

## Interview

### Give a Shit!

An Interview with Laura Korčulanin by Tereza Kuldova

**Tereza Kuldova:** Laura, you are the mind behind the activist, artistic and academic project *Give a Shit*, which aims at raising awareness and breaking persistent taboos related to toilets and excrements, while also proposing a reorganization of the existing western system of flushing. Two things strike me about this project: firstly, its focus on the urban areas in the developed world – for we all know that when we talk of problems with shit, we tend to displace it onto the so called 'Third World', onto the Other, comfortably ignoring our own excremental challenges and secondly, its focus on flushing and water use. Could you tell us what is the biggest problem we choose to ignore is and why?

**Laura Korčulanin:** First of all, thanks Tereza for creating the space for this kind of dialogue. Yes, we are speaking of a very delicate topic, mostly overlooked and beyond our comfort zone. Most projects on sanitation and water issues focus primarily on developing countries. What we aim at in our project, *Give a Shit*, is exactly the opposite, we are focusing on raising awareness about toilet issues in the developed world. In the developed world, we are part of the problem every time we visit our fancy toilets. With every single flush, we waste between 3-7 liters of drinkable water, which is more than people who lack access to it have for their daily survival (5 liters in average) – for cooking, cleaning and hygiene altogether (UN, 2010). Old toilet tanks in some buildings still waste 10-13liters of drinkable water per flush. Today's western system of flushing accounts for nearly thirty percent of an average household consumption of water, being one of the largest amounts of potable water used in our homes (EC DG EV, 2009). Moreover, simultaneously we flush down the drain and waste our precious 'gold' - human excrements. Excrements could be potential renewable sources of energy or fertilizers. And believe it or not, as researchers from the Arizona State University confirmed, we flush down the drain various fine metals, such as gold, silver, and platinum.

Mostly, it seems that we believe the problem to disappear once it goes down the drain. But the reality is quite different and a lot more shocking we can imagine. Not only is drinkable and purified water used to flush our excreta away, but 80% of wastewater globally is never going to be reused again (report from UN-Water and Sanitation, 2017). Sanitation and drinking water were declared human rights in 2010 by the UN, being one of the 2015 Millennium goals (UN, 2010). Of fundamental importance here is to understand how human and natural changes impact available resources so that we can develop sustainable attitudes and ensure adequate access to fresh water. The project *Give a Shit* focuses particularly on issues related to the human factor, to behavioral issues and mindset change to assure adequate water management, improving efficiency in water use and bringing alternative water resources to use. But there is more to the concern about toilets – as Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) claims, approximately 27,000





Laura Korčulanin during intervention in public toilet facility in Lx Factory, November 2016, Lisbon. Photo: Fernando Mendes.

trees are wasted every day on our softly bleached toilet paper. Moreover, the latest scientific and medical discussions on our toilet system are also concerned with our position once we are doing ‘it,’ something that goes beyond technological and environmental issues.

All in all, a lot of precious blue, brown and green ‘gold’ is being (un)consciously wasted every time we visit our toilets. Something being flushed away means something rejected, perceived as useless and undesirable, something that becomes forgotten once it disappears in front of our vision. As Dominique Laporte argued, this had happened with the introduction of water systems in the city and invention of a toilet flushing system in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when flushing transformed the human sensory experience of ‘elimination.’

The fact that most of us normally prefer not to see or smell our own products seems to confirm that the rejection of and prejudice against excreta is not just a technological coincidence. As discussed by Mary Douglas and others, today’s prejudice against our own shit is regulated by psychological games of shame and disgust and societal parameters of cleanliness and dirt, and purity and danger. During our childhood, we are socialized into treating our bodily fluids as something private, to be dealt with in an intimate space and into perceiving it as a ‘shitty’ thing to deal with or speak about. Though the expression ‘shit’ is used in most languages, helping us either to ‘purify our



Public intervention in Rossio Square of Lisbon for World Toilet Day, 19<sup>th</sup> of November 2015. Photo: Pedro Carvalho Fernandes

souls' when we need to release our frustrations or to say aloud that we do *Give a Shit* about something.

**TK: You speak of design solutions, also given your involvement with design anthropology. Could you tell us what concrete design solutions you have in mind and what would a sustainable flushing system look like in terms of design?**

**LK:** Yes, I work with design solutions based on anthropological research. Firstly, I believe that it is important to clarify and emphasize that speaking of design solutions does not necessarily mean being only focused solely on product design. Design today is increasingly about service and system design and about informing policies with creation of guidelines and different models to set up the possible solutions. In my Ph.D. at Universidade Europeia, Laureate Universities, I use anthropology as a basic methodology to approach the problem and understand it from different perspectives. This gives me an opportunity to approach the problem differently than common design practice would do. One of the most important discoveries in my research is that we are not dealing just with an issue of toilet design but that we are facing a technological lock simultaneously with a social lock one. Speaking about toilet issues means understanding this multi-layered complexity; we are dealing with a 'wicked problem,' difficult to address only from one angle or through one stakeholder. The fact that our western system of toilet design has remained, apart from aesthetic and comfort innovation, almost untouched from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, tells us something about the need for



Give a Shit project taking action for World Water Day, 22nd of March 2017. Photo: Caroline Masselli.

systemic intervention in toilet design. To address this problem adequately, I am working with a living lab methodology where I approach the problem with the help of different stakeholders to co-create proper sustainable solutions for our future generations. My goal is to formulate guidelines that could serve as operational knowledge for those involved in the process of implementation and diffusion of innovative sustainable toilet design, be it waterless toilets or zero freshwater specification toilets. There is much happening lately related to sustainable innovation of toilet design, particularly in *Reinvent the Toilet* of Bill & Melinda Gates and under the World Toilet Organization platform, though much less is being done in respect to social re-organization and holistic approach to technological implementation and diffusion of its sustainable practices in developed countries.

**TK: You have also mentioned the different taboos related to excrements that we still stubbornly maintain in the West, what would be your favorite examples from the field and what lessons can we take away from them?**

**LK:** A moment when living in Barcelona changed my life course; it was one of those 'aha' moments that showed me the degree to which toilets are underlined by a taboo. When living in the city centre, I have constantly been, daily, noticing an unbearable smell of urine on the street in front of my building, and its surroundings. Curious, I began to dig deeper and talk out the issue with my friends, ask around bars, restaurants and so on. I wanted to know, why, when there are public toilets, does everyone piss in the street? Nobody talked about the problem nor showed any interest in the topic. People felt awkward at hearing the question; others would make fun of it. The strange thing was that there was no public or private pressure to change the situation and there were no public toilets in the city. However, once posters with fees to pay for public urination emerged in the public space of Barcelona while no additional public toilets were



Give a Shit project taking action for World Water Day, 22nd of March 2017. Photo: Caroline Masseli

provided and tourism was increasing, I understood something was wrong, and no one wanted to talk about it. People would say there is nothing to do about it or they felt impotent in the situation. They preferred to hold their pee than to demand new facilities. I would see the people crossing particular streets covering their noses but refusing to speak about it. This was when the *Give a Shit* project began to take action.

**TK:** In his book, *History of Shit*, Dominique Laporte shows how the process of 'civilization' and development of capitalism was parallel to the progressive privatization of shit, and thus also individualization, and hence crucial to the development of the modern individual, while also showing that we are full of shit and often deep in shit, precisely when we appear at our cleanest and most hygienic. Have you thought about

**privatization of shit also along these lines, and if so, how do you see this relate to the current development of capitalism and neoliberalization of society at large?**

**LK:** We live in times of convergent crisis, where environmental, social or political crises cannot be seen as independent issues. Since these issues are interdependent, they are becoming difficult to address. If we look at the issue of privatization and its consequences, we would be addressing the issue from a comprehensive perspective of 'common' wealth – water. Privatization of such resources can abdicate control over a vital public resource while creating conflict in its usage and distribution since it's using a different set of criteria, often one that emphasizes profitability. On the other hand, seeing toilets as representative symbols of 'civilized' nations throughout history until today, we can see them as important parameters of what's happening in our society. The fact that our mobile devices, clothes, and cars have experienced bigger and quicker innovations than toilets over the last 140 years could pose a trivial question in regards to the basic needs overlooked by the capitalist consumerist system we live in. More people have access to mobile phones (6 billion) than to toilets (2.4 billion of people still lacking

access to it – UN 2015). This is a point of concern in today's society, but understandable as a socio-cultural tendency where visual and comfort experience is more appreciated. Most public toilets are becoming privatized or semi-private or are non-existent in bigger cities of developed countries and cities, New York being a case in point. The important question to ask is whose responsibility should it be to provide public toilet facilities in public spaces? Is it us, the users, or the government? Should we not be able to 'do it' without having to eat or drink in the closest Starbucks?

On the other hand, we pay for the water to be purified and to travel kilometres far, to clean our excrements away. We pay for excrements to be flushed away and disappear from our perception. There are countless problems being 'flushed' away from our perception every day. Manifold crises can be solved only by a conscious and liberated society speaking out without shame, fear or disgust.



Public intervention in Rossio Square of Lisbon for World Toilet Day, 19<sup>th</sup> of November 2015. Photo: Pedro Carvalho Fernandes

**TK:** Shit has been increasingly popular in the art world, especially in the last couple of decades, as some of the essays in this special issue show, precisely because of its ability to shock, and offend, a sign of resistance and rebellion. On the other hand, as such, shit has also been commodified and its power to offend weakened, could it be that using shit as a form of showing the finger to the powerful has become merely a sign of our own weakness vis-à-vis the forces we can no longer control? Does shit still have any revolutionary potential in your view? On the other hand, we could say that in shit we stand united as humanity.

**LK:** Yes, shit is being increasingly popular in the art world, and even in my artistic work, it is a significant symbol of power or empowerment to speak out loud about shit. Shit still has a subversive and powerful meaning and thus also a potential to interact with society. As Barthes once said, 'when written, the word shit doesn't smell' – or for that matter, once it acquires an additional meaning or is taken out of its regular smelly environment. If I reflect on the socioeconomic doctrine on secretion and nutrition as

discussed by Pierre Leroux and Laporte, we are all part of a natural circle (Laporte 1993, 129), where we can satisfy our own needs by ourselves as producers and consumers. I would say we are all producers and consumers of our own shit. So, we better take charge of our shit and start a revolution. Begin with peaceful revolutionary actions as the one we create in our *Give a Shit* project. For the starters, we created golden poops together with different kind of volunteers who do give a shit about existing toilet issue to raise the awareness and mobilize the society towards change. Poop and other 'forbidden' topics are powerful revolutionary objects to work with and influence the societal change.

**TK: Where can we see you next and 'give a shit' together with you?**

**LK:** For the next month, I am based in New York where I am conducting my artistic residency funded by Ministry of Culture in Slovenia. But if not in New York, you can always join us and follow the Give a Shit project on Facebook <https://goo.gl/xDVhXN> there you can also find out about our past and future projects. We are also already planning a diverse program of activities for November when we shall together with UN and World Toilet Organization celebrate the World Toilet Day.