RESEARCH PAPER

The Role of Sculpture in Communicating Archaeology in Museums

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In this article I discuss an innovative museum strategy that aims to create a more evocative and engaging visitor experience. I argue that the inclusion of contemporary art, and specifically sculpture in exhibition design, activates visitor agency, empowering the public to take part in interpreting the human past. I explore the unique sensory engagement sculpture provides and the important role this can play for the public presentation of archaeology. I also examine an existing project that has called upon sculpture as an interpretive resource at the National Museum of Scotland, discussing its impact on visitors and its contribution to the discipline. I conclude with a discussion of a selection of living sculptors including Rachel Whiteread and Antony Gormley whose work, I argue, signals exciting opportunities for future artist-curator collaboration. By considering both current examples and future possibilities, this article builds a case for sculpture as an important and dynamic tool for the public understanding of archaeology in museums.

Introduction

Archaeology has a responsibility to engage with the broader public (e.g. Schadla-Hall 1999; Ascherson 2000; Matsuda 2009). As a crucial point of interaction between the discipline and society, it is important that museums provide a meaningful journey into the human past (Merriman 1991:1,117 & 139–40). Traditional museum display methods are often unsuited for this purpose, creating an atmosphere that limits engagement and precipitates passive acceptance of specialist explanation (Silverman 1995: 161; Skramstad 2004: 128). Equally, archaeologists and curators rarely acknowledge the uncertainties of archaeological investigation that leave room for non-specialist perspectives (Hooper-Greenhill 1999:18; Gardner 2004: 14–15). Museums should instead encourage visitors to become like archaeologists and reach their own interpretations of displayed material. New and creative approaches to exhibition design can enhance public experience of archaeology whilst also conserving objects (Falk and Dierking 2000; Basu and Macdonald 2007).

Contemporary sculpture can achieve these aims: three-dimensional artwork has the greatest capacity to activate visitor agency via the unique viewing experience it creates. By occupying space, sculpture facilitates a bodily-engaged response, first confronting and then drawing viewers in and around the piece to discover its form, materiality and detail (Tucker 1974: 9; Potts 2001: 9–10). This captivates and sustains visitor attention, encouraging further exploration of its meaning, as well as the wider exhibition context.

This paper has three main sections: the first introduces a working definition of contemporary sculpture and the challenges associated with a shortage of data relating

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to the visitor experience. The second section is a detailed discussion of existing collaborations between sculptors and curators, focusing particularly on a project at the National Museum of Scotland. In the third, I explore a selection of works with archaeological relevance not yet displayed in a museum context that represent opportunities for purpose-designed commissions. Finally, I highlight key points for future research and draw together the range of interpretive objectives met by contemporary sculpture for archaeology in museums.

A Working Definition of Contemporary Sculpture

In order to ground this discussion, a short and necessarily partial definition of contemporary sculpture is offered: a three-dimensional art form that occupies space, and ranges in style from classical to conceptual.

The Modernist movement of the early 20th century led to more freedom in the creative process extending the range of materials used by artists. With a rejection of realism and shift towards the avant-garde, the category of sculpture was extended to include found objects (Marcel Duchamp b.1887 d.1968), moving parts (Jean Tinguely b.1925 d.1991) and performance (Joseph Beuys b.1921 d.1986) (Causey 1998: 7–11). Sculpture expanded even further with postmodernism (c.1970 –c.1990), giving rise to an art form that became increasingly conceptual (McEvilley 1999: 46). Contemporary sculpture is therefore not bound by conventional parameters such as the plinth (Morse 2010: 31). It is a dynamic and open category that is full of possibilities (Causey 1998: 7 & 259).

Obviously this explanation is a gross simplification of the shifting cultural attitudes affecting art, the terminology (modernism/ postmodernism) of which suffers from 'an overemphasis on chronological succession' (McEvilley 1999: 35) and continues to be the subject of much debate. My aim is to provide a brief summary of how these movements affected sculpture. Causey (1998) provides a clear guide to contemporary sculpture's

changing definition and role; Potts (2000) discusses the history of sculpture and its public reception, and Tucker (1974), a sculptor, presents his personal reading of the art form.

The Data Gap

It is important to preface the following discussion by highlighting the shortage of relevant data that would allow for wider analysis of sculpture as a communicator of archaeology in museums. There are very few audience research projects available as sources in this field. My evaluation therefore relies heavily upon the views of artists and curators, as well as my own interpretations. This is problematic because any study that seeks to create a more engaging museum experience *should* include the perspectives of visitors. Where possible, I support arguments with data from a similar project for which museum visitor responses to contemporary sculpture are published (Morris Hargreaves McIntyre 2009).

The terms *visitors*, *viewers* and *the public* are not applied without an awareness of their drawbacks: these blanket terms do not reflect the diversity of people who visit museums from a range of demographic, educational and cultural backgrounds, and with different interpretive needs. Likewise, due to lack of data, any detailed assessment of the sculptures according to criteria such as whether they cater to the interpretive needs of specific groups (e.g. families) cannot be tackled.

Both factors lead to an unfortunate but inevitable homogenisation of individual *visitors* to museums and galleries, and the *public* body that is archaeology's potential audience. These issues are the subjects of extensive debate: this paper is also by no means the final word on the topic.

Existing Collaboration

To further explore the purpose that sculpture can serve for archaeology, examples of existing collaboration between the two disciplines must be examined and their contribution assessed.

Relocation and Absent Materials

The British sculptor Andy Goldsworthy (b.1958) typically works in the landscape using natural materials to make sculptures that degrade and cease to exist except in photographs (Malpas 2004: 146). These ephemeral sculptures explore themes pertinent for archaeology such as time, decay and the human relationship with the natural environment. Goldsworthy has also collaborated with curators, creating installations that transport visitors back in time and outside the museum walls.

In 1994–1995, Goldsworthy collaborated with the British Museum for *Time Machine*, an exhibition in the museum's Egyptian Sculpture Gallery (Putnam and Davies 1994) with works by other artists such as the sculptor Marc Quinn. By including contemporary sculpture amongst ancient Egyptian works, this project sought to encourage visitors to see continuities in, and identify similar motifs between, past and present products of human creativity, thus making the past more accessible (Putnam 1994: 8).

Goldsworthy used thirty tonnes of sand (Putnam 2011) to create *Sandwork*, a sculpture that snaked between cabinets and figures [Figure 1]. The sand returned the ancient statues to their original context, the desert; but the shape of *Sandwork* also played an interpretive role, recollecting the River Nile, the life source of Ancient Egypt. Either reading encouraged visitors to imagine how the statues might once have been seen. Goldsworthy did not however intend for its shape to have one meaning but rather to refer to rivers, snakes, trees and prehistoric earthworks (Goldsworthy 2002: 113). In any case, *Sandwork* worked as a powerful visual tool drawing the visitor's attention into and around the gallery, an effect intensified by the contrast of the yellow sand upon the gallery floor's dark granite.

The British Museum allowed *Sandwork* to be displayed for just three days on the grounds that it disrupted public access (Putnam 2009: 155). The sculpture was instead represented by video and photography for

Figure 1: Andy Goldsworthy's *Sandwork* (1994) created for the *Time Machine* exhibition at the British Museum – this river of sand returned the Egyptian statues to the Nile Valley. © James Putnam

the remaining weeks of the exhibition, a step that would normally diminish a work's impact. For Goldsworthy however, this enhanced the artwork's message about the passage of time. Just as the Egyptian sculptures (museum objects) are traces of a past society, the photographs and film serve as a memory of *Sandwork* (sculpture). In fact, in its material form and as a photograph, *Sandwork* facilitated relocation: the sculpture returned the Egyptian statues to the desert and the photograph helped visitors envisage Goldsworthy's work as it was in the gallery.

In 1998, Goldsworthy made a group of works for the *Early People Gallery* in the new National Museum of Scotland (NMS), Edinburgh. Like *Time Machine*, this established 'a dialogue between the ancient and

Figure 2: *Enclosure* by Andy Goldsworthy (1998) represents an Iron Age structure unique to
Scotland and provides an interpretive context for displayed objects. © Nick Kirkby

the contemporary' (Goldsworthy 2000: 8). Made from 66,000 horizontally-laid roofing slates, the largest of the series is *Enclosure*: a circular, four-part sculpture that represents a broch, an Iron Age structure unique to Scotland (Goldsworthy 2000: 10). It encircles displays [Figure 2] about prehistoric agriculture and food processing, encouraging visitors to follow its sweeping form to explore the gallery (Malpas 2004: 139). Like *Sandwork*, it also encourages visitors to consider objects in their original, prehistoric context as part of the agricultural landscape. Goldsworthy intended that *Enclosure* be a reminder of the cyclical nature of 'working the land' (Goldsworthy 2000: 10). Each of the sculpture's walls has a circle of slate in its centre. Read left to right the circles turn clockwise, representing the rising and setting of the sun and moon as well as circularity of time (Goldsworthy 2000: 10). While there is no data to establish the proportion of visitors to whom

this conceptual message is successfully communicated, it would be interesting to examine, for example, if an explanatory leaflet is required and how far this step could undermine my wider argument for the facilitation of independent interpretation by museum visitors.

Goldsworthy created a second sculpture for the centre of *Enclosure:* a circle of burnt and unburnt wood that forms a notional hearth [Figure 3]. The hearth had a practical role providing food and warmth but also a symbolic and social significance for prehistoric communities in Europe (Bradley 2002: 70). Goldsworthy's choice of wood sourced from the NMS construction site is also significant. By creating something new through burning he references another important prehistoric concept - rebirth and transformation through fire (Bruck 2001: 153). The presence of wood in the gallery also reminds visitors of this organic material's important role in

Figure 3: Andy Goldsworthy's hearth of burnt wood within *Enclosure* (1998) puts this natural material, typically absent from museums, at the heart of a display about processing of resources. © Andrew McMillan

prehistory, a material typically absent from displays due to lack of preservation. The bias of the archaeological record means that metal, ceramic and stone artefacts dominate museum displays. This can often give museum visitors a skewed impression of a past where no textiles or wood were used: Goldsworthy's work helps to counteract this distortion.

For the bays of the south wall of *Early People*, Goldsworthy created a series of large, cracked-clay panels. These bring earth itself into the sterile museum context and so serve as a reminder of the excavation process. Their colour also reminds visitors of the richness of natural pigments used in prehistory, colours that, on recovered objects have lost their vibrancy with time (Blackwell 2012). Goldsworthy designed one panel, *River* [Figure 4] specifically for the display of a prehistoric dugout canoe, an object that could easily be mistaken for a coffin or tree trunk rather than a water-faring vessel. It is the only panel to include the 'sinuous meander' (Goldsworthy 2000: 8) of a dried-up riverbed. This jux-

taposition provides visitors with visual clues as to the use of the object thus encouraging independent interpretation. Traditionally museums use painterly backdrops of landscape-settings to provide a context for this type of object; yet, these artistic representations are inflexible and rarely look anything like the real world (D. Clarke, *pers. comm.,* March 2013). Goldsworthy's contextualisation is more appropriate. His sculptures encourage visitors to imagine, rather than passively accept one interpretation of the past. They also reflect the nature of archaeology, which can, at best, only provide partial traces from which the human past can start to be understood.

Distant Past: Familiar People
The Scottish sculptor Sir Eduardo Paolozzi (b.1924 d.2005) is famous for his collages but describes himself 'primarily, as a sculptor' (Paolozzi 1983: 39). Whatever the medium, his works create a fusion between past and present using found objects in his sculptures

Figure 4: Andy Goldsworthy's *River* (1998) provides interpretive clues for visitors as to the use of the object displayed at its front: a canoe. © Nick Kirkby

and pages from old books in his collages. Paolozzi's longstanding interest in this synthesis and the related practice of museum curation is further evidenced by his involvement with the *Museum of Mankind* in 1985 (Paolozzi 1985). His exhibit rejected conventional approaches of display, presenting a diverse collection of ethnographic material as a homogenous group (Anon. 2005). Paolozzi believed that the objects could be united by their all being human-made products regardless of their date or place of origin (Overton 2009). This is an interesting preface for his later collaboration with the National Museum of Scotland.

In addition to Goldsworthy's sculptures, NMS commissioned a series of works from Paolozzi, also for the *Early People Gallery*. Since the museum's primary objective is to 'display all things Scottish' (McKean 2000: 101), Paolozzi served a dual purpose as a Scottish artist whose sculptures could represent prehistoric Scots. Today, Paolozzi's

twelve one-and-a-quarter-life-size bronze figures *People* form an avenue that welcomes visitors to the exhibition.

Paolozzi's *People* are abstract and dynamic with organic and mechanistic forms combined into their prominent musculature (Paolozzi 1983: 43). They project a universally identifiable human that unites people of the present (viewers) with people of the past (sculptures). Traditionally mannequins are used to represent past people but these lifeless models project one reading as faithful reconstruction, such as the entrenched popular prehistoric stereotype of the bearded, fur-clad brute (Moser 1998). Instead, Paolozzi's stylised, non-sex-specific depictions reflect the archaeological reality that there is little evidence to help us describe prehistoric people realistically – the figures provide an impression from which visitors can develop their own ideas.

Each of Paolozzi's sculptures was also designed to incorporate the display of artefacts into their dimensions [Figure 5]. Glass boxes are included in the figures at the points at which archaeologists believe personal objects would have been worn. These glass components enable visitors to interact with the archaeological material at a level scale, 'human-to-human' as the pieces would have been originally experienced. This means objects can be examined close-up rather than at a distance on the low shelves of traditional museum cabinets. Knowledge of their detail and intricacy helps impress upon visitors that amongst the ancient Scots were skilled jewelers: one of the intended messages of the gallery (McKean 2000: 113). By being non-sex-specific Paolozzi's figures also avoid gendering any of the jewellery they display. The glass components therefore encourage visitors to behave more like archaeologists, making interpretations based on a detailed assessment of material evidence. Such an engagement enables the public to take part in 'the process of meaning making' (Robins 2007: 23) and champions the museum as an active learning environment. Through important

Figure 5: Eduardo Paolozzi's *People* (1998) display objects as well as presenting exhibition themes and stages of socio-economic complexity. © Nick Kirkby

Figure 6: This group of figures by Eduardo Paolozzi presents the theme *Wider Horizons:* the upheld palm communicates 'hello' and 'stop', to reflect the possible manner of early contact between prehistoric communities. © Leah Acheson Roberts

steps like these, archaeology can become a more inclusive discipline.

Paolozzi's twelve figures are grouped into four sets, each of which illustrate a thematic section of the gallery and form a sequence that communicates the key developmental stages of socio-economic complexity from the Mesolithic to the Viking Age. Their layout does not correspond with the linear Three Age System but zigzags to reflect the prehistoric conceptualisation of time based on recurring seasonal cycles.

The first group and theme *A Generous Land*, examining natural resources, is depicted by a scenario showing a rectangle (workbench) on which a cube (natural resource) is transformed into a sphere (product) (D. Clarke, *pers. comm.*, February 2012). In the next thematic group *Wider Horizons*, a figure presents this circle (product) to another, whose outstretched palm can be read to say 'hello' or 'stop' to reflect the amiable or hostile early

contact made between prehistoric communities [Figure 6]. The circle here represents processed goods but also the ideas exchanged via trading relationships. Paolozzi's third group presents *Them and Us*, showing a seated (enthroned) figure flanked by two standing figures (subordinates), whose hand rests upon an orb that represents the control of resources [Figure 5] (D. Clarke, *pers. comm.*, February 2012). And so the sequence continues, culminating in a lone figure who represents the invisible prehistoric individual.

This is, however, an intellectually challenging display. Many visitors will struggle to understand the full range of information presented without the help of textual explanation or guided tour. The conceptual representation of the different stages of socio-economic development may prove particularly difficult to unravel. While this

limits the sculptures as interpretive tools, I am convinced that explanation would also be required for conventional museum alternatives, such as the often-impenetrable diagrams and timelines. In fact, Paolozzi's *People* provide a striking introduction to the themes and concepts explored in the exhibition that, combined with the avenue the groups forge through museum space, persuades visitors to continue their journey through the gallery. An example of a sculpture playing a similar role, for which published data exists, is Antony Gormley's *Case for an Angel I (2008)*, displayed in the entrance foyer for *Statuephilia: Contemporary Sculptors at the British Museum* (Morris Hargreaves McIntyre 2009: 8). Many interviewed visitors felt its outstretched wings welcomed them and offered a 'choice of directions to go within the Museum' (Morris Hargreaves McIntyre 2009: 26).

Future Collaboration

In the following section, I propose potential areas for future collaborations between museums and contemporary sculptors. Unlike those by Goldsworthy and Paolozzi, these sculptures are not made with the museum visitor in mind. Instead, they are existing works that have an archaeological relevance and/or demonstrate that the artist has explored ideas suited to a purpose-designed commission for archaeology. Analysis of their role as communicators of archaeology is therefore based upon artists, curators and critics' interpretations of the sculptures *outside* the museum. Consequently, I offer my own ideas about how visitors will respond to the works in an archaeological context. These are convincing arguments that demonstrate the potential for further collaboration between the two fields.

Human Traces and Spaces

British sculptor Rachel Whiteread (b. 1963) is essentially concerned with how humans regard and relate to their built environment. Her sculptures express absent human bodies, drawing the viewer's attention to overlooked aspects of objects and architecture (Whiteread 2004), ideas resonant with archaeological aims and practice.

The majority of Rachel Whiteread's works are casts of abandoned objects such as furniture found in second-hand shops (Whiteread 2004). Using synthetic materials like plaster, concrete and dental putty she solidifies negative space, creating detailed three-dimensional inversions that are both unsettling and familiar. They describe 'our physicality' (Mullins 2004: 10) by capturing the unoccupied spaces of objects created for a universal human: baths, beds and wardrobes are, for example, 'about the height and length of a person' (Elliott 2001: 9). Thus, the absence of the human form is described through the reification of absent space. Close inspection of her negative casts of chairs, sinks and hot-water bottles also reveal traces of humanity. By detecting and interpreting these marks and fragments, viewers of Whiteread's sculptures become like archaeologists, inferring how the objects were used and by whom. This echoes the central aim of archaeological investigation: to reconstruct past human experience from the traces left behind.

This concept is most clearly expressed in her series of bed mattress casts made during the early 1990s. Whiteread's use of a urine-yellow coloured rubber to cast these evocative objects recalls the recurrent urban image of the abandoned, stained mattress. It leads viewers to speculate as to the intimate past human actions these traces might represent, ranging in kind from 'sickness to passion' (Elliott 2001: 9), once again appointing them the role of the archaeologists.

Whiteread next sought to capture traces of the human past in architectural space as, like furniture, it too 'corresponds to the human form' (Mullins 2004: 39). In 1990, she made *Ghost* [Figure 7], a plaster cast of a room of a North London house, not dissimilar from her childhood home (Mullins 2004: 23). The casting process reversed positive and negative features, transforming the inside walls

Figure 7: Rachel Whiteread's *Ghost* (1990): a cast of a room that captured traces and memories of the lives lived there. © Nathan Harrison

into the outer and defining shape of her sculpture (Potts 2001: 20–21). Archaeological traces of the life lived there, such as wallpaper fragments and soot from the fireplace, were also lifted with the plaster for viewers' consideration (Mullins 2004: 23).

In 1993, Whiteread took this idea further, creating a large-scale, in-situ concrete cast of an entire terraced *House* [Figure 8] on a street in Hackney, London. Like *Ghost*, this work petrified space and inverted architectural features; alcoves became protrusions, and doorknobs, rounded hollows (Dixon 1993). This made 'amateur archaeologists of the onlookers' (Mullins 2004: 52), inviting them to imagine past room uses and users. The transformation of the familiar into the unfamiliar unsettled viewers, drawing out the sense of sadness we all experience at memories, people and past lives now lost - themes relevant for archaeology (Lingwood 1995; Sinclair 1995). Equally, by fossilising urban space Whiteread highlights the scale at which humans live, a message that could

be used in the museum to aid public understanding of social space through time. However, for local residents *House* exposed a private home like 'their own' to public scrutiny (Mullins 2004: 7). Some were so outraged they campaigned for its demolition, which went ahead in 1994 (Schlieker 2001: 59). Indeed, the strong public reaction, as well as the critical acclaim it received (winning the Turner Prize 1993), are an indication of the work's powerful social and political impact.

Whiteread's sculptures present ideas pertinent for archaeology, drawing viewers in to inspect traces of humanity and reflect upon their own lives and relationship with the built environment. Her process could also work as a kind of rescue archaeology, capturing positive impressions of excavation trenches or historic building interiors that would otherwise be lost to urban redevelopment. However, such casts prevent any internal spatial information being accessed: rather like a jar of air, any evidence beyond the outer shell would become invisible to the viewer. This

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Figure 8: *House* (1993) by Rachel Whiteread: the Turner-Prize winning cast of a house interior made and displayed *in situ* in East London. © Simon Edney

friction between preservation and inaccessibility highlights the similar limitations of the virtual reality (VR) and 3D modeling techniques now widely used to map archaeological sites (Hermon and Nikodem 2008). Whiteread's casts facilitate public experience of 'lost' space but also limit it, just as VR and 3D visualisations enable future generations to experience sites to the forensic detail, but cannot recreate what it feels like *to be there*. In a museum context, these new sculptures could be used to encourage visitors to take part in academic debate both about the authority assigned to particular categories of evidence (i.e. tangible over intangible) and the role of embodied experience for the interpretation of archeological sites.

The similarity between Whiteread's casting process for *House* and archaeological excavation also offers an important message for the public presentation of archaeology: for the information and evidence to be reached, the original material context must be destroyed. To cast its rooms meant filling them with liquid concrete before tearing away the original shell and source of the work (Dixon 1993). In the same way, the act of digging by archaeologists is unrepeatable and inevitably destructive. A similar museum-based installation could help communicate that the past is vulnerable to human agency, both in the form of landscape redevelopment and professional misconduct by archaeologists in not providing a clear and detailed record of an excavated site.

Being Human

Antony Gormley (b. 1950) is another sculptor chiefly concerned with human scale but unlike Whiteread, he expresses this through direct figurative representation. His sculptures explore the limits of human bodily experience, creating a conversation with viewers via their 'co-habitation' of space (Gormley 2011).

Aside from his monumental public work *The Angel of the North (1998)* Gormley is most famous for the multitude of 'body case'

Figure 9: An early example of Antony Gormley's 'body case' sculptures made by casting his own body. Antony Gormley SOUND I, 1986 Lead/fibreglass/water 188 x 60 x 45 cm Installation view, Salvatore Ala Gallery, New York, USA, 1986. © the artist

sculptures he creates by casting his own body [Figure 9]. What begins as a plaster cast is transposed into lead, bronze or iron to make sculptures that both contain and occupy space (Gormley 2000 *cited in* Caiger-Smith 2010: 29). These hollow forms express the 'darkness of the body', the space behind the external appearance in which all humans dwell (Gormley 2005: 17). The ritual of beginning with a cast of Gormley's form results in unique works, each of which record different and momentary experiences of being in his body. They capture fleeting moments frozen in time at the point of creation, echoing the plaster casts of Pompeii. Because they have the same origin, these sculptures also have an inevitable physical uniformity, a characteristic emphasised by the regimented still-

ness of Gormley's poses and simplicity of his final forms. Through the dichotomy between their unique internal experience and external uniformity, Gormley explores *individual* embodied experience and the *universal* human condition.

The scale shared by sculpture and viewer prompts viewers to recognise aspects of their own condition in Gormley's bodily experience. In fact, the artist describes these hollow sculptures as 'void spaces, awaiting [the viewer's] thoughts and feelings' (Gormley 2011). This shared human scale therefore directs viewers to 'look at themselves' (Gormley 2000) and consider what it feels like to be in their bodies (Gormley 2005: 17). By highlighting that we all experience and understand the world through our bodies (Merleau-Ponty 1962), Gormley expresses a human commonality, a message that could help unite museum visitors with the people of the past.

The viewer was also the focal point for Gormley's *Field* series [Figure 10]. Always made collaboratively and just a few inches tall, these small abstract sculptures were brought together to form vast installations. Gormley created many different versions during the 1990s and 2000s, ranging from the 150 'prehistoric-looking' (Caiger-Smith 2010: 49) fired-clay figures of 1989 to the 35,000 displayed in the British Museum's Great Court in 2002. Gormley's undifferentiated forms always filled their display space and outnumbered viewers, provoking responses that ranged from awe to anxiety (Caiger-Smith 2010: 50–52). Each figure's 'mute unflinching gaze' (Caiger-Smith 2010: 50) transformed viewer into viewed and consequently highlighted the very act of looking (Putnam 2009: 178). Rather like the reflective ceiling panel in Olafur Elliasson's *The Weather Project* installation (Leahy 2010: 167) in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall in 2003, Gormley's *Field* series encouraged viewers to 'see themselves, seeing' and in doing so, evaluate their own condition (Elliasson quoted by Meyer 2004 *cited in* Leahy 2010:
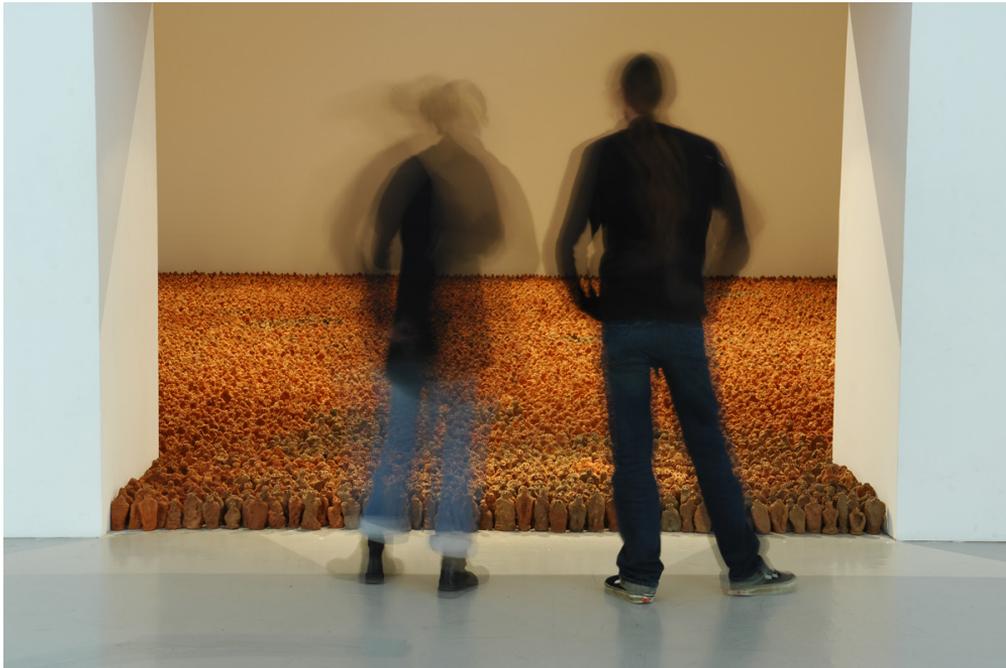
Figure 10: Antony Gormley's *European Field*: this photograph shows how the works banish viewers from the display space. Antony Gormley EUROPEAN FIELD, 1993 Terracotta Variable size: approx. 40 000 elements, each 8–26 cm high Installation view, Musée d'Art Moderne de Saint-Étienne Métropole, France, 2009. Photograph by Yves Bresson. Commissioned by Malmo Konsthall, Malmo, Sweden. © the artist

167). For archaeology, *Field* could highlight how public constructions of the past are influenced by present-day prejudices and therefore underline the importance of a representative and ethically responsible discipline (Ucko 2001).

For his 2011–2012 installation *Still Standing* at The Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg, Gormley worked directly with archaeological material, creating a conversation between ancient and contemporary sculpture (Gormley 2011). He removed Roman statues from their plinths so that viewers had the unique experience of encountering the gods and heroes of antiquity as equals [Figure 11]. Through this, Gormley sought to make viewers more aware of their own bodies in space (Gormley 2011). Gormley also installed his own sculptures composed of 'pixels of rusty iron', a degrading material used to encourage viewers to reflect on concepts of time and decay (Gormley 2011) - themes relevant to archaeology.

In his 2007 work *Blind Light* [Figure 12] Gormley created an interactive environment that made the viewer participant and subject (Caiger-Smith 2010: 108). A glass box (10m wide and 3m high) was filled with a cooled atmospheric cloud of 90% humidity, which, combined with the effects of intense fluorescent white light reduced visibility to less than an arm's length (Caiger-Smith 2010: 108). This led visitors to experience a heightened state of consciousness and bodily awareness, highlighting the broader sensory capabilities of perception. *Blind Light* therefore reminded participants of the human condition that we are both restricted and enabled by our corporeality.

Gormley's sculptures establish a relationship with viewers by exploring the universal conditions of human experience. This is

Figure 11: For this part of the exhibition *Still Standing*, Antony Gormley removed ancient sculptures from their plinths so that they confronted museum visitors face-to-face. Antony Gormley STILL STANDING The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, Russia, 2011 – 2012. Photograph by Yuri Molodkovets. © the artist

useful for the presentation of archaeology because it offers a message of human continuity: although the world is always changing, the way that we experience and perceive it remains the same. This could help banish condescending stereotypes (Moser 1998) and so enable museum visitors to relate to the people of the past. Gormley's ideas are also in-line with phenomenology, a school of thought that argues that human perception and understanding are determined by the body (e.g. Merleau-Ponty 1962). This 'embodied' approach has been used for the interpretation of archaeological sites and landscapes (e.g. Tilley 1994). It has also been identified as an important avenue for museum research (e.g. Monod and Klein 2005) but there is little evidence of any concerted application of these principles in this field. Gormley's sculptures represent a route through which the embodied approach to museum interpretation can be developed.

Order and Disorder

American artist Mark Dion's (b. 1961) creates sculptural works comprising conceptual installation and performance elements that examine how dominant ideologies, traditions and public institutions, shape our modern-day understanding of human history and the natural world (Art 21 2013).

For his project *History Trash Dig* (1995) Dion simulated an archaeological excavation in an art gallery context [Figure 13]. In the early phases, viewers could observe the artist and volunteers unearthing objects from piles of earth transported from nearby construction sites (Coles 1999: 26). This relocation meant that archaeology gained a new audience who were able to learn about excavation processes but also witness the creation of Dion's final installation, a comment on museum convention comprised of found objects and tools used by excavators (Coles 1999: 42). Through these stages Dion

Figure 12: Antony Gormley's *Blind Light*: an environment that enabled an experience of heightened bodily-consciousness. Antony Gormley BLIND LIGHT, 2007 Fluorescent light, water, ultrasonic humidifiers, toughened low iron glass, aluminium 320 x 978.5 x 856.5 cm. Commissioned by the Hayward Gallery, London. Installation view, Hayward Gallery, London. Photograph by Stephen White, London. © the artist

highlighted problems associated with the lack of information provided by museums about objects' contexts of discovery and associated artefacts. The indoor-excavation also questioned the sterility of the art gallery, an activity that could be usefully transposed to the museum domain to remind visitors of the many processes through which displayed objects arrive on display, that is: discovery, processing, restoration, analysis and curation.

Dion took his exploration of archaeological principles further with the *Tate Thames Dig* (1999–2000). He, along with a team of local volunteers, used archaeological field-walking techniques to comb the Thames foreshore for any objects that caught their attention (Williams 1999: 78; Blazwick 2001: 108). Because collection was guided by choice and personal

interest rather than research questions, some felt that this project harmfully misrepresented archaeological method to the public (Renfrew 1999: 14). However, by gathering only surface material devoid of stratigraphic context, Dion's approach was sensitive to any underlying archaeology (Dion 2009)

These issues carry over into Dion's final piece: a four-metre long, double-sided, wooden cabinet to display the objects collected on the foreshore [Figure 14]. This design was based upon the *Wunderkammer* (literally, 'wonder cabinet') of The Enlightenment but, unlike the original, was interactive (Williams 1999: 98). Dion chose a symbol of the 'look-but-don't-touch' (Blazwick 2001: 105) tradition for an installation that encouraged participation, as a way of challenging the detached observation expected

Figure 13: *History Trash Dig* (1995) by Mark Dion: a simulation of archaeological excavation and processing in an art gallery context. © Eliane Laubscher, FRI-ART

of museum and gallery visitors. The cabinet activated viewers to make interpretations of material, just as an archaeologist would do (Williams 1999: 94). Being able to handle the objects also meant viewers could establish personal links with the people of the past (Renfrew 1999: 15).

The diverse spectrum of objects presented – ranging from a fifty million year old sea urchin to a mobile phone (Williams 1999: 86) – also prompted visitors to question why certain objects are favoured for museum display over others (Dion 2009). By organising only some objects, and according to different taxonomies such as their colour, use or shape, Dion undermined established taxonomic principles (King and Marstine 2006: 272). This rejected the 'authoritative role assumed by specialists' (Coles 1999: 29) and empowered viewers to reach their own conclusions as to the meaning and significance of the objects.

In a museum setting, an interactive display like *Wunderkammer* could help transform how the public experience and regard archaeology. Dion's cabinet would provide an exciting snapshot of London's long history for a museum in the city. Exploration of its diverse contents could help visitors learn how to interpret objects and realise that archaeology includes recognisably modern material as well as ancient artefacts. Equally, if Dion's simulation of excavation was transposed to the museum environment, this could provide opportunities for the close observation of, and even direct visitor participation in, the archaeological process.

Discussion

It is clear then that contemporary sculpture meets a range of interpretive objectives for archaeology in museums. Through this critique three specific impact categories have emerged, which I discuss below.

1. Sculpture can facilitate independent interpretation

Goldsworthy and Paolozzi's sculptures create a dialogue with museum objects. Goldsworthy provides textural and symbolic clues that guide visitors to independently interpret displayed artefacts and locate them in their original context as part of a living landscape. Through the display of personal objects *in situ*, 'about the bodies' of his *People*, Paolozzi facilitates a viewing experience like that of the archaeologist. The glass boxes enable close-up consideration of artefacts which, combined with the figures being non-sex specific, encourages visitors to imagine past wearers based on the archaeological evidence.

The details captured in Whiteread's casts of objects and architectural space also encourage viewers to behave like archaeologists, reconstructing past human uses and occupants from the traces left behind. Dion goes further by involving the public directly in archaeological activity. Plus, his *Wunderkammer* provides a hands-on experience that challenges the authority of specialist explanation by enabling the public to draw their

Figure 14: Mark Dion's *Wunderkammer,* part of *Tate Thames Dig* (1999–2000): an interactive
display that offered visitors the chance to handle and interpret material discovered on the
Thames foreshore. © Tate, London 2013

own conclusions and connections between objects. In a similar vein, Gormley's sculptures, by instructing viewers to look at themselves, highlight that our interpretation of the past is determined by our present-day experiences. This interaction could be used to activate museum visitors or conversely to help them face up to their own prejudices when building a picture of the past.

Sculpture therefore empowers the public to take part in the construction of meaning, achieving a more engaging museum experience that reflects the archaeological reality that very little is certain. While this is not the sculptors' primary aim, it is a powerful secondary impact of their work: whether through the objects, traces and symbolic clues they present, or through the relationship they foster, these sculptures bring the viewer into focus and facilitate independent learning about archaeology.

I frequently make the point that contemporary sculpture encourages museum visitors to behave like archaeologists. The visiting public should feel inspired to assess, consider, examine and reflect upon museum objects and displays – sculpture encourages this. Granted, this behaviour is not unique to archaeologists; it applies to other practitioners who interrogate material evidence such as detectives. However, my point is less about uniqueness and more about the importance of greater *equality* between the public (visitor) and specialist (curator). To clarify, this 'behaviour' is important because by encouraging non-archaeologists to interpret displayed material independently, visitors will experience a deeper engagement

with the artefacts and better understand associated archaeological concepts. Through this, a more meaningful museum experience and indeed, a more inclusive discipline can be developed.

2. Sculpture can help museum visitors relate to people of the past

Paolozzi's *People* present a 'universal human' that rejects traditional prehistoric stereotypes. The figures provide an abstract impression from which visitors can formulate their own ideas of how prehistoric people looked. Just as these represent the *Early People* of Scotland, Whiteread's casts of objects and architectural space might also be used to represent the *absent* people of the past.

The mix of objects from different time periods included in Dion's *Wunderkammer* inspires viewers to build narratives and draw connections between themselves and the lives of past people. Similarly Gormley's sculptures express aspects of the human condition shared by all humanity, a message that could be used to encourage museum visitors to consider what they share with the people of the past.

Archaeology is about the *people* of the past. It is therefore extremely important that the objects we uncover and display do not become detached from the people who once owned and used them. Equally, an expression of continuity in the experiences of humans through time helps make the 'passage of time' less incomprehensible. Sculpture can provide this link.

3. Sculpture can communicate important archaeological themes and concepts

Goldsworthy's sculptures remind visitors of the archaeological processes through which objects have come to be in the museum. By using wood and clay in *Early People*, Goldsworthy also highlights the role of natural materials in prehistory – materials typically absent from displays. The vibrancy of his clay panels recalls the richness of the natural pigments used by prehistoric people, the traces

of which are now faded or lost to the archaeological record. In their quest for conservation, museums present an impression of the past as being stable: Goldsworthy's sculptures help to counteract this misrepresentation by relating themes of time and decay. Whiteread's work examines the similar, important concepts of death and memory that are often sanitised from the traces of the human past as displayed in the museum. In performing a kind of rescue archaeology her process could also be used to highlight the limitations of digital methods of recording and the importance of embodied approaches to interpreting archaeological space.

Paolozzi's sculptures provide an intuitive illustration of the developmental stages of socio-economic complexity important to understanding prehistory. This is, however, difficult to unravel. The groups also, like Goldsworthy's *Enclosure*, present time as cyclical not linear, to reflect the prehistoric conceptualisation of time based on the circularity of the seasons. Both these works also encourage further exploration, playing an indirect but nevertheless valuable interpretive role for archaeology: they contextualise the display's thematic sections and their shape and configuration physically guides visitors further into the gallery.

Conclusion

Contemporary sculpture enables a physically engaged encounter with the remains of the human past, bringing vibrancy to the museum experience and activating visitors to make independent interpretations. By reminding visitors of important concepts, themes, and materials not usually present in the museum environment, sculpture inspires an active response that leads to an enhanced idea of the past and archaeology – record, practice, and theory. By encouraging visitors to take part in archaeological interpretation, sculpture animates the people of the past and builds relationships between them and the people of today. Empowering non-archaeologists to participate also

helps to achieve one of the main aims of public archaeology: to reach a multi-vocal and more representative discipline. Archaeology strives to bridge the gap between past and present, and through these interactions, contemporary sculpture is able to contribute to this goal.

My arguments are restricted by the lack of data relating to the visitor experience: questions about whether sculpture might be a challenging interpretive tool for some visitors are under-explored. There is also limited discussion of the extent to which traditional methods are required, or indeed appropriate alongside sculptures to aid interpretation. My proposals are not applied to a specific audience or exhibition type e.g. temporary versus permanent display. However, these points have been identified as priorities for future research and are limitations that reflect the nature of this field, which relies too heavily upon the views of specialists for its self-evaluation.

Acknowledgements

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