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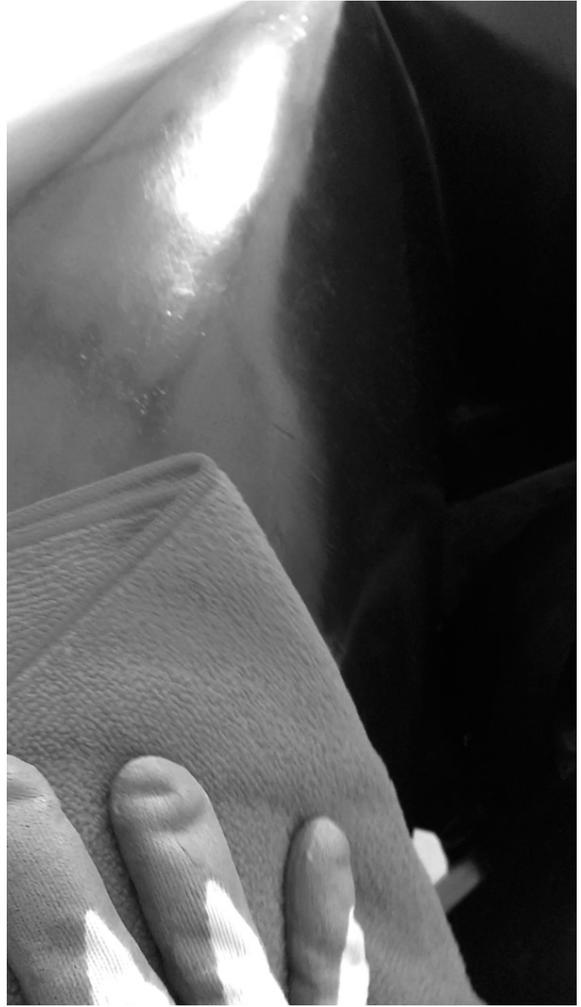
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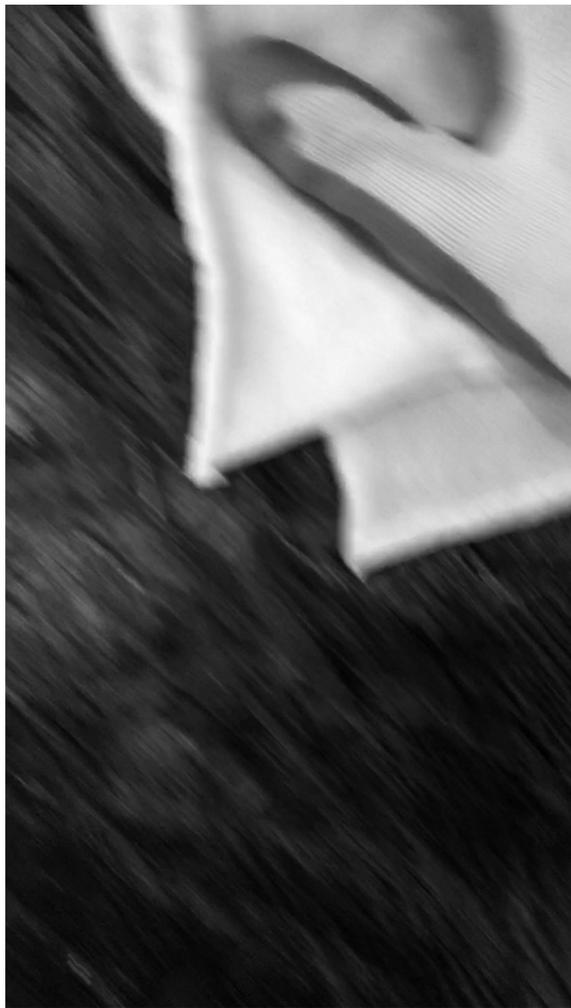
Under my hand, a soft cloth moves across a surface. As it traverses this surface it describes the contours of an object. It touches not just those visible, obvious zones of the object, but its undersides and unnoticed edges. Instead of revealing some singular thingness of this object, however, the meditative action reorients my attention towards time, towards history, towards a world which complicates this object and its place here.



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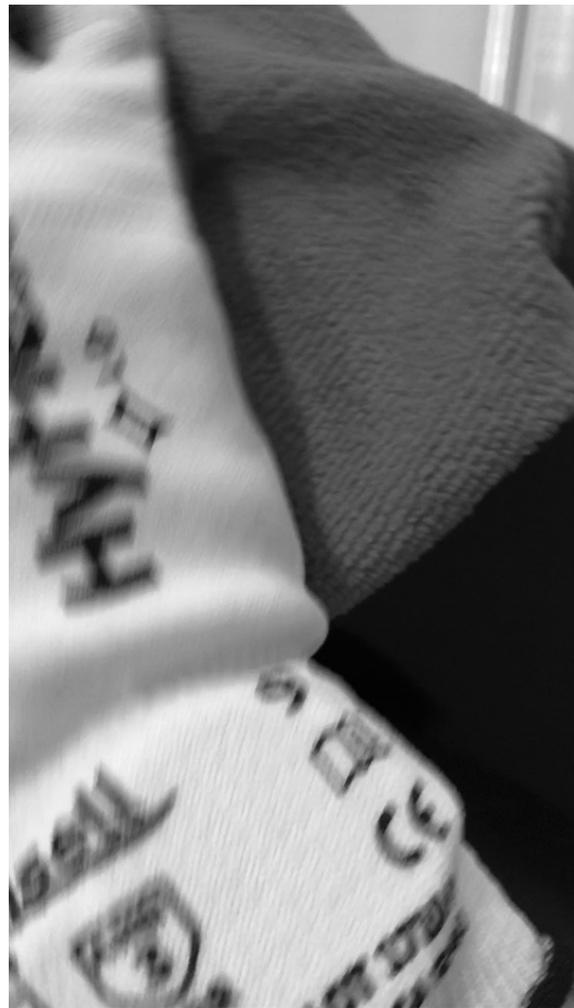
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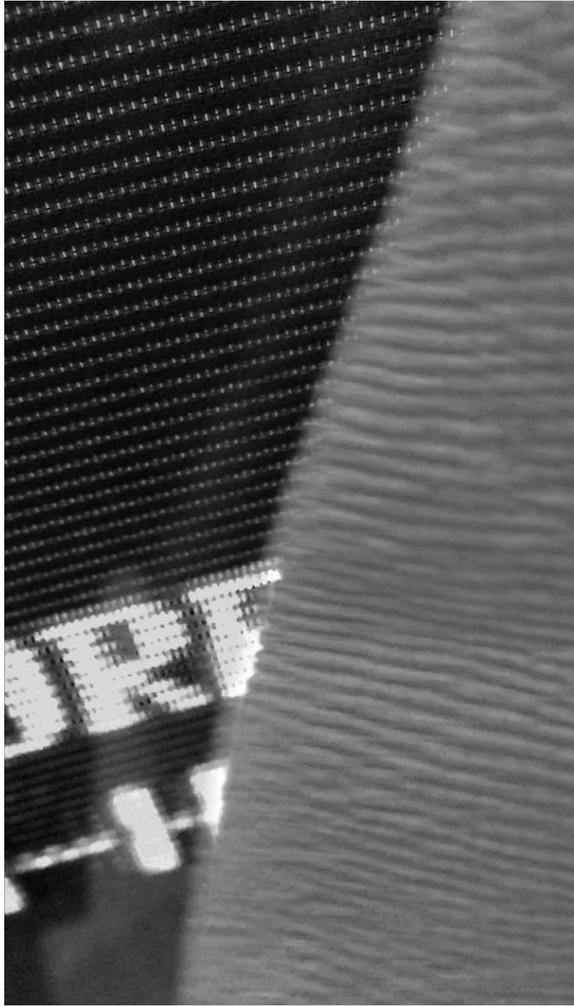




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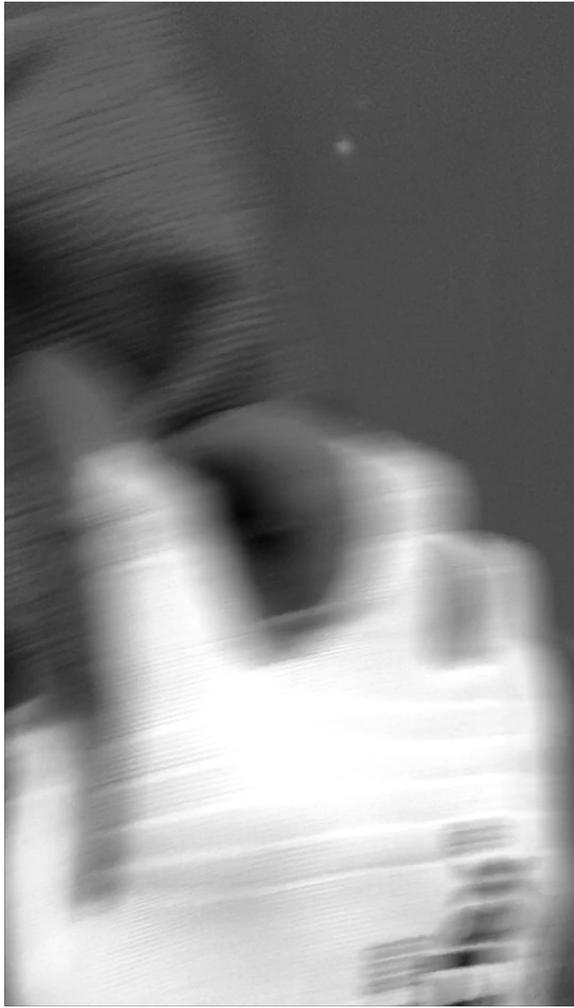




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The cloth gathers dust as it passes over the surface, catching the particulate in its fibers until what was previously nearly invisible—a fine film—becomes a dense grey mass. The dust has accumulated there on that object over the previous week, or maybe just a few days, or possibly it has been accumulating there for months, unattended.¹ If we made the object invisible, I often think, we would see just the light grey shadow of its volume, its shape described by time, by decay and change. We would see its form described by the presence and absence of bodies.

¹ Dust gathers on different objects at different rates, depending on their location, proximity to doors and air vents, and their popularity or value.

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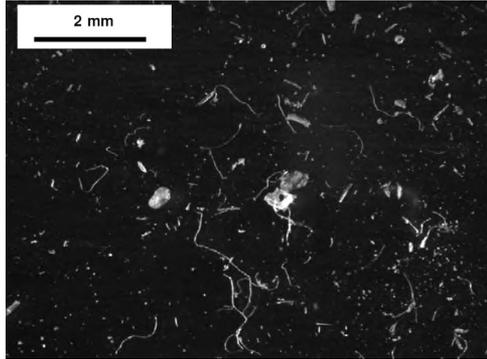


fig. 1

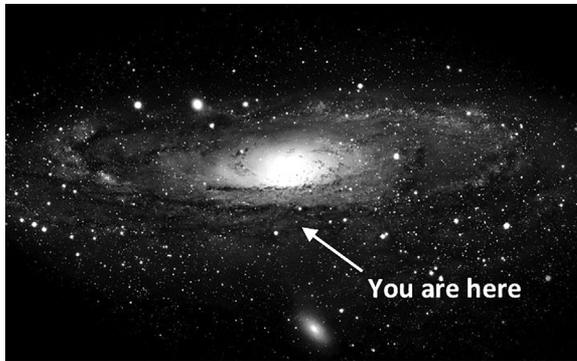


fig. 2

Dust is pervasive. It is everywhere, all encompassing and inescapable. Dust permeates every level of being, from the microscopic (fig. 1) to the cosmic (fig. 2). In our mere existence we contribute constantly to the proliferation of dust in the world. Simultaneously, in our mere existence we are *but* dust. *In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.*² Dust and being are intertwined. Dust is the materiality of our existence.

²Genesis 3:19.

What does dust do, then? To indicate the
broad potentiality of dust as a practice, I have
collected the following list of verbs:³

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- To settle.
- To disperse.
- To gather.
- To distribute.
- To surround.
- To swirl.
- To encircle.
- To flow.
- To spread.
- To cover.
- To accumulate.
- To drift.
- To diffuse.
- To tickle.
- To permeate.
- To incapacitate.
- To obscure.
- To float.
- To contain.
- To manifest.
- To diffract.

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How then do we deal with this constant manifestation which is dust?

We practice dusting.

³Richard Serra, floating.

Dusting is both positive and negative, additive and subtractive. In his exegesis on dust, Michael Marder offers the following on the gerund dusting:

“If dusting is a thing, then it refers to a thin layer or to a sparse application of any sort of loose stuff, such as powder or snow. If, conversely, it is an activity, then it means wiping dust away... To dust something is, at once, to add and to remove that which lends this occupation its name.”⁴

Dusting contains this inherent contradiction: the condition of its possibility—the accumulation of a dusting—is also the condition of its impossibility—the resultant redistribution of that dust.

⁴Michael Marder, *Dust*, 1-2.

No matter how thoroughly we think we have dusted, we look again and find that a thin veil of matter has reappeared across the surface. We can only redistribute. To dust is, conversely, to dust. Dusting, then, demands deferral in its very nature.⁵ If we are to judge the success of our dusting on its elimination of dust, it is an intrinsically self-defeating occupation.

⁵The latin root of deferral is *ferre*: to carry apart, scatter, disperse. Deferral is rooted in dust.

It comes through the window
It comes through the floor
It comes through the roof and
It comes through the door

Dust is everywhere
Sweep
It sneaks in ignored
It stacks up around

It follows, now swallow
You're biting it now
Suffocate, suffocate
Breathe
Dust is everywhere
Sweep

—*Dust*, Parquet Courts

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fig. 3

So, we are left with deferral. And perhaps the most expert at deferral is the vacuum (fig. 3). The vacuum, in its name, gives us the promise of nothing, total elimination. A space entirely devoid of matter. The opposite of a vacuum, for what it is worth, is a plenum, a space every part of which is full of matter. The vacuum is a fantasy, the plenum is the reality. Even the space between you and me on this page is full of matter.⁶

⁶Look for the dust floating in the light of the lamp you are using to illuminate this page.

In the name of tidiness, cleanliness, newness, timelessness—in the name of capitalism—we fetishize the vacuum (fig. 4). We perform the vacuum (fig. 5). And we survey the vacuum (figs. 6 and 7).⁷ But at some point, the reality of the plenum prevails, and we have to empty the vacuum, which is full of dust.



fig. 4



fig. 5

⁷Another notable vacuum project: Issey Miyake's collection designed in collaboration with Dyson, including a special edition Issey Miyake vacuum.



fig. 6



fig. 7

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I turn now to applied dusting, in the form of preservation and production in the institution of the museum. My affinity towards and interest in dusting comes, in part, from my work as an art handler and preparator in museums. Dusting is a central component of my work in museums; I spend a few mornings every week carefully removing dust from platforms, cases, and objects in the galleries using a variety of tools. Platforms and cases can be dusted with soft, clean cloths, often scraps. Some objects can also be dusted with a soft, clean cloth (fig. 8). For more delicate surfaces, a soft bristled brush is used (fig. 9).⁸



fig. 8



fig. 9

⁸ Badger, goat, or sable hair is sometimes used for these brushes. I read that the softest bristles actually come from the Siberian Squirrel.



fig. 10

The most delicate surfaces—or irregular surfaces that might catch the fibers of a cloth or the bristles of a brush—demand no touch at all. Instead, air is puffed at the dust (fig. 10), redistributing it away from the object, ideally captured with a vacuum. Using these tools, I take on the mantle of conservation and preventative care within the institution.

The goal of conservation and preventative care is to mitigate the effects of time on the object, preserving it for posterity, and maintaining its cultural value. In this context, dust is the accumulation of time via entropic processes, both in the environment of the object and in the object itself.

Dust is abrasive, it traps moisture, and it can attract and harbor insects. All this can lead to damage of the object. For example, from a pdf titled “How to Brush Vacuum an Object,” in the section “Is It Dust or Data?”:

Removing dust and dirt by brush vacuuming (surface cleaning) can be very beneficial for many material types. However, removing dust and residues from objects should be carefully considered as they may provide clues about where and how an object was made, even who used it. Before you surface clean an object, ask yourself if the dirt is actually an important part of the item’s history. Do not brush vacuum if the surface of an object will be damaged, eg flaking paint.

This is the double bind of dust. The action of removing (redistributing) the dust from the object simultaneously damages the object. The dust, which will inevitably alter the object whether it is left to accumulate or is removed, is both organic and abrasive. Being organic matter, its proximity to an object over time

can chemically alter the material make-up of that object. Thus, it seems logical to remove the dust to preserve the object. But in the process of wiping, or even brushing the dust from the object, the dust itself abrades the object’s surface. Over time, this surface will wear away, shed like the skin that in turn comprises a part of the dust removed.

The accumulation of dust also introduces the notion that these artworks exist in time, a time outside of the non-time of the white cube. A time in which the world—made up of bodies, materials, *things*—changes and decays and eventually undergoes a death cycle of some kind. This runs counter to the notion of the museum as a site of preservation, where time does not pass in the same way as it does outside in the world. Here, objects are isolated from the traces of time passing, from the context of their prismatic and complex histories.

In the institution, dusting becomes an issue when it becomes *visible*. Either in the presence of dust on objects, cases, or platforms, or in the physical presence of those laboring in dusting, this manifests as an aesthetic nuisance. Institutionally, a lack of dusting—or alternatively, an accumulative dusting—signifies neglect, messiness, even poorness. This counters the narrative of the institution as the caretaker of cultural value, but also undermines its authority in the articulation of narratives that *produce* this cultural value, which is also tied up in the production of monetary value and capital (via board member, donor, gallery, and even artist relationships).

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This project was precipitated by a desire *not* to dust. A desire to allow dust to accumulate, in an act of protest or an acquiescence to the passage of time. For me, the fine layer of dust on the surface of artworks in the museum was poetic.⁹ It pointed toward a being-in-time of the objects, and linked them to the world outside of the institution.

In part, I attribute this desire to a distrust in the ways in which museums as institutions preserve and produce value and the subsequent invisibility of the labor of caring for these objects within the institution. That hierarchy of institutional labor includes my own maintenance in the galleries, but also house-keeping staff, facilities and building engineers, and conservators, who all work in different ways towards the management of dust in the museum.

In letting this dust accumulate on objects, I could enact a miniature revolution against the values being preserved within the institution. The accumulation of dust would create visibility through the absence of labor. The dust would become that absence. Time would make itself known (fig. 11).

⁹ Surely Duchamp would agree.

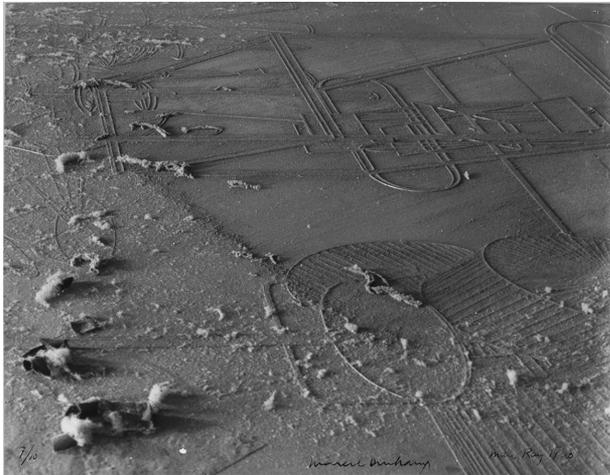


fig. 11

Under my hand, a soft cloth moves across a surface. As it traverses this surface it describes the contours of the object. The cloth gathers dust as it passes over the surface, redistributing that accumulated residue. In this way, I have run my hands over countless artworks countless times, traversing the entirety of their forms. As I dust an object, I am caressing it. I am intimately engaged with it. This is a loving gesture towards the object, a gesture of care.

My touch is not alone on this object. There are many touches here. The security guards, janitors, and preparators who care for these objects, the curators, board members, and critics who shape their narrative, and the visitors who receive these narratives all hold the object differently.¹⁰ Each of these touches contribute to and complicate the dusty signifier, which comingles multiple realities of class, race, gender, and economy.¹¹ Dusting simultaneously conceals and reveals the immensity of signification within that signifier and undermines its singularity. The meditative, often sisiphsian act of dusting asks us to reorient our attention towards the subtlety of the phenomenon as a way of knowing the world. It makes the volumes of space and time visible, reminding us that there is no void, no vacuum. There is only plenum, that space in which each and every part is full of matter. Matter matters.

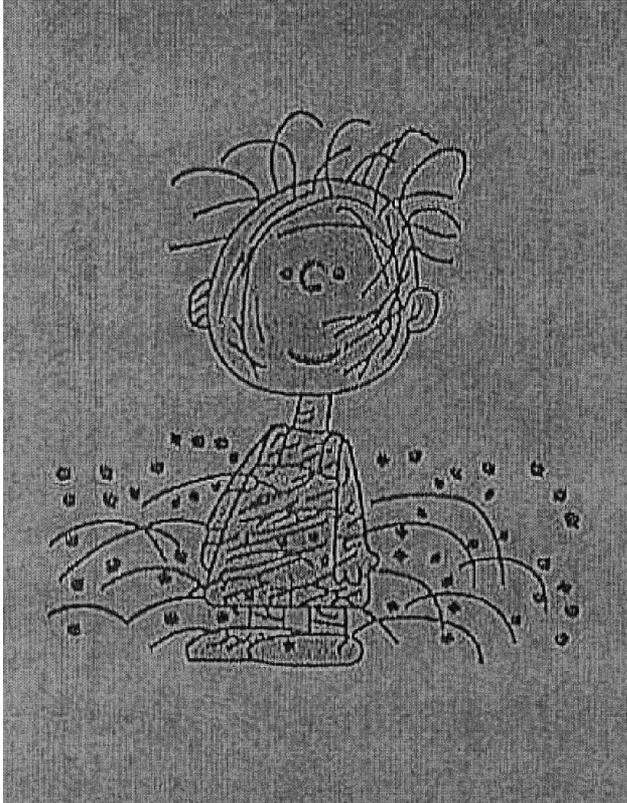
¹⁰ Each time a visitor to the museum touches an artwork—which is literally all the time—an “art related incident” report is filed. I think about these ac-

cumulations of touches co-mingling with my own touches. The traces are minimal. Often, the security officer making the report indicates the “no visible damage was noted.” I am reminded of an anecdote told to me by a conservator about the foot of a solid bronze statue of a deity which over hundreds of years of accumulated devotional touches, has been worn down to almost nothing, leaving just an impression, like an ephemeral footprint in the soft earth.¹¹ It bears noting that dusting is most commonly a domestic act, historically relegated to women and to working class, often non-white maintenance workers. This maintenance, as Mierle Laderman Ukeles asserts in her 1969 *Manifesto for Maintenance Art*, is often poorly paid or not paid at all. In the institution this role is inverted. Dusting art reframes this labor as a specialized task for MFA and PhD educated, often white and male, art handlers and conservators, distinct from the regular maintenance performed by the housekeeping and facilities staff.

Dusting reveals not the thing which it covers or uncovers, but the inherent contradictions of the institution in which it is undertaken: that no matter how carefully a museum contextualizes an artwork, it can only present the work as singular, totemic. That as a steward, the institution denies visibility to those who enact that stewardship on a daily basis. That in the care of objects, the institution enacts their decay. That to hermetically seal an object, freeze it in time in the name of preservation, is to effectively kill it. That the history of the institution supersedes the histories of the objects that it houses. Dusting breaks down

the object, like a prism, multiplying it and refracting it. Dusting reveals the aporia of the institution, that its condition of possibility is in fact the condition of its impossibility. In the multitudes that it contains, dust is catastrophic—a multi-particulate remix of memory and agency from objects and subjects and phenomenon incompatible with each other in their formless form of remainder.

Dusting, like critique, is a continuous process which has to be recommenced and rearticulated regularly. Dusting is a practice.



DUSTING is a book by Thomas Huston, 2019.
Typeset in Adobe Garamond Pro.
Cover fonts are Times New Roman and Spectral.

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