

Cyprien Gaillard
South End Green WCs
1 Constantine Rd, London, NW3 2LL
Curated by Ben Broome

Cyprien Gaillard's interventions - engraved into brass finger plates of the Southend Green men's & women's toilet cubicles - are untitled. They exist amongst the scrawlings of others, not as individual named artworks, but as the artist's own contribution to the scribbled discourses. These toilets have no exterior architecture: they are built inside the ground, exclusively interiors, bodies with no skin. Their structural decay - peeling paint, dripping roof, urinal enamel eroded from 100 years of ammonia - marries harmoniously with the tags and gougings proliferated by its users. With no fixed date for Camden Council's proposed plans to renovate these historic bathrooms, they teeter on the edge of death but cling on, steadfastly serving London's public.

Gaillard borrows from German master Albrecht Durer (1471 - 1528) for his own mark making, focusing on two motifs that characterise Durer's obsession with the inevitability of death and the march of time in an unjust hierarchical society. A bagpipe playing jester - from the Durer illustrated *Ship of Fools* (1494) by Sebastian Brant - adorns the panel facing the entrance. Brant's "ship of fools" describes a vessel run by an inept crew, an allegory for the governmental failures that arise when a political system operates without the guidance of informed expertise. Inside the cubicle, on the verso, Alice - from the 1951 Disney movie - pulls (or pushes) at the door to her Wonderland.

A locked cubicle of a public toilet is the most private of public spaces...our own personal wonderland for that moment of use. Here, you might find yourself half naked, often alone, or if not, vulnerable to another. These subterranean refuges are places of solitude to check in with oneself - or perhaps with someone else - amidst a city that is the most surveilled in the world.

Gaillard's images were etched into the original brass panels by master engraver John Cook for which the doors were removed entirely, engraved and subsequently replaced. To take only the brass panels - which are fused with the doors by the enduring bond of time - would have destroyed the tarnished patina built up over generations. Gaillard's process was one of subtraction as opposed to addition, like a sculptor chipping away at a block of stone, his materials are the bathrooms themselves.

Built in 1897, their original mosaic floor, tiled archways and marble topped urinals - unrivalled quality that led to a Grade II listing by Historic England in 1993 - are a vestige of a time when the provision of such public services was a source of great national pride. Now, in the face of decades of governmental budget cuts, the very existence of these toilets as an operational public utility is miraculous. Thousands of these spaces have closed countrywide resulting in the business of toilet provision becoming increasingly privatised. The place where you piss (outside of your own home) is, more often than not, enclosed in the same building you might buy your shoes, clothes, coffee, groceries, iPhone. Now, even the high-street toilets of naughties neoliberalism are under threat. It's within this narrative of survival against all odds that Gaillard's relics preside. On the doors of this decaying bathroom they appear to have been there forever but, in truth, their days are numbered.

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