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Modern Plumbing

Alexandra Midal

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Alexandra Midal HEAD HES-SO
Modern Plumbing

“The bathroom is part of our brain, contributing to the unique growth of the individual mind.”

Richard Buckminster Fuller

The two visuals chosen for communication relating to the symposium that brought us together, *Intimacy Exposed. Toilet Bathroom, Restroom*, raised questions. The call for projects was launched with a photograph showing two series of urinals placed on either side of a room with yellow walls and a black and white checkered floor. Rather than signifying the necessary diversity of toilets, the choice fell on the urinal, an exclusively male device, as if it were the synecdoche of the toilet and by extension, of the bathroom. This presupposition betrays the masculine predominance that governs the production of spaces, and toilets.

Secondly, a photograph was circulated to announce the symposium, and what did it show? Two young women, students from the Interior Architecture Department, dressed in a swimming costume, facing the lens. As a preamble, I asked myself how and why these two students posed in this outfit in front of a photographer’s lens. And then I wondered about what this political and aesthetic choice was meant to state. Finally, I tried to understand what relationship this cliché had with the issue of intimacy and toilets ?

Might it be the feminine counterpart to the previous image, showing two rows of five urinals? How might we analyse this scopophilic scene? A scene in which two young female students, backs to the wall, as in mugshots taken by the police, are reified. They look like objects of contemplation in a scene that highlights the contemporaneity of the thesis outlined in the seminal analysis developed almost fifty years ago by Laura Mulvey and Margarita Jimenez¹. Aren’t we again facing the concept of the “paradox of phallogentrism”, sometimes subconscious, made famous by Mulvey in her seminal essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”?

Clearly, by questioning the choices underlying the way *Intimacy Exposed. Toilet Bathroom, Restroom* was communicated, our introduction may seem controversial, but that is not our intention. It aims

¹ Laura Mulvey (1989) “The Spectacle is Vulnerable: Miss World, 1970” in: *Visual and Other Pleasures. Language, Discourse, Society*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2009. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-19798-9_1

to demonstrate, if need be, that the issue that brings us together today is political, and that it is essential that we examine it. Choosing pictures of urinals and scantily clad young women obviously raises questions about the prevalence of unchallenged masculinity and about the decorative status in which women are circumscribed, considered as the decorative elements of intimacy². With *Modern Plumbing*, our aim is to relate, through the small lens of plumbing, certain scattered events steeped in an ever-present form of androcentrism.

Obviously, this may appear as a reference to Marcel Duchamp's urinal which he acquired in a shop, and the bidet that Le Corbusier took from an industrial sanitaryware catalogue³. The architect chose a photograph of a violin-shaped bidet by Maison Pirsoul and published it in *L'Esprit Nouveau* in 1923-1924, six years after Duchamp sent *Fountain*, a white earthenware urinal produced by J. L. Mott Iron Works, to the Society of Independent Artists' exhibition in 1917⁴. Alongside the urinal that "furnishes the public domain⁵" and collects urine, the bidet furnishes the home and cleans secretions. Urinals, bidets and toilets fall within the scope of "pipework" both literally and figuratively. They are part of the vast project of "domestic Taylorism⁶" driven by women proto-

² In the domestic space, this split responds to the idea of the feminine as "angelic", praised by poets such as Coventry Patmore in *The Angel in the House* (1854) and repeated in specialist works focusing on the education of young women or "angels in the house" as John Ruskin calls them, for whom benevolent wives must pool their efforts to create an emotionally and psychologically serene environment for their exhausted husbands. At the end of the 19th century, in England, the founding fathers of design gave women a mission, i.e. to build a shelter to protect their husbands from the tribulations and evils to which the modern city subjected them.

³ In *Privacy and Publicity* (1996), Beatriz Colomina combines these two mass media images of the bidet and the urinal by placing one above the other. See also Beatriz Colomina and Mark Wigley, *Toilet Architecture: An Essay about the Most Psychosexually Charged Room in a Building*, Pin-Up N. 23, Fall Winter 2017/18. <https://pinupmagazine.org/articles/toilet-modern-architecture#17>

⁴ *Fountain* went from product to work of art with the addition of the signature "R. Mutt" on the front left, above the handwritten year "1917". The year did not indicate the year of production of the urinal, but its deliberate artistic appropriation and its display in an artistic event. It also owed this new status to Alfred Stieglitz's photographing of it. Indeed, *Fountain* was not on display at the American Society of Independent Artists: supposedly it had been lost behind a partition for the duration of the event. It then met its destiny by constructing its fantastically modern, mass-media legend through Stieglitz's photograph, which was first published in *The Blind Man*, the avant-garde magazine that Duchamp co-edited, and where it appeared in front of a plant signed with the photographer's name. For his part, Le Corbusier took the Picoul violin-shaped bidet and in turn published it. The public discovered it in the pages of his magazine *L'Esprit Nouveau*, then in the pages of *L'Art décoratif d'aujourd'hui* in 1925, where it served as the opening to the chapter entitled *Autres Icônes Les Musées*. For Le Corbusier, its presence justified the condemnation of the arbitrariness of which he accused museums and which he dismissed in favour of "real" museums, which, according to him, were exhaustive, brought together all the objects of life and erased all separation between art and everyday life.

⁵ Fanny Beaupré, Roger-Henri Guerrand, *Le Confident des dames : le bidet du XVIIe au XXe siècle. Histoire d'une intimité*, Québec, Les Éditions du Bien Public, 1997, p. 124

⁶ Paulette Bernège, *Si les femmes faisaient les maisons*, Paris: Mon Chez Moi, 1928.

designers who worked towards the invention of a rational organisation of the home, and of the history of design and architecture.

- The virtues of waste

This was the case of Paulette Bernège, director of the publishing house *Mon Chez Moi* and president of the League for Household Efficiency who tracked down examples of useless work carried out by women in the household, including “saboteur stairways”, “‘tiring’ materials” and above all “vampire distances” that suck the energy spent by the housewives’ untimely comings and goings: “I call ‘vampires’ these poorly studied distances that drain human forces⁷”. In so doing, Bernège pleaded for a civilisation of pipework that linked chimneys to the human body, and radiators to waste water, and she surrounded her statements with drawings interspersed throughout her essay entitled *Si les femmes faisaient les maisons* (If Women Made Houses, 1928). Her way with words echoed those finely crafted by her model, American professor of household science and contributor to the magazine *The Designer* between 1920 and 1929, Christine Isobel Campbell Frederick. Bernège made her work known in France as early as 1915, and Frederick found in Bernège her alter ego, the European pioneer in the teaching of “modern scientific household management⁸” and the science of domesticity for women. The celebration of this domestic and scientific conception gained momentum and echoed a timid recognition of the importance of women⁹ in American society, while it remained almost non-existent in Europe.

A theorist of domestic life, Frederick invented the concept of “creative loss”, an economic notion according to which consumption, the driving force of the nation, must favour waste and loss. By following a transformation circuit similar to organic digestion, the economy reproduces the circulation of food ingested by the human body until it is excreted. With this notion Frederick asserted the importance of the body. Initially published by the Butterick Publishing Company and in *The Ladies’ Home Journal*, “creative loss” emerged as the capitalist and consumerist expression of

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.13.

⁸ Christine Frederick, *Selling Mrs. Consumer*, New York, The Business Bourse, 1939, p. 284-285.

⁹ For more about this question, see Alexandra Midal, *Design by Accident, For a New History of Design*, Berlin & London, Sternberg, 2019.

the rational organisation of the body and the household as applied to the economy and society. The development of this notion was seen as a progressive act that developed, according to the analysis of Ellen Lupton and Jack Abbott Miller in *The Bathroom, the Kitchen, and the Aesthetics of Waste: A Process of Elimination*¹⁰ in the late 1990s, into an ethos of the disposable. The oxymoron “creative loss” highlighted the redeeming role and culture of waste, and propelled it into the highest spheres of morality. The importance of this analogy between body and society, in order to function well, aimed at destruction which ensured a form of renewal. Above all, Lupton and Miller demonstrated how rationalisation was the product of the double obsession of modern America fascinated by the avalanche of new products and the plethora of diets that promised to reshape your body to your liking. This is why American consumers celebrated with euphoria the principles of planned obsolescence which served the idea of an economy engaged in a cycle where goods are continually ingested, digested and expelled, only to be absorbed again, all under the guise of an aesthetics of fluidity where the digestive system, nature and culture, home and the economy merge. A similar apology for fluidity was advocated by all the designers of the Streamline movement, the first modern American design movement, one of whose most important figures, Norman Bel Geddes, demonstrated its benefits in his design, as in *Magic Motorways* (1940), his work that addressed the country’s highways.

- Eugenics in the bathroom

To support their demonstration, Lupton and Miller focused on the importance of modern plumbing in circulating water and wastewater in cities, and on the mobility of toilets and pots, the original portable objects that gradually became fixed¹¹ and spatialised in the household. This ground installation gave rise to the functionalisation of a place then assigned to ablutions and body care. From objects, these items of furniture became industrial enamelled porcelain equipment for the modern bathroom. Their easily washable white surface was meant to reflect the simple, pure and hygienic white order and other Law of Ripolin that appeared at the turn of the 20th century. As Cristina Cogdell pointed out in *Eugenic Design*¹², the intertwining of Bel Geddes and eugenics forged an association where excess flirted with an ideology that merged with Streamline and also found its

¹⁰ Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller, *The Bathroom, The Kitchen, and the Aesthetic of Waste*, New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 1996

¹¹ See Baupré and Guerrand, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

¹² Christina Cogdell, *Eugenic Design Streamlining America in the 1930s*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004

defenders in Henry Dreyfuss and Raymond Loewy, who claimed its moral expression and hoped to select objects as well as bodies, thus transforming them according to their aerodynamic industrial design with pure, streamlined lines, in order to save society. Reflecting their functionalist obsession, the Streamline designers thought they were working to improve the human race. Moving thus from the body to comfort to the organisation of the household demonstrated the disruptions that sometimes accompanied the rise of progress and its ideological objectives, which were often nauseating in terms of scientific performance¹³.

While this concept spread to the interior and to the bathroom, constituting both its paradigm and its demonstration, the Modern Movement aimed to establish a regime of cleanliness that was meant to reflect the ideal of fluidity of continuous production applied in assembly lines in factories. For Lupton and Miller again, these standards of personal and household hygiene, from the kitchen to the bathroom, accompanied health and hygienic reforms and exceeded the requirements of architectural rationalism: “the functional ‘need’ for clean bodies and clean houses has fed the culture of consumption, by mapping out the human and architectural body as a marketplace for an endlessly regenerating inventory of products¹⁴.”

To demonstrate the popularity of the discourse on the virtue of the fluidity of the body, Cogdell illustrated her point with a reproduction of X-ray photographs showing the itinerary of the breakfast according to John Harvey Kellogg in 1918. She also presented a 1937 advertisement for Petrolagar laxatives extolling the benefits of an ideal intestinal transit where excrement, much like in a train

¹³ In 1939, Geddes was not the only industrial designer to promote eugenics, the body and design. Vogue magazine invited nine all-male industrial designers, Walter Dorwin Teague, Donald Deskey, Raymond Loewy, Henry Dreyfuss, Egmont Arens and George Sakier, to design the garment for the “Woman of the Future” as part of its special issue devoted to the New York International Exhibition, whose theme *The World of Tomorrow* explored future scenarios. The Loewy-designed dress appeared on the cover of the magazine, worn by a woman whose body in profile was turned towards the future. Although focusing primarily on her clothes and accessories, the streamline designers did not hesitate to comment on the physique of the woman of the future, predicting a perfect body and mind, according to their masculine bias, through the application of triumphant eugenics applied to everything and everyone. See Christina Cogdell, *Products or Bodies? Streamline Design and Eugenics as Applied Biology*, translated into French in A. Midal, *Design, l'anthologie*, HEAD - Genève, ESADSE, Cité du design, 2013: “For example, Deskey proclaimed, ‘Medicine will have given her a perfect body. She will never experience obesity, skinniness, head colds, excess hair or a bad complexion thanks to a proven diet and a controlled basal metabolic rate. Her size will be increased and her eyelashes lengthened, with a little hormone X’. Because of her beautiful body, she will no longer need to wear underwear, he thought, and after a period of nudism, she will likely dress in semi-transparent fabrics, similar to togas. Teague’s idea revealed that he also believed that most women would have ‘beautiful bodies and that the current trend towards nudity would continue apace’. Sakier, for his part, said that ‘the woman of the future would be tall, thin and beautiful; *she will be brought up for that*, for the pleasure of the community and her own happiness... Her point of view will be clear and direct. She will be free of all kinds of complexes and inhibitions’.”

¹⁴ Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller, *Op. cit.*, p. 9

arriving at the station at the exact time, circulated according to a precise timetable, in a punctuality amplified by the drawing of a hand holding a stopwatch at the bottom left of the advertisement. She analysed programmatic drawings such as *Postures in Evacuation; Exercises for Women* from Hornibrook's book¹⁵ kept in Bel Geddes' library. These drawings recommended and indicated the correct posture to adopt for defecation. Only women were depicted as if they were the only ones who could relieve themselves of the risks of "abdominal stagnation", while men were not concerned with these issues, busy as they were designing that same toilet. This is the case of Henry Dreyfuss, for example, who imagined the *Criterion Closet* in the 1930s: a low, violin-shaped toilet designed for Crane Co., whose unorthodox design was supposed to facilitate expulsion by relying on the springs of primitivism, according to which, modernity has distanced us from calls of nature. The itinerary of food responded to the good health of the colon, the fluidity of transport, that jewel in the crown of the automotive civilisation and the liberal American economy. The latter was seen from an ergonomic and aerodynamic perspective as a territory to be colonised: "The consumerist body ingests and expels not only food – the prototypical object of consumption – but the full range of images and objects that pass through the cycle of manufacture, purchase and disposal. In this *process of elimination*, the body itself is remade¹⁶." And of course, such an allegory of good digestion focused on the richness of production and loss, between ingestion and excretion, and the economy, design and health referred to the toilet and the pleasure of the anal stage: "(...) twentieth-century design gradually articulated the bathroom and kitchen as the erotogenic zones of the domestic body¹⁷." Lupton and Miller's analysis also oscillated in the same proportions between desire, loss and sexualisation: "As sexual pleasure is sustained on the utilitarian processes of digestion, the restless desire for new commodities built on fetishised routines consolidates biological consumption¹⁸."

-Confident and confessor

Aside from their notoriously industrial character, the interest shown by Le Corbusier and Duchamp in sanitary facilities revealed the importance of the new "white order" of the 1930s, and a relationship to bodily waste that had become a subject in itself and could sometimes even be

¹⁵ Ettie A. Hornibrook, *Restoration Exercises for Women*, London, William Heinemann, 1932, p. 54-55.

¹⁶ Lupton et Miller, *Op. cit.*, p. 9.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 8.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

elevated to the level of a work of art. The bidet however, belonged as much to hygienic and medical conveniences as it did to libertinism and lust. After having been straddled equally by men and women, its use changed after the old regime in France. The urinal and the vespasienne reserved for male urination were considered to be an instrument of popular and urban hygiene which “furnished the public domain”, and the bidet, associated with cleanliness, was gradually considered to be an effeminate device whose use would be exclusively feminine. The first mention of the bidet, according to the analysis of Fanny Baupré and Roger-Henri Guerrand¹⁹, reminds us how delicate it is to determine its etymological origin with certainty. It “(...) could potentially come from ‘baudet’²⁰” in one of these distorted linguistic mysteries that made it into a toilet object under Louis XIV back in 1739. It appeared on the calling card of master turner Rémy Pèverie, a cabinetmaker who offered “bidets with back and flap” and “double bidets that can be used by two people at the same time²¹”. Baupré and Guerrand noticed an amusing piece of information: the editor of the *Almanach des honnêtes femmes* reportedly proposed a “Fête du bidet” on 2 February, Candlemas Day, stressing the importance of the object and the intimacy that ladies shared with it: “Many ladies call their bidet their confessor. It erases all sins with perfect ablution²²”. The bidet played the role of confidant. Erotic literature was not to be outdone and took it in its turn. This was the case with Antoine Bret’s *Le ***** Histoire bavarde*, where Urgande’s young lover, Cyparide, is metamorphosed into a bidet and his male organ takes the shape of a sponge, thus associating onanism with the use of the bidet. It was perhaps in this same dynamic that Duchamp, father of the *Bachelor Machine*, wrote a cruelly funny note about Le Corbusier: “L.C.: case of early male menopause sublimated into mental coitus”. Sublimation here referred to a geographical shift in creation where the architect and the artist defined the origin of modernity in a relationship between man and his body, while integrating bodily functions and eroticism and constantly questioning the nature of this itinerary.

- Washbasin Woman and Skyscraper Man

Surrounded by A. Stewart Walker as the Fuller Building, Leonard Schultze as the New Waldorf Astoria, Ely J. Kahn as the Squibb Building, William Van Allen as the Chrysler Building, Ralph Walker as One Wall Street, D. E. Waid as the Metropolitan Tower and J. H. Freedlander as the Museum of

¹⁹ Baupré and Guerrand, op. cit.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, see p. 15 & sq.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

²² *L’Almanach des honnêtes femmes pour l’année 1790*, 1870 edition, p. 11 mentioned by Baupré and Guerrand, *Ibid.*, p. 20.

the City of New York, Edna Cowan, also known as “The Basin Girl” was the only woman in the men’s parade of the famous 1931 *Architects’ Ball*. She walked around New York’s dizzying skyline, wearing a washbasin and double taps in place of the cigarettes and cigars usually offered for sale by young women in this type of get-up. Like a new hygienic standard, alone among the dominant architects, Cowan wore a piping system and exposed reproductive, rather than a creative loss. In *Delirious New York*, his “retroactive manifesto” as he calls it, and an indictment of Le Corbusier’s decongestion, Rem Koolhaas chose to show these two photographs of the *Architects’ Ball*: in the first picture, a row of delighted men, dressed in their respective New York skyscrapers naturally erected vertically; and in the second, Edna Cowan carrying her basin on her belly as if it were a symbolic extension of her organs. Her solitary presence within a masculine architectural universe speaks of the isolation of women and the hierarchy that prevailed in architecture²³. To better understand the sad banality of this situation, let us bear in mind that after completing the construction of the E1027 (1926-1927) in Roquebrune, Eileen Gray spent many months there with Jean Badovici. Around 1938-1939, Badovici invited Le Corbusier to stay there, but when he left, the modernist masterpiece was found vandalised. Naked, as the photographs show, the guest painted the fresco *Sous les Pilotis* on one of the walls of the house. With phallocrat impunity, he committed an offence that disfigured Gray’s architecture. Emblematic of the sexual politics at stake, Le Corbusier’s act was a clear attack on women and their architecture and production.

- Strategy of the Void

²³ In this context, it might be a valuable circonvolution to note that Koolhaas’s *Delirious New York* distills a charge steeped in sexual symbolism that runs through his opus *SMLXL* published in 1995 with the precious collaboration of Bruce Mau. The photographs cleverly echo the body of the text, and certain exchanges operate like mysterious clues left here and there to be deciphered by the reader, responding to each other in distant chapters within the book’s 1345 pages. Such is the case with the first image representing the Villa Dall’Ava, the first private construction built by Koolhaas. The photograph shows a large geometric white area in the centre of the page. The represented volume is surrounded by the greenery of the future site. In making this choice, Koolhaas postulates, as did Le Corbusier previously, that before any construction, a site contains architecture waiting to be revealed. The second clue to this rebus can be found in another chapter entitled “Strategy of the Void”. The first image is a black and white photograph of a naked woman, seen more or less from the side in which she grasps a geometrical shape in her hand, represented by a black bar. We can tell from arrangement of the sheets that this is a sex scene, and that the lady is grabbing a penis. This volume corresponds to the shape of the Villa Dall’Ava. Both images are constructed in the same way: the black volume echoes the white, turning these forms (a piece of architecture and a penis) into an area of correspondence, even interchangeability. With Koolhaas, the erectile metaphor of skyscrapers is replaced by a geometric area and reproduces the established hierarchy. The comparison via this camouflage of two *a priori* identical forms serves on the one hand to embody the creative force of the male architect, and on the other, refers to the reification of the woman whose creative role is, at best, reproduction.

Duchamp was not to be outdone, if we believe his possible misprision with *Fountain*. Documents relating to the work of Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven that were recently unearthed, raised questions as to the attribution of this major work in the history of modern art. In a letter dated 11 April 1917 which Marcel Duchamp wrote to his sister a few days before the exhibition, he mentioned that “one of his friends, under a male patronymic, sent *Fountain* to the New York exhibition”. It seems the name “Richard Mutt” might have been the pseudonym chosen by von Freytag-Loringhoven, who lived in Philadelphia at the same time as Duchamp, and that she might have been the author of the work, not Duchamp. If she did not take offence at this, unlike Gray, who ceased all contact with Le Corbusier, this may have been because the work was rejected, and because she died ten years later, in 1927. Duchamp would then have let people attribute the authorship of the work to him, without batting an eyelid, in 1935. Another sculpture by von Freytag-Loringhoven entitled *God* (c. 1917) is explicitly a masculine mirror of *Fountain*. Von Freytag-Loringhoven exposes this *God* made of pipes and one can understand the reasons why the father of the *Bachelor Machines* appropriated this work, which so successfully questioned the symbolism of plumbing, and which addressed a pseudo-transaction and circulation between the feminine and the masculine. And one cannot help but notice the extent to which these sexual manipulations partly explain the eradication of women by modernists in the history of design and architecture, such as Nicholas Pevsner in *Pioneers of the Modern Movement* published in 1936 or Reyner Banham in *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment*, his work on air conditioning, networks and plumbing, where no woman, not even in a swimming costume, is ever studied.