The Dinner Party
by
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Abstract:

This manuscript both describes and documents the artistic practice that I have developed during my time at MIT in the Visual Arts Program. This writing presents three projects created during my time as a graduate student and the projects' sources in the structure of a work of fiction. The story's form highlights the process of constructing historical narrative, focusing on innovations and failures made by historical amateurs, connecting their work in various fields to my own interdisciplinary practice.

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The Dinner Party
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Introduction
"If people did not sometimes do silly things, nothing intelligent would ever get done"
-L. Wittgenstein
I’ve always dreamed of travelling back in time. Never to the future, always the past. History once appealed to me because I knew it was solid. It was firmly cemented, unchanging and knowable. But going back in time would change it. It would be an impossible feat - an ant moving a mountain. Because history is so big and I am so small.

The first art project I did that involved rigorous historical research was entitled “Lily Pons,” and was about a famous opera singer from the 40’s. I was becoming interested in great opera singers of the past because I was working as a research assistant for another artist named Paul Etienne Lincoln. He was collecting sounds of the highest sopranos and the lowest bassos from the Metropolitan Opera from every year between 1919 and 1980 and it was my job to find them. I spent about three years working on that project, and came away with a knack for research and all kinds of surprising information on the topic.

I had been told by a fiction writing teacher in college to write about something that I knew and that most others didn’t and I would have the bones of an interesting story. I figured the same could apply to art making, so I began to dig deeper into the life of Lily Pons. The more I read about her, the more serendipitous connections appeared. I found that history had a way of linking itself directly to me and I developed a kind of relationship with the singer. The artwork that had started out based on facts and scientific phenomena, became more of an exercise in closeness. It was a way for me to connect to someone I could never possibly meet and a way to immerse myself in a time that I could never visit. It was like time travel.

I was given a book called, After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection. I opened it and read,

We began this book 20 years ago asserting that history is not some body of knowledge "out there" in the past, but a continual act of construction whose end product is being reshaped and made anew every time someone ventures into the archives. (Davidson, Lytle, vii)

To me, this meant that I could actually shape and interact with history simply by study-

1 “Lily Pons” 2006 documented in detail on pp.. 78-79
2 Contemporary Artist Paul Etienne Lincoln works with elaborate, often historical multimedia installations. His project “New York, New York” portrays the city of New York through a collection of lost sounds.
ing it. All I had to do was venture into the archives. But the act of research does not necessarily make a good artwork. It is just a mode of collecting data. The construction part is more important.

The evidence of the past...comes easily enough to hand. But we still need to be taught how to see it, read it, and explain it before it can be turned into a story. (Davidson, Lytle, xi)

The final product of this discipline is typically a story, just like a fairy tale, or a fable. This is because history is rooted in a narrative tradition, and...

...as much as it seeks to generalize from past events, as do the sciences, it also remains dedicated to capturing the uniqueness of a situation. When historians neglect the literary aspect of their discipline - when they forget that good history begins with a good story - they risk losing that wider audience that all great historians have addressed. They end up, sadly, talking to themselves. (Davidson, Lytle, xi)

Historians make stories. That is one way to deal with the construction part. But what if these little fragments of peoples' lives and relationships were made into something else? The narratives that were usually read or told could be contained in another form that allowed for a more fluid reading - one that was more aware of the construction that was happening - of the fact that the reader/viewer/listener was changing the history as he consumed it and that the same process had occurred for the person presenting it.

My artistic practice and that of a historian are similar more than in subject matter alone. In the above description of the nuances and possible failings of historical detection, Davidson and Lytle sound as if they are talking about art. History and art both do not quite fit into the sciences. Nor are they entirely exclusive from them. They have an audience that they each seek to communicate with. And when they do not capture the interest of their respective audiences, they often fail.

But with an immense amount of historical material behind us, how does one choose when and whom to focus on?

After working with Lily Pons I suddenly began to gravitate to the 18th century in Europe and America. My reading and research kept bring me to certain types of thinkers, inventors, and scientists that all seemed to lack any kind of formal training in the fields in
which they worked. It seemed that the time was a veritable renaissance of the amateur, when people all over the world weren’t letting their expertise, knowledge or lack thereof interfere with their passions for innovation. It is not that the amateur was new. It is only in recent history that there has been such a stark division between amateur and professional.

Somehow the notion of amateurism as something that’s not done well has overcome the notion of amateurism as something that’s done with passion - something that’s done for the love of it. (Kimmelman)³

This time appeals to me because of the fuzziness of professional boundaries. Anyone could work in any variety of fields and succeed without the stigma of not having been properly educated or certified. The word, “amateur” is a pejorative today, connoting sub-par performance, or general lack of expertise, but it comes from the Latin amator, or, lover. I identify strongly with this way of thinking about ones work, especially as an artist working in other fields than art. When one is willing to shift disciplines to use whatever the best means may be to produce his work, he will find that he is rarely an expert, but his passion and dedication can make up for his lack of formal training.

My interest in the amateur, and the particular time of the mid 19th century coupled with my working at MIT led to a focus on scientific and technological breakthroughs and interesting failures that were made by amateurs, or by professionals who made mistakes. It was a direct reaction to the great amount of technical expertise all around me. I wanted to work within the sciences, but in a stupid way. I wanted to do things that scientists couldn’t do because they knew better. I wanted to be an amateur because they are...

...not afraid to do something for the first time...we need not suffer the paralysis of indecision because we don’t know it all. (Boorstin)⁴

But my embrace of the amateur spirit is not only in reaction to the disciplines surrounding me. It is to my own as well. My experience in an academic program for fine arts, and in an increasingly academic art world as a whole, has been confusing in some

³ Michael Kimmelman is the chief art critic for the New York Times and an accomplished amateur pianist.
⁴ Daniel J. Boorstin was an American historian, professor, attorney, and writer. He was appointed twelfth Librarian of the United States Congress from 1975 until 1987.
ways. The discipline's constant struggle to validate itself as a rigorous academic pur-
suit has frequently resulted, in my opinion, in dry, scholarly artworks that would do
better to be published as academic papers or just highlighted on the pages of the theory
books that they illustrate. I think that trying too hard to squeeze the square peg of
artistic practice into the round hole of academic tradition can result in artworks that,
sadly, speak only to themselves.

The menace here is in the academies, the pretentious self-appointed custodians of pres-
tige and respectability. Balzac was never elected to the Académie Francaise. Posterity
and the free public are our authentic Académie. Dickens was quite right when he declared
that "the people have set literature free" - from the arrogance of patrons of which the
professions are the latest and most assertive. (Boorstin)

So how does one discuss these ideas without utilizing a conventional academic form?
Sure, the projects themselves are good to talk about in an analytical way, and they are
documented as well as possible within the pages of a book, but really, they are made to
be experienced as artworks. But, the stories that the artworks come from and create are
perfectly suited to be read in a book. And sometimes there are more stories surround-
ing the works than are immediately apparent. I see this written work as a chance to re-
present the stories that went into the artworks discussed herein to create a new work.
I want to present theses stories in such a way that a reader might experience something
like the act of construction discussed above. I want readers to experience the process
of the amateur historian, picking the bits of evidence out of the narrative, and recon-
structing them into new narratives or other forms entirely.

I saw a lecture given by Michael Snow once. He wanted to show his film Wavelength,
but there was simply not enough time, so he prepared a new work called W-V-L-N-T. He
spliced the film into six new reels. The first contained the first fifteen minutes of the
film, the second contained the second fifteen minutes, and so on. He projected them all
simultaneously on top of each other so that we could see and hear the entire, feature
length film in fifteen minutes. The experience stuck with me, reminding me that as an
artist, the representations of your work are often the only form that the world sees.
Sometimes the work doesn’t fit into the mode or medium of the presentation, so it becomes
the job of the artist to re-make his work every time it is presented. This work at-

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Michael Snow is a Canadian artist working in painting, sculpture, video, films, photography, holography, drawing, books
and music. He may be best known for his structurist film epics, Wavelength and La Région Centrale
tempts to do just that. This is the written version.
As I walked into the vast dining room I suddenly felt under dressed. It wasn't that I was clothed very differently from most of the other guests, but the room itself was so lavishly decorated it was a little bit oppressive. There was gold leaf everywhere and delicate embroidered linens on the table. The glasses were crystal the utensils were silver. There were eight places set, but looking around the room I could only find six other people. We were all friends, acquaintances, or colleagues, of our host, Bernard Black, except for me. I was here as the date of Carol Schultz.

Black had acquired his wealth by being born into a family of media proprietors with tragically short lives. After the death of his last senior relative, he was given controlling shares in several broadcast media companies, and a handful of major newspapers. Leaving most of the finer points of running the company to its executives, Black had publicly devoted his adult life to philanthropy, animal rights and patronage of the arts.

Tonight, Black's rotund physique was neatly split into hemispheres, the lower made of khaki and the top navy blue cashmere, divided by an equator of patent leather with a silver buckle in the middle. His face had the ruddy complexion of someone who had just climbed too many stairs to quickly, and his eyes were magnified through his thick glasses lenses. He was smiling, greeting and introducing his guests.

I was surprised right away by the lack of any kind of house servants or a butler. Black had showed us in, himself, and though all kinds of snacks and hors d'oeuvres had been carefully laid out in the front parlor that we had walked through, there was no evidence of anyone to replenish them.

Most of the guests seemed to have been acquainted with one another. I was examining the décor of the room closely, trying not to cling to my date and let her socialize with the rest of the group. I was relieved, though to find that my place card at the table was next to the only person at the event that I knew. The table was set so that each of the two long sides had places for three people, and the head and foot could each accommodate one. I was at the end of one of the long sides of the table. To my left was my girlfriend, Carol, who was somewhat of an expert in a handful of scientific fields. On my right, the foot of the table, the seat was empty but the place was set. The only other people whose names I knew were Black, at the head of the table to my left, and an artist named Devin Galli-Curci who's art show I had seen a week earlier and left me feeling baffled and angry.

There was one woman in the group other than Carol, and she was seated directly across from
her. She seemed younger than most of us and was in casual clothes. She wore glasses and had her red hair tied back from her pale, sharp-featured face. She wasn't as talkative as the other guests and she seemed to be avoiding an assault of conversation with the man seated across from me. He looked to me like a Vegas performer or something. His jacket looked well made, but was kind of sparkly and flashy in a way that made it seem cheap. He was well manicured and his face was framed by a line of facial hair so thin, it appeared to have been painted on. His conversation attempts seemed mostly to revolve around places that he had been invited to in some professional capacity.

Eventually, to the unveiled relief of the woman to his right, he turned to me and introduced himself as Clayton Conaway. He was an illusionist, he told me, kind of like David Copperfield or Siegfried and Roy without the other guy or the tiger. I decided to introduce myself to the woman to his right. I said that I was a journalist (which wasn't entirely true - I was currently unemployed) and she introduced herself as Jenna O'Brien. She wrote a column in a local paper and performed stand-up. When I looked over to see what my date was up to, she was talking to an older man to her left about aeronautics. His name was Warren Mason, and I gathered he was some kind of inventor. He was talking about various failed flight attempts in great technical detail. Finally, Black was in enthusiastic exchange with Galli-Curci about his recent museum show.

I was in limbo for a moment, not really engaged with anyone and about to decide which guest I should direct my conversation toward when the sound of a ringing bell that seemed to come from every surface of the room caught the attention of all of the guests. Black took the opportunity to thank us for joining him (yelling over the din of the bell), and announced that the first course should be arriving. I looked toward the doorways at either end of the long room, but the only people around seemed to be the guests at the table.

I noticed that some of the other guests were looking up to the ceiling and turned my gaze to see steaming glass orbs descending from what had appeared to be purely decorative gold rings in the elaborately carved ceiling over each of the place settings. As the glass spheres came lower, I could see that they were not, in fact, spheres at all, but half globes with the tops chopped off horizontally. The lip of each soup bowl was coated with some metallic material that was attached to the cable it descended on by magnets. When the bowls reached the place settings, the magnets silently let go and retracted back into the ceiling with a final, punctuating moment of the circular holes sliding shut. I looked over at Carol, impressed. She whispered, "I hope all the other food is small enough to
Black looked pleased with his guests' reactions. He described the dish,

_The first course of tonight's meal is a white turnip soup sprinkled with shaved truffles. It is one of my favorites._

Some of the guests and I began to enjoy the delicious white soup, but Warren Mason was so fascinated by the way the dish had been served that he wasn't eating at all. Instead, he was offering an amused Bernard Black a series of theories about the preparation and delivery of the meal.

_The magnets, first of all, have to be electro-magnets. How else could they just turn off at the precise moment when the bowls reached the table? But having the kitchen directly above the dining room, now that was a brilliant design._

_There is no kitchen above the dining room,_

Black interjected, smiling

_In fact, there is no kitchen in the entire house._

Mason was confounded,

_But how... I mean, it can't be delivered? Or ..._

he trailed off.

Black described the system for the distribution of the soup:

_The soup is made entirely by machines in a basement laboratory that is kept stocked with fresh ingredients from all over the world. The machines are not particularly intelligent except for one sense. They are tasting-robots. Naturally, to experience the tastes in the way that we do, the robots must smell as well, but their sensors for airborne particulate matter are only about as sensitive as our noses. Their taste sensors are more powerful than the most refined restauranteur—than any human being, period. They combine ingredients together weekly, tasting them, and producing fabulous new concoctions of all kinds, but when it is a soup, this is how it is delivered. First, the soup is made in a_
very special copper boiler whose temperature and pressure can be controlled very precisely. The soup is then pumped through sterile, glass plumbing up to the top of the house where it is stored in a second heated boiler until the meal begins. The signal for the meal to begin is triggered by the weight and heat of living guests sitting in the dining room chairs. After a few minutes for introductory conversation, the soup is dispersed from above as you have witnessed.

Mason was clearly impressed and said,

*What a fine piece of engineering*

I could almost see the disagreement bubbling from Carol before she opened her mouth to say,

*But this isn’t fine engineering at all. Sure the soup is delicious- it really is one of the best dishes that I have ever tasted- but a trained engineer would never have produced such an elaborate system for getting soup to the table. The most basic understanding of design principles would have ruled out pumping hot soup four stories up, only to be brought back down three of the stories before being put on the table. And the two separate boilers… Why should there be two parts in a single system that do the exact same thing? And the way that the soup was lowered to the table was beautiful to watch, but totally inefficient.*

She was addressing the whole table now and was hovering above her chair with excitement, ready to stand until she suddenly became self-aware again and maybe even a little embarrassed and trailed off. Mason was smiling and Carol couldn’t tell if it was a patronizing smile, or a smile because he agreed with her.

*That is exactly why I think it is great engineering - or maybe it’s better than engineering. A trained engineer could never have designed a system so pleasing to all of the senses. He would have focused on solving a problem. In this case, the problem would be how best to get soup from where it is produced onto the table. Or how to serve guests the fastest. Or some other problem whose best solution would never result in anything like what we have just experienced. It reminds me of the work of one of my favorite amateur engineers, Clement Ader, a Frenchman who was working on the problem of flight in the late 19th century.*
Mason paused, maybe for dramatic effect or maybe to look around the table to see if we were interested enough to hear the rest of the story.

Ader made no notable contributions to aeronautical science. In fact, he barely even left the ground. He is an extreme example of someone who did not let expertise get in the way of his vision.

His most remarkable accomplishment was a device named the "Eole," a single steam engine tractor monoplane that bore little resemblance to any flight apparatus built before or since. It was made out of an odd variety of materials including a bamboo four-bladed propeller made to look like bird feathers, and cloth wings that were severely curved, resembling those of a bat. There were no elevator, no rudder, and no conventional flight controls. Each wing could be adjusted forward and backward by separate hand cranks to control the pitch of the plane in flight. Wings could be flexed up and down by foot pedals, and wing area and camber could be changed by additional cranks. In all, six hand-operated cranks, two foot pedals, and engine controls had to be operated by a single pilot in flight. Needless to say, the description of the craft as a "chaos of mechanisms," at the time of its public unveiling was apt.

One can only imagine how comically difficult it must have been to pilot the Eole, but Ader somehow succeeded to take off, and travel a distance of 165 feet before touching down again. This flight, and here I use the term loosely, was by no means controlled or sustained, but it was encouraging enough that the French government funded a second machine's production that Ader began, but never finished.

Jenna was amused

It's like his work being recognized as legitimate kind of ruined him. He did better working against all the people telling him he couldn't do it than he could do with their support. I guess that's sometimes how it works. But in a way the absurdity of the thing took it to another level. The way I picture the device, it had no business flying. An engineer would have thrown out this weird clunky thing ages ago, but it seems like Ader was becoming less interested in flying,
and more interested in making the Eole fly—regardless of any kind of rules of physics or limitations of the human pilot.

I could see Carol easing into the shift in the conversation’s direction. As the tension left her body she said,

Early plans (below) for Ader’s Eole
I still disagree that the soup system in this house or the flying apparatus you described could be described as "good engineering," but I can see how they are valuable in ways that are uncommon in the work of trained engineers. I'm seeing this type of work, Ader's Eole in particular, as failure, but interesting failure. Even as valuable failure. Even a professional scientist can understand how sometimes a failure can be more interesting or even useful than traditional success. In the hard sciences some of the greatest contributions have been failures. Or scientific failures have changed the course of history.

Nicola Tesla is one of the scientists that I have always admired and have tried to emulate in some ways in my practice. He invented a huge amount of stuff that we use every day, but is relatively unknown to much of the general population largely because of poor business decisions. Toward the end of his career, Tesla was fluctuating between genius and insanity. And sometimes it was hard to tell which you were witnessing. He'd invent Radar one day, and talk about radio transmissions from Venus and Mars the next. It was during this period that he called a press conference to unveil the Death Ray.

Jenna was laughing,

You mean he actually called it the Death Ray? I mean, that's pretty direct. No beating around the bush what this invention is for. It's straight out of a comic book. Mad scientist stuff.

Carol agreed.

Yeah, he was very direct about his intensions for the invention. He said that it was a weapon so powerful it could never be used. He actually seemed to think that the introduction of this device would end war forever. That the threat of this thing would make everyone in the world too scared to do anything that might result in its use.

Anyway, he called the press conference and got everyone up to his weird lab in Colorado and brought them all out into the yard where he had this device set up for a demonstration. It was a big boxy thing with all kinds of dials and gauges all over it, and a long tube protruding out of one side. Once all of the reporters had assembled out of the way of the ray, Tesla turned it on. A faint purple beam came out of the tube and shot through the air for a few hundred feet and shot into the earth. It was silent and nothing really happened. At some point an owl flew through the beam and died instantly. But that was it. He turned off the ray and said that the demonstration was over. The press were baffled.
They asked what had happened. Was it the owl thing? And Tesla said no, that the owl was an accident. He said that the beam was way too dangerous to actually demonstrate on location, and he had aimed it at a specific set of coordinates in the North Pole. An explorer who had been told about the death ray demonstration ahead of time would eventually visit the coordinates that had been targeted, and report back to civilization with the devastating results. The press were disappointed not to have witnessed anything, but waited for the explorer to return with the news. He eventually did, but had nothing to report. The location of the coordinates specified by Tesla was unaffected. Tesla was puzzled, but got on with his other work until he heard news of a devastating disaster in Northern Asia. A mysterious explosion occurred in the same year as Tesla’s death ray demonstration in Tunguska, Siberia. Many scientists attribute it to a meteor and other theories exist as well, but Tesla knew what had caused it immediately. His death ray had worked, but had been aimed improperly. The area that had been affected by the blast had been completely leveled and was roughly the size of the state of Rhode Island. When Tesla saw [what he thought to be] the results of his new weapon, he was distraught and disassembled the device immediately. He did not work on that project again in his lifetime.

When he died however, the US government was interested in the papers of the great inventor—specifically the notes concerning an invention called a “death-ray.” They held onto his notes for over a decade, letting scientists look them over and debate whether his ideas were plausible. Finally, the scientists concluded that beam weapons couldn’t work due to the qualities of the atmosphere on earth. Ruled harmless, Tesla’s papers were released to his family back in Russia. The plans were eventually sold off—dispersed throughout the scientific community. Years later, during the cold war, American intelligence reported that the Soviets were building something unusual. It was a big boxy structure with dials and gauges all over it with a long tube sticking out of one side.
UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT

DATS: Jan. 30, 1951

TO: MR. FOLSON
FROM: L. B. NICHOLS
SUBJECT: [redacted]

called yesterday and said he would be in town for the next two or three days and wanted to see me. I told him I would be glad to see him late yesterday or today at his convenience. He is coming in today at 3:30 p.m.

I asked him if there was anything special which would require my doing any checking. He stated there were two things he wanted to discuss.

1. The case of Nikola Tesla and Abraham M. Spansel, President of International Latex Corporation.

Our files reflect that Nikola Tesla was one of the world's outstanding scientists and in fact designed the generators installed at Niagara Falls. He died in New York on January 7, 1943, and is supposed to have left details and plans for a so-called death ray.

Our files also reflect that Colonel Erskine of Military Intelligence called us on January 9, 1943, advising that Tesla had died, that Spansel had communicated with the War Department regarding this death, that Tesla had a nephew named Sava Kusanovich who had taken possession of Tesla's papers and Spansel thought the papers might be used against our Government.

We made an immediate inquiry in New York and the first report was that Kusanovich and others entered Tesla's room with the aid of a locksmith, broke into a safe containing some of Tesla's valuable papers including formula.

Coincident with this, on January 8, L. M. C. Smith called Mr. Tam at the Alien Property Custodian about seizing these items.

We interviewed Spansel who expressed concern over Tesla's effects and Spansel stated that Kusanovich had turned over the effects of Tesla to the Alien Property Custodian. Spansel further stated the day before Tesla died, he tried to get in touch with the War Department to make available certain...

US Government documents (left and opposite page) that have been released regarding Tesla's "Death Ray" invention.
VEST

UNSUB -- EQUIPMENT, EXPERIMENTS AND RESEARCH OF NIKOLA TESLA CEASED -- ESPIONAGE -- N. RETEL UNDER ABOVE HEADER TO THE BUREAU FROM THIS OFFICE DATED JAN MINE LAST. INQUIRY DEVELOPS THAT TESLA DIED JAN EIGHT, RATHER THAN THURSDAY, JAN SEVEN, AS STATED IN REFERENCE TELTYPE. ON THE NIGHT OF JAN EIGHT, SAVA KOSANOVICH, GEORGE CLARK, AND KENNETH SWEENEY VISITED TESLA’S HOTEL WITH A REPRESENTATIVE OF SHAW WALKER CO. IN ORDER TO OPEN THE SAFE IN THE ROOM OF TESLA. KOSANOVICH LATER REPORTED TO WALTER GORSUCH, OFFICE OF ALIEN PROPERTY CUSTODIAN, NYC, THAT HE WENT INTO THE ROOM IN ORDER TO SEARCH FOR A WILL OF TESLA. KOSANOVICH AND THE OTHERS MADE THE SEARCH OF THE SAFE IN THE PRESENCE OF THREE ASSISTANT MANAGERS OF HOTEL NEW YORKER AS WELL AS REPRESENTATIVES OF THE YUGOSLAVIAN CONSULATE, IDENTITIES OF LATTER NOT YET KNOWN. AFTER THE SAFE WAS OPENED, SWEENEY TOOK FROM THE SAFE A BOOK CONTAINING TESTIMONIALS SENT TO TESLA ON THE OCCASION OF HIS SEVENTY FIFTH BIRTHDAY. THIS BOOK WAS ARRANGED FOR TESLA BY SWEENEY. KOSANOVICH TOOK FROM THE ROOM THREE PICTURES OF TESLA, TWO BEING ENLARGED NEWSPAPER PICTURES. ACCORDING TO MANAGERS OF HOTEL AND KOSANOVICH HIMSELF, NOTHING ELSE WAS REMOVED FROM THE ROOM OR SAFE. THE SAFE WAS THEN CLOSED UNDER A NEW COMBINATION, WHICH COMBINATION IS NOW IN POSSESSION OF KOSANOVICH. ON SATURDAY AFTERNOON, JAN NINE, GORSUCH AND FITZGERALD OF ALIEN PROPERTY CONTROL WENT TO HOTEL AND SEIZED ALL THE PROPERTY OF TESLA, CONSISTING OF ABOUT TWO TRUCKLOADS OF MATERIAL, SEALED ALL ARTICLES AND TRANSFERRED THEM TO THE MANHATTAN STORAGE AND WAREHOUSE CO., WHERE THEY ARE NOW LOCATED. AT THAT TIME THERE WERE ALSO IN THIS WAREHOUSE APPROXIMATELY THIRTY BARRELS AND BUNDLES BELONGING TO TESLA WHICH HAD BEEN THERE SINCE ABOUT MINE YEAR THIRTY FOUR. THESE HAVE ALSO BEEN SEALED AND ARE NOW UNDER ORDERS OF ALIEN PROPERTY CUSTODIAN. IN VIEW OF FACT TESLA IS A US NATURALIZED CITIZEN, ALIEN PROPERTY CUSTODIAN FEELS THAT ITS JURISDICTION OVER PROPERTY IS DOUBTFUL BUT FEELS THAT NO OTHER AGENCY WILL BE ABLE TO GET TO THIS PROPERTY FOR AT LEAST TWO DAYS, COPIES DESTROYED.

REDUCTIONS ON THIS PAGE ARE NOT FOIA DELETIONS

COPY IN FILE

FEBS 1943

NOT FOIA REDUCTIONS

Page 29
One scientist remembered all of the speculation about Tesla’s weapon and suddenly, America was interested again. We knew that it couldn’t work—our best scientists had all ruled it out. But why would they be building it if it didn’t work. So there was a new debate. And all of the new scientists still said that the death ray could not work. Except one. He was still skeptical of the device, but suggested that if the problem with the Death Ray was the earth’s atmosphere, maybe it could work in a vacuum. Like space. That was enough to get a huge military program started for developing outer-space defensive beam technology, also known as “Star Wars.” All because of some weird invention that never worked.

That’s the crazy thing about it though. It didn’t matter if it ever worked. It didn’t even matter if it actually ever even existed. The idea of it—just the possibility of this thing was so powerful that it shaped an era.

Mason was clearly excited by Carol’s story

It’s amazing the way sometimes things that really don’t function in the way that they are intended to can be more important and influential than their creators ever might have imagined. It kind of takes the attention off “doing” and shifts that focus to “trying.”

It reminds me of a childhood fantasy about tying my body to thousands of flying insects to achieve flight. Even as a young child, I realized that this was impossible, but the idea was just so appealing, I couldn’t shake it. At the time it was common for schoolchildren to catch houseflies in their—our bare hands. Once we had one we’d shake it around in our cupped hands until it was too disoriented to fly. A co-conspirator would pluck a single hair from the head of a girl—usually someone that the fly catcher would have romantically interested in. While one of us gently held the fly’s body in place, the other would delicately tie the single hair around the fly’s neck, like a leash. Once the fly recovered from its disorientation, it could be “flown” like a kite or balloon.

Conaway spoke to the table for the first time

This is interesting to me. There has always been a fascination with taming the large and small. In many ways, I see fly-flying or flea circuses as coming from the same place as lion tamers and Crocodile ranglers. It ends up less about the danger that we think of with taming large wild beasts, but more about controlling nature on a dramatically different scale.
scale from our bodies. In this way, the taming or manipulating of insects is even more impressive than lion taming, because the difference in scale is so severe. The flea circus, specifically relates to the Tesla's death ray, because half the time, there weren't even any fleas. Circuses could be great in two ways. They could be great because the "ringmaster" has collected and trained his fleas so successfully that they actually perform their respective tasks perfectly and on command. This is doubly impressive because the average flea’s lifespan is only a couple of months, giving the trainer very little time to teach the insects their craft. Or, on the other hand, the show can be great because of the elaborate means that the "ringmaster" has gone to to simulate the existence of fleas. I've heard accounts of tiny mechanized chariots attached to dead fleas, or even tiny automatons inside of the empty shells of flea bodies. It sounds almost greusome. The strange thing about all of this, is that it is exceptionally hard to determine which of these two options the show you might be watching is representative of. A man named Bertolotto, widely regarded as the inventor of the flea circus, was once accused by the Baroness Rothschild of presenting "only flea-skins filled with tiny machinery." When the showman protested, telling the baroness that if a flea were placed on her arm that it would bite her she responded, "You are a great genius, and if you can make them walk, you can make them bite."

Bertolotto (above, left) pictured with daughter and son
A typical bill (right) advertising a flea circus from the mid 19th century.
To me, that's where it starts to get interesting. When you don't know what's "real" and what's not, but it doesn't matter because either way is unbelievable.

Mason was beaming.

I know! I saw a flea circus as a boy and was beside myself. I had been to the zoo and seen elephants and grizzley bears, and had even seen the lion tamer at the circus, but never was I so mystified by the natural world until I couldn't actually see it. I still wonder if seeing those tiny cars moving around or high-dives off the tops of pens were a trick of the tamer or a trick of the flea. But the most appealing thing for me was just the tiny size of everything. I didn't realize it at the time, but the wonder looking at those tiny things was like traveling into space or some other world. You couldn't imagine a person making things that small, so it was otherworldly, like these things had come from somewhere else.

Conaway was clearly in his element with this topic and he went on,

It's interesting that the smallness resonates with you, because I think that that was actually how performing fleas began - not fleas with tiny things built for them, but the other way around - fleas were used to showcase smallness as pinnacle of craft. I said that Bertolotto was commonly regarded as the inventor of the flea circus, and he might have come up with that name, but hundreds of years earlier a man named Mark Scaliot, a London blacksmith, showed a "gold chain of forty-three links that fastened around the neck of a flea by a minute lock and key said to be easily pulled by the insect," in 1578. Here, the flea itself was not the spectacle, it was simply there as an indicator of scale, to demonstrate an instance of fine craft.

Mason smiled saying,

It's true that half of the wonder of this tiny world is the ability of humans to manipulate it. When I dreamed of flying with flies, a huge part of my imagination was concerned with what the device that would transfer my body weight to thousands of tiny threads would look like, and how would it be made? I envisioned a kind of jumpsuit with thousands of threads coming from every surface and direction. I thought it could be made with the fly's leashed embedded into the material. Another thought was to wear a harness that was tied to a single rope. The rope would split into several smaller ropes. Those ropes would split into smaller bits of string, and those would become threads etcetera, etcetera. It
would be like a fractal, but I think this would be a better way to get off the ground. Who knows how the swarm will behave when they are all tied to the same thing. This is going to be so much fun.

Is going to be?

Conaway asked, amused.

Are you actually planning to do this?

Jenna looked pained as she spoke,

I don’t mean this to be rude- I really don’t, but this just sounds stupid. There are dozens- no, probably hundreds of ways that you could easily succeed in flying, but you choose the one that has maybe a .1% possibility (and I think that’s pretty generous) of success. Come on, you seem like a pretty handy fellow. Get out in the garage and build a jet pack out of a leaf blower or something like that. Or hell, go totally crazy and try to learn to fly without anything at all. You know, just by forgetting to hit the ground. That last part was a joke, but seriously- how can you give your time enthusiastically to something that is doomed to fail?

Warren Mason opened his mouth to answer, but was interrupted by the sound of another bell signalling another part of the meal. Once again, our heads turned toward our host and when the table quieted down, He began to speak.

I know that it is unconventional, but I didn’t want to serve drinks until we had all arrived and for those of us who hadn’t previously met to get a chance to know each other so I decided to wait until after the first course. It seems that we are still waiting for one,

He said, gesturing to the empty place setting to my right,

but we’ll just have to go on. I hope everyone likes white wine.
To Capture Enough Flies to Carry My Weight (2007)

This project was based on the anecdote that Warren Mason told about schoolchildren (usually boys) in the sixties catching flies, shaking them around in their cupped hands until the insects became too disoriented to fly, and tying a single human hair (plucked from the head of a love interest) around their necks. The flies could then be "flown" like balloons or kites on their leashes. When I heard this story from a friend, all I could picture were those people who tie thousands of balloons to a lawn chair and fly away - except with the balloons replaced by a cloud of tens or even hundreds of thousands of insects. I envisioned an accumula-
tion of artifacts that would describe an amateur’s uncompromising pursuit of the impossible, like Ilya Kaba-kov’s The Man Who Flew into Space From his Apartment. But there would be no need for implied or actual success. I was entirely interested in the failure.
The project was partially influenced by an overwhelming sense of technical aptitude around me at MIT. In the spirit of the amateur, I was interested in trying to do something in a way that no expert would support and then pursuing it with the greatest possible earnestly.
Glass fly-catchers have existed for hundreds of years. They are made to have small holes in their bottoms and stand on three of four legs so that this bottom opening can be accessed. The hole in the bottom of the vessel is pushed in a little bit, so that it can hold a small amount of fluid. A ring of sugar water or a little bit of meat is placed inside the bottom of the fly-catcher, and flies are attracted to the food. They fly up into the opening at the bottom, but do not know how to fly back down and become trapped. They eventually die inside the vessel.
The traditional vessels are laborious
to make, so I simplified the design allowing them to be made quickly and by a single person. I made as many as possible for a few weeks until I had enough to accommodate the number of flies necessary to lift my body weight. The new design of the fly catchers required that they be kept on a shelf with holes in the shelves beneath each vessel since none of them stood on feet. I built a piece of furniture to hold the fly catchers and displayed them accompanied by the sound of the swarm that would eventually fill them.
The lights dimmed and our attention was directed to a single spotlight illuminating the mantle of the massive white marble fireplace on the wall behind Galli-Curci, O’Brien, and Conaway. The light was centered on the small painting above it depicting a pristine Roman fountain filled with golden water. There were plump, winged cherubim lounging all around it in what appeared to be various states of intoxication. The painting’s imagery was remarkably flat. I was surprised that Black would own a painting whose technique was so pedestrian. A higher and somehow lighter sounding bell than the one that had captured our attention rang, and I noticed that the painting was not a painting at all, but dozens of tiny little shapes of different material inlaid into the wall. The small shapes that made up the painting were slowly sliding out of the wall like drawers, each at a different rate. Soon the painting’s image was unrecognizable, but colored arms reached out several feet into the room and veered off at different angles. Eventually the dim light revealed the long arms to be translucent tubes that finally extended to every guest’s place setting.

I was acutely aware of every noise in the room because the conversation had stopped and each mechanical action produced a distinct individual sound. I was listening to the sounds, hoping for a clue about what the next part of this spectacle would be. Beneath the mechanical whirring and grinding I heard a soft rustling coming from above. I couldn’t see what was producing it in the dim light, but dark shapes that were also somehow sparkling were approaching the table gracefully from all around, high above the table. I could finally make out one of the shapes to be an enormous pigeon carrying a very delicate looking wine glass. The Massive bird hovered in front of my seat at the table, just as seven others did the same at each of the other guests’ seats, placing the glasses down so gently that not a sound was made. The birds each touched down for an instant, before alighting again in perfect synchronization, and disappearing into the tall, dark corners of the room. The strange, extended arms from the painting over the mantle seemed to sense the presence of the glasses and re-positioned themselves so that each was over a glass and then began to pour white wine, about half filling each vessel. Once the drinks had been poured, each arm retracted back into its respective place quickly, until the painting was once again a simple, flat image and the lights were raised. I glanced up at the high ceiling and saw no sign of the giant birds that had given us our drinking glasses. They must have left the room somehow- maybe through passages integrated into the ceiling just as the soup bowls had arrived. After a moment of silence, once we all realized that the performance was over the guests turned toward Black and applauded. Our host took the opportunity to make a toast.

To friends, old and new. Thank you all for coming.
I picked up my glass to raise it and marveled at its weight (or lack thereof). I felt like I was holding only the liquid itself. The glass was so paper-thin that it flexed slightly in my hand. I guessed that it had to be for the bird to be able to carry it and fly at the same time.

Black was delighted, grinning ear to ear. I might have thought he had never experienced any of this before if I hadn’t known that it was his house. Mason was once again talking quietly to Black, trying to guess how each part of the system worked. I missed the beginning of his barrage of questions, but by now Mason seemed to be suggesting that the great birds were automata programmed to repeat the single action of delivering wine glasses. Black was still giggling, just as amused by the inability of his guest to comprehend the performance as the performance itself.

No, no, no.

Black said

The birds are just birds. Big ones, and specially bred for their line of work, but real birds nonetheless. They live in a separate building - well, more like a giant nest actually - on the grounds. They have been trained from birth to bring specific things to specific places in response to certain sounds. When they complete the correct action for the specific sound, when they return to their nest a meal will be waiting. It’s actually quite easy to train them. They are bred from carrier pigeons. It is in their genes to deliver things and then return home.

I don’t know,

Said Jenna,

I liked the robot birds theory. After all, weren’t we just talking about tiny flea skins filled with robot parts. And that was in the 19th century. If Black can make tasting robots and paintings with arms that can sense where a wine glass is, why shouldn’t he be able to make robot birds?

I guess just like those flea circuses, either way it’s pretty amazing.

Conaway looked up from his already almost empty glass and said,
Our host strikes me as quite the performer. Some of the greatest showmen in history have used this kind of debate as the main attraction of the show. In some ways, it is similar to Tesla's death ray or the flea circus whose performers are invisible to the unaided eye. The actual act, whatever it may be is secondary to the debate surrounding it. This is what the viewers pay for - not to see "the thing," but to participate in the discussion.

For example, P.T. Barnum began his career by showing an older woman in a tent. That was it. Joice Heth was a slave woman that Barnum bought in New York in 1835. Barnum was still a young man, but at 25 he already had several successful business ventures including a weekly newspaper, real estate speculation business, and a general store.

But back to Heth. Somehow Phineas (that's what the P. stood for) had a keen understanding of his contemporaries and knew that he could not only get away with, but be incredibly successful with exhibiting to the public extraordinarily banal things. In this case, a slave woman probably in her 60's sitting in a rocking chair in a tent. But the way that the showman framed his exhibitions was really important and novel. He claimed that Joice had been a nurse to George Washington and was over 160 years old!

This part of the story caught the attention of Galli-Curci who had been spending most of the night's previous conversation looking bored and making slightly biting comments to
Black and Jenna. He looked up from his wine that he had been sulking into and said,“There’s nothing novel about lying. Showmen have been doing it for ages. I don’t see how this instance is any different.

That’s the thing,
said Conaway,

It was novel because he did nothing other than lie. Heth was not extraordinary in any way. She did not look any older than her true age. She didn’t do anything other than sit in a rocking chair and knit occasionally, but Barnum realized that people would pay to be involved in a discussion. These types of shows were a big part of 19th century popular culture, and if you wanted to participate in the discussion at the dinners and cocktail parties with your friends, you had to have seen the show. Even just to say, “That woman didn’t look 160 years old at all!” Which I’m sure, was the exact reaction of the majority of people who had seen her.

I see,
said Galli-Curci

Barnum seems to have invented the "readymade" almost 80 years before Duchamp. It’s the same idea though, something not unusual at all - or someone in this case - re-presented in a new
context that transforms it. The way that Duchamp talked about his selection of objects seems to parallel your description of Barnum’s choice of Joice Heth. He said,

"It is necessary to arrive at selecting an object with the idea of not being impressed by this object on the basis of enjoyment of any order. However, it is difficult to select an object that absolutely does not interest you, not only on the day on which you select it, and which does not have any chance of becoming attractive or beautiful and which is neither pleasant to look at nor particularly ugly."

The three prototypical readymades were exactly the pedestrian and utilitarian objects that fit Duchamp’s description. There was “Bottle Rack” in 1914 which just as the name suggests was a steel bottle rack, “Prelude to a Broken Arm,” in 1915 which was a snow shovel, and of course, the very famous “Fountain” of 1917, a porcelain urinal laid on its back and signed, R. Mutt.

So much of the success of these works, particularly the famed “Fountain” lie in the scandal associated with re-contextualizing them. People had trouble with those things being art, so they remembered them and discussed them and they were successful works as
a result. It seems that Barnum must have thrived on scandal, too. Maybe it was better for him to be doubted and slandered than for him to have shown convincingly "real" things all the time.

Conaway nodded in agreement,

It was he who coined the phrase, "any press is good press," and for him, it was true. Even after a few years of showing Joice Heth sitting in her tent, when enough people had seen her that they could all agree that she was probably not as old Barnum had advertised, Barnum wrote anonymously to the press suggesting that Joice Heth was not 160 years old, she was an automaton! This prompted a resurgence of popularity for the exhibit, and Barnum prospered from it for several years again. Everyone had to go back and see the old woman once more so that at social gatherings they could still feel included when someone said, "That woman was not a machine! She seemed perfectly normal."

My point is, Barnum knew the value of scandal to be so great, that he created his own. This is only one of many instances in his career that he did this, and it never took away from his success.

Galli-Curci was captivated.

Baudrillard was interested in scandal as a kind of tool as well. His great example is Watergate. He thought that scandal was used to hide the fact that the same types of things that caused the scandal were always happening. The focus on and exposure of one was just to draw attention away from all of the others. He described it nicely, saying that Watergate was the "same scenario as Disneyland (an imaginary effect concealing that reality no more exists outside than inside the bounds of the artificial perimeter)"

Just as Galli-Curci was delivering the quote, there was the slam of a door, a rustling of wet clothes and hurried footsteps coming from the front hall to the dining room entrance behind Black's chair. We all became quiet and looked expectantly at the open doorway. I saw a shadow approaching, saw the dripping wet shoe step into the frame of the doorway, and was startled by another, higher pitched ringing bell. I looked up, instinctively, toward the sound of the noise and saw the wires quickly descending to retrieve the empty soup bowls. I turned back to the doorway to see a drenched, disheveled, and bleeding man resting against Black's backrest and panting. He had a copy of a paperback book folded over revealing the heading "Discourse on the origin of inequality" in his right hand. It was swollen with water and probably unreadable, but he kept
looking down at the page the book was open to, as if trying to find his place. Black stood up quickly, and concerned, said,

*Colin, what on earth has happened? I was starting to get concerned, but look at you. Here, let me take your coat... and are you bleeding? What happened?*

The man who had just walked into the room, Colin, was middle aged. He seemed to be physically in good shape but was poorly dressed in mismatched plaids and a brightly colored argyle sweater. On top of that, his glasses were broken, his forehead and nose were bleeding slightly, and everything on him was completely soaked with water. He had dirty blonde hair that was plastered back away from his face, revealing a slightly receding hairline. He was still panting, and now holding up the hand clutching the book as if to say,

*Hang on, I just have to catch my breath*

We were all watching him, waiting for an explanation. Black was pulling his wet coat off and taking it to the front hallway to hang it to dry. The new arrival didn’t seem to notice any of us except for our host. Finally, his breathing slowed to a normal rate and he looked up, surprised to see the rest of around the table looking back at him. He smiled sheepishly and said,

*Sorry I’m late everyone. My name is Colin Greenwood. There was an accident. Everything’s fine, but... Geez I must look ridiculous.*

*Here, Colin*  

Said Black, putting his hand on his back and walking him into the next room,

*Let’s get you into some dry clothes. We’ll be right back.*

The next several minutes crawled by slowly. We tried to make small talk and some even tried to resume earlier arguments, but no one’s heart was in it. We were all dying to know what had happened to this strange, late guest.

Finally, Black returned with a still disheveled, but dry and better dressed Colin Greenwood. He pointed him toward the seat next to mine and Colin silently walked to the foot
of the table, head down and sat in his chair. He picked up the wine glass waiting for him and took a large gulp. He looked up, smiled once again and said,

I'm so sorry to have been so late and to have disrupted the party. I wish I had called or something, but I couldn't find my phone.

What exactly was it that happened?

Asked Black

I don't want to take anymore time away from th-

Nonsense! Tell us what happened. I think I can speak for everyone when I say that we are at the edge of our seats. Let's hear it.

Ok, but it might be a kind of long story.

That's alright. We have over a half an hour until the main course. By the way, I'm sorry that you missed the soup. It really was delicious. But I'm sure the main course will be worth the wait. Anyway, let's hear it. Tell us how you arrived here in this alarming condition.

Greenwood took another long swig from his wine glass, touched his cut forehead gingerly and moved his swollen paperback from his lap to the table next to his glass.

I wrecked my car. I smashed it into a tree. It was Rousseau's fault. At least in part.

I was confused.

You mean the 18th century french philosopher was responsible for your car accident? And on a side note, are you OK? Should be call an ambulance or the police or some-

Carol cut me off by squeezing my leg under the table, hard. I sat back in my seat quietly.

I'm fine, really. But the car is totally destroyed. I ran here the rest of the way. I'm not sure how far away it was, but it was raining hard and it seemed like a long
time. And I couldn’t find my place in my book. I kept trying to find where I had left off on the page, but it is difficult to read and run at the same time. Especially when you are being chased.

This guy seemed totally crazy. Maybe he was just shaken from his accident, but he was acting like a lunatic. I wondered why Black would invite someone with such an obviously weak grasp on reality to his home.

Slow down Colin. Let’s hear it from the beginning. Where were you coming from?

Black asked calmly

Ok, ok. I was at the library. I’m doing research for a new book. I had ordered some books on loan from another university and they called me in today to collect them. I was very excited. I thought I might be able to finish the chapter I have been working on about Rousseau’s romantic relationships with women - one in particular, but I’ll get to that later. I thought I might have found a connection between some of his writings and some letters that had not yet been made. Anyway, I was running late for this dinner, but I just couldn’t stop reading, so I decided to bring some of the books along. I should have known better, but I grabbed a couple of the more common texts and got in the car. I have a tendency to lose books if I take them out of my house or the university library and it is getting to be an expensive habit replacing them so I won’t usually bring anything unusual, so today I was rereading Works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, which contains The Confessions, Emile, The Social Contract & Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, to name a few.

There was another problem though. I have a sponsor that pays me so that I can do this research, but in exchange, I’m supposed to do things for them. They just call me occasionally and I have to fly somewhere and examine some artifacts or old texts. But they are not interested in academics. I’m not sure what their motivations are. I just do what they ask and then return to my research. I was in a disagreement about an artifact recently. I got in an argument with one of these idiots and published something that they wanted to keep private out of spite. It was in a journal that I’m pretty sure only about five people read, but they saw it just the same and they were not thrilled.

What did you publish?

I asked
It was about an old Sanscrit text that they had pulled out of the foundation of some building in Turkey. I was excited about it because with the proper analysis, it could potentially prove that certain parts of the world were interacting much earlier than we had previously thought. But they weren't interested in that. They just wanted to know what it said. I politely explained that I couldn't read the ancient language and the guy blew up at me. Anyway, this is beside the point. I really made a mistake to cross these people and now I think I'm being followed. It makes me nervous that I haven't heard from them at all. No calls, emails, letters for weeks. But I know they are there. But today, I hadn't seen anything suspicious. Not until I started over this way. It was raining already. Like I said, I was late and I was trying to focus on driving but I kept looking over at the book sitting on the passenger seat of the car.

As he said this he picked up the soggy book and smacked it against the table.

I finally gave in and started read-

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, (above) painted by Alan Ramsay in 1776. This portrait depicts the thinker wearing his unusual fur hat.
ing again while I was driving. It's not as bad as it sounds. There wasn't really any-
Rousseau had this kind of love hate relationship with the people in power wherever he was. He would become accepted by them, employed by them, financially supported by them, and then turn on them or resign or do something to get himself in trouble - something I could relate to in light of recent events. He writes about this relationship, not directly, but pretty close, in this book. He talks about an inversely varying proportion of protection to freedom in relationships. He uses it to talk about people and their governments, but it seems to apply to relationships in general. The more protection an individual is given by his society, the less freedom he has. It is the choice of the individual where to position himself in this spectrum, and Rousseau couldn't ever make up his mind.

It was just as I was reading this passage, that a brilliant white flash of light blinded me and I wasn't driving anymore. My head was full of all kinds of unusual, foreign thoughts and they were swimming so quickly that I thought I was going to faint. I felt dizzy and my chest felt constricted. I was standing, somehow and had to sit down to catch my breath so I did, and as my vision returned I found myself in a wood near a footpath, resting in the shade of a tree. The air was humid and it was hot. And I saw that I was holding an old newspaper written in French. So, I stood up and started walking down the path. I knew which way I had come from because there were footprints in the dry soil of the path. I eventually came to the edge of the wood and could see in the distance what could only be an old prison. I could see people walking around in the distance and I wanted to approach them to ask where I was, but that bright flash happened again, and I was still in my car, in the exact same spot I had been when it occurred. It was as if time had stopped. But I wasn't expecting to be in the car again, and I came back with my nose in the book, unaware of the road and the rain and the car that was coming toward me. It was too late, I saw the headlights and swerved, trying to miss the car. There was another car behind me now, and its headlights illuminated the one I was trying to avoid. I could see into the driver's side window of the oncoming vehicle as I passed and for an instant I made eye contact with the driver. She was beautiful, with piercing blue eyes. And she smiled at me just before I drove off the road. The black SUV that I had swerved to avoid plowed into the car that had been behind me. It did not stop, It just kept driving. My car rolled over once before wrapping itself around a tree. I'm not sure how, but I wasn't badly hurt. My head had hit the steering wheel from which no airbag deployed smashing my glasses and cutting my forehead. My nose must have been hit too.

As he said this, he touched his now slightly swollen nose gently.
But I looked around, wiggled all of my extremities and once I determined that I was in one piece, unbuckled myself and climbed through the broken windshield into the wet outdoors. I somehow hung onto the book through all of this, and found it in my hand as I carefully climbed back up the embankment to the main road. I looked back down on my car that was now in a comical embrace with a tall elm tree. There was no sign of the other car that had been hit, and I knew that no other vehicles would be coming by for a while, so I started trying to find my place in the book to keep reading. All the rain on the pages made it hard to find where I had left off, but I randomly opened up to a page where Rousseau describes the circumstances that his ideas for his essay on inequality came from. I had never read this part before.

Rousseau was close friends with Diderot. Rousseau had contributed a lot to Diderot’s Encyclopedie project and they had grown close. Diderot however, had been imprisoned for some anti-religious statements in his writing. Rousseau was furious when he learned about the imprisonment, and claimed to have written a letter to Madame De Pompadour (the king’s mistress) immediately, demanding the release of the great thinker. No letter has been uncovered, and Rousseau had a tendency to embellish the truth a bit, but that doesn’t mean it didn’t happen. Regardless, Diderot was not released, so Rousseau used to walk the distance from his house to the prison weekly to visit his friend. On his walks he liked to read the newspaper. It was on one such walk that Rousseau read an advertisement for a contest. The contest asked for essays on the origin of inequality among men. Reflecting, Rousseau says,

"The moment I read these words I beheld another universe and became another man... All at once I felt my mind dazzled by a thousand lights. A crowd of splendid ideas presented themselves to me with such force and with such confusion that I was thrown into a state of bewilderment."

He actually goes on with this description for some time, but he describes, bright lights, thoughts from nowhere, pressure on his chest and trouble breathing. He sits down under a tree to catch his breath, and when he comes out of this spell, the front of his jacket is...
drenched in tears that he doesn’t remember crying.

Needless to say, I was beside myself. I had just had the same experience. It is as if for a short while, I had been Rousseau in his moment of rapture. Many people look at this as the precise moment of the birth of the romantic era.

Just as I was having this epiphany, I saw headlights coming and I closed the book. I stepped out into the road to flag down the oncoming vehicle. It began to slow down when it got nearer. As it rolled to a stop in front of me I saw that it was the very same vehicle that I had almost hit. And sitting behind the wheel was the woman I had seen right before my crash. She was smiling and there was something disarming about the smile. I could see more figures moving around behind her in the back seat. Men in black suits wearing sunglasses. Dangerous looking men. So I ran. I ran back off the road into the trees where it would be hard to see me. I ran fast, tripping over brush and fallen logs. I could see flashlight beams and heard a single gunshot, but I just kept running. And I still had the book. Eventually, when I didn’t hear anyone behind me and the woods had opened up enough to let some light in from above I opened it again and started reading. I still couldn’t find my place but I opened to a part about Rousseau at the end of his life, before he went totally off the deep end.

He had followed in the footsteps of Diderot and ended up publishing some writings that were also critical of religion. Not a good thing to do in those days. Louis XV ordered to have him imprisoned. He was given a tip by someone that the authorities were coming and gathered his belongings to flee the country. He packed up a carriage that evening and fled. It turns out that at the exact moment of his flight, the authorities were just turning onto his road and the two carriages passed. For a second, the philosopher was only feet from his assailants. Rousseau escaped and lived out the rest of his life a free man (at least to some extent), but there are some details that stand out to me here.

Woah, wait a second. The Rousseau thing is interesting, but how did you get the rest of the way here?

This was Catherine now, but I could see that we all wanted to hear the end of Colin’s weird story.

Oh, right. Well, I kept running while reading. Really slowly - the reading that is, and when I looked up, I realized that I was totally lost. My adrenaline had finally dissipated and I was starting to feel cold, and wet and achy. I didn’t know what to do so I just kept running. I figured at least it would keep my body temperature up. And then another
flash. I was no longer running, but sitting in a carriage. There were black curtains on the windows and trunks and boxes everywhere. I pulled back one of the curtains to look outside, and saw a stretch of moonlit countryside, flecked with small farmhouses all built of stone. I heard another carriage approaching and kept the curtain open just a sliver to look through. And as the other carriage passed, I looked into the same eyes I had seen in the SUV. I'm sure of it. Her style of dress was now from the 18th century and she wore a giant powdered wig, but there was no doubt in my mind, she was the same woman. I think it was Madame De Pompadour. She knew I was in the carriage. I could just see it in her face when she looked me in the eye and smiled. She mouthed something to me in the split second that the carriages passed, but I couldn't make out what it was. I let the curtain drop, just as another flash of light hit me. I was still running now, but I was in a different place. There was a garden. And I could see a tall, round house in the distance and I knew it was my destination. I had no idea how long had passed during this vision, but I ran the rest of the way here. That's when I walked inside and found you all having dinner.

We were speechless. Everyone was either gawking at the man who had just basically told us that he was insane, or looking down at his or her wine glass, as if hoping that the next topic of conversation might appear there. Colin seemed oblivious to the awk-
wardness around the table and after another long drink form his glass he said,

All that back and forth dimensional stuff aside, this experience has really illuminated part of my research. It was the mysterious woman. She won’t leave my thoughts, and because of her resemblance to Madame De Pompadour, I cannot stop thinking about the king’s mistress either. I think I mentioned that I was writing a piece on Rousseau’s relationships with women. He had a few long strange ones and was ultimately married to someone from a much lower class than where he had risen to - something that was pretty rebellious in his time. He also fathered almost a dozen children all of whom were placed directly into an orphanage. But there was one relationship that was not talked about. Somehow, whenever Madame De Pompadour appears in relation to Rousseau, records become vague and the philosopher manages to come out on top. Here are two examples:

First, Rousseau claimed to have written a letter demanding the release of his friend Diderot. If he had written such a letter he would have been implicating himself and a co-conspirator. Correspondences to and from Versailles were kept very carefully and reviewed by many people other than the addressee. So it is strange that no record of such a letter exists unless it had not been written. Or, unless it had been written and someone with Rousseau’s best interests in mind destroyed it. We know that Madame was an exceptionally sharp thinker and secretly supported the Encyclopedie project that Rousseau and Diderot worked on even against the wishes of the king. We also know that Madame never wrote anything political or controversial in letters because they were so public. It is possible that it was she that was trying to protect the thinker?
Second, who could have given Rousseau information from within Versailles that he was going to be incarcerated with such urgency and precision that he could escape just as the authorities were coming for him. Could it have been Madame again? Could the king’s mistress herself have been present in the carriage coming to collect him? Could an exchange have taken place between the two as the two carriages passed? If Madame de Pompadour was risking her position and life to protect Rousseau, what did she get in return? Perhaps it was the pleasure of reading his essays and contributions to L’Encyclopedie, but I think it is possible, if not probable, that their relationship was more than intellectual.

Colin’s last sentence was punctuated by a new sound from above, this time a horn. We turned to Black who was smiling with a little less exuberance than previously, but genuinely enough, in what I can only imagine was anticipation of the main course.
Then Benjamin Franklin, the amateur inventor, writer, philosopher and politician visited Paris in 1776, he was an enormous celebrity and the French sought to somehow connect him to the then extremely popular philosopher, Rousseau. Rousseau’s likeness had been captured in several portraits wearing an unusual fur cap, so an engraving was made of Franklin wearing a similar hat to signify that he was also an enlightened thinker.

If becoming an enlightened thinker required as little as a portrait with a hat, I had to make my own from one of the portraits of Rousseau. It was helpful that he and I had similar features to begin with. Once I had remade myself as the philosopher, I became
more and more interested in his life. I had begun by looking for more connections between the two of us, and I found some, but it turned out that my interest in reconstructing one or two unknowable moments was enough to immerse me in his world. At the same time, I was experimenting with anamorphosis, a technology from the same time period and was learning to make images that were revealed in anamorphic cylinders. I was reading about two times that Rousseau and Madame de Pompadour, the mistress of Lou-
Anamorphically distorted painting (above) and anamorphic cylinder (right) (2009)

is XV, could have crossed paths, but probably didn't - the same instances written about by Colin Greenwood above. This possible, but improbable relationship was the subject for the installation that included two channels of sound on speakers that moved across the walls in opposite directions so that a viewer could only hear the complete stereo image when standing at the location that the speakers aligned. Further, the sound was contaminated with the loud motors mounted on either wall powering the speakers. An anamorphically distorted painting was laid flat, turned into a table that when decoded in a glass anamorphoscope. Similarly to the sound, the image reflected in the mirrored cylinder was revealed and hidden as a randomly flickering light turned on and off above. The painting, when viewed without the aid of the anamorphoscope, shows Madame de Pompadour and Rousseau positioned distantly from one another. When viewed in the curved mir-
for however, the two become quite close and Rousseau's body points to Madame even as his eyes look out into the world.
We only could have been at the table for a couple of hours, but it seemed impossibly late, as if the night were slowing down to allow for all of the stories being exchanged. My mind was already becoming tired trying to deal with all of the new and challenging information that I had been given, and the glass of white wine had softened the edges of my thoughts, but the prospect of the next course was enough to lift my energy level and enthusiasm and I found myself smiling in anticipation. Looking around the table, I could see that most of the other guests were on the same page except for Carol, who somehow never got visibly tired, and Colin, who now no longer talking, had turned to flipping through his book.

The horn sound became louder and I felt the floor moving beneath my feet. Galli-Curci let out a shriek or surprise as two of the delicate wine glasses from the table smashed on the floor. I noticed a fissure in the tabletop in front of me that was slowly widening. About a six square foot chunk of table directly in front of me was separating itself from the rest and slowly moving away, bringing my chair and my body with it. Each person's respective table real estate was doing the same thing. The table that had been a long rectangle had broken apart into identical pieces and was re-forming itself into an equal sided octagon. Only one very small central section of the original tabletop remained rooted to the floor, supporting a modest flower arrangement in a polished silver vase. Once my section of table stopped moving, I focused my attention on the centerpiece. I could see, reflected in the polished surface that although my section of table was now stationary, the rest of the room was still in flux. The walls were repositioning themselves to become a great circle around the table. Sections of wall with paintings or fireplaces were revolving, revealing bare white walls on the other sides. And then the flowers began to grow. A small daisy in the center of the arrangement quickly and smoothly doubled its diameter in less than a second. It continued at this rate until it was about three feet across. The rest of the green vegetation on the vase reconfigured itself to support the now severely top-heavy daisy. One of the particularly stiff looking grasses pierced the daisy's center, like an axle through a wheel. The engorged flower's petals extended outward, becoming long and thin, and eventually each grew two articulated joints in their middles just like dozens of little elbows and wrists. Finally all of the growing and moving stopped, and I was looking at something like a simple machine made out of vegetation. Black stood up from his seat and walked into the center of the room. The lights dimmed slightly as he approached the vase.

My Grandfather Spent his life trying to discover perpetual motion. I created this flower an an homage to his research. It spends most of its life storing energy. It can hold huge reserves of it in its roots. However, when it is given a very specific chemical
cocktail, It changes into the shape you see now. This is the optimal form to release its stored energy and it can be harnessed for any variety of uses. For us, it will be dinner and theater. It's physical shape is based on an early perpetual motion design called an overbalanced wheel, or sometimes called an Arabian wheel. We all know that perpetual motion is impossible, but the plant’s stored energy can be turned into kinetic energy to help it keep going - once I give it a little jump start.

With that, Black reached out and delicately grabbed an end of one of the jointed petals between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. It looked impossibly fragile, but he thrust it downward with all the vigor of a gambler pulling the lever of a slot machine. The flower spun easily and gathered speed. The elbow-like petals folded over one way against the edge of the flower’s center during half of the rotation, and extended out straight for the second half. I guessed that was why they might have called it an overbalanced wheel. There was always extra leverage on one side causing it to favor rotating in that direction.

The spinning grew faster and faster until the flower became a translucent yellow blur. The lights grew brighter again with the surplus of energy being produced. Black walked back to his chair, sat down and said,

This part might be a little uncomfortable for some, but I assure you that it is perfectly safe.

I felt something reach around my waist and looked down to see that the chair I was sitting on had grown a new appendage like a safety bar on a roller coaster. It was hard and unyielding as if it had always been part of the furniture. My chair pushed back from my section of table and shot straight up. I was sure I was going to be smashed into the ceiling, but at the last second, a passageway slid open above me, just large enough to fit my body and the chair. My chair's ascent was perfectly in sync with the
other guests. It looked like we were still sitting around an invisible table, but we were in motion and all had strained expressions on our faces. Except for Black. Each chair was attached to polished metal tubes that seemed to be able to telescope infinitely. We moved through the ceiling holes and passed through a dimly lit story filled of the house with glass pipes of different colored liquids and what looked like an enormous clockwork turtle stepping slowly and jerkily across the space in the middle of our circle. We shot through that ceiling as well, into another floor, this one so think with white steam that I could not see Carol to my left or Colin to my right. We passed through a final ceiling and came out in a perfectly round room, covered in a great frosted glass dome. There was a round table in our center laid out with eight place settings. The food looked beautiful and smelled amazing. Our chairs released their grasp on our midsections and with eight clicks in perfect unison our chairs now rested on four legs on the floor.

This course is Beef Wellington with whipped celery root and baby asparagus. For this part of our meal, We’ll be shown a bit of theater, so we’ve come to the magic lantern room.

Black pointed to an unfamiliar device in the center of the table. It looked complicated and old, kind of like a camera with lenses sticking out of every direction.

This device is a modified Magic Lantern. Many people regard this device as the predecessor of film. This one is special because of two qualities. First, it has the ability to both record and project, and has a clockwork mechanism allowing it to capture a new image of the world beyond this dome once a day. It has been doing this since this house’s completion in the 1850’s. Secondly, it has multiple lenses that break up and distort the images it produces, so that when projected onto the dome over us, the images appear to exist in three dimensions from certain perspectives. Specifically, the eight seats
that you are sitting in. The distortion applied to the images to achieve this effect is called anamorphosis. We can talk more about the mechanisms after we eat. It would be a shame to let this meal get cold.

And with that, Black pushed a button attached to the table, and the lights dimmed. I silently cut and chewed the first piece of my meat and it practically dissolved in my mouth. The frosted dome all around us was bathed in bright white light coming from all the lenses protruding from our new centerpiece. There was a whir of small gears turning fast and a sharp click and we were no longer eating in the top of a strange round building, but were sitting in a field. We were surrounded by farmland and I could recognize different kinds of livestock grazing in the nearby fields. Behind Jenna was a field of corn, and off to my right there was an old well. The images projected above and around us were static and monochromatic, but still eerily realistic. Somehow the perspective worked in a way that was just like looking at objects in real life.

This is the land right when the house was built. We'll see a lot of what the house has seen once the lantern really gets rolling.

Black said, and we sat there eating silently and watching the uncanny show around us. The next image came after a few seconds. Not much had changed except that the livestock were in different places and the quality of the sky was different. The next image came in a second, the next in about half that, until we were watching a stop motion animation that spanned over 150 years. It was
incredible. We watched saplings become trees, we watched houses being built and crumbling with age. We could see the city off in the distance growing like a crystal formation. Parts were being constantly being demolished and rebuilt. We saw carriages replaced with automobiles and trains, the birds suddenly sharing the sky with airplanes. Until the last projected image. That showed what it had been like earlier today. The sky was gray and it was raining. The entire century and a half had gone by in less than twenty minutes. I had already eaten my fill of the healthy portion on my plate, but many of my fellow diners had been too distracted by the spectacle to have had much more than a bite.

Colin seemed to finally be focused on the rest of the room and not his soggy book. It seemed to have been left on the table below us. He turned to Black and asked,

*How is it that a house of this shape and unusual design would have been built in the mid 19th century here in the States? It seems pretty incongruous with the styles of the time and even the resources and building technology here.*

Black smiled,

*You never stop working, do you Colin? Or you never work. I haven’t yet figured out which. You are quite right to think that this house has no relation to local tradition. It was built as a surrogate for another actual place. This house began as an exact replica of a folly built in the Desert de Retz in Chambourcy, France, in 1780 and 1781 by Francois Nicolas Henri Racine de Monville. It was a functionless structure that was made to look like a giant ruin of a classical column, hence the house’s cylindrical shape. One of the strange things about the original structure is that it was designed to resemble a ruin, but decades after its creation, it fell into actual ruin. Now, the structure is being restored to its original state of ruin. Anyway, My relatives insisted that this house be built exactly to the specifications of the original. Therefore it had no kitchen, no running water, and none of the amenities of a functional dwelling. My family originally built separate outbuildings containing these creature comforts which have since been connected together.*

*But why was your - your great grandfather would it be - why was he so fixated on this structure,*

*Carol asked.*
I'm not entirely sure. He was such a grounded man in his daily life. In addition to running the newspaper business, he was a successful inventor. He had dozens of patents on all sorts of practical things, like new kinds of hardware for doors and windows, and ways to get heavy objects up to high places. But in his free time, I think he was kind of a dreamer. He spent his time trying to invent perpetual motion machines and fantasizing about French nobility of the past. Like many of my relatives, his health was not great. And the doctors that eventually took up residence in the house forbade any kind of lengthy travel. But I don't think that this was the reason that he never visited the site. I think he didn't want to tarnish his vision. He longed for it when it was new. When it was teeming with people like Louis XV, Madame de Pompadour, and who knows. maybe even Rousseau himself. But that was before his time. He couldn't possibly visit that version of the folly, so he built his own. This house is like a monument to the impossibility of his dream - A monument to his longing. That's why I still live here and I'm sure that's why all of the rest of the Blacks before me have.

Galli-Curci asked,

Isn't it odd that it is the same cast of characters? The house, Colin's research, The mysterious woman... It just seems like a strange coincidence.

Just as the artist was reaching for his fork to take another mouthful, there was a jarring ringing, like an old telephone at full volume and my stomach flipped as I was grabbed around the waist by my chair and pulled back down quickly toward the ground floor. I felt as if I were being flushed down a drain and was so surprised I let out a squeak. We rocketed back through the steamy level, and then the level full of glass tubes with no sign of the giant turtle machine this time, and finally slammed abruptly onto the hard marble floor. We were once again seated around the large octagonal table configuration that we had left when we ascended. We looked confusedly at Black for an explanation.

He said

Sorry, that happens when the doorbell is rung. I wasn't expecting any more guests tonight. Just a moment.

He stood up and went to receive the visitor.
Enoch Robinson is a man who, similarly to Bernard Black's Great Grandfather, built a round house as surrogate for a place he was never able to visit. Below are the circumstances of my encounter with the house, more details about the life of its creator and a description of the project that I made based on the house and its stories.

Legal documents and other public records show that Enoch Robinson moved to Somerville, at the time known as Charlestown beyond the neck, in 1847 and finished construction on his unusual round house in 1856 at 36 Atherton St. He was listed in the 1870 census as a 69-year-old locksmith, so was born in 1801. His wife, Ellenor (possibly spelled differently) was 62 at the time of the census. Living with the couple were five other people: a daughter, Ann (40 years old), two other daughters whose names and ages were unknown. A son named Shepard who was listed "at school," and a female domestic servant.

Robinson is most frequently noted in written records for his successful lock and hardware firm, Enoch Robinson and Company, but before opening
his own business Enoch Robinson worked at the New England Glass Company, where he and Henry Whitney (1786-1859) patented what was possibly the first glass-pressing machine. According to Joseph N. Howe, an agent for the company, Robinson attempted new methods of pressing glass "against the ridicule of the craft, [and] succeeded in moulding a salt stand and various articles for table use."

There is quite a bit of writing on Robinson’s hardware designs, his handmade locks, and decorative knobs. Almost all of it is favorable. Clarence Howard Blackall (1857-1941), the founder and first president of the Boston Architectural Club wrote, "Boston dealers consider that the best locks in the country are the hand-made goods turned out by such firms as Enoch Robinson’s." In addition to the patent he received while at New England Glass Company, he has dozens of U.S. patents for inventions including innovations in hardware design, a way of attaching glass doorknobs to metal handles, improvements on the mechanisms for steering a boat, and a windlass.

Robinson was not only prolific, but well liked by friends and neighbors as well. When he passed, his obituary said that Enoch Robinson had been a man of "industrious habits, energy, and sterling integrity. Though somewhat eccentric, no man had ever a kinder heart or more generous impulses."

The information collected above about Enoch Robinson is concrete. It is based on letters, scraps of paper, faded photographs. This collection of artifacts tells a story that is more complex than birth and death dates, census numbers, and newspaper clippings. Ultimately, I am not really interested in the concrete details, I want the story. I want to know the reasons for Robinson’s eccentricities. I want to know why he built a perfectly round house for himself and his family. I want to know why he spent his free time working tirelessly on inventing perpetual motion machines. Because Robinson’s personality, wants and desires can
As is often the case with structures built by eccentrics, there is a lot of local lore that attempts to explain the round house. When I first encountered it by chance and stepped out of my car to photograph it, some neighborhood kids approached me and I asked them what they knew about the house. One told me that it was built during the revolutionary war, and that the battlements surrounding the third floor were defensive structures to hide behind while shooting British soldiers.

Another unconfirmed source claims that the house was once featured on Ripley’s Believe it or Not, and suggests that Robinson’s wife had a fear of ghosts. Because the spirits were said to only be able hide in corners, the house was built with only round rooms to prevent hiding places.

These stories seem to be untrue in that they don’t agree with some of the other concrete facts presented above. I know that the house was built significantly later than the revolutionary war, and I was able to

The only surviving image of the interior of Enoch Robinson’s round house and its French panoramic wallpaper (photographer unknown)
find no reference to the house in archives of Ripley's Believe it or not. But, the battlements on the house are surprising and certainly look like they could be functional. And as far as fears of ghosts, who is to say that Mrs. Robinson wasn't slightly eccentric herself. There is no way to prove otherwise. Alternate or augmented histories occur organically around the inexplicable or unusual. I consider my work with the Robinsons and their home a continuation of the natural historical process.

Robinson was fascinated by the French royal classes of the past and designed his entire home accordingly. The design of the exterior plank siding is attributed to phrenologist, author and amateur architect, Orson Squire Fowler. Fowler wrote many books on a variety of subjects, but his last, published in 1848 was entitled: A Home for All, or A New, Cheap, Convenient, and Superior Mode of Building. In this, he extolled the virtues of octagonal houses. The interior of the house, and its round shape seem to have come from a folly built in the Desert de Retz in Chambourcy, France, in 1780 and 1781 by Francois Nicolas Henri Racine de Monville (1734-1797) in the shape of a huge, round, ruined, classical column. The Desert de Retz was an enormous pleasure garden with many "follies," or functionless buildings (like simulated ruins) for wealthy visitors to stumble upon. It is unlikely that Robinson ever actually visited the Desert de Retz. More likely, he had seen photographs of the destination and dreamed of a time when Marie Antoinette
and Louis XV might have strolled through the lush French countryside together, perhaps even pausing for a rest in the broken column building. Robinson did not stop with modeling the floor plan and exterior after the unusual structure, he papered the walls of the house with French scenic paper depicting royalty in castles, gardens, and hunting scenes. Part of the reason I imagine that Enoch Robinson never visited the Desert de Retz is because he simply couldn’t visit the place he imagined. He did not want to visit the overgrown garden of his time - he wanted to visit the garden in the 1780’s when its structures would have been new and the grounds would have been teeming with French nobility.

Robinson was preoccupied with the impossible. He spent much of his free time in his adult life working on designing perpetual motion machines. The Idea of perpetual motion had already been widely debunked (the U.S. patent office was refusing perpetual motion patents that were not accompanied by working models), and Robinson, an accomplished engineer and designer would have been aware of the impossibility, but he worked on some of these projects for his entire adult life.

I had been studying the period that Robinson was so interested in for another project and identified with his interests. In many ways, his and my longing overlap. Our desires were quixotic and in some ways, we both knew better. I began to think of the house that he built as a symbol of that longing and a kind of monument to the impossible. I thought that Robinson’s surrounding himself with representations and recreations of the Desert de Retz was the closest he could get to actually being there.

Robinson himself has been gone from this world for a long time, but his house remains. I wanted to manipulate the house to realize his dreams and mine simultaneously. I decided that since the interior of his house shows the place that the house should actually be, I should invert the house. I turned it inside out so that the exterior became an interior from which viewers could look out of to see the scenery that was once Robinson’s wallpaper.

I made a scale model of the Robinson house in glass. Since the house was virtually cylindrical, it fit perfectly into the vocabulary of glassblowing. I created a drawing of the architectural detail of the houses exterior unrolled flat, and had it made into a stencil which was then applied to the exterior of the glass cylinder. I sandblasted away the lines of the drawing, and filled them with a fire-on enamel. After heating the glass cylinder to 1100 degrees F to melt in the drawing, I used a light in the center of
the cylinder to project the lines of the house all over the walls of a dark room. While
doing this, I was reminded of the phenomenon of afterimage.

Afterimage occurs when a person’s eyes are significantly dilated in a dark space and a
brief, bright light is introduced. While the person might not have enough time to vi-
sually navigate the space during the brief flash, the image can sometimes become burned
into his retina temporarily so that he can see all of the detail afterwards with his
closed eyes.

I thought this phenomenon could mimic the way Robinson might have imagined his “Desert
de Retz” when he closed his eyes in a way that would be repeatable identically for every
viewer.

So instead of having a constant projection of the inverted house, I built a timing cir-
cuit that only allowed the light to flash for a second every minute and twelve seconds
(the time I determined it took to properly dilate the eyes).

Once this was done, I wanted to use the wallpaper from the interior of the house to
recreate an actual view from the broken column house in the Desert de Retz. Research
turned up only a single image of the wallpaper that had been in the home when it be-
longed to its original owner. I tracked down the original slide, so that I could get a
high enough resolution image that I could reconstruct it into the landscape at Desert
de Retz. I built a window that lined up in scale with the ones projected on the walls
and used it as a picture frame for the collage image. This way, when viewers entered
the dark space, they would struggle to read the image in the frame, focusing their eyes
on a good place to receive a retinal flash, and also so that they might see the landscape
from the projected interior for an instant in the bright light.
It seemed like a long time before Black returned to the dining room and there was nothing in front of us at the table to keep us occupied. When he did return, his face looked grave, without a trace of his usual amusement. He looked older when he wasn’t smiling.

There is someone to see you Colin

There was a person behind Black as he said this, and as soon as Colin stood up, the visitor stepped into the doorway and became visible. She was beautiful, with cold blue eyes. She was dressed simply in a perfectly tailored black suit. Her hair was hidden neatly under a scarf. She brandished something in her hand behind Black’s back. I feared that it was a gun.

Hello, Mister Greenwood,

She said with the slightest French accent.

I’ve been trying to give you something for a long time, but you are a hard man to get alone. I suppose I’m just going to have to do this right here in front of everyone.

Wait.

Colin said quietly,

I really am sorry about the publishing thing. I had no idea that that information was so important to you people. I can-

The woman interrupted him

Your apology is meaningless to me. I’m here for one reason and it is to give you this.

She slowly raised the hand that was behind Black’s back to reveal an old looking piece of paper in a plastic bag.

I think this is what you’ve been looking for,

she said as she walked to Colin’s end of the table and placed it next to his soggy book.
It’s a letter from Madame De Pompadour to Rousseau. It was supposed to have been destroyed, but my family has been saving it for generations. It proves that the two corresponded for years, but never had an actual, physical love affair. They wanted to be together, but it was impossible. My grandmother thought it was the most romantic thing she had ever read. A letter commemorating an impossible relationship.

Colin was frowning

If you were trying to help me, why did you run me off the road? Why were you shooting guns at me? Why did you try to kill me?

Our new guest was smiling.

We weren’t trying to kill you, we saved you. At least twice today if I’m not mistaken. When you drove into a tree, I was getting between you and a car full of people who were going to put a bullet in you. I unfortunately didn’t hit them hard enough and they managed to drive out of the woods. I had to come back to keep them from getting you on foot. Luckily I got there first and you ran off, but when they did show up they wanted blood. If not from you then from me. We had to run into the woods as well to avoid being shot.

Who is we? Who are you?

My name is Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson. I have the same name as my great, great grandmother. You know who she was Mr. Greenwood, but the rest of you probably know her as Madame De Pompadour. And the rest of “we” are my brothers Jean-Baptiste, and Luc. They are keeping watch outside.

Colin was flabbergasted

And this letter - I can... really?

It’s yours. You’ll have to get it tested to prove that it is authentic, but I can assure you, it is very real.

Colin looked as if he had won the lottery. He was without words, so Black stepped in,
Please, why don't you join us? Dinner is over, but we will be having dessert any minute now.

I'm sorry, I have to go. But thank you.

And with that, Ms. Poisson showed herself out. An engine growled followed by the sound of wheels crunching gravel fading into nothing.

I hope everyone has had enough to eat

said Black,

but since we are all down here again, the dessert should be on its way...

Why don't we all go back to our seats and get ready?
The piece that I mentioned in the introduction about Lily Pons began with my interest in breaking glass with harmonic resonance. There have been several singers throughout history who have claimed to have been able to break glass with their unamplified voice. Caruso, for example, bragged for his entire career that he had succeeded in doing this on multiple occasions, but never gave a public demonstration. After his death, his wife revealed that his claims had been untrue.

Lily Pons was not famous for being able to shatter glass, but she was known for one particular very high pitched note. It was the "F" above high "C" at the end of the Bell Song in Lakme. She was able to produce and sustain the note unlike any performer before her. With her youthful looks and incredible talent for singing, Pons became a prima donna of the Metropolitan Opera very quickly, and her fame and popularity lasted decades. She was so popular that manufacturers wanted to name products after her. One company designed a pattern for pressed glass that they named Lily Pons Glass.

I was interested in making a glass to resonate with her high F in the role of Lakme, so I made a loop of the note from one of her performances and produced dozens of different shapes and sizes of glass. Once I found the approximate volume and thickness of glass needed to properly resonate with the note, I found an image the singer on stage at a table setting in the production and copied the design of the glasses at the table. I melted down half of a pickle dish made with the pattern named after her and carefully blew it into a glass that resembled the one she had been pictured with, and made it to the specifications so that it would resonate perfectly with her High "F."

I used a powerful amplifier and special high frequency speakers to deliver the note to the vessel. I installed the piece with the amplitude of the sound high enough to make the glass dance around in its box, resonating with the loud sound enough to vibrate, but not quite enough to break.
I included the unused half of the pickle dish that had been transformed, and an image on Pons in costume as Lakme in front of the table setting that the glass' shape had come from.

The work was practically unviewable, due to its dangerously loud soundtrack, so when I displayed it publicly, the noise had to be turned down. I was at first disappointed not to show the phenomenon that I had been interested in when I began the work, but I quickly realized that the project had transformed as I had been making it. It became more of an homage to the soprano, and an accumulation of evidence of my relationship with her through reconstructing parts of her life.
Bibliography


