

On the Love of Things

Michael Serres has said: “The object ... stabilises our relationships, it slows down the time of our revolutions. For an unstable band of baboons, social change is flaring up every minute... The object, for us, makes our history slow.”¹ In addition to having their function, name and location determined by people, objects also have their silent characteristics, which originate from their material nature and their internal historical processes. For instance, it would be difficult to imagine society and culture without the existence of objects, without them accumulating and enduring. The basis for putting together U18 was the collection of time-transcending material – the archive – that the authors of this issue view from various angles, at times drifting far away from this starting point, translated into words or images, art or space.

In an era of short cultural memory like the contemporary one, archives – collections of objects, documents, books and other material – are increasingly gaining attention. Obviously, the archive can no longer be considered a memory prosthesis that represents the past in an all-encompassing way and strives for the truth. For example, according to Derrida, the archive always carries a paradox: in the ceaseless work to maintain one memory at the expense of another, the archive not only maintains and curates the memory, but buries it as well². However, as a collection of purely historical material in the modern digitalized world and obviously in its selective narration of the past, the archive functions as an important source and support that identity can refer to and gain strength from. In an interview with U, the literary scholar Marin Laak outlines the background of the currently happening cultural change – the so-called digital turn – and talks about how memory institutions are handling the state programme, which requires that the more valuable part of Estonian cultural heritage should be digitized by the 100th anniversary of the Republic of Estonia (and the concomitant practical and philosophical problems that follow from this). We talked to Carl-Dag Lige and Hannes Praks, the engines behind the exhibition ‘Expedition Wunderlich’, about a specific archive as a time machine that the students of the Interior Architecture Department of the Estonian Academy of Arts travelled around in last year, and the possibilities of displaying and digitizing an archive and about the material itself.

Objects not only create permanence; they also keep past times connected to the present. The material does not choose which memories to carry or which narratives to tell. Therefore, objects enable the emergence of different stories, even forgotten ones, bearing witness to the diversity of the past. The city is exactly the kind of complex set of

remains from various eras, and thanks to the functionality of the material (for example, houses are usually not demolished just because they have an unacceptable symbolic meaning) it preserves signs of various past realities around us. This relationship between symbolic and functional, when it comes to valuing materials, is discussed in this issue by Kristina Jõekalda, who focuses on how heritage conservation agencies and the public dealt with ‘foreign’ heritage during the first period of independence and now, after re-independence. The editors’ column ‘Where is the Estonian Academy of Arts?’ deals with the non-material underlying factors of the demolition and recreation of the city-archive, giving the reader an introduction to the still-continuing transition period of the Academy of Arts, which began with the demolition of the academy’s old building six years ago and continues spatially to this day.

The front page and the contents of the issue feature photographs of sculptor Jevgeni Zolotko’s dust-grey installation *One Day of The State Archivist Life* which deals with the same time-transcending material, still retaining its shape but now mute, and its relationship with the present. Zolotko’s other exhibition cycle, *Things*, takes us deeper into the realm of objects and material (decoded for the reader by the art critic Indrek Grigor). Here, the artist tampered with the microcosm of the objects in an attic, symbolically cleansing them of their communicative and representative roles to get back to the beginning – to the material nature of the world, and the unity of object and man in the physical sphere.

The cognitive acceleration of the flow of time accompanying cultural change makes one restless, but the material world with its slowness and engagement with the past offers a kind of existential sense of security; we look back, dig into the digital collections of museums, open archives and stroke objects. Every second art exhibition has at least one stand with items from archives; objects and collections of objects are clearly in vogue today. In the humanities and social sciences, this new wave (which is a clear reaction to the anti-material views of culture and society that dominated the 20th century as well as the influence of the digital turn) is seen as a return to the material. For nearly a decade, this wave has fed creativity and is changing notions of the foundations, history and progress of human society. Yes, in a mad world, it is good to let your senses relax in the protective lap of the material. So – do take a chair and some time and enjoy the read.

1. Serres, Michel 1995. *Genesis*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, p 87.

2. Sampson, Walker 2011. *From My Archives: Derrida's Archive Fever*. [Accessible at: wsampson.wordpress.com (last accessed 12.12.2015)].