

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 artefacts 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 architecture, occupiable furniture, and a sculptural deviation made to house the remains of Marie Antoinette and her lost wedding trousseau.

The essay that follows is a fictional test of The Vanity's measure – of its elasticity as a demarcation of narrative and milieu.

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 silvering 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 bewilderment 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 embellished 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.

The incident waned through the earliest plunges of night; chasing the candidate toward a grave desire to produce substantiating evidence; a feeling made all the more urgent by the uncertainty of how long the figment might remain lodged in the hall. With a meagre set of tools, the candidate and his three conscripted aides set about the careful measuring and recording of the solid apparition. They worked tirelessly through the night, logging metrics, siting relationships, and inferring the potential root of the geometries bound up in the mysterious origins of the form. When they were assured that the figment had been secured in all manner and medium, the candidate carefully removed a small reflex camera from his satchel and raised the twin lens 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 committed to paper.

Dawn advanced. Shrill 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.

It is often the case when we travel, that we are transformed by the journey; made different by the awe and otherness of the unfamiliar, but it is exceptional to be outwardly transposed; to be changed both literally and unequivocally by immense external forces. On the 21st of April 1770 a cortège of fifty-seven horse-drawn carriages pulled out of Vienna, conveying the young archduchess of Austria across the Holy Roman Empire and toward her future as the Dauphine of France.

The carriage would have listed and lurched under the displeasure of an unpaved road meeting the technological limits of a leaf spring. It would take another sixty-eight years for the first road in Europe to see asphalt, and another hundred years for independent suspension to be invented.

The thin mottled glass in the windows of the carriage would have warped the Bavarian stands of linden, beech, alder, elm, and oak establishing their shoots and blossoms against the ashen sky as the retinue traced its way through feral stretches of the Black Forest. At the end of her journey, the Dauphine would come to look upon the compulsively groomed landscape at the Palace of Versailles, stretching out in perspectival washes – its tame army of pruned myrtle, yew, arborvitae, and privet, and recall that the time spent staring out of the thin vitreous shell of her carriage, during her three-and-a-half week passage towards the tertiary basin of Paris, had been nothing short of a forced march into vanity. The panes of the carriage, a mere pretext to the tyranny of reflection and public exposure that she would have to endure for the next twenty-four years of her life.

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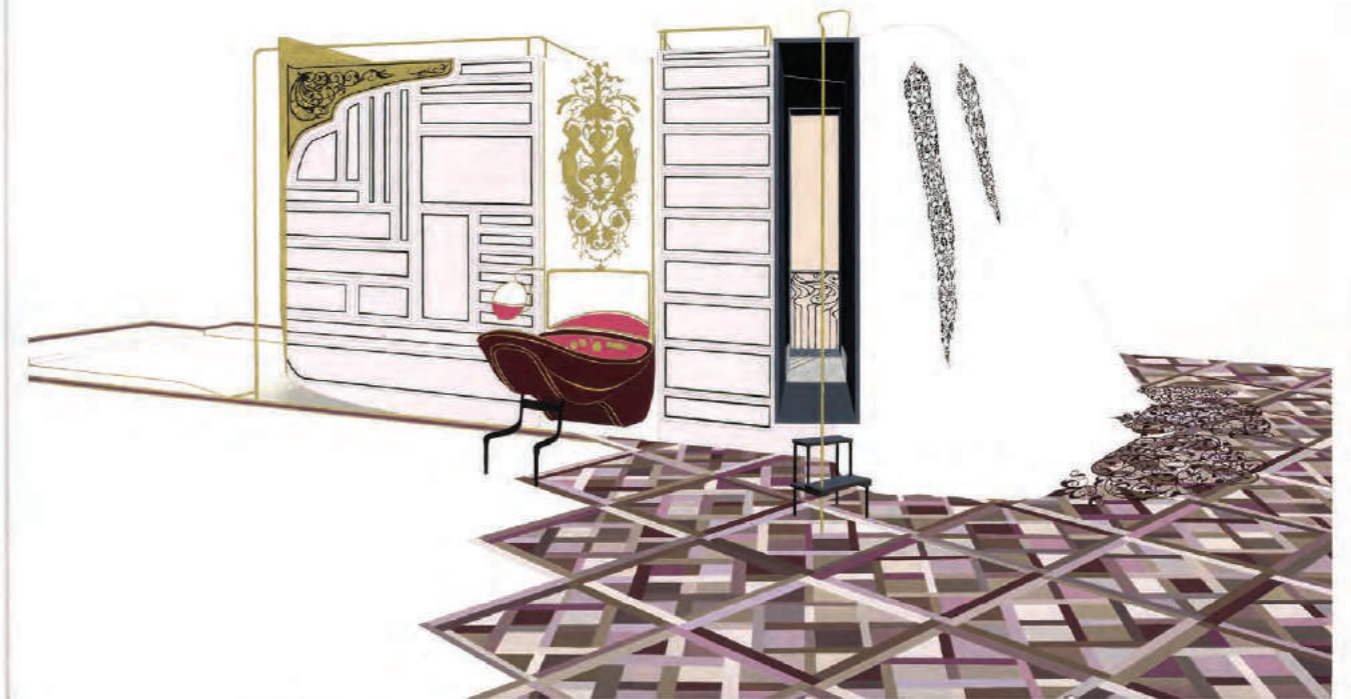
Among the four of us, our characterizations of this thing are collagic at best. Guillaume and Jean-Pierre think that it might be totemistic. Louis suspects collective hallucination, and has asked a lot of questions about the prospect of mercury poisoning. I'm utterly bewitched, and mostly at a loss for words, but in our floundering attempt to triangulate the exact nature of this thing before us, we've taken to calling it "the Vanity".

Perhaps the reason why we're having such a difficult time understanding its marrow, is due to the method of its arrival, and that it seems quite certain that a new form of interiority had been made through the intercession of this disturbance.

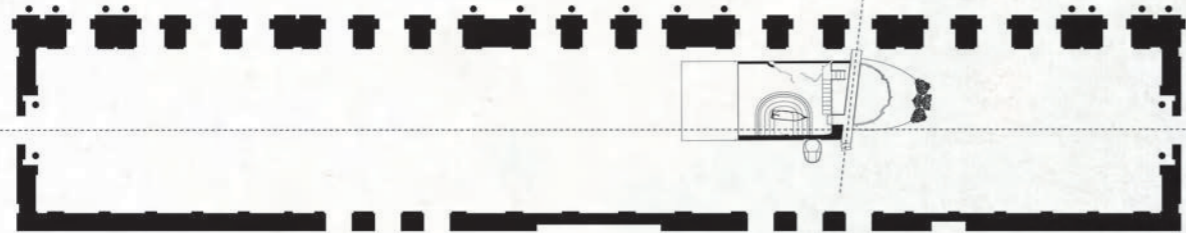
An enumeration of its presenting characteristics

- the collision of a carriage and a Robe à la Francaise
- a bridal veil held in suspended animation - charred, vitrified, iridescent
- a leather dressing trunk or wardrobe turned inside out and dyed the color of a blushing cheek
- the bucket of a Model T or a Finnish sleigh parked against an encrusted, gilt confection

This piece, which I assume is made of dark enameled steel, has the intimacy of a back seat hemmed in by a glazed windshield and side mirrors. It looks to be a place for the construction of appearance; the application of powders and creams; the arrangement of wigs into ever more towering constructions; miniaturized landscapes commemorating the invention of the hot air balloon, or a mock naval battle composed of tiny galleons spun out on high seas of roiling gray horse hair and papier maché; tableaux of historical progress, voicing the technological victory of the French by way of gun powder and frigates; vignettes that inspire grooming as a public spectacle.



Based on the readings that we've taken with the surveying transit, the Vanity appears to align the distant interiors of the Hall of Mirrors and the boudoir of the Petit Trianon (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 the one hand, the labored and irrational mores 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 phase with the emerging philosophical ideas of Rousseau that were fueling the oncoming revolution.



On the 16th day of the archduchess' bridal journey to Versailles, the cortège stopped on an island in the Rhine River near Kehl. The horses were brought to rest so the front wheels of the carriage were situated in France, while the back wheels remained in Germany. The careful positioning of the royal carriage over the finite and imagined border, ensured that the body of the Dauphine was left to inhabit the impossibility of the line itself, however brief the transaction may have been.

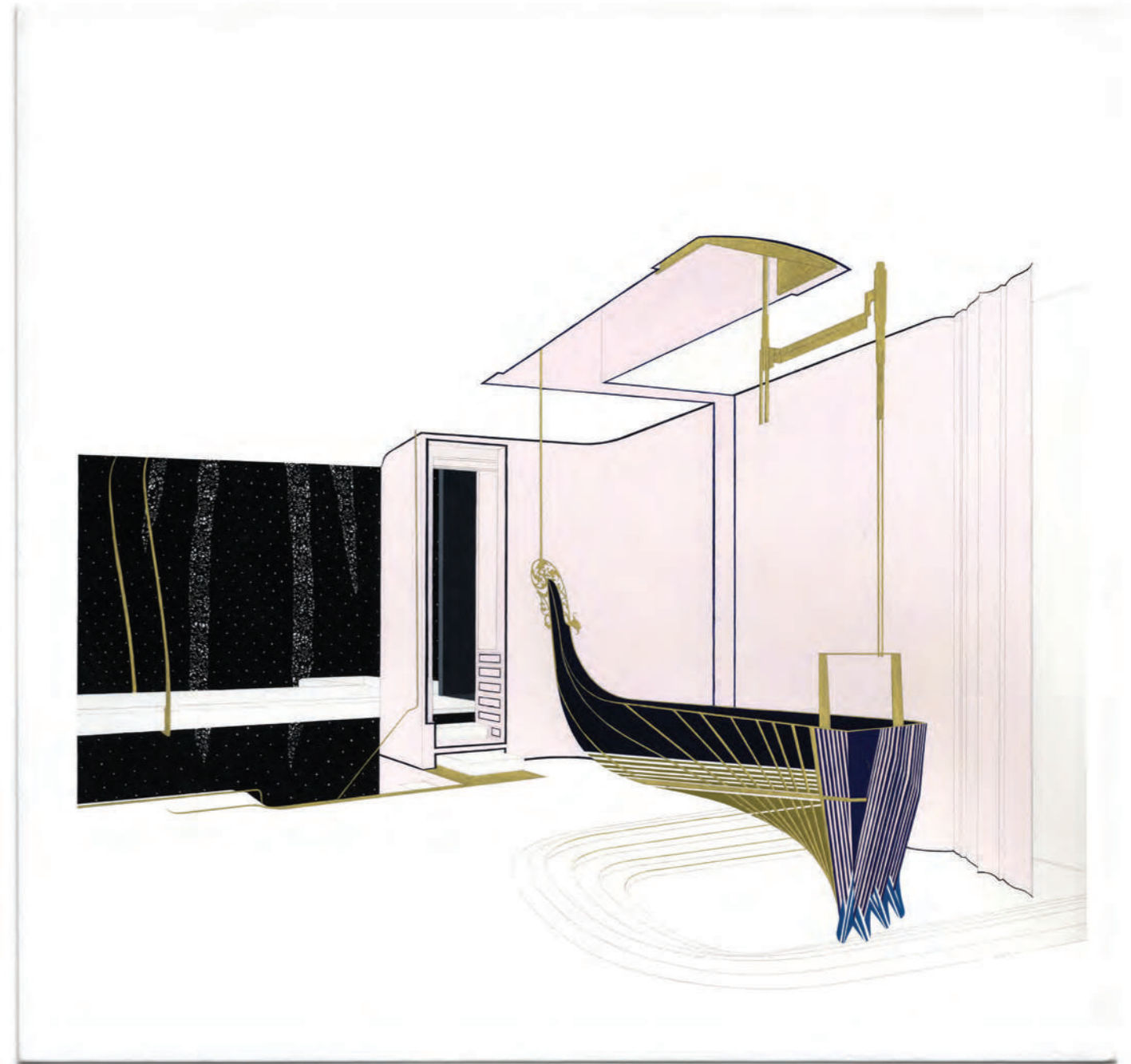
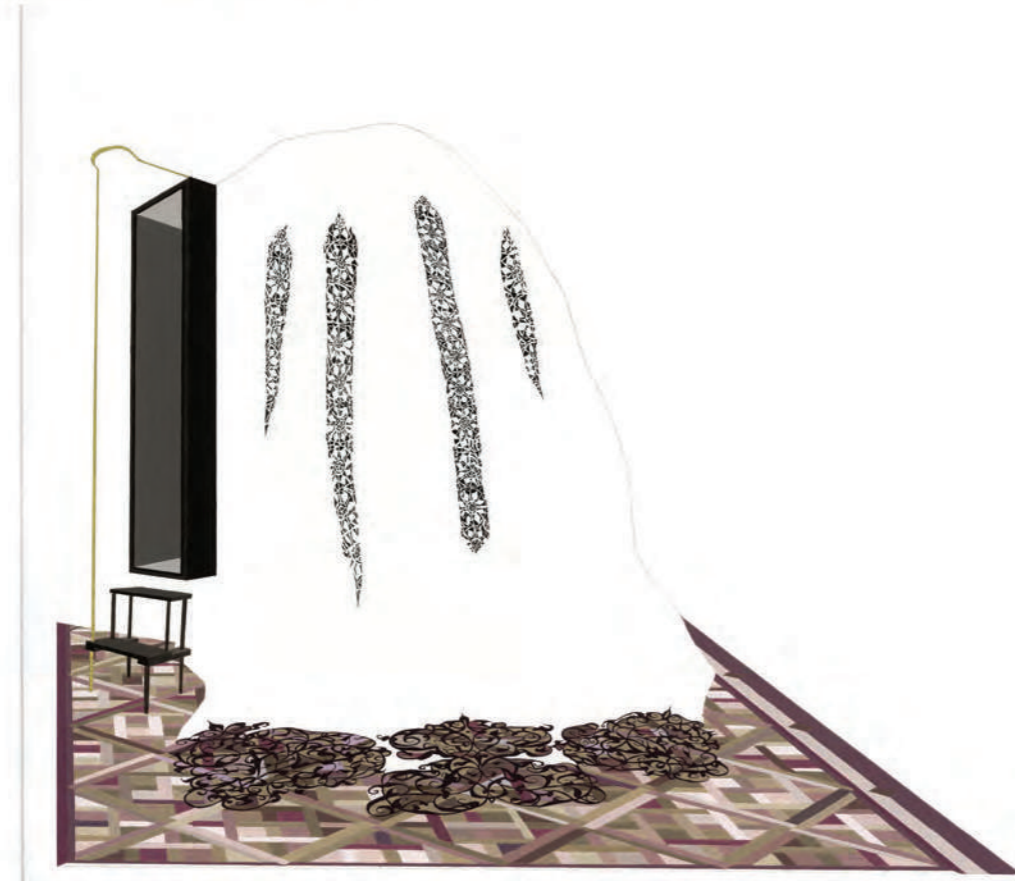
Geology proves that these forms of abstraction are absurd; that the division of Germany and France drawn along the fiber of a map, or willed across the soil of a small wet island ceases to be true below the surface and in the constancy of air. But these abstractions do sometimes manage to ceremoniously and psychologically perform the cleaving of personhood, and to extract any last remaining trace of privacy that a Bourbon child might have possessed. The handoff of this 14-year-old girl required the literal abdication of all clothing and possessions, including her undergarments and a Chinese pug named Mops, as well as the loss of her mock-wedding trousseau.

Lèche vitrine: literal translation from the French, *window-licker*, contemporary usage, *to window shop*.

One has to wonder, among the small acts of deviation that have led to loftier acts of misprision; if the pubescent Dauphine had dared to press her tongue against the rippled glass of her carriage window as her entourage arrived, in formation, at the courtyard of Versailles, might the history of France have gone down rather differently.

The posterior looks like the blossom of a full dress arrested in charred wood, which trails onto the parquet floor and turns into a patterned inlay of black mother of pearl and labradorite. I thought that it might be lofted by some colossal and unseen pannier, and the thin lace windows suggest that the billow may have an underside.

I mounted the two small carriage steps to investigate the possibility of an interior, and discovered that the billow of this skirt conceals a double-height space pin-pricked with votive light wicking at the darkness like ancient descriptions of the stars wedded 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 between where you came from and where you are; a tight, sombre compaction of space not entirely accepted into the licit tectonics 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 asymmetry of a gondola, the elegiac bathtub of Jean-Paul Marat, vestiges of corseting, no... maybe the intricate linen patterns of a mummy's wrapping shrunken tight around a chassis; taut from centuries of parched, breathless air. But this buoyant coffer is girdled in leather and pitches back and forth on a large brass bridle, echoing inside this hollow volume.

Twelve miles from Versailles, in the markets of Faubourg Saint-Antoine, famished women began to organize their discontent. They took up arms, and brandished demands as they marched west through thick fog in the detention of their corsets. The hem of their petticoats 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 protesters 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 shivving of her mattress, the deposition of Louis XVI, and the supplication of the monarchs on the balcony off of the king's bedchambers.

By midday the sky was washed in beryl glazes and dusted in thin cloud cover. Under hostile terms, the royal family is compelled back to Paris and displaced to the threadbare apartments of the Tuileries. During their first night of captivity, minus all impediments to physics and the human mind under duress, the king might have imagined that the axis of his bedchambers could cut 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 woe. Eventually, the exhaustion of all other plans would lead him to an overlooked accomplice.

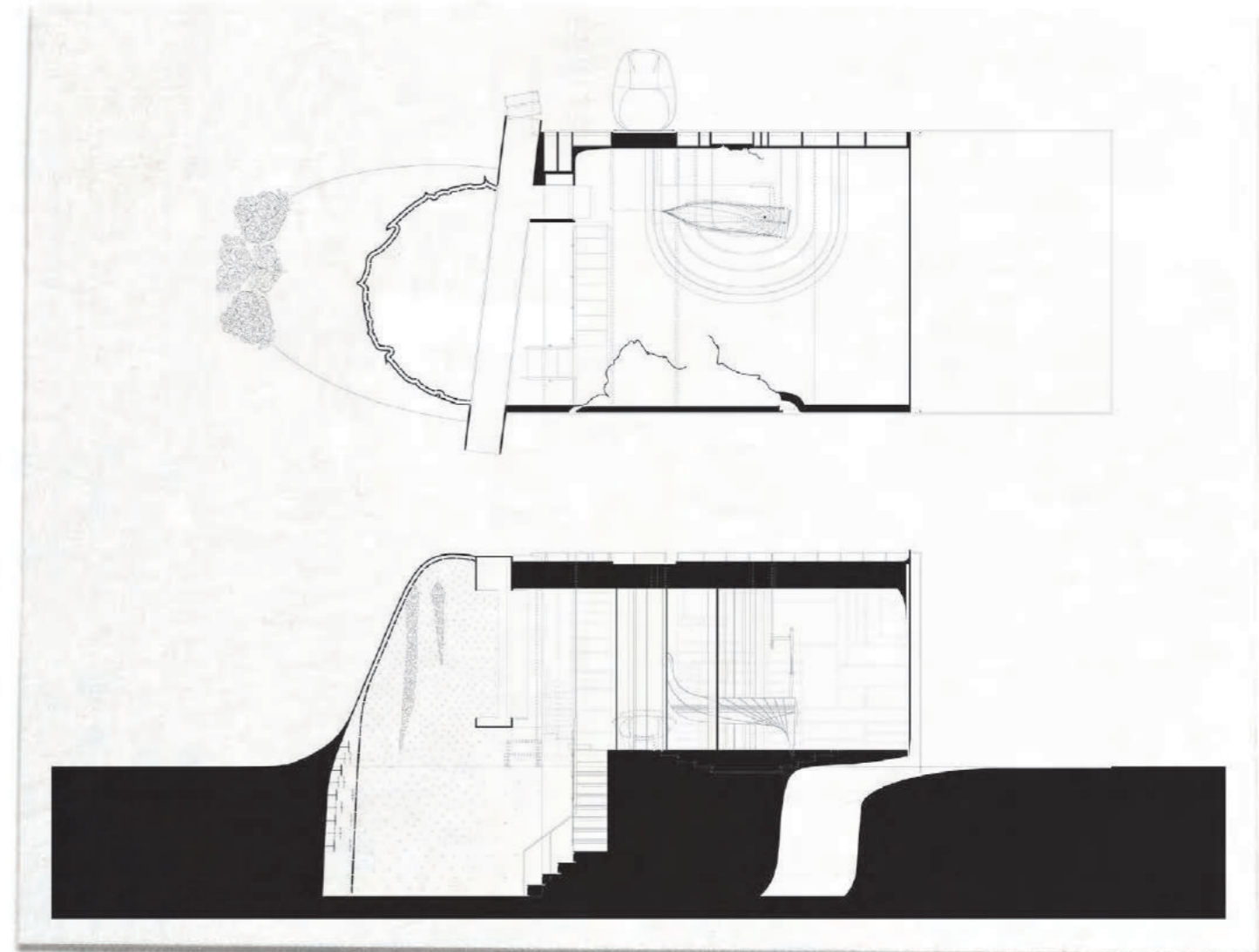
At Versailles, a royal bed with the curtains drawn had been the only place where the eyes of the court could not go. On the night of their planned escape, the king and queen pulled the

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shroud of their beds closed and requested that they be allowed to sleep for an additional hour. While the guards took their wards 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 mob, before the plan unraveled. While stopping briefly to replenish 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.

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We have all felt a sense of woe when facing the thick steel blade mounted over an inestimable depression in the floor; a leading edge that has literally cleaved the front end of the Vanity off, 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. Nevertheless, on a bleak Wednesday morning, as a bouquet of manure and yeast was picked up by the wind, the deposed queen of France was carted to the Place de la Concorde and summarily executed.

When her head was rendered 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, summoned the intractable threshold that she had been subjected to on her import to France; as the body of her carriage lay poised over that abstract and fateful boundary drawn by an unwitting cartographer.

Over the course of the life bracketed by the road in, and the road out of Versailles, there were many indictments; accusations involving diamonds, cake, lesbianism, overindulgence and naïve simplicity, youthfulness, and incest. For those who live in the hairpin turns of history there is hardly ever refuge from a violent and inimitable dénouement.

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Sources

Antonia Fraser, *Marie Antoinette: The Journey* (New York: Anchor Books, 2001).

Leon Battista Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, trans. Joseph Rykwert, Neil Leach and Robert Tavernor (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988)