

Making Sense of Mess. Marginal Lives, Impossible Spaces

‘Queering’ and ‘messing up’ are activities and actions as much as ‘queer’ and ‘mess’ can be about states/status, positions, identities, and orientations. These various formulations of queer and mess are not independent of each other and are relevant to my discussion below. While people may balk at the idea of mess as ‘constituting’ queer, it is precisely the discomfort elicited and provoked by the idea and realities of mess that is at the heart of my formulation and provocation.

(Martin Manalansan, “The ‘Stuff’ of Archive”)¹

¹ Martin F. Manalansan IV, “The ‘Stuff’ of Archives: Mess, Migration, and Queer Lives”, *Radical History Review*, Issue 120 (Fall 2014), 94-107, 97.

Mess and the Sense It Makes

Making sense of mess, coming to terms with it, making it understandable. This is what many of us probably feel we do on a daily base: in our social interactions, in the professional sphere(s) we operate, in our affective life. More often than we would like to admit it, it seems that ‘mess’ is all around us: it challenges, or effectively resists, our ability to generate order, to systematize the world, to organize, name and number the ‘stuff’ that surrounds us. However, *making sense of* something evokes primarily a capacity of the mind, of our own interpretative power, rather than our agency to intervene in the world in order to transform it physically. Therefore, to the editors of this issue, to make sense of mess does not mean to erase it, to exorcise it, but rather to assess its function, its value, maybe its beauty, and despite our apparent compulsion to deny its tenacious grip on our lives, its resilience to our drive to transform it and erase it.

In a 2014 essay published in *Radical History Review*, “The ‘Stuff’ of Archive. Mess, Migration and Queer Lives,” Martin F. Manalansan IV explores the issue of “mess, clutter, and muddled entanglements” as a way into a queering of the archive. The scholar’s focus is on one particular apartment in Jackson Height, Queens, New York City, and its tenants, six queer undocumented immigrants. Borrowing from both affect theory and material culture studies, and moving from an understanding of the archive as a quotidian site for dwelling, Manalansan’s aim is to account for, and give flesh to, those marginalized queer lives that dwell in disorder and chaos. Whereas Manalansan’s main interest is towards a radical revisioning of the notion of archive as much as in a critical intervention into queer studies, it is more precisely his interest in affect and material culture, together with a fascination for ‘discomfort’ and ‘provocation’, which inspired our guest-edited issue of *Anglistica AION*.

In this issue of *Anglistica AION*, we have welcomed contributions that

investigate the idea of ‘mess’, at once physically tangible and intellectually slippery, in national, global, and transnational cultural productions and social practices. Thus, we envision ‘mess’ as piles of seemingly unorganized materials, unsanitized spaces, dirty interstices that refuse to be cleaned and systematized. Like most of the scholars who contributed to this issue, we are particularly fascinated by its potential impact on the study of what J. E. Muñoz broadly defined as ‘minoritarian subjects’: in fact, resistance to ‘normalcy’ and the challenge to sanctioned symbolic ‘order’ have been at the heart of late 20th century queer, ethnic, gendered, indigenous, and other identitarian studies. In addition, the notion of mess, messing-up, mash-ups, and morphing, both as theme and as cultural practice, may signal a productive gesture that rejects hierarchical organizing and linear/causal relations of value, thriving instead on simultaneity and precariousness, in overlapping and contested spaces and conflictual, even irreconcilable, dis/identifications.

Far from advocating for a romanticized approach to ‘mess’, or for a flattening of the concept onto a negative, pathologizing view that sees it merely as a *lack* of clarity, order, or organization, we have encouraged investigations that explore both the aesthetics and the politics of mess, in a critical attempt to make sense of it.

What We Talk About When We Talk About Mess

Mess is foremost an opinion. A judgment loaded with negative connotations. It refers to something the speaker does not appreciate, whose function, objectives, or whose appearance s/he does not understand nor often agree with. But mess may also refer lovingly to my niece’s attempt of drawing an elephant, or hopelessly to Trump’s foreign (or domestic, or environmental, or...) policy, to a series of street riots following a political scandal, to a hoarder’s den, or even to a painting by Basquiat: arguably, these can all be seen as ‘mess’. Despite its generally clear physical connotation (e.g. expressions like “this room/ street is a mess” evoke a rather clear referent), its intellectual import is always slippery; as the Basquiat example above reveals, quite often the definition of mess marks a limitation in the viewer’s ability to ‘make sense’ of it.

In the following few paragraphs I sketch some of the main concepts that animate our understanding of ‘mess’, as a way of attempting to outline a tradition of thinkers that were fascinated by lack of formal order, by chaos or filth; I hope then to draw a constellation of keywords which help us clarify the connotations of the term we intend to use as a guiding idea running throughout this issue.

In its comparative understanding, as the opposite or ‘lack’ of order, balance, and clarity, mess reminds us of the canonical Dionysian/Apollonian dialectic as famously articulated by Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). Inspired by the figures of the two gods from Greek mythology, and their consolidated cultural representations, the German philosopher argued that the Apollonian signals rational thinking, analytic distinction and individuations, order and purity, whereas

the Dionysian, often associated with drunkenness, ecstasy, and madness, is instead the marker of chaos, instincts and irrationality. Some aspects of the Dionysian resonate with Kant's idea of *sublime*, especially in the latter's overwhelming, disruptive effects, in the powerful erasure of 'individuation', and certainly in its antithetical positionality towards 'beauty'. Unlike the sublime, however, the Dionysian is all-encompassing, embedding the viewer (and in fact the participants) in the experience without allowing for any critical, sublimating 'viewing' distance.

Nietzsche was interested in analyzing the fragile balance between these two opposites, their necessary interplay, in Greek tragedy. In Nietzsche's critique, the dialectic between these two extremes is indispensable and must never be 'resolved'. His investigation into the Dionysian impulse in Greek tragedy clearly points to some powerful, resilient thread running through Euro-American culture, which surfaces recurrently in our present understanding and appreciation of mess, as represented and analyzed in this special issue.

Fast-forwarding to more recent times, it is noticeable that postmodern culture is certainly deeply fascinated by mess, by simultaneity and overlapping, by directionless hyperactivity and the overcrowded physical scenarios of mass society and conspicuous consumption. Since Jean-François Lyotard's groundbreaking *La Condition Postmoderne* was published in 1979, the author's critique pointing out the postmodern incredulity towards metanarratives and *Grands Récits*, the end of the master narratives which provided an order, a coherent method or frame to understand the world, has by now become common knowledge among those who work in the humanities. Our ability to contain, systematize, and order Knowledge into a single powerful and coherent discourse has apparently been seriously compromised, and as a result, replacing Grand Theories with more modest, specific, contingent, and fragmented analysis has emerged as a quintessential postmodern practice.

A notion that seems to illustrate this postmodern skepticism towards clean closure, control, and effectiveness is 'entropy', which is both the title of a widely anthologized and taught short story by postmodern iconic writer Thomas Pynchon, and also a concept that is often circulated in discussions about postmodernism and its cultural traits.² The notion of entropy of any given system, as Rudolf Clausius (1822-1888) observed, is the measure of the unavailability of its thermal energy for conversion into mechanical work. In other words, a certain amount of functional energy is always lost to dissipation or friction, a phenomenon that relates to the second law of thermodynamics, which states that energy systems have a tendency to increase their entropy. The theory of the heat-death proves that as entropy increases, a system tends to deteriorate and lose its distinctiveness, to fall from a state of organization and differentiation to one of chaos and sameness. The deterioration and the loss of distinctiveness remind us of a crucial feature of Nietzsche's investigation into the Dionysian. For postmodern thinkers, however, the theory of entropy offers rather a fascinating metaphor for consumerist society,

²Thomas Pynchon, "Entropy", *Kenyon Review*, 22.2 (Spring 1960), 27-92.

and for the loss of that guiding frame, those master narratives that helped ‘explain’ the world, which now leaves the postmodern subject on a stage where efforts are wasteful, where directions are unknown, where stuff piles on itself uselessly before we can start envisioning an effective way to organize or understand it.

The notion of entropy sheds light on those aspects of mess and chaos that have to do with loss of functioning and purpose, energy waste, but also on the complex interplay between a system and its parts that fail to remain distinct and discrete and instead meld into a deteriorated and useless sameness.

One of the most intellectually exciting challenges that some postmodernists take on is precisely the attempt to make sense of an entropic world, where things fall apart and human determination to force order onto chaos and senselessness proves inadequate. Postmodern cultural producers seem to have a higher tolerance, or a straightforward preference, for ambiguity and contradiction, for lack of closure and coherence, and finally for the fascination of inclusivity of incommensurable elements, as displayed in pastiche, collage, and various forms of visual and textual juxtaposition. Architecture has been traditionally at the forefront of early discussions on postmodernism and the postmodern aesthetics. Celebrated architect and theorist Robert Venturi, who in his own career navigated away from modernism into postmodernism, is the author of the ironic slogan “Less is Bore”, which mocks the iconic line “Less is More” by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, powerfully exemplified in modernist aesthetics (in architecture, but not exclusively) concerning the economy of the lines and structures. In his *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*,³ Venturi elaborates his idea of the ‘difficult whole’, the attempt of imagining unity and wholeness in a postmodern era:

³ Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1966).

Inherent in an architecture of opposites is the inclusive whole. The unity ... is achieved not through suppression or exclusion but through the dramatic inclusion of contradictory or circumstantial parts. Aalto’s architecture acknowledges the difficult and subtle conditions of program, while ‘serene’ architecture, on the other hand, works simplifications.

However, the obligation toward the whole in an architecture of complexity and contradiction does not preclude the building which is unresolved. Poets and playwrights acknowledge dilemmas without solutions. The validity of the questions and vividness of the meaning are what make their works art more than philosophy. A goal of poetry can be unity of expression over resolution of content. Contemporary sculpture is often fragmentary, and today we appreciate Michelangelo’s unfinished Pietas more than his early work, because their content is suggested, their expression more immediate, and their forms are completed beyond themselves. A building can also be more or less incomplete in the expression of its program and its form.⁴

⁴ Ibid., 99.

Inclusivity, skepticism toward resolution, and suspicion for completeness, these are some of the features praised by Venturi in his ‘difficult whole’. His objective is a unity that refuses ‘serenity’ and simplification and instead thrives on contrapuntal

relationships, in inflected fragments and acknowledged dualities, a unity, and here Venturi quotes from August Heckscher, that “maintains, but only just maintains, a control over the clashing elements which compose it. Chaos is very near; its nearness, but its avoidance, gives ... force”.⁵

⁵ August Heckscher, *The Public Happiness* (New York, Athenaeum Publishers, 1962), 289, quoted in Venturi, 99.

Venturi’s embracing of complexity and contradiction in architecture, his flirtatious attitude toward chaos and mess, and his being unpersuaded by serenity and order, clearly resonate with many of the ideas evoked so far in this introduction. We have briefly traced the fascination for ‘mess’ back to the classic dialectic between Dionysian and Apollonian, again to some features inherent in Kantian sublime and the Romantic fondness of it, through postmodern celebrations of entropy after the end of the Grand Narratives. But we began from a queer inspiration, Manalansan’s desire to expand our understanding of the archive by focusing on a queer household in Queens, and the clutter, physical as much as affective, within it. The Asian American anthropologist’s wish to depathologize mess succeeds in showing that mess “is not always about misery, complete desolation and abandonment but can also gesture to moments of vitality, pleasure, and fabulousness.”⁶ With these various fragments and suggestions in mind, I hope it will be more rewarding, and hopefully more fun, to navigate the diverse collection of essays that follows.

⁶ Manalansan, “The ‘Stuff of Archive’”, 100.

This Issue: A Fabulous Mess

We have deliberately preferred an inclusive understanding of mess, therefore the articles contained in this issue are exquisitely diverse, in their topics, in the disciplinary approach of the scholars that authored them, and finally in these scholars’ own grasp of the issue of mess, and the sense it makes.

In the following pages, mess as a favorite topic, or theme, of the cultural product under scrutiny is often coupled with mess and messing-up as a cultural practice; most of the contributors highlight the fact that we may understand this slippery notion better if we see it relationally, in the shifting dynamics between chaos and order, for example, or as an intentional strategy to contaminate the ostensible purity of the body of the nation (Schrader, Sookkasikon, Moitra), or again as an Indigenous/Native challenge to Euro-American ideals and norms of coherence and structure (Sookkasikon). In fact, the mess of history is equally at the center of some of the following contributions, both the messiness inherent in history-making as well as historical memory: we read about war trauma and post-apocalyptic landscapes (Di Gennaro, Alison), but also about postmodern messy re-visioning of the tradition (Moitra, Schrader, Sarnelli) or again we will witness the material accumulation of waste, debris, discarded objects, filthy and/or unintelligible ‘stuff’, crowding themselves into sites that evoke or embody impossible spaces (Fusco, Schrader, Sookkasikon, Alison).

The issue opens with six poems by Shirley Geok-lin Lim, ironic as much as

concerned meditations on displacement in a disquieting and confusing political climate. It follows with an essay by Timo Schrader on the multimedia performance project *El Spirit Republic*, in which a collective of Puerto Rican artists and activists in New York reimagined the borders and the rules of affiliation to an imaginary nation state, in a visionary attempt to celebrate cultural citizenship and decolonize the imaginary. In the following essay, Serena Fusco investigates the series *Breaking Bad* in a theoretically rich analysis that questions the very paradigmatic core of contemporary neoliberalism while describing the series protagonist's parable into a corrupted world, and his attempt at remaining unsoiled.

Irene Alison provides a critical overview of disturbing messes in war photography, by focusing on the photobook *War Porn* (2014) by Christoph Bangert, a photographic exhibition *Conflict, Time, Photography* at the Tate Gallery in London (which opened in 2014), and finally *They Fight with Cameras* (2015), a photobook collecting the work of Walter Rosenblum. Paola di Gennaro's ambitious article focuses on selected writings by Uranian Poets, and from the First and the Second World War exploring both war trauma through its literary expression, and the discourse of male homosexuality that these writers articulated, by activating analogous rhetorical strategies for coping with the unspeakable.

At the heart of Fulvia Sarnelli's essay there is an articulate analysis of the documentary *Halving the Bones* by acclaimed Japanese American writer Ruth Ozeki, which recounts the stories of three women across three generations. Ozeki's documentary, Sarnelli contends, claims a position within the tradition of Asian American family documentary while simultaneously 'messing up' its very foundation of truth, insofar as the work seems to be thriving on multiple layers of uncertainty and programmatically acknowledging the inventive nature of memory.

Pahole Sookkasikon insightfully investigates selected short stories from two collections, *Sightseeing* (2005), the acclaimed debut by Thai American writer Rattawut Lapcharoensap, and *This is Paradise* (2013) by Native Hawaiian writer Kristiana Kahakauwila. Sookkasikon argues that heteronormative waste and destruction, legacy of a complex militouristic apparatus in both Thailand and Hawaii, have led to a violent suppression of local and Native brown bodies. These writers, the scholar powerfully contends, rewrite their communities back into the sanitized landscape of paradise, messing up its fantastic construction, and exceeding the imperial gaze upon them.

Finally, the issue concludes with Tehezeeb Moitra's reading of Chitra Ganesh's *Tales of Amnesia* (2002), a 21 parts tableaux based on the Indian comic book series *Amar Chitra Katha*, created in the Sixties and still running, which is composed for children, and serves as an educational instrument to instruct younger generations about Hindu myths. Moitra highlights Ganesh's rewriting of the classic representation of gender through an emphasis on the *Jungalee* female body and its sexual agency, thus serving simultaneously both to articulate cultural nostalgia and to mock representational conventions. The figure of the defiant, improper female

character effectively reveals and explodes assumptions about cultural and national identity.

“Making Sense of Mess”, and the essays it hosts, is aimed not only at disentangling ‘mess’ from its pejorative semantic universe. It also contributes, I believe, to questioning the rationale behind a value system that prioritizes order and rational organization of space, objects, and people. In refraining from erasing mess and its inherent value, from containing it or framing it, the contributors to this issue dared to gesture towards alternative narratives that exceed clear-cut dichotomies, hierarchization, or teleologies, opening up the possibility for a newer, stronger ‘sense’ that may emerge precisely out of the filthy interstices, the confusing overlaps of time and space, which are often the stuff that life is made of.