

## ARTICLE

# Archaeological encounters: Ethics and aesthetics under the mark of the Anthropocene

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## Abstract

What legitimizes archaeological work in an age of global climate change, socio-political crises and economic recession? On what topics should archaeology focus its research questions, and what forms of archaeological engagement are not merely justifiable but able to make a difference in light of such challenges? Today, there is a tendency, we argue, that archaeological responses to current challenges are expected to align with a specific mode of conduct, political stance and genre, where, for example, a very particular notion of activism, responsibility and ethics is dominating. There is no denial that current challenges call for immediate instrumental reactions, but we contend that valuable reactions can – or even must – vary, and that more fundamental and slow ontological and epistemological change should also be nested within these responses. In this article, we explore what it means to care – what it means to be concerned – in the Anthropocene through archaeological practice and aesthetic engagement. By highlighting the relations between ethics and aesthetics, we explore ways in which we get in touch with the objects of concern, placing undecidability and speculation as dispositions equally important to urgency and impact.

**Keywords:** ethics; aesthetics; speculation; the Anthropocene; posthumanism; responsibility

## Framing and positioning

In her essay, ‘She unnames them’, Ursula K. Le Guin tells the story of a woman who tasks herself with relieving the animals of their generic names, such as ‘poodle’, ‘dog’, or ‘bird’, and of ‘all the Linnean qualifiers that had trailed behind them for two hundred years like tin cans tied to a tail’ (Le Guin 1985, 26). Initially, the woman finds that some species are reluctant to give up their names, but once realizing they only have to surrender their generic species’ names, and not their individual given names, they all agree. The names of the insects then evaporated in ‘vast clouds and swarms of ephemeral syllables buzzing and stinging and humming and flitting and crawling and tunnelling away’, while the names of the fish ‘dispersed from them in silence throughout the oceans like faint, dark blurs of cuttlefish ink, and drifted off on the currents without a trace’ (Le Guin 1985, 26). The protagonist ends up surrendering her own name, given to her by her partner, Adam, and his father. While Adam is busy searching for some lost keys to the garden, she leaves, telling Adam, ‘I’m going now. With the –’, then pausing before saying, ‘With them, you know’ (Le Guin 1985, 26). Ultimately, she ponders:

‘In fact, I had only just then realized how hard it would have been to explain myself. I could not chatter away as I used to do, taking it all for granted. My words now must be as slow, as new, as single, as tentative as the steps I took going down the path away from the house, between the dark-branched, tall dancers motionless against the winter shining’ (Le Guin 1985, 26).

In this article, we propose the contemporary era is confronted with challenges that force us, as argued by Le Guin, to step back from ‘taking it all for granted’. The encounter with a changing Anthropocene environment destabilizes our conventional classifications of things, sites and context, and the names we usually apply to them. In light of the perceived or real novelty of the Anthropocene, we must explore the epistemological and ontological bearings of the contemporary, asking how we get to know things, what things are, and how we get in touch with them and care for them. If the Anthropocene is as radically new as the naming of a new geological era suggests, it is compulsory to revisit and question our ways of recognizing things, classifying them, valorizing them, and describing them. Such rethinking, we contend, is a matter of certain urgency as well as a matter of academic ethics and responsibility. But what does it mean to take action and act responsibly in academia today? And what forms of responses count as *ethical* in this context?

These are the central questions we pose in this article. As we will explore with footing in our own discipline, and to tease out a hint to our arguments, our response to these questions is that there is at present a tendency to expect reactions to current challenges to align with a very specific mode of conduct, political stance and genre, where a particular notion of activism and ethics dominates. Responsible reactions should be fast and evidence-based as opposed to hesitant, speculative and poetic. Taking issue with this position, however, we suggest that in the current climate, ethics, responsibility and care (as a form of active and solution-oriented concern) are also designations in need of rethinking (for related critique see e.g. Cobb and Crellin 2022; Crellin 2020; Crellin and Harris 2021; Eriksen and Kay 2022). And by highlighting the relations between ethics and aesthetics – between responsibility and care – we want to suggest hesitation and speculation as dispositions equally *ethical* and important to urgency and impact.

We frame our notion of care as nested in a traditional archaeological engagement with a concern for things and their trajectories. We hold this engagement to be an aesthetic encounter, and an ‘embedded and embodied empiricism’ (Braidotti 2020, 467). The archaeological gaze allows us to illuminate not only where things come from, or how objects decay and degrade, but even more so how they endure and gather, how they form new, unanticipated and counterintuitive contexts that do not make much sense with reference to origins, causal explanations or ‘meaning’. And now, perhaps more than ever, archaeology is challenged to move beyond any merely retrospective passion for ancient curiosities, concerning itself with the matters of contemporary society. Obviously, archaeology as a means to socio-political action is not a novel topic, and moreover, as repeatedly argued, archaeology is not a separate activity set aside from the contemporary world. Whether referring to a Marxist backdrop in the vein of Gordon Childe (1979), or answering Lewis Binford’s (1962) call to tap into wider anthropological concerns, or considering archaeology ‘always a politics, always a morality’ (Shanks and Tilley 1987, 212), or if acting against archaeology’s substantiation of a gender mythology (Conkey and Spector 1984), or explicating the need for a politics of things (Olsen 2003), or undoing colonialism through indigenous and black feminist archaeology (Atalay 2006; 2012; Battle-Baptiste 2011), or situating intimate archaeological encounters within the decolonial (Rizvi 2019), or adhering to the socio-political obligations of contemporary archaeology more generally (González-Ruibal 2018), a politically responsible archaeology cannot withdraw to balmy and distant seclusion beyond the urgency of ‘real-world’ issues. It is not enough to conjure up interesting narratives of the past, uncovering and exhibiting curiosities, or to contribute with depoliticized archaeological musings for an entertainment industry. This, we contend, is more or less a common understanding in academic archaeological communities of the present.

As the discipline of stuff, of things’ trajectories, of their withdrawal, duration, fragmentation, swelling and gathering, we believe archaeology has a valuable contribution to make in the present condition, also beyond disciplinary boundaries. Archaeology’s legacy and gathered knowledge of the deep past, and even more so the archaeological perspective and mode of attending, has always afforded a more-than-human approach, where understandings of human eco-dynamics, non-human object agency, and indeed human being, can be contested and nuanced. Some of this we have explored in our own work (Figs. 1–5), through attendance to oceanic drift matter with

unclear origins and biographies and with equally uncertain futures and destinations (Pétursdóttir 2017; 2018; 2019; 2020; 2021), through dilapidated architecture blending any comfortable categorization of nature and culture and of heritage and waste (Pétursdóttir 2013; 2014; 2016; Sørensen 2015; 2016; 2017a; 2017b; 2021) and through nuclear waste repositories planned on the basis of timescales beyond any human grasp (Dawney, Harris and Sørensen 2017; Sørensen 2018). What we gather from these empirical experiences is that any form of reaction to current environmental challenges – in the broadest sense of the expression – necessitates a concern *not only* for human being and human agency, but unavoidably also a sensitivity to how non-human beings affect and endure in the world. And hence, we ask how a new era – whether designated as geological or cultural, or a combination of both – affects our epistemologies and ontologies, the way we come to know being and beings, our classifications and notions of causality and intentionality. In short, we argue, we must consider to what extent existing modes of operation and taxonomies in archaeology are taken for granted, whether they must be altered, and how this affects ways of encountering and caring for things.

Of course, these concerns and arguments reflect a much broader scholarship within and beyond archaeology, building on the work of scholars who are associated with positions variously labelled as object-oriented ontology, new materialisms, speculative realism, feminist epistemology, multispecies ontologies and so on: a range of approaches we here bring together under the label ‘posthumanist’ attitudes. Though disparate, the observation we draw from these perspectives is generally that the anthropocentric, Cartesian, positivist, semiotic and evolutionist rationale dominating Modernity is (on its own) unable to make sense of the Anthropocene’s current challenges and the deep entanglement of entities, including humans and non-humans. Instead, we need a different approach that is critically concerned with more-than-human worlds, with additional modes of being than human being, and with the object agencies that are becoming ever more apparent in the new terrains of the Anthropocene.

As should be evident, the frictions between Modernist and posthumanist ontological discourses are fundamental, and in whatever way one chooses to define the radicalness of these ontologies, they have resulted in heated debates and criticism across the dividing lines. The critique of posthumanism goes in different directions, but we see it as revolving mainly around three general points (based on Andersen and Jacobsen 2020; Boysen 2018; Cipolla 2017; Cole 2013; Díaz de Liaño and Fernández-Götz 2021; Fernández-Götz, Maschek and Roymans 2020; Hacıgüzeller 2021; Hamilton 2017; Hornborg 2017a; 2017b; Ion 2018; Kristiansen 2022; Lindstrøm 2015; McGuire 2021a; 2021b; Rekret 2016; 2018; Ribeiro 2016; 2019; 2022; Ribeiro and Wollentz 2020; Van Dyke 2021; Vetlesen 2019). First, critics have claimed that reliance on the notion of object agency *eradicates human responsibility*. Second, aesthetic, phenomenological approaches have been criticized for *leading to passive, indifferent and lyrical meditations* in the face of severe ecological and social challenges. Third, the consequence of the first two confrontations – against object agency and aesthetics – leads to a further point of criticism, which concerns the *fetishization of things and the alienation of human beings*. We take issue with all three points, and accordingly, part of what we challenge in this article is the general perception that posthumanist responses to the Anthropocene offer some sort of crippled, paralysing poetry and nonsense in the face of tremendous problems in need of urgent action. Furthermore, we contest the notion that a concern for things’ being automatically implies a disregard for humans, humanity and human responsibility.

Such accusations are certainly worthy of response, but moreover we believe that they bring to the fore some significant issues rarely addressed. Hence, we want to discuss the seemingly widespread willingness to spell out a particular form of academic action as self-evidently legitimate and *ethical*, while other modes of conduct are seen as *apolitical* and *irresponsible*. Moreover, we are interested in exploring why ‘ethics’ are rarely defined within the discourses and agendas that tend to criticize or even reject posthumanist approaches for their alleged deficient or non-existent ethical ground. Following Jacques Derrida, our question is quite fundamental: what *is* ethics – ‘What is



**Fig. 1.** *Encounter #1.* Date: 7 August 2015. Place: 70.96262°N, 26.66342°E. Photographer: Þóra Pétursdóttir.

the ethicity of ethics? The morality of morality? What is responsibility? (Derrida 1995, 16–17) – and why is ethics seemingly divorced from aesthetics and other than fact-based, evidence-driven ways of knowing the world? Narrowing down even further: what kind of a priori conception of ethics and action is grounding the claim that posthumanist and aesthetic approaches are depoliticized – and passive? What we pursue in this article, thus, is a discussion of the implications of a posthumanist ethics and its relations to aesthetic archaeological encounters in the Anthropocene, where things’ agency and unknown future trajectories urge for our attention (Figure 1).

### Dithering and just-so stories

In 1949, in the aftermath of the Second World War, Theodor Adorno phrased his agonizing avowal, ‘To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’ (Adorno 1981, 34). The original quote occurs in the concluding passage of his essay ‘Cultural criticism and society’ but has since travelled widely and given rise to a discussion, which Adorno himself claimed not to have foreseen (Adorno 2000, 110). Here, his bewildering statement, divorced from its original context, has been interpreted, rephrased and paraphrased in various ways. It has often been taken at face value, understood quite literally, and seen to predict the end of poetry or even as a call to abandon the arts altogether (Adorno 2000, 110; see also Rowland 1997). Confronted with the devastating horror of total warfare and the Holocaust, art, poetry and aesthetics might be seen as acts of burying one’s head in the sand – a futile and privileged endeavour, weighing on the verge of the immoral. In other words, *there can be no poetry after Auschwitz*.

It is interesting, at present, to recall Adorno’s words and not least the reactions they caused. To be clear, we do not wish to draw any semblance between the post-war context of his thinking and the present: we do not claim that the genocides and atrocities of Adorno’s era are *the same* as anything else. That being said, the present is faced with its own devastations and concerns, as well as statements about how and how not to address its perils. Among the most prominent of these concerns is the undeniable and alarming fact of a changing climate, which has resulted in and will continue to produce increasing socio-economic challenges, destruction, crop failure,

species extinction, pollution, rising sea-levels, abandonment and displacements of populations. In the humanities, social and natural sciences alike, these environmental and socio-economic challenges, widely referred to as the Anthropocene, are stirring up calls, illustrating the pressing need to ‘do something’.

Despite its anthropocentric framing and naming, the Anthropocene is encountered not least through material and more-than-human phenomena: objects and substances that may have been emancipated, i.e. lost, abandoned, discarded, released, rejected, forgotten or forsaken, but which have since travelled, gathered, swelled and persevered in ways that humankind did (or would) not anticipate or intend. Therefore, the contemporary global, socio-political condition urges a reasoning that transcends anthropocentric measures. Whereas social constructivism long assigned primacy and meaning in whatever relation there was to human actors or pedigrees, the present is calling for a broader more-than-human approach, where the trajectories of significance are more manifold, and where human being is not the only or necessarily most central mode of being.

What is interesting in the criticism of such posthumanist orientations, however, is that these have been targeted on numerous occasions for representing and advocating positions that are, allegedly, *ethically* problematic. Moreover, since posthumanists contend that we need to pay more attention to non-humans, such positions have been charged, not merely for fetishizing things but also for objectifying human beings and disregarding human rights, intentionality and responsibility. Altogether, these positions are criticized for adopting a *passive* and *poetic* attitude to real-world problems, and for inciting a philosophical and unintelligible ‘dithering while the planet burns’ (Hornborg 2017b). As one critic warns, archaeology might be reduced to a ‘poetic contemplation’, and this will allegedly have ‘immediate bearing on how we imagine the role of archaeology in today’s society: either as an endeavour that can become a powerful reflexive tool with social, cultural and political impact, or as a lyrical and passive metaphor’ (Ion 2018, 198). In other words, one has to make a choice between an approach that can make a difference, or one that merely produces meaningless speculations with an ensuing loss of accountability. So, pretty much like poetry after Auschwitz, these critics draw a bleak picture of posthumanist approaches as not only futile, but even more so, as verging on the barbaric.

In consequence, in much of the literature expressing genuine concerns for the environment, responses to the Anthropocene seem to be of a certain sort. There appears to be an overwhelming emphasis on quantitative, evidence-based and natural-scientific perspectives, calling for ‘a systematic and strategic engagement of archaeology and archaeologists with contemporary climate change’ (Riede 2018, 20). In other words, scientific and technological approaches to ecological thinking are frequently implied to constitute *the* potential for an archaeological contribution (e.g. Boivin and Crowther 2021; Burke et al. 2021; Hussain and Riede 2020; Riede, Andersen and Price 2016; Smith 2021b). Michael E. Smith (2021a, 1,085) thus argues ‘that any actionable insights from archaeology will need to be quantitative and scientific in nature’. Such attitudes, it seems, are taken to represent a solution-oriented approach to the problems at hand by, first, providing us with the facts needed and, second, by developing responses that may offer expedient answers to clearly delineated challenges, taking archaeology ‘beyond stewardship and towards action’ (Riede, Andersen and Price 2016, 473; but see also Lane 2015, 11).

Yet, we reject the notion that scientific and technological modes of action need to be pitted against an assumed lesser *aesthetic engagement*. It seems, perhaps, that the aesthetic here becomes synonymous with a sort of naïve or deceitful beautification, or with a superficial loyalty to something unproductive and unnecessary, maybe even a side-tracking of the proper investment of resources and activities. In such a perspective, the aesthetic is reduced to a mere ornament, which, according to Adolf Loos, is ‘wasted manpower and therefore wasted health (. . .) it is also wasted material, and both mean wasted capital’ (Loos 2002, 33). In a similar concern for the economy of archaeological labour, Felix Riede considers ‘it critical that the stories archaeology tells are not merely *just-so stories*, not just parables’ (Riede 2018, 18, emphasis added). This vocabulary is telling; ‘just parables’ may at

first seem agreeable in the sense of being mere fairy tales about the past, leaving little or no relevance for the contemporary world by being mere entertainment or pure ornament. Traditionally, however, a parable is an allegorical narrative, serving as a parallel story to illustrate a moral. So, when Riede argues for the ‘production of salient nature-culture narratives’ that may foster ‘societal change through the social transmission of actionable cultural information and know-how’, he is in fact pointing precisely to archaeology as offering parables for contemporary society. Within this discourse, the past is used didactically as an allegorical instrument (also Boivin and Crowther 2021; Hudson et al. 2012; Mitchell 2008; Rick and Sandweiss 2020; Riede 2017; Rockman 2012; Rockman and Hritz 2020; Sandweiss and Kelley 2012; Shaw 2016; Van de Noort 2013).

While Riede advocates the use of archaeology as a scholastic allegory, Alf Hornborg (2017b) distances himself passionately and unequivocally from parables and poetic lingering altogether. Specifically, he criticizes the works of Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing for surrendering to a superficial linguistic ornamentation that produces ‘obscure theoretical reflection’ rather than analytical clarity: ‘the aim of much of this writing seems to be to fashion prose as imaginatively as possible, replete with evocative allusions, poetic metaphors, and unbridled associations’ (Hornborg 2017b, 62). Furthermore, he contends, Haraway and Tsing express ‘an urge to rephrase familiar thoughts in a more poetic, if less accessible, jargon’ (Hornborg 2017b, 64), aiming at ‘maximum unintelligibility and inaccessibility’ in a ‘play of free and frequently unfathomable associations’ (Hornborg 2017b, 65). Altogether, for Hornborg (2017b, 68), this ‘dismantles any chance of politically challenging the destructive forces ravaging our planet’. He concludes:

‘( . . . ) academics deliberating on the Anthropocene have a responsibility that goes beyond publishing hazy and elusive dithering. I am agitated not only because we are destroying the planet, but because legions of critical academics are devoting their intellectual energies to everything but contributing to an analytically rigorous grasp of our dilemma’ (Hornborg 2017b, 75).

Elsewhere, similar criticisms have been voiced, arguing that severe environmental challenges require fast and robust solutions rather than aesthetics, poetry and lyrical meditations (e.g. Ion 2018; Van Dyke 2021), or plain ‘terminological incontinence’ to cite Hamilton’s dismissal of Haraway (Hamilton 2017, 92). In many respects, these criticisms echo earlier charges made against phenomenological approaches for enticing ‘cancerous semantic growths’ (Gellner 1975, 445) that would hamper the possibility for well-defined concepts and meanings, ‘because the slapdash, wilfully obscure and undisciplined verbosity makes it impossible to be sure just precisely what it is that is being said’ (Gellner 1975, 446). Similarly, Marvin Harris (1979) went as far as labelling phenomenology as ‘obscurantism’, because he saw phenomenology as perceiving all experiences and narratives as equally true. This, he argued, would lead to ‘moral opacity’ and the inability to pass moral judgment, which should instead rest on the capacity to ‘identify who did what to whom when, where, and how’ (Harris 1979, 324).

When aesthetics, the sensory, prose, poetic metaphors and parables are targeted in these ways, it is obvious that the understanding of such genres is cushioned in a deeper and often implicit tradition that separates contemplation from responsiveness, form from content, and *aesthetics from ethics*. This distinction rests on a legacy pointing back to Alexander Baumgarten and Immanuel Kant, who divorced aesthetics from *sensory* experience. In short, they translated ‘the aesthetic’ into beauty, whereby it came to represent ‘what is elevated, elitist, and exclusive’ (Casey 1973, xvi). It is on the basis of this tradition that aesthetics are viewed as non-essential and expendable, ethically superficial and even inappropriate in the confrontation with ‘real-world’ problems. Our argument is that this tradition results in the current policing of ethically appropriate conduct, embracing actionable, evidence-based responses as legitimate, while ostracizing aesthetic engagements as passive, too slow or unimpactful. To be clear: we contend the unknowable situation of the Anthropocene requires sensible, aesthetic archaeological engagements (see



**Fig. 2.** *Encounter #2*. Date: 19 December 2017. Place: 55.28673°N, 11.81478°E. Photographer: Tim Flohr Sørensen.

also Horn 2020), not only because they are fit for illustrating an unprecedented era but because they are necessary to encounter and address this situation in meaningful ways (Figure 2).

### Fossilizing the ethical

At the core of our concern is the observation that despite its occasional harshness (alluding to accusations of immorality), the criticism of lyrical passivity, beautification, just-so stories, dithering and hesitation rarely goes together with any explicit discussion of ethics as such. We argue this is because the criticism mostly subscribes to a normative view of ethics, i.e. as a formal ethical ‘code’, where ‘the ethical’ itself is beyond critique and analysis, and where the object-focus of archaeology (and other object-oriented approaches) becomes automatically stigmatized by, on the one hand, a foreclosed understanding of ethics as an exclusively *human* concern and, on the other hand, by a misguided dichotomization of ethics and aesthetics.

Drawing on criticisms dismissing hesitation and alleged passivity, we also take issue with a trend we see in academia currently, where the understanding of action – of what it means to react, show concern and *to do something*, or rather what is considered *meaningful to do* – has become too politically narrow, responding uncritically to a rather restrictive narrative of crisis and urgency. As phrased by Rosi Braidotti, current politics is permeated with a ‘hefty necro-political dimension, which fuels a political economy of negative passions in our social context. We live in a state of constant fear and in expectation of the imminent accident’ (Braidotti 2010, 142). Furthermore, she argues, ‘In this global context, what used to be the high-energy political activism of the Left has been replaced by collective mourning and melancholia. A great deal, if not most, of contemporary social and political theory stresses vulnerability, precarity and mortality’ (Braidotti 2010, 142). While Braidotti emphasizes that these are not necessarily negative reactions, in our current culture, nevertheless, ‘the politics of melancholia has become so dominant (...) that it ends up functioning like a self-fulfilling prophecy, which leaves very small margins for alternative approaches’ (Braidotti 2010, 142). As a replacement for this, Braidotti formulates an ‘ethics of affirmation’, which is anti-rationalist and anti-dualistic and where ‘the ethical ideal is to increase

one's ability to enter into modes of relation with multiple others' (Braidotti 2010, 143), including non-human, posthuman and inhuman entities. It is an ethics of becoming, of change, of relations and relatedness, and altogether rejecting self-centred individualism and anthropocentric narcissism, including the hubris of considering solution-oriented human intentionality as the exclusive mode of ethical response.

Following Braidotti, we take issue with the notion that action and the responsibility to act can be cushioned solely with reference to *human* intentionality, command and hegemony. In turn, we contend aesthetics are a form of action that refrains from control, and instead invites doubt, ambiguity and patience, all of which, we claim, are in fact *urgent* responses to the 'real world' of the present day. Those 'real-world' challenges we experience today are very tangible, sensory and deeply affective, or, in a word, 'aesthetic'. Hence, the compartmentalization of ethics and aesthetics is not only unnecessary but utterly unhelpful, in that it disentangles ethical discourse from the very concrete challenges at hand. In short, if an aesthetic approach is deferred, it may in fact delay our potential for getting to know these very challenges that confront us. In short, sensory, affective, speculative encounters are of urgent importance.

These points are all interconnected, but at the core is our claim that ethics and aesthetics are one, or belong together. This is not a new argument and has, for instance, been put forth by Adorno (2000, 140) and Ludwig Wittgenstein (2013, 86). However, for the most part, it has been more common to highlight the differences between ethics and aesthetics rather than their affinities. This carves out the aforementioned dichotomy, where ethics 'has to do with human actions', while 'the aesthetic is concerned with contemplation, with seeing or beholding something' (Collinson 1985, 266). Also, it is generally considered possible 'to bypass the aesthetic in a way in which we cannot [by our social contract] bypass the ethical' (Collinson 1985, 266). Following directly from that, ethics becomes associated with general rules and principles of (declared) 'good action', whereas aesthetics concerns judgement based on subjective experience, similar to Baumgarten's notion of 'aesthetic criticism' as 'the art of forming taste' with reference to the experience of delight or displeasure (Baumgarten 2014, §607). That is, ethics tend to be perceived as factual, rational, and even calculated, whereas aesthetics is personal and optional; in an ethical matter, thus, we consciously *act* toward a perceived common good, whereas in an aesthetic matter we are subject to our being in the world, experiencing things for their own sake, whether good or bad (Collinson 1985, 266). This should all be rather familiar, as these very credentials have dominated most ethical discourse after Baumgarten and Kant, also in archaeology, where ethics is mostly a matter of *human* 'rights', 'codes', 'responsibility', 'action' and 'ownership' and rather less about 'passion', 'care', 'desire', 'being' and 'becoming'. With such oppositions taken into account, it may indeed appear barbaric to conjoin ethics and aesthetics. So why do we argue it is important to consider them as interdependent?

Returning again to Adorno, it is interesting to recall how he responded to the turmoil caused by the avowal that poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. Deliberating on his statement, and in response to those taking his words at face value, he elaborated:

'I would readily concede that, just as I said that after Auschwitz one *could not* write poems – by which I meant to point to the hollowness of the resurrected culture of that time – it could equally well be said, on the other hand, that one *must* write poems (. . .). [A]s long as there is an awareness of suffering among human beings there must also be art as the objective form of that awareness' (Adorno 2000, 110).

Or, as he says elsewhere: 'because the world has survived its own downfall, it still needs art as its unconscious historiography. The true artists of today are those in whose works absolute horror still quakes' (Adorno 1977, 506; English translation in Hofmann et al. 2011). What is interesting in Adorno's response is that he speaks of art and poetry – or the aesthetic approach – as an *objective* form of addressing social concerns and the pain of others. In other words, he appears to argue for



**Fig. 3.** *Encounter #3*. Date: 3 October 2017. 69.67980°N, 18.97640°E. Photographer: Þóra Pétursdóttir.

speculation and aesthetics as *ethical means* – as opposed or equal to rules, codes and principles. And this, we believe, is crucial. For one, it formulates the speculative as ethical reaction, and by so doing calls for a consideration of the ethical and of responsibility as hinging also on uncertainty, deferral, speculation and hesitation. For decisions to be made, leading to action, there must be doubt and uncertainty, critique and self-questioning. We connect this with Derrida’s argument that undecidability should not be opposed to decision:

‘I would argue that there would be no decision (. . .) in ethics, in politics, no decision, and thus no responsibility, without the experience of some undecidability (. . .). If we knew what to do, if I knew in terms of knowledge what I have to do before the decision, then the decision would not be a decision. It would simply be the application of a rule, the consequence of a premiss, and there would be no problem, there would be no decision. Ethics and politics, therefore, start with undecidability’ (Derrida 1999, 66).

This complicates the more action-oriented notions of ethics. By calling into question whether action is even possible, Derrida challenges mainstream notions that ‘All ethics share a concern with the “right” way of acting’ (Riede, Andersen and Price 2016, 467) and that ethics is about aiming for the best solution to a problem (Peppoloni, Bilham and Di Capua 2020, 43).

Yet how can undecidability be justified in an era of urgent and pressing challenges? Derrida’s answer is that *questioning* ethics, morality, and responsibility, and the matters of concern are the first amongst urgencies:

‘In a certain way they must remain urgent and unanswered, at any rate without a general and rule-governed response, without a response other than that which is linked specifically each time, to the occurrence of a decision without rules and without will in the course of a new test of the undecidable’ (Derrida 1995, 16–17).

Fundamentally, if ethics must remain urgent and be linked to specific contexts, we take this to imply that a hesitant and deeply empirical, sensory approach is necessary if we are to familiarize ourselves with the still emerging and hence uncertain terrains of the Anthropocene. In this process, ethics and aesthetics will also have to be explored and questioned, further sustaining their reflective and underdetermined nature: ‘Not knowing what to do does not mean that we have to rely on ignorance and to give up knowledge and consciousness’ (Derrida 1999, 66). If we look at the critique raised against posthumanist approaches, at current social criticism more generally, and also at how ethics is articulated in archaeology, it is clear that ‘the ethical’ is here often understood in a very different way: existing mostly *above* the objects of care, and *beyond* the reality contested. It is this zone raised above the aporia of undecidability we want to turn to now (Figure 3).

### Things without politics?

At times, the right thing to do may seem obvious. However, when the ethical becomes veiled in the consensus of an already given code, the matters of concern become abstracted from the real, leading to fixed notions of, for example, ‘agency’, ‘nature’, ‘environment’, ‘human’ and ‘non-human’. This coding encloses important matters of concern within a given normative agenda while appearing as if depoliticized and unbiased, perhaps even beyond discussion. Erik Swyngedouw has showed how this has happened to the concept of ‘nature’ in environmental discourse; where the very multifaceted meaning of nature has become increasingly colonized by generalized and homogenized connotations, effectively leaving nature itself as hollow: ‘politically mute and socially neutral’ (Swyngedouw 2011, 259). Altogether, the political has thereby been ‘evacuated from the terrain of the environment’ (Swyngedouw 2011, 256; see also Beck 2010: 263).

Alfredo González-Ruibal (2018) has argued that the new materialisms in the context of archaeology have led to a similar depoliticization of things. He contends that the ‘celebration’ of things runs the risk of forgetting ‘their monstrosity’ (2018, 56) and ‘the politics that are involved in their production and the moral and political inequalities that exist within things’ (2018, 57). González-Ruibal holds new materialist approaches to be disinterested in, for instance, ‘the politico-economic causes of marine pollution and its consequences’, instead fetishizing things by asking what they deserve (2018, 57). Opposing such an attitude, he stipulates that ‘there might be things that do not deserve anything – smallpox, for one’ (González-Ruibal 2018, 57). Indeed, does everything – literally *every thing* – deserve something? Is the very question as self-evident, even laughable, as González-Ruibal makes it sound? This depends on what we imply by ‘deserve’: *what* does smallpox deserve?

In the course of the 20th and 21st centuries, Western democracies have largely gone through a process of accepting that more and more phenomena ‘deserve’ some kind of attention, warranting new ways of thinking about them, previously unthinkable. Ancient monuments that were once perceived as valuable quarries for new construction work were suddenly framed as ‘heritage’; animals and ‘Nature’ that used to be seen as economic resources now became demarcated by safeguarding and rights; children, women, political and ethnic minorities, who were once subject to the totalizing power, will and idiosyncrasies of a master, became delegates of society.

Today, the significant Other is, in short, not what it used to be. As Christopher Stone argued, ‘each time there is a movement to confer rights onto some new “entity”, the proposal is bound to sound odd or frightening or laughable. This is because, until the rightless thing receives its rights, we cannot see it as anything but a thing for the use of “us” – those who are holding rights at the time’ (Stone 1972, 455; see also Smith 2017). More specifically, claims have insinuated that notions of object agency and the general turn towards things will serve only to conceal or remove responsibility – as opposed to revealing culpability, causality and locating blame – resulting therefore in an unhelpful and even *unethical* agenda. In this vein, Clive Hamilton argues new materialisms ‘*take agency away* from humans and distribute it throughout the natural world (...) dissolving human



**Fig. 4.** *Encounter #4.* Date: 30 August 2016. Place: 55.94516°N, 12.24921°E. Photographer: Tim Flohr Sørensen.

intentionality in a soup of natural forces and objects' (Hamilton 2017, 91). This loss of sovereignty is also noted by Bill Brown, who states that new materialisms make 'it impossible to locate individual human agency', and he goes further to argue that Bruno Latour's extension of democracy to things is 'haunted by the fact that we don't yet enjoy democracy among persons' (Brown 2015, 168).

However, what things *deserve* should not automatically be confused with 'rights', nor should ethics. Smallpox, González-Ruibal contends, does not deserve anything, but the example is perhaps mistaken. Smallpox surely deserves – even *demands* – our respect; it needs to be taken seriously for what it is. It deserves our full attention and care, because where would we end up if we fail to attend to smallpox as a biological, socio-political and material phenomenon? The risks associated with smallpox – or economic recession, abandonment, ruination, seaborne debris, and nuclear waste – are, however, not necessarily easily handled or even known. Rushing to categorize such phenomena and their management might even prove to be premature, prolonging the problem or even worsening its effects on human and more-than-human environments. In this context, we argue that a key quality of archaeological practice is particularly relevant, namely its capacity for attending to things and entities otherwise considered unworthy of attention. This means that the question about what things 'deserve' might have a different character in archaeology than other disciplines, because archaeology traditionally (at least since Worsaae 1843) assumes a non-discriminatory attitude to the seemingly worthless. It even has to accept that yet unclassifiable or unidentifiable things must be given their due without knowing what it might be good for. Hence, what might otherwise seem to be a 'radical' attention to the alterity of things is in fact simply what we might term 'caring archaeologically', i.e. noticing and caring for things without knowing in advance whether attending to them will ever prove worthwhile.

In other words, what we find necessary is a revitalization of the traditional *archaeological encounter*: attending to things themselves, to object agencies, formation processes, vulnerabilities and vanishing, only this time under the mark of the Anthropocene, where we have to learn things anew, precisely because 'there has been no biological adaptation and no cultural learning or transmission to prepare us for the kind of environmental/geological changes that loom' (Hamilton et al. 2015, 5). Hence, in this new era we cannot remain content with the arrogance of assuming we know in advance what things are, how they emerge, where they come from, or how they should

be named, categorized and embedded in our pre-existing systems. Instead, we need to start with undecidability (following Derrida) to invite alternative ways of knowing and making sense of the material, patiently, perhaps hesitantly, as a means of questioning the human monopoly on having a voice, inviting other ways of storying others. In this perspective, in accordance with matter in the Anthropocene, ethics must be able to cope with restlessness and indeterminacy, relating to the past, indeed, but not determined by it: we hold ethics to have to adjust to movements of matter in the Anthropocene, which is ‘an irregular and partly unpredictable motion, but it is neither *random* nor *probabilistic*’ (Gamble et al. 2019, 125). Or, in the words of Stacy Alaimo:

‘The interacting material agencies provoked by the staggering scale and fearsome pace of human activities will no doubt bring about unknown futures. Rather than approach this world as a warehouse of inert things we wish to pile up for later use, we must hold ourselves account-able to a materiality that is never merely external, blank, or inert space but the active, emergent substance of ourselves and others’ (Alaimo 2012, 563–564) (Figure 4).

### What is the ethical?

This condition of restlessness and uncertainty in the Anthropocene – not being able to know in advance what things are, how to engage with them or what should be done – does not relieve humans of having to act. Instead, it implies that ethics is a situated practice of ‘co-existing and co-emerging with others’ and ‘working out *possibilities* for what we will decide’ (Zylinska 2014, 92, emphasis added). This includes what Patricia MacCormack (2012a) terms an ‘activist absence’, revolving around the ethics of ‘leaving be’, i.e. knowing when *not* to act. The limits of the applicability of this ethics, we argue, cannot be codified or defined in advance but has to be encountered through exploration.

We perceive aesthetic encounters and narrations as part and parcel of this exploration and ‘radical openness to everything’ (Morton 2010, 15), which must be able to chart other taxonomies than the ones ordinarily taken for granted. Frequently, these are carved out as subject/object, human/non-human and culture/nature. However, in the face of the Anthropocene, we argue we must add to these a destabilization of any easy, fast or conventional distinction between significant/insignificant, activism/hesitation and facticity/speculation. The uncertainty and profound aporia encountered in the destabilization of these categories and binaries must be examined sensibly, meaning we need to revisit things otherwise classed comfortably within established categories, forming a new, coherent yet also heterogenic and unruly ecology.

This form of ecological thinking stands in stark contrast to the fossilized ethics represented in much of the criticism of posthumanist concerns and which portrays them – with reference to ethics as a principle, code or rule – as passive, immoral and indecent, and thereby forecloses dialogue on these very claims. Here, the question of ethics appears absolute and beyond context. It becomes excluded from the relational ‘here and now’ and rendered more or less ‘utopian’, a ‘pure model’, or a ‘pure structure without content’ (Le Guin 1989, 81). Referring back to the criticism of aesthetics for being passive and unworldly, we believe it is important to remember that aesthetics are dealing with ‘real world problems’: aesthetics is a sensory response to experiences of and in the world as an ‘embedded and embodied empiricism’ (Braidotti 2020, 467). Therefore, aesthetics are at least as ‘real’ as any other approach, focusing on ‘the social’, ‘the economic’, ‘the technological’, ‘the environmental’ or ‘the political’, let alone ‘history’, ‘the past’ or ‘the future’. Like the ethical, accordingly, aesthetics cannot be systematically displaced from the precarious terrains of the Anthropocene (cf. Swyngedouw 2011, 256). Above all, the Anthropocene becomes ‘real’ by being aesthetic; by being material and affective and by being corporeally experienced. In turn, we need ethics to be speculative, not given; ethics needs to be generated through aesthetic – phenomenological – engagements with *real*, polluted environments, and not before, above or outside of them.



**Fig. 5.** *Encounter #5*. Date: 2 November 2016. Place: 55.28638°N, 11.81475°E. Photographers: Þóra Pétursdóttir and Tim Flohr Sørensen.

It needs to respond directly to experiences of ruination, contamination, resource depletion, and over-accumulation by *becoming exposed* to such phenomena. Or, as argued by Braidotti, ‘One has to *become* ethical, as opposed to applying moral rules and protocols as a form of self-protection’ (Braidotti 2010, 145, emphasis added; see also Ferrando 2020, 147; Grosz 2017, 1–2).

Moreover, *becoming* ethical, and *acting* ethically, cannot be a systematic problem-solving endeavour. It is not exclusively about impact, about setting things right, once and for all – about *saving* the world. It is at least as much about enduring in the world, in conflicting, problematic – but also passionate – contact with various others, human as well as non-human. In this way, the ethical is not so much about the rights of entities, beings or creatures but about the space between them, and how to share those spaces (MacCormack 2012b, 257). Accordingly, ethics is always about encounters, about being thrown into the world and experiencing it aesthetically on, in, through one’s body and aesthetic contact. This means ethics requires courage and desire to meet the other *as* other, and an openness to the alterity and changeability of the other, rather than the ability to immediately make distinctions and to tell right from wrong. This is precisely the potential we see in archaeology with its sensitivity to formation and deformation processes, transformation, transience and endurance but also with its confrontation with radical alterity and estrangement – working with realities from which the human subject is suspended, leaving only things behind.

This, we argue, entails a move away from aligning ethics with fixed parameters for responding to the world: away from categorical taxonomies and forms of fossilized ethics where the idea of moral conduct is given *a priori*. Instead this implies an ‘ethics of life in a world of difference’ (Grosz and Hill 2017, 16) by referring to the imminent potential of any being to become other, whereby we have no choice but to perform a ‘disquieting confusion of ethics and ontology’ (Olsen and Witmore 2015, 193). What we take from these observations is that it is not necessarily better – or more ethical – to ‘act’ than to ‘remain’ in lyrical ‘passivity’, because aesthetics and poetry is an active and deliberate way of being patient, of being metaphorically indirect and speculative, while letting things and thinking linger and emerge.

Yet, how is it even possible to consider ‘dithering’ and producing speculative fabulations in the face of dire environmental, social or political challenges? What we argue is that one response does not exclude the other. Hesitant, aesthetic engagement abstains from making claims about

inventing a new solution, pursuing instead a concern for charting and getting in touch with new anthropocentric terrains and matters of concern. In the course of familiarizing ourselves with this new environment<sup>1</sup>, a hesitant, descriptive attitude seems to us to be useful – also for the ethics of quantitative, evidence-based, solution-oriented projects, we imagine.

Altogether, we argue that the terrains of the Anthropocene call for a ‘speculative ethics’ (de la Bellacasa 2017, 7; also Haraway 2016), where caring is confronted with a protracted hesitation before answering the question ‘*how to care?*’ The speculative, aesthetic approach has two objectives: first, we must chart the landscapes of a new era, re-familiarizing ourselves with its topography, and second, we must venture into the vulnerable anticipation of possible futures. We stress that hesitant, aesthetic and speculative ways of getting in touch with things in the Anthropocene neither dismiss nor prevent action-driven responses to the challenges in front of us. *One response does not exclude the other* (Figure 5).

### This mess we’re in

To sum up, we criticize the widespread assumption that ethics can be approached as factual: as a decision between binaries of urgent and negligible or right and wrong. Instead, we argue that ethics has to exist as the vibration between decision and undecidability, at whose heart is speculation, aesthetics, creativity and critique, and also, as noted by numerous feminists, a concern for ‘relationality, situated knowledges, and embodied experience’ (Ferrando 2020, 147). In these perspectives, aesthetic engagements are integral to ethics because they are ways of encountering the world. In fact, we see the aesthetic inquiry as a profound form of responsiveness and care, inhabiting the same world as more technocratic and action-driven approaches. It is important to emphasize that aesthetic engagements are first and foremost about tactile *encounters*, about ways of meeting the terrains of the Anthropocene, and getting in touch with them. What we take from our inquiry into Adorno’s concerns about poetry after the Holocaust is that he was not addressing poems as a cultural *product*; rather, he was speaking to the necessity for the *process* of writing poetry as a site of encountering and dwelling with the aftermath of the atrocity. Hence, we object to the opposition voiced for instance by Hornborg, arguing that ‘The terror of the Anthropocene can obviously inspire poetry as well as analysis, but poems alone will not suffice to guide students who hope to engage in political activism’ (Hornborg 2017b, 66). Surely, poems *alone* will not enable us to solve the challenges, but encountering the challenges aesthetically might help us address, describe and comprehend the Anthropocene, and to endure in its presence. The poetic can nourish hope.

Again, without claiming any similarity between past and current calamities, we might paraphrase Adorno’s statement about poetry: ‘To write poetry *during* the Anthropocene is barbaric’, because the real challenge is to endure within the contemporaneity of the current challenges. While Adorno was concerned with how to live on in the *wake* of the horrors of the Second World War, what challenges the contemporary is how to take hold of the *present*. Of course, for Adorno historical reality is not a thing of the past. To the contrary:

‘One wants to break free of the past: rightly, because nothing at all can live in its shadow, and because there will be no end to the terror as long as guilt and violence are repaid with guilt and violence; wrongly, because the past that one would like to evade is still very much alive’ (Adorno 1998, 89).

Similarly, the world we encounter today is increasingly messy – a mesh of infiltrated phenomena and trajectories, some of which have little or no directional course nor cause, and where the contemporary ‘archaeological record’ emerges as an ‘insane collection’: ‘a collection for its own sake and for its own movement’ (Stewart 1993, 154). The past is hardly a distant terrain that can be contained within clearly bounded temporal coordinates. Think of oceanic drift matter with

unclear origins and biographies, and with equally uncertain futures and destinations. Think of dilapidated architecture that blend any comfortable categorization of nature and culture, and of heritage and waste. Think of nuclear waste repositories planned on the basis of timescales beyond any human grasp. Accordingly, we hold it to be self-evident that nothing is self-evident anymore. Things – in the widest possible sense of the word – need to be debated, not taken for granted; stirred up, not fossilized; and explored, experimented with and questioned. Things need to be encountered and attended to.

Like the woman in Le Guin's story, we argue that our encounters with a changing and messy world become too narrow and too restricted if we confine ourselves to describing it with familiar names, terms and concepts. Paraphrasing Le Guin, our words now must be as slow, as new, as single, and as tentative as the steps we take going down the path away from taking it all for granted. Attempting to respond to this mess we're in makes us hesitate. It quite literally makes us think about object agency and speculate about the continuous presences and aftermath of things. This is not because we see humans as free of responsibility or as a side-lined non-concern, but rather because this mess turns people, places and things into multispecies' assemblages, where, we contend, ethical activism not only can but *must* be aesthetic and speculative, allowing *also* for patience and slowness – a poetic lingering, if you like.

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## Note

**1** Of course, our argument revolves around the importance of becoming familiar with the *new* terrains of the Anthropocene, but we cannot help wondering whether the emphasis on the novelty of the Anthropocene marks a problematic culture-historical bias. While posthumanist responses to the Anthropocene substitute human exceptionalism with multifarious arrays of entities, they hardly do away with the exceptionalism of the contemporary. Our point is that it is not entirely unproblematic that "we" in our present – note: *our* present – continue confirming to ourselves that the contemporary is historically unparalleled. Does this narrative not run the risk of a massive blind spot: that we inhabit the very present, we ourselves describe as exceptional, because it is unthinkable to us that our present should not be an exceptional turning point in history? Do we not risk becoming guilty of the same narcissism characterising anthropocentrism, only replacing the human figure with the figure of the contemporary?

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