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## Beyond Art/Archaeology: Research and Practice after the ‘Creative Turn’

Thomas, A., Lee, D., Frederick, U. & White, C.

### **Introduction**

There are many points of intersection between art and archaeology. These can be explored from a number of different perspectives, such as the role that images play in archaeological narratives and visual practice (Molyneaux ed. 1997; Smiles & Moser eds. 2004), and the influence of archaeology upon modern and contemporary artists (Causey 2008; Renfrew 2003; Roelstraete 2013). What is particularly interesting, however, is the increasing trend for activities which might be understood as evidence of an archaeological ‘Creative Turn’: collaborations and conversations in which archaeologists have aimed to break down disciplinary boundaries and explore research and practice through themes common to both art and archaeology (see, for example, papers in Russell and Cochrane eds. 2014).

These interactions have built upon two decades of fertile art/archaeology discussions, with groundbreaking work such as that undertaken at Leskernick (Bender et al. 2008; Tilley et al. 2000) an influential early example. But in many examples of art/archaeology research and practice, the *archaeology* in question remains focussed upon the distant past, often a particular kind of monumental architecture or landscape, and (British) prehistory. This has implications for the way in which the collaborative field has developed. The unknowable nature of this seemingly mysterious, distant past attracts many artists to archaeological material and sites (Lippard 1983) and also captures the public imagination. As a result, in many examples of art/archaeology work, art and artists are used as both tools for outreach, and heuristic devices to bridge the apparent temporal divide between prehistory and present. Arts practice is exploited for communicating, interpreting or translating the unknowable, distant past to broader audiences; ‘feeding an archaeologist’s vision to the public’ (Harrison & Schofield 2010, 117). Although not without merit, we must be aware that this situation can also create false ruptures between past and present, between archaeology and art, and the archaeologist and the public as consumers of archaeology.

What distinguishes the contributions to this forum from many previous art/archaeology interactions is their engagement with the *contemporary* world. As others have pointed out, the archaeology of the contemporary world can be thought of as having a ‘special relationship’ to contemporary art practice (Harrison & Schofield 2010, 107). Unlike the more distant past, ‘long the exclusive preserve of archaeologists’, the archaeology of the contemporary world is naturally interdisciplinary (Graves-Brown et al. 2013, 2) and draws attention to the performative nature of doing archaeology (Harrison & Schofield 2010, 106; see also Pearson & Shanks 2001). Any distance between past and present, and archaeologists and the public can be collapsed: ‘we begin as participants, rather than excavators’ (Graves-Brown et al. 2013, 16). The more proximate relationship between artist and archaeologist, then, moves art away from its use as interpretation and representation of conventional archaeological outcomes, and instead allows archaeologists to challenge their own practice-based research *creatively*.

## ***This forum***

With the above ideas in mind, we invited papers that explored the possibilities for creatively-engaged contemporary archaeologies. As a springboard for the discussion, we suggested that the following questions might provide starting points:

- How can the practice-led approach proposed here contribute to academically meaningful, and socially relevant, 21<sup>st</sup>-century archaeology and heritage studies?
- How can *archaeology's* unique understanding of the world contribute to the 'creative turn' in the wider humanities, as explored by geography and anthropology, for example?
- Given the fluidity of academic subject boundaries, what makes archaeological contributions to trans-disciplinary collaborations distinctively *archaeological*?
- What is a suitable term for describing these projects (and indeed, do we need one)? Is 'Creative Archaeologies' useful or does it limit what the field might incorporate?

This forum arose from the "Creative Archaeologies: Emerging theory and practice from art/archaeology interactions" session convened by the editors at the meeting of the European Association of Archaeologists in Glasgow in September 2015. The session was intended to be deliberately provocative in challenging archaeologists to move beyond the usual tropes of art/archaeology. This forum contains several of the original contributors from the conference session with additional voices; all share practice, collaborations, experiences, and ways forward.

The articles comprise a diverse range of responses from academics and practitioners working creatively with heritage—in its broadest sense—from a range of disciplinary perspectives. The contributions vary from critical discussions to detailed case studies, and offer a variety of opinions, not always in agreement with one another. We welcome the opportunity to expose a number of tensions within the field; rather than aiming to resolve the frictions, we choose to see their productive potential for dialogue and experiment (cf. Russell 2006, 2). More importantly, several interlinked themes - interdisciplinarity, practice, participation, and relevance - surface throughout the contributions.

## ***Interdisciplinarity***

The wide range of disciplinary influences revealed in this forum highlight the fact that the recent 'creative turn' is far from unique to archaeology. Indeed it is precisely such interdisciplinary strategies that 21<sup>st</sup>-century artists are embracing to comprehend and communicate the conditions of the contemporary. A recurrent question is how to negotiate the terms of creative engagement across different disciplines particularly given their varied histories within the academy in relation to funding, critical reflection and analysis, and public engagement.

As Acheson Roberts and Sterling note (this forum), transdisciplinary collaborations are not a new phenomenon. They discuss the Archaeology/Heritage/Art network, established in 2014, which re-frames the model of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century 'Conversazioni'. These semi-public events enabled a space for display, dialogue and

debate across the arts, humanities and sciences. Using the ‘Conversazione’ as a model, they argue—and we agree—that within the wide range of possible interactions between archaeology, heritage, and art, the most successful examples display two key qualities: ‘a transdisciplinary entanglement of concepts and questions and...grounded participation across the fields in question’. Such collaborative practices are not about the appropriation of each other’s expertise and practices but about approaching similar questions from multiple distinct perspectives in order to create a new understanding.

In a similar vein, Maarten Liefoghe (this forum) highlights the need to acknowledge the critical value of disciplinary differences in order to push beyond traditional definitions and problematize ‘doing art’ and ‘doing archaeology’. He discusses the Brussels-based architecture collective *Rotor*, who mounted a participatory and experimental exhibition *Grindbakken*, as an example of work at the interface of site-specific art and an archaeology of the contemporary. In step with several of the other contributions, Liefoghe notes that ‘the seductive but problematically under defined adjective ‘creative’ in ‘creative archaeologies’ is unnecessary and even unhelpful, and questions the need for a term at all. We agree that terminology can be restrictive, but wonder, how *do* we define this distinct modality of archaeological practice?

Harriet Hawkins (this forum) suggests that a key starting point for critical accounts might be found in wider cross-disciplinary calls to get beyond the ‘fetish of creativity’ (Edensor et al. 2009; Hawkins 2016). As a cultural geographer, she encourages critical reflection ‘on the often hard-won skills and techniques that are gained through training, whether as a creative practitioner or as an archaeologist or as a geographer as much as a creative practitioner’. Hawkins’ discussion of the creative turn in geography provides a crucial comparison for the current archaeological debate. Yet there remain important differences. Whereas creative practice retains a certain provisional status with archaeological research, Hawkins notes that within cultural geography, it is no longer considered avant-garde, and has even been institutionalised.

The importance of combining critical reflection and creative practice is evident in Mike Pearson’s discussion (this forum) of his interdisciplinary practice across archaeology, cultural geography, and performance. Focussing on a collaborative landscape project in Ousefleet, North Lincolnshire: ‘the only one kilometre grid-square on a 1:50,000 scale Ordnance Survey map that is completely white...the so-called ‘emptiest place in Britain’,’ Pearson advocates interdisciplinary synergies of creativity through *practice*, arguing that performance works as a mode of representation *and* enquiry; it is both ‘a *doing* and a thing *done*’.

### ***Practice***

Practice is integral to the relationships between art, archaeology and heritage, and archaeology is always creative (cf. Bradley 1993): ‘a work of imagination as much as of interpretation’. Archaeological processes involve working ‘...from traces, residues, absences and presences—appropriating, mixing, and inventing techniques and methods from across the academy...’ (Russell 2013, 298-299). In this way, and as Aldred and Pálsson demonstrate (this forum), ‘the act of archaeology has the same ontological status as creative work’. Their *imprinted archaeology* explores the relationship between lino printing and archaeological process and the implications of the different, but parallel acts of marking, cutting, and revealing the uncanny, that both bring to bear. Representing the ‘situated material practice’ of their collaborative engagement over five

years, their project may be regarded as a work-in-progress, a continuous flow of experience and personal development based on process rather than product.

Freedom from the need to produce traditional outputs is crucial if we are to test visual conventions of archaeology and explore new modes of representation. Geneviève Godbout's *Junk Drawer Project* (this forum) takes up the challenge. By subverting the visual tropes of artefact assemblage photography, her images defy the epistemic foundations of representation in archaeology, and 'the very recording process through which traces of the past are made visible'. Such confrontations are important: '[i]f archaeologists fail to intervene reflexively in discourses of visual literacy, then this threatens meaning and value in archaeological research and risks the loss of the social and visual relevance of archaeological expression' (Cochrane & Russell 2007, 3).

Chris McHugh (this forum) also explores the use of photography in archaeology and its role in creating narratives. His work at a ruined pottery in Seto, Japan, is described as a 'creative materialising intervention', an overlapping contemporary archaeology and arts practice. McHugh recorded abandoned material and spaces of the pottery 'to bear witness to this transitory site', and used this photographic imagery to make decals fired onto the ceramic objects as surface decoration. By 'repurposing' the imagery into new artworks, he explored the changing material culture of the site and its enfolding into different times and memories.

A similar interest in materiality is evidenced in Rupert Griffiths and Lia Wei's contribution to this forum. They detail their hybrid practice across cultural geography, archaeology, art, and architecture in the UK and China. Their ongoing project, *Site Seal Gesture*, explores sites in rural margins—specifically abandoned military sites in the UK and rock-cut burial sites in China—through long-distance conversations and sketch dialogues which they develop cast and carved artefacts and sites. They create new ruins, making links between sites and continents in a way which 'allows ideas to become unanchored from disciplinary constraints'.

### ***Participation***

The forum illustrates again and again why practice-led collaborations are an essential feature of creative archaeological projects, in which research is not simply shared but co-produced by archaeologists, artists, non-archaeologists, and other practitioners (cf. Holtorf 2016). The public is a critical component of this collaborative effort (of which, we, as academics and practitioners, are also a part). As Acheson Roberts and Sterling emphasise (this forum), critical efficacy and increased participation *in the performance of art* across all fields of archaeology and heritage are not mutually exclusive.

James Dixon argues (this forum) that public engagement offers archaeologists critical learning opportunities. His contribution details workshops undertaken in Leeds, Bristol, and London, in which non-archaeologist participants undertook 'an experiment in an artistically-inspired site-specific archaeology'. Participants explored buildings and sites through a 'micro-archaeology' of sounds, words, and found objects using only pens and paper, focusing on interpretation and observation, non-traditional 'practical' recording or training. In both drawing on arts practice, and in being participant-led, Dixon's project went beyond merely using creative approaches as a form of 'outreach'. This is important. Given the political and economic pressures currently facing the heritage sector, there is a real need to find new ways of sharing archaeological knowledge and

encouraging public support for archaeology (Richardson 2017). At the same time, we must be wary of collaborative projects which exploit art practice, or which only pay lip service to public outreach, in order to fulfil funding requirements. Dixon's work provides an excellent example of how it is possible to break down the knowledge hierarchies which often permeate public engagement exercises in archaeology, without compromising on archaeological or art ethics.

### **Relevance**

Embracing a socially-engaged, participatory archaeology can be seen as a political, and academically critical act in itself. As Dixon points out (this forum), public engagement is not just about transmission of expert knowledge. Benefits to both sides of the participatory equation make archaeology more socially-engaged, and crucially, more *relevant*. This may be particularly pertinent in archaeologies of the contemporary world, which recognise that the past and futures we are working with exist in the present, and as such are always contested—and are always political.

Modern relevance has been brought into sharp focus by the seismic political events of the past year (2016). As Vesna Lukic and Thomas Kador highlight (this forum), archaeology can play an important role in these contemporary debates. Their work used the film camera as a research tool for the recent and contemporary pasts of a Holocaust landscape in Šabac, western Serbia and its link with Second World War Jewish refugees known as the “Kladovo transport”. They explore the mutable boundary between filmmaking as artistic practice and archaeological investigation; it was ‘both impossible and meaningless to say where the archaeological ends and the artistic begins or vice versa’. Although it was not its explicit purpose, their project allows a consideration of the symmetry between 20<sup>th</sup>-century history, with the current refugee crisis and recent rise in explicitly racist and anti-immigration political parties in Europe.

The political, social, and environmental hurdles posed by contemporary events demand innovative methodologies from all disciplines now and into the future; they challenge us to remain relevant, and to find new ways of managing and working with heritage. Such a novel approach can be seen in the *Wilder Being* project discussed by Anne Bevan and Jane Downes (this forum). Conceived as a ‘place-based participatory event’ on the island of Sanday, Orkney, the project was led by an archaeologist and artist who gathered participants from a wide group of backgrounds and disciplines. On the beach at the foot of cliffs from which several thousand years’ of material culture continue to erode, they constructed a mythical sea creature, a *Wilder Being*, from plastic flotsam and jetsam. Ostensibly a form of socially-engaged art to highlight issues of climate change, marine rubbish, and rural sustainability, this project contained within it the seeds of a far more radical notion. Rather than trying to ‘save’ those archaeological remains for which neither preservation *in situ* or by record is possible, we should consider using them for creative purposes. This project highlights the fact that archaeologies in and of the present have an important role to play in both challenging the salvage paradigm (Graves-Brown et al. 2013, 11; see also DeSilvey 2017) and drawing attention to the creative potential of change (cf. Penrose ed. 2007).

In questioning the status quo and the potential of change, archaeology plays an important role not only in the present, but also in the *future*. One possible future is conceived in the contribution by Ola Ståhl, Mathilda Tham and Cornelius Holtorf (this forum). Working from a design perspective, they argue that design and archaeology are

at critical points of reinvention in relation to the Anthropocene. They present a fictional narrative imagining themselves as 'post-anthropocentric, speculative archaeologists' in a future threshold between the Anthropocene and Post-Anthropocene. Like artists before them (for example, Simon Fujiwara or Patrick Ryoichi Nagatani) the authors highlight the potential of archaeological practices to create, convey and disestablish powerful narratives. By positioning archaeology as a form of *futurology* (cf. Graves-Brown et al. 2013, 11), we can use creativity as a driver for innovative engagements which respond to the social and political tests thrown up by the Anthropocene.

The challenge, therefore, and as Doug Bailey points out (this forum), is for an archaeology which 'engages modern and contemporary political and social action'. Contemporary ceramic artist Virgil Ortiz's subverts references to known cultures and ceramic traditions. Bailey suggests that Ortiz's art provides a template for work which 'sits outside of the processes and definitions of both art and archaeology: in a third space where cultural producers, artists, and archaeologists ... work with the past in the present with particular attention to contemporary political issues'. It is this third space that many of the contributions here occupy, a space which allows a creative applied archaeology of significance and relevance.

### **Conclusions**

Several key themes run throughout this forum, drawn from contributions by practitioners from diverse fields including archaeology and visual art, and also performance, film studies, cultural geography, architecture, design theory, and heritage studies. Certain disciplines, are absent, most notably cultural anthropology (although this discipline is also undergoing a creative turn: see Schneider & Wright eds. 2013). Likewise, the geographical spread of responses is largely drawn from Europe and North America, and it is unfortunate that other regions are unrepresented.

As such, this forum does not aim to provide a definitive global overview of art/archaeology work; its strength resides in a 'snapshot' of the work currently been undertaken. Alongside a new literature of art-practice-based research (Barrett & Bolt 2010) and art-science collaborations, the archaeology-art-heritage nexus is a developing field of enquiry. New projects and approaches are emerging all the time: many have been presented at recent conference sessions and seminars such as the Creative Archaeologies I and II sessions at EAA in Glasgow 2015 and Vilnius 2016 respectively, sessions at TAG both in the UK and in Chicago, USA, and at the *Breaking the Frame: Art and Archaeology in Practice* symposium at the Eighth World Archaeological Congress (WAC) in Kyoto in 2016. The WAC symposium sought to draw contributions from archaeologists and artists from the Eastern Hemisphere, but instead saw a continued emphasis on North American and European practice albeit with a couple of notable exceptions drawn from Australia and Japan. The WAC 2016 conference did, however, offer two very heartening bright spots of disciplinary and geographical diversity. Firstly, the large exhibition held at the Museum of Kyoto during the Congress, entitled "Art and Archaeology Exhibition: the Silent Voices of Materials and Soil" in which intersections in art and archaeology practices were highlighted, curated by archaeologist Masakage Murano in collaboration with Japanese artists. Second, was the support by Museum of Kyoto curators for a smaller exhibition in which symposium presenters displayed their creative work as part of the set of academic presentations.

We support such endeavours and hope that the varied and innovative work presented in this forum can also provide springboards for future research and practice. We celebrate the differences contained in the contributions, as we applaud the ways in which they are united by a commitment to shared exploration of collaboration and experimentation. In offering new approaches to the archaeology of the contemporary world, they demonstrate the rich potential for archaeological work which explores the collaborative and participatory potential of creative projects, but which looks beyond using art simply to interpret or communicate the past. Freedom from the need to solely, or directly, interpret or represent the past opens up the potential to work creatively with remains that are being otherwise actively destroyed by a range of natural or political processes, including coastal erosion and conflict. As a consequence, the creative work we encourage might stray into difficult intellectual and social territory, but we should embrace those unexpected outcomes.

We must be aware, however, as Harriet Hawkins notes, that ‘all that is exciting about what the creative turn can do to reshape the contours of our disciplines is also all that can be challenging and unsettling’. The work we advocate presents several methodological and theoretical challenges. Is it possible to balance these concerns and resolve these tensions? Can archaeology be creative and experimental at the same time as being socially and politically relevant? Is it possible to undertake participatory, process-led work that is freed from the need to produce traditional outputs whilst also being academically rigorous? We certainly think so, and believe that this is demonstrated in the work in this forum. By taking the dialogue outside of the museum or archaeological site, into the art gallery or the wider community, possibilities are opened up not only for a critical and relevant contemporary archaeology, but for socially-meaningful research and practice with significance across a range of disciplines.

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