Tomb Series: GHOST (RECOVERY)

0x6e31 May 1st, 2023
1 Collected



GHOST, OBVERSE

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Disc surface darkened, fading. Big battery spent. First witnesses called out to us. We gathered. Looked up, overcome by all it meant. Each of us reconciling ourselves to the existence of this place Without It. The fearful spoke out. *It is being extinguished. Poisoned. Covered over.* Their voices unrecognisable, our kindred. Measured elders intervened. *What force could do such a thing? For what reason?* Its darkening relentless meanwhile. There and then each of us was admitted to Without It and quite alone. Whatever this terror was, it would be emboldened by its results. All gasped as it was gone out, blacked out. Without It, we could not even see each other's faces. Nauseating silence held as light was seen then to spill out from behind it, outlining its deathly silhouette with sharpening none of us could bear. From where did this bright doom emanate?





Art historian Claudia Brittenham studies carvings on the undersides of ancient Aztec sculptures. The kinds of markings that interest them remained, in their original cultural contexts, resolutely unseen and unseeable. Brittenham claims that, for particular groups of Mexica Aztecs, this was:

> a systematic and intentional practice, where carvings were intended from the outset to be hidden, conceived of as part of a unified program with both visible and invisible elements.

In their essay *What Lies Beneath*, Brittenham describes two eight-feet tall figures, sculpted in stone and named Coatlicue and Yolloticue. Weighing around two tons each, presumably they were never moved after their initial production and installation. Despite their complete inaccessibility, Brittenham shows, the undersides of their bases were elaborately carved. The broad significance of these concealed surfaces is almost certainly divine. In Aztec culture, they likely appealed to godly powers of extraordinary sight:

> Thus, if the hidden carving … addressed a divine audience, it posited preternatural powers of vision, capable of seeing through obdurate stone. Perhaps it also allowed human viewers who knew of the carvings underneath to lay claim to godlike sight.

What is the consequence of the exposition of these hidden images, by academics such as Brittenham? By revealing them, documenting them, and theorising them, is the poetry of their unseeable nature reproduced for a new audience, or corrupted and dissolved?

In their essay *On Transtextuality*, esteemed author Gilbert Adair reviews *Palimpsests*, literary scholar Gérard Genette's theory of the derivative work. Genette's theory is thoroughly categorical, naming and defining myriad genres (intertextual, paratextual, metatextual …) and sub-genres (continuation, authorised sequel, simple pastiche …). Adair is delighted by this, the transtextual being their lifelong, postmodern project. Practically everything Adair wrote was what Genette called a *hypertext*: a genre of the transtextual to which texts that in some way *imitate* the work of another writer belong. (A definition of this word quite tangential to Ted Nelson's more familiar coinage.) Far from any flippant, stereotypical postmodern insincerity, Genette asserts hypertextuality as a demanding craft:

> In order to imitate a text, it is inevitably necessary to acquire at least a partial mastery of it, a mastery of that specific quality which one has chosen to imitate.

Employing this studied imitation method, Adair wrote novels, criticism and commentary, biography, translation, and adaptations for the screen. Such transtextual practices were held, Adair notes, in “deep critical disrepute”, despite, as they point out, “pastiches of every order …” being “nearly as ancient as literature itself.” Adair’s first novel, published in 1986, was *Alice Through the Needle’s Eye* (genre: hypertext, sub-genre: posthumous continuation). It is a world-rebuilding of Wonderland, masterfully recreating Lewis Carroll’s prose style, typographical word play, and mathematical allusions, while repopulating their world with new characters and narratives. The Lewis Carroll Society did not look kindly on its publication. In a television interview, the chairman of the society describes Adair’s book as a “doomed project”, to which a Yung Gilbert is shown responding, indirectly, with an impudent expression.



GHOST, like each of the 177 works in David Rudnick’s Tomb Series, fictionalises its own facade: we see the *back* of the media storage disc that it depicts. This imaginary object occupies its graphic black picture plane with resolute flatness: all perspective and lighting effects are decisively neutralised by an impossibly even glow that betrays no hint of anything beyond the immediately visible surfaces. GHOST, OBVERSE, the first work to be recovered, anonymously, from GHOST, audaciously pictures this unseeable *beyond*. This gesture is reminiscent of Cornelius Norbertus Gijsbrechts’s extraordinary work of trompe-l’œil virtuosity, *The Reverse of a Framed Painting* (1670). This painting, commissioned for the Royal Danish Kunstkammer in Copenhagen, is a hyper-realistic depiction of the *back* of a typical artist’s canvas, including the grain of its wooden stretcher, an imaginary inventory number, some believable patination of age, and a skilfully modelled effect of depth. To reinforce its wicked illusionism, Gijsbrechts’s painting was displayed on the floor, leaning informally against a wall, as if inviting the viewer to be irritated by its seeming state of unpreparedness, only then to exaggerate their delighted disbelief as it discloses the true, meticulously crafted, nature of it surface.



Tomb LIX – GHOST

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To look on GHOST, OBVERSE, too, is a confounding and reflexive experience. By manifesting that which the original fictionalises, it risks demystifying GHOST, thus corrupting and dissolving the unseeable poetry that it means to channel. But so masterfully does this imitation capture the digital craft of the original drawing, it is able to reflect Rudnick's fictive move back upon itself. The *source* of the *impossibly even glow* that coolly illuminates GHOST, and each of the Tomb Series, is perfectly *eclipsed*, becoming itself the object of a new fiction.

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#1

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