

Thoughts of a Ladies Toilet Attendant

During my time in the Ladies Edwardian Cloakroom, Bristol, I inhabited the position and perhaps even somewhat took on the spirit of toilet attendants in the space.

Forms were filled in; contracts were signed; I was handed the key to the door: the building was in my care (for the purposes of an art exhibition). I was specifically told to leave it as I found it. Upon entering, I noted how grubby it was: dust collected in the sinks; grit on the floor; accumulated detritus of occasional use; and the toilet bowls filthy with who knows what.

Leave it as I found it? I don't think so. This public convenience was my responsibility, and I was going to leave it better than I found it. I felt I owed it to the building, and the previous toilet attendants charged with its care. Perhaps there are rules about the upkeep of listed buildings and how one goes about it but a bit of a dust down and a mop wouldn't go amiss. It didn't seem right to not show it off to its best.

It was a public toilet. Past tense. The water had been turned off long ago and if you needed to go, you had to go elsewhere.¹ I brought my own water and set out to make it presentable. It was important to clean it, out of respect for the space. And, anyway, no one enjoys an unclean latrine.

As I wiped the accumulated dust and grime from the walls in each cubicle my thoughts carried me to Dolly. No longer with us, in her time she had taken several jobs to keep her family sheltered, fed and clothed. When she wasn't working in a cake factory, she worked in a hospital washing the bodies of the dead. I recalled reading in Jeanette Winterson's memoirs about how this ritual was traditionally carried out by family and friends in the home, and how Jeanette had washed her mother's body out of a mark of respect and love.²

The building was a living relic of sorts, and as I washed and wiped it down, it felt like a way of honouring it, and a way of coming into harmony with the space I was to spend time attending. It felt important to present it as the best version of itself under the circumstances. The installations I created

¹ Professor Clara Greed, an urban design academic, has long argued the importance of public toilet provision in the design of healthy, sustainable places.

<http://people.uwe.ac.uk/Pages/person.aspx?accountname=campus%5Cc-greed>

² "...I would not give up the body I love to a stranger to wash and dress. It is the last thing you can do for someone, and the last thing you can do together..." Winterson, J. *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (2011) London: Vintage, p.75.

for the space were a site specific response - intended as complement, not competition with the space.

As I swept the floor and wiped out the sinks, I thought of Connie, my Grandma, who, when she first went out to earn her keep, had been a charwoman, cleaning someone else's home for a living. I thought about the history of cleaning through the women I'd known and how I had never 'seen' it or thought about it very much before. I thought about relationships with spaces based on the tasks done in them, and I thought about the invisibility of a lot of work that takes place and of the people who do them.

I thought about the nature of the word 'work', of doing work, going to work, making work, creating work, working out, working well and so on. I considered its ubiquity in everyday use, and how its origins in many language roots derive from the word torture³. I thought about how it might be possible to renegotiate the terrain, and find a way of being that didn't have its foundations in violence, pain and struggle. What was it that Confucius said? Something along the lines of, "Do what you love and you'll never work a day in your life." On this basis, would it be possible to eradicate the word 'work' from one's vocabulary, and see marked improvement in outlook and wellbeing?

Part of the Ladies Cloakroom was given over to what had once evidently been a small office. I had intended to sit in it during my four day invigilation of the space. Inspired by reading Victoria Hughes' memoirs that shared stories of her time as a toilet attendant on The Downs from 1929 to 1962, and through this my subsequent process of becoming an attendant myself, I decided to populate it with objects that Hughes specifically mentioned using, including: knitting; a novel; the local newspaper; a teapot and chipped china cups, amongst other things.⁴ From this I created a room that was also about what I, as the current attendant, wanted for comfort and convenience in a semi-private space within a public one.

I called upon my pregnant sister to put her crocheting skills to the test and hand make a 'granny blanket' in colours of her choosing, that could be passed on in the family in due course, but keep me warm in the meantime. I incorporated other signifiers of small personal, private comforts but that also spoke of a 'cloak' of one sort or another - barriers to mask sounds, smells, noises of a public space where private acts

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jan/14/language-labouring-reveals-tortured-roots1>

⁴ Hughes, V. *Ladie's Mile - The Remarkable and Shocking History of Twilight Bristol* (1977). Bristol: Abson.

occur - including: an ashtray (in place of the cigarette); mint imperial sweets; cheap fresh flowers; a radio and popular British music from c.1930s playing in the background.

Over the course of my time in the Ladies Cloakroom, I found myself cultivating habits and rituals specific to the space. Each morning after I'd set up and also in the evening before closing, while no visitors were around I would take time to carefully sweep the floor of the toilets and the path outside. I enjoyed the pace of being an attendant in that space, of having specific tasks that no one else saw me carry out, and a care for the building that although the results of which were public, were performed in private.

To be continued..

Jodie Marks

November 2016