

Pink

Sonya R. Jensen

Coffin for a memory

Existing: *Romeo and Julieta*
Cigar Box 6" x 8" x 2"

The box is eight inches across, six inches in depth and sits two inches in height. The exterior of the box has been blackened by the presence of waxy fire. I made a handle with a bent fork and stretched rubber bands from its prongs all around the box to keep the box closed. When I remove the rubber bands one of the short sides falls open, and I can lift the lid. With the short side removed I can lie my hand flat, palm down, inside the box, and close the lid over it. The lid is perforated with 2" nails. When I close the lid of the box over my hand, these nails secure the position of my hand, by occupying the space my hand does not. Inside, my hand cannot move: at the same time it is comforted by the pink batt insulation which lines the interior of the box. If someone else were to put their hand in the box, they could understand it relative to mine.

"WHY PINK?"

I asked, when the suggestion of Pink as an attitude for *The Fifth Column* arose after the coolly anesthetized "White Issue" (Vol.9-No. 3/4). Not the source of the initial inspiration, I posed the question in two senses: why would *The Fifth Column* want "Pink" as an attitude and what position does "Pink" define? From the answers given I inferred the desire for a more *au courant* appeal, a publication that would bring up issues in architecture which are more street-wise, outside the domain of the profession and academia. A publication less stodgy, more: arresting.

Considering Pink's popularity as of late, I am unconvinced that a Pink cover could provide even a superficial transformation. Late we are, since in the realm of fashion, that which is done is over. The Spice Girls, the Barbie song, and kitsch culture (I can't define it but I would include Pink vinyl in its set) are all "Pink." I appreciated them in their moment, but they have mellowed into vague disinterest. I am not saying that the discomfort Pink can cause has been completely dealt with by its foray into the fashion sphere, simply that we would be no more than skin deep if we did not probe the issue further.

The Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary (unabridged 1956) reveals a myriad of definitions which exemplify the contradictions in how and what the word is intended to convey:

Pink, n. [prob., from pinkeye, literally, little eye, a trans. of the French "Oeillette" (English "carnation")]

As a noun its French translation refers to the carnation flower, and its relationship with the tradition of wearing the flower in a buttonhole (hence "buttonhole," or "little eye"). "Parlour Pink" refers to "a liberal or anyone advocating liberalism in theory; especially one who has no intention of subsequently applying his views in action." Aside from the colour, the adjective Pink also means "mildly radical." The verb can mean "to stab, to prick" or "to ornament, to adorn."¹

Pink's most striking quality is its capacity to encompass two opposite poles: in the man made sphere, Pink is used to express contrast with something serious, or make something appear artificial: a Pink tuxedo or Pink Cadillac for example. In nature's context, Pink is far more liminal than lighthearted, sited in sunsets, flowers and flesh. Even in granite or marble, the presence of Pink does not mock stone's solidity.

How is the colour Pink able to heighten the character of the artificial and silly in the things we make,

when our experience of it in nature has neither of these qualities? Another way to look at Pink is by comparing it to our perceptions of the colour gray. Gray is perceived as a moderating expression of black and white. It is enjoyed for the fact that it removes the extremity of either black or white. Combining red and white, Pink is not neutral at all. The quality it conveys depends entirely on its context: it is either superficial, painted on, or sublime, illuminating pure light on the changing horizon between night and day.

Can Pink be rendered neutral? Pink's neutrality is unlikely in the world of fashion, which devours contrast only in order to express the eternal return of the same.² Much has been written on the understanding of architecture as a series of historical "styles," and the analogy of architecture to the body: face/façade, skeleton/structure. What is the difficulty in reconciling architecture and fashion? How does architecture resist fashionability? Fashion can be flippant and constantly changing, allowing us to express a shedding skin which encloses an evolving self. Architecture resists being fashionable by the amount of time it takes to create and understand. The history of architecture is not a simple parade of stylistic changes.

When Pink is included in rose, it is swallowed up into a larger realm of symbolism. In western commercial culture there has been a specific association of Pink and female. For most of us the symbolic realm of rose (and thus pink) is closely associated to things feminine and female. Bringing architecture into the picture leads me to ask an overwhelming question: How does a person orient herself towards history as a woman? The question is relevant if one understands architects to be interpreters of history. Simply put, women have been excluded from participating in the writing and interpreting of history, for diverse reasons. This exclusion is separate from the interpreted accounts of their contributions, thoughts and actions. I phrased the question "how does a *person*" in order to refer to the idea that we are never only engendered beings. Gender is a loose and shifting skin constructed and projected somewhere between ourselves and all others/all else. Ultimately, gender is bequeathed to us, yet it is never quite in our possession.

A history that has positioned women as only an engendered existence has done as much to construct "men": to draw a line around one thing and exclude the rest is one way to define form. What is an architecture that once symbolized the natural world it graced as female to become when the line between

natural and synthetic is constantly pushed back? Seeing the Female (yourself) historically portrayed as the muse of architecture can present an oblique approach to the questioning of how to design and how to understand history.³

Pink also retains nautical references: a "pink" is a Danish boat with a narrow transom. In the *Illustrated Marine Encyclopedia* (1890), Rose is used in the term "windrose" (in French *Rose des vents*), a diagram on pilot charts for indicating the source and strength of the wind. Also, a "compass rose" is a device with graduated circles inscribed in each other for plotting nautical courses.⁴ I see Pink as a symbol of a search for origins: as women we live a difference between a recorded interpretation of our lives and what we experience. Has this condition been in place as long as history has existed? How long has history existed? How does it happen that in the last two hundred years women have come to be accepted as writers and interpreters of history in Western Culture? What prompted the desire to enter a domain previously unchallenged? Why were they ultimately permitted?

The project description which follows is for now my point of reference in this question of orientation. It was in this student project that I retrospectively noticed the slight of hand left at the end of my signature—a tiny italic fishtale I had not known. I realized it had been and was always to be present in my being and work.

The project was to design a coffin, the explorations of which are illustrated in the captions. As it is another that performs the eulogy, the difficulty in this project was in understanding what it means to be in the position of this other. The last description recounts a blessing of fortune: during my internship in an architect's office, I was able to participate in the design of a coffin.

From the initial project it became apparent that a manipulation (read: handmade construction) can imbue narrative into a found object. The machined object, the ballot box and the cigar boxes, became a receptacle for a worldly story. The object's already-given state acted as the surface through which a personal story could be told. In the office project, A Coffin for the Archeological Remains of Seven Jesuits, the story was drawn from documented history.

These disparate ideas all arose from thinking about Pink and Architecture, an exercise which has stretched out to many questions, perhaps without addressing the answer to any one. Can Pink be ren-

Coffin I 1996

Existing: A red painted galvanized steel ballot box from the Town of Mount Royal, Montréal. The box is 12" square and stands 18" in height.

The lid is hinged on the 12" side with a lip sealing the volume. In the lid is a round opening (the ballot hole) closed by a screw cap on the underside. The screwcap and opening were stuffed with bubble gum when I received the box as a premature gift for my twenty-first birthday.

Near the bottom of the front face of the box, I cut a thin horizontal slot. Both sides I lipped with a new fold of sheet metal. The coffin could now be a mail box.

Leaving only a frame of metal, I cut out the bottom face of the box.

Once the bottom of the coffin was removed, the mail could be released without having to open the lid. In order to keep the mail inside, I inserted two square panes of glass—like shelves. Each pane of glass now has two of its corners pinned to the box, and two corners unsupported. The unsupported side of each pane is guided by a cable which escapes the coffin through the ballot hole in the lid. On the exterior of the coffin the cables can be tied holding the panes fixed, and the coffin shut. To open the coffin I untie the cables and let the two panes drop open, releasing whatever mail had been trapped within.

dered neutral? Do we want it to be? Is the Pink of Art Deco Architecture of the same intention as a Pink mechanical room? The Rose windows of Gothic Cathedrals expressed a particular understanding of the transfer of light from without to within. It is said the West Rose Window of Chartres Cathedral can be projected down onto the etched labyrinth in the floor, at the heart of which is a rose.⁵ A legend of the Pantheon has it that rose petals were dropped through its oculus at Pentecost during the middle ages. One source alleges that the original labyrinth of Crete had its walls lined with roses.⁶ Ever since a modern study found Pink to have a calming effect on the psyche, insane asylums have armed themselves with it. Strange that a Pink surrounding is able to soothe hidden horrors—unless one remembers there is a thick layer of Pink in our technical walls that keeps us from freezing to death.

1. Webster's *New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language*, 2nd Edition.

2. Walter Benjamin, *Paris capitale du XIX^{ème} siècle: Les livres des passages* (Paris: Les éditions du cerf, 1989), 95–96.

3. Francesca Hughes, *The Architect: Reconstructing Her Practice: An Introduction* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), xi.

4. Captain H. Paasch, *Illustrated Marine Encyclopedia* (Antwerp: the author, 1890), 203.

5. Jane Carroll, Keith Critchlow, and Vaughn Lee, "Chartres Maze: A Model for the Universe," *Architectural Association Quarterly* 5.2 (1973): 11–20.

6. Cowen Panton, *Rose Windows* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1979), 99.

7. J'aimerais remercier L'étude de Louis Brillant, architecte, pour l'occasion de travailler sur le projet du Cerceuil, lui-même pour son contribution au texte concernant le cerceuil et ses conseils patients pendant que j'écrivais cet article. J'aimerais aussi remercier Anne Bordeleau pour ses efforts avec le passage écrit en français.

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La fabrication d'un cercueil pour les restes de sept jésuites.

Contexte : Lors de fouilles archéologiques entreprises à Québec, une découverte a été faite près de l'église Notre-Dame des Victoires. On identifia les objets datant du dix-septième siècle comme étant des vestiges sacrés de Jésuites. Dans les boîtes d'archives qui furent remises aux Jésuites se cachaient les restes de sept squelettes qui reposaient dans le site de sépulture de l'ancienne école des Jésuites. Les Jésuites nous ont invités à partager avec eux l'occasion d'inhumer les reliques en construisant un cercueil. Après avoir acquis une connaissance tangible des restes incomplets, nous avons souhaité construire un cercueil qui reconnaîtrait la dignité de chacun et leur redonnerait leur surface sépulcrale. Le cercueil a été conçu entièrement en bois; nous avons jugé important que la construction ne laisse aucun indice archéologique à l'exception d'une simple trace de résine de bois. Les côtés sont faits de sept planches emboutées et les coins à la tête du cercueil sont en queue d'aronde. Chaque squelette est rangé sur une tablette transparente. En superposant les tablettes, nous cherchons à comprendre un corps en le reconstituant visuellement de plusieurs. Les supports individuels sont glissés un à un par la base, un linceul les enveloppant, évoquant par son traitement et ses proportions l'étole du prêtre. Le couvercle est ensuite glissé au-dessus de l'ensemble comme ont été insérés auparavant les supports. Le dernier côté ferme le cercueil en glissant verticalement dans une fente du couvercle, conférant ainsi sa rigidité à l'ensemble et servant de support à la plaque funéraire. La base du cercueil sera détaillée de manière à permettre l'installation temporaire des "bras" servant au déplacements.

La tradition jésuite, considérant l'écriture d'un texte comme essentielle à la construction, nous a amenée à reconnaître l'importance de construire le cercueil selon un texte et de comprendre sa construction comme une étape du rituel d'enterrement. Finalement, la décision de construire le cercueil en matériaux naturels (bois, lin, sans clous ni charnières) est née du souci de nous rapprocher des Jésuites du dix-septième siècle à travers ce que nous partageons avec eux et aussi de n'interférer que le moins possible lors de fouilles archéologiques futures.⁷

Coffin for a Barbie

Existing: *Rafael Gonzolaz 25 Coronas Extra*
Cigar Box (6" x 9" x 1")

The coffin is for a Barbie who was accidentally decapitated during my formative years.

I first steamed off the paper decorating the exterior of the box and then stained the wood with watercolours. I scented the box with perfume which mingled with the scent of cigars. With a fuschia satin ribbon I tightly tied the coffin like a gift box. I lined the interior of the box with strips of white gauze tied in knots. To make a small pillow I wrapped a piece of batt insulation with gauze and placed it at one end of the box. To signify the absent Barbie I outlined where she would lie in the coffin with a beaded necklace.