

Dust and the Avant-Garde

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**Abstract:** In his paper, "Dust and the Avant-Garde," Jake Kennedy presents an interdisciplinary exploration of experimental modernism in the work of visual artist Marcel Duchamp and writer Gertrude Stein. Kennedy focuses on the strange presence of dust in the work of these two artists and argues that as an abject object -- it is literally the unwanted of domestic space -- the idea of dust engages radically modernism on a material level. Dust is also the unwanted of modernity itself, as it represents a potentially subversive sister-part to urban, masculine modernity's valorisation of machinery, glass, and steel. Transmuted into the metaphysical stuff of avant-garde experimentation, the powdery "residue" of the bourgeois household evidences Peter Bürger's claim in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde* that the historical avant-gardistes did not so much seek to destroy the bourgeois institution of art as to transfer it (fuse it) more fully to the "praxis of life." Steinian and Duchampian dust thus works to confirm the radical presence of art-in-life, but it also marks multiple, ambiguous sites of gender struggle and self-construction. Their highlighting of dust's liminal aesthetic qualities makes possible a dynamic interrogation of the state and spaces of modernist gender politics, aesthetic "propriety," and the vital place of the bourgeois domestic in the avant-garde project.

**Jake KENNEDY****Dust and the Avant-Garde**

Why are Marcel Duchamp and Gertrude Stein, two exemplary representatives of the modernist avant-garde, so fascinated with the dust of the bourgeoisie? An obsession with notions of habit and chance, especially as embodied in dust and dusting, is evident in Stein's *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and *Tender Buttons*, for example, as well as in Duchamp's premier visual work *The Large Glass*, its catalogue *The Green Box*, and in his collaborative photography with Man Ray. Although Stein seems more interested in dust removal and Duchamp conversely in dust accrual, both artists play with dust as an explicitly domestic, feminine trope. Dust, as Duchamp and Stein's work illustrates, radically engages modernism on a material level because it is an abject object: it is literally the unwanted of domestic space. But dust is also the unwanted of modernity itself, as it represents a potentially subversive sister-part to urban, masculine modernity's valorisation of machinery, glass, and steel. In this way, dust necessarily belies the grandeur, strength and lucidity of masculine materials and of modernist positivism. The powdery "residue" of the bourgeois household, as it becomes transmuted into the metaphysical stuff of avant-garde experimentation, evidences Peter Bürger's claim in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* that the historical avant-gardistes did not so much seek to destroy the bourgeois institution of art as to transfer it (fuse it) more fully to the "praxis of life" where it would be finally preserved (Bürger 49). Steinian and Duchampian dust works to confirm the radical presence of art-in-life, but it also marks multiple, ambiguous sites of gender struggle and self-construction. Their highlighting of dust's liminal aesthetic qualities proves to be a dynamic interrogation of the state and spaces of modernist gender politics, aesthetic "propriety," and the vital place of the bourgeois domestic in the avant-garde project.

In Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Alice writes: "I always say that you cannot tell what a picture really is or what an object really is until you dust it every day and you cannot tell what a book is until you type it or proof-read it. It then does something to you that only reading never can do" (*Autobiography* 106). The passage is multiply ironic: we are suspended, in our reading, somewhere between Alice and Gertrude, fact and fiction, cleaning and art history, "serious" and disingenuous speech. Stein at once radically valorises both the homemaker and the genius artist. She implies that the complexity of the modern art object and the artist are verifiable, but can only be truly understood by the routinized attentions exemplified by the housewife -- thus fusing the apparently opposed jobs of cleaner and creator. As Stein grants the "housewife" this new, visionary status as art-critic/interpreter she also critiques the stereotypes of the feminine domestic space, and thus indirectly challenges the high-art (anti-domestic, anti-quotidian) esotericism of a traditional modernist aesthetic. Lyn Hejinian, in an essay on Stein's poetics entitled "A Common Sense," writes that "It was through participation in the everyday with its 'inevitable repetition,' that Gertrude Stein first came to understand the metaphysical as well as compositional force of habit" (Hejinian 361). Household dust can be viewed as a symbol of the Steinian ideal of inevitable repetition, or "insistence" -- dust itself becoming the living definition of domestic routine as it bespeaks and demands a "compositional force of habit."

In *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas writes: "Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. This idea of dirt takes us straight into the field of... symbolic systems of purity" (36). Unlike most household dirt though, dust is generated seemingly *invisibly* -- by the very processes of domestic action that strive to keep it hidden and controlled. There is something especially inscrutable about dust -- intersecting with Douglas's notions of purity and system and also with Julia Kristeva's theories of the abject -- in that dust never really proclaims itself, totally, as dirt. Dust is a different kind, or special kind, of dirt, the most "refined" and most clearly a (by)product of a system. Uncannily, dust both represents the "domestic" (it is the everyday signifier of the bourgeois home) and threatens to erase, or at least contaminate, that very space as it connotes imperceptible, paradoxical "invasion" from *within*. Dirt can usually be thoroughly traced, like bootprints across the carpet, but dirt

in its dust-form "descends" and is nearly as ubiquitous as oxygen. Thus "the domestic," in its most general sense of a home environment, *is* dust.

What is perhaps most exciting about Alice's dusting in *The Autobiography* is the way it engages directly with popular representations of the domestic feminine, especially as advertised in the mass culture magazines of the early and mid 1900s. In his work *The Condition of Postmodernity*, David Harvey explains that "popular American journals like *Good Housekeeping* were depicting the house as 'nothing more than a factory for the production of happiness' as early as 1910, years before Le Corbusier ventured his celebrated... dictum that the house is a 'machine for modern living'" (23). It is telling, too, that twentieth-century women's magazines stressed the links between dust and sanity. In an October 1909 article in *The Ladies' Home Journal* entitled "Good Taste and Bad Taste in Beds," "crazy" furniture is described as that which is overly elaborate (foreign) and therefore requires too much "dusting" (35). The foreignness of these "crazy" beds also possibly suggests a colonial terror of contamination: the bourgeoisie might be understood to dust, in part, to shore up against both racial and sexual "invasion." In a 1907 issue of *The Ladies' Home Journal* entitled "Actresses as Housekeepers" we encounter a series of photographs showing female professional artists (singers, actresses, writers) in pleasant domestic costumes and settings. The captions underneath the photographs are revealing: "The friends of Miss [Eleanor] Robson say that she is as good at housekeeping as at acting. She is a 'natural-born' housekeeper -- as fond of ordering, of marketing, of dusting and of cooking, as she is of her pet cat, 'Peter'." And: "Although Miss [Ethel] Barrymore leaves all the housework to the servants, she sees to it that everything is properly done. She is especially particular about the dusting, notably of the books in her large library." The contrasting of the women's actual professions as famous entertainers with their "natural-born" professions as housekeepers is not only a hegemonic means of confining these women's status to the relative anonymity of the domestic habitat, it also serves to equate the combating of "dust," for example, with the purity of a phantasmatic feminine being. In her work *American Domesticity*, Kathleen Anne McHugh argues that "the ideal domestic engineer, the worker best suited to implement scientific management effectively in the home, emerges [in modernity] as an excessively feminine housekeeper. Unlike her factory counterparts [industrial men], the mechanized home manager-worker must attend always to the question of beauty" (73). The suggestion in these photos and captions is that despite a woman's passionate, professionally supported gifts for expression, she is still instinctively obsessed with the "performance" of a clean, elegant house. Though we are told that Ethel Barrymore, for example, does not do her own dusting, she certainly *oversees* it. Thus the domestic (even despite profound class discrepancies) is ultimately essentialized and homogenized in these stories as pure feminine territory. To fail to dust, to fail to cook or clean, or even to fail to *supervise* the cleaning, is thus not only to forfeit "good taste" but to risk becoming a perverse feminine subject.

"Alice's" dusting is, then, to some extent, an inversion of *The Ladies' Home Journal* mass-culture dialectic. If "Alice" dusts a picture, an object, or a book it is not necessarily to make it more beautiful (that is, to remove the dust in an effort to better display the qualities of the art work and to thereby confirm the purity of Alice and her house). Rather, Stein implies that "Alice's" domestic toils are implicitly about aesthetic self-fulfillment: she dusts the paintings and the sculptures in order to *know* them better, even in order to seek direct aesthetic pleasure. This is not to say that Stein is dangerously, if creatively, advocating women's domestic work as always untroubled because always utopian and edifying; but only, conversely, that within the context of the multiple ironies of the utterance it is written by a woman (Stein) in the voice of her lover (Toklas) about the politics of gendered labour and even indirectly commenting on the difficult demands on a "reader" of Stein's own aesthetic work -- the declaration boasts complex potential for feminist redress. In this equation of dusting and art, and most importantly in this blending of feminine personalities, there is a taunting of high modernist, masculinist theories. T.S. Eliot's argument in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," for example, that when a new work of art is created "the existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves" ("Tradition" 2207) seems tendentious and artificially sublime beside the everyday image of "Alice" dusting a painting or an object. If Eliot's literary-critical lexicon invokes cultural monoliths -- the radically undustable! -- then Stein's

aesthetic theory more playfully implies a realm of chuchkas. There is something clearly anti-auratic about "Alice's" dusting as well: the aura of the art work, if it exists here at all, *depends* on the dusting. Stein grafts her modernism to the devalued actions of domestic tasks and thus she eschews the guiding existential, erudite, urban masculine rationale of high modernism. However, if so much depends on the duster, then Alice's/Stein's dusting is also complicated by the Steinian project of avant-garde self-promotion. As Alice is pictured dusting the works of art she is literally illuminating the aesthetic qualities of not just the modernist house at 27 rue de Fleurus, but of Stein's own "original" delectation and artistry. Alice's dusting is a confirmation of the exquisite "material," the *stuff* of Steinian modernism; the dust gives shape to the actual objects and the actual pictures of her "master's" modernity. There is also an erotic aspect to "Alice's" typing and dusting as she must be seen here as industriously *working* at the "body" of Stein's own art and writings. "Alice's" dusting is a form of symbolic capital, too, as it legitimises Stein's work, and it is also a not-so-subtle form of symbolic pedagogy: her dusting literally *teaches* the patience (to Alice and then indirectly to the reader) required to understand the demands of modern art. In this way, "the housewife" dusting -- but here crucially *understanding* -- the avant-garde art object may further represent a metonymic, or parodic, fantasy for Stein in terms of the traditional bourgeois mindset that she felt herself so deeply estranged from, and even despised by. Alice becomes, in this analysis, the ideal fictive reader of Stein's text and taste: a utopic blend of both the avant-garde sensibility (transgressive, erotic, radical) and middle-class temperament (tidy, reserved, faithful).

The complexity of Stein's aesthetics of dust seems to reside, again, in its strange domestic agency: it is both dead and alive; both of the home and radically invasive; a trope of routine and a trope of transcendence; a certain contaminant and yet, somehow, not quite completely "dirty." As dust ambiguously defies "law" and yet also demarcates a system, it constitutes a dynamic aesthetic metaphor for the experimental modernist moment. Like Stein, Marcel Duchamp was preoccupied with the avant-garde qualities of dust. Calvin Tomkins, Duchamp's biographer, narrates an intriguing moment concerning the "meeting" of dust and a few prominent members of the New York avant-garde: "Work on the *Glass* had almost stopped. [Alfred] Stieglitz and Georgia O'Keeffe saw the two panels leaning against the wall when they dropped by his studio one day. O'Keeffe was greatly distressed by the disorder and the layers of dust on everything. 'The room looked as though it had never been swept,' she said, ' -- not even when he first moved in. There was a single bed with a chess pattern on the wall above it to the left. Nearby was a makeshift chair. There was a big nail in the side of it that you had to be very careful of when you got up or you'd tear your clothes or yourself... and the dust everywhere was so thick that it was hard to believe'" (Tomkins 245). Unlike the domestic tranquillity implied in Stein's descriptions of 27 rue de Fleurus, O'Keeffe's recollection invokes the rather dangerous, potentially toxic landscape of the classic artist-bachelor pad: this is the garret haunt of the artist who is, ostensibly, too busy working on his *Glass* or playing and perfecting chess to worry about anything as "menial" or "feminine" as sweeping. Duchamp's studio is a place, O'Keeffe points out, where one might tear one's clothes or even one's self on the hazardous furniture. In terms of the *Good Housekeeping* or *The Ladies' Home Journal* models of restful, pleasant domestic environments, Duchamp's "unbelievably" dusty abode is a rather dystopic counter-example. But Duchamp's dust here is, to some extent, *intentional* -- a planned domestic experiment. Just as Stein was fascinated with the aesthetic process of dust removal, so was Duchamp compelled by the *breeding* and, finally, the permanent fixing of dust on and in an art object. Indeed, as Tomkins explains, Duchamp set his magnum opus, *The Large Glass*, on saw-horses in his studio for over six months, and thus allowed half a year's worth of dust to collect on the two glass panels. At the end of this domestic experiment, Man Ray was invited over to the apartment and, using a time exposure (this was one of Ray's first photographs), he then photographed the intriguing patterns of dust on the leaded glass. Duchamp titled the collaborative work *Dust Breeding* (*Elevage de poussière*) and finally fixed the dust permanently (where it outlined the "sieves" on his *The Large Glass*) with an application of varnish.

Stein's and Duchamp's interrogations of dust, notably, both depend upon a kind of collaboration. Just as "Alice," at some level, must remove the dust to confirm Gertrude's genius, so must

Man apprehend the dust on film in order to ensure the strange spectacle of Marcel's avant-garde vision. Yet despite these polarities of removal and addition, Stein and Duchamp are comparably invested in an exploration of dust as bourgeois, domestic metaphor. *Dust Breeding*, or *Dust Raising*, implies a maternal *nurturing* of dust (a rearing) and therefore ironically intersects with both modern domestic, and modern feminine, discourses of the "good" housewife. Indeed, it is Duchamp's female alter ego, Rose Sélavy, who will claim direct ownership of *Dust Breeding* by "signing" Ray's photograph. In fact, when the photograph was ultimately published in the October 1922 edition of *Littérature*, it was run with the suggestive captions: "domain of Rose Sélavy" and "How arid it is -- how fertile -- how joyful -- how sad." The introduction of Rose Sélavy is not only a further fusion of collaborative identities, it also obviously amplifies the "domestic" (fertile domain) and "feminine" resonances of *Dust Breeding* (there is an interesting correspondence between Marcel's "Rose," and Stein's "Alice" -- dust, in these avant-garde examples, seems powerfully linked to the manipulation of subjectivity). Rose Sélavy (whose name can be phonetically understood here as Arroser Lavis, a pun on washing or watering or cleaning) becomes the radical, avant-garde femme fatale: the anti-housewife revelling in the abject, indeed even giving birth to, and nurturing, that abjection. *Dust Breeding* is thus a photograph -- an almost hyperbolic "apprehension" -- of the unrepresentable, the unthinkable of traditional domestic bourgeois space. Rose (also notoriously photographed by Ray wearing fashionable hat and fur stole, and posed with a rather coquettish look) is a domestic terror because, like the dust, she is lawless and ambiguous. As the transgressive feminist subject, Rose is terror personified because underneath the make-up and the haute couture she is in fact a "man." Amelia Jones and Rachel Blau Duplessis, among other critics, have pointed out that Duchamp's transvestite strategies may ultimately only serve to re-invigorate the powerful, active position of the masculine subject. Jones states, for example, that "The nonoppositional other, Rose is Duchamp and yet clearly, she is not. She is separated (or not separated) from her other only by *inframince*, activating the paradox of subjectivity, especially for the woman: she becomes an author through signing and yet she herself has been 'authored' by her other" (Jones 160). Dust and cross-dressing converge here, rather spectacularly, at the level of coherence and simulation.

The inauthentic dust, and the inauthentic woman, are signs of horror because they dramatise "impurity." Dust and "gender-play" are also necessarily about "shame" then as they jostle traditionally "approved" domestic identities. As dust refuses borders it constitutes a real crisis in terms of the boundaries of bourgeois (heterosexual?) subjectivity. In a 1923 article by Sarah Field Splint in *The Ladies' Home Journal*, entitled "How to be Happy Though Housecleaning," Splint argues for the ease of housecleaning (thanks to modern methods) but also embellishes her discussion of housecleaning with military language: "Then with trusty vacuum attack open book cases" (Splint, 106). If the modern bourgeois home is designed as a kind of prison or fortress -- to keep the wife contained within and the world resisted without -- dust connotes invasion and escape. Dust means breach. In this way, *Dust Breeding* illuminates the importance of feminine domestic occupations in the perpetual confirmation and buttressing of masculine, patriarchal identities. Dust, this *other* dust, is of the factory, the industrial site, the street, the carpenter's shop: to breed dust in the domestic environment is thus to critique the gender assignments and their subsequent power privileges. Men (including artists like Duchamp) *make* dust, apparently, and women (including artists like Stein/"Alice") *remove* it. The "contiguities" of Duchamp's dust are so complicated and varied, in part, because Ray's photograph of Duchamp's *Dust Breeding* turns out to be, finally, a piece of Duchampian art work *about* a Duchampian art work. In other words, just as Stein-Toklas/Duchamp-Ray become ambiguously blurred in terms of the shared author-function, so too does Duchamp's *The Large Glass* (the *site* on which this dust is literally being raised or farmed) become blurred with the *Dust Breeding* photograph. Thus *Dust Breeding* is happening atop Duchamp's domestic-erotic allegory of the bride and her bachelors and is incorporated into that visual narrative (Duchamp's *The Large Glass*, or *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even*, [*La Mariée mise nu par ses célibataires, même*] is comprised of two plates of freestanding glass measuring in total about nine feet). The two panes are separated by a horizon line, indicating the demarcation between the world of the bachelors and the world of the bride. *The Glass* notoriously



depicts a cryptic allegory, even a type of machinery, that seems to impishly illustrate the workings of sexual desire. The piece, which has been compared to James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, presents an overwhelming series of elaborate visual and verbal puns -- many of which are directly relevant to domesticity and eroticism. *Dust* is the finest expression of the modernist masculine disavowal of the pristine domestic space, at least as embodied by Duchamp. Indeed, Duchamp is celebrated (despite two marriages) as the quintessential bachelor-artist who, in interviews, regularly expressed his phobia of the bourgeois domestic lifestyle. In a dialogue with Pierre Cabanne, for example, he explained that, "I understood, at a certain moment, that it wasn't necessary to encumber one's life with too much weight, with too many things to do, with what is called a wife, children, a country house, an automobile" (Duchamp, "Eight Years" 15). Duchamp's dusty critique of the domestic is liberating but also potentially conservative as it derides feminine labour/domesticity generally and restores the (male) artist to the centre of the praxis-of-life.

*Dust Breeding*, incorporated by association into the fantastic domestic narrative of *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, is discussed explicitly in its companion catalogue, entitled *The Green Box*. Duchamp writes: "to raise dust / on Dust-Glasses / for 4 months. 6 months. which you / close up afterwards / hermetically. = Transparency / -- Differences. To be worked out" (*Green Box* n.p.). Jennifer Gough-Cooper and Jacques Caumont point out that Duchamp is here probably alluding to Alfred Jarry's *Doctor Faustroll*, in particular to a passage in *Faustroll* which concerns the Doctor carefully putting on boots that have been left for many months to gather dust (Caumont and Gough-Cooper 50). It is perhaps a "pataphysical" inheritance -- a play with the Jarryesque science of imaginary solutions -- that compels Duchamp to want to "close up... hermetically" the dust once it's raised ("Pataphysical" is proto-surrealist Alfred Jarry's coinage for "the science of imaginary solutions"). For Jarry, the pataphysical is necessarily preoccupied with the *exceptional* -- with all of that material and phenomena which seems to exceed the rational law(s). Jarry's brilliant inversion of positivist science as radical art serves as an important precursor for Duchamp's own impish, discipline-flouting corpus. Moreover, Duchamp is also notably concerned with "transparency" and "differences." In fixing the dust to the glass Duchamp is actually making the glass (what looks like transparency) into dust (difference or otherness). This direct sabotage of "transparency" then seems to want to deny, or at least trouble, mimesis proper. The dust is also an occlusion of the specular, mirror-like clarity of Duchamp's *Glass* and would then seem to disturb a masculinist narcissistic "gaze" but also perhaps symbolise the fear of that very disturbance.

While *Dust Breeding*, in Duchamp studies, is considered more of an eccentric collaboration and, at best, a nuancing of the more major achievements of Duchamp's corpus, there is some suggestion in *The Green Box* that the photograph/art-work is intrinsically important to *The Large Glass*. *The Green Box* usually begins with the title "The Bride stripped bare by her bachelors / even" followed by a sub-title that reads: " -- Agricultural Machine." At the bottom of this page Duchamp has written: "Apparatus / instrument for farming." Like *Dust Breeding* then, the *Glass* itself is an ambiguous machine about "agriculture" and "farming." As this title-page alludes to the *Dust Breeding* photograph and the relevant "dust" text we will encounter later on in the catalogue, it also trains a reader to align the bride and her bachelors with a scientific-domestic symbology. Duchamp's *Glass* is so parodically powerful, in part, because it laminates an absurdist, mechanical nomenclature over a theme of domestic, erotic (mis)adventure. *The Large Glass* thus plays out a very modernist tension, one that specifically dramatises the interrelationship between mechanisation and desire. One of the pressing enigmas in *The Green Box* and *The Large Glass* concerns just what exactly is being farmed -- what kind of agriculture are we looking at, even? Duchamp's dust is the most direct, convincing correlative and it is intriguing to remember that he literally "planted" the dust into the glass itself with varnish. The final cryptic note about dust in *The Green Box* reads: "To be mentioned / the quality of / the other side of the dust / either as the name of the metal or otherwise." The "other side of the dust" is, on a first thought, absurd: only a pataphysical possibility. But, indeed, as Duchamp's farmed dust is now embedded in the terrain of the glass pane, a viewer may circle the dust and actually "witness" the *other* side. The multivalences of dust, especially as they are integrated with *The Large Glass*'s fascination with "oculism," are here richly exploited as metaphors of both the domestic (dust) and sexual desire (seeing). Perhaps the

other side of the dust, as it mingles the domestic and the erotic, is also the place where two bachelors like Ray and Duchamp can raise dust, together, happily ever after? The homoerotic "maternity" of Duchamp and Ray suggests that Stein and Toklas (two husband-less brides?) were also participating in a fantastic mothering process in terms of dust and their aesthetic "attentions." Perhaps the *tending* of dusty art-objects is always necessarily about parenting: a meditation, in some form, on growth, beauty, fear? So an epistemology of dust here fuses with same-sex domestic/familial revisions and especially their links to the avant-garde project. The other side of the dust, in terms of a metaphor of the homosexual closet -- the "metaphor" which Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has defined as speaking to "the relations of the known and the unknown, the explicit and the inexplicit around homo/heterosexual definition" (Sedgwick 3) -- is a kind of "coming out" of otherness and instability. It is therefore possible to draw further connections between the Kosofsky Sedgwick closet and the actual domestic dust, or broom, closet of the bourgeois home. These are both marginal, usually cramped spaces that exist, both within and without a house, in liminal territory. Dust, in this sense, is rather more literally uncanny than abject: that is to say that it is *unheimlich*, both of the home and *not* of the home.

This description of dust may also serve as a general definition of the poetics of Stein's experimental work in *Tender Buttons*. Stein's simultaneous defamiliarization or refamiliarization with the objects of domestic space would seem to work both with, and against, traditional perceptions of the "home." The first poem of the text, in the "Objects" section, entitled "A Carafe, that is a Blind Glass," could be read as a verbal anticipation of Duchamp's completed *Glass*. Stein writes: "A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading" (*Tender Buttons* 462). *The Green Box* reveals that what Duchamp desired was to have dust act as a new kind of colour, what he called a "transparent pastel". Stein's "hurt color," for example, could be describing this very effect. But it is more illuminating, I think, to note Stein's marked attention to "spectacle," "nothing strange," "arrangement in a system," "not ordinary," "not unordered in not resembling," and "the difference is spreading." There is a general tension between the ordered ordinary and the "not resembling" spectacular; or perhaps more precisely between the spectacular *writing* of the *ordinary*, domestic space and moment. Stein seems guided, or even haunted, by notions of decorum: this first poem is about system and disorder; and also about the reactions, or receptions, of disorder as it plays out (spreads out) along the lines of spectacular "difference." Like Duchamp's fascination in the "dust breeding" text with "transparency" and "differences," Stein appears to work out from the glass carafe and perhaps even detail the image of people (a cousin) and other objects reflected in the glass itself. These reflections, like dust, would make the carafe a blind glass (compromising its transparency) but also a glass of spectacle because it literally here displays a spread of "difference," a fun-house mirror of domestic images. The carafe is a dazzling object then because it is "displayed" by Stein as both resolutely avant-garde and bourgeois.

Stein's next poem, "Glazed Glitter," is even more playfully preoccupied with ideas of domestic cleanliness and polishing. She writes, "sometime there is breath and there will be a sinecure and charming very charming is that clean and cleansing. Certainly glittering is handsome and convincing" (*Tender Buttons* 462). The poem continues on to discuss: "spitting and perhaps washing and polishing." These lines emphasize that *Tender Buttons* takes the domestic as its *focus* and thus necessarily reveals the links between aesthetic and household systems in the modernist moment. "Certainly glittering is handsome and convincing," for example, is at once an avant-garde credo and also a domestic slogan. The limpid artwork and the limpid home are hardly incommensurable and they seem to conjoin here most impressively at the level of "cleanliness." In another (nearly still-life like) *Tender Buttons* poem, entitled "A Red Stamp," we read: "If lilies are lily white if they exhaust noise and distance and even dust, if they dusty will dirt a surface that has no extreme grace, if they do this and it is not necessary it is not at all necessary if they do this they need a catalogue" (*Tender Buttons* 465). Stein's meditation on the aesthetic beauty and purity of the lilies leads her to a domestic consideration of dust. Her anxious conjunctions "If" also disturb, in their experimental repetition, the syntactic "everydayness" of our reading patterns so we are involved,



at least twice-over, in a simultaneous domestic/avant-garde experience. Stein also blends the dust with dirt and it is, ultimately, not clear whether the dusty dirt is a muddying or an enhancing of the lilies' original beauty. Perhaps the dust here is even a form of the lilies' pollen, implying then a new array of erotic or "spreading" symbols. Marguerite S. Murphy argues that, in *Tender Buttons*, "much of the prose comes to encode lesbian intimacies, in its reconsideration of what is 'dirt' and what is 'tender,' in the repeated use in ambiguous contexts of such evocative words as 'spread,' 'cut,' 'mounting,' 'hurt,' 'kind,' 'redness,' and 'pink'" (391). The fact that Stein's putatively lesbian love poem about flowers and dust should resolve itself with a need for a "catalogue" is clearly in line with Duchamp's own erotic-onanistic style of self-legitimization. In other words, Stein's poem seems to be making an argument (perhaps, by definition, as all avant-garde works must) for its own necessity, as if it were saying that the very ambiguity of the dust and the lilies requires a *Tender Buttons* (a catalogue) in order to apprehend and explicate their presence. Finally, dust in *Tender Buttons* seems particularly tied to Stein's perceptions and theorisations of colour. In the poem "Box," which follows "A Red Stamp," Stein writes: "Left open, to be left pounded, to be left closed, to be circulating in summer and winter, and sick color that is grey that is not dusty and red shows, to be sure cigarettes do measure an empty length sooner than a choice in colour.... Winged, to be winged means that white is yellow and pieces pieces that are brown are dust color if dust is washed off, then it is choice that is to say it is fitting cigarettes sooner than paper" (*Tender Buttons* 465). Stein's determination, like Duchamp's, to detail the elusive colour of dust imbues her domestic "pictures" with a kind of "home-made" chiaroscuro.

The presence of dust make Stein's word-paintings expressive of not just avant-garde material -- as might, in the end, be the case with Duchamp -- but also of domestic action. The dust here is being washed off and this implies not only the working hand of Alice B. Toklas but perhaps the hand of an unnamed servant and even of Stein herself. In the "Rooms" section of *Tender Buttons* Stein ruminates more explicitly on the apparent "givenness" of the domestic system. She writes, "Why is there the resistance in a mixture, why is there no poster, why is there that in the window, why is there no suggester, why is there no window, why is there no oyster closer. Why is there a circular diminisher, why is there a bather, why is there no scraper, why is there a dinner, why is there a bell ringer, why is there a duster, why is there a section of a similar resemblance, why is there that scissor" (503). *Tender Buttons* itself is obviously lodged in this logic of spreading difference: a kind of paradoxical process of affirmation through repetitive queries that imply a negation. The Steinian domestic space is, again, not entirely "traditional" in that it is a modern art salon (in this sense it represents a *Vogue* or *The Ladies' Home Journal* ideal) hosted by two "queer" subjects. So the line "why is there a bather" is a resonant utterance because, for example, it may refer to both a painting/sculpture and/or to an "actual" bather. In the same way, Stein's "why is there a duster" may also be, potentially, both a household implement and a modernist avant-garde artefact. This suggests a process of writing and looking, under an arch of experimental modernism, that is also highly relevant for Duchamp: the aggressive "political" critique of gender may finally be subsumed by the guiding aesthetic desires of the avant-garde vision. Thus Stein's question about the duster, like Duchamp's *Dust Breeding*, must remain radically uncertain -- and therefore politically volatile -- as it deliberately confuses the systems of experimental and domestic experience.

Dust is a netting over the entire house but it also reveals the spuriousness of the boundaries of the domestic. Dust is Dada, too, as it ignores walls, sabotages bourgeois "objects" and then signifies "genius" because of its stubborn omnipresence. Dust radically engages modernism on the level of identity because it is a *living*, but often invisible, abject subject: dust is air-borne, insidious, and yet partly comprised of microscopic bits of dead human flesh. Thus dust speaks paradoxically to fears of both "otherness" and the radical terror of our own imminent death. Rudi Laermans and Carine Meulders, in their essay entitled "The Domestication of Laundering," explain that "From the 1880s onwards, the discoveries of Pasteur, Lister, and Koch confirmed the fundamental importance of the nonperceptible reality in matters of health... The medical world claimed that the 'enemy' preferred to hide in dust, dirt, rotting waste, and impure drinking water" (Laermans and Meulders 120-21). And Kristeva explains that "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that

causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). It is interesting to note that Kristeva later refers to the abject as both "beseech[ing] and pulveris[ing] the subject" (5), as if the abject itself creates the terror of a possible reduction to dust. Dust is a lawless and perpetual advertisement of "disturbance" and, as such, it is both an apposite symbol for anxious modernism and more seriously for patriarchal modernity's conception of "the feminine." How significant is it for modernism then, and specifically for any would-be revision of the canonical modernist project, that the vacuum cleaner (hand-powered) was invented in 1869 and finally electrified and "perfected" in the early-to-mid 1900s? In his work *Home*, Witold Rybczynski explains that "More than half the electrified homes in 1927 contained a vacuum cleaner" (154). As a household implement meant to remove dirt and dust from the domestic environment, the vacuum cleaner is itself a spectacular locus that importantly *embodies* both the Victorian and incipient modernist moment. And as a literally man-made tool for the efficient "purifying" of the domestic landscape and air-space, the traditional gendering of the vacuum cleaner as "female" is especially intriguing. If the vacuum cleaner arises, in part, from the crisis of domestic "service," the resultant growth of the bourgeoisie and subsequently the full-time installation of the "housewife," then the vacuum cleaner is as significant a modernist technology as either the camera or the automobile. But while the camera and the automobile connote a more active masculine process of use (one *creates* a picture, one *reaches* a destination), the vacuum cleaner depends, to some extent, on containment and removal. It is explicitly a machine of service and it is, importantly, *tethered* to an outlet. Allowing the dust to settle on the camera and the automobile, we might then locate the defining, archetypal technology of modernism in the vacuum cleaner itself. Perhaps this would lead to a more detailed uncovering of the historical "gendering" of modernism, and also an examination of the investment of the avant-garde within the bourgeois sexual-domestic, mass-culture matrix. Then we might begin to analyse something like the work of art in the age of mechanical suction!

All of these speculations reveal the extent to which modernism *depends* on dust and specifically on the bourgeois artefacts, and domesticity generally, that dust may be said to both outline and mask. Modernity's desire for collecting, for cataloguing, and finally for displaying suggests the indispensability of dust and dusting. "To dust off" is, perhaps, merely a variation on, or even the original of, that running-shoe-like slogan of Poundian Modernism -- to "make it new." Modernity wants a ruin-rescued renewal, a vibrant original: dust-free. But the avant-garde recognises that the abject and the uncanny are the necessary materials of the experimental craftsman. Dusting is fundamentally about sameness and thus precisely about the anxious avoidance of the very hybrid and protean qualities that the avant-garde regularly champions. Stein's beguiling phrase "the difference is spreading," like Duchamp's haunting title "dust breeding," are encapsulations of an ever-dissenting, ever-restless experimental aesthetic -- an innovative modernism that transmutes the positivist, totalizing narratives of culture into a heterodox futurity.

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