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# Final Thoughts on *Beiläufigkeit*

Susan Pollock, Reinhard Bernbeck, Stefan Schreiber, Lena Appel & Anna K. Loy

The essays in this theme section demonstrate clearly the diversity and complexity of a topic that seems negligible in practice but emerges as important upon further reflection—the incidentalness of things. In this brief afterword, we highlight three of the themes addressed by all or most of the contributions, which we suggest are of particular relevance when considering the place of the incidental in our archaeological engagements.

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## The incidental as relational

All authors of the essays assembled here are in basic agreement that *Beiläufigkeit* is not something that particular things have or lack; rather, incidentalness is located in dynamic relationships among things, people, and other sentient beings. Laurent Olivier emphasizes that the meaning of archaeological things rests to a significant extent on 'the way they were deposited in or on the ground'—incidental matter consists of unstable, hybrid assemblages. The same unsteadiness appears in Þóra Pétursdóttir's drift matter. She suggests that it must be grappled with as assemblages of unspecific and unspecifiable things that constantly shift, move and reconstitute themselves; they must be taken as they are. It is a mistake to search for origins or to isolate single things within such hybrids.

We note here a difference of scale concerning material things when thinking about *Beiläufigkeit*. Julian Thomas, Hans Peter Hahn and Laurent Olivier tend to think of things as clearly limited entities, whereas Shannon Dawdy, Jutta Wimmler and Þóra Pétursdóttir write about assemblages. With a gaze oriented towards whole assemblages, Pétursdóttir is therefore able to keep the *Beiläufige* in its state of incidentalness; a focus on a particular drifting object, such as the remains of a fishing net, might evoke the image of birds or fish upon which the net acts: the bird fights desperately to escape a slow and tortuous death by a thing that kills it. It is on this smaller scale that *Beiläufigkeit* dissolves. The 'democracy of materiality' presumes a distanced and distancing positionality, one that abstains from considering erstwhile relations of struggle between humans or other sentient beings and things.

Hahn also argues that *Beiläufigkeit* is unstable and transient, but insists on its universality. In contrast to our suggestion in the introduction, but concurring to a certain extent with Pétursdóttir, Hahn argues that incidentalness is not a product of a world (over)stuffed with things. Rather, on the basis of his ethnographic work, he sees people's engagement with things as equally careless and neglectful whether they have few or many of them. We would counter, however, that his is a study that places consumption in the centre, whereas our argument is that one significant element in enabling things to become *beiläufig* today has to do with one's positionality as it relates to knowledge about the labour invested in making things. The massive presence of things the genesis of which is unknown to their users allows them to remain primarily in the realm of the incidental. This is less easily the case when people are aware of who made things, what kinds of machines were involved, what temporalities they entailed, and which general conditions of labour existed—in other words, knowledge of their deep past.

## The incidental as political

In the introduction, we argued that *Beiläufigkeit* has political import, a point on which all of our interlocutors agree. This contention rests first and foremost on the fundamental observation that the incidental has a powerful effect on our lives *because* we do not notice it. Thomas suggests that non-human entities can be least conspicuous when they are most important.

Dawdy takes such arguments a step further. She discusses an event where masses of *beiläufige* things turned significant. When things suddenly become the focus of our attention, they also have the potential to reveal their ideological nature, i.e. explicitly to expose unequal power relations. Jutta Wimmler observes that historiography is part of a universe of discourse that stabilizes and perpetuates hegemonic narratives, and it is therefore one of the tasks of historians to enquire why certain things appear or disappear from historical accounts. Questioning the importance not of things themselves, but of their position in historical narratives, is for Wimmler an important political programme of re-organizing discourses about the past. It is, if one wants to use De Landa's terminology, an act of discursive de- and (re-)territorialization. Paradoxically, the success of such an endeavour—the establishment of a new discursive constellation—is its own demise, similar to the paradox of making incidentalness disappear when reflecting on its specificity. Both Wimmler and Dawdy draw our attention to the intentionality with which certain things may be allowed, encouraged, or forced to become incidental.

The contributions reveal an asymmetry in processes of (de-)incidentalization. As Olivier makes clear, to become incidental requires a duration in order for something to fade into that state. On the contrary, the process by which things reveal themselves and are catapulted out of the realm of the *Beiläufige* is often abrupt and unforeseen. Hurricane Katrina and its consequences are an obvious example of this. The temporal asymmetry inherent in the phenomenon of incidentalness gives it a particular political character.

## The incidental as anthropocentric?

In our introductory remarks, we raised the question of whether *Beiläufigkeit* can exist in a non-anthropocentric world or whether it must be considered a product of the attentiveness (or lack thereof) on the part of human observers.

Two of our interlocutors, Julian Thomas and Þóra Pétursdóttir, take a decidedly non-anthropocentric position, arguing that it is both possible and necessary to think of incidentalness outside an anthropocentric frame. Thomas proposes that one can conceive of a world 'in which all material things normally exist in a state of reciprocal incidentalness, sporadically revealing some aspects of themselves through their mutual interactions'. The attentiveness that they periodically command may pertain in part to human-thing relations, but this is only a small sub-set of more general kinds of incidentalnesses. Thomas seems to have distinct objects in mind when reflecting on the issue, and he dissects their 'essence' into attributes with more or less emergent capacities. Pétursdóttir's diagnosis of how matter can 'retreat and withdraw from our grasp' is based rather on locations of occurrence, and her focus is on the ungraspable hyperobjects that are so typical for the Anthropocene.



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But do objects experience each other, and does such thingly experience have its own history? In the other commentaries, experience and perception are seen as central for incidentalness. Both Wimmler and Hahn frame their enquiries into the phenomenon from the perspective of human perception. Wimmler agrees with Olivier in conceptualizing incidentalness as an effect in our present world, but examines this more specifically in the academic world. Hahn and Dawdy's concern is *Beiläufigkeit* as a historical-social manifestation. Dawdy also focuses on intentionality and thereby notes potential problems with taking post-humanism to a logical extreme. Olivier cites the decentring of humans as a fact of life in the Anthropocene, although his 'post-histories' of things also seem to be closely tied to the narratives archaeologists construct about the past. It seems that the jury is still out on where to situate *Beiläufigkeit* in discourses on (non)anthropocentrism.

Ultimately, the inclusion of *Beiläufigkeit* as a category in archaeological or other analyses is an attempt to diversify the focus in examinations of archaeological things, temporalities and locations. In the paradoxical interplay between attention and casualness, regimes of visibility and affect come to the fore that bear often well-hidden political dimensions, be those regimes conceived as anthropocentric or post-humanist.

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