Academic Performances, Artistic Presentations.

Yannis Hamilakis, Mark Pluciennik and Sarah Tarlow

Abstract

When they were members of the Department of Archaeology, University of Wales, Lampeter, Yannis Hamilakis, Mark Pluciennik and Sarah Tarlow organised a workshop on archaeologies of embodiment called Thinking through the Body (June 1998). In conjunction with the workshop an exhibition of paintings, other images and sculptures by artists who also deal in various ways with the human body was presented. This paper explores the results of these various juxtapositions and the implications and possibilities of developing a closer relationship between art and archaeology. We note that despite the difficulties in defining and categorising art, as it is understood in the lay sense, the concept is often used to represent a particular set of emotional and aesthetic responses, and contrasted to logical and intellectual reactions which are seen as the norm within academia. We argue that in fact all these types of responses are present within both spheres of activity, but that highlighting the overlap between art and academia may encourage archaeologists to explore further the potentialities in different sorts of academic performance and expression including collaborative ventures with artists.

Keywords: art, academia, performance, argument, archaeology

Introduction: What do we mean by 'art'?

Any attempt to address the themes of art and archaeology and their relationship needs to interrogate the concept of art and investigate its genealogy and cultural biography, a process which is crucial in any further discussion. Otherwise, it may end up conflating art with visual imagery, or even simple archaeological illustration.

Art in the sense in which we use it in this paper is a western concept which came to signify certain mainly representational forms of expression at a relatively recent time in European/Western societies. As a term often used to refer to fine art, it expressed the ability of the elites to distinguish themselves from the rest of the population by showing that they could indulge in what was seen as non-functional investment of resources. The concept was applied by extension to non-western societies in order to signify similar modes of expression which were elevated to the category of art on a par with their western counterparts. In these contexts, art became a way of making the Other more familiar, especially when certain representations were compared with western so-called High Art (cf. Morphy 1994). It is well known that in
present-day western societies, art often operates as a mechanism of distinction, and its possession and appreciation can signify the possession of cultural capital. Among the middle classes in particular, cultural capital accrues to those who have the cultural competence to decode the encoded messages and meanings (Bourdieu 1984, 1993). Social actors are therefore predisposed to appreciate and react emotionally in particular ways to certain representational expressions which are considered as art within a certain world view.

Many European traditions of the 19th century saw archaeology as a part of art history, a situation which reflects the aristocratic and elitist origins of the discipline (Trigger 1989). Still today in many countries, archaeology is seen in the same way, a phenomenon which is reflected in the institutional organization and the educational structures: archaeology is often under the Ministry for Culture, or Fine Arts, and in universities archaeology is often associated with art history. Emotional reactions are often seen as a necessary part of the aesthetic appreciation of the fetishized, de-contextualized artefact which has been elevated to the status of art. The New Archaeology gave a serious blow to the tradition with its positivist and scientistic paradigm. The decline of this paradigm, at least in the Anglo-American tradition, allows us to re-open the discussion on the issue, hopefully within a more sophisticated framework.

Other ways of communicating

But where does all this leave us? In talking about art and its relation to archaeology we should be aware of all the connotations of the concept, its historical entanglement, and the social context in which it has been produced and operated. Given this conceptual baggage as well as the fuzziness of the term, in many contexts, it may be better to avoid it altogether and use alternative or more precise terms and concepts, depending on our needs: non-academic narratives and other forms, visual imagery, representational media, poetry, painting and sculpture might be some alternatives. However the term art in its colloquial sense often means the sort of thing one expects to see in an art gallery, theatre or similar cultural venue, although we are aware that the definition of art, its separation from or integration with other areas of experience and expression have been much contested and debated over recent decades. Similarly, whatever the diversity within Higher Education, the term academia is often used to describe a rather dry and unemotional way of interacting with the world, through lectures, spoken presentations and
specialized publications. It is the distinction between art and academia, in these colloquial senses, that this paper aims to explore, because the two terms in many ways stand for polar opposites in what actually is, we shall argue, a spectrum of ways of engaging and responding within both fields. Thus we have chosen to use the word art here precisely because of its accumulated, romantic meanings, in which the term stands for particular expectations of form, content, medium and ways of encountering material. When people hear the word art, they may expect innovatory and experimental approaches, be open to aesthetic and emotional responses, and be prepared to tolerate different notions of truth and argument, as when a theatre audience makes a ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ (as Coleridge characterised ‘poetic faith’). When we use the term art in this paper, we therefore mean it to stand for a range of forms of (re)presentation which are not normally considered to be part of the academic repertoire.

One of the questions we wish to discuss here is how we as archaeologists can communicate with peers and non-peers alike using a diversity of expressional forms, beyond the conventional, often dry and unimaginative scholarly academic text. More importantly, given that we have come to appreciate recently that most of the stories we attempt to piece together are extremely complex and full of subtleties, ambiguities and ironies, a diversity of formats which include representational media and poetry, might be a more appropriate way to convey some of that complexity. Besides, it has been suggested that today visual images have become the dominant mode of representation and expression in many people’s lives, partly due to the widespread use of the representational print and especially electronic media:

Since image has displaced print as the primary medium of discourse, the public use of reason can no longer be limited to print culture. To be effective, writing must become imagoscription that is available to everyone (Taylor and Saarinen 1994).

While this argument is expressed here in a extremely schematic mode (especially as far as the idea of ‘displacement’ is concerned), it does point to an interesting phenomenon in western societies over the last decades: the prominence of images in public culture and discourse, which challenges even further the insistence on conventional, text-based writing among academics. Of course, this poses immediately two crucial problems: How can we deploy visual narratives, maintaining at the same time critical thought and the interrogation process associated with texts? More importantly, and more pertinent to the themes of a workshop on Thinking through the Body, do visual representations and narratives solve the problem of academic disembodiment and the treatment of issues such as sensory reactions, emotions and bodily
memory, in an analytic, disengaged manner? It seems that the deployment of
images itself does not automatically solve this crucial obstacle, but simply
privileges certain sensory modes such as gaze/sight. Imagoscription is still an
inscribing practice (Connerton 1987), still fundamentally different from
embodying/in-corporating practices.

The ‘Thinking Through the Body’ exhibition

We will attempt to explore some of these issues further by presenting our
recent experience in organizing the Thinking Through the Body exhibition at
Lampeter in June 1998. The exhibition ran alongside the Thinking through the
Body academic workshop http://archaeology.lamp.ac.uk/Arch/thinkbody.html, a
colloquium for the presentation and discussion of work on the archaeology of
the body, preparatory to the production of an edited volume (Hamilakis et al.
2001). The exhibition was the result of the organizers’ idea that it would be
interesting to have other approaches to the topic of the body on display.
Informal inquiries about the existence of any suitable artists soon came to the
attention of, among others, Ron Dukelow. As a member of Cambria Arts - a
non-profit-making local organization - he took over responsibility for contacting
artists, and mounting and displaying the artworks. As members of the
university, we were keen to encourage relationships between the local and
academic communities, and so also wanted, like Cambria Arts, for the
exhibition to be open to the public. The pieces were displayed in the same
building in which the conference was held and we worked with Cambria Arts
to produce posters and a catalogue to publicize the event.
The exhibition comprised sculptures, paintings, drawings, photographs and an
installation.

The sculptures by Alison Lockhead were perhaps those with the most
immediately ‘archaeological’ references: they involved the forms of
pregnant women in whose (cut-away) bellies could be seen pots or other
artefacts, and also drew on ideas of regeneration, death, fertility and rebirth
(fig.1). Others were more straightforward drawings, paintings,
lithographs or photographs of the human body. The pieces were
distributed throughout the conference building (though not in the seminar venue itself), and members of the public were invited to progress through the building with the aid of a small free catalogue. Most of the pieces were for sale, and a few were indeed sold.

(fig.1)

The exhibition and the workshop

This was a very ad hoc arrangement, and although we invited both artists and academics to the conference/exhibition opening, there was no further agenda, nor plans to draw directly on each other's experience to discuss either the academic or artistic content in any forum. In this case there was very little formal response or incorporation of the exhibition into either papers or the discussion of conference themes, although there was some reaction from women (tellingly, during the discussion following the paper by Shanks and Pearson - see below), who found some of the work in the coffee area offensive. These were realistic - and arguably misogynistic - depictions of nude women (figs. 2 and 3).
Others however - including the women from Catering Services involved in serving the refreshments - though at first unsettled, told us that they grew familiar with and in some cases appreciated those paintings. In addition, as a further attempt to blur boundaries in the subsequent publication and portrayal of the conference/exhibition, and as a resource, we asked a colleague (Luci Attala) from the anthropology department who had experience with video work, to film whatever she wanted during the period of the workshop. We hoped that Luci would be able to produce a short film capturing impressions of and providing a commentary on the workshop, the exhibition, and interaction between the participants, exhibitors and members of the public.

Despite much that has been written and done in relation to archaeology, the public and education (e.g. Boniface and Fowler 1993; Hodder et. al. 1995 (part 3); Stone and Mackenzie 1990; Stone and Molyneaux 1994), the workshop and the exhibition were, partly because of the limited time available to organize the displays, not planned to feed into each other in any direct manner, nor to educate or inform the public about specific issues. Nor was any part of the workshop designed to cater for interested lay-persons or other members of the public more generally. The exhibition catalogue did not contain any description of the theme or content of the workshop, or how and why either had come about at this particular point. In this instance the exhibition was open to the public but they were excluded from the academic arena. Questions which arose after the event were: What was and what could be the relationship between the conference and the art exhibition? Would greater integration be useful and/or desirable? Should academics qua
academics be prepared to put themselves 'on display' to the public and show what academics do (i.e. rather than putting on archaeological or other exhibitions specifically designed for consumption by the public)? What are the benefits and disadvantages for the different constituencies (e.g. artists, academics, members of the public), and what are the politics of the public-academic interface in this instance? This small-scale colloquium/workshop involved pre-circulated papers, usually assuming an extensive background in social, anthropological and archaeological theory, and was largely unsuitable for people with a non-archaeological or anthropological background. Most (though not all) of the papers were traditional in their style of presentation: spoken versions of the pre-circulated texts, with the addition of visual aids. Some presentations did experiment with other communicative media; the most radical of these was Michael Shanks’ and Mike Pearson's contribution to the workshop involving a multi-screen and multi-media presentation. It showed the sort of material which can come out of another kind of academic/artistic collaboration, between an archaeologist and a theatre professional (see Pearson & Shanks 2001). In this instance the non-traditional subject matter - a recent murder in Cardiff - provoked more passionate debate than is usual at academic conferences (see below). Would collaboration of this sort generally be more useful - or is the simple fact of shared venues (and costs) and juxtaposition of different traditions and forms of presentation and appreciation sufficient justification for initiatives of this kind?

Some positive things that came out of the exhibition

Despite our lack of consideration of these issues at an earlier stage, we can identify some positive points which arose from the experience of simply mounting the exhibition. Firstly, in however small a way, it was useful for the artists, in providing a venue, and in giving members of the public (and conference participants) the opportunity to see for free some of the work produced by local professionals.

Secondly, the exhibition did provide a useful talking point, stimulated conversations, and made for a slightly different and perhaps more relaxed atmosphere; informal contacts helped show or introduce both artists and academics to what each other did. Similarly, members of the public might become aware that academics do not simply go on holiday during the vacations (a common misconception), and could have informed themselves in a minor way about some of the content of the conference.
Thirdly, in the context of our institution, the process of organizing and mounting the exhibition allowed individuals to make contacts with people whom they might not normally meet, and in a wider sense demonstrated the willingness of the institution to provide facilities for other people and organizations, and to make connections beyond the often insular world of academia. Certainly Cambria Arts is now aware of the availability of a suitable venue for other ventures which may be run separately or in conjunction with the university. However, these are minor points (however valuable) in relation to any weightier political or intellectual points people might wish to make.

In this case we did not work closely with the artists in producing, 'framing' or discussing the contents and possible outcomes of the exhibition. What would be the potential of more and earlier collaboration e.g. by jointly suggesting common themes and working through them in a variety of formats and processes to produce integrated exhibitions, performances, workshops and publications or other presentations? What are and might be the relations between these categories of art and academia in the process of performing and displaying them? In this paper we reflect on where the value of breaking down the categorical separation of the two might lie.

**Emotional responses?**

It has been suggested that the emotional response which can be evoked by art might be a ground upon which to build emotional archaeologies. Visual media, argued one of those involved in the exhibition, have an immediacy and an emotional, sensual effect which could be the basis for a more three-dimensional and holistic kind of archaeology and a way to bring emotion into archaeology. This view, however, met with resistance from the organizers. First, for some of us, the visual does not necessarily produce stronger emotional responses than other stimuli. Our responses were just as much 'intellectual' as 'emotional', and this separation is itself problematic (see Tarlow 2000 for wide discussion of emotion in archaeology). As we argued earlier, responses to visual art are just as much learned as responses to rational argument. The appreciation of visual art is not somehow natural and visceral, in distinction to the cultural understanding of intellectual argument, and to maintain that art has some kind of hot-line directly to the emotions perpetuates a problematic dichotomy.

Secondly, there are problems with any argument that proposes emotional empathy as an adequate basis for the examination of the past. Particular
emotions are not universal; emotional responses vary hugely within and between cultural contexts. Empathetic approaches make assumptions about emotional continuities which may not be justified when we aim to reconstruct the experiences of people in the past. We need to find a more critical and analytical way of addressing emotional and experiential aspects of lives in the past. Nevertheless, an empathetic, emotional response could be of academic value as a way of opening up areas of human experience which traditionally have been neglected by archaeologists. Making people think about their own emotional experience of the world would be a good first step to trying to find a way to examine emotion in the past. But this could only ever be a point of departure - it is not the place to look for answers.

Contradiction and rapprochement

We need to step back and think through our terms. The difficulties and ambiguities of what constitutes 'art' have already been discussed, and now we find it hard to say where art stops and academia begins. Shanks' and Pearson's contribution to the workshop is a case in point. Theirs was an unusual conference piece. They presented, through images and words, a consideration of a modern crime and a crime scene. In terms of its presentation, it was more performance than conventional conference paper. The words were outside the normal register of academic discourse: piled up images, fragments, thoughts and feelings surfacing and submerging. It was uncomfortable - the subject matter was a real murder, the brutal stabbing of Lynette White in the Cardiff docklands a few years ago. Many of the delegates were shocked and disturbed. (Quite right. Murder should be shocking and disturbing).

But it wasn't only the subject matter that people felt uncomfortable with - it was the muddling up, apparently, of theatre and traditional academic forms of communication. Some participants thought Shanks' and Pearson's work was 'cabaret.' Some found it voyeuristic. So there was a strong emotional and aesthetic response to an 'academic' contribution.

Conversely, some of the art exhibition evoked an intellectual response in many of those who saw it. For example, Declan Kelly's work explored areas of law and society in a very academic way. His was potentially the most controversial piece and was housed in a separate room with the windows blocked off and warning notices on the doors, to comply with obscenity laws. The installation - which had already run into problems of censorship and
restricted access in Swansea - was a commentary on the image and concept of the phallus in relation to gender constructions, ideas of masculinity, and contemporary post-structuralist thought (figs. 4 and 5). His pictures were overlain with text, legal and philosophical, and the exhibition was accompanied by Kelly's own comments on the philosophical problems he was addressing. Perhaps because of the incorporation of explicit theory and text into the images, many of the academics found this one of the most stimulating and accessible pieces in the exhibition, though others were embarrassed or uncertain how to react to the multiplicity of erect and flaccid penises on display.

Although we didn't design it that way, juxtaposing the exhibition and the academic workshop did undermine the wall which is commonly erected between 'The Arts' on one hand, understood Romantically as the product of the unfettered creative imagination - performative, written from and speaking directly to the emotions - and 'Academia' on the other, created by a disciplined mind, subject to rigorous criteria of rationality, and addressed to the intellect. Kelly's work was obviously informed by highly academic concerns and a deep knowledge and awareness of intellectual and legal issues. Conversely, Shanks and Pearson's 'academic' paper was both theatrical in its style of presentation, and directly emotional in its appeal - aiming to shock. It is also important to realize that there is a tendency for certain text-based academics to consider and intend their work as uniquely difficult and exclusive, in a way which sometimes amounts to intellectual snobbery. However (and especially since the 1960s in Britain, for example) much contemporary, especially conceptual art is explicitly intellectualized and itself produced in an academic environment (e.g. early responses to deconstruction and the linguistic turn at Goldsmith's College). In considering contrasts between art and academia it is certainly not simply a question of emotional and aesthetic responses to art, in contradistinction to intellectual responses to academic presentations. Much art is a deliberate statement in the context of previous art (or other) theory, and catalogues often include copious notes explaining what the artist is setting out to do. A piece may only 'make sense' in the light of extensive knowledge of artistic traditions or the artist's personal trajectory. Similarly, performance, presentation and rhetoric (ie the aesthetics of presentation) can play a large role in academic conferences in persuading people of particular positions and arguments. It should also be noted that archaeologists (and others) have already drawn on, for example, theories of the phenomenology of art, especially as ways of rethinking possible relationships of archaeologists and others to monuments and landscapes (e.g. Tilley 1996: 193-197; Renfrew 1998).
Blurred boundaries

This difficulty in maintaining a distinction between art and academia, in this case the discipline of archaeology, actually moves us towards one of the most interesting potentials in events such as the Lampeter Archaeological Workshop's Thinking through the Body colloquium, and that is in blurring the boundaries. There is no sharp edge between more artistic and more academic forms of expression. There is a range of possibilities in our choices of expression, although as academics we usually restrict ourselves to the forms of conference paper or written text sanctioned by disciplinary tradition. But we can take advantage of other kinds of discourse. Freed from the constraints of academic convention, we can say new and different things in new and different ways - we don't always have to use linear narrative for example (recent experiments include Pluciennik and Drew 2000; Hamilakis 1999). We don't have to maintain traditional styles of argument. Radically different positions, different awarenesses may demand different forms of expression - something that some post-modernist scholars, particularly feminist and post-colonial academics and artists, have been exploring (see Denzin 1997).

These new and other ways of talking about things have the power to evoke meaning in different ways and may demand to be understood differently. Despite our inability to draw firm lines between art and academia, as conventionally understood, the encounter with, say, a sculpture of a pregnant belly opening into a tomb full of pots demands another set of interpretative skills and an adjustment in our expectations of 'meaning' or 'argument' from the encounter with, for example, a colleague giving a paper about neolithic burial practices. The possibilities offered by traditionally more artistic forms of expression are already being explored in what are conventionally considered academic contexts by some archaeologists (Tilley 1998; Barnatt, Bevan and Edmonds 1998; Pearson and Shanks 2001).

The addition of what are considered as theatrical or artistic elements into academic archaeology can perhaps have a role in making us question our responses, our assumptions. Perhaps drawing upon art can help in expressing ideas or making connections in new ways - fluid, fragmented, multiple, contradictory, inconsistent, hazy or disordered. Outside the often linear framework of academic presentation, one can be freer to express the complex piling-in of associations as creative process. However, one of the things we like about academia is precisely the sharpening, assembling and clarification of those associations into an argument, and we would be sorry to
see the displacement of more linear forms of academic discourse. We are arguing here for an extension of the range and form of expression, not for a substitution.

Moreover, the juxtaposition of more academic and more artistic styles, the deliberate blurring of the edges we have just mentioned, can have the effect of foregrounding the construction of academic texts and perhaps challenging the conventions within which academic discourse usually takes place. James Clifford wrote in the introduction to his book Routes, which itself mixes different forms of expression, that ‘scholarly discourse, an evolving set of conventions whose constraints I respect, condenses processes of thinking and feeling that may experiment in diverse forms’. He goes on to say, in the context of his book, that a ‘mix of styles evokes these multiple and uneven practices of research, making visible the borders of academic work’ (Clifford 1997:12). Academic texts are also the products of creative process; they are not inevitable; they could be other than they are, and juxtaposing what are normally different forms of expression points this up.

Looking ahead

All these thoughts, though, are post hoc. We didn’t set out with the intention of challenging the conventions of academic discourse; rather we thought it would be an interesting idea to put up some related pictures and other works of art around the conference building, and so we organized a last-minute show with the help of a local organization. We were ourselves pleasantly surprised by the interest and enthusiasm generated by the exhibition, and only now in the light of our experience and subsequent reflection have we become aware of the potential of perhaps working, rather than just coinciding, with artists. The organizers of the following year’s Lampeter Archaeology Workshop, on the theme of Embedded Technologies http://archaeology.lamp.ac.uk/techno/enter.htm, made early plans for a more extensive exhibition and secured a grant for an artist in residence to work on a piece exploring some of the themes of the workshop. Projects in the Peak district (Edmonds pers. comm.) and Cornwall (Tilley 1998), for example, are also beginning to link archaeological fieldwork and artistic expression. We are just now beginning to experiment, to frame questions about art and archaeology. We don’t yet know whether making these connections will bring about revolution, or aesthetic sensation, or nothing at all. But we’re keen to give it a go.
Acknowledgements

Luci Attala, Gordon Crabb, Declan Kelly, Gwyneth Kelsey, Alison Lockhead, Stephen Player, Squidge, Lynn Watkins and Geoffrey Wynn contributed works to the exhibition and gave permission for images of their work to be used in this paper. Ron Dukelow and Hilary Booth of Cambria Arts organized and mounted the exhibition which took place at the University of Wales, Lampeter in June 1998. Thanks to Tony Rollason (Estates Office, UWL), for facilitating use of the building, Alan Rogers and Academic Computing Services staff for co-operation in maintaining security and transferring computing facilities during the exhibition. The organizers are grateful to the Department of Archaeology, UWL, for their financial, intellectual and practical support for the workshop. A previous version of this paper was presented at TAG98 at Birmingham. We are grateful to Cole Henley for organizing the 'Art for art's sake? The potential of art(s) for archaeology' session. The text of this article was compiled and edited by Sarah Tarlow. Images prepared by Mark Pluciennik.

Bibliography


~ 19 ~


~ 20 ~


Yannis Hamilakis,  
Department of Archaeology  
University of Southampton  
Highfield  
Southampton S017 1BJ  
UK  
Email: y.hamilakis@soton.ac.uk  
http://www.arch.soton.ac.uk

Mark Pluciennik  
Department of Archaeology  
University of Wales, Lampeter,  
Ceredigion SA48 7ED  
Wales, UK  
Email: m.pluciennik@lamp.ac.uk  
http://archaeology.lamp.ac.uk/Arch/corepage.html

Sarah Tarlow  
School of Archaeology and Ancient History,  
University of Leicester,  
Leicester LE1 7RH  
UK  
Email: sat12@le.ac.uk  
http://www.le.ac.uk/archaeology/

© Yannis Hamilakis, Mark Pluciennik and Sarah Tarlow  
© assemblage 2001