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*The Innate Artistry of Inarticulate Materials*

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ABSTRACT: Dust, debris, trash, waste, we produce it, we mass produce it in exponentially increasing amounts; we sweep it up, vacuum it, shake it off, take it away, . . . someplace else, out of sight, but there is always the potential of a return, the return of uncontrollable, inarticulate material that eludes immediate perception. But artists have been helping us overcome our anxieties and our innate aversion to this inchoate matter by giving it symbolic form and thereby enabling us to look at it in a new way, to see its power and its potential. Some of the works included in this essay will be: J.M.W. Turner's paintings of sunsets of 1816, the recordings of the atmospheric pollution caused by a massive volcanic eruption; Vik Muniz's *Pictures of Dust* (2000) made from the dust he collected from the vacuum cleaners of the Whitney Museum; Jenny Holzer's *Dust Paintings* (2014) an adaptation of a type of Arabic calligraphy called "ghubar" ("dust writing") in her expose of the heavily redacted government reports of the Afghan War; Kristin Jones's *Eternal Tiber* (2005), giant she-wolves made of the dirt and dust that accumulates on the embankment of the Tiber river, a reverse graffiti technique employed again by in 2016 by William Kentridge in *Triumphs and Laments* for the Tiber river of Rome. Perhaps the most radical enactment of what can be done with dust is Lynn Nottage's play *POOF*, in which a housewife manages to incinerate her abusive husband with the power of her voice and then sweeps the pile of dust that are his remains under the carpet.

KEYWORDS: Artistic Agency, Reverse Graffiti, Industrial Pollution, Maintenance Art, Dust writing, Erasure.

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«Vede, – disse l'uomo seduto di fronte a me nel treno, – io mi occupo di polvere, nient'altro che di polvere», e lo disse con una finta nostalgia di non essersi occupato di cose più consistenti, in realtà lasciando intendere che la polvere era un universo ricco e variegato, del quale certamente io non sapevo nulla. «Immagino che per lei la polvere sia soltanto un fastidio, trascuratezza e invecchiamento del mondo, invece è piena di novità».

Daniele Del Giudice, *L'orecchio assoluto*<sup>1</sup>.

The Monumental Cemetery of Staglieno in Genoa is a vast, 250-acre site filled with heartbreakingly beautiful sculptures expressing grief for the loss of loved ones – a husband passionately kisses the dead body of his wife, a widow lies prostrate at the feet of her late husband, winged angels bend over the body of a dead infant falling from his mother's arms. The grief is palpable. All are rendered in white marble as if to ensure that something of the loved one will endure. Yet years, decades, even centuries have passed since they were made; now even the mourners have passed away, and the sculptures of the beloved are abandoned, with dust settling over them

like a patina of time (Fig.1). But the dust, as it accumulates in carved crevices



Fig. 1 – Monumental Cemetery of Staglieno, Genoa, photo by J. A. Isaak.

articulating the pattern in the widow’s shawl (Fig.2), the feathers in the angel’s wings, or the tears running down the husband’s face, renders them even more poignant; it is as if the dust is working as a collaborative partner in the artistic expression of grief, settling on these monuments to loss and reminding us that we are dust and to dust we shall return.

Perhaps this accounts for our innate aversion to dust. It is the constant reminder of our own dissolution. And as if to disavow this we sweep it up, vacuum it, shake it off, take it away, put it somewhere else – out of sight; but never completely out of mind, there is always the potential of a return, the return of inchoate material that eludes our control. Hovering between presence and absence, it signals time’s slow attrition, the fragility of memory, and the inevitability of decay – even as it can

heighten beauty, reveal form, or express grief.

In her book *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966), the anthropologist Mary Douglas suggests there is an alternative to dealing with dust and dirt, or what she describes more neutrally and generically as “matter out of place”. One way to overcome our aversion, she mentions, is to re-categorize the anomaly – the matter out of place – as art. She argues that we enjoy works of art because they enable us to go behind the explicit structures of our normal experience. Aesthetic pleasure arises from perceiving in a new way, and drawing upon the philosophy of William James, makes a case for what she calls «dirt-affirming»



Fig. 2 – Monumental Cemetery of Staglieno, Genoa, photo by J. A. Isaak.

rather than «dirt-rejecting» philosophies<sup>2</sup>. The ambivalence between affirmation (embracing dust, dirt, and detritus as a measure of time's passage and all that it entails of chance, decay, entropy, loss, and erasure) and rejection (the aversion to decay, disorder, the anxiety over pollution, potential engulfment, the desire for control, cleanliness, permanence, solidity) has been the subject of a multitude of varied art practices. Many artists have explored this philosophy and embraced both sides of this duality, helping us overcome our aversion and anxieties about this amorphous matter that surrounds us by giving it symbolic form, and thereby enabling us to look at it in a new way, to see its power and its potential. From the volcanic dust that gilded J. M. W. Turner's sunsets to Jenny Holzer's powdered "ghubar" script drawn from redacted war documents, artists have repeatedly turned to dust to probe and expand our assumptions – about what is considered beautiful or ugly, what persists and what is forgotten, what labor is valued or erased, and how social and aesthetic hierarchies are built or broken. It is fragile yet persistent, a medium that is intractable but settles into meaning. As it enhances beauty, reveals form, or lays bare violence, dust can become a quiet witness to injustice – carrying the traces of displacement, labor, erasure, and survival. This essay traces that fascination across two centuries, showing how each maker – painter, photographer, sculptor, or social-practice artist – lets dust settle differently on our imagination.

«Molta polvere non appartiene alla casa, viene da vulcani che eruttano o foreste che bruciano in altri continenti, la porta il vento».  
Daniele Del Giudice, *L'orecchio assoluto*.

In J.M.W. Turner's paintings of sunsets, dust takes on a powerful dual role – both as an ominous physical phenomenon and a symbolic force. Turner was fascinated by the scientific effects of light and particles in the atmosphere. The dust in Turner's sunset scenes is not explicitly rendered as particulate matter, but rather suffuses the atmosphere, transforming light, air, and color into a luminous haze. His brushwork dissolves the boundaries between land, sea, and sky, evoking the way dust scatters sunlight and tints the horizon with glowing oranges, fiery reds, and soft violets. His paintings often mirror the real atmospheric conditions caused by industrial pollution and in particular the volcanic eruption of Mount Tambora which filled the skies with ash and dust, leading to extraordinary sunsets across Europe. This atmospheric dust scatters sunlight – a process called Rayleigh scattering – enhancing warm tones and softening form, which Turner captured with unprecedented fidelity<sup>3</sup>. The volcanic eruption caused what became infamously known in 1816 as "The Year Without a Summer" a climate anomaly with

widespread effects on weather, agriculture, and culture, especially in Europe and North America, resulting in massive crop failures and widespread famine. Turner's sunsets, veiled in dust, or his paintings of the smoke emissions from steamships, trains, and factories evoke the sublime – a sense of awe before the vastness of nature and time, a sense of awe which Turner extended to his expressions of industry's might. His paintings are also early examples of what has become known as “toxic sublime” – the paradoxical emotional and aesthetic response to landscapes or imagery of environmental degradation, that still possesses a haunting or terrible beauty.

Artists, sometimes inadvertently, began depicting the “toxic sublime” long before the term was coined. Edgar Degas in 1877-79 made several studies of factory smoke in monotype printed in black ink. The factories themselves are not depicted; his interest is in the billowing formations created by the black soot. The Impressionists inherited a fully industrialized atmosphere. The moment the artists started painting “*en plein air*” and recording real atmospheric conditions, they recognized that the air was not so plain. Claude Monet was so absorbed with the recording of light and air that he also faithfully recorded the pollution in the air. His brush captured the particles in the air not as awe but as everyday fact – such as the sulphureous emanations of steamboats on the horizon which his relatives were looking at from their terrace in his painting *Terrasse à Sainte-Adresse* (1866–67), or the “miasmas” that rose from dirty streets of London alluded to in the pale mists blanketing his many images of the Thames river, or the coal dust smoke and steam from the trains that obliterates everything in *Saint-Lazare Train Station* (1877).

While Monet dissolved smoke into ambient light and color, George Seurat dissected it. His pointillist dots mimic the very particulate matter rising from industry, turning pollution into a systematic vocabulary of dust. In *Une baignade à Asnières* (1883–84), the bathers seem lethargically suspended in time and the hot, still summer haze, filled with the grey, brown, and yellow particulate matter or particle pollution (PCBs) being produced by the factories of the industrial Paris suburb of Asnières, which is depicted in the background. In *Courbevoie: Factories by Moonlight* (1882–83), he uses Conté crayon to record the black soot and dust that all but obliterates the moon and the vaguely discernible industrial structure that comes into view in the upper left and lower right, while two tall smokestacks – one at the very forefront and one in the far distance – create both a visual tension in the composition and a strong sense of industry's relentless impact on the natural world.

Seurat's studious observation of the industrial zones of Courbevoie on the outskirts of Paris is repeated in Edgar Chahine's gritty etchings in which smoke and dust become the central actors – no longer background atmosphere but the subject itself. Chahine recorded the atmospheric effects produced by this industrial zone in a series of etchings with dry point. In *La Seine à Courbevoie* (1907), he relegates the factories to the background; the river and the dead trees in the foreground are depicted in the same tones as the factories and the smokestacks — all tarred with the same pollutants.

Chahine and Degas still find elegance in the dust particles in the atmosphere, but many artists such as Camille Pissarro, Maximilien Luce and the Meuniers drop the romance. Pissarro repeatedly documented the impact of factories on his hometown of Pontoise. In an early painting, *La Petite Fabrique* (1863-5), the factory is just as the title suggests – a little factory – not disproportionately larger than other buildings. The chimney doesn't even smoke. There are people in the foreground. But over time, his paintings record the relentless encroachment of factories with smoke billowing from their chimneys into this small village. In the latter paintings of the same scene, the people and all the plant life have disappeared. By the 1870s, Pissarro was both painting and writing about the ways in which the factories were taking over the landscape and damaging the health of the workers. He became involved in anarchist politics, condemning industry for the destruction of rural life. He held that factories were pernicious, huge workhouses in which the proletariat lost their identities in the service of capitalism. In *Le Pont Boëeldieu à Rouen* (1896), the bridge and the sunset are obliterated by the smoke coming from the factories and from the ships in the harbor.

Maximilien Luce confronts us with apocalyptic vistas where toxic smoke and dust smother all hope. In the late 1890s, Luce worked on a series of paintings, drawings and prints depicting the industrial town of Charleroi in southern Belgium with painter Theo van Rysselberghe. Their Belgian series focuses on workers and factories, especially the smoke and dust emitted from chimneys, smokestacks and blast furnaces processing coal. The colored lithograph *Usines de Charleroi* (1898) depicts the effects of the blast furnaces that overwhelmed the region. Perhaps the bleakest vision of dust was that recorded by the Belgian artist Constantin Meunier and his son Karl Meunier in their series of paintings and etchings depicting factory labor and coal mining in the Black Country – the name given to the Borinage, an industrial region to the west of Mons in Belgium. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this area was transformed by the exploitation of coal deposits and the setting up of miners'

cottages – whole towns built for the population working in the mines. *Au pays noir* is a print by Karl Meunier based on an 1893 painting by his father that shows a view of the blighted countryside from above a wooden viaduct. The effect produced by this print is one of striking bleakness. The tall chimneys, dotted about the devastated countryside, throw out thick, black plumes of smoke into the dark sky – nothing is living, and the whole world is suffocated by a blanket of dust.

«Ma il resto la produciamo noi, lei e io e tutti gli altri facciamo migliaia di tonnellate di polvere, e io mi occupo anche di questa, ogni fiocco lanuginoso è diverso da un altro, dipende dalle abitudini dei padroni di casa, basta saperla leggere la polvere, ingrandita migliaia di volte è come un bosco con tronchi liane e rocce, e una miriade di animali. È il mondo degli acari, vivono lì a milioni, senza occhi, con zampe acuminata, un unico blocco che forma il tronco e la testa. Se ne stanno lì, in attesa delle squame della nostra pelle».

Daniele Del Giudice, *L'orecchio assoluto*.

Dust is rescued from its ignominious role as the sign of environmental degradation by Marcel Duchamp, who invited it to be an intentional co-creator in the production of a work of art. In so doing, he pivots the conversation from aversion to engagement, from representation to materiality, and from passivity to agency – dust now has a role to play. He placed his work, known as *The Large Glass*, horizontally on two sawhorses in his studio, accompanied by the sign «Dust Breeding», and allowed the dust “to breed” for six months. And since, as the expert on dust in Daniele Del Giudice’s short story *L'orecchio assoluto* tells us, we all produce quantities of dust ourselves, inevitability in the random collisions with the molecules of the air in his studio, bodily residue from Duchamp himself would be commingled in the artwork, and perhaps this “breeding” accounts for the ambivalent metaphor of sexuality in the full title of the work *La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires*. Man Ray’s 1920 photograph of the work, taken from above, *Dust Breeding* (“Élevage de poussière”), has the appearance of an aerial photograph of a vast barren wasteland – *the bride stripped bare*. After Man Ray photographed the work, Duchamp sealed the dust in the *Large Glass*, making it an integral part of the piece, which when the glass broke he pronounced “definitively unfinished”, reflecting his acceptance – and even embrace – of the accidental occurrences, as if to suggest that over time disintegration and dust would continue to be part of the ongoing creative process.

Man Ray’s iconic photograph was the inspiration for the exhibition *A Handful of Dust. Histoires de poussière. D’après Man Ray et Marcel Duchamp* held in Paris at the Le Bal exhibition spaces from October 2015 to January 2016. It is important

to note that it is the photographs of dust, the representation, not the material that is the focus of the exhibition, which brings into question the relation between photography and dust. The photographs in the exhibition, while they represent the beauty of dust as in Laure Albin Guillot's captivating portfolio *Micrographie Décorative* (1931), which reveal mesmerizing geometric and organic patterns that resemble dust particles magnified, or the enormity and destructive power of dust as in the press images from the 1930s Dust Bowl, America's worst environmental disaster, they are representations of dust – dust contained and fixed in time and in some ways controlled and sanitized. Conversely, for the exhibition *Resersos* held at the Museo del Prado (11/7/2023-3/3/2024), which presented the hidden side of paintings, the reverse side, the curator Miguel Ángel Blanco wanted the dust on the back of the paintings to be part of the exhibition. He also collected the dust that accumulated on the back of some paintings and used it to make three box-books for his *Library del Bosque*.

«Naturalmente c'è una polvere meno nobile, e una parte meno nobile del mio mestiere. È la polvere che si aggomitola sotto i letti, dietro gli armadi, lungo le prominente dei muri. La polvere delle case è più difficile da decifrare perché più multiforme, ma quante notizie ci sono lì, notizie di chi vi abita; inconfondibili come un'impronta digitale».

Daniele Del Giudice, *L'orecchio assoluto*.

Duchamp's creation of the new role for dust inspired later artists like Gabriele Picco, who rescues vacuum-bag residue to make literal "dust paintings" that are equal parts debris and homage as they embody time, entropy, and memory and a gesture of salvation. He ironically claimed it was motivated by an attempt to save his mother from her anxiety about dust: «I thought about making them many years ago, when I was 17, because I couldn't stand my mother's obsession with cleaning. In 1997 I wrote a story about her. With her vacuum cleaner she wanted to clean the whole world. It ended with her being sucked by the vacuum cleaner and me trying to save her»<sup>4</sup>. Picco gathers piles of dust from vacuum cleaners, the detritus of other people's lives immured in refuse. This matter is affixed to the canvas with minimal framing, allowing their raw, textured surfaces to remain visible and exposed. For a time, they become intriguing *objets d'art*, a palimpsest of everyday existence and social habits. They are hung on the immaculate white walls of the gallery until, over time, the frangible particles inevitably drop off the canvas and once again are vacuumed away. The operation is ironic but imbued with a sense of loss that pervades all that is discarded of our everyday life.

Picco's source of art material was mined earlier by Muniz in his *Pictures of Dust* series (2000), which brought the dichotomies inherent in photography, minimalist art, and museum practices into high relief. He collected the dust from the galleries and offices of the Whitney Museum of American Art – gathered from vacuum bags – and used the grey dust to draw reproductions of the museum's archival installation photographs of Minimalist and Post Minimalist sculptures that had been exhibited in the museum over several decades. He then photographed the dust drawings and printed them in large scale format: *After Tony Smith's Die* (1962) is a cube-like sculpture recreated in dust and photographed in a dramatic, enlarged format; *After Donald Judd, Barnett Newman & Carl Andre* is a composite dust interpretation of multiple minimalist works that were exhibited at the Whitney; *After Richard Serra's Prop* (1968) is a tall, pillar-like dust drawing based on Serra's large-scale installation; *After Barry Le Va* is a delicate, scattered dust recreation of a "scatter" sculpture by Le Va. Muniz selected dust as his drawing material for its ephemeral nature and its irregular uncontainable form, characteristics which contrast sharply with the geometric precision of Minimalism.



Fig. 3 – Vik Muniz, *Marat (Sebastião)*, from *Pictures of Garbage*, 2008 Digital C-Print. © 2025 Vik Muniz, member Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.

Whereas Minimalist art suggests clean lines, order, solid surfaces and permanence, and an assertion of monumental stability and importance, dust suggests decay and the passage of time. «In Pictures of Dust», Muniz explains, «I became interested in Minimalist art because it attempts to avoid interpretation and historical contextualization. Minimalist art refers to nothing but itself... Minimalist art is orderly, dust is chaos»<sup>5</sup>.

Working with dust and rethinking what is considered valuable and what is discarded led Muniz in 2008 to begin a much larger project called *Pictures of Garbage*. This series began a long-term collaboration with the residents of Jardim Gramacho, Rio de Janeiro—Latin America’s largest garbage dumpsite. The people who live there, the *catadores*, or garbage pickers, are a large community of people who make a living picking through the hundreds of tons of garbage that arrives every day to this vast landfill; they sort it, clean it, reassemble some of it and sell recyclables and scrap materials<sup>6</sup>. Muniz began by creating large-scale portraits of some of the pickers, often in poses adopted from images of Old Master paintings: Sebastião “Tião” (Carlos dos Santos) posed for Marat in David’s *The Death of Marat* (Figg. 3, 4); Zumbi (José Carlos da Silva Bais Lopes) posed for Millet’s *The*



Fig. 4 – Still from *Wasteland* directed by Lucy Walker 2010 .

*Sower*; Magna de França Santos posed for Picasso’s *Women Ironing*; Irmã, the Gramacho cook, posed in an interpretation of Atlas in Guercino’s *Atlas*, and Suellen and her children posed for the *Mother and Children* portrait. Muniz projected these photographs greatly enlarged onto the floor of a nearby warehouse that he used as studio space, then each person helped to create an assemblage of their portraits made of garbage they collected from the garbage dump—plastic, metal, wood, clothing, buckets, fridges, toilet seats, wheels, rusted chains, etc. and

arranged them on the floor guided by the format of the photograph. This labor-intensive process aligned the highly valued activity of artmaking and the devalued activity of trash picking. The monumental trash-portraits assembled from garbage were then photographed from above and printed in large-format chromogenic prints. They have been exhibited globally and sold at auction, with proceeds from sales going to the *catadores*' cooperative, Associação dos Catadores do Aterro Metropolitano de Jardim Gramacho (ACAMJG) and to the individuals themselves. This project and the award-winning 2010 documentary *Wasteland*, directed by Lucy Walker, brought the work these pickers do into public attention – they gained visibility, dignity, and financial support, enabling them to set up a library and a healthcare center on site. It also showed the intelligence, pride, and incredible strength of a people marginalized by society; they, too, had been categorized as “matter out of place”.

Muniz was not the first artist to turn the Whitney Museum's dust into art; in fact, his practice echoes a lineage that leads directly to Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Long before Muniz gathered vacuum-bag residue to create his *Pictures of Dust*, Ukeles was already performing what she called “maintenance art” inside the same institution – dusting vitrines and display cases, washing floors, scrubbing the sidewalk outside the gallery, and documenting the invisible labor of the museum's custodial staff. Muniz's fascination with discarded matter and the people who handle it thus dovetails seamlessly with Ukeles's lifelong project of honoring “maintenance” labor – from cleaning museum glass to shaking the hand of every New York sanitation worker. Her early actions raised fundamental questions about what counts as enduring or ephemeral work, which forms of labor are valued or undervalued, and how we assign aesthetic worth. In 1969, she articulated these concerns in her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art*, a document that brought art and the work maintenance workers commonly do into a provocative affiliation. A decade



Fig. 5 – Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Handshake Ritual* (1979–1980).

later, during *Handshake Ritual* (1979–80), she spent eleven months personally thanking and shaking the hands of all 8,500 sanitation workers in New York City (Fig. 5). This was part of an ongoing series of works called *Touch Sanitation*, designed to bring people closer to their garbage.

Ukeles's initial museum-based incursions with dust eventually propelled her to confront trash on an even grander scale. Since 1977 she has served as artist-in-residence at the New York City Department of Sanitation, and she was commissioned to help transform Fresh Kills – the three-thousand-acre Staten Island landfill that once received 27,000 tons of garbage daily – into a public park. The site's mountainous heaps of refuse, rising 300 to 500 feet (what architect Michael Sorkin dubbed “the Alps of New York”), have become her *magnum opus*: a decades-long artwork that reimagines the city's waste as landscape, memorial, and, ultimately, a testament to collective responsibility. As one commentator put it, «One man's trash is another man's treasure, but 8 million people's trash, well that's art!». This *magnum opus* will occupy her for perhaps the rest of her life.

Ukeles's civic scale recurs in the projects of Kristin Jones, who in the summer of 2005 created huge (8 meters high by 13 meters wide) images of she-wolves along the walls of the Tiber River in Rome. She was inspired when she watched maintenance workers from AMA Roma S.p.A., il Dipartimento Tutela Ambientale del Comune di Roma undertake the Sisyphian task of removing the black dust and grime from the embankment walls and broad walkways that line the banks of the Tiber River. The job of the workers is daunting as the river, by the time it gets to Rome, is particularly dirty, and the walkway in those days was littered with crack vials, cigarette butts, beer and wine bottles, and all manner of flotsam and jetsam. Black dust and grime accumulated on the embankment walls. As Jones watched the workers use pressured water hoses to clean the walls, she discovered that the water hoses functioned much like a giant airbrush. Devising a reverse graffiti or “subtractivist” technique, she made large-scale templates out of plastic sheeting, attached them to the wall, and then the maintenance workers, using their water pressure hoses, selectively removed the dark build-up of dust around the edges of the plastic template – creating the images of the she-wolves by leaving behind the darker silhouettes. The she-wolves – the symbol of Rome – are, in fact, the remaining dust (Fig. 6). This project took over two years to bring to fruition, and it involved: working with the complex bureaucracy of the city government, research on the she-wolves aided by a curator at the Musei Capitolini, and the participation of many volunteers and the skills of the maintenance workers. On June 21, 2005,

the area of river embankment lined by the 12 giant she-wolves was lit with 2,758 candles to celebrate the birthday of Rome, and thousands of people came out to celebrate the rebirth of the river. Over time, the accumulation of more dust on the embankment walls gradually obliterated the images of the she-wolves, but this was



Fig. 6 – Kristin Jones, *She-Wolf*, *Tevereterno*, 2005, photograph by Filippo Monteforte.

the beginning of an ongoing environmental project called *Tevereterno* (Eternal Tiber), a multidisciplinary cultural project dedicated to converting this area into an open-air public space for site-specific contemporary art and to acknowledging the work of the maintenance workers who manage and maintain Tiber River Park. Over the years many artists, recognizing the enormous potential of the riverfront, have participated in ephemeral projects for *Tevereterno*, and now today this is a lively space for art, music and dance performances and all forms of recreation.

Jones's reverse graffiti was used again in 2016 when William Kentridge undertook *Triumphs and Laments: A Project for Rome*, a monumental 550-meter-long frieze along the river walls between Ponte Sisto and Ponte Mazzini. It featured more than 80 large-scale figures, up to 10 meters high, all created in the dust on the wall's surface. Episodes from Rome's history – both good and bad – are written in dust: Romulus and Remus being suckled by the she-wolf; Marcus Aurelius on horseback; Bernini's sculpture of the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*; along with

contemporary and controversial figures such as Mussolini and Pier Paolo Pasolini, the filmmaker and intellectual murdered in 1975. The unveiling of *Triumphs and Laments*, a spectacular opening event including two processional marching bands and live music by Phillip Miller, was attended by over 30,000 people across three evenings. But over time, Kentridge's epic storytelling of episodes of Rome's history, literally written in dust, was inevitably obliterated by more dust.

Jenny Holzer also attempts to inscribe episodes of history with dust. Language has always been Holzer's primary medium, and she has mined government documents for source material since 2004, but the *Dust Paintings* series marks a striking departure from her trademark LED scrolls and bold, confrontational typography. They still wield language as a weapon, yet in this series – part of her ongoing engagement with violence,

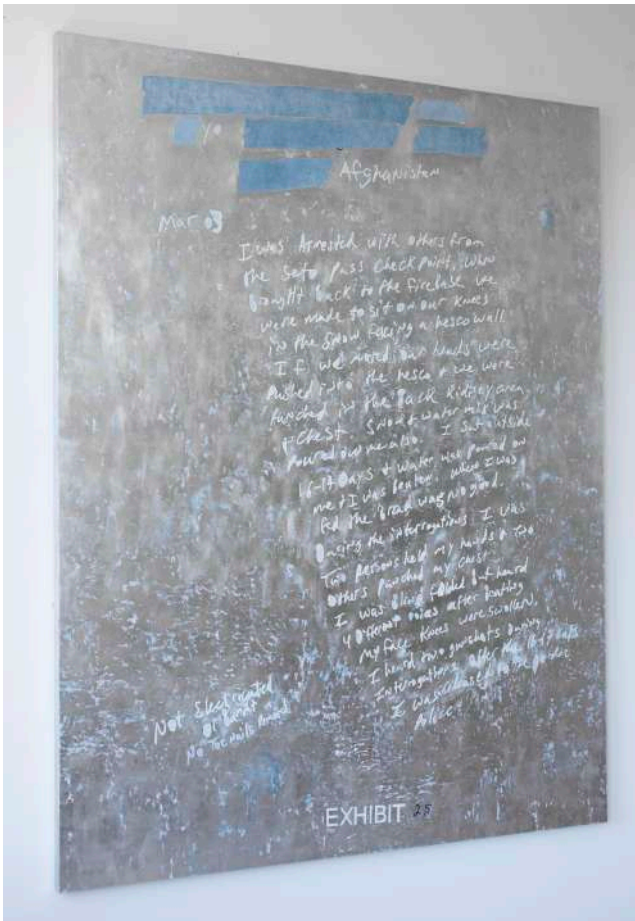


Fig. 7 – Jenny Holzer, *Or Burnt*, 2013-19, Palladium leaf and oil on linen 80 x 62 in. / 203.2 x 157.5 cm. Text: US government document. © 2025 Jenny Holzer, member Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.

war, secrecy, and state power – the words assume a shrouded, forensic intimacy. She adopts the traditional Arabic calligraphic technique *ghubar* – literally “dust writing”. Using silkscreen, Holzer layers iron oxide, graphite, and other mineral pigments onto linen or canvas, then hand-traces every letter to recreate heavily redacted interrogation, military, and CIA reports from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The technique yields a powdery, friable surface, as if the image might crumble at a breath, evoking impermanence, fragility, and the

physical decay of information. Some works incorporate metallic dust or charcoal, further intensifying the sense of violence and combustion.

One series draws on the U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Command's Gardez Report, which documents the death of Jamal Naseer, an Afghan prisoner beaten and water-tortured before dying in U.S. custody. In *Or Burnt* (2013), black redaction bars hover over a pale grisaille field; only shards of text – «Not Electrocutated / or Burnt / No Toenails Removed» – come into view when the reader leans in (Figg. 7, 8). The bureaucratic



Fig. 8—Detail.

chill of the language, at once cover-up and confession, both invites and repels. These letters, including Naseer's own statements written in powdered pigments: matter out of place turned witness, each motelike letter speaking of unspeakable acts threatening to vanish as quickly as the truths it tries to preserve. Henri Cole evokes the poetics of Holzer's practice: «These new paintings of Jenny's are a kind of dust-writing, or to be more exact, a kind of dust-painting. ... Standing before Jenny's dust-paintings, if I squint my eyes and let my imagination run wild, I can hear a call to prayer. I can see a crowded street with men rushing past, stirring up dust. And I also can see shrouded women behind them sprinkling water—quietly, methodically—to settle it»<sup>7</sup>.

Across these case studies, the role of dust oscillates from elegance to abjection, from pollutant to pigment, from matter out of place to *objets d'art*, from detritus to be purged, to an invited artist, recognized as a co-collaborator in the formation of our everyday life.

In accepting its unruly presence, artists have shown us the way to accept our own: destined, like them, to settle – quietly, inevitably – into dust.

## Note

- <sup>1</sup> D. Del Giudice, *L'orecchio assoluto*, in *Mania*, Torino, Einaudi, 1997, pp .5-6.
- <sup>2</sup> M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966, pp. 161-162.
- <sup>3</sup> A. Souter, *Dirty Pretty Things: Air Pollution in Art from JMW Turner to Today*, «The Guardian», 28 Oct. 2020. «The effect was so significant that scientific researchers have been able to correlate the red-to-green pigment ratios in Turner's paintings to data about the levels of volcanic matter in the air – and conversely to develop a methodology for using historic visual art to identify levels of pollution for places and times about which there is little data.»

<sup>4</sup> G. Picco, *Dust Paintings*, 2013, [gabrielepicco.com/works/dust paintings](http://gabrielepicco.com/works/dust%20paintings)

<sup>5</sup> Whitney Museum of American Art, *Picture of Dust* (Tony Smith, Die, 1962, installed at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1975) by Vik Muniz, 2000, <https://whitney.org/collection/works/13718>

<sup>6</sup> Jardim Gramacho is a metropolitan landfill established in 1970 and sited at the north edge of Rio de Janeiro's Guanabara Bay. It receives 7,000 tons of garbage daily, taking 70% of the urban waste produced by Rio de Janeiro. It is home to the favela of Jardim Gramacho and the *catadores*, a permanent community engaged in the peripheral economy of recycling 200 tons of materials each day – surrounding the landfill with 5,000 workers and their families in a population totaling c.13,000 people. The activity of the catador was formalized in 1995 with 1,752 officially registered workers granted licenses by Rio's sanitation department and safety standards including the banning of child workers. Jardim Gramacho, Wasteland website, WastelandMovie.com, accessed 17 July 2025. (es.wikipedia.org+2lemonde.fr+2mdpi.com+2es.wikipedia.org+7wastelandmovie.com+wastelandmovie.com+7).

<sup>7</sup> H. Cole, *Jenny Holzer's Dust-Painting*, Exhibition catalogue, Cheim & Read, 2014.

