Towards an ethics of oblivion and forgetting: The parallax view

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Introduction

The archaeological endeavor is founded on a belief that the revelation of the past through discovery, documentation, interpretation and, at times, preservation is a categorical imperative – that there is an ethical obligation to preserve the past for future generations. Through sampling, the processing of artifacts, laboratory work and survey, the hope is to create knowledge or at least preserve future possibilities for better or different knowledges of the past. This paper, in the spirit of symmetrical archaeology, suggests that while archaeology is often presented as being primarily concerned with documenting and preserving the past, such narratives oversimplify the complex tensions between absences and presences, documentation and omission, that fuel archaeological endeavour and affect (see Giannachi *et al.* 2012; Shanks 2012: 35-36, 133-139; Shanks and Witmore 2010: 273; Shanks 2007; Witmore 2007; Olivier 2004).[1] It is proposed that far from being a discipline that is concerned only with preserving things, archaeology can also be a discipline of forgetting (see Borić 2010; Buchli 2010; Mills 2010; Meskell 2002, 2004). Underappreciated and under-critiqued, the role and influence of absences, forgetting, decay and oblivion in the archaeological process may provide fertile intellectual ground for a more ethically informed archaeological endeavour.

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[1] For a substantive archive of the discussions around symmetrical archcaeology by Timothy Webmoor and Christopher Witmore, see: http://humanitieslab.stanford.edu/23/Home [Last accessed June 13, 2012]. And for a list of publications pertaining to symmetrical archaeology, see: http://humanitieslab.stanford.edu/23/814 [Last accessed June 13, 2012]. Also see the special section of papers on symmetrical archaeology in *World Archaeology* 39 (4) (2007).

A circle forgotten remembered

In the west of Ireland, a circle of stones sits on an open expanse of rock – a stark contrast of formal geometric gesture within an environment of slow, inevitable, organic change and decay. This is Richard Long's *A circle in Ireland* made by the artist in 1975. This description may seem brief and insufficient – lacking location, material, measurements, history, and so on, and while I would like to give you more information, I have been asked not to.

In 2007, I wrote to Long enquiring about whether he might be interested in revisiting this early sculptural work with some archaeologists as part of the build up to the Sixth World Archaeological Congress's events exploring relationships between art and archaeology.[2] I received a very pleasant letter from the artist stating his wish that the work be allowed to pass into anonymity, without any intervention or addition – even information. My curatorial fidelity to artistic intent moved me to play my part in the passing of this work into oblivion – or at least informal memory or vernacular history.[3]

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[2] For information on the art and archaeology events of the Sixth World Archaeological Congress, see: http://www.amexhibition.com [Last accessed June 13, 2012].

[3] It should be noted that curation of artwork is not fixed to artistic intent. There are many layers of subjective interpretation in the processes of acquisition, conservation, cataloging, installation, curation and presentation of artistic work. These processes often involve multiple people as well. Thus, I prefer to think in terms of fidelity as opposed to authenticity in relation to the presentation of work, as fidelity suggests an equal place both for my own (or others') subjective presence in the management, interpretation and presentation of artistic work but that this presence is a mediation between our own subjectivities and our perceived sense of the spirit of the artist's work. Also of interest is a recent critical ethnographic engagement with the processes of acquisition and conservation of art work, see: Van Saaze, V. 2009. Doing artworks. An ethnographic account of the acquisition and conservation of *No Ghost just Shell*. *Krisis: Journal for Contemporary Philosophy* 1: 20-32.

At the same time, my disciplinary intentions as an archaeologist to document and record the past struggled somewhat with this request.

Complicating my ethical tension, after receiving Long's letter I learned of another artwork by a contemporary artist named Sean Lynch. Lynch is known for a style that seamlessly weaves history, memory, place and image into his art. With some projects, he appears to play the role of an antiquarian, local historian, museum curator and even an archaeologist. Lynch's work was a color photograph modestly titled *Finding Richard Long: A Circle in Ireland, from 1975, was found close to Doolin Pier. Visitors to the site have seemingly repaired any deterioration to Long's sculpture by continually adding further stones* (2006). This work was part of a wider and continuing project by Lynch to trace the contemporary condition of Richard Long's sculptures in the landscapes of Ireland. Lynch's own role as artist allowed him the freedom to embrace the tension between memory and oblivion. He created a new image, mobilizing the title of the work as the (con)textual document of his artistic act and supplanting Long's intention (though perhaps unknown to Lynch) with his own.

To a person with curatorial sensibilities or sensitivities to intellectual property law, the ethical imperative of honoring authors' or artists' intentions regarding their work may seem obvious. A living person has a request about the treatment of something they themselves have created.[4] An archaeological training, however, does not readily prepare

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4 The recent end to the decade long controversy over the relocation of the famed Barnes Foundation art collection is a potent example of the political tensions surrounding the ethics of adherence to individuals' wishes post mortem (See Rosenbaum 2004; Vogel 2004; The Associated Press 2007; Kennedy 2011; Smith 2012). The collector Dr. Albert C. Barnes (1872-1951) had famously stipulated in the charter of the Barnes Foundation that no picture from his collection, which he placed on display for the public in a purpose-built mansion in Merion, Pennsylvania, could be lent, sold or even moved from the walls of the galleries. Dr. Barnes also famously restricted weekly access to the collection to 1,200 admissions per week, heightening

one to handle artistic or intellectual intent, especially when it runs counter to the

imperative of recording, documenting and, at times, preserving the traces of past actions

that survive. What if the figures of the past want their story to be forgotten? What is our

ethical obligation to a person or people to honor and perhaps facilitate their wishes in

relation to memory or oblivion?

Oblivion and memory: The parallax view

With most archaeological material, one does not have to contend with the

intentions or wishes of the creator of the artefact; and thus, it is possible to be ignorant of

a wish that something be forgotten or allowed to decay and simply continue with our

work of recording and documenting (see Mills 2010). With contemporary action,

something shifts, and where a wish for oblivion is muttered, a conflict arises. Take for

example the nuclear waste disposal project Onkalo operated by Posiva Oy in Finland.[5]

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the cult appeal of the collection's original curation and presentation. From 2002-2004, due to political pressure and failing finances, the Barnes Foundation's board, with the support of the city of Philadelphia, sought and won court approval to relocate the collection of Impressionist and modern artworks, including numerous works by Renoir, Cézanne and Matisse, to a suburb of Philadelphia. A community group known as the Friends of the Barnes Foundation was established in opposition to the relocation, and an 8-year legal battle over the legacy and creative intentions of Dr. Barnes. Ultimately the court's and the Barnes Foundation board's interpretation of what was in the best interest of the collection and of best value to the public was deemed to take priority over the individual yet legally stipulated intentions of Dr. Barnes.

A less controversial example of such tensions is the celebrated success of the expansion of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum of Fenway Court in Boston, Massachusetts by architect Renzo Piano. The result of another wealthy private collector and philanthropist, the museum was opened in 1902 by Isabella Stewart Gardner who later passed away in 1924. In her will, she created an endowment for the museum and stipulated that the museum remain as she arranged it "for the education and enrichment of the public forever" (Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum 2012). Today, the anachronistic curatorial qualities of the museum is part of its success and appeal, as well as its somewhat central location in Boston. The contemporary expansion by Piano, while not disturbing the overall fabric or curatorial program of the museum, it does represent a dramatic shift in the presentation, interpretation and public face of the museum. Boldly proclaimed on the design project website: "[This building] seeks to be, itself, a work of art worthy of taking its place in the Gardner's famous collection." (Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum 2010)

[5] For more information, see: http://www.posiva.fi/en/research_development. Last accessed June 13, 2012.

Currently being built into the bedrock beneath Finland, the waste repository will begin operation in 2020 and receive waste until 2120 when it will be sealed with the intention that it remain undisturbed for 100,000 years when the nuclear waste will cease to be radioactive and no longer pose an ecological risk. Eloquently discussed in Michael Madsen's documentary *Into Eternity: A Film for the Future* (2010), the proposition of ensuring that a site remain undisturbed for 100,000 years is something of a sublime temporal hope. How could we possibly ensure that a warning message of danger encoded in text, visual or material form be correctly interpreted over such a time span? Little of what humanity has built has survived more than perhaps a few thousand years, and even those things that have survived and are afforded archaeological study are, at best, dimly apprehended for the significance, meaning, intention or messages their creators may have had. Through interviews with some of the employees and consultants at Onkalo, Madsen proposes that, instead of recording the presence and dangers of Onkalo through markers, success for the facility may be achieved through a commitment to oblivion. Furthermore, in some interviewee opinions, knowledge of the site, which is required to be archived by law, and the ensuing human curiosity to disturb and explore it, may be the greatest threat its success. How then could we intentionally forget Onkalo? The act of remembering to forget itself becomes a commemoration of the very thing we wish to forget.

Thus, either choice – remembering or forgetting Onkalo – presents a perhaps irreconcilable ethical dilemma. It is a clash of imperatives – an ethical conflict between oblivion and memory. Inspired by the thought of Slavoj Žižek, I propose that resolving this conflict is not possible by the selection of either forgetting or remembering. It should not be a polarity of opposing positions. Rather, the tension between modes of

archaeological agency should be the focus of our care. For Žižek, the tension constitutes a parallax gap – "the confrontation of two closely linked perspectives between which no neutral common ground is possible". (Žižek 2006: 4) Indeed, if we follow Žižek's rehabilitation of dialectical materialism in his *The Parallax View*, we could posit that archaeology, while pursuing a systematic preservation of the past, simultaneously creates absences and omissions which both strengthen and weaken the system. This tension between preservation and omission is a mode of Žižek's parallax view experienced as an ethical symmetry and union of preservation and loss, recording and omission, remembering and forgetting (see Shanks 2007).

The significance of acknowledging the parallax gap within archaeological agency is that it reveals the fundamental socio-political implications of rendering archaeological knowledge and our ethical obligation to confront it (see Witmore 2007; Meskell 2005). Each choice we make is symmetrical. Some things are remembered, while others are forgotten. The archaeological sampling process itself is in this way an institutionalized system of selection that simultaneously renders both memory and oblivion. Simply put, while we understand archaeology to generally be concerned with the discovery and recording of the past in the present, there is also a simultaneous and symmetrical archaeological agency which effects oblivion and destruction.

Archaeology and commanded forgetting

Archaeological, museological and cultural heritage research has done much to reveal, address and critique injustices based on readings of the past (e.g. Sandell and

Nightingale 2012; Wylie and Nicholas 2009; Langfield *et al*. 2009; Meskell 2009; Meskell and Preucel 2004). The institutionalization of archaeological knowledge in the rendering of scientifically authoritative images and narratives of the past has also led to some deeply problematic omissions, forgetfulness and oblivions. Katherine Hayes' recent paper in *Archaeological Dialogues* addresses "why and how forgetting happens in concert with the construction of social memory, history, identity, and heritage" through interpretations of a 17th-century plantation site in New York (2011: 197). Hayes' argument skillfully reveals how forgetting often plays a core part in the creation of new identities. She furthermore asserts that forgetting can enable an institutional amnesia of the history of the construction of racial and social categories that support the definition of new identities. Suggesting that this amnesia is often far from a simple organic process, Hayes engages the thought of Paul Ricoeur (2004: 447-55), proposing that institutional archaeological categories of interpretation can at times play into the phenomenon of commanded forgetting. Commanded forgetting, briefly, is an institutional, strategic amnesia that is often popularly misunderstood as a form of forgiveness or amnesty. Through an archaeology of forgetting, Hayes works to counter what she and Ricouer might describe as dominant modes of commanded forgetting, producing compelling narratives that reveal processes of memory manufacture, degradation, manipulation and obfuscation within archaeological institutions.

The modernist nationalist and colonialist roots of the archaeological episteme have been well discussed (e.g. Diaz-Andreu 2009; Thomas 2004; Lyons and Papadopoulos 2002; Meskell 1998; Kohl and Fawcett 1996). Likewise calls have been made for serious and sustained engagements with the ethical positioning of practitioners

and the knowledge we create (see Meskell 2005). Beyond criticizing modern archaeology for its role in identity politics of the 20th century, what is important is a continuation of an attunement to the implications of allowing any systemic categorizations of objects of the past to be considered self-evident. We should seize space for deliberating over and mediating the political and ethical tensions around the knowledges of the past we create. Letting go of a degree of absolute certainty and preservation to allow for an equal engagement with the possibilities of uncertainty and omission as part of a balanced tension around the constitution of knowledges of the past.

Archaeology's faculties of forgetting

Inspired by the work of Hayes and the thought of Ricoeur, I would propose that archaeology itself has strategies of commanded forgetting embedded in its epistemic processes. Simply put, we cannot preserve all pasts or all things of the past, neither can we know all pasts.[6] Nor would we want to. As Barbara Mills (2010: 363), after Gerd Gigerenzer (2005), rightly states… "there are few who would choose to become like the character in Jorge Luis Borges's tale 'Funes the Memorious,' who remembers every detail but cannot abstract or generalize." To do so would require resources, space and time beyond our means – nothing short of stopping time itself to effect an eternal stasis.

Despite ethical flaws, we inevitably must make choices about what to keep and what to discard. Learned behaviours of recognizing and identifying what are "artefacts"

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[6] For a compelling exploration of the tensions regarding archival practices of performance in the digital age and "the quest for total documentation", see Piccini and Rye 2009.

and what are not allow excavators to make decisions "on the trowel's edge" about what is kept and what is discarded:

> At the moment the thing was found, Erica had to make the crucial decision as to whether or not that thing was valuable evidence, i.e. an artefact, a bone, a useful sample, or something else worth keeping. This is a routine decision which diggers like Erica make hundreds of times every day. But what is worth keeping anyway? In 1958, Lewis Binford provoked James Griffin when he decided to keep and catalogue large amounts of fire-cracked rock as well as coke bottle tops and nails (Binford 1972: 128). But value is not only linked to classification. Very small things are often not deemed worth classifying and worth keeping in the same way that others are – which is why on many excavations not all earth is routinely being sieved and why size does matter (Hodder1999: 15–17; Orton *et al*. 1993: 47). (Holtorf 2002: 57)

This quotation is part of a simple, yet important archaeological project undertaken by Cornelius Holtorf (2002) to record the life history of a single pot sherd from its point of "discovery" to its final deposition in a museum repository. The article moves through all the phases of decision-making in the archaeological process (also see Hodder 1997), and doing so, Holtorf reveals the numerous habitual practices that have come to dictate what is and is not kept and recorded, but also how recording takes place and how this recording often represents a slow, inevitable subjection of the artifact to categorical and numerical oblivion.

This subjection of the object of archaeological endeavour (the artefact) renews the parallax tensions within archaeological practice – between the active subject and the passive object. In Žižek's reading, the paradox of subject:object relations is that it is also the object which is active, in the sense of *that which objects*. It "moves, annoys, traumatizes us … [and] disrupts the smooth running of things", bringing an equal

passivity to the subject. This paradoxical inversion of active and passive agency in objects for Žižek is the parallax object (Žižek 2006: 17).[7] To quote Žižek:

> The standard definition of parallax is: the apparent displacement of an object (the shift of its position against a background), caused by a change in observational position that provides a new line of sight. The philosophical twist to be added, of course, is that the observed difference is not simply "subjective," due to the fact that the same object which exists "out there" is seen from two different stances or points of view. It is rather that, as Hegel would have put it, subject and object are inherently mediated, so that an "epistemological" shift in the subject's point of view always reflects an "ontological" shift in the object itself. Or – to put it in Lacanese – the subject's gaze is always-already inscribed into the perceived object itself, in the guise of its "blind spot," that which is "in the object more than the object itself." The point from which the object itself returns the gaze. (Žižek 2006: 17)

Considering Žižek's proposition, archaeological methods such as representative and random sampling can not be merely unbiased objective modes of engagement. The epistemic stance of adopting a structure of interpretation effects an ontological categorization in the appearance of the objects of enquiry, which is a subjection of the object. This is not to say that one should not undertake these methods. Rather, it is an acknowledgement of the appearance of the archaeologist themselves within their objects of study, an elimination of the distance between subject and object – archaeologist and artefact. It is an admission of the subjectivity of the supposed object and a holistic acceptance of the multiple ontic possibilities for the object and its epistemic expression. In the words of Michael Shanks (2007: 591) in discussing symmetry in archaeology: "Archaeology is a process of mutual self-constitution, under this attitude. Working on the past makes us who we are. This is a dynamic process because there is no resolution; it just keeps on going. The process is iterative."

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[7] For a discussion of object agency and dispersed agency within anthropological theory, see Gell 1998.

Returning to Holtorf's pot sherd, the situation becomes more pressing as he moves from the processes of forgetting that parallel recording to consider the negative decision process of identifying what is of the past in the first place. Holtorf asserts that for archaeology this begins when the artefact is first identified as not being current or contemporary. This epistemic shift in the subjectivity of archaeology impacts the ontic possibilities of the objects of archaeology in its institutionalization of an oblivion of the most known and lived occupation of any site – the contemporary occupation of archaeologists on site:

> Artefacts found on an excavation can be of very different ages – from a few months (or even contemporaneous with the archaeologists) to many millennia. Diggers are usually encouraged to keep and record all artefacts, although most of them would in practice not look twice at rusty nails or beer bottles that are 'obviously' of no great antiquity and therefore not 'worth' keeping … Things that derive from the archaeological excavation itself, such as bent nails, small ends of string, or food remains are quickly discarded, too. All such things are often not considered to be finds but 'rubbish'. As a result, the most recent phases of occupation of archaeological sites tend to be systematically undervalued. This raises the question on what grounds diggers are able to identify relatively quickly that one artefact is 'ancient' (which I take to mean from before a possible local person's own memory, i.e. older than 50–80 years), and another one is mere recent rubbish. This is not a trivial question, considering that the digger is not able to apply any kind of sophisticated dating method on site. Instead he or she will glance at the object, maybe remove some dirt that is stuck to it, look again, and usually make a decision after these few moments. (Holtorf 2002: 59-60)

Archaeological fever

Holtorf's article describes a perhaps routine commanded forgetting of the very presence of archaeology itself. Excluding the contemporary from the archaeological effects a temporal disconnect which renders a false belief in the past being somewhere

else.[8] Simultaneously it induces a pathological nostalgic drive to find that lost place. If we consider this in relation to the philosophical treatise *Archive Fever* by Jacques Derrida (1996), perhaps we could propose that this disorder in archaeological process could be named archaeological fever. To quote from *Archive Fever*:

> It is to burn with a passion. It is never to rest, interminably, from searching for the archive, right where it slips away. It is to run after the archive, even if there's too much of it, right where something in it anarchives itself. It is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement. (Derrida 1996: 91)

One might argue that one of the most pressing symptoms of what could be called archaeological fever is the increasing amount of grey literature in relation to published syntheses of archaeological interpretation. The last two decades have witnessed a boom in the amount of contract archaeology undertaken in many countries, mostly symptomatic to the increased pace of development in urban, suburban and rural locales. In contrast, however, research and publication have not increased at a similar rate. In the *Archaeology 2020* report produced by University College Dublin's School of Archaeology and the Heritage Council (2006), it was shown that over the period from 1992-2004 the number of published archaeological reports per annum in Ireland stayed the same every year (well below 50) while the number of excavation licenses increased dramatically from around 200 in 1992 to a height of nearly 2,000 in 2003. The result was a tremendous increase in unpublished documentation of excavations (grey literature) with no increase in the number of published reports per annum.

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[8] Important work has been done over the last decade in addressing this disconnection through the development of a sub-discipline of "archaeology of the contemporary past". See, for example, Harrison and Schofield 2010; Buchli and Lucas 2001a. Also see the Contemporary and Historical Archaeology Listserv for current discussion around these issues: https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A0=contemp-hist-arch [Last accessed: June 13, 2012].

This dramatic outpacing of published, synthesized interpretations of archaeological excavation by the production of grey literature is not unique to Ireland. In 2001, the Council for British Archaeology published a report in which they conducted surveys studying the use of grey literature by various professionals in the sector. Other than with local government, contractors, consultants and planners, the use of grey literature was found to be extremely low with researchers, students, academics, museum professionals and local interest groups. Across all participants, there was, however, agreement that the amount of grey literature constituted a significant problem for the discipline and practice of archaeology.[9]

The difficulty and problem with this grey literature is that increased quantity does not result in increased access or quality of interpretation. Much of this literature is inaccessible both physically and intellectually. The physical holdings are often in hard-to-access locations (e.g. archaeological firm offices, discreet holdings in local authority offices and minimally cataloged or un-cataloged holdings in institutional libraries), and they are written in a form and style that is difficult for non-specialists to read, understand, interpret and create meaning from. Given the political implication of spending public finance on producing largely inaccessible or unusable data or knowledge, it is difficult to view the growing amount of grey literature as anything other than unintentional institutionalized oblivion. The irony is that the categorical imperative to record and preserve that drives archaeology to undertake and document so many excavations is undermined by increasing amounts of grey literature, inevitable forgetting of the

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[9] Richard Bradley's recent work to utilize and synthesize grey literature into publications should be noted. Especially Bradley, Richard 2007 *The Prehistory of Britain and Ireland*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

literature through lack of access and interpretation, eventual amnesia and finally oblivion. Returning to *Archive Fever*, it is as if archaeology suffers from its own fever which though it wishes to save the memory of the past (ἀρχαῖα (*arkhaia*)) in itself, it creates its own amnesia of its construction of this memory and thus is doomed to forget it entirely.

> The concept of the archive shelters in itself, of course, this memory of the name *arkh'*. But it also *shelters* itself from this memory which it shelters: which comes down to saying also that it forgets it. (Derrida 1996: 2)

Knowing archaeology: The archaeological choice

Conceiving of archaeology in this way, the archaeological endeavor not only distances itself from the contemporary context of its own agency, but it also denies itself the ethical revelation of itself to itself - that contemporary archaeology is itself present within the past. Following Žižek, the parallax view of archaeology is that archaeology itself is present in the object of the past, just as the past is present within the contemporary enactment of archaeology. To know archaeology cannot simply be achieved by objective study of "out there" or "back then" but must also be focused on knowing and accepting archaeology itself with all its flaws in its knowing of the world.

This is an important shift in the ethical approach to the discipline from those that have been proposed by scholars such as Alison Wylie (2003). Wylie, in discussing the ethical issues and categorical imperatives of archaeological research, argued that:

> the categorical imperative may thus require that you recognize and respect what it means to treat others with dignity - as an end in themselves - in their own terms. This is just one example of how lines of argument well established within Western traditions of ethical thinking may reach beyond themselves, providing support for the principle that we should respect the integrity and autonomy of cultures very different from those that have given rise to the utilitarian and deontological theories I describe here. (Wylie 2003: 12)

Wylie in her paper appropriately highlights the moral imperative of acknowledging the dignity and integrity of others. I would argue that this must be equally met by a substantive engagement with the knowing and accepting of oneself in its dialectical oppositions. Considering Žižek's parallax view, I would go as far as to suggest that (similar to the previous discussion of archaeology) the domain of ethics is not "out there" but rather it comes from a holistic appreciation of the dialectical materialism of the object through the apprehension of it as part of the subject and simultaneously that the subject is within the object. That is to say that ethical practice is not an outwardly facing dialectic but is a radical inward collapse and simultaneous outward expansion of the constructed opposition of object:subject into a reflexive awareness of oneself and the world including all its flaws, imperfections and failings.

Building on this resituating of the ethical dialectic of archaeology, focus turns to the inevitability of choice. In the enactment of archaeology, the archaeologist is presented with a seemingly infinite number of ethical choices such as the selection of historical periods and sites, artefact identification, categorization, and the broader narration of the temporal framework of the past, and so on. This unavoidably propels the archaeologist into the realm of the decision – a place Derrida argued to be inherently political (see Sokoloff 2005). For Derrida the politicization of the decision hinges on his articulation of undecidability as an attempt to problematize dualisms (See Bates 2005). "Undecidability is always a determinate oscillation between possibilities (for example of meaning, but also of acts). These possibilities are themselves highly determined in strictly defined situations (for example, discursive . . . but also political, ethical, etc.)" (Derrida 1977, 148). Thus we could suggest that making a decision is an inevitably flawed choice,

violating undecidability by selecting one choice over the maintenance of the possibility of infinite choice.

Too much stuff: Oblivion as a flawed necessity

The 2003 paper issued by the National Museums Directors' Conference in the United Kingdom was titled "Too much stuff? Disposal from museums" (National Museums Directors' Conference 2003). Dealing broadly with the issues of limited resources and space that many museums face today, the paper attempted to raise awareness in political, cultural and popular discourses that simply preserving objects does not preserve their use or value. Rather, it is argued that through appropriate management, access and use that the public can gain the maximum value for the investment in preserving objects. To this end it is inevitable that museums must be able to deaccession objects either to preserve the value of their limited resources by acknowledging their limitations and making well-intentioned choices to pass-on objects that would be of greater value elsewhere.

Coming to the issue of archaeology, the paper takes an interesting turn in discussing the practice of destroying holdings as a way of deaccessioning items:

> Archaeologists frequently argue that it is best that excavated material that has not been selected for retention should be reburied or destroyed. Selling or distributing it in some other way risks creating and sustaining a legitimate market in unprovenanced archaeological material, thus providing a cover for the disposal of illegally excavated objects. As the cost of retaining archaeological material has become more evident, the proportion not selected for retention has been increasing. While the reason for this is clear, it does seem regrettable that any object which has the capacity to provide enjoyment should be reburied. It might

be better for museums to find other ways of disposing of things which are not to be retained. [National Museums Directors' Conference 2003: 10-11]

In this passage, archaeologists are shown to be the advocates of oblivion and amnesia through the means of destruction or reburial. The argument used is based on economic values, suggesting that destroying archaeological finds that are to be deaccessioned helps limit the growth of potential markets in antiquities trade (see Renfrew 2002). The additional side of this scenario that is not mentioned in the paper is that such destruction would also increase the value of those items which were not destroyed by limiting supply – both within the museum sector and within illicit markets. This destruction or oblivion creates absences – absences that effect anticipation or anxiety which fuel both the archaeological drive to fill and an economic drive to capitalize upon theses absences.

Finding a way to love oblivion and decay

In Astra Taylor's film Examined Life (2008), philosopher Slavoj Žižek, standing amidst a heaps of garbage at a processing depot, makes the argument that true ecologists must find beauty not in an idealized vision of the world as they would wish it to be but in trash itself. They must find a way to love the sublime presence of waste and garbage in our world. Love, for Žižek, is not an abstract idealization but it is an acceptance of the world with all its failures and flaws – a way of seeing perfection in imperfection itself – a parallax view of something where flaw and virtue are one and the same. Shifting to an archaeological mode, recent scholarship has revealed creative and liberating possibilities for forgetting and decay within the modes of archaeological agency and interpretation. Caitlin DeSilvey's (2006) efforts to synthesize the tensions of the material present at a

decaying and derelict homestead established in 1889 and abandoned in 1995 in Montana are especially inspiring.

DeSilvey worked from 1997 at the site as a voluntary curator and later a doctoral researcher. Invoking Georges Bataille, she aptly addressed the epistemic challenge posed by decaying matter to the archaeological curator.

> As I worked in the homestead's derelict structures, I often came upon deposits of ambiguous matter – aptly described by Georges Bataille as the 'unstable, fetid and lukewarm substances where life ferments ignobly' (1993: 81). Maggots seethed in tin washtubs full of papery cornhusks. Nests of bald baby mice writhed in bushel baskets. Technicolor moulds consumed magazines and documents. Repulsive odours escaped from the broken lids of ancient preserve jars. Rodents, moulds, insects and other organisms, long accustomed to being left alone, had colonized the excess matter. Packrat middens crowded attic corners with pyramids of shredded text and stolen spoons. Hoardings deposited by animals and humans mingled indistinguishably. (DeSilvey 2006: 319)

DeSilvery (2006: 320) rightly identified her problem as one of interpretation – "how can we think about these things, and how do we work with them without eliding their ambiguity?" Echoing the sensibilities of a symmetrical archaeology (see Shanks 2007; Witmore 2007), she recounted her encounter with a particular deposit, a "book-box-nest" and her struggle with epistemic categorization, interpretive imperatives and their impacts on the ontic possibilities of the object:

> Faced with a decision about what to do with this curious mess, I baulked. The curator in me said I should just pull the remaining books out of the box, brush off the worst of the offending matter, and display them to the public as a damaged but interesting record of obsolete knowledge. Another instinct told me to leave the mice to their own devices and write off the contents of the box as lost to rodent infestation. I could understand the mess as the residue of a system of human memory storage, or I could see an impressive display of animal adaptation to available resources. It was difficult to hold both of these interpretations in my head at once, though. I had stumbled on a rearrangement of matter that mixed up the categories I used to understand the world. It presented itself as a problem to be solved with action – putting things in their place. But what I found myself wanting to do most, after I recovered from my initial surprise, was to take what was there and think about how it got there. (DeSilvey 2006: 322)

What follows in DeSilvey's article is a considered, reflexive engagement with the

lives of things beyond an anthropocentric episteme and an engagement with the shifting

ontic possibilities of objects based on her epistemic categorizations. Playing with the

categories of environmental archaeology, the "book-box-nest" could be an *artifact* – a

relic of human agency, or an *ecofact* – a relic of other-than-human agency (e.g. climate,

weather, biology, and so on) (DeSilvey 2006: 323). For DeSilvey, the interpretation of

the object is somewhere in the gap between these two categories – in a parallax. Invoking

the popular visual metaphor of the image that is at once both a wineglass and two kissing

faces:

> If you're only attuned to see the wineglass – the evidence of explicitly human
> activity – then the onset of decay and entropic intervention may look only like
> destruction, an erasure of memory and history. Paying attention to one aspect of
> the object's existence deflects attention from another. … If we can hold the
> wineglass and the kiss in mind concurrently, decay reveals itself not (only) as
> erasure but as a process that can be generative of a different kind of knowledge.
> The book-box-nest required an interpretive frame that would let its contents
> maintain simultaneous identities as books *and* as stores of raw material for rodent
> homemaking. (DeSilvey 2006: 323).

The importance of this proposition is that it struggles against the modern scientific

episteme of stabilization and fixing of frames of reference for the interpretation of things

(see Witmore 2006). Furthermore, it offers an alternative for addressing the

anthropocentric episteme of archaeological knowledge (also see Witmore 2007). It

presents a symmetrical archaeology – a substantive interpretive opportunity for

reconsidering what might be seen to be "negative" processes of decay and degradation as

part of a holistic revelation of the subjectivity of the object of the past.

> Objects generate social effects not just in their preservation and persistence, but in
> their destruction and disposal (Hansen 2003; Hetherington 2004; Lucas 2002; Van
> der Hoorn 2003). These processes facilitate the circulation of material and the
> maintenance of social codes; the death of the object allows for the continued
> animation of other processes. This is also true of objects transformed or disfigured
> by ecological processes of disintegration and regeneration. These things have
> social lives, but they have biological and chemical lives as well, which may only

become perceptible when the things begin to drop out of social circulation (Edensor 2005: 100). The disarticulation of the object may lead to the articulation of other histories, and other geographies. An approach that understands the artefact as a process, rather than a stable entity with a durable physical form, is perhaps able to address some of the more ambiguous aspects of material presence (and disappearance). The book-box-nest is neither *artefact* or *ecofact*, but both – a dynamic entity that is entangled in both cultural and natural processes, part of an 'admixture of waste and life, of decadence and vitality' (Neville and Villeneuve 2002: 2). Of course, in order to think this way it's necessary to defer the urge to 'save' the artefact. Interpretation requires letting the process run, and watching what happens in the going. Though this might seem wilfully destructive to those who locate the memorial potency of the object in its unchanging physical form, I want to suggest that a different kind of remembrance becomes possible in this kind of work. (DeSilvey 2006: 324-325)

This different kind of remembrance for DeSilvey (2006: 323) is well summed up in the title of her third figure: "An accidental collage of seeds and text forms on the wall of a dismantled cabin". Inspired by such assemblages, DeSilvey chose to extend the collaborative process of the site's becoming as archaeological knowledge by inserting herself into the "object as process". Encountering an over-stuffed bushel basket in the homestead's harness shed, she found a deposit of "scraps of printed matter mixed in with a mass of pits and seeds, woolly fibre and feathres, long johns and holey socks, a 1928 licence plate and a few delicate mouse spines" (DeSilvey 2006: 333). Choosing against the imperative which would have led her to discard most of the items except those interpreted to be the most discrete, she instead took liberty to explore the scraps of text, and inspired by Dadaist poet Tristan Tazara, composed a poem whose authorship she likes to ascribe equally to herself, the mice as well as to the authors of the articles in the shredded magazines.

Admittedly, DeSilvey's poetic interpretive response to her experiences at the Montana homestead reveal perhaps more about herself and her interventions into the site. They do also, however, reveal the substantive opportunities afforded by an admission of

the parallax view of the archaeological endeavour and the possibilities for alternative knowledges of the past. Through her "serious play" and enmeshment of herself within the object of her enquiry, DeSilvey presents a step towards what Michael Shanks and Christopher Witmore called a symmetrical archaeology and a positive vision of the role of degradation, and perhaps oblivion, in the overcoming the anthropocentric tendencies of the archaeological endeavour (see Shanks 2007; Witmore 2007: 546).

Conclusion

Victor Buchli and Gavin Lucas (2001b: 80) wrote, "the relation between remembrance and forgetfulness is not a linear process but a struggle, a tension … it is what is *not there*, what is *absent* that causes this tension." Perhaps this is one perspective of the parallax view imbedded in archaeological practice, through endeavouring to achieve a fuller image of the past, the absence as well as the artefact are equally objectified. Absence becomes a teleological argument for the categorical imperative of archaeological practice to preserve the past. Absence becomes the object and obstacle of the archaeological endeavour - the utility for sustaining both affective engagement with the intention of the discipline and conviction to overcome it. Thus, forgetting and oblivion become convenient strategies for inducing absence, and as these inducements become routine, they become a positive vision of Ricoeur's commanded forgetting – a creative, constructive and unavoidable force in the manifestation of memory (see Mills 2010).

To conclude, perhaps we are entering a phase in archaeological awareness where the choices that are made to preserve may be equaled in importance by those choices that

are made to forget. Echoing the important endeavour of understanding social and political processes of commanded forgetting, the archaeologist may be tasked increasingly with managing processes of forgetting, developing both practices and critical faculties for conceptualizing and understanding the acts, conditions and implications of oblivion and decay. While artists traditionally fear oblivion as an end to their artistic identity, legacy and influence, Richard Long requested that I help his work *A circle in Ireland* pass into anonymity. Perhaps he saw the slow anonymous process of progressive amnesia and inevitable oblivion as a creative intentional choice. In the famous words of Pierre-August Renoir, "an artist, under pain of oblivion, must have confidence in himself…" Through facing oblivion then, artists can come to terms with themselves and their intentions. As archaeological absences are one component the parallax view that sustains archaeological endeavour, through accepting, and perhaps loving, oblivion archaeologists can find a deeper confidence and symmetry in the archaeological choice and its ethical implications.

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