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DESPERATE

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TIMES

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CALL FOR

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MODEST

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MEASURES



# Desperate times call for modest measures

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The fragility of our society and its weaknesses face to face with global crises are each day more manifest. What more striking example than the inability of this world to face a global epidemic like COVID-19? In such a society, the idea of global collapse is taken seriously by philosophers as well as scientists, and in the end, it is becoming a serious belief for more and more people, who are trying to shift their patterns and invent new resilient ways of life. But the designer should always take a critical view of any issue to develop the most inventive but also coherent solutions. Facing the idea of global collapse, he is forced to see that most of the solutions that are proposed to meet the issue are not affordable for everybody. What would happen to the working classes that are stuck in a precarious way of life? They obviously cannot afford to leave their work and home to retire in the countryside, as a lot of privileged people chose to do. Then, a mindful designer cannot just believe that a great education would be the key to shift the models of society. He must think of another path. It is this other path that we are trying to explore here.

## *Forewords*













*Listed in order of appearance:*

1. Photograph taken in front of a shopping mall in Marseille, 2019  
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2. Photograph taken during a garage sale, 2019  
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3. Photograph from the serie *Our Lives and our Children*, 1979-1982  
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5. Photograph from the serie  
*Sur les petites routes du grand débat*, 2019  
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# Introduction : Working classes vs crises

According to several social studies, it can be observed that the working classes usually pollute less than other social classes\*. Taking into consideration those studies quickly modifies the common perception of working-class people, who are usually accused of being responsible for the environmental crisis, because of over-consumption habits. It also contradicts the idea that eco-responsible ways of life depend on environmental awareness. Indeed, what's at stake here is that working-class people seem to have eco-friendly lifestyles despite pretty weak environmental awareness. But is it really paradoxical? In the opinion of Paul Ariès, who explored the question in his book *Écologie et Cultures populaires*<sup>1</sup>, this can be explained by the working-classes' cultural predisposition to be eco-friendly. For example, the popular acceptations of time, nature or pleasure are close to what decreasing thinkers try to promote. In the same way, George Orwell used the expression "common decency" to show that the working classes cope better with frugal living conditions than with the excess of modern society. However, if we managed to prove that the working classes already have resilient practices and cultures, this would allow huge hope regarding the potentiality of global crises. It would suggest that the solutions are not to be found in new ways of life, but in the existing practices of disregarded people. Then, the designer's job would be to promote what society has refused to see so far.



1 • Paul Ariès,  
*Écologie et cultures populaires*,  
Utopia, 2015

\*As an example, the study of the ADEME (*Agence de Développement et de Maîtrise de l'Énergie*) reveals that the "popular consumers" (working class people having a day-to-day way of life) are emitting each year less than 4,000 kg eq. CO<sub>2</sub>, while the "eco-elite" (economically privileged people who try to lead an ecological life) are emitting more than 6,000 kg eq. CO<sub>2</sub>/year. Finally, the "installed bourgeoisie" emits almost 30,000 kg eq. CO<sub>2</sub>/year.

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22 First of all, we must focus on a concrete popular practice that could support our hypothesis. From there, we might be able to identify how the designer could promote it as a model that the society could refer to in order to withstand global crises. The example of the allotment gardens seems to be a good case to study.

1.

The Allotment  
gardens: a key for  
withstanding the  
global crises?



### A / What allotment gardens are

To begin, it's necessary to identify what is at stake when speaking about allotment gardens. Here, it refers to plots of land made available for families, to give them the possibility to grow their own fruit and vegetable. These plots are usually made for urban populations, and more specifically for the working classes living in towns. A great diversity of allotment gardens can be noticed depending on the country and its history. The forerunners are probably to be found in England in the 18th century. But, more generally, those gardens usually date back in Europe to the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century. They were established to enable industry workers to grow extra food and to reconnect with the earth they often had to leave because of the rural flight. At the time, much of the fresh food eaten by laborers was supplied by this allotment system. Today, even if the number of available plots has widely decreased, they are still very much appreciated by the working classes for whom it combines frugal outside leisure and extra food supply.

In former communist countries like Czechoslovakia, the system is a little different, these gardens tend to be used as holiday houses. In Russia, they are called "datchas" and they were very appreciated by the working class in the 20th century. But since the collapse of the Soviet Union, these "datchas" have been quite depreciated by Russian people. However, this seems to be the only example of dislike of allotments. Indeed, in most countries, the demands are usually a lot higher than the available plots. In 2008, there were 100,000 applicants on a waiting list for a plot in those gardens in the United Kingdom, according to The Guardian.

Finally, allotment gardens should not be confused with community gardens, which appeared in the USA and are now developing in European countries. A community garden is a shared plot where anybody can grow something. It demands more efforts in terms of self-organization on the gardeners' part. Thus, most community gardens are not as efficient as allotment gardens in terms of food supply and access to autonomy. They are mostly used for leisure, aesthetic

2 • Michel Poallan,  
«An Open letter to the Next Farmer in Chief»,  
The New York Times Magazine, 9 octobre 2008

or pedagogic purposes. On the contrary, the owners of allotment gardens are able to cultivate their autonomy and learn how to get more resilient year after year. In the end, it is obvious that these gardens are proof of the long-standing resilience of people belonging to the working classes. Yet, we still have to prove that it may potentially become a larger-scaled model.

### B / How allotment gardens could spread as a concrete model of popular resilience

Many times in modern History, the world has had to face global crises. Of course, the two world wars are probably the most important examples in the last 100 years. Then, if we look back at how societies managed to face those crises, we might learn about how we could face the coming ones. Concerning food supply, we could pay close attention to what were called victory gardens. During the world wars, individuals were encouraged to grow their own vegetables in gardens to make up for food shortages and curb the food price increase. That way, the populations managed to improvise gardens anywhere: in parks, urban wastelands, or even in the holes made by bombings. According to an article published in *The New York Times* by Michael Poallan<sup>2</sup>, the victory garden would have allowed the production of 40% of the whole food in the United States during the Second World War, throughout 20 million gardens. Finally, it must be noticed that this huge collective effort was possible thanks to a popular willingness more than a political directive. Indeed, at the beginning, the US government, that feared the agrifood business might object, was not in favor of such practices. It was the popular pressure that made them change their mind and encourage gardening. But tribute should be also paid to Georges Washington Carver, an eminent botanist and agronomist born in slavery, who had a great influence on minorities and in poor social environments. At the end of his life, he encouraged the development of victory gardens through a publication entitled *Garden for Victory and Peace*.

Even if this huge popular effort was often forgotten by history, it is clear that it played a major role in the moral and practical resilience of people during such hard times. Moreover, it is now clear that popular gardening could be a key to meeting the coming issues; and the ingredients are already there as we take into consideration allotment gardens. It is indeed worth mentioning that many allotment gardens are former victory gardens, especially in Great Britain, Germany or France.

### C / The garden, a good place to cultivate virtuous popular cultures to defy the mass society culture

Finally, not only do allotment gardens have a real potential to tackle the major food issues to come, but they also have the potential to model new eco-responsible popular cultures. Unlike community gardens, allotment gardens are designed for individual uses. But this does not imply individualistic behaviors. Indeed, a taste for comparison and mutual assistance among gardeners creates strong connections and a convivial atmosphere. People enjoy taking part in picnics or annual contests. Pieces of advice and seeds are also shared, the others' practices are observed and gardeners learn from each other. This definitely shows that, far from being isolated, they form a community whose ethic flourishes against capitalistic principles. It does not mean that those gardeners are anti-capitalist, in fact, they usually are not committed activists. But their daily practices, their conception of joy or their relation to the world and nature keep them utterly away from capitalistic injunctions. In their garden, they experience the joy of losing time and of harvesting the fruits of their work. They also experience democracy: in her book *La démocratie aux champs*<sup>3</sup>, Joëlle Zask explains how political cultivating the land is. But mostly, they experience that happiness comes from the link one establishes with nature and with the others, rather than with consumption goods. This is the distinction Paul Ariès makes between enjoying having and enjoying being ("jouissance d'avoir"/"jouissance d'être"<sup>4</sup>).

3 • Joëlle Zask,  
*La démocratie aux champs*,  
La découverte, 2016

4 • Paul Ariès,  
op. cit.

Yet, not only are these behaviors essential in the construction of alternative cultures to oppose the mainstream mass culture model, but they are also essential from a concrete point of view. Indeed, climate change is about to change the way we have to farm. Agriculture will have to face new challenges: new diseases, water shortages, consequences of soil pollution, etc. It implies innovating in the ways of growing food. As a matter of fact, the collective empirical learning we observe in allotment gardens, through experimentation, mutual assistance, knowledge sharing, etc., could become crucial to pragmatically meet the food issue.

Ultimately, it makes no doubt that allotment gardens could be one unexpected key to a collective and humanist resilience. On the one hand, they constitute an existing fertile soil that has already proved its efficiency in History, with its ability to withstand hardship; on the other hand, it conveys cultures, ways of life, ethics, that may be relevant alternatives to the current mainstream capitalistic model, which is leading us to disaster.



We have just identified that working-class people already have resilient and frugal practices and cultures that might be good substitutes for questionable capitalistic models. Now, we have to understand why those virtuous behaviours are invisible in society, and why it is so difficult to regard them as key stakeholders of an alternative resilient model.



# 2.

2.

**Representing the  
working classes:  
a graphic design  
issue**



A / Misjudgement of the working classes

If we pay attention to how working classes are represented, we might have some answers. Indeed, two degrading features are very often associated to working-class people in representations: social deprivation and the masses.

First, if they are represented as individuals, they usually appear to embody social deprivation. They look either poor and helpless or stupid and uneducated. To give examples, we could quote, on the one hand, a campaign by the French red cross entitled *son seul espoir c'est vous*<sup>5</sup>, in which we can see a dramatic staging of poor and lonely individuals in their shabby homes asking for the viewer's pity; on the other hand, the movie *Idiocracy*<sup>6</sup> is a good example of how modest people are depicted as intellectually and morally deprived. In this movie, the future has been doomed because working classes have reproduced faster than upper classes. Then, everyone has become severely stupid. In both cases, this assimilation of working classes with any forms of deprivation suggests that such a population needs education and help from the upper-class. Anyway, nothing can be learnt from them and they much more appear as a problem than a solution.

Next, if they are represented as a group, working classes are mostly associated with the masses. In a book entitled *À l'ombre des majorités silencieuses*<sup>7</sup>, Jean Baudrillard explores the consequences of applying the concept of mass to a society. He explains that a mass is the contrary of a social group: a mass has no History, no energy, no willingness. In other words, the masses are a destructive aggregation of unconscious people. Of course, the working classes are a very complex social construction that does not fit with this concept. Then, since we keep talking about mass consumption, mass culture or mass society, we are simplifying very complex societal mechanics into a global and abstract concept that only fits the market's intentions. As far as they are concerned, the point is to have masses of consumers with identical consumption desires.

Now we can see how prejudiced our perception of the working classes often is. This perception has prospered through our words and language,

6 • Mike Judge, *Idiocracy*, 2006, © 20th Century Fox

5 • Agence 6AM, *Son seul espoir c'est vous*, posters for the french red cross 2012, © 6AM



5

6



7 • Jean Baudrillard, *À l'ombre des majorités silencieuses ou la fin du social*, Sens & Tonka, 1978, 1997

but it is obvious that Graphic Design has also played a role in the spreading of such representations for the benefits of the market. It is, then, obvious that Graphic Design can play a role in shifting those biased representations in order to propose another perspective, closer than what we have observed so far. But first, what about the perception of allotment gardens? Is this rejection of working-class people at stake there?

### B / Misjudgement of the allotment gardens

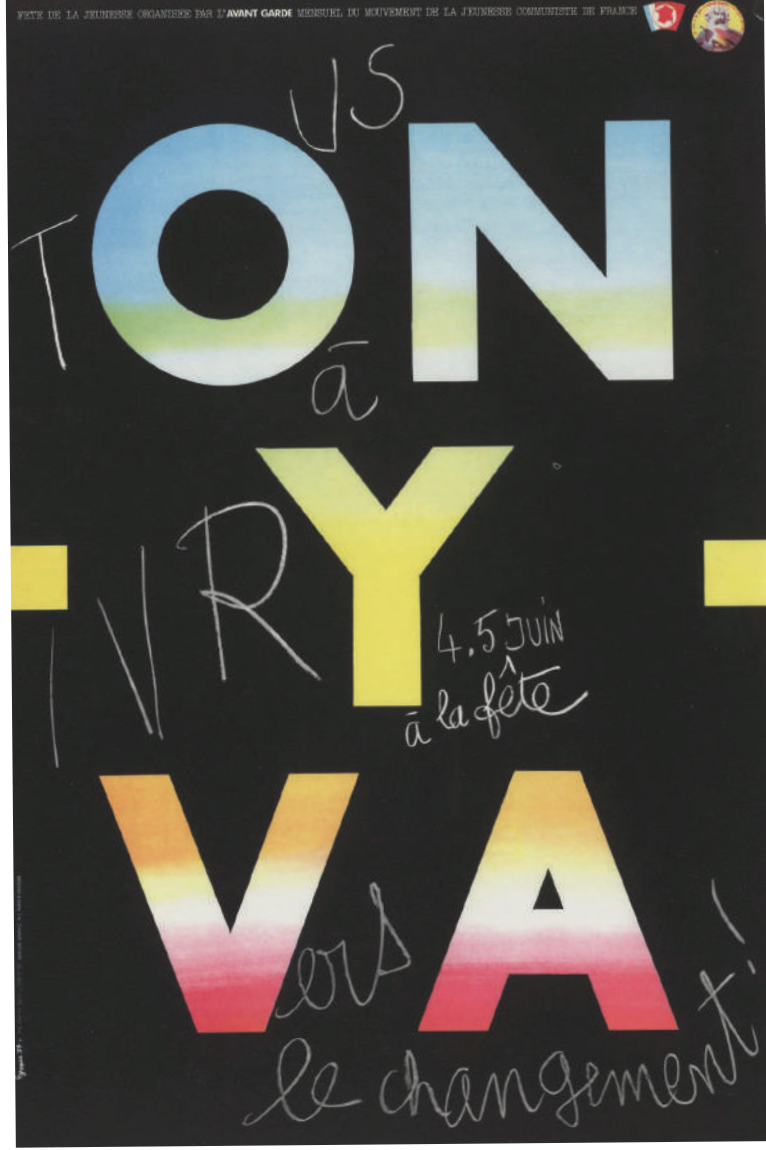
Just like images or languages, spaces can contain symbolic violence. Monique Pinçon-Charlot and Michel Pinçon have shown in their book *La violence des riches*<sup>8</sup> that the delegitimization of working-class people can be conveyed in public spaces and urbanism. This is exactly what we can observe concerning allotment gardens. They are often relegated in the suburbs, undervalued by the urbanistic decisions and even sometimes threatened of expropriation – in Marseille, this is concretely going to happen to the Joseph Aiguier gardens, threatened by a new highway project. Public decisions jeopardizing allotment gardens have been observed by a study entitled “Potagers urbains vs jardins familiaux? Réformes urbaines et controverses autour du beau jardin et son usage légitime”<sup>9</sup>. Through this study we learn that the conception of gardening in allotment gardens doesn’t fit in the new standards of urban plans. In other words, allotment gardens are jeopardized gentrification. The ideal of an autonomous self-production – which is so important for working-class people, as explained in the study – doesn’t suit the bourgeois preference for an ornamental or pleasure garden. This is why many small new community gardens are developing well in Europe, even if they are not as efficient, in terms of food supply and self-consumption, as classical allotment gardens. Of course, such an opposition must be put into perspective. Many community gardens are very popular and remarkable in terms of social link. Yet, this opposition is important to set in order to highlight the devaluation of popular ideals of gardening, for the benefit of a bourgeois conception of gardening that constitutes a much less resilient model. To sum-up, it is clear that the rejection of allotment gardens embodies the rejection of working classes in the society. What we detailed earlier can be applied in this context. Then, the issue of shifting the representations can be easily transposed to the allotment garden and we now have to detail how Graphic design could do so.

8 • Michel Pinçon  
et Monique Pinçon-Charlot,  
*La violence des riches*,  
La Découverte, Paris, 2013, 2014

9 • A. Frauenfeldem, Q. Delay et L. Soalambirin,  
«Potagers urbains vs jardins familiaux? Réforme urbaine et controverses autour du beau jardin et son usage légitime»,  
Érès, *Espaces et sociétés*, 2014

### C / A graphic design protocol to shift the representations

Building alternative representations of working classes could start with proposing a protocol for a popular graphic design. This means we have to construct a visual language capable of shaping popular values, in which the working classes could recognize themselves, and that could make their models more enviable for the rest of the society. To do so, we could rely on three concepts that seem to match the working-classes’ ideals: conflict, resistance and enjoying being. First, conflict is inseparable from the popular conception of democracy, which is very spontaneous and full of (opinion) disagreements, whereas the bourgeois conception of democracy prefers a soft consensus that erases minorities’ voices. What’s more, the working classes are a large patchwork as they are constituted of many different subcategories (workers, farmers, employees, unemployed, people living in town, people living in the countryside, etc.) Then, conflict and plurality are necessary to mediate all those disparities. From a visual point of view, conflict can be conveyed by a voluntary mix of multiple and disharmonious graphic expression and ambivalent messages. This generates conflictual images that are not consensual and that prompt political discussions. The images of *Grapus*<sup>10</sup> are particularly efficient to illustrate this.



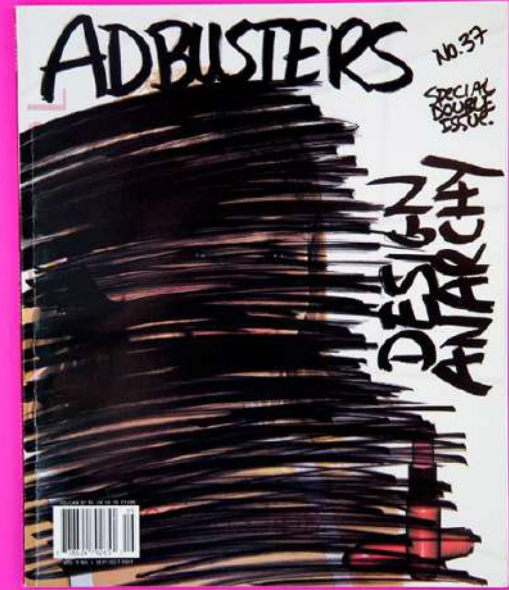
10

11 • Jonathan Barnbrook, 2001,  
Couverture pour la revue Adbusters n°37,  
© Jonathan Barnbrook

10 • Grapus, 1977,  
Poster for la fête de l'Avant-garde  
© Grapus

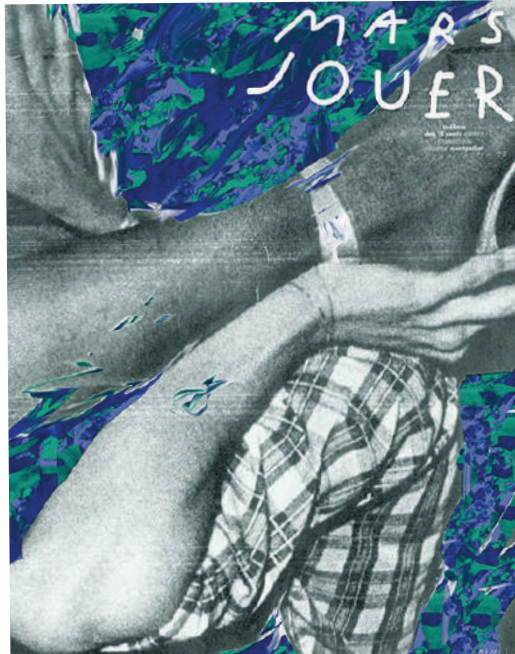
After conflict comes resistance. What's at stake here, as we talk about resistance, is not necessarily a hard opposition against a system, but a quite soft and unconscious resistance against the moral of modern society. Emphasizing the concept of resistance is also a good way to overcome the perception of working classes as the masses; a resisting people is the opposite of a mass. Visually, it can be conveyed through a satirical and provoking graphic expression. We could find good examples in the images of the graphic designer Jonathan Barnbrook<sup>11</sup>, who melts punk inspiration with pop culture parody. More generally, the funny images circulating on the internet – more generally called “memes” – are full of an aesthetic impertinence that expresses well the will to challenge the sanitized images of modern society.

11





Finally, enjoying being is a concept we introduced earlier and it might be the most important thing. Opposing enjoying having to enjoying being is a way to oppose two visions of the working classes. We want to break the first one, which expresses the unattainable modern promise; but we want to promote the second one which emphasizes a basic link to the others and to the real. Thereby, it is obvious that such a concept is the key of a popular graphic expression, as it contains both a virtuous relation to the world and disenchantment with consumption society. When it comes to images, enjoying being implies a sensual link to the visuals. It means emphasizing imperfections and making the materials and tools visible. It also implies a truthful relation to bodies: showing them in action, with their reality, as opposed to the modern conception of the body. We could give as an example the works of *Formes vives*<sup>12</sup>, which offers a very sincere and sensual look.



12

12 • Fromes Vives, 2018,  
Posters for le Théâtre des 13 vents  
in Montpellier,  
© Formes Vives







We have now three ingredients that give a shape to the idea of a popular graphic expression. Gauging the prevalence of each of these three ingredients should change the tone of the communication and make it suitable to different situations. Next, we will be able to start thinking of how to apply such a protocol to the allotment garden and what shape could take a Graphic Design project in this context.



40 Finally comes the time to deal with the shape, that a project in allotment gardens could take, regarding the issues we have identified. Which intervention should a graphic designer privilege in this context? Which supports and devices should be selected?



# 3.

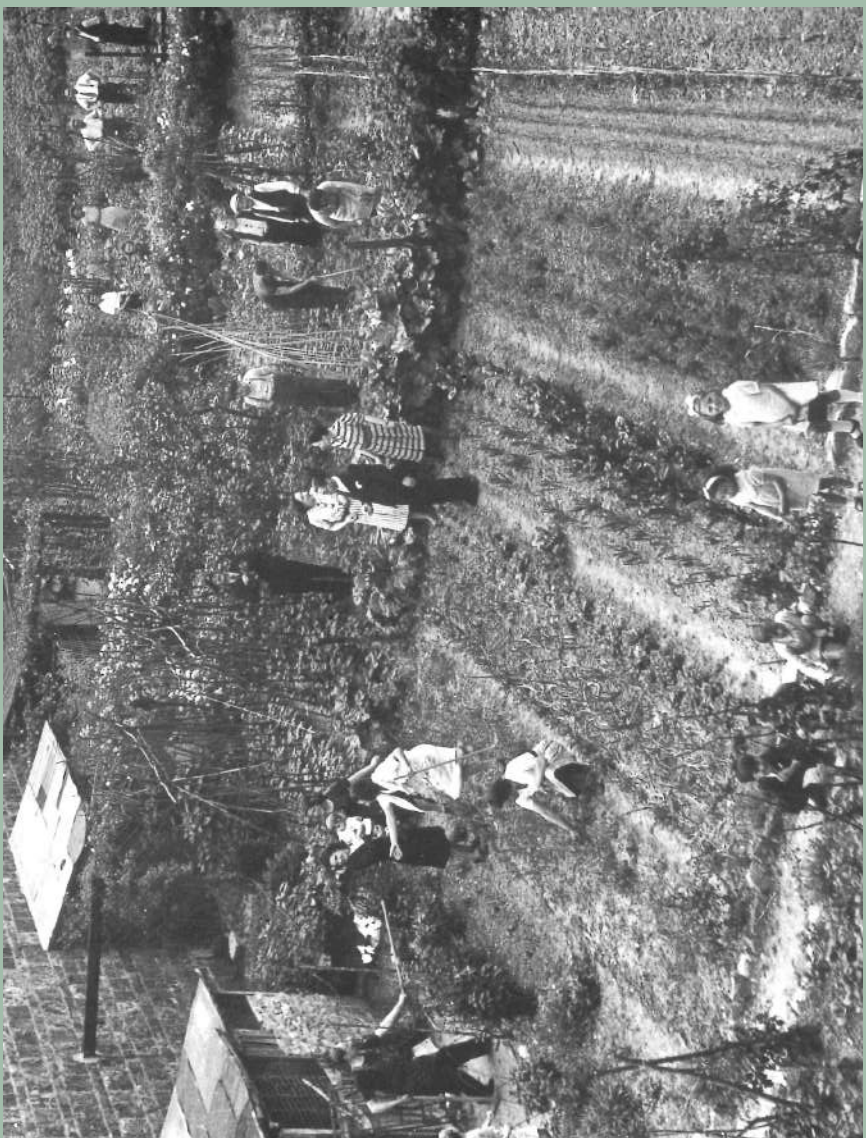
3.

A graphic design  
project in allotment  
gardens





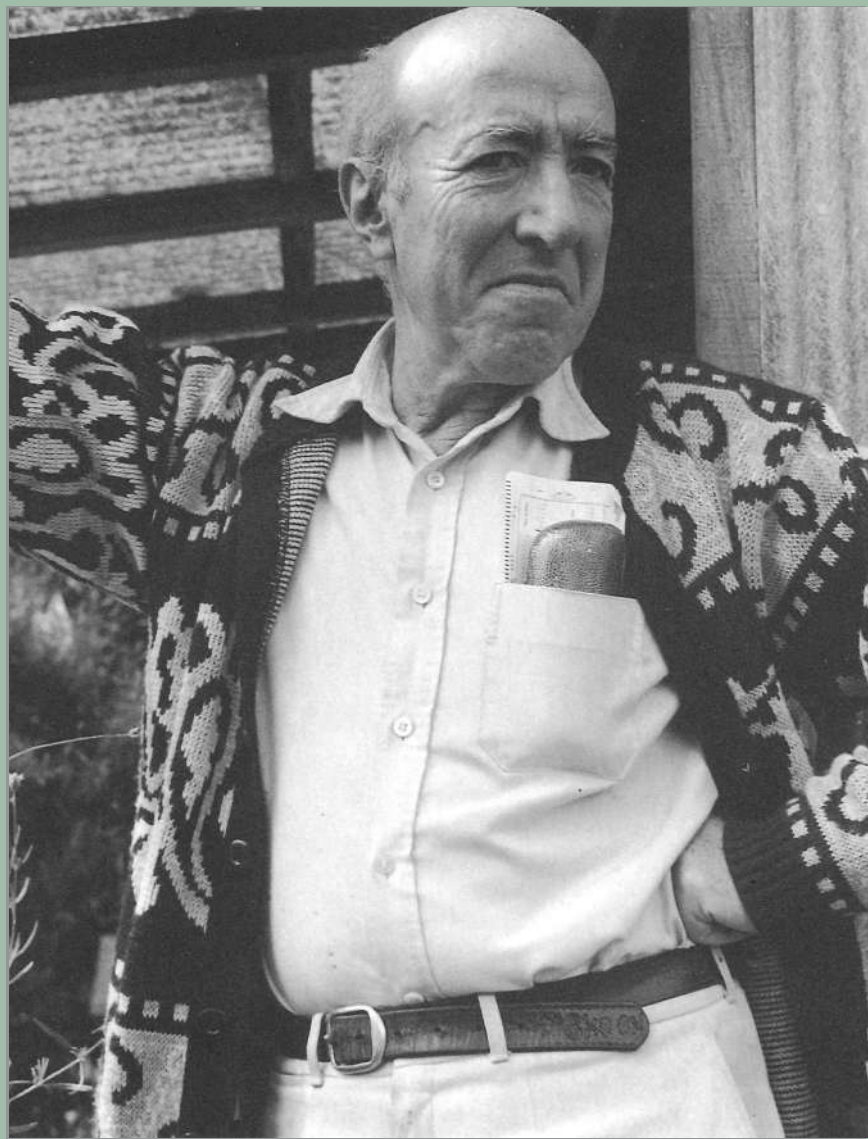
















*Listed in order of appearance:*

1. Allotment gardens in Billancourt, from 1991 to 1993  
© Julie Ganzin
2. Allotment gardens in Nîmes, Summer 2019  
© Quentin Bougot
3. Allotment gardens in Limoges, Winter 2019  
© Quentin Bougot
4. Allotment gardens in Ivry, 1949  
© Robert Doisneau
1. Allotment gardens in Billancourt, from 1991 to 1993  
© Julie Ganzin
2. Allotment gardens in Nîmes, Summer 2019  
© Quentin Bougot
3. Allotment gardens in Ivry, 1989  
© Jacques Faujour
1. Allotment gardens in Billancourt, from 1991 to 1993  
© Julie Ganzin
2. Gardeners in the countryside, Autumn 2017  
© Quentin Bougot
3. Allotment gardens in Paris in 1989  
© Ligue du coin de terre et du foyer

### A / An empowerment strategy

A classical Graphic Design project might consist into a promotion campaign of allotment gardens, that would target either the upper classes or the political institutions. Yet, if we are faithful to our primary hypothesis – that we, as a society, including thinkers, designers, scientists, etc, have a lot to learn from the working classes – then, we cannot just consider such a vertical project that doesn't really take advantage of the gardeners themselves. At the opposite extreme, we could consider an empowerment project. This concept of empowerment is to be attributed to the American sociologist Saul Alinsky. He theorized this term in the 1930s, while he was trying to empower weak minorities, which means, he tried to link and animate communities to make them get more rights and carry their voice into local policies. In the context of the allotment gardens and, as a graphic designer, an empowerment strategy would consist in giving the visual supports that could help the gardeners get more confident about their legitimacy towards the public policies and society in general. It would give the gardeners a visual identification and provide a feeling of belonging to a large and powerful community capable of shifting the society's current models. Finally, it would give them devices and mediums to get organized and enhance their models and knowledges about resilient gardening. But, it could also strengthen their capacity to defend themselves in case of expropriation projects or to obtain more cultivating land in order to spread their influence. Then, with this strategy, the first targets of the project are no longer the institutions or the other social categories, but the gardeners themselves. This implies innovation about devices and supports that we are going to explore thereafter. Yet, first we have to study to what extend such a strategy may match the context we target: the allotment gardens.

13 • Antigone Mouchtouris,  
Sociologie de la culture populaire,  
L'hamattan, 2007, pp. 56-57

### B / How to empower low-profile gardeners

Could an empowerment strategy really work in allotment gardens? What raises doubt is indeed the assumed profile of gardeners in allotment gardens. Usually, those who cultivate in those places are considered as quite passive and discrete individuals, who don't necessarily want to spread their model and rather keep off any protesting activity. Then, an empowerment strategy might seem inappropriate. Actually, it is not that certain at all. Indeed, it must not be forgotten that Saul Alinsky never empowered communities with obvious activist backgrounds. As an example, before he died, he told on an interview<sup>13</sup> that he had the project to empower the middle class, which seems politically sluggish. Yet, he analysed that this apathy covered unexpressed social unrest that he wished to transform into a progressive and democratic struggle.

Concerning the gardeners of the allotment gardens, it could be quite similar. To check this hypothesis, several interviews of gardeners have been led in the allotment gardens of Limoges. Usually, gardeners are happy to talk about their activity, they enjoy presenting their practices and their feelings. At the time, it was just the beginning of Spring, and many were frustrated about not being able to show how beautiful their garden is when their plants and flowers have grown, at Summer. Moreover, some clearly expressed the idea that allotment gardens were not sufficiently put forward and valued, in local media for example. To prepare these interviews, eight postcards had been realized<sup>15</sup> and the choice was given to the gardeners to keep those they liked most and felt closest to. Each postcard contained the ingredients of a popular graphic design we detailed earlier, but with different tones. Some were more sarcastic; some were more poetic; some more political, etc. In the end, each type of card was very appreciated, but the most appreciated ones were the most political and poetic. It clearly shows a taste for asserting values and morals, especially when it comes to political issues.

Thereby, it appears, through this test and those interviews, that such a context seems really suitable for an empowering graphic design project in the allotment garden. It is now time to design this project.

### C / Building a holistic Graphic Design project into the allotment garden

As we reach the end of this writing, we have to expose concrete supports and devices that could empower people in the allotment gardens. Three complementary devices have been chosen to shape one coherent and holistic project. First, allotment gardens need a graphic identity. It is essential to provide more credibility towards the institutions and it helps publicizing allotment gardens in society.

The objective is to design a common identity to be developed through different logos for each allotment garden in France. To do so, a procedural program must be created. From a common pattern, it will generate an infinity of logos. Each association in charge of a garden will have access to the generator and will be able to create its own logo.

Therefore, it encourages the association to have a logo and it affirms their belonging to a large community of gardens through a common and recognizable visual identity.

The second medium is a poster exhibition about gardeners' testimonies. This is a way to highlight working-class people for a public that is not familiar with allotment gardens. Building an exhibition is indeed a way to target rather upper-class people, who, most of the time, undervalue working classes. What's more, gathering gardeners' testimonies about their practices and outlooks on life, and then highlighting them, is a way to make them realize the precious value of their models as they become pieces of art.

Finally, the third device is a newspaper dedicated to popular gardening and offered to people in allotment gardens. The aim is to give the project a more political and critical dimension. Opinion newspapers are quite popular media because of their satirical tone. This newspaper could raise awareness and inform gardeners about complex environmental issues. This could also advocate the role of popular gardening regarding these issues and give gardeners confidence to defend their ways of life. At last, this newspaper could be distributed to a wider audience to explain and promote allotment gardens and working-class gardening.

Each of those mediums lean on working class gardeners to spread their model in society through three different paths. This is a holistic project that tries to connect allotment gardens to the rest of society through complementary ways, with a view to giving back working-class gardeners dignity and credibility to model a more humanistic and sustainable outlook.



**Conclusion** ■



## *Conclusion : Another outlook*

Global collapse might never happen in the coming decades and our modern civilization might find unsuspected resources that will sustain it for a few more centuries. However, even in such improbable eventuality, the world will have to face heavy crises that will strike the most vulnerable.

Anyway, all along this research work we have been unfolding a collective hope against this looming future. All we had to do was to focus on what modern society has been trying to hide but failed to break: the working-class imaginary. We have observed in this object a virtuous relation to other human beings and their environment, but besides, we have identified an unexpected capacity to face crises. Those working classes have been repressed from the modern imaginary through repelling representation. Then, the issue is to reverse the situation and defeat this modern imaginary by promoting a working-class imaginary. A graphic designer can do so, but only practice can prove it next.





# Annexes

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This abstract starts with the tension between the possibility of global crises to come – climate crisis, financial crisis, political crisis, etc. – and the condition of existence of the working classes. From this comes a hypothesis: is there not any form of withstanding to crises in the way working-class people live and shape their relation to the world? If this intuition was right, then the designer might have a role to play on representations that have overlooked virtuous cultures and practices already experienced by a large part of the population