

# *Dirty Work*

**Michael Hirschbichler**

There is a tradition in architecture and art – proclaimed by Leon Battista Alberti, Adolf Loos and others – to refrain from dirt.<sup>1</sup> According to such an understanding, architectural and creative thinking and making are conceived as an intellectual and pure endeavor – inscribing the human mind into matter – or a moral project of purity aimed at keeping unwanted matter out. Despite countless historical and contemporary concepts that run counter to such a position, this sort of renaissance-modernist idealist tradition still forms a powerful current in contemporary forms of worldmaking. Dirt, impurity, contamination are, however, inevitable aspects of life, and have to be taken into consideration when one thinks, acts, builds and so on.

Following one of the most well-known definitions of dirt as ‘matter out of place’,<sup>2</sup> in a literal sense, all extraction-based constructions – that is most of the objects, buildings, environments, art works and so forth that make up our world – are ‘dirty’. They are made by taking matter out of a place and accumulating it somewhere (mostly somewhere else). This holds true, at least as far as the material aspect of out-of-placeness is concerned. When it comes to the immaterial aspect – to the social impacts of such redistributions of matter, and to moral, sociocultural and political definitions of what the ‘right’ place of matter is and what therefore constitutes its out-of-placeness when removed from there – things get more complicated. For dirt is connected to (and produced by) systems of categorization, linked to forms of power and order, while simultaneously offending that order.<sup>3</sup> Entangling material and immaterial aspects, dirt is often situated in an in-between space, provoking reflections on the relation of ‘order to disorder, being to

non-being, form to formlessness, life to death'.<sup>4</sup> In doing so, dirt possesses a relational and processual character. It raises questions, such as: Where is something coming from ('out of' which 'place')? Where is it going or staying? Who is affected by it and in which way? And what are the necessary processes to clean, remove, transform or otherwise treat it? As a fundamental marker of difference, dirt brings to light the boundaries created by codes of purity and pollution.<sup>5</sup> And more generally, it can help to reveal the rules and ideologies of systems and create links to often unwanted or overlooked domains of reality.

This is why I advocate 'dirty work' as a *modus operandi* for understanding and remaking the world. Dirty work acknowledges and deals with dirt in its many forms. Instead of clean operations, of idealizations and abstractions from a distance, dirty work demands active material and bodily engagements with places and environments. It relies on fieldwork as a practice of working *in*, *with* and *through* the field, of ploughing through the thick textures of life and the myriad material-immaterial relations that each place is entangled in.

Roughly sketched, 'Dirty Work' can be circumscribed as follows:<sup>6</sup>

*Dirty work* attends to accumulated pasts and attempted and aborted futures. It grapples with the leftovers, fragments, debris of things, ideologies and lives, with the facts and fictions that haunt every spot on Earth, with the many ghosts that abound and demand engagement.

*Dirty work* is concerned with whispering phantoms.

*Dirty work* is carried out in and on wastelands, the territories of our time.

*Dirty work* acknowledges that all images and constructions are inevitably

contaminated. It is – in the language of -isms – engaged with the impurism, contaminism, toxicism of matter and ideas.

*Dirty work* is yet another type of bricolage, a remix art, a kind of dumping ground magic. It requires painting, sculpting, building, thinking with degraded, second-rate (or rather third-, fourth- or nth-rate) material.

*Dirty work* is a searching process that consists of careful observations (uncovering, tracing, experiencing), interpretations (putting in relation to each other, ordering, collaging, montaging) and transformations (intervening, realizing, rewriting, transforming).

*Dirty work* tries to find the shadows of fairyland in the rough textures of life, to uncover strata of imagination beneath ruins of facts, and aims to build a world of beauty from the wastelands between dream and reality, between longing for the stars and everyday labour.

*Dirty work* necessitates both rationality and emotion, waking and dreaming.

*Dirty work* knows that we will endure less than most of the things we fabricate.

*Dirty work* builds up and deteriorates.

*Dirty work* demands pessimistic optimism.

*Dirty work* is not afraid to fail.

*Dirty work* is an accumulation of footsteps.

*Dirty work* is an attempt to make sense of history, to pick up and turn around and transform its splinters, piece by piece.

*Dirty work* is not imprisoned by novelty.

*Dirty work* cultivates a discipline of memory in a reality of neglected associations.

*Dirty work* exploits the glories of corroded time.

*Dirty work* constructs melodies against the darkening sky.

*Dirty work* adheres to a realism of the Earth.

*Dirty work* may cause headaches, allergies.

In *dirty work* the roaches come and go.

*Dirty work* spills like ice-cream dropped on concrete.

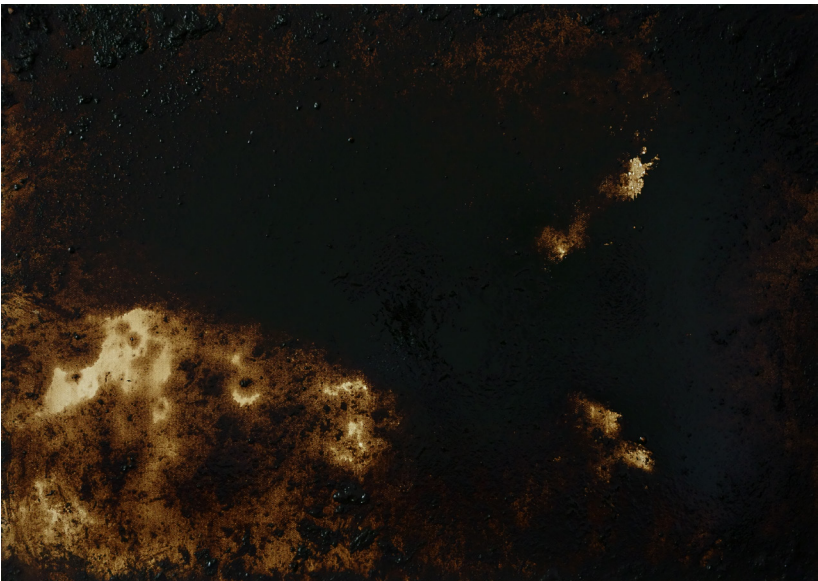
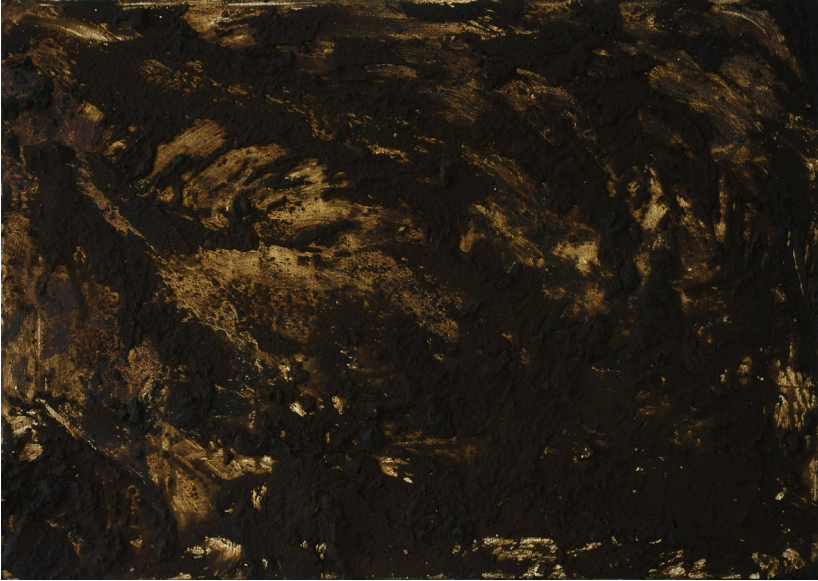
*Dirty work* offers no true liberation.

Despite the many misfortunes to which we are heir, humour is important – for hell knows no smile.

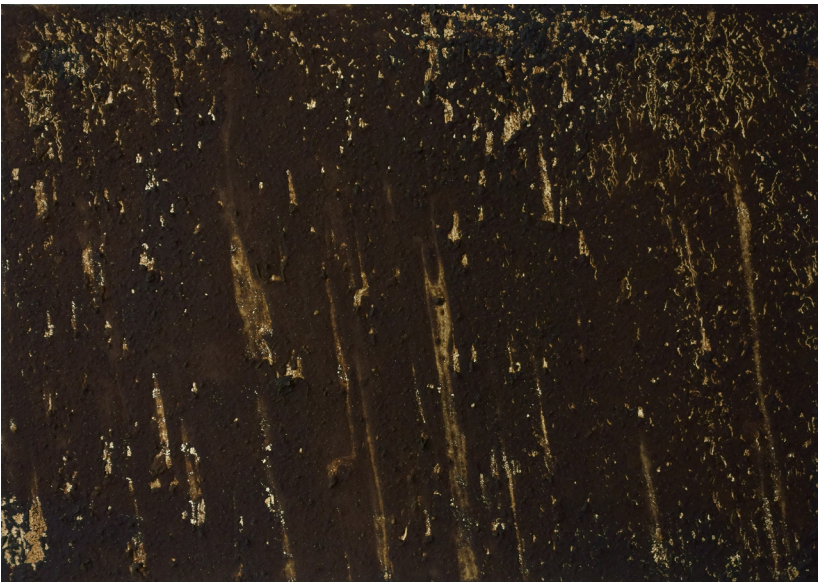
One must imagine the *dirty worker* happy.

**Oil Field Paintings, 2017, Baku, Azerbaijan**

In the painting cycle *Oil Field Paintings*, I was interested to trace our wealth of oil-based goods and ways of life back to its *urgrund*, the world's oldest industrial oil fields in Baku, Azerbaijan. In a kind of 'Plein Air' action, playfully engaging traditions of landscape painting as well as Abstract Expressionist techniques, crude oil is taken directly from oil spills in the landscape and carried onto white canvases. Applied in coarse gestures, the paintings are recordings of the different material characteristics and aesthetic qualities of oil – as a valuable resource and as dirt, taken from puddles in the contaminated ground, mapped out on canvas. The performance-like painting process was interrupted by the security forces controlling the oil fields, foregrounding the territorial power relations in which this resource is enmeshed.















- 1 Adolf Loos, 'Plumbers', in: Nadir Lahiji and Daniel S. Friedman (eds.), *Plumbing: Sounding Modern Architecture* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), 19.
- 2 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London/New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), 36.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 2, 36.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 5.
- 5 Richard Fardon, 'Purity as Danger: "Purity and Danger Revisited" at Fifty', in: Robbie Duschinsky, Simone Schnall and Daniel H. Weiss (eds.), *Purity and Danger Now: New Perspectives* (London/New York: Routledge, 2016), 29.
- 6 The following is a slightly modified excerpt from Michael Hirschbichler, 'Drecksarbeit / Dirty Work. A Manifesto', in: *Review Summer 2022* (Vienna: IKA, Academy of Fine Arts Vienna), 20.