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## Special Section

# Are All Things Created Equal? The Incidental in Archaeology

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*Archaeologists evince a strong tendency to impute significance to the material traces they study, a propensity that has been especially marked since the post-processual emphasis on meaning and that has taken on renewed vigour with the turn to materiality. But are there not situations in which things are rather incidental or insignificant? This set of essays emerged from a workshop held in Berlin in April 2018, in which a group of scholars was invited to discuss the place of the incidental in social life in general and in archaeology in particular. Rather than lengthy formal papers, we offer an introduction that presents a general set of reflections on the issue of the incidentalness of things, followed by essays that pursue particular directions raised by that introduction as well as our discussions in Berlin. It is our hope that these brief forays into a complex topic will stimulate further work on this subject.*

### Introduction

'If there was one blade of grass you know what would have happened, you would have eaten it'—this was the first thought of former Auschwitz prisoner Kitty Hart when she revisited the erstwhile concentration camp and saw the green grounds. Tourists, on the other hand, do not notice the grass as anything special: it is a green background typical for memorial sites and parks. This extreme example shows that the material world can evoke vastly different meanings and expectations, from considerations of existential importance to total obliviousness. Archaeology as 'the discipline of things' (Olsen *et al.* 2012) seems to be particularly well placed to investigate

such questions. Reading recent contributions to the archaeological literature and philosophical works on which they draw could encourage us to view the material world of which we are part as one of enormous significance. However, traditional archaeologists have also acted as though even broken fragments of the most mundane artefacts are of major import.

The workshop from which this set of papers emerged had its genesis in discussions among several of the authors on positionality and shifting relations between things and identities within the framework of the 'ontological turn' and new materialisms in archaeology. These took place in the framework of informal discussions concerning the implications of an emerging archaeology of Nazi times in Germany as well as the problems of massive quantities of archaeological finds, especially but by no means exclusively from excavations of sites of modernity (e.g. Hofmann *et al.* 2016). In particular, it seemed to us that an issue of substantial importance that has been left aside in many of these discussions of otherwise fundamental principles is whether things—however exactly we define them—invariably have meaning or other kinds of

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significance for people. But are there not also situations in which they are incidental or insignificant? And, if so, what kinds of situations would call forth incidentalness? And for whom? We can best recognize incidentalness, often related to the quotidian, by reflecting on its opposite, such as the circumstances of extreme cruelty and inhumanity in which inmates of Nazi concentration camps found themselves. There, things take on very different qualities—as Kitty Hart remarks, they are almost never insignificant for those confined there. In other words, in our theoretical musings we must take into consideration those situations that contrast with more ‘normal’ ones, in which many things do indeed seem to fall into the realm of the incidental, inconsequential and casual.

Our intent with this introductory paper is not to offer a programmatic statement, but rather to open a discussion on the incidentalness of the thingly world. We raise a variety of issues and point in certain directions, suggesting potential avenues and posing questions, rather than providing definitive answers or charting a clear path forward.

### Conceptualization and problems of translation

In looking for inspiration on how to conceptualize these issues, we turned in the first instance to the work of Martin Heidegger on *Zeug* as *zuhanden* (‘ready-to-hand’)¹ and to Hans Peter Hahn’s writings on material culture and the *Eigensinn* of things (Hahn 2014; 2015). It was in the latter that we found discussions about *Beiläufigkeit* that seemed to us to be on the mark.

With it, however, we encountered a first significant problem, that of translation: there is no single satisfactory English term that captures the meaning of *Beiläufigkeit*.² We have translated it for present purposes as ‘incidentalness’—not a very elegant word in English—but it encompasses a semantic field that includes not only notions of the incidental, but also casual(ness), inconsequentiality, that which is parenthetic, ‘by the way’, and apparently insignificant. The phrase ‘by the way’ incorporates an important element of the German term, where *bei-* implies a vague notion of ‘next to’ without any specific direction, distance, or quality of distance between two entities; *laufen*, to walk, suggests a spatial relation of unspecific distance and a sort of ‘moving non-target’. In daily language, *Beiläufigkeit* denotes something that barely makes it into our consciousness, if at all.

To plumb the depths of complex terminologies and concepts, it is often useful to think in pairs of oppositions and not just in synonyms. However, the search for an opposite of *Beiläufigkeit* also proves difficult. One can think of words denoting fullness or heaviness, conjuring up in the reverse a certain lightness and emptiness that surrounds the *Beiläufige*. Attentiveness, amazement, astonishment, caring, focusing, framing and spotlighting also capture elements of the opposite meaning. *Beiläufigkeit* not only denotes something vague, dynamic and barely perceived: the word itself avoids specificity.

This may be one of the reasons for Heidegger’s choice of the term *Zeug* in *Being and Time*. *Zeug* is derived from the propensity of the German language to hang substantives onto each other in a substantivist way of thinking: *Nähzeug*, *Fahrzeug*, *Spielzeug* are all words that denote an unspecified and unordered set of material things: ‘things to sew with’, ‘things to move/drive’, ‘things to play with’. The latter could, for example, be anything from a game board to a teddy bear or a football or even a pen with which a person fiddles during a boring meeting.³ In this sense, Hahn’s use of *Beiläufigkeit* and Heidegger’s more precise definition of *Zeug* are fairly similar. Faced with these translational issues, we fall back frequently on the German term, but also use the English words incidentalness, casualness, or inconsequential, depending on the context.

### The varying fate of meaning in archaeology

Each of us has found her- or himself reflecting at various times and in various ways on the archaeological tendency to attribute meaning to all of the things we excavate, document and study. This (over)emphasis on meaning rears its head in many places. Post-processual archaeology of the 1980s and 1990s was concerned to counteract processual archaeology’s propensity in the opposite direction—to functionalize everything and discount attempts to access meaning. The result was an obsessive attribution of deep significance to almost everything, often a complex symbolic one: white limestone cliffs are supposed by virtue of their colour to be a relevant factor in site locations (Boriç 2002); simple lines of pottery decorations point to specific underlying social structures and meanings (Hodder 1982).

But do all things, regardless of how mundane, peripheral, banal, have a meaning (cf. Olsen 2010, 84–7)? More importantly, do all things embody similar levels or intensities of meaning? Or, rather, are not levels of meanings unstable, dynamic and context-dependent? Recent currents in archaeology, such as new realism and approaches based on object-oriented ontologies, once again realign discussions about the relation between humans and things (Edgeworth 2016; Olsen *et al.* 2012; Witmore 2014). The paradigm shift away from a discourse- and language-based philosophy, as promoted by Lacan, Foucault, and Barthes, has led to a renewed focus on materiality and a corresponding decline of interest in meaning as a relation between humans and other beings or things in general. New and speculative realism as well as object-oriented ontologies belong to a widespread discourse, one central tendency of which is the decentring of human beings. As a consequence, things and indeed the world are rendered flat; the split between human motivations and their outer appearance has been replaced by a way of thinking that fuses subjects and objects into actants and assemblages (Bennett 2010; DeLanda 2006; Hamilakis & Jones 2017; Harman 2009). Interest in ‘meaning’ as a relation of human symbolic and practical-manipulative power over objects fades (Boivin 2008). Perception and meaning

transform into forces contributing to a coagulation or dismemberment of assemblages, released from human intentions or humans as actors. Interestingly, the outcome of this intellectual atmosphere in archaeology is a ‘democracy’ of objects where any and every object seems to be in need of fundamental ‘care’ (Olsen *et al.* 2012), where the thing world can be called a ‘parliament’ (Latour 2004). In recent discussions, Ian Hodder has promoted the concept of ‘entanglement’, which emphasizes the relevance of almost everything to the constitution of our lived worlds, although in a reworking of his initial book on the subject he has pointed to the asymmetrical relations he sees as typifying entanglement (Hodder 2016).

The concept of *Beiläufigkeit* can contribute to a critique of this supposed equality of things by insisting that relations between humans and things have highly variable intensities and qualities. Our reflections represent an attempt to open a space to discuss the conditions and processes that are responsible for the variable status of things in a world of objects. Is there a possibility for things/people/other entities to have more or less ‘meaning’, rather than either none or an unspecified full one? Does a potential for variable importance and sense of specific things follow historical rhythms? On what or whom would such an ebb and flow of significances depend?

### Mapping *Beiläufigkeit*

We suggest that the notion of *Beiläufigkeit* offers a way to address these issues, by shifting attention to that which is physically present but not necessarily a focus of perception or imbued with any particular significance. *Beiläufig* is that which in a specific context fades into the background. For Heidegger, this is the ready-to-hand that one does not notice because it is simply there and fulfils a task; it is the task that is the object of attention, what is hammered, not the hammer itself (Heidegger [1927] 1962, 98). In more contemporary terminology, one might say that this kind of *beiläufige* use of tools or gestures is part of embodied knowledge, a know-how that becomes sufficiently automatic as not to require conscious thought—until or unless it is disrupted by a broken limb or a broken hammer. This is a thing world upside down. The focus on single things, whether graffiti, taxi cab doors, or museum objects and their complex trajectories (e.g. Fuglerud & Wainwright 2015; Savoy 2017), creates an exceptional attention that does not correspond to daily routines in which the thing world drowns in a sea of incidentalness. Indeed, the incidental is the precondition for the ability to perceive and direct affect.

Incidentalness as a general phenomenon remains difficult to grasp and describe, elusive and ambiguous. Everything that we are not aware of belongs to this sphere. Our attention is focused first on one thing, then on another, constantly moving, so that only small attention-seeking islands appear and disappear in a sea of incidentalness. In archaeology, *Beiläufigkeit* is also related to the use of particular media to depict and represent objects. These are

traditionally overwhelmingly visual. We do not pursue here an exploration of the role of other senses in producing incidentalness or its opposite, although this would be an intriguing direction for future research.

Basing on our common-sense understanding of *Beiläufigkeit*, as well as attempts to think theoretically through the concept and its implications, has led us to emphasize the dynamic aspects of *Beiläufigkeit*. Under what circumstances do things become (more or less) *beiläufig*; when and how do they move out of that status?

A cautiously formulated result of these reflections could be that a generalized, broad ‘Incidentalness’ with a capital ‘I’ should be distinguished from concrete, historically manifest *incidentalnesses*. On the level of generalized *Beiläufigkeit*, definitional issues can be discussed as well as the question of whether Incidentalness is characterized by a fundamental fluidity and ambiguity. On the other hand, there are concrete historical incidentalnesses, cases in specific and changing worlds that can be compared in terms of their patterns and dynamics. In order to broach these differences between the general Incidental and the specific multiple cases, we have tried to systematize conditions that influence the shaping and framing of *Beiläufigkeiten*. These are first and foremost the traditional ones of time and space.

### Time and rhythm

Incidentalness is fluid, characterized by a process of constant re-focusing. It has a dynamic routine and its own history. The incidental is an unquestioned element of our life, but not an unquestionable sphere, and it should not be conflated with a traditional definition of ‘lifeworld’ as the unquestioned *and* unquestionable (Habermas 1984, 70). Any element in a *beiläufige* environment can be consciously ‘zeroed in upon’, fixed, and in the process changed to a very different state, one of impressiveness or attentiveness. However, the material world also exerts its own power over the potential of subjects to guide their attention towards specific elements in their surroundings. The dialectical relation between the ability to concentrate on some things and the possibility to let go have their counterpart in the orientational power of those very things. They embody their own patterns of change, which may be unique and directional or recursive and therefore to a certain extent foreseeable. We begin with several facets of directional change.

A first facet is growing up, which can be understood as a learning process during which more and more aspects of the world become incidental, or at least acquire the potential to be so. Children have much less of a need or a capacity for incidentalness and make distinctions between the incidental and the focused much less systematically and less often than adults. In this way, *Beiläufigkeit* seems to be a fundamental phenomenon of socialization, but the specific result—which elements of a world can be pushed aside as incidental—is the outcome both of growing up in a particular culture and of personal sensibilities

(cf. Benjamin [1987] 2006). These issues are of significance to an emerging archaeology of childhood and socialization (e.g. Baxter 2008; Coskunsu 2016).

In the process of socialization, we learn about incidentalness by getting used to inserting specific kinds of things in specific frameworks. We learn, for example, what a house looks like, or what things afford which contexts—e.g. forks in a kitchen—but also what is socially acceptable and expected of us in particular locations. These frameworks have their own complex multitemporal structure: some elements reach far back in time and have a strong power to anchor perceptions and experience over the long term, influencing generations if not whole epochs in their understanding of the world, e.g. architectural traditions; others are only short in duration and decay quickly, for example, the use of public telephones and phone booths to call people when away from home.

Change comes through small alterations of practices. We can de-incidentalize things by focusing on them and their surroundings, something which often requires an initial call for attention. Consequently, incidentalness is neither inherent in objects or living beings, nor is it purely a matter of individual perception or a broadly generalizable relation between the two. Rather, incidentalness needs to be understood as a culture-specific potential that underlies the contingency of relations.

Second, the more we involve ourselves in a particular environment, the easier it is to focus attention on highly specific individual phenomena and by implication to ignore everything else. Travel and the accompanying experience of being a foreigner lead to a rapid lowering of incidentalness. Where language, culture, food, clothing and rituals are foreign, full attention is required to make sense of one's impressions and the relationships between them. Non-incidentalness and the active, intensified search for meaning are closely related. Conversely, the most basic elements necessary for survival will, after a short time, tend toward the casual even in foreign environments. They will be primarily situated in the material world rather than in linguistic and intellectual spheres and are therefore relevant for any material studies.

Third, rites of passage produce an abrupt change in the well-rehearsed world of the incidental, set in motion through ritually structured processes. Since these are stages in life through which other subjects also go, such deep-running changes are predictable from an external perspective and in their objective consequences; they lead to a shift in perceived identity. The required negotiation between the new role and one's surroundings entails a re-socialization which is not in essence distinct from travel, as parts of the changing environment have to be mastered and condensed into a routine.

Fourth, certain historical circumstances can lead to an expansion or narrowing of relations of incidentalness. A secure, little-changing environment might tend towards a fast spread of incidentalness at the expense of attentiveness, as dangers are minimized and awareness of contexts is not required. Situations of threat, on the other hand, lead to greater attention and therefore to a diminution of the

*beiläufige* world. One can consider conditions in prisons, in war or participation in a hunt as examples. Reports about battlefields by former soldiers suggest that in violence-prone situations the world of inattentive routine almost completely disappears and even the smallest everyday objects, every movement or sound, take on extraordinary relevance. Not without grave consequences. Walter Benjamin noted that the experience of extreme violence in the First World War ended with a society-wide loss of the capacity for experience (Jay 1999/2000).

Such non-recursive temporal frames of *Beiläufigkeit* include varying degrees of unforeseeability. In contrast, repetitive events have their own position in incidental worlds. In this realm, it is useful to distinguish quotidian from exceptional recursivity.

Quotidian recursive temporalities and incidentalness reinforce each other. Cyclical occurrences mesh with daily, weekly, or seasonal habits. They bring with them sets of experiences that spur expectations, often including expectations about the framing of specific events (Koselleck 2004, 255–75). Time and space fuse, making a crowding-out and forgetting of the spatio-temporal backstage world relatively easy.

In contrast to such quotidian recursiveness are exceptional occurrences such as rituals (for definition, see Kertzer 1988 and Bell 1992). Often set into transcendently anchored complex religious dogma or political staging, they capture our full attention when they are able to mobilize a host of elements that frame our lives, from movements (processions) to smells, tastes, the audible, or gift giving. One could even propose that successful rituals are those that temporally abrogate a maximum amount of incidentalness.

Both quotidian and ritual temporalities are part of experienced and remembered time (Rosa 2010). Time filled with special or exciting encounters passes very quickly. Conversely, the same amount of time spent with everyday, repetitive activities feels as though it goes by very slowly. This perception of experienced time is often inversely proportional to remembered time. Extraordinary moments remain in one's memory long after, while the boring ones are perceived as *beiläufig*, unimportant, and coalesce into an undifferentiated mass in one's memory. This multitemporal aspect of *Beiläufigkeit* could, in Rosa's sense, be an effect of the relationship between experience and memory and also an expression of feelings of social acceleration and slowing down.

## Space

Incidentalness is supported by spatial conditions. We distinguish two fundamentally different approaches to the relation between space and the incidental. Some authors start from a subjectivist notion of incidentalness and describe it as driven by perception, while others analyse the incidental as a *mise-en-scène* or framing.

Heidegger's attempt to describe a room and its perception in his chapter on *Zeug* and *Zuhandenheit* in *Being and Time* highlights the complexity of incidentalness from



the perspective of a subject. The ready-to-hand is by definition 'in its place' and includes—according to Heidegger—a specific nearness and directionality (*Verweisung*).<sup>4</sup> One might formulate this, following Mary Douglas, by saying that the incidental is *matter in place* (Douglas 1984, 36–41). Still, in Heidegger's philosophy, things do not only passively hold a place, but act, since he describes them as 'retreating', stepping away into a 'veiled underworld' (see also Harman's 2002 rereading). The consequence is that a particular spatial or relational distribution of objects can be experienced as unproblematic, unperceived, we might say 'normal'.

Miller expresses the specific actions of things as their 'humility' (Miller 1987, 85–108) and mentions monumentality as (one of) the opposites of such a quality. Engagements with thing worlds often start from this opposing end and question why and how people perceive particular things as possessing an enhanced rather than an unobtrusive and low-key position. Another good example is Walter Benjamin's engagement with aura. Benjamin (1968) takes a person as the starting point, and the focus is placed squarely on that which attracts and enchants, that which is *not* incidental. Underlying these approaches is the conviction that incidentalness and attentiveness are an antagonistic pair. Typical for this paradigmatic choice is Miller's (1987) term *objectification*: the world is understood as a configuration of entities exterior to a subject.

This point leads us to a brief aside: Does this mean that a world where things consist of a mix of what we traditionally consider lifeless objects and living beings would not differentiate between the incidental and the attention-commanding? The question has regained renewed attraction with the ontological turn and questioning of the affective qualities of relations between things, rather than just between people and things. A non-anthropocentric view may help us to think more generally through questions concerning the quality and quantity of relationships.<sup>5</sup> Rather than being an epistemological mode of human perception and evaluation of relations, *Beiläufigkeit* might be understood as an ontological relation. Is *Beiläufigkeit* then a quality or mode of interaction between entities, one that is undirected, random and unrepeatable? With what other humans and non-humans do things come into contact? Or is it rather the externalized result of a process of territorialization of an assemblage (DeLanda 2006, 12–13), an unstable, boundary-drawing process of a 'subject-less self-referring entity that captures different actions into the same flow' (Normark 2010, 168; see also Schreiber 2018, 113–14)? These questions would not be answered in the same way by each of the authors of this paper.

Let us return to the previous argument and turn the logic around to consider the spatialities of incidentalness as a matter of *subjectivation*. Here, incidentalness is not in the eye of the beholder or the potentially changeable interest of a person, but is rather determined to a certain extent by spatial conditions. Erving Goffman's (1986) concept of frame analysis is a useful starting point, although his

approach is situated in intersubjective and discursive realms, whereas our concern is with material framing. Goffman's ideas of social life as framed make reference to theatre as an underlying metaphor: actions are carried out on a stage that has scenery and a setting.

Such framing is, we propose, an organizer of incidentalness. A specific material setting draws attention to particular things while deflecting from others (Butler 2009). It dissects an endless attention-seeking world into entities that gravitate towards specific relations and practices. Umberto Eco takes from Goffman the example of a person<sup>6</sup> and a mirror (Eco 1994, 105). At a hairdresser's a person inspects the mirror for its decorated frame rather than to adjust their hair. The same mirror is sold in an antique shop, and a person stands in front of it adjusting their hair rather than examining the frame. The point is the mirror's context, which emphasizes some of its qualities and pushes others into a stage-like background. When these culturally fixed expectations are not followed, the scene is perceived as inappropriate. Put differently, *Beiläufigkeit*, attentiveness and specific rules that relate them need to be considered as a set of connections that is constantly reproduced through material practices in daily life. On a broader level, frame theory could lead to an investigation of the relation between material frames and expectations for practices. Both can to some extent be materially manifest, and in such cases, the diversion from these expectations could give us a sense of how people in the past dealt with the incidental. In our workshop discussions, Shannon Dawdy referred to the concept of facilitators, things that were made to be incidental; we may think of a computer mouse or paper coffee cups. Other things may become that way, despite different original intentions.

#### How does *Beiläufigkeit* challenge archaeological practice?

Archaeologists often study pre-modern worlds. These are frequently reconstructed as emptier than ours, bare of the thousands of human-made things we surround ourselves with and are surrounded by. Varying abundances of things in specific locations and times may accord them a more or less meaningful position, specifically in archaeological discourse. If we follow the idea of material framing as a stage set that leads to specific forms of subjectivation and understandings of incidentalness, what does this imply for pre-industrial times? Answers to this question are not straightforward. Should we imagine that the whole issue of incidentalness is a truly modern one, the outcome of a world that drowns in things,<sup>7</sup> so that a generalized Incidentalness (with a capital 'I') cannot be posited at all? Do material framings subjectivize people into fundamentally different selves whose constitution defies comparability? Or does incidentalness lend itself to cross-cultural comparisons? No matter how we approach thingly quantities and their effects on framing, a basic issue for dealing with *Beiläufigkeit* in the deeper past surely must be a sort of hermeneutic withdrawal from one's own overflowing thing-world.

The issues of framing and staging also raise again the question of whether all things have similar potentials to be *beiläufig*. Are specific kinds of things inherently more or less likely to become or to remain *beiläufig*? Or—and we argue that this is more likely—is *Beiläufigkeit* always a relation dependent on a staging of an object world, an emergent property of the relationships between people and things, rather than being somehow inherent in things? Fundamentally, it seems to us that *Beiläufigkeit* is much more easily produced in a highly specialized world such as ours, one that is filled with stuff and in which the object world is at least in part separated from personal culture, than in a materially frugal, less specialized realm. This rests more on the recognition (or lack thereof) of the work that goes into making things than on a simple issue of quantity (cf. Fowles 2010). Incidentalness is related to knowledge and/or visibility of labour, drudgery and skill in the making of a material world, even if indirectly. When we are not confronted with or do not make the effort to see the labour entailed in making the clothing we wear, the computers on which we write our papers and through which much of our communication takes place, or the ‘cleansing’ of internet content performed by workers in the Philippines, this inattention contributes to the making of incidentalness.

#### How research changes the object of study

Archaeology is a discipline that is quintessentially opposed to *Beiläufigkeit*, as we search almost by definition for meaning in all material that captures our attention, even when that meaning amounts to little more than functions of things. But this is not a democratic process—we sort things out according to our (often implicit) interests and questions, paying attention, for example, to chipped stone artefacts when they are found in Palaeolithic or Neolithic contexts, but not when they occur in Bronze Age occupations. Our search for meaning takes place in two registers. On the one hand, much effort goes into (more or less explicit) reconstructions of the meanings of concrete things. On the other hand, archaeology and its often frustratingly unimaginative attempts at historiography are part of a whole apparatus of *Sinnproduktion*, ‘making sense of the past’ as an orientation, however imprecise, for the future (e.g. Rösen 1990). An archaeological field project, article or book that does *not* want to make sense of an issue, a site, or a research problem is doomed to failure.

We note that the role of incidentalness is much more easily grasped and analysed in a diachronic study, whereas a synchronic search for the incidental in other (past) cultures faces many more obstacles. It is a symptom for the state of archaeology, a discipline that cannot relinquish things and let them return to their ‘humble’ past contexts where they perhaps did not have an overly important place, where they were just the casual object next door. We are left with the question of how we can extract from our evidential record hints at the varying *potential for incidentalization* of past things or enchainments of things.

We are not the first to note one of the paradoxes of research on *Beiläufigkeit*: when training the spotlight on a concrete incidental thing, we automatically—per definition—take this very thing on which we focus out of the realm of the *Beiläufige*. We archaeologists deal best with incidentalness when we are off duty. While we are used to destroying that which we investigate materially through excavation, in this case the effect is located in the conceptual world. A study of *Beiläufigkeit* is thereby invariably part of the history of knowledge at its most complex—as a developing diachronic relation.

What do we do with this paradox of automatically destroying the very core of our interest? It has no real solution, but we see three possible ways of coping with it. The first is to abandon wholesale the issue of *Beiläufigkeit* as outside of academic investigation. Clearly, this is not a direction we advocate. A second option is to study incidentalness not as it shapes up, but as a matter of memory. In this case, we are confronted with personal anecdotes, a way of thinking that is often the starting point of philosophical treatises. We consider this insufficient for an anthropologically and politically engaged archaeology. A third alternative is to attempt to objectivize the issue: to study the things that were made to be incidental. In the realm of material (or other) production, that means investigating tools and their position in social life, since they are material means that were used for other ends. In terms of consumption, incidental things would be the opposite of Latour’s (1999, 186) ‘sleeping policeman’, e.g. man-hole covers, to stay with the example of the street. These are things that hide, that do not disrupt, but that still keep their agency. From that perspective, present and past material elements for the production of incidentalness might best be conceived as large-scale systems of concealment.

One final characteristic needs to be added to these reflections on the incidental: its political import. The world of *Beiläufigkeiten* is political in complex and indirect ways, first, because that world appears to be the opposite of anything political: the unperceived, irrelevant, casual, peripheral. This very location below the radar renders incidentalness so powerful. The unnoticed is unquestioned and does not run the danger of being opposed.

The threshold that separates the non-incidental from the casual, unperceived reality is deeply ideological. It determines what we can capture with our senses, whether through language, sight, acoustics, or otherwise. We follow Rancière’s (2004) insight that perception is a cultural-political process that cuts the world into specific parts that for us come into existence through the senses. These parts are continuously reproduced, modified, and sometimes abruptly changed.

The world of incidentalness has its own inner structure. In archaeology, this structure has developed historically. We attempt to democratize the *Beiläufigkeit* potential of the thingly world by claiming to take everything as important, although we, too, sort (out), classify, and attribute meaning or withhold it. Some things can be closer, others further

away from the threshold of imperceptibility. The papers that follow provide important insights into the complex field of relations between people and things, divisions, processes and emergent dynamics that remind us how much of the world in which we live remains barely noticed, if not completely overlooked, yet deeply influential.

#### Notes

1. Heidegger ([1927] 1962, 95–122). We did so with many reservations. Not all of us were willing to fully engage with Heidegger's work, as the influence on his philosophy of his Nazi political leanings—which he neither denied nor renounced during his lifetime—remains intensely disputed (see Scheit 2001).
2. The German noun is *Beiläufigkeit* [incidentalness, inconsequentialness]; the adjective is *beiläufig*.
3. In the English translation of Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, *Zeug* is generally rendered as 'equipment'; only in a few places is the somewhat pejorative 'stuff' used (Heidegger [1927] 1962, 97). Julian Thomas has suggested the term 'kit'.
4. Our understanding of *Beiläufigkeit* differs in a fundamental way from Heidegger's. His whole vocabulary consists of substantives, such as *das Hingehören* or *das Zuhandene*, dividing the world into static building blocks that are set into relation to each other. We consider incidentalness to occur mainly in the becoming, rather than as static being.
5. One may note that the ontological turn has led to a wave of anthropomorphization of the material world, with the proclaimed refusal of anthropocentrism in many cases turned on its head.
6. A woman in the original.
7. A recent conference on the 'massive accumulation of things' discussed these issues (Hofmann *et al.* 2016).

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## Insignificance: On the Unobtrusiveness of Material Things

Julian Thomas

### From inexhaustibility to non-appearance

In their introduction to the discussion of *Beiläufigkeit* in archaeology, Pollock, Bernbeck, Appel, Loy and Schreiber build pleasingly on the theme of what Daniel Miller refers to as the ‘humility’ of physical things (2010, 50). By this he means that objects do not determine or prescribe the actions of human beings, but mutely establish the circumstances under which we operate, conditioning our expectations of how to proceed. Things are often not conspicuously meaningful, but unobtrusive or ‘hiding in plain sight’ and bringing about unacknowledged effects (Alvis 2017, 212). This state of affairs has been recognized by both the phenomenological tradition and the more recent ‘new materialisms’, but what I want to suggest in this contribution is that these perspectives implicitly indicate that things can be ‘incidental’ in a variety of subtly different ways.

It is arguable that in the modern West a proper knowledge of reality has come to be associated with a considered and analytical inspection of things, stepping back from physical engagement in order to achieve objectivity (Dreyfus 1991, 45). It follows from this that knowledge takes a form that is both explicit and composed of distinct ‘bits’, which have a self-evident significance and can be gradually accumulated to create a satisfactory understanding of the whole (Johnson 2011, 765). However, an important critique of these ideas was developed within the Romantic movement. From Herder and Schelling onwards, it began to be argued that not all of life is fully conscious,

and that some experiences cannot be expressed in an unambiguous and particulate fashion, or even verbalized at all (Berlin 2013, 115). No matter how closely we look at something, there is potentially always more to be seen and more insights to be gained, and in this lies the wonder of creation. But at the same time, the implication is that our knowledge of the world will always be partial and incomplete. This insight was developed within phenomenological thought. For although Edmund Husserl initially hoped to strip away the inessential paraphernalia of everyday life, in order to isolate the core of pure experience, those who followed him were often concerned with the everyday ‘natural attitude’ that he had sought to set aside (Hintikka 1995, 88). How and why do we pass over, and neglect, much of what is *closest* to us? These later approaches were explicitly concerned with *non-appearance*, how things fail to become discrete objects of knowledge or *withdraw* from our attention. Indeed, these perspectives recognize that only a small portion of the understanding that we rely on in order to conduct our lives is acquired in any explicit manner. The atomized ‘facts’ that the Western tradition deals in can be identified as secondary and derived, rather than as the grounding building-blocks of knowledge.

For Martin Heidegger, it is a mistake to imagine that material things are isolated and self-supporting entities, or that we can get closer to them by listing their outward qualities or identifying their process of manufacture (Heidegger 1971, 164). Famously, in *Being and Time* (1962), Heidegger identifies two distinct modes of engagement between people and things. The Cartesian/Baconian way of looking consciously and analytically at objects, as if from a distance, places them in a mode of present-at-handness. They are just *there*, to be observed as lumps of matter. But this is a relatively unusual state of affairs,