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On Dust: Memory as Performance and Materiality

Natasha Lushetich

Abstract

The world's "worldliness" is, to a large extent, perceptually constructed through touch, kinaesthetics, and proprioception. Gesture, too, is embedded in sedimentations of the body's prior sensory exchanges with the environment. Materiality is transitive; it triggers sensory landscapes through performance. Consisting of particles of pollen, human and animal skin, hairs, minerals, soil, and burnt meteorites, dust is usually seen as the antithesis of the performative-material nexus. In this paper, I propose a different view: that dust is and acts as a connective tissue. Borrowing from Hélène Cixous's *écriture blanche*, Quentin Smith's degree presentism, and theorizing nostalgia as a structuring absence, I argue that dust does not numb memory but instead codes it. Activated by embodied acts that bring to light its metaphysical function, dust illuminates the grammar of existence in the spatial, temporal, and affective register.

Key Words

degree presentism; haptic vision; memory; nostalgia; sensory stratigraphy; white writing

1. Introduction

I am... a hollow, a fold, which has been made and which can be unmade^[1]

Pondering Maurice Merleau-Ponty's view of individual human existence as a hollow and a fold in the flesh of the world, Laura U. Marks points to the similarity between the malleability of the fold and the malleability of the universe seen through the lens of quantum physics. On this view, the universe is a movement, a temporality and a geometry that brings together infinitely distant planes and surfaces creating a giant strudel in which every new perception acknowledges the continuity of the universe's multiple spatio-temporal layers.^[2] Among numerous connective tissues that actualize the phenomena and events enfolded in these layers is haptic vision. Unlike its ocularcentric counterpart, which presupposes distance, surveyability, and detachment, haptic vision depends on proximity, touch, kinaesthetics, and even proprioception, the body's sense of balance. Anchored in the network of sensory sedimentations, it illuminates our position in the world as "caught in its fabric," to borrow from Merleau-Ponty once again.^[3]

At first blush, dust blurs and disorients haptic vision by embroiling our sense of encrustedness in the familiar environment. Habitually associated with oblivion and decay, which even a cursory glance at the commonly used metaphors—to eat the dust, to dust off, to bite the dust—shows, dust imposes a hiatus on the material world. Given that even the hardest materials, such as bone, steel, and stone, erode and become dust, dust is also among the most minuscule things the naked human eye can see. It is often equated with insignificance and poverty, to which metonyms like "beggar's velvet" testify. Dust is ubiquitous; it is found in all things solid, liquid, and vaporous: minerals, seeds, pollen, insects, molds, bacteria, hair, feather, skin, blood, and excrement. However, it is neither the ubiquity of dust nor its origins in the collapsing stars that forms its connection with the infinite; it is its opaque metaphysical function.

Dust forms the ceaseless tides of becoming and dissolution and is both the medium and the locus of invisible transformations, although the word 'metaphysical' should not be understood as "beyond the physical," "otherworldly," or "extra-temporal" but as referring to Kitaro Nishida's notion of reciprocity, a structuring process through which phenomena, things, and beings come to form the concrete world. Consisting of all things big and small—mountains, rivers, humans, animals, pebbles and specks of dust—the concrete, immanent world is, for Nishida, the metaphysical society; every 'it' is here a 'thou,' not in the animistic sense of the word but because of its embeddedness in the complex relationality of ceaseless multilateral structuration and codependent origination.^[4] Such structuration, which, on the one hand, activates previously inscribed relationships between matter, phenomena, sentient beings, behavior, and practice, and, on the other, proliferates new relationships, could be seen as a general grammar of existence.

Coming from the Greek *grammé*, which means to inscribe, grammar configures biomaterial and social worlds. It creates biosocial synchrony. Like the linguistic grammar that consists of verb conjugations and noun declensions, the psychophysical grammar of existence "conjugates" our mode of connection with the sensory environment, much like it "declines" our memory—the coming together of things and beings in lived and historical experience. Far from being a mere signifier of oblivion or obsolescence, dust illuminates the subtle relationship between performance and sedimentation, between becoming as the taking-form of fleeting impulses and durable inscription or habit-formation. More specifically, dust renders transparent three existentially grammatical areas: spatial and environmental writing,

which, after Cixous, I will call white; the simultaneous temporal presence of all things and beings, also referred to as "degree presentism" (Smith); and the structuring absence best described as nostalgia, understood not as cheap sentimentality but as a complex process of affective structuring.

2. The white writing of dust

Being minuscule, ubiquitous, and almost imperceptible, dust is difficult to classify; it triggers confusion and uncertainty. A house covered in dust is not quite a house. It's not an instrument against chaos as Gaston Bachelard famously claimed it to be but, more likely, an instrument of chaos because of the unintelligibility of past traces.^[5] Spatially, the psychophysical grammar of existence manifests in ingrained ways of walking, sitting, leaning against the wall, eating, drinking, paying attention, bestowing value, and valancing place, space, and time. Quotidian practices of living, formal and informal interactional rituals create spaces and develop identities within those spaces. Social synchrony emerges from the way we haptic-visually read spatial cues—the layout of used objects or items of clothing, the presence of spatial "scars," indents in the furniture or stains on the carpet—in other words, cues that make us perform specific actions in specific ways, such as leave the coffee cup on the mantelpiece rather than on the coffee table or take our shoes off at the bottom of the stairs instead of in the hall. In each specific case, the grammar of existence emerges from the reactivation of response dispositions triggered by the context cues that occurred during the last performance and the last individual or social choreography. In each gesture, movement, or action, the accumulated layers of individual and communal experience, present in and through material networks, spring to the surface.

Ostensibly, dust gathers in the absence of movement, action, and interaction and is, in this sense, both the residue of performance and its erasure. But dust is also much more than that. It's a form of subliminal perceptual relationality comparable to the mystic writing pad, a children's toy consisting of a thin sheet of transparent plastic on a wax board that so intrigued Sigmund Freud and Jacques Derrida. When written upon with a pen, the plastic makes an indentation in the wax. It creates a dark trace that can be seen through the plastic. When the plastic sheet is lifted from the surface of the wax tablet, however, the dark traces disappear and the pad is clean again.

In "Freud and the Scene of Writing," Derrida discusses Freud's dependence on metaphors of writing, such as the mystic writing pad, to describe unconscious psychological processes. He concludes that such notions are not metaphors; perception really is a writing machine that resembles the mystic writing pad because the marks on the pad are not visible straight away but become visible through the contact of the wax and the (reverse side of the) plastic. For Derrida, we never apprehend the world directly, only retrospectively. Our impression of the world and our understanding of our physical and metaphorical place in it is the product of previous marks and memories, our own and those of other people. "Writing," therefore, for Derrida, "supplements perception before perception even appears to itself."^[6]

In spatial terms, dust both creates and reactivates past traces, albeit in a manner that doesn't impose its presence or temporality in the form of a clearly distinguishable mark. This is why it's more appropriate to call dust's writing white. First conceptualized by Hélène Cixous and often referred to as feminine writing, white writing or *écriture blanche*, is like mother's milk.^[7] Like the mystic writing pad, it unfolds pre-perceptually yet has no definitive difference in color, shape, or indent. It's not a mark left on a passive surface by an active agent but a constituent part of the environment that brings to the fore many degrees of visibility at once. Upon entering a space that other people have frequented before and where they have invariably left their traces, I unconsciously trace those positions, postures, and attitudes because the varying degrees of dust have created a map of interactive frequency and now lure me into the more rather than the less frequented spots and positions. They make me trace their traces one more time. However, lingering in these spots—standing, sitting, crouching, leaning against the wall or the rail or picking up and fingering objects—also creates new marks and cues that, like musical theme variations, merge with the haptic image of the space while simultaneously altering it. For Cixous, the purpose of white writing is to think-feel with the environment, to trace the tracing that has already been traced, thematizing the process of sensory sedimentation and illuminating its pre-perceptual inscription.^[8]

But such tracing is not limited to situations of close bodily, and temporal, proximity, as can be seen from works like Jorge Otero-Pailos's *The Ethics of Dust* (2009). Taking its title from the eponymous 1865 essay by John Ruskin, which differentiates between restoration as a refashioning of the past and conservation as preservation, this work emerged from Otero-Pailos's conservationist practice.^[9] While cleaning the Palazzo Ducale in Venice, the artist covered the walls of the palace in several large sheets of latex. When the latex was peeled off, centuries of dust came into view (Fig. 1). Marks left by climatic and atmospheric conditions, such as strong winds or earthquakes, maintenance practices, even ideas about conservation, the materials and chemicals used, all brought to the fore the continuum of the visible and the invisible.



Fig. 1. Jorge Otero-Pailos, *The Ethics of Dust*, Doge's Palace (2009), as exhibited in the Corderie of the 53rd Venice Biennale. Collection of Thyssen-Bornemisza Contemporary Foundation T-BA21. Courtesy of the artist.

For Merleau-Ponty, "the visible is a quality pregnant with a texture, the surface of a depth ... a grain or corpuscle borne by a wave of Being" but "the total visible is always behind, or after, or between the aspects we see of it."^[10] The visible is encrusted in that which, strictly speaking, remains invisible but can be sensed through haptic vision, such as the body's postural schema, sense of touch, balance, and movement, all of which are attuned to the numerous processes of transubstantiation unfolding imperceptibly in the world around us at all times. The moment I touch the trembling fur of a two-month old kitten and my hand melts into its pillow-like surface, or the moment I jump into the cold ocean on a hot summer day and my hot body dissolves into the coldness of the ocean, is a moment of transubstantiation. Here, one substance (fur, skin, water) merges with and becomes another. However, the moment I reach for the long-forgotten top shelf of my bookcase and my hand touches a soft, dry, feathery surface, sensing something that is neither a substance nor a non-substance, neither present nor absent, since dust has no weight and no shape, is like sensing myself touching the fold, touching an infinitely delayed transubstantiation branching onto a dizzying multitude of potential substances. Like snow, dust muffles sound. Even if very faint, the sound of one's hand touching the wooden bookshelf, the wall, or the ladder can be heard, but not the sound of touching dust. Dust thwarts the taken-for-granted-ness of the touching-nearing-hearing sensation. Instead of the usual orientation cues (the sound of the surface; the feedback loop), there is the long yet inconclusive movement of expectation. Touching dust with one's hand is like touching the metaphysical society with one's entire being. It awakens the dormant cycles of repetition and variation that manifest in different yet simultaneous degrees of temporal presence.

3. Degree presentism and the folds of time

Having grown out of the irreconcilable differences between the so-called A-theory of time and the B-theory of time, degree presentism suggests a difference in degree and not kind. On the A-theory, or the so-called "tensed" theory of time, time is a real feature of the world. Despite the fact that the past and the future can only be accessed through the present moment, which is in a continual process of passing, the present moment is nevertheless a real location in the world, as are all notions of coming into being. On the B-theory, by contrast, time is not a real existent. Events in space occur without tense. They are unrelated to the "present," "past" and "future" and can only be spoken of in relational terms, such as "earlier than," "simultaneous with" or "later than."^[11] Contrarily to A-theorists, B-theorists view any notion of present, past, or future as a construct of the mind, since, on the B-theory, events are not related to time but are *in* time and *of* time. Time is here a relational concept used to describe change. In an attempt to reconcile the relativistic with the ontological approach, Quentin Smith proposes a theory of degree presentism and suggests that:

[b]eing temporally present is the highest degree of existence. Being past and being future *by a merely infinitesimal amount* is the second highest degree of existence. Being past *by one hour* and being future *by one hour* are lower degrees of existence, and being past *by 5 billion years* and being future *by 5 billion years* are still lower degrees of existence. The degree to which an item exists is proportional to its temporal distance from the present; the present, which has zero-temporal distance from the present has the highest (logically) possible degree of existence.^[12]

Importantly, in degree presentism, where the main conceptual operator is subtly changing differences, not segregated categories, a particular event is always present, even if only to a degree. This brings the historical sedimentation of embedded and embodied performance into play. If I go away for a period of two months, and if my study is dusted in the meantime,

upon my return, my sedimented connection with the familiar environment will be immediately available to me, and also immediately reactivated through performance, since my performance is, in part, elicited by externality. If, upon my return, my study is covered in dust, my absence will be abundantly present, as will be the various degrees of my presentness and absentness. Whereas the desk as the focal point of the study may be covered in light fluff, the less frequently used top shelves of my bookcases will be covered in much thicker gray dust. There may even be ashen layers of dust in the more remote corners of the room. The different degrees of neglect and absence will be palpably different in texture, color, and shape. These differences will, in turn, create a rich haptic-visual fabric that functions both as a scale and a negative. A place we call home, simultaneously a place, a relation, a climate, and a set of circumstances, is a repository stocked with varying degrees of presence, our own and those of other people, animals, and objects. It is a micro metaphysical society in which numerous relations have sedimented into a rich, mnemonic texture that acts as an anchor in the ocean of incessant becomings and dissolutions.

Dust is both a metaphysical ingredient and a perceptual relation that shapes our relationship with familiarity and estrangement creating complex psychophysical patterns in the process. The most extreme of these patterns is melancholy. When an object is entirely covered in dust, we search in our memory—the meta sense that encompasses all other senses, i.e., sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell, haptic vision, kinaesthetics, and proprioception—for the precise presentness, the shape, angle, texture, color, hue, and luminosity of the object. Instead, we see a blankness, an erased presence that gives rise to a sense of displacement or dissipation creating a break in the valancing system by momentarily embroiling the grammar of existence, like an unconjugated verb in a fragmented sentence, such as "or... to do..." that denotes very little beyond the vague possibility of a generic action. Even if we have never seen the object in question, a thick veil of dust creates a temporary inertia. It freezes the ebb and flow of time. It interrupts the connectivity between seeing, touching, and being touched in the physical and emotional sense alike, not least of all because of its smell, that faint, mildly prickly, relatively neutral, yet strangely settled scent that comes much closer to the smell of dry mortar or sand than to anything organic. An object or, more generally, a convex surface conspicuously covered in thick, mildly olfactorily prickly, settled dust draws attention to itself by way of negation. It draws attention to its simultaneous presence and absence or, better said, to its severance from the network of *established* mnemonic relations.

Jenny Holzer's *Dust Paintings* probe just such temporal, sensorial, and emotional severance (Fig. 2). Consisting of text-based abstractions painted in oil on linen, the content of *Dust Paintings* is derived from declassified U.S. government reports on brutality, torture, and death during the 2001-2014 Afghan War. The feathery, gray strokes of paint here stand in stark contrast with the typewritten notices, "For Official Use Only-Law Enforcement Sensitive or SECRET/NOFORN" (meaning: "no foreign nationals" are allowed to read the report) that interrupt the haptic-visually pleasing flow of dusty marks.



Fig.2. Jenny Holzer *Dust Paintings: Or Burnt* 2013, oil on linen. Dimensions 80 x 62 x 11/2 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

The effect is, of course, paradoxical, as objects covered in dust both reassure us that there is a persisting presence, an enduring continuity, while simultaneously negating that very continuity. As Nishida notes, time is, by necessity, both continuous and discontinuous. There has to be something continuous in time for change to be change. And yet, time *is* change. As change, it is discontinuous.^[13] This dialectical relation, which is the same in Nishida and in degree presentism, despite considerable genealogical differences between the two theories, is rooted in the event's simultaneous eternal presence and its perpetual mutation in quality and, thus, also in quiddity, which illuminates the fragility of memory. Memory, too, is both continuous and discontinuous. Predicated on repetition, performance, regeneration, or, conversely, entropy, it is steeped in the material-performative nexus. The *Dust Paintings'* narratives are witness statements of Afghan soldiers who were tortured or who died in American custody. In some cases, the words below the main text's first-person accounts read: "Not Electrocuted," "Or Burnt," and "No Toenails Removed." They point to the fact that the paintings are simultaneously documents of actual events and abstractions. Their feathery surface is a veneer of cultural oblivion that cues the dissolution of social grammar that articulates, in words, emotions and social gestures, a slippage into inhumane yet profoundly relational forms of behavior.

Like the performative-material nexus exemplified by pre- and peri-perceptual white writing, the socio-cultural tissue, too, is woven of past relations. Nothing is ever erased. No development, entropy, or, more generally, structuration is ever stopped, only rendered culturally and sensorially imperceptible. Both despite and because of its veiled, frozen nature, the persisting presence of purposefully distanced objects and memories continues its movement on the continuum of degree presentism. What is more, it amplifies memory's affective working, one could even say fermentation, by way of negation.

4. Nostalgia as a structuring absence

Another way to describe dust is as a process or formation that activates nostalgia, both in the phenomenological and historical sense, if nostalgia is understood in its original meaning. In Greek, the verb *nostalgho* is a composite of *nosto* and *algho*. *Nosto* means "I travel back home" to a dense experiential materiality, temporally saturated with a multitude of different yet simultaneous degrees of presence. *A-nostos* means "insipid, without taste." The opposite of *a-nostos* (*nostimos*) characterizes something that has matured and ripened and is, for this reason, tasty. *Algho*, on the other hand, means "I ache for." It evokes the sensory dimension of memory in estrangement foregrounding the somatic and emotional pain of a body cut off from the material-temporal trajectory of maturation. Nostalgia is linked to lived and historical experience in a nuanced and productive way. It is the sensing of the various degrees of ripening through *not* ripening or, more generally, of the various degrees of deployment through non-deployment, destruction, or annihilation. When we see objects like Roger Hiorns' *Untitled* (2008), a pulverized aircraft engine that, in its present state, is no more than a heap of fine-granule metal dust, we ponder the solid object-hood's strange metamorphosis into something as small and negligible as dust (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Roger Hiorns, *Untitled* 2008, Atomised passenger aircraft engine. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam.

Sensorially and conceptually shocking as the sudden disappearance of a large, technologically sophisticated and powerful object may be, the heap of dust continues to reverberate with the engine's past potentiality, with what it could have had it remained an engine. Exactly the same occurs with people. When, at the age of twenty-nine, I found out that a secondary-school acquaintance, last seen when we were both seventeen, had died of a sudden heart attack barely a year after our last encounter, for months I couldn't stop thinking about the events that would have or could have been part of Meemy's life between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine: Meemy playing basketball, cycling, or sailing (he was a strong sportsman); Meemy studying mathematics or physics at university (he excelled at math); Meemy, the university student, in a part-time job that makes use of his computing skills (an accounting job); Meemy laughing with friends (he had a loud, infectious laughter). The list is endless. The unexpected severance of Meemy's lifeline and the surprisingly long time it took for the news to reach me (we had both

moved away and lost touch with our peers) made me visualize and re-visualize countless variations of his possible life paths, all of which were in stark, and emotionally shocking, contrast with the urn of dust and ashes that Meemy had actually been on his mother's mantelpiece for more a decade, and, quite likely, still is.

Nostalgic perception, the perception of what could or would have been, had the circumstances been different, which is the simultaneous perception of a dizzying number of variations of countless possible paths, renders affectively palpable the continuity of the various cycles of multilateral structuration and the invariable finitude of its components. It's a structuring absence that, in not being there, gives shape, circumference, texture, and emotional tenor to that which could, would, or should have been in its place. Nostalgia thematizes perception as a continually changing (because evolving or ripening) transmutation of the perceived, the perceiver, and the medium of perception.

Dust is both a process and the medium of sensory and affective rapprochement and distanciation in lived and historical time, whether as a semantic cue—a heap of dust—or as a nostalgic circuit that weds memory to finitude and cyclicity. Like nostalgia, dust renders the zones of the imperceptible perceptible through haptic and emotional visibility. It explicitly links performance to materiality, both as a positive and a negative, in the analog-photographic sense of the word. The relation between dust and what it covers, much like the relation between solid object-hood and pulverization, or life and death, is a relation of mutation. The sense of dissipation caused by the blurriness, change, or absence is not deposited on the object, surface, sentient being, or a particular segment of time alone. It is also deposited on the perceiver. Memory, like its slippage, is woven of the many micro cross-communications between the environment, the senses, affect, and imagination. It is both elicited and silenced by externality. The sensory landscape, with its meaning-endowing spaces, objects, and temporalities, bears within it historical sedimentation that triggers and codes gestures, action, affect, and emotions that, in turn, open up the sensory landscape's stratigraphy and expose its materiality. In contrast to this infinitely nuanced, reticular process in which different modalities of experience weave the not-quite-visible but nevertheless perceptually present objects, the current imperative of high visibility renders the very process of rendering imperceptible (which has a cultural structure based on prescribed zones of non-experience), invisible, and, therefore imperceptible, in spatial, temporal, and affective terms.

5. Without dust

Whereas certain forms of imagination and visual depiction—pointillism, *sfumato* or one-line drawing—encouraged the ripening and maturation of the haptic image in the observer, precisely because the image had to be extracted from the invisible or the semi-visible, the current quest for high visibility is both the cause and result of the relentless production of standardized facticity. The absence of dust in the spectacular-virtual world derobes images of mnemonic tracing, of the different degrees of presence and affective circumference borne of gradual ripening, or becoming, through absence. There is, of course, a cultural and historical connection between the proliferation of standardized images, that is, images that do not require the perceiver's completion, and the digital totalitarianism of availability of all things and people. The moment not-yet-commodified things, activities, or spaces become commodified, which is to say standardized and interchangeable, they take on palpably different spatio-temporal coordinates for human perception. The mass production of visual facticity has created a perceptual apparatus attuned to the consumption of over-visible images and their ceaseless amassment through digital prosthetics. What is more, the deluge of completed images has given rise to a politics of the imperceptible, a politics that denies visibility to all things that are encrusted in the world but escape the ocularcentric regime of commodification.

The missing negative, which is spatially, temporally and affectively so present in the actual world where dust falls, apples rot, and humans and animals decompose and die, is a map of possibility, of past potentiality, that, like all potentialities, has a profound influence on the texture of the present. It's a four-dimensional map of that which has not taken place, of things you have not done, of places you have not visited, of people you have not seen, of occurrences you have not witnessed; in short, a map of the irreducible, non-compressible heterogeneity of becoming. Much like a place called home is stocked with the most varied phenomena and is, for this reason, the prime example of the multilateral structuration characteristic of Nishida's metaphysical society, our at-homeness in the world is encrusted in past potentialities. Much like nothing that has ever existed can be fully erased, nothing that could or would have been is ever fully excluded from the circulation of what is. Weightless and shapeless, dust remains the most palpable sedimented immateriality humans can perceive. As the fabric of the fold, it is a barely haptic-visible connection to the immanent metaphysics of existence in which space, time, affect, events, and material culture interpenetrate to create a perception of history that is inseparable from the history of perception and, ultimately, memory.

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Endnotes

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[8] *Ibid.*

[9] See John Ruskin, *The Ethics of Dust, The Works of John Ruskin 18*, eds. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: Allen, 1903-12), pp. 209-368.

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[13] Nishida, p. 117.