
Theory at Sea

Some Reflections from the Gunwale

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Introduction

Fishing was the main source of livelihood in the area where I grew up. In my village, as at other places along the Arctic coast of northern Norway, it had been for centuries carried out from a boat called *nordlandsbåt* (literally, ‘northland boat’). Though the oar and sail powered boat varied in size, from 4.5 to 14 m, the construction was essentially the same: an open and clinker-built keeled vessel characterized by a long slender hull and high raised stems. A very important quality of the northland boat was lightness. The boat had to be light enough to be easily beached and pulled onshore when not in use. Sheltered harbors were thus not a necessity and this flexibility in terms of landing made it possible to live at exposed coastal places close to the fishing grounds. A tiny stretch of decent beach was all that was needed (Fig. 16.1).

During the first half of the 20th century, however, the Norwegian fishing fleet became motorized and by 1950 the northland boat was mostly replaced. Its successors were in average somewhat larger but above all much heavier due to being equipped with the (internal) combustion engine itself and, of course, the necessary axle and propeller, but also by taking on other heavy equipment afforded by the motor, such as an anchor and net winches. Additional weight also came with the new additions of decks, cabins and wheel houses, along with more developed keels.

One consequence of this weight gain was that it became difficult or even impossible to beach the boats and to pull them onshore above the tideline. Thus, while not in use they had to be anchored offshore, which along this rough coast again required sheltered harbors. There were, of course, places blessed with decent natural anchorage but most lacked them. To compensate some communities managed to obtain resources to develop artificial harbors with piers and huge stone breakwaters, but for many small villages this was economically out of reach or even impossible due to natural conditions. For continued life at these places the combustion engine was not a blessing.

The motorization of the fishing fleet undoubtedly eased and secured coastal life in the far north. However, an unforeseen and less desired outcome was depopulation and



Fig. 16.1. Beached northland boats at now abandoned fishing village of Makkaur, Arctic Norway. The photo is taken between 1910 and 1920 (photo: Johan Granmo/Finnmark County Library/Digital Museum).

abandonment affecting a large number of small fishing villages along the outer coast. At the same time, places in more sheltered coastal locations started to swell despite many of them being less optimal in term of distance to the fishing grounds. This, however, was overcome by the motorized boat's capacity to move faster, farther, and safer. Though undoubtedly affected also by economic constraints, devastating WW2 destruction, and state programs of centralization, the combustion engine and the weight gain it initiated took on an unforeseen significance in shaping 20th century demography and living conditions along this Arctic coast of Europe.

As alluded to above, the boat's story is partly autobiographically informed, since the northland boat and the consequences of its replacement is part of my own background. The northland boat was common to everyone living along this northern coast prior to my generation. Even in my childhood, in the early and mid 1960s, some of them were still in active use, while other redundant and permanently beached ones served as playgrounds for coming sailors and fishers. This was also the kind of boat that my father used for decades after he started fishing in 1919 at the age of thirteen. It likewise was used by uncles, grandparents and generations of ancestors on both my mother's and father's side of the family, all of whom were dependent on fishing and the sea. While our village had an excellent natural harbor and survived the motorizing shift well, the situation was very different where my mother grew up. And when her family finally decided to abandoned their ancestral homestead, it was primarily because a place ideal for the

northland boat had proved intolerable for the needs of its motorized successor. Despite this change, also in the coming years and far into my youth, ocean, fishing and boats continued to be an existential a priori for us living here. Until a road was completed in the late 1980s, boats were the only way of getting to and from our village – a six hours' journey over rough seas to get to a place big enough to accommodate a road or regular ship route connection to the world outside.

This case came to my mind when struggling to come up with something to write after been asked to contribute to this volume, and was likely triggered by the book's maritime profile. Autobiographical reflections create some personal unease and initially this was just thought as a way to help with the always tricky part of getting started, by finding 'a way in', so to say. However, the case may do more than that. As I shall return to below, while cases and examples may be used to test and concretize a theory, or work as a heuristic device, they may also play a crucial role in informing and influencing our theorizing (Lucas and Olsen, 2021).

A Note on Symmetry and Trust

A main objective of the volume is to bring together perspectives from maritime archaeology and contemporary philosophy, in particular what has become known as object-oriented ontology. It reflects a wish to make maritime archaeology engage more with theory and the pressing environmental issues facing us, but also to push theories deeper into the maritime realm. The latter, and more generally to make theories encounter the concreteness and complexities of things, I find of utmost importance. This also in order to balance a persistent hierarchy, which explicitly or implicitly often has grounded the common plea for 'more theory' in archaeology, that is, of theory (and theorists) hovering above and informing the real. This hierarchy was evident in the processual and post-processual claims that all data, all empirical observation, is theory-laden (but never the other way around); in other words, the idea that things, the real, cannot speak without the benefit of intervening theory.

I think we should be skeptical of this thesis and spend far more efforts on inquiring into how things, and in particular the specific material we deal with, affect theory and our theorizing. Or for that matter, inquiring into how theory can speak at all without the benefit of intervening things. Maritime archaeology, as with the rest of the field, may gain a lot from interacting with object-oriented and other thing-friendly philosophies, but it is equally important to say, that if these philosophies plunges deep into the field of maritime archaeology they will not be unmoved by this encounter. The maritime archaeological material should not just be informed and enriched by these philosophies but they themselves be affected, perhaps even shattered, by the richness and uniqueness of this material. As stated by Peter Campbell (this volume) in his reflections on pelagic being and thinking, 'It is an alien archaeology beneath the sea, requiring one to think differently'.

Symmetry, thus, is a principle that applies to the relationship between theory and data, but also to interdisciplinary exchange, and as a way to balance between those who talks and those who listen. While there are exceptions, philosophers, writ large, have not found archaeologists very attractive discussion partners. In this respect, the material turn represents a change, which in many ways is remarkable. Scholars who have played a

crucial role in this change, such as Graham Harman, Jane Bennett and Levi Bryant, have approached archaeology with curiosity and interest for what is happening in our field (e.g., Bennett, 2013, 2015; Harman, 2016, 2019a, 2019b; Bryant, 2021, 2022; Harman and Witmore, forthcoming). In some sense this may be said to be expected; who would be more likely discussion partners if one wanted to turn to things and know about them? Still, there is an effective history of disciplinary distancing that does not exactly talk to the advantage of archaeology and which was strangely upheld among the forerunners of this turn, despite their sometimes very close disciplinary links (see Appadurai, 1986; Miller, 1987, pp. 110-111; 2002, p. 240; cf. also Latour and Weibel, 2005). When this has become a kind of ‘normality’ during the last decade, I will argue, it is also because archaeologists have had an impact on this turn, and perhaps more than any time after the 19th century have had a significant impact on theoretical discourses beyond the limits of our own discipline.

Still, a more symmetrical relationship requires that we shrug off an effective history of inferiority and latent dependency that still affects the interaction (–who invites whom to participate in an exchange, for example?). Moreover, disregarding rewarding outcomes, it is a profound irony in philosophers and theorists lecturing archaeologists about things, and, perhaps even more so, that we have been for so long such a susceptible audience. While often productive and enlightening in its own terms, philosophical discourse tends to deal with absolute or ideal instances. Such may be ready-available in texts, literature, and thought, but as we know all too well not so much in our ruined records. Most theorists do not have to engage directly with waste, wrecks, sea currents, glaciers, soils, trowels, underwater suction excavators, or with annoying finds that say nothing or contradict your interpretations; their dealings with things are primarily chosen, discursive, and second-hand. Archaeology, however, has constantly dealt with things, with things broken, soiled and sunken, and as a disciplinary practice it reflects a commitment to the real, with *what there is*. This commitment should also be manifested in the way we theorize, and for how we engage and interact with philosophers and theorists, also because the archaeological encounter may provide other glimpses, other understandings, of things’ being than those featuring in their current embracement in the social sciences and humanities. There is of course also a disciplinary division of labor that applies, and perhaps we become even more interesting collaborators for those who have reached out a hand if we stay tuned with our own commitments.

To do so requires trust and confidence, trust in our trade as well as in our objects, and also, when appropriate, to have the confidence *not* to theorize. I think Matt Edgeworth makes this point well in relation to the East Tilbury ‘archaeosphere’ objects that he deals with. These are powerful and sometimes dangerous entities that affects humans and non-humans alike, and, thus, are ‘strong and vibrant enough to stand up for themselves... Far from being inert objects that require a framing ideology to enliven or activate them, they can be taken to constitute a basis on which new theory might be generated or established theory transformed’ (Edgeworth, this volume).

It Matters What Theories Matter For

And this brings me back to the role of the example, and the value we assign to things, cases, and experiences in our reasonings. In one of this blog posts, Levi Bryant addresses precisely this point, where he starts out expressing a distrust in theories that do not employ

examples, because this, as he writes, may cut off their connection to the world as well as release them from the responsibility of really explaining anything of it. However, he also goes into the formative role of cases or examples in theorizing, asking how a theory is informed by the example used and, thus, whether it would have been different if other examples or experiences were made relevant:

'An example is not a simple ornament, but is that to which the theorist bears responsibility in their theorizing. In this regard, I think that it's noteworthy that prior to the twentieth century, so many philosophers were not first and foremost philosophers. Descartes, for example, was a mathematician, scientist, and soldier. Leibniz was a mathematician, diplomat, engineer, and many other things besides. Spinoza was a lens grinder. Locke was a physician. For all of these thinkers there was something else, a sort of "matter", that introduced a little bit of the real, a little bit of alterity, and which constrained their speculation' (Bryant, 2016).

For Bryant the example is more than a pedagogical or heuristic device; it rather affords and informs a certain theorizing that otherwise would have been difficult or different, and thus places the example 'at the core of theoretical work' (Bryant, 2016).

Importantly, however, this should not merely be a matter of 'reference', of cases or examples to be applied, but rather of how theory is part of the world, is itself 'thrown' into it, and thereby may have semblance to other objects of this world, whether northland boats, funnel beaker pottery, or the Dutch East India Company. In other words, we should try out the option of not seeing theory as something to be applied or imposed on the material but as operating *amongst things* and, thus, as something that may be challenged, transmuted and shattered by its encounters with them. In order to achieve this, and to keep and restore the fidelity to things, our theorizing has to be situated and partial, and much like the objects it seeks to frame, steer clear of the cleansed and allow for reasonings that are fragmentary, soiled, and eclectic. Allowing for such theoretical elasticity may also help turning the much-condemned task of theory borrowing into a creative art of archaeological theorizing (Pétursdóttir and Olsen, 2018).

With reference to what is said above, what I will do in this paper is to explore how the case of the Northland boat, though moving in and out of my account, allows for some nuances in relation to how we think of things, of things in the Anthropocene and why we have gotten here, and also to how we think of theory and the practice of theorizing. Though the relations may appear to be more implicit than explicit, these arguments are also developed in dialogue with, and as responses to, the stimulating contributions making up this volume.

Made in Our Image, after Our Likeness

One of the most emblematic but also least scrutinized features of what has become known as the 'material turn', is anthropomorphism or the transfer of human qualities to things. Given the effort put into abandoning modern negative dualities between inert things and creative, thoughtful humans, and to adopt a more inclusive or flat ontology (a 'democracy extended to things'), such anthropomorphizing may be an expected outcome. In order to enhance their status, bestowing things with qualities one normally associates with humans (e.g., agency, biography, vitality) clearly proved helpful.

There are, at the least, two issues at stake here. One is the very anthropomorphism itself, the other is the bias towards positive or desired human qualities in facilitating it. I shall address them in that order. As one among the rather few, Jane Bennett has explicitly theorized and provided thoughtful argument in defense of this anthropomorphizing of things (see also Killian and Rich, this volume). According to her it works to enhance our sensibility to the similarities that exist among humans and non-humans across categorical divides. Thus, it represents a levelled approach that enables us to reveal and acknowledge ‘a whole world of resonances and resemblances’, that from a more hierarchical viewpoint likely would be ignored (Bennett, 2010, p. 99). In such levelling, anthropomorphic metaphors play an important role, Ian Bogost further argues, that if not fully helping us to reach the alien other itself, then in the least open a way of nearing it (2012, pp. 64-67).

There are a number of concepts in circulation here, and where links to animism (Ingold, 2006) and panpsychism (Shapland, 2021) also may be made. However, if we conceive of it methodologically (and epistemologically), what is proposed is basically a classical hermeneutical approach whereby one in order to understand the other puts oneself in the other’s place (e.g., Schleiermacher, 1819/1986, p. 83; Johnson and Olsen, 1992). Though contrary to the efforts of Schleiermacher, Humboldt and the like, of course, it involves a more-than-human (and perhaps more-than-tricky) twist. As well summarized by Killian and Rich (this volume), in Bogost’s and Bennett’s account, ‘the human anthropomorphizer steps into the place of the anthropomorphized, gradually relating to its way of being’. Morton and Boyer take this extended hermeneutics even further when describing how we as ‘hyposubjects’ subscend into objecthood, craving nothing else than being a piece of flotsam on the beach (2021, pp. 64-65).

As already alluded to, there are some epistemological and ontological issues involved here, e.g., regarding whom has the privilege to ‘isomorphize’, and, not the least, to qualify its success (see Witmore, this volume)? This also may be raised as an issue when Killian and Rich (this volume), in response to Bogost’s claim to the anthropomorphic metaphors as way of nearing the alien other, write that ‘And as we do, we are (re)learning that so many extrahuman kin experience sentience, sensations, and sorrows far beyond our wildest personifying fantasies: speaking plants, negotiating fungi, mourning crows, pranking octopi’. But how do we, actually, learn and know that, beyond recourse to our own adjectives and naming? How can a fungus, a bat, or a piece of Styrofoam express their view about our attempts of becoming identical to them? Likewise, is it the case that ‘just as we *anthropomorphize*’, a dinosaur ‘*dinosaurmorphizes*’, ships *nauticomorphize* or gods *theomorphize* (Killian and Rich, this volume)? Is it probable or even imaginable that things and animals *just as we* extend their being and qualities to other beings? And if so, what happened to their difference and integrity? As noted by Heidegger, ‘Every valuing, even where it values positively, is a subjectivising. It does not let beings: be. Rather, valuing lets beings: be valid – solely as the objects of its doing’ (1977, pp. 228).

Another problem I see with this is that despite the emphasis on things and matters we are largely left with discourse, more words. Narratives, literature, fiction, metaphors, far too often become the only measures for theoretically addressing things and qualifying their inclusion (as exemplified well, I think, by Mentz’s paper in this volume). Rather than bringing us closer to things, may it be, as Walter Benjamin argued (1928), that this excess of words contributes to subjugate things and nature further to human domination?

Though equally anthropomorphic in his critique, Benjamin argued that this domination ('overnaming') had deprived things and nature of their own ability to speak. It was precisely this, and their fate of being 'known by the unknowable', Benjamin argued, that was the cause of thing's lamenting and 'deep sadness' (Benjamin, 2004, pp. 72-73). 'There is, in the relation of human languages to that of things, something that can be approximately described as "overnaming"—the deepest linguistic reason for all melancholy and (from the point of view of the thing) for all deliberate muteness' (Benjamin, 2004, p. 73).

If we return to the northland boat, we may ask how the skipper (*høvedsmann*) and the crew related to the boat, to each other, and to their tasks and the sea? Language was of course important, not just for the crew's internal exchange; boats were named, of course, and there was also a detailed and intricate vocabulary for its different parts, for the way it handled, for actions carried out in and with the boat, for the conditions of the sea, and so on. However, in order to name and metaphorize you have to possess some knowledge of the matter you are dealing with. These words, concepts, were closely tied to experiences and things, and semantically formed part of larger tactile and lived 'field'.

This field, thus, contained a lot that was never named or linguistically expressed but which nevertheless was articulated and known through a bodily felt awareness for how the boat behaved and worked. This also included a sensibility for disturbances and interruptions that was crucial for amendments and the 'tuning in' of boat, particularly with a new boat, but also as constant aspect with its later handling. The sea is never the same, it changes, offer new challenges, which along this mountainous and uneven coast often involve dangerous fall winds and cross currents. Previous experiences helped, of course, but there was a constant aspect of learning, adjustment and managing risk, which only partially was discursively executed.

Relating to the boat and the sea in a concrete, ready-to-hand engagement that at times also were interrupted by 'bringing-to-mind' disturbances, was for these northern fishers, a way of nearing. And perhaps the sensibility emerging from the lived experience with the northland boat, with sea and cod, actually made those manning it more perceptive to the 'world of resonances and resemblances' and the similarities that exist across categorical divides than those performing intellectual anthropomorphism? Maurice Merleau-Ponty in my opinion captures this particular point of *material* nearing well. Living in a tactile world of shared 'physiognomy', being flesh among flesh, our body brings us in direct contact with things, 'which are themselves not flat beings but beings in depth, inaccessible to a subject that would survey them from above, open to him alone that . . . would coexist with them in the same world' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 136). Merleau-Ponty also sees this relation to things as committing, a 'pact between them and me according to which I lend them my body in order that they inscribe upon it and lend me their resemblance' (1968, p. 146). If nothing else, this may remind us that the mind is not the only medium through which humans relate to the world, and that there are other ways of and to knowing. Even for our relation with a rose (Harman, this volume), there is more to the relation than the rose itself and our thinking of it.

As I shall return to below, in their own and humble ways, these very northern fishers knew well the OOO wisdom that the boat (as well as the sea) is more than what it is doing at any moment and, and their use did not at any time fully exhaust

its reserve of potentials. For them, however, this wisdom was not so much arrived at through theoretical mediations, though in some sense they were also highly educated scholars of oceanic thought. Through daily and intimate interaction with the boat, including in gut-wrenching situations, they had been taught about these potentials and what they might imply. While clearly building trust in the capabilities of their craft and themselves, they had also learnt the lesson to acknowledge and be prepared for the unforeseen potential of the precarious (Bojer, 1921).

Things for Good and for Bad

An expected outcome of the anthropomorphizing of things would be the nuanced impression that, as among us, there are good ones and bad ones – and many in between. Yet, the intriguing fact is that what has been disclosed through this ‘touch of anthropocentrism’, are primarily good or sympathetic qualities (‘a swarm of “talented” and vibrant materialities’) (Bennett, 2010, p. 99). Though not a particularly conspicuous feature in this book, reading through the chapters one will find that the adjectives applied to count for things’ impact (–or agency) often are of the kind that trigger positive associations. Things and other non-humans are referred to as shimmering, vibrant, independent, resistant, energetic, resilient, mysterious, talented, dynamic, enabling, and even when they take on the role as colonizers, this seems not to come with the associated negative or condemning aspects that cling to their human conceptual models. For some reasons, but perhaps as a compensatory measure for things’ previous neglect (do I dare to use the word subalternity?), less desired qualities such as preventing, damaging, foreclosing, boring, passive, violent, despotic, stubborn, and so on, are far less frequently to be encountered. Writ large, the rehabilitation and repatriation of things as significant entities of the world largely seem to have made them captive to our human norms – and often made them perform as our desired alter ego (Olsen, 2013).

This bias has, of course, been *Gefundenes fressen* for those arguing that the new ‘celebration of things’ has gone too far and led to a turn away from people. Actually, one argument here is that such a neglect is facilitated precisely by avoiding things’ problematic and monstrous qualities in favor of their more pleasing attributes:

‘Thus, few or any of the objects mentioned in some of the main texts of symmetrical or neomaterialist archaeology (e.g., Olsen, 2010; Witmore, 2007, 2014; Pétursdóttir, 2012, 2013) can be labelled monsters. They can be more or less difficult to handle for humans, but they are scarcely monstrous from a physical, ontological, or moral point of view. We do not see cluster bombs, methamphetamine, or asbestos mentioned...’ (González-Ruibal, 2019, p. 177; c.f. Ribeiro, 2019; VanDyke, 2015, 2021; McGuire, 2021).

Disregarding that González-Ruibal’s description is wrong, this critical corrective, of course, comes with more than a *touch* of anthropocentrism. For these critics, a monstrous thing is primarily an outcome of bad intent, a corrupted human morality inscribed and, thus, predefined in that thing, whether napalm, the atomic bomb, mustard or nerve gas (González-Ruibal, 2019, pp. 171-178; see also Watson, this volume). Though this is true for some weapons of terror, it also true that other ‘killing machines’ (machine guns, grenades, flamethrowers) have been indispensable in fights for democracy, in anticolonial fights for

freedom and liberation, and other just wars against fascism and Nazism. Moreover, from this perspective, little can be said of the monstrous in nature, and the pain and suffering created by erupting volcanoes, earthquakes, landslides, bolide (meteorite) impactors, or the range of natural toxic chemicals deadly for us and others. Asbestos, for sure, features on González-Ruibal's list of monsters, though as if it was an agent similar to cluster bombs (and with little regard for the trivial fact that this monster for more than five millennia was the preferred means for ceramic tempering among hunter-gatherers in northern Fennoscandia) (Carpelan, 1979; Jørgensen and Olsen, 1988).

However, and more relevant here, is that this position makes it difficult to understand how ordinary and intentionally innocent things and practices, including synthetic garments, plastic toys, solar panels, wind turbines, internet gaming or livestock farming are radically transformed into hyper-monstrous beings such as marine and terrestrial debris, environmental degeneration, greenhouse gasses, and toxic pollutants that today provide the greatest threat to humanity. And if we look back at my own mundane case, such a position offers little help with understanding why the internal-combustion engine, despite its many good and life enhancing effects, also proved to have unforeseen and fatal consequences. Whatever one may think of the motives and ambitions of Herbert Akroyd-Stuart and Rudolf Diesel, they hardly included any desire to desert northern coastal villages – or, for that matter, contribute to global warming and rising seas.

Ian Hodder has rightly argued that there is a darker side to our relationship with things that is often missed out: that things build dependencies and restrict our choices. As seen with the motorization of the fishing fleet, they often leave us in a sticky entrapment:

‘A key aspect of our relationships with stuff is that they involve more than networks of humans and things, more than a symmetry of relations. Rather, our relations with things are often asymmetrical, leading to entrapments in particular pathways from which it is difficult to escape’ (2014, p. 19).

Hodder, however, seems little concerned with the actual capacities of things themselves. These capacities, I believe define degrees of dependencies; and these also include things in their afterlife, when they become redundant and out of hand, but yet stubbornly continue to haunt us with new and unforeseen potentials. Such is the case with waste, sea-born debris, as touched upon by many of the papers in this anthology. What is needed, however, is not an asymmetrical but rather a more and truly symmetrical perspective, one which allows to account for how things affects us and other beings immensely various ways and, thus, helps us see both gains and losses.

And this brings me to some thoughts about things in the Anthropocene and what has brought us here, thoughts that for some years now have emerged and matured through conversations Christopher Witmore and I have had about this issue. Put simply, as seen with the case of the motorization of the fishing fleet, this is basically about the consequences of weight, about heaviness, a heaviness produced from all our stuff gathering around us, stuff that builds up, and accumulates. Stuff that clearly enables but which also creates dependencies and restrict choices and changes.

Weight

The coming of the Anthropocene has made us increasingly aware of climatic and environmental changes, and how our societies and economies have contributed to them. Less attention, however, is brought to the fact that we are increasingly unable to cope with change. At a time when environmental changes require flexibility we are increasingly entrapped in constant constructions of more tenacious ways of living. Ways of living characterized by weight, corpulence, and, thus, increasing immobility. Despite the pleasing post-modern image created of humans as the new nomads, constantly on the move in an ever more shifting and fleeting reality¹ --- our lives are actually characterized by an extreme and constantly developing material corpulence that differs from anything humanity knew in the past. A sedentariness created by massive investments in increasingly heavier stationary infrastructures and dwelling machines, by increasing masses of people that increasingly cluster in cities and urban areas, and by the masses of redundant things and garbage produced at an ever-escalating rate.

This, what seems to have become the new normality, is a way of living that actually depends on environmental stability; a standstill that never has existed before. Notwithstanding what sometimes seems to be believed, climate and the environment have undergone changes, also dramatic changes. And if there is one lesson from this, it is that there undoubtedly will be more serious changes, whether as now humanly induced or by nature's own forces. Consider sea-level changes. Archaeological and geological knowledge tell us that extreme changes in sea-level have been experienced by past human societies. Especially during and after the last deglaciation dramatic they were dramatic. As the ice melted the rise in sea-level flooded entire regions of lowland Europe, including Doggerland, the large continent between Denmark and the British Isles. Studies from areas set wide apart, such as the west Atlantic area and South East Asia, shows a sea-level rise of four to five meters per century during the final stage of the Pleistocene (Bard et al. 1990; Hanebuth et al. 2000). In some northern areas, such as Norway and Sweden, isostatic rebound dominated. Free of the burden of the enormous ice cap, the land rose much faster than the sea-level. In some areas, the sea level thus dropped dramatically, such as in the Gulf of Bothnia where the first post-glacial hunter-gatherers had to cope with shoreline displacement of one meter *per decade* (Påsse og Daniels, 2015, p. 24). Needless to say, such changes were of course experienced within the frame of human lifetime. New lands opened or closed as coastlines and islands of one generation became terrestrial or maritime for their children and grandchildren. What if our current coastal metropolises had to face such conditions?

When these early societies could cope it was due to their lightness and mobility. And this is nothing exceptional for the very distant past. Even during the last centuries, such lightness was characteristic of the poor majority, those who lived outside cities, and those who fished from the northland boats. They were tuned to season, to the land, and to the movements of herds or fish. With far fewer possessions, past societies lived in a world of tolerant lightness and this enabled them a capacity to cope. As did their knowledge based

1 'Today's internet generation no longer needs a home. It is mobile. It works six months in a shared office in Berlin, spends the summer in a caravan in Chile, and shows up just in time for the next project at a temporary desk for a client in New York' (Klanten et al. 2015, *The New Nomads*).

on a life and a nature that was anything but stable. It should call for reflections that the indigenous tribes of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Indian Ocean, as well as coastal tribes in Thailand, sensed and survived the Tsunami in December 2004. As reports tell us, they did it due to their mobility, lightness and ability to read the signs that living with an unstable nature had learned them.

The pace of the coming environmental change may come to match what our forebears faced in the early Mesolithic, yet it does so at a time when we are more immobile than ever. The spiral of material entanglement has constantly made us more rigid, more fragile in the face of change. While we would search in vain for any architect or human intent to blame for this dystopic trajectory, the past has rendered a wealth of material clues to how and why we got here. Interestingly, though, the trust that once came from looking to the past in order to understand the present is now rendered irrelevant. As the story goes, our situation is unique; we have never experienced such environmental challenges. From this vantage point the experiences of early Mesolithic hunters and fishers become redundant or irrelevant, as do the ones of those recently settled the deserted villages of the Arctic coast of Europe. In the discourses of the present and future, such people become too distant, too primitive and ‘other’, to be recognized in the ‘we’ that ‘never before’ has experienced such challenges. The current crisis may cause alertness but it is also likely to turn us into temporal narcissists so absorbed by our own situation that we completely forget how it was to be human for what was by far the longest part of humanity. And, thus, also made us forget that what is truly unique by our situation is our weight and inability to change.

Onshore Afterlives and Speculations

Let’s once again return to the northland boat. The construction and lightness of this boat afforded other and non-maritime uses. If surprised by bad weather long way from home, and a suitable spot of beach was within reach, the boats could be pulled ashore, demasted, and turned bottom-up to work as a temporary shelter until weather conditions allowed safe return. The small boat crew could stay for days and even weeks in such a boat shelter waiting for calmer weather. This onshore experience may have initiated the quite common habit of giving retired northland boats extended lives as more permanent abodes for animals, things and humans. To serve this new role, amendments were needed; the inverted boats were firmed by being lined with stones and turf, the gunwale might be extended with planks to get a proper wall, and sometimes the bow or stern part was cut off to provide place for a straight short wall with a doorway. Their use as human shelter peaked following the catastrophic impact of the scorch-earth tactic applied by Wehrmacht troops during their retreat from northernmost Norway in 1944 (cf. Olsen and Witmore, 2014, pp. 165-166), when local families as a substitute for their burnt down houses lived for years in these inverted vessels turned homes (Fig. 16.2).

Boats have a primary purpose of carrying people and things on and across water, a quality that also affords innumerable other tasks. When an accident happens and they sink, this in many ways make manifest ‘the discontinuity between the ship’s ‘working life’ at the surface and its ‘afterlife’ at the seafloor’ (Rich et al., this volume). The northland boat, however, reminds us that there are diverse destinies for a boat



Fig. 16.2 Northland boat turned dwelling for homeless natives in the village of Gamvik, Arctic Norway, after the German retreat in November 1944 (photo: The museums for coastal heritage and reconstruction in Finnmark).

and that this discontinuity may be negotiated and overcome in many different ways, as also thoughtfully addressed by Chelsea Cohen (this volume). Old boats were commonly dragged onshore and left there; initially, perhaps, in a kind of waiting mode (for unlikely repairs, new owners), but in most cases for an undecided onshore destiny as playgrounds, nesting places for eider ducks, or as source of fuel during cold winters. It happened, of course, that the northland boat got lost at sea. The boat was rigged with a square sail and especially during rough weather tacking it could capsize if mistakes were made or something unexpected cropped up. Due to its light wooded construction, however, it was not prone to sink and would commonly continue to float upside down. There are numerous stories about 'keel riding', boat crews being saved after clinging to the shallow keel of the northland boat (Bojer, 1921). The actual wreckage of the boat, if not saved, would normally happen when it drifted to the shore and was smashed against rocks, ending up as smaller and larger pieces of driftwood.

This range of possible afterlives, and other uses, is not just a reflection of happenings but constitute repeated and knowable experiences. These other destinies were thus part of a reservoir of possible and even expected outcomes, that add to the corpus of knowledge associated with their active use at sea. This I find important, and if we allow theory to enter these waters and operate amongst the northland boats this may cause some reflections, and possibly insights, with regard to knowing objects and what an object is. We may for a start ask whether some or any of these described destinies represent instances where the boat enters into 'a loose relationship with its own qualities' (Harman, this volume)? For instance, when turned upside down and

used as human dwelling did the northland boat lose its 'boatness'? Did it become a 'weird crack' in reality, something 'beyond concepts' (after Morton, 2013, 2016)? Or is it rather likely, as I would suggest, that experiencing these many transitions had allowed for some elasticity with respect to this relationship, as well as with the concept of the boat itself? In other words, regardless of whether it ended up as terrestrial dwelling, wreck, driftwood, or playground, the boat connection was never really lost. Even when used as fuel for fire you knew well it was a boat burning. Experiences modifies absolutes, also conceptions of 'weirdness' (Harman, this volume), which likely depends on who judges and from what perspective. In other words, that what may seem weird to American philosophers might not necessarily be strange or 'beyond concepts' for northern fishers, a north Atlantic cod, or an eider duck.

Modes of Nearing

This is not to rank these experiences, just to acknowledge their difference and the elementary phenomenological insight that we are situated beings. More basically, these remarks relate to the question of knowing and the possibility of knowing and nearing the object. Following Harman (2016), we cannot know the essence of objects; what they really are will always remain hidden to us, and released potentials of their unknown reserves will thus be a source of frequent surprises. Everything, including the northland boat, has such an autonomous essence that cannot be known, and what I specifically want to bring attention to here, is Harman's conviction that 'our practices grasp it no better than our theories do' (Harman, 2016, p. 16). Following Harman, the best we can hope for is to be provided glimpses 'through indirect, allusive, or vicarious means' (2016, p. 17).

It is interesting to note whom he thinks are able to provide such glimpses and by which means. Based on the examples used, artist, critics, and writers, seem to be the ones gifted with the needed means, and thus able to catch some oblique sights of things being. For example, the art critic who writes allusively and vividly about Picasso's *Les demoiselles d'Avignon*, 'brings its subject to life rather than replacing it with bundles of explicit and verifiable qualities. Sometimes we can only reveal things obliquely, looking for paradox rather than literally accurate predicates as our entryway to a thing' (Harman, 2016, p. 32). It is through creative writing, thus, and possibly other allusive artistic means, that we can reveal a thing's essence (though only obliquely).

It is difficult to speculate what kind of status Harman assign the skills held by those who fished from the northland boat and the knowledge they had about their vessel. Or, moreover, what would have happened if this boat rather than *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* (or the Pizza Hut chain) was used as his go to example? Perhaps not so much, given his position on 'practices', and since the unknowability of things is known in advance? Nevertheless, the examples used by Harman are hardly accidental and perhaps they reflect his field of experiences and thereby somehow color the position arrived at? Though I am sure that the crew of the northland boat would be more than ready to share Harman's position that the boat is always more than what it is doing right now, and that what it holds 'in reserve' cannot in any way be exhausted, what they likely may also may have argued is that partial knowledge, and richer knowledge, of this reserve is possible to arrive at through tactile engagements. And probably also, that it matters to our knowing which kind of object we are dealing with (Fig. 16.3).

While being critical of this particular aspect of Harman's object-oriented philosophy, there are other important features of it that I share, and which have been decisive for my own reasonings about things. There is also a specific aspect of his contribution to this volume that I find very interesting, and if I understand him right, also may contribute to a somewhat different, and in my mind more material, means to account for what an object hides or holds in reserve. This relates to what is addressed above in relation an object's deviations from intended purposes, but with a somewhat different outcome.

Harman makes the point that the shipwreck in some sense becomes 'more' than the operating, fully functional ship; that an object often becomes most itself when stripped of its usual context, and exists in tension with that context and its own qualities (Harman, this volume). Without making this link himself, this resonates well with Walter Benjamin's thoughts on the ruin as somehow speaking 'truer' or being more articulate than the complete building. Being 'scattered and preserved', the ruin exists in a kind of revelatory tension (a 'petrified unrest'), between its own pre-history (of uses, success, and hopes) and its after-history as wrecked and redundant (Benjamin, 1999, pp. 473-476; see also Buck-Morss, 1999, pp. 110f, 219-21). From this perspective, the shipwreck might be seen as an archetypal case of the ruin and the abandoned thing. Released from its chains of relations,



Fig. 16.3. Resting Northland boats in the harbor of now abandoned fishing village of Finnkongkeila, Arctic Norway, ca. 1910 (photo: Johannes Øwre/Finnmark County Library/Digital Museum).

and 'freed from the drudgery of being useful', as Walter Benjamin phrased it (2002, p. 39), the ruin, the wrecked ship, more fully presences itself outside its habitual domain.

And maybe it is in this state as thing 'out-of-hand' (Pétursdóttir, 2014), when no longer being a thing-for-us, that we most easily catch sights of its difference, those aspects that neither are released nor exhausted by its use. However, rather to be seen as something disclosed beyond or even in opposition to the field of experience, a kind of secret affordance reserved for the attentive modern intellectual, such disclosures are common. Actually, I would claim they were more common in previous times when the useful were allowed to encounter the stranded and redundant in more generous portions, but also because habitual living – such as with the northland boat – far more frequently were put at risk by intervening presences of the not habitually known.

Postscript: Weirdly Cracked?

Today the northland boat has taken on new lives among enthusiasts and boat societies all over Norway and even abroad. It frequently features in the touristic depiction of northern Norway, and is the subject of its own regattas and various boat and fishing events. As old boats are repaired and new ones built at an increasing pace, the future seems reasonable bright for the legendary boat. Less so, however, for the northland boat that was left in the timbered boathouse when my mother's family finally vacated their homestead sixty years ago. The reason for this, if any specific, remains unclear, since the boat was well kept and in good shape. It was one of the smaller types, though, a *kjeks* built for two pairs of oars, and may have been regarded as of little value. However, and with the liberty that comes with narration, its destiny may of course be retrofitted as a pertinent material commentary made by those who left on their and their homestead's fate.



Fig. 16.4. The collapsed boathouse at my mother's homestead in 2019 (photo: Bjørnar Olsen).



Fig. 16.5. The trapped *kjeks* in the boathouse ruin (photo: Bjørnar Olsen).

Despite going back each summer in the years after the move, the boat was never launched again. Nevertheless, the airy boathouse cared well for the boat, which remained in its unused position for decades. As the years passed the homestead received new and distant owners and visits became less frequent. When going back a decade ago the boathouse was in a critical state of tilting, with slanting poles raised as a provisional measure to prevent its collapse. Still, the northland boat was surviving seemingly unaffected with its green-painted gunwale, as if enjoying, in its anthropomorphized gestalt, its autonomy and ‘releasement’ (pace Heidegger, 1966).

Upon our last visit, in 2019, the boathouse had finally surrendered to the weight of its heavy sod-covered roofing and laid collapsed in a mess of timber and turf with the northland boat trapped inside. Peeking up through the heap of rubble was the pointed bow of a red fiberglass speedboat that later had been stored here (Fig. 16.4). The situation indeed looked weird. The *kjeks*, though, despite being irretrievably trapped in the rubble, seemed to have survived even this, stubbornly keeping its upright position (Fig. 16.5). For me, there was indeed some ‘dialectical imaging’ in all this, an instance of critical interruption, so to say, as if the past and the present had joined in a tension-filled constellation (Benjamin, 1999, pp. 474-476). Being an object ‘blasted’ out of continuous history, has the trapped boat perhaps settled in a ‘weird crack’ of reality after all, and for which it becomes both a victim and a witness? It remains to be seen, however, whether that brings us any closer to its essence than having built it, sailed it, and left it here for our speculations.

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