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Dust is everywhere. Not just the particles of dry matter that settle from the air; it is gathered in a dustpan and placed in a dustbin for the dustmen; we grovel in the dust after things turn to dust and ashes before shaking the dust off our feet if it hasn't settled after a dust-up, which is never dry as dust, but can occur in the Dust Bowl if we haven't raised sufficient dust. As a verb, it is even more Janus-faced: we dust a kitchen counter to clean it, before dusting with flour.

It is fitting, therefore, that this protean material is the subject of a new work by Jorge Otero-Pailos, who has long crossed genres as an artist, architectural conservator and academic. With *The Ethics of Dust* he turns to a formula that draws on his area of academic study, the preservation of historic buildings.

For much of human history, the new was the object of desire for the rich and powerful. They routinely razed and rebuilt their homes, or regularly added wings and modified façades; the notion of a building having a single "authentic" presentation was almost non-existent. Then, in the nineteenth century, a struggle for meaning saw, at one extreme, architects such as Viollet-le-Duc, who understood the purpose of restoration as the "re-establishment of the finished state" of a building – a state, however, that "may in fact have never actually existed". Opposing him were some who proposed that all old buildings be left to decay: repair would by its nature destroy their history, and therefore their integrity.

John Ruskin was a prime mover in the shift from admiration of the new to veneration of the old. In *The Stones of Venice* he renamed weathering as "time-stains", elements that spoke of the history of the building, while his study *The Ethics of the Dust* from 1866 (ostensibly a text for girls subtitled "Ten lectures to

Ashes to ashes

Particles of history, preserved in latex

JUDITH FLANDERS

Jorge Otero-Pailos

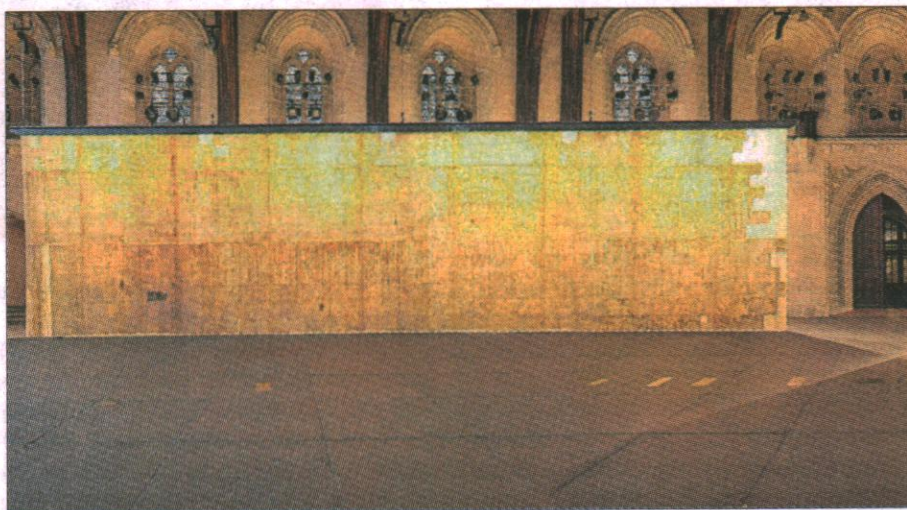
THE ETHICS OF DUST
Westminster Hall, Houses of Parliament, until
September 1

little housewives on the elements of crystallization") laid out a cyclical vision of dust over centuries being transformed into stone before disintegrating once more into dust.

Arguments for restoration, or non-restoration, raged. Pragmatists were firm: dust was soot, it was rubbish. For to preserve the accre-

tions of centuries in Venice, jeered one Outraged of San Marco in a letter to the *Times*, was as ludicrous as addressing a petition to "the Lord Mayor [of London] that the soot might not be removed from Westminster Abbey".

At this confluence, of dust and soot, art and architecture, history and progress – and even Venice and Westminster – enter Otero-Pailos. For nearly a decade this conservator-artist has been melding his disciplines to examine the meaning of conservation. In 2009, he reprised a piece that had first seen the light in northern Italy the previous year, using an architectural conservation method to apply a film of latex to



A detail from *The Ethics of Dust* in the Houses of Parliament

a wall of the Doge's Palace. In a restoration, the dried latex is then pulled away, bringing with it dirt, soot and other debris that has adhered to the wall over centuries, leaving a clean wall behind, while the latex is discarded. Otero-Pailos, however, did not discard this "dust", but instead hung the latex sheets in the Arsenale, as an art installation.

Now, in a commission from Artangel, the arts organization that previously commissioned Rachel Whiteread's "House", Michael Landy's "Break Down" and Roger Hiorns's "Seizure", Otero-Pailos has created another dust-to-dust installation, in a piece that renders visible Westminster Hall's dust of centuries, exactly as the *Times* letter-writer of 1886 had imagined in mockery.

The dust of the eleventh-century hall, with its fifteenth-century hammerbeam roof (visibly dusty, even from the ground, 28 metres below), has carefully been lifted from a single wall, and its latex symbiotic impression hung a metre or so away, a golden, vellum-like 50-metre-long mirror image creating a new "corridor" in this ancient building.

These dust sheets encourage the viewer to a fine-grained examination of the very notion of history, of collective memory and materiality. The display itself is also a reconfiguration of a political arena that promotes consideration not merely of spatial organization, but of political and social structures.

Otero-Pailos has made in parliament, out of the very fabric of parliament, an installation that opened to the public days after the population of Britain reconfigured the position of parliament and its work. If the sign of a good work of art is its ability to encompass many meanings at once, then *The Ethics of Dust* passes with flying colours, for at this particular moment, its dusty, golden grandeur can also feel like a shroud.

A couple of actors having a fit of the giggles and not being able to say their lines for several minutes does not make a performance more authentically "live". It makes it unprofessional. So when this happened on the night I saw Anthony Neilson's new play, *Unreachable*, at the Royal Court, I was disappointed to find myself surrounded by people who found this episode especially "real" and therefore hilarious. The audience response and the actors' giggles became locked in a prolonged and helpless give-and-take.

Reflecting on this afterwards, wondering whether I should just lighten up, I realized that the audience-actor feedback loop of uncontrollable laughter was the same as that which is generated by Michael Frayn's immaculate farce, *Noises Off*. Except that where Frayn carefully directs and controls the audience laughter, giving it purpose, here the laughter had no purpose. It was wasteful: just an outburst of excess energy with nowhere to land.

It was also perhaps inevitable, given Neilson's method of writing and directing his plays. He arrives without a script and devises his plays with the actors in rehearsal. It must be nerve-racking for everyone involved, especially when the first night comes into view. With *Unreachable*, Neilson and his cast pull it off – just. And it's the "just" that makes it so exciting. Flying by the seat of their pants, high on confidence and adrenaline, the actors bring exceptional energy and spontaneity to the

evening. If, as with the protracted fit of the giggles, they occasionally skid off the tracks, it's a price worth paying for such enthusiastic engagement with their material, their fellow actors and the audience.

Maxim, played by Matt Smith, is a Palme d'Or-winning director, seemingly bent on not finishing his latest masterpiece, the post-apocalyptic "Child of Ashes". He claims to be obsessed with a particular – perfect – light, that matches a particular orchestral chord change, which needs (in an expensive change of mind) to be captured on film stock rather than digitally; all this leads to a hiatus in the production which Maxim appears to find essential for his creative process. Smith, at times mesmerically laid back, at times a diva throwing attitudes of despair, cuts a painfully convincing figure: evasive, self-absorbed,

manipulative, needy, whimsical and funny.

The play's first half is a futile yet frequently witty war of persuasion, waged by the forceful but besotted producer (Amanda Drew) and the long-suffering and aggrieved lighting director (Richard Pyros) against Maxim's willed inertia. Eventually, determined to unleash his own apocalypse, Maxim hires a notorious actor, Ivan, known as "The Brute". Anyone who has read the actor Klaus Kinski's memoirs (and survived the experience) will recognize the origins of the appalling monster created with gleeful brilliance by Jonjo O'Neill. He is a kind of feral Falstaff, a man whose very presence takes over the play he is in, transcending it but also, in effect, wringing its neck. O'Neill rages at the actors and the audience with a fetid baroque virtuosity – there is much eloquent talk of phlegm, snot, vomit, piss and sperm – and as we laugh at his ever-expanding tirades against an unappreciative world, it becomes clear that the man brought in to destroy the proceedings is a force for creativity and life, while the supposed creative centre, Maxim, is himself a dark and draining force of destruction.

An interval asks questions of a play. With

Unreachable, the simple and very funny set-up of the first half is not matched by any development in the second half. The comedy stays fresh, though it doesn't intensify, and attempts to deepen the relationships between characters, or to bring resonance to the themes of the play, seem thin and forced next to the jokes and the knockabout fun.

Perhaps it is not surprising that a play devised in rehearsal should hover around themes such as the proximity of creation and destruction, the search for an elusive and all-encompassing meaning or effect, the inability to get something achieved or finished. But hover is all it does. It never lands. The main consequence of Neilson's method appears to be that a lot of good material is generated that, for want of time for sustained development, has to be tied off a bit smartly.

The play ends, for instance, with a beautiful tableau (set, Chloe Lamford; lighting, Chahine Yavroyan) which appears to capture for a moment the magical light and sound which has so haunted and preoccupied Maxim. But the oohs and aahs of the audience are won at the cost of Maxim's belief, quietly admitted a little earlier, that such a moment is necessarily always just out of reach. The result, although visually wonderful, is pure bathos.

Unreachable is at its best when airborne. As soon as it stands still, or takes itself seriously, one begins to wonder about what might have been. Best, like the actors, just to go along for the ride.

Hover craft

A new play about creativity and getting things done

HAL JENSEN

Anthony Neilson

UNREACHABLE
Jerwood Theatre Downstairs, Royal Court,
until August 6