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1289Archaeological Dialogues 18 (2) 172–176 © Cambridge University Press 2011
doi:10.1017/S13802038110002371290 **Art and archaeology. A modern allegory** Ian Alden Russell*

1292 On the foot of the recent discussion of excavation in *Archaeological dialogues*
 1293 (18, 1), Rodney Harrison's questioning of the viability of excavation and
 1294 depth as viable tropes for conceptualizing and communicating archaeology's
 1295 epistemological processes is both timely and pertinent. Beginning where
 1296 Harrison finished, his use of Anselm Kiefer's artistic work as a 'framing'
 1297 device brings me to some intriguing critical trajectories for understanding
 1298 archaeology's modern condition and the possibilities for it at this moment
 1299 through deeper engagements with contemporary art, and visual and material
 1300 gesture and culture.

1301 Many have argued that art and archaeology share a disciplinary history and
 1302 a sensibility, rooted in predisciplinary practices of antiquarianism (Cochrane
 1303 and Russell 2007; Ingold 2011; 2007a; Renfrew 2005; Renfrew, Gosden and
 1304 DeMarrais 2004; Russell, forthcoming; 2008; 2006; Shanks 1991; Smiles
 1305 and Moser 2005; Wickstead 2008). The more I reflect on this assertion,
 1306 though, the more I think that there is a misconception in this proposition
 1307 that points to a fundamental problem both in the way archaeology is
 1308 encountering art and in how archaeology (as well as, perhaps, other academic
 1309 subjects) conducts itself as a discipline. It is certainly true that archaeology Q19
 1310 is as much a mode of material and visual expression as contemporary art,
 1311 and it is indeed critical for archaeologists to be reflexively aware of their
 1312 roles as cultural producers in contemporary society. There is, however,
 1313 a critical difference between archaeology and art that is rarely discussed
 1314 within the emerging discourse of art–archaeology partnerships. In art, the
 1315 artists or 'makers' are neither the authorizers of the critical discourse which
 1316 interprets their work nor the authors of the discipline's history. In archaeology
 1317 (and indeed other academic subjects as well), these roles are not clearly
 1318 established. The producers of archaeology are also themselves the authors
 1319 of the critical discourse which interprets the material and visual expression of
 1320 archaeological practice and the authors of their own history. Perhaps some
 1321 might argue that this is a more holistic approach to cultural production, and
 1322 this may be the case if we approach archaeology as a separate and distinct
 1323 discipline and practice. In the creation of 'art–archaeology' analogies and
 1324 the searching for models of working and expression within artistic practice, I
 1325 would argue that this leads, however, to either a decontextualization of artistic
 1326 practice (i.e. abstracted from its own critical discourse) or a reification of the
 1327 archaeologist as a universal arbiter in the discourses of materiality and time or
 1328 both.

1329 I commend Harrison in his identification and filling of an urgent
 1330 absence of critical context for the developing practice of archaeology

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1331 of the contemporary past, and I also commend him for his interpretive
 1332 engagement with artists' work in the process of his intellectual inspiration.
 1333 I do not wish to invalidate these efforts. Rather I hope to continue in
 1334 their spirit to provide critical context to his engagement with artists' work
 1335 to demonstrate how deeper critical engagements with artists as cultural
 1336 producers within wider critical discourses can enhance such interdisciplinary
 1337 conversations. Furthermore, while Harrison intended to propose a new trope
 1338 for 'archaeology-as-surface-survey and assemblage', I propose that his paper
 1339 is also an example of an emerging discursive trope of 'archaeology as art'.

1340 It is not surprising to read archaeologists responding to and being inspired
 1341 by Anselm Kiefer's studio complex at Barjac in southern France, especially
 1342 given the currency of Sophie Fiennes's documentary of the site in *Over your*
 1343 *cities grass will grow* (2010). Its scale is sensational and evokes a sense
 1344 of the Romantic sublime as a way of engendering a humility within our
 1345 contemporary sociocultural moment. Though Kiefer's project may evoke a
 1346 certain humbling in its visitors, it also requires an artistic hubris not dissimilar
 1347 to that of John Ruskin and his aesthetics of ruins. In this way, it does speak
 1348 very directly to the sublime qualities of modern archaeology as a means of
 1349 placing contemporary society at a humble position within the grander cycles
 1350 and processes of time. It also reveals perhaps an attraction within archaeology
 1351 to the independent agency of the artist as the maker of worlds.

1352 Harrison admits that his use of Kiefer's Barjac studio complex is primarily
 1353 a narrative device and a point of inspiration. So while this leads to a
 1354 cursory engagement with Kiefer's artistic career and work, it creates an
 1355 opportunity for an interesting critical conversation. Beyond Barjac, Kiefer's
 1356 work and artistic process are very appropriate for a critique of archaeological
 1357 epistemologies. Working unconventionally with the traces and fragments of
 1358 industrial and craft processes (straw, ash, clay, lead, shellac and so on), Kiefer
 1359 is perhaps best known for richly worked painted surfaces which operate as
 1360 meditative mediations of memory through materials.

1361 His paintings are often interpreted as unfinished; that is, they do not
 1362 represent permanent or fixed ideas or material realities. Rather, Kiefer imbeds
 1363 time as a medium in his works. The material fragility of the substances he
 1364 incorporates into his paintings shift and change almost imperceptibly over
 1365 the *longue durée*, yielding a tense durationality and awareness of not only the
 1366 fragility of the contemporary moment but also its inevitable transformation
 1367 over time. His work grapples to manifest an ephemerality of the material
 1368 object, the monumental and the artistic gesture that transcends the duration
 1369 of a human life.

1370 In his paintings, Kiefer locates himself as a processor of history through the
 1371 working and reworking of materials and symbols. Plain or everyday materials
 1372 are transformed into symbols of historic moments, places and meanings
 1373 through a literal imbedding within a 'new' ground of thick painterly surface.
 1374 This conscious reworking of historic memory and symbols of place through a
 1375 construction of internal logic and meaning links Kiefer's work to what some
 1376 have termed a style of 'new symbolism', with Kiefer said to be its master.

1377 Though working with materials, Kiefer avoids an objective deployment
 1378 of things and rather approaches history as subject and historical memory as

1379 medium, implicating the viewer in the resolution of the material language of
 1380 his paintings. His aesthetic, in its destructive and perhaps depressive qualities,
 1381 elicits emotional responses from the viewer. This is perhaps where his Barjac
 1382 studio project and his paintings unite in relation to a critical encounter with
 1383 archaeology. Less concerned with objective narrative, Kiefer utilizes affect as
 1384 a primary interface with the materiality of his work.

1385 This is perhaps what both separates and unites archaeology and
 1386 contemporary art. The discourses of aesthetics and beauty foreground the
 1387 importance of rigorously engaging with affect as a serious component
 1388 of work. In archaeology, issues of disciplinary aesthetic and critical
 1389 affect are, at best, secondary to the production of objectives of
 1390 archaeological excavation, documentation, survey, recording, reconstruction
 1391 and representation. Archaeology's epistemological intentionalities are firmly
 1392 grounded in objectivity and positivism, while art (at least as far as Kiefer
 1393 is concerned) is largely based in affect. Thus it is understandable how
 1394 archaeologists in their self-authorized renderings of objective material worlds
 1395 would find it attractive to establish an analogous relationship between the
 1396 artist and the archaeologist. Doing so establishes the archaeologist as a
 1397 critical authority over the objective materiality of the contemporary world
 1398 while simultaneously allowing for an uncritical utilization of affect in the
 1399 perpetuation of the aura of modern archaeological process.

1400 Harrison has rightly indicated that the trope of archaeology as excavation
 1401 is problematic as it has the tendency to impose an incorrect distance between
 1402 the contemporary agency of archaeology and the rendering of the past. While
 1403 I am intrigued by his proposition of a new trope of archaeology-as-surface-
 1404 survey and assemblage, I am hesitant to wholly disregard the archaeological
 1405 depth metaphor. The archaeological metaphor is perhaps the most immediate
 1406 and obvious conceptual bridge across numerous modern disciplines. So while
 1407 I agree that the use of the depth metaphor as an interpretive trope is
 1408 problematic, I propose that the tremendous social and cultural currency of
 1409 the depth metaphor has extended the metaphor of modern archaeology to
 1410 the extent that we should consider it a modern allegory.

1411 The implication of considering archaeology as allegory is that it shifts
 1412 critical engagement with the rhetoric of depth and layers from objectivity
 1413 to affect and meaning-making. For example, *The frozen city* (2010) by
 1414 Simon Fujiwara proposed, through a fabricated archaeology, to reveal the
 1415 city beneath Frieze Art Fair. Fujiwara's installation leverages the value
 1416 of the modern archaeological allegory for the purpose of comment on
 1417 contemporary art societies and markets. It is a testament to the ongoing
 1418 fascination within contemporary art with the epistemological structures and
 1419 conceptual propositions of modern science and the capacity of archaeology
 1420 to provide visual and material objects as representational expressions of
 1421 modern society and culture. A decade earlier, Mark Dion's *Tate Thames*
 1422 *dig* (1999) similarly utilized the allegorical value of the aesthetic of modern
 1423 archaeological process. Taking the form of a mass, participatory 'excavation'
 1424 of the Thames riverbank in London and the formal typological arrangement
 1425 of the 'finds' and exhibition in turn-of-the-century exhibition cases, Dion
 1426 affected a proposition of the structures of mediation within archaeology as

1427 a formal aesthetic. And perhaps most sensational was the excavation and
 1428 removal of painter Francis Bacon's studio from London and its reconstruction
 1429 in Dublin by curators and conservators at the Dublin City Gallery, the Hugh
 1430 Lane and archaeologists from Margaret Gowen and Company Ltd in 1999
 1431 (see O'Connor 2008).

1432 These appropriations of modern archaeology as aesthetic form and allegory
 1433 point to a currency of the modern discipline. Unfortunately, it is a currency
 1434 which has mostly been used by contemporary artists, eliciting provocative
 1435 responses within the archaeological community, some of whom have voiced
 1436 concerns over the appropriation of the discipline within artistic practice (see
 1437 Renfrew 1999; Bailey 2008). However, I would argue that this is not a one-
 1438 way process of appropriation. The utilization of artists' processes (especially
 1439 when abstracted from their critical context) within archaeological discourse
 1440 is equally an extension of a metaphor for subjective, affective and aesthetic
 1441 creativity and thus equally a modern allegory. Whether it is Richard Long
 1442 and Antony Gormley for Colin Renfrew, Anselm Kiefer and Simon Fujiwara
 1443 for Rodney Harrison or Didier Appelt and Roman Ondak for myself, the
 1444 appropriation of the artist or their work as an affective framing device for
 1445 discourse is an allegory for the negotiation of the objective: affective schism
 1446 within modern archaeology practice.

1447 The assertion of the maintenance of the depth metaphor as allegory in no
 1448 way precludes the critical development of other modes of discourse such as
 1449 Harrison has argued in his paper. Rather, it requires that ongoing critical
 1450 discourse be continued and enhanced. What I would suggest is, rather than
 1451 asserting a 'modern' (i.e. 'new') solution to how we should self-conceptualize,
 1452 that we engage in a sustained critical analysis of the strategies we deploy in
 1453 establishing our discipline's epistemological authority and to what extent
 1454 we are implicated in perpetuating modernity's ontological foundation in the
 1455 notion of 'progress'.

1456 Currently within contemporary art practice, an increasing number of
 1457 artists are exploring lateral dynamics for disciplinary development, and
 1458 specifically the possibility for a transgress-based ontology rather than a
 1459 progress-based ontology. Debates over what may or may not be 'movements'
 1460 have been attempted under the terms 'relationalism' or 'altermodern' (e.g.
 1461 Bishop 2004; Bourriaud 2002; 2009). Suffice it to state here that artists are
 1462 now realizing work which actively resists categorization and transgresses
 1463 disciplinary boundaries. That said, this lateral slippage is not a flattening of
 1464 artistic discourse to a two-dimensional navigation of a contemporary surface.
 1465 Far from it; artists are more deeply exploring the cinematic, durationality
 1466 and time itself as a medium within their work, exploring the malleability
 1467 and tractability of time within artistic gesture. Thus it is not a dismissal of
 1468 bounded depth for mobility on surface. It is a four-dimensional transgression
 1469 between depth and surface resulting not in fixed gesture but in percolations
 1470 of time and material (e.g. Witmore 2006b).

1471 I wholeheartedly agree with Harrison's assertion that 'what we need more
 1472 than anything else is a series of detailed, long-term, longitudinal studies which
 1473 demonstrate the actual contribution archaeology can make to understanding
 1474 the present, rather than a series of justifications for it' (p. XX). As with Q20

1475 artistic practice, it is critical that we continue to make work and that our
 1476 work engage with our contemporary moment. While I would not call for
 1477 justifications as well, I would encourage that we simultaneously develop a
 1478 sustained critical discourse around the intellectual strategies, narrative tropes
 1479 and aesthetic forms and affects we deploy in our work. While inspired by the
 1480 rigour and skill with which contemporary artists negotiate material, time and
 1481 affect, we must not allow ourselves to assume an analogous positioning of the
 1482 archaeologist within society, without responsibility for critical reflexivity or
 1483 historical context. While complex and at times overwhelming, archaeologists
 1484 are creators, authors and critics who work with rich and potent affective
 1485 allegories of modern objectivity to produce narratives, visuals, performances,
 1486 gestures and material expressions of human agency over time. In occupying
 1487 our own historical, intellectual, social and cultural context, we can at best
 1488 hope to know ourselves and our intentionalities and to reveal both by being
 1489 fully present within the manifestation of our archaeological agencies.

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1492

Archaeological intervention in the past, present and future tense

1493

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1495

I was trained as a processual archaeologist in the 1960s, and as a result my
 1496 interests and research, along with the vocabulary I have used to express these,
 1497 have followed a different trajectory from those paths that have emerged out
 1498 of what we once called postprocessual archaeology. This is not to say that
 1499 we do not have common beacons. I believe we certainly do. To this end, I am
 1500 writing this dialogue with Harrison's piece to rename the 'archaeology of the
 1501 contemporary past' as 'archaeology in and of the present' and 'for the future'.
 1502 I like the new name for contemporary past archaeology, but archaeologists
 1503 in and of the present should not forget about their own past.¹

1504

Grounded in the then contemporary methods and theory of archaeology,
 1505 the Garbage Project has recorded data in great detail on 192.2 tons of
 1506 fresh garbage collected from 20,416 individual households in seven different
 1507 metropolitan areas, and has excavated and recorded 45.3 tons of refuse

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¹As one small example concerning intellectual genealogy, which Harrison tends to blur in his article, when I came to teach at the University of Arizona in 1971, Michael Schiffer was a graduate student focused on the archaeology of the past. I asked students to study the relation between attitudes, behaviour, and material culture in contemporary Tucson, so they could understand how archaeology works in describing a familiar contemporary society. I involved them in the founding of the Garbage Project in 1973 for the same reason. My friend Michael started his first study of the present a few years later (Schiffer, Downing and McCarthy 1981) and has continued to make major contributions ever since (see, for example, Schiffer 1991; 1992; and Schiffer, Butts and Grimm 1994).