This summer we went for a walk around Baltimore to explore the city and catch a glimpse of the fugitive power of “things” at work. Baltimore, aka “Charm City,” is located on the Amtrak line between New York City and Washington D.C., and yet it feels very off the grid. The densest inland port on the U.S. east coast, Baltimore was once an industrial giant and an important transit hub for the rest of the continent by way of the Baltimore Ohio railroad. With its population peaking at nearly a million residents in the 1950s, Baltimore has since grappled with the flight of population and capital that accompanied the implosion of the American industrial economy. Its population today is around 600,000. What this means is that Balti-
more is a city where a great deal of material things—homes, factories, storefronts, and highways—remain largely undisrupted by human agents. We had planned to conduct something like an interview about what it’s like living here. What happened, however, was that things kept interrupting our best attempts at narration. They insisted upon being part of the conversation.

We took as our inspiration something that Thoreau once said about an encounter with “the Wild”: “It is in tension against conformity, a challenge to our default ways of seeing, feeling, and judging. Thoreau found in Nature a source of "perceptual suggestions and provocations," in contrast to "the trivialness of the street." It affirms the spirit if not the letter of Thoreau's sojourns, we experienced a certain "wildness" in the lively alleyway in search of trash. Though David Thoreau proposed walking as a practice of opening oneself up to the "subtle magnetism in Nature," he found that his own daily walk produced a style of perception especially attuned to the specificity of things. This "technology of the self" was used to cultivate a sensibility that Thoreau felt walking in the woods of Concord or atop Mt. Ktaadn in Maine. This is a question of what humans (human and non-human) bodies have to offer one another and be affected by in turn. Here we are invoking Spinoza's definition of a 'body' as that which is simultaneously a source of action and susceptible to being altered or 'affected' by its encounters with others, and thus also a recipient of action. Wondering at trash has a levelling effect: we look at it as if we look back defiantly at us. "It is never we who affirm or deny something of a thing, it is the thing itself that affirms or denies something of itself to us." It can also enable a fleeting connection across eras and scales of existence. It is an affective-aesthetic exercise, but not an "aestheticism." It requires only a willingness to expose oneself to the sensuous materiality of stuff.

Hampden is a neighbourhood that has been defined by sudden waves of migration before. The first wave was formed by Appalachian workers who arrived to the mid 19th century to sell their labour in the mills. The second hit in the 1990s, when empty mill buildings became attractive studio spaces for artists. The two cultures—or camps—in the 1980s and working-class families now marginal-
ized in the neoliberal economy and "creative class"—live side by side. New residents on the patio of an expensive Italian restaurant on Chestnut threaten, while across the street people buy and sell crystal meth. What did digging through and associating with the garbage of this neighbourhood do to us on our walk? How it is an occasion for an experi-
ence of materialist wonder akin to the sense of the wild Thoreau felt walking. For Thoreau, nature was a tonic against conformity, a challenge to our default ways of seeing, feeling, and judging. The "street," it turns out, is not at all trivial. It is in this sense that we think of our walk as doing "philosophy in the wild." Thoreau chose beautiful nature as the partner for his sojourns. We chose beautiful nature as the partner for his sojourns. We did not try to return them to an earlier function. But do not try to return them to an earlier function. Though in the end, Thoreau’s walks were a source of action and susceptible to being altered or 'affected' by its encounters with others, and thus also a recipient of action. Wondering at trash has a levelling effect: we look at it as if we look back defiantly at us. "It is never we who affirm or deny something of a thing, it is the thing itself that affirms or denies something of itself to us." It can also enable a fleeting connection across eras and scales of existence. It is an affective-aesthetic exercise, but not an "aestheticism." It requires only a willingness to expose oneself to the sensuous materiality of stuff.

Baltimore seems to be in a constant state of incomplete repair. You can't really tell if businesses and construction projects are on their way in or out, up or down. But whereas urban repair in the U.S. and Canada offers issues in dramatic real-estate speculation, Baltimore's on-going rehab con-
forms more to a model of temporary bricolage. As Elizabeth Spelman writes in Repair: The Impulse to Restore a Fragile World: "Bricoleurs collect and make use of pieces of the past but do not try to return them to an earlier function." We head west to see the I-170, Baltimore's famous "highway to nowhere" an ambitious urban development project proposed by Robert Moses that would have stuck a four-lane highway right through west Baltimore in order to connect the city to the transcontinental I-70. Construction of the highway began in 1975, but the project, which cut through a vibrant African-American neighborhood and displaced hundreds of vulnerable first-time homeown-
ers, was thwarted by courts from the start. What remained for a while was a sunken, two-mile stretch of garbage in the city. By the time we visited it, the city had begun tearing out the highway's dead end to replace it with a park. We got no good photos. The park will change things a little, but it can't erase the violence of this two-mile concrete scar.
6 The materialist mood of our walk isn’t anything fancy or dreamy—it’s everyday, a conversation starter. It makes us think about the material practices of people across the stark lines of class and race. We go to Lexington Market and are struck by the experience of something like what Walt Whitman called democratic ‘comradeship’: it is to the development, identification, and general prevalence of that fervid comradeship—that I look for the counterculture and offset of our materialist and vulgar American democracy, and for the spiritualization thereof.”

7 In a city like Baltimore it’s hard to make connections with people across the stark lines of class and race. We go to Lexington Market and are struck by the experience of something like what Walt Whitman called democratic ‘comradeship’: it is to the development, identification, and general prevalence of that fervid comradeship—that I look for the counterculture and offset of our materialist and vulgar American democracy, and for the spiritualization thereof.” Here’s why: Lexington Market is the oldest and most active of Baltimore’s traditional seafood markets. Waxing our way through the crowed of human bodies shopping, chatting, waiting for the bus, calling friends, and meeting with friends, we think about how the material constitution of the space enables the surprising encounters going on around us. We find a sipping wet thing under the table that we decide is gross. It looks like an eel, or a severed arm. We are told that it is some sort of sponge used to collect the runoff from the refrigerated cases of fish.

8 Ideas, like things, are dangerous because their effectivity is indeterminate—you know they’re going to produce effects, but you don’t know what effects. If ‘vital materialism’ can have some positive eco-political potential, it has to counter the idea of vitality that is also at work in the neoliberal capitalistic practice of endless economic “growth.” We’ve organized our entire society around a vitalistic understanding of political economy, with disastrous consequences: perpetual growth, undermining streams of consumer “goods,” over-stimulated desires, selves, mountains of poisonous garbage. As Deleuze and Guattari have said, “Capitalism is at the crossroads of all kinds of formations—it is not capitalism by nature.” This materialism is ultimately unsustainable and self-deceiving, as it undermines the activity of repair and the restorative capacities of the ecological systems that sustain it. Why do we keep on this way? It is the thrill of endless immortality? But this is just one vision of vitality, and not the most desirable one. Renaissance humanists also thought about the vitality at work in history, but there was an organic vitalism that stressed the interdependence of growth and decline. Vital materialists also think that the world engages in real creativity, but its processes of growth and decay don’t have to be channelled in a single capitalistic direction. Instead they affirm the plurality of vital systems and their diverse forms of interdependence. The market is not a privileged site of vitality, but theirs was an organic vitalism that stressed the interdependence of growth and decline.

9 Being a materialist means being open to surprises. We walk north from the market, past an abandoned restaurant on Eutaw that was the site of one of the city’s most important civil rights sit-ins, and arrive at Seton Hill, a neighbourhould of renovated row-houses, public housing, and some houses of unidentified purpose, surrounding an English garden park. We find a church we like on Orchard Street and decide to go in. On a plaque in the entrance we learn that we are in the oldest standing structure built by African-Americans in Baltimore. While Maryland didn’t secede during the Civil War, it was the northern-most southern state and an active hub in the North American slave trade.

10 Edifi ed by our contact with these bricks, we are about to open ourselves up to what’s next. We find some grass strewn with litter that reminds us of mushrooms we found earlier in the day in Druid Park. We were so very pleased, enchanted really, with the line of faggus we found in the park. But we don’t care much for the line of trash in this park. Why? No materiality is ever really available to us as something utterly divorced from its cultural effects. But still, we value the useful fiction of the thing-in-itself, which still sometimes affords us a tiny glimpse of a material agency, which is indeed at work around and within us.