



Rooster Gallery
Contemporary Art
190 Orchard Street
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roostergallery.com

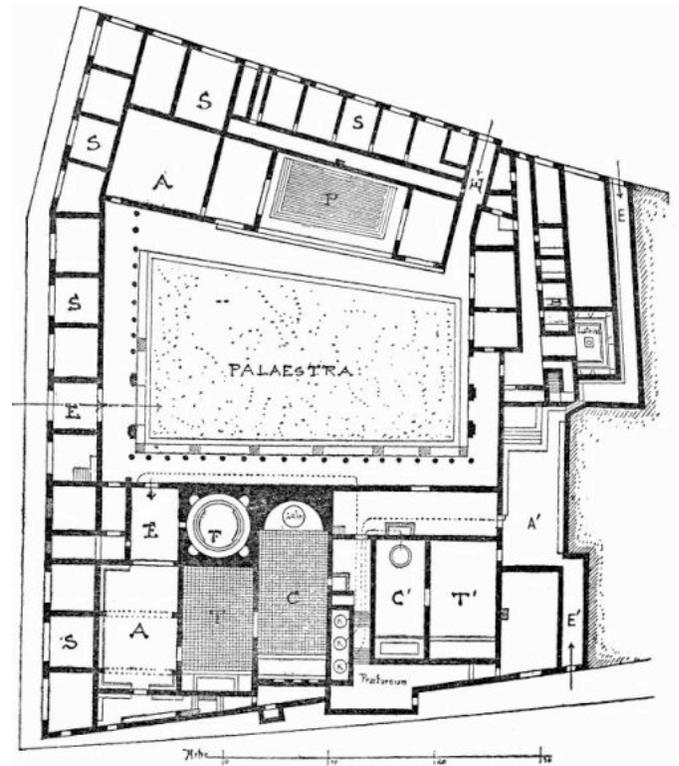
THE BATHROOM Project Space

“Then came the time for the evening visit to the toilet, for which, in all likelihood, you had waited, all atremble, all day.”

— Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago: 1918-1956*

A bathroom is one of the most recognizable spaces. Whether at home or in a public place, once you enter such a space, the message emanating from all its elements and objects leaves no doubt as to its function. The tiles, the toilet and the roll of paper next to it, the washbasin and the soap, the bathtub or the shower, all contribute to the idea of an arena where scatological functions and hygienic ablutions take place. Because of its fundamental but distinctive purpose, this is a space where social gatherings do not often take place, at least from a contemporary perspective.

The notion of a place where cleansing rituals are performed is not recent; it can be traced as far back as 3000 B.C. In the Indus Valley city of Mohenjo-daro, archeological findings prove the existence of lavatories and Western-style toilets. But, the Roman public baths – one of the best-documented ancestors of modern bathrooms – were invested with a deeper meaning as regards human gathering and socialization. The *thermae* were, in fact, elite stages for the exchange of ideas and political plotting, and are often mentioned in Roman literature or written accounts of the period (Seneca, Pliny the Younger, Varro, Cicero¹...). In his *De architectura*, Vitruvius discusses the concept and design of these amenities, further attesting to their importance in Roman day-to-day life². At the height of the Empire, the *thermae* even incorporated libraries or theaters, evidence of their cultural importance.



The Stabian Baths at Pompeii in *De Architectura* by Vitruvius

Spas may have retained the social and therapeutic character of the Roman public baths. However, the concept of bathroom was born from the baths' decline after they came to be viewed as a potential health threat and water came to be considered a disease carrier. The idea of the bathroom as a private room began gaining prominence, and in the 20th century became a fundamental part of any living space. Strict rules governing such facilities as well as rules of conduct governing their users developed, partly based on notions of education and hygiene (more or less universal, despite cultural differences), but also based on the introduction of new accessories specifically created to make users' experience more convenient and pleasurable.

This is also true of bathrooms located in public spaces – such as a gallery. They are there to serve the physiologic needs of gallery staff, artists and visitors alike. In a gallery layout, bathrooms are usually inaccessible or, at least, hidden from the public eye in order not to have direct “contact” with the space where art is on display. Such is the case with Rooster Gallery's bathroom.

In 1975, Brian O'Doherty, in his three seminal Artforum articles, stated that galleries are “constructed along laws as rigorous as those for building a medieval church³” and that the objective of such rules is that “The outside world must not come in.⁴” ...or the “inside” world, for that matter. The work of art is thus isolated inside the white cube, and flushing sounds or repulsive smells should not or cannot disturb the art's “sacrosanct” existence. Unless these “threats” are part of the work itself...

In “Ladies And Gents – Public Toilets And Gender,” the editors Olga Gershenson and Barbara Penner had invited several authors to expand the debate surrounding bathrooms. The book included essays on gender and segregation, design and architecture, cultural representation and art. In the foreword, the editors state that after issuing a “Call for Papers,” despite enthusiastic support by some, “Others said that [their] project was an immoral, even scatological, perversion and a waste of public funds.⁵”



The original *Fountain* by Marcel Duchamp, 1917, photographed by Alfred Stieglitz at 291 Art Gallery

It is not Rooster's intent to generate such an acrimonious argument, although this is certainly not beyond the realm of possibility. Instead, THE BATHROOM Project Space is intended to focus attention on the validity of a space to display works of art, the ability of the space to generate new approaches resulting from the problems it raises – whether typological or artistic – and to change the viewers' perceptions. No doubt it will generate humorous banter, just as Marcel Duchamp's 1917 ready-made “Fountain” did when it started a serious debate regarding the authenticity of a work of art and challenged the preconceptions of his fellow members of the Society of Independent Artists.

Hence, THE BATHROOM Project Space is born of the desire to broaden the gallery's continuing multidisciplinary dialogue, but also out of need. Rooster's limited area would only allow this project to take place in the gallery's bathroom, an unusually large room relative to the rest of the premises. The invited artists or curators will confront a black room with low ceilings and dim lighting, thus obliging them to develop their projects in a clever way, as clever as reorienting a urinal 90 degrees from its normal position of use.

As Kathy Battista pertinently states, "The curious proliferation of toilets and related infrastructure is an abiding element of contemporary art."⁶ Such is also true with regard to bathrooms as an art space. The concept is neither new nor revolutionary and Rooster Gallery does not claim authorship. Other such experiments have taken place throughout the 20th century, most notably and praiseworthy – Gracie Mansion's Loo Division, whose uncanny experiment was not uncanny at all, if one takes into account the period – 1980s – and the place – East Village:



Gracie Mansion's Loo Division, circa 1982

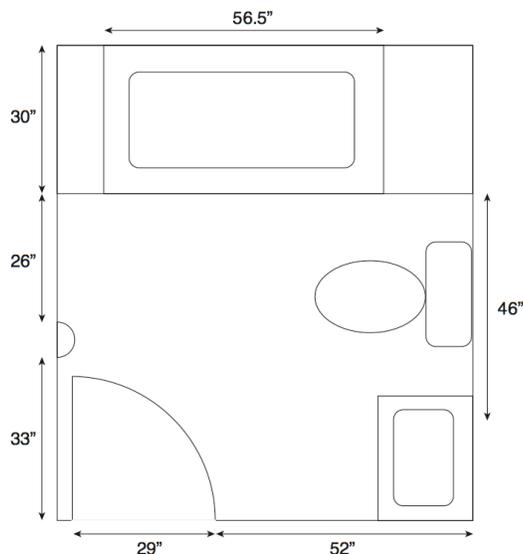
"It seemed to be a time of no limitations. Everything was possible; more than that, it was probable. Around this time, I started using the name Gracie Mansion. In my fifth-floor walk-up, with a bathtub in the kitchen and a tiny room for the loo, I had hung a selection of photographs that Timothy Greathouse had given me. In 1982, I offered to present them in the loo. He loved the idea, and I set about designing a letterhead for the new Gracie Mansion Gallery, Loo Division. The press release had

the show running for one night, with access “by appointment” for the rest of the month—one-at-a-time viewing in an intimate setting.⁷”

Although Rooster Gallery’s presented projects may not necessarily run for a whole month, THE BATHROOM will be somewhat similar to Gracie Mansion’s Loo Division in its *modus operandi*. It will not be by appointment but by a “can I please use your bathroom?” type of approach. No press releases or invitations will be sent; those who inquire about the projects will always have to go through this process. The threshold resistance usually felt when going to a gallery or when talking with its staff will now be called into question. The viewing process, that in itself bears an element of risk, consequently becomes a sociological experiment in normative behaviors:

Public vs. Private
White cube vs. Black cube
Curiosity vs. Repulsion
Mind vs. Body
Stability vs. Precariousness
Function vs. Use
Sacred vs. Profane

All this will be under debate every time a new site-specific project is installed in THE BATHROOM Project Space.



THE BATHROOM Project Space, Rooster Gallery, 2014

“How relieved, how eased, the whole world suddenly became! How the great questions all simplified themselves at the same instant---did you feel it?”⁸

¹ “Cicero wrote that ‘the gong that announced the opening of the public baths each day was a sweeter sound than the voices of the philosophers in their school’.” in MITHEN, S., *Thirst – Water and Power in the Ancient World*, Harvard University Press, 2012, p.127.

² VITRUVIUS, “Book V - Baths” in *De Architectura*, translated by Prof. Morris Hicky Morgan, Harvard University Press, 1914, p.157.

³ O’DOHERTY, B., “I. Notes on the Gallery Space” in *Inside The White Cube – The ideology of the Gallery Space*, University of California Press, 1999, p.15.

⁴ O’DOHERTY, B., “I. Notes on the Gallery Space” in *Inside The White Cube – The ideology of the Gallery Space*, University of California Press, 1999, p.15.

⁵ GERSHENSON, O., PENNER, B., “Introduction: The Private Life of Public Conveniences” in *Ladies And Gents – Public Toilets And Gender*, edited by Olga Gershenson and Barbara Penner, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 2009, p.2.

⁶ BATTISTA, K., “Toilet Training – Sarah Lucas’s Toilets and the transmogrification of the body” in *Ladies And Gents – Public Toilets And Gender*, edited by Olga Gershenson and Barbara Penner, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 2009, p.178.

⁷ MANSION, G., East Side Story: Remembering the 1980s East Village Art Scene, March 20th 2013, www.artnet.com

⁸ SOLZHENITSYN, A., *The Gulag Archipelago: 1918-1956*

