Chapter 1

The absent present
Archaeologies of the contemporary past

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Development of the archaeology of the contemporary past

Archaeology developed as a discipline concerned with the distant past, not only helping to establish the antiquity of humankind but unravelling ancient histories long buried and previously undreamt of. Throughout most of the history of archaeology, these early times remained the prime foci of the discipline, the more recent past receiving much less attention and something presumed best left to historians. Even when archaeologists did work in historic periods such as Medieval and early Modern Europe or Colonial America, these were, until recently, marginal fields in the discipline and frequently seen as ancillary to History. Since the 1960s, this attitude has been slowly changing and as we enter the new millennium, we no longer regard archaeology as a discipline defined by a particular time period – indeed the theoretical upheavals initiated during the 1960s can be seen as largely responsible for this. By focusing attention on the nature of archaeological methods and data, in particular on the fact that, as archaeologists, we deal primarily with material culture, the whole issue of how recent the subject matter of archaeology should be, becomes irrelevant.

The archaeology of modern or contemporary material culture arose during this upheaval, manifesting itself during the 1970s with projects on the university campuses of Tucson, Arizona led by Michael Schiffer and at Honolulu, Hawaii by Richard Gould. One of the most famous projects to emerge from the former campus was Rathje’s Garbage project set up in 1973 and still going strong. These projects reached a wider audience and acclaim with the publication in 1981 of Modern Material Culture: The Archaeology of Us, edited by Gould and Schiffer, stemming from a symposium at the American Anthropological Association meetings in 1978. Indeed, it was in this volume that Rathje explicitly stated that archaeology can no longer be defined either by digging or a concern for old data, but is ‘... a focus on the interaction between material culture and human behaviour, regardless of time or space’ (Rathje 1979: 2; Rathje 1981: 52). But what was the agenda of the ‘archaeology of us’ – was it really a concern with contemporary/modern material culture or were they after something else?
The answer is rather ambivalent; on the one hand, there is no doubt that many of the authors saw the archaeology of contemporary society as an important theme, in particular as part of the larger project of the archaeology of the historic and/or recent past. Nevertheless, Rathje, Schiffer and Gould all gave equal, if not more, prominence to the ethno-archaeological and pedagogic value of such studies. A primary concern of the volume lay in trying to understand the relation between material culture and human behaviour in terms of generalising statements, even laws, as befitting the spirit of the time which could then inform more conventional archaeological research. As Schiffer and Gould state in their preface to the volume mentioned above, ‘… anyone looking for direct applications of the recent findings to past human behaviour presented by the chapters in this book will be disappointed. The archaeological payoff of this book can only be realised indirectly, first by positing relationships of a general nature and then by deriving predictions or tests of each relationship with respect to particular prehistoric- or historic-archaeological cases’ (Gould and Schiffer 1981: xvi).

The studies in that volume and subsequent research on contemporary material culture have tended to reproduce this dual characteristic – indeed, perhaps one can examine the subsequent history of archaeological work on our own material culture according to the prime concerns driving it. Two main strands of modern material culture studies in archaeology may be identified: first are those that are explicitly ethno-archaeological and concern themselves with more general issues of material culture which are supposed to feed back into research in traditional archaeological periods. Second though, are those that deal explicitly with the present as an archaeology of us, sometimes enfolding their study within a longer-term, historical perspective. Of course not all studies fall exclusively into these categories and nor should they – one can be equally concerned to elucidate aspects of our everyday material life and draw more general inferences on the nature of material culture. But it is important to characterise the primary agenda behind any study of modern material culture, for the concern of this book is to distinguish the archaeology of contemporary or modern material culture from its function as ethno-archaeology.

Ethno-archaeological approaches to contemporary material culture in archaeology have a long pedigree – Kidder excavated a town dump back in the 1920s, although he did not publish it, probably because he saw it only as a heuristic exercise for his own edification (Rathje 1979: 3). Such studies though have been occasional and rarely published. The real impetus came in the 1970s in the wake of the New Archaeology. Work already mentioned on the university campus in the States focused on a range of contexts, most of which were intended both to instruct students in the principles of archaeological reasoning and develop critical understanding of how the archaeological record formed. Much of Schiffer’s career has been devoted to exploring processes involved in the formation of the archaeological record and much of this was based on studies of the material culture of his own society. Indeed many of the papers in the Schiffer and Gould volume are explicitly ethno-archaeological. Such middle-range research has continued into the present, but another strand of ethno-archaeological studies of modern material culture emerged with the rise of post-processualism, particularly from Ian Hodder and his students.

Hodder’s own study of a pet-food factory and the role of bow ties worn by the workers was quite clearly an attempt to understand more general issues surrounding material culture and, in his conclusion, he raises the question of its implications for archaeologists dealing with the past (Hodder 1987: 19). While Hodder’s study is firmly within his contextual archaeology and his own perspectives on the nature of material culture, on the whole it differs little in intent from Schiffer and Gould’s work, namely the elucidation of the relation between material culture and human actions or behaviour. Regardless of the markedly different views on this relation, both processual and post-processual ethno-archaeological studies of modern material culture share this perspective: whatever the similarities or differences, such studies are not primarily interested in the archaeology of modern material culture but use it as a means to an end.

The second thread, and the subject of this volume, is with the archaeology of us, and it is also the least developed. Rathje identified three phases in the development of the archaeology of us, which he saw as part of a multidisciplinary interest in modern material culture (Rathje 1979). The first phase is defined by an interest in popular culture, which manifests itself archaeologically in ‘what if?’ games – such as, what if archaeologists were to dig our remains in a thousand years, what would that tell them about us? The second phase is more reflexive and links material culture to behaviour, but does so in a very passive way so that it becomes purely a search for material correlates of social or ideological aspects of society – ‘studies in search of stereotypes’ as Rathje aptly describes them (Rathje 1979: 20). The third phase is defined by the awareness that material culture is not passive and reflexive but can act back upon us in unexpected ways, which has particular resonance in popular mythologies of technology. Thus one of the first concerns is for studies on the social context of technology, one example being resource management issues and consumerism. Rathje’s phases are useful although in many ways the ‘archaeology of us’ as more than an occasional project only really emerged in his third phase and is still not a major area of research within archaeology. Indeed, the best known contemporary research project remains Rathje’s Garbology, which has focused its investigation on ‘fresh’ garbage and, since 1987, landfills. Rathje has identified what he sees as the unique element of this kind of archaeology in that:

... all of its studies have been grounded in the hands-on sorting of quantifiable bits and pieces of garbage in place of collecting data through interview-surveys, government documents, or industry records. In other words, the Garbage Project is studying consumer behaviours directly from the material realities they leave behind rather than from self-conscious self-reports.

(Rathje 1996)
This quote also highlights the major focus of the project – consumerism – and some very revealing interpretations have emerged. For example, studies on fresh garbage highlight themes revolving around differences in what people said or thought they did and what they actually did, while the study of landfills had wider implications for recycling and source reduction of waste (ibid.). Rathje clearly sees the project as helping to change current practices and, as such, reinforces an important element of the archaeology of us. Another recent study is by Schiffer, his The Portable Radio in American Life is explicitly situated within the tradition of behavioural archaeology and serves as an alternative to personal histories, narrow technological and social histories and cryptohistories dished out by corporations’ (Schiffer 1991: 4). As such it acknowledges the sheer overabundance of information that characterises twentieth-century experiences. But this excess – as surely as any dearth of information – obscures other understandings and voices and, in this respect, raises another significant side to an archaeological approach.

Schiffer’s study deconstructs corporate ‘cryptohistories’ of products established by dominant multi-national electronics manufacturers to reveal a very different story, one that also has far-reaching impacts on the development of twentieth-century societies. As Schiffer states: ‘Because ignorance of real product history is so widespread, cryptohistory has a way of insinuating itself into serious discussions of industrial and economic policy’ (Schiffer 1991: 226). A dependence on received discourses about ‘taken for granted’ objects such as the portable radio seems to provide banal and trivial information enforcing an obfuscation of the origins of everyday things. Schiffer’s archaeological approach serves to make connections and reveal hidden narratives unavailable to the researcher employing the traditional data and methodologies of design, social or cultural history. At the crux of Schiffer’s argument is the waning of American industry and the loss of jobs and ensuing social costs that are naturalised and obscured by such dominant corporate ‘cryptohistories’ which structure our understandings of industry, national policy and the material world around us.

Comparable post-processual studies explicitly focusing on modern material culture include Shanks and Tilley’s study of British and Swedish beer cans where they affirm the importance of an archaeology of the present (Shanks and Tilley 1987: 172). However, they criticised the projects spawned by the University of Arizona as being too ‘empiricist and functionalistic’ and limiting insights, but most significantly, failing ‘to realise the potential of the study of modern material culture as a critical intervention in contemporary society, an intervention with transformative intent’ (ibid.). This is certainly true of the more ethnographic-archaeological type of projects, but perhaps less true of Rathje’s Garbology. Their own study of beer cans showed how the differing designs in Britain and Sweden can be seen as different ideological resolutions of a major contradiction in Western society over the consumption of alcohol – as a lifestyle activity associated with pleasure and as a potential poison to the healthy body. However, they reiterate a point of Rathje’s, thereby echoing the concerns of other commentators on modern experience which focus on daily practice and the quotidian as important sites of analysis:

If we are to demonstrate that archaeology really can make a distinctive contribution towards an understanding and critique of the present then, we feel, reference must not only be made to discourses but must pay detailed attention to the material culture-pattern as well.

(Shanks and Tilley 1987: 172–3)

This point was directed specifically at the structuralist studies of material culture such as by Barthes (see below), and also aimed at Daniel Miller’s earlier study of state housing (1984a, 1984b). To be fair to Miller, however, he also makes the same point in his conclusion (Miller 1984b: 47), and more significantly, it is Miller who has done more than anyone in Britain to advance the subject of modern material culture studies. It is to this subject that we now turn and ask what relation an archaeology of the contemporary past might have with it.

Archaeology and modern material culture studies

While having grown out of Hodder’s post-processual archaeology with Shanks and Tilley, Miller has since gone on to develop a new ‘discipline’ of material culture studies, although Miller would question whether it actually is, or should constitute a distinct discipline in the sense of, say, archaeology (Miller 1998). Miller takes up many of Hodder’s points about the nature of material culture – he does not espouse any general theory (as for example Schiffer and Miller 1999) but rather seeks to focus attention on the materiality of culture and the specific way it operates in contemporary society. Arguing against the simplistic structuralist uses of material culture which portray it as merely reflecting or reproducing structures evident in other arenas (e.g. ethnicity, gender and race), Miller argues for the active role of material culture and consumption in social relations. This very trait also makes it able to transcend disciplinary boundaries and draw different connections and ways of seeing (Miller 1998).

The burgeoning field of material culture serves as a forum for these preoccupations with the human interaction with the artefactual world (Miller 1998, Editorial 1996). As Daniel Miller has stated, modern material culture is an inherently multidisciplinary space where a number of disciplines converge: ‘Material culture studies is not then constituted by ethnography, but remains eclectic in methods. Approaches from history, archaeology, geography, design and literature are all equally acceptable contributions’ (Miller 1998: 19). Most mainstream design history for example is more concerned with design per se and not with use/consumption or indeed other aspects of the material world which are more marginal to the discipline such as the vast majority of ordinary everyday objects and the contexts of their uses. However, more recent studies (Atfield 1999, Sparke 1986, Crowley and Ried 2000, Glassie 1999) have attempted to
work along similar holistic lines; some design/art historians have ventured outside the confines of traditional boundaries to engage issues similar to those engaged by specialists in material culture trained in anthropological and archaeological traditions.

Many archaeologists have argued for a similar role for anthropological archaeology as a holistic enterprise concerned with the totality of human social and cultural experience (Rathje 1981, Schiffer and Miller 1999). In that sense it has the advantage of synthesis across a wide range of concerns that other disciplines such as design history, art history and cultural geography are not as well equipped to deal with. This point is constantly reiterated by the archaeologists represented in this book who are not distinguished methodologically by exclusive work in the non-discursive realm and the use of trowels and the like. So is archaeology the same as material culture studies? Perhaps the issue is not about re-defining the boundaries of archaeology as a material culture science irrespective of time or place — in fact such disciplinary circumscription is largely irrelevant if it were not perhaps arrogant. Rather, what counts is that archaeologists can bring unique contributions to the study of modern material culture because of their methods and theoretical perspectives — disciplinary divisions really do not matter. This volume therefore does not pretend to define the field of the ‘archaeology of us’; what it does however show, is what happens when archaeology works with contemporary material culture and the themes and issues that such studies raise. We believe that on the whole, only archaeological approaches could have uncovered these themes and it is important therefore that we discuss why we think this.

Absent presences

Temporal proximity

We began by saying that archaeology developed precisely because it was concerned with the distant past, and a past with no written sources. An archaeology of the present, of us, would seem to be a perverse exercise in terms of a traditional archaeology — in the first instance, it deals with the present, not the past and in the second, it deals with contexts that are textually and discursively rich. While we no longer have to justify the extension of archaeology into recent historic or even modern periods which have rich textual evidence, there is a sense in which the theme of temporal distance remains largely unaddressed. One of the issues arising from an archaeology of the present for example is the justification for distinguishing it from historical archaeology. On the one hand, there is no doubt that themes and issues of today can be elucidated by an historical perspective and linking the present to the past is an important exercise. But equally there is something to be gained by focusing explicitly on an archaeology of the present, on an archaeology that engages with the here and now. The idea of the ‘contemporary past’ suitably sums this up compared with an historical approach which might be said to be concerned with the ‘recent past’. ‘Recent’ implies close in time to us, ‘contemporary’ implies now; the difference is between proximity and identity.

The difference is more than semantic — there is a deep sense in which the ‘archaeology of now’ engages ourselves in a way much more intimately than any historical approach. With the latter, the object of study remains at some distance, there is still some gap, no matter how small, between the archaeologist and what is studied. With the archaeology of us, any gap is constantly being contested and collapsed because we are implicated in what we do to an extent much more immediate than with any other kind of archaeology. If anything, this is an archaeology of the future, if we take such an oxymoron seriously. Not so much in the sense of ‘doing the job’ for archaeologists of the future which Rathje describes, but in the sense of creating the future by being actively engaged in the materialisation of the present — as much as designers, for example. Caught in the double hermeneutic whereby we cannot study without changing the object of our study is perhaps nowhere more true than in the archaeology of the present. In this light, the question of the alterity or otherness, of the object of study becomes sharply focused.

Archaeology as alienation

Traditional epistemology asserts the gap between past and present, between archaeologists and the society they study; if this epistemological distance has a temporal implication, what does it mean when this temporal distance collapses? To a large extent, the archaeological method (as science) can sustain the distance — as it does in ethn-archaeology or more generally sociological and ethnographic work, where the epistemological issues remain much the same. However, there is a sense in which turning our methods back onto ourselves creates a strange, reversed situation — a case of making the familiar unfamiliar. For example, the archaeological method applied to objects of the distant past serves to familiarise something inherently alien and unfamiliar. This is a domesticating strategy, and one essentially aimed at knowledge and control over something over which we have no control (Lowenthal 1985, pp. 252–5). But consider what happens when the same methodology is applied to the contemporary past — when we classify objects in the home for example by material categories such as ceramic, metal or plastic, or when we quadrant a bedroom floor for spatial control of artefact distribution (see Chapter 14). This is almost a perverse exercise in making familiar categorisations and spatial perceptions unfamiliar — a translation from an everyday perceptual language into an archaeological one (consider for example the conceptual artist Mark Dion’s project/installation Taste Thames Dig 1999).

The archaeological method takes us further away, distances us from any attachment to the objects and the material world we encounter. In the same move it makes those objects of archaeological inquiry palatable and sanitised by its distancing effects, enabling us adequately to cope with any distress we might...
feel in the situation – the distress of invading someone’s privacy for example or uncovering a mass grave. We take two examples: the first is that of corporeal decay. Most of us are disturbed by images of corpses, especially ones that are in a state of decomposition; yet people have to deal with such corpses all the time, from forensic teams to medical staff. Through training, they become desensitised to such sights, the bodies become objectified into forensic or medical cases requiring autopsy and diagnosis. As archaeologists, we are trained exactly the same way when excavating prehistoric burials. We might think this is not the same, because there is rarely flesh surviving on archaeological bodies, although archaeologists still deal with such situations (e.g. mummies), but perhaps more significantly, we still feel distressed about viewing the bones from mass graves but do not think twice about bones from a prehistoric cemetery.

Clearly context is critical to our reactions to a corpse, exceeding any ‘universal’ distinction between fleshed and unfleshed, in particular the sense that perhaps the corpse is in the wrong place. A transgression has occurred which elicits feelings of disgust around the corpse, which gives forensics its ‘edge’ over the routine excavation of prehistoric or historic burials. It is a transgression to which we can only be sensitive because it is something with which we can emotionally identify, something that draws on self-image. It is very difficult to imagine a comparable sense of transgression in a traditional archaeological context – while we might be able to perceive its possibility, this is not the same as feeling it. This is because, as archaeologists, we are trained to distance ourselves from what we study – the alienation of our subject lies at the heart of archaeological methodology. To demonstrate this further, let us give another example. In a public presentation of our study of a council house, one of the more severe responses we received concerned the invasion of privacy. The ensuing debate spun the issue out much further to ask, for example, why is it acceptable to conduct this study in, say, an African village or even for that matter, a prehistoric one, and not in our home country? It raised into relief precisely the point being discussed now. We do not question the invasion of privacy in other countries or other times, because it is other; that is what archaeology studies – the other. Other corpses, other homes. Moreover, they are not simply already other, but are inscribed as other, or sustained as other, because of archaeological methodology. It is not upsetting that council cleaners went in after us, saw all that we saw, touched all that we touched; what was upsetting is that we objectified one of our own (despite obvious asymmetries), made them ‘other’, doing precisely what all archaeologists do everywhere, every day. Perhaps the real issue is that we never crossed this.

**Transgression**

This operation of a familiar subject/object made unfamiliar creates profound anxieties and, as such, functions as a diagnostic tool for relevant and socially engaged cultural work. It coincides with Kristeva’s notion of the abject:

*L’abjection* is something that disgusts you. For example you see something rotting and you want to vomit. It’s ‘abject’ on the level of matter. It can also be a notion that concerns moral matters – an abjection in the face of crime, for example. But it is an extremely strong feeling which is at once somatic and symbolic, and which is above all a revolt of the person against an external menace from which one wants to keep oneself at a distance, but of which one has the impression that it is not only an external menace but that it may menace us from the inside. So it is a desire for separation, for becoming autonomous and also the feeling of an impossibility of doing so – whence the element of crisis which the notion of abjection carries within it. Taken to its logical consequences, it is an impossible assemblage of elements, with a connotation of a ‘fragile limit’.

(Kristeva 1997: 372)

The issue of nausea is something that appears very often in the archaeology of the contemporary past, the somatic response to the archaeological act and the ‘fragile limits’ it negotiates. This is the nausea of decomposing bodies familiar to forensic archaeologists and the aversion to rotting waste of the garbologist and the issues of putrid excess addressed by these archaeologists as well as the ‘instinctive’ aversion to the object of study, whether repulsion at perceived violations of privacy or the stench of rotting corpses. Such studies highlight areas of unconstituted discourse and most of the papers in this volume illustrate this point through the highly charged emotional, ethical and political themes that they evoke. Michael Shanks has discussed this theme in relation to the conservation work of traditional archaeology: ‘Conservation stems loss and decay, and I would connect it with a series of drives: ridding oneself of nausea, of decay; there is a sense of illness and holding off death’ (Shanks 1992: 73). Shanks comments further that ‘The excremental culture of archaeology, which may wish to avoid the nausea of loss and an absent past, finds gratification in a purifying perhaps neurotic desire to hold on and to order. It is allied with the marginalization of feeling and of heterogeneity, the irreducible otherness of the past’ (Shanks 1992: 75).

Comparable with the abject is the idea of the uncanny or unheimlich in Schelling and Freud which has been explored by Anthony Vidler in his book The Architectural Uncanny (1992). Vidler relies heavily upon archaeological analogies to sustain his discussion of architectural interpretation and while for the most part such musings on archaeology outside the discipline seem irrelevant, in the case of the contemporary past, the architectural historian/theoretician and the archaeologist of the contemporary past are working in similar territory. It might be useful here to re-appropriate this archaeological analogy when considering the archaeology of the contemporary past. According to Vidler, archaeology and the archaeological act is by definition an ‘uncanny’ act which reveals that which should have remained invisible (Vidler 1992: 48). The unheimlich is also often intimately related to the idea of
‘haunting’. The idea of ghosts is very close to the archaeological imagination: the disappeared, the past and how such spectres enthrall us, at once horrifying and comforting. Vidler’s discussion of Pompeii as an uncanny experience is instructive. The sight of the quotidian frozen in time by a catastrophe and revealed many centuries later induces this sense of the unwelkmich. The ‘uncanny’ effect seems to be the result of repetition, a doubling through a simultaneous process of presenting and distancing. This ‘doubling’ creates a residue, a ghost that is uncanny and disturbing, which is unassimilable, there but not there. An absent present. This occurs with profound consequences when considering the archaeology of the disappeared for example and the implications of a romantic preoccupation with the uncanny is stripped of its aesthetic qualities and becomes a profound therapeutic act.

Archaeologies of the contemporary past expose just such realms of the abject and the uncanny; because of their approach focusing on the material, the non-discursive, they frequently engage with the unconstituted. This is not simply the unsaid, but the unsayable – it lies outside the said, outside discourse. This does not mean it is not visible, not experienced, but all too often the experience is crowded out by other, hegemonic discourses. The feelings of abjection and the uncanny arise precisely because we are suddenly faced with no words to articulate the experience.

Non-discursivity and the unconstituted

The issue of text is raised by both Rathje and Schiffer in their recent work – for Rathje, contemporary texts often do not have the same kind of information about consumer behaviour which he can glean from garbology, while for Schiffer, the texts such as corporate cryptohistories are, if anything, giving too much information. There is a sense in which text can be both deficient and excessive with regard to material culture and, in either sense, unbalanced. There is always an element that remains outside discourse, unconstituted.

A recurrent theme of this book is the absent present. As a theme, it resonates with a growing body of literature on post-modernity and post-colonialism, particularly those dealing with issues around national and individual identity, issues of ethnicity/race and gender where subaltern identities and discourses are relegated to the margins, mute and silent (Bhabha 1994; Butler 1993). The realm of the disenfranchised, the subaltern, while usually outside the realm of discourse, is precariously near and as such it is not an unknown object of discourse but rather a non-object, forming the boundaries of the social and enfranchised. Homi Bhabha’s writings on post-colonialism and issues of nationalism and identity argue that the location of important cultural work in the late twentieth century is not through the articulation of national identities or established bodies of knowledge, but interstitial, being created in the spaces between such bodies. In the process of translation and the articulation of the untranslatable and inarticulable, incommensurable elements emerge, ‘stubborn chunks’ (Bhabha 1994: 219). Moreover, the crossing of these boundaries creates ‘blasphemies’ which often result in violent, visceral reactions – as occurred with the writing, translation and articulation of Salman Rushdie’s Satanic Verses (Bhabha 1994: 225). Bhabha quotes Judith Butler on similar effects on the generation of ‘queer’ identities (bhabha 1994: 219); Butler’s work considers how categories such as the ‘feminine’ and ‘queer’ fall outside the dominant heterosexual matrix, not in the sense of a ‘beyond’ but as marginal, forming the boundaries of the dominant discourse; they are a constitutive outside. Moreover, she introduces the notion of ‘matter’ as those things that are brought into the realm of discourse which are viable, as in ‘mattering’ and as a consequence of their social worth, materialised (Butler 1993).

We argue that an archaeology of the contemporary past can perform the same kind of operation – it can materialise the material in the sense of making it matter, it can bring Bhabha’s ‘stubborn chunks’ to the fore – but along with all the painful associations this carries such as ambivalence and nausea. This sort of work suggests a different sphere of activity. Rather than ‘discovery’ it can be characterised as an opening up, occupying an ‘intermediate’ space or an iterative time: an archaeology of the future and social possibility rather than of the past and social facticity; one that is constitutive of the present as much as any other contemporary materialising practice such as architecture or design among others (Buchli 2000 and Stevenson, this volume).

Archaeology as constituting the unconstituted

The popular image of archaeological investigations into the present – that is popular views on garbology – are deliberate ways of taking the familiar to make it distant and with a certain social effect in mind. When people put into play such an archaeological operation, the purpose is to create a distance from the familiar, to make the familiar unfamiliar and ironically by defamiliarising taken for granteds, making what is too well known almost less known, one attempts to establish some sort of truth about what is being observed, the analytical distance that defamiliarises curiously enough establishes truthfulness about who we are. The same effect is achieved with the time capsule which, ostensibly an attempt to prevent archaeologists of the future from misinterpreting, misrepresenting us, in actual fact serves to underline a sense of our own material identity in the present. Individuals and organisations constitute their own material record of their experiences as a way of constituting the present, giving it a monumental quality (often it is fragile ephemera that is saved) and coming to terms with their experience through the exercise of attempting to preserve artefacts for future generations to look at. Thus this conceit is an epistemological claim and argument with which to establish certain truth claims, turning something discursive into a non-discursive, materialising discourse.

Archaeology clearly has a significant role to play in mediating these extremes, but ultimately, archaeology too is most often about producing texts – making the
undiscursive discursive, making 'the mute stones speak'. What might be hazarded as unique as argued above is that the archaeology of the contemporary past addresses those aspects of experience that are non-discursive; inarticulate and otherwise unconstituted practices (either through suppression or otherwise). Though other disciplinary forays into the realm of twentieth-century material culture studies generally tend to be at the discursive level, archaeology penetrates even more into the non-discursive levels of experience to address tensions, contradictions, exclusions, pains, etc. The traditional lack or limited extent of textual/discursive analysis within archaeology makes it well equipped to deal with non-discursive realms of experience and with particular poignancy when the subject is the contemporary past.

Recent theoretical works on the subaltern and dispossessed have shown that the realm of discourse is the realm of the enfranchised. It is usually through the examination of the quotidian, the overlooked and 'taken for granted' that the traces of subaltern voices and experience can be constituted. It has been one of the great methodological feats of literary and cultural historians to attempt to constitute these voices in various projects concerned with, for example, slave narratives, women's narratives, queer narratives, etc. In addressing the issue of the non-discursive realm the archaeological act comes directly into contact with the subaltern, the dispossessed and the abject. This is not simply in terms of the usual archaeological preoccupation with remains, but the practical and social act of uncovering that which has once been hidden. The two converge here both literally and figuratively.

If prehistory is often characterised by a dearth of material with which to understand past social processes, the experience of the twentieth century and the recent past is confronted with an equally obscuring excess of information. The archaeological act traditionally has attempted to tease information out of the apparent poverty of information, allowing the artefacts to speak. The inverse becomes true when archaeology addresses the recent past. Within so many voices, which are almost universally dominant compete ones, other voices are silenced and do not speak, or more accurately, are not able to be heard. Thus the archaeological act, as the case studies in this volume show, attempt to constitute and articulate these voices. Beyond just performing the scholarly duty of constituting more and more information with which to understand the circumstances of our existence, the result has acute social effects enabling a critical empiricism that works on the contradictions of contemporary experience.

Such subaltern and 'silent' and abject voices are disturbing indicators of the contradictions and painful effects of twentieth-century experience. The archaeologist in this respect performs a very painful therapeutic operation that at times helps individuals and communities address these unconstituted painful and obscured silences. At times such a constitution of these experiences by the archaeologist is not permitted or is contested (as in Argentina or Britain) or is too painful to be addressed until a later, more appropriate time when such issues can be addressed more safely (World War Two, Auschwitz, Stalinism). Thus the archaeology of the contemporary past can happen only at certain times and in certain contexts in different parts of the world. At this point one might question when and why an archaeology of a contemporary past appears. What are the social and historical circumstances that permit such cultural work or not? What is clear is that the archaeological act, in addressing the absent present, addresses the silent and painful lacunae in our understanding of recent experience. As these case studies show, it almost invariably goes to the heart, or more accurately, the painful nerves and tensions of experience that would disrupt and/or challenge the dominant voices structuring our experiences. That is why it is often the case that the archaeological act is an extremely delicate and painful operation which elicits considerable emotion and at times objection.

In this respect the traditional operation of 'archaeological uncovering' serves a different purpose in the recent past, one that is more immediate, socially relevant, and as a consequence tense and often painful which addresses the painful ridges (or scars) delineating the contours of experience. In this respect the age-old methodological distinction of 'excavation' and 'uncovering' that which has been hidden from view through the analysis of artefacts yields considerable power in addressing the issues of recent experience. The diagnostic properties originally attributed to material culture as evolutionary indices by nineteenth-century ethnographers and archaeologists, function in other vital ways when confronted with the recent past. Orvar Löfgren has commented on Swedish material culture studies' greater concern with 'back-door research entrances to general problems' (Löfgren 1997: 110) which focus on the 'micro-physics' and 'micro-sociology' of consumption by focusing on specific artefact types and in-depth 'thick descriptions' of people's interactions with otherwise mundane objects and activities. Löfgren suggests a more critical return to the empiricism that characterised ethnology and archaeology in the last half of the nineteenth century when material culture as a concept emerged and what could or could not be constituted as material culture was determined, entered into museum collections and became national cultural history. As such, archaeology has never really given up these ancient techniques and has always been eminently suited to such 'back-door' techniques in its traditional methodologies and, as we can see here in this collection of studies, archaeology very much continues to do so through its critically empirical work. However, other disciplines that share a concern for the material culture of twentieth-century and recent experience do not perform this operation as effectively, rarely performing the act of making the invisible visible, presencing that which is absent or creatively constituting that which previously was inconstitutable, literally bringing into being and constituting a material culture when there had been none before and thereby expanding the scope of discursive culture.
Redemption

Shanks draws an analogy between the archaeological act and psychotherapy. He notes that psychotherapy '... is to help patients reflect about themselves and sort out the relation between their past experience and present behaviour' (Shanks 1992: 78). Thus the psychotherapeutic encounter, just as the archaeological one, '... is to bring about a release of meanings of the past which will prove to be of use. This is practical reasoning.' It is also the pragmatic turn as evinced by various neo-pragmatist philosophers indebted to the tradition established by Michel Foucault, which sees the purpose of the intellectual, cultural worker as someone who enables her audience to 'cope' more adequately with changing contingencies (Rorty 1991). Rorty sees philosophy's role in exposing them as continuous with that of literature and the social sciences. Rorty's pragmatist '... thinks contemporary democratic societies are already organised around the need for continual exposure of suffering and injustice, and that no "radical critique" is required, but just attention to detail' (Rorty 1991: 25). It is precisely this attention to detail, this critical empiricism, that assists much of the archaeology of the contemporary past in its therapeutic endeavours.

The archaeological act works towards constituting that which has fallen outside the realm of discourse for a wide variety of reasons (all of which are usually symptomatic of the contradictions of modern experience). It also serves as a critique of other discourse-dependent disciplines such as design history, as Greg Stevenson's and Majewski and Schiffer's papers in this volume demonstrate, as well as broader issues including nutritional policy and environmental sustainability, as William Rathje shows in his contribution. Thus the old bugbear of traditional archaeology 'suffering' from the lack of discursive/ textual evidence has, on the contrary, served it well by forcing it to develop techniques to understand human behaviour enabling a critical empiricism where discursive evidence is lacking. This has certainly been the case of historical archaeology which has demonstrated the importance of its work to supplement and more importantly challenge discursive historical evidence. Along the continuum of this framework we can see how valuable the archaeology of the absent present is towards approaching those issues that fall outside the realm of discourse in modern experience.

So what is unique about archaeology's role in this? Beyond its overt emphasis on material culture, it moves away from the interests of design, art and architectural history and attempts to make that which is absent present through the effects of the archaeological act. This is an inherently creative act which constitutes objects for the formation of discourses that did not exist before. More than ever the troublesome romantic notion of 'discovery' affecting archaeology becomes supplanted by 'creativity' instead. Stevenson has suggested that archaeologists are as much 'designers' of the material world as any others. The constitution of these objects of discourse and their political implications are more emphatically deliberate and willed into being than what is suggested by the serendipitous and somewhat passive notion of discovery. Rather than saying that 'we are only uncovering what has always been there', we propose that archaeologists constitute things in the present, not only conceptually but materially as well. This is a creative materialising intervention, which has redemptive and therapeutic powers which help individuals and communities cope with painful contradictions that otherwise would remain unarticulated.

References


Part I

Production and consumption