Introductory note on dirt (and spirit)

To make a painting is to embrace folly. Paintings resist demands for efficiency and productivity. They remain indifferent to scientific advancement and the moral imperative to be useful. They are technologically anachronistic, and socially irrelevant. As entertainment, most lack the razzle-dazzle of even a B-grade television show. So why does the desire to paint persist?

Although individual paintings have achieved pinnacles of intellectual sophistication, refined formal elegance, and grotesquely distorted auction prices, the act of painting usually comes down to relatively mundane gestures: spreading coloured dirt on a cloth, wiping the dirt off, spreading it on again. This basic logic seems to hold, even when the objects and materials involved are less easily identifiable as painting than oil on canvas.

The process of painting is earthbound. Frank Stella's famous dictum that in his work "what you see is what you see," is a deflation of the big claims made in painting's name[1]*. The undeniable material aspects of the practice are in many ways easier to account for, to endorse, than the metaphysical trappings that become attached to painting in various discourses. Nevertheless, even the most thoroughly disenchanted painting points outside itself, to the meanings constructed through its particular alignment of process, form, and image. In rebuttal to Stella's assertion, Philip Guston claims, "[t]he painting is not on a surface, but on a plane imagined. It moves in a mind."*[2]

The resilience of this archaic practice rests in its capacity to engage the whole being of both the painter and the beholder. The putative split between mind and body, sensuous and rational, is undone in a painting. Instead of mutual exclusion of opposites, a painting implies mutual necessity. In other words, it is neither dirt, nor spirit that holds sway in a painting, but the rough and uneasy alloy of both.

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[1] *Glaser, Bruce, "Frank Stella and Donald Judd: Questions to Stella and Judd by Bruce Glaser (1966)" in Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art, ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 121.*

[2] *Guston, Philip, "Talk at 'Art / Not Art' Conference" in Philip Guston: Collected Writings, Lectures and Conversations, ed. Clark Coolidge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 278.*