

Vive la Miroiterie: A Preemptive Elegy

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“There is going to be a war,” Anne-Sophie Devos says. She pulls beers from a borrowed shopping cart, setting them on the outdoor bar before us. She lives and bartends at La Miroiterie, a former mirror factory in Paris’s 20th Arrondissement that artists and others have illegally occupied for 13 years, accruing a measure of fame. As I serve beer with Devos, a punk band plays a concert, producing phlegmatic screams and a steady, percussive drone.

After this month, police plan to evict the squat at 88 rue de Ménilmontant. Punk, rap, and jazz concerts that have drawn thousands of bands from several continents will lose a venue, and 13 squatters will lose their home. The complex—two buildings sitting on a fenced courtyard—measures about 1,400 square meters in total. An industrial room on the ground floor accommodates about 150 concertgoers. Two hundred more can crush into the courtyard. Upstairs, the factory’s onetime offices are bedrooms and a painters’ workshop. Two Brazilian men who live at the squat teach free capoeira classes three evenings a week. The residents, artists, and concert organizers have worked together. Once they dressed as spotted sheep and bleated as they marched downhill to City Hall. Look what the system does to you, they were saying. Lately, though, eviction weighs on La Miroiterie, and these people sort messily into factions.

Entering the squat is like entering a jungle. Thick layers of bright spray paint cover the walls of the courtyard, depicting a blonde doll’s head, a pink-and-blue My Little Pony, and six-foot-tall penises arranged as a waving hand. A three-legged cat prowls the courtyard. Strings of lights and dried vines drape the courtyard walls. Black paper butterflies stud them.

Devos serves beers to mostly men with gauged ears, scowls, Mohawks. One man has improved his bald spot by shaving a stripe down the back of his head that continues, skunklike, into his neck. In general,



Devos disdains these punks. They are just passing through. She hands them cans across the counter top covered in moldy stickers, and I follow her lead. Other times we serve mulled wine in quickly melting plastic cups. Someone’s German shepherd curls on a low table adjoining the bar. Tonight’s music is so loud; I wonder how the dog can sleep.

This concert is Michel Ktu’s birthday party. He is 46. His girlfriend, who is 32, joins us behind the bar. She holds back a lock of my hair to whisper: Ktu is shy about his birthday. “He is a public figure, he gives interviews left and right, but it’s the timidity of the artist,” she tells my ear. “I find it touching.”

Ktu, who organizes the punk concerts, helped found the squat in 1999. He spotted the shell of the factory. He had long moved in a circle of artists for whom vacancies were resources. He is prominent, too, among cataphiles, those who explore the city’s catacombs. His father, he has explained to me, was an Egyptologist who traveled for fieldwork. Left alone, adolescent Ktu began his own excavations below the city. The name he took is a contraction of Cthulhu, the name of an undersea

demon in an H.P. Lovecraft story. I first noticed Ktu's eyes: they are light blue and very round and protrude from his head like those of fish in ocean valleys where the sun's rays don't reach. He widens them to tell me, "L'underground, c'est moi!"

Ktu is widely quoted in newspaper articles about La Miroiterie, which attracts punks, students, adventurous yuppies, and support from politicians as well as journalists. "I would be very sorry if ever La Miroiterie disappeared," says Florence de Massol, deputy mayor for the 20th Arrondissement.

Devos has told me, dryly, "At the end of a squat that is well-known, everyone wants to have a hand in.... All these people are saying they lived at La Miroiterie when they never set foot inside."

One punk shoves another, toppling a beer, and scolds me when I rush to right it. As I take notes, the punks poke fun.

"You're writing your thesis?" They say.

I say, "Would you like a beer?"

They ask, "Are you inspired?"

Over several months I spent visiting the squat, I verified several myths about its early days. A company called Bosch ran the mirror factory, but the property was divided among many owners. The building fell into disrepair and Bosch abandoned it in the 1990s. When I heard the factory's name, I was rapt. "It is a little like 'The Garden of Earthly Delights' here, isn't it?" I said to one squatter and artist, Andy Bolus. "Yeah, it is," he said fondly. "Full of freaks."

Ktu arrived there with two other artists who had worked in squats before. They named themselves after the mirror factory—*miroiterie* in French—and installed mosaics of shattered mirror, which resemble insect eyes and store many sevens of years of bad luck. Squatters in France who remain in a space for more than 48 hours cannot be immediately evicted but must be removed through a lawsuit. Some of the building's proprietors seemed not to care about their portions. They didn't sue, and the squatters stayed.

In 2009, a real-estate company called Thorel finished buying the parcels that comprised La Miroiterie and sued the squatters. It belongs to a businessman who owns a passel of similar companies. Its listed address is a spare Haussmannian cage for screaming phones.

A bailiff sent to count the residents and determine the uses of the space found in March 2009: "sculptures, paintings, and an empty mezzanine... a photography workshop... metal sculptures, musical instruments, and a drum set... a collective kitchen."

A February 2010 ruling said the squatters had to go, but Thorel needed to navigate appeals and delays. In September 2011, for example, a judge awarded the squatters a delay of six months in the eviction proceedings, finding the former proprietors had neglected the space, the squatters fixed it to be livable, and their projects were "artistic therefore useful." Because French law known as the "winter truce" forbids evictions between November 1 and March 15, the squatters weathered several winters. The truce technically does not apply to squatters but makes their wintertime eviction impolitic and rare.

The squatters requested another delay in the fall of 2012 and were denied two weeks before the start of the winter truce. Although they could stay the winter, they would have no legal recourse when spring came. They protested the decision outside City Hall, collecting thousands of signatures.

After a late-season snow, the government extended the year's truce to March 31, 2013. Wet, dense flakes caused the squatters to cancel a concert without entirely muting the squat. "It's a little anarchic, a little hellish," says Bernard Morlon, a painter there, laughing. "It's the end."

Thorel had the eviction order authorized. Police were set to carry out the order after the winter truce ended in April.

Before La Miroiterie was a factory, it had housed a painter named Daniel Pipard who hosted storied parties. He was called the Duke of Ménilmuche, which is local, affectionate slang for Ménilmontant, the Belleville neighborhood in the city's hilly Northeast where the squat is located. Belleville, a village covering the present-day 19th and 20th Arrondissements, was incorporated into Paris late and remained untamed. Here stood the last barricade of the Commune of 1871. The state's troops shot local rebels against a wall in nearby Père-Lachaise. Ktu tells me one of his ancestors died defending the Communards' barricade, which is not an uncommon story in this part of town. Eric Hazan writes, in *The Invention of Paris*, "Certain quarters of Paris have a character that owes most to history and architecture, others to their economic activity, and others again to geography. None of these criteria, however, is quite suitable for characterizing the hills stretching from Buttes-Chaumont to Père-Lachaise, and defining what makes Belleville and Ménilmontant unique. For my part, I am convinced that these are quarters whose identity is largely an emotional one ... Here these are emotions of affection for many people, but there are others as well."

When I asked her about squats in the 20th Arrondissement, one of the district's deputy mayors, Françoise Galland, prefaced each

of her responses with the suggestion that a foreigner was not likely to understand it in any case. Over the course of a 400-page volume, Hazan never quite defines the “emotional” quality of the Parisian East more precisely. Similarly, Galland’s characterization of the district that had charged her was surpassingly delicate. She said, “There are singers and a poetry you won’t find in the 16th, you won’t find in the 17th, in the chic neighborhoods. Often they forbid it, there. To say this in another way, the 20th is not under too much police surveillance. It’s surveilled for its large problems, but it’s not monitored for the little details. Which is to say, now, you don’t have the right to sing in the street, but in the 20th, you can. And I don’t want to say that everyone sings in the street in the 20th, but, still, as soon as it’s nice out, there are people who walk around, and ask for money.”

The squatters have developed other theories about their home. An old woman once knocked at the door to tell them she remembered dancing at a ballroom in the basement. Devos says a river runs far below La Miroiterie. Pipard would have wanted the place to remain artistic. They execute his wishes. “We preserve the patrimony of this old house,” Ktu says.

Sylvain Dreyfus, the squatters’ lawyer, has not heard this argument, but squat truth is relative. I imagine a will drawn in a more coercive magic than the normal legalese. Morlon, the painter, is the oldest person at La Miroiterie, and at his 66th birthday party, as Morlon smiled and spun, a guest told me, “He has made a pact with the devil. He has been dancing for three hours. He will turn young again. It will be a historic moment.”

For Christmas, Devos and Morlon painted the second-floor workshop sea-blue and decorated it with ornaments and miniature candles, which the squatters used to light their joints. They were always repainting the workshop, as if to avoid capitulation. Now it shone, changing tone when Devos dimmed the lights. She danced in her chair, raising and hooking her arms, smiled so as to share the joke. An accordion played the Georges Brassens song “Belleville-Ménilmontant.” We sang along. Devos shouted, “Vive la Commune!”

Ktu broke an ornament, but I couldn’t hear it shatter—the room shook underneath tapping feet. “It’s a miracle there have not been injuries or fires there over the years,” Dreyfus said. Structurally the squat is not sound. Until recently bags of glass dust and pulverizing chemicals made a back room deadly. Stories rise from its past to startle me when I recall them: times the squat has reached a kind of fever pitch, a tumble down stairs, showing bone.

I reached Catherine Pipard, Daniel’s daughter, who said she had



lived at 88 rue de Ménilmontant until 1982. She said her family had owned the place since 1830: "It was always artists." She called its current occupants "dishonest." She recently visited the building, and its decay alarmed her. "They are there completely illegally," she said. "I want nothing to do with these people."

"Artistic therefore useful," I remember. Devos says, "People ask if I am an artist. I say, I paint my life."

Bolus, who builds instruments, once looked for the ballroom where the stranger remembered dancing. He picked over the hollowed-out car in the courtyard. He felt about for a trapdoor. He found nothing but still believes in the underground room. He prefers his version: chandeliers, a red carpet, Belle Époque luxury, now choked with dust.

The squatters carry on the tradition of bohemian Paris, a city where artists can wait decades for a government-subsidized studio. They are a dying kind: among the last independent squatters in Paris. About 15 years ago, the City of Paris began awarding temporary leases to some artists who squat in buildings it owns. The artists pay rent and must not sleep at the building. The city typically helps to select the artists, who must provide projects or events for the neighborhood. "It's a kind of cultural dictatorship," Ktu says. The city has bought squatted buildings, afterward assigning leases that let the squatters stay. The first and most famous now attracts nearly 60,000 tourists a year. Marc Wluczka, a deputy mayor for the 20th Arrondissement, politically supports these leases, but they offend his sense of art: "Did Picasso ask for the help of the state?"

I have arrived too late to this Bohème. La Miroiterie still holds concerts but its major artistic accomplishments, which are venerable, lie behind it. Eviction hangs over the squat. Those who can leave soon have left. I visit two or three of the most determined squatters whose main art consists in keeping the squat open out of force of will, as if wrenching it open. What I see of their home is both emptier and more beautiful than its media image. Morlon uses watercolor to paint a building of gorgeous green glass and adds palms, fountains, knots of red blossoms, and a sign: number 88. "It's La Miroiterie in the future," he says.

Dominique Pagès, a councilor for the 20th Arrondissement, tells me a squat is a boîte noire, a black box, referring to its inscrutable inner working. As the mechanics of La Miroiterie become clear to me, I realize it is more similar to a void. Squatters occupied the empty building, and each filled it with whatever he or she required. I realize I am asking for a myth. Yet the squatters seem to need a chronicler. Devos tells me, "I say I paint my life" in a string of aphorisms she dictates. My notebooks are

her canvas, I think in stupid pride.

She says the commissariat has promised to warn the squatters two weeks before the eviction. Dreyfus has advised them to leave before the truce ends. Devos, anyway, has been boxing up belongings since November: a matter of pride. "We are the ones who will choose the way of leaving," she says.

As the concert finishes, as Ktu's 46th birthday wanes, the German shepherd rises and walks across the bar, delicately stepping among beer puddles, plastic cups, ashes. I give a page of notebook to a handsome punk who asks for it. He returns lines from the Renaissance poet Pierre de Ronsard. I accept the gift politely but secretly am flattered. The studs on his leather jacket are taller than the other regalia I see, and I imagine this accords him alpha status.

I turn to Devos. She will stay at the bar long after the band has left. "You see the moon every time you enter La Miroiterie, through the trees," she has told me. Sometimes I catch it, sometimes it eludes me.

Ktu, who has opened squats before, is unbothered this one will soon close. He and Morlon spend nights roaming the city, eyeing vacancies. They want to open their next squat on the Champs-Élysées, for symbolic reasons. Squats are like phoenixes. Normally they don't last 13 years. "A squat is ephemeral," Ktu says. "If we open another squat, we'll call it La Miroiterie."

POSTSCRIPT

Months after this essay appeared, La Miroiterie was still open. I felt happy for the squatters and also a little sheepish. I searched and found multiple articles like mine written over the years, carefully studied in eviction proceedings, tolling the end. But the squat remained—in part, I thought, because each eviction menace generated popular buzz.

I walked by the squat many months later with a sometime squatter who had helped to open it. We were marching against the eviction of another Belleville squat, La Cantine. The Jourdain market, disassembling nearby, gave off a smell of fish on melting ice. A tawny dog with spotted paws leapt about and lay down in the road. We stopped before La Miroiterie. The façade had been re-painted into a version of the Looney Tunes last card in which the rabbit was scarred and smoked and looked challengingly at passerby, inquiring, "Is that all, folks?"

"The artists I knew have aged," said my companion, a juggler known as Snoopy, really named Stéphane Bourotte. "Then, we were all

outlaw squatters, and maybe now, those who have been rehoused someplace are happy to have a little place to sleep and not be evicted the next day ... That's human." He had long lived in Belleville and helped to resist the neighborhood's razing in the '90s. His building was to be destroyed. Talking heads termed the protests a "second barricade." The neighborhood resistance held meetings at a since closed squat called La Forge de Belleville. "Now it's beautiful there," Snoopy said, "because they've let the vines grow."

Like many others, Snoopy smiled knowingly when he heard La Miroiterie was to close, this time from a concerned woman who was marching with us. "They always say that," he said.

He explained La Miroiterie would never be evicted because no one could build there. There were holes and caverns in the ground below the squat. I started, remembering Devos's river. La Miroiterie was not untouchable for its legend. It was untouchable because its foundations were unfit. Now he showed me where the stone wall buckled outward. The old factory was slowly collapsing. Two men nailing beams to prop it up saluted us.

Snoopy mentioned the catacombs. "They dug out all the stone from underneath Paris, and then used it to build the city on the holes. Smart, right?"

His tone was wry and fond, not mocking. This was his city. He loved it even for its faults. Still, the implication seemed to be all Paris would buckle and fall one day, its underground reclaiming it. We walked to Belleville Park and could barely make out the Eiffel Tower. The next day, the city would waive public-transit fees because of the pollution. A fine white mist covered its buildings. They faded into the contours of the valley.

**During a concert April 20, 2014, a wall of La Miroiterie caved in. Ktu blamed pressure from the growth of a nearby tree. Police evicted the squat April 26, 2014, though Devos told a news website that La Miroiterie would live again. .*

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