

## Let's Talk 'Dirty'! (28–30 Oct 20)

Online, Oct 28–30, 2020

Daniel Fountain, Loughborough University

An online symposium that brings together a wide range of researchers, practice-researchers and artists united in their study of 'dirty' matters. Spread across three days, with four sessions on the following themes: Gender and Sexual Politics, Place and the Institution, Geographies and Ecologies, and Materialities. Talks range from the ways in which classifications of 'dirt' are used to impose social and political hierarchies, to the materiality of 'dirt' itself.

Online Symposium Programme

All timings: UK, GMT.

Free tickets and info available via Eventbrite.

Wednesday, 28th of October

Gender & Sexual Politics

13:00 Introduction and announcements

13:15 Messy Bitches: The Use of Mess in Contemporary Feminist Performance

Lydia Wilcock, MA Graduate, Queen Mary University of London

This paper examines the phenomenon that is the lack of research into mess in performance. Although the mess is there, the writing is not. Using key texts from anthropology, gender studies, philosophy and theatre studies I build a theory as to what I think mess is. I assess the political potential of mess through its operation as both an artistic material and performance which, I posit, aids understandings of gendered and historical conceptions of mess, women and unruliness. This theory is then implemented within my analysis of Lauren Barri Holstein's performance *Splat!* (2013).

13:45 'Doin' ya mom': Drawing Maternal Desire as an Abject Mother

Penny Davis, Artist and Practice-based PhD Researcher, Loughborough University

As a single mother to three children my research explores the intersections between drawing and writing about maternal embodiment – how it feels to be a mother. In thinking about how maternal embodiment relates to maternal desire, I become confronted through my children's responses to my body with the real-life experiences of abjection as it fixes my maternal self into the devouring, monstrous or phallic mother. But what happens to a mother's desire within this process? Through drawing I explain how I capture the 'syntax' of maternal desire as it becomes abjected using diaries, social media conversations, psychoanalytic theory and anecdotal writing. Drawing becomes a way to explore how it feels to be a desiring mother caught in the abject battle for

autonomy during which her body is laid to waste.

14:15 Break

14:45 Hysteria – Same Old Shit – Guilt – Not For You – Sa(d)isfy Me  
Dr Ina Jessen, Art Historian, Universität Hamburg/Dieter Roth Museum

Using terms and phrases such as 'hysteria,' 'same old shit' and 'guilt' the artist Monica Bonvicini places her substantive, feminist focus on identifying normative gender attributions and persisting social conventions. As such, the graphic work *Hysteria* (2020) is an example of the reciprocal relationship between word, motif and its material iconographic attribution. In my paper, the politicisation of what is deemed 'dirty' refers to the visual representation of gender specific power structures at the interface between material iconography and handwritten or printed words in Monica Bonvicini's artistic position. The terms cited and negotiated by the artist point to and question ongoing socio-political differences and the lack of equality in different parts of civil society.

15:15 Piss Soap  
Arthur Guilleminot, Artist

In a time of global pandemic, the conception of what is disgusting is narrowing to be more restrictive than ever. The constant fear and anxiety related to contamination promotes a more prude society, concerning notions of filth and disgust. *Piss Soap* challenges our understanding of the binary of dirtiness and cleanliness. Can an object be made out of gruesome material and beneficial to our health? Where lays the line of our mental contamination? *Piss Soap* embodies the desire of my artistic practice to decolonize disgust in our western society.

15:45 Questions and Discussion with Lydia Wilcock, Penny Davis, Dr Ina Jessen and Arthur Guilleminot

16:15 Conclusion of the day

Thursday, 29th of October  
Session 1: Place & the Institution

9:30 Introduction and announcements

9:45 Sinks, Drains and Scum – The Council Estate and the Language of Dirt  
Shonagh Short, Artist

My paper reflects upon a two-year artist's residency on the Johnson Fold estate (Bolton), exploring the council estate as an archetypal place and the pervasive use of dirt as a metaphor in mainstream discourse. Through a series of dialogical and performative artworks developed in collaboration with a local women's group, the residency aimed to make visible the language of dirt as used to stigmatise people and place, and the value of cleanliness as a form of social capital. I will analyse the artworks created through this process and consider their success in presenting an alternative narrative to the 'sink estate'.

10:15 Welcome The Vagabonds! Art and Labor in the Era of Dirty Capitalism

Dr Cristina Moraru, Assistant Professor, 'George Enescu' National University of the Arts (UNAGE), Iași.

Contemporary society has gained a liquid consistency (Hito Steyerl). This allows for its continuous mobility while maintaining different categories of socially differentiated humanity. It condemns the vagabonds, those who do not have the same fluid mobility, to a miserable existence. The condition of workers has changed from worker/producer – active in the industrial society – to worker/consumer – afferent to postmodern society. Accordingly, the artist's condition has also changed. Economic globalization and the liberalization of the capital market generated the opposite of a homogenization of the human condition – a polarization of humanity, ranging from vagabonds to tourist, from the liquid elite to the criminalized poor (Bauman).

10:45 Break

11:15 Towards a Base Materialism of the Art School

Richard Hudson-Miles, Artist, researcher and member of the artists' collective @.ac

Dr Andrew Broadey, Lecturer in Contemporary Art, History and Theory, University of Central Lancashire (UCLAN), member of the artists' collective @.ac

Drawing upon the work of Bataille (1985), this visual essay articulates a base materialism of the art school, which counterposes splinters, paint stains, chemical burns, cigarette ash, violent protest, and cirrhosis of the liver, to the strictly regulated and disciplinary space of the contemporary neoliberal art school. Herein, an anarchical general economy is invoked beyond the restricted economy of 'economised' (Brown, 2015) curricula, managerialism, signature buildings, and the latest studio gadgetry. Our video essay disrupts sanitised art school marketing with an ontology of dirt and debris.

11:45 Dirty Practice: Artistic Practices and the Subversion of Institutional Hierarchies

Dr Christian Mieves, Lecturer in Fine Art, Newcastle University

Maggie Ayliffe, Artist and Cultural Theorist, Wolverhampton School of Art

Dirt offers an ideal context to explore critically current artistic frameworks where manual skills and studio-based practices are increasingly denigrated in favour of conceptual or socially engaged art practices. Based on Dirty Practice, an initiative we started at Wolverhampton School of Art in 2015, the paper seeks to explore critically to what extent the teaching of creative disciplines through 'dirty' Fine Art practices (painting, sculpture, printmaking) ironically becomes a subversive activity for staff and students in today's art schools. The paper will further discuss ways in which the creative potential of impurities or 'anomalies' (such as dirt) opens opportunities of subversion and renewal (such as traditional skill sets or regimented environments).

12:15 Questions and Discussion with Shonagh Short, Cristina Moraru, Richard Hudson-Miles, Andrew Broadey, Christian Mieves and Maggie Ayliffe

12:45 Lunch Break

Session 2: Geographies and Ecologies

14:00 Introduction and announcements

14:15 Building ruderal practices: on the botanical narration of alien ecosystems and how to learn against it

Julie Robiolle, Researcher and Curator

Ruderal spaces are liminal spaces: abandoned industrial zones, highway edges. Zones of abandonment - deconstruction - wastes flourishing in dirty soils. They are places where social contracts no longer apply: failed mutation of capitalism, sedimentation of progress. Today those plants are at the same time a mirror of recent tremblings in European identity politics and reverberations of the centuries-long tradition of plant-based colonization. Those correlations can be found in media, political discourses, and scientific vocabulary, but also in contemporary research-based art practices. By looking at both botanical and artistic politicization of nature and ruderality, we come to understand waste as a complex cultural production, rooted in social policies. But can a multiple, divergent understanding of ruderal be translated into a counter-practice for the now?

14:45 The Path Project

Claire Morris-Wright, Artist

The Path was an airport perimeter to landing strips during World War Two. Hidden behind forest, overgrown, splitting concrete, where tree roots have forced and made their way. Nature has spread, a re-wilding that I watch, recording my view of this path through regular encounters and a creative gaze. The seasonal changes, the haphazard, natural interventions are observed and stored. A relationship, a growing, in-depth knowledge, seeing what falls, grows through the year. Dirt from rotting leaves, branches, mosses, lichens, creating a fertile host for new growth, an anomaly, a positive notion that hostile environments are burgeoning with life.

15:15 Break

15:45 Leaky materialities and drifting transparencies in La Hague's radioactive landscapes

Agnes Villette, PhD Researcher, Winchester School of Arts, University of Southampton

At the tip of the Norman peninsula, overlooking the British Isles, La Hague's nuclear cluster has been caught in continuous controversies concerning the seriousness of its radioactive pollution. Radiation and toxic spill outs, nuclear waste, porous installations are counterbalanced by a hegemonic discourse on safety and containment. The managerial approach to nuclear's ontological uncertainties has succeeded in defeating evidential proof and redefining thresholds of accountability. The paper explores how La Hague's toxic legacy intersects toxic materialities and transparency narratives.

16:15 My dear T-shirt: journeys of second-hand clothes and other intimate material objects

Dr Aija Lulle, Lecturer in Human Geography, Loughborough University

This paper addresses the materiality and representation of 'dirt' by analysing students' engagement with 'dirty' clothes and representing 'dirt' on donated and sold second-hand clothes. My research is grounded in a broader understanding of the reuse, exchange, donation and dumping of clothes by students in Loughborough, based on interviews with ethnically diverse students at Loughborough University. The reuse of clothing is environmentally sustainable, low cost, and creates global economic value. It also provides new insights into the memory of material objects, the

behaviour of global citizens and the migration of material objects. With this research, I push forward our understanding of 'dirt' through lenses of mobility of goods and youth identities.

16:45 Questions and Discussion with Julie Robiolle, Claire Morris-Wright, Agnes Villette and Dr Aija Lulle

17:15 Conclusion of the day

Friday, 30th of October - Theme: Materialities

9:30 Introduction and announcements

9:45 Between Eternity and Garbage  
Nenagh Watson, Artist

Ephemeral Animation is a concept I created to frame the animation of debris by the elements (e.g. a plastic bag 'dancing' in the wind). As a puppeteer, I was fascinated by the inherent beauty of these fragments of animation, void of human agency, which I would capture on film. The mundane, tawdry debris of contemporary living are, (to steal from Tadeusz Kantor), 'free' and 'autonomous'. The autonomy explicit within Ephemeral Animation forced me to reconsider the need for human intervention and as such to question the necessity and indeed the desirability of an outside manipulator. Within this paper the materiality of 'dirty' matter collides with the very status of the puppet, whose 'poor' beginnings have salvaged its rich legacy.

10:15 Der Engel Schwieg (The Silent Angel)

Dr Johanna Love, Artist, Pathway Leader for MA Fine Art Printmaking, Camberwell College of Arts, and Senior Lecturer, University of Brighton

Dust is everywhere. It is in the air we breathe and on the surfaces we touch. We come from dust and we decay into dust. In this paper I will discuss a body of drawings emerging from my current research project examining dust particles in collaboration with scientists at The Natural History Museum, London. I have become increasingly interested in exploring dust through the process of drawing. Within its constituents lies a microscopic world that can tell us about human experience; revealing stories about life and history. In particular, I am examining dust from my grandmother's birth home in Hamburg, Germany – a city heavily bombed during World War Two. Collected from undisturbed places such as the cellar and attic, I consider this dust as a valuable archive that may speak of my family's past – a witness to history and time.

10:45 Break

11:15 Dirt. Plate.

Dr Gillian Dyson, Senior Lecturer in Performing Arts, Leeds School of Arts, Leeds Beckett University

Examining the relationship between the body and home-dirt, I offer a critical analysis of my research performance which investigated the uncanny and abject relationship between domestic object and female body. Eating the plate involved the literal chewing of an unfired clay plate – a corporeal experience of the half-way state of solid and liquid. The gobs of clay were spat out as

clinging, formless waste which refuses to conform to the 'clean and proper' (Douglas cited by Grosz 1994, p.195). The performance brings into question the boundary between body and house/home and in doing so resists the hegemonic certainty of both.

#### 11:45 Lockdown Deconstruction

Sarah Feinmann, Artist

My creative practice explores urban dereliction and our throwaway society – the process of consuming, discarding and decaying. I use documentary photography to record these aspects, which is referenced in fabric assemblages. I work with found objects that show their history, including found and second-hand linens. I bury the table linens in the compost and use eco printing to stain and mark the surface. During lockdown checking and harvesting the compost became a ritual and, in turn, part of my practice. My paper will discuss the process of affecting the material and how it relates to my photography of urban decay.

12:15 Questions and Discussion with Nenagh Watson, Dr Johanna Love, Dr Gillian Dyson and Sarah Feinmann

12:45 Conclusion of the symposium

#### Reference:

CONF: Let's Talk 'Dirty'! (28-30 Oct 20). In: ArtHist.net, Sep 16, 2020 (accessed Jul 4, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/23533>>.