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Archaeology and Art



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Introduction

Archaeology has a long history of parallel development with art, and within that relationship, we see a huge range of different nuances. Here, I will focus on evolving connections between the theory and practice of art and that of archaeology. I will, largely, confine discussion to manifestations of “archaeology and art” that have arisen from within archaeology itself. Many artists have taken inspiration from archaeology, its practitioners, and its methods, and although the works produced by these artists are a very important part of the symbiosis of the two fields, there is simply not space for a full review. So, there will be very little discussion here of “art about archaeology,” although its existence and volume must be remembered as an essential element of the background to what follows (the term “creative archaeology” encompasses a wider set of practice and theory). It is, of course, not easy to enact such a split. In some cases, specific art works referencing archaeology have inspired archaeological thinking. Here, such works will be discussed. In others,

archaeologists have developed creative practices that closely resemble or are intentionally described as art works and these too will be included. Lastly, and perhaps most worthy of fore mention here, outside of the Western scholarly tradition, the relationship between archaeology and art is rather different because archaeology and art themselves can be conceived in different ways. I have opted here to discuss this in the International Perspectives section below, while the main discussion will focus on what “archaeology and art” looks like to me, close up, as a European archaeologist, and its manifestations within the discipline of archaeology.

Suffice it to say that although a particular direction has been taken here, there is a wider world of “archaeology and art” in which the definitions and divisions used here do not matter, and recognizing that openness is essential to creative thinking. The following attempt at ordering recent thought may provide a way in, but is really only an attempt to highlight the wide range of interests and approaches that will and do find a home in “archaeology and art.” Ultimately, the idea of “archaeology and art” is a global discussion open to all.

Definition

“Archaeology and art” describes a wide-ranging body of theory and practice addressing the ways in which different engagements with art –

principally with artistic practice – can help to create new ways of thinking archaeologically about the world, its histories, and its futures. It is, at its best, an open-ended field bringing together a wide variety of scholars and practitioners who place collaboration, creativity, and experimentation centrally in their work. Many key “archaeology and art” projects feature artists and archaeologists working together to combine, or to contrast, their approaches to understanding the contemporary world. For clarity here, a distinction is drawn between “archaeology and art” and “archaeology of art,” although the two will necessarily overlap, for instance, in the excavation of Francis Bacon’s Dublin studio in 1998 (O’Connor 2014) which has gone on to make substantial contributions to both. Where the “archaeology of art” may be more ordinarily taken to mean the occurrence of art objects as a subject of archaeological analysis, “archaeology and art,” as the “and” suggests, is usually an effort to suspend objective archaeological analysis and examine the results of collaborative engagement, whether explicitly working with artists or seeking to use artistic histories, theory, and practice in ways that go beyond simple appropriation. As such, “archaeology and art” finds itself more readily engaged with contemporary art (or perhaps, more specifically, with art post-dating the advent of Surrealism), although the two disciplines enjoy a long-shared trajectory of interrelation. From antiquarian representations of their contemporary archaeological worlds, through the interrelation of artists, ethnography, and museums and their role in the development of archaeology as a social science from the late nineteenth into the mid-twentieth century, to the almost identical funding structures imposed on (certain parts of) the two in the public realm of the late twentieth century, archaeology and art have rarely been easily separable.

Historical Background

Early antiquarian depictions of historical and archaeological sites in more artistic than scientific ways will be well known. From William Camden

onward, the investigation and description of ancient sites and landscapes went alongside visual representations that sought often to depict those archaeological remains, their investigation, and their landscape context. This tradition perhaps reached its apotheosis in *Our Ancient Monuments*, an outcome of work to establish the first national heritage list in England by Pitt-Rivers in the 1880s. Here, photographs and scientific archaeological drawings of sites are joined by watercolor depictions by W.S. Tomkin, some in a broadly Arts and Crafts style that works to connect not just archaeology and art but developing archaeological theory and practice with a (then) contemporary artistic movement.

In the early twentieth century, notably in Europe, a particular interrelation developed between art, ethnography, and museums that gives us, perhaps, the origin of archaeology as a social science in the contemporary sense and the beginnings of the relationship between archaeology and art that exists today. With new forms of art developing through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including but not limited to Surrealism, that put greater emphasis on the daily lives of people, ideas of psychoanalysis began to influence art and ideas of “inner minds” and “the subconscious” became an accepted and regular artistic subject. Many artists undertook early ethnographic excursions, a coincidence of their quests to discover the nature and manifestations of “primitive” or “savage” minds and their (for many at least) ability to self-fund expeditions. The result, combined with contemporary developing theory in anthropology, was ideas connecting the subconscious mind, human society, and material culture in such a way as to have a direct impact on early ethnographic museum displays (Kelly 2007). Although archaeology has a longer history than this, it is perhaps at this point that we see the emergence of that part of archaeology that is an academic social science.

In much of the Western world at least, neoliberal politics in the second half of the twentieth century has led to private sector concerns dictating much of the development of the built environment. In the United Kingdom, this combined with a particular kind of cultural aspiration promoted

by Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government in the 1980s (but echoed elsewhere in the world) to create a situation wherein private finance led development directed in part by a body of guidance known as the PPGs (Planning Policy Guidance). These were influential in the development in the United Kingdom of private-sector archaeology, but also promoted green space, playgrounds, art and more, to be created alongside development. Thus we see, and are still very much within, a world where archaeology and art both exist politically and in legislation as aspirations for responsible, sustainable development, both as mitigation and as tangible narratives for changing landscapes.

The three key aspects of the history of archaeology and art briefly presented here do not necessarily run into each other as a chronology might but instead give three different trajectories of that relationship to bear in mind. They all manifest in different ways in the contemporary world and in academic thinking. However, those trajectories – visualization, theorization, legislation – are worth keeping in mind.

Key Issues/Current Debates

At their best, archaeology and art come together in a spirit of collaboration and experimentation. The full range of expressions of that relationship at one level work together to provide a body of work that enables creativity within archaeology, whether in practice or in theory. There are, however, a few themes worth highlighting for their specific contributions to the wider field.

Archaeological Theory and Art

Perhaps the strongest central theme in archaeology and art is the bringing together of aspects of the two disciplines to drive archaeological theory and practice forward. Colin Renfrew, in 2003, wrote of the potential for archaeological engagement with contemporary art to change the way we understand the past. In *Figuring It Out: The Parallel Visions of Archaeologist and Artists*, Renfrew highlights a similarity in how practitioners of the two disciplines think about the connections

between people, things, and landscapes, going further to draw an analogy between the visitor to an art gallery, or viewer of a sculpture, and an archaeologist uncovering an artifact for the first time. But this is more than an analogy, he writes, their tasks, coming to understanding of the world through a primary encounter with the result of a creative moment, are the same. Renfrew takes his discussion beyond representation and visualization to encouraging an understanding of artistic process as a means to better understanding human creativity in the archaeological past.

“Archaeology and art” features prominently in *After Modernity*, Rodney Harrison and John Schofield's 2010 work on archaeological approaches to the contemporary past. As part of a wider chapter on working between disciplines, they highlight three relationships between archaeology and art: “art as an archaeological record (or the archaeology of art), archaeological investigation as performance (or archaeology as art), and art as interpretation, narrative and characterization (or art as archaeology).” Their outline works well and has proven influential in much recent writing and presentation on archaeology and art. It does not necessarily describe an equal relationship between the two disciplines, with art perhaps being elevated to a position of understanding to which archaeology should aspire or attempt to emulate (rather than a true collaboration as equals). Despite this minor quibble, *After Modernity* remains the most useful widely available work that discusses archaeology and art within the body of a wider discipline of archaeological thought.

Ian Russell and Andrew Cochrane's *Art and Archaeology: Collaborations, Conversations, Criticisms* (Russell and Cochrane 2014) focuses on archaeology and art coming together in practice and primary research, bringing together a number of practitioners for whom direct engagement with art is central to their thinking. The book, and the essays it contains, stresses the importance of creative collaboration, “archaeology and art” through doing. The work is notable for its inclusion of a number of “creative archaeologists,” archaeologists (of different kinds) who regularly build creative expression into their

archaeological practice. As such, it stands as something of a call to action for archaeologists to let themselves be inspired by art and to let that inspiration take their archaeology to new places without necessarily worrying about where those places are or how that might be critiqued.

In 2010, the exhibition *Unearthed* at the Sainsbury Centre for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures saw a collaboration between archaeologists and artists use Japanese Jōmon dogū to investigate thematically the potential for archaeology and art to influence each other at the level of interpretation (Bailey et al. 2010).

Archaeologies of Art/Art About Archaeology

Although, as stated above, archaeology of art is a different thing to “archaeology and art” as presented here, and although I have restricted myself to discussion of that relationship as it appears within archaeology, it is worth making mention of a few key projects that have worked between the two disciplines. The following stand out for both their innovative approaches to material, whether the impetus comes from archaeology or art, and for their regular occurrence in archaeological writing on art.

Tate Thames Dig by Mark Dion saw the artist, with volunteers, collect material from the Thames Foreshore adjacent to the two London Tate sites. Material was then sorted and classified. The work was first shown as part of the *Art Now* series at Tate Modern between 1999 and 2000 and thereafter entered Tate’s collection. Objects collected as part of the project sit in a large mahogany cabinet sorted into various categories, but with no further interpretation. The work avoids chronological ordering of the objects which are presented grouped by broad types (pottery, metal). The viewer is invited to create their own interpretation of the objects seen and their interrelation. Cole and Dion’s 1999 book *Archaeology* focuses on the work and other of his works that address similarly archaeological themes. The book includes an essay by Colin Renfrew covering themes later revisited in *Figuring It Out*.

In 1998, a team of archaeologists and conservators excavated Francis Bacon’s studio at 7 Reece Mews in London in advance of its being

dismantled and installed in Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane between 1998 and 2001. As well as the archaeological understanding of the space and its contents created by the project, the work also sought to investigate the connections between artistic and archaeological practices. It inspired a number of written pieces and a plenary session at the World Archaeological Congress in Dublin in 2008.

Journalist, artist, and archaeologist Christine Finn has created a number of projects that work between archaeology and art, but of particular interest is the series *Leave-Home-Stay* in which she addressed, through both archaeology and art (and reportage), the process of dealing with the house she inherited from her parents. The series has involved an excavation, open days, exhibitions of artifacts, and writing on the subject and brings together a wide spread of approaches to the space, from the architectural-historical to the intimate and difficult personal attachment to the house as a home (Finn 2014, 2017).

Performance

It is worth making particular mention of the relationship between archaeology and performance. The archaeological interest in art has most often been interested in sculpture, photography, and film. We see a clear concern with performativity although this is often when, as discussed by Harrison and Schofield, an art work has included a conscious recording and presentation of a process of investigation; archaeological investigation as performance. Performance itself has seen less engagement from archaeologists. Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks’ *Theatre/Archaeology* (Pearson and Shanks 2001) discussed this issue, seeking to take the connection between archaeology and performance “beyond the theatrical paradigm,” an aspiration roughly equivalent to the move past performativity mentioned above. Mike Pearson has produced further work in this area, and *In Comes I* (Pearson 2007) and *Marking Time* (Pearson 2013) are both exemplary “archaeology and art” although published as part of a Performance Studies list.

Performance differs from other visual media in its ephemerality and temporary nature. It is,

perhaps, harder to engage with for archaeologists because it relies on presence at the time of performance (although performances are recorded and “performance re-enactments” take place). Despite this, working with live performance is essential for understanding space and duration, not least for thinking about archaeology; not casting it as a performance, but understanding it as a durational act in the present moment.

Art-Archaeology

Lastly here, we can step away from the “monolith” approach to archaeology and art, the way I have presented here as start points a number of key texts and works taken from a vast body of available work, and acknowledge a messier world of archaeology and art that is going on on a daily basis around the world. Here, “archaeology and art” (or art-archaeology, or art/archaeology, or artaeology, or creative archaeology) exists more as ongoing practical experimentation between archaeology and art. The results may be presented or published, or they may equally validly not be, but connecting everyone working in this area, which includes all of the authors already mentioned, is the desire to allow archaeological practice to be affected and changed by experimentation with art, whether this happens at the level of general creative inspiration or through specific collaboration.

In Europe, much of this kind of experimentation takes place under the umbrella of contemporary archaeology and much has been presented at the various conferences of the *Contemporary and Historical Archaeology in Theory* (CHAT) group since its inception in 2003. Common at CHAT conferences are approaches to archaeology that are intentionally experimental and the extension of this to artistically inspired experimentation (or collaboration) has proven to be an easy one. Art is now regularly recognized among the conference’s sub-themes. The result is a kind of archaeology that while not quite fully anti-disciplinary does intentionally blur the boundaries of what archaeology can be and do.

Projects that demonstrate this aspect of “archaeology and art” include the *Papay Gyro Nights* art festival in 2013. This saw

archaeologists Antonia Thomas and Daniel Lee undertake an archaeological residency at the festival, bringing creative archaeological practice to Papa Westray in Orkney (Thomas and Lee 2017). Also of interest is the new creative engagement journal *Epoiesen* edited by Shawn Graham, which is beginning to showcase interesting artistically inspired contemporary archaeology including *en-counter-maps* by Gísli Pálsson and Oscar Aldred (Pálsson and Aldred 2017). Between 2007 and 2009, the group Artists in Archaeology (later Art + Archaeology), led by Helen Wickstead, produced a series of artistic residencies alongside the *Stonehenge Riverside Project*, primarily to investigate the archaeological process through art, but also inspiring a number of other creative archaeological outcomes for individual participants (Wickstead 2008, 2014). Archaeologist Carolyn White’s ongoing collaboration with photographer and philosopher Steven Seidenberg, including *The Archaeology of Artists’ Studios*, has focused on the potential for interdisciplinarity to change how archaeology and art can think differently about space (Seidenberg and White (n.d.); White and Seidenberg 2017). James Dixon has produced a series of projects using artistically inspired practices in public archaeology to differently understand how we might approach local places and sites, and live in or develop them accordingly (Dixon 2017). Ursula Frederick brings her artistic background to contemporary archaeology, both in expanding the range of types of site that might be of archaeological interest and understanding them in ways that need an expanded, refined archaeology, but also in creative experimentation with archaeological recording to produce an allied archaeological-artistic record of sites (Frederick 2014).

I have presented a rather unequal relationship between archaeology and art. This is intentional. The bringing together of archaeology and art, whether through collaboration, or to produce art works, or to produce archaeological products, happens in more ways than can be covered here. It happens in more complicated ways than will benefit from the simple explanations I have provided. I have chosen to focus on manifestations of the close relationship between archaeology and

art within archaeological discourse and publishing and as such have intentionally ignored more than half of what the wider archaeology and art world might be reasonably considered to be.

But, I repeat, if “archaeology and art” is a thing, it is a thing about openness and experimentation, and will mean a different thing to every person who engages, if they are thinking creatively beyond the referencing of texts.

International Perspectives

Archaeology and art exist, of course, across the world. The relationship between the two is highly variable although outside Europe and the USA one seems more likely to encounter archaeologies of art or art about archaeology than the kind of collaborative, experimental work presented here, although it does exist. There are many reasons for this, not least that the relationship between art and the daily lives of people is equally variable wherever we go, and different art forms dominate different places.

We should recognize that the blurring of disciplinary boundaries is an aspiration that principally arises from positions of security. The freedom to self-ascribe permission to disregard established practices should not be taken for granted. Of course, in most cases, this kind of experimentation is undertaken from a position of respect for the disciplines involved where proper knowledge of the two is recognized as a necessary precursor to pushing at the edges. Elsewhere, the same respect and knowledge may result in intentionally not-experimenting.

Global “archaeology and art” has benefitted in recent years from prominent placement at international conferences, notably the World Archaeological Congress (WAC). At WAC 6 in Dublin, a strong archaeology and art theme ran through the conference, inspired by the tenth anniversary of the excavation of the Francis Bacon studio. The aforementioned volume edited by Ian Russell and Andrew Cochrane (Russell and Cochrane 2014) arose partly from this conference, as well as their earlier collaborations around archaeology, art, and

visualization, for instance, as presented at the CHAT conference in Bristol in 2006.

Archaeology and art was again a central theme at WAC 8 in Kyoto in 2016. Here, a number of sessions in the area, including art-archaeology and archaeology of art, ran alongside two exhibitions, *Art and Archaeology: The Silent Voices of Materials and Soil* (cur. Sahoko Aki, Masakage Murano, Oki Nakamura, and Toshio Matsui) (Museum of Kyoto 2016) at Museum of Kyoto, and *Garden of Fragments* (cur. Sahoko Aki and Peter Matthews) at Ryosokuin temple. There were also a number of other events bringing archaeology and art together. The particular Japanese perspective on archaeology and art presented at WAC 8, and through the preceding 2 years of work by the Kyoto Art and Archaeology Forum, has shown a relationship between the two much more centered on aesthetics. The Japanese context however leans toward a role of aesthetic thinking in daily life that may not, perhaps, exist so explicitly elsewhere and which will provide a rich source of inspiration for non-Japanese archaeologists in the future.

Future Directions

The key future direction for “archaeology and art” is to do more of the same. As has been stated throughout here, “archaeology and art” as a sub-field of archaeology is intentionally open, collaborative, creative, and experimental. It benefits from not having an overt agenda. More creative archaeologists from around the world should meet and work together. Ultimately, “archaeology and art” should aim toward ways of doing archaeology and thinking archaeologically that create better understanding of people, places, and things, and that will happen best if it works to become more inclusive of all takes on what “archaeology” and “art” (and “and”) can mean.

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