

## In the bathroom with Marc Martin



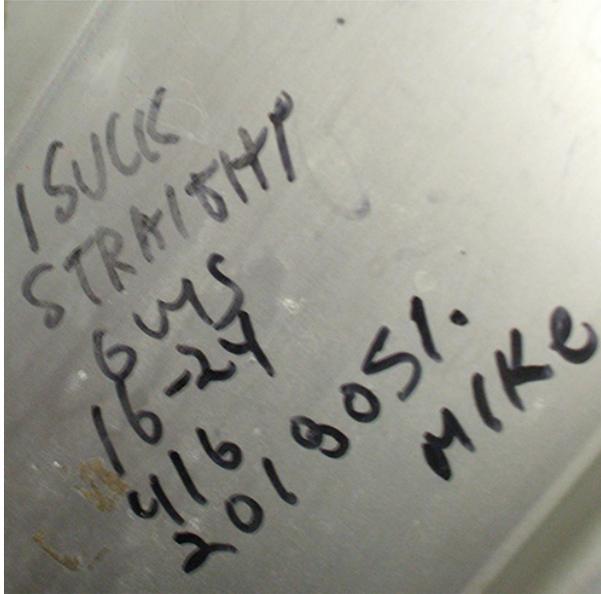
Marc Martin, 2017 - Photo Raphael Lucas

**It is often said that walls have ears. But do we know they whisper? Walls of public toilets tell private stories. Underdogs' ones. Indeed, for a long time, these confined spaces were the only refuge where sexual minorities could display themselves. To look into [Marc Martin's](#) work at the urinals during the health crisis is like a passport to the forbidden: an erotic stay in a troubled area. An experience that is not possible today in the public space.**

"[Les tasses](#)" in french ("*Tearoom*" in english), that's a funny name for an exhibition that has been travelling between Berlin and New York, from Paris to Brussels, since 2017. It is also a joke to the sanitized culture and to the agreed, even convenient memory. Martin shows the hidden face of public washrooms. In the collective imagination, they symbolize the most sordid and smelly places in the urban space. Yet, in the photographer's lens, they wake up vintage colours of the rainbow. Exploring a piece of history that seems not very glorious, he reveals the slang poetry of yesteryear on the dirty and oozing walls of public toilets.

If Marc Martin focuses on the place, rather than on the cruising facts, it is because he sees an aesthetic specific to these spaces. An architecture that encourages changes in use. Built for the most part in the early days of urban hygienism, urinals sheltered his first throb, embodying his emancipation: "*What makes the romanticism of an encounter? It is often the place*", as the legend of his installation "*Paradis Perdue*", a corpus of 80 photographs of abandoned urinals, says. The prints, symmetrically arranged at equal distances, recall the motif of tiling. They cover an entire wall from which a certain nostalgia emerges. This perfume of yesteryear prevails over the stinky smell and the legendary dirtiness of these places. "*An aesthetic à la Jean Genet*", writes [Etienne Dumont](#). This is it!

## At the doors of pleasure



"The places where we have neither loved nor suffered leave no trace in our memory" wrote [Pierre Loti](#) (1850-1923). [Marc Martin](#) remembers public bathrooms graffiti as a door open to a parallel world: "As a teenager, the toilets were my first libidinal reading room. Behind the closed doors, on the ceramics and the ugly yellowed paint, a parallel world opened up. Contrary to the political slogans expressed in more open spaces, sexual graffiti, more intimate, converged in more confined spaces. The damp walls of public toilets inspired this type of free expression. Free of social convention. These underground walls of expression, considered unworthy, illustrated the existence of a homosexuality resistant to oppression. Ignored, stigmatized, it expressed itself wherever it could", he writes in his [book](#). If graffiti in public toilets represent sexual misery for many, they are of great richness in the eyes of [Marc Martin](#). For him, subversion is total: spelling, typography, calligraphy, lexicon, rhetoric, epic, prophecy... Answers, erasures, deletions, correspondences, overlaps, themes, variations, repetitions...



To graffiti, the precursor of classified ads and profiles on digital apps, Martin offered several installations: a toilet door from a French university, torn off just before the restoration of the building, is religiously displayed as a relic.



« Dans la tête d'Ernest » is a papier-mâché bust made of thousands of graffiti collected on the walls of *pissoirs* in Paris in the 1960s and 1970s. Made by **Jan Krass** and displayed as a statue: "Hairy trucker, 35 years old"; "Shit and shut up", "I come very quickly"...





An old suitcase symbolizes the baggage of [Eugène Wilhelm](#) (1866-1951), a pioneer of LGBT rights at the end of the 19th century, who had found dozens of graffiti in bathrooms. This suitcase, recently recovered thanks to [Régis Schlagdenhauffen](#), offers unfiltered access to a subculture with slang terms of the time: century-old graffiti. While another "palimpsestes" installation projects photos of sexual graffiti from all over the world onto the walls.



Marc Martin – *Tearoom Tracks* - 2018

**Marc Martin** is also a video maker: in former Berlin washrooms (closed to the public but specially reopened), he has recreated the silent atmosphere of furtive encounters in a short historical-erotic film "[Tearoom Tracks](#)". With this title, the artist pays a double homage. First, to the sociologist [Laud Humphreys](#) (1930-1988) for his famous thesis "[Tearoom Trade](#)". The second refers to "[Tearoom](#)": images that the Mansfield police in the United States filmed through a two-way mirror in the public toilets of Central Park in 1962 and which led to the arrest of a large number of men. [Pierre Emö](#), Berliner-dandy, plays the role, cruising for hours by numbers. Ignored by the sphere of LGBT festivals (perhaps because of explicit scenes), this porno-historical documentary goes around the underground festivals now. And Martin is happy with that.



Since its premiere at the [Schwules Museum](#) in Berlin, "[Les Tasses](#)", subtitled "[Public Toilets, Private Affairs](#)" has continued to make its way. Between poetry and pornography, **Marc Martin** appears on [Le Figaro](#) (the most famous conservative daily newspaper in France) and feeds the fantasies of informed adults on fetishist sites. By thus creating a bridge between the dark past of public toilets (which the gay community would surely have preferred to erase from its memory) and the immaculate walls of contemporary art galleries, **Marc Martin** takes part of the tradition of transgressive art in the urban space: "[Classé X](#)", the sexual graffiti, poor parent of the Street art family, has had his coat of arms sunshined.

In 1989, in the midst of the AIDS epidemic, **Keith Haring** (1958-1990) had already achieved the feat: in a puritanical America, uncomfortable with sexuality, he offered a homoerotic fresco in the men's toilets of the West Village in New York. "[Once upon a time](#)", his masterpiece with dozens of juicy cocks tagged on the walls of the toilets is today considered the most personal and provocative of all his public creations. It has just been restored and made into one of the most precious bathroom pits in the USA.



Keith Haring, « Once Upon a time », 1989 - [LGBT Community Center National History Archive](#)

## Urban Traces



Because modern town planning is closely linked to hygiene. The purity of public space reflects a political ideal of social cohesion. By making these places with "dirty" walls disappear, a whole subculture is being erased. In 2005, the historian **Abel Sierra Madero** for the University of Havana carried out an anthropological study in Cuba's washrooms: "[Walls Talks](#)". Between four partitioned walls, the researcher observed this unprecedented social and racial mixing. He describes well the homoerotic atmosphere that oozes from Marc Martin's photos: *"The place had a little grimy window, no light and excreted a sickly, suffocating, sweet stench - a mix of sulphur, methane, semen, sweat and furtive, anonymous sex. The odors were like a "territorial mark" left behind by urban "tropical animals." The chaotically scribbled-on walls—transtextual manuscripts on concrete,—revealed the imprint of an anonymous and clandestine communion of writers engaged in a flow of words, simultaneously public and private, sexual and marginal scriptural practice in a urban milieu that ignores its producers. Attracted to each other by physical contact, this open community of writers and speakers—so familiar with the comings and goings of passersby—of various professions, social classes and groups, unearthed a series of conflicting identities and sociability models..."*

Sierra Madero also notes that many of those who frequent the washrooms see the place as a playground, an initiation to their sexual desires or a place for experimentation between men. The boundaries between straight and gay men are blurred. They are weakened by this common promiscuity, with sex in hand: *"Some pretend to be peeing, but they're actually just displaying their genitals as goods in a shop window. Most of the time there is no talking... and if anything is said it's always very impersonal, anonymous."*

In countries where homosexuality is still frowned upon, or even banned, the walls of the public toilets today still play their role of clandestine mediation.



Marc Martin with Pierre Emö, 2017 - Photo Raphaël Lucas

French photographer **Marc Martin** openly claims to be a "fag" and [fights against the sterilization of Queer culture](#). For him, LGBT pride must be displayed in all its diversity. Now, with social distancing and barrier gestures, promiscuity in confined spaces is not on the agenda. The next stations of his exhibition in New York ([Leslie Lohman Museum](#)) and Brussels ([LaVallée ArtCenter](#)) have been postponed. For sure. In the meantime, there is a way to penetrate Marc Martin's wet world. Take your keyboard, check [marcmartin.paris](http://marcmartin.paris) and then, wash your hands (or not) before and/or after that. It's up to you.

