Sludge Syntax in a Fluid Ground

By Kirsten Cooke
In response to Bryony Gillard's, *My Wits or Salts* (2025)
Commissioned by Focal Point Gallery

Sludge Syntax is an exercise in arranging text and responding to the orientation of images when we assume a different ground for reason, one in which mediation is entangled with that which is mediated. As the author of this text I am entangled with Gillard's work through the words that are produced on this page – the page that you are holding or scrolling. This is why the term 'sludge' is taken from the first chapter in Gillard's series, *Activated Sludge*. *Chapter 1: Activated Sludge* explores the metabolic continuum of humans and the more-than-human that make up our bodies, environments, socio-economic structures and political systems. It also interrogates the entanglement of artist-technology-environment-video that composes the audio-visual works in *My Wits or Salts*. Throughout the chapters, Gillard does not picture entities as autonomous prior to their encounter but already infiltrated by each other as a mixture or 'sludge' composite. This is why I am deploying a hyphen to function as a relation when arranging the above terms, the use of '-' traces an entangled relation that is absent from a modernist English syntax which positions the mediator outside of that which is mediated.

Fluid Ground refers to the context that I bring to Gillard's practice, through which the artist's work becomes entangled. *Fluid Ground* is my ongoing project, which takes bodies of water as its organising principle and aims to map-with water. To 'write-with' *My Wits or Salts* is to capture both myself and Gillard's practice in the act of writing, to prevent my voice from writing over the top of the practice or assuming, erroneously, that it can be objective or transparent.[1] Karen Barad refers to this action as producing 'agential cuts', which are formed out of 'intra-actions' rather than interactions.[2] Intra-actions position us inside the phenomena, as coextensive with our context. Picture a spider who is plugged into their wider environment through their web. Imagine how it feels to register the vibrations from a passing predator, sensing it through the threads of the web which are attached to the bushes that are disturbed by the creature's movement. Agential cuts refer to the points of significance that I have crystallised into a set of terms that appear as subheadings across this text; Metabolic Encounters, Scopic Uncanny, and Audio Folds. These terms refer to a (dis)ordering of the reasonable image in Gillard's body of work. This (dis)ordering reorientates the viewer through an encounter with an alternative 'reasoning' of the human relationship with our environments, through what I am terming a *Sludge Syntax*. Following on from the spider analogy, an example of an agential cut is the intra-action I inferred through my depiction of the encounter that can be recomposed as predator-bushes-web-spider-writer. Agential cuts are produced from within the field of materials and environments with which I am intra-acting, these range from our contemporary's wider socio-political and economic context to the lens produced through my *Fluid Ground* project and it's

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[1] Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene,* 2016, London: Duke University Press

[2] Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway, Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, 2007, London: Durham Press, p. 74

encounter with Gillard's practice.[3] *Sludge Syntax in a Fluid Ground* is a praxis in opacity, as opposed to clarity, as we all disturb the environment with which we are interacting, and the environment disturbs us. Feel the weight of this page in your hands, or the brightness of it on your screens.

Metabolic Encounters

> *Turbidity is therefore also a condition that has the potential to envelop us within it, sweeping us up into its midst and changing the conditions of what we see and how we see it.*[4]

Bridget Crone's term the 'Turbid Image' refers to the scientific practice of measuring turbidity, which is the density of particles (often pollutants) that are suspended in water. Crone's turbid image is opaque because it is filled with particulates that are coextensive with its environment; the environment indexed by the content, the embodied lens of the artist and the materials that are used in their practice. It does not reiterate the practices of 'mastery' or 'immediacy' which are implicated in naturalised claims for clarity or transparency in image making or the processes of sterilising potable water. Both of which take labour (human and planetary) and matter (chemical compounds, microorganisms and digital pixels) out of the equation to construct an 'objective' or 'reasonable' position.

Gillard's practice starts in the middle, amid water's metabolic relations. In *Chapter 1. Activated Sludge,* we (the viewers) are dipping our heads above and below the horizon line of a body of water. When viewing its surface, this body of water is being pumped with a murkier substance as it is clouded by bursts of another consistency (possibly sewage) entering its flow. When we are beneath the horizon line, our view is laced with atomic particles reflecting light as they float into and out of our field of vision. We are immersed in Gillard's sludge-relation, a turbid image that orientates our gaze to picture wastewater in its entanglement with the artist. It folds its context into itself, including the artists embodied relation to the materials depicted (UK sewage crisis) and the materiality of the image (audio-visual). We are also inside a voice, in both audio and text caption form, that is recounting a narrative of the body, which we are told takes about 48hours to eat itself in the act of decomposition. The bacterial agents which are of our organic human bodies also decompose them and a similar process is woven into the fabric of sewage filtration. Our narrator states that bacteria are essential in producing the microbes that breakdown waste, as it is these organic actors that are added to sewage, forming a material referred to as 'Activated Sludge'. We feel embroiled in this continuum, our bodies and the more-than-human that runs through them and connects them to the outside. Gillard envelopes the audience into the encounter with this sludge-relation. We are porous subjects, which are connected to metabolic systems that do

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[3] For more on Karen Barad's 'Agential Cuts' please refer to: Fiona Byrne, 'A Diffractive Approach to Multimodal Transcription: Materialising Entanglements between Humans and Non-Humans' in *Multimodality & Society 5, no. 2*, 2025, pp. 167–88: https://doi.org/10.1177/26349795241291369

[4] Bridget Crone, 'Turbid Images and Bodies in the Field' (pp. 491 – 521) in *Fieldwork for Future Ecologies: Radical Practice for Art and Art-based Research* eds. Bridget Crone, Sam Nightingale & Polly Stanton, 2024, p. 493

not place a moral slant on water or bodies as 'good' or 'bad'. For one microorganism waste is their food source and we are told by the narrator that they are 'speaking through shit'. Gillard subsumes the viewer in this turbid image, as we encounter this anthropogenic zone (sewage in a body of water) as not one of either purity or waste but a communication amidst a cyclical flow.

Scopic Uncanny

In *Chapter 2: Heatwave* our gaze is orientated around action in a domestic interior: we are likely in the kitchen, but the angles captured by the camera never disclose this fully. Both the interior of the space and Gillard's embodied movements when handling the camera are indexed in the shifting, hovering, and differing heights from which the action is filmed. We are watching small hands as they mix miscellaneous ingredients, including a pink substance and drawings on paper that are folded into the sludge with a wooden spoon. A close-up of the bubbles indicates a series of material intra-actions that are producing chemicals which froth at the surface. A metabolic cycle is completed, as the actors pour back the mixture into the pre-used bottles from which its contents came, some recognisable from their shape.

In the voiceover we hear references to both the UK sewage crisis and climate crisis, as Gillard captures a scene in which people are bathing in the polluted River Avon to escape the heat in their homes. If the sewage from our homes has entered the river, then this embeds what is usually considered 'outside' the home into its insides – its guts – through our (the swimmers') guts. Here, the environment of the home is already contaminated and is neither sealed off nor impervious to its surroundings:

> *Representative of modernity's inherent contradictions, the modern home, in a simultaneous act of need and denial, hosts in its guts everything it tries to keep outside. It is its connection to everything it tries to disconnect from, to the invisible material and social relations that lie underneath its visible counterparts, that make the modern home appear to be functioning in an autonomous way.* [5]

In the *City of Flows,* Maria Kaika goes onto to describe how the modernist ideology of the home can be disrupted by an uncanny encounter with it, for example when a tap fails to produce water or a room is flooded with sewage. It is then that we recognise that our homes are connected to wider socio-economic and political conditions – that in the UK our water supply and sewage disposable are privatised. Water and sewage management are modernist hybrids, which are materially produced as a commodity and socially constructed as natural. In *Chapter 2: Heatwave*, the narrator is standing in a queue for ice cream and strikes up a conversation with an older woman in a dry robe. We learn that she worked for admin in 'the' water company for thirty years and recalls the water act in 1989, Margaret Thatcher's shareholder democracy. This is a turning point in the company, which raised shareholders dividends while cutting investment in infrastructure by half. It is only when she takes up river swimming that the weight of this mismanagement of sewage is felt. It is felt in our guts as the river water flows through a child's mouth who provocatively keeps ducking his head underwater despite warnings.

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[5] Maria Kaika, *City of Flows: Modernity, Nature, and the City,* 2005, London: Routledge, p. 66

The listener is brought into this scenario, sensing the bacteria as it enters our system, a metabolic cycle in which the home and the body collapse under the weight of what we thought could be kept outside.

Through implicating the unfamiliar in the familiar, sewage in public water, Gillard's 'Scopic Uncanny' problematises the modern image by evidencing how strange the familiar ways of looking are. The viewer's relationship to water and wastewater in the home is reorientated and experienced as a complex range of intra-actions between human and more-than-human actors, rather than the simple case of turning on the tap and flushing the toilet.

Audio Folds

Guts connect the infrastructure of pipes that are hidden in the walls and underneath the floors in our homes to our fleshy interior tubes that carry flows in, across and out of the body. In *Chapter 3: One Confident Flush* the viewer becomes implicated in one continuous pipeline, viewer-body-home-environment, as these pipes are probed by an endoscope or plumbing inspection cameras. Through technology we are plugged into the flows of the landscape into which we write and which writes back.

I am on my fourth encounter with the chapter, which has been previously encountered on laptop and computer screenings (I await the Big Screen Southend iteration). I have turned my iPhone over so that it is face down. Earphones are in and noise-cancelling mode is on. I am completely focussed on Gillard's audio track. My body shifts as it relaxes on my doughnut cushion and I am folded into an architecture built by sound, which starts my mind racing down a motorway at night in a concrete tunnel. It then is lighter as if my body could float away, but it is pinned back down by the lyrics, 'I don't wanna do your dirty work no more'. A tinny sound of reflective surfaces suggests that walls are closing in. This is taken over by a shuttling motion; a movement that is building through the hummed voices and buzzing drone that accelerates into a high pitch note then curls off into silence.

Gillard has constructed a soundscape that envelopes the viewer into its folds and brings another context into the work widening the frame of the image. We no longer have the narrator's voice as audio; this is now exclusively in the text captions. Gillard's juxtaposition of an asymmetrical audio to that of the image and written narrative, brings in the wider implications of 'care' in systems that are kept invisible by the modern imaginary, domestic and maintenance work. In this new arrangement the lyrics 'I don't wanna do your dirty work no more' (reworked from the original song *Dirty Work* (1972) by Steely Dan) speak of a body and planet that feel exploited. The work of care is usually buried by its privatisation, which also masks the labour relations at play in the home and the wider infrastructures and resources into which it is networked. In *Chapter 3: One Confident Flush* the viewer is implicated in these systems of care, as we are addressed by the exclamation; 'your dirty work'.

In *Matters of Care*, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa proffers a situated care that is entangled with its context as an alternative to the modernist notion of a bifurcated care (carer/cared-for) that can be instrumentalised to produce a universal and hegemonic

system of care (one size fits all). This becomes even more necessary when intra-acting with the more-than-human:

> *Care appears as a doing necessary for significant relating at the heart of the asymmetrical relationalities that traverse naturecultures and as an obligation created by "necessary joint futures". Relations of "significant otherness" are more than about accommodating "difference", coexisting, or tolerating. Thinking-with non-humans should always be a living-with, aware of troubling relations and seeking a significant otherness that transforms those involved in the relations and the words we live in.*[6]

In *Chapter 3: One Confident Flush*, the viewer is situated inside the plumbing infrastructure, as we travel with the more-than-human probe as it relates to its landscape. This is a form of machine-vision that brings the viewer into proximity with the technology and the environment that it is probing. We are perhaps scanning a terrain of stained cement walls that are built in a modular or cellular system indicated by the ribbing at regular intervals. Folded into the image-scape through the probe, the viewer is asked to consider all the socio-ecological processes that it took to make and lay the cement. It also relates us to our own bodies, as this could also be our intestinal track that is being probed. This suggests that we have fluid bodies, which have already been re-wired through interactions with technology. Bodies which are not always in the binary mode of 'human/nonhuman' or 'well/unwell' but can slip through and across these definitions. Johanna Hedva's, *How to Tell When We Will Die: on Pain, Disability and Doom* (2024) signals to us that all our bodies will one day need care, some now others later. Gillard's audio folds us into this landscape of fluid care, our bodies are situated as precarious and changeable and connected to other more-than-human fragile contexts and bodies.

Postscript

In 'googling' the term *Sludge Syntax* I came across two curious references, which seem to widen the context of this text so are included here:

1. SLUDGE Game Engine Syntax: SLUDGE is a game engine designed for text-based games and refers to the commands, functions and variables in the scripting language.
2. Behavioural Science "Sludge": in the context of behavioural sciences this refers to obstacles that make it hard for people to fulfil their intentions, this can range from form-filling and hidden fees to the inclusion of unnecessary steps.[7]

[6] Marie Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*, 2017, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p.83

[7] With thanks to Christopher Cooke for proof reading