

Josh Shaddock

## TAKE THE STAIRS

Josh Shaddock lives and works in New York, USA. He is an artist and writer, and a friend and colleague of Lisa Tan. In this essay on Tan's project for osloBIENNALEN he draws on his own everyday life.

Lisa Tan's project for osloBIENNALEN consists of: (1) renovation of the outdated public restrooms located on each landing of the central staircase of Myntgata 2, a building housing 60 artist's studios; (2) a printed card with a text by Lisa about artists looking at other artists, placed in literature racks in the same central staircase, to be taken and read by resident artists and visitors.

Lisa and I are friends, and have been talking about this project for some time. In the course of our discussions, I was brought on to design the card (I'm a graphic designer most days). So, I was well aware of the parameters, her thinking, and how it had all evolved. But then I was invited to write a text about it. This text. And that was another matter (I'm not a writer most days). Public/workplace bathrooms, art studios, artistic influence, art labor, printed matter, reading. Such vast and divergent territories to navigate—so much that could be said. I said yes.

The first day of writing. After dropping off my kids at school and finishing a bit of design work, I start by going to the library at a nearby university. A quiet place, removed from interruption and surrounded by information. I had only been to this library a few times, so I wasn't familiar with the hushed corners for study, but after about a half-hour of distracted wandering (and a trip to the restroom) I found a carrel and began.

The bathroom itself. A structure for talking about artistic influence? Toilet (evacuation), sink and trash can (sanitation), vanity mirror (grooming). Artists ingest, digest, incorporate what's nutritious, expel what's not, clean-up, and make it presentable. No... hacky metaphor. But keep on with the toilet. The anal stage in Freud's psychosexual development? What about that again? Retentive/Expulsive? The ego develops then, right? A few books from the shelf (and more distracted browsing)... and yes, that's it. I guess it relates to artists and how they work and keep their workspaces, but it's a thin connection. What about toilets in contemporary art? Duchamp, Manzoni, Warhol's silver commode in the Factory rest/darkroom, Gober, Sarah Lucas, Cattelan's recent gold-plated fixture at the Guggenheim, Tom Burr (a key reference for Lisa's project), Franz West, Tom Sachs, Lawrence Weiner's "Us and Them," Arneson, Bonvicini, Slominski... I love this game and could go on and on. But what does this have to do with Lisa's project?

Not a great start, three hackneyed dead-ends. It was now early afternoon and I was hungry and a little frustrated. I had skipped lunch. Then I noticed I was missing an essay by Tom Burr that Lisa cited in her text. I message her to ask for it. She sends the Burr essay, I tell her I'm at the library, and then I ask her if it's OK to be funny in the text, already nervously hoping to find a way to improve my writing with shit jokes. She says yes. I'm tired and I remember I need to pick up my son soon, so I decide to stop. On the way out of the library, I get trapped by the lure of the stacks again, lose track of time, and have to rush to make it to his school. Then it's home, more design work, cooking dinner, straightening up the house, and getting the kids ready for bed. In the evening, I comb through my shelves and make a stack in my office of whatever books might be useful (too many) and prepare to return to writing the next day, Wednesday. But then I remember that my wife is going on a work trip that will last through the weekend and I worry whether I'll have the time or energy to write. I don't. I try, but I fail.

On Monday, I return to work. But over the next several days, the cycle of everyday disruptions and fruitless research continues – and my confusion and irritation compound.

I read about the history of sanitation systems, the impact of toilets and clean water on public health (miraculous), personal hygiene, the architecture of public toilets (Norway, it turns out, has the one voted most beautiful in the world, on the Helgelandskysten scenic route), labor rights and bathroom breaks, gender politics and public restrooms, and the common habit of reading on the toilet. The last of these has a long but poorly-recorded history, the most recent development being the smartphone as the medium of choice. I find literary depictions of people reading on the toilet. A highlight: Joyce's depiction of Bloom reading a magazine column and then wiping his bottom with a torn-away section. I read through texts on the artist's studio and art labor; writings by artists about other artists and artistic influence; look at photographs and films of artists in their studios [...]

There's a lot more. And I was going to continue, but my three-year-old son just jumped onto my desk and asked to watch drum solos on YouTube. Forty noisy minutes later, I'm writing again.

My office is in my house, so I'm used to this sort of disruption. I'll be immersed in typesetting and moments later making chocolate milk or helping my daughter with math homework. The time spent working on this text has been nothing exceptional in this regard: transporting kids to and from school/activities, cooking, design work/meetings, laundry, yardwork, taking my daughter to the doctor, phone calls from my mom. Working at home provides little resistance to the intrusions of private life. While understandable, and even beneficial, they can be exasperating when time and focus are required. Add to this a congestion of the words and thoughts of others that seemed increasingly irreconcilable and distant from the task at hand. Despair set in. Despair of mundane duties that take me away from my work and of research that fails to produce work. The deadline is two days away. I reevaluate and start over.

Lisa's project consists of: (1) a moment of everyday life made more pleasant; (2) a reverie on artists looking at other artists.



Lisa Tan, *Other Artists in Myntgata 2*

Lisa and I are friends, and have been talking about art and life for some time. Our discussions about TV, books, tennis, politics, and just about everything else have rarely been directed towards achieving a direct result or goal. It's a freewheeling dialogue that delights in what we each bring and what we take away together. It drifts untroubled around the obligations and schedules of work and life. It washes over us; never tasked to perform work, never resentful of disruption or delay, never privileging one sphere of life over another. It is a model of openness and generosity embodied in her project for osloBIENNALEN, one I paradoxically lost sight of while working on this text.

It's so easy to place work at the center, as I did. And doing so has a distorting effect on all that surrounds it. Everything is counted as either contributing or detracting. The duties of life outside of work, however significant or mundane, are irritating and breed resentment, because they are non-work. Encounters with other artists, whether social or art historical, are judged for their usefulness, and so tend to be either ignored or instrumentalized. Like all positive feedback loops, it is all-consuming and unstable.

Lisa's project is a quiet gesture that shifts focus away from work, away from the studio spaces of Myntgata 2, into the transitional spaces and activities of the staircase. The restroom—warm, clean, efficient, and soothing—allows one to stop, reflect, breathe. And being the gesture of another artist, it takes on a feeling of collegial care. The text recounts the connections that informed its own writing and is an open reflection and appreciation of the connections between artists across social, physical, and historical space. It makes no precise claims and gives no advice, it merely acknowledges the prevalence and importance of these connections, to itself and at large. It's freely available to artists and visitors as they move between floors, to read now or later, to be kept and read again.

This shift in focus counteracts the distortions and offers the broader possibility that there is no center; that all parts of life—work, study, friends, exercise, family, sleep, eating, reading, bathing, travelling, conversation, money, all of it—derive their value from our being present to what they are and how they are connected. They don't serve one another and they are not opposed; they are not divisions of a whole, but nodes in a network; and the maximum capacity of each is realized through balance.

The modesty and inconspicuousness of Lisa's project is faithful to her point. Understanding and maintaining this sort of balance requires attention to the small things and moments that make up most of life and hold it all together. No artist comes to this building for the staircase, they come to work. But no artist works without taking the stairs.

