

Archaeology | and the sea

Andrew Paterson, [07.2005]

The origins of this text lies in a visit to the Shetland Isles in the summer of 1999.

On a walk along one of the *Sounds* (a common Shetlandic term for a beached inlet of the sea) near Lerwick, I came across unusual floatsam among the seaweed. What at first glance looked like coloured shells turned out to be small organically-shaped pieces of plastic. Represented by all colours, albeit some faded through time, these plastic fragments were the remnants of a fishing vessel which sank off the coast several years previously. In fact, what was left of the plastic fish boxes, washed up continuously by the tide and worn down by friction of water and sand.

Gathering these pieces, I imagined myself as a future archaeological museum curator, considering fragments from the distant past, writing a text such as follows..

"The intensive 'digi-archival' period began several decades before the peak of the information-age societies. Northern and Baltic peoples of the late 20th and early 21st century developed an efficient and pervasive archival system across disparate and pan-media, which converged to a form based upon the difference of two states - '1's and '0's. Material traces of silicon in the examples archaeologists have found in remote Northern areas of Europe - such as Inarijärvi, FI, and the mountain areas of Lofoton, NO - harnessed electrical current to describe the two states mentioned above. Leading archaeological theorists suggest these to be dynamic containers for 'captured personal experiences', similar to those expected to be found in more populated regions around the Baltic coast now submerged by the sea.

Our best clue to how people of this time personally and collectively identified with these materials are through the few remaining 'digital signatures', contextual 'tags' and their associated media excavated from hard-disks of the period. Unfortunately damage caused by chemical pollution, water damage and high levels of humidity has rendered the data, and the knowledge we have of this period, as scarce.

We hope that this exhibition of sonic data fragments from around the Baltic & North Sea region gives an insight into this fascinating period of middle-age history, and evokes an imagination of the acoustic time and place.

[For further individual study, the Contemporary Digital Heritage Society holds an optical record, under the search term of *realitystats.1983-2033*]"

If preparing such a display for a museum, my initial imagination then was to represent these historical artifacts as an audio-visual installation. Involving, for example:

A looped light projection dissolving and morphing through images of the shipwreck floatsam; Audio soundscape with analogue recordings of real sea waves and seagulls, displayed through an open sound-system for all in the space to hear; Immersive sound-loops of digitally recovered sounds accessed individually from headphones distributed round the space.

If commissioning such a display for a museum, artists and musicians would be invited to contribute sound files from all around the Baltic and North Sea coast.

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 don't see | washed up
pieces of | technology
 worn | down to
organic | shapes
memory | reminders
past endeavours | ruined
to civilise | plastic
bits | bytes
colour chunks | killer
jumps | into unknown
territory | where?
 rock | ambush
navigational | systems
 to be | who?
steers | the ship
to doom | or destiny
what? | could it be
did we miss? | the stars
the bliss | the rock and roll
drugged up | chemicals
to free | that beat
the rhythm | the drum and bass
 crashing on | wood or metal
electric | micro / macro
 synergy | no silicon
that pumps | through
our veins | and so
clogs up | the arteries
making dance | disabled
head-heavy | with self-
induced doubt | that is
virtuality | another wo/man's
 immortality.

1999.

