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A Doubtful History

In a typically stupid organizational error, I neglected to put Diana Falchuk's one-night installation, *Artifact*, into last week's calendar, so in a spirit of penitence I went down to VAIN to see it. I'm glad I did. There was plenty to chew over in this meditation on layers of history and meaning.

You were greeted at the door by various languidly wandering women wearing white slip-like dresses and black boots, each one looking like something between a Yukon-gold-rush-era prostitute and Wendy from *Peter Pan*. A rather long bit of wall text explained what you were about to see (artifacts found under the sidewalk in front of the salon by a Seattle Public Utilities worker during a sewer repair job in 2001: a ratty pillowcase, a pile of hair, a bit of painted floorboard) and, for context, the relevant bits of local history.

To wit: The Vogue Hotel--current location of VAIN, formerly the Vogue, with the famous graffiti--was once the site of a brothel, and then of a transitional home for prostitutes trying to get out of the business, run in the early 20th century by a former prostitute named Annabel Notch. Notch, it is thought, maintained a secret pact with the Washington Women's Christian Temperance Union--the purity-minded group that advised not only forsaking liquor but also physical desire, with the rather counterproductive effect of sending husbands into the arms of prostitutes.

The artifacts on display--in among the salon chairs

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and mirrors and hairwashing sinks--included the floorboards, which were distressed and fragmented, with what might have been pens and what obviously were ovaries painted on them. There were letters to various archival societies, and lists of letters from a manuscript collection belonging to John G. Hooson, and a taped interview with the utilities worker who found the objects.

Here is where the history Falchuk assembled began to fall apart, in an interesting manner. The worker, when he spoke of laterals and sewers, sounded authoritative enough, but he was also agreeably digressive, delivering little tangential discourses about how his wife cuts his hair and how he doesn't like his daughter to play with trash; not a scripted work, exactly, but one with the luminous wink of fiction.

This is when the liberties that Falchuk had taken with her installation, such as current-day hairstyling tools mounted like museum specimens, took on a clearer outline. A cursory web search the next day on some key terms--"Annabel Notch," "Seattle Office of Urban Archaeology," "John G. Hooson"--turned up exactly nothing, which means that this story is either entirely invented or something Falchuk has found far beneath the level of available information. The installation wasn't perfect--it felt a little spare, and I would have liked to see it go overboard trying to prove itself, and not just through large chunks of text--but I liked the way it both appealed to my credulity and then slowly stripped it away. All history, like Falchuk's version, is ultimately mutable, subject to shifts in telling and perception; so much of it lies ignored beneath our tramping feet, waiting for someone curious enough to dig it up.

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