

CALLING FOR CULPABILITY: ANISH KAPOOR'S *DIRTY CORNER*

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Beginning in 2008, The Château of Versailles has hosted temporary exhibitions by contemporary artists. This paper looks at the backlash incurred against the exhibition by British-Indian artist Anish Kapoor, specifically his sculpture Dirty Corner. After Dirty Corner was vandalized with antisemitic hate speech, the artist pushed back against removing the graffiti, which only compounded the already antagonistic relationship between Kapoor, Versailles, and the public.

This paper posits that Kapoor's refusal to cleanse Dirty Corner of its anti-Semitic defacement confronts France's lingering denial of responsibility in both the Holocaust during WWII, and the nation's burgeoning xenophobia in the wake of the European Refugee Crisis.

The reception to contemporary art exhibited at Versailles has not been warm. Detractors largely fall into two categories: there are those who simply do not appreciate the aesthetic value of contemporary works in heritage context, and there are those who react far more vehemently. In particular, those of royal descent who, backed by the right-wing organization *Coordination Défense de Versailles*, filed injunctions to prevent artists Jeff Koons and Takashi Murakami from exhibiting in 2009 and 2010 respectively, stating that “respect due to the work of Louis XIV” must be protected.¹ The controversy over Koons and Murakami, however, was all but eclipsed by the apoplectic reaction to Anish Kapoor's 2015 exhibition; specifically his sculpture *Dirty Corner*, which was installed on the *Tapis Vert* between the Château and the Grand Canal in the Gardens of Versailles from June to November of that year (Fig. 1). The sculpture was abhorred for its form, dubbed by the French media as “the Queen's Vagina” after the artist referred to it in a press conference

¹Martin, “Contemporary Art at Versailles.”

by using female pronouns, and it was vandalized multiple times—most notably by way of anti-Semitic graffiti that sprawled over much of the installation’s surface area.² It scandalized the art world, and the nation of France, when Kapoor fought to allow that hateful graffiti to endure, visibly, as “scars”.³ Kapoor’s refusal to cleanse *Dirty Corner* of the graffiti deliberately confronts France’s culpability in the ethnic cleansing of Jews during World War II, and the consequential latent racism in the present.

Before delving into the issues of vaginal imagery, anti-Semitism, and the overall problematization of *Dirty Corner* at Versailles, a consideration of the sculpture’s genesis provides insight on interpreting the title, and what that interpretation says about the intention of the piece. *Dirty Corner* was not conceived specifically for its appearance at Versailles; it was originally installed in 2011 at the warehouse-esque *Fabbrica del Vapore* museum in Milan (Fig. 2). There, spectators were invited to an interactive encounter with the work—a “multi-sensory aesthetic experience”.⁴ The sixty-meter long cor-ten steel structure, shaped like an oversized baroque trumpet, was made available to guests for exploration. They were encouraged to enter the piece and contemplate the change in diminishing light, space, and acoustics as they walked further into its recess. Inside the exhibition space, a conveyor would occasionally deposit mounds of dirt on top of the sculpture towards the end of its “tail”. By evaluating the work’s title in relation to its form, a plausible interpretation is that the title speaks to the idiomatic connotations of a “dirty corner”: shame and secrecy. When considering what a dirty corner is, in terms of dialectics, the inference is that an unsavoury secret lurks within an entity, hidden from plain sight. In this context the work’s title in Milan fits. As the spectator/participant traverses the interior of the sculpture they move deeper towards what is not visible from the surface, into a restrictive, hidden crevice—a corner—that is repeatedly heaped with dirt. The metaphor is not subtle. In Milan, Kapoor’s *Dirty Corner* was referred to as a “cornucopia, an ear trumpet, a Tibetan horn”,⁵ and critics described interacting with the work as “an almost mystical encounter”.⁶ No outrage, no vaginal references, no graffiti.

In the gardens of the Sun King, the sculpture met a much crueler fate: indignation, scandal, and vandalism. At its exhibition in Versailles, *Dirty Corner* was a display only installation. The *Fabbrica del Vapore*’s conveyor belts were eliminated and replaced with permanent earth mounds and giant slabs of raw marble, which mock

²Cascone, “Anish Kapoor Calls Vandalism at Palace of Versailles an ‘Inside Job’.”

³Anish Kapoor, “Dirty Corner,” mixed media, 2015, <http://anishkapoor.com/1031/dirty-corner-06-09-2015>.

⁴Verbeeck, “There Is Nothing More Practical,” 234-236.

⁵Verbeeck, 234.

⁶Verbeeck, 234.

the classically crafted statues throughout Versailles' gardens—the slabs exist in their natural state, but for a few symbolically painted blood red, as if to say “we are not hiding anything, not pretending to be anything we are not”. Gone, however, was the multi-sensory aspect of the work; everything was look but don't touch. This approach—denying the spectator the opportunity to interact with the work—creates tension between subject and object as the piece becomes a “space of obscurity [...] scatological, abject, problematic”.⁷ The title, then, aided by a somewhat labial appearance, becomes scatological, abject and problematic in return. No doubt, Kapoor's motivations for exhibiting *Dirty Corner* differed for each setting, yet, in relation to the form of the work, the title's “shameful secret” connotation remains the same. The wildly different aesthetic receptions, however, could not have been predicted. Whereas in Milan *Dirty Corner* was deemed “mystical”, in Versailles, it was criticized as a “pornographic provocation and attack against French identity represented by the figure of the Queen”, and the graffiti soon followed.⁸

Though critics of Kapoor's sculpture claimed that the identity of France was anti-Semitic, the nature of the graffiti revealed why such an attack may have been warranted: France has a culpability problem. Prior to Murakami's exhibition in 2010, the *Coordination Défense de Versailles* released a statement condemning contemporary art exhibited in Versailles as “the veritable ‘murder’ of our heritage”⁹ — a paradoxical claim, as the heritage of France lacks no bloodshed. As is the case with the history of many western nations, France's involvement in war and brutality dates back as far as the birth of the nation itself, though in the modern era it is the Vichy régime's involvement in what is known as “Operation Spring Breeze” that has left the nation with a permanent mark of shame. On Thursday, July 16th 1942, in the midst of the Second World War, the Vichy government of occupied France sanctioned the roundup of 7,000 Jewish refugees, 4000 of whom were children under the age of sixteen, and corralled them in the *Vélodrome d'Hiver* to await deportation to internment camps and then on to Auschwitz for execution.¹⁰ The event is not something that most post-war French governments have cared to address. Numerous Presidents, such as Nicolas Sarkozy, François Mitterand, and Charles De Gaulle, have openly denied culpability and encouraged France not to be ashamed of its past, stating that the republic of France is separate from Vichy, and therefore cannot be held accountable.¹¹ In fact, contrition did not come until 1995 when then President Jacques Chirac publicly acknowledged France's involvement in aiding

⁷Verbeeck, 235-236.

⁸Verbeeck, 236.

⁹Martin, “Contemporary Art.”

¹⁰Burton, “Operation Spring Breeze,” 221-222.

¹¹Boswell, “Should France be Ashamed of its History?” 237-247.

and abetting the Nazis.¹² One wonders then if the denial of culpability has contributed to a rise in nationalist sentiment. Historians tell us that Vichy's decisions in 1942 were not implemented under duress, but that they were calculated and motivated by a desire for more political autonomy.¹³ Yet, there is a persistent discourse of victimization that prevents any real progress of accountability from developing.¹⁴

That same discourse of victimization is what *Dirty Corner* was met with in Versailles in 2015, and what Kapoor was pushing back against by fighting for his work to sit, sullied with racist vandalism, on Le Nôtre's immaculate grounds where everything is "ordered, geometrical, formal, almost as if it's hiding nature".¹⁵ Traditionalists, royalists, and the "alt-right" claimed to be traumatized by the sculpture as it threatened the "resonance of a specific location [Versailles] that is known and familiar".¹⁶ The work was perceived to be "foreign", an intruder in a place it didn't belong, its contemporary style and defiled appearance at odds with the heritage and history of the Palace in relation to the identity of the nation. Therefore, when taking in to account the previously discussed "dirty corner" idiom, it is clear that the vandalized version of *Dirty Corner* speaks directly to the latent bigotry that had reared its head, and asks its spectators to shine a light into the dirty corners of the country and take a look at the hate and shame that lurks there.

Much of the critical discourse on the controversy surrounding Kapoor's *Dirty Corner* has covered the conflation of female genitalia and the idea that the exhibition of the sculpture was a shameful experience, which polluted the image of France's national identity. Though each of these topics have been briefly touched upon here, a more in-depth analysis of the problematic nature of the conflation lies outside the bounds of this paper. What is left to acknowledge presently, is that 2015 was also the start of the European Refugee Crisis, which undoubtedly impacted Kapoor's decision about the fate of his sculpture. With Syrian and African refugees arriving in Europe by the tens of thousands monthly, the migration was reminiscent of Jewish refugees after the First World War.¹⁷ In a statement released by Kapoor after *Dirty Corner* was vandalized by the anti-Semitic graffiti, he remarks:

At this time, when we need to have compassion for the thousands of refugees on the road in Europe, the anti-Semitic, racist attack [...] brings to

¹²Bush, "July 16: 'Operation Spring Breeze'."

¹³Burton, 216.

¹⁴Boswell, 245-248.

¹⁵Verbeeck, 236.

¹⁶Kwon, "The Wrong Place," 34.

¹⁷European Union, "The EU and the Migration Crisis."

the forefront the intolerance and racism in our midst. Dirty Corner has become the vehicle for the expression of our anxiety of "the other" [...] I will not allow this act of violence and intolerance to be erased.¹⁸

Regardless of his statement, Kapoor did eventually acquiesce to taking action after being issued a court order, which ironically charged that allowing the graffiti to remain visible made the artist culpable of "incit[ing] racial hatred".¹⁹ However, instead of cleansing the sculpture of the vandalism and erasing its existence, he covered it in opulent gold leaf (Fig. 3)—a move he referred to as his "Royal Response".²⁰ Sadly, *Dirty Corner* would suffer two more attacks of minor vandalism before the end of its exhibition. During its final days in Versailles, a fence was put up around the sculpture in an effort to dissuade harm-doers. Gone was any potential for interaction and understanding. The work, labeled abject and offensive was shut off from the public, signifying that this work was different, something to be careful of, to be afraid of. It stayed that way, corralled in its wounded state until it was finally removed from the site and shipped off to exile in a move that is strikingly evocative of the Jewish refugees being corralled and held in the *Vel d'Hiv*.

Anish Kapoor's *Dirty Corner*, taken into consideration with the idiomatic connotations of shame and secrecy, called on France to claim responsibility for its involvement in the holocaust, and exposed the xenophobic underbelly of the nation in the process. It is debatable whether *Dirty Corner* was conceived as a protest piece, but regardless of intention that is what it became, and at a time when the persecution of people based on their ethnicity is still acutely problematic in many parts of the world (see the Gaza strip, the "no tolerance policy" at the U.S./Mexico border, and the plight of the Rohingya), we need more art like *Dirty Corner* to challenge intolerance and affect change. How do we move forward? Well, since Kapoor, Versailles has remained committed to its exhibition of contemporary art stating: "[The contemporary exhibitions], sometimes emphasizing contrast and synthesis, show Versailles as a living site always open to creativity".²¹ Art is creative, yes, but it also shows faith in the potential for change.

¹⁸Kapoor, "Dirty Corner."

¹⁹Sajej, "Anish Kapoor Sued."

²⁰Verbeeck, 234.

²¹Chateau Versailles, "Contemporary Art."

FIGURES



Figure 1: Anish Kapoor, *Dirty Corner*, Versailles.
Photography by Fred Romero. October 25, 15.
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/129231073@N06/27100356650>

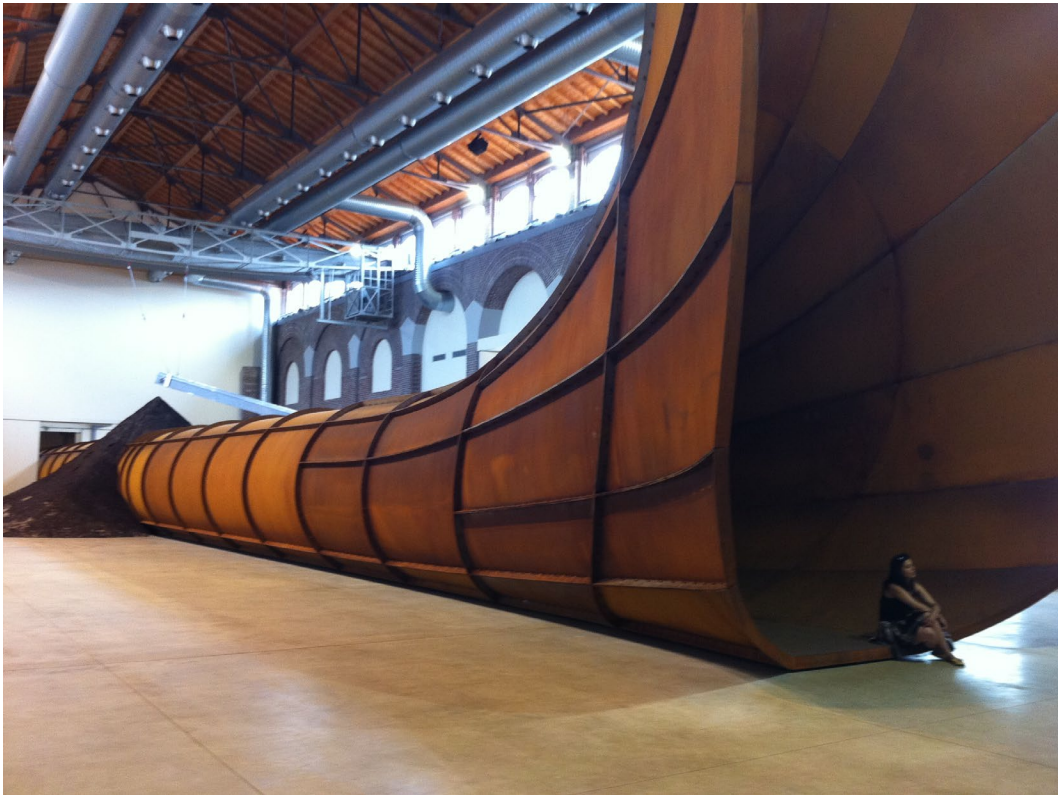


Figure 2: Anish Kapoor, *Dirty Corner*, Fabbbrica del Vapore, Milan.
Photograph by Silvia Sfligiotti. August 6, 2011.
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/oinoi/6018608912>



Figure 3: Anish Kapoor, *Dirty Corner*, Versailles.
Photograph by Fred Romero. October 25, 15.
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/129231073@N06/27100356650>

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