

# Bohemian elegy

The chaotic heyday of an artistic community

**LAUREN ELKIN**

**IMPASSE RON SIN**

Murder, love, and art in the Heart of Paris

**MUSEUM TINGUELY**

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**W**HEN I MOVED TO PARIS to study in the 1990s, my university assigned me a shared flat in the southern part of the seventh arrondissement, near where it meets the sixth and the fifteenth. It was almost Montparnasse, but not quite. The metro station was Duroc, located so close to the Institut National des Jeunes Aveugles that there was a guard rail protecting the steps, which swung open to let you in or out, but prevented anyone who couldn't see them from falling down. It was also next door to the Hôpital Necker-Enfants Malades, named for the salonist and writer Madame Necker (Suzanne Curchod), who founded it in 1778. I went there with my flatmate, when she sprained her ankle while out running. *Elle s'est tordu la cheville*, I learned to say that day. I also learned how to say *this is a children's hospital, we don't treat the sprained ankles of adults*.

What I did not learn until many years later was that on the other side of the hospital was the Impasse Ronsin, a small cul-de-sac which had once been a much larger cul-de-sac in which could be found a number of artists' studios - until the early 1970s, when they were taken over by and absorbed into the hospital. Constantin Brâncuși, Jean Tinguely, Eva Aeppli, Niki de Saint Phalle, François-Xavier and Claude Lalanne all worked there. Marcel Duchamp, Albert Giacometti, Raymond Queneau, and Max Ernst passed through on studio visits; Kiki de Montparnasse had her first gig as an artist's model with a sculptor there. Now all that remains is a nondescript fragment of the old street onto which has been built a featureless group of modern buildings, and one café, the only structure to have withstood the onslaught of time and the real estate developers. Word is, the grounds of the Impasse have been turned into the hospital morgue.

The Impasse Ronsin: there is no place left in Paris like it. This is not *nostalgie de la boue* but simple statement of fact. "*L'endroit le plus insalubre de Paris*", the filthiest place in Paris, said the writer Harry Mathews, whose first wife, Niki de Saint Phalle, had her studio there for several years. "I don't think anyone who has not seen the Impasse Ronsin as it was can imagine its squalor." Dirt floors, no plumbing, shared toilets - the bohemian dream. The cheap rents and makeshift standalone structures meant that artists had a good deal of freedom to make what they wanted without having to worry too much about the market. The painter Reginald Pollock recalls that, when he arrived in the early 1950s, a lifetime lease to one of the studios cost \$75, or about \$850 in today's money. Monthly rent was \$7, or \$79 today. Each studio, constructed with salvaged lumber from the World's Fair of 1889, was about 25 by 45 feet, with a skylight in the ceiling.

An exhibition devoted to the street ran in New York in 2016 at the Paul Kamsin Gallery, and has been moved, in revised form, to the Museum Tinguely in Basel, where it opened earlier this year. For those of us who haven't been able to get to Switzerland in this time of closed borders and quarantines, there is a fascinating catalogue thick with anec-



dotes, illustrations and art, a psychogeographic portrait of a place that no longer exists, an excavation of the different people who worked, slept, taught, destroyed, fucked, and killed each other there.

Nicknamed "crime alley", the Impasse Ronsin first became famous the world over after a pair of murders committed in 1908. The victims were a painter called Alfred Steinheil and his mother-in-law. The likely perpetrator was Steinheil's wife Marguerite, who ran a high-toned salon patronized by people like Viollet-le-duc, François Coppée, King Edward VII, and a certain Prefect of the Seine called Eugène Poubelle, whose reward for introducing the publicly-collected waste bin was that it was named after him. But Marguerite's greatest claim to fame, before 1908, was that she had been the mistress of President Félix Faure, who died in suspicious circumstances in 1899, allegedly while being fellated by Mme Steinheil. In the French press this misadventure earned her the sobriquet *la pompe funèbre*. "Yet curiously," writes one of the show's curators, Adrian Dannatt, "this vast scandal is only known today because of a completely different artist, because Constantin Brâncuși came to work and live in this same Impasse. It is as if the O.J. Simpson case were only known in a hundred years' time because Jeff Koons had moved onto his street."

The street, if one can call it that, had been home to artists since at least 1864, but it was after the First World War, as artists went to Montparnasse in droves, drawn by the cheap rent and legendary bohemian, that the alleyway reached its heyday. By all accounts it was like finding yourself in the countryside in the middle of Paris: dirt roads, copious trees, creeping vines housing myriad sparrows in their nests, cats, dogs, poultry in an enclosure; "even a majestic goose ran about as they do on any farm". But life was hard. Harry Mathews, who really was shocked by the squalor, said: "It was really hard

**Student in front of a wall of Brâncuși's former studio, Impasse Ronsin, 1965; from Impasse Ronsin**

to believe that people who had known better quarters could accept living there ... You couldn't even think of it as partaking of any of the bohemian charm of certain neighborhoods of Paris ... I think there was one loo for the entire bunch of people there, except for Brâncuși." The artist Phyllida Barlow describes being taken to visit the Lalannes in their studio when she was a child. "My sister and I need a pee", she recalls:

someone points to a shed in the yard;  
there is a wooden door;  
it is dark;  
the ground is soft and moist;  
the stench is of shit and piss;  
we clamp our hands over our mouths and noses ...  
we stare in bewildered horror at the dark,  
encrusted orifice sunk deep in the damp ground;  
"go there" [my mother] says, as if this is ordinary;  
we take it in turns to squat over the poisonous hole,  
holding each other's hands for support, dreading  
any contact with the blackened scabs of shit;  
we emerge, gasping for air.

The writer Phyllis Tower recalls her own stay there in 1960-61, while she and her husband were studying at the Sorbonne. "Our studio was luxury compared with some of the others. There was a stone-flagged floor in the kitchen, a big black coal stove for heat, a shower with a butane tank for hot water, a chemical toilet in a little side alley where the coal was kept, and an inviting wall of books. It was perfect, except when Ed had to leap out of bed in the freezing winter mornings and rush to get the stove going while an icy rain streamed down the big skylight."

The Impasse, Tower writes, was a perfectly peaceful place to live and work, except for "the occasional crashing and grinding and banging emerging from Jean Tinguely". Tinguely - a Swiss artist who made ludic steam-punk assemblages from bits of metal

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and industrial material, sarcastic machines for doing nothing - was just starting out when he lived in the Impasse Ronsin, and he kept his neighbours up at all hours “hammering away” at whatever he was working on. One day in 1961, he gathered all his friends together to push his machines through the streets of Montparnasse on wheels, a kind of cacophonous art jalopy. That was a noisy day in the Impasse.

Tinguely moved there in 1955 with his partner, Eva Aeppli, also Swiss and an artist. Her dark, charcoal drawings are included in the catalogue; “Narcissus III” (1957) bears a strong resemblance to her husband, depicting a man with white flowers in his hair, turning his open palms to the sky like Buddha, apparently unaware of the noose that has slipped down around his neck. They both freely took lovers, and everyone knew about it. In 1960, Aeppli moved out and Tinguely took up with Niki de Saint Phalle, whom he had met when she borrowed a friend’s studio in 1957. Saint Phalle was fleeing Mathews and their two children, trying - there’s no other way to say it - to find herself, as a person and an artist, and the Impasse gave her the space in which to do both. She staged some of her first “shootings” there, in an empty lot left by some demolished studios. A few of these works are visible in the catalogue and they are wonderful; the pockmarked topology of the shot-up canvases, often built up with plaster and unwanted objects and other bits of detritus, all of it covered over with streaks of the paint she had hidden in bags or containers behind the plaster, burst open in a literal explosion of colour.

Carrying on the tradition, the Argentinian artist Marta Minujin turned up in 1963 and decided to

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destroy all the art she had made up to that point in order to make a fresh start. She presented the pieces at her studio in the rue Delambre and, when the show was over, took them to an empty lot in the Impasse, smashed them up, and set them on fire.

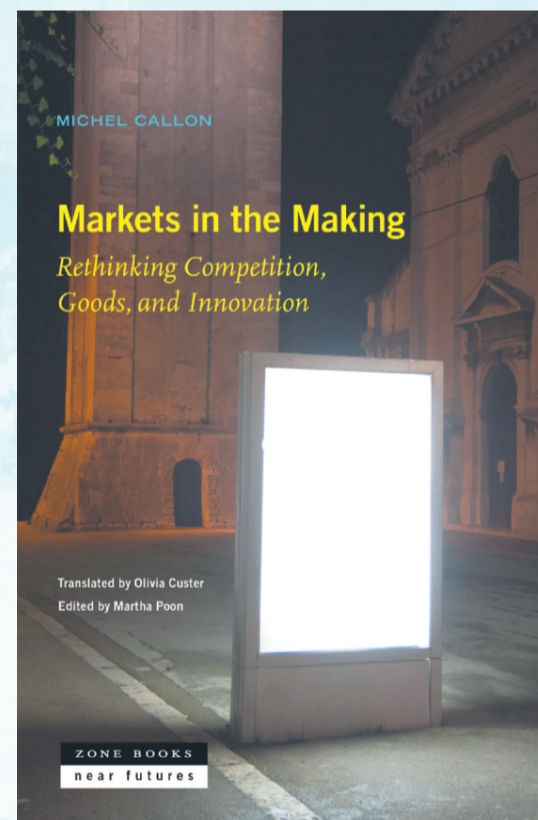
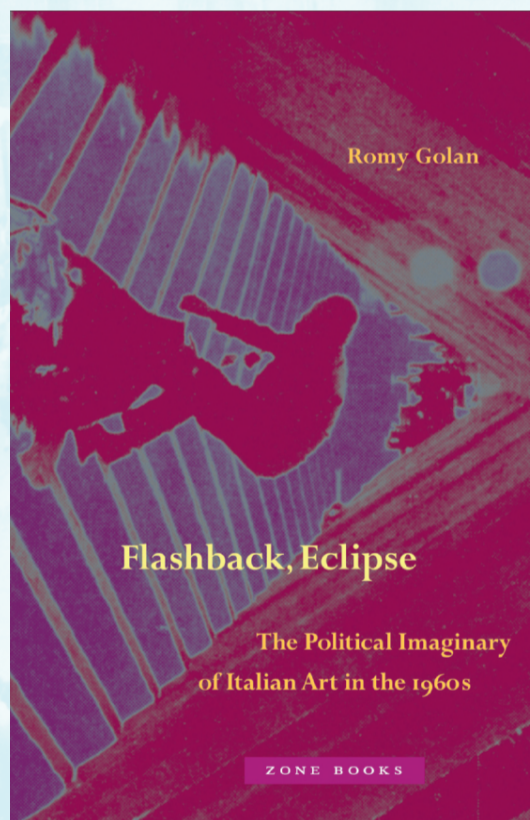
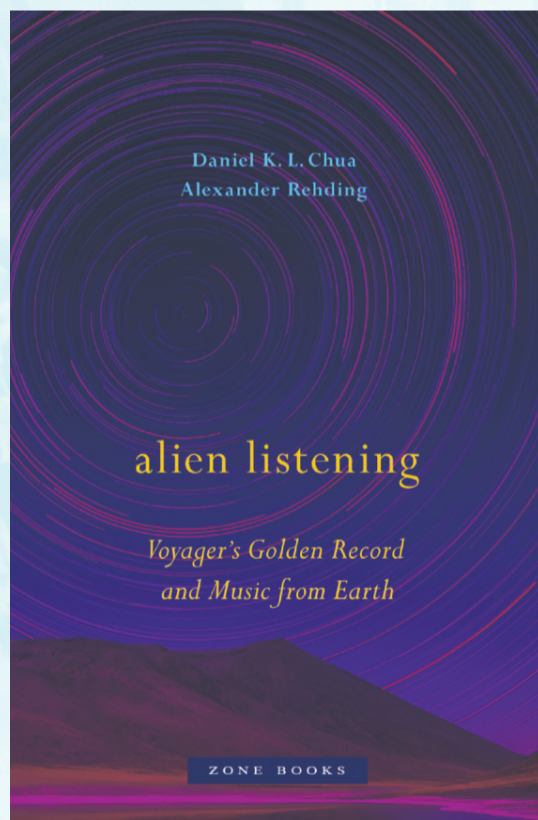
The catalogue features art by most of these people, and after the stories of their hijinks it comes if not as a disappointment (it does sometimes) then as a gnomic pendant; it is a reminder that there is, so often, little correspondence between wildness of lifestyle and of art. Tinguely and Saint Phalle are the obvious exceptions; but whose work is more hermetic, more silent on the desires and discomforts of the flesh, than Brâncuși’s? (He was, Jérôme Neutres reminds us in the catalogue, a cabinet-maker by training, and this seems about right.)

And yet this is a man who laboured in these minimalist conditions for forty-one years, after walking all the way to Paris from Romania in 1903-04, setting up in the Impasse Ronsin in 1916, where he remained until his death in 1957. Visitors to his studio, like Peggy Guggenheim or Man Ray, said it reminded them of a “Tibetan monastery”; it was “like entering another world”. The walls were painted “clay-pot red”, according to Reginald Pollock, who said they had been painted that colour “by a former occupant of the studio, Odilon Redon”. Everything else was white, from the sculptures to Brâncuși’s beard, from his shirt to his dog’s fur. Saint Phalle recalls the first time she visited him in his studio: he served her “bad Italian champagne” that she felt guilty refusing. She went back several times but eventually had to stop visiting. Only the hardest of men can drink like that in

the middle of the day and then get on with their work.

After he died, Brâncuși left his studio and everything it contained to the French state, on the condition that it be preserved exactly as it was. He thought he was protecting the other artists from eviction. But the state found a way around this: the studio was accordingly extricated from the premises and transported to the Musée d’Art Moderne, and then to the Palais de Tokyo, and finally to the Centre Pompidou, where it remains today, out on the plaza in front of the museum, contained within a white stone structure as placid as one of the artist’s sculptures. Exposed to the elements and the tourists, it is the polar opposite of his warm wooden monastery tucked away in the countryside of Paris. With its star inhabitant gone, the Impasse Ronsin could no longer hold out against the encroaching hospital. By 1971, the last artist had gone.

In his introduction to the catalogue, Luc Sante speculates that “[t]he microbes of inspiration left behind by the more than 100 artists who lived and worked there over the course of a century must lie somewhere under the asphalt, perhaps plotting their eventual triumphant return”. That may well be. But at the moment, with the filth of the Impasse Ronsin erased by the the hospital, and the other studio spaces in Montparnasse converted into luxury apartments for lawyers and bankers and people who work in marketing, Brâncuși’s and Tinguely’s and Saint Phalle’s inheritors can’t get a toehold in the city. They’ve been driven to the wilds of Montreuil and further out still, in search of dilapidation and companionship, away from the capitalist ravages of the big city. ■



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