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## ELECTRIC POETIC— THE NAMING AND NOTICING OF INFRASTRUCTURE

*Ruth Oldham*

### ABSTRACT

Electrical substations, in which medium voltage electrical current is converted into low voltage current that can safely enter our homes and workplaces, are densely dotted through our urban surroundings. As pieces of essential public infrastructure, they each require identifying. Substations in the UK and Belgium are identified with numbers. In France, they have names, usually related to their address, such as the name of the street or village. However, in the Paris suburbs, these names are more complex, diverging from the realms of the pragmatic and technical into those of poetry and storytelling.

I have been observing and cataloguing these names over the past few years. I consider them to be “as found” poetry, forming a discreet narrative layer woven into the fabric of the city. They tell us stories about local and national history, about politics, science, art and literature. Some are serious and some are funny, some are obvious, some are obscure. This article takes the reader on a psychogeographic walk through my neighbourhood in the eastern Paris suburbs, stopping to first notice, and then make sense of, each of the substation names found along the route.

**SUREAUX** is the French for elder, parallel to this street is the *sentier de Sureaux* — Elder Path. I can't see an elder tree but these names tell me that there have been, or maybe still are, elder trees nearby. An image of the delicate white flowers, the sprigs of dark berries, and a memory of the taste of the cordial enter my consciousness. Two streets away on the *rue des Groseillers* — Gooseberry Bush Street — is a substation called **GROSEILLERS**. This residential district becomes imbued with images of fruit, sweet and sharp flavours and smells, a distant memory of picking gooseberries — pale green, slightly translucent, patterned with whitish veins and tiny spikes. A little further down the hill I'd already spotted **CERISIER** — cherry tree — and a few streets east there is **NEFLIER** — medlar tree. Somewhere there must be *pêcher* as peach cultivation on espalier trees was the main economic activity around here in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. I haven't yet found that substation.

But I'm getting distracted. Before I go on my way I will take a quick detour, right onto the *rue des Papillons* — Butterfly Street — and up to the substation called **PHALÈNE**. This was an early find and one that stopped me in my tracks, perhaps the first name I came across that constructed a more complex and subtle connection with its place. I had to look up the word *phalène* and saw that it refers to a genus of butterflies and moths. It was only a little later in the day that it occurred to me with a jolt, the substation called *phalène* was in the *rue des Papillons*. How beautiful, it still makes me smile.

I turn back down the hill, take a right, and go past **MARE** — pool or pond. The next street up is the *rue du Marais* — Marsh Street. This area has heavy clay soils and was once full of springs and streams; in medieval times, it supplied water to the fortress and royal residence of Vincennes, a few miles south down on the plain.

Then we get to one of my favourites. The French equivalent of Shepherd's Pie is *Hachis Parmentier* — *hachis* means minced meat and Parmentier refers to potatoes after the eighteenth-century agronomist who championed them as a food source. The street I have just turned onto is the *rue Parmentier*, and yes, this substation is named **HACHIS**.

Now past **GABELLE**, tucked behind the local tax office. The *gabelle* was a tax levied on salt introduced in the fourteenth century and only abolished in 1945. It was widely reviled and considered a great injustice.

I cross the covered marketplace to reach the *rue Edouard Vaillant*. If I was to continue, I would get to **COURAGE**, fitting for valiant Edward. But my destination is the swimming pool. A substation sits on the left, opposite the big pool building. It's called **PISCINE**. But there's another blue sign on the pool façade, beside the main entrance: **BRASSE** — breaststroke.

We've walked through my neighbourhood in Montreuil, on the eastern edge of Paris, from the street I live in to the public swimming pool. We didn't take the most direct route; we meandered and dawdled and sometimes even backtracked. As we walked, we learned snippets of information about the neighbourhood and wider French history and culture.

Our walk was punctuated by the frequent appearance and disappearance of a low hum, marking the presence of an electricity substation, inside which 11 kilovolt electrical current is lowered to 230 volts — a safer level for it to enter our homes. This happens by passing the current through a coil of steel, aluminium, and copper, within whose magnetic core the energy is dissipated, generating heat and sound. Ventilation grilles allow the heat to escape and the hum travels with it. The form of the street and buildings outside each substation affects how the sound is dissipated or amplified and thus

perceived. But once your ears are attuned to it, the sudden appearance and disappearance of this low hum starts to punctuate your movement through the city.

It was this sound that first made me notice the anonymous metallic substation doors. I lived opposite one for years and on warm summer evenings the 50 hertz hum would enter my flat through the open windows. I gradually tuned into the presence of their blue signs and the little yellow letters slotted into them, dotted across the city.

The one I lived opposite was called **GRAINDORGE**, which was the name of a nearby street. *Grain d'orge* — grain of barley — is a surname originating from Normandy. Within a 50 m radius of my flat were **BAUDOT** and **HIRSCH**. But it was only when I came across **INTELLO** in a far-flung suburb north of Paris that my curiosity was truly sparked. *Intello* is French slang, sometimes derogatory, for an intellectual. Why would a piece of infrastructure be named *intello*? I delved into that one, discovering that a Marxist student activist and brother of a well-known philosopher, who played a prominent role in the May '68 protests, committed suicide in the town in 1978. Was this an obscure homage to him? I'm not sure I will ever know but I decided to start collecting the names of the substations I came across.

As pieces of essential public infrastructure, each substation requires identifying. In the UK and Belgium, they're identified with numbers; in France, with names. In Paris proper — the administrative district within the *périphérique* — the names are just addresses: the street name and number. In small villages beyond the city the names are often quite straightforward too: the name of the village or an obvious landmark such as the town hall or church. However in the Paris suburbs, and in other big cities

such as Marseille and Nantes, the names are more complex, diverging from the realms of the pragmatic and technical into those of poetry and storytelling.

What makes a good substation name? Some of the names are more arresting, more engaging, than others. **FLASH** **NECTAR** **BAOBAB** **VENUS** **AUDACE**.

These are strong and direct words conjuring up clear images or even emotions. But many of the names are less evocative, either unfamiliar or neutral sounding. But it is not just about the word alone, it is about the relationship between the word and the place, and things get interesting when that relationship is one step removed. **REVOLUTION** might be a strong and exciting word but as that substation is situated on the *rue de la Révolution*, it loses in interest as a name. **MAGIOUE** however, adjacent to the DIY store Leroy Merlin, gains. Sometimes the connection takes a while to decipher or requires some research. There are word games, **MONTILLE** on the *rue Lenain de Tillemont* or **ROBRUN** on the *rue Rochebrune*; there are jokes, a temporary substation supplying a construction site with electricity was named **DÉPENSE** (French for expense); there are references to literature, **HELOÏSE** on the *rue Jean Jacques Rousseau*; to history, **SICILE** on the *rue Garibaldi* and **ASTRAKHAN** on the *rue Stalingrad*; or to science, **RADIUM** on the *rue Pierre et Marie Curie*.

So who or what is behind this? The electrical distribution network is managed and maintained by the public utility company Enedis, in existence in its current form since 2008 having emerged from the restructuring and partial privatization of French energy distribution in the early 2000s. Before that, since 1946, EDF (*Electricité de France*) was in charge. The substations I am interested in began appearing in the post-war period. The network is an ongoing project: new substations appear as new parts of the city are built or rebuilt; other substations disappear or become abandoned. The naming process has been



Figure 1. ASTER, rue du Sergent Godefroy, Montreuil. My daughter's name is Aster, and I feel lucky to have this one in the collection as it was demolished soon after I spotted it.



Figure 2. BAUDOT, rue Charles Graindorge, Bagnolet. This substation is one of the older types. A pleasing arrangement of moulded metallic door, ventilation grilles, and lintel.



Figure 3. EUCALYPTUS, rue Franklin, Bagnolet. This has to be here; it has to exist. A lucky manifestation of the dialogue between Angela's work and mine. I had seen it months before but only managed to photograph it a few weeks after the second Live Writing event in May 2024.



Figure 4. GLOIRE, boulevard Rouget de Lisle, Montreuil. In 1792 French army officer Claude Joseph Rouget de Lisle wrote the lyrics of a song which in 1795 would be adopted as the French national anthem, La Marseillaise. The second line is 'le jour de gloire est arrivé', 'the day of glory has arrived'.



Figure 5. GRAINDORGE, rue Marie Anne Colombier, Bagnolet. This one was opposite my bedroom window for nine years. I love the deep blue colour.



Figure 6. INTELLO, Goussainville. One of the first to make me wonder what was going on. Why would a substation be named 'intello', slightly derogatory slang for intellectual?



Figure 7. JOIE, sentier de la Tranchée, Bagnolet. The story attached to this one is joyful and almost magical.



Figure 8. MAGIQUE, attached to the Leroy Merlin DIY store, Rosny-sous-Bois. Merlin the magician.



Figure 9. PATERNEL, rue Alexis Lepère, Montreuil. It was months before I connected the word 'paternal' to the name 'Lepère'.



Figure 10. PHALENE, rue des Papillons, Montreuil. Phalène is a genus of moth and butterfly. This was an early find and a confirmation that I had stumbled across a discreet form of poetry.



Figure 11. PRALINE, rue Mouss Diouf, Bobigny. This is one of seven new substations in a new urban development, the others are CHOCO, AMANDE, FRAISE, VANILLE, CANELLE and NOUGAT.



Figure 12. STOKVIS, rue Jean Lolive, Bagnolet. From 1980 to 1997 the building behind was home to Stokvis Tapes, a company specialising in adhesives and packaging materials.

going on for around seven decades. When I first tuned into the names, I imagined an unknown poet earning a quiet living somewhere in the depths of the Enedis administration. But over such a long period, it cannot be one person, there must be a system of sorts, a set of guidelines. I have written to Enedis via their website but my request did not fit into the usual categories and has been ignored. The ex-employee of Enedis I met by chance at my community compost promised she would enquire on my behalf but has since been distinctly evasive. At some level I am a little ambivalent about finding out, wary of breaking the delicious spell of mysterious poetry.

The names strike me as quite natural in the country that is the birthplace of Oulipo. The *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle* — Workshop of potential literature — a group of writers working with self-imposed constraints in the aim of liberating creativity and new ideas. Founded in 1960, they were, and continue to be, a playful group, counting Georges Perec and Italo Calvino among their members. Their work is vast in scope and range, involving devices such as palindromes, ambigrams, lipograms (Perec wrote a novel, *La Disparition*, without using the letter “e”), and other mathematical or formal constraints, producing novels, poems, short stories, and countless experimental texts. The founding members of Oulipo are long dead but the movement lives on. Similarly it seems that whoever set up the substation naming guidelines must have certainly retired by now but the process continues and is as inventive as ever. In a brand-new neighbourhood, still being completed, I found a family of new substations: **RECIF** **CARAÏBE** **LAGUNE** **ARCHIPEL**.

After four years, my collection has grown to well over 400. It provides a record of my movement through the city. There are substations along my everyday routes, and my less frequent routes, but to keep the

collection growing (when time allows) I modify and lengthen my routes, adding detours and wiggles. I allow myself to stop suddenly or even backtrack. To my mental map of bus stops, bakeries, short cuts, pharmacies, bottle banks, clothing bins, sweet-smelling fig trees, low-hanging wisteria, busy roads, quiet roads, and bike lanes has been added a constellation of isolated words. And with it, a constellation of images and emotions. One cold grey morning I was walking past a housing estate and car park, beyond which I glimpsed a familiar single-storey flat-roofed form. I was running late but curiosity got the better of me and I made a detour. It paid off; the substation was called **TOIE**. That glum humdrum corner of the city has been forever transformed.

# RESPONSE TO RUTH'S TEXT

by Angela Kyriacou Petrou

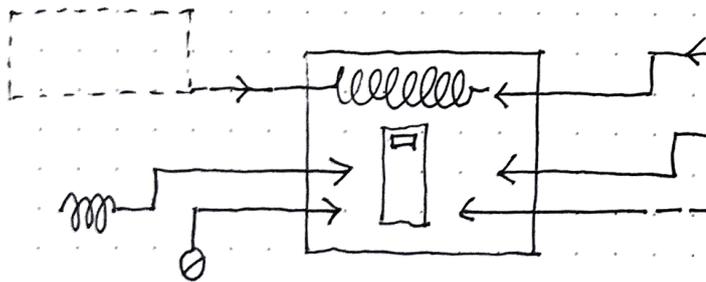
## RUTH ELECTRICITÉ - Home



The domestic infrastructure of the electric works at the scale of the neighbourhood stories of everyday life.

As the curator of the utility new reorganisation Ruth\_Electricité, Ruth v sounds of the neighbourhood between home. - THROUGH COLLECTING + DISTRIBUTION

Plugging in the Hoover => Cle



Turning on the boiler => clea

listening to music ...

RUTH.ELECTRIC - Archives the patterns of a detailed / intricate recording of act (housework (planting / cooking ...)) that A

to Pool



many substations

pool - collecting

search utility

will be story-ing  
the pool and her

DISTRIBUTING STORIES  
around the house



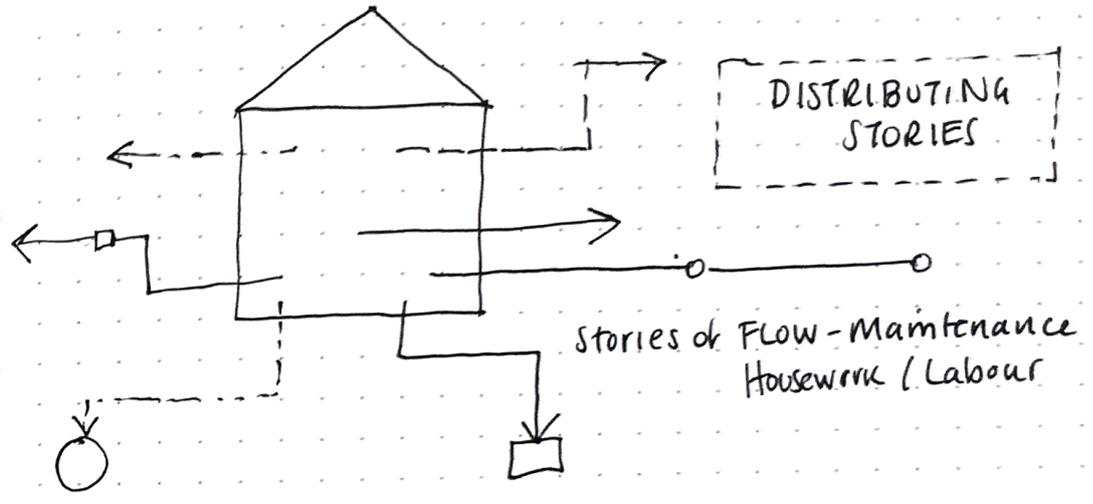
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daily life through

ans. (labours)

eed into the

sub stations. Matching the lives of the residence with  
the historic data of the substation names.



RUTH. ELECTRIC CAN CHANGE THE DIRECTION OF FLOW  
By changing the direction of flow through the curatorial  
network R.E can follow the network of stories and  
infrastructures that flow from the house(s)

like Mierle Kadermans Sanitation Project, Ruth can  
follow the path of objects / trash / sewage / water / power?  
that flow from each house:

Manholes / telegraph poles / garbage collection / recycling  
The currents and flows that run overhead + underground  
Entangled with the stories of the substations the distribution  
of stories from the house expands the space of the  
neighbourhood.

## RESPONSE TO ANGELA

by Ruth Oldham

*Something I love about writing is that you never quite know where you might go. Once the thoughts leave your mind for the paper it's as if they have freed up a little space for new thoughts to develop. Like water or electricity flowing through a network of pipes or cables, thoughts need to keep moving and blockages be avoided.*

*Writing in dialogue, reading and responding to each other, the "this could go in so many directions" phenomenon is amplified. Thoughts collide and mingle and resonate and spark. The pipes and cables divide and multiply — faster flow, more ideas.*

*And this has led to Ruthélectricité (big smile) and to the universe of Mierle Laderman where I find all sorts of themes that I have long been interested in and some even obsessed with.*

*One of these obsessions is (hu)man-made mountains. I've written about a variety of rubbish heaps and spoil tips and other mounds. I think what interests me, beyond the natural/artificial duality, is their relationship to the deep*

*and dirty reality of our society, generating colossal amounts of waste at a dizzying rate. The notion of accumulation, of something we struggle to control, threatening order.*

*Having been artist in residence at the Department of Sanitation in New York City since 1977, in 1989 Mierle Laderman took on the same role at the Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island. In her words, 'a 50-year-old social sculpture we have all produced, four mountains made from 150 million cubic yards of the un-differentiated, un-named, no-value garbage'.<sup>1</sup> Created by 'using, living in, and passing through New York'.<sup>2</sup>*

*Could the Ruthélectricité substations become the flipside of the physical landfill mound-archive-sculptures? Places to access the collective stories of our existence? What if to throw something away you had to write a short story about it? (That might slow the flow of rubbish generation.) And the story would get directed to the appropriate substation... the butterfly one, the swimming one, the revolution one.... substations as mini libraries.... Anyway, time to stop....*

*Thanks Angela,*

*Ruth*

1 Holland Cotter, 'An Artist Redefines Power. With Sanitation Equipment.', *The New York Times*, 15 September 2016, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/16/arts/design/an-artist-redefines-power-with-sanitation-equipment.html>> [accessed 20 April 2024].

2 Evangelos Kotsioris and Paula Vilaplana de Miguel, 'Mierle Laderman Ukeles on (Re)Imagining Freshkills Park', *MoMA Magazine*, 14 July 2023, <<https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/925>> [accessed 20 April 2024].

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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Ruth Oldham trained as an architect in Glasgow, Paris and at the Bartlett. After several years practicing architecture in Paris, notably spending five years retrofitting an Auguste Perret building, she now teaches architectural history, translates architecture and art related texts from French to English, and carries out independent research and writing projects.



