

An Archaeological Avant-Garde

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In recent years, vague attempts have been made to characterise Contemporary Archaeology as an archaeology of modern material culture; of post-war archaeology; as archaeology 1950–2000; or more widely as a reflexive, interdisciplinary historical archaeology. I would argue, in opposition to some of these attempts, that Contemporary Archaeology is inspired by, rather than shackled to, any temporal period or subject of study. Rather, Contemporary Archaeology has the potential to be defined through its mode of engagement with the world, an engagement in which ‘traditional’ archaeology, interdisciplinary work, materiality, politics, and more are inextricably linked. With reference to recent projects originating in a number of different arenas, this chapter attempts to describe the Contemporary Archaeologist and their place within the subject discussion of this publication. Through this effort, I hope to stake a claim for Contemporary Archaeology as a truly avant-garde movement with the potential to profoundly influence the future of the discipline.

INTRODUCTION

For at least ten years, there has been much discussion within the field, referred to by this volume, of the relationship between ‘Industrial Archaeology’, ‘Post-Medieval Archaeology’ and ‘Historical Archaeology’. The discussion incorporates different types of material, different dates, and different research agendas, and it doesn’t appear to be near to resolution. Perhaps, rather than trying to find some unifying thread between these different fields, it is of more use to archaeology, certainly in terms of strengthening archaeological theory and practice, to work to establish them as different, or even opposed, ways of seeing.¹ By this I mean that each of the above disciplines can assuredly bring a different focus, different body of theory and historical development and different ways of working to the wider field without any need to integrate them. The creation of all-encompassing research agendas, something that would be an inevitable result of any attempt to answer the question of what the above sub-fields actually are and how they relate to each other, should be seen as secondary in importance to the need to be comfortable and confident with the way we work; comfortable with people working in different ways to ourselves; and confident that other ways of working primarily serve to challenge and strengthen Archaeology rather than posing a threat. Archaeology is not a finite resource, and it will stand up to being looked at in a multitude of different ways.

Fundamentally, archaeology is about the relationship between people and things. How we, as archaeologists in the 21st century, approach this relationship in a knowing, thoughtful, holistic manner is of the utmost importance both to our understanding of historical material and to the great potential for archaeology to make a meaningful contribution to everyday life. In this discussion, I present a particular way of seeing derived from the newly emerging field of Contemporary Archaeology. It is necessarily personal, such is the need I perceive for archaeologists to consider in depth their own stances within the wider field of Archaeology before (or at least alongside) any attempt to understand others, whether past or present.

CONTEMPORARY ARCHAEOLOGY

In the 21st century, particularly since the founding of the Contemporary and Historical Archaeology and Theory (CHAT) conference group, the phrase ‘contemporary archaeology’ has begun to appear on the archaeological ‘horizon’. There certainly does appear to be such a thing as contemporary archaeology, but it has seemed thus far to defy description. In my experience of working with the CHAT group, there are many people who would tentatively describe themselves as contemporary archaeologists, but each of them likely has a different idea of what they mean by ‘contemporary’. Any quick look through the available literature² will reveal contemporary archaeology to be the archaeology of the 20th century. Or perhaps it is the archaeology of AD 1950–2000. Or the study of modern-day material culture. Or archaeology with added modern media techniques and perspectives.

Which is it? Well, of course, it’s all of them. However, like with the sub-fields mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, we can go further than getting ‘bogged down’ attempting a definition. To tie contemporary archaeology down as a period division is surely unhelpful, unimaginative and somewhat predictable? The SPMA has dropped its ‘cut-off’ date of AD 1750 and it would be a shame if another group were to impose a new date upon the SPMA by declaring that contemporary archaeology begins in a certain year. There is much to be gained from fuzzy boundaries and overlapping concerns. That being so, the first thing to be done here is to draw a distinction between two different concerns. In practice they are not so easily divisible nor should they be. They are intertwined, both in origins and in practice, but there is an important distinction to be made nonetheless.

The distinction I draw is between contemporary archaeology, the subject of this chapter, and archaeology of the contemporary past. The latter first really came to the fore with the book by Gavin Lucas and Victor Buchli, *Archaeologies of the Contemporary Past*³ and perhaps reached its zenith thus far with media coverage of ‘The Van Project’ led by Cassie Newland and John Schofield, which saw the ‘excavation’ and post-ex analysis of a Ford Transit Van.⁴ I don’t want to take anything away from this work, but I wish to go a step further. While The Van Project made the useful point that we can apply traditional archaeological methods to modern and unconventional sites and artefacts, my personal wish is to move away from such a focus towards developing contemporary archaeology as a distinct approach inspired by the contemporary world, but with applications across whatever periods of history we choose to engage with.

Despite the use of the phrase ‘avant-garde’ in the title, this discussion is most certainly not a manifesto. It is not my intention that everyone take up the ideas I will suggest here;

indeed, it would be disappointing if that happened. I do not see a need for a unified contemporary archaeology 'movement', as I believe the ultimate conclusion of undertaking a contemporary archaeology to be a strongly held personal conviction of whatever position one finds through this undertaking. In a sense, and although I will not elaborate too much on this idea here, contemporary archaeological work and thought has the potential to develop archaeology as a philosophy that is, at one and the same time, highly relevant to how we approach the past, the present, and the future.

Avant-garde has a lot of different implications depending on your background.⁵ Daniel Miller, for instance, in the introductory essay of *Acknowledging Consumption*, makes use of the term 'vanguard', asserting that studies of consumption are leading the way in establishing a new way of interpreting history.⁶ This sense of the vanguard as 'the leaders of the way' is a typically Anglophone interpretation of the avant-garde concept,⁷ which implies somehow that the vanguard are the first discoverers of a 'truth'. Here, I will use a more continental, artistic sense of the phrase. I see my avant-garde as those sent out to explore 'no-man's land', with more predisposition to antagonism than to leadership. The no-man's land in question is, in part, today, the early 21st century. But this no-man's land is also the space between people and things, between past and present, and between myself and others. I wish to investigate new ways of working that have been inspired by modern, changing conceptions of what can be considered archaeological and make a case for the relevance of these contemporary archaeological approaches to all time periods. I will discuss three main points: Territory, Process and Reflection. The examples I give will be of where I have encountered, dealt with or used these ideas in my own work. As befits the personal nature of the field that I outlined above, my intention is try to give an overview of contemporary archaeology as I see it.

TERRITORY

Recently, and partly as a response to the wording of funding body directives,⁸ there has been a rise in the number of projects describing themselves as inter-, cross- or multi-disciplinary. There is a case for saying that archaeology is multidisciplinary as a matter of course. This can take us two ways. It is often said that archaeology is the only department you need in a university because you can do anything else within it, but I'm aware that logically the opposite must be equally possible: that perhaps archaeology is the only department you don't need because you can do it within almost any other subject. This brings me to my first point about contemporary archaeology: it is none of the above; rather, my contemporary archaeology is an anti-discipline.

As stated earlier, most archaeology crosses boundaries. One of the very reasons that this chapter exists is because of contemporary archaeologists looking at non-traditional things that gives rise to a whole new series of questions for us to ask. With archaeologists looking at iPods, mobile telephones or computer games, economic systems, or sustainable housing, the subject is moving into a whole new realm. One such non-traditional thing is engineered crash-testing. As an archaeologist, I find the world of accident simulation fascinating. The journals are full of descriptions of micro-seconds of violent physical contact between objects told holistically in terms of justifications, parameters, results and conclusions.⁹ There

is unlikely to be anything that comes as close to placing material culture at the centre of a continuity between past, present, and future as the literature surrounding accident simulation. The material culture itself is fascinating; one laboratory uses a 1kg steel cube as the best physical representation of, very specifically, 'the aggressiveness' of a medium-sized mountain rock, dropped rather than thrown, from an overhead bridge onto a train cabin window by disaffected youths.¹⁰ And they are very strict about each of these points.

The implications of the material properties, materiality or physicality of things are also an interesting aspect of accident simulations. The ability of a steel tube to withstand certain collision conditions may have direct consequences for the autonomy of wheelchair users the world over.¹¹ It is, of course, very human too, and a degree of angling here or there, a millimetre's difference in the thickness of some steel may be the difference between life and death or disablement.¹² It is worth pointing out that the primary objective of crash-testing is to recreate exactly past 'real-world' accidents (which has some resonance with experimental archaeology) rather than to test new designs, which is a much later part of the process.

Things that I have learned from my archaeological study of engineered crash testing include both an increased appreciation of the physicality of objects and a more holistic approach to events and things and what they do. Crash-testing is bound up in science, politics, materiality, ethics and so on, but then if we're honest about it, so is everything else, now and historically. What my encounter with the world of accident simulation has given me is a whole new set of questions to ask of material culture. Whereas The Van Project sought to ask traditionally archaeological questions of unconventional material, I don't see anything wrong with allowing material to dictate its own interrogation (although I mean less that data 'speaks' to us and more that we should be aware of the existing fields of inquiry, academic or otherwise, surrounding things we come to anew as contemporary archaeologists), something that has to be borne in mind as we begin to consider the material of our own time. The wider implication is that perhaps looking at modern material we can learn how to approach the chaotic complexity of worlds past and present. Ideas reached through reading around crash testing, for instance, can be applied to material culture related to revolutionary France or to the 1381 Peasants' Revolt.

A good example of this approach can be seen in the work of existential historian and philosopher Jacques Rancière. In his work on France in the 1830s and 1840s,¹³ he looks specifically to contemporary workers' journals as a means of capturing the 'non-working moments of dreaming',¹⁴ of what he calls 'worker-intellectuals'. One metal worker, Jérôme-Pierre Gilland, writes extensively discussing his own social, economic, and political situation through a lens of the manufacturing processes he is involved in and, more importantly for us, the objects he comes into contact with in his daily practice. Rancière finds in his writings 'the depicted virtues of forged metal'.¹⁵ Here, as with crash-testing, we can see the explanation of a situation (political dissatisfaction / social implications of car crashes) through the materials present. Following the workers' journals and the experimental data of the crash laboratory, we see speculations on the future based on material histories evolve into new material presents, where both objects and their sociopolitical implications are intentionally changed through direct action. I would certainly argue that people writing about objects is as much a concern of the contemporary archaeologist as anything else.

Being actively anti-disciplinary allows us to come at things from non-traditional directions, and is a case of establishing 'places for thinking' that suit each of us. Where contemporary archaeology can lead, and is leading in this area, is in purposefully 'trespassing' in other disciplines and, on behalf of everybody else, asserting the archaeologist's right to ramble. Simply put, you can be archaeological anywhere and we should actively try our best to be archaeological everywhere regardless of any perceived restrictions. Of course, if this is to be the case we have to be tolerant of those from other disciplines who choose to trespass in archaeology!

PROCESS

My first point on process follows on from this. To paraphrase Doreen Massey,¹⁶ 'In place of an archaeology which searches for material culture to employ in the production of historical narratives, contemporary archaeology looks to the act of searching as the essential space of the archaeological.' Recently, I reviewed an exhibition by artist Johan Grimonprez at the Whitechapel Gallery in London called 'Looking for Alfred'.¹⁷ The centrepiece was a film of a number of Alfred Hitchcock look-alikes in variously Hitchcockian scenarios in the Palais des Beaux Arts in Brussels. We look for Alfred but he's always just disappearing around a corner, up stairs or through a door. The film starts with a nonsense story based on one of Hitchcock's own. Two men are travelling on a train. In the luggage rack above them is an unusually shaped package. One man asks the other, 'What's that you have in the luggage rack?' The other replies, 'That's a MacGuffin.' 'What's a MacGuffin?' asks the man. 'It's an apparatus for capturing lions in the Adirondack mountains of New York.' 'But there are no lions in the Adirondack mountain of New York.' 'Well then,' says the man, 'that's no MacGuffin. You see a MacGuffin is nothing at all!' In filmic terms, a MacGuffin is a plot device that drives a story on while being of little or no relevance of itself.

Cornelius Holtorf has told us that all archaeology is contemporary archaeology in the sense that it 'offers a perspective from which the past and its remains can be understood in the light of our present'.¹⁸ Perhaps, then, the idea of 'the past' is more a prompt than an objective, and maybe there is some mileage in looking to the past not as what we find, but as the reason that we seek. To focus on the hunt rather than the treasure is, I believe, to realign archaeology with its origins, to rejuvenate the joy of the unexpected discovery.

In 2003, I undertook a desk-based assessment looking at a late-19th-century estate landscape in south Cheshire.¹⁹ Between around 1860 and 1910, successive Dukes of Westminster made large-scale changes to their lands, including the planning and rebuilding of several entire villages and the relandscaping of the estate house at the centre of it all. This made an interesting enough landscape assessment, and I thought no more of it until the next time I was in Chester, a year or so later. Wandering around the town, I noticed a large number of buildings bearing the Grosvenor insignia, the family name of the Dukes of Westminster. Investigating Grosvenor Park, I found constructed ruins, a statue of one of the dukes, and buildings built in the same style and by John Douglas, the same architect as in the villages I had been looking at for my desktop assessment. Carrying on to the riverside, I found yet more: a row of trees planted by Grosvenor, architect-designed, and now listed, ice-cream stalls and an impressive iron bridge, all looked over by Chester's Roman walls and

medieval south gate and bridge. Most importantly, walking along the riverside, I noticed a small sign advertising boat trips on the river Dee as far as the very villages at the centre of my study.

The trip, south through the two villages I had focused upon and along the eastern border of the estate house and garden between them, was essential to my understanding of this historic landscape. As we drifted along, I saw that there were farmhouses dotted along the way, alternately on the left and right banks and always on top of a ridge. There were repeated but fleeting glimpses of the Alfred Waterhouse clock-tower at the centre of the estate, and when you couldn't see it, you could hear its bells chime. At the end of the journey, another iron bridge. At the first of the villages, you walk from the river up a gentle slope towards the centre. On your right as you walk is a high stone wall that, if you try, you can see over into a series of neat, walled fields, each with an architect-designed barn. Further on, the church. Behind the church, the end of the hunt. The treasure. Behind the late-19th-century church was another. Smaller. Ruined. And the resting place of the very men who had designed the landscape I had just travelled through. Wonderful things indeed.

The landscape as designed by the Dukes of Westminster is one that ties together the history of Cheshire, and of the Grosvenor family in particular, with a number of other phenomena, not least agricultural improvement in a time of national decline, income from the family's lands in Belgravia, London and the very idea of local tourism. The boat trip too is historic: it is listed in 19th-century copies of the *Chester Chronicle*.²⁰ So this landscape is meant to be experienced and, in the present day, can be. Without the temporal experience of two hours on that little boat, without the visual, the aural and the haptic experience of that tour, the estate is simply data. The eventual unexpected discovery of the graves of the dukes surrounded as they were by birdsong-punctured silence is, to an extent, the reason the whole of this part of Cheshire exists. There is a tangential point to be made here about the limitations of certain forms of archaeological work, and the fact that by staying in the library you can easily miss the point of a site entirely. More importantly, after some time of having imposed myself and archaeological inquiry upon the site, to follow this historic route, both geographically and temporally different from my previous work, gave me an entirely new kind of engagement with the site that was dictated by the landscape itself. My later visits to the estate house were certainly helped by my ability to put the formal garden with its sightlines and architectural references within a wider 'landscape of experience'.

This might sound a lot like phenomenology, but it isn't quite, at least not as phenomenology has been used in archaeology.²¹ I don't seek to make guesses about what people thought when they were here before, but I know, with hindsight, that I would not have the understanding of that landscape that I do now if I had not experienced it in this way and very consciously as a 21st-century archaeologist. More than providing answers about what the landscape may mean, I find that such an experience conditions the way I write about it and the way I am able to explain what the landscape is. To me, this kind of micro-study, of my experiences on a given day, is of equal if not greater importance than an attempt to shoehorn the landscape into any master narrative, whatever the basis of this might be, and it is only allowing conclusions to be drawn from process that allows this to happen. There are two areas where this way of working is much practised: firstly,

in contemporary art where artists often set themselves tasks, not as an end in themselves, but to facilitate a primary engagement with a place or landscape; the second is an idea being developed in geography called non-representational theory, which looks to establish the immediacy of sensual experience as an object of study.²² In both of these areas, and in this facet of contemporary archaeology, experience is brought to the fore as a preferred starting point for work. It may not provide any new facts, but perhaps facts are given undue authority anyway. I like to think that in contemporary archaeology we judge people first on the questions they ask and only secondly on any answers they may give.

In her 1967 work, *On Interpretation* Susan Sontag talks about the incessant habit of interpreters looking for the latent content behind things. Certainly this resonates in archaeology, whether we see it in Marxist interpretations of individual objects or grand narratives like capitalism, Improvement or industrialisation. What I've always loved about archaeology is that it works from stuff out, but I think that importance has to be given to the sensual and very real relationship between the archaeologist and the thing, whether it is a landscape, document or pot shard. So, a focus on process is central to contemporary archaeology as we use new ways of seeing and encountering things to think about what we do, which brings me on to Reflection.

REFLECTION

Earlier, I talked about territory and how we should ignore boundaries and push out as far as possible. Well, if we do that, we have to accept it happening in the other direction. We, as archaeologists, have no intrinsic right to past material culture. Historical geographers and environmental historians, for instance, do things that look pretty much identical to what we do. The only thing that truly distinguishes us from anyone else is that we are archaeological. Something that has run through this whole discussion is the idea that you can do whatever you like as an archaeologist so long as it is done archaeologically. I will avoid the potential pitfall in attempting an 'across-the-board' definition of that term by saying that the archaeological will be differently defined by each individual and that it is only by having different ideas playing out alongside or in opposition to each other that we can come close to reflecting the complexity of the world.

The ability to approach this mass of shifting ideas comes about through an ingrained reflexivity, and it is perhaps this aspect of my contemporary archaeology that is the most personal. It is important to be constantly aware of what has influenced you in the way you think, whether this is empirical experience, aspirations, television shows, or anything else. By being so aware, it may be possible to begin to consider concepts of irrationality, spontaneity and imagination, all important things in any attempt to lessen a reliance on preconceived frameworks. Again, this is certainly inspired by modern material. When we are literally doing the archaeology of ourselves it is hard not to ask some quite personal questions. This can certainly be carried over into any other period of study. If you ever cease asking why you're doing what you're doing, there becomes little point in doing it.

CONCLUSION

Through this chapter I have spoken about three, admittedly from among many, characteristics of contemporary archaeology, and what these do in practice and what they mean for the wider field. They are all interconnected. We have territory and the idea of contemporary archaeology as an active ‘anti-discipline’, purposefully situating itself outside the mainstream in order to ask new questions and to accept new questions being asked. Of course, the study of post-medieval archaeology was once right there on the edge, striving for credibility within the wider discipline (there is still reluctance among some to begin to consider the last two centuries when the archaeology of earlier post-medieval periods is still not fully understood, a position I reject as I don’t think that the archaeology of any period is or will ever be ‘done’), and the study of 20th- and 21st- century archaeologies will, in time, become part of the established archaeological canon. We have the focus on process and on direct experience rather than on interpretation. Professional and academic guidelines dictate that we must, however, provide answers of some sort, but the aspiration towards process-led modes of engagement is, I think, a worthy one. Finally, we have reflection and the constant questioning of what we do and why. Clearly, this is not limited to contemporary archaeology, but it is and should be something that is explicit in contemporary archaeological work.

Although I started with a literal definition of *avant-garde*, perhaps we contemporary archaeologists, as defined by me of course, are not too far from an artistic *avant-garde* after all. Any artistic *avant-garde* is asking the question ‘what is art?’ in one form or another, and it is there that we converge. My three points have all come down to personal questioning of what it is to be archaeological and to working within that question itself more so than attempting to answer it. In that way we are an *avant-garde* in the artistic sense, thriving on antagonism and intoxicated by the sheer exhilaration of movement beyond the bounds of regularity.

A formalisation of some of these ideas may be seen in John Law’s recent work on the concept of ‘messy research’²³ in which he writes that formal academic inquiry may miss out on a lot and that research frameworks assume that the world is to be understood as ‘a set of fairly specific, determinate, and more or less identifiable processes’.²⁴ Rather, he advocates, as I do here, ‘messier’ ways of working that take nothing for granted and seek to unmake methodological habits. The idea that research is creative rather than an objective discovery of truth is central to my contemporary archaeology, and while I see that period distinctions, meta-narratives and all-encompassing research frameworks may be of use to some archaeologists in formulating their ideas, my personal thought is that archaeology has the potential to do much more than try to understand the past, namely, to understand ourselves and use our perspective on the relationship between people and things to consider how we think and act in the present. I will close by saying that it doesn’t really matter what you think of contemporary archaeology, but it does matter that you think of it at all. Question what we do and how because therein lies the future.

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NOTES

1. Berger 1972.
2. See Buchli & Lucas 2001; Penrose 2007.
3. Buchli & Lucas, 2001.
4. Myers et al. 2008.
5. Poggioli 1968.
6. Miller 1995, 1–57.
7. Poggioli 1968, 28.
8. For instance, the AHRC Landscape and Environment networks and the EPSRC Heritage Science programme <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/apply/research/sfi/ahrcsi/landscape_environment.asp> [accessed 24/05/2008]; <<http://www.heritagescience.ac.uk/index.php?section=1>> [accessed 24/05/2008].
9. Mukherjee et al. 2006; Simms & Wood 2006; Simic et al. 2006
10. Simic *et al.* 2006, 357–9.
11. Rodríguez Senín et al. 2006, 425.
12. Yao et al. 2006.
13. Rancière 1989.
14. Rancière 1989, viii.
15. Rancière 1989, 4.
16. Massey 2005, 10.
17. Dixon 2004.
18. Holtorf 2005, 15.
19. Dixon 2008 unpublished.
20. Chester Chronicle, 1 May 1897.
21. Tilley 1994.
22. For instance, Wylie 2006.
23. Law 2004.
24. Law 2004, 5.

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