

RSVP  
The French Diplomat's Office  
Barbara Bloom

15 January – 20 February 2015  
Galerie Gisela Capitain St. Apenr Straße 26 Cologne 50667



A watercolor found on a flea market in Paris is apparently a rendering of some interior decorator's rendition of an office. Shall we refer to it as the *French Diplomat's Office*. It conveys that combination of modernist austerity and gilt-edged historicism that is a marker of the postwar haute monde. The anonymous artist attended carefully to rendering the fluting of the furniture legs, all the details of furnishing and decoration, except the carpet, which the artist has peculiarly depicted more abstractly. Does the carpet have quasi-geometric pattern, or is this not a patterned carpet at all, but a depiction of fallen shadows?

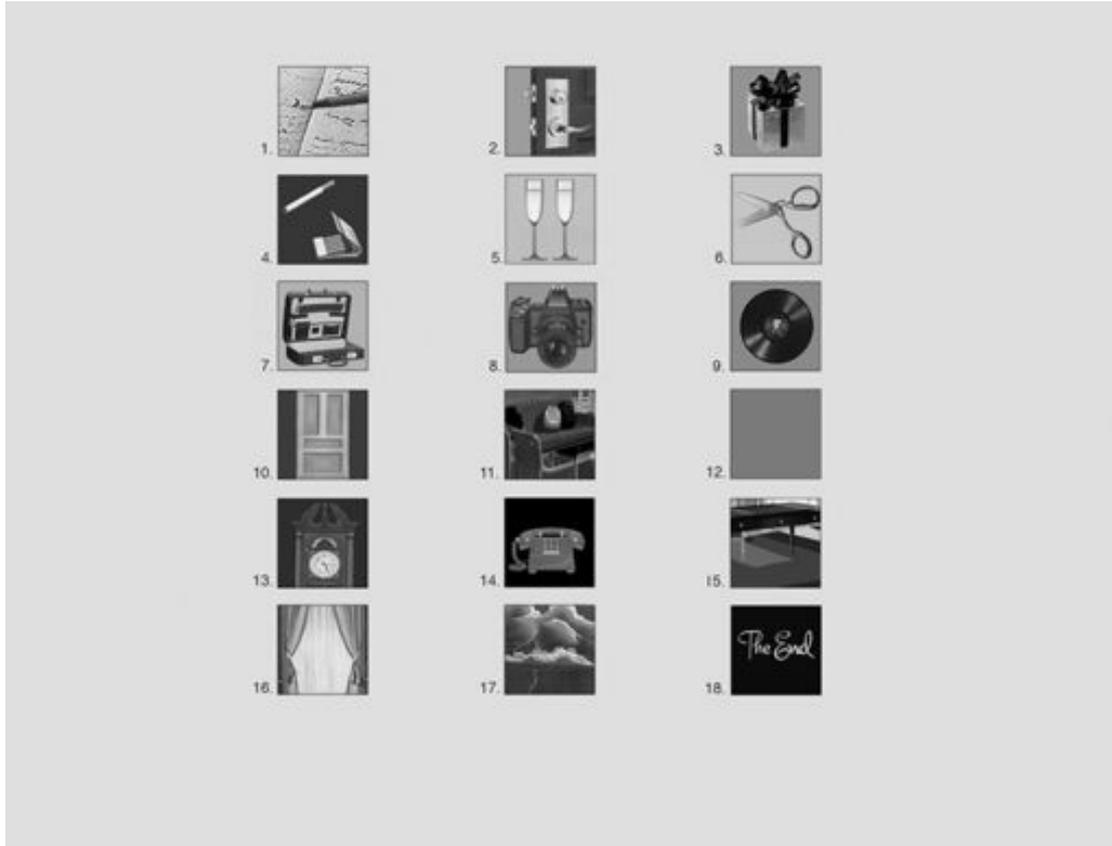
And yet, upon further reflection on the watercolor, it is obvious that shadows are impossible. If those long dark stripes were cast by the framing of the windows, surely they should not end halfway up the room without regard for physics.

The peculiar take on the experience of objects in space from this watercolor seemed to demand that the abstracted two-dimensional room become an actual room in which the carpet and walls form a setting intent on triggering some inkling of a narrative. The carpet in this room is facsimile of the one in the watercolor. It depicts an aerial view of what we see in the image with the following additions: The places where a piece of furniture would have touched the carpet are indicated by grey woven marks carved slightly into the pile. Footprints of a man and a woman have been woven and carved into the carpet, appearing near the couch – where the pair may have been involved in conversation – and walking over to a window – one follows the other, perhaps dancing a few steps, before stopping to look out together, or pausing somewhere close together. The footprints indicate some invisible narrative, some interaction that took place in this room between this fictional “French Diplomat” and an unidentified woman.



The room's walls match those of the watercolor, though the paintings have been replaced by simple rectangles of darker color, indicating the once present paintings – now removed. The only trace of the absent furnishings is now incorporated into the carpet design. We are reminded of that expression: *A drink before, and a cigarette after, are the three best things in life.*

The theatricality and suggestiveness presents us with the odd sense of a world not quite properly understood, something we could call *Visual Innuendo*. This might remind us of the Nouveau Roman, a French literary genre from the mid-20th century. This group of writers, including Alain Robbe-Grillet, rejected the novel's traditional focus on plot, action, narrative, ideas or character. They suggested a form focused on objects, and subordinating plot and character to the details of the world. In books from this period there are men and women referred to as A and B who look out windows, sip drinks on verandas, and stare despondently into space (à la Monica Vitti). Settings are described in great detail, especially the houses and rooms where stories take place. Objects, too, are evoked with intense particularity – an eraser, a chair or venetian blinds. But the people who inhabit the narratives remain much more vague implying perhaps that the author loved the blinds more than the girl.



Back cover for the CD *Soundtrack for The French Diplomat's Office*

A soundtrack for *The French Diplomat's Office* was produced as collaboration between Barbara Bloom and Christian Marclay in 1999. It is a mix of what might seem like French movie music, and sounds that could have occurred in the office, though peculiarly missing any human utterance.

Eighteen tracks of clock ticks, door latchings, champagne cork poppings, and match strikings suggest a chain of events. Like the watercolor and the room, the soundtrack presents a collection of carefully constructed details, held together by a logic that has been so abstracted from its origins as to be almost, but not quite lost.

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Semblance of a House  
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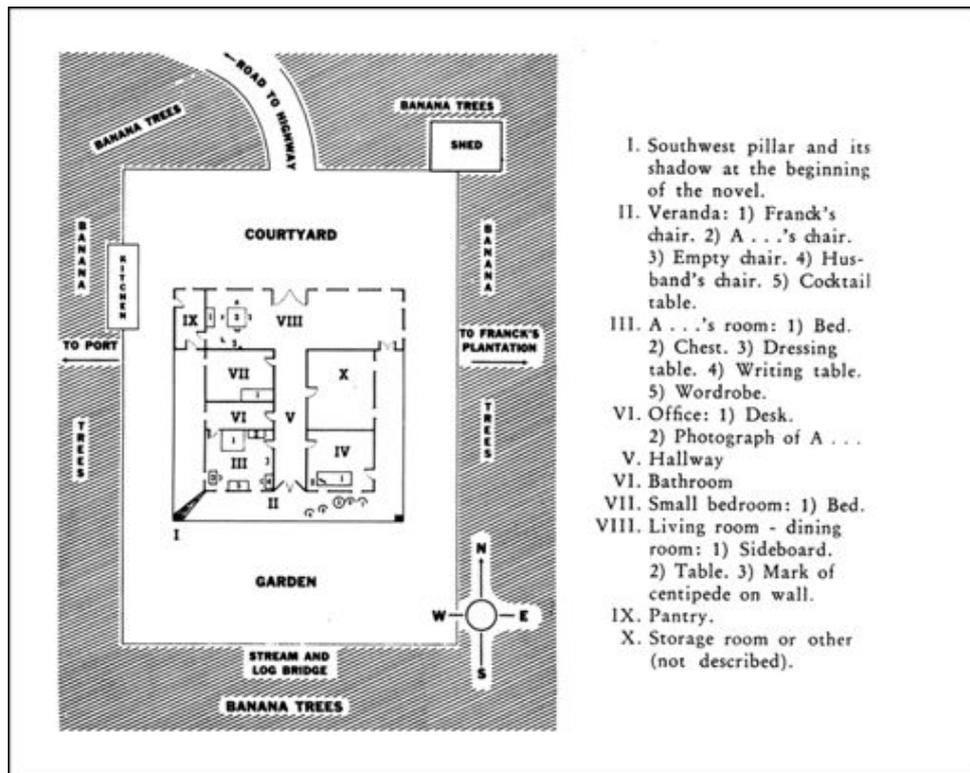


*“To take the wrong door means indeed to go against the order that presided over the plan of the house, over the layout of the rooms, over the beauty and rationality of the whole. But what discoveries are made possible for the visitor! The new path permits him to see what no one other than himself could have perceived from that angle. All the more so because I am not sure that one can enter a written work without having forced one’s own way in first.”* Edmond Jabès

For the exhibition *RSVP - Semblance of a House*, the space is filled with abstracted furniture-like forms that serve as display cases for objects. Barbara Bloom invites the visitor to experience the rooms as exhibition spaces and also as the semblance of a home – one filled with imagined historical guests grouped around a piano, toasting at a table, conversing on the sofas, browsing in the library, playing cards, etc. One might think of the exhibition as a visit to a party in this home unaffected by time and space. We can eavesdrop on conversations between improbable combinations of figures who never actually met in real life.

Each area of the residence is accompanied by open book pages with evocative written passages that suggest conversations between people including George Gershwin, Sigmund Freud, Amy Winehouse, Marcel Proust, Vladimir Nabokov, Albert Einstein, Joan Didion, Friedrich Nietzsche, Arnold Schoenberg, and many others.





Above: Map on frontispiece. Below: Text excerpted from *Jealousie*, Alain Robbe-Grillet, 1957

*“Her back to the door she has just closed, A... takes a few steps into the room, goes over to the heavy chest and opens its top drawer. She leans over and shifts the papers in the rear of the drawer. After looking a little longer, she straightens up and remains motionless, elbows close to her body, forearms bent and hidden by the upper part of her body - probably holding a sheet of paper between her hands. The paper is blue, the size of ordinary letter paper, and shows the creases where it has been folded in quarters.*

*Then holding the letter in one hand A... closes the drawer, moves towards the work table (near the second window) sitting down, she removes a sheet of pale blue paper similar to the first, but blank. She unscrews the cap of her pen, then after a glance to the window to the right, she bends her head in order to write. The pen remains suspended an inch or so above the paper.*

*Franck’s voice continues. A... encourages him from time to time by a few words indicating her attention. During a pause the sound of a glass being put down on the little table can be heard.*

*A... is writing, sitting at the table near the first window. Actually, she is getting ready to write, unless she has just finished a letter. The pen remains suspended an inch or so above the paper. Her face is raised towards the calendar hanging on the wall. Between this first window and the second, there is just room enough for a large wardrobe. A..., who is standing beside it, is therefore visible only from the third window, the one that overlooks the west gable end. It is a mirrored wardrobe.*

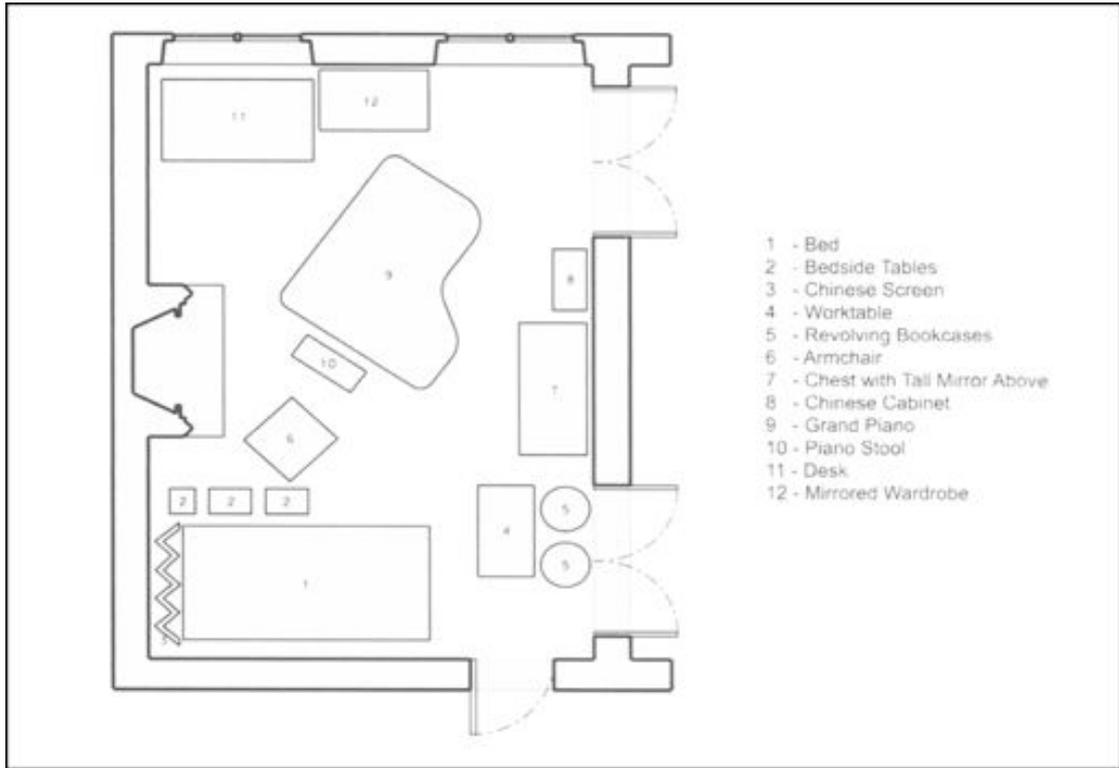


Diagram of Marcel Proust's bedroom

In Proust's bedroom, the clutter left little space for maneuvering. His mother's worktable blocked easy access to the bookcases, her grand piano was pushed so close to the wardrobe that its door were never opened. From the fortified corner of his bed, Proust could monitor all three of the room's entranceways and the two windows, assuming a position of defense against threshold and aperture.

*"There is ground for taking the house as a tool for analysis of the human soul... Not only our memories, but the things we have forgotten are "housed." Our soul is an abode. And by remembering "houses" and "rooms," we learn to "abide" within ourselves." Gaston Bachelard*

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