

Empire State

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Now!

Skira *RIZZOLI*
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Shadi Habib Allah

Jean-Paul Marat makes a live-work space of his bathtub in order to soothe his grotesque skin disease. The publication of his writing from the tub provides fuel for the French insurgency. Marat refashions the bathtub—conventionally a site of cleansing and pleasure—into a locus of the revolution.

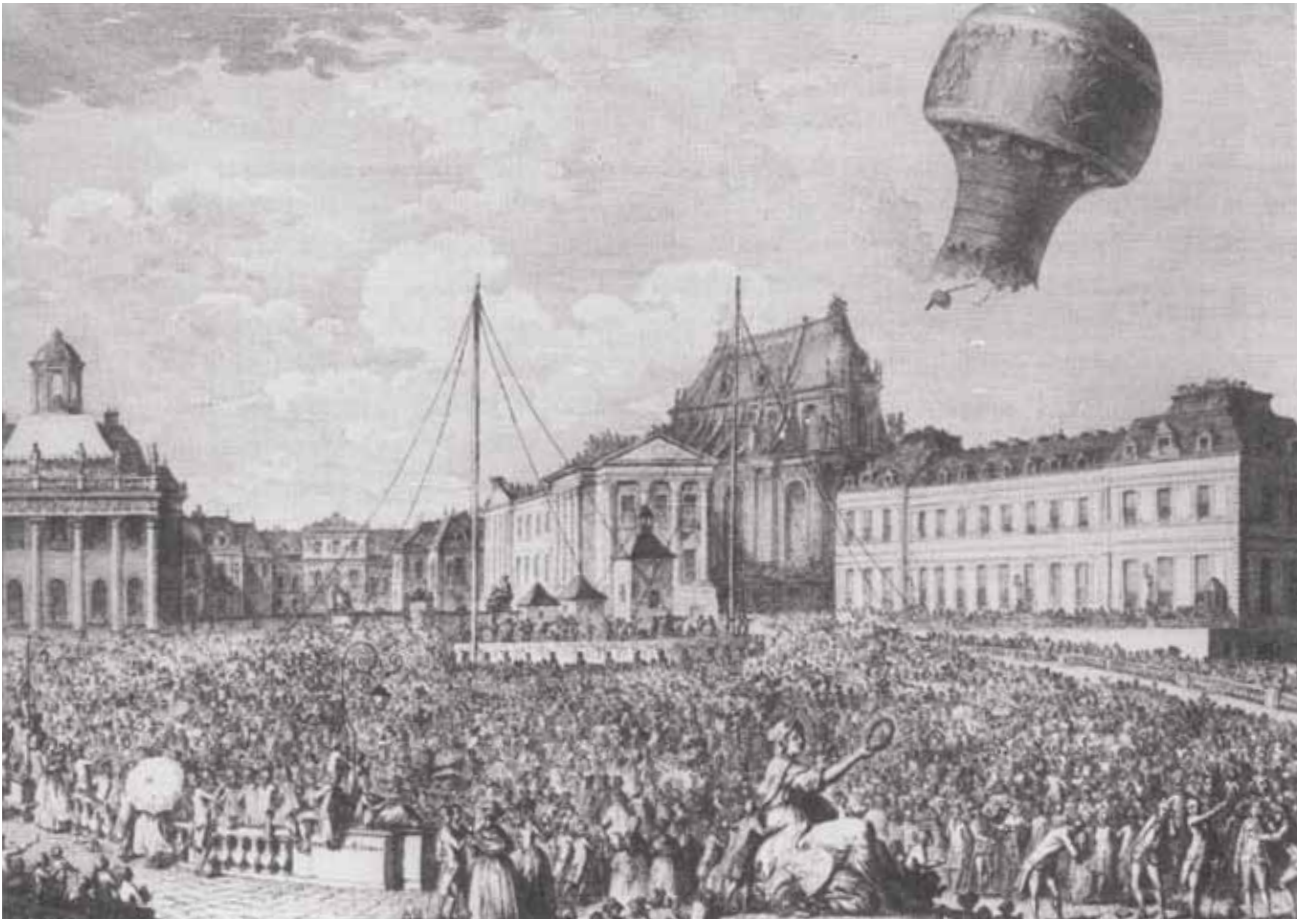
Grotesqueness is operative for the transformational aspect of Marat's work. I'm talking about the possibility of working through sickness to remove one's muzzle and give voice to useful, unvented forms of psychic discharge. Though Marat's skin disease is a weakness of immunity, it is also an abjection that supplies energy, which he redirects toward a kind of social upheaval. Think of the utilitarianism of a rose's thorn. It's unpleasant, but it's also a necessity in order to maintain the composite flower body.

Marat likely contracted his skin disease while using the sewer as an initial live-work space. The monarchy issued warrants against him, so he hid in the drain and kept working. Marat working in the sewer links his covert activity to plumbing, and plumbing links the sewer to the bathtub. There is a systemic connection between his contamination and his purification. Marat moves from the bowels of Paris, the city sewer, to the productivity of a womb-shaped bathtub. Habib Allah's reconstruction of Marat's tub intimates that sometimes you have to be in proximity to the shit in order to induce clarity and effectiveness.

There is an argument that judging maternal biological processes as abject is a strategy for integration and survival within phallogentric social structures. This explains why today's prototypical college jock thinks menstruation is "so gross"—an attitudinal assimilation within a penetration-oriented economic field. The organic form of Marat's warm-liquid suspension tank relates his struggle in opposition to this maternal abjection. His peculiar bathtub appears to me as a propositional inversion, since it is from this uterocentric form that Marat champions his abjection and gets to work. It's not ironic that the twenty-something virgin daughter of an aristocrat assassinates him while he is in this liquid suspension chamber—it is a complete matricidal inversion.

The original bathtub is now in the Musée Grévin, a wax museum in Paris. A wax Marat lies in the tub. Nearby are contemporary figures, such as a wax George Clooney. The mediocre resting place for this politically charged object informs the conversation on transhistoricity and the decreased function of the artifact today. Allah's meticulous reconstruction of this artifact is a work that knowingly doubles the object's co-option. The artist's counterfeit version of the bathtub is not necrophiliac formalism. Rather, the work prompts the question: What unseen location might now be transforming into a pivotal site of counterstrategy out of metabolic necessity?

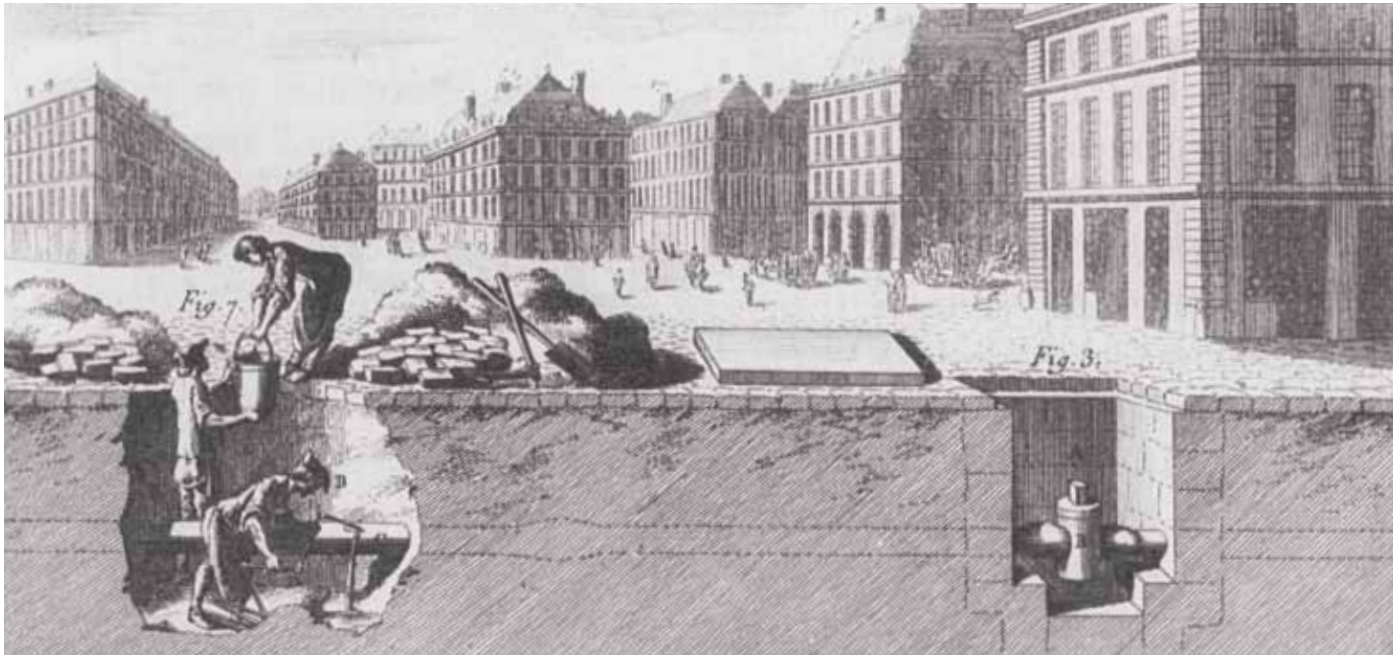
—Walter Smith



During the reign of Louis XVI, the Montgolfier balloon was launched at Versailles. Peasants were allowed to attend alongside nobility.



Louis-Léopold Boilly depicts Marat's triumphant trial at the Assembly, marking the beginning of the decline of the Girondins.



Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat by Charlotte Corday

