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DIRTY CORNER

Luka Travas

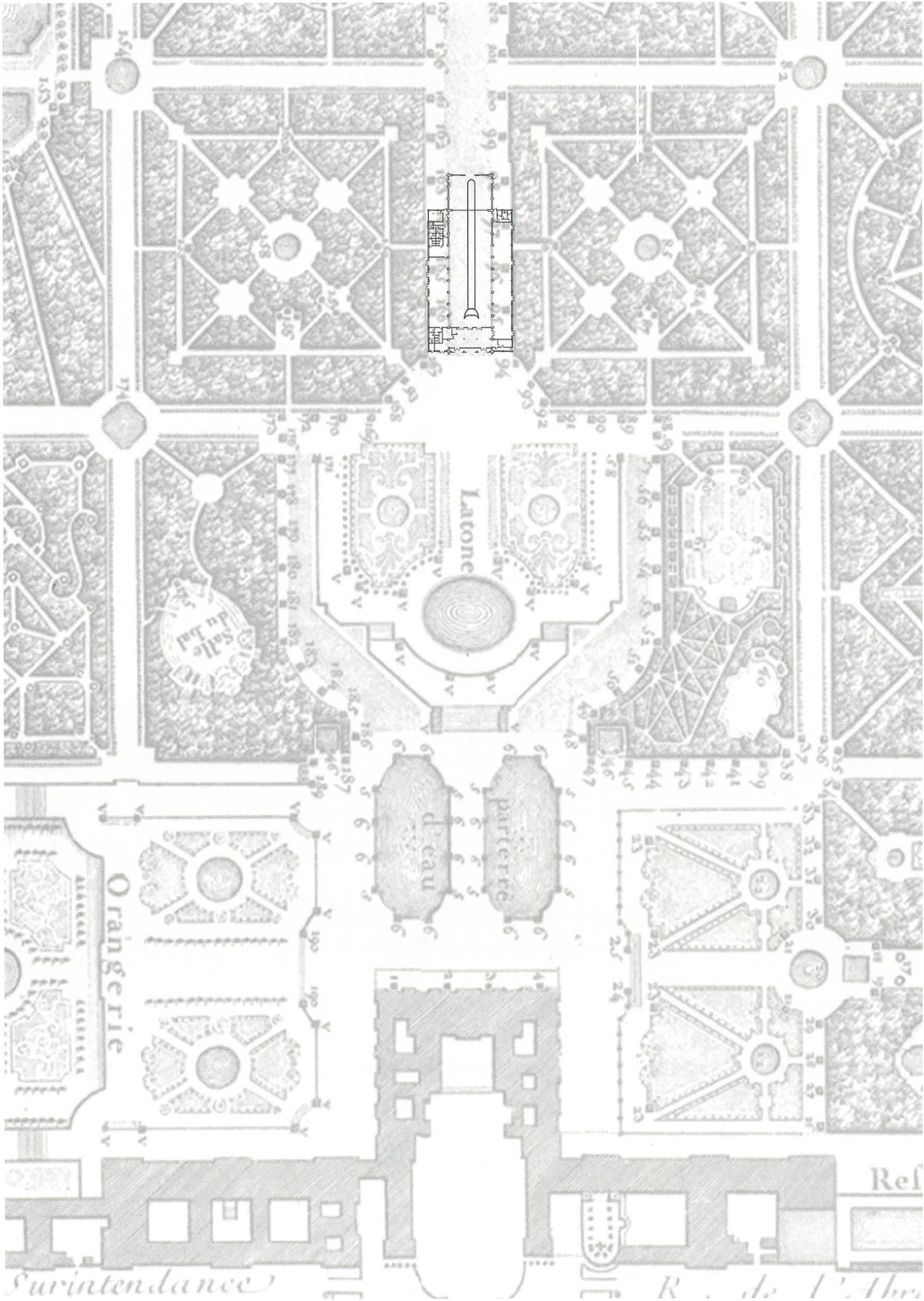


fig. a Overlying of the gardens of Château de Versailles with the Fabbrica del Vapore, drawn by the author

From June to November 2015, the *Château de Versailles* exhibited works by Anish Kapoor both in its gardens and the *Galerie nationale du jeu de paume*. «Dirty corner», already shown in a similar arrangement in Milan's *Fabbrica del Vapore*, faced numerous interpretations, an even greater amount of criticism and multiple vandalizations.¹ Although respecting Le Nôtre's plan and the baroque garden's ideal geometry with a precise placement on its middle axis, to the visitor it seemed to have wounded the immaculate tapis vert and obstructed the grand perspective over the sun king's seemingly endless grounds with its obscene appearance. Kapoor's work often interacts with the age-old duality of the subconscious and the conscious social self. The unruly, chaotic, contradictory subconscious stands in stark contrast to the organized, logic-loving and law-abiding conscious self. This tension used by Kapoor explains the spectator's strong, often bodily reaction when confronted with the art in question. The tension is expressed by several of Dirty Corner's aspects. Not all can be discussed within this article, so we will focus on the sculpture's alleged violence, color, form and spatiality. The recurrent play on size and scale of the abstracted artworks allows for the work to become not only of spatial interest but a space in itself, which connects it to the realm of architecture.

Interpreting «Dirty corner» as a cutting, wounding element, one is reminded of Kapoor's earlier works, such as «The Healing of St. Thomas» (1989), a red cut through the gallery wall, which wounded the perfect white surface. Representing a passage between the inside and outside of the body, the wound created a tension between the physical reality of the gallery wall and a suggested metaphysical world.² This tension, intensified by the natural feeling of discomfort produced by the hideous reminder of the wounded body, makes up the duality in Kapoor's work.

With the use of strong colors representing the world of the body, discomfort and provocation are intensified. The force of this element can beautifully be retraced in the early artwork «1000 Names» (1979-1980), consisting of heaps of pigments in a vibrant red color. Red is the color of the earth, the color of blood and body, it refers to nature in a metaphysical way.³ In a dim shade it instills anxiety of a deep darkness, invoking the most primal human fear regarding the source of life, death and afterlife. In «Dirty Corner» the use of red rocks scattered around the brownish red corteen steel structure can be understood within this line of thought. The form of the corteen steel body, shaped like an oblong lily blossom, evokes the form of female genitalia.⁴ The observer is confronted by the forbidden, inherent in the representation of the sexual organ. Additionally, one is

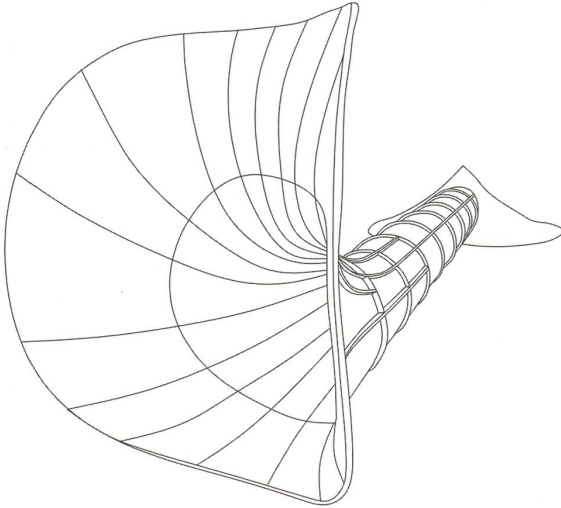


fig. b «Dirty Corner», drawn by the author

reminded of the naturalness of the motherly womb, its fascinating power as the source of life and its nearly magical quality of forming human existence out of single cells. These opposite references place the percipient in an in-between zone: The feeling of indecency on the one hand, on the other being moved by the evocation of nature's creational energy. Even the sculpture's name does not reflect on its shape but on its provocative underlying imagery and the sanctimonious judgments it seemed to elicit.

Besides form and color, the exceptional size of Kapoor's sculpture places it in an evocative relation to the viewer and its surrounding. Its impact on the exhibition environment is therefore of a very spatial quality, which was understood and perceived in different ways due to the two different exhibition contexts. Milan's *Fabbrica del Vapore*, a former tramway factory transformed into an exhibition space in 2008, displayed the sculpture from May 2011 to January 2012 in its cathedralesque main space. Analogous to Versailles, where the sun king had a strict and systematic daily procedure from the *lever* to the *coucher*, the *Fabbrica* too formerly honored systematic procedures that were manifested architecturally with a strong axial arrangement. The building process' proportions dictated the factory's size in order to enable the movements and interactions of man and machine instead of hindering them. Within these two different but alike contexts the artwork in question was arranged similarly. In Versailles the piece of art was placed in the East-West-axis of the Château, which also contains the palace's heart piece: the king's bedchamber. The axis forms the line of symmetry around which the Château is constructed, glorifying the absolutist powers of the king by simulating perfection and infinity. Similarly the sculpture was placed on the symmetrical axis of the *Fabbrica*, following and strengthening the building's geometry and structure.

Although similar in arrangement, «Dirty Corner» appears to have a different size in the endless gardens of Versailles than in the former factory. The form appears longer and taller inside the former industrial space, engulfing the whole *Cattedrale*. The sculpture seems smaller while set in Le Nôtre's 800 hectare masterpiece and the shape is being scaled by its context, respectively. This is especially intriguing, given Kapoor's working practice. The artist builds scaled models of his sculptures before constructing them on a one-to-one scale, elaborating the ideal shape through miniaturization that is manageable in relation to the hand. In the end «Dirty Corner» is present in four different sizes and perceptions, giving each its own presence: The reference and original of the oblong calla lily, from which the form of the sculpture is abstracted; the scaled wooden

model, which Kapoor works on, allowing a clear view on form and space; the impression in the exhibition of *La Fabbrica del Vapore* in Milan; and the presence in the gardens of Versailles. When comparing these four identities of the sculpture, one realizes that, while reducing the form to an architectural model clarifies its spatial perception, an enlargement seems to provoke the opposite, defying the sensory perception of the viewer. While its sheer size commands awed attention it also allows for abstract contemplation and understanding.

The different architectural spaces and the thereby changed relation to the viewer give unique opportunities to read the sculpture. Exhibited in the *Fabbrica*, visitors had the possibility to experience the sculpture not only from the outside, but also from the inside. The steel sculpture created a dark, cylindrical inside gangway, leading the viewer to its hidden section. Walking along this path the surrounding becomes gradually darker, immersing the viewer into a space impossible to grasp. When exiting the structure the visitor is left blinded for a moment, and thereby forced to enact Plato's cave analogy. The spectator finds himself in a situation where he can neither grasp the space inside the sculpture, nor its entire outside. Unfortunately, spectators were not able to walk through the sculpture when exhibited in Versailles, which led to the sculpture being perceived as a facade, an object, rearing up against the palace's meticulous 168 meters long facade. 'Dirty corner' lost its strongest relationship to the exhibiting space while setting up residence in Versailles. Thereby it lost its capacity to forcefully question the viewer's spatial perception.

By creating «an artificial world extraneous to nature but immersed within it»⁵, Kapoor's work searches for something best described by adjectives as spiritual or metaphysical. He is attempting to refine the percipient's view on the world by challenging it through the presentation of what cannot be represented. In order to be able to create this unique relationship between the viewer, the sculpture and the beyond, the transcendently primal and ultimate, the sensation has to be a bodily one, thereby being universal to mankind. Therefore, Kapoor's work lacks any national thinking, pre-given interpretation, logical process or claim of authorship. Irrespective of the cultural, historical, or intellectual background, the viewers are still unsettled in their perception. The work implicates our subconscious mind, our instinctual self, instead of our social conscious identity. Kapoor's work therefore is not the result of an intellectual, logical process; it is the result of an excavation. It is a discovery, a discovery of the transcendental through the constant.

- 1 <http://www.lefigaro.fr/arts-expositions/2015/09/06/03015-20150906ARTFIG00088-le-vagin-de-la-reine-une-nouvelle-fois-vandalise-a-versailles.php>. Retrieved: June 11, 2016.
- 2 Paolo Cecchetto. Interview with Anish Kapoor, 'From Terror to Intimacy', in: Richard Leydier (ed.), 'I have nothing to say', Montreuil, France, 2011, p. 47.
- 3 <http://anishkapoor.com/178/in-conversation-with-marcello-dantas>. Retrieved: May 27, 2016.
- 4 Gianni Mercurio, Demetrio Paparoni 'The turning point of sculpture', in: Gianni Mercurio, Demetrio Paparoni (ed.), 'Dirty Corner', Milan, Italy 2011, p. ix.
- 5 Demetrio Paparoni. Interview with Anish Kapoor, 'Blood', in: Richard Leydier (ed.), 'I have nothing to say', Montreuil, France 2011, p. 69.

Luka Travas, born 1994, has been studying architecture at ETH in Zurich since 2012. This article was written during his internship in London.