Dirt Palace

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY JESSICA HOPPER

Dirt Palace is a 9,000 square foot place of magic in Providence, RI. Before I stepped in the door and saw with my own eyes, it was described to me as "a feminist art commune in an old library"—which is absolutely true, and remarkable in its own way, but misses the bigger point: The entirety of the building is one giant art project, one big handmade home for willfully wayward girls. In an enchaanted hull of the half-burned-down former public library, the women of Dirt Palace have made real the dreams deferred of many girl-artists. Walking through it, I wondered why, years later people still are mythologizing the long-dead Fort Thunder and meanwhile, Dirt Palace is living, breathing, giggling and thriving. Touring through their mammoth space was enormously inspiring: it made me want to be part of their can-do cadre. I wanted to be one of these girls who rewires the a room and then screenprints her own elaborate wallpaper for it.

Interviewees: Annapurna / Himal von Wagner / Kristina Brown / Xander Morro / Pippi Zornoza / Natalja Kent / Sasha Wiseman / Lauren Fisher

What is Dirt Palace?
Annapurna: Well, when strangers/ parents/sponsors ask me where I live, I employ the jilted catch phrase "All-Female Art Collective in Providence, RI".

Kristina: It's an inapposnous rotting brick building in the thick of opiniated pedestrians, aggressive loud-mouthed drivers and Rhode Island's finest hot weißers that is Oneyville Square. Inside is a spectacle of madness, obsession, absurdity and inventiveness that cannot be fully appreciated without completely resigning yourself to the vast history of the objects, art, and cobwebs that layer every inch of the structure with the finger prints of every woman who has passed through its

Natalja: DP is sometimes a base wherein howling amas, shrilling laughter, and juicy gossip can revive and destroy.

Xander: The Dirt Palace is a casepeknecroted netherworld docked along the shore of the Woomequacket River. In past lives it was a library, a place of worship, a junk pile, a basement phone sex operation, and a drug store. It is now a place where nobody lives, where nobody ever lived where there are many many books and cats and girls lingering in twoed ballos noing things potentially not in the most efficient way nor using scientific method.

Pippi: It's a junk pile! Uhhhh... a beautiful junk pile.
Sasha: Over the past four years I've lost all concept—myths, rumors, realities (definitely in the plural form). It is something different to everyone who has been involved enough to form an opinion.

What is the history of the place? Were you looking to start DP, or did the opportunity just present itself?
Annapurna: The place was an abandoned library. Top floors burned down at some absurd juncture of Oneyville history. Pippi + Xander bought the place + have been trying to fulfill their punk, ornate, diabolical, jeweled, ruffled, and fierce vision since then. The amount of work they have done on the place cannot stand without serious accolades. Providence seems to me a land of fortuitous opportunities—I've lived here barely a year—a lot of cubic zirconia in the rough. I don't know how they ultimately found the place, though. I reserve it for mythological speculation.

Xander: The building at 14 Oneyville sq. kidunpped our hearts and hid them beneath the floorboards or behind the walls, I don't know where exactly. Perhaps when we find them we will be able to move on. The fear is that they are actually hidden in ghost wings of the building that have been appearing in our dreams for years (there once were three more floors above the two that we inhabit today that were burned off in a fire), and that the only way to get to the missing organs is to find the missing floors and dig them out on the astral plane.

Pippi: The missing part of that mythology is also that we were desperate for space where we could be messy, loud, build large things, and not fear eviction.

Natalja: The histories as I've collected them are as varied as day and night. Saturated in love, loss, explosion, boredom, useless junk, phantom fame, deception and loyalty.

Sasha: As far as the history of the DP in my life, it just presented itself. I was seventeen and living in a mill across the street from the Palace. In a room I had made out of cheap industrial shelving and formore, when Pippi mentioned to me that they had a studio opening up. I was living with a bunch of crazy boys—the night before I moved out one of them hit another with a 2x4 and knocked out some of his teeth, stuff that like was always happening—so I was pretty psychic to seek refuge among the amazons at the end of the block.

Did you feel like in the context of the RISD/providence warehouse scene a specific feminist presence was lacking? Was it a response in particular to the scene?
Annapurna: I can answer to this is that Providence is more slam-packed with the most intelligent, extrmely capable women than any other town I've lived in. I've lived all over the US + the Astounding Women saturation here is more than I've ever seen. But they still get shit on. For the most part, no matter what, dudes rule the scene. They always get shared, their records get put out, and they make history. They rule the scene. I'd like it through potential fuck-knit-bored for non-jung, talent, boldness or a combination thereof, their hegemony is the unseen underground rule. Duh.

Xander: Probably eight years ago when we started there was definitely a crew of peter pan like boys doing things and seeing things in very specific ways (got Fort Thunder). Very preoccupied with freaking out about the warped detritus of our culture and building a new world out of this rubble. Very romantic and apocalyptic, very inspiring but not much room within it to talk about how broken our culture has also been by racism and sexism (as opposed to the straight up materialism, greed, capitalism that manifests itself in the garbage of our time). Our version of "otherworld building" was not so much a critical response as loving variation. Which is not to say that there were never heated debates or angry battles, often on one on one with our brotherly neighbors, and shit even sisterly neighbors. Hearts have been broken and mended and broken.
Natalja: A scene or town cannot be measured by one space or counterpointed by another. Spaces like this cannot occur simply out of a response to it's opposite. Rather, it manifests out of the intentions of many. DP is just one point on a web, a context of feminine.

Pippi: When we started the dirt palace I know that each and every one of us had different motives and vision. Honestly, I just wanted to be doing it myself. I felt so inspired by the women around me. It made sense to birth the beast with them. I was very much in love with our community at that point—still am. I know that some of the women felt that there was a lack of a feminist presence, but I never felt that way at the time. My macho airs and attitude made me blind. Now my perspective is a little different.

Sasha: I used to live in a more reactionary way than I do now. I could go off endlessly about the inequalities you encounter as a female artist and performer, but I really don't care anymore. I believe that if you are as talented and driven as the men around you, there's nothing to worry about! Maybe you have to be a little bit tougher, but really that is good for you.

**Did you look at Dirt palace as being a long-term project or? What were your specific goals? Do you own the building?**

Xander: Pippi and I own the building. Which is sometimes hard though sometimes kind of interesting dynamic. So we are the only ones building equity through the project, though on the flip side because it has been such a community minded endeavor if we were just to decide to cash it all in and sell to some developer or something we would loose, you know friends and community etc...also it's sort of like because part of the point of the project is create this artist/owned/run space rent is as low as possible...as soon as there is equity built, there is the need to put on a new roof and take on more financial liabilities soooooo...there are many ways to conceptualize this arrangement and it takes a lot of trust, clarity and definition. There are people who have lived here who have interrogated the possibility of having a "collective" in a situation where two people own the space and others rent. Not every aspect is collective. Pippi and I deal with the long term planning and capital improvement stuff. We all decide together who is going to take out the trash and clean up the cat vomit and whether or not to have vodka at the new year's party and what will happen on any given work day. The grey zones are not easy. There have been people who are really interested in anarchism who've lived here and criticized that no one should be someone else's landlord and moved out to rent an apartment from a landlord who they can more easily hate. I've gotten pretty good at trusting myself in terms of sorting through what criticisms I think are important to reflect on and take to heart and which are coming from a place that's been a bit contorted by negative shit. Any way...speaking for myself I see it as a long assed project, like I imagine that I will get old and die at the dirt palace. In terms of goals, I think that creating a space that fosters the personal/political/artistic growth of women artists through their cooperation and collaborative projects is sort of what I'd seen the major goal to be on a micro level...in terms of big picture I think that the goal was that these projects and artists (supported and empowered by each other and their experiences here) would change the culture of providence and the world beyond. Sometimes when I go to shows and look around I believe that shit has already changed.

Pippi: For me the project has always been long term. Trying to buy a building was an effort towards some sort of stability/sustainability. I'm going to need someone to take care of me when I'm old.... Xander?? Ahem. I mean I knew I was never going to have a flesh baby, so where is my family? It's all happened pretty naturally, but I've always had a sense that I wanted to form some sort of alternate family structure. I've never been interested in the traditional roles of settling down with your mate – I'm not saying that it won't happen — but I'm still taken with the idea common to five year olds that you'll live with your best friend forever and I'm 30 years old.

Natalja: Xanders personal space neighbors the common space. Whenever a gajgle of us and our guests are in there getting rowdy she's got the sounds of it barely blocked by a sheet of drywall.

Or Pippi's space being right in draft of the bathroom. The kind of patience and dedication it must take to endure years of frantic happenings plus the dedication of years to come is astounding.

Sasha: I don't own the building, but I have no interest in owning a building, so this arrangement works out very well for me. I don't have any intentionally long term projects.

**How was it at first? What are some of the things that have really changed over the years?**

Annapurna: The roof leaks a little less. Or more, depending on what room you're in.

Xander: It was cold and dirty in the beginning and it's cold and dirty today. But really that first winter was pretty hellish and dark. No heat upstairs we all camped out downstairs on top of each other with no real personal space or windows. We had no need to refrigerator vegetables. We were all super young and many of the questions of what will this be exactly were not hashed out at all. Today the challenges be faced on a weekly level are much less demanding and not as pertaining to basic needs. I think that today the communication/co-habitation skills and sensitivity around each other's needs is miles ahead of what was on the table when we first started. I think that I'm probably less of a demanding maniac ass-hole.

Sasha: Things were more strictly structured when I moved in...it was the

"MOST PEOPLE ARE PRETTY RIGHT ON IN THEIR ASSUMPTIONS—THINKING THAT WE ARE A COVEN OF SATANIC SEX CRAZED SPELL CASTING COMMUNIST WITCHES."
What are some of the most special things you have done over the years?
Kristina: Mastering the art of throwing chains.
Xander: Each other's dishes.
Lauren: Egyptian jazz style pedicures over cucumber gin and tonics.

What are some of the failures, or the ideas that were too big? What did you learn from that? What's the hardest thing to do?
Xander: Conceptualizing how to be a "community" space (where there is no money to implement "outreach" or "programs") and we are all mostly already broke and overworked) and to balance that with being a home that's nurturing and productive/inspiring for each of us.
Lauren: I haven't been here at the DP that long, but of what I've seen, I don't think one could say that there have been significant failures, only a shifting and reshuffling of ideas, of strategies and plans. I've been in Providence some years now and lived in multiple collective living situations in this town—all born, not only of ideologies and lifestyle choices, but also of a potentiality inherent in the space itself. This city is full of majestour spaces, and with such grand spaces come grand visions and plans, but things change: landscapes change, demographics change, economics change, climates change. Yet despite the changes, spaces persist—physically, given they're not bought by developers, subdivided into cubicles and sold to Staples and hypothetical Boston commuters, and psychologically, given they're able to adapt to the change & still maintain the ideologies, the lifestyle and the notion of new potentials. With each person who comes through the DP, it seems that some old notions might go out the window, but new potentials are always being realized.

Sasha: I think the idea of empowerment is tricky, especially in a communal group setting. I also have too many big ideas about chicken coops on the roof and wood stoves and things like that but maintain that there is still hope... I think I am in denial about living in the middle of a metropolis, a capital city.

What do you think Dirt Palace is a response to capitalism?
Anna: Anything that assists a life beyond work-eat-sleep-watch reality TV is against—and responding to—capitalism. We live with other values.
Lauren: I think everyone who actively seeks out the Dirt Palace, be it those of us who rent space, those who come for a show or a reading, those who come to volunteer at books through bars or unearth Satanic scriptures in the library,
constant communication—we all brush each other off, and ACTUALLY LIKE EACH OTHER—that we always know what’s going on with one another. And in our separate interactions with the Providence community at large, we have genuine interest in each other’s performances or projects and attend them. We’re a bit of a cell in town, but our exterior associations cover so many areas we permeate most of the city scene. We cover Providence like a lace net.

Xander: Drugs and ritual magic.

Pippi: Gotta be a loser - not a hater. I think it’s pretty ironic that I sound like the biggest hippie.

Natalia: We have house meetings every week, eat together and discuss relevant/irrelevant topics.

What is each person’s favorite thing in Dirt Palace? Annapurna: Well, I can’t believe that I live in a place with a washer and dryer. It’s so bourgeois, but I love it. I really love the people I live with. Every day I can’t believe it. I never dread seeing anyone. Consistently we have great conversations. I’ve moved so many times I thought I would never have a home, but this is really fucking close to the ideal.

Natalia: The two battling infatuated black cats.

Kristina: The small rabbit hole beneath the bicycle grave yard and ancient jewelry, under the basement stairs, that leads to the fountain of eternal pleasure and creative ecstasy.

Xander: Hmm...maybe the fancy nooks in the kitchen or the “jerk haggard used cars... I am not afraid” drawing at the top of the stairs or the garbage pull kid version of the “it is a skull or it is lady looking into a vanity?” optical illusion painting at the top of the other stairs.

Pippi: I wish that I could just insert the image because I know that I won’t do it justice - but there is a comic on our bathroom wall of these ladies on some mythical Mars-like planet. I have no idea who drew it, but some times I lie awake thinking about it.

Lauren: The Domo Michelle noodle and pugs Emmy boards on the wall in the bathroom.

What sort of art does each of you make? How has Dirt Palace life affected what and how you make? Annapurna: I write. I draw. I am completing “The Great Work.” I make jewelry. I take loads of photos. I do obscure performance art. Taxidermy, whatever. I’m primarily a musician, as I said. I’m in a band with Pippi - that’s how I wound up here. I can’t imagine living in a place where you cannot play REALLY FUCKING LOUD. You aren’t really living there. There are so many opportunities to involve yourself in any form of the arts here this house is a hub of sorts, maybe information dispensal center is better... but I’ve been invited to explore all manner of things since I moved here. Gallery art, crazy theater, PBS performance, all sorts of things. It hasn’t so much altered what I do living here, but it has opened a myriad of avenues in directions I had no way to previously access. I had no idea! And that encouragement only makes me want to explore everything. Tattoos? Cabinets? Croissants?

Kristina: I spin the detritus of civilization into gold and black lace utilizing the spatial expanse of the palace and the dark crooked minds of its members to further influence the realization of my imagination.

Sasha: I’m taking a break from making things. I’ve been known to act some things out on magnetic tape and melt some lead and push ink through screens. Avoiding drawing at all costs. Sometimes sewing when the art market fashion industry lets me down.

Xander: Lately what I make: Prints, puppet shows, phone calls, movies, quilts, soap, soap boxes, speeches, sculpture, spread sheets and of course love.

Pippi: Right now I’m working on a lot more music than other things - but still printing, drawing, carving etc.

Natalia: I make music, draw, paint, take pictures, collage, cook and span time with others. DP has put me in a more constant and accessible dialogue with other female makers.

Lauren: Small things, forged metal, dehydrated-inspired light fixtures, expanded spaces, aspiring microscopic drawings, simulated deep-sea environments.

What is each of your favorite project/thing you have worked on in Dirt Palace? Annapurna: I turned my life around here. If it didn’t move here, I would have fucking killed myself in a shitty Maine apartment. I’m serious.

Kristina: The seven chinks I sewed within the first month here, which have been used in more ways than I ever could have imagined.

Xander: The curved plaster shelves in the kitchen.

Pippi: My favorite is the macabre printed with glitter face exit sign that I made with blacksmith Lu Heinitz. It really chases up the joint.

Natalia: Smokers bench out front.

Sasha: So many things. Wintery paper mache mountains and fake snow tiny animal scenes for the storefront window gallery—made them with buddy Nicole D., our entire lower arms became numb as we worked on dipping strips of newspaper in chilly waterpaste mixture in the unheated grand ballroom! Large project scene downstairs. Also hosting a masquerade ball, doing pre-construction demolition on the sewing room, kissing boys on the roof, psychedelic quality time with roommates, building a 14-foot-tall gingerbread house, learning about all kinds of electricity.

Lauren: My double-decker loft/shelving-stairs in my studio. I built it entirely from found materials, mostly old wood pallets that I tore apart. The only material I bought was a box of screws. Aside from the space in my room being nearly doubled, the raw palette wood ‘makes me feel like I am in a boat... or maybe at the beach.’

What do people say about Dirt Palace when they move out? Xander: Every person who moves out probably has something pretty different to say probably ranging from “psycho-hippies”, “to ‘it’s the 5th wonder of the world’”, to “in order for this to be a truly revolutionary project it needs to undergo a deep reflection on power dynamics, personalities and economics” to “the most important things I’ve learned in my life I learned at the dirt palace” to “it was pretty wonderful but dang cold” to “I’m psychologically scarred from the experience” to “it was incredibly empowered by the experience” to “it was just a bunch of girls in an old library, it’s no big deal...” Hmm maybe we should start doing exit interviews.

Pippi: Thank god I’m out of that nut hole.

Lauren: Ok, we don’t talk to people who move out, uncommunicated for life biatch!

Sasha: Ask them! I think I’m the only person who has moved out and then moved back in. I say it’s a precious 9,000 sq. ft. in this world.

How is Dirt Palace more than just a giant-giant punk house? Annapurna: Since I’m an 18-foot tall punk, don’t ask me. I just moved here ‘cause it was the only place I could stand up in.

Sasha: When you poke in the hallway you are expected to do something about it before everyone else wakes up.

Xander: On a cultural level the dirt palace is a space that has been informed, influenced and shaped by a pretty wide variety of spaces and ideas. The “punk-house model” is one that some residents have had more or less experience with or cared about in varying degrees, and correspondingly different residents have been influenced by and identify with punk differently. Punk and DIY consciousness is relevant but not central to what connects us. Other sub-cultures that have influenced members include: the experimental film underworld, lesbian shamanism, academia, the world of social justice organizing, black metal, conspiracy literature, typography and graphic design list-servs, folk-psyche fantasy illustration, comic books, needle lace convention goers, etc.

Pippi: Punk is dead—or god is dead or, well...