

MUME

The Butterfly Effect: Notes for a Possible Fiction

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Sometimes it is not a question of what the visible hides but how it is that we have failed to see certain things on its surface.

Anne Anlin Cheng

I have always been interested in anecdotes that relate to each other through minor associations and resemblances. It is well known that the six degrees of separation theory; first proposed by Hungarian writer Frigyes Karinthy in 1929 has almost always proved to be true. On the contrary, the metaphor of the butterfly effect, in which a slight event can have repercussions in a major happening, has long intrigued me as a fact. Thus, [this is a story of a possible fiction, one that connects different characters through small gestures, histories and pieces of evidence that fashion a relationship between museums, dance, politics and architecture.](#)

When I learned about Laura Bragg (1881 -1978), who was the first woman Director to run a public museum in America: The Charleston Museum in South Carolina, I realized that her story was not only relevant because of her female pioneer role in an institution, but for the reason that she had developed a clandestine and keen strategy to democratize knowledge at a time of severe social segregation. Her emblematic "Bragg

Boxes" were wooden briefcases with miniature exhibitions that travelled to every public school in the city, including those schools for black students that were not allowed to enter the museum before her tenure in 1920. Thus Bragg soon understood that the travelling cases were powerful objects of knowledge that could be accessible to anyone.

As any other woman of the Progressive era, she intensified her active role as a cultural leader and her awareness regarding social biases. [Also, as a child, Bragg developed a hearing impairment that made her partially deaf, a fact that surely contributed to understand a marginalised perception of the world around her. After Charleston, she was invited to run the Berkshire Museum in Massachusetts where she continued to present the Bragg Boxes, but also anticipated exhibitions that were far advanced for the museum's agenda. One of them was Alexander Calder's first individual show in a museum in 1933, where he presented his famous wire sculptures, including the dancing figurines of Josephine Baker, the performer and actress who also became a symbol for her support to the civil rights movement.](#)

During the late twenties, Josephine Baker was at the height of fame in Europe as she popularized the Charleston dance, a version of the Foxtrot that became widespread as a distraction and entertainment after the Great War and that supposedly obtained its name from the eponymous city. It is well known that Baker did not only

embodied the 'roaring twenties' in Western society during the Jazz Age, but that she later served as a spy for the French Resistance by delivering secret information that was written with invisible ink on her musical scores. Just as Bragg, Baker understood that her privileged female position -in her case as an émigré celebrity that later adopted the french nationality- could be clandestinely used to support effective causes.

But just before Baker's role as an activist, her success during the 1920s reached the city of Vienna, with a presentation at the Johann Strauss Theater in 1928, where, unlike the great reception that she had in Paris during the *Revue Nègre*, had detractors in the press and suffered a great rejection of the conservative society, except one individual that had previously met her: the Viennese architect Adolf Loos. The renowned architect revered her to such an extent that he designed a project of a house for the *Bronze Venus*: the 'Maison Josephine Baker' to be built in Paris. Contrary to his proclamation for the rejection of ornament in architecture, The Baker House, that was never erected, would have been supposedly decorated with black and white marble stripes on the façade.

This 'exotic' pattern has been referred to as an association of Loos with his interest in the skin as a raced motive: animal, primitive or gendered. The theorist Anne Anlin Cheng describes that the "face of this house, designed to showcase this famous woman, itself embody a crisis about seeing –more

accurately, a crisis about how to see."¹ As a result, the Baker House is also an object of concealment, one that cannot be fully deciphered or interpreted. We could even argue that the façade of the Baker House bears resemblance with the dazzle ships that were painted during both Wars to confuse the enemy or to be imperceptible. Loos, just as Bragg, was also partially deaf, and thus his relationship to aurality has also been studied in relation to the Baker House and his barred pattern². From invisibility to muteness, the house that was never built becomes a mythical space, one that has no fixed place, yet it continues to reveal furtive messages.

The culmination or rather, the beginning of this story, is framed by the work of Yanieb Fabre, a Mexican artist based in Paris. Her work *Neurotique New Erotique* (2014) is set at the stairways of the Seine river in Paris. With Sigmund Freud's voice over explaining psychoanalysis, her anxious body begins to 'dance' ambiguously at the edge of the water. Fabre's video hence is a notable colophon/epigraph that encompasses not only the facts in these multiple stories (Paris as scenario of the Baker House, Freud as an émigré in Vienna and

¹ Cheng, Anne Anlin. "Skins, Tattoos, and Susceptibility." *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 98-119. doi:10.1525/rep.2009.108.1.98.

² Weizman Ines. "Tuning into the Void: The Aurality of Adolf Loos's Architecture" *Harvard Design Magazine* No. 38. <http://www.harvarddesignmagazine.org/issues/38/tuning-into-the-void-the-aurality-of-adolf-loos-architecture>

contemporaneous to Loos, as well as the sensual body related to Baker's eroticism) but to encode an invisible writing, or calligraphy –as the artist refers to, of the female body, that is again ciphered and concealed.

Note: Adolf Loos died in 1933, coinciding with Alexander Calder's exhibition at the Berkshire Museum, where the artist presented his Josephine Baker sculptures and was organized by Laura Bragg.

The Butterfly Effect: Notes for a Possible Fiction began as a personal quest to find the first female museum director in America, while I was simultaneously being invited by artist Oscar Cueto to realize an exhibition in his genuine, fictional and nomadic museum MUME – now theoretically based in his studio in Vienna. His new version of the museum, based on histories of migration and without a fixed place, was the perfect setting to replicate an itinerant “Bragg Box”, ornamented as a Baker House with a “skin” that uses the pattern of dazzle warships to contain multiple stories. The museum-studio-box-house is thus set as a *mise en abyme*, where all facts or fictions can be seen, connected, forgotten or become invisible within an imagined place.