Going Nowhere, Slow: An exercise in ‘pataphysical curiosity

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Published in:
Miscellanea: A cabinet of curiosities

Publication date:
2023

Document version
Publisher’s PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (APA):
For Tom
from Bingle & Doug
for no particular reason
other than affection -

(a wandering chef)

18 May 62
Out of context
During the autumn of 2019, archaeologists from a museum in Denmark excavated a piece of land prior to construction work. The excavation would prove to produce settlement traces ranging from the Early Bronze Age to the Medieval, which is, in itself, not a remarkable or unexpected outcome of archaeological fieldwork in Denmark. The greatest curiosity of the area was the unearthing of 262 golf balls, many of them decorated with markings and smileys. The occurrence of numerous golf balls would make sense if they were found on a discontinued golf course, or if they were located near an existing one. However, this was not the case, and the archaeologists sought other explanations. Someone suggested foxes could be responsible for the amassing of the golf balls, as they are known to occasionally carry them back to their dens, confusing the golf balls with eggs. Others ruled out this explanation as the nearest golf course was simply too far away to be within the territory of a fox. In addition, given the quantity of golf balls, it would have been the daftest of foxes hitherto known. The most plausible explanation for the occurrence of golf balls at the site of the excavation, the archaeologists suggested, was that ‘some dude’ living nearby had been throwing a party with friends, driving golf balls from his garden across a neighbouring agricultural field for no particular reason other than amusement. Later, the archaeologists would donate the golf balls to a second-hand charity shop. (Jepsen 2019).
Yet is it even interesting where those 262 golf balls came from? Why is the sheer presence of golf balls on the site of an archaeological excavation far from a golf course not reason enough for pausing to ponder? Does the presence of something completely unmotivated and unexpected not deserve to be cherished in its own right, inviting us to dwell for a wee bit longer with this strange occurrence, acquainting ourselves with the unknown—in its quality as unknown—instead of rushing to explain it retrospectively through logical causation (see also Martinez et al. 2021; Sørensen 2021)? In this perspective, there is no such thing as ‘out of context’; a thing without anterior relations creates new contexts.

Accordingly, perhaps, we ought to think of this archaeological engagement as a work of land art: an agricultural field with meticulously incised excavation trenches yielding a distribution of linear structures of postholes and golf balls with smiling faces drawn on them. A rather rare and wonderful thing, is it not? Think about it.

Lost horizons

In the 17th century, New England clergyman Increase Mather worked on a project to publish a natural history with the title Discourse on Miscellaneous Observations, Considered Rare and Wonderful (Daston 1998). At the time, classifications that would later become so deeply embedded in Modernity’s conception of the world that they seem unquestionable had not solidified. This pertains not only to the division of nature and culture, but also with regards to with the separation of facts and superstition, science and religion, art and academia. In the 17th century, distinctions that may appear so ‘natural’ in Modernity were less obvious. Thus, in the face of bizarre observations, unexplainable occurrences, strange events, and monstrous anomalies, responses revolved simultaneously around curiosity and anxiety. This led Increase Mather to pursuing the ‘rare and wonderful’ in miscellaneous observations, also evidenced in rarity collections and cabinets of curiosity of the time (Daston 1998; see also Daston and Park 2001).

One may also point to the 16th-17th century literary genre known as miscellany (Corbellini, Murano and Signore 2018; Eckhardt et al. 2014, Vine 2019). Miscellany are collections of diverse and unrelated texts and images, pertaining to philosophical ruminations, step-by-step fly-tying instructions, theological discourse, empirical observations of plants and animals, travelogues, poems, descriptions of art exhibitions, culinary recipes, short stories and advertisements for anything from ointments to hunting equipment. In the same era, yet in a slightly more stringent fashion, Jacob Spon (1685) published Miscellanea eruditae antiquitatis as a very early attempt at advancing the study of ancient relics out of antiquarianism. The volume retains much of the messiness and honest rawness of archaeological traces, which
has later been denied by systematic and analytical science-based scholarship. It is important to remember that what is frequently today seen as naïve and un-academic fetishist traction towards things was in fact no less empirical than present-day ‘evidence-based’ research. Yet, what we might learn from the naivety of these varying degrees of unsystematic studies is their enthusiasm for the things that are not justified in advance; the aimless curiosity of their embrace of the strange, just because encountering unknown things is exciting and luring (see also Pétursdóttir 2014).

What is there left to wonder in the everyday of our contemporary world, we might ask. What space is there today for encountering the bizarre, strange, and unexplainable, except in ‘explanations’ that are themselves bizarre and monstrous, e.g., conspiracy theories, anti-feminism, and racism? Are we even capable of cultivating any sensitivity to the strange and wondrous in unexceptional, un-extraordinary everyday encounters with the mundane and trifling? Perhaps, the attempts at explaining unmotivated golf balls in an excavation is a token of such inability, i.e., having to figure things out instead of dwelling with their strangeness.

Yet at the same time, it may also be quite telling that the seemingly only ‘good explanation’ for the presence of 262 decorated golf balls far from a golf course was an imaginary engagement: *maybe* a fox was responsible, or *maybe* a party of cheerful buddies was responsible. Instead of turning to strategic disinterest, such as deeming the golf balls ‘irrelevant’ or ‘unimportant’ to the excavation, the archaeologists invited speculation and fragmentary reasoning as a mode of engaging with the occurrence of something strange and unexpected.

In most cases, however, the desire to attend to and even describe ‘rare and wonderful’ occurrences seems to have been tamed, or naturalised, with Modernity’s advance of natural science and epistemologies depending on falsification and mutually exclusive classification. In this process, rarities became a particular class of things, an anomalous category of uneasy deviants, separated from the common, typically as abnormal exceptions, digressions, and errors in the natural system (Daston 1998; Greenblatt 1991; Mordhorst 2005). Effectively, this meant that the extraordinary became parcelled out from the ordinary. Hence, the singular or unique had to be understood as being the antithesis to the norm, or as out of joint with the logics governing natural laws.

The present collection of essays explores encounters with everyday oddities as well as exceptional things that are quite common in mundane environments. They do so without the need to rehabilitate the element of superstition from the 17th century as a method to explain the strange. Instead, they reclaim *speculation* as a mode of engaging chance observations. While cherishing the incidental as a possibility for getting stuck and for slowing down, the essays also explore the unanticipated as an invitation
for leading on. In other words, surprise and wonder can invoke distraction, pointing in directions unanticipated and unplanned for. This is an argument in favour of releasing fieldwork, material encounters, and lines of reasoning from the constraints of looking for something more or less specific. This attitude is about stepping back from having to make deductions something anticipated in advance, revitalising instead the ability to set out on a path with no predefined destination, and to see the strange in the trivial and insignificant.

Following Kathleen Stewart (2008), it implies that relaxed modes of attending—being strategically open to things—may offer confusion, doubt and redirections, and, accordingly, stimulate the appreciation of unexpected observations. Such experiences, the essays suggest, may lead to new discoveries in or through things otherwise utterly trivial and self-evident. Through hesitation and delay, they may allow us to learn something different about the world, realising something new about sensing the world, or discovering something new about ourselves and our relations to, with and in the world.

Yet in addition to idyllic visions of surprise discoveries and epiphanies, it must be acknowledged that confusion, doubt and distractions may indeed also lead ‘nowhere’. Dead ends, and redundant annotations of exhaustingly obvious or self-effacing things, may be the destination. That is indeed the risk. Or, perhaps rather, the promise. Either way, the stakes are undeniable high. Yet, the authors of the essays in this collection did not take on the task of going nowhere as a heroic gesture of daring and courageous exploits. The ambition was simply to lower the guard, relax, and remain open to the superfluous, unwarranted, and erratic. Thus, they seek alternatives to epistemological and methodical safety measures devised to hinder failure and error which, allegedly, threaten to lead to the accursed nowhere. — But why even aspire to go in the direction of nowhere? ‘Nowhere’, you might argue, is merely a balmy elsewhere, located beyond criticism and critique; a blissful and irresponsible state of uselessness and indifference, or a Sangri-La of epistemology.

Search, and you shall seek
The essays in Miscellanea challenge this prejudice against heading nowhere, demonstrating it is not the easiest decision to aim towards nowhere. Rather, going nowhere travels a road filled with searching, friction, and doubt. And besides, most of the time, finding this bloody ‘Nowhere’ is very difficult as most road signs and atlases point to ‘Somewhere’ and not in the direction of lost horizons. At best, we may find ourselves facing the signposting of a ‘dead end’, but such a sign seems most of the time to be a warning and not an invitation. Yet, there ought to be a town sign, saying

*Welcome to Dead End*
*Population: 10. Twinned with Failure*
*Enjoy your stay*
Only in rare cases are we offered field guides to getting lost, like Rebecca Solnit's travelogue from *terra incognita* (Solnit 2006: 14). “You get lost out of a desire to be lost. But in the place called lost strange things are found”, she says (Solnit 2006: 20), contending that when we are lost, “the world has become larger than our knowledge of it” (Solnit 2006: 22).

One of the strategies employed by the creators of the essays in *Miscellanea* is a careful, minute and tenacious attention to detail, perhaps out of a desire to get lost. As such, the contributions are explicitly empiricist in their care for material observations as they all subscribe to the premise behind the experiment leading to these essays: to offer a speculative fabulation on incidental observations.

Hence, Amalie Weitling and Michael Ulfstjerne describe the encounter with things and people in a self-storage facility, and reflect on pelicans and hoarders, and things that come and go without any clear charting of exactly what comes and goes. Such a space—whether in the pelican’s beak or in the bowels of a self-storage monster—seems to constitute an involuntary home for things that do not fit in the home proper, lingering for an unknown stretch of time, and for unknown purposes, perhaps, eventually, only to be forgotten. Forgetting could be another way of releasing things from the donkey work of being useful, you might say.

Nina Vohnsen speculates on laziness, ruminating how the already existing mess at home—with rice under her socks and a table sticky with honey—deters her from sharing her partner’s ability to see the potentials and pleasure in refurbishing a dilapidated and worn-down old farm in a project to build a new home. Vohnsen does not pursue laziness as a deliverance from being active. Rather she prescribes a strategy that remains in the affirmative of laziness; accept being lazy and try to avoid thinking too much about the situations you cannot be bothered. *The antidote to lazy is just ploughing ahead with no thought for consequences or the bill to pay further down the road*. Planning is double work. Change is quicker than planning. Forget the future. If you do not forget the future, you will start complaining, and then Nick will tell you to go shopping for groceries.

The home is also the centre of attention in the essay by Anna S. Beck and Christine Finn, contemplating their relationships with permanence and transience of homes, and how senses of belonging become entangled with experiences of mess and losing one’s plot in meandering realisations of not having arrived at the place you had expected, or being stuck in places all too familiar. The essay characterises the home inside out; it is about the home seen next to the Pacific Ocean, the Channel, and the Seine. *I was too tired to walk beside the sea, but it was good to know it was so close*. Waking to the sounds of starlings can be enmeshed in such scenarios.

Marko Marila and Mikael Nordström task themselves with playing a game of chess with an ensemble of unconventional chess piece-
es, toying—in the literal sense of the term—with rules and memory in the cold facts of the Finnish winter. The players, including Suvi Tuominen, who has the role of Marila’s and Nordström’s opponent, bring their own chess pieces. These consist of everyday objects with personal or historical significance. This stimulates “purposeless joy”, perhaps like driving golf balls across an agricultural field in the company of good friends in a slightly drunken state at a garden party. A “pure play”.

Martin Demant Frederiksen and Þóra Pétursdóttir share a play with overlays and the compositing of encounters with burials of dead cats in respectively Croatia and Iceland. They interweave slightly displaced yet curiously agreeable images and words, altogether creating a strangely elegant mess and mesh of impressions and languages. This essay is perhaps the most truncated of all the contributions to the collection, and equally the one going most visibly around in circles. The essay does not move very far, and almost seems to be grinding to a halt even before it gets going. Or, perhaps, it is an essay that gets lost in its own tracks, bothering to remain committed the unbending path of distraction.

Finally, Jeff Benjamin and Tim Flohr Sørensen relate a memory of a tumbling home, squeaking floorboards, and fox kits playing in the rays of the rising sun. Also in this essay, the home, and the act of playing, play a role in incidental fabulations on speculative observations. These meander through stringently inconsequential, empiricist accounts of factually present things that seem to stir up unrelated recollections, forgotten secrets, and reveries at will.

All of these essays share an interest in dwelling long enough on random and purposeless observations for them to become a thing in their own right. Perhaps, some of the details, things, textures and sentiments expressed in the essays would never have materialised as a publication without the shared commitment amongst the authors to creating speculative fabulations on incidental observations.

The laws governing ordinary exceptions

In her description of a passage in Robert Hooke’s Micrographia from 1668, Lorraine Daston emphasises how Hooke depicts a blue fly under the microscope: “the commonplace is estranged by means of minute inspection and at the same time transformed into a thing of beauty, worthy of a still life” (Daston 1998: 32). Like the essays in Miscellanea, this way of getting lost in detail is not a starry-eyed attention to the outstanding, exceptional and unique, but more so a way of approaching quite ordinary things and observations with a sensibility to aspects of mundane encounters that usually pass by unnoticed (also Perec 1997 [1973]).

Daston further refers to 17th century botanist Nehemiah Grew, who—unsuccessfully—tried to have included in the inventory of the Royal Society Repository not only things considered strange and rare, but also “the known
and the common” (Daston 1998: 30). What is interesting here is the relationship between the ordinary and the strange, or their difference, or how these differences come about. In principle, the difference between familiar and unexpected experiences would be displaced by repeated and careful attention to objects: i.e. if a surprising object is encountered multiple times, it should cease being surprising, you would think. We would quite simply get used to it, maybe even bored with it; like when Georges Perec tasked himself with “exhausting a place in Paris”, describing everything he notices in the street, sitting at an outdoor café. After spending days, noting people passing by, city lights changing, and buses coming through the street, he wonders whether anything is really moving anywhere from day to day:

Many things have not changed, have apparently not budged (the letters, the symbols, the fountains, the plaza, the benches, the church, etc.); I myself am sitting at the same table. Buses pass by. I’ve lost all interest in them (2010 [1975]: 29).

Perec’s point, and as essays in Miscellanea also show, it is by making careful observations of mundane contexts, attending to the wealth of useless details, that curiosity may in fact be prolonged.

The question of what qualifies as useless is of course an important and challenging issue, yet in the politics of everyday life—within and outside academia—it is typically addressed in wildly Manichaean ways. Most of the time, uselessness is circumscribed by its opposite, meaning that ‘useless’ must be the things, people and places that fail to assume purpose or cease to sustain it. However, this definition is purely binary and antithetical, passive-aggressively phrased in the negative; it equals saying that the colour black is the opposite of white, as if the colour black does not exist independent of white. Thus, uselessness becomes defined by way of abstract generalisation. Instead, as this collection of essays suggest, working towards specific phenomena characterised by insignificance and indeterminacy, context, and lack of context, constitutes a different and more affirmative measure of uselessness.

Some essays in this collection, or aspects of the essays, might be likened to the artistic and philosophical assemblage of ideas known as ‘pataphysics, developing from French writer Alfred Jarry from the 1890s onwards. It is difficult to define or characterize ‘pataphysics, but it shares some affinities with Dadaism, surrealism, Situationism and related movements at the turn of the century. Jarry himself defined ‘pataphysics as “the science of the particular”, examining “the laws governing exceptions” (Jarry 1996: 21), i.e., epiphenomena or accidental side-effects. ‘Pataphysics, for Jarry, stands in contrast to “the common opinion that the only science is that of the general” (Jarry 1996: 21). The ‘general’, such as causal explana-
tion, Jarry contends, are “true only in the majority of cases” and are “codified only for convenience” (Jarry 1996: 22). Despite the teasingly sarcastic tone, the 262 golf balls emerging unexpectedly out of context does prove Jarry’s point. The instinctive response was to try to reconstruct the causal trajectories leading to their arrival in the place, where the archaeologists encountered them. Yet why presume their past trajectories were of primary—or exclusive—importance? And why focus on the bulk of golf balls, and not on the individual item?

According to biographer of ‘pataphysics, Andrew Hugill, ‘pataphysics “is subjective, privileging the particular above the general, the imaginary above the real, the exceptional above the ordinary, the contradictory above the axiomatic” (Hugill 2015: 2). Jarry exemplifies this with the figure of a watch:

> Why should anyone claim that the shape of a watch is round—a manifestly false proposition—since it appears in profile as a narrow rectangular construction, elliptic on three sides; and why the devil should one only have noticed its shape at the moment of looking at the time? – Perhaps under the pretext of utility (Jarry 1996: 22).

Jarry held ‘pataphysics to be “the science of imaginary solutions” (Jarry 1996: 22) and proposed a reasoning seeing the contradictory and the particular as the source of this imaginary. It is “a poetic theory of contradictory undecidability, continually inverting a dyadic hierarchy, while momentarily subverting its mutual exclusion – neither cancelling nor surpassing the dialectic” (Bök 2002: 33). Importantly, this does not imply a wholesale denial of the real, nor of the serious. Contradictions and particularities are, indeed, part of the real, but in ‘pataphysics, these are approached without reduction: ‘pataphysics does not seek to explain contradictions and particularities through analysis, nor by referring observations to the systematic, the orderly, the typical, or the general.

Thereby, ‘pataphysics may be seen as highlighting a paradox or tension in the epistemologies at the heart of the discipline of archaeology, which is fundamentally divided in terms of its attitude to exceptions, the unique and the particular. In some cases, archaeologists approach such occurrences as anomalies, suspended from systematic analysis and from serious representations of past realities. Things known as ‘outliers’ and the ‘extraordinary’ are rarely granted explanatory power, and become excluded, because they are anomalies, a-typical and incomparable. In other cases, however, archaeologists seem to cherish exceptional phenomena as ‘treasures’ or ‘outstanding finds’ that represent something of particular value, or a sovereign type in the vast ocean of repeated forms. In such cases, anomalies are held in high esteem, perceived as yielding information about otherwise invisible aspects of the past.

So, in archaeology, exceptional occur-
rences can either be appreciated as windows into unique aspects of the past or as hiccups that cannot be taken seriously. However, 'pataphysics does not seek to do one thing or the other, since causal explanation and the creation of general laws are not the goal. Rather, the aim is to be able to take contradictions and exceptions seriously in their own right: “One of the fundamentals of 'Pataphysics is that of Equivalence, which may explain to you this obstinacy we have with regard to what is serious and what is not; for us there is no distinction” (Boris Vian cited in Hugill 2015: 5).

Failure and its futures
The contributors to Miscellanea were not asked to refer or subscribe to ’pataphysics when creating their essays; some of them might not have heard about this rather obscure scientific orientation before, nor may they necessarily see their essays as being in harmony with 'pataphysics. The reason for bringing together the essays with reference to 'pataphysics in this afterword is that few other epistemologies, except certain feminist orientations, seem to welcome incoherence and the erratic with the same unswerving open-minded curiosity as 'pataphysics.

Undoubtedly, the essays in Miscellanea must, at least to some, verge on the unserious, or at least remain in the realm of the academically frivolous. There is no denying that the usefulness of attending to the kinds of things, contexts, and un-contexts that the authors explore, is—in bourgeois terms—limited or even absent. They do not concern themselves with retracing the origins of things or their value, nor do they make purposeful generalisations or offer solutions to pressing problems. Some of the essays refer to (or at least seem to refer to) ‘real’ objects and places, while other are imaginary (or at least seem to be imaginary). Such libertarian attitudes to reality does not sit very well with current requirements to academic work, expected to be applicable, socially relevant, and solution-oriented with a clear analytical point. The essays do not reflect serious academic work, you might say. Yet, why distinguish between the serious and the unserious, and not instead venture on to explore; like a leap of curiosity that plays with the vectors of the possible without filtering away in advance that which is assumed to be useless or unrepresentative in all its particularity?

As noted in the dictionary entry quoted above, ‘curiosity’ shares a genealogy with ‘caring’, which may be an observation particularly worthwhile in the current academic atmosphere, where curiosity seems to have been made redundant by ‘relevance’. So, while curiosity killed the proverbial cat, ‘relevance’ has, in turn, killed curiosity.

Perhaps tellingly, Increase Mather’s 17th century pursuit of ‘rare and wonderful’ miscellaneous observations never materialised as a publication. In the early 21st century academic world, ending up unpublished is the hallmark of failure. Miscellanea is the result of a process that threatened to qualify to such failure.
In the course of 2019, the author of this afterword asked the contributors to join a loosely formed collective of academics under the moniker *The Hub for Speculative Fabulations upon Incidental Observations*. This was to be a space for engaging in epistemological and aesthetic exchanges on—precisely—incidental observations and their potentials for engendering ‘speculative fabulations’. Obviously, Donna Haraway (2016) is the scholar coining this expression, highlighting a particular appreciation of ways of encountering and storying the world, “promiscuously plucking out fibres in clotted and dense events and practices” (Haraway 2016: 3).

Yet in fact, the expression ‘speculative fabulations’ has a different source of origin in the context of *The Hub for Speculative Fabulations upon Incidental Observations*. Between 2003 and 2006, the author of this afterword received numerous rejections on applications for funding for a PhD project. In one of the rejection letters, the assessment committee stated that the proposed project “seemed merely to lead to speculative fabulations upon incidental observations”. Apparently, the assessment committee did not consider this a positive feature. By contrast, *The Hub for Speculative Fabulations upon Incidental Observations* stipulates that academic observations must include—and are sometimes only possible on the basis of—incidental things and encounters. Getting in touch with, even noticing, such incidental occurrences is made possible through speculative fabulations, because the openness towards the unexpected is a speculative attitude—i.e., an empirical curiosity along the vectors of the possible. Although the expression ‘speculative fabulations’ does not directly, or exclusively, refer to Donna Haraway’s homonymous term, much of the actual inspiration for how to make speculative fabulations relates to her work, and that of other feminist scholars.

**It’s a long way to Nowhere**

The first activity in *The Hub for Speculative Fabulations upon Incidental Observations* was to produce text and images that were to care for and play with incidental observations through speculative fabulations. The essays are the outcome of a two-step procedure. First, in August 2019, participants committed to work in pairs, crafting a speculative fabulation upon incidental observations. Partnerships were composed by drawing names from a hat (a hard hat, actually) instead of pairing authors that could be assumed in advance to work well together. The experiment was in part about seeing what would happen when writing partners were coupled at random, potentially creating unforeseen synergies, while acknowledging the potential for similarly unanticipated obstacles or irreconcilable differences.

This way of establishing collaboration was an implicit critique of many large-scale,
interdisciplinary, and otherwise respectable research projects, where ‘collaboration’ typically turns out to be a question of accumulating individual parts under the guise of strategic commonality. As such, the widely acclaimed ‘synergy’ of research projects usually revolves around sensible and rational juxtapositions of separate limbs into a coherent but also somewhat embellished mannequin. The collaboration staged for the sake of this writing experiment, on the other hand, may have more in common with a Frankensteinian monster; that is, as an “in/appropriated Other” (sensu Haraway 1992), composed of an equal measure of whimsy and partly decomposed fragmentary parts being connected into yet unknown states of becoming and dissolution. This was an attempt at allowing collaboration to remain accidental and disobedient for a little while longer than usual, experimenting with the erratic formation of ideas, practices, communication, text and images as a mess and a mesh, since it was quite unpredictable how—or even if—collaborators were able to work together.

The authors agreed to contribute with essays consisting in narratives based on fragmentary observations of incidental encounters whether with people or other entities in the world. They contributed under the condition that they hesitated, slowed down their writing process and committed to patience, doubt, and distraction. Then, in May 2020, the partnerships were to submit their speculative fabulations of 3000 words and five images. Initially, the intention was to publish the presumably unfinished essays online, while the authors were given the opportunity to continue amending the text and images as they saw fit until the final version of the essay was due in February 2022. In the meantime, authors were free to amend, rework, delete and replace their speculative fabulation, questioning themselves, dithering and rewriting their texts. This was not a request that had the objective of leading to improved, flawless contributions, but simply to allow texts to be open to metamorphoses for as long as possible, sustaining processes rather than producing results.

This first phase of the experiment was characterised by numerous delays and a growing uncertainty whether anything would ever materialise in a condition worth sharing, even online where anything seems to be publishable these days. Some contributors were struggling to find time to write their essays, and some were facing personal challenges—as in any other collective project, of course. Moreover, the first deadline coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, for a while postponing the submission of contributions indefinitely. Then, some contributors bailed out, or simply seemed to disappear, while new partners joined the experiment, so the final deadline was postponed, accommodating the unforeseen changes. In effect, contributions never made it on to the online platform.

The second phase of the experiment—planned to commence in February 2022, yet first postponed, then cancelled—was to pass on the manuscripts to new authors who would complete the respective essays. This part of the writing experiment was conceived as a form of ‘archaeo-writing’, mimicking the archaeological formation process, where some elements of past realities endure in seemingly intact form, while
others are transformed, decay or swell, while yet others disappear without a trace. Importantly, in the hands of archaeologists, traces of past realities always become reconfigured, or disfigured, and archaeologists should therefore be considered contributors to formation processes rather than their mere outside witnesses. The idea was to distribute the first edition of the essays to new partners in the writing experiment. The new authors would then rematerialize the initial images and work, allowing for interventions with new sentiments, sensibilities, and speculative fabulation.

Although the planned phase of ‘archaeo-writing’ did not materialise, the long period of utopian hibernation of the experiment, between late 2020 and the end of 2022, is nevertheless comparable to the state of the archaeological trace. It rests for an indefinite period of time, until encountered by human or non-human agents excavating it, gnawing at it or seeping through it. Archaeological traces, hence, should not be perceived as either still or vibrant; rather, they can be both, sometimes even at the same time, as some weird form of mutually-exclusive-yet-nevertheless-concurring metabolism.

Without blaming COVID-19 for all dead ends in the world after 2019, the pandemic did indeed bring the experiment to a state of hibernation, or to a dead end. It is surely evidence that ‘shit happens’, and, less kindly, a token of bad project management. Yet, it also marks an organic process with a minimum degree of control and discipline, in addition to a protracted and fruitful online exchange between participants leading exactly nowhere; that is, to here.

Perhaps there are also more structural and political reasons for why the experiment was grinding to a halt; the fact that academic careers rarely leave much time for an exercise of the sort represented here; and the fact that academic publications are typically expected to follow a very uniform configuration, leaving little or no space for unfinishedness and erraticism. Therefore, it is also in this quality—as an incomplete and open-ended rogue object—Miscellanea is published, or, rather, passed on.

An invitation to the reader

Undoubtedly, some readers will have been trained to consider speculative fabulations and incidental observations deserving of nothing but sheer rejection, being useless, unserious, or ridiculous. Regardless how cute such hysterical rejections can be, it might nevertheless be worthwhile welcoming speculations, fabulations and the incidental, in part because such qualities remain intertwined with those trajectories and institutions of academia that are conventionally held in higher esteem. For instance, in the perspective of ‘pataphysics, the traditional museum can be seen in the very quality of the incidental and speculative. Accordingly, for Hugill, museum visitors are often responsible themselves for engendering imaginary accounts of the meaning and background to the artefacts they encounter, or conversely because the curators’ explanations of objects in museum exhibitions “can often seem strange or downright ridiculous” (Hugill 2015: 30). He further stipulates:

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Part of the pleasure in attending museums lies in the secretive perception: that the objective truthfulness of what we are told is beside the point. The glass cases, the explanatory plaques, the interactive installations, the illustrated catalogs, even the public lectures by experts, serve to provide us with enough fragmentary evidence to piece together in our minds the lives and activities of those long gone. These are inevitably mysterious (Hugill 2015: 30).

In this perspective, knowledge implies a ‘mysterious’ component, at least when knowledge refers to empirical encounters rather than rational reasoning. The encounters with things in the archaeological excavation, in the ethnographic fieldwork, in the artist’s studio, in the museum exhibition, in biographies of people, things, and unthings will contain some degree of unknown, or something strange. Responding to such unfamiliar encounters in the familiar poses an epistemological dilemma: how does one remain truthful to something strange without dispelling its strangeness? Perhaps, part of the answer is to embrace Ursula Le Guin’s avowal: “It is a strange realism, but it is a strange reality“ (Le Guin 1986: 170).

So, this collection of essays is perhaps best understood as a tiny cabinet of curiosities, resting inside a mislaid box in the lost-and-found corner of the janitor’s office, waiting to be encountered and engaged with anew. This brings us to the only possible conclusion, which is at the same time an imaginary solution: the reader is hereby invited to approach the essays in Miscellanea as leftovers from past activities, or a form of enduring, erratic traces, welcoming new encounters with essays already couched in delays, deferral, uncertain, indecision, and change of mind. If taking up the invitation, future authors should all commit to the role of being archaeologists of the text; not by recovering, sorting, analysing, or interpreting the ‘original’ text retrospectively, but by carrying on its traces in the process of capricious emergence and dissolution; simultaneously leading anywhere and nowhere.
References


In pataphysics, mutually exclusive opposites can and do exist.