

Contemporary Archaeologies: Excavating Now

by Cornelius Holtorf and Angela Piccini (Editors)

Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main, 2009.
221 pp, 50 illustrations, paperback, index.

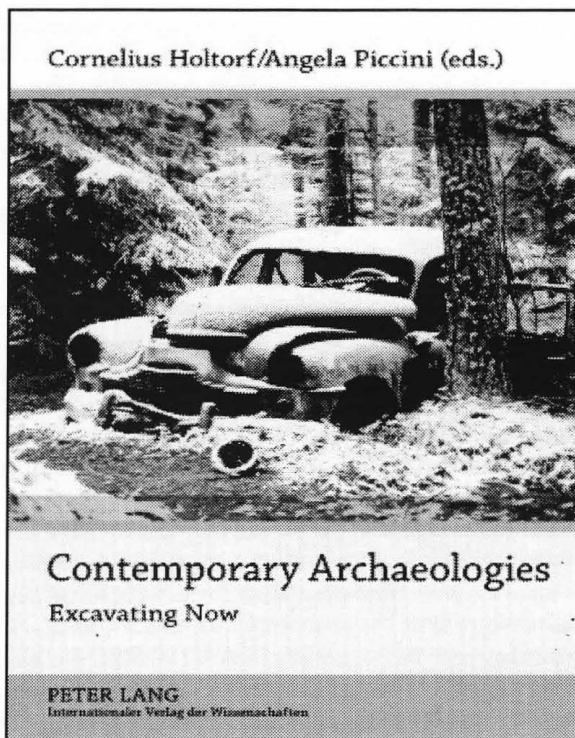
Reviewed by Marina La Salle

If there's one word that could neatly sum up this book, it'd be: 'unconventional.' But this volume cannot be so easily summed—indeed, it would be a disservice to try—so to this, I will add, 'refreshing,' 'liberating,' 'unsettling,' 'innovative,' and 'unexpected.' Throughout, its emphasis is on plurality: no one approach or collection of methods, aims, or interpretations is offered, for instead the core philosophy of this volume revolves around diversity and creativity.

Like 'historical' archaeologists, those who study the 'recent past' face criticism both within the discipline and without. Objections are based on two points, the first being how the past is often valued—older is better. Why would we want to preserve all this 'modern stuff' anyway? We already *know* what it means...don't we? This ties into the second assumption, that archaeology is "what you do if you do not have books" (Piccini 11). Yet books are themselves *artifacts* of particular contexts, agendas and perspectives, and so rather than making things easier, they usually further complicate matters.

Both critiques represent the *strength* of 'contemporary archaeologies,' for studying the material world of today makes it possible to compare a plethora of evidence from material culture, oral and written texts, and ethnography, allowing us to speak directly with people about the things they use. For Holtorf, these evidences converge in the concept of 'materiality'—the dynamic relationship between people and things—and indeed the chapters in this book actually "tell stories *through* material culture" (Piccini 12). A focus on the meaning highlights that archaeology is wholly a *contemporary* practice, undertaken today to serve the interests of today, and thus archaeologies of the contemporary demonstrate "the impossibility of speaking about the past in any other terms than the present" (Piccini 10).

The volume is organized into three parts: "On the character of archaeology/heritage," "Recording and preserving twentieth-century heritage?," and "New dimensions of materiality." The myriad topics, methods, and presentation styles really resist such artificial organization, but for ease of discussion, I present the chapters here thematically, just one of the many ways this book could be understood.



Landscapes of capitalism

Several chapters invoke a landscape approach to understand contemporary ideology, in particular the relationship between 'heritage,' material symbols, and capitalism. With his usual flair for 'pop culture,' Holtorf analyses the use of archaeology in contemporary theme parks such as Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas, concluding that such sites are not offering 'authenticity' but are instead "telling fairytales and selling dreams" (52). Yet Holtorf suggests that theme parks can "contribute to peoples' social identities and can give inspiration, meaning, and happiness to their lives" (59), for "all history is to some extent invented" (60), no matter what some archaeologists might suggest.

Focusing on the global trend towards privatization, Graves-Brown investigates its relationship to changing technology, from the British rail system, promoting integration while reinforcing class and gender segregation, to cars "as symbols of status and expressions of style" (208). Graves-Brown believes that such technological privatization increases alienation—i-pods and mobile phones "hint at our atomised way of life" (211)—and prompts the need for intimacy, reflected in the 'social networking' movement that has made Facebook and Twitter so popular.

The archaeology of globalization prompted Gorman to consider the material culture of space—a launch facility in South Australia and Syncom 3, the first satellite in orbit and now considered space junk. Gorman discusses how space technology has contributed to the marginalization of already-disenfranchised groups, for example where rocket ranges were built on the territories of Indigenous peoples, who were in the process of being forcibly removed from their lands. Such colonialism is supported

by the view that there is “natural human urge to explore” (164), which means that spacefaring states are portrayed as evolutionarily ‘fit’ and thus ‘more advanced.’ Gorman concludes: “For some, globalisation has meant new possibilities and opportunities; for others, it has meant the erosion of identity in contexts where colonial exploitation has already exacted a high price” (176).

Endangered heritage

Archaeology is often broadly used to mean exposing, revealing, unravelling, or uncovering; as it turns out, we have Sigmund Freud to thank for this. Delving into the mutual influences between Freudian psychoanalysis and archaeological excavation, Thomas notes how both draw upon the themes “of repression, of loss and concealment, of discovery and revelation” (33). In this sense, “archaeology serves as a metaphor for the recovery of hidden or suppressed knowledge, and the pursuit of origins” (36) for nation states and the human species itself. Archaeology is also seen as a way to ‘save the past’ from destruction, which Piccini articulates as “a narrative of loss, the sense in which as sites as landscapes disappear, they call out for preservation” (21). Still, it is possible that some events might be “remembered better through the absence of material remains than through their presence” (Holtorf 23).

Burström’s study of a decomposing car cemetery in Sweden confronts this challenge in contemporary archaeology by considering whether an old junkyard and car wrecks should be “considered garbage and cleared away or protected as cultural heritage” (131). While public opinion was in favour of preservation, the department responsible for cultural heritage did not consider the site to be ‘real’ culture. Public opinion won in the end, but the process highlighted for Burström (131) that:

Within heritage management as well as within archaeology there is a tradition of a rather narrow-minded view on material remains focusing on them just as potential sources of information about the past. Inherent in the material past there is, however, also a strong power to affect people and to evoke reflections concerning eternal human questions.

Archaeologies of the contemporary, then, bring to the fore the contested nature of heritage, and question the authority of archaeologists in determining ‘significance.’ While many archaeologists got into the business because they are ‘things-people’ and not ‘people-people,’ increasingly they are having to become conflict mediators and social workers. This forces them to consider how people related to material culture and how material culture *affects* people, thus “it is necessary to consider the emotive and reflective potential in things” (142).

In one of my favourite chapters, May provides a fascinating analysis of the representation of tigers in recent history, illustrating how their portrayal has shifted from that of “dangerous outsiders, from which humans need to be protected, to endangered insiders in need of protection themselves” (67). This, she describes as ‘domestication,’ and considers “the way in which endangerment domesticates dangerous things” (76). But May takes an unexpected turn by relating this to post-US invasion Iraq, arguing that its heritage is threatening to the ideology of the “New World Order” and so is neutralized via a ‘conservation’ discourse. This chapter

truly demonstrates the innovative thinking of archaeologists who study the representations of heritage and history in the recent past.

Complex materiality

Looking at contemporary material culture means looking at ourselves, with attendant challenges and benefits. In Pearson’s analysis of the material remains from expeditions to Antarctica, he confronts the “inherent instability in the nature and meaning of things” whereby one object “might be *functional, decorative, representational, fictive* and/or *cognitive*, both from time to time and concurrently” (86). Recent material culture is left open to this ambiguity, for we can all recognize it in our own things but somehow ‘uncertainty’ gets filtered out as ‘noise’ when we are looking at the things of ‘others,’ of ‘past peoples.’

Not only can the things of today challenge our interpretive assumptions, but the people who made them can, too. Beck *et al.* discuss challenges they faced while working at a controversial site in use today, specifically the ‘Peace Camp’ in Nevada, a protester’s camp directly opposite a nuclear testing area. Using the techniques of archaeological survey and ethnography, they sought to understand the use, value, and perceptions of this site. Their interactions with local protesters, state authorities, and media forced the researchers to recognize “archaeologists as political figures, the effects of our research on a site, and the interests of those who created and use the site” (109), to whom archaeologists have a fundamental responsibility.

Experience, perception, emotion

Studying ‘our own things’ also blends the lines between art and archaeology, reality and perception, experience and emotion; and it was refreshing to see such creative presentation of these concepts by several authors. For example, Wilson pursues the use of sound in creating representations of militarised landscapes, specifically at Orford Ness, a ‘Cold War’ military testing site in the United Kingdom. Her exhibit was provocative and emotive, reminding us that archaeologists can make use of all five (or more) senses in communicating their interpretations. Piccini follows this up in her chapter discussing her film “Guttersnipe,” a 14-minute video and live spoken word performance. Its focus is the street curb as an archaeological landscape where objects connect disparate worlds and histories—for example, in a ‘Bounty’ wrapper, there is a story of “slavery and Bristol’s wealth all in one convenient bar” (187). Her goal was to explore “photographic practice as archaeological practice” (184), and her gaze is on the event and its performance; the curb becomes like the river of Heraclitus, never twice the same. Piccini’s work highlights the impermanence of experience and that meaning is created in the moment, not in the ‘thing,’ which inherently resists the typologies and stringent record keeping that archaeologists are trained to produce. Ulin also constructs a unique presentation of the excavation of her childhood home, where the memories, experiences and meanings of over 500 artifacts are related through poetry, prose, and photographs. Finding things that are already linked with a personal memory and emotionally loaded is unusual for many archaeologists; but it is a good

lesson in empathy in order to understand what is in many cases a regular occurrence for descendant communities engaging with archaeologists.

Reading this volume, I was delighted by the diversity of fresh topics and innovative approaches, and by the direction of thought and connections made in some very critical pieces. It was a pleasure to be off the beaten path and this volume both demonstrates the capacity of archaeology to surprise, and its limitless potential to see the world through new eyes. While 'historical' and 'contemporary' archaeologists will no doubt continue to receive criticism for studying 'the things we already know,' Holtorf puts it simply: "there is no reason why archaeologists, studying material remains, should not be studying objects from the recent pasts" (9). Indeed, this practice is singularly in a position to "help us to apprehend everyday realities that we are usually expert at ignoring" (Holtorf 16).

This is the strength of anthropology—making the familiar, seem unfamiliar—and archaeology is most potent, most powerful, when it is used to look at our own material culture, where we already have some understanding of our cultural analogies, metaphors, and networks of meaning. Applying an 'archaeological gaze' can destabilize these, disrupt our accepted norms, expose our ideologies, and challenge us to think critically about everything that we say, do, or buy (into). It can also "give a voice to those silenced in or by society" (Holtorf 12), and in doing so create "a powerful narrative in a global politics of power, domination and resistance" (Piccini 14). An archaeology of the contemporary therefore is immediately socially relevant, in part because those responsible for the material record are in large part still around, still interacting with the material world, and still making meaning from it. As Holtorf and Piccini (16) assert, "contemporary archaeologies marry archaeology *in* the modern world with the archaeology *of* the modern world." This book illustrates the diversity and creative potential of such a marriage, and is a must-read for all who want to broaden their archaeological horizons—the sky is no limit.

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Archaeology as Political Action

by Randall H. McGuire

University of California Press, Berkeley, 2008.
xv + 294 pp.; figures, maps, index

Reviewed by Bill Angelbeck

Scholars cannot resolve the dilemma of politics and archaeology by invoking a sterile vision of archaeology as either science or politics. Two decades of debate have shown us that archaeology is both science and politics. The productive question is not, How do we make archaeology one or the other? but, instead, How do archaeologists link science and politics in our practice (McGuire, p. 36).

Archaeologists often strive for scientific objectivity. This can lead to the idea that archaeology is, or should be, apolitical. Randall McGuire, in *Archaeology as Political Action*, argues that archaeology always has a political context to it. Yet, this is not to abandon any sense of objectivity—rather, his main point is that archaeology is both political and scientific. Archaeologists have to retain the authority of their craft, but they also should be vigilantly aware of the sociopolitical context in which they operate. They should use their work for positive and moral ends to serve the needs of communities. To be effective in doing so requires that our knowledge claims be tied to the data we gather.

McGuire acknowledges that archaeology can seem to be a most arcane intellectual pursuit. Many might think that archaeological information could only be used in critique, as Jared Diamond or Brian Fagan cited such data to comment on the issue of global warming, for instance. However, in this book, McGuire shows how archaeologists can use archaeology to further positive political action, to help those communities that have been oppressed historically or exploited economically. This is using archaeology to effect changes in society, to make it relevant.

To set the basis for this, McGuire recalled how important archaeological sites have been strategically targeted in wartimes. Many acts of war have aimed to destroy the heritage of the enemy. This includes the routine acts of conquerors in the ancient near east to scrub evidence of prior rulers, and it includes more recent events, such as the Croats specifically bombing the centuries-old Stari Most bridge in Mostar valued by Bosnians (an act that has been described as "killing memory"). These actions constituted attacks upon their heritage and ideology, and these can be devastating for a people. McGuire argues that archaeology can serve to work the opposite way: as a positive force, extolling heritage or providing accuracy or corrections to claims about the past. This is using archaeology as praxis.