

Dirty Theory: Troubling Architecture

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Introduction

Dirty Theory: Troubling Architecture

There is nothing very respectable about dirty theory. It seeks out approaches and plots trajectories from a position close to the ground. We must move past our disgust, to work with the dirt: This is an imperative for coping with our dusty, dirty, defiled world. To think with it, not against it. Dirt never emerges from nowhere, *ex nihilo*, but from beneath your feet, from under your fingernails, from encounters and relations and from the accumulated odds and sods that compose any mode of life. A life, where it is not stultified as *nature morte*, is inevitably dirty, messy, buffeted by contingencies. Theories, ways of actively thinking-with, can be derived from all kinds of sources and situations. The dirty theorist is usually something of an avid collector, accumulating not just the regular set readers – written by the usual theoretical suspects – but pamphlets, brochures, maps and postcards, snatches of conversation and grabs of social media feed, accepting all the while that distinctions between

low and high culture are easily undone. (An old lesson we keep forgetting, caught up as we are in a will to purification.) What was once sacred and revered in the next moment may well be expelled as abject, judged to be without sense, useless. The dirty theorist follows the materials, tracks the soiled effluent, observing from where it came and the direction that it appears to be taking. She is unafraid of selecting at will from the sedimented archive of thinking.

Dirty theory messes with mixed disciplines. Showing up in ethnography, in geography, in philosophy, it can just as well find a home in architecture, design and the creative arts. Dirt and art have an existing long-term relationship, whether rendered as negative sculptures extracted from the earth, or maintenance manifestos or soil re-valued as currency. Dirt and architecture – beyond the uptight habits of the archetypal heroic architect's will to purification and hygiene – admits sly allegiances here and there. David Adjaye's Dirty House dabbles in dirt, but better still, Katherine Shonfield's transient installations dig deeper and Jennifer Bloomer's dirty ditties and dirty drawings conspire to imagine architecture otherwise. Dirty theory helps architecture think about the ordinary gestures of care, repair and maintenance that can form part of its mandate. Most powerfully, following the dirt can be a creative movement, a profound relationship with our local environment-worlds.

Dirty theory is wary of the strictures of discipline, preferring instead indiscipline, a wayward approach to problems. It's scattergun, if not scatological. Dirty theory appropriates and critically, knowingly, misappropriates, because ideas do not belong to singular authors, the dirty theorist avers. Dirty theory, the dirty theorist and the theory slut herself are not very respectable, rational or reasonable figures. The preferred approach here is one of a "groping experimentation" (Deleuze & Guattari 1994, 41), to quote that still disreputable pair, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Groping the world, prehending it, trying not to grasp it too hard. To be respectable means to have accepted and internalised the status quo, where everything and everyone is agreeable and none are prepared to rock the boat. To rock the boat would be to place oneself at risk of being thrown overboard, only to discover that the mythical island of reason has disappeared into the mists. To be rational assumes that reason has been determined in advance, and that everything can be organised in good measure. To be reasonable, well, it means you are prepared to get along and are certainly not a woman who makes a fuss. The reason that supports the reasonable ("be reasonable now!") assumes that each thing has its proper, measured and assigned, place. Once a title on the lands belonging to reason has been secured, and "a solid foundation to build upon" (Kant 1979, 180) has been

established, why should we not be contented? Why venture further? Beyond the island of truth, as Immanuel Kant has famously expounded, we only risk venturing further into the fogs of illusion. Yet islands, in this age of concatenating global climatic crises, rising sea levels, micro-plastics and pollutants, turn out to be not so secure after all. Island, land, dirt, all proffering opportunities for the cultivation of reason: There is more than a whiff of the colonial impulse in this territorialisation of dirt. Pure reason must be muddied. Dirty theory thus has additional labour in the political project of decolonisation, and even in the decolonisation of the otherwise too clean imaginary. Dirty theory demands that other voices be heard.

The dirt, the earth, is the required ground in which concepts can be planted and eventually bloom as flowers or weeds (either way). Dirty theory, you see, is neither good nor bad per se; like flowers or weeds it depends on the situation, the relations at hand, on what comes together to form a greater or a meaner composition. The dirt may not be sufficient for anything at all to grow. To territorialise, to deterritorialise, to reterritorialise – all such movements depend on the dirt rendered as the earth, *la terre*, beneath your feet, between your fingers, in your mouth as you utter a furious expletive. Without these movements-utterances, not much would be achieved, for good or for bad, and you are bound to get dirty either way.

It is the anthropologist Mary Douglas who famously offers the neatest definition of dirt: Dirt is matter out of place (Douglas 1966, 36). Matter located where it is judged not to belong. Judged as such by someone, or rather, judged by some societal context organised around societal norms and structures. Douglas explains that this simple formula directs us toward order and then the contravention of ordered relations. Dirt is that which crosses boundaries, challenges decorum, contravenes norms. The low, the reduced, the underfoot, the despised, the rejected, the expelled are at the same moment the accumulated ground upon which the powerful steady themselves in order to reach rarefied heights. Dirt carries material and conceptual weight, it is part of the stuff of all manner of corporeal relation, and it is also symbolic. Dirt registers the conjunction of the material semiotic. It invokes unholy mixtures of concepts and materials, of words and what matters. Jennifer Bloomer puts it plainly: “The world and the language are all tangled around each other” (1993, 87). The tangle should be read as a growing vine, a process of entanglement, as of that emerging from the mouth of the young woman in Botticelli’s painting *Primavera* [Spring] (1478); either she is choking on, or else she is vomiting up, growing life.

If it is Douglas who represents dirt for the ethnographers, then it is the architectural thinker-doer Jennifer Bloomer who best represents dirt for the

architects. She represents it in such a way as to steal it from the grasp of the would-be phenomenologists, and those who would wax lyrical about dirt as an elevated outcome of weathering (Mostafavi & Leatherbarrow 1993), or celebrate the aesthetic effects of dust or seek a metaphysics of the imperfect and impure. Much like violence when violence exudes a curious fascination in its beholder, dirt is ever at risk of aestheticisation. Despite this risk, cannot a dirty theory enable creative possibilities beyond mere aestheticisation – creative possibilities that can make a critical difference where it matters? Bloomer, I believe, can help show the way.

With architecture, we are ever at risk of rendering dirt bucolic and rustic, of laying it out for our phenomenological enjoyment. Bloomer, who will play an important part in what follows, has darker tales to tell concerning dirt. She mixes water and blood, mixes words and matter, putting things purposively where they do not properly belong. An example: On introducing the beloved architectural motif of the *poché*, the secret that is supposed to properly reveal the deepest phenomenological desires of the architect, she shows instead the hole at the back of the wardrobe through which a young girl escapes from sexual abuse; the *poché* becomes the after-effect of a cigarette burn, the dirt that comes from the violence that is hidden behind the stern façades of what are supposed to be proper family men (1993, 178-179). Sobering scenes

for a dirty theorist. In this sleight of hand Bloomer deploys feminist resistance in response to the accepted definition of *poché*, which instead gives way to matter in the wrong place. Trailing behind Bloomer, suddenly a standard definition breaks into narrative and is off and away. This is no Bachelardian reverie in her discourse, no, it is nothing so saccharine as that. The phenomenological sacred is instead rendered profane and filthy. This is critique, what I would call material semiotic critique, an elegant slippage. The clean sheet turns out to be smudged.

Why get dirty? Why dirty theory now? Dirt is what gives relief to the mark drawn on the dusty ground with a stick to say: inside/outside, included/excluded. To mark, as Michel Serres explains, means to leave a footprint in the soil, and thus to claim, and reclaim, a territory (2011, 2). Dirty theory is a reminder that theories are good for nothing unless they are bound up with the muck of mundane relations on the ground, with the kind of environmental things that are increasingly at stake today, that were at stake yesterday, too, and that certainly will be at stake tomorrow. Make a mud map, find your way through the dirt. The temporalities of dirt take us all the way from property rights to a call for the commons and a return to practices of communing, getting dirty together. These are what Maria Puig de la Bellacasa calls “soil times” (2017). Dirt is in the body, the home, the environment (Cox et al. 2011)

and in all that we share and divide. At its best, dirty theory could participate in the imagining of new modes of getting messy together, accepting what Donna Haraway calls our messmates: our more-than-human relations. Dirt demands that we listen to the environment-worlds in the midst of which we lose and find ourselves, becoming and unbecoming. Dirty theory is concerned with discovering new ways of getting along with each other that challenge fixed categories, that track a diagonal and even a zig-zag course across taxonomic charts to invent new kinds of territories. *La terre* is what dirt might aspire to become, as long as the Earth is something that can be adequately, equitably shared.

There are thinkers of dirt, and they are diverse. I will attempt in the short chapters that follow to think-with them. There are practitioners of dirt, who understand the nutrient bases of the dirty work required, who can remind us of how some contact with the dirt can build up our immunological systems and open ameliorative relations beyond the habits of human exceptionalism. Think dirt. Do dirt. But because this is dirty theory, the thinking and the doing are messed up, and a theorist one day is a practitioner the next, and a practitioner one moment is a theorist the next. Dirt relations are transversal relations. Make a mess, clean it up, accept that the task must start over again the very next day. I have no doubt that Sisyphus was caked in muck and dirt.

Dirt has already settled into some of the crevices of architectural research, whether through a fascination with dust, or weathering, or with what David Gissen calls architecture's "other environments", to which he offers a name: "subnature" (2009). This is a name presumably meant to designate that which comes from below or which operates from beneath the domain of proper disciplinary conventions, and this begs the question: Do subnatures subconsciously structure our disciplinary habits, and our behaviours, too, in relation to our habitats? Gissen makes no recourse to Sigmund Freud, more politely presenting a series of architectural projects that admit a fascination in the dirt of the subnatural, from the work of *enfants terribles* François Roche and Stéphanie Laveux of R&Sie(n) with their speculative Bangkok tower, B_Mu, which was designed to attract rather than repel the polluted air (Gissen 2009, 79), to Jorge Otero-Pailos's iterative experiments in the reappropriation of dust, which test the radical preservation of architectural surfaces (Gissen 2009, 95-99).

While Gissen does not venture to mention Freud's tales of what may lie beneath conscious consideration when it comes to dirt and architecture, Bloomer certainly does, and Haraway likewise points out that Freud can act as a guide to understanding the traumas associated with the conceit of human exceptionalism (Haraway 2007, 11). No doubt dirt of various

kinds has been at work in architecture from its dark beginnings, registered in the first moment that some dirt was cleared to create the ground on which human life could commence its performances. Some ground is cleared, a circle is demarcated, what is considered foreign is removed and as a result a rarefied space is secured. In his own meditations on pollutants and dirt, *Malfeasance: Appropriation Through Pollution?*, Serres argues that dirt and its distributions play a fundamental role in relation to the basic questions: “How do the living inhabit a place? How do they establish it, recognise it?” (2011, 2). He answers: “*appropriation takes place through dirt*” (3; italics in the original). Through the scent-signs of our personal stains, body odour, urine, “perfume and excrement” (2), we demarcate territories, venturing to make them our own. We spit into the tasty soup so that no one else will eat it. Dirt admits a spatiality in the simple observation that other people’s houses do not smell quite right, because they do not smell like home.

When addressing dirt in relation to architecture and art, a detour through the formless becomes inevitable. Here, the proper name of Georges Bataille necessarily enters the frame of reference, followed by mention of Yve Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss’s exhibition at the Pompidou in Paris (1996) and the subsequent book *Formless: A User’s Guide* (1997), which was supported by their thinking with

Bataille. It is worth noting, though, that Bloomer's experimental work *Architecture and the Text: The (S) crypts of Joyce and Piranesi* also draws on Bataille and was published some four years earlier (1993). Acknowledging the long relationship between dirt and artistic expression, Bloomer quotes Mark Taylor on Bataille. In reference to a meditation on the ancient cave paintings of Lascaux, Taylor reports: "From the beginning (if indeed there is a beginning), there is something *grotto-esque* and dirty about art. Bataille is convinced that the dirt of art's grotesque, subterranean 'origin' can never be wiped away" (cited in Bloomer 1993, 50). Note especially the grotty textual invention of *grotto-esque*. Despite its title, with its apparent emphasis on textuality, Bloomer's artfully composed (s)crypts, and her other essays, reveal a distinctly dirty underground, including dirty ditties and lewd allusions to the dirty stuff that the passageways between architecture and text inevitably reveals. A perhaps unknowing companion thinker to Douglas, Bloomer meditates on the intimate relations cohering between the sacred and the profane, concluding that architecture "actually *represents* the 'filth of the sacred'" (1993, 50; italics in the original).

The essays that are collaboratively and individually signed by Bois and Krauss in *Formless: A User's Guide* are instructive in terms of dirty precedents. They cut a cross-section through representative

samples of the performances of the formless in art and architecture. Included, for instance, is Gordon Matta-Clark's infamous intervention *Threshold* (1973) (Bois and Krauss 1997, 190). Folded into Matta-Clark's title is the temptation to allow for a slip of the tongue, turning it into a dirty word: arsehole. No doubt such controversial quasi-architectural examples, which appear to take things apart rather than construct anything, would not be accepted by those who take a more conservative view on disciplinary taxonomies. The core of the discipline of architecture, as Bloomer explains, concerns building habitable buildings in which to dwell (Bloomer 1993, 33). This architecture is a simple, unified, disciplined and essential affair, much in need of dirtying. In Bois and Krauss's work, the unholy relation between form and the formless dominates, though there is still something rather masculinist and heroic about the celebration of the formless as a will to break down the ordered compositions and surfaces of a world. To break things apart. The formless still tends to organise the mess of materials as something of a side effect necessary to the expression of the formless over form. While there is evidence of the inclusion of dirt, vomit, shit, blood and other satisfyingly repulsive materials in the media of art and architecture, in Bois and Krauss's account these tend to fall under the remit of the powers of the formless. While it troubles their neat distinction, the formless

here does not equate to an overthrow of the form/matter dichotomy. Questions of the formless are still too caught up in the predominance of form, which accords form a privileged position relative to matter. It could well be simply a matter of emphasis, and in any case it could also be that both Bloomer and Bois and Krauss's textual self-enjoyments merely return us to a somewhat nostalgic recollection of the theoretical fascinations of the 1990s, when the pastel pop of pomo (postmodernism) was beginning to become rather jaded. Only, dirty theory is not afraid of such apparent anachronisms. What the dirty theorist insists is that when we dismiss something – a work, a text – as 'anachronistic', we might as well be describing it as dirty and should instead go for a closer feel.

Dirty theory seeks support in the emergence of the environmental humanities, and intersects with what has come to be called feminist new materialism (though the 'new' here ought to be held in suspension, and even placed under interrogation). Dirty theory is distinctly posthumanist in its tendencies toward more entangled human and more-than-human worldly relations and practices of worlding and even an acceptance of everyday contaminations. The philosopher of science and dog lover Donna Haraway is clearly a champion here, though she has her own reservations about the category 'posthumanist', averring instead that we have never been human (Haraway 2007, 3-108).

Genealogical acknowledgements are necessary, and the dirty precedents that are dealt with above presage a distinct turn to material concerns that emerged in the first decade of the 21st century, through edited collections including Katie Lloyd Thomas's *Material Matters: Architecture and Material Practice* (2006), Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman's *Material Feminisms* (2008) and Diana Coole and Samantha Frost's *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (2010). To these, Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* could be added, and especially the early scene depicting her encounter with "Glove, pollen, rat [dead], cap, stick" mashed into a plug of refuse in a storm water drain on Cold Spring Lane, Baltimore (2010, 4). Note here, an architectural thinker-practitioner, Katie Lloyd Thomas, leads the brigade toward what matters when it comes to material relations. Plunging further into the murk of a recent theoretical past, I will continue to champion the enduring legacy of Bloomer's work, especially for those brave enough to track a feminist and queer course through the pristine halls of architecture. Trailing blood and guts in their wake. I proffer here that the subsequent impact and uptake of new materialism allows us to undertake a reengagement in Bloomer.

New materialists, especially those with a feminist project, explain that through the 1980s and '90s we had gotten so caught up in textual play and discursive