

Concrete Matters

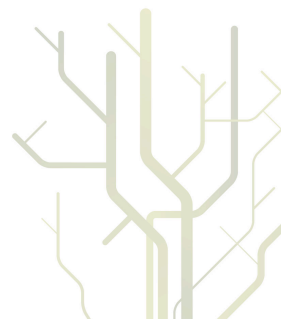
Towards an Archaeology of Things



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A dissertation for the degree of
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1. Introduction

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, unremembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning*

(T. S. Eliot "Little Gidding", *Four Quartets*)

In his *Praise of Love* Alain Badiou states, with reference to Plato, that, "anyone who doesn't take love as a starting point will never understand the nature of philosophy" (Badiou and Truong 2012: 3). This may perhaps sound as a ridiculous claim, but to Badiou love is not some transcendental or supernatural occurrence that carries us away or "beyond" the everyday, but a down-to-earth intense experience of otherness. It is the risk taken when we are challenged by difference and rather than being suspicious of it we put our trust in it, in the otherness of the other or the world. Despite its depiction as such love, thus, is never a fairytale of the perfect match – on the contrary, woven from the experience of otherness, love does not seek sameness but embraces what is different, incompatible or even impossible. Love is to risk moving towards and believe in the possibility of rising above that which appears impossible, and therefore it is, Badiou argues, that "thinking inspired by love is also thinking that is created against all order, against the powerful order of the law" (Badiou and Truong 2012: 79).

While Badiou is for the most part referring to love between two *human* beings I think his theory or "re-invention" of love and its relation to difference is pertinent also to other experiences of affective otherness, as the passion we may feel for the things we do or surround us with. I believe that this is also what he (and Plato) is referring to when suggesting that love should be the starting point of philosophy. Because, rather than rendering us blind, in love we open for the possibility of the impossible, accept difference, embrace otherness, and thus seek

to experience the world not merely from our own perspective, but from the perspective of the other. Love, thus, has an ethical undertone.

This may be an unusual beginning to an archaeological work. Nevertheless I believe there is something important to be learned from Badiou's "re-invention" of love for us as archaeologists who constantly strive to reach the other, in the many different forms and figurations this other may appear. That, indeed, is what drives my own passion for archaeology – its invitation to (at least attempt to) experience the world and its otherness, also from the perspective of the other. The following, thus, is an introduction to a project that might just as well be described as my love affair with two archaeological sites, two abandoned herring stations in the Icelandic northwest – my immediate fall for their ruined and often uncanny presence and, eventually, my attempts to retain that spark by taking the risk of embracing their otherness rather than reducing it to sameness – to the reign of the known, the familiar and safe. This was not an entirely straightforward journey, however, and the few sentences from T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* quoted above somehow portray, in their simplicity, the path I have wandered with this project; from my initial encounters with the two sites explored, through a period of *doing archaeology by making sense* of their otherness, only to return again to where I started; to that moment of initial wonder, to where I *saw* and *fell for* the sites for the first time and instead allowed myself to *do archaeology by sensing* their otherness. Importantly, and paradoxically, that strange quest – my belated return to what was already there – is also the most significant part of my "discovery". It does not consist in *new* findings or hitherto *unseen* facts but rather in *a return* to the most ordinary and frequently observed, yet rarely expressed experiences of the archaeological everyday; a return to moments of encounter and to things preceding explanation.

The "return" in my journey, thus, like the one depicted in T. S. Eliot's passage above, is not to be understood in any negative way. It was neither a matter of failure nor loss of hope. Much rather it was an optimistic reaction to a growing belief in the richness of the material I was working with, and a trust that risking to follow its affective lead would indeed direct me to a new beginning. Accordingly, the return itself cannot be sidelined or overlooked in any honest or

convincing retelling of my explorations. It is an indispensable part of my journey and a turning point for my progression.¹

As an opening to my project, my explorations and results, I must therefore inform that this introduction is not of the classical kind possibly expected. At least, I didn't intend it to be of that sort. What I mean is that it should not be thought of as a "background" to the project or the articles published in its course; not as a theoretical point of departure from where I pursued to answer questions that were already formed with results that were already anticipated. Because the truth is that what I had in mind at the beginning of the journey gradually evaporated as my acquaintance with the material grew, and with it also my empathy and respect – or *love* – for its characteristics and peculiarities. And it was only in the return that followed, through an attentive dialogue with the sites and things themselves, that questions and answers began to take form. Moreover, and in accordance with T. S. Eliot's seemingly paradoxical claim in his "Little Gidding" that "What we call the beginning is often the end", this introduction, this beginning, is also the very last thing I write – at the end of the journey. Thus, rather than the traditional research "background", a rational description from beginning to end, this introduction is intended to describe and discuss the process of how I *ended* up doing what I did. With reference to the path I have travelled it is not only a description of my current stand but inevitably also a recollection of how I got to this point that in the end became my beginning.

¹ Indeed, the "return" is present as part of the research progression and employed as a form of rhetoric in three of the articles published during the project's course (articles "A", "B" and "C").

2. Origins and theoretical terrains

Having said that this introduction should not be read as an actual background to my research it is nevertheless constructive to begin by looking at the theoretical landscape from which the project originates. While it is surely possible to discuss this from several different angles I will here focus on two currents or “movements” which I recognize as essential to both the project’s origin and further development. These two movements are, on the one hand, the so called “turn to things”, designating the ongoing theoretical turmoil, or paradigm shift, in the humanities and social sciences, and, on the other hand, the development and ongoing establishment of an archaeology of the contemporary past as a subfield within the archaeological discipline.

While both of these strands have been prominent in the academic and archaeological discourse for some time, I prefer to discuss them as *movements* rather than theoretical or scientific *frameworks* since both are identifiable in this discourse as “matters of debate” rather than blackboxed matters of fact (cf. Latour 1987). That is, rather than representing what Kuhn (1996: 181-183) referred to as “disciplinary matrixes” or fixed frameworks that delineate a scientific paradigm’s means and modes of operation, I conceive of these movements as *yet unframed* accumulations of different and diverging ideas, theories and programs of action. These theories are assembled around a mutual anomaly or problem within the two respective movements: the “missing masses” or ambiguous location of matter in social theory, and the equally ambiguous place of the present and modern material culture in a discipline of things traditionally focused on the past. In other words, as recent uprisings within or against a “normalized” disciplinary landscape these movements should therefore not be seen as providing my project with any fixed background; with ready and available instruments, ideally competent questions or already anticipated answers, but rather as offering the possibility to take part in – and be affected by – an ongoing dynamic dialogue where things are centre stage.

Thus, before moving on to the project itself I will discuss briefly each of these movements, beginning with the more wide-ranging current theoretical

rotation apparent in the humanities and social sciences. Importantly, what is presented here is a “sympathetic” *reading* of a turn to things as it has so far manifested itself through academic *texts*. As I will discuss further in the following chapters, however, a need for a certain resistance to or rebellion against this mostly *discursive* turn also arose when confronted with the stranded things themselves – when *turning to the herring stations* and their rich assemblages of tangible things.

The turn to things

It is difficult to even imagine where to begin a search for an origin of the theoretical unrest rising in different forms within various branches of the humanities and social sciences since the 1990s, let alone to find one adequate name that grasps these different trends, although a few have so far been proposed; for example “new materialisms” (Coole and Frost 2010), “posthumanism” (Braidotti 2013; Wolfe 2010), “the speculative turn” (Bryant et al. 2011) or “the return to things” (Domanska 2006). Of course, an important predecessor of these (while at the time not necessarily an attempt to grasp an interdisciplinary movement) is Bruno Latour’s claim for a “symmetrical anthropology” in his book *We have never been modern* (1993), which has since become one of the landmarks of this theoretical turn. Echoing this, of course, is also the line of reasoning developed within archaeology during the last decade and referred to as “symmetrical archaeology” (Olsen 2012b; Olsen et al. 2012; Shanks 2007; Witmore 2007). The label I have referred to above, and in the heading of this chapter, “the turn to things”, constitutes yet another suggestion and is sought from the title of Alex Preda’s seminal article from 1999, where he argues for the importance of a sociological theory of things, drawing on the work of Latour and other network theorists.

Reflected in all these different labels, however, is a shift away from the “cultural-”, “constructivist-” or “linguistic turn” that heavily influenced social and cultural research since the 1970s; the paradigm which through the frameworks of e.g. structuralism, post-structuralism and social constructivism had honoured discourse, symbols, power and ideology as the fundamental constituents of

society and “reality”, and where, moreover, language and texts provided the pertinent models for how to conceive of that social reality. Thus, what is shared among the trends united under the rubric of “the turn to things” is a concern for the insufficiency of these frameworks, while their deficiency has been more explicitly articulated in several different ways. For example, as argued by Bruno Latour (2005) and other actor-network-theorists, the shortcoming of many social theories is to allow terms like *social*, *ideological*, or *cultural* to designate both the actual interactions dealt with by these theories as well as the underlying forces enabling the durability of the same interactions. What such ambiguous and largely tautological cross references fail to explain, Latour argues, are the practical details, “the steel”, that make it possible for these forces or social ties to last at all, rather than rendering them, as philosopher Michel Serres has expressed it, “airy as clouds” (Serres 1995: 87).

Another and more extensive articulation of the shortcomings of the cultural and linguistic approaches is stated by Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman in their introduction to *The Speculative Turn*; “In the face of the ecological crisis, the forward march of neuroscience, the increasingly splintered interpretations of basic physics, and the ongoing breach of the divide between human and machine, there is a growing sense that previous philosophies are incapable of confronting these events” (Bryant et al. 2011: 3). Thus, while Latour is calling for a concern for the “steel” of social cohesion, what is more explicitly articulated here is the difference or diversity of the “thing” we are encouraged to turn towards. This can be anything from plants, animals, technology, quarks, commodities, weather patterns, water, microbes, ruination, or absence. To simplify, or generalize, we could say that the “thing” turned to is the *non-human*,² in its untold varieties, and thus that the turn to things is not only a break from the anti-realist stance of previous social/philosophical theory but also a decisive contravention from the anthropocentric Cartesian worldview. Beyond this statement, however, any gross generalizations serve limited purpose; the approaches are as diverse as they are many. I must therefore underline that the

² Which importantly though does in no sense imply a turn away from *humans*, but rather a different conception of what it means to be human – as for example captured in Latour’s phrase “we have never been modern” (Latour 1993).

following is an attempt to delineate my own stand within this movement, and not the diversity of perspectives that may thrive within it.

To begin with, and following the note above on the diversity of the “things” turned to, it is important to mention that there is no consensus over what to name these material phenomena. Many scholars refer to “non-human” (Latour 1993, 2005) or “thing” (e.g. Bennett 2010; Brown 2001; Latour 2005; Olsen 2010; Preda 1999; see also Heidegger 1971), while others prefer to use concepts like for example “unit” (Bogost 2012) or “object” (Bryant 2011). I have in this work mostly applied the concept “thing” (and also non-human) to grasp and articulate the phenomena I am working with, which mainly comprise of concrete/physical archaeological artefacts, fragments, structures and sites. The “physical” reference of “thing”, which for some scholars is the very reason for the concepts inadequacy (e.g. Bogost 2012), is therefore in this context rather considered an important and eloquent attribute. Moreover, as has been pointed out the concept’s old Germanic, and indeed contemporary Icelandic (“þing”), etymological reference to simultaneously a gathering/assembly and a unified or fixed locality for that gathering captures both the “þing’s” physical component and its excess beyond that physicality (Glassie 1999: 67-68; Heidegger 1971: 172; Olsen 2010: 109).

It is worth stating at the outset that this new materialism or realism is not in any sense a return to previous forms of empiricism. First of all, its general conception of things as vibrant entities capable of action, whether intentional or not, utterly contradicts any conventional notion of inert matter. Materiality is here, moreover, understood as “...always something more than “mere” matter: an excess, force, vitality, relationality, or difference that renders matter active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable” (Coole and Frost 2010: 9). Unlike its predecessors, thus, it is based on a “flattened ontology” (DeLanda 2006) and may therefore rather be referred to as a form of “enchanted materialism”, as suggested by Jane Bennett (2001), or a “democracy of objects”, as suggested by Levi Bryant (2011) (where object in his conception importantly refers to human as well as non-human). Secondly, the *unpredictability* that comes with acknowledging the agency of things or non-humans (whether it is intentional, relational or not) underscores not only the fundamental ontological difference of

this materialist stand but also its epistemological difference; it is not a form of positivism that anticipates or rests on a belief in the possibility of grasping things completely, predicting their “behaviour” and reducing them to natural laws, but rather a positive stand to things’ inevitable escape from any attempt at such condensation or totalization. As stated by Slavoj Žižek in *The Parallax View*, with reference to the “parallax” or an object’s apparent positional displacement as an effect of change in view point; “Materialism means that the reality I see is never “whole”” (Žižek 2006 :17). Žižek furthermore argues that it is only through acknowledging and attending to that inevitably incomplete perception of reality that one commits to a truly materialist stand.

Although many theorists of this new materialism have overtly breached with phenomenology (see however Harman 2002), this statement evidently echoes what initially was its humble attitude; that is, its acknowledgement for what things always hold in reserve (Heidegger 1966, 1971). It may also be seen as recalling an approach to things central in Walter Benjamin’s (2002) expression of the aura; the unexplained veil that secludes the observed from the observer. In other words, it alludes to a materialist perspective – which I adhere to in my approach – that gives room to the *otherness*, remoteness and solitude of things and the affect their difference has on encounter. This, moreover, points to what I see as two key notions of this new materialist stand, and which further underscore its difference from earlier versions; that is, firstly, the importance of experience and thus of my being in the world³, and secondly, the irreducibility of that which is experienced to my experience of it. In other words, a symmetrical recognition of the significance of encounter/experience and of the ownness/integrity of that which is encountered – it always partly withdraws from view, and holds something in reserve; a materialism, thus, that contrary to its predecessors is able to embrace discontinuity, unpredictability and incompleteness. Importantly also, experience is here to be understood not as an objective or interrogating gaze from afar but as a multisensory and partly familiar encounter with a world we are always part of and, thus, always already

³ This is not least clear in the emphasis on *affect* in many original approaches within the human and social sciences, also referred to as a “turn to affect” and thus adding yet another label to the list referred to at the beginning of the chapter (see e.g. Gregg and Seigworth 2010; Ticineto Clough and Halley 2007).

encountering. What this implies is therefore also a turn away from a negative focus on the constraints caused by the “situatedness” of perception, as emphasised by social constructivism, towards a more positive conception of situatedness – of our “thrown” condition (Heidegger’s 1962) – as that which actually *enables* perception and knowledge.

Another important notion of this new materialism concerns a particular understanding of the relation between “part” and “whole”, which again draws on the emphasis on *unpredictability* as well as *irreducibility*. The turn to things and the acknowledgement of thing agency has of course advocated a conception of agency as not necessarily intentional and always to some degree *relational*. Various network or entanglement theories, as Actor-Network-Theory, have therefore been extremely influential among its allies. Unlike the traditional understanding of agency as based on purposeful/intentional, independent action, and thus something reserved for humans only, action is here seen as always performed through the assembled force of associated and related entities (Latour 1999: 182). However, an equally important aspect of this new conception of agency as “relational” is the recognition of the at least partial autonomy of the individual parts, whether these are human or non-human. That is, that no part is reduced to its relations within the assemblage. As argued by Bryant, “the root of the Modernist schema arises from relationism” and, thus, are we “...to escape the *aporia* that beset the Modernist schema this, above all, requires us to overcome relationism or the thesis that objects are constituted by their relations” (Bryant 2011: 26; see also Harman 2002: 280-294; Olsen 2010: 154-157). This, importantly, does not mean full equality or complete symmetry, or that differences between parts are ignored – indeed, difference is a central phenomenon in the agency theories of Latour and other network theorists – but that we adopt a conception of difference as one of degree rather than of kind; that is, as argued by Ian Bogost in his *Alien Phenomenology*, that “all things equally exist, yet they do not exist equally” (2012: 11).

This also requires a different understanding of the “assemblage” or “whole” – different, for example, from the seamlessness of organic totalities in the Hegelian tradition. As argued by DeLanda (2006) in his Assemblage theory, drawing on the work of Deluze, an assemblage is never sealed or seamless but

consists of autonomous parts, whose interactions also constitute its emergent and unforeseen properties – unforeseen because they cannot be explained with mere reference to the properties of its constituting parts. This is because, DeLanda (2006: 10-11) argues, we have to make a distinction between, on the one hand, the *properties* of a given part or entity and, on the other hand, its *capacities* to interact with other entities. While properties are the given and definable constituents of an entity its capacities can never be grasped or foretold at any given moment. This is because while capacities do indeed depend on an entity's properties they cannot be reduced to those, since their realization refers to the properties (and thus capacities) of its interacting entities (which in accordance are also associated with yet other unforeseeable entanglements). Therefore, as capacities may be understood as simultaneously afforded by the thing itself – always already *resting* in its physique – but realized only in its association to other things or matters, a part can neither be reduced to its relations nor a whole to the mere sum of its parts.

In the main, what this symmetry implies is a more egalitarian regime based on the simple assertion that there is only one indivisible world, a common ground inhabited by humans and non-humans who (ideally at least), because of their differences, are able to compensate for each other's weaknesses in cooperative "programs of action" (Olsen 2010, 2012b). It is in no sense a turn away from people, nor from the fact that people are different from (other) things and other animals, but merely a recognition of the fact that there is no such thing as *human* society (or a natural reserve for that matter), because, as argued by Latour (1999: 193), "We live in collectives, not societies". That is, things or non-humans are seen not only as intermediaries but also as social actors – who through the power of relations are holders of *agency* and *vitality* similar to (though *different* from) their human co-actors (e.g. Hodder 2012).

For archaeology, a discipline concerned with things or non-humans, this means that its subject matter cannot be regarded as some epiphenomena of *human* society, or as the passive signifiers of past social dynamics, but as actual social actors, which agency moreover, in power of their physical durability also reaches beyond, or deconstructs, the conventional distinction between past and present. Thus, for a discipline concerned with the past this new conception of

things means that not only are the remnants of past dynamics, “the spoils of history” (Lowenthal 1998), accumulating around us, but that the past itself is *actively present* in things that endure and continue to affect our habitual actions and ideas – and thus that archaeology is in fact as much a project concerned with the present and future. Moreover, while we have during the reign of post-processualism frequently heard accusations of archaeology’s passive consumption of theory, and a similar scepticism regarding the existence of any such thing as *archaeological* theory (e.g. Johnson et al. 2006), this new theoretical current arguably postulates something radically different; namely an “archaeological moment” that puts archaeologists in a rare position not merely “... to contribute significantly on the intellectual scene, but also to realize the full potential of the archaeological project” (Olsen 2012a: 20; for similar arguments see also González-Ruibal 2013; Olsen et al. 2012). We might even speak of a *return to archaeology*, to add yet another tag to the list above.

Archaeology of the recent past and present

The second movement this project can be said to originate in is the growing branch of archaeology focusing on the recent past and present, also referred to as archaeology of the *contemporary past*. Again, I would like to stress a conception of this as a movement rather than a framework, though a brief look at the field’s history may reveal some persistent trends. Its later development has, moreover, coincided with the turn to things in the humanities and social sciences and can thus, to some extent, even be seen as belonging to the same revolution or paradigm shift – indeed, the same *archaeological moment* – although its pedigree can be traced further back in time.

Traditionally archaeology is of course a discipline concerned with a distant past, a *pre-historic* past and thus its presence in material culture. As an offspring of modernity (cf. Thomas 2004a, 2004b) and its break with tradition it has furthermore been rooted in a conception of the present as distinctly different from the past. Its identity as a scientific discipline has therefore to a considerable extent been grounded on this temporal, albeit paradoxical, displacement from its subject matter; the past, understood as over and gone, becomes a challenging

problem, a mystery to be solved *because it is hidden* to us in the present (Olsen 2010: 112). Or, as Shanks and Tilley have remarked, "...the distance, the otherness, the absence of the past is postulated as a condition of the challenge. It is this which obscures" (Shanks and Tilley 1987: 10). What traditionally is seen as the task of the archaeologist, thus, is to unveil and order, to demystify and make sense of that otherness, of that which was unknown or appears unfamiliar. For these and other reasons the pre-historic, unwritten past has traditionally been archaeology's unquestioned domain whereas the more recent and more "familiar" or "known" periods have received less attention and for long also considered better left for historians, sociologists, ethnographers or others to explore. This, however, has gradually changed and today the archaeology of the very recent or contemporary past is considered as one of archaeology's recognized "sub-disciplines" (Harrison and Schofield 2010).

It can be difficult to trace or to "retrofit" the origin of this sub-field to a specific point in time while the two milestones now generally mentioned are, on the one hand, the ethno-archaeological approaches that flourished within the New archaeology from the 1960s and 70s, and on the other hand, the development of a more anthropologically focused field of Material culture studies in the 1980s and 90s (cf. Buchli and Lucas 2001a; Harrison 2011; Harrison and Schofield 2009, 2010). Particularly important (within the New archaeological campus) were the modern material culture projects of Michael Schiffer in Tuscon and Richard Gould in Honolulu (cf. Gould and Schiffer 1981), but not least, following these, Bill Rathje's famous Garbage project started in 1973. What happened with the development and acknowledgment of these projects, as stated by Rathje himself, was that the definition of archaeology shifted from a focus on temporal distance towards "...a focus on the interaction between material culture and human behaviour, regardless of time and space" (Rathje 1979: 2; Rathje 1981: 52). In other words, archaeology was to be understood first and foremost as "the discipline of (people and) things" – already anticipating a *turn to things*. Thus, while the actual agenda of these early approaches may sometimes have been of a primarily analogical character, rather than based on a concern for "an archaeology of us" for its own sake (it is worth

stating, though, that the Garbology project was from the outset truly that), the contribution of these early attempts is unquestionable.

Considering these early approaches as the first phase in the development of an archaeology of the recent past and the present, a second phase can be said to take over by the turn of the millennium. Also here references have been made to two milestones representing this shift (cf. Harrison 2011; Harrison and Schofield 2010); these are the two edited volumes, *Archaeologies of the Contemporary Past* edited by Victor Buchli and Gavin Lucas (2001b), and the more interdisciplinary focused *Matter, Materiality and Modern Culture* edited by P.M. Graves-Brown (2000b) (see however also Schnapp 1997). In these two volumes the editors, as well as contributors, reflect on what an archaeology of the recent or contemporary past is and what it could become, how it could challenge and alter the conventional conceptions and research traditions within archaeology, and how its contribution would add to our understanding of materiality, past and present. Thus, unlike the approaches developed during the earlier phase these are boldly turned towards modern material culture *per se*. As stated by Buchli and Lucas their concern with the book was (moreover) "...to distinguish the archaeology of contemporary or modern material culture from its function as ethno-archaeology" (Buchli and Lucas 2001a: 4), and thus, towards its definition as, plainly, archaeology. In the introduction to *Matter, Materiality and Modern Culture*, Graves-Brown declares that its central theme is materiality and "... how the very material character of the world around us is appropriated by humanity" (Graves-Brown 2000a: 1). This, he argues, has been sidelined in most research on "modern (material) culture" (ibid.) – thus also echoing a critique voiced by advocates of the turn to things generally.

Both volumes moreover articulate objectives that have since been further manifested as key themes on the field's common agenda: By turning the focus to the material present and past of living memory, archaeology is able to render the most quotidian and familiar appear less familiar and by such "othering" to subject to scrutiny the many "taken for granted" of historical and cultural conceptions. Through its expertise in dealing with the non-discursive realms of human society, Buchli and Lucas (2001a, 2001c) further state, archaeology is capable of unveiling not only the unsaid but also the ineffable aspects of present

or past events and realities. In other words, it has the capacity to “presence absence”, to reach the subaltern, and give voice to other(ed) experiences and pasts, and thus supplement and challenge established historical “truths”.

Following this one might argue that archaeology of the recent past is from the outset established, partly, in opposition to text (or the dominion of text), as a specific approach to the tacit and unwritten, which also counts for the earlier garbage archaeology (Rathje and McCarthy 1977; Rathje 1984). It is, moreover, interesting to note that the existence of text has never been the issue of debate within this field of archaeology, as it was, and still is to some extent, in historical archaeology. Again, as stated already by Rathje (1979, 1981) but stressed also by Buchli and Lucas (2001a), the defining criteria for archaeology had by the turn of the millennium been divorced from temporal concerns and oriented towards the particularity of the archaeological gaze and *material* focus. Thus, while it may have been questioned whether an archaeology of the *recent* and *contemporary* could really claim to be archaeology at all, the issue has to some degree been settled on the conception that all archaeology is in fact contemporary (e.g. Buchli and Lucas 2001a; Hodder 2001; Olivier 2001), in the sense that it takes place in the present, and furthermore that all archaeology is “*prehistoric*” (Lucas 2004), in the sense that it is engaged primarily with things and not text. One could therefore claim that with the advent of archaeology of the recent and contemporary past, and the justification for its existence, the conception of archaeology has come to involve a far more explicit articulation of the autonomy in relation to history, and other text based disciplines, than what was uttered by spokesmen of historical archaeology (cf. Andrén 1998). Although not put in such direct terms the underlying subtext of this movement is that *Archaeology is not History* – or, indeed, that *Archaeology is Archaeology*. In that sense it can be claimed that the development of this field of archaeology resonates well with the changes we have witnessed on a broader scale within the human- and social sciences, the turn away from discourse and towards things.

This notwithstanding, there appears to be, for some reason, a strong need for self-justification among the field’s practitioners (see Harrison 2011 for criticism), and the rationale most frequently asserted can be said to still allude to history as the common ground. The arguments that the archaeological

perspective enables access to alternative realities and other histories than those produced through historical sources and engagements, that things allow us to reach also the undocumented and unspoken, and thus the silent or silenced groups of the past and present, can be seen as examples of this. Accordingly, the new interest in previously neglected things or material cultures of the more recent pasts can be seen as endeavours towards such correctives; deconstructing the prevailing master-narratives by giving voice to those marginalized or absent – *peoples* without history (Little, 1994; Wolf 1982).

This further means that archaeology often appears as an option where historical or other sources fail to complete a reconstruction and to reach the marginalized and silenced, rather than an alternative and radically different approach to (and conception of) the past or present. Thus, while Buchli and Lucas (2001a: 16) do suggest that “the troublesome romantic notion of “discovery”” is with these approaches replaced with “creativity” – underscoring that archaeology is understood as a constituting act of contemporary social significance – it may nevertheless be argued that these themes (which have characterized the field’s growing “representational archive” during the last decade) continue to build on a traditional conception of archaeology as “disclosure” and its subject matter (“past” or not) as something inevitably or preferably distant, absent or *other* than the *ostensible* present. That is, that absence, a void or incompleteness still appears as the condition of the challenge (cf. Shanks and Tilley 1987: 10) – even as the legitimizing condition of the whole approach.

Thus, one could claim that there exists a certain inconsistency between, on the one hand, the often heard aims of critically scrutinizing the most proximal, of embracing the unrecognized everyday and familiar, and on the other hand, the simultaneous contention that this proximal and quotidian reality is yet absent or hidden and thus needs to be disclosed (see Harrison 2011 for similar discussion). The claim that the archaeological gaze will render *unfamiliar what appeared familiar*, speaks in the same vein, implying that obvious or *ordinary* things – all that is already showing itself – are not really interesting enough in and of themselves, in the sometimes “un-exotic” and dull way they actually reveal themselves.

Before discussing this further, however, let us turn away from these mostly text-based arguments towards a confrontation with the two sites explored and their rich portfolio of things. Returning there will provide solid ground for the further discussion and also recall what was the turning point in the projects progression. However, before arriving at the two sites yet another contextual side-step seems appropriate; that is, to very briefly account for the project that my work grew out of and which initially drove me to explore the possibilities for an archaeology of the sites in question.

3. Between ruin memories and herring histories

The project here presented began and unfolded as part of the larger research project *Ruin Memories: Materiality, Aesthetics and the Archaeology of the Recent Past* (www.ruinmemories.org). This was a three year (2010-2012) research project funded by the Norwegian Research Council's KULVER program and designed both as a cross disciplinary dialogue on the growing concern for modern ruins and materiality, and as an exploration of and within the growing field of archaeological approaches to the recent past. With empirical focus on the constantly budding *ruin-landscape* of the "modern", of the very recent past and present, the overall aims of *Ruin Memories* were, firstly, to critically scrutinize the normative categorization of modern ruins and the discourses and practices that may have led to their academic and historical marginalization; and secondly, to reassess the cultural and historical value of this "prehistory" and of the role things play in expressing the ineffable. In this vein the project's various case studies explored three main themes⁴:

Firstly, *the aesthetics of waste and heritage*, referring to the ambiguous perception of modern ruins and how this relates to the modernist oppositional hierarchy between, on the one hand, functional and/or aesthetically pleasing things and, on the other, waste – things broken, ruined and unwanted; a binary opposition, and othering, also claimed reflected and maintained within heritage management and definitions. Of central importance was to explore how such processes of othering reflected aesthetic preferences and values, but also how modern ruins in their ambiguous and uncanny state might be seen as uttering their own resistance and cultural critique, and thus how they might fuel a critical discourse on these very values and aesthetic conceptions.

A second theme was *the materiality of memory* focusing mainly on forms of involuntary memory (Benjamin 1999), as opposed to recollective memory and deliberate commemoration. Important here was to explore how modern ruins – the survival and gathering also of things made redundant and discarded – may become potential agents of disruption and "actualisation" (ibid.). By enduring in

⁴ See: www.ruinmemories.org for project description.

opposition to the functionally and ideologically useful these stranded things may reveal the gaps in the construction of history as progress, as a continuous narrative, and thus enable us to examine the role things play in upholding the past and informing social and historical inquiries. This importantly also involved a re-conceptualisation that liberated ruination and decay from the purely negative associations conventionally assigned these processes, to instead suggest that new memories, meanings, and knowledge might actually be released through processes of destruction (Benjamin 1999; Andersson 2001): meanings that are only possible to grasp at second hand when no longer immersed in their withdrawn and useful reality (DeSilvey 2006).

Finally, a closely related third theme explored in the Ruin Memories project was *the significance of things*. Here the aim was to scrutinize further the cause for things' marginalization in scholarly work⁵ but also to develop the emerging but still largely unexplored awareness of things' potential for informing studies of contemporary and recent society. Crucial here was, of course, a concern with the way things mediate or express the "unsaid" and "ineffable" experiences of people's lives and realities unfolding outside social discourses, and thus to work out how an archaeology of the recent past might provide alternative stories and alternative modes of historical engagement.

My own aims and objectives were formed in dialogue with this framework, and my choice of research material as well. My decision was to explore two abandoned herring factories in Strandir, a remote part of the Icelandic Westfjords; one in Djúpavík in Reykjafjörður, the other at Eyri in Ingólfssfjörður (fig. 1). Both had been established and abandoned within the first half of the 20th century and represented an important and well-documented period in Iceland's recent history and economic growth, while neither of them was in any effective (or official) way remembered or commemorated as such. My aim, therefore, was to explore why the ruins of this recent "golden age", relics of the country's very modernization, had become marginalized in discourses regarding the nation's history and heritage. Why the herring factories, despite their historically claimed significance, had been forgotten by history and also

⁵ For criticism of the "thing amnesia" in social science see Miller (1987), Latour (2005), Olsen (2007).

appeared incompatible with any received conception of heritage or heritage value? Through archaeological investigations I wanted to not only scrutinize their unfortunate fate but also reverse this development and seek justice on their behalf. That is, to examine and underscore how these decaying remains also contributed to upholding the past, and thus, importantly, to enable memories of its hitherto forgotten or ignored aspects; ruin memories or alternative histories that might differ considerably from the already well established written history of this recent past. For example, I wanted to approach questions concerning the modernization of the country and the cost and material surplus of capitalism; questions that would challenge the modern inclination to see history as systematically unfolding in linear sequences and thus scrutinize the conception of modernization as pure progress. As relics from the golden age of the herring industry the abandoned factories, in their decay and ruination, could indeed be seen as manifestations of the reverse; stubbornly commemorating not only prosperity and progress but also the conflicting realities of failure, lost promises and submission.

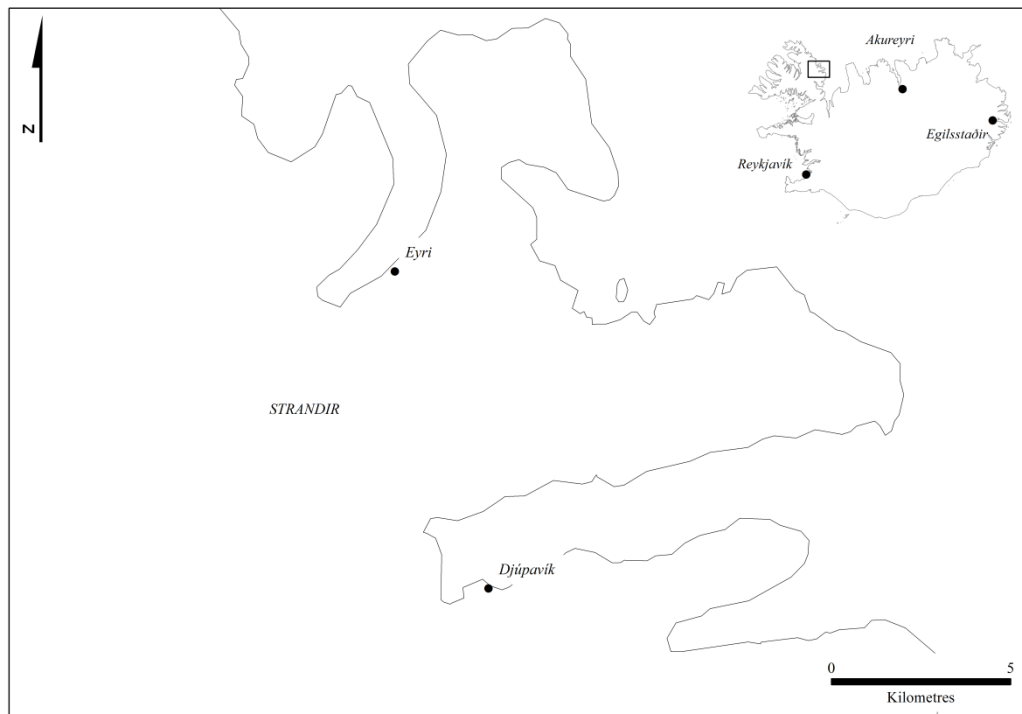


Figure 1: The two herring stations, Eyri and Djúpavík, on the east coast of the Westfjord peninsula.

In short, a critical reflection on the interplay between the involuntary memories and alternative histories ingrained in material things and modern ruins, and the often opposing wished for ideals discursively construed and maintained in history, was what I had planned when I set off on this journey. Needless to say, my plan and the project it grew out of thus shared many of the aims – and shortcomings – addressed above as characterizing much of archaeology of the contemporary past. What I was to learn, however, as my acquaintance with the material grew, is that there are tensions between *ruin memories* and (herring) *histories* that cannot be settled through the translation of one into the other, and which, if taken seriously, may problematize or in fact rule out the possibility of such translations altogether. In other words, from my archaeological viewpoint there soon appeared to be a fundamental difference, an incommensurability, between valuing the things I saw and emphasising their historical or otherwise derivative value, and thus that an attentive *turn to those things*, or a consideration of *their* value and significance, could not be mediated through history. However, in order to better account for these and other emerging thing lessons let me first, very briefly, and not the least for heuristic reasons, introduce the familiar/established historical “background” of the two sites I explored, in order to contrast this with my own encounter with them and their rich and already rather “unfamiliar” material presence.

Herring in history: the established background of Djúpavík and Eyri

“The Northland herring is a noble creature both in terms of beauty and intellect, possibly the most wonderful god has created”, Icelandic writer Halldór Kiljan Laxness (1972: 180) declared in his satiric description of the Icelandic herring industry in his novel *Guðsgjafarþula (A Narration of God’s Gifts)*. There is an element of truth to his irony though; herring does hold an almost divine stand in Iceland’s recent history. As most parts of the Western world Iceland underwent large-scale social and economic transformations during the twentieth century; from being one of Western Europe’s least developed countries by the turn of the century to become one of the world’s wealthiest and most developed nearing its

close. The growing fishing industry, and not least the herring industry, was an important drive in this development, producing wealth and employment, but also furthering settlement nucleation with changes in means of subsistence and livelihood (e.g. Jónsson 1984; Jónsson 2004; Magnússon 1985; Sigurðsson et al. 2007; Þórðarson 1939). The strongest indication of the herring industry's acclaimed impact is maybe captured in the phrase "síldarævintýrið" or the "herring adventure" which is generally used to describe and denote the golden age of the herring industry from the early 1900s into the 1960s. Salted in barrels, rendered into oil or dried and grinded the herring has repeatedly been portrayed as one of the key elements in the nation's modernization process, as well as in its struggle to independence and economic viability during the former half of the 20th century – a period and product thus considered highly significant to the nation's recent history and present identity. A significance, moreover, well reflected in the attention devoted to the history of this period and the "herring adventure" in both scholarly and literary works.

During the former half of the 20th century the herring industry affected more or less every settlement along the coast of the island and new landing- and processing stations were also established in remote and previously sparsely settled areas where proximity to the resource was a first priority (cf. Ragnarsson 2007). Hence, even places previously marginal and out of reach became through this development entangled in a powerful and prosperous economic network. With time some of these communities grew strong and rooted, while other awaited a gloomier fate. With technological changes in terms of transport, processing and preservation their strategic marginal location was no longer essential or even proved economically unfeasible, and as the herring stock also started to diminish already from the 1940s onward, so the economic basis of small and newly established communities was impaired.

Djúpavík and Eyri, the two sites explored in this project, are good examples of such communities that both came and went with the herring. Located in the remote region of Strandir (or Strandasýsla), on the east coast of Iceland's Westfjord peninsula, these sites became homes to two of the country's first highly mechanized processing plants for herring in the 1930s and 40s. The region's herring history, however, can be traced further back to 1906 when

Norwegian entrepreneurs established the salting station “Hekla” in the vicinity of Djúpavík in Reykjafjörður. Their initiative was soon followed with the founding of salting stations on several other locations in the area, there amongst in the vicinity of the farm Eyri in Ingólfssfjörður in 1915 and in the previously unsettled cove of Djúpavík in Reykjafjörður in 1917. This first phase of the regions herring industry came to an abrupt end, however, when markets in Europe collapsed following the post-war depression in 1919 (Matthíasson 1973; Ragnarsson 2007; Ragnarsson and Lúðvíksson 2007).

A decade later the wheels started turning again and in September 1934 the Djúpavík Corporation was founded at Hotel Borg in central Reykjavík with the objective to build and run a herring factory in Djúpavík. Constructions were immediately started and the new factory was completed only a year later, in 1935, and was at the time the largest concrete building in the country, equipped with the most advanced and up to date machinery of the day – some say the finest of its kind in all of Europe. The waters north of Iceland were full of herring in the years that followed and Djúpavík immediately became a place filled with life and a focal point in a prosperous industrial network. Along with the growing industry the small community expanded – houses were built, dwellings, a shop, a bakery, piers and so on (Jóhannesson 2001; Matthíasson 1973). A similar development took place at Eyri, with the Ingólfur Corporation’s construction of a competing herring factory in 1944. Like in Djúpavík this industrial enterprise initiated the formation of a small, and partly seasonal, community at the site, with dwellings, offices, garages, a shop, a bakery, and so on (ibid.).

A considerable reduction in the herring stock along the Westfjord peninsula was apparent already in the mid 1940s and the rationales for the two industrial powers in Strandir were gradually eradicated. After a short life in function the engines at Eyri and Djúpavík were, thus, finally silenced in 1952 and 1954 respectively (cf. Jóhannesson 2001; Matthíasson 1973). However, while people did leave it seems they held on to the hope of once returning again and, thus, while the sites were abandoned many things, most things in fact, were left behind: In the factories, the dwellings, the laboratory, the garages, the shop – everywhere things, machines, tools, beds, chairs, food supplies and spare parts remained, in the prospects of return – a wish however never fulfilled.



Figure 2: Herring history exhibited in the Djúpavík factory (Photo: Þóra Pétursdóttir).

The post-industrial lives of the two sites have been somewhat dissimilar. After their abandonment both sites were left more or less unattended for and allowed to gradually decay and ruin. This has been the fate of Eyri to the present day. The factory in Djúpavík, on the other hand, was bought in the 1980s together with a few other buildings in the cove. Soon after, the new owners had restored one of the buildings (the residence for women working at the salting station) into what became both their home and a hotel, and where they have since welcomed a constantly growing number of tourists visiting this remote region every summer. Little by little they have also rebuilt and mended other buildings in the cove, expanding the hotel's capacity and cleared its surroundings of all unwanted or harmful material so that the overall appearance of the site, despite the decaying factory, is orderly and tidy. The full restoration of the factory itself, however, is well beyond their capacity, and despite their attempts they have received little genuine financial support for this endeavour from heritage authorities or others.⁶ Nevertheless, small amendments like replacing

⁶ Icelandic heritage law (Lög um menningarminjar 2013) does not, because of their young age, automatically protect the sites and although special protection can be applied also to younger buildings and remains heritage authorities have so far not indicated any incentive in this direction.

broken windows, stopping leakage and infilling frost cracks, as well as sweeping floors and clearing away surplus material, has halted the buildings decay enough to make it possible for them to exploit the lure the old factory has on visitors. Hence, guests can now attend guided tours along the processing line, visit a small herring history exhibition in the engine hall (fig. 2), or even enjoy art exhibitions and concerts in the many wonderfully lit and acoustic spaces it provides (fig. 4). The latest achievement has been to paint the exterior of the whole factory, changing it from concrete grey to glistening white, which understandably also completely transforms the whole appearance of the site – and renders the contrast between the two sites, Djúpavík and Eyri, even more apparent and interesting.

All things considered the herring factories in Djúpavík and Eyri appeared as the perfect cases for my research questions, featuring as anomalies to many of the established notions I intended to scrutinize. Despite their origin in a historically valued era they seemed more or less at odds with both official and general understandings of cultural heritage. As monuments of modernization they furthermore appeared utterly out of place; located in one of Iceland's most isolated regions they compellingly disturbed the currently well-established dichotomies between core and periphery – between the modernized urban present and the traditional rural past – as their persistent and rich material remains triggered involuntary memories of other economic geographies. Moreover, as relics of the herring *adventure* they seemed to rather represent its negative, its other(ed) and less attended side of failure, economic loss and unrealized futures. In short, it seemed they represented anything but an “adventure”. However, for someone with a passion for archaeology and things, not to mention *strange* things, meeting the two sites, and especially Eyri, was most definitely an adventure – an encounter so affective, in fact, that it would completely change the course of the project, its focus and research questions. Thus, let me now move away from the history *behind* the two sites, and their distant past, to the encounters with their very concrete present.

Ruin memories: encountering Djúpavík and Eyri

The historical tradition in Iceland is both strong and deeply rooted. Being the “Saga-island”, home to the legends of the Norse Vikings, has understandably highly influenced not only the Icelandic identity but also the Icelandic archaeological tradition. This is well reflected in its strong Viking age and Early Medieval focus (Lucas and Snæsdóttir 2006; see also Friðriksson 1994) as well as in its dominating culture-historical scope. Although the earliest written records appear roughly 300 years after the island’s first settlement, and although it has for this reason been strongly debated, all archaeology in Iceland is often claimed to be historical archaeology. And because of history’s and the written past’s very strong status, academically and publicly, Icelandic archaeologists have thus always had to struggle with or adjust to a dominant conception of the past as *history*, or as mainly historically/textually construed.

In accordance with this tradition I was well prepared on my first visit to Strandir. I had conscientiously done my homework, read much of what there was to read about the sites, and the period and history they belonged to – the herring history. This solid ballast notwithstanding, what I encountered in both sites, yet differently, took me by surprise. Nothing of what I had read had accounted or prepared me for what I saw (or smelled, touched and felt). Logically, when approaching from the south, Djúpavík was my first encounter. I arrived there on a bright mid-summer afternoon after a long drive along the narrow and dusty roads threading the strip of land along the coast, in fjord, out fjord, or climbing the steep mountainsides to cross between them. Inhabited farms and settlements get sparser the further north you get while the derelict remains of a recently abandoned past became more evident. Today the Strandir region is one of Iceland’s most isolated and its northernmost part, Árneshreppur municipality (home to the two sites), is the country’s least populated, with approximately 50 inhabitants.

When at last you reach Reykjafjörður, a deep fjord with towering, dark mountains on each side, the little cove, Djúpavík (meaning “deep cove”), appears quite suddenly, beyond a last turn. In the distance, after threading this desolate region for hours, it bears an instant but bizarre resemblance to a lost metropolis where it curdles in the small cove below the steep cliffs; like the skyline of an

urban waterfront with high-rising buildings and grey smoke stacks (fig. 3). As you proceed its size dwindles, of course, the buildings just over a dozen and only one decaying smoke stack towers the monstrous herring factory that seems to occupy most of the cove. This gigantic, concrete-grey building-complex, and the rusting remains of the stranded coastal liner *Suðurland* on the shore in front of it, is the first impression you meet on arrival from the south. Passing the decaying factory and oil tanks, past crumbling concrete walls tinted with moss and lichens, overlooking the ship's body leaning at a dangerous angle, the feeling is immediately one of desertion, abandonment and deprivation. You sense a vibrant but now long-gone past that had given way to failure, lost hopes and unrealized futures; a prosperous past manifested as stranded rubble in the present.



Figure 3: Djúpavík “waterfront” with the remains of Suðurland on the shore in front of the factory and oil tanks (Photo: Þóra Pétursdóttir).

However, as soon as you get beyond the factory and into the little cluster of houses the atmosphere changes. You recognize that many of the houses are in fact lived in (during the summer that is), that people are working and minding everyday matters. Many of these people, however, are visitors at the site or tourists that wander the beach, around the factory and in between the decaying structures. Many of them in fact came to experience just this. The feeling, thus, is

no longer one of desolation, abandonment or neglect. And if you stay a while you may take pleasure in visiting avant-garde art exhibitions in the factory's concrete halls (fig. 4), the herring history museum in the engine-room (fig. 2), or enjoy a concert in one of the oil tanks (fig. 12). It only takes a short stay in Djúpavík, following and chatting with its inhabitants and visitors, to reveal that the centre of attraction, is the decaying herring factory – the gigantic concrete spectre that has long outlasted its purpose but still stubbornly commands every perspective possible on that little strip of land.



Figure 4: “Áfram með smjörlikið”, art exhibition by Jóna Hlíf Halldórsdóttir and Hlynur Hallsson, Djúpavík August 2010 (Photo: Þóra Pétursdóttir).

Its lure fascinated me, the awe and wonders it evoked among people, but not least because this affect seemed in many ways completely unrelated to its very purpose or historical mission; that is, unrelated to its herring history. Much rather it seemed inspired by the very gravity of its own presence here and now, and its own “immortality” conflicting with its simultaneous manifestation of time passing. I soon realized that arguing that the site or factory was *neglected* or *unvalued* simply could not hold. Interestingly, however, the way it was valued could not be grasped with any conventional notion of heritage value, with reference to its history and past, but appeared more or less entirely based on its

current state and ongoing ruination. Thus, encountering Djúpavík, its rusting machines, leaning shipwreck, and fracturing concrete structures, and speaking to its inhabitants, visitors and admirers, soon made me hesitant to some of my objectives. How would I account for its value or significance if not only in terms of “heritage value” and historical significance?

This sense of unease only grew with my acquaintance with the second site, Eyri, and its decaying structures (fig. 5). Unlike Djúpavík, the small community of buildings at Eyri had, since its abandonment in 1952, been left more or less unattended for. Its ruination, therefore, had been uninterrupted, and now, 60 years later, an aura of otherness veiled its whole presence. Eyri is located almost by the end of the road. The last bit of the gravel track takes you from Trékyllisvík in sharp and twisting curves up the Eyrarháls pass, from where you get the first glimpse of the Ingólfssfjörður fjord, and the little cluster of houses at the foot of the steep slope below you. The three farm houses (now used as summer houses) are lined along the east side of the river flowing down from the mountain and into the sea (Eyri in fact means river estuary). But on the other side of the river rests the decaying herring station, the massive factory and the various buildings and structures around it (fig. 16); by the shore is the stately “Ólafsbraggi” where the managers and higher ranked staff resided; at the foot of the slope is the red roofed timber house, “Thorsteinssonbraggi”, where the women working at the salting station lived and where the Eyri farmer also ran a small hardware store in the basement; in front of it is the low, timber built Storage house where also the grocery shop, laboratory and offices were housed; behind them is the massive, concrete-grey Ingólfur herring factory itself, stretching from the shoreline up towards the mountain slope; and further away the substantial, concrete built oil tank where the valuable herring oil was stored before it was shipped out to markets in Europe. Visible in between the standing buildings and along the shoreline are also many less conspicuous structures – concrete foundations from earlier buildings and the remains of timber piers, together with the ruined landing crane resembling a gigantic rusting spider on the beach.

From above, Eyri already looks deserted. The eastern gables of two of the timber houses are gaping towards the fjord mouth, walls are leaning, roofs caved

in, windows broken and the concrete of the factory is cracked and fractured. The previous clear distinction between the man-made and the natural is blurred; grass is growing on roofs and floors, moss and lichens in bright colours on walls and window ledges. A swarm of birds circles above – it is the arctic tern that now has overtaken the flat roofs of the factory, and made into its home. Smaller birds also fly in and out of its broken windows, sparrows nesting in nooks and crannies enjoying the protection and security involved in neighbouring the aggressive tern. Sheep graze between the buildings and seek shelter from rain and wind in their vacant rooms, while mice hide in darkness.



Figure 5: Eyri herring station; “Thorsteinssonbraggi” to the left, the red roofed Storage house in front of the Ingólfur factory and the oil tank behind it (Photo: Þóra Pétursdóttir).

Along with the screeching sound of birds the buildings also generate different eerie and indistinct noises; loose boards of corrugated iron or timber move in the wind, hinges creak, things fall, water drips, dust drifts. Walking around and inside the buildings you hear the sound of rubble and glass crushing underneath your feet. It is cold and dim inside, even though it is sunny and rather warm outside. The smell is intense but different from house to house and room to room – a heavy stench of damp and rotting wood and paper, moist soils, animal dung and mould.

As the eye adjusts to the dark inside the buildings their strange world takes over. Everywhere you turn things insistently demand your attention, familiar and alien, whole, broken and pulverized: rusting machines in the factory (fig. 6), unused spare parts in the storage, equipment and tools in the garage, beds, straw mattresses, cupboards and stools in the women's residence (fig. 10), desks in the office, empty shelves in the shop, rusting cans of liver pâté and fish pudding in the stock room, an archive of damp books and documents in the attic (fig. 8), test tubes and jars in the laboratory (fig. 7), soil, dust and animal droppings on floors (fig. 9), and more, more. A strange mass of things degraded and reunited into a state of threatening otherness in a yet familiar context. A mixed feeling of wonder, excitement and despair overtook me – exhausted by the overwhelming and pestering presence of these strange things wherever I turned I was unsure how to proceed? Of course, I never doubted the significance of the things and fragments in Eyri or Djúpavík to a fuller understanding of their past. Simply walking among the machines in the factory is an undocumented experience and thus adds a whole new aspect to the herring history. So does also sitting on a stool in one of the bedrooms in the women's house silently reading their carved and written names, calculations and images on the wall panels, doors and bedsides (fig. 11). Or threading the rooms in the Storage house, a landscape of strange things, unfamiliar and out of hand – all of this was undocumented, unspoken and even ineffable.

However, I recognized that *making sense* of these things in a conventional way would risk rendering irrelevant or explain away the immediate *sense of things* here and now. That allowing them a share in the history they had been excluded from was not necessarily a way to include *them*. Or how would I navigate between these ruin memories and the herring history? Between what I sensed and something “sensible”? How would I translate this otherness, these strange things, fragmented and unruly, into something known and familiar, without something significant, the very characteristics of these things – their fragmentary and incoherent nature and their otherness – being lost in the course of translation? Because, as so tellingly argued by historian Eelco Runia (2006: 6), “... unfortunately, discontinuity is not what is left when you have deconstructed

continuity. Accounting for discontinuity requires addressing not primarily the question of how continuity is created, but how *discontinuity is brought about*".



Figure 6: Oil centrifuges in the Ingólfur factory, Eyri (Photo: Þóra Pétursdóttir).



Figure 7: The "laboratory" in the Storage house, Eyri (Photo: Þóra Pétursdóttir).

In other words, including these neglected things and truly accounting for their otherness could not simply involve the deconstruction of a master-narrative but required a whole new approach, a different way of doing archaeology, and a very different way of expression. Thus, whereas I had previously considered that the only way to proceed involved overcoming, or ignoring the presence effect of the sites and my immediate affection for them, it dawned on me that maybe a turn to things also required just that, a return to *them* as they are here and now, to unmediated moments of encounter and to things preceding explanation. In other words, that another way to approach these things, to include them and underscore their significance would be to recognize them as they are – as ruins, fragments and as things abandoned – and take seriously the ruin memories they afford and the aesthetic affect they generate on encounter.



Figure 8: Eyri's archive in the Storage house attic (Photo: Þóra Pétursdóttir).

Moreover, what I encountered in the two sites did not merely seem incompatible with the history I had wished to nuance and enrich; the unruly masses of soiled, broken and strange things that surrounded me in Eyri and Djúparvík also seemed strangely at odds with the *kind* of things most prominently featuring in the literature pertaining to “the turn to things” (see however

Bennett 2010; DeSilvey 2006; Edensor 2005a). Unlike Eyri's assemblages of crumble and debris these were predominantly whole, clean, few or singular things – objects preferably with clear functional qualities and often *nice* or attractive. Things we like to keep in our vicinity and which, moreover, with reasonable credibility seem likely to perform with the traditionally anthropocentrically defined virtues of agency, mobility, and vitality, mobilized in their re-conceptualization and enrolment. As typical archaeological artefacts, abandoned, discarded, broken and “useless” the things in Eyri and Djúpavík seemed devoid of these virtues; released from human utilitarian relations and networks. Their *life* and *activity* was therefore very different from thing's useful agency as *things-for-us* so readily emphasized in many attempts to turn to their favour.



Figure 9: Floor assemblage, Eyri (Photo: Þóra Pétursdóttir).

Because, in the abandoned state things are no longer restrained from exercising their own non-human vitality and their native material agency manifested, for example, in qualities as fragmentation, rusting, tearing and decaying – qualities or activities, however, rarely favoured or praised in our habitual or academic dealings with things. But qualities, nevertheless, that afforded these things with a powerful and affective presence. Their conspicuous

physical remoteness, their corporal recoil from full recognition, not to mention from any clear *utility*, rendered my encounters with them completely different from the sometimes oblivious and use-driven “umgang” with things in habitual surroundings. Recalling Heidegger’s (1962) distinction between things’ “readiness-to-hand” (Zuhandenheit) and their “presence-at-hand” (Vorhandenheit), did not help. While his definition of “presence-at-hand” does indeed refer to a thing’s sudden burst into view or coming into consciousness through an interruption of its familiar mode of being, this coming into view always recalls the thing’s readiness-to-hand and thus useful being-for-us. In other words, it is arguable that both modes mainly refer to things’ usefulness and relevance for us, the way they either enable or interrupt our everyday transactions, and thus refer to our always-already entangled and objective-driven relations with them as, first and foremost, “things-for-the-purpose-of” something (Introna 2009).



Figure 10: One of the bedrooms in the women’s residence house, Eyri (Photo: Þóra Pétursdóttir).

This I find holds true also for the things addressed in much of the literature budding under the rubric of the turn to things. In other words, there appears to be little room for genuine strangeness, for things decaying, destroyed and discarded – indeed, for archaeological things – as well as for the possibility

of positively acknowledging them as such, as strange and useless things (see however e.g. Bogost 2012; Waldenfels 2011). Thus, what also became manifest on the encounter with the two sites was the need to scrutinize more explicitly to what extent the self-proclaimed inclusive and democratic turn to things is in fact, or at least runs the risk of becoming, an act of appropriation and domestication and thus an effort to turn things into things-acceptable-to-us. And, indeed, that archaeology, and not least an archaeology of modern ruins, could be a very effective way to counter this and to approach things differently.



Figure 11: Figure on bedside, women's residence house, Eyri (Photo: Þóra Pétursdóttir).

4. Returning to things and ruins

In retrospect, thus, I would argue that my initial ideas and aims at the beginning of the project were of a nature characteristic for much of historical archaeology and lately also archaeology of the recent past; the approach was very archaeological in its material focus but the aims and scope nevertheless historical in so many of their less deliberate or implicit assertions. Surely my stand was juxtaposed to an established historical standpoint but through that very situating it also reinforced an a-priori *historical* conception of the past – or indeed present – I sought to enlighten. Both my critique and questions were sought from that sedimented notion of the past and therefore implied that also my own anticipated revelations, my “alternatives”, would be historically articulated. In short I based my approach, at the outset, not on the two abandoned sites *per se*, but on a historical archive or “strategic formation” (Said 1978) *about* them and their time, on an “effective history” (Gadamer 1975) that coloured not only my ideas about the material at hand, but also my notions about how I could, or should, make that material known; I anticipated alternative histories but no alternatives to history (pace Nandy 1995).

Additionally, or as follows, I was very fixed on the idea that what I was trying to grasp was not what I immediately saw or sensed. Despite the gravity of the two sites’ material presence, their extremely rich topography and the intense “presence effects” (Gumbrecht 2004) they gave rise to, I felt I had to aim for something beyond this immediacy. As stated by Michael Shanks in *Experiencing the past*, according to the modern scientific tradition there exists an unspoken urge to make a choice between on the one hand, reacting on private affective experience, or on the other, actually concerning oneself with science and *doing archaeology* (Shanks 1992: 8) – and keeping the latter separated from the first, of course, is a first priority. Showing aesthetic affection or attachment, being moved by things’ sheer material presence, easily triggers a fear deeply embedded in modern thought, one that signifies naïve, superstitious and fetishistic inclinations. This, of course, is largely seen as incompatible with scholarly

conducts, not the least because it may question the taken for granted hierarchy in the thing-human relationship and indicate that there may be a *something* beyond our defining/rationalizing grasp, something inherent to these things themselves that involuntarily affects us. In short, to be affected and moved by things is to give in to a dangerous primitivism, which even may open for the absurd thought that things are significant in and by themselves. Academic work, science, or interpretation should not be about *sensing* things but about *making sense of* them.

It may be argued that the temporal distance traditionally involved in an archaeological study (aimed at a distant past) secures a “rational attitude” and avoids the “biases” of affects and sentiments (see however Renfrew 2003: 39-40). This, however, becomes less obvious when dealing with the recent past or present. As argued by Buchli and Lucas, such distance may nevertheless be maintained by the very nature of the archaeological *scientific* methodology, at the heart of which, they state, lies the “the alienation of our subject” (Buchli and Lucas 2001a: 10). Archaeological methodology, they argue,

“... takes us further away, distances us from any attachment to the objects and the material world we encounter. In the same move it makes those objects of archaeological inquiry palatable and sanitised by its distancing effects, enabling us adequately to cope with any distress we might feel in the situation – the distress of invading someone’s privacy for example or uncovering a mass grave” (Buchli and Lucas 2001a: 9-10).

Needless to say, I found this distancing hard to achieve working with and among the things of Eyri and Djúpavík. Wherever I turned they seemed to enquire my attention and rather than becoming palatable and sanitised their aggression, obstinacy and enticement remained. I will not claim that consistently adhering to a more “scientific” methodology could not have shielded me from the pestering presence of things, but rather that it troubled me to do just that; that is, to avoid facing and taking seriously their affective otherness. And I started wondering whether it was necessarily so that critical inquiry and affection/aesthetic appreciation were incompatible paths? Or whether there rather might be time to

reconsider the place of sensation and affect in academia.⁷ Indeed, and recalling Alain Badiou's call for love as the starting point of philosophy, whether something similar, like "critical romanticism" (Shanks 1995) or critical aesthetics, could not occasionally hold for archaeology as well?

The irrational compartmentalization of sensation and affect is not the only problem however. The immediate, ordinary and ostensible – the surface of things, and how they directly address us – has also been deemed hermeneutically defective and "superficial". That is, the modern imperative of interpretive depth has generated a split between, on the one hand, the form/the obvious and affective, and on the other hand, content/meaning. What you see or sense is rarely enough because *meaning* is always hidden or buried beneath the surface of the immediate and everyday (Olsen 2010: 152-153). And as follows meaning is also never what one directly encounters, but is something that must be derived from such immediate effects. This, for example, has long been a dominant attitude within art criticism, which, as early articulated by Susan Sontag (1966), has been characterized by an "overt contempt for appearances". What we actually see and experience on the stage, screen or canvas is merely an expression of a deeper meaning, and being able to grasp that deeper meaning, which importantly involves mastering the educated (or high-culture) terminology through which it can be described, equals understanding. Being affected and moved is one thing, but to *understand* is reserved for the privileged few, and meaning beyond such intellectualization is mostly regarded *meaningless*.

A similar crusade against *superficiality* has indeed also characterized interpretation in archaeology, which has almost without exception been driven by the inclination to dig deeper, to get beyond the muddy surfaces of things themselves. As argued by Bjørnar Olsen (2012a: 22) the emphasis within interpretive or postprocessual archaeology (as well as material culture studies) seems to imply "... that the sexiest significance of things always lies in their metaphorical, representative or embodied meanings." As an example he points to recent Scandinavian rock art studies where, he argues, "... one will find that a

⁷ As has of course been suggested and elaborated. See for example Gregg and Seigworth 2010; Ticineto Clough and Halley 2007.

boat, an elk, or a reindeer can be claimed to represent or signify almost everything ... apart, it seems, only from themselves. A boat is never a boat; a reindeer is never a reindeer; a river is always a “cosmic” river” (ibid.). In other words, understood as the process of going beyond the immediate, penetrating or reaching deep below the ostensible surface of things, interpretation has become, as argued by Sontag (1966: 9), “the modern way of understanding something”.



Figure 12: Herring oil tank, Djúpavík (Photo: Þóra Pétursdóttir).

One may expect, though, that the archaeology of the recent past or present, recalling its general emphasis on addressing also the proximal, the quotidian, everyday and familiar, was signalling a different approach. Nevertheless, and paradoxically so, the ordinary and “superficial” things themselves, per se, and their presence effect, is rarely the focus of these studies. And although emphasis may be on the proximal and familiar, the persistent devotion to a conception of the archaeological project as, by nature, distancing and alienating can be said to annihilate the possibility of reaching *merely* the ordinary and familiar *as such*. To get closer to things themselves, or their sometimes banal mode of being, becomes futile or even impossible since the archaeological gaze, as it is claimed, will estrange them and always render them distant and unfamiliar.

A kindred criticism of the inconsistency between the field's aim/theory and practice has recently been voiced by Rodney Harrison (2011) who further contends that this may in fact be wedged in the field's loyalty to the modernist trope of "excavation-as-investigation" – the conception that research inevitably involves penetrating the surface, going beyond and gaining depth, rather than concerning itself with the proximal or "superficial" surfaces of things. Opposing this Harrison suggests that the way forward for an archaeology of the present must be to replace these traditional conceptions of "archaeology-as-excavation", as a quest for stratigraphic/historic depth and as a process that alienates and distances its subject matter, with the alternative trope of "archaeology-as-surface-survey" – as essentially an engagement with the here and now. Pertinently "surface" should here not be understood as *superficial*, nor opposing *depth*, but rather as a dynamic/unconstituted and multi-temporal assemblage that enables archaeology to move beyond the stratified notion and established dichotomy between past and present. A move where emphasis is not primarily on chronological or contextual relations between entities, human or non-human, but rather on the ways in which "...their coincidence is *itself* creative and generative of possible futures" (Harrison 2011: 158). In other words, things do not have to *make sense* to us in the conventional interpretative way, but are encountered rather in the very way they are immediately *sensed* – in the way they show themselves (pace Heidegger 1962: 58).

As Harrison stresses his distinction is primarily of metaphorical significance and is not an attempt to oppose or do away with excavation or traditional archaeological methodology generally, but rather to challenge the conventional considerations of "what archaeology *is* and *does*" (Harrison 2011: 156) – and thus also how we rule out perspectives or approaches on the grounds that they represent what a *scientific* archaeology *isn't* and *doesn't do*. And such rethinking, I argue, is exactly what a *turn to things* also requires. As argued by Isabelle Stengers in her article "Wondering about Materialism";

"The challenge, which I deem a materialist challenge, is that whatever the mess and perplexity that may result, we should resist the temptation to pick and choose among practices – keeping those which appear rational and judging away the others, tarot-card reading, for instance. The need for such a resistance is

something naturalists have learned, when learning to avoid judging animal species as either useful or pests. This does not mean that some animal species cannot be considered as destructive or dangerous. In the same way, some practices may well be considered intolerable or disgusting. In both cases, the point is to refrain from using general judgemental criteria to legitimate their elimination, and to refrain from dreaming about a clean world with no cause to wonder and alarm” (Stengers 2011: 379).

Facing the challenge: other questions and different approaches

As archaeologists, I think we all experience the affective immediacy of the world we study – the alarm or wonder when we encounter a thing unrecognized and unseen before; a moment of *pre*-historic or pre-contextual wonder when we see only the thing *itself* and become affected by its sheer concrete presence (cf. Renfrew 2003: 39-40). Unfortunately, however, we have often failed to contain that momentum, as we have sooner or later found ourselves drawn to do *proper archaeology*, to make sense of and render that thing part of something *known* (cf. Olivier 2011: 32). Because sensible meaning is to the modern mind not easily portrayed or conceivable beyond such contextualisation or interpretation, which moreover is intended to render the world manageable and comfortable (as opposed to strange or alarming). However, and without ruling out such approaches or dismissing that things may indeed act as devices for symbolic or abstract expression and communication, when surrounded by Djúpavík’s and Eyri’s unruly masses of decaying things, and sensing the gravity of their presence, it seemed just as misleading to rule out the possibility that things themselves may also, occasionally, be the very source of their own signification (cf. Benso 1996, 2000; see also Davison 2012).

Therefore, instead of avoiding the challenge of facing things’ otherness, a central research question became: *How can I approach it and make it creative?* This main challenge caused me to formulate a number of other questions to be explored through my research: *How can an archaeology of things, per se, contribute to an understanding of things, their characteristics, capacities and non-human agency? How could such an approach enable new perspectives on issues regarding (heritage-) value, aesthetics and (thing-) ethics? How would these*

perspectives nuance and contribute to the current efforts of turning to things? And, further, how could these perspectives, or an archaeological insight, enlighten the conditions and constraints of such a turn? And finally, to rephrase Sontag's (1966: 12) question regarding criticism and the work of art – what would an archaeology look like, that would serve things and not appropriate their place?

This of course constituted a certain turn in my journey, a turn away from my previous ideas and intentions regarding the two sites, but nevertheless *a return towards the sites themselves*, their unruly masses of things and the ways in which we encounter them. And with footing in the two sites I set of to explore these questions in the articles that constitute the basis of this thesis. For simplification I will in the subsequent text mostly refer to them with the following abbreviations:

“A” = Pétursdóttir, Þ. (2012) ‘Small things forgotten now included, or what else do things deserve?’, *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 16: 577-603.

“B” = Pétursdóttir, Þ. (2013) ‘Concrete matters: ruins of modernity and the things called heritage’, *Journal of Social Archaeology* 13(1): 31-53.

“C” = Pétursdóttir, Þ. (2013/2014, forthcoming) ‘Things out-of-hand: the aesthetics of abandonment’, in B. Olsen and Þ. Pétursdóttir (eds.), *Ruin Memories: Materiality, Aesthetics and the Archaeology of the Recent Past*, London: Routledge.

“D” = Pétursdóttir, Þ. and Olsen, B. (2013, forthcoming) ‘Modern ruins: remembrance, resistance and ruin value’, in P. R. Mullins and J. Schofield (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Global Archaeology: Archaeology in the Modern World*, Springer.

“E” = Pétursdóttir, Þ. and Olsen, B. (forthcoming) ‘Imaging modern decay: the aesthetics of ruin photography’, paper submitted to *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology*.

It is important to state that the way they are listed here reflects the chronology of their publishing, not their order of writing. The latter order, which is D, B, A, C,

E, is thus more indicative for how I dealt with the challenge caused by the turn in my journey, and the new questions that arouse from this.

In what follows I shall deal with these questions by returning to the three main themes of the Ruin Memories project (see chapter 3): *The aesthetics of waste and heritage; the materiality of memory; and, the significance of things*. By discussing each of them in light of my findings, and with reference also to how these themes are addressed and further articulated in the articles, I also hope to make more explicit how my research has contributed to this project.

The aesthetics of waste and heritage – or aiming beyond anthropocentrism

The fragile dialectics between heritage and waste, and the often rather elitist conception of heritage are discussed in detail in article “B”. In the same article I argue for the possibility of a different and more *thing-oriented* heritage concept with reference to an ethics extended to things. A more general discussion of ruin value and an exploration of the roots of heritage discrimination and othering is articulated in article “D”. The issue of aesthetics as “presence effects” (Gumbrecht 2004) is central in both articles, but is more explicitly articulated in article “C” on the subject of abandonment, and in the more practice oriented article “E” on the use of photography in research on modern ruins.

Walking among the well-kept ruins of Pompeii, of Rome or of Athens is aesthetically pleasing and an impressive and moving experience. So is also entering a recently abandoned building, yet in a different way; it may not be aesthetically *pleasing*, but no less moving or impressive. However, as discussed above such affordances are generally not associated with the value or meaning of things, and even considered superficial and deceiving. *Meaningful* content, thus, is thought to dispartate from the way things immediately strike us, and is rather something that must be consigned onto things or sites through a *deeper* cognitive understanding of them and their context. But is there a different way of thinking heritage value? How would a thing-oriented approach enable new perspectives on issues regarding heritage value, -aesthetics and -ethics? And further, what would a thing-oriented heritage policy look like?

This may sound like an absurd question, considering that heritage definitions long have been highly criticized for being too thing-oriented (e.g. Ruggles and Silverman 2009; Smith 2006; Smith and Akagawa 2009), and even too archaeologically oriented (Waterton and Smith 2009), by accentuating mostly physical remains and thus *tangible* heritage at the cost of *intangible* heritage. As I argue in more detail in article “B” the claimed appraisal of physical heritage and even of a tangible conception of heritage value may, however, on closer inspection not be so very *thing*-oriented and in fact mostly related to intangible human values.

Generally speaking, when we think about our everyday dealings with things we tend to regard our relations with them as mostly “use-driven”; things in our surroundings are important because they are *useful*, because they fulfil some functions or purposes. Thus, things are often little but *things-for-us*, reduced to resources or what Heidegger termed *Bestand*; that is, where *everything* awaits as “standing reserve” to be called upon and put into *use*, rendering things significant only for our advantage (Heidegger 1993b; see also Introna 2009). In this same vein utility also roots our ideas about the *value* of things. Things are not considered valuable in and of themselves but because they work properly or can be appropriated and therefore become useful, whereas waste, broken or destroyed things have, generally, lost their use-value and should therefore preferably be disposed of and cleansed away from our appropriately functioning habitual surroundings.⁸ The same perception also conditions the conventional modern valuation of land and nature, determined mainly on their yield as *resources*.

The same calculative rational may appear less appropriate, however, when it comes to explaining the value of culture, of art, of history or of heritage. Indeed, heritage management might even be seen to rebel against conventional conceptions of value, concerning itself also – or even mostly – with things that have been abandoned or discarded and thus long left their useful or functional being. Nevertheless, the rational behind arguments for protection rarely refer to an *inherent value* of the respective sites or things but to *our need* for, and *right to*,

⁸ I of course acknowledge, although I will not go into the discussion here, the controversial fact that waste has become the “valuable” resource of a growing global waste-management/recycling industry.

historical rootedness and sense of belonging – and thus to their *function as tools* in identity construction. In other words, also heritage is mostly valuable because it is useful-to-us, crystallized most clearly in the concept of “cultural *resource* management”.

This at the same time also questions the novelty of the much-acclaimed turn towards the intangible in heritage studies (for criticism see Solli 2011; Harrison 2013). Despite much well founded criticism of the emphasis on inheritance and possession in heritage definitions and conventions (Rowlands 2002a, 2002b), and the consequential prominence of tangible heritage (captured in the notion of heritage as a “recourse”), it is debatable to what extent this opposing “*intangible* turn” is really offering any novel or original perspective either on value or on *things* in the heritage context. The source of heritage value has more or less consistently since the 19th century been firmly anchored in human perception, experience and attachment, and percolated through *intangible* conceptions of history, identity and sense of belonging. I have therefore argued (see article “B”) that rather than accounting for a paradigm shift, the introduction of intangibility only makes explicit, and reinforces, what has always been the underlying rationale of heritage discourses. What could be truly original, however, would be to introduce within the heritage discourse a more thing-oriented discussion of value and meaning which would, importantly, build on an understanding of the intangible and tangible not as binary oppositions but as equally significant and interrelated processes in heritage “construction” (see also in this relation Harrison’s discussion of heritage and sustainability, Harrison 2013: 166ff.).

This brings us to another important premise for a rethinking of heritage; namely that heritage has never been an all-inclusive category, a *democracy of things* – a paradox present, yet not scrutinized, in most heritage definitions and legislations. And despite its ongoing “democratization” reflected in the struggle to involve the interests and concerns of marginalized others (e.g. through the introduction of *intangible* heritage), a similar care for seemingly subsidiary or othered *things* is usually not seen; that is, apart from general age preferences, heritage of course contains its own regimes of cultural valuing and othering (see article “B” and “D”) that is both selective and prescribes a certain care, and thus

mode of being, for the selected few. Again, while walking among the well-kept ruins of, for example, Pompeii, Rome and Athens, may be an experience equally (though differently) affective to that of entering a recently abandoned building, the fact remains that the former is easily conceived as heritage while the latter is not. And more important than their genuine “oldness” in this relation, is the fact that the former have been subjected to a particular curative care and a particular aesthetics, crucial to their current mode of being – as humanized sites/things. As such they invite visitors to a styled, ordered and pleasant space where further decay is staved off through restoration and preservation and where disturbing material and pollutants (as plants, fauna, modern debris or chronological anomalies) are attempted cleared away (Edensor 2005b). In other words, a central paradox of heritage management, and of general heritage conventions and policies, is the simultaneous concern for *ruins* but absolute intolerance for *ruination* (see article “D”). And even more serious is the apparent lack of critical discussion of this issue within heritage studies, or of the aesthetic inclinations it seems to imply (see however Ouzman 2006; Carman 2010).



Figure 13: Path leading visitors between the factory and oil tanks, Djúpavík (Photo: Þóra Pétursdóttir).

Aesthetics has not been a central theme of discussion in heritage studies or discourses, other than those concerned specifically with the management and

conservation of “works of art”. However, in her article with the telling title “The aesthetic experience of ruins” philosopher Linda E. Patrik (1986) discusses aesthetics in relation to *ruins* also more generally. Interestingly, Patrik argues that the effects of ruination, like fragmentation, overgrowth, disintegration and incompleteness, actually contribute to the *aesthetic pleasure* of experiencing structures. Unlike Roman Ingarden (1961), who’s ideas she contests, Patrik argues that ruination does not “shock” or disturb the observer but that the structures are rather valued *as ruins*; that is, that ruination and deterioration may add positive aesthetic value and sense of historical depth to objects and structures, and thus even render aesthetically pleasing objects that before were considered non-aesthetic. Patrik’s argument and her genuinely positive perception of ruination represent a rare and important perspective on these matters. Nevertheless, what Patrik does not address is what the concepts/phenomena of *aesthetics* and *ruin/ruination* involve. Moreover, her examples all belong to a category of “ready-ruined” classical structures, already safely incorporated into heritage management programs, which means that her important argument does not in any way challenge the conception of the valued heritage ruin as, above all, aesthetically *pleasing*, comfortable and unchallenging – that is, as everything that *active* ruination is not.

The origin of *aesthetics* both etymologically and philosophically⁹ is, however, rather different from this *humanized* and currently canonized conception. The concept derives from the two Greek words “aisthithicos” and “aisthisis”, where the former refers to “that which is ‘perceptive by feeling’” and the latter to “the sensory experience of perception” (Buck-Morss 1993: 125; see also e.g. Bale 2009). As introduced by Alexander Baumgarten, the first to employ it as a philosophical concept, aesthetics thus referred not to representation but to *reality itself* and the unmediated corporeal experience of it (ibid.; Bale 2009). As such the aesthetic experience can be understood as a “discourse of the body” (Eagleton 1990: 13), a cognition “... ‘out front’ of the mind, encountering the world prelinguistically, hence prior not only to logic but to meaning as well” (Buck-Morss 1993: 125). As a kind of “presence effect” (Gumbrecht 2004)

⁹ The concept was introduced to philosophy by the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten in his uncompleted manuscript *Aesthetica* (1750-1758).

aesthetics is therefore intrinsically better allied with animal instinct than the “philosophical trinity of Art, Beauty, and Truth” (Buck-Morss 1993: 125). However, this archaic form of aesthetic experience has been more or less ignored in modern interest in the topic, where focus is predominantly on the ever more profound cultural/social taming, or sophistication, of this primitive sensual perception – and the concept thus ever more tightly knit to the *acceptable* or *pleasant* alone.

In line with this and resonating with the relation between utility and value heritage definitions and conventions have always favoured a *pleasant* and comfortable aesthetics, a Cartesian aesthetics of distanced contemplation – even of the sublime – rather than one of physical engagement with the ruined and real (Eagleton 1990; Jameson 2009). According to Jameson (2009: 594ff.), who draws on Kant’s assertion of the disinterested and uninvolved subject, this notion of aesthetics is rather “a bracketing of reality”, where the observer is placed at “a passive-contemplative distance from reality” (ibid. 594), rather than “thrown” into it, as for example argued by Heidegger (1962). To the extent that people are encouraged to “engage” with heritage, it is largely through acknowledging the deeper historical/contextual meaning of things and sites – and the conditions of experience are therefore mainly directed towards the imperatives of how it can most adequately serve this meaning or at least avoid disturbing it. And valuing decay, therefore, does not tone with the current aesthetics of heritage and conservation. While heritage scholars have repeatedly encouraged an understanding of heritage as *process* (e.g. Smith 2006), that conception has never included its actual and tangible aspect. The traditional idea is that as things or sites become heritage they should, by means of management and conservation, be rescued from any *material* processes natural to them and turned into frozen facts, into stable points of departure around which processes of intangible value prescription may evolve. In other words, things are *aesthetically muted* or made manageable – restrained, controlled and kept from revealing themselves to us in their true being.

As I argue in article “B” while pushing heritage beyond anthropocentrism may be impossible – as it is inevitably something that *we value* – moving towards a broader heritage conception is absolutely viable. That is, towards a conception

that is not bound to a valuation of things that equals their complete domestication or the abolition of their thingness but is open to the possibility of appreciating things also in their otherness, for example in ruination. A heritage conception, moreover, where the notion of process may encompass both tangible and intangible aspects, and the dynamic and interactive relations between them, and is thus capable of acknowledging also things' own affordances, enunciation and, like in the case of the two herring stations, their own contribution to the very act of *becoming heritage*.

The materiality of memory – or aesthetic memory

The materiality of memory, and what I refer to as *aesthetic memory*, is a theme touched upon, from different angles, in all five articles. The thread running through all works is the contrast between on the one hand recollective memory and deliberate commemoration, and on the other hand the various material forms of involuntary memory (Benjamin 1999; Bergson 2004). In other words, and without devaluing how things of course can be consciously mobilized to act as vehicles for commemoration, I seek to stress how all things simultaneously, in power of their durability and being out-of-hand (see article "C"), also enable involuntary and spontaneous remembering. A memory thus that is mostly beyond our control, but granted/forced upon us through our constant and intimate engagement with things. This further points to another important subject emphasised in all articles, though most explicitly in articles "A" and "C", which relates more specifically to *how* things (or indeed we) remember and to the very *characteristics of memory*, such as fragmentation, incompleteness and nonlinearity. As I argue in more detail in article "A" the positive acknowledgment of these qualities may call attention to the friction between archaeology and history but also underscore how things enable a different approach to past, present and future.

This differentiation of memory also connects to the discussion of heritage conceptions above, and to a tension rarely addressed between two ways of conceiving heritage: On the one hand heritage as something discursively communicated, appropriated and consciously considered, and on the other,

heritage as something lived with – as an existential and “thrown” dimension of our being-in-the-world (Heidegger 1962). The first, and the overwhelmingly dominant conception, relates to the kind of conscious memory politics at work on the heritage scene today, where decisions are constantly made as to what is selected and presented for commemoration and how; the second conception relates to the existential, material or *aesthetic* dimension of memory that is involuntarily ignited through our inhabitation of a world of present pasts – thus, further underscoring our inability to fully control commemoration. It is this latter dimension that considers the involuntary and inevitable experience of living with a material past that is constantly accumulating around us. A telling example of this is the inescapable experience of living with a Soviet heritage, or indeed inhabiting an explicitly Soviet materiality, in a declared “post-Soviet” contemporary Russia. The viscosity and persistency of this material *past* critically questions traditional notions of historical succession and chronology (when did Soviet end, and has it ended?), and which further urges us to the question whether it is, as often asserted, a mental heritage of political passivity which constitutes the legacy and “effective history” (Gadamer 1975) of “Sovietism”, or if we rather are dealing with an *effective archaeology*: a thick and sticky material heritage which buffers or impacts on all attempts to move on? (Olsen 2013a, 2013b: 185-188). As such the exploration of these different modes of memory also overlapped with the objective of this project to contribute to a different heritage conception and the recognition of both tangible and intangible, and/or involuntary and voluntary processes at work in its formation, management and mediation.

Memory has for the last decades been a central theme in cultural and social studies and much attention has, for example, been devoted to how memory crystallizes into objects, sites or places, generating locales or *lieux* (Nora 1996) of collective remembering (e.g. A. Assmann 2004; J. Assmann 2011; Connerton 1989; Halbwachs 1997; Tamm 2013; Van Dyke and Alcock 2003). Nevertheless, memory is here mostly associated with a “re-collective” conception or, in other words, with memory as a conscious and willful human process of recalling the past, which also characterizes how memory, as a fright of forgetting, is mostly articulated within the heritage sphere (for critical discussion see

Harrison 2013: 166ff.). The materiality of the place or object is, thus, in these contexts not decisive; the crucial issue is the past event and the will to remember it through subsequent site embodiments (the appropriation/construction of sites, monuments, memorials etc.). As archaeologists, however, we are of course fully aware that things endure whether or not we intend them to, and that the massive and enormously diverse assemblage of both useful and discarded pasts resulting from this gathering enables alternative *habitual* and *involuntary* memories and mnemonics, fundamentally different from those related to controlled recollection (Olsen 2013a).

As outlined in article “D”, while re-collective memory implies a conscious gaze directed towards a particular past, *habit memory* (Bergson 2004) is an existential implicit act of remembering embedded in our bodily routines and ways of dealing with things: “it no longer represents our past to us, it *acts* it” (Bergson 2004: 93). According to Bergson, habit memory is largely a function of adaptive value, meaning that only those aspects of the past that are *useful* or compatible with our present conducts are habitually remembered. But the material pasts budding in our present of course also include discarded and supposedly *abandoned* ones. And no less than those more consciously *lived with* or utilized also these continue to be *involuntarily* remembered (Benjamin 1999) and adhered to, and thus work to slow down the articulated efforts to rise above them. Through the redundant and stranded materials that survive in tension to the habitually useful, ideologically correct, and aesthetically pleasing, these things give face also to the trivial, outdated and failed and thus might be said to exercise a material “care” which also extends to the victimized, superfluous or ignored and which both the recollective and the habitual memory may have displaced (Olsen 2010: 166-172, 2013a).

Importantly however, when *brought out-of-hand* (see article “C”) through processes of ruination and decay, things and ruins (in their *otherness*) become potential agents of disruption and “actualisation” (Benjamin 1999: 473-476) also on another level: bringing forth, or indeed remembering, the very *mode in which they remember* (see article “A”). That is, by being fragmented, broken and disordered they do not shun but commemorate the unique qualities of all memory, including its incompleteness, its “irrational” entanglement, non-

linearity, and close relation to oblivion (see e.g. Augé 2004). In other words, things in ruin or things *out-of-hand* allow us, as archaeologists, to acknowledge that *they do not remember* – willingly at least – the cultural history, the linear narratives, we relentlessly make them bear witness to (cf. Olivier 2011). Indeed, such appropriation of things and fragments from the past as “historical witnesses” may also be seen as one aspect of their *domestication*; a conduct where things are made to serve as loyal contributors to a continuous past which they, in reality, are blasted out of (Benjamin 1999: 473-476) and exist in opposition to.

Moreover, it is the very conception of things as serving (cultural) history that leads to the disparaging conception of the archaeological record as incomplete and “distorted”, as representing loss, failure or defect, and therefore something we must correct by filling in the gaps in order to heal the material past as History (Olsen 2012a: 25). Things should of course be mobilized in historical reconstructions, but crucial for a turn to things is to also acknowledge *how* archaeological things remember, and allow their *ruin memories* to infuse new and different approaches to pasts and presents. Not to replace culture-historical or other more conventional accounts of our past but to contrast them with a different thing-oriented perspective, that also may challenge the sometimes all too well established conflation of the past with history in Western culture (see Nandy 1995). And indeed, as Laurent Olivier (2011) has argued, archaeology may find more in common with the trope of memory, for example fragmentation, discontinuity and oblivion, than with the continuous, linear, narratives of conventional culture-history.

To recognize the otherness of things and their fragmented memories, however, requires both cognitive and sensual openness; an attentive attitude to things themselves and a will to acknowledge the way they affect us in their different modes of being. An attitude that will not approach them with already fixed questions and anticipated answers, and thus will not immediately seek to *make sense* of them, to rationalize, contextualize or historicize them, but is rather itself rooted in an appreciation of their solitude, unfamiliarity and otherness. Importantly, this neither involves the precedence of subjective sentiments nor subjectively prescribed meanings, but is rather a serious consideration of the

affections and *different* meanings born through the very encounter with things in their sheer presence, bare and “a-theoretical”. And, thus, involves giving primacy to the *interactive* affect of the aesthetic experience and to the moments when the body “rebels against the tyranny of the theoretical” (Eagleton 1990: 14). In other words, allowing for a primitive *aesthetic attentiveness*, as discussed above, that is released from the restraints of having to see things merely as something “for-the-purpose-of” (cf. Introna 2009) – and consequently either *ready-to-* or *present-at-hand* (cf. Heidegger 1962) – to instead allow for a third mode of their being, their being *out-of-hand* (see article “C”), and thus truly enable us to see things in the way they show themselves (Heidegger 1962: 58).

This moreover entails the abandonment of the imperative of *anaesthetization* (cf. Buck-Morss 1993) that has characterized modern academia and sciences generally, to make room also for experiences of *wonder* and affection (Bogost 2012: 113-134; Malpas 2012: 251-267; Stengers 2011). In archaeology this means reclaiming what might be called the *archaeological experience* or *sensibility*; that is, acknowledging the significance of the underrated archaeological field method, which’ indispensable component is the bodily or aesthetic experience of *being present* at a site or place and being exposed to its rich portfolio of ineffable material impacts (Andreassen et al. 2010; Harrison and Schofield 2010: 69; Olsen et al. 2012: 58-78). As I will discuss in more detail below, this sensitivity also refers to our conception of fieldwork as an existential engagement that cannot be confined to any one mode of observation but involves and affects the broad sensory register of sight, smell, sound, and bodily sensations. Indeed, one effect of the now long history of apprehension for superficiality and of the concurrent urge to reach the *deeper* meanings beyond things, what might be called the “fallacy of interpretation” (Olsen 2011), is the numbness of our senses and repression of our *aesthetic memory* – a self-protective move against charges of intuitive, irrational reactions. Thus, to reclaim our ability to recall things does not so much require new education or learning as it compels *de-learning/unlearning* this fear, to instead daringly return to what we already know, to what is already there. Because this return to our senses, as stated by Susan Buck-Morss (with allusion to Walter Benjamin), “... is no longer a question of educating the crude ear to hear music, but of giving it

back hearing. It is no longer a question of training the eye to see beauty, but of restoring ‘perceptibility’” (Buck-Morss 1993: 131).

In my case this involved, as so crudely argued by Ian Bogost, “... to go where *everyone* has gone before, but where few have bothered to linger” (2012: 34); to *return* to the herring stations themselves and their unruly masses of strange things, not as mere remnants of past meanings but as affective concrete presences capable of mediating object lessons or *aesthetic memories* that the now conventional interpretive meaning pursuit could not convey.



Figure 14: Visitors at Eyri (Photo: Tryggvi Hallgrímsson).

The significance of things – or in praise of difference

The significance of things is arguably an underlying theme in all five articles but most explicit in the first three, articles “A”, “B” and “C”. Article “A” discusses the significance of things, fragments and ruins and the memories they hold as alternatives to historical reconstructions of the past. Article “B” considers the place of things in heritage discourses and argues for their significance in processes of heritage formation. It furthermore discusses the significance of (modern) ruins and the need for a reconsideration of *ruination* in the heritage sphere, as a natural material process that does not necessarily counteract or

diminish heritage value. Article “C” continues in a similar vein to discuss the particularity and character of archaeological things and the significance of their physical otherness in our encounters with them and, moreover, how their ongoing *bringing-out-of-hand* becomes most explicit and uncanny in the context of the recently abandoned or modern ruin. Finally, article “E” explores the encounter with things and ruins through photography and its potential in mediating or prolonging the *encounter with the other*, also to a second hand audience.

The *things* addressed in all articles are of course modern *ruins* (the herring stations) and *abandoned/archaeological things*. Importantly, however, these are addressed not merely as remnants (of something gone) but *as what there is*, and in the way that they *are* and appear here and now. Their significance, thus, is considered inevitably anchored in their *otherness* – and the way this is disclosed to us. That is, what I emphasise is not only that things are inextricable constituents of the past “social” contexts or fabric they previously have been reduced to (historical) witnesses of, but that they are of interest in their own respect; that they have an “integrity” of their own (Olsen 2010). A central concern to my discussion of their significance, therefore, is *difference*; how things differ, and how their difference, when acknowledged and allowed to *let be*, affects us and other beings. In other words, how things in their own constituency are “... *capable of an effect*, of inflicting some kind of blow on reality” (Harman 2002: 20).

As discussed in Chapter 2 a turn to things, to materiality and the “real” has already been present in the humanities and social sciences for two decades. Hence, we might as well state, as historian Frank Trentman, that “things *are* back” (2009: 283, emphasis added). This, however, is only partly true. Because, as I have argued (articles “A” and “C”), despite the impressive range of subject matters covered and despite the avowed interest in the material, actual and ordinary things themselves, not to mention the (archaeological) masses of things soiled, broken, ruined and discarded, still seem to escape serious consideration. Furthermore, when assessing how things are addressed and credited significance as “full-fledged *social* actors” (Latour 1999: 214, emphasis added) in *our* democracy, another conspicuous feature is the repertoire of positive and

largely wished-for *human* qualities and virtues consistently ascribed to them (e.g. “actor”, “agency”, “delegate”, “vitality”, “democracy”, “personality”, “biography”). That is, *everything* seems “... to be elevated *up* to the same status as humanity” (Bogost 2012: 7). Rarely, however, are the “thing-specific”¹⁰ qualities of fragmentation, decay, moulding and rusting included among the virtues cited when underscoring their cultural or social significance. Thus, with a hint of irony, we might say that what has also been referred to as a “*symmetrical* approach” is in fact running the risk of surrendering *difference* for *symmetry* or sameness – constructing things in *our image*. Importantly, to criticize this is not to ignore that things do encompass agency and vitality, of course, but to underline that a *turn to things* cannot avoid also facing the less desirable otherness of things – that is, the difference of their thingly mode of being and the “agency” that this difference may bring forth. In other words, to underline the irony that the relationship must, to some extent, remain *asymmetrical* (Benso 2000: 141).

Ruins of the recent and contemporary past provide an exemplary heuristic case in this respect by conspicuously accentuating, through their withering and crumbling, the integrity and otherness of things; in other words, how things exist, act and inflict on each other, also outside the human realm, outside direct *purpose* or *utility*, and how their very presence and (alter)*native* thing-agency affects us on encounter. An observation of things abandoned, therefore, like the ones in Eyri and Djúpavík, may help make manifest this unmasked *face of things* (see article “C”). Of course, ruination, decay, fragmentation, abandonment and discontinuity are concepts and phenomena that are conventionally understood in a negative way. Based on the imperatives of utility, purpose and proper function, they indicate processes through which things and sites are degraded, humiliated and deprived of value, meaning and information. If, however, acknowledged as part of things’ own mode of being these same processes may be seen as revealing and constructive in a more *prospective* sense (e.g. Desilvey 2006). Rather than signifying loss ruination may thus be perceived as the manifestation of “... the eternity of these ruins”, as

¹⁰ And to be sure, these are in *reality* not at all thing specific qualities as in non-*human* qualities, hence the quotation marks.

Benjamin (1996: 470) expressed it. Thereby also abandonment loses its purely negative association to be perceived instead as a condition that allows things to exhibit their difference – or with reference to Heidegger’s concept of *Gelassenheit* (1966), a condition that releases things from the chains of usefulness and *lets them be*, for themselves and out-of-hand (article “C”).

Needless to say, approaching things in themselves, or turning to them in their own genuine mode of being, is far from any simple exercise and may even be outright paradoxical since the very act of addressing them, enrolling them in research or speaking in their name, is inevitably to some degree anthropocentric. Heidegger himself declared that “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” (1993a: 171). There are possibilities, however, in an approach that dares to move towards such impossibilities, as Heidegger (1966) does, and the concept of “*Gelassenheit*” or “releasement toward things”, and its kindred notion of “openness to the mystery”, imply the possibility of such an approach. To clarify his idea of *Gelassenheit* Heidegger makes a distinction between “calculative thinking” and “meditative thinking” (Heidegger 1966: 46). The former, he claims, is the kind of wilful, goal-oriented thinking that already expects an outcome and thus represents the conventional scientific and rationalized mode of thinking and advancing. The latter, however, is a kind of thinking that is released from such bonds of anticipation, and instead *waits* for that which may come towards it (ibid.: 47). In other words, meditative thinking is an “attitude” of *Gelassenheit* that is open to the mystery of its surrounding and thus also disposed to perceive it differently. “In waiting we leave open what we are waiting for”, Heidegger writes (ibid.: 68), and therefore remain open also to receive and acknowledge the strange ways in which things may show themselves.

It is this kind of attitude, I contend, that must constitute the *difference* of a turn to things themselves. Starting from *Gelassenheit*, or from *love* as argued by Badiou (Badiou and Truong 2012), this kind of attitude should moreover be thought of not as a belated invite of inclusion but as an open and non-demanding ethical turn to the complete other (or “the other of the Other” as things are referred to by Benso 2000). As suggested by Levinas it is only in the locus of

ethics that the Other can enter philosophy, and a turn to *things* – understood as the “other of the Other” (ibid.) – must therefore be considered as essentially an ethical matter; or in other words, as an ethics extended to things (Benso 1996, 2000; Introna 2009, forthcoming). Of course ethics is traditionally about people and *other* persons but not about things, or as stated by Silvia Benso (2000: 127-128), “If there is ethics, it is not of things; and if there are things, they are not ethical.” An ethics of things may therefore sound absurd or inconceivable. Nevertheless, bravely disregarding its alleged illogicality, by bringing together or supplementing (in Derrida’s notion) two philosophical strands, that of Heidegger’s things and that of Levinas’ ethics, Benso (ibid.: 127ff.) has showed how the ideas of both may be furthered to infuse just that, an ethics of things. Because while fundamentally disparate, what nonetheless unites Heidegger and Levinas is the concern for otherness – “the desire *not to be oblivious to differences*” (ibid: 132, emphasis added).

It is this desire, I argue, that also must ground a turn to things and inform our exploration of their significance. Not merely because it is a morally correct move on our part to meet them as the things that they are, and acknowledge their right to *be*, but also because we cannot deny them a moral dimension when recognizing their agency, vitality and force. As qualified constituents in our common “society of monsters” (Law, 1991) things are never innocent beings, they are never just there as simple means towards our ends. We may enroll them and charge them with our values and meanings to give them substance and weight, but these inscriptions are successful because things are partly autonomous and because they *endure* and *outlive* us (see Latour 2002, 2012). And, moreover, rather than being a concern for good or bad, for abstract principles, or for making the “correct” move, ethics is about being attentive to “... reality itself, its concreteness, the gravity of things” (Benso 2000: 131). In other words, it is about taking things seriously. And for me that involved practicing, as argued by Thoreau, “the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen” (cited in Bennett 2010: 5); to halt, *wait* and step back to observe the abandoned condition and linger within the ruins and among things, instead of stepping right in to manipulate them archaeologically. In other words, to take seriously the call

of things, their “thing-power” (Bennett 2010), their lure and affect, to simply explore what might come from it.

However, as already noted taking things seriously, hearing their call or accounting for their different being is a complex task. Let me therefore turn to a more explicit discussion of the methods and theoretical pragmatics employed in that endeavour.



Figure 15: Floor assemblage, Eyri (Photo: Þóra Pétursdóttir).

5. Approaching things: theory as (/) in practice

As noted above there has long been uttered a scepticism among archaeologists towards the relevance of theories originating outside the discipline and cautions have equally frequently been raised about our presumably passive consumption of these “alien” theoretical frameworks. This has also led to such discussions as to whether or not there exists any genuine *archaeological* theory (e.g. Johnson et al. 2006). An important aspect of this scepticism has focused on the particularity of the whole archaeological project and forcefully argued that there is an inconsistency between, on the one hand, the material archaeologists work with and the physical methods they employ to approach it, and on the other hand, their reliance on abstract theories to explain the same material – theories that have no conception of the colours, textures or smell of soil, nor of the weight, concreteness or fragility of things, or of the physical labour often required to reach them. These issues, and more explicitly how an unquestioned dependence on abstract theoretical discourses may work to downgrade and even rule out the significance of the archaeological approach itself, and the uniqueness of the archaeological material, has recently been discussed in an intriguing article by Matt Edgeworth (2012). He states that:

“It has become customary for almost every theoretical paper in archaeology to take as its starting point a philosophical position originating from outside the discipline, and then to see how archaeological material is configured within such a conceptual framework. ... Yet most theories applied thus to archaeological data are profoundly non-archaeological, thought by thinkers who – however great – have never chopped the surface of the earth with a spade, scraped away its covering of subsoil, outlined archaeological features with the tip of a trowel, jumped into a feature while digging it out, followed down a cut in the poring rain or been astounded by the often unexpected evidence that turns up as a result of these material interventions. ... When it comes to level of *engagement with* and sheer *embeddedness* in the material world, archaeology has the edge over any other social science discipline, no matter how theoretically sophisticated” (Edgeworth 2012: 76-77).

As an example Edgeworth takes the well know archaeological operation of following a cut, an act that "... can only be performed while the archaeologist is actually in touch with evidence and engaged in working upon it" (ibid.: 78). Tracing the cut requires the archaeologist's active pursuit, which unavoidably is based on her experience and expectation, but simultaneously requires her openness to the unanticipated and thus recognition of the autonomy of the cut followed. In other words, archaeological endeavour compels a dialogue where an archaeological feature may be daringly confronted with expectations and opinions but is also met as a concrete matter that may reject the "... cognitive moulds prepared for it, and which has the capacity to surprise, resist, contradict and re-shape knowledge" (ibid.: 77). Edgeworth thus declares that,

"The fact that cuts can be followed is important because it means we know what to do even if there does not happen to be a relevant theory lying around. We do not have to start with an explicit theory. The unfolding cut, in the context of our work upon it, configures our experience in such a way that we are obliged to follow it and see where it goes, and in what direction it takes us" (ibid. 78).

I absolutely agree with this. However, I believe it is important to underline, or not to ignore, the fact that being able to "listen" to things or features in this way involves, consciously or not, also a theoretical standpoint. Or rather, being able to recognize and openly talk about the everyday action of following a cut as a meaningfully constitutive and interactive action, and not merely a means to an end, indicates a very specific ontological stance whether or not one chooses to emphasise this as a theoretical point of departure. And many of the theoretical frameworks applied in archaeology through the last 50 years have, on the same grounds, because of their ontological position, been utterly unable to span such descriptions of following cuts – or listening to things and hugging trees – as intellectual work and as such meaningfully, or indeed theoretically, constitutive.

Gavin Lucas has argued that what differentiates the current "interpretive dilemma" in archaeology from the one that occupied the discipline in the 1970s and 1980s is that the current one is not epistemological but ontological (Lucas 2012: 3). That is, it is rooted in the often unaddressed metaphysical postulations of different statements and in lack of dialogue between different discourses and

practices within the discipline. For example, Lucas asks, “Does the reality posited in archaeological discourse about agency theory bear any correspondence to the reality posited through excavation or through artifact analysis?” (Lucas 2012: 3). Though the quest for correspondence may in itself be a problematic issue (cf. Pickering 2011), what grounds it – and still seems forgotten in most takes on the “*interpretative*” dilemma – is the taken for granted ontological divide between, on the one hand, “inert” things themselves and, on the other, not only the “social context” to be reached through these things but also *interpretation, meaning* and *knowledge* itself. This has furthermore inevitably rendered interpretation an act of reaching what is on the other side of this bifurcation; in other words, that which is beyond things. The very notion of interpretation has thus become grounded in a particular ontology that has created specific expectations of what interpretations should be about, and also of *how* to reach them.

This ontological divide has therefore also been the undercurrent in much of the explicit epistemological and methodological debate in the discipline, such as the recurring question of how to bridge the gap between a static archaeological record and the dynamics of past living societies. Fundamental to this concern, of course, was the widely shared understanding of societies and cultures as primarily *human* entities independent of their material expressions, which also for so long rendered things mostly irrelevant to mainstream social and cultural theorizing¹¹. It thus became imperative to archaeologists to provide bridging arguments and “middle-range” theories in order to translate their inert things into living cultures and thereby also to make social and cultural theory archaeologically relevant (e.g. Binford 1977, 1983; Raab and Goodyear 1984; Schiffer 1988; cf. Olsen 1997).

The changes associated with the recent turn to things have, however, opened for a very different take on these issues. By no longer being treated as epiphenomenal witnesses of society but as its indispensable constituents, and thus fundamentally involved in human conducts and social trajectories, things’ epistemological status as “data” has been radically changed. That is, the previously fundamental gaps between humans/society and things, between

¹¹ Marxism can be claimed to represent an exception within the social sciences. It nevertheless required acceptance of a rigid structural model of society as well as a very narrow repertoire of roles that things could fulfil within this model, e.g. as means and forces of production.

dynamics and statics, have withered and thus to some extent made redundant many of the bridging arguments formerly required. Though the potentially radical implications of this are yet to be scrutinized, this also suggests an end to the discriminating separation between theory, method and data; in other words, the still fundamental difference between knowing *what* and knowing *how*.

Andrew Pickering has argued that one way to abolish this schism may be by shifting the way we think about science or scientific work from what he calls the “representational idiom” to a “performative idiom”. The former, he argues, and the one that characterized the linguistic/constructivist turn, embraces a conception of science “as a body of representations of nature, of empirical statements, theory, language” and thus furthers a fundamental and ontological separation between *the reality* scientists work with or reach for and their representations of it (Pickering 2011: 3; see also Anderson and Harrison 2010; Thrift 2008). This idiom, Pickering states, “... produces the standard epistemological problematic of realism and all the puzzlement about *how nature can get into our representations*” (ibid., emphasis added). Pickering’s main suggestion is that we take leave from these representational concerns and rather start addressing questions regarding the performance, agency and the practice of science. That is, that we start from our scholarly “thrown condition” (pace Heidegger 1962) and consider attentively *how we do things*, and how other entities like instruments, data and colleagues, also *do things* and affect us within the worldly laboratory we all work. And, thus, how everything, every action and every “result” – like following a cut – is brought about through a back-and-forth movement, “a dialectic of resistance and accommodation” or what Pickering (2011) also calls “a dance of agency”. In the case of the cut this involves, as described by Edgeworth (2012), the constant movement between the archaeologist’s active ensuing through the use of various techniques and methods and “... a constant adaptation to the unfolding and *changing reality* of the cut itself” (Edgeworth 2012: 78, emphasis added). By recognizing at the outset this “dance of agency”, Pickering states, “It becomes entirely obvious that the material world plays a constitutive role in science” (Pickering 2011: 3), and moreover, by recognizing this dancing as the concurrent emerging performance of *methods, ideas and data* – in other words as emerging knowledge – it also

becomes obvious that the material world is a *constitutive part* of our knowledge and theory of it (ibid.).

Building on a notion of this kind of *dialectically emerging realism* and thus a “flattened” ontology (DeLanda 2006), my approach can be described as an attempt not to entrench theory into an abstract domain of reasoning but to explore its direct pragmatic and analytical relevance in concrete engagements with things – with abandoned herring stations. In other words, to rather explore how each feeds into and thus affords the other; how theory is also part of my “doing” or a form of praxis (e.g. Hodder 1992; Tomášková 2006) and thus like the more embodied methods is always interactive and affected by things and features that may lead, resist, confirm and surprise. Moreover, rather than committing myself to any one particular theoretical perspective or “framework” my pragmatic approach is rather guided by a *bricoleur* attitude; an attempt to pursue the ways in which productive reasoning from various bodies of work can be enlightened, enriched and strengthened by creatively merging their most applicable parts (Olsen 2010: 12-14). Despite the internal controversies that may arise from such an eclectic and collective approach, it seems far more appropriate when dealing with things – entities which have repeatedly proved to be far too complex, different, and unruly to be captured by any single philosophy or social theory (ibid.; Latour 1999: 176). Moreover, and importantly, when viewed from the perspective of a flattened ontology theory can no longer be kept *pure*, compartmentalized and sheltered within some abstract domain, from where it can be picked (singularly) and applied. Like any other entity it emerged through and must continuously fight its existence in a “dance of agency” with and among other bodies that will resist, accommodate and affect it. In other words, *archaeological theory is interactive practice or it is nothing*.

Phenomenological approaches to fieldwork

This notion of theory as interactive practice and bricolage also involves attaining an open attitude to previous discourses on things and the material world and not saving all trust for the latest and theoretically “new” (cf. Harman 2002: 7). And while the turn to things surely is a current turn, it is important not to ignore that

it is deeply indebted to contributions made by a number of 19th and 20th century philosophers and social theorists. In fact, early phenomenology introduced the very slogan “to the things themselves” (zu den Sachen selbst) (Husserl, see Heidegger 1962: 58). Thus, in addition to more recent theoretical approaches such as actor-network-theory, science studies and various new realist programs (see chapter 2, e.g. Bennett 2010; Bogost 2012; Bryant 2011; Bryant et al. 2011; Coole and Frost 2010; DeLanda 2006; Latour 2005) I have also found much inspiration in the works of Bergson, Heidegger, and Benjamin. This inspiration is evident in this text (see chapter 4), as well as in my articles. For example, the works of Bergson and Benjamin provide extremely valuable insights on the role things themselves play in remembering (Bergson 2004), as does Benjamin’s positive conception of decay, ruination and fragmentation as forms of disturbance and disclosure (Benjamin 1985, 1999). Likewise I find that Heidegger’s phenomenology of things brings forth a very important and analytically relevant perspective on human engagement with things as well as on what things are in their own being (Heidegger 1962). Heidegger’s later philosophy also deals directly with what things hold “in reserve” and thus with the ethical implications of seeing things as more than things-for-us, in other words, requiring an attitude that does not reduce them to sameness (Heidegger 1966, 1971).

Phenomenology was initially launched as a way of “relearning to look at the world” (Merleau-Ponty 1962: xx, xvi), a reclaimed “seeing” grounded in our lived experience rather than in abstract philosophical concepts and theories. Understood as an attentive way of experiencing, phenomenology can thus be described as a project committed to restore to things their integrity by respecting their native ways of manifesting themselves (cf. Heidegger 1962: 58; Merleau-Ponty 1968: 4). As follows, phenomenology bears much resemblance to later thing theories, and at some point even goes further in considering what things are in their own and different beings, and thus fruitfully complements and contributes to dialogues based on a notion of a dialectically emerging realism as discussed above. As my encounter with Eyri and Djúpavík came to “enforce” my return to *the things themselves*, and their intriguing otherness, I instantly found this humble and attentive ontology prolific and inspiring, as captured in

Heidegger's description of phenomenology as a way "to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself" (Heidegger 1962: 58). Moreover, its premise that the direct and material engagements with things bring forth a mode of familiarity and understanding that cannot be achieved through a detached intellectual stance alone seemed to directly pertain to an *archaeological* sensibility (cf. Edgeworth above); that is, to the non-discursive aspects of *archaeological knowledge* and experiences that emerge from our being-in-the-field.

Phenomenology, in my opinion also provides important clues when attempting to move from the "representational idiom" towards the "performative idiom" (cf. Pickering (2011) above). As argued by Heidegger "'Phenomenology' neither designates the object of its researches, nor characterizes the subject-matter thus comprised. The word merely informs us of the "how" with which *what* is to be treated in this science gets exhibited and handled" (Heidegger 1962: 59). And this "how" refers, further, to grasping the objects of study "... *in such a way* that everything about them which is up for discussion must be treated by exhibiting it directly and demonstrating it directly" (ibid.). And it is this *directness* and "descriptiveness" (ibid.), as opposed to abstraction, that pertains to the project of approaching the things themselves. The problem of representation, as it surfaces in archaeology, together with its kin concept of interpretation, is that both are coupled with a twofold abstraction. Not only are we dealing with the question of correspondence between the archaeological reality encountered and our representation of it, but also between the past reality believed to reside beyond the one encountered and our meaningful interpretation of this lost reality.

The directness of things, obviously, has no place within this utterly representational idiom. Thus, my overall objective with attaining a phenomenologically inspired field methodology was to avoid this abstraction and overcome the ontological discrimination between theory and data.¹² Not by means of bridging or middle-range approaches but by attending to a common

¹² Indeed, Heidegger states that; "Phenomenology is our way of access to what is to be the theme of ontology, and it is our way of giving it demonstrative precision. *Only as phenomenology, is ontology possible*" (1962: 60).

ground where theory is not applied but interacts with, and is infused by data. And, importantly, where the directness of things – *that* which is encountered and *how* it is encountered – is considered interesting in and of itself.

The field methods possible in this relation are many, and rather than a toolbox the phenomenological project may also better be described as a “methodological conception” (Heidegger 1962: 50), as a commencement that drives you towards the challenge of facing things themselves and the coincident interactive exploration of *the how* best to grasp them. This moreover involves the exploration of how to translate or prolong the encounter with things and their thingly otherness in ways that may retain this difference rather than obscure it, and thereby – to some degree at least – also may be capable of articulating the directness and affect of the encounter to a second hand audience. Let me therefore describe what this implied for my fieldwork by briefly accounting for the four most significant facets of my work with the herring stations: *being (t)here, excavation, photography, and description.*

Being (t)here

Being present is usually not articulated as part of any field methodology but rather, and obviously so, considered simply the unavoidable and given nature of any fieldwork. What I mean by *being present*, however, is something more than merely its literal implication and something that, moreover, is important on two levels. I will refer to these as, on the one hand, *being there*, and on the other hand, *being here*.

By *being there* I am referring to fieldwork itself and to the active and conscious strive for attaining an open and attentive attitude towards things and the way we encounter them. In my case this involved refraining from the historically grounded and thus already anticipating mode of confronting the herring stations to instead obtain a less demanding attitude which, based on Heidegger’s (1966) concept of *Gelassenheit* or “releasement toward things”, was less troubled and more encouragingly challenged by their otherness. This phenomenological attitude and receptive delineation for how to approach things may very well recall what is sometimes condemned as *naïve* empiricism. But it is

precisely because of that “naivety”, I will claim, that this approach retains an attitude that is attentive to the surface of things themselves, and moreover leaves room for wonderment and affection (Malpas 2012: 251-267; Stengers 2011).

In other words, *being there* refers to a naïve or “banal” openness for the strangeness and unfamiliarity of things and for the “presence effects” that, as argued by Gumbrecht (2004), are normally silenced or explained away as irrational disturbances in today’s more conventional scientific and hermeneutic chase for meaning. In his plea for a reconfiguration of practices and knowledge production within the humanities, Gumbrecht argues against the dominion of interpretation that for too long has been allowed to forge a binary opposition between, on the one hand, surface and materiality, and on the other, depth and meaning. Rather than seeing these as opposites, bridged through interpretation, Gumbrecht (like Pickering (2011) in the discussion above) directs his focus towards the *emergence* and *experience* of meaning; that is, not only to that which appears but also to *how* it appears and thus to the interface or “dance of agency” (Pickering 2011) between materiality and meaning, and “... between “presence effects” and “meaning effects”” (Gumbrecht 2004: 2).

The success of such an approach is dependent on an acquaintance with the sites studied, acquired through the bodily experience of *being present* at a site or place and thus being exposed to its rich portfolio of ineffable material impacts (Andreassen et al. 2010; Harrison and Schofield 2010: 69). Sensitivity for these manifold faces of places and things importantly also refers to a conception of fieldwork as an existential engagement which cannot be confined to any one mode of observation but involves and affects the broad sensory register of sight, smell, sound, and bodily sensations. That is, *being there* involves the physical and cognitive effort of *bringing-yourself-there* (pace Heidegger’s discussion of “bringing-close”, 1962: 138ff.) – a movement towards things through situating yourself among them and, importantly, *remaining there* to experience their days passing, weathers shifting and appearances changing.

This brings me to the other side of being present, which I have called *being here*. By *being here* I am referring not only to the significance of experience but also to the importance of allowing that experience to be present and visible

in accounts and retellings of fieldwork; that is, the importance of *being here* in the text as “I”. This is rather uncommon in academic or scientific texts (or any scientific products), which often tend to be characterized by what Donna Haraway famously referred to as “the god trick of seeing everything from nowhere” (Haraway 1991:189). To me, however, it is important to understand experience and archaeological engagement not as an objective or interrogating gaze from a perspective external to the world but as a multisensory and partly familiar encounter with a world we are always part of and, thus, always already encountering. Therefore, unlike Haraway, I am not suggesting (in this context) that situatedness is rendered a problem but that we obtain a more positive conception of situatedness – as the “thrown” condition that actually *enables* perception and knowledge.

And therefore, like *being there* the *being here* also recalls in us a certain naïve nerve – a kind of “ambitious naiveté” (Bennett 2010: 19). That is, it requires us to boldly “name” things themselves, as they show themselves; to name how things come to our view, or withdraw from it; to name their colour, smell, texture, sounds and movements – and to name the sensations, memories, fears, and dreams that their sheer presence may provoke in us on our encounter with them, no matter how naïve or banal these declarations may appear in the context of “normal science”.

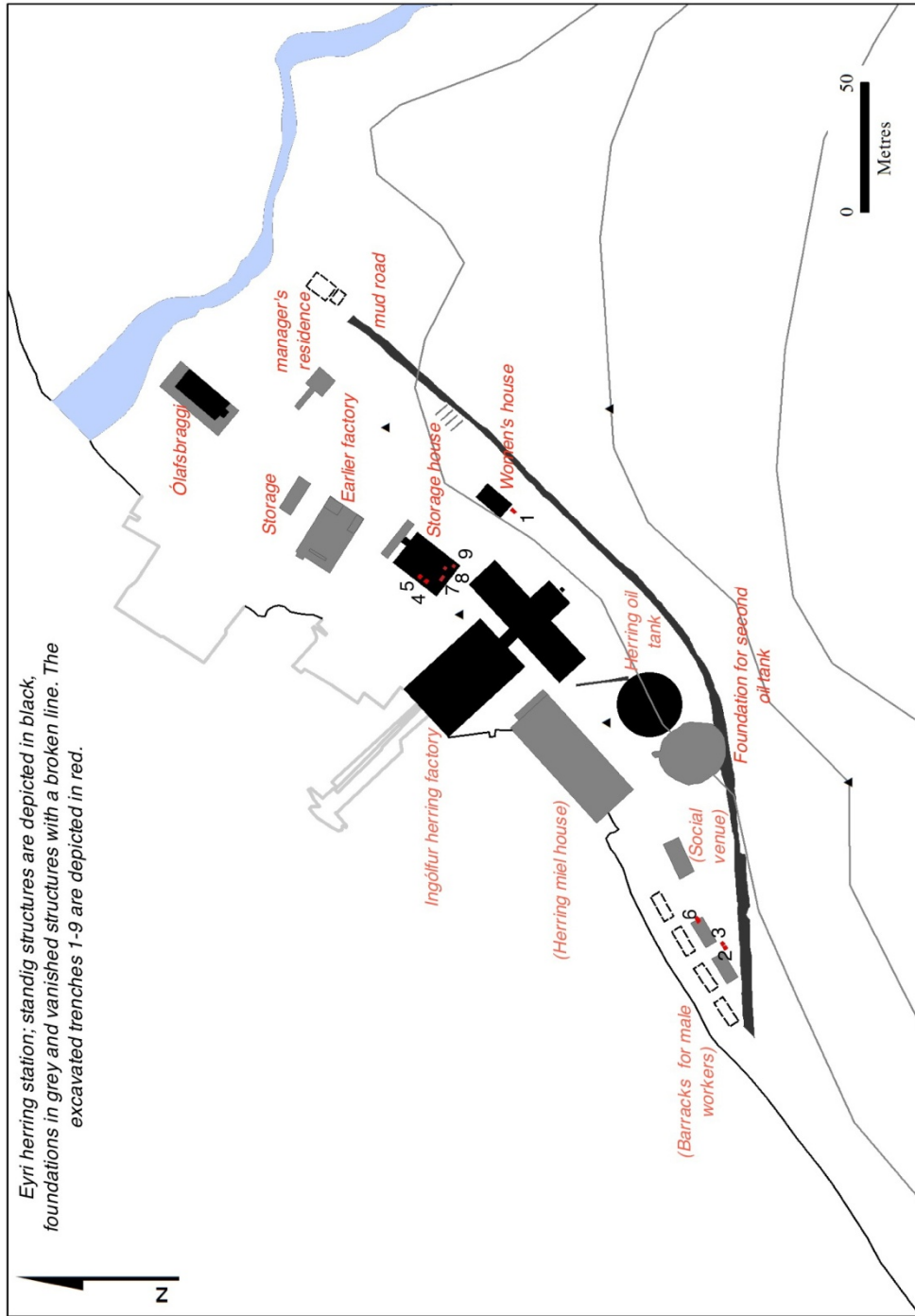


Figure 16: Eyri herring station

Excavation

Excavation, in its conventional understanding, did not play a very important role in my fieldwork, and was moreover only conducted at Eyri. The morphology of the sites, the richness of their surface assemblages, rather encouraged a gathering of data based on faithfulness to what was *already revealed* by the things or sites themselves, in their current modes of appearance. In other words, they called for an approach that literally allowed things to be seen in the very way in which they already showed themselves (pace Heidegger 1962: 58). This notion, importantly, also recalls Benjamin's (1985, 1999) emphasis on ruination, decay and fragmentation as forms of *disclosure*, and thus infers a perception of (modern) ruins, and the herring stations, as sites that are in fact undergoing a form of "*self-excavation*".

Returning to the more conventional conception of excavation, I find it interesting to note that the layout of trenches at Eyri bears a distinct trace of the projects progression and change of course, or my "return" to things themselves (fig. 16 and 17). The location of trenches 1, 2, 3 and 6 thus reflect the initial phase where shedding light on past dynamics and life at the herring station still had a first priority. Targeting midden deposits outside, respectively, the female (trench 1) and male worker's (trenches 2 and 3) lodgings, and the foundation of a WWII-barrack used as residence for male workers (trench 6), these trenches were intended to shed light on living conditions and subsistence at the herring station, also from a gender perspective. Trench 7 could also be included here; located between the counter and shelves in the former grocery shop the rich floor deposits were partly thought to provide interesting comparative material to trenches 1, 2 and 3. Trenches 7, 8 and 9, however, were actually added to the initial research plan when, quite unexpectedly, a decision was made by the owners of Eyri to burn down the Storage house in early autumn 2011 (fig. 23)¹³. Thus, to meet the sudden transformation of the investigations from mere research to rescue I decided to also excavate trenches in the extremely rich floor

¹³ It may be significant in the context of this thesis that permission to do so was immediately granted by the heritage authorities.

deposits within the shop (trench 7) and laboratory (trenches 8 and 9).¹⁴ The excavation of the two remaining trenches, 4 and 5, was however, as I will return to below, from the outset more of an “experiment” that was intended directly as an approach to things themselves, their agency and unpredictability (fig. 18 and 19; see also discussion of this in article “C”).



Figure 17: Excavated trenches in the Storage house, Eyri.

While the excavations did, as initially expected, contribute with insight into past conditions and life at the herring station my attention was, as already discussed, very soon grasped by the present conditions at this presumably abandoned and “dead” site; its subtle dynamics, the otherness and different agency of things, and the ways in which they emerged, approached me and surfaced – also through my excavations. Let me therefore briefly articulate how the obtained phenomenological approach pertains to my conception and practice of excavation.

¹⁴ It is worth mentioning that in addition to this a more thorough survey of the whole building and its many and varied spaces was conducted, and “object collections” representative for rooms or spaces not excavated were “randomly” collected. An archive of documents and books found in the attic above the shop and office was also obtained in its entirety.

The importance of *being there*, as discussed above, is maybe most explicitly experienced in the context of excavation. Following the subtle outlines of archaeological features and their not always anticipated behaviour requires an excavator's full presence and participation in a lengthy "dance of agency" where the lead is constantly moved between the feature, that is always already there, and the excavator, that is yet materializing it (cf. Edgeworth 2012, and discussion above). It requires the excavator's recognition of the slightest change in character, in the shade, compaction and texture of soil and the sound of scraping as well as a certain nerve of creativity and experimentation when the distinctive characteristics of features every now and then withdraw from the lead and must be actively "chased to the surface" again. By placing emphasis on how the feature is *co-revealed*, attention is importantly also brought to the already *meaningful* dialogue taking place in the trench. Rather than the "gathering of data" and thus a mere means to an end excavation becomes understood as a meaningfully constitutive dialogue itself between theory, method and data, and thus ontologically on level with, rather than preceding (or even discriminated from), acts of knowledge production.

Importantly, I claim, this also sets this approach apart from attempts at "reflexive" fieldwork, and experiments with "extending interpretation to the trowel's edge" (e.g. Hodder 1997; Berggren and Hodder 2003). The latter may of course be seen as an invitation to embrace these sensory and affective aspects. Seeing the trowel as an extension of the body it may imply an effort to account for both the significance of tacit skills and the very tangible interfaces involved in our engagement with soil, structures and artifacts. However, in my opinion the material and tactile part of the slogan has proved mostly metaphorical and may therefore rather have led to an extension of the regime of interpretation resulting in an immediate "discursivization" of the field and its otherness. While fieldwork was at some point driven by the "naïve" ideas of attentiveness, of curiosity, and of knowledge as something revealed through the order of things themselves, it has increasingly been appropriated as an intellectual exercise, and where the significance of things is not manifested in their physiognomy, appearance or sheer disorderly presence, but is always hidden beyond such "superficial" attributes or observations.

As I approach it excavation can in many ways be said to bring forth a movement towards things. Quite literally it requires the archaeologist to kneel down towards the level where things will surface – to bring herself to proximity with them, as forcing them close is not an option. Moreover, the always present factor of *not knowing* what will emerge may be argued to bring forth an ultimate and sincere care for things *qua things*. A care that is there even before they surface – and thus a care that is in a way unbound to any *idea* of them or their significance, beauty, value etc. This element of not knowing is also significant for understanding the very direct way in which things emerge for us through digging. That is, despite our previous experience or possible anticipation the unexcavated or “*undiscovered*” thing is of course, as argued by Heidegger, quite literally “... neither known nor unknown” (Heidegger 1962: 60) and what it may comprise is moreover “... something of which we have neither knowledge nor ignorance” (ibid., note 2). In other words, there is always a strong element of *coincidence* in how we encounter things through excavation. They may emerge slowly or abruptly but their emergence resembles a twist of fate, which intensity, moreover, is not least grounded in the paradox of being both anticipated, as something possible, and simultaneously utterly unexpected.



Figure 18: Trench 5 under excavation, August 2011 (Photo: Bjørnar Olsen).

This element of chance is not least interesting when we consider the role these things play, or the burdens we make them carry, as historical witnesses in our reconstructions of the past (see critique of this in article “A”), and thus also when considering the chance, that always was a possibility, that the encounter with them had *not occurred*. It was this element of chance that I was playing at in the “experiment” with trenches 4 and 5 (fig. 17), a set of square-metres, which I visited several times between 2011 and 2012 (see discussion and figures 7, 8, 9 and 10 in article “C”). The squares were located in rooms 2 and 3 in the Storage house, where the herring station’s office and service desk were previously housed. Now their floors were covered with a thick deposit of things and debris, their windows were broken and their ceilings leaking. The first visits, in June and August 2011, involved determining the exact location of the two squares and a documentation of them through photography, but without any further intervention. The observations in August were then followed by the excavation of each square. The trenches were documented immediately after excavation, and then again the following day. I also revisited the trenches on October 15th 2011 (the day after the destruction of the Storage house) and for the last time a year later, in September 2012. My acquaintance with the two squares showed that these were far from stable assemblages – and not really *abandoned* in the conventionally understood sense. Things moved and mingled freely, in or out of the squares, and changed the assemblages and their internal relations, even overnight. Surely, small things, travelling lightly, moved more frequently but also larger things shifted locations, tipped and turned. For example, both squares were invaded and/or abandoned by relatively large tables during the observing period.

Of course there are several agents, or *things*, enabling this mobility; there is wind and water, snow and ice, humans, fire, insects, sheep, foxes, birds and rodents – all of which take part in the formation of the assemblages by enabling and encouraging things to live out their capacities (DeLanda 2006; cf. Schiffer 1987). Therefore, I believe this somewhat naïve experiment enabled yet another small step towards things themselves, their agency and relations. If nothing else it underscored the very vibrant and unpredictable nature of the assemblages I excavated. Observing the movements of things within these small and

“sheltered” spaces recalled the vastness of the world and the chance involved in our knowledge of it. It remembered the many things that remained undiscovered and continued their lives beyond both my knowledge and ignorance thereof. It recalled, as stated by Jane Bennett “... that the world is not determined, that an element of chanciness resides at the heart of things, ... that deep within is an inexplicable vitality or energy, a moment of independence from and resistance to us and other bodies: a kind of thing-power” (Bennett 2010: 18).



Figure 19: Trench 4 after excavation, August 2011 (Photo: Bjørnar Olsen).

Photography

Photography has been part of archaeology and archaeological fieldwork more or less for as long as it has been practiced as an independent discipline, and its use has gradually grown along with its technological development and general accessibility (Bohrer 2011; Downing 2006; Hamilakis et al. 2009; Parno 2010; Shanks 1997). This whole time photography’s significance has been tied to, on the one hand, its role in *documentation* and thus the photograph’s part in the archaeological record, and on the other hand, its central role in *illustrating*

dominantly text based archaeological products. Lately a new growth and emphasis on photography has become apparent in relation to the development of archaeology of the recent past and present, where documentation is often focused on material that is *already revealed* and thus less pertinently applicable to e.g. the conventional recording techniques of excavation.¹⁵ The ways in which photographs are used in these contexts have also changed, and although this remains to be scrutinized (see however article “E”) it is arguable that the photograph, and not least the modern-ruin photograph, is gaining increasing independence from text and thus acknowledgement of its own meaningful content and constituting power.

Photography became a central method in my research, partly for the very reason described above; that I was working with sites which’ morphology urged a gathering of data based on faithfulness to what they *already revealed* in their current modes of being. My deliberate aim to approach things themselves moreover called for modes of documentation that, again, could allow things to be *re-seen* or *re-experienced* by a second hand audience in a way that remained faithful to how they showed themselves to me. Photography, thus, appeared as an extremely appropriate means in this endeavour. However, employed as an approach to things themselves an important departure from current standards of archaeological field practices and conventional photo work was to avoid any procedures of cleansing and “styling”, fixing or refitting (cf. Hodder 1999: 124; Olsen et al. 2012: 51-52; Parno 2010: 123-126), but rather to be faithful to the specific field context and the way it revealed itself.

Importantly, my conception and use of photography was also infused by the overall phenomenological approach to fieldwork practices. Thus, unlike the conventional understanding of photography as mere *documentation*, where emphasis is put on the final product (the photograph) alone, I emphasise no less the *act itself* and employ it as a means that enables an *engagement* with things as well as a mode of mediating on or “commemorating” these engagements. Like

¹⁵ Because of the very limited number of photographs usually allowed in archaeological journals, and conventional publications (and their often poor quality) we have not yet seen many good *archaeological* examples of this in print (but see archaeological project websites, e.g. the Ruin Memories Project www.ruinmemories.org). This will hopefully change with the forthcoming *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology* where photo-essays will be an accepted format of submission. See however Andreassen et al. 2010; Olsen and Pétursdóttir forthcoming; Penrose 2010.

excavation this engagement requires *being there* in the sense of being open and attentive to things and their self-presencing – and thus to actively follow their lure but also allow them to lead the lens in new directions. In that way photography can be depicted as yet another component in Pickering’s (2011) “dance of agency” and the photograph as its material trace which’ “one-sided gaze” also bluntly ensures a discernible link between my *being there* and my *being here* (as discussed above).



Figure 20: Unused and labeled spare parts in the Storage house, Eyri (Photo: Þóra Pétursdóttir).

Moreover, despite frequently heard charges of photography’s aggressive and objectifying nature I prefer, in this context, to think of photography rather as a non-intrusive and non-demanding approach to things. In other words, a means of grasping them which actually brings forth, or encourages, a respect for their solitude and remoteness by quite literally allowing them to always hold “a side” of their being “in reserve”. This, I argue, enables the photograph to grasp and transmit aspects of things being, their otherness and difference, in a less censored way than for example text could ever accomplish. Importantly though, this ability of the photograph is to some extent also dependent on a tolerance for its independence from text, and conventional forms of interpretation and

explanation; that is, an acceptance of the photographs sufficiency to by itself deliver and/or constitute knowledge – although this knowledge may be different from what the modern conception usually associates with it.

As we discuss in further detail in article “E”, these claims are often met with some scepticism and insinuations that the ruin photograph is rather a superficial and disturbing estrangement or *aestheticization* that alone and unexplained is only capable of depicting things out of context and beyond meaning. However, as we argue it is not least in this uncensored and unrestricted character of the textually independent ruin photograph that its strength resides. A strength that moreover may very well be called an *aesthetic* force, recalling the conception of “the aesthetic” as the primitive cognition of the body and the aesthetic experience, thus, a perception of reality that “is ‘out front of the mind’” (Buck-Morss 1993: 125). Therefore, without refuting that a sensation of otherness may indeed be enhanced, and problematically so, through various effects and alterations I also believe that photographs, like rich textual descriptions (see below), are able to express or recall that very *sensation of the encounter with the other*. A sensation that today is mostly forgotten or excluded in the dominating and scientifically acknowledged modes of disseminating archaeology.

In his *Camera Lucida* Roland Barthes argues that confronting a photograph can be a violent experience, “not because it shows violent things, but because on each occasion *it fills the sight by force*, and because in it nothing can be refused or transformed” (Barthes 1984: 91). In other words, the photograph appears and persistently remains *violently* “superficial” in the sense that it refuses to reduce its content to sameness, to domesticate or explain it. It is superficial, thus, in the positive sense of being eternally loyal to the surface of things; superficial because in the photograph the thing’s presence is always banal, revealing only its physical form or deformation, its volume, the space it occupies and its “meaningless” relations to other things. It is superficial in the sense that it never loses sight of things themselves, in their native and sometimes *alarmingly different* being. And that is also why the photograph’s tautological nature (Barthes 1984) carries a unique potential to recall and *prolong* the initial encounter with things prior to their subjection to explanation,

and bring forth something of their otherness and the responding wonder evoked on encounter. The fact that the photograph startles and disturbs in a way that may not always be clearly defined is therefore not necessarily a bad thing, but on the contrary a sign of its – and things’ – very significance; that is, if the photograph cannot, or rather will not, allow us to *say* what it lets us *see* it only underscores that the photograph does neither substitute text, nor should it be considered an illustrative backdrop of interpreted narration. Because what it lets us see is something entirely different – something that text, traditional analysis or narration cannot convey.

Description

Written documentation of some sort has of course always been part of archaeological fieldwork, while the way archaeologists write or articulate themselves in text has not been a matter of much scrutiny (see however Baker and Thomas 1990; Bender, Hamilton and Tilley 2007; Hamilton 1999; Hodder 1989; Joyce et al. 2002; Pluciennik 1999; Tilley 1989). Apart from discourse analyses of disciplinary terminology, and debates over the abstract relations between material culture and text archaeologists have, unlike for example historians and ethnographers, rarely entered heated discussions over their texts as such, or how to write them. Explorations into new ways of writing have, moreover, been mostly focused on a democratization of *voices*, either archaeologist’s own voices by involving a broader spectrum of perspectives or people and more reflexive dialogues, or voices of the past by adorning invisible blobs with faces and speech (cf. Pluciennik 1999; Hodder 2003). In other words, how to write about the *silent* stuff we actually work with has rarely been up for discussion (see however Shanks 1992, 2004; Pearson and Shanks 2001: 64-65), and a quick exploration into publications from the last two decades indicates that this also obediently follows the discrimination between theory and data discussed above. That is, reflexivity or explorations of other and more evocative ways of expression are matters of the *interpretation* of data and not the *description* of data. This is most evident in the case study, where a thick

theoretical section and a bold interpretation are frequently intervened, and quite abruptly so, with an often overly systematic and dry description of data.

The development of the archaeological site report is another telling example. As showed by Ian Hodder (1989) the report has gradually (from the 1770s to the article's present) changed from actor-oriented accounts, written in first person at a known time and place, where interpretation is directly linked to the process of discovery and the use of poetic terms or imagination are rather the norm, towards objective and systematized descriptions, written in a passive voice and fixed terminology beyond time or place, and where interpretation is avoided and imagination is unseen. "We have become blind to the fact that we are *writing*", Hodder (1989: 271, emphasis added) declares – and this blindness, I argue, is not merely present in the site report but has spilled over to most forms of archaeological publication. In other words, it is possible that the clear divide between the arts and sciences, between creativity and the construction of knowledge, and not least the linguistic turn's total emphasis on the text as *construction* with the consequent death of the author (Barthes 1977), has made us forget that *writing* is also a creative act. And while it is important to emphasise the text's, like other thing's, partial autonomy from its creator, and therefore its unpredictable entanglement with other *things* and thus unforeseen accumulation of meanings, that should not refrain us from thinking about our texts as active means of creative communication.

Alongside photography description thus became an extremely important component of my work with the herring stations, both in the form of rich note taking in the field and in the following publications as evocative recollections of the encounters with the sites and their things. Recalling Hodder's description of site reports from the 18th and 19th centuries I could honestly say that these, and the general descriptive richness of the antiquarian, served as indirect sources of inspiration for my formulation of and expression in these descriptions. Thus, I strive to *be present* in the description as "I", and importantly, not merely as a narrator but as a responsive corporeal being that moves among things and is *touched* by their presence. Or, as argued by Benjamin in "The Storyteller", I attempt to tell a story that "... does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report" but one which "... sinks the thing into the life

of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel” (Benjamin 1973: 91-92). In that way my presence or *being here* in the text also refers directly back to my *being there* in the field.

In the same way I attempt to use a prose that may render the story, like things, tangible and weighty and thus aesthetically bearing like the encounter itself. In that sense my story or text aims to *bring things close* but, importantly, without undoing their otherness or how this affects me. Moreover, by not equating this *bringing-close* with recognition or sameness, like categorization, I believe the story is able to bring forth aspects of things’ own being beyond type, function or other possible *beings-for-us*. An open and attentive attitude towards things upon encounter – *being there* – thus preconditioned the truthfulness of the descriptions, which like the photographs are intended as transmissions of experience and otherness to a second hand audience.



Figure 21: Bedroom in the women’s house, Eyri (Photo: Þóra Pétursdóttir).

While this was generally my underlying aim with all texts produced or published in relation to the project, I also “collected” short stories or “ruin memories” (see articles “A” and “C”) that were more deliberately thought as explorations beyond the borders of conventional archaeological writing. It is

interesting to recall, however, that this collecting was not really consciously adopted as a method of documentation but much rather gradually grew out of my engagements with the sites. The moving encounters with strange things started to materialize in more imaginative thoughts and memos among my field notes and then grew into short stories and recollections – part of which I have included in two of the articles published (“A” and “C”). It is well possible that these may appear, to some readers, as absurd and fragmented subjective accounts of private affections – which I cannot deny that they are – but I also believe that their element of “absurdity”, or rather *naivety*, endows these stories with an aesthetic force which, unlike the impersonal and dry conventional archaeological description of data, enables them to recall and transmit to the reader something of the encounter with things, their otherness and affect, which also constitute the very source and inspiration of these accounts.

Moreover, these stories are neither thought as *representations* nor *interpretations* and they are not presented as final or conclusive statements. Their naivety and ingenuous fragmentary and incoherent character rather recalls my very experience of things in Djúpavík and Eyri, their direct accessibility but simultaneous seclusion and remoteness, and thus the controversy of the very project of approaching things themselves; that is, the stories’ obvious selectivity and personal gaze also recalls how things will always “... *exceed* what we know or ever can know about them” (Bogost 2012: 30) – in other words, they do not pretend to grasp things fully, but acknowledge that they always do hold something in reserve. And if these stories are considered lacking in facts, measurements and ratios, if they are considered too vague, too naïve, or too *un-realistic* I would like to refer to Ian Bogost’s wonderful “manifesto” for “alien phenomenology” where he declares that speculative realism, a turn to things or whatever name we would like to give it,

“... really does *require* speculation: benighted meandering in an exotic world of utterly incomprehensible objects. As philosophers, our job is to amplify the black noise of objects to make the resonant frequencies of the stuffs inside them hum in credibly satisfying ways. Our job is to write the speculative fictions of their processes, of their unit operations” (Bogost 2012: 34).

And if anything, these speculative fictions are sincere and honest. I never make anything up. After all, as pointed out by Victor Shklovsky in his essay “Art as technique”, poetry is far less about creating than about *arranging* images; the images are handed to poets and therefore “the ability to remember them is far more important than the ability to create them” (Shklovsky 1965: 7).



Figure 22: Herring press, Djúpavík (Photo: Þóra Pétursdóttir).

6. In praise of things: some concluding remarks to recall the beginning

“That is how chance is curbed: the absolute contingency of the encounter with someone I didn’t know finally takes on the appearance of destiny”

(Alain Badiou, *In Praise of Love*)

I opened this introduction with a reference to Alain Badiou stating that unless *beginning with love* we may never be able to grasp the true nature of philosophy (Badiou and Truong 2012: 3). This because love, in Badiou’s conception, represents an attitude of openness for the diversity, differences and otherness of the world we inhabit. In that sense his conception of love is also an ethical stance that recalls Sylvia Benso’s (2000) ethics of things, or of the “other of the Other”; an ethics achieved through merging the contrasting worlds of Heidegger and Levinas through their mutual concern for otherness and thus realizing the potential of an ethics extended to things.

Like Badiou I contend that archaeology must begin with love, with an attentive openness and “naïve curiosity” for the things we encounter and which drive our research. However, no less important is that our work also *ends with the same love*. That at the end we may look back towards the beginning and still recall how we got there. In his discussion of the modern genre of archaeological report writing, Ian Hodder criticises the tradition of *retrofitting* (Latour 1999: 170) where at the completion of research, with a concluding interpretation in hand, “we work backwards and reorganize our data so that they are coherent” (Hodder 1989: 272) and then publish our accounts as if naturally describing what was actually encountered. Accounts, moreover, that tend to be deprived of any personal touch, or any recollection of *how* we encountered these data or facts, or of the affects released on these encounters. Therefore it is, that we might claim for much of contemporary archaeology what Jeff Malpas has claimed for contemporary philosophy (Malpas 2012: 265, emphasis added); that it may

“... begin in wonder, but inasmuch as the demand for explanation constitutes a demand for illumination and transparency, so it can

also come to constitute a blindness to ... the prior belonging to the world that first drives the demand for explanation as such. *Philosophy begins in wonder, but it often ends in alienation – alienation from self, from others, and from ordinary things, as well as the extraordinary.*”

In contrast to such a tradition of explanation, historicization and transparency, the preceding introduction was intended to recall just this – my encounters with the wondrous things that initially drove me onto this path. Because as I stated in the beginning my “discovery” did not consist in *new* findings or hitherto *unseen* facts but rather in a belated *return* to the most ordinary and frequent yet rarely expressed experiences of the archaeological everyday; a return to moments of encounter and to things preceding explanation.

Archaeology is of course conventionally understood as a discipline concerned with the past and the archaic, and *archaeology's* etymological root seems to indicate the same, referring to the “primeval”, “ancient” and “olden”. As a modern scientific discipline, archaeology is moreover considered to be about reconstructing and interpreting that past by making sense of the fragmented data it has left behind. In light of this it will not surprise me if some would claim that what I have done is not archaeology at all, neither respecting its roots as a study of the past nor that of making *sense* of the subject matter, in any conventional explanatory or interpretative understanding of that term. However, *archaeology* is also the discipline of things and etymologically it also refers to “arkhe”, which means “beginning” or “to begin”, and archaeology, irrespective of its focus, *always begins with things here and now* – with moments of encounter and with things preceding explanation. It is these rarely accounted for beginnings, the encounters with tacit things, which became crucial for my archaeology and which despite their absence in the archaeological discourse are grounding *all* archaeology. Moreover, to account for or mediate these encounters is also decisive if we are to take seriously the turn to things and allow them a more generous space in our research. As argued by Latour, “to be accounted for, objects have to enter into accounts. If no trace is produced, they ... remain silent and are no longer actors: they remain, literally, unaccountable” (Latour 2005: 79).

My approach, therefore, is an attempt at *an archaeology of things* qua things – not an attempt to make them speak or bear witness, but to account for their silence, for their different mode of being and for *how* they came to my view. By so doing I wished not only to make these things *accountable* but also – *in praise of things* – to retain a notion of their autonomy from my, or any, accounts of them.



Figure 23: Eyri, October 14th 2011 (Photo: Þóra Pétursdóttir).

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Available HTTP: <<http://www.ruinmemories.org>>

Articles A, B, C, D and E

Article “A” = Pétursdóttir, Þ. (2012) ‘Small things forgotten now included, or what else do things deserve?’, *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 16: 577-603.

Article “B” = Pétursdóttir, Þ. (2013) ‘Concrete matters: ruins of modernity and the things called heritage’, *Journal of Social Archaeology* 13(1): 31-53.

Article “C” = Pétursdóttir, Þ. (2013/2014, forthcoming) ‘Things out-of-hand: the aesthetics of abandonment’, in B. Olsen and Þ. Pétursdóttir (eds.), *Ruin Memories: Materiality, Aesthetics and the Archaeology of the Recent Past*, London: Routledge.

Article “D” = Pétursdóttir, Þ. and Olsen, B. (2013, forthcoming) ‘Modern ruins: remembrance, resistance and ruin value’, in P. R. Mullins and J. Schofield (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Global Archaeology: Archaeology in the Modern World*, Springer.

Article “E” = Pétursdóttir, Þ. and Olsen, B. (forthcoming) ‘Imaging modern decay: the aesthetics of ruin photography’, paper submitted to *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology*.



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