

An American in Paris

A Seattle artist finds joy and inspiration amongst the books and brick-a-brac at le Marche d'Aligre.

By Don Fels

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I'm to be in Paris for a couple months on an artist residency, and Crosscut asked to come along. I'll be writing about what I'm up to here, and also a bit about my artistic process.

I tend to do several things at once, so my time in Paris involves overlapping tasks, including working with a group of 12-years-olds, just outside the city in the Banlieue, on pollution of the Marne River; continuing ongoing work on a large-scale installation; and producing small collages for an exhibition in New Orleans. I'll write more about those projects later. But first, I wanted to share some ruminations that arrived as I traveled around the city today. Giving myself over to those thoughts is all part of the process.

I leave my garret-in-the-roof Paris flat, down five flights of stairs, and out into the street towards the Colonel Fabien Metro station. A five minute walk. I cross a couple streets and, descending into the station, take my wallet out. When I flatten it against the top of the turnstile the emitted sound tells me and anyone else that my pass is current and, accordingly, the turnstile gives way as I lean in. I head towards Nation, a half dozen stops ahead, where I will change for Ligne #1 and the Gare de Lyon, one of several large Paris train stations. Sitting in the train car, I look, maybe even act like a Parisian commuter.

Blending in is one of the tricks of the *flaneur* and of the traveler. It makes everything easier, perhaps even safer, though safety is not much on my mind here. In fact, I am not a 'real' commuter. I am an interloper, a pretender. As an artist I make myself at home everywhere, and nowhere. Almost every culture (certainly la France) proclaims its love for arteests. In reality the love is usually fleeting, and skin deep.

Artists are celebrated when and where they are famous or deemed potentially profitable, but otherwise they seem tolerated at best. The essential conundrum of the artist life: To be an artist, one needs time, time costs money, which usually means a job, and the job of course takes time, which for most artists means time away from art-making. In other words, to be artist, one has to find a way to steal time. Or, put less politely, an artist is, more or less, a legalized thief.

Anyway, here I am on the train, not commuting. I'm actually heading to the Marche d'Aligre, which I know from my time in Paris last year, and which I am hoping will be even half as good as it was when I was there last. At base it's a working class street market, which spills over into a little square, which when it's not pouring rain is overstuffed with vendors selling all manner of used bric a brac: old clothes, older books, art on paper, plates, silverware, glasses, dishes. If I actually lived in Paris, I would populate my kitchen with items from the Marche, with their wonderful variety of shape and form and built-in history.

Adjoining Marche d'Aligre is the historic Beauvau-Saint Antoine covered market, selling all manner of fabulous, and sometimes pricey foodstuffs. On the street outside the market building, many North African fruit and vegetable vendors have fresh produce from Italy, Spain, France and of course North Africa, on display at affordable prices — affordable because this is

produce near the end of its shelf life, quite good if consumed in the next day or two.

Wine merchants, boulangeries and, of course, cafes surround the little square and market. The place is wildly popular, not as a tourist destination, but as a spot for locals to gather, look and buy and, especially for older Algerian, Tunisian and Moroccan men, as a place to sit on a bench and catch up. The men wear long-ago stylish suits. They speak in Arabic to one another, French to others.

I come here for all of this, for the produce and the bric a brac and the talking men in their vintage suits, but especially for the tables full of old books. Today, I buy two thick century-old *anatomie topographie* books and several outdated maps (less than a euro each) — all will be sacrificed for collage material. Then I find a place on the end of a bench full of Algerians murmuring in Arabic and bask in their infectious warmth and the sun on our backs. Until the need to pee sends me heading for the corner café, the one with the guitarist out front playing in the Django mode.

For the price of an espresso, I get toilet privileges and a table outside where I watch the parade of people and, with the drunk across the way, tap my foot to the music.

I return to Gare de Lyon two and half hours after leaving the station, my two bags full and my arms lugging two thick old books as if I'm not a commuter at all, but some kind of old scholar.

As I ride the Metro back to my flat in the 19th, my thoughts turn back to commuting, which has two meanings: One is “going to work.” The other is freeing one of a sentence, as in having one’s jail time commuted. Back in the garret I look up the etymology and find that commute, from the 15th century, originally meant “to often change”, or “to change altogether”. A century later it referred to making something (like jail time) less severe, and only at the end of the 19th did it come to mean a working stiff off to his or her daily toil.

Musing about that etymology, I guess I really am a commuter. Traveling, living abroad, as I often do, is often driven by work, and it certainly involves change. And in the larger sense, this kind of commuting for me involves the ‘less severe’ sense as well. I think in the end (or maybe in the beginning, middle and end as Otto Rank proclaimed) we are all of us all the time, trying to pretend that we are not, well, sentenced to death. But of course we are all going to die. As I age, I realize that while there is no choice in that, there is a choice in its opposite, how one is going to live.

And so I chose to go to the Marche d’Aligre. I told myself I was going there because I needed to get some art supplies. But really I was in the market for some pleasure, and the place fills me with joy. There were plenty of places I, and pretty much everyone there, could have gone to find food, companionship, even old useless tchotchkes. I chose the marche for the feeling which comes from sharing an unselfconscious place in the company of other people, strangers, who have made the same choice and for many of the same reasons.

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