

Dust and Breath: The Materiality of Air Quality

Keywords: domestic dust, decay, air, visible, invisible, materiality, breath, spirit, human and non-human.

Conference presentation to read in conjunction with the photographs presented in a separate document.

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Throughout this presentation I will be discussing my photography-led practice-based research, to explore the material signifiers of air quality. In my practice, *air* functions as a focal medium of my photographic and textual investigation, witnessed through the material presence of domestic dust. This allows me to consider the socio-economic, spatial, and environmental factors of air quality, which shape our everyday environments.

My interpretation of the *materiality of air quality* brings photographic attention to what is present and absent, material and ephemeral, as examined through a sensory and critical engagement of air's material conditions, and through the traces it leaves behind. Domestic dust—visible to the naked eye and the camera lens—serve as particulate markers, allowing for multiple interactions across interior and exterior thresholds.

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In *The Senses Still*, anthropologist Nadia Seremetakis writes 'dust is the perceptual waste material formed by the historical-cultural repression of sensory experience and memory (Seremetakis, 1994). These dusty agents allow for an interrogation of air quality not just as an environmental and health-related concern, but as emergent relationships between human and non-human worlds. Although air is vast and formless in its materiality, I am proposing that it is never empty, but full of histories, bodies, contaminants and memories.

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The dust I collect serves as a language to communicate nebulous levels of reality that are not directly accessible to us. Like dust, air often goes unnoticed—fluid, flighty, and performative as it flows around, through, and within our bodily movements, engaging in a dance with us. It is a threshold material existing between states, constantly interacting with other elements, objects and beings.

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The domestic spaces we occupy, and how we exist within them, impacts the air quality we breathe. This has important health implications – ‘considering 90% of our time is spent indoors’ (Air Quality Expert Group, 2022). Unlike the invisible gaseous components of air - dust is an aggregate, containing organic and inorganic materials including hair, skin cells, textile fibres, pollen and pollutants. It is important to ask ourselves:

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What am I breathing?

What visible and invisible residue do the spaces I inhabit hold?

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Multiplying, thriving and propagating, dust becomes a material signifier depicting the effects of air's residue, inside and outside of the body. The photograph becomes an index of invisible presence, and a way of materialising the ephemeral. From a phenomenological perspective, photography allows me to fulfil an embodied experience, inhaling and exhaling in the presence of these particles, whilst inviting the viewer to build their own sensory, emotional and critical resonance - whether consciously or unconsciously. This creates an intimate connection between myself- the photographer, image and the viewer, whereby dust transforms into a rich narrative.

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The philosopher Michael Marder states that dust is a 'breath of matter on the brink of spirit, both solid and yet insubstantial, an element as much of air as it is earth (Marder, 2016).

If dust speaks of our physical manifestation, then the invisible collective consciousness draws on metaphysical themes, implying unison between the material and invisible realms.

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This presentation also considers air as the medium and the soul of life, through a personal and shared experience. Breath is a personal unifying life force, yet fiercely divisive in its inequality. In the book *Through Vegetal Being: Two Philosophical Perspectives* by Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder, they state 'if breathing reminded me of the difference between the air in which I dwelt and the air that corresponded to my soul or my spirit (...) breathing also reminded me of the difference between the other and myself (Irigaray and Marder, 2016).

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In the beginning and without end (2018) is a series of still and moving image work, where I manipulate domestic dust to place emphasis on the material in motion in the form of a dust cloud, whilst a crumpled heap of dust sits in the corner adopting anthropomorphic qualities. This adds a performative dimension to the photographs, creating shapes, movement and traces within the image. Grotesque material, such as domestic dirt, contextualises these artworks in the realm of abject art, which has been extensively explored by the philosopher Julia Kristeva meaning, 'the state of being cast off' (Kristeva, 1992). The abject does not respect boundaries creating a threatening disturbance between order, rules and what is appropriate for public display. Photography allows me to materialise this abject matter, provoking discomfort and a visceral response, as the dust is used to represent our physical body, as our true self or soul is invisible.

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To quote Barthes 'ultimately, photography is subversive, not when it frightens, repels, or even stigmatises, but when it is pensive, when it thinks' (Barthes, 1981).

In one way the juxtaposition between the dust in motion and the inanimate pile of dust symbolises separation but also union of spirit and breath in equal measure. My photographic practice engages with the notion of spirit as an active force—something that emerges in the space between visibility and invisibility, presence and absence. The act of photographing becomes a performative negotiation between the human body and atmospheric matter, where the indefinable rhythm of breath—both literal and metaphorical—foregrounds a mode of embodied perception. Dust becomes a catalyst for engaging with the threshold between the visible and the invisible, the material and the immaterial. In this exchange, the act of photographing is not a detached observation but a form of embodied presence—an entanglement between myself, the photographer, subject and atmosphere. What emerges is not merely a visual document, but a material trace of an encounter drawing attention to the suspended particulates of human and non-human bodies that inhabit the space. This invites a deeper reflection of our cohabitation and disturbance, on the unseen forces that constitute and animate our environments.

Although *spirit* has no definable physical substance or accessible scientific proof, it is still believed across many non-Western cultures and indigenous beliefs, that its existence has long been held as the essence of one's being. An entity that lies within all of us and which some argue survives death. In traditional Mexican culture, the body is the vessel of the self, containing the soul or spirit - tied to memory, ancestry, land, and community. The word *spirit* comes from the Latin word *spiritus*, originally meaning a *breath or gust of wind*. In Hinduism - *atman*, the sanskrit word for spirit, often translates as essence or breath, which is the air and the air which is the soul.

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So what happens to our energetic body after death? How does it transmute into our collective atmosphere and what role does the element of air play in this?

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Chapter four of *Through Vegetal Being* explores *the generative potential of the elements* stating that ‘air has the greatest power to ensure a mediation between the different states of matter, within us and outside of us. It allows us to be both a body and a soul, (...) it is able to make possible the transition from the materiality of our body to the subtlety of our soul’ (Irigaray and Marder, 2016). Dust’s liminal presence—neither fully part of the domestic environment nor entirely separate—reflects the discomfort associated with mortality and decay, especially when we consider how non-human life inhabits our bodies and contributes to our life cycle of regeneration.

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In *Patterned Ground: Entanglements of Nature and Culture*, Stephan Harrison states, ‘encounters with dust raise questions about what (if anything) is consistent or whole about our bodies, and where (and indeed whether) a line can meaningfully be drawn between the human and nonhuman worlds’ (Harrison, Pile and Thrift, 2004).

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In my photographic series *Dust Cave* (2018), I wanted to explore the intervention of man-made and organic materials to draw on our reciprocal relationship with the environment. Along with naturally occurring dust, I have also staged huge clumps of domestic dust interlaced with shrubbery, as it takes on new life forms in an abandoned caravan. By interweaving domestic dust with decaying plant matter, the work draws attention to the porous boundaries between the living and non-living, the human and more-than-human. These hybrid forms speak to a reciprocal ecology, where the air we share becomes a medium of exchange, contamination, and coexistence, as dust and mould become carriers of microbial and vegetal life. In occupying this liminal space, this series invites reflection on our domestic environments —where breath, decay, and regeneration are actively shared.

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Mossy Jumper (2023) continues to visualise connections between multispecies relationships, showing the resilience of moss and how it flourishes between the boundary layer - in-between worlds, where the air is thin. The boundary layer accumulates carbon dioxide from decaying matter, in this case an abandoned jumper I found behind my bin and photographed in my home. In this context, I am exploring how the intimacy of air is shared between human and non-human forms.

This boundary is not fixed but porous, allowing for constant movement of particulates across and through bodies, objects, and atmospheres. These particles flow across embodied thresholds - not contained or static, but as continually negotiated spaces of exchange. The air here becomes a carrier of both presence and decay, memory and matter, circulating between human and more-than-human worlds.

Air and atmosphere are shaped by the rhythms of our own individual and collective breathing, yet they are also shared by all biotic life forms across time and space. In *Mossy Jumper*, the entanglement of organic and man-made materials becomes this shared porosity—where multispecies are registered not just visually but materially.

Closing thoughts

As we navigate collapsing systems—ecological, political, and epistemological—we are called not only to witness but to actively participate in an interspecies dialogue. This requires a conscious attunement to ourselves and to more-than-human agencies, to recognise that nature is a co-creator, a collaborator, and as many indigenous cultures believe, holds more knowledge and wisdom than our human species alone.

To breathe is to participate in a shared, entangled system—one that crosses bodies, species, geographies, and histories. The quality of air is shaped by infrastructures of inequality, yet it is also a medium of connection. Air, in this sense, is a carrier of particulate matter and

meaning, containing all of earth's sediment. The materiality of air is shaped by its dual nature as a medium that is both spectral and deeply material. In this sense, we might begin to dismantle hierarchies between human and non-human forms by asking:

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What does air know? What does air resist? What does air need?

END.

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