

‘Designated Sites’: A Review of the Photography of Valentin Merlin

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“Designated Sites” is the expression used by French Travellers to describe the stopping places where they are forced to live by the authorities.^[1] In France, there are over 1,200 official caravan sites for French Travellers. The photographer Valentin Merlin travelled around the country to document those places and has photographed over 230 of them since 2015.

Valentin Merlin wanted to go against the prevailing tendency in Western photography to represent so-called *Gypsies*. He writes:

You know as well as I do those stereotypical photographs featuring children’s faces, men with guitars and women in long skirts. The ‘Designated Sites’ project shows no people, you will see no one in the pictures, just the sites where the French State is keeping those who have chosen to continue living in caravans. What characterizes those caravan sites is that they are almost all located in problematic places: near cemeteries, waste dumps, factories, motorways, and so on.^[2]

Figure 1.
Clermont-Ferrand, Puy-de-Dôme by Valentin Merlin, 2020



1 In French, *terrains désignés*. The French government calls these caravan sites, *aires d'accueil*, literally in French “welcoming areas”.

2 Valentin Merlin, “Série ‘Terrains désignés’”. In *Barvalo. Roms, Sinti, Gitans, Manouches et Voyageurs...* Marseille: Anamosa/MUCEM, 2023, p. 208–207.

Figure 2.
Saint-Germain-en-Laye, Yvelines by Valentin Merlin, 2020



Figure 3.
Figeac, Lot by Valentin Merlin, 2020



Indeed, photography has the power to show places in a new way. Valentin Merlin asked himself how he could shed light on the environmental segregation suffered by French Travellers. The answer was quite straightforward: by enlarging the frame, by taking a step back and by making visible what surrounds a caravan site – a railway, a nuclear power station, a highway, for example. To use his own words: “I climbed up in trees, on electricity poles, on the roof of my truck to document and to produce evidence that French citizens are being placed under house arrest in places that are hostile to all forms of life.”

What we learn from Valentin Merlin’s photographic project is that if you are categorized by the French authorities as *gens du voyage* [Travellers] and if you do not own a piece of land, you are obliged by law to live in specific places chosen by the local administration. The photographs reveal that the places chosen to accommodate so-called *gens du voyage* are marginal areas. These areas are considered unsuitable for housing, often for environmental reasons. But as dedicated caravan sites are not classified as residential sites – because a caravan is not recognized as a residence – it is therefore possible for local authorities to build caravan sites very close to chemical plants or highways.

The “Designated Sites” photographic project shows not only that French Travellers are victims of environmental inequalities but also that France does not respect the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states that “everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state.”^[3] So-called *gens du voyage* are forced to live in guarded enclosed places, surrounded by

Figure 4.
Givors, Rhône by Valentin Merlin, 2019



3 Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

fences. Most of the time, those sites are being run by private companies who make a profit by having Travellers live in polluted and dangerous areas.

As we remember the colonial legacy of photography, projects such as Valentin Merlin's can become reliable allies in the fight against environmental inequalities.^[4]

Figure 5.
Petit-Quevilly, Seine-Maritime by Valentin Merlin, 2019



4 To learn more about French Gens du Voyage facing environmental inequalities, see Lise Foisneau, "Dedicated Caravan Sites for French Gens du Voyage: Public Health Policy or Construction of Health and Environmental Inequalities?" *Health and Human Rights Journal* 19 (2): 89–98, 2017.

Figure 6.

Hellemmes-Ronchin, Nord by Valentin Merlin, 2019



Figure 7.

Rive-de-Giers, Loire by Valentin Merlin, 2019



Figure 8.

Riom, Puy-de-Dôme by Valentin Merlin, 2020

