EXHIBITIONS |
*DIRT*, THE FILTHY REALITY
OF EVERYDAY LIFE
BY JOSHUA CRAZE

*religion*
*hygiene*
*disapproval*
*virtue*
*morality*

# MORAL CONQUEST

## visiting the Wellcome Collection

The idea of an exhibition about dirt created by a trust dedicated to the advancement of scientific knowledge made me distinctly suspicious. Though it is hard to talk about dirt in a way that doesn't carry some sense of disapproval, the moralism implied by the exhibition's title, the *Filthy* Reality of Everyday Life, did nothing to allay my fears. This would be the opposite of the exhibition I wanted to see: rather than being a display of our hysterical modern relationship to dirt, it would be a paean to our triumph over filth on the road to spotless white kitchens and frequent showers.

Such triumphalism is misplaced. Dirt isn't some*thing*; it's a position. You can't get rid of dirt. Sitting in the Wellcome Collection's very clean café at the entrance to the exhibition, I read through my press pack, which quotes the anthropologist Mary Douglas approvingly: 'dirt is matter out of place'. That quote, so often used in discussions of rubbish, dirt, and detritus in the city, is itself a form of dirt, so often is it taken out of place, and out of context. In *Purity and Danger*, whence the quote emerges, Mary Douglas analyses the conventions and categories that provide the scaffolding of our lives. Things, as much as people, have places: dirt is the emergence of something in a place it should not be. Mud in the field is fine, on the kitchen counter, a horror.

If you are going to follow this observation and construct an exhibition around it, as the Wellcome Collection claims it has done, then it should not be a history of the conquest of mud and bacteria, those enemies of mankind, but an inquiry into the conventions that create situations in which things come to be classified as dirt, and a display of the myriad ways humans and dirt find themselves bound up together.

For if dirt is a result of things moved from their proper places, often by human hand, people also spend a great deal of time inveighing against dirt, and ensuring that other people spend not inconsiderable amounts of time preventing its appearance. If people move dirt, dirt moves people. The need to be clean maintains the borders of the very categories through which dirt moves; the possibility of dirt creates the need for a constant watchfulness, and thus distributes roles and tasks to people. It is not so much kitchen surfaces that were scrubbed in American suburban houses in the 1950s, as it was a dream of security and comfort that was polished. Such logic is on magnificent display in the first room of the Wellcome Collection's exhibition, which explores home-life in seventeenth century Delft.

Upon entering, I immediately felt elated, and unclean – the exhibition *is* going to inquire into the categories that create dirt, it *is* going to uncover that history of the moral imperative to be clean, and here was I doubting the exhibition, merely because it is organised by the public relations arm of a pharmaceutical giant.

In that first room, we are in the age of Calvinism, and purity is next to Godliness. On display are brooms and bibles, instruments for cleaning the house and the heart. Long before twentieth century anthropologists talked of purity and danger, the Calvinists understood that spirit rests in things, and that there is a correspondence between the purity of the house and the purity of the soul; dirt is an index of morality.


*Bruce Nauman, video installation.* Raw Material Washing Hands, Normal *(A of A/B)* Raw Material Washing Hands, Normal *(B of A/B), 1996*

*ARTIST ROOMS. Acquired jointly with the National Galleries of Scotland through The d'Offay Donation with assistance from the National Heritage Memorial Fund and the Art Fund, 2008*

The saintly women shown in the pictures on display, fervently scrubbing the stone floors of merchants' houses, are taking part in a moral economy in which religiosity, hygiene, and morality are bound up together at every turn. I wondered whether the women of Dutch painting are scrubbing those floors to remove dirt, or whether the dirt appears to keep them scrubbing. Probably both; dirt maintains proper places – the woman in the house, keeping busy – as much as it transgresses them.

Tips and tricks for the dutiful housewife are contained in manuals of *oeconomia*, which are on prominent display in the exhibition. The term goes back to ancient Greece, when oeconomia referred to the management of the home. For Aristotle, oceconomia cannot be a science. It is instead stories of ethical examples and small sets of rules suited to particular contexts: a sort of *Practical Housekeeping* magazine with overtly moral overtones. There is a fantastic demonstration of the convergence of the moral and the practical in a devotional illustration from 1600 by the Flemish engraver Anthonie Wierix: four cherubim angels are intently scrubbing the believer's heart with mops, while Christ is cleaning out the demons.

## 2

Economics and morality gradually appear to part company over the next four hundred years. The former is transformed from the study of the management of the home to the study of resource allocation. The economy is no longer a moral one.

For even if the most fervent capitalists see a free market as the best way for humans to realise happiness on earth, each individual act – buying a car, trading on the futures market – no longer holds the same explicit promise of a moral balm that was offered to the housewives of Delft, who scrubbed stone floors as if their hearts depended on it. Necessity replaced morality as a justification in economics.

Something similar happened to the way we deal with dirt. Over the last three hundred years, an injunction replaced the explicitly moral imperative to be clean. As dirt became linked with disease, cleanliness became about medical necessity, established as objective scientific fact.

This is not to say morality is scrubbed out. Dirt, as a transgression, always creates outrage. But as cleanliness becomes divorced from moral codes, and is instead justified by the apparent obviousness of scientific truth, the moral economy of dirt becomes as hidden as Anthony van Leewenhoek's 'little animals' – the microbes and bacteria that first became visible under the Dutchman's seventeenth century microscope.

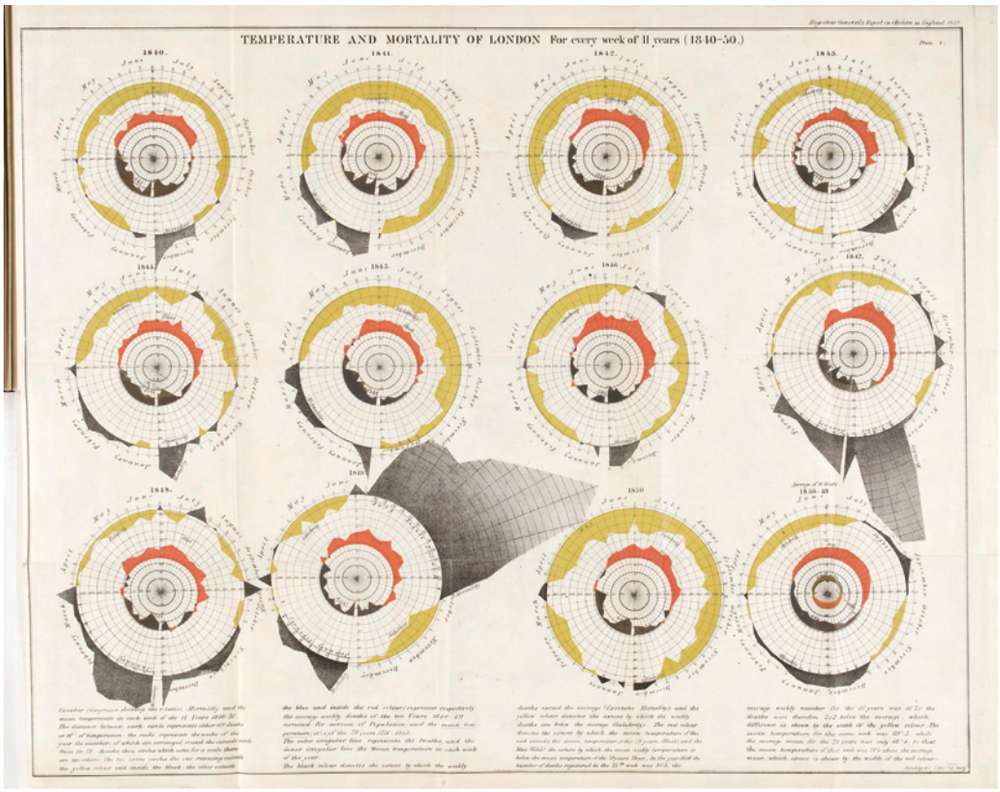
The American kitchen, which surely deserved a room at the exhibition, is a picture postcard of suppressed moralism. Today, as mops are replaced by disposable floor-cleaners, not only is the dirt made to disappear, but even the device that removes the dirt is discarded. From the compulsive teeth cleaning of American adolescents, to plastic surgery and the soul-saving appeal of detergent commercials, everything conspires to promise you a world in which dirt and blemishes are forever banished from your soul. I think I prefer the dour Dutch Calvinists, with whom at least one could argue about the relationship between the moral and the sanitary: an argument that today in America is swept away by claims of scientific truth.

## 3

As I left the exhibition's first room, full of thoughts about economies, moral and otherwise, I had high hopes for the rest of the exhibition; I imagined rooms of toothbrushes, the advertising of cleaning products through the ages, and photographs of the actual cleaners at the Wellcome Collection, paid a pittance to remove the dust from around antique seventeenth century Dutch brooms.

It was not to be. The second room contains the well-known story of the triumph over cholera in Victorian London, and the defeat of miasmatic notions of disease transmission. In the exhibition's display of John Snow's beautiful ghost map of cholera, the moral economy vanishes, to be replaced by the triumphant march of medicine and hygiene, arm in arm, winning battle after battle in our forever war against death.

The visitor then comes to a room describing the reconstruction of Victorian London, and, perhaps, the exhibition's greatest claim to contemporary relevance. In the press release, it is written that, 'We live in unmistakably filthy times. For the




Wellcome Library, London L0049743

*Charts showing the temperature and mortality of London for every week of 11 years (1840 - 1850). Report on the mortality of cholera in England. Great Britain: General Register Office, 1852*

first time in human history over half the world's inhabitants live in urban environments and exposure to dirt is the corollary of overcrowding, inadequate sanitation and the industrial shaping of metropolitan life'. All of the recent hand wringing and anxiety about the growth of slums in the world seems to stem from a certain memory of European urban planning, in which European slums were destroyed, as part of a grandiose top-down urban planning movement. When we think of slums as a problem, and implicitly or explicitly think about how to get rid of them, we are repeating the thoughts of the nineteenth century. What will become increasingly clear, I suspect, as the twenty-first century runs on, is that the contemporary slum, like dirt, is here to stay, whatever our fantasies.

The rest of the exhibition wanders without direction. The visitor will encounter New York's *Fresh Kills*, an enormous landfill site that grew exponentially, like a distorted mirror image of our consumerist dreams. It is now being turned into a park. Just before that, one is presented with the Deutsches Hygiene-Museum in Dresden, which, during the Third Reich, linked the scientific discourse of hygiene to racial purity. Just as in modern life, the way dirt is dealt with in the exhibition moves uneasily between treating it as a moral disorder and as an object of medical and technological intervention. Just as in the American suburban home, the moral economy behind our treatment of dirt is never addressed.

## 4

Dirt is not a particular object. Anything can be dirt. The category of dirt is instead a stage in the life of every object (and person): as things decay and die, they become dirt, impure and contaminated.

Dirt is a moment in the life of an object. And what is the end of dirt's life? In *Purity and Danger* Mary Douglas writes: 'Dirt was created by the differentiating activity of the mind, it was a by-product of the creation of order. So it started from a state of non-differentiation; all through the process of differentiation its role was to threaten the distinctions made; finally it returns to its true indiscriminable character'. At the end, for Douglas, it is ashes to ashes, and dirt to dirt.

If only it were so. While if one takes a cosmic view, perhaps, dirt is truly dirt – the undistinguished mass of everything that is not categorized; dirt also endures. Perhaps this is why it is considered so powerful; as dirt passes from one domain to another, it carries with it the mark of its past life; a transgression that can make it holy. Before the Hindi festival of Durga Puja, the statues of the Goddess Durga are made from dirt and straw from the banks of the Ganges. The most important addition to the statues, however, is a small amount of dirt from just outside a brothel: the holy and the unclean, joined together, barred from the everyday world.

Dirt endures. We need it. One of the joyful things about watching Tarun Paul's film *Durga Goddess*, on display in the exhibition, was that one is reminded of a world in which dirt is not ignored, and the interplay of the categories of dirty and clean, and the transgressions between them, are celebrated.

Perhaps the worst thing to do with dirt is pretend we can get rid of it. Think of the two categories that have stalked this review: morality, and the type of thought that claims that practices of hygiene and cleanliness are based on absolutely objective facts. Upon the latter view no mark of morality can appear, the better not to taint its appeal to the absolute authority of science. And yet, as is made explicit in our endless commercials for detergent, the modern obsession with hygiene is a view as moralistic and normative as the most devoted Calvinist manual of oeconomia. Except that, for us moderns, unlike the Calvinists, in the modern view, morality plays no part in cleanliness; it is kept hidden, like a bad stain that cannot be scrubbed out.

As I left the grand building of the Wellcome Collection, I thought about the exhibition I had wanted to see. I wanted to see American bathrooms and clean kitchen tops. I wanted to see the triumph of a demoralised regime of hygiene. That, I realised, is exactly what I got: except that wasn't what was on display in the exhibition, rather, it was displayed in the structure of the exhibition itself. Science's stain. ■

Wellcome Library, London V0046155

*Durga Puja: a procession carrying an idol of Durga to honour her victory over evil. India, 19th century gouache on mica.*