

# vacantly occupied: movements queering materialities (or, becomings from the toilet)

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## abstract

This text-based essay investigates and makes uncertain public toilets through ficto-critical writing. The essay is a response to an experimental analysis where I vacantly occupied several public toilets around Melbourne, each for varied amounts of time. This embodied methodology allows the interior itself, relieved of any expected utility or function, to become foregrounded, eventful. The research builds on an existing body of research into the interior subcultures of public toilets and their representation in pop culture. 'Vacantly occupied' refers to the process of occupying toilet cubicles and making uncertain the binary of 'vacant' and 'occupied'. To vacantly occupy queers the binary function of the cubicle lock, the toilet, design, and labour more broadly, and turns it into an open-ended situation. 'Queering' because it blurs categorisation—occupation without *an* occupation—and embodies a functional, utilitarian space in a deliberately a-functional way, as opposed to dysfunctional because design too often looks towards explicit function as reification of 'good/bad'. I argue this kind of majoritarian binary qualification isn't necessarily useful for queering, which unlike identitarian definitions of 'queer' resists certainty. This text deploys queering tactically to move beyond these dynamics in order to destabilise and make uncertain in both content and form, thinking design in different ways. Ficto-criticism is used as a methodology to develop two distinct perspectives: the author's, and through its diverse language loosens normative interpretations of critical writing for the reader, creating a second. The style, much like toilet cubicles themselves, is at times messy, fragmented, and blurred, mixing academic, dirty, common, poetic styles attempting to resist cartographic objectivity in favour of a language that cultivates multiple perspectives that queer the form of a critical research essay. This is reflective of a broader argument that, in the case of public toilets, other viewpoints beyond dominant heterosexist norms are needed now more than ever, that other historiographies and perspectives that create uncertainty in how we assume, use, and design with logics, utility, function, cleanliness, and so on can be embraced to envision radically different interiors.

## keywords

toilets; queering; ficto-criticism; embodiment; dirt

## editorial note

This essay examines subject matter and uses terms that some readers may find challenging. Reader discretion is advised.

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## we need to go

'I really need to shit. There wasn't any toilet paper in Diane's guest bathroom, and that's not something one talks about.'<sup>01</sup>

'[W]e needed for there to be sites where the meanings don't line up tidily with each other, and we learned to invest those sites with fascination and love.'<sup>02</sup>

In *Tendencies*, Eve Sedgwick writes about their passion for perverse readings of texts. For Sedgwick, perversity charges cultural objects with energy and openness, embracing the autonomy of the reader to re-appropriate, re-embody, reframe. By pressing back into these cultural objects, allowing their charge to pulse through us, we can reshape what's there, creating other perspectives through uncertainty and, dare I say it, maybe *fall in love with them*.

I've recently fallen in love with toilets. An unfortunate fact for some, queer people have always needed to go to the toilet. Perhaps some would even argue we belong there. Putting aside the important work designers are doing to break down binary heterosexism in construction codes and advocating for clients to be more inclusive, queer people have historically and culturally been implicated in these interiors, either by association—we are *dirty*—or by implication—we are there because anything to do with toilets is, like Guillaume Dustan muses above, *not something one talks about*.

That *subcultural* line, where on one side is perversity, transgression, and the other sits sanitised normalcy makes toilets so interesting. This ficto-critical text-based essay loves that line—loves *fucking with that line*, making its boundaries uncertain—leaning into the cultures, contradictions, and eventfulness in these spaces is what vacant occupation seems to surface. The ficto-critical approach experiments with a way of writing—designing—theory *from*, rather than *about* interiors. It uses embodiment as a creative-practice research methodology to queer the way critical analysis on interiors is written—and read.

The initial design intent was that each section of this essay would become a tableau of a particular interior, adopting a coordinating style. While writing, it became clear this approach wouldn't allow me to embrace a process of *writing from* these interiors, as the emphasis would be on a return to the location, space, time, and consequently falling back into a methodology, and normative design logic, of *writing about*. To circumvent this, I reflected on the project holistically, embracing a process of selection and extraction. When I bring *myself* to these interiors, what territories and perspectives can be opened through perverse uncertainty? How might they be related, or not, to interior design? Hélène Frichot reminds us in *Creative Ecologies* that 'every point of view is a point of view on variation, even while standing perfectly still'—literally a good point when vacantly occupying.<sup>03</sup> The approach



became to deploy the text in a way to make uncertain perspectives from my experience, adopting style to design conditions for other perspectives from the reader. This methodology views uncertainty in this text as generative, inviting the reader into the essay, creating another perspective from mine by forming loose interpretations of dirty language. Hopefully you do this with fascination and love.

Fragments are scattered throughout the essay, the result of a writing experiment undertaken during one of the site visits. Following a similar approach to Georges Perec's *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris*,<sup>04</sup> I documented everything I was focused on at the time. Interestingly, this was mainly listening to what was going on outside the cubicle, with little attention paid to what might be happening inside, where I was sitting. I found this approach useful to a certain degree, but ultimately inappropriate to continue in other locations. The reason was two-fold. First, the focus became almost exclusively on the outside of the cubicle. Second, the approach felt too much like labour and conceptually worked against notions of 'vacant occupation' that the project and this essay sought to explore. Nevertheless, it felt right—dirty?—to scatter some decorative happenings into the text, in a similar sense to when you're lost in thought and suddenly a hand-dryer goes off or somebody farts—an interruption that ultimately re-locates you.

## **certainties**

Toilets were never designed for queers.

The first flushing public toilet was designed by engineer George Jennings, situated within the great exhibition of 1851 at the Crystal Palace. To use it one needed to 'spend a penny', coining a popular euphemism in Victorian English society. The Crystal Palace, a structure fabricated predominantly with steel and glass, was designed by Joseph Paxton, known for his work on gardens and glasshouses. The palace, with its near non-existent *poché* was decorated by Owen Jones, whose subsequent tome, *The Grammar of Ornament*, as with the exhibition itself, can be read as an ostentatious exposition of great British manufacturing and decorative imperialism, featuring works and motifs fabricated from plundered materials and artefacts from across Britain's imperial dominions. Jones opens the book with the somewhat curious aim of aiding:

in arresting that unfortunate tendency of our time to be content with copying, whilst the fashion lasts, the forms peculiar to any bygone age, without attempting to ascertain, generally completely ignoring, the peculiar circumstances which rendered an ornament beautiful.<sup>05</sup>

Jones sought a *décor* epistemologically appropriate for the times, a *couture* for this monumental shift in interior design, itself a reflection of a shift towards industrialisation, a *levelling-up*, to adopt neoliberal language, of capitalism. The building cleverly and



significantly blurred the interior with its exterior, the main interior [Fig. 01] featuring huge gardens with trees, statues, and fountains, surrounded by grand lawns and plump pines. A fluid interior in so many ways, it seems fitting that public toilets would make their debut in Victorian society with a flush of excitement at this event, which sought to aesthetically express what the Victorian English saw as a marvel of their 'civilisation' and, quite legitimately, an innovation in public health and sanitation.



**Figure 01.**  
*Interior of Crystal Palace, London, 1878–1890, courtesy Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.*

The toilets were affectionately known by Jennings as 'monkey closets,' named as such because of the shape of the plumbing<sup>06</sup> and box-like mahogany joinery, with later iterations renamed as the more generic, and sanitised, 'water closet,' or WCs.<sup>07</sup> WCs were exceptionally ornate cast-iron affairs, detailed in fine timbers and ornate floral patterns that sought to conceal the activities within, deploying visual counterweights to their olfactory effects.<sup>08</sup>

'That which is beautiful is true; that which is true must be beautiful,' Jones declares!<sup>09</sup> The WC interiors somewhat anxiously and earnestly focused towards the cleanliness, concealment, and comfort of cisgender men, then later cisgender women. One 'must distinguish between naïve and deliberate Camp,' Susan Sontag notes. 'Pure Camp is always naïve. Camp which knows itself to be Camp ("camping") is usually less satisfying.'<sup>10</sup> Camping myself inside these interiors for hours on end, one can't help but recognise that, from the beginning, modern WCs were really quite queer little things. Oh, the irony of this giant glasshouse! A transparently 'straight,' useful, outwardly flexing public interior inadvertently full of *fabulous* mahogany closets!

### **production**

Patricia MacCormack reminds us simply that 'the queer approach is nothing more than an approach.'<sup>11</sup> 'Queering' moves beyond an explicit sexual, and other, categorisation, suggesting a movement towards yet-defined alterity. Always fluid, always moving, never septic. Importantly, for MacCormack it opens:



each tactical temporary territory to what is needed, to change the assemblages rather than seek the finite point of perception which will tell us what is queer, how to be queer, what metaphors are associated with and applicable to queer. We are all queer and not queer in ways which exceed representation.<sup>12</sup>

Queering as a process of tactical production evades the known, is unknown, pushing beyond binary transgressive dialectics of majoritarian power relations. For a designer this seems impossible. How does a designer, and, more to the point, a design *discipline* framed by an interior/exterior dialectic like interior/spatial design/architecture queer in any meaningful way while still retaining its integrity, its stability, or consistency as a discipline? If radical queering of interior design evades any sense of disciplinary norms and identification, my guess is it probably can't.

Design production typically follows a standard paradigm, one that allows it to functionally coordinate with clients, trades, consultants, and the legal frameworks that govern commercial relations. Theorist Elizabeth Freeman describes this as *chrononormativity*, or 'the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity.'<sup>13</sup> Such temporal hegemonic paradigms form long-standing certainties in design, producing logics and assumptions deeply embedded in design culture. Importantly, these deliver



**Figure 02.**  
Toilet cubicle Melbourne, 2023. Image taken by author.

consistency in product, or something that can be *identified as design*. The discipline of the brief regulates temporal consistency by setting a deadline, and qualifies design from non-design, evaluated by the designer's response against the client's request. This is a problem for queering interior design because these enforce a normativity that should be evaded. Queering, then, might turn to something like an unstructured event, one that is unpredictable, unknown, and not asked for. Interiors that in form and time may not even be recognisable—or immediately useful—to their designers. Let's pretend for a moment Guy Hocquenghem, a queer activist, is an interior designer:



As I leave the [Front homosexuel d'action révolutionnaire] meeting, a boy takes me by the arm and leads me to an obscure passageway.

I enter into a dark, humid hovel where we wade in puddles of water and urine: the toilets of the Beaux-Arts. Half a dozen bodies, anonymous in the dim light, are enlaced in there in what complex circuitries one cannot immediately decipher. I feel burdened by the enforced blindness, the acrid smell of piss chokes me and I recoil, feeling guilty immediately. The boy at my side murmurs in my ear: *"What? Are you ashamed?"* He might just as well have said *"Are you ashamed, comrade?"*<sup>14</sup>

Hocquenghem deliberately places us in an uncomfortable space in two senses: the acrid darkness of the toilet in the Beaux-Arts and, the uncomfortable resonance of a homosexuality, queerness defined by majoritarian categorisations. In this sense the homosexual, the queer, like other minorities, don't exist without definition/relation from the other. Hocquenghem shoves us here and there because for them the project is not about defining, but finding ways of affirming a not yet defined. Ways of becoming queer, but also acknowledging that fucking in a toilet is kind of hot: 'I wish I could,' he says.<sup>15</sup> It's complicated, contradictory, and far from idealistic. It's this chaos, and that fact we're *in it*, that makes it even more attractive. By considering

materiality of toilets in an expanded sense that's inclusive of the desires and politics that dictate their creation, we can open up ways of reshaping and reclaiming them. The interior pictured here: a heady materiality of piss, pleasure, and politics. Simultaneously utilitarian—we piss, shit, bleed—social—we chat, have sex, do drugs—and symbolic—a space where majoritarian forces push, flush, condemn, turn away.

Programmatically, the toilet is dynamic and *very* unstable. Cruising, what Hocquenghem viscerally illustrates above, exemplifies this instability. Cruising happens anywhere, but in toilets there is a delicate symbiosis where queering subverts and makes very uncertain dominant heterosexist and toxically masculine behaviour. Men openly present their dick in crowded urinals, often to nobody—they barely even look. The cruiser presents subtle cues to someone who's looking for a good time, evading the gaze of others who are conditioned to not to look at all. What these cues are is irrelevant to this essay—I'm not outing anyone, especially because for some men this is the only safe way to express sexuality—except that their formation facilitates sometimes quite highly performative interiors where multiple programs coexist, are formed, and dissipated instantly. The aversion of majoritarian gaze, like the literal averted gaze of cishet men at urinals, allows subcultural queering to discreetly live and immanently, tactically emerge, pulsating, flowing. If you make eye contact with another man while 'pissing,' it's likely that you either know him, or he's cruising too.



This instability provides a malleability, turning the interior quickly from one thing to another. Its morphological potential is not insignificant. But it is not a simple one-way process of queer liberation, either—if only it could be so reductionist so we could get on with getting off! To be fair, Hocquenghem places an emphasis on how we might escape heteronormative power relations because he laments it a little. Being called a *faggot* is depressing, but labelling yourself one, if you desire, can be liberating. Faggot of course, is a dirty word, a particular one. In the right circumstances, much like a public toilet, its meanings become malleable and can be messed with. Being a faggot fucking in a dark place,<sup>16</sup> and *unthinkingly* emulating cishet sexual dynamics is symptomatic of heterosexual power influencing the inner workings of queer desire. Criticality is key. Others like Bjarne Melgaard<sup>17</sup> and Ashkan Sepahvand<sup>18</sup> swallow Hocquenghem's point but appear more comfortable with and even *enjoy* the concept of faggotry. They reclaim it. Change it. Fuck with it, fuck with him. Fuck with relations that *define* queer bodies.

shadow lingers, jeans move towards cubicle door, another shadow moves past door, hand dryer, elastic, distant tap, hand dryer, person in front of cubicle gone, hands being washed, someone walks past cubicle and presses on door, moves into cubicle next door, blue jeans, door pads shut, door pads shut, door pads shut, brushing, elastic, foot tapping, quiet.

foot tapping, tan leather boat shoe appears, foot tapping again, quiet.

### **enchantment**

Unlike faggotry seeking to foreground its dirtiness—I'm a *dirty* faggot!—Jennings's toilet paradigm is significant because it *really* separates individuals from their shit. This trend is further progressed by contemporary toilet models featuring 'easy clean drop zones' along with other aesthetic features and interior detailing that make efforts to conceal plumbing and other features inside walls.<sup>19</sup> With some models, a user need only insert a cartridge into a wall to maintain cleanliness.<sup>20</sup> These—are often complimented by toilet cubicles that, apart from the minimal pedestal and a hook on a door, have no other discernible fittings. These obviously have health, hygiene, and cleaning dividends, but also work to create an interior where *very* human functions are symbolically, culturally, and programmatically separated from the body.

Contemporary toilets like these manifest a form of commodity fetish. Anxious about the shit it spends its energy concealing, the means of production is separated from the body through mystification via concealment. WCs turn what was once a communal interior into a space that forges an isolated individual, disconnected literally and figuratively from others and their own body processes.<sup>21</sup> Focusing on responses to the unknown or unfamiliar through declarations of 'dirt' as a form of queering, much like how the contemporary toilet fetishises, we can mystify



our relationship with it through creating a thought-form that deliberately queerly reforms accepted assumptions of dirt: a mystic anus.

Our mystic anus dilates with Mary Douglas's now infamous definition of dirt as 'matter out of place.'<sup>22</sup> We know dirt as firmly sociological and consequently subject to change. Douglas, like all of us, has their own toilet story:

I always remember how unrelaxed I felt in a particular bathroom which was kept spotlessly clean in so far as the removal of grime and grease was concerned. It had been installed in an old house in a space created by the simple expedient of setting a door at each end of a corridor between two staircases. The décor remained unchanged: [...] the books, the gardening tools, the row of gumboots. It all made good sense as the scene of a back corridor, but as a bathroom—the impression destroyed repose. [...] In chasing dirt, in papering, decorating, tidying we are not governed by anxiety to escape disease, but are positively re-ordering our environment, making it conform to an idea. There is nothing fearful or unreasoning in our dirt-avoidance: it is a creative movement, an attempt to relate form to function, to make unity of experience.<sup>23</sup>

Interestingly, Douglas' back-passage toileting experience suggests interior design and decoration are techniques that

express cleanliness *through control*. It's also reminiscent of Le Corbusier's bolshie decorative move to place the bidet in the middle of their Paris studio apartment bedroom, in a gesture fitting of Modernist logic, not the *dirty* toilet but the fixture that *cleans!*<sup>24</sup> But this definition is obviously linked to what majoritarian 'normative' understandings of dirt and good interiors are, and certainty of what *belongs* inside/outside. This is unacceptable to the mystic anus. An anus is a door that enters the body, but the digestive tract is much more ambiguous, forming a tube between the head and the body, through, and formed of, the viscera. A threshold queerly connecting mind and body. 'Dirt' here can be viewed as morphological: an unstable materiality enabling queering of interiors. As matter out of place it is rogue, other. Its ability to act within any interior should not be understated. Dirtiness has a visceral effect *because* it doesn't belong, not because it is romantically tolerated. A gentrification—*purification*—of dirtiness will only bring us back to where we started, providing nothing more than a warm, fuzzy, authentically-feeling-but-not-actually pastiche. Its power as a tactical queering strategy is to produce otherness, challenging engendered norms of class, quality, sexuality, and gender within interior design. But simply wrecking the joint will not do. It must move past a dirt/clean dialectic because if we define queering as a general resistance to codification then we must see dirt *like* any other material, also *unlike* any other.<sup>25</sup> In an examination of Modernist bathrooms in Christopher Isherwood's novels, Ian Scott-Todd notes more specifically that:



As a sexually segregated space in which users are brought into contact with the genitals and excretory organs—both their own and, more peripherally, those of other people of their own sex—the bathroom has the potential to give rise to homosexual panic as well as homosexual desire. Anality and excrement have consistently borne associations with queer or non-normative sexual desire and, vice versa, queer sex—particularly gay male sex, often linked in the cultural imagination with the anus—has traditionally signified as dirty.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, any person who has enjoyed rimming another has deliciously challenged widely accepted notions of 'dirt' through anality, and delightfully re-mystified the ass. Scott-Todd's remarks reminds us that what is certain can be horrendously ignorant, and the line between panic and desire dubiously porous. So we enter an ambiguous anus—or perhaps it *circcludes* us?<sup>27</sup> In order for it to become productive, we must make it mystical. This must be more than surrealist gestures like painter Paul Nash's silver-glazed wonderland where one can watch oneself as other from a suspended mirror on the ceiling,<sup>28</sup> or how you might piss over Melbourne as some voyeuristic 'fuck you all!' act from the 35th floor urinal at the Sofitel Atrium Bar. No, in taking on the ability of design to fetishise, we should turn towards the mystical not as a site of concealment or surreal play but as an amorphous space of creative opportunity.

Unlike the commodity fetish, creating unknowns through mere trickery, we might reconceptualise a mystic process that joyfully embraces unknowns, cultivating a kind of conceptual perspective where we can learn from mystic a-functionality.

The mystic anus enchants an environment-world of materiality and relations that hold 'powers' beyond moral, binary categorisation, and allows designers to radically, in the transformative sense of the word, reform design's relationship with commodity fetishisation. In the dark of the mystic anus we find both pleasure and excrement, inside and outside, pulsating movement—always movement—but never sanitisation, control. We should be okay with this because, evoking the pleasurable contradictions of dirty faggotry, 'a dick always carries back some shit, because we are always depositing cum in shit or leaving some shit on the dick coming out of us.'<sup>29</sup>

### **come, as you're not**

There's always a body. Queering entangles an embodied subjectivity, a marker of presence, of someone moving through the world, getting lost in it, an *enchantment*.<sup>30</sup> I'm staring at dried, brown, probably cum stains on the cubicle wall as I slowly peel the sole of my shoe off the floor: 'in the sticky fold of desire, alterity is encountered within the self, through the other, and the other encounters the self in ways the self cannot autonomously express.'<sup>31</sup> The materiality of cum in a toilet cubicle holds a beautiful ambiguity as a mucosal substance that is a





Figure 03.

Toilet cubicle Melbourne, 2023. Image taken by author.

mediation between the body and another: 'normatively' a face, an ass, toilet paper, tiles, it once seeped, shot, lubricated, *stuck*.<sup>32</sup> It is a little stuck though, it needs a little lube don't you think? Cum is often delivered in one-way dominant/submissive situations that replicate patriarchal, masculine cultural and economic dominance. It is *given* to another in crass, basic gender performativity defining *alpha* from *beta*, where alpha is always the one that gives and *never* receives. Think gauche money shots; it's *his* orgasm that matters, that marks the crescendo, btm subs, gagging, looking up at their dom tops covered in thick white spunk. It's all a bit basic after a while.

\*Deep grunts\* daddy's *got a load!*

Cum is loaded but mucous is non-binary, its connotations potentially transgressive.<sup>33</sup> Shot inside a cubicle and left alone, the dried cum is crusty, static. But the event itself? The event in the cubicle? The moment this sticky mucosa flew from the body into the world as an ecstatic connective tissue, in-situ. A projection without an explicit use, unlike the surrounding glazed tiles that received it. Projections that could engender, become hybrid with another. I think of all the guys that celebrate cum beyond transgressive dynamics, as a connective bonding, post-orgasm, sexual intimacy, lingering.<sup>34</sup> Literally and allegorically present, a way to navigate the gap between self and external force, a way of thinking Spinoza, practising them.<sup>35</sup> Enchanted by the mystic anus, connective mucus can be brought into hybridity with a figure, recognisable yet beyond convention, ambiguous, but importantly making something, *bonding*. Cum's queering potential is literally and allegorically how it spasms from the body and ambiguously, fleetingly connects another.

indistinct chatter, 'so nice!'; cubicle next door used again, rubber pads on laminex, chatting continues, 'fucking hurt!'; flush, door closes, pissing, flush in distance, closer pissing, further pissing, closer pissing again, hits water, acrid smell, door unlocked, hand dryer, hand dryer, flush, door still shut, flush, clang of plastic on ceramic, toilet seat clanging loudly, flush, distant flush, toilet paper rustles,





Figure 04.  
Toilet cubicle Melbourne, 2023. Image taken by author.

## vacancy

An attempt to use form to collapse interior and designer, this section deploys textual uncertainty to destabilise the reading experience based on Byung-Chul Han's proposition that the contemporary, 'with time,' experience is by its very nature uncertain because so much is constantly happening.<sup>36</sup>

Tourists, Susan Sontag notes 'unsure of other responses [...] take a picture,' because 'using a camera appeases the anxiety which the work-driven feel about not working when they are on vacation and supposed to be having fun'<sup>37</sup> the anxiety Sontag identifies resonates widely within the creative neoliberal subject:

they experience a constant negotiation of shifting boundaries between themselves, their loves, and their labour sometimes, I felt guilty simply sitting in a cubicle, I felt a compulsion to *perform* analysis, to know who, what was sharing these interiors with me and why, a compulsion to do labour that ends in knowing, that ends with a product, I was anxious about 'getting something' from these experiences, that my doing nothing would lead to a form of failure, is this a betrayal of 'queering' in some way, *touring* these interiors, touring them for reasons other than their function but what is their function, really? I am forced into spectatorship but it's not a detached form of watching rather a watching that comes from within these interiors and is actually more of a listening because I can only see so much and I see a small flimsy lock on a cubicle door<sup>38</sup> this small and flimsy lock is itself a very vague suggestive little thing that could mean anything these locks are more signifier than lock they are so flimsy and small, they signal a body is inside, occupied—it could be pissing or shitting but it could also be crying, bleeding, fucking, gossiping or doing drugs it could just be staring at a crater in the door above a little lock where there was once another little lock that got kicked in for whatever reason evidence how the lock is more signifier than actual lock precarious and often only certain in its symbolism I've never been in a toilet when the door was kicked in this always happens when I'm not around and I'm sad I don't see the violence and have an eventful story but a more complex question emerges from behind this little lock that I



guess the little lock can't keep out how being vacant but present can be used to *design with* how to use the useless thing while still keeping it useless? queer? designers are occupied with normal things: doing big projects, small projects, lucrative projects, passion projects passion projects are the worst because they're almost always done for free they are so exploitative this is where the paradox of vacancy could be a point to think about design labour that transcends Sontag's anxious fun-work one that embraces the blurred lines of neoliberal subjectivity, subverts it, reworks it, leans into it, maybe it's uncertainty that's inside vacancy? creative director Babak Radboy in a cute video for DIS.art explains to children that money is theft of time and that just by *living* bodies add value *into* the world you shouldn't have to work, they say, it's how GDP works, stupid! they encourage the children to think about a model of value that is more than profit/loss, one that is morphological to living: it grows moves to where it's needed and dies when it's not<sup>39</sup> what's important is that this form of value comes from the body, comes from life—is *éros*—and is a-functional because functions often end up drowning in money or debt, it's a kind of love, a movement from one thing towards another a love that is fluid but not necessarily made of fluids a love that is eventful multiple one of many loves not based on recognition in a dialectic but it's more like being bitten by a vampire<sup>40</sup> or following MacKenzie Wark, getting fucked in the ass so hard you lose yourself to the world<sup>41</sup> these loves are transformative they take your body and dissolve it, a radically

open movement, and crucially about the body not being *laborious* but being joyful within a space and a time a kind of love that can come about through a rearrangement of space-time-labour emerging through an uncertain vacancy.

Byung-Chul Han recognises that one does not need to draw conclusions of contemporary experience as they might miss out on further connections of content. Consequently:

a space made up of possibilities for further connection does not have any continuity. In it, again and again, decisions are made anew, and new possibilities are constantly pursued, making time discontinuous.<sup>42</sup>

This approach to contemporary experience can cause burnout, exhaustion, anxiety, but also lends itself to endless reconfiguration.

### **a here anywhere**

Maybe it's just a mundane Berlin,

Or Glasgow, Bristol, London, Marseilles,

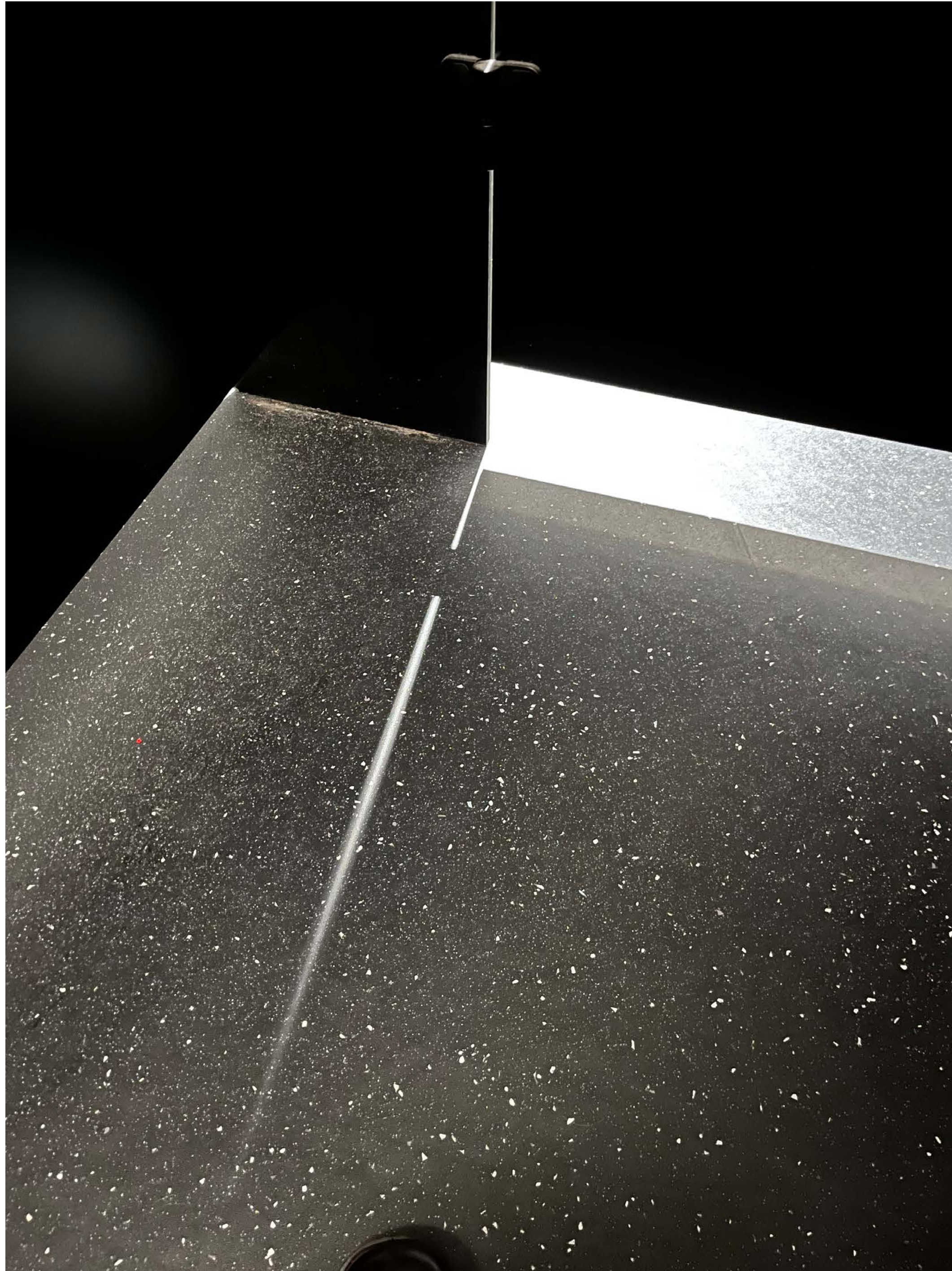
Or probably you've forgotten where you are, Past the view of the toilet walls.

Here, now in the wet.

But perhaps there's an escapism in whatever this is?

This water-world acting as a fertile ground for an elated form of feminism.<sup>43</sup>





**Figure 05.**  
Toilet cubicle Melbourne, 2023. Image taken by author.

In this spoken-word pop song, artist Katie Shannon talks about an undefined moment of time spent with their lover in the bathroom: drinking, smoking, sitting, talking. Generally, just hanging out, vibing. The scene is tender and delicate. Consequently vulnerable but not at all clichéd. They sing in a Glaswegian accent. Having lived in Glasgow, I imagine the bathrooms inside the cavernous tenement flats, tiled, painted in bold colours, dusty, cold. Steamy when used and forever damp when not. An inflection of the city itself. Dodgy landlord-led renovations typical of the cheap-but-sexy accommodation creatives make homely the world over. For them, this moment temporally

‘expands and contracts,’ is uncertain and ambiguous. How for a moment in time, an event, one might escape a contemporary capitalist system that ‘simultaneously leaves us over-stimulated and exhausted’<sup>44</sup> for something that only ever remains partially defined, but desirable because of this, then encapsulated in a fully defined pop song.

‘[A]nd I can’t quite remember feeling real/ amongst the series of disjointed things,’ Shannon confides as they craft an uncertain space where different places and times are brought together in an open-ended way. Shannon takes those contemporary conditions that cause the burnout Byung-Chul Han theorises and, with *éros*, transforms them into delicate and tender events. Past experiences and intimacies are shared anew, distributed through song, allowed to form new relationships. It’s polyamorous, yet poppy, and that’s significant. The song could be described as a kind of meta-critique bringing a self-awareness of the interior depicted and the fragility of the theoretical poetic proposed—‘perhaps there’s an escapism whatever this is?’ It depicts what it seeks to be its effects through several overlapping temporal and unstable interiors.

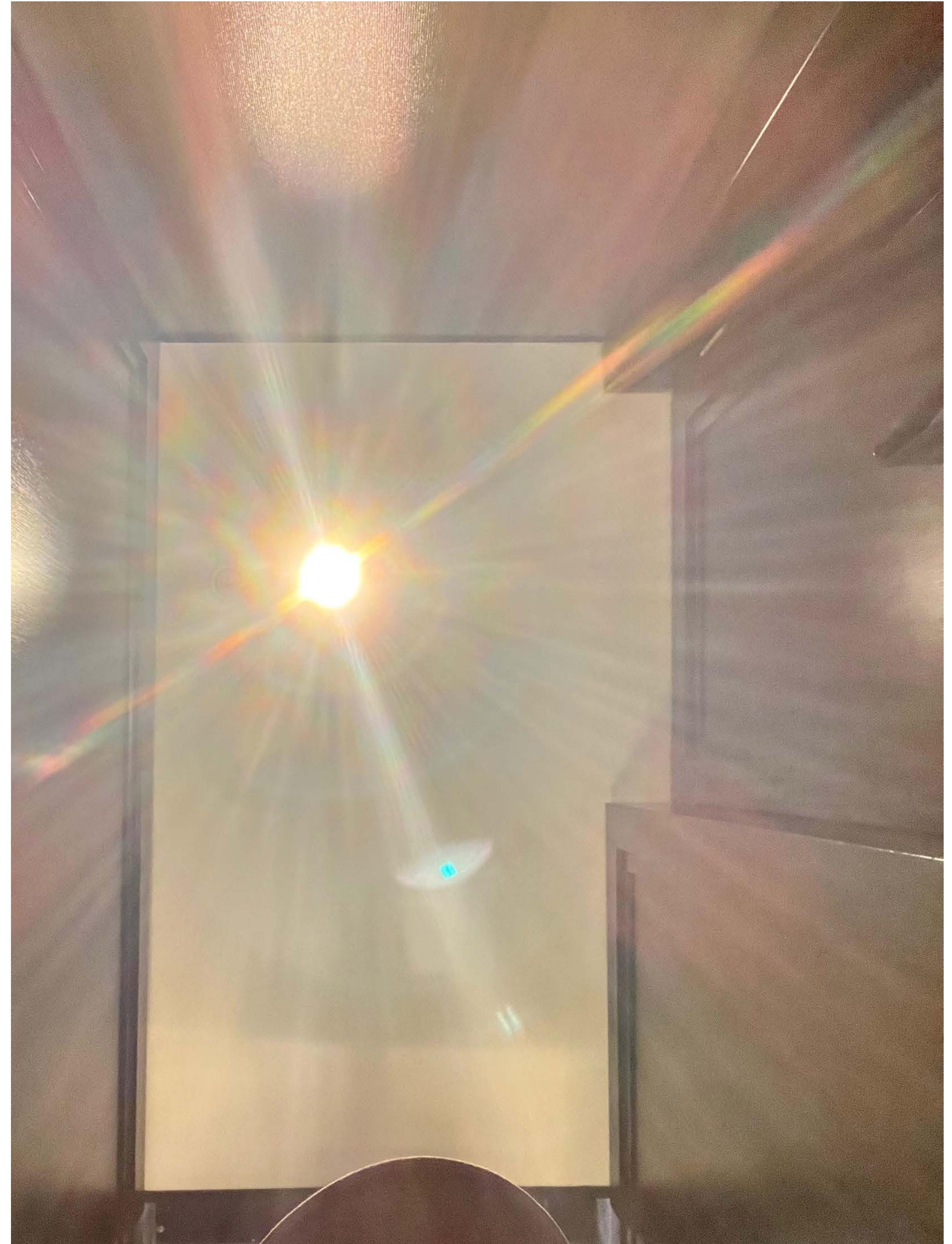
Putting aside for a moment the scene, the formal structure of the song provides a technique of embodiment, allowing an almost three-way interpolation: the listener embodies the pop song, the song the listener, which is in turn a reflection of the artist who is attempting to impart a theoretical sensibility in a poetic, visceral way. Pop is used as an



emotive form of embodiment. That moment in the commodity-form of a pop song, one with many streamable remixes in different temporalities inflecting each other, becomes this moment where the listener is invited simultaneously into a queer scene, queerly.

The scene itself offers another queer temporality in the ambiguous use of 'toilet.' Listening to the song one could be forgiven for visualising being inside a nightclub toilet cubicle somewhere that all of a sudden turns into a domestic bathroom. This feels deliberate, a spatial and temporal shift from the generic western European nightclub to the tenderness of coming down with a lover the following day. This scene is an interior temporally driven resisting chrononormativity.<sup>45</sup> In 'The Last Song/ present,' representation and effect collapse on each other in the vacant occupation of a toilet, perhaps *toilette*, accessible through an unstable and amorphous temporal interior, one drawn from the fragility of 'whatever [that] is.'

smooth synth keyboard perfect  
showroom pop cold yet soft generic  
and repetitive, can't feel foot again,  
distant cubicle door thuds shut on  
rubber pad, water gushes through  
wall, door lock clicks shut, hand dryer,  
flush, hand dryer, steps in leather-  
soled shoes, faux-marble digital print  
with tiny stipples under gloss, rustling,  
wiping, hand dryer somewhere else,  
distinct dry fart, wet fart, plop, finger  
prints smeared across door, quiet.



**Figure 06.**  
Toilet cubicle Melbourne, 2023. Image taken by author.

**0**  
'Death on the toilet is fantastically banal,' Max Porter writes. 'It is not humiliating because it is gloriously normal, and you are dead.'<sup>46</sup> Porter is writing about Francis Bacon's *Triptych May-June 1973* depicting their lover George Dyer's death on the toilet. Bacon trained as an interior designer, and was largely closeted about that fact. An interior reading beyond the obvious content understands Bacon's figures not as abstracted from the world, but as abstracted by the world. Victims shaped by forces beyond them, shaped by their interiors in perverse ways. The painting is three views from the same point, the



interior perverted. We're disoriented as we shift from a body on the toilet, to one under a light, and finally heaving limp over a sink. The interior shifts as much as the body. A transformation is happening here; Bacon makes space uncertain. It's hard not to see Dyer's contorted, twisted form as becoming meat, becoming interior. We see references to both mouth and anus but not *as them*.<sup>47</sup> As plumbing. As othering. George Dyer is like the toilet. Their twisted, white, rough trade muscles glisten like ceramic. They *are* that toilet.

In death, the body remains. Perhaps *that* the body remains, void of agency, limp like a shit, that's the problem? We see it as what it was, not what it is. Following this perverse line of thinking, we can consider the subject enveloped by their environment as a source of uncertain *potential*. The certainty of a positive 1 becomes the uncertain 0. In Tarot death means 'end' but also signals 'renewal' because death as an event *transforms*: something else *must come*. Tarot of course, can be used in two ways: foretelling a future that enforces a linear time; and as reflexive intervention into the present, re-focusing on something in a different, enchanted way. To think about its second use is to open the cards and death to other becomings.

For materiality, death is collapse of signification. It's powerful because it threatens ontology. 'It is no longer I who expel, "I" is expelled,' Julia Kristeva writes, concisely describing the spectre of corpses.<sup>48</sup> Tarot's death, in a similar

way to Kristeva's abject, or Bacon's painting, challenges the border between the I and Other. Moving from 1 to 0 is drawing challenging lines towards radical immanence, and can be thought about by designers as a way to reconfigure—not just what we do, but when and how we do it. We see excitement in dirt, shit, piss, cum. It comes over heterosexist spatial planning, bad habits, mean social conditions, and disciplinary tethers that block the movement of thought to practise something else. We can, and I argue should, see materiality, the relations that designers have to materials that form interiors and our experiences of them, in this radical, transformative, uncertain way, because something else *will* come. At the very least, we should make movements before it shits all over us.

### **we need to stay**

Vacant occupation, like theory, is what it does. Designing thought from these interiors, not of them, seeks ways of queering passages within the substance of their materiality. Passages that are not representational, but experiential in their own way, through the materiality of design-writing. Toilets try desperately to be certain, upholding majoritarian values and closeting anxieties. Their insistence on binary organisation—including functionality and utility—betrays a naïve, pure camp closeting bodies, viscerally pissing, shitting, bleeding, and squirting their abject back into the world, while the gaze remains averted. They are instrumental in the production of this relationship with our abject, what we choose *not* to see, smell, hear.



Looking back towards what happens inside these interiors, H el ene Frichot reminds us that, with the thinking-doing of design, ‘epistemology, animated and extended [...] can be approached not in a strict way, but in an opportunistic and situated way, [...] an approach that allows the bringing together while remaining sufficiently distinct of thinking and doing via disjunctive syntheses.’<sup>49</sup> In vacant occupation, territories are *created*, that is to say, *more than* claimed or observed, and the designer-thinker forms relations with the spaces in which they, *I*, was situated.

The embodied methodology in this project invites a relationship to grow between the designer-thinker and the environment-world they are a part of, and eventually collapse 0-1-0. One that’s subjectivity-forming and formed by that subjectivity, drawing attention to the multiple perspectives that can, and I would argue *must* exist to make uncertain assumptions and opinions on which design so often lazily relies. In the case of public toilets, we must remind ourselves that what we assume as ‘normal’, pragmatic, potentially useful is not what it appears, and space for other perspectives has never been more needed. Toilets express so much about ourselves and culture—but, evoking Guillaume Dustan again, ‘that’s not something one talks about.’<sup>50</sup> This is no easy task, because we must learn to be happy in dark rooms, creating complex, pleasurable circuitries, *loving* uncertainty’s productive potential. This picks at who we are as designers, and how we approach what

we do. In case we lose our nerve, Bacon paints an arrow on the outer canvases of their triptych: ‘*Look* here. Don’t you *dare* turn away,’ they say.

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- 32 MacCormack, *Posthuman Ethics*, p. 109.
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- 37 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), p. 10.
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- 42 Han, *The Scent of Time*, p. 96.
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