

Domestic Objects, Wild Things: Aletheia, Ruination, and Drift
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In June of 2017, I found myself in a restaurant in Oslo with Bjornar Olsen and Thora Pettursdottir. It was my first night there and I was quite exhausted from jetlag, but it was a marvelous meal, filled with great conversation. I still wasn't quite sure why I was there. Why had archaeologists taken an interest in my work, I had wondered for months? I had read the descriptions of the *After Discourse* project Bjornar had sent me, as well as descriptions of their earlier project *Object Matters*, and still couldn't quite understand what they were up to. I associated archaeology with ancient Egyptian pyramids and Greek temples. The idea of an archaeology of the contemporary, of abandoned industrial cities and fishing villages, landfills, and drift on beaches just made no sense to me. I suspect they had heard this sort of thing before. Patiently they explained their surveys to me and they talked about archaeology as the discipline of things; a brilliant battle cry, I think. As they spoke passionately about ruins and what ruins teach us, as well as drift, I happily exclaimed that they were exploring "undead objects". In this moment I felt very clever. Mentally I prepared to hold forth and give a fascinating discussion of Zizek's analysis of the undead applied to the category of objects. This, of course, would have been a psychological defense against my nervousness at meeting these new people and being unsure of why I was there. You see, I was trying to domesticate their discourse by integrating it in a system of conceptual coordinates I was familiar with. I was trying to make the uncanniness of their discourse canny or *heimlich*, as Freud might say.

At my mention of undead objects, Bjornar leaned back in his chair and got that devious smile that sometimes dances across his face. He knew what was coming. Thora gave me an

intense and venomous look. “They are not undead!”, she exclaimed. Amused, Bjornar quietly whispered “she *really* doesn’t like that characterization”. A blush rose to my cheeks. As we say in the States, I had stepped in it. On my very first night in Norway, I had managed to offend my gracious and hospitable hosts. Fortunately, it turns out it wasn’t as bad as all of that.

In the years since this first encounter, I have often reflected on this moment. Why, I have wondered, was the term “undead object” objectionable? After all, it has a nice ring to it, no? It’s rhetorically sexy! Not only does it allow you to bring in the baroque complexities of the Greimasian or semiotic square with its brain melting negation of negation in the form of that which is neither living nor non-living, but it also evokes all of the great horror movies directed by people like Romero and Raimi. What’s not to love? It’s a signifier that has legs! A signifier that is seductive. It’s super cool! Yet, as I have come to understand, they were profoundly right. The characterization of ruins and drift as undead objects misses the entire point and profoundly mischaracterizes the being or nature of things. This has been a humbling thing, for I, as someone who has sought to theorize objects or things for over a decade now, arguing that they are withdrawn and in excess of any conceptual elaboration or meaning we might give them, have learned from these archaeologists that I have barely begun to think the excess of the thing over the object that archaeologists profoundly deal with on a daily basis in their work.

As I recalled that June night while composing this talk, I was transported back to my childhood. I couldn’t have been older than twelve at the time. Like many Americans, part of my childhood was spent growing up in a suburban housing development, not unlike the housing developments you might see in Spielberg’s *E.T.* or *Poltergeist*. This Ohio housing development was built on old farm land. Former corn fields, to be precise. At the edge of the housing

development in an area that had not yet been developed, was an old, abandoned farm house. We were convinced that this abandoned farmhouse, this ruined home, was haunted. Occasionally we would get the courage to explore it, which probably wasn't a great idea given the dilapidated ceilings and roof and the rotting floors and stairs. It was filled with all sorts of mysterious things. For some reason, rusting razor blades could be found all over the place, on counters, in drawers, and on the floors. There were boxes of rat poison and rat traps throughout the home. Tattered curtains blew in the wind. There were mysterious boxes of long forgotten dish soaps and canned coffees that you could no longer find in stores. Here, there would be a rotting comb. There, there would be an old shoe or piece of infant clothing. Over there would be some rotting mail or an old phone book. Like the encounter Pettursdottir describes at the Icelandic fishing factory, there seemed to be little rhyme or reason to the things strewn about the house. To be sure, many of the artifacts strewn about the floors and counters indexed their domestic origin, yet they were arranged in a way that made no domestic sense. The farmhouse was a place that was simultaneously frozen in time in an unsettling or eerie way, but that also had undergone all sorts of transformations. Inasmuch as they could be read through the rot, the abandoned commodities that littered the house had unrecognizable brand names and dated color schemes marking them as remnants of the sixties or seventies. It was as if human time had stopped and the home had been overtaken by another, inhuman time.

It was an *unheimlich*, uncanny place that we explored with hushed, frightened, reverent voices. I've often thought back on that sense of reverence and still don't fully understand it. What was it about this place that evoked feelings of reverence? It was an attunement I would experience again, last year, when Bjorner was kind enough to take me along to the remote region

of Svaerholt to survey a Russian POW camp, portion of the Nazi Atlantic Wall, abandoned fishing village, and ancient, pre-historic home foundations and rendering pits. In this haunted house, our young imaginations took flight, devising stories to explain this wild place. We could not understand why it was abandoned or how such a thing could happen. We couldn't understand why it was *still* here, why it was still a thing that remained. Emancipated from human occupation, it almost seemed like an affront, a protest, an objection to being exhausted by human use, for it to continue existing. Yet oddly, when a few years later it was demolished to make room for more homes, there was a great sadness and feeling that this was wrong. At any rate, we wondered whether perhaps a terrible murder had taken place here. Were those blood stains we saw on the floor? Perhaps there were razor blades everywhere because someone who lived here suffered from severe depression, heroically fought off their death wish for many years, only to eventually succumb. Would we find a desiccated body in the next room? Or perhaps, as in Daniel Mann's film *Willard*, a race of super intelligent rats had taken over the home and enslaved the family that lived there, eventually killing them and taking the it over for nefarious posthuman rat aims we could scarcely comprehend or imagine. We had all sorts of stories. The likely explanation was probably far more prosaic. Perhaps, like so many farmers in the region, the owners of the home sold their land to the developers for a big profit and moved elsewhere, leaving it there to slowly fall apart until it would be replaced by more stylish, updated homes.

Everything, I think, is here in this anecdote. The ruined home of my childhood neighborhood was a dehiscent being, a split being. It was a being split between its status as an object and as a thing. More precisely we can say that the ruined home presents us with a split at the heart of disclosure. It simultaneously discloses beings in two heterogeneous ways: the home

is disclosed as a domestic object and a wild thing. I will have more to say about this later. For the moment, we can say that the archaeological artifact infects us with a sort of a double vision. The archeologist, I think, sees everything double, almost like the shaman that is simultaneously able to discern this profane world and the spirit world. Where the object, as what I call a domestic object, ordinarily presents itself as a seamless unity of materiality and meaning, of the material and the symbolic, the archaeological artifact effectuates a split between these two dimensions of disclosure, revealing them in their difference. Consider the following analogy. We are told that there is a blind spot between the two images our eyes produce in vision, yet we are unaware of this blind spot because our brain effaces it creating one seamless image. There is a blindness at the heart of our vision of which we are unaware. This is how it is with the domestic object. We encounter the dimension of signification and materiality as identical and as a single unity. In the archaeological artifact these two dimensions of disclosure become dehiscent, they split.

The archaeological artifact presents us with the split between the domestic object and the wild thing; in particular, it presents us with the emancipated life of the thing. Perhaps we could even claim that archaeology is the practice of this split. What archaeology discloses is an unruly agency at the heart of things, an agency beyond domesticity, that discloses a counter-being. It reveals the thing not as undead, not in its afterlife, but in a life that is ordinarily foreclosed or effaced within the field of our everyday concernful dealings. This life, of course, was always already there, but covered over by domesticity. If we are to think the anthropocene, we must, above all, think the wild thing at the heart of objects.

If we are to understand this, we must begin with the domestic object. In everyday experience, beings disclose themselves as domestic objects. This is true of both human artifacts and objects of so-called nature. The domestic object is the domesticated thing. We should understand the domestic object as a sort of transcendental illusion in the sense of Kant reworked by Deleuze. In Kant, transcendental illusions are not simple errors like confusing salt with sugar when making a cake, but are rather illusions that arise internal to reason itself in its transcendent employment. For Kant, there is a certain inevitability to these illusions or something unavoidable to them. Despite the fact that it is unable to do so, reason is driven to cognize the whole or the totality of being and, in attempting to do so, falls into these illusions. The Deleuzian twist is that these transcendental illusions are not founded in reason, but arise from nature or being itself. I want to claim that the domestic object is one such illusion and that the archaeological encounter is a privileged site for seeing beyond this illusion.

Put differently, Husserl argues that in order to reach intuition so as to give a proper phenomenological description, we must practice what he calls the phenomenological *epoche*, suspending the natural attitude. The natural attitude is that form of thinking that conceives beings as beings of nature, located in time and space, governed by causality, and so on. By suspending the natural attitude in the *epoche*, we instead ask how the objects of experience give themselves to us in lived experience and intentionality. In an analogous manner, our day to day concerned dealings are characterized by engagement with domestic objects. The archaeological artifact performs a sort of *epoche* on the domestic object, allowing us to discern the split between meaning and materiality that is at the heart of the beings of our world.

The domestic object is the familiar object, the *heimlich* object. It is the object, whether natural or manufactured, that presents or discloses itself as familiar and known. In what follows, it must be understood that the terms “object” and “thing” are not synonymous. Conceptually I will be striving to distinguish the two, even if I nonetheless contend that every object contains, in veiled or concealed form, the thing within it. Domestic objects present beings as localized, discrete, enduring in the order of time, passive or lacking in agency, and subordinated to meaning and use.

Before discussing these features of the domestic object in more detail, let’s first explore how the illusion of domesticity is produced. The thing is domesticated in two ways: First, it is domesticated through maintenance and second through what I call the symbolic. The domestic object is the thing as maintained and curated. This is especially true of the world we primarily dwell in as human beings: the world of urban and suburban settings, but also even rural settings. We live in a world of entropy. The things about us, whether they be vehicles, roads, homes, computers, or kitchen cabinets, are perpetually threatened by entropy. Driveways and walls crack, grass grows in the seams of sidewalks, coffee cups get chipped, cars get scratched and dented, decorative bushes in yards get overgrown and grow wildly in all sorts of different directions, and the doors of kitchen cabinets come off of their hinges. Everywhere domestic objects harbor anarchistic and insurgent wild things within them, constantly threatening to emancipate themselves so as to become free for their own adventures.

A tremendous amount of human labor and energy goes into fighting the entropy of the world. Everywhere and daily there is a struggle against the wild thing. Concrete roads crack and are replaced. Grass is mowed and edging is done along sidewalks and berms by city workers.

Home foundations shift and walls crack, creating the necessity of patching and repainting. Daily we sweep our floors and weekly we vacuum our carpets, also cleaning stains made by our cat that coughed up a hairball. Wild things are at the heart of domestic objects, threatening them with entropy. Here, however, we should recall what Spinoza says about value judgments in the Appendix to Part 1 of the *Ethics*. There, in a manner that Bergson will later repeat in *Matter and Memory* and his essays on metaphysics, Spinoza points out that distinctions like that between the ordered and the disordered, the chaotic and the regular, the beautiful and the ugly, the useful and the useless, etc., are not in the things themselves, but arise from our judgments about things with regard to our aims and projects. Things themselves are neither useful nor useless, neither chaotic nor ordered, but are useful or useless, chaotic or ordered with respect to our needs and projects. The domestic object is the thing subordinated to those projects. When we wax philosophically about nothingness, wondering how it is possible for something to be missing or absent within being, Bergson contends, what we forget is that nothing is lacking in being, but rather we have merely failed to find what we were looking for.

There is a paradox here, for despite the fact that an inordinate amount of personal and social labor that is expended in maintaining domestic objects and fighting an endless, always doomed to be lost, war on the entropy of the wild thing, there's a sense in which the maintained and curated domestic object creates the illusion that things are eternal, unchanging, and without agency. We spend a tremendous amount of time maintaining things, yet somehow we forget this. It's as if we repress the wild thing at the heart of the domestic thing. In this regard, what Sloterdijk says of the original concept of ideology-- that they are doing it without knowing they are doing it --can be said of the manner in which domestic objects disclose themselves to us.

Haunted by the wild thing within it, the domestic object is, as Jane Bennett observed, lively and vivacious, refusing to be localized, and furtively undergoing all sorts of adventures through which its form and nature changes. From the standpoint of the domestic, I say the tree is over there and the house is over here. These two things, the tree and the house, are treated as discrete individuals that are partitioned and separated. Yet the roots of the tree call this localization into question, mocking it, tracing their underground journey to the foundations of the home as they search for water, bringing about cracks in the walls or driveway. You can tell we're currently dealing with foundation issues in our home. Despite all of our labor, it is as if we repress our knowledge of the wild things at the heart of domestic things, instead treating the domestic things as eternally unchanging, each with their own place or location in the world. Domestic objects are disclosed to us as discrete individuals, separated from one another. This is especially true for those who spend very little time curating and maintaining domestic objects because they only encounter the products of that labor because they have house cleaners and lawn workers to do these things for them. Here the psychoanalyst in me wonders if there isn't a more fundamental psychodynamic and cultural mechanism at work leading to the repression or foreclosure of the wild thing? Here I'm tempted to account for this repression through Freud's account of how the reality principle arises from the pleasure principle. In the beginning, Freud argues, the infant makes no distinction between imagination and perception. Faced with the absence of the bottle, the infant attempts to satisfy its hunger by imagining the bottle. Inevitably disappointment follows. Out of this disappointment, the reality principle emerges, leading the infant to the discovery that it must make a detour through reality to satisfy itself. Might not the repression of

entropy, this dream of absolute mastery where the thing is identical to the object, grow out of this ordinary disappointment?

The second way in which the thing is domesticated is through what I call the symbolic. The symbolic is a broad category consisting of language, signifiers, signs, categories by which we parse the world, norms, laws, narratives, and discourses. The domestic objects that make up our everyday experience in our concerned dealings with the world consist of a unity or synthesis of the symbolic and the material. The symbolic is like a net thrown across the earth, lacerating it and structuring it. It transforms the analog into the digital, the continuous into the discrete, or the smooth into the striated. Perhaps the paradigmatic case of the symbolic is to be found in the longitude and latitude of the globe. Here we should note the transition from speaking of the earth to speaking of the world. The world is what happens when the earth falls beneath the net of the symbolic. The earth itself has no longitude or latitude, but rather longitude and latitude are something we impose on the earth allowing us to assign a precise location to the things of the world. National, state, and city borders can be thought in a similar way. There is nothing in the things themselves that constitute a border, even where we might employ natural features of geography such as mountain ranges and rivers to serve this function. Rather, a border is a creation of the symbolic that brings an entity such as a nation into existence. It is but a short leap from symbolic formations like latitude, longitude, and borders to recognizing that *categories* like soccer moms and undocumented immigrants are symbolic formations. At the level of materiality, both I and the undocumented immigrant are biological beings, yet the signifiers that befall us-- citizen and non-citizen --transform us in every aspect of our social being and activity. As one of my undocumented students recently remarked, “because of this categorization I live

my life in fear and must act in all things with caution to prevent myself from being captured, imprisoned, or sent away.” For example, the undocumented immigrant might drive five miles below the speed limit to minimize their chance of being pulled over. This student is no different from any of my other students, yet just as longitude and latitude bring the world into being from the earth and render it possible to precisely locate things, this signifier transforms every aspect of his life.

The symbolic domesticates the thing in three ways. Let us begin with Lacan. Lacan, echoing Hegel, observes that the word murders the thing. In what way does the word or symbol murder the thing? First, the symbolic carries within it the curious power of conferring identity. Recall Plato’s famous analogy of the divided line. With regard to visible things, the physical things that make up the world, Plato tells us that we can only ever have *pistis*, opinions, or beliefs, never *knowledge*. His reason is surprising. We might think we can only ever opinions about physical or visible things because everyone perceives or interprets them differently. However, I believe that Plato makes this claim for quite a different reason. It is not that we perceive things differently, but rather it is built into the nature of physical or visible things themselves. Because they *change*, what is true of them *now* becomes false later. I say “the rose is red” and that is true now, yet next week it is brown. As Deleuze will later argue in *The Logic of Sense*, things are characterized by a mad becoming in such a way that they defy truth. Or, as Hegel says in the *Phenomenology*, if we write down the sentence “the rose is red” on a piece of paper, we find out that it becomes stale next week. The thing, then, is characterized by becoming, by change. We might say that this is the “life” of the thing, its living being.

In what way, then, does the word murder the thing? It freezes the thing and confers an identity upon it that the thing itself does not have. Consider two examples of this. A human life is characterized by profound transformations. At times it is merely the journey from childhood to adulthood by which we become other. Were I to meet my self as a young boy exploring that farmhouse, he would no doubt seem like an alien stranger to me. At other times, these transformations arise from the events that befall us that have the effect of sundering time into a radical before and the after. In these events there is a profound discontinuity, such that we say everything, including ourselves, is different. Perhaps we survive cancer or through our own actions lose love. In the furrow of these events there is a sort of liminal time where we cease to exist as a subject or become a sort of between-subject. This time is very difficult to describe. The point here is that the self prior to these events and after these events is, in many instances, a dramatically different subject. The subject now that in the past betrayed and lost love looks back on the subject that did the things that led to that loss and cannot recognize himself in the subject that did these things in the past and that thought and acted in these ways. It's as if they were another person. Such is the nature of becoming. We don't know who that person was and cannot recognize ourselves in them. Yet we still call that person "me" despite this fundamental transformation. Why? Perhaps the simple presence of a name confers a sort of illusory identity and continuity on what is, in reality, a discontinuity. If this is the case, then the word kills the thing-- in this case, the subject in its becoming --by freezing that which is characterized by becoming and difference.

In a very different context, we might think of the term "speculative realism". These days, 13 years later, we find people writing articles and saying things like "speculative realists believe

this and argue that.” This is a very curious thing for those who know the history of speculative realism. Alberto Toscano organized a conference at Goldsmith’s University, bringing together unusual continental philosophers defending various versions of realism and materialism. As is so often the case with philosophers, they didn’t agree on much and Brassier, Grant, Harman, and Meillassoux were even in heated debate with one another. As you might imagine, there was a particularly lively debate over the *name* of the conference. Harman wasn’t particularly keen on any name that had materialism in the title. Indeed, Graham would later go on to write a book called *Immaterialism*, criticizing materialism. They compromised and settled on the conference title “speculative realism”. Later, the journal *Collapse* published these talks.

Well, a signifier is a dangerous thing. A few years later there was an explosion of interest in “speculative realism”. Predictably, like the search for El Dorado or the Fountain of Youth, people began to wonder *what* speculative realism is? In other words, they took a *somewhat* arbitrary name or signifier and transformed it into an essence-- a mysterious essence, to be sure – to be discovered and elaborated. What are the claims of speculative realism, people wondered? They wrote books. They wrote articles. They gave conference talks. Yet there is no speculative realism, if by that we mean a shared or distinct philosophy. It was four distinct philosophers or thinkers articulating positions in dialogue and heated debate with one another that had to come up with a conference title. If the word here killed the thing, it was by taking what was a diversity and set of differences, freezing them, and transforming it into an essence. We can therefore say that the first way in which the symbolic domesticates the things is by freezing it and giving it an identity foreign to its becoming and diversity. It tames that becoming and that diversity. Despite

the fact that the thing becomes and changes right before our eyes, it gets transformed into an unchanging identity characterized by a sort of eternity.

The second way in which the word kills the thing and domesticates it is by introducing absence into the world. By virtue of the word, we can refer to things in their absence. We can even refer to things that are so radically absent that they don't exist at all. The implications of this are, I think, profound. For while we can wax Lacanian and talk about how the advent of the word introduces an a priori absence in the world such that we are condemned to be eternal creatures of desire, what we sometimes forget in this phenomenon is that to the same degree that the word introduces an ineradicable absence into the world around which our desire is condemned to pulsate without ever being able to fill it, it also paradoxically opens the space of the illusion of absolute presence. Through the word I can make what is absent present. I can speak of that which is absent and conceptualize that which is absent. While, in the depths of the Norwegian winter I am consigned, perhaps, to eating nothing but fish, I can nonetheless *speak* of the cloud berries that will happily come into season with the return of the sun and the thaw of the snows. With the word, I believe, we encounter the greatest sin of philosophy. We encounter the reign of discourse and the reduction of the thing to discourse. Insofar as the word allows me to speak of the thing in its absence, it also allows me to replace the thing with the word. The word brings the thing before thought as the thought-thing and henceforth I, the philosopher, come to treat the thought-thing, the absent thing, as identical to the thing itself, abandoning the necessity of encountering the thing in all of its carnal materiality and capacity to surprise as the wild thing.

Finally, with the symbolic and the net that it throws over the world, things are domesticated by coming to be structured in terms of locality and discreteness. The world will

now be carved up into fields of signifying structural places that governs what is to appear in those places and what activities are to take place there. There will be private spaces such as the home and public spaces. There will be the natural and the cultural. Everything will have its place. Space will take on a structure. If we find ourselves amused when we watch the documentary *Zizek!*, then this will be because he keeps his clothing and underwear in his kitchen cabinets and drawers, and lays in bed beneath the covers, his black and gray hairy chest exposed, discoursing about Hegel, Lacan, and a variety of other thinkers while simultaneously ironically subverting himself and his own authority as the subject that knows. In doing so, Zizek foregrounds the difference between the symbolic and the real. We are shocked when he shows us his kitchen and that his clothing is in the cabinet and the drawers because this is not the *function* assigned to these places. After all, we've read the elaborate and illuminating analyses of the anthropologists in their explorations of the *signification* of places and spaces. We are all too familiar with Levi-Strauss's analysis of dual organizations. We are also familiar with Baudrillard's profound semiotic analysis of the living room in works like *The System of Objects*. Zizek subverts all of that. The bedroom is a private space, devoted to sleep and other activities-- in certain cultures, at least --and is not a place where you lay in bed with your chest exposed discoursing about the intricacies of dialectics for a person making a documentary. Zizek draws attention to the manner in which the symbolic comes to structure space and place, giving every thing and activity its place and transforming them into something discrete.

These are all obvious things, but perhaps they are such obvious things that they are difficult to see and discern. What, then, is the wild thing? If I gave an answer to this question, I fear I would undermine the entire point, for then I would transform the thing itself into the

thought-thing, and thereby domesticate the wildness of the wild thing. I would involve myself in a performative contradiction. Instead, I will try to engage in some etymological gymnastics, in etymologies that I am not sure can be defended from the standpoint of rigorous philology, and that I therefore offer as a sort of fantasy or science fiction that might at least allow us to indicate, notice, or prepare ourselves for sensing the wild thing. I wish to say that the wild thing is ruination and drift. Both of these terms have negative connotations. I hope, through these etymological games, to perhaps contribute to giving them a positive charge. Recall, as I observed earlier, I experienced an odd reverence in the face of the old, abandoned, haunted house my friends and I explored as a child.

The wild thing is an anarchic spatio-temporality at the heart of the thing. It is ruin, ruination, and drift. We are, of course, accustomed to thinking ruins and ruination as abandonment, collapse, and that which has been. We associate ruins with the past; a past that is now gone or lost, leaving only traces or vestiges in the thing. The farmhouse of my youth was a form of ruins. The World War II Russian POW camp, abandoned fishing village, and portions of the Atlantic Wall in Svaerholt, Norway are ruins. They were objects-- and again I ask you to attend to the difference between the object, the domestic object, and the thing --that once were and that now are not. Instead, there are only traces. This is how we ordinarily think of ruins and is what led me, ignorantly, to suggest that ruins are undead objects or things and that the archaeologists of the Unruly Heritage project are engaged in an exploration of the undead. The undead are that which are dead but that, paradoxically, refuse to die. They persist-- whether they be zombies, ghosts, vampires, mummies; how marvelous this workshop is being held in October, the sacred month of Halloween! --as a shadow of the living being they were. The zombie

lumpers about, tatters of their once glorious clothing falling off their body, their bodies decaying and falling apart, filled with an awful hunger for the living as if they have a dim memory of life and being alive that can only gain respite from their condition through cannibalism. The zombie cuts a melancholy figure of the past as that which is gone, remaining only as a trace of the living. Such a picture of the zombie is perfectly captured in Jonathan Levine's brilliant 2013 zombie love story, *Warm Body*, where the story is told from the *zombie's* point of view. In this film, the zombie, R, is a shadow of a person, a ruined person, that dimly has consciousness, that is a remnant of a person, and that has a voice and desires, but as if heard beneath the water. The zombie is the shadow of what once was and this is how ruins are often conceptualized. The ruins are thought merely as a shadow of what once was and are therefore thought as the remains, the remainder, of the domestic object.

In short-- and I think this is what the archaeologists of the Unruly Heritage project, *Ruin Memories*, *After Discourse*, and *Object Matters* are trying, in part, to teach us --in the concepts of ruins and ruination, the wild thing is subordinated to the domestic object in a way that obscures, forecloses, and effaces the being of the thing itself. It would take us too far afield this evening to explore the way in which Western thought is organized around a series of binary oppositions in which one term always holds the privileged position and the other the subordinate position. The term with the higher position is the one that embodies meaning and intellect, while the term that is subordinate always embodies materiality. Mind is treated as superior to body, and as ruling the body. Culture is treated as superior to nature, and as ruling nature. As Derrida showed us, speech-- which creates the effect of an identity between thought and voice and therefore absolute presence --is treated as superior to writing, and writing is treated as a mere effect and copy of

speech. At the level of gender relations, men are treated as superior to women by virtue of the fact, the argument runs, that they are less dependent on the vicissitudes of their body as encountered, for example, in pregnancy or menstruation. Physical and manual labor is treated as inferior to intellectual labor. In matters of religion, ritual is treated as inferior to doctrine and belief. Everywhere the material is treated as inferior to the intellectual and that which signifies. And, of course, as those who bring us here for these few days will attest, the archaeological is treated as inferior to the anthropological. The anthropologists conceive their work as the cultural, as the exploration of that which signifies and has meaning-- which is to say, what signifies --while the archaeologists are merely those who dig in the dirt, unearthing ruins of all kinds, whether they be buildings, burial sites, or tools and weapons, that function merely as *vehicles* for cultural meanings. We must not, as one anthropologist said, forget the indian behind the arrowhead, for the arrowhead itself contributes nothing, but is merely a vehicle, a carrier, of significations and meanings and it is these meanings and significations-- the domestic --that are what is truly important. In another vein, as Bjornar says, the cave painting of the reindeer can be about anything *but* a reindeer.

Thus, when the symmetrical archaeologists declare that archaeology is the discipline of things, when they claim things as their domain and provenance, they are making a truly radical claim. They are not only making the claim that the things speak and have something to teach us, but they are also making the claim that things, not objects-- no, things --are not zombies. They are not merely signs-- where, as Lacan said, signs are things that stand for something to someone --to be deciphered so that we might return to the world of meaning and signification where again,

we feel as if we have mastered absence by converting things into thought-things. No, the things themselves as things teach us something.

In this connection, there is something truly beautiful in the etymology of the term “ruin”. The term “ruin” derives from the Latin term “ruere”, which means “to fall”. We can see how the evolution of this term could have led to the thought of ruins as that which has collapsed and is now undead like the zombie. However, what if instead we were to hear, in ruere, that of the thing that falls from the domestic object? What if, instead of collapse, abandonment, and shadows, we were instead to hear that ruins and ruination were the life of the thing in its materiality independent of its domestication by our endless fight against entropy and the subordination of the thing to the object through the symbolic? In short, what if we came to think ruination not in terms of what has been and what has been lost, but rather as the life of the thing?

Here I think we encounter the most provocative innovation of the symmetrical archaeologists and, for me, the most challenging thing in their work to think. Traditionally archaeology is thought as attempting to reconstruct the past based on artifacts uncovered from surveys and digs. Fishing hooks, buttons, fish and other animal bones dug up in a midden pit where Nazi officers threw their waste tell us something of how these people lived. Here the artifact is thought as a sort of sign or clue, and we reconstruct the past based on these clues. More dramatically, as Olsen and Whitmore point out, that which is uncovered often challenges official historical narratives. Thus, for example, we get the domesticated version of history in the case of Nazi prison camps where we were told that they were brutal, horrific places-- and they often were --and then we encounter, at the level of the archaeological dig, POW camps like the one in Svaerholt where we find mysterious objects like cologne bottles, bottles used for

alcohol, game pieces and other things. These things are, of course, ordinary enough, yet what makes them strange is where they are found. They suggest, as Olsen and Whitmore point out, that perhaps in this place the relationship between the Nazis and the prisoners differed from other places and raise all sorts of questions as to why that might be. In this regard, archaeology is not merely the servant of history, but rather complicates the narratives we tell.

This form of archaeology is, I think, familiar enough. Returning to our zombies, it would consist in approaching our zombies as signs or traces of the persons they once were and attempting to reconstruct that person based on the clues that they provide. For example, through investigating the clothing of the zombie, we might be able to infer their country of origin, what their occupation were when they were alive, and so on. Earlier I spoke of archaeologists as having a sort of double vision. This would be one eye of the archeologist; an eye that encounters the artifact as a trace, a chronosign, that is a remnant of the past. This is what we were trying to do as children, though in a fanciful way that was completely a product of our imaginations. Based on the things we found in the house, we tried to make inferences as to what had happened in this place. We tried to narrate it. We were doing this, of course, in a way that was purely a product of our imaginations. We were trying to domesticate this unruly place through narrative. With one eye turned towards the past, the archaeologist, by contrast, does this in a rigorous and careful way that is not unlike the way Sherlock Holmes proceeds, or Freud who attempts to reconstruct the repressed, unconscious idea at the heart of the symptom through scraps and remainders of the patients speech and life like slips of the tongue, bungled actions, dreams, and jokes she tells.

This is a valuable and important task, but perhaps what is forgotten is that the zombie is not merely a remnant of the past, of the person that it was. The zombie is not *merely* a clue or a chronosign of what was. No. The zombie *is* something. The zombie *continues* to act in the world doing all sorts of things quite distinct, obviously, from the sorts of things that it did as a person. It is this insight, I think, that is one of the most remarkable contributions of symmetrical archaeology. Lest this example prove too distracting from the point I'm here trying to make, let's take a more commonplace example. As Chris Whitmore and I were walking about the abandoned fishing village in Svaerholt taking pictures, he didn't merely point out ruined homes, the remnants of the dock, former machine gun turrets, or Nazi storage caves blown into the side of the cliff, but also pointed out the enormous fields of bright green nettles growing here and there between the buildings. To me they were just plants to be navigated carefully because of their ability to sting and scratch. "See those nettles", Chris asked? "That's where they they processed and rendered fat from whales. They draw off the phosphates that dripped into the ground, thriving on it, growing green like that."

There is nothing undead about this. It cannot be described as an undead object, nor the afterlife of an object. These are things that are fully alive. They are not dead and sterile, but continue with an unexpected life. Returning to the theme of the dehiscent object, we encounter a split thing, a forked thing, with one dimension of its being pointing back to the past and what had happened here-- the processing and rendering of fat from whales --and another dimension pointing towards an unruly and unexpected future. It is not simply that the nettles are a chronosign or clues allowing us to infer the past and what had happened here, but also that the phosphates *continue* to act in the world, providing a fertile ground for the nettles. And who

knows what adventures, in their turn, the nettles render possible. Perhaps a very complex ecosystem composed of various plants, animals, insects, and other creatures arise as a result of these nettles and phosphates. The phosphates aren't dead and sterile, but continue to act in the world. Following Michel Serres, Chris Whitmore calls this crumpled or percolating time. Time does not have a linear structure where the past is what was, the present is what is, and the future is what might be. It does not have a structure in which the past is gone, now replaced by the present. No, in a manner similar to that so beautifully described by Bergson, the past continues to act in the present in all sorts of topologically complicated ways. Confronted with a dead reindeer entangled in rusting barbed wire from the Nazi fortress at Svaerholt, Olsen and Whitmore will ask "did the occupation end?" The occupation continues through these wild things, despite the fact that it is no longer occupied by soldiers.

This is what I mean when I say that one axis of the wild thing consists of ruins. Earlier, following the Latin, I suggested that ruins are that of the thing that falls out of the domestic object. I realize this is a somewhat obscure formulation. We will recall that the domestic object is the object maintained by humans and mastered through the symbolic. The domestic object is the illusion that things are passive beings, lacking in all agency, that are merely surfaces or blank screens, as Stacy Alaimo puts it, for our discursive inscription and use. The claim that ruins are that which falls out of the domestic object is the claim that the wild thing is the life of the thing in its thingliness in defiance of domestication. Drawing on a term related to ruin-- collapse --we encounter the Latin term *collabi*. Collapse is that which "slips together". The wild thing is that which slips out of the domestic object. Indeed, it is the very reason that we must perpetually engage in maintenance. For at the heart of every domestic object, a wild thing pulsates,

subverting our mastery and demonstrating that the object, far from being a passive thing awaiting our action, contains an inhuman life within itself that undergoes all sorts of adventures.

Paraphrasing Jane Bennett, when we think in terms of domestic objects, we believe the plastic water bottle is gone when we throw it in the landfill. Yet that bottle continues to undergo all sorts of adventures of its own independent of us. All objects harbor wild things within them and are characterized by the temporality of ruin. In this regard, we can say that archaeology truly is the discipline of things, for it perpetually confronts us with this wildness at the heart of objects.

This, I think, is one way in which the concept of withdrawal should be understood in object-oriented ontology. Withdrawal might be thought as a synonym of ruins or ruination. It means that there is always something that slips away or that falls out of the object. Things withdraw insofar as they contain a volcanic life within them that evades mastery and that can't be captured even within a discursive ontological account of the object. Chris Whitmore observes that the object objects. The object, as a wild thing, objects to our mastery, undergoing all sorts of adventures we could not have anticipated. A whale rendering plant becomes a field of nettles that then becomes the site of a novel ecology growing in the cracks and distances between buildings dating back to the middle ages. What objects is the wild thing at the heart of the domestic object. To say that the thing is withdrawn is to say that it perpetually carries the possibility of surprising us. And if this is true, we must practice a superior empiricism and become more Husserlian than Husserl. In the *Logical Investigations*, Husserl declared that we must return to the things themselves. A gorgeous battle cry! Unfortunately he did not fulfill it, for he contented himself with describing the presentations of the domestic objects that appeared about him like blue mail boxes or the coffee cup on his desk. But if we truly believe in the wild

thing, we must place ourselves in the thick of things in their unruly environments, opening ourselves to the possibility of being surprised by them. As a philosopher and a theorist, I say that if I truly advocate the account of things I advocate, I must expose myself to the trial of the midden pit, for insofar as things are wild things, insofar as they harbor the productive and creative power of ruin within them, I cannot know in advance or a priori what they are. I must expose myself to surprise, sheltering a space in which the things themselves might speak.

One dimension of the thing, I contend, is therefore ruin or that which falls out of or slips out of the domestic object. This is the temporal dimension of the thing that we encounter in the archaeological artifact that leads us to see double: one eye turned towards the past in our encounter with the thing as the expression of another world, another eye turned towards the present and the future insofar as the thing persists and continues to act in the world, emancipated from domesticity, and tracing an unexpected, aleatory path that we could have never anticipated. The phosphates become the ground of the nettles creating a new ecosystem quite independent of any human aims that might have led the phosphates to be there in the first place. Such is the nature of the wilderness. The other axis or dimension of the wild thing is drift. We are familiar with the concept of drift from the work of Thora Petursdottir. What her work reveals is that drift is not merely an ontic phenomenon that occurs on beaches-- though drift on beaches can teach us much about the concept of drift --but that it is a general ontological feature of things. On beaches we find all sorts of things thrown together that, in the world of the domestic object, don't belong together. Over there is the head of a child's doll with some sort of fungus-like sea life growing on it. Over there is the carcass of a crab. There is a beer can that a hermit crab is using as a shell. There are some plastiglomerates that look like stones while weighing next to nothing. What is

that? A coconut shell on an Icelandic beach? There is something uncanny in drift. Things are thrown together and co-exist that ought not to be together from the standpoint of the signifying spatio-temporal structuration of the symbolic.

Before discussing why I believe this is significant, I want to pause with the Old Norse and Middle Dutch origins of the term. In Old Norse, drift refers to that which is driven and has a number of connections to snowdrifts in particular. In Middle Dutch, drift refers to courses and currents. At the heart of the wild thing is a sort of drive. Despite our best efforts to conceive the thing as the domestic object, it has a drive within itself that subverts our wish to think the thing as eternal and unchanging. The wild thing is that which differs from itself by virtue of changing and becoming. No matter how slowly, it acts of its own accord and is not merely a recipient of our action. The Middle Dutch signification is more complex, I think. We can think courses and currents in two different directions: the domestic and the wild. Along the axis of domesticity, we perpetually strive to keep objects in their current, working hard to make sure they don't mix with things with which they don't belong. Everything must have its place. Again, we sweep our home daily because the sand of the New Mexican desserts don't belong in our home, or as a thin coat on the screen of our television, or in our bed sheets, or on our kitchen floor. We often believe there is a proper course of things, where courses are thought as the paths objects are supposed to follow and the places they are supposed to occupy.

Yet with the wild thing, courses are quite different. The course of the wild thing is anarchic. It defies all boundaries, national borders, and the symbolic structuration of space so beautifully described by Baudrillard in *The System of Objects*, throwing things together that, from the standpoint of domestic objects, do not belong together. Over there is a hermit crab that

has made a head of a child's doll into its shell. From the standpoint of the domestic object, the neighbors tree is supposed to be, well, the neighbor's tree. Yet, when encountering problems with flushing your toilet leading you to snake it, you find that roots come up. The tree is not merely over there, but refuses property boundaries. The factory dumps its industrial waste into a pond on its campus, yet that waste then seeps into the groundwater. Drift has both a spatial and a temporal component. Spatially it is the inmixing of things that we try to keep separate according to the latitude and longitude of the symbolic that we impose on the earth to give everything a discrete and defined place. Temporally it is the way in which the past, to use Whitmore's term, percolates in the present, throwing different strata of time together like staves on a musical score that are layered upon one another. I walk along a road across the isthmus of Svaerholt carrying things from our camp at the Russian POW camp to the abandoned fishing village, following a road that the Nazis made decades ago, yet perhaps they made the road there following a much more ancient path carved out by people hundreds and maybe even thousands of years ago. Like ants following pheromone trails, we build on the past that persists. I express anger at the road design in the Dallas area and then remember that its madness results from the fact that road design, as the city grew, had to navigate the buildings and road design that came before. What before seemed to be a certain design madness to me, was actually a set of rational decisions given the way the past persists in the present. And similarly, when I jump in my car it is an assemblage of temporalities, with the wheel citing discoveries thousands of years ago and my fuel injected engine citing the discovery of misting perfume bottles. The spatio-temporality of the wild thing is characterized by both ruins and drift.

When I first conceived this talk, I thought I might discuss, in part, Heidegger's concept of truth as *aletheia*. Prior to propositional truth or statements we might make about the world, Heidegger says, things must first be disclosed, they must show themselves. Putting it far too simplistically, Heidegger's concept of truth as *aletheia* is the idea that things are unconcealed or rescued from hiddenness. When I walk into the archaeological labs of Tromse, I encounter a mysterious place, filled with mysterious objects I scarcely understand. The objects of the lab do not disclose themselves to me. They are there before me, yet are nonetheless hidden. For the archaeologist, by contrast, they are pervaded by sense and meaning. With every disclosure or unconcealing, says Heidegger, there is a concealing. For example, when the physicist or botanist approaches the pumpkin, they might explore it in terms of its mass, genetics, and growing conditions. It is disclosed or unconcealed as a material object, yet in being unconcealed in this way, the pumpkin as a symbol of Fall or Halloween, or as a story element in *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* is plunged into concealment.

Throughout this talk I have been exploring two forms of disclosedness, that of the domestic object and the wild thing. As we find ourselves at the apex of the anthropocene, where climate change threatens the continued existence of the world as we know it, I contend that the problem of climate change is as much a problem of *aletheia* as it is a material problem. It is my conviction that our practices will only ever be as good as the world that discloses itself to us. Climate change arose, in part, because things have disclosed themselves as domestic things; that is to say, as things that are localized, discrete, passive, and identical to their use and meaning. Things have disclosed themselves as beings that we have mastered and that have no agency than their own. For this reason, we unthinkingly believe that we can simply throw things out and

dump them, because domestic objects do not act but are only acted upon and always remain in their place.

Archaeology discloses things as wild things, as ruin and drift. Through the archaeological artifact we encounter the object as a dehiscent object, split between its meaning and materiality, its past, its present, and its future. As ruin, the wild thing discloses how there is always something of the thing that slips away from our mastery and that contains a pulsating life of its own. As spatio-temporal drift, the wild thing discloses the way in which things slip together in all sorts of ways we could have never anticipated and that we certainly did not intend. The double vision of archaeology and the manner in which it discloses the wild thing as a dehiscent object helps us to cultivate the sensibility necessary for thinking the anthropocene and climate change and developing those practices necessary for addressing it.