James Jack

SATOSHI KOYAMA GALLERY

cover image
Kailua, O'ahu. 2011 (detail)
pigment and gum arabic on paper
76 x 56 cm

next
Philosophy of Dirt. 2011
pigments and gum arabic on paper
76 × 56 cm

Philosophies of Dirt

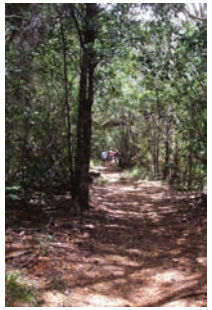
James Jack









Notes on Reading the Philosophies of Dirt:

On the Art of James Jack

by Brandon Shimoda

Dirt has a mind. In reading James Jack's *The Philosophies of Dirt,* here is one idea to which I propose we commit—that not only does dirt have a mind, it uses it. Dirt thinks. Dirt conceives itself in thinking. In that, dirt is, along with fire and other elements, adhering the sustenance and destruction of the earth into a single motivation, the *social conscience* of the earth. And by virtue of Jack's works on paper being the *expression* of that conscience, not only made but informed by dirt from what he calls "contingent sites"—literal landscapes in the midst of their process of being landscapes, literally—they are the record of that social conscience: the song, the minutes, the story. In that, Jack's works on paper are a form of witness—expressing both evidence and in-evidence—possessing a balance between being devotional and enigmatic, as subject to erosion as what they are. Therefore, the "philosophy of dirt"—humble and repetitive gestures of listening to and speaking with the earth that might, if one takes care and has great patience, reveal the first reflections of a mirror.

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Look at any of Jack's works on paper, his drawings: a square or squares—without corners, this is crucial—rendered of dirt tempered with water on a white page. See how the square pulls the white page towards it? The white page gathers at the square. Though the margins are wide—there is a great deal of white *space*—they are drawn close at the square, the square becoming a *commons*, a social and cultural center where the constituents of the square—the dirt and water—gather to express themselves. This is not philosophical; this is physical. The environment in which these drawings exist enforces a reading of this expression, enacting each work's genesis. Within each square is a story beginning with the story of the dirt: volcanic breccia (lit. gravel) from a hot springs in the Pacific Northwest; volcanic ash from Hokkaido; fossil dust from the island of Shōdo; yellow stones from the coast of Oregon; clay-like soil from the islands of Moloka'i and O'ahu; soils from farms in Florida and Hawai'i; soil from an installation in a gallery in New York City; dirt on the road to the Bibi (Ainu) burial grounds near Chitose; soil outside the Pearl Harbor Memorial; the dirt of forty-six contingent sites, all with which Jack had—and has—a specific relationship, and all for whom he arrived as a particularly prescient character within its unfolding history. An oracle, so to speak.

□

The strata of the Earth is a jumbled museum. Embedded in the sediment is a text that contains

limits and boundaries which evade the rational order, and social structures which confine art. In order to read the rocks we must become conscious of geologic time, and of the layers of prehistoric material that is entombed in the Earth's crust. ROBERT SMITHSON, *A Sedimentation of the Mind* (1968)

□

In 1977, Walter De Maria filled a gallery in New York City with 280,000 pounds of earth, at a depth of nearly two feet. The earth has since occupied the 3,600 square foot gallery. De Maria had executed similar installations twice before, both times in Germany: in Munich (1968) and in Darmstadt (1974). New York City would be the first permanent incarnation of the *earth work*. What would be the consequence of this *permanent* installation? The earth, taken at any point or place, is not permanent—both dirt and fire attest to this—though if we must console ourselves with the idea, then we can insofar only as the earth coheres what works within it, that is, *what is impermanent*. The earth is the *form impermanence takes*. De Maria's installation is called *The Earth Room*. Consider the initials: ER. Is there a play on ideas here, with Earth conceived as a space of Emergency? Or is the work *emergent,* always coming into being, always susceptible to the unexpected? Curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist seems to have defined an aesthetic for the Emergency itself when he says, "a certain framework which is fragile, which is mutating, which is exposed to change, to permanent crisis." What makes De Maria's installation and Jack's drawings indispensable is that they report directly this permanent crisis, and they do so, despite vastly different means, in a way that examines, however subliminally, the paradox of the situation: a "permanent crisis"—an unchanging change, decisive point without end. This seems to suggest there is no urgency, but what the work is actually saying is that the urgency is total and absolutely insatiable.

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Dirt is the process of the earth, and Earth, breaking down, to discover not only what it is, but what it will never be again. Earth is a slowly disintegrating rock. It will never reintegrate to assume the form it once held. Dirt is among the canaries singing the fate of the earth. I use the word "fate" to refer simply to an inescapable situation. Earth disintegrates into smaller and smaller constituent parts—boulder and lava fields, landslides, rocks, stones, dirt, sand—until those parts become indivisible, with something like the reversal of cellular or atomic fission, both ends of the spectrum arising from or falling back into nothingness. In that sense, dirt is a manifestation of time. It tells it; time is its story. By lifting samples of dirt from the earth, Jack is putting his hands directly into a manifestation of time—that is, time—to retrieve from it perhaps an eternal element. His drawings are clocks, clock faces. With them, Jack has excerpted some part of the epic story of time as a way to re-set the hands, to invite the clock to start spinning sideways, horizontally, perhaps haphazardly, in a kind of simple, elegant, maybe even humorous, collaboration with the earth. But look closer into Jack's square faces: we are never far from the gaze of the death's head, and the ensō of Zen Buddhist painting. Why is it important to report directly from permanent crisis? Artists bear the *potential* responsibility of working from within the ruins, as oracles touched and yet untouched by them. Our ruins, right now, are time; we live in the permanent crisis of timelessness: crisis without end.

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…but a flood of ruin / Is there, that from the boundaries of the sky / Rolls its perpetual stream; vast pines are strewing / Its destined path, or in the mangled soil / Branchless and shattered stand; the rocks, drawn down / From yon remotest waste, have overthrown / The limits of the dead and living world, / Never to be reclaimed. PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY, *Mont Blanc* (1816)

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I'm writing from Tucson, Arizona, a small city in southern Arizona that Jack Kerouac described in *On the Road* (April 1951), as "one big construction job." Right now, Tucson is, to validate Kerouac's observation, under construction. A streetcar system is being installed. It will take years. Many of the main thoroughfares have been torn up. Vast tracts of dirt have been exposed and in many places heaved into enormous piles. Parts of Tucson resemble landfills. Dirt, to the modern man, demarcates a dehumanized zone, somewhere between an un-peopled paradise and death. At the least, it is the embodiment of absence, an eyesore. At the most, it is where weeds and rodents roam unchecked. To the average Tucsonan, the piles of dirt represent either progress or a lack thereof. Heraclitus, who believed permanence to be an illusion, said, "The most beautiful world is like a heap of rubble tossed down in confusion." And Robert Smithson, who consecrated ruins as "monuments," wrote, "These processes of heavy construction have a devastating kind of primordial grandeur and are in many ways more astonishing than the finished project." At root, the ideology of development is laid bare: in order to "develop"—that is, to "evolve"—we need to cover over, inch-by-inch, acre-by-acre, the earth, and thereby remove ourselves from its fundamental processes. What is lost is indiscriminate.

Among them, the ability to read human experience and history (development and evolution) by the landscape, and thereby know ourselves better, that we might begin to make more informed decisions about what we do, and how. Modern man generally leaves such thinking to the poets and philosophers, the artists and scientists, to whom are given total responsibility for and of the imagination, as modern man continues to roam, unchecked, without recourse, and with a kind of blazing insouciance that is the perceived human equivalent of the very landscape one claims to understand, but doesn't.

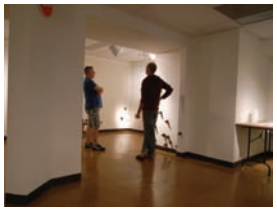
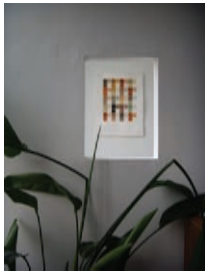
□

Here is a concretely beautiful thing about James Jack's work: He lets the materials speak for themselves. He does not use color; he *reveals it*. Rather, he lets color reveal itself. His squares provide fields for life to determine its rules. This is not passive, but generative. Yet his is not an omniscient role; his work is thoroughly collaborative. Dirt is his collaborator. I am beginning to understand the dirt in Jack's works as being a generative substance, serving a nearly biological function. He removes dirt from an original site and introduces it as a vital element into a creative act, one that multiplies the potential forms the dirt might possess. With him dirt travels often thousands of miles from its place of origin, metamorphosing into an object of contemplation, yes, but also a reliquary of the place of origin, the thousands of miles, and the elasticity between, which replicates, over and over, Jack's role as the itinerant storyteller. I picture Jack as being perpetually with dirt in his pockets, the dirt spilling out, leaving traces that form, in his wake, a kind of atlas, crisscrossing lines of an unfolding story. I believe storytelling serves a biological function, and in a way reversing the process of pure, animal biology: stories give birth *in reverse,* from present existence to one's ancestors, from ancestors up the watershed, out the widening branch, to the origins of human, in fact all, history. The works that constitute *The Philosophies of Dirt* express lineage, labor, crisis and consequence, and they do so by the simplest means, all without overwhelming the primacy of the dirt and the colors it makes. These are fragments of an epic work, which only can be known by faithful and affectionate labor, choices made deliberately and by chance, within the vagaries of the methods and the earth itself, so that the "philosophy" of dirt might be to make the moment reflective and eternal.









Plates

Wa'ahila Ridge, O'ahu. 2011
pigment and gum arabic on paper
76 × 56 cm

Cotter Mine, Utah. 2012
pigment and gum arabic on paper
76 × 56 cm

Mooloch, Oregon. 2011 detail
pigment and gum arabic on paper
76 × 56 cm

Pearl Harbor, O'ahu. 2011
pigment and gum arabic on paper
76 × 56 cm

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