The Vanity and Entombment of Marie Antoinette

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ABSTRACT

In his fifteenth century treatise on building, De re aedificatoria, Leon Battista Alberti argued for the expansion of architectural purview through the inclusion of objects such as sundials and dovecotes on the grounds that the former marks and fundamentally registers human beings in time and space, while the latter acknowledges the possibility of constructed environments for other species.

The long march of coincidence that denoted the inimitable life of Marie Antoinette has provided cover for leveraging subjects that have not yet been mined as architecture; much less as possibilities for critical exploration. The Vanity and Entombment of Marie Antoinette attempts to goad the limits of critical spatial inquiry by examining a series of salient artifacts from the queen’s monarchical life: the guillotine as incontrovertible threshold, cleaving life from death, mind from body, thought from matter; the carriage, which widened the experience of the world past the limits of human physiology, and placed architecture on the move; curtains and crinolines; those soft precincts between body and berth, which beg the question, ‘is there architecture in the occupation of a material condition, however tight the stays of the corset may be?’

The Vanity is a conceptual project imagined for the Hall of Mirrors; an object that is indeterminately a diminutive and inferring the potential root of the geometries bound up in the mysterious origins of the solid apparition. They worked tirelessly through the night, logging metrics, siting relationships, recording data, and commitment to paper. The candidate and his three conscripted aides set about the careful measuring and recording of the Hall of Mirrors toward his subject; fearful that the dilation of the aperture or the sound of the shutter might cause the figment to retract like a superstitious tribal elder on the occasion of having his image burned off of a pond.

THE VANITY AND ENTOMBMENT OF MARIE ANTOINETTE

On November 2, 1955, a figment appeared in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles. It was late in the evening. The room had long since closed to the public, and was now inhabited by three guards overseeing the work of a doctoral candidate from the Sorbonne who was carefully sampling each of the hall’s three hundred and fifty-seven mirrors for chemical analysis, in order to shore up his theories on mercury poisoning at the Royal Glass Works of Saint-Gobain during the reign of Louis XIV.

The candidate was the first to notice. He was standing on the third rung of a ladder with his back turned to the room, when he sensed the emergence of a shadowy form come into focus against the silvery of piece number three hundred and three. In distrust of reflections, he lifted his chin over his left shoulder; lost his balance, and fell to the floor; bringing the eyes of the guards first to him and then to the bewildered standing at attention before them.

By all accounts, the candidate returned to his feet and approached the figment, cautiously as if it were a wild animal. He reached out to touch its broad, soft flank, embossed with Cartesian lines – half expecting it to dematerialise like a sheet of gold leaf under the weight and heat of his fingers. But the form endured, as he began to estimate that the scores in its surface were, in fact, the embossed edges of a vast set of drawers.

The candidate pulled at the surface, enlisting the guards to do the same. One after another; they found the drawers to be empty – sitting idle like raided tombs – uncertain as to whether they had once held something of import, or if the contents had simply never arrived. As the candidate pulled at the last unopened drawer, a small sheaf of papers was revealed. They appeared to have been ripped from a book of unknown origin; the text describing a closely observed set of episodes in the life of Marie Antoinette.

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Dawn advanced. Shriil light, which had travelled ninety-three million miles from the surface of the sun, rolled over Poland, West Germany, and the region of Champagne, pouring down the Avenue de Paris toward the Place d’Armes. It reached the Hall of Mirrors through a sprawling reflection that rebounded from the standing water in the drained ornamental lakes, penetrating each of the three hundred and fifty-seven panes of glass on the western façade of the palace. At 7:36 ante meridiem, the figment dissolved into the air of the hall with the measured leaving of humidity burning off of a pond.

What follows are remnants of the candidate’s field notes, his drawings and photographs, and the last remaining pages of the book discovered in the small bottom drawer; whose author has never been ascertained.
This piece, which I assume is made of dark enameled steel, has the intimacy of a book chest housed in by a glass-enclosed seat. A rear view of the rear view reveals the rear view of the rear view—"beneath my body, my body, my body." A realiza of the realization of the realization, she radiates light, her eyes shining with light, her body bathed in light. The light is warm, comforting, and inviting. She is a beacon of light, guiding the way for those who are lost and in need of direction. Her light pierces through the darkness, casting away the shadows and illuminating the path forward. She is a symbol of hope, a source of strength, and a beacon of promise. She is a reminder that even in the darkest of times, there is always a glimmer of light waiting to be discovered. She is a light in the darkness, a beacon of hope, a symbol of strength, and a reminder of promise.
Based on the readings that we’ve taken with the surveying transmis, the Veyt appears to align the distant interiors of the Hail of Miers and the boudoir of the Petit Triamour (which I later discovered was given to Marie Antoinette by Louis XVI as an exclusive retreat from the intrusions of the French court). This causes me to wonder if these spaces stand in for the polarities that defined the life of the queen on one hand, the labored and irresponsible mood of the aristocracy which expected their queen to be extravagant and then ridiculed her for being so, and her interest in a pared-down agenda in place with the emerging philosophical ideas of Rousseau that were fueling the coming revolution.

On the 16th day of the asbackon’s bridal journey to Versailles, the convoy stopped on an island in the Rhine River near Koblenz. The horses were brought to rest so the front wheels of the carriage were dug into a stone, while the back wheels remained in Germany. The careful positioning of the royal carriage over the limits and imagined borders meant that the body of the Dauphine was left to inhabit the impossibility of the line itself, however brief the transaction may have been.

Geology proves that these forms of abstraction are absurd; that the division of Germany and France drawn along the fiber of a map, or willed across the soil of a small wet island causes to be true before the surface and in the continuity of air. But these abstractions do sometimes manage to commensurately and psychologically perform the clearing of personhood, and to extract any last remaining trace of privacy that a Bourbon child might have possessed. The handoff of this 16-year-old girl required the literal ablation of all clothing and possessions, including her belongings and a Chinese rug named Maps, as well as the loss of her mock-wedding monogram.
The posteriors look like the blossoms of a full dress arrested in charred wood, which trails onto the parquet floor and turns into a patterned inlay of blank mother of pearl and labradorite. I thought that it might be lofted by some colonial and unseen painter, and the thin lace window suggests that the pillars may have an underside.

I mounted the two small carriage steps to investigate the possibility of an interior, and discovered that the hollow of this skirt conceals a double-height space pin-pricked with votive light shining at the darkness like ancient descriptions of the stars added to the porous vault of the heavens.
I’m now inclined to think that this must be a tomb. Upon entering the interior, one senses a thickness to a threshold between where you came from and where you are; a tight, suffocating compression of space not entirely accented into the local tectonic of the era.

There is something here, something lowered into place from a deep aperture in the ceiling, lined with brass and laying open to the sky. This something – a sarcophagus, perhaps – is suspended over a shallow cascade of stairs, which puddle like the steps so often found at the entrances to bureaucratic buildings.

This sarcophagus seems to suggest many simultaneous allusions: the symmetry of a gemstone, the elegiac hothub of Jean-Paul Marat, vestiges of courting, so... maybe the intricate linen patterns of a nun’s/cloaking shrunken tight around a channel; taut from centuries of parched, breathless air. But this hagiant coil is twisted in leather and patched back and forth on a large brass bundle, echoing inside this hollow volume.
Twelve miles from Versailles, in the markets of Rambouillet Saint-Antoine, furnished women began to organize their discontent. They took up arms, and brandished demands as they marched west through thick fog in the devotion of their causes. The hoes of their peasants lapped at the puddles of a narrow street, which in sixty years time would be widened to the proportions of an army regiment. It was the morning of October 5th, 1789. As dawn began to blush in the dark eastern sky, the patriotes besieged the palace. The assault resulted in no less than the beheading of two royal guardsmen, the looting of the queen’s apartments, which involved the symbolic shaving of her mattress, the deposition of Louis XVI, and the repudiation of the monarchs on the balcony off of the king’s bedchambers.

By midday the sky was washed in grey clouds and drenched in thin cloud cover. Under hostile terms, the royal family is compelled back to Paris and dispatched to thethreadbare apartments of the Tuileries. During their first sight of captivity, minus all impediments to physics and the human mind under duress, the king might have imagined that the site of his bedchambers could not a line clear to the Alps; a realm that would be signed into sovereignty twenty-six years in the future, near the site of his wife’s birth. On the second night, he might have weighed and revisited the probabilities of earlier flights that had been ruled out for reasons of uncertainty or war. Eventually, the exhaustion of all other plans would lead him to an overlooked accomplice.

As Versailles, a royal bed with the curtains drawn had been the only place where the eyes of the court could not go. On the night of their planned escape, the king and queen pulled the shutters of their bed closed and requested that they be allowed to sleep for an additional hour. While the guards took their wants to be asleep behind the opacity of their bed curtains, the royal couple managed to slip out of a ground-floor apartment with their children and a small group of attendants, fleeing in plain dress toward the Austrian border.

They made it as far as Varennes, one hundred and fifty-eight miles from the reproach of the court, before the plan unraveled. While stopping briefly to requisition the stock of horses driving them east toward immunity, the king was seen leaning from the carriage his unmistakable nose in silhouette against the prospect of their asylum just thirty-three miles off to the north.
We have all felt a sense of unease when facing the thick steel blade mounted over an inescapable depression in the floor; a leading edge that has literally cleared the front end of the bilge, and appears to be held in place by two thin rails that pierce through it near the top edge and are held in position by collars bolted to the floor. That blade has a destabilizing effect; it disturbs the choreography of the room, turns it into a kind of dry dock, displacing an ocean of weight, poised to return at the first sight of any weakness or outward vulnerability.

We rarely think of historical events as having occurred, for instance, on a particular day of the week. Nonetheless, on a bleak Wednesday morning, as a bouquet of masts and yachts was picked up by the wind, the deposed queen of France was carried to the Place de la Concorde and summarily executed.

When her head was removed from her body, the blade of guillotine, which had been used to section through the neck of her husband two hundred and sixty-eight days before, announced the invariable threshold that she had been subjected to on her import to France: as the body of her carriage lay poised over that abstract and liminal boundary drawn by an unquiet carcanet.

Over the course of the 18th century, the road out of Versailles, those were many indictments, accusations involving diamonds, calumny, blackmail, overindulgence and water-sprinkling, prostitution, and incest. For those who live in the haunted times of history there is hardly ever refuge from a violent and insidious dismemberment.

Sources: