

The Mystery of “The Kiss”

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all photos by the author

There's danger on the edge of cemetery Montparnasse. A famous *baiser de la mort* (kiss of death) - Constantin Brâncuși's masterful “Le Baiser” (The Kiss, 1909) - has of late been boxed-up in a permeant-looking wooden enclosure, mysteriously removing it from public view where it has topped the tomb of Tatiana Rachewskaïa since 1910. Ms. Rachewskaïa, a young Russian student, had committed love-leadened suicide in response to her fiancé, a Romanian doctor named Solomon Marbais who was a friend of Brâncuși's. Dr. Marbais purchased the sculpture directly from the artist to place on Ms. Rachewskaïa's grave. Its open air installation dates back to the very end of 1910 or early 1911.

For almost a century “The Kiss” (see pink dot) has been an easily assessable and attractive public Parisian jewel: and one of the main attractions to the cimetière du Montparnasse. Long under video surveillance while resting in its original context (a rare cultural experience comparable to visiting Caravaggio’s “Madonna dei Pellegrini” (Madonna of Loretto, 1606) still *in situ* at the Sant’Agostino church in Rome) “The Kiss” compliments the rightly famous reconstitution of Brâncuși’s studio that sits on the piazza opposite the Centre Pompidou.

Together they have made Paris the Brâncuși site *par excellence* for art-inclined visitors, as Brâncuși bequeathed his entire studio to the French state following his death in 1957.



Partial view of Atelier Brâncuși at the Centre Pompidou, photo by Georges Meguerditchian,
MNAM-CCIDist, RMN-GP

The mystery is: why is this 1992 designated historical monument that apparently belongs to the city of Paris (*propriété de la commune*) closed-up and made unavailable to the public for six months now? Is the propriety under question? Is “Le Baiser” itself being prepared for its own kiss of death?

The danger signs are there: seven years ago, concern for “The Kiss” was sounded by Didier Rykner who reported in *La Tribune de l’Art* that it had been the subject of an application for an export certificate that had been initiated by a descendant of the deceased, a member of the Russian Rachewskaïa family. It is amusing to note (not too, however) that in 1910 the then Rachewskaïa family did not appreciate this eccentric funerary monument and proposed it be changed. But Brâncuși himself overruled any modifications. The good news is that in 2011 monsieur Rykner interviewed *le service du ministère de la Culture en charge des trésors nationaux* (the department of the Ministry of Culture in charge of National Treasures) and was told that the Rachewskaïa tomb was registered *in full* as an historic monument on May 21, 2010. More precisely, the registration order stated then that pending the decision of the *Tribunal de Grande*

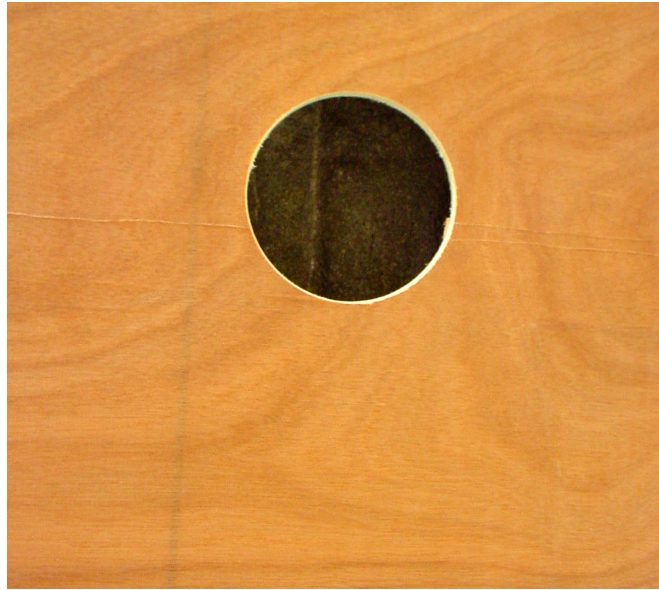
Instance de Paris, the Rachewskaïa funerary monument belongs to the city of Paris. *Hyperallergic* has been unable to discover any ruling by the Tribunal that contradicts the 2010 registration.

Six months before being incarcerated in this bird-house looking box, the stone kissers were already completely obscured by plastic wrapping and some light wood support. Back then, inquiries were made with the cimetière du Montparnasse guardian. The response was that the *tombeau* (tomb) was being renovated. This seemed like good news then, for, as Marvin Gaye sings, sometimes there's need for some sexual healing. As one can see in the photographs, there has been some weather wear on the arms and knees of the lovers and possibly a crack under the female figure's bust.





When the solid box was discovered recently, further inquiries were made, this time at the cimetière du Montparnasse office and by email. The official line is that cimetière du Montparnasse has no idea why the sculpture had been inaccessibly boxed up, nor what lay ahead for it. Only that it was “the family” who was doing this, and thus beyond cimetière du Montparnasse’s control. They could offer no further details. This perplexing explanation of private family control, regardless of assumed public ownership by the city of Paris, has been confirmed by *Hyperallergic* in an email from Sylvie Lesueur, the conservateur des cimetières Montparnasse, who gave no further details other than confirming that it was the Rachewskaïa family behind the box. So “Le Baiser” now sits covered in secrecy by a very solid wooden compartment with a tiny hole that supposedly reveals that the sculpture is still there.



So what is happening here with the Rachewskaïa clan and the cultural wing of the city of Paris? Can art-lovers intervene in the public's favor before it is too late? The private monetary stakes are high and the Drac Île-de-France, Ministère de la Culture has been so far unresponsive to *Hyperallergic* email inquiries. Recently a far smaller and inferior version of “Le Baiser” was sold at Christie’s in New York for \$8.565 million, well above the asking price of 5 million dollars.

The kissers must be freed and preserved for the public *in situ*. These entwined balanced bodies are squatting face to face, knees to knees, face to face, in perfect vertical symmetry: a sign of the equality of the sexes, where two eyes make one. Of it, Brâncuși said he wanted to evoke not only the memory of this unique couple but of all the couples in the world who knew love before death.

Joseph Nechvatal