

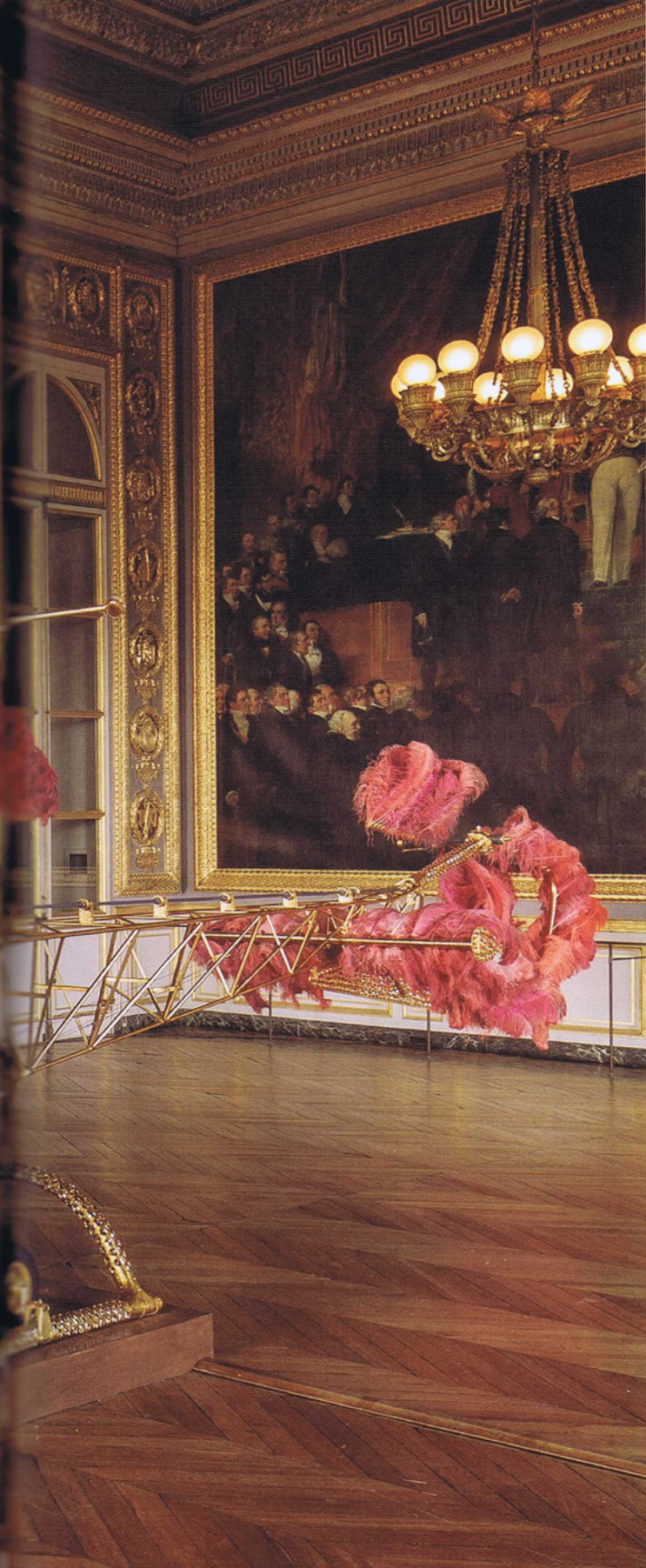
The painting depicts a modern interior scene. On the right, a red sofa with yellow and orange cushions is positioned against a blue wall. In front of it is a dark wooden coffee table with a lower shelf, holding a bowl of yellow lemons, two small wooden figurines, and a stack of books. To the left of the sofa is a wooden side table with a white lamp, a small red flower pot, and a dark bottle. A large potted plant with dark green leaves stands to the left of the side table. The floor is covered with a light-colored, textured rug. The overall style is a vibrant, painterly representation of a contemporary living space.

art

& Australia

Graham Fletcher
7th Asia Pacific Triennial
Joana Vasconcelos, Theaster Gates
Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro





Rupturing Versailles:

JOANA VASCONCELOS'S
DISEMBODIMENT, FEMINISATION
AND KITSCH

Fae Brauer

Drawn-thread work and other embroideries, felt appliques, bobbin lace, tatting, quartz-decorated pottery, handmade woollen knitting and crochet, fabrics, ornaments, polyester, steel cables, 400 x 530 x 1400 cm
Produced in collaboration with the artisans of Nisa, Câmera Municipal de Nisa
Photograph Luís Vasconcelos. © Unidade Infinita Projectos

CHOOSING *MARY POPPINS*, 2010, TO INTRODUCE Joana Vasconcelos's installation at Versailles may seem puzzling. Yet, like the magical umbrella-wielding Poppins, this tentacular body of industrial fabrics and handmade textiles suspended above Ange-Jacques Gabriel's monumental marble staircase provoked alternative perspectives of its histories. Rather than celebrating the affluence, culture and conquests of the Bourbon dynasty, and commemorating the King's body, it signalled the disembodiment, displacement and exclusion of women and working-class cultures at this Royal Court opened by Louis XIV in 1682. 'The objects used in my works are disembodied', admitted this Paris-born, Lisbon-based artist, 'lost in their ordinariness and from which regular use has obliterated all of their potential aura.'¹ Deceptively appearing to adhere to the 'extravagant and excessive aesthetics' of this glittering 700-room, 2000-windowed palace, in being made of 'everyday objects', her artworks deny expectations of rare gems and precious materials and defy the imperatives of high culture.²

Dissimulating the ways in which Versailles functioned as a living entity filled with silks, satins, laces, pearls, diamonds, rubies, emeralds, gold, silver, feathers, ruffles and wigs, Vasconcelos conducted 'a game of subversion'. By making what look like icons of privilege with 'commonplace things', the 'game' played by Vasconcelos at Versailles entailed subverting its spectacles of excess and its sensorial stimuli. Through this process she redressed the cultural exclusion of the women and commoners who ran this estate, intended as a stage for the performance of the Bourbon dynasty's absolute power.³ Through her dialogues and counter-dialogues with the cultural politics of Versailles, the rhizomatic sprawl of her installations ruptured its official history, particularly the success stories extolled daily to rapturous tourists. 'Of course my work also represents something of a rupture', she acknowledged, 'but the pieces adhere to the extravagant and excessive aesthetics.'⁴

That the King was subject to no earthly authority was pictured in some 300 official portraits and medals of Louis XIV alongside

multitudinous statues and tapestries. The Sun King's 'divine right' was imaged throughout the War, Peace and Apollo Salons at Versailles, as well as the Hall of Mirrors. Ranked as nothing more than the King's dutiful subjects, the women of Versailles who organised its fetes, concerts, banquets and decorative arts are conspicuously absent. Nevertheless, Vasconcelos found their impact on the chateau omnipresent: 'For me, Versailles feels much closer to the female universe than to the male ideal, and I invaded the chateau bringing in objects related to femininity.'⁵

Every dinner at Versailles was a public performance, the ushers welcoming all who were neatly dressed. After witnessing the Dauphine eat her soup, they would watch the Dauphin crack open his lobster, as signified by Vasconcelos's two ceramic lobsters perched on the crimson damask-covered table in the Grand Couvert. Entitled *Le Dauphin* and *La Dauphine*, both 2012, the lobsters are feminised by the lace crochet covering their bodies and the fishnets pulled over their claws. The feminisation of male icons was even more apparent, with white crochet draping the Port Laurent black marble lions guarding the Queen's Chamber. 'Lace decorates and protects', Vasconcelos explained, 'but protection is but another manifestation of imprisonment.'⁶ In *Perruque*, 2012, she illuminates how the Queen was never able to escape her incarceration in this 'golden cage'.⁷

Every meal taken by the Queen was a public spectacle; every birth in her Bedchamber was an aristocratic one, with her body never free from prying eyes and listening ears. That her body was never her own to nurture and possess is illuminated by the conjugal debt incumbent on the Queen to secure the dynasty through the legitimate and public birth of sons who, as soon as the umbilical cord was severed, were paraded in silver dishes and removed from her sight. As the cocoon shape of *Perruque* suggests, the Queen was inscribed as nothing other than a royal uterus. That her womb was the subject of constant monitoring and surveillance is signified by the numerous ear trumpets or funnel-shaped foetal monitors glued to its bulge,







Gardes, 2012

Port Laurent marble (Pakistan) lions and bases,

Azores crocheted lace, each 200 x 65 x 110 cm

Courtesy Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris and Brussels,

and Haunch of Venison, London

Photograph Luís Vasconcelos. © Unidade Infinita Projectos

from which tresses of different coloured and textured hair cascade.⁸ Yet the humiliation did not stop there. Even after Louis XIV's Queen, María Teresa of Spain, had endured this corporeal invasion for six pregnancies, she still had to bear the further indignity of having to take the King's *maîtresse en titre* into her household and ennoble her, as illustrated by the notorious Marquise de Montespan, Athénaïs, conjured by Vasconcelos's *Marilyn*, 2011.

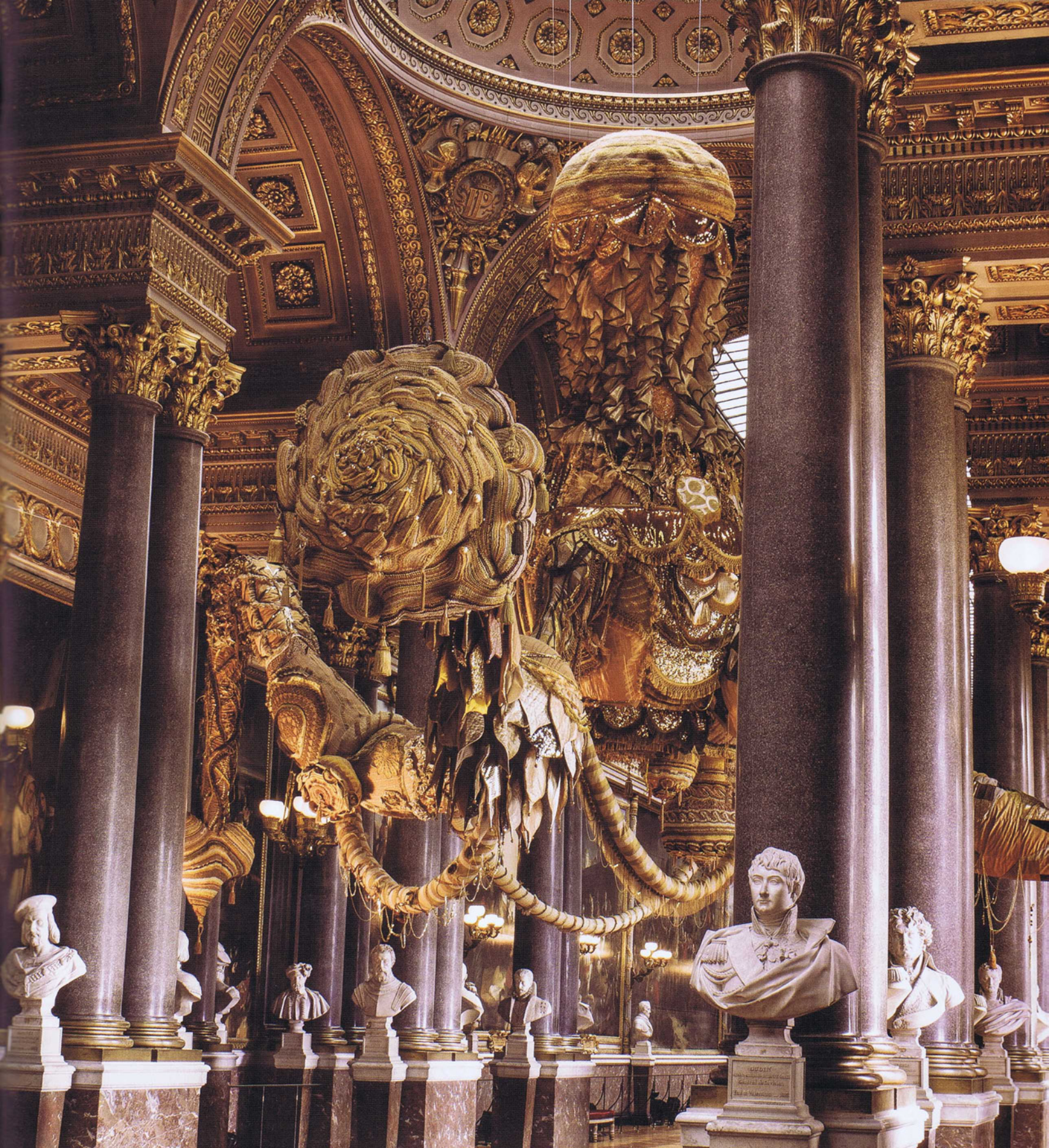
Known as 'the real Queen' who gave birth to six children fathered by Louis XIV, Athénaïs patronised La Fontaine, promoted Molière, organised elaborate festivals at Versailles, commissioned rococo furniture, was painted by Le Brun and sculpted by Étienne Le Hongre – but never as a court official and only ever as a shepherdess.⁹ Nicknamed 'the torrent', the palatial apartment given to her by Louis XIV overlooking the Royal Court had convenient access to his bedroom. Voluptuously dressed in diaphanous gowns that never seemed able to cover her breasts, she became notorious for her high-heeled silken mules in which she strutted through her fabulous Appartement des Bains – only removing them to enter her octagonal bath cut from a single block of marble, and lined with linen and lace.

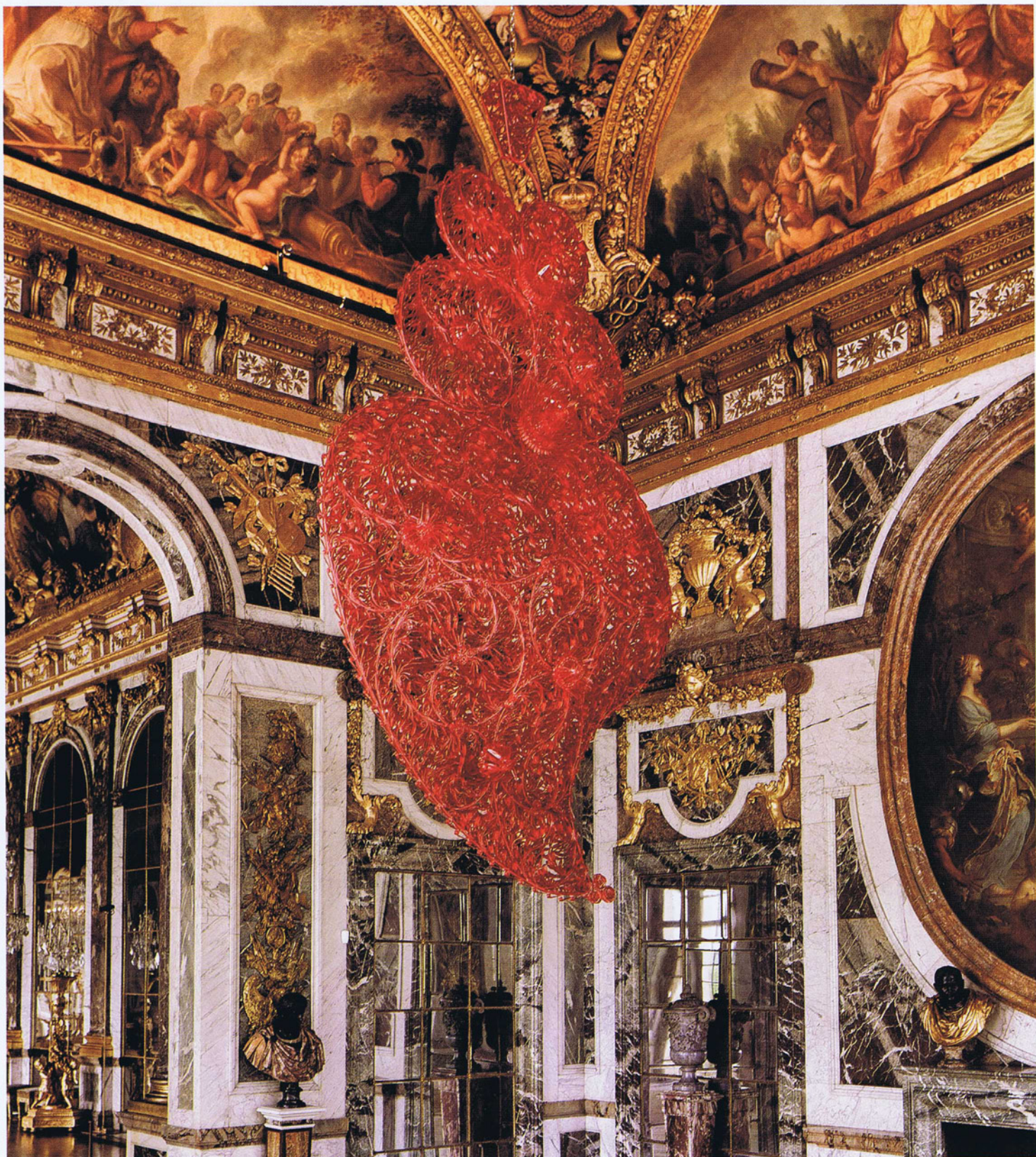
Vasconcelos's title – *Marilyn* – links the high-heeled silk mules of Athénaïs and Marie Antoinette to the pearl and diamante sandals of Marilyn Monroe. Located in the setting for the most prestigious of all court events and as monumental in scale as the 357 mirrors, it announced the kind of shoes that would have been worn by Versailles women at receptions then as now. With French soldiers heroised by Le Brun's murals of the Sun King's military victories and women relegated to the role of gilded *guéridons* in the Hall of Mirrors, Vasconcelos's installation acted as a disembodied trace of woman's phenomenological presence at these events and her performance as a major participant, if not an empowered player. Yet instead of consisting of precious gems and rare silks as would befit the marble and bronze, chandeliers and mirrors – the most expensive of all items – this monumental pair of sandals is made of stainless steel casserole pots and lids.

As reflective as the mirrors and as metallic as the armour and shields painted by Le Brun, these pots not only illuminate the amount of food that would have been served at these spectacles but also the way in which it would have been prepared by women carefully concealed in kitchens located out-of-sight in Versailles's far wing. 'The subversive force of my works', Vasconcelos explained, 'surely resides in the fact that they brandish the trappings of luxury without the means. I cultivate this ambiguity – this interaction – between the saucepans and the pumps. I take the pots out of the palace kitchens and place them in these areas.'¹⁰ Through the installations *Independent heart*, *Lilicoptère*, 2012, and *Valkyries*, in which luxury is made over as kitsch, this pinnacle of high culture is also infiltrated by the commodities of mass consumerism and femininity.

To bolster the concept of 'divine right' during the Parisian insurrections of La Fronde, the nexus between the King's heart and God's will was constantly affirmed by such quotes from the Bible: 'The king's heart is like a stream of water directed by the Lord; he guides it wherever he pleases.'¹¹ The prime organ of the mortal body through which God supposedly directed the King, the heart was removed from the King's body after death and enshrined in a silver casket. Its power to legitimate the King's right to rule directly from God, independent of the will of the people, is exposed by *Black independent heart*, 2006, and *Red independent heart*, 2005. Twirling from the ceilings, the red passionate heart in the Salon of Peace and the black deathly heart in the Salon of War signalled the two compulsive obsessions of Louis XIV: sex and war.

Despite the central cameo in the Peace Salon showing Louis XIV giving peace to Europe, his reign was marked by wars, as signalled by Vasconcelos's black heart that dangled in front of his war trophies and the huge equestrian medallion in the War Salon depicting the Sun King mercilessly trampling his enemies.¹² That militarism was inherent to Versailles was also conveyed by *Lilicoptère* and by the juxtaposition of *Royal valkyrie*, *Golden valkyrie*, both 2012, and *Valkyrie trousseau*,





opposite

Red independent heart, 2005

Translucent red plastic cutlery, painted iron, metal chain, motor,
sound installation, 371 x 220 x 75 cm

Collection Museu Coleção Berardo, Lisbon

Photograph Luís Vasconcelos. © Unidade Infinita Projectos

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Lilicoptère, 2012

Bell 47 helicopter, ostrich feathers, Swarovski crystals, gold leaf, industrial coating,
dyed leather upholstery embossed with fine gold, Arraiolos rugs, walnut wood,
wood grain painting, passementerie, 300 x 274 x 1265 cm

Produced in collaboration with Fundação Ricardo do Espírito Santo Silva, Lisbon

Courtesy Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris and Brussels, and

Haunch of Venison, London

Photograph Luís Vasconcelos. © Unidade Infinita Projectos

2009, with the thirty-five war paintings in the Gallery of Battles. Yet as if to redress the absence of any signifier of femininity, this installation is named after the women who in Nordic mythology are not vanquished in battle but granted the power to decide who wins and loses and who can be brought to the hall of afterlife.

Defying the rectilinearity of this Battle Gallery, the three *Valkyries* seemed to spread like water beneath the vaulted ceiling. As distinct from the armour depicted in each battle painting, the *Valkyries* are made from the gold fabrics and exuberant floral brocades associated with femininity. Although they appear to glow with luxuriousness, just as *Red* and *Black independent heart* seem to glisten like intricate filigree and to radiate like the iconic Portuguese jewellery piece, the Heart of Viana, both are made over as kitsch.¹³ While *Golden valkyrie* consists of false gold and industrial rather than handmade lace and textiles, and while *Lilicoptère* is coated with salmon pink and orange ostrich feathers and thousands of rhinestones, a close-focus lens on the *Black* and *Red independent heart* reveal that they are made of plastic mass-produced cutlery – the kind of chintzy knives, forks and spoons to be found at the cultural opposite of Versailles: McDonald's.

Just as Mary Poppins ruptured the Bankses' family, so Vasconcelos's installations threatened the official histories of Versailles by constantly alluding to their absences: the stories that are not told, the workers who are denied, the women who are disavowed and the kitsch that was banned. Replicating the spectacles of excess inside while stacking thousands of blue bottles of champagne outside until they reached the height of the fountains, Vasconcelos evoked the sated Versailles nobility and the starving commoners. As she explained: 'In the palace, in the court, money was spent like water, while at the same time, beyond the walls, people were wasting away.'¹⁴

Seeming to burst like clouds across these sumptuous spaces, Vasconcelos's rhizomatic artworks conjured her-stories rather than his-stories, metanarratives rather than grand narratives, to rupture the continuous, progressive and teleological histories of Versailles

unfolded daily to thousands. Analogous to Gilles Deleuze's rhizome, they have no beginning or end.¹⁵ With multiple, non-hierarchical entry and exit points, they appear 'always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo',¹⁶ and able to transgress what Michel Foucault identifies as the rigid order of things in this classical episteme.¹⁷ Hence in exposing the patriarchal militarism, the subjugation of women, the ostracism of commoners and their cultures of kitsch, Vasconcelos's rhizomatic installations ultimately ruptured the official histories of Versailles.

Joana Vasconcelos Versailles, Palace of Versailles, 19 June – 30 September 2012.

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- 1 Rebecca Larmarche-Vadel, 'Interview with Joana Vasconcelos', in *Joana Vasconcelos Versailles*, exhibition catalogue, Skira Flammarion, Paris, 2012, p. 185.
- 2 *ibid.*, p. 181.
- 3 *ibid.*: 'My work has long had Versailles as a subtext; it has its natural place in this environment, it's just that my pieces are made out of everyday objects, from commonplace things, and so the essential is a game of subversion.'
- 4 *ibid.*
- 5 *ibid.*, p. 184.
- 6 *ibid.*
- 7 *ibid.*: Vasconcelos correlates this ambivalence with the ways in which protection not only incarcerated Portuguese women within the domestic sphere but also became 'a tool of emancipation'.
- 8 The ear-trumpet invented in the seventeenth century consisted of long horns, shaped as funnel-like cones, with a large opening at one end and a smaller one at the other. Sound pressure waves entering the large end were considered to be condensed into a smaller volume at the ear end to increase the audible sound pressure.
- 9 Antonia Fraser, *Love and Louis XIV: The Women in the Life of the Sun King*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 2006, pp. 144–45. Molière's rehearsals for *Alceste* were held in her apartments in November 1673; she also promoted Molière's *Tartuffe*. I thank *ma belle mère*, the late Dr Gwen Fleming, for giving me this book.
- 10 Larmarche-Vadel, *op. cit.*, p. 182.
- 11 Proverbs 21:1.
- 12 The main ones were Franco-Dutch, League of Augsburg and Spanish Succession wars.
- 13 'Coração Independente', in *Joana Vasconcelos Versailles*, exhibition catalogue, p. 24.
- 14 Larmarche-Vadel, *op. cit.*, p. 182.
- 15 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi, Continuum, London and New York, 2004.
- 16 *ibid.*, p. 23.
- 17 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences/Les Mots et les Choses: Une Archéologie des Sciences Humaines*, Pantheon Books, London/Editions Gallimard, Paris, 1970/1966.