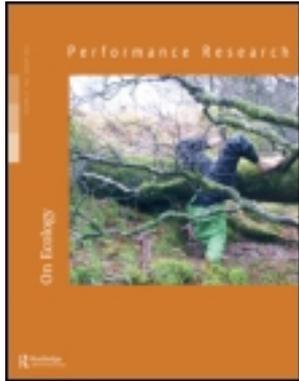


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Archaeological Explorations of Duration in the Contemporary City

JAMES DIXON

INTRODUCTION: ARCHAEOLOGY AND TIME

Archaeology is, of course, deeply engaged with time. Traditionally, we excavate the material remains of those who lived before, the physical remnants of the past. However, recent developing trends in archaeological theory and practice point to a need for the discipline to rethink its relationship with time. As will be discussed in this article, archaeologists are increasingly concerned with the very recent past, the present day, the future, and the performative aspects of *how* material culture happens, not merely *when*. All of these require a re-evaluation of that central concept if we are to incorporate them into a new archaeology of much expanded concerns.

Different kinds of time are employed in archaeological analysis, each used to create different kinds of world from the material with which they are concerned. For instance, there is the palimpsest. This is a time-space concept whereby a process of part erasure and replacement over time ensures that any assemblage, site or landscape will represent the current state of a series of physical interventions, natural and cultural. Thus, the things around us partially represent a succession of different time periods rather than all being from any single one (Bailey 2007; Lucas 2008; Robb 2008). This idea is of particular use in archaeological fieldwork as it is the process whereby we describe our understanding of a site or landscape at the point of encounter. Increasingly, archaeologists are also exploring notions of 'flattened time'. Another time-space concept, 'flat time'

approaches the past and the future through the ways in which they are manifested in the present. For instance, we might replace the locating of a hand-axe in a typological sequence of similar artefacts spreading over many thousands of years with consideration of what problem (past) it was made as a solution (future) for one present day in the distant past. Of course, these ideas of transition, whether we see it in the succession of contexts in a palimpsest, in a site's stratigraphic matrix (the kind of schematic drawing used by archaeologists to represent the physical relationship between different contexts and structures below ground) or in an artefact typology or sequence do pertain to some concern with duration, but I argue here that this is a kind of duration imposed from the present day to order and understand things largely on our terms and is more to do with the production of archaeology than with the lived relationships between people and things in the past.

In most archaeological fieldwork, the 'product' is a chronology: a list of things that happened in time order, usually from oldest to most recent. This is the archaeological product for a number of reasons, ranging from its connection to the likely presence and depth of archaeological deposits on a building site to creating new understanding of different historical periods. What the chronology takes for granted is that, in the past, time happened in a way that we understand. Of course, logically, this cannot be true, as the time of our chronologies is now past when once it was the present and the future to those whose lives we seek to understand. Nevertheless, the chronology is an essential archaeological tool doing a particular

archaeological job. If, as stated above, we are starting to do different jobs, we need new tools.

Of course, archaeologists are not all made of straw. There has been much exciting and innovative work produced around temporal dynamism whereby we seek to understand how the points of our chronology interweave (see, for example, Witmore 2007). We see a hint of this in discussions of flattened time which look at the active enrolments (for example, Grint and Woolgar 1997) of elements of the past in present-day constructions (Holtorf 2007; Shanks and Tilley 1992). We also see it in those works, not necessarily archaeological, which seek to look at non-linear temporality, simultaneity (Massey 2005) or the multi-scalar (see, for example, Hicks 2007; Orser 2009), all of which have made important contributions to how we understand time not merely as something through which to locate things in relation to one another, but as something active.

The problem remains, however, when we try to consider the actual present, what we might call history-being-made. Here, we cannot necessarily understand time in the ways mentioned because we do not know the factors acting upon our objects of study and we certainly do not know what will happen tomorrow. It is the contention of this paper that as archaeologists begin to focus on new, contemporary material, we need to lessen our reliance on time as a mode of understanding and recast it as something to be understood. In doing this, the most important thing we might seek to develop new ideas around is duration.

THE NEED FOR DURATIONAL ENGAGEMENTS

There is a clear need for a new consideration of duration alongside, or even in place of, time when we come to new material. Whether this is because of the lack of available chronological context in analysing the material conditions of the present day or an increased importance in conceptions of time as the world changes (Harrison and Schofield 2010; Schofield 2009; Virillio 1994) we can point to a distinct gap

where an understanding of duration, that is to say time as lived, enacted or performed, is needed. Time ceases to be a container for the things we study, as in previous uses of the concept. Rather new kinds of archaeology can look to time as part of what we are trying to understand. We can, for instance, take inspiration from writers on such phenomena as the impending (Ranci re 1989; Sartre 1975: 1–17), nostalgia (Trigg 2006), enchantment (Bennett 2001), or simultaneity, and look to how duration can be both in and of ‘things’. I suggest that with new modes of analysis, the traditional subjects of archaeology can be re-used in an effort to understand what duration is, as well as using ideas of duration to understand people’s relationship with material culture. In this way, we might say that duration, material culture and people are mutually constitutive whereas we previously focused on the latter two of that triumvirate with time as an ordering tool.

Duration is a vital concept in a number of ‘new’ areas of archaeological interest, as well as those which take inspiration from other disciplines’ work, such as that of Sarah Whatmore and Steve Hinchcliffe on social ecologies (Whatmore and Hinchcliffe 2003, 2010). We might look, for instance, to the work of Christine Finn in which she documented the process of inheriting, clearing and selling her parent’s house. We might also include Rodney Harrison’s and John Schofield’s various investigations of the recent past (Harrison and Schofield 2009, 2010), recent archaeological work on homelessness (Kiddey and Schofield 2011), ethnographies of archaeological practice (Edgeworth 2006) or any of a multitude of works dealing with prisons, shopping, motor travel and other modern phenomena. These archaeologies differ from much other archaeology in that their attempt is to analyse personal experiences as conditioned by and as they in turn condition material. All of these are not just locatable in time; their very nature is formed by individual human beings’ experience of time as an ongoing phenomenon. In other words, of duration. There are hints here of existing phenomenology-based archaeological analyses, but I will not go deeply

into that here for reasons of space. Suffice it to say that understanding duration has a strong contribution to make to phenomenological archaeologies also.

Although focused primarily on public art, my own archaeological work since 2006 has been much concerned with social ecologies and the various practices of ongoing daily life, taking care where possible not to prefigure any of my analysis, but instead using an almost journalistic method of 'following leads' as they are revealed to me, creating a rather organic research methodology (after Law 2004). In particular, among other things, my work in Bristol, UK, in this time has looked at the building of a shopping centre, the establishment of anti-corporate community movements, the demolition of a nightclub and a riot (Dixon 2009, 2011). Each of these I followed 'in process', removing the ability to rely on hindsight in my archaeological analysis of events. What became increasingly clear to me while following these events, is that within one broad phenomena (for example, the building of a shopping centre), different things become important for different lengths of time. So, for instance, to understand the three-year building period of Cabot Circus, we need to understand the two-month period in which there were rumours that the development had been stopped. We need to understand the 12-hour shift of a crane driver, a 45-minute lunch break and the duration of the opening day performances. We might even look to the period of time between the doors opening and the closing of the first shop, the new durational experiences created by newly established shortcuts, or the durations ended by the closure of existing businesses. A shopping centre, as a hand-axe, or a pot, or a person, is not simply an architecture to be understood as existing or not, it is a thing that happens, and that happens for long and short durations together; time can pass slowly or quickly. Durational engagement with a shopping centre, as with any other aspect of a contemporary city, is wholly different for every individual who encounters it and even for that person there may be moments of slowness or boredom that counter the fast moments

of excitement. These things are, of course, conditioned by the shopping centre itself as well as feeding back into it. For an archaeologist to understand the contemporary city (or any experience), they must understand the nature of duration.

As mentioned above, my own work has largely been based around the intersections between contemporary archaeology and public art, particularly those public artworks that come as the result of durational engagement with sites. I was able to work with a variety of artists working in different ways, ranging from those who remotely produced very large works requested by the developers of the shopping centre 'Cabot Circus' to artists undertaking three-week residencies and using the time to produce more performative, temporary work (Gabie 2009a, 2009b). The 'heavy metal' sculpture (for more on which, see Hall 2004; Miles 1997; Miles and Hall 2004) commissioned by the developer to complement their finished project can, perhaps, be taken as the artistic equivalent of the more traditional (although essential) archaeological investigation of a site. Temporary artworks, performative artworks and those which are not directly connected to developer-funding are, perhaps, the equivalents of the new modes of archaeology suggested here. In these, duration is both the method and the subject of the work and it may be that the concept will eventually emerge of 'durational archaeologies', although this will seem amusing to anyone who has spent months digging on one single site.

In the following part of this paper I will give a (very) brief explanation of the relationship between art and the city through duration, with reference to how this relationship, in its different forms, can be of use and interest to contemporary archaeologists.

ART, ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE CITY

Perhaps the shortest duration we might meaningfully encounter is the 'passing by' – the daily encountering of things for a few seconds while on the way elsewhere. This very duration was the explicit subject of New British Sculpture

(NBS), the UK's first external sculpture exhibition in 1968. For NBS, sculptures were placed in locations around Bristol that connected most to the new post-war Brutalist re-imagining of life in the city (the inner circuit road, the Norwich Union building, and so on). Most of the pieces shown were chosen for being formed of joined, but disparate pieces (as opposed to, say, Henry Moore works carved from one solid block). The idea expressed by the curators of NBS, Arnolfini, was to counteract the modernist city with its prescribed pedestrian flows and assigned area functions with reasons for people to stop, if only for a few minutes. We can see here, one duration seen to be 'wrong' being opposed with another, longer one. The clear implication for contemporary archaeology here is that we can identify a conflict between different durational ideals. The durations we must understand in order to understand the city are relational, that is to say that an experience is not long or short, only long-er or short-er than expected. Thus we can begin to add values to our various durations as we find not just a length of experienced time, but the reasons for that time to be experienced in a particular way.

Through the 1970s and the 1980s, much public art and architecture developed concerns with locality, biography (see Foster 1989; Lippard 1980; Lippard 1997) and an opposition between the speed of life (as a whole) and the slower pace of people's lives. At this time we see public gardens being given more amenable seating arrangements and the first use of the phrase 'desire lines' in park design literature. It was becoming common at this time for artists to take over disused or partially developed buildings and to temporarily recast them as tea shops, galleries or sculpture parks, the idea again being to introduce moments of stillness and calm into a busy world, although with longer duration than observation of the NBS works. The choice of development sites is particularly significant as it is these which best signify 'progress' and embody fears of losses of local identity in the face of external planning. Whereas for NBS the fear was the life prescribed by the finished buildings, later artists were

more strongly concerned with potential loss, this overcome or opposed by acts of claiming ownership like the aforementioned installations or the UK's then burgeoning graffiti scene.

In terms of time-scale, the other end of these temporary durational interventions can be seen in the work of Tehching Hsieh, particularly in the case of the contemporary city, *One Year Performance (1981–1982)* (Heathfield and Hsieh 2009). One of Hsieh's lifeworks, this piece saw the artist live outdoors in New York City between 26 September 1981 and 26 September 1982 (only once going indoors when he was arrested). As well as his time outdoors, the work consists of a series of maps on which Hsieh drew his route and made occasional notes. Other of his works consist of living in a cell for a year and spending a year clocking into a machine every hour. Of course, the real importance here is the consideration of a full year as experienced. In each of these works, Hsieh does only that which is his art, that is, clock-in or live outdoors. Thus, the full year can be experienced as a distinct duration as there are minimal external interruptions, or at least because the complexity of a year in New York is represented as a single action. The significance of work like Hsieh's for archaeology, and of other artists undertaking projects similar to these lifeworks (Heath Bunting in Bristol, for example) is that engagement with them allows us to begin to understand the very long, repetitive, and we might even say banal, encounters between people and material that we may tend to overlook when focusing on the more typically archaeologically visible single or short actions.

It is highly unlikely that an archaeologist would ever be able to spend a full year in the act of fieldwork to the exclusion of all other things. We can, however, take from Hsieh's work some of the extremity of duration, as well as the juxtaposition of the day with the year. Every time that an archaeologist will assign something to is further divisible into units more important in the past present days the time represents. Years are made of months, months of days, days of hours, hours of minutes and so on. It may seem an impossible task to understand the duration

of each of these units at the same time, but that is what we must try to do if we are to get to grips with the contemporary world. Certainly, long duration is vital for archaeologists to understand, partly as a counterpoint to the shorter durations we can uncover more readily and as the more accurate reflection of the relationship between, say, a person and a house or town.

TOWARDS AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF DURATION

Archaeology is inherently performative, from the repetitions of certain practices in the field to the building up of narratives around material things, narratives that become widely adopted as accepted histories of people and places. Even the most objective or scientific gathering of data involves a level of subjectivity, story-telling and imagination that is some way from the rigid application of fieldwork techniques aspired to by some in the field's past and present. If we acknowledge the ubiquity of these virtual enactments, performances and stories in our work, and we choose to look at the daily lives of people in the present day, people we know and can name, it becomes imperative that we learn to mediate the relationship between the nature of our work and the nature of those people's lives in as complementary a way as possible. An archaeological understanding of duration and how different and concurrent durations are lived and performed is essential to the future of the discipline if it wants to engage with the contemporary world while avoiding the more obvious ethical problems of treating fellow citizens as scientific subjects while simultaneously placing them at the centre of subjective narratives.

To understand duration, we must learn to treat durations as distinct events, such as Hseih and his year outdoors, rather than containers within which a variety of things happen. Of course life is never so simple as to allow us a clear picture in this way, but we ought to experiment with, on occasion, leaving the rush to complexity behind and focusing on the enduring simple. We do not need to draw,

photograph or analyse here, at least not while we are still learning. To understand a car we should not draw it but hear it drive into and out of earshot. To understand a building we should dedicate ourselves wholly to the short consultation period over whether it should be torn down rather than drawing it and tying it down to a date and architect, as in art history.

Archaeology does not deal well with small time periods. Generally speaking, they are invisible in our work and we only retrospectively impose approximate dates. Not so in the contemporary city. I know there are seconds because it took me five to write this sentence. Minuscule periods of time are revealed whenever we wait for the lights to change and cross the road, or when a car bumps a kerb, or when we sit and eat a sandwich. All of these human-material interactions can be thought of in terms of how they both form and are formed by durations (the traffic light is on a fixed timer but I run because I am late). In life most immediately meaningful durations are short. We should start small and progress to connecting our found short durations with others – the old archaeological adage of working from the known to the unknown.

When we understand durations as distinct events and understand short durations, we can begin to build more complex understandings of how the contemporary city exists as an ongoing series of performances. We may say that a shopping centre was built, but for some it happened quickly whereas for others it dragged on and on. We may know a nightclub for years, but the two weeks in which we fight for it to not be demolished may be the time in which that relationship is truly defined, when the building comes to mean more to more people than it has before.

It may not be immediately obvious why archaeology needs performance research to fill the gap I have described here in the ways I have suggested. But archaeology has flirted with performance studies for many years and I see reason only to try to strengthen that relationship. Suffice it to say that contemporary archaeology needs to develop a distinct

approach to duration if it is to escape the bonds of traditionalist approaches, and the key to understanding duration is to understand how it is performed and experienced. Duration is, after all, *time happening*. If this short piece prompts a performance researcher to talk to an archaeologist or an archaeologist to read the rest of the volume, we will be well on the way.

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