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## Room Journal

Issue 01:  
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Punting Us, Alex Schweder, 2003, Jack Hanley Gallery, San Francisco, CA.

# In Toilets We Trust Alex Schweder



In Orbit, Alex Schweder and Ward Shelley, 2014, Pierogi Boiler, Brooklyn, NY. Photograph: Scott Lynch

I once asked "Will you pick up some of that nice ham on your way home?" But what I really wanted to know was "Do you still love me?" This explains the heart-sink I felt when my addressee said, "I don't have time." Similarly, this answer cloaked their message "You should start loving yourself."

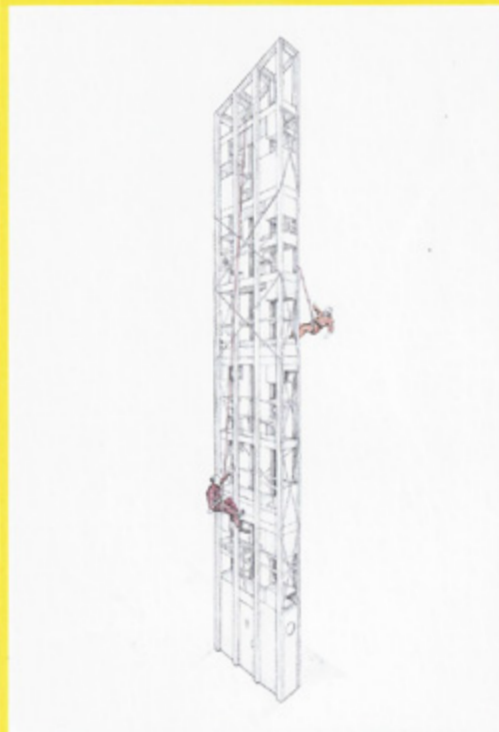
Often without knowing, people do this; they ask questions that parallel those they really want to ask. The answer to the surface query might be relatively low stakes compared with that of the implicit. It's in this way of embedding grave questions within innocuous questions that I have come to understand one question that I am asked more frequently than most people: "Where do you go to the bathroom?"

For this to make any sense, let me provide some context; I am an artist who builds extreme environments with my creative partner, Ward Shelley. We then live in these structures for predetermined lengths of time thinking of this act as a performance. For this

duration, we discover how our exaggerated space changes us individually and as partners. Unlike most performances, however, we invite visitors to talk to us about their impressions of this situation. Conversations often gigglingly open with the curiosity as to where our drinks and meals wind up. After ten years of making works of this kind, it occurred to me recently that people might be asking something profound masquerading as trite. With this theory, I ponder below what might be serious behind the door of our most joked about room.

If all is well, nobody escapes the need to expel waste every few hours, there is no paying someone else or designing a machine to do it for you. Without a place to manage our digestive cycle within an environment, people leave to find a place where they can. Think of an automobile journey; every few hours, healthy passengers need to stop for a bathroom break or suffer sitting upon soiled upholstery. A likely reason consumers





Counterweight Roommate, Alex Schweder and Ward Shelley, 2011.

do not demand an automotive toilet is that the frequency of a car's need for fuel usually converges with our need to rid ourselves of what was once fuel. Our speed machines and our flesh are similarly contingent on petrol stations.

We've never performed in a convenience station, so what confronts our audience is our claim that we do not leave the structure. At the moment they understand this durational aspect of our work, they try to imagine what it would be like for them were they in our shoes. One hour, ok. Two or three, maybe. But by the fourth hour, if there is no bathroom, we need to leave the boundaries of our project and break our vow. Once they have the evidence they need, though, subtler questions can be entertained. Through this line of thinking, it seems that the question they are asking through "Where do you go to the bathroom?" is the question most pressing between two strangers "Can I trust you?" Without proof, even a positive answer leaves doubt.



Counterweight Roommate, Alex Schweder and Ward Shelley, 2011. Photographs: Georgios Petalas.

Trust and the way people produce and communicate trust through space is a thread running through Shelley and my artistic explorations. Perhaps the performance that most clearly visualized trust through an architectural situation was Counterweight Roommate. For this first performance, Shelley and I constructed a two-foot deep by seven-foot wide five-story tower, threaded a rope as long as the building was tall through two pulleys at the top of the tower, tied one end of the rope to Shelley's waist and the other to mine, and for five days used one another as counterweights to move from floor to floor. In the middle was a living room big enough for two chairs. Above and below that was a workspace for each of us that converted to a sleeping area at night. Finally, at the upper and lower most levels were the kitchen at top and the bathroom at the bottom.

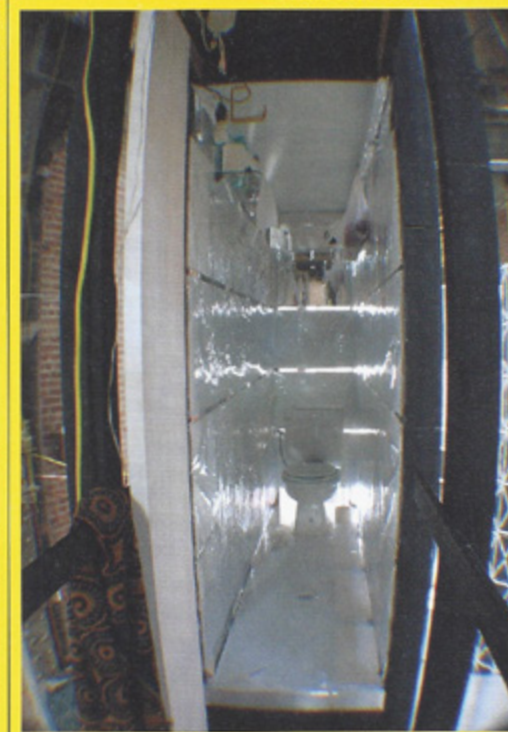
There were several reasons as to why the bathroom was located at the bottom. We wanted this room to



Flatland, Alex Schweder and Ward Shelley, 2007.

be private and sheathing this level with plywood offered structural benefits as well. Essential for building trust with visitors, we wanted people to be able to believe we were really staying on the structure, so a gap in the bathroom door served the same purpose as that in Christ's chest for any doubting Thomas who might pass by. Finally, at the top and bottom respectively, the length of the rope required that the person occupying the "stuff goes in" space of the kitchen be balanced by the other person who would occupy the "stuff come out" space on the bottom floor. A nice conceptual balance.

What we had not anticipated was that the lived experience of this arrangement would leave me crippled with fear when Shelley's daily rhythm required him to become a little lighter. I have a very real fear of heights. I hated going to the kitchen. Even though we were always securely attached to the structure, my knuckles were as white as the eggs I boiled there. Ward did his best, he cooked without complaint and



Flatland, Alex Schweder and Ward Shelley, 2007.

peed in bottles as often as he could. But at least once a day I had to go to the kitchen. We each felt a part of ourselves reshaped when the need to inconvenience one another revealed the illusion of autonomy. This of course was visualized by our rope and tower, but it was through the occupation that we found the tacit imbalance would need care for one another's emotions. Ham has never tasted better.

A few years later, I began putting Ward's nice ham in the bathroom sink. He'd walk one way and I would walk the other, soon enough he'd have my offering when the sink would come up to him. "All's well between us" spoken with meat. Our bathroom stayed upright as this house sized wheel spun, everything else attached and fixed, upside and down. Ward on top, of course, twenty-five feet up, I took the bottom. We took care of one another like this, never switching places during our ten days.

A steady stream of people kept us occupied, asking, of course,



where we went to the bathroom. Pointing to our box we'd explain how it works. Demonstrating, was another thing. I convinced myself that such a display would be distracting and that visitors would focus on the salacious act rather than the larger situation. Again, a stated thought and inner experience misaligned, I was too shy. Ward, up in the unlit ceiling was hidden and practiced at his bottle. He did not suffer this wait. I wish I had the courage to use a jar.

Several projects forward, his bottle was still with us, but our bathroom, like every other function, sliding back and forth from one side of the wall we were living on, again for ten days. All the privacy we needed was on offer. Why is he bringing that bottle? We never saw each other and speaking was hard, the wall blocked our voices, the room echoed brightly, and we both should have worn ear plugs more often in our youth. It was intended to be a work about sharing and the need to do for someone else what you yourself want done for you later. Living on it, though, brought other relations forward. The inability to communicate directly led to interpretations of gestures that had no intended meaning. Pulling the dining room forward too quickly and slamming it. Is he mad at me? Staying in the chair all day. Why isn't he thinking of my feelings? These interpretations saying more about us than the emotional state of the person on the other side of the wall.

When the photographer came, I saw it. Ward's pee bottle hanging prominently from the wall, smack in the middle of the picture, almost to mark it as his territory. Why would he do that? Is he showing how he can rough it? Is he thumbing his nose at the polished aesthetic? Is he displaying his guyness? Any answer would let you get to know me better than him.

Then I remembered how his bottle behavior was a way of assuaging my kitchen anxiety as we negoti-



Urinals, Alex Schweder, 2001. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.



Peedie: Fountain in Peerscapes, Alex Schweder, 2001. John Michael Kohler Arts Center.

ated the rope. Who could know that a bottle of pee could express more care than I can repay. It hung there, never to be seen by me except as a photograph, holding urine and the unspoken message that I am loved. I love you too, Ward.



Spit Six, Alex Schweder, 2008. American Academy in Rome.