INSIGNIFICANTS

A marvelous talk today at Stanford from Tim Flohr Sørensen (Copenhagen) about his project – **Insignificants** – [Link]. So much in a short report on such a beautifully simple experiment.

Archaeologists often pride themselves on taking up what is overlooked, insignificant, discarded as irrelevant, detritus, mere traces, garbage. But what does this involve? What happens when we deliberately focus upon what may be categorized as insignificant? How liberating might this be?

Tim’s project, this experiment investigating insignificance, has involved each month gathering insignificant things and putting them on display in a bell jar, to which he adds a title and a caption, a “speculative fabulation”.

Last year he finished the series, buried the bell jar in a nature reserve, found that someone had investigated it, then had the remains excavated.

Of course these acts are ironic, contradictory, conferring significance upon what otherwise would have remained insignificant. This is one of the take-aways from the “experiment” which poses, in such a wonderfully concise and compressed way, questions of the archaeological imagination, its circuit of encounter, gathering, and transformation [Link].

Tim’s simple experiment shows us how our knowledge making actually works – pragmatically, in everyday performances. The work of archaeology that makes the past what it is to us.

Comments on archaeological performativity

The insignificant becomes significant, and vice versa, even as we try to hold onto one or the other. This is surely what Hegel would hold as the dialectic, the relational association of contradictory states of being. In this both significance and insignificance belong to a dynamic field that is navigated when we act, when we perform certain operations.

A conceptual field, a semantic field. Tim outlined the suggestive range of words and concepts that go with insignificance – weak, meek, irrelevant, unassuming, trivial, shy, humble, tedious, overlooked – all aspects of agency!

The necessity of speculation. Wasn't it David Hume who emphasized that conjecture is essential in any *empirical* account, offering bridges between what would otherwise remain discrete?

Pragmatic leaps of faith. Wasn't it Carlo Ginzburg who unpacked Peirce's pragmatist concept of abduction as speculative reasoning, the intuitive leap of faith in recognition of significance that is grounded in accumulated experience.

Tim's experiment, his performances of gathering and locating, side step the meanings that are conferred through words. Significance is here a dynamic pragmatic achievement. What you do may matter much more than what you say in the way of (un)intended communication.

When Marcel Duchamp "playfully" diplayed a urinal in a gallery and named it as art object, he drew attention to the *agency* involved in the status of things. As artist, he could turn something into something else by saying and displacing, in a performative (speech) act. And with no necessary distinction between personhood and thinghood: we can do this with people and with things.

Dynamic processes here incorporate signal and noise, figure and ground, distinguishing what matters from what is background "noise", reminding us also that there can be no signal without grounding noise, without material "medium".

The situationist dérive – attentive to the katachrestic accumulation of encounters in the urban milieu.

This involves the forensic disposition so characteristic of modernist senses of space and locale – at a scene of crime anything might be significant evidence – even when it isn't a scene of crime!

I liked a comment made in the questions posed to Tim after his talk that he has taken us into matters of "base materialism" (after Bataille and Dubuffet), the *existential* encounter with formless being, and the nausea that may accompany the slippery shifts between meaning and nonsense.

Tim left us with a concept he didn't explore much in his talk, but which suggests so much – the stowaways of history …

About *Insignificants* – Nonetheless – May 2020

The objects in the exhibition were all collected during April 2020. This is a period marked by the outbreak of the COVID-19, which means that I have spent a lot of time in my neighbourhood and bicycling around Copenhagen with my children, not getting an awful lot of work done. Despite enjoying these tours tremendously, I admit to having been periodically absent-minded, as my thoughts have occasionally been wandering off to the academic tasks and challenges that I would have liked to work on more intensely.

While I cannot justify the random and unplanned tours to various places in Copenhagen as proper 'fieldwork', I did nevertheless make observations and collected objects, while also starting to notice how the daily rides often resulting in some kind of silent, inner dialogue about the objects of my roadside collection campaign. This conversation was stirred by a resonance between what I observed on the ground and more theoretical challenges in my academic work. I guess, this is – at least for me – how theoretical questions always emerge: when I least expect them. Attending to traffic and listening (and responding) to my children's conversations, my theoretical echo chamber got interrupted repeatedly, but I noticed how I started taking things literally. That is to say, the things I passed by – lying on the ground, by the side of the roads, at driveways to garages, in makeshift parking lots, on paths, in bicycle sheds and former industrial plots, now reclaimed by shrubbery, weeds and moss – resonated in a very direct and literal way with my theoretical musings. And since the things that repeatedly caught my attention were often struck, run over, trampled or squashed, I began sending warm thoughts to the notion of 'flat ontology' in a very literal sense. – I know, it's a bit silly, but that's what happened. I couldn't help it, and I see no reason to censor this way of unleashing a thought process.

Flat ontology is a name given by a number of scholars to the idea that all objects exist on the same ontological level. While frequently misunderstood and deliberately misrepresented as an unethical way of making all entities in the world identical, flat ontology means that everything – i.e. *every*thing – exist on the same ontological level. Importantly, in a flat ontology everything is different. Nothing is the same. For some scholars, this means that each object is infinitely independent, and for others it implies quite the opposite, i.e. that all objects are incessantly coming into being through their relations to other objects.

As an inconsistent materialist, I wonder why one thing has to exclude the other. I would appreciate an ontology accommodating that which is contradictory and mutually exclusive. Is this not the very lesson learned from archaeology? That things change, move in and out of conditions and states of being; sometimes they are one thing, sometimes the other, and occasionally, they are both at the same time. So, do things really have to be categorically one thing or the other? Do they have to be either independent *or* relational?

My capricious observations of literally levelled objects resonated with my flimsy philosophical pondering. This stirred a basic question: What does a topography that almost approximates to nothing do to flat ontology? The things on the surfaces repeatedly showed themselves as objects that were not merely themselves, nor simply entangled with other things, but also sponging off their edges. Sometimes it seemed that they wanted to create a buffer between themselves and their surroundings, creating space by dissolving the contours that touched other things. At other times, it appeared as if they had to efface any strict Euclidean line preventing them from seeping into and merging with other things, as if they wanted to establish relations. In yet other cases, these metamorphoses looked more like a process towards nothing, as a dissolution towards becoming non-objects.

Over the past years, I would say that I have accumulated quite some training in making incidental observations, and I believe to be moving more confidently in the direction of a strictly accidental field method. Accordingly, in the encounter with unanticipated, flattened things, I had quite a few “Hmmm…?” experiences. As many of the objects were lying on temporary or makeshift parking lots amidst gravel and dust, or in the ‘edgelands’ between the orderly and the vibrant, they were often visually indistinct, their colours blending with their surroundings; an impression enhanced by crackled and torn edges, making it difficult to determine the end of one object and the beginning of another. Such objects are easily overlooked, and I like to think it is in this very capacity we need to appreciate them.