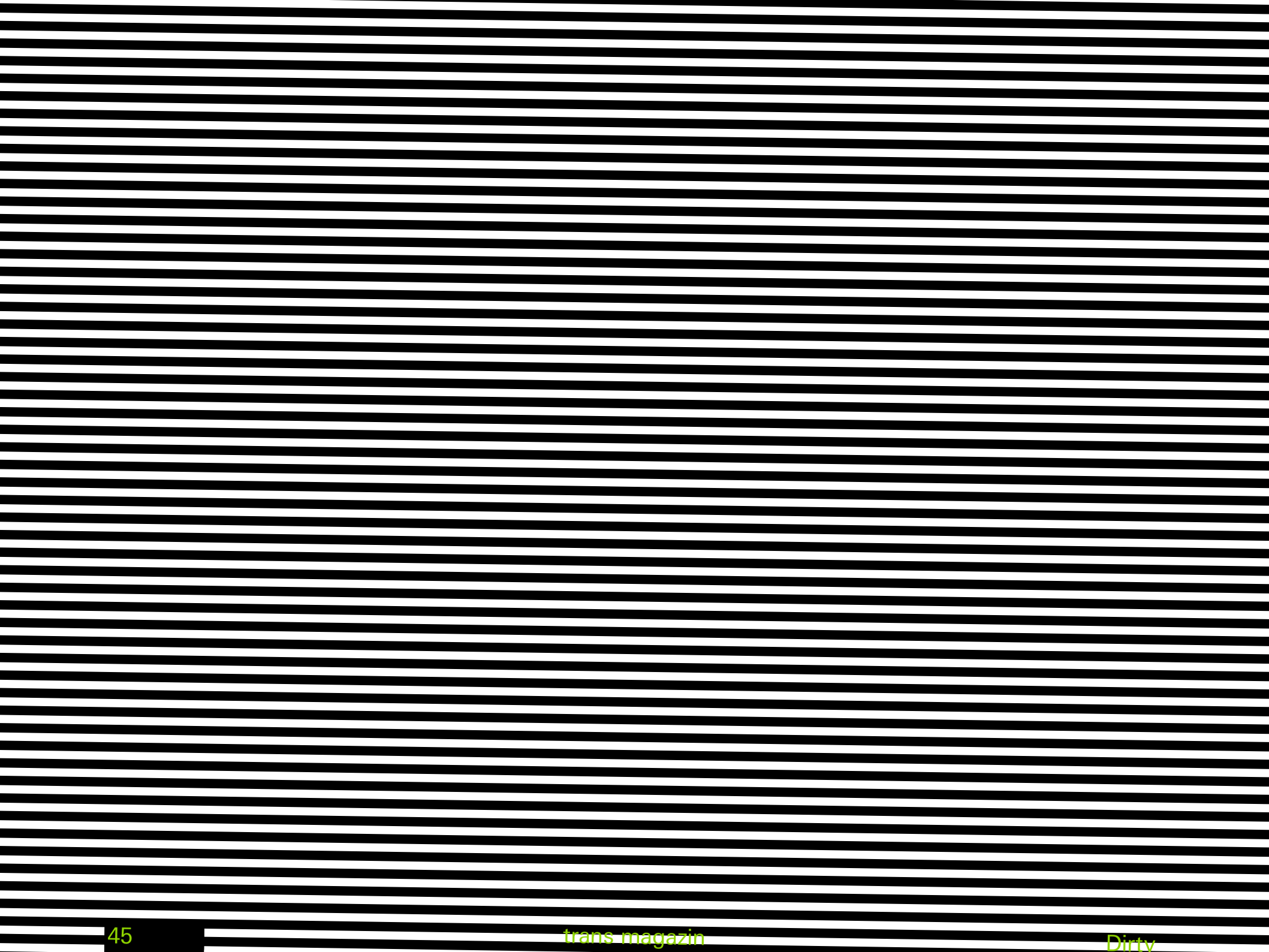


Chapter I – Spill

Chapter II – Wipe

Chapter III – Stain

Chapter IV – Conceal

CHAPTER 1 SPILL

Recent Excavations
Thomas Sommerauer

Instead of a building, there is a pile of rubble.

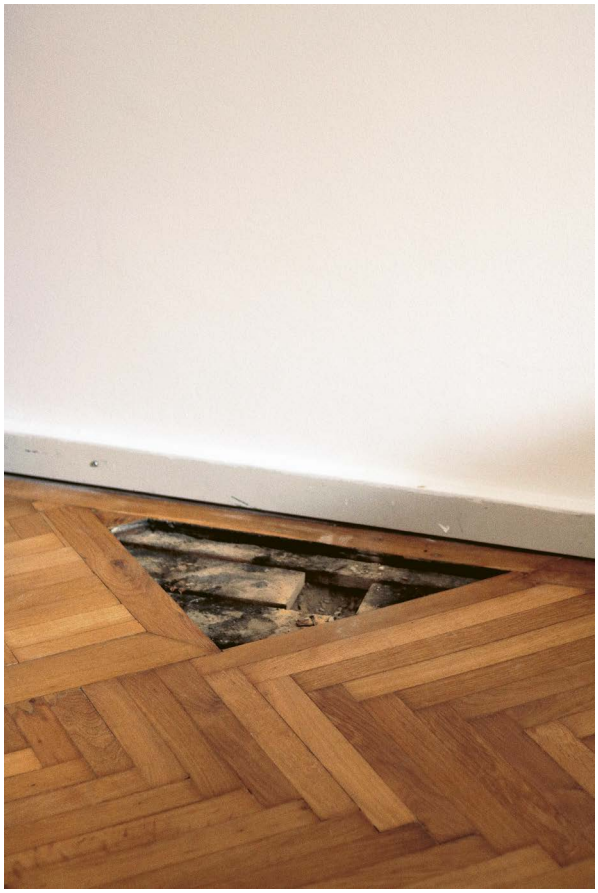
Shattered bricks, cracked beams of wood, twisted iron clamps, fragments of interior fittings. It feels like looking at the innards of what was once a solid structure. What is usually covered behind smooth layers of plaster and neatly placed parquets is laid bare, all mixed up, and ready for disposal at the dump site. This rather unpleasant experience made me think of a historical comment I recently came across while researching and writing about the kinds of houses I used to work and live in – and occasionally encounter in the form of rubble piles. Were not there stories about sort of auto-phagic processes where the debris of former buildings was absorbed in the construction of new ones?

Since the interest I follow is very much about trying to understand the material culture in which the making of these buildings was embedded, I want to know more about the one edifice I live in. It is a relatively common Viennese tenement house built around the turn of the last century, along with thousands of other buildings, to house a rapidly growing population. All of those were being erected in more or less the same manner and more or less the same solid quality, which is proven by the fact that the city of Vienna still consists of a large number of those buildings – around 14,000 to be more precise. (1)

The efforts to make this construction activity happen were, of course, enormous. And it did make builders arrive at unconventional decisions. While most of the materials used were rather conventional and applied in a well-crafted yet highly standardized manner, the historical literature mentions that occasionally building rubble was used to fill the interstices between the wooden beams of the ceiling, to give its structure a minimum level of mass that served both the acoustic insulation and improved fire resistance. (2) Can this be true? Is it possible that there is rubbish in the very ceiling I am standing on right now? What a charming challenge to the contemporary conception of our built surroundings, being so much about the mere assembly of more or less bureaucratically

A

B



C

A–C

Images: by the author

standardized industrial components. It definitely may be of practical interest to develop a more empathic sensibility toward the mechanisms and logistics necessary to transform the residues of former buildings into a valuable resource within a thoroughly systematized economic regime: Old constructions becoming substantial resources for new ones.

It is a lovely idea that an integral part of these enjoyable buildings consists of materials that nowadays would generally be considered worthless. An appealing ambiguity arises from the image of people meticulously cleaning their floors while those may be resting on packed beds of trash and rubble. The point is that the way we attribute value here needs to be revised: as long as the surface is clean, the substance below is neglectable. Would these dear dwellers reconsider their notion of trash if they knew? Since the alienation from the substance that makes up our built surroundings is severe, there is only one way to find out: we have to look behind the surface.

Time to move from theory to practice. I start dismantling the floor of my building to see how it is made. Since the flat I inhabit is rented, I am not exactly sure if my landlord would appreciate this kind of scientific inquiry – nevertheless, I decide to follow my urge. First step: Take out the flooring. Feeling like young Gordon Matta-Clark, I carefully start by taking off the delicately shaped oakwood herringbone parquet board by board in an inconspicuous corner. Then, a brief moment of doubt: did not my professor share the rather unpleasant insight that sometimes there happen to be traces of contaminated slag in these floor fillings? I hesitate. A leftover FFP2 mask is quickly at hand. You never know.

The filtered smell of 121-year-old dust enters my nose. It is a warm odor, reminiscent of the scent of old attics in summer, blended with the sulky aroma of worn-out filter cloth. These boards have pretty surely not been moved since they were first put into place in 1903. What appears below is a layer of rough-cut planks of what is probably spruce wood, implemented with gaps of 10 to 15 mm. Through these gaps, I first gaze upon the material of interest that brought me here. Curiously, I poke around in the dry, brownish-grey aggregate, extracting some peculiar pieces with archaeologic precision. The findings might not be very exhilarating at a first glance. Yet, they are pretty intriguing when one starts to think about how these fragments of glazed tiles, bricks, natural stones, and organic fibers found their way into the ceiling I live upon day by day.

By now, this practice of punctilious building dissection is becoming a regular activity among friends. It appears to develop as a form of subtle collective activism that enhances our

understanding of the physical presence of the things around us. But beware: eventually, this may cause bruises, be it on your hands or buildings.

Thomas Sommerauer completed his studies in architecture at Technische Universität Wien in 2019 with distinction. Among others, he worked for Anna Wickenhauser in Vienna and Pezo von Ellrichshausen in Concepción, Chile. Since 2022 he is part of the research unit «Hochbau und Entwerfen» at TU Wien. In his dissertation, supervised by Astrid Staufer and Lorenzo De Chiffre, he researches the constructive concepts and hybrid tectonics of the «Wiener Gründerzeithäuser».