

QJMN

INTIMACY EXPOSED Toilet, Bathroom, Restroom Edited by Javier Fernández Contreras and Roberto Zancan

ISSUE I

SPOT ON

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INTIMACY EXPOSED



The Alte Fabrik in the Swiss town of Rapperswil was virtually predestined for an exhibition on the subject of toilets. This building, now a cultural center, housed Geberit AG's first major production facility. The company is known not only in Switzerland but throughout Europe and beyond as a sanitary technology group that is now active worldwide. It can be traced back to the Gebert family from Rapperswil and Albert Gebert, who commissioned this old factory, the "Alte Fabrik".

Back in 1905, the Geberts succeeded in manufacturing the first lead-lined wooden cisterns. The *à Phoenix*, which was protected by the Imperial Patent Office in 1912, was produced for several decades, with subsequent innovations that significantly improved toilet flushing. The importance of reliable toilet flushing can hardly be overestimated to this day. Few people have never found themselves in the unpleasant situation of being confronted with someone else's "business" in a toilet (à Florian Bühler, *Abort*, 2019). This is precisely where fear of the other emerges, as Ruth Barcan notes: "When I hear of people afraid to touch a tap, I think less of real germs than of the fear of the other" (101). This physical contact is just one of the many complexes and sensitive relationships with and in this place. The toilet is a multi-layered cultural form in which psychology, medicine, sociology, architecture, design, and technology are intertwined. In the *Spot on* exhibition, the toilet stands out as a metaphor and interface for the inside and the outside, the visible and the invisible. What was just an invisible part of

the human being turns into something disgusting: a visible excretion in the toilet bowl, to be immediately ejected and disappear into the sewer pipe and the sewage system. The toilet brings the inside of a person—her or his biology and psyche—into contact with the outside, their environment, the architecture. Moreover, it is connected to the underground via the invisible sewage system.

The use of a toilet can thus also be understood as a moment of transfer: on the one hand as an interface between the visible and the invisible in our society, and on the other hand, as a precarious psychological moment.

More than 50 years ago, Alexander Kira's study *The Bathroom* (102) showed that the normal posture used in the West for defecation is harmful to our health. Yet the design of the toilet and the associated posture has hardly changed since then. "Toilets resist change," notes Harvey Molotch in the Introduction to *Toilet: Public Restrooms and the Politics of Sharing* (103), because the designers of toilets plan for them to be hidden: the toilet is also a taboo for architects. This tabooing of human excretion, a relatively recent phenomenon, has advanced hand in hand with modernization. Using the toilet, theories of modernization can be questioned as theories of progress. Toilets with flushing water existed as early as 3000 BC, and in the Roman Empire, there were even latrines with underfloor heating and marble seats. In the Middle Ages, however, they were dispensed with and the urge for relief shifted to the street. According to Norbert Elias (104), the tabooing of the excretory functions has had something to do with the process of civilization since the 18th century, i.e., in step with changes in



social structures. In *Purity and Danger* (105), Mary Douglas argues that dirt is what society defines as such in order to maintain order.

At the level of the individual as well, the toilet represents a psychologically critical moment. One has to deal with one's own body and its uncontrollable expressions, as well as those of other people. As soon as the excretion is ejected, it is no longer considered to belong to the body. It stands for an encounter with the repressed and the threat of non-influencable transformation.

A key work of the exhibition is Sarah Lucas' sculpture *The Old In Out* (1998). In this work, the toilet, a potentially disgusting object, becomes an extremely attractive sculpture cast from polyurethane. This was originally part of an installation consisting of nine toilets. The ordinary becomes elegant here, as is so often the case in Lucas' work. The English expression "the old in-out" has both sexual and—in this case—scatological connotations. It reminds one of foods and liquids that enter the body and are expelled as excretion. The transparency of the sculpture also points to what flows through the body. The toilet motif is repeated in the work of Lucas, one of the major representatives of Abject Art. This feminist art movement deals with abjection, things that trigger disgust or phobias. With Lucas, toilets stand for mortality, self-destructive instincts, and abusive attitudes towards the female body.

102 Alexander Kira, *The Bathroom* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1966). 103 Molotch, Harvey, Laura Noren, eds, *Toilet: Public Restrooms and the Politics of Sharing* (New York: NYU Press, 2010). 104 Elias, Norbert, *The Civilizing Process, Vol.I. The History of Manners* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), 224–236. 105 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (New York: Praeger, 1966).

The Old In-Out is also reminiscent of the most famous toilet in art history, Duchamp's 1917 *Readymade Fountain*. On the one hand, the aesthetic exaggeration of the object, the toilet bowl or urinal, is achieved by *Fountain*, through the title and in *The Old In-Out*, the material and the design. On the other hand, the toilet is visible in both works as a gender-specific object. The urinal was ultimately not approved for exhibition by the Society of Independent Artists in New York in 1917 because above all, it was deemed not suitable to be presented to the female exhibition visitors. This gendered connotation is particularly interesting against the background of *Fountain* for Marcel Duchamp and also for a woman, Dada artist Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. Several art historians have provided credible evidence for this thesis in recent years. Glyn Thompson, for example, showed that the urinal was not in fact made by J.L. Mott Iron Works, as Duchamp claimed in the 1960s (in an interview with Otto Hahn: "Mutt came from Mott's"), (106) but by Trenton Potteries Co. Given that *Fountain* was sent to the Society from Philadelphia, and Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven was living there at the time, her authorship seems to be entirely plausible. Somewhat more daring is the interpretation of R. Mutt's signature as a reference to "mother"—the baroness came from Germany—or the statement that when turned 180 degrees, the urinal reminds one of a uterus. In response to these research results, ten artists—Anna Artaker, Julia Bodamer, Lily Cursed, Lotte Meret Effinger, Julia Kälin, Quintessa Matranga, Victorine Müller, Sereina Steinemann, Vanessa Thill and Addie Wagenknecht—were invited to pay homage to Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven's *Fountain* to complement the umpteen homages to Marcel Duchamp's

Fountain and playfully capture the possibility of female authorship for this famous artwork. Posing the question, *Où sont les toilettes s'il vous plaît?* (2018), Bethan Huws pays an important tribute to Duchamp as well. Huws has been reflecting on Duchamp's work since 1999 and enriches the research about him with her own interpretation. In particular, at the linguistic level, titles, puns, ideograms and symbols have attracted her attention, along with Duchamp himself. The social environment in Duchamp's time was shaped by World War I (to which the Dada movement reacted): upheavals and revolutions, modernizations and industrialized production. This shows in a work like *Fountain*, as well as in the question of the relationship between art and industrial production that generally arises (107). The avant-garde of modernism was interested in technological modernization at the beginning of the 20th century, not as the standard bearer of this modernity but as its critic. It aestheticized modernity and showed that the ideology of progress was absurd and deceptive. Sewage systems and bathrooms have been shaped by this ideology of modernity and progress, like other areas of architecture. This aspect has been visualized in the series *Ideal Standard* (2015) by Noha Mokhtar & Gregor Huber. Their photographic investigation of facades in the broader sense tracks down political ideologies and shows how they are manifested in architectural and domestic objects like the stacked toilets photographed by Mokhtar in Egypt in 2015. But wouldn't it be equally plausible if these toilets had been photographed in the USA in the 1960s? The words of Molotch come to mind: "Toilets resist change". (108) In 1966, Alexander Kira published *The Bathroom*. (109) This study was to the bathroom what

106 Hahn, Otto, "Passport No. G255300 [Interview with Marcel Duchamp]." *Art and Artists*, vol. 1, no. 4, July 1966, 7–11. 107 Boris Groys, "On Art Activism," *e-flux journal*, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/56/60343/on-art-activism/>, last accessed September 5th, 2022.

the Kinsey Reports of 1953 were to the realm of sexuality: the first comprehensive scientific investigation of a social taboo. In view of the social upheavals at the end of the 1960s, it is not surprising that the first edition in 1966 contains schematic drawings and images of clothed bodies instead of photographs of naked people, which changed for the second edition, published in 1976. Perhaps the interdisciplinary Fluxus group of artists, built around George Maciunas on the issue of architecture and design issues, was inspired by Kira's study to formulate suggestions for alternative toilet designs that were not meant to be very serious (110). The Fluxus ideas in the 1970s, like at the design competition for the toilet of the future launched by Geberit AG in 1989, show that it is not that easy to design a "better" toilet. How design and technical solutions have changed over the last hundred years and the arguments used to sell the products sold to men (and less often to women) is illustrated by the wallpaper featuring Geberit advertisements and product information since the 1920s.

The design of sanitary appliances is in itself a challenge for private spaces. The task becomes even more complex when it comes to public toilet facilities. Only here are the taboos associated with the toilet completely broken down. Here, the boundaries between public and private become blurred, and psychological and social mechanisms of oppression become visible. Several works in the exhibition address the toilet as a social space with certain rules of behavior and a strict communication system. Public toilets are a particularly sensitive issue, as shown by the absurd discussions fueled by Donald Trump about transgender and gender-neutral toilets in recent years, because

they are gendered places. Jaanus Samma has been examining public men's toilets for several years. *The Readymade Divider* (2017) takes a central position in this area of his work. The three partition walls create—in the exhibition space as well—a stage on which a social theater takes place. They focus on contacts in the sphere of the urinal and the associated uncertainties. Samma's collages entitled *Study of a Toilet* (2016–2018) focus on overlooked objects with an unusual combination of historical ornaments and motifs, as well as everyday objects from toilets. The collages elevate these objects and expose their misguided tabooing.

Julie Verhoeven is a master at addressing taboo subjects with ease and humor in her art. In 2016, she transformed a public toilet facility as part of Frieze Projects at the London Fair into an immersive work of art called *The Toilet Attendance... Now Wash Your Hands*. She decorated the room, developed an ambient fragrance and played music mixed with digestive noises.

As a toilet attendant, Verhoeven sold toilet props such as pile of shit emojis made from velvet (customers were allowed to pay as much as they wanted), and engaged her toilet users in conversation. With her performances she drew attention to the precarious working conditions of the mostly female toilet attendants. As seen in the video *Now Wash Your Hands* (2016), she encountered various toilet taboos without fear of contact: menstruation, sex, excretions, drugs, and smells. In the video, the toilet attendants almost become psychologists who strike up conversations amongst themselves and with others on issues such as gender, disgust and hygiene.



The message, “Now wash your hands” is followed by *Vos mains ne présentent maintenant plus de risque* (2019) by Johana Blanc. Various subtly pronounced instructions for action on the toilet such as the request to wash one’s hands or automatic flushing are intended to ensure that the toilet remains a bacteria-free precinct. Johana Blanc pursues such instructions on a verbal level. She condenses found requests to wash hands into poetic texts, which she applies manually by hand in lettering. This “contaminated” script implicitly refers to the contamination that one wishes to counter with hand washing. The soaps by Isabelle Krieg, Sonja Duò-Meyer, Mickry 3, Marlies Pekarek and TOILETPAPER are also linked to this topic and expand it in various directions. Soaps are multi-layered through their material. They have a special aesthetics and feel (one is inevitably reminded of Lucas’ *The Old In-Out*) and, last but not least, they also refer to cleansing with soap as a global cultural technique. As objects midway between art and design, they enjoy great popularity.

Toilets are not only connected or related to bacteria. Standardized behavior is also expected here. Quantitatively-dosed soap dispensers, self-closing taps and timed hand dryers are the most harmless signs of this expectation. Steven Pippin defied this in his work, *The Continued Saga of an Amateur Photographer, dripping with English humor* (1993). He turned a train toilet into a camera obscura on a trip from London to Brighton. A video documents his actions, his performance, the way he exposes, develops, and fixes the photographic paper. Is the toilet becoming a viewing machine or is Pippin’s work more a self-portrait? This reversal of perspectives is manifested



as one of the leitmotifs of the exhibition in two other works, Daniel Eatock’s *Toilet Paper* (2019) and Andreas Slominski’s *Cap* (2016). Both play with the bourgeois habit of hiding toilet paper in a witty way. But what is actually said about us in the fact that we equip toilet paper roll holders with mirrors so that we can see ourselves while we are sitting on the toilet (Florian Bühler, *Wandstück I*, 2017)?

The *Stoned in the Bathroom* installation by Jérôme Nager and Timéa Schmidt, from the Interior Architecture Department at HEAD–Genève, returns to the fact that deviant behavior in

public toilets is not tolerated. Fluorescent lighting indicates a form of social and political oppression of marginalized groups in this place. These lights were installed in Swiss toilets at the beginning of the 1990s to make it impossible for drug addicts to see their veins and to ban them from these places. An essay by Nager follows the history of this lighting, and a sound track complements the installation with noises from the interior of the toilet technology. A transportation box indicates that the installation could be set up elsewhere at any time.

To close the circle—we remember questions of technology, design, and architecture in the haze of the toilet—we dare to suggest an allegory between the inside of the body and the inside of architecture with two works. Firstly, Jan Sebesta’s work *Slepenec* (2019), which invites one to carry one of the four yellow tube or worm-like parts on

the body. One can and should reach into these objects to activate a loudspeaker that makes digestive noises. Here, the proximity of infrastructure and body is not only visible, but can also be experienced.

Finally, *Kanalvideo* by Fischli//Weiss (1992) takes us on a hypnotic journey through the “guts” of the city of Zurich. The tracking shot is a cinematographic readymade of the sewage system. The artists assembled film material created by the urban drainage department and processed it with colored grids. Fischli//Weiss’ preference for the repressed, the mundane, and the seemingly banal shows itself literally on the surface and is transformed. *Kanalvideo* can also be read as an ironic commentary on Switzerland, which is known for its cleanliness.