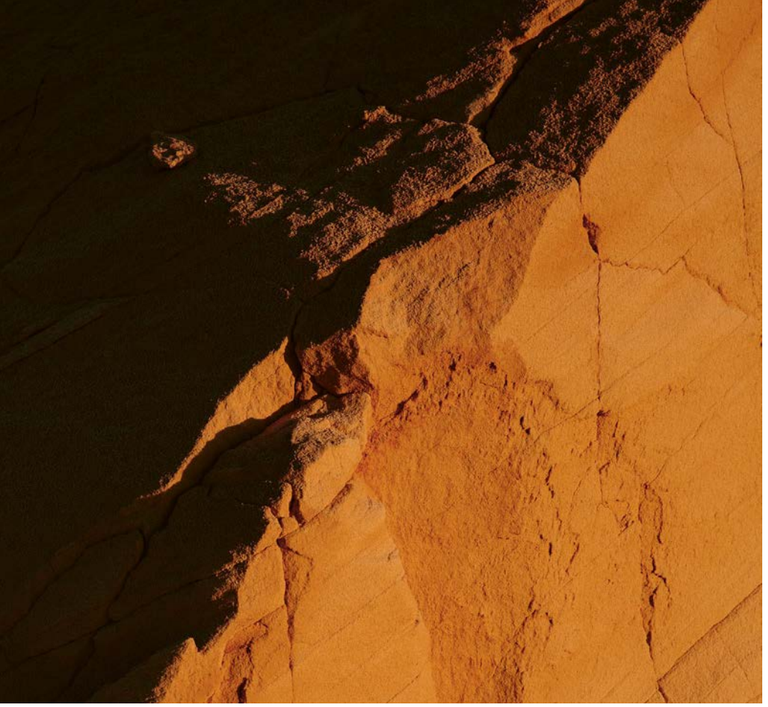

DIRTY WORK
A taxonomy of muck.

“What would happen if suddenly, magically, men could menstruate and women could not?” With this question posed at the outset of her famous essay *If Men Could Menstruate*, Gloria Steinem imagined a society in which men would make periods an “enviable, worthy, masculine event.” Rather than being seen as an embarrassment or something to hide, “that time of the month” would become a sign of courage in patriarchal societies, she argued. Scientists would prioritize researching the origin of stomach cramps over heart attacks, from which menstruating men would be hormonally protected. All in all, what many societies have traditionally deemed dirty would instantly become an element of pride.

Though fictional, Steinem’s essay allows readers to take in one simple truth: Dirt, and indeed all things perceived as unpleasant, is in the eye of the beholder. What some groups of people consider pure, others will find unclean, as theorized by British anthropologist Mary Douglas. Dirt, she wrote, is simply matter out of place. Blood inside one’s body is normal but finding it anywhere else can prompt squeamishness. A foot may be clean, but putting one’s feet on the dining table is certainly frowned upon. A fingernail isn’t particularly dirty when it’s on a hand, but that changes as soon as said nail ends up on the floor.

Dirt is relative, Douglas points out, because what we consider impure is that which breaks our social order, and different peoples have different sets of rules. In a household, things are dirty when they don’t belong where they are. In a larger social context, however, the implications are far-reaching: Social systems are built around what people consider pure or polluted. Hygiene guidelines, insofar as they are used to determine what is pure, become a way to organize society and control human behavior. Whether religious or not, alcohol bans, rules about women’s premarital virginity, the taboo surrounding periods, or even foods banned from consumption, all contribute to the way people are policed into acting. Needless to say, women and marginalized groups have historically gotten the short end of the stick. Indeed, as Douglas pointed out, the construct of purity is the enemy of change.

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A LOAD OF CRAP
The sanctity of cheap stuff.

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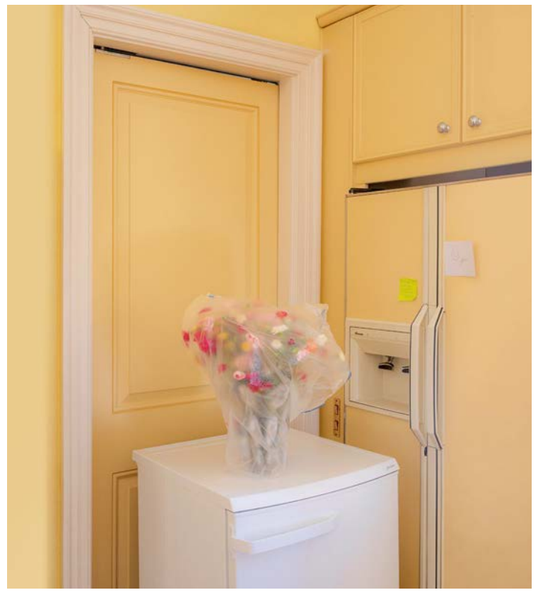

Filling personal spaces with purely decorative, cheaply made trinkets—or tchotchkes, knickknacks, bric-a-brac, junk—is as American as apple pie. “Over time, Americans have decided—as individuals, as members of groups, and as a society—to embrace not just materialism itself but materials with a certain shoddy complexion,” writes author Wendy A. Woloson in her book *Crap: A History of Cheap Stuff in America*.

The country’s proud heritage of excess began during the consumer revolution of the 1700s, when artisans created inexpensive replicas of in-demand exotic goods; faux-wood finishes and paste gems imbued a sense of luxury. Soon, traveling salesmen were hawking cheap goods to people on the lower rungs of the social strata. All of those unnecessary baubles became “conduits through which Americans could envision better lives,” Woloson writes. Items easily discarded and replaced also lowered the stakes of ownership—people no longer had to meticulously care for a precious few costly goods over a long period of time.

The burgeoning railroads and canals of the 19th century transported inexpensive goods to further reaches of the country, and variety stores sprang up. Americans saw themselves as consumers, taking pride in their ability to buy and display. Pop Momand’s 1913 comic strip, “Keeping Up with the Joneses,” was based on this socioeconomic phenomenon, and the title remains a popular idiom for embracing materialism.

Americans also championed being at the forefront of innovation and efficiency—cheap gadgets supplemented clunky, costly tools, not just halving the time of shucking corn or washing clothes, but transforming drudgery into entertainment. The combined need for functionality and low-risk purchasing has persisted, as evidenced by the popularity of QVC, As Seen On TV stores and SkyMall catalogs. Amazon updates its most popular gadgets page hourly.

The true worth of novelty or collectors’ items, gift shop souvenirs or promotional goods lies in the eyes of its owner. “What constitutes crap is highly personal and historically contextual,” Woloson writes.[1] However their material cost is defined, Americans’ abundant, cheap possessions have become a vital component of identity—and therefore a meaningful clue to who we are.

(1) Cheap items are often referred to using a synonym for bodily waste, Woloson writes, because “crappy things are, in various ways, excrescences—quickly used up and happily, even proudly, disposed of.”