



Livry-Gargan, June 2021



Romainville, September 2020



Mehdi (right) and a friend pretending to count drug money in Aubervilliers, June 2020



Saint-Denis, May 2021



Aubervilliers, May 2020



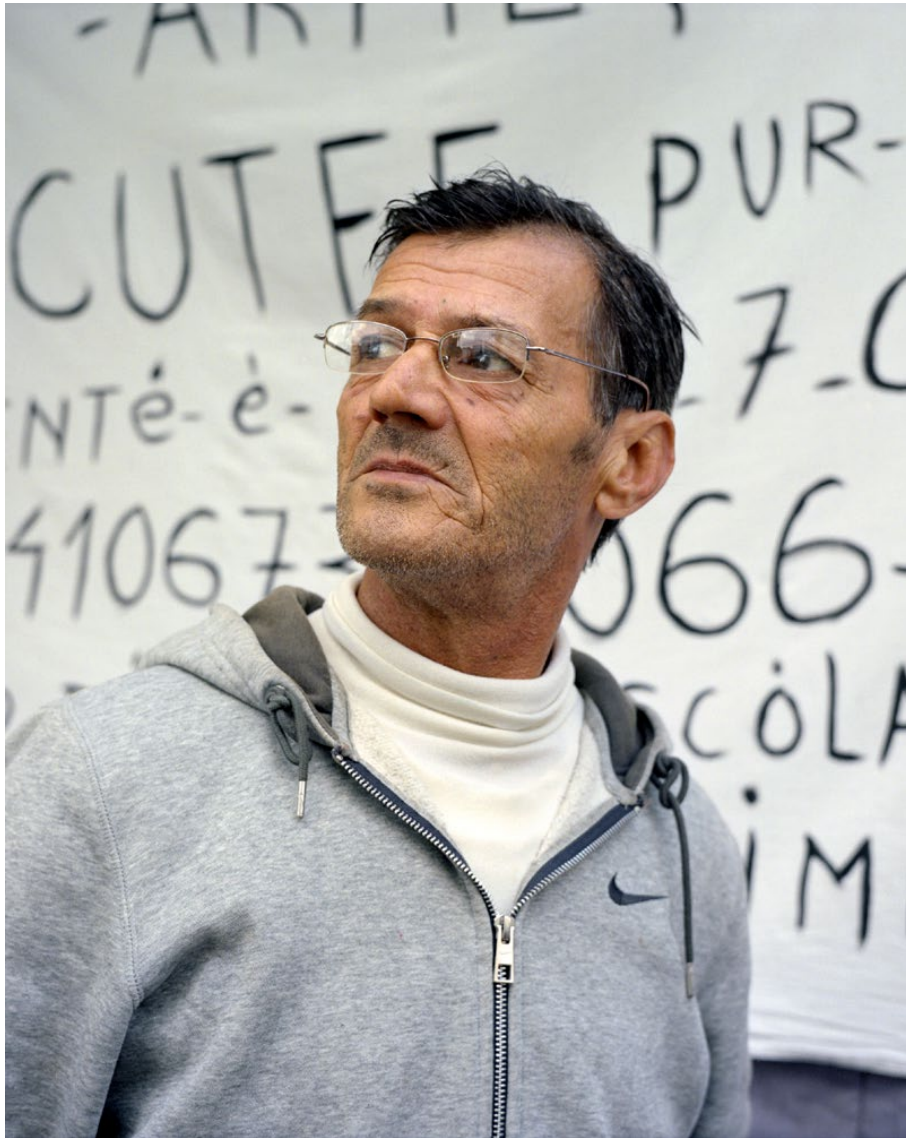
Aubervilliers, May 2020



Emmanuel (droite) and a friend in Rosny-sous-Bois, May 2020



Aubervilliers, June 2020



Iosif in Saint-Denis, June 2020



The facade of the building where three members of the November 2015 Paris attacks commando were killed after a 7-hour assault on November 18th, 2015, in Saint-Denis, May 2020



Cricket match in La Courneuve, May 2020



Concrete testing for Tadao Ando's Bourse de Commerce redesign, Pantin, June 2018



Aulnay-sous-Bois, June 2021



La Courneuve, May 2020



Aubervilliers, June 2020



Bobigny's old train station, used during WWII to deport Parisian Jews to Germany and Poland, May 2020



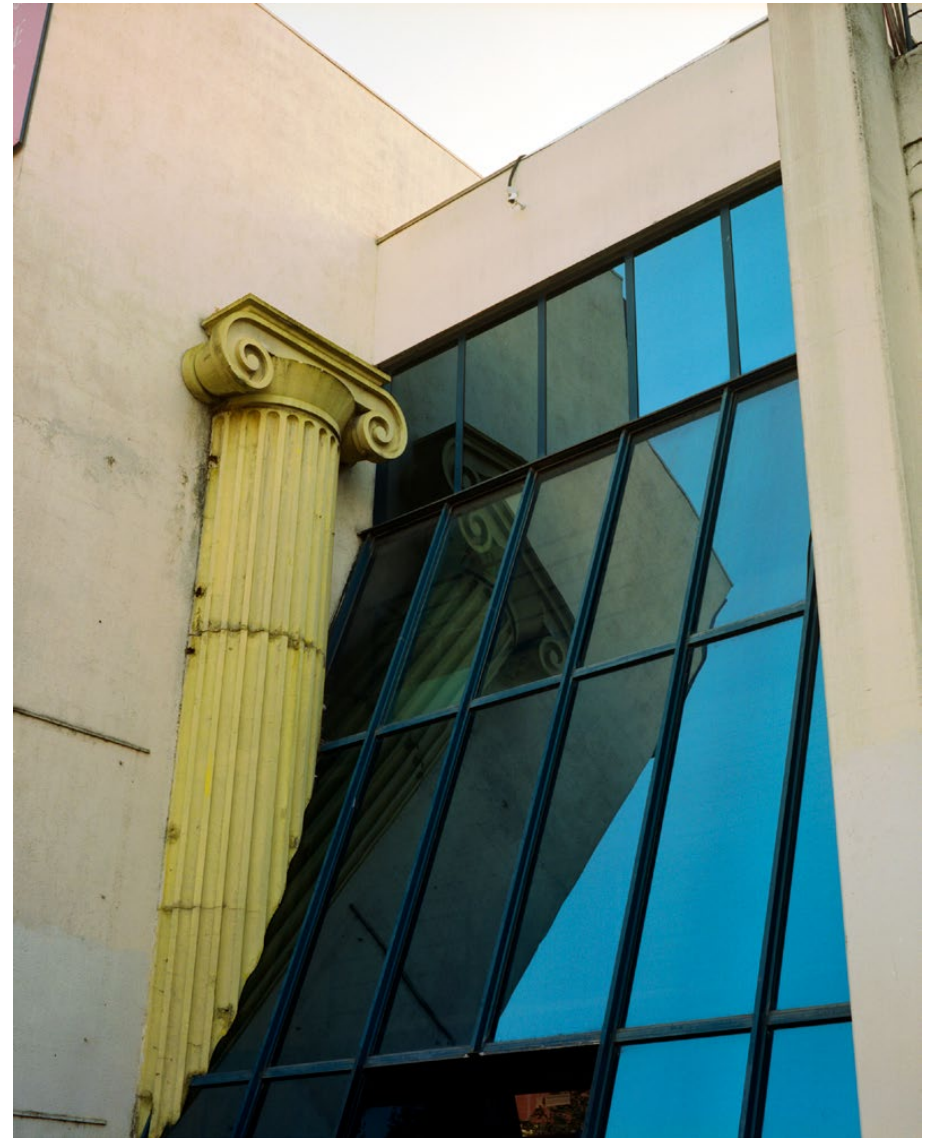
An Afghan cricket player searching for the ball on Eid, Saint-Denis, May 2020



Aubervilliers, May 2020



Imad in Aubervilliers, May 2020



Aubervilliers, September 2018



Saint-Denis, May 2020



Aubervilliers, June 2020



Under the A86 Highway, Bondy, August 2020



Samir in Aubervilliers, September 2018



Noisy-le-Sec, May 2020



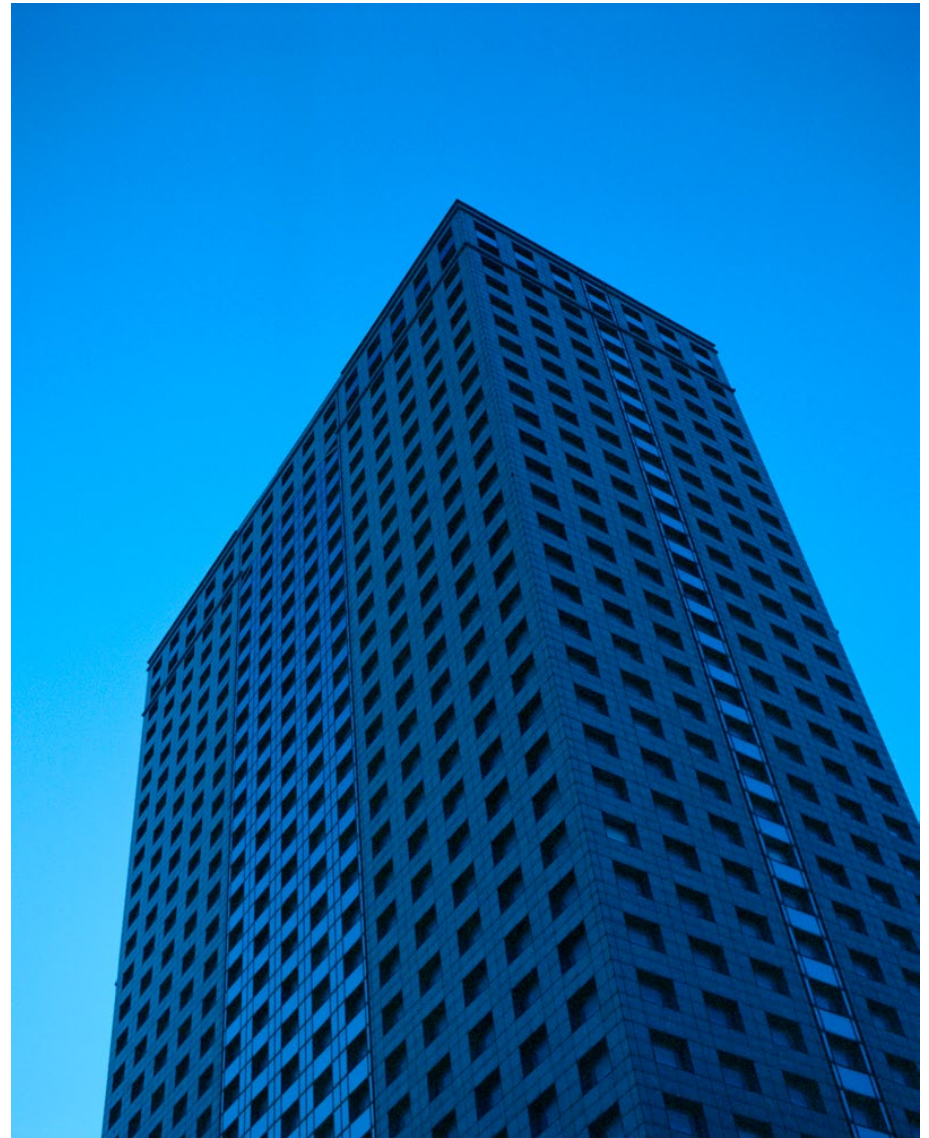
Khady and Ali in L'Île-Saint-Denis, October 2019



The A15 Highway bridge in Argenteuil, March 2021



Bobigny, May 2020



La Tour Villette, Aubervilliers, May 2020



Ahmed in Drancy, June 2021



Udriss in Saint-Denis, May 2020



Rosny-sous-Bois, May 2020



Aubervilliers, June 2020



Le Blanc-Mesnil, May 2020



Justin in La Courneuve, August 2020



Villetaneuse, March 2021



Bobigny, June 2018



Two brothers in Bobigny, June 2018



Sevrans, June 2021



Villetaneuse, April 2021



La Courneuve, May 2021



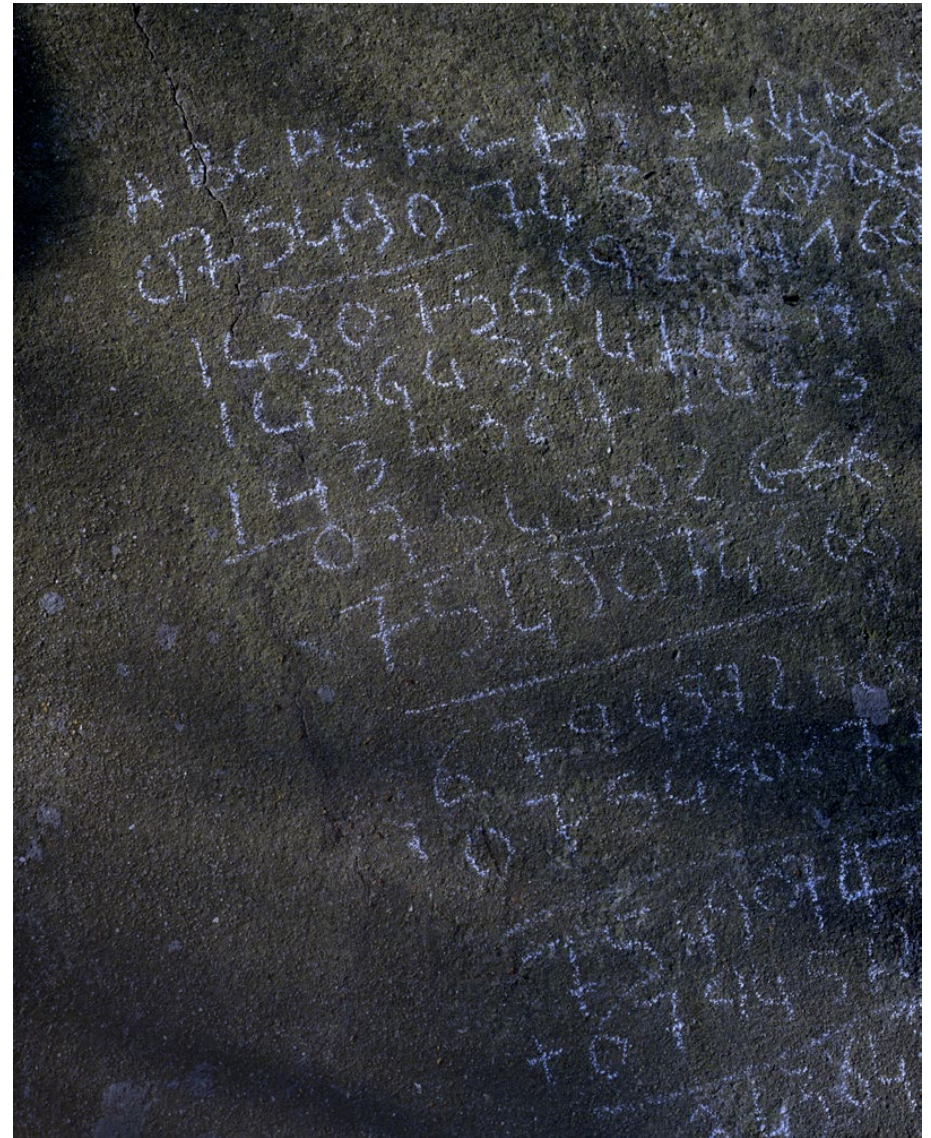
Stains, April 2021



Butte Pinson, Montmagny, April 2021



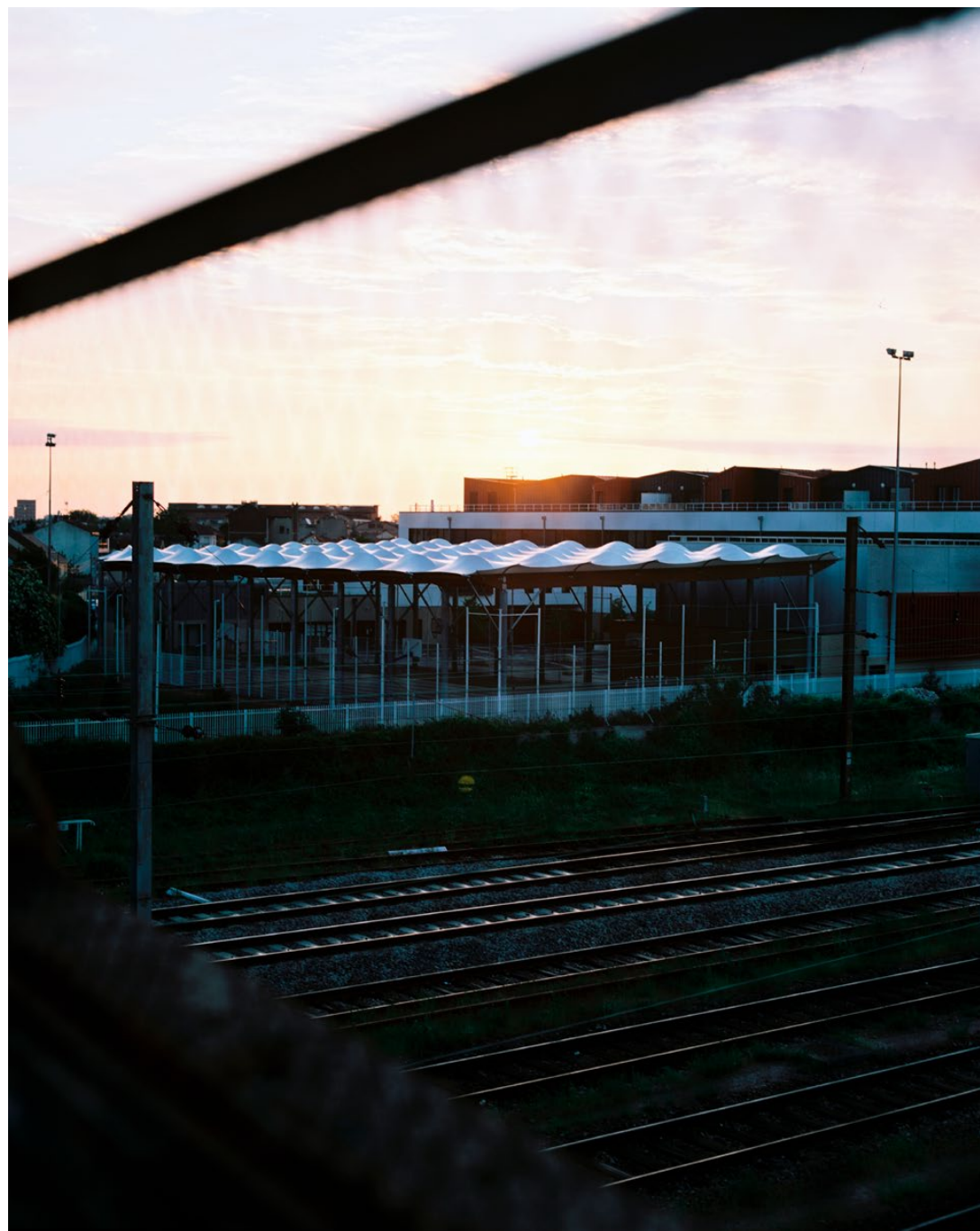
Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, April 2021



Saint-Denis, April 2021



Aulnay-sous-Bois, May 2021



Drancy, June 2021



Coubron, June 2021



The site of the old Citroën car factory in Aulnay-sous-Bois, May 2021



Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, March 2021



Aubervilliers, May 2020

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