

“To live is to leave traces”

Walter Benjamin

On the shortest day of the year I went for a walk with an archaeologist. We were heading to the Uffington White Horse in Oxfordshire. This is a vast chalk drawing carved into the hillside that has existed for millennia and is part of a complex of prehistoric sites, including the Uffington hillfort, the Ridgeway and various burial mounds. There is no part of the English landscape that has not been touched by man. The ‘touch’ at Uffington is a repeated mark making, scouring and remarking the landscape through time. The monument only exists because the people around it have maintained it and so the White Horse becomes a remarkable proof of continuity of mark making. Archaeological thinking has led me in a more general way to reconsider art making.

The underlying conceptual axis of archaeology are space and time – or this is what my archaeologist friend tried to explain to me as the light gloomed and evaporated around us. These are continual flowing axes that we choose to chop up and apply analytical frameworks too. That you can go and visit early human past is a strange possibility to consider when walking a hillside. There is also the material record, *things* left behind; objects found at ‘the site’, excavated finds, treasure, that need to be identified, categorized, archived or displayed. The activities of artists can be seen as a vast uncoordinated chaotic research program looking at what we are and how we know what we are. It is only how the axes of time and space are chopped up that allows for a separation to be made between art and archaeology – with the status of the ‘artifact’ occupying the enigmatic middle ground. This has not troubled me before, but now I wander around the British Museum or a gallery thinking, “Am I looking at art or archaeology? Is it just the date, which century, which millennium, that defines this?”

Art is a communication with our selves across time. Our time is an age of signs as distinct from symbols. Our signs are constructed to convey a narrowly defined message to signal a category, or direct our choice of alternatives within a category. The White Horse, like a good piece of art, is a deliriously confident incompetent sign. It transmits a constellation of meanings, and signals many meanings simultaneously. It is explicit, an archaeological site, a surface landmark. The bulk of archaeological investigation seems to happen underground, things made visible because of digging. This is where archaeology enters the world of the uncanny, it reveals that which should have remained hidden, a preoccupation of much art. This consideration of the absent present,

what once was here and present and is now gone, is driven by the primary desire to stem loss and make a rationale or science out of death. It is only the archaeological framing that makes it possible to stand in the museum and view real human remains.

At the beginning of this year I moved out of Shoreditch. For twelve years I've been living on the top floor of a building on Shoreditch High Street. I'd lived above Shoreditch, a frenetic nightclub neighborhood; by not being that close to the ground I avoided the zone where the confusion occurred. The experience of packing up a life lived somewhere is surprisingly painful. My domestic space became an overwhelming landscape of boxes of stuff, with mountains of as much material to throw out as to keep. A loose and chaotic archival registering of yourself. I now live in a house, something I haven't done since I was a child. I go upstairs to bed. The house has a cellar. This is my favorite bit of the house. It is damp, cold with unhealthy air and now full of those same now ordered and labeled boxes; buried and dormant with a long wait ahead of them until they are unpacked again. It is strange to be underneath the rest of the house but I find I am very at home here.

Underground takes place in the basement of Shoreditch Town Hall. A building that I have navigated for the last twelve years; I've known people who have lived in bits of it, had openings and launches from it, voted in it, and I cried my way through my best friends getting married in it. 'More Light More Power' is the motto that adorns various pieces of yellow glass, combining a nod to the municipal electricity generating facility that the borough was once so proud of, and a general civic pride that is embodied in the grandeur of the architecture. The building is labyrinthine at the best of times and has been much repaired recently as it struggles to live up to former incarnations.

Archaeology occupies an expanding space in our culture, whether that is a discussion of heritage management or political identity. It tests ideological beliefs about the past, as the past exists as part of the present in terms of the aims, assumptions and conceptual frameworks of the archaeologist. When searching for the deep generators of language, or identifying the sedimented strata of the personality, both structural linguists and psychoanalysts have recourse to the metaphor of archaeology in establishing the separation between surface and depth. Various contemporary artists have explored its conventions. One of the most successful of these being the artist Mark Dion undertaking a number of 'digs', (on the banks of the Thames, a canal in Venice and two cubic metres from the city centre in Fribourg), with one of his many

personas being the archaeologist. These works had a performative element surrounding the three stages of each dig – the collection of material, the cleaning and identification process, through to their classification and presentation. Victor Buchli and Gavin Lucas are archaeologists who have undertaken a study of the present, using tools usually employed to work on the past, to consider our experience of modernity. They have employed archaeological methodology to the contemporary past, a council flat, a soviet building, or a rubbish dump. Their consideration of the interaction between material culture and human behaviour regardless of space and time, the archaeology of us, has initiated a re-describing of aspects of the ‘unsaid’.

The basement of Shoreditch Town Hall is very different to the public building that exists above ground. This is where the work of Roger Ackling, Eric Butcher and Simón Granell has been installed. Installed, placed, hidden, and buried. This is an extraordinary and uncanny space. Perhaps all spaces underground are, as once we descend, even if invited, we are no longer in our own surface environment. We have entered the level we return to once our scurrying around is all finished. The walls are painted and peeling dark plum browns and rotted greens. They are marked with dust shadows of removed shelving, conduit, and purpose; peppered with holes from worms of wiring now removed. Ceilings are covered in pipes, some functioning and wrapped in silver lagging, most just still there from previous systems of heating, wiring, communication that have been outmoded, a history of the buildings’ now impotent internal workings that no one has seen the need to remove. This is a chthonic architectural space; you are in the bowels of the building.

On the day I spend with the exhibition, it is raining outside, up there. You can hear the rain landing and the extra noise that traffic makes in the rain, but in a muffled way as if its filtering down to you. The rain is also streaming through the pipes, drains and overflows; more confirmation you are in the guts of the building. It may seem strange to be trying to describe this space rather than the works in it but I think that the works have become part of this space; they are in the arena below the understood language of the white cube art container.

Roger Ackling has made a decision not to light his work. It is only lit by the light that leaks onto it, filtered from other spaces, the dregs of daylight that seep down this far. This is a beautiful light but you have to wait for your eyes to agree to see in it. A stack of painted wooden objects are housed in a cardboard box, not so big that one person couldn’t carry it. This is placed on the floor of

a derelict chamber, a room with domestic architectural reference points, shelving and a fireplace. The wooden forms are painted in simple colours and primary shapes – diamonds, squares. They are found pieces of wood where their use and purpose has gone out of them, uncatalogued artifacts rescued, worked and then exquisitely abandoned in this dark subterranean place. Ackling uses the sun to burn black onto the surface of found objects. This necessitates him working outdoors, in the light, transforming light into its negative. To take the sunlight, blacken with it, and then bury it in the basement starts to form a mythical narrative, some primal understanding of light and dark. Mark making and drawing share something with the evolution of photography, both are a manipulation of light and dark. The mark is most often registered as a dark on a lighter ground. Ackling's ground is a found object often a mid tone of wood or card, and his mark a collision of light and dark, sun and burn.

Simón Granell's mark is slower. His paintings are made up of a progression of horizontal lines that are ploughed across a board ground. They are rich warm brown fields of paint. The paintings are produced over long periods of waiting; they are wrapped as each layer of paint dries, masking off the northern areas of the field as the paint travels south. Gravity and the direction of the application of paint lend these encrusted surfaces an orientation down. The brown blisters with warts and cysts of paint, an ancient leathery skin. These are paintings that have been bandaged and waited for. It leaves them with a blindness. You are looking at what has been revealed when the covering has been removed, these are works that have been buried for a long time and are now excavated. Beautiful, grounded, and patient works.

Eric Butcher also applies paint to surfaces. He works on highly polished metal planes and structures that vary in their form. Sometimes lengths are taller than the rooms they stand in so they lean against the wall, sometimes smaller sections of beams that sit on the floor, or lengths that are mounted to the wall like a shoal of exotic iridescent paintings. The thin dragged spectrums of paint shimmer across the surface of the metal as if lit from behind, light bouncing back off of their polished ground through these stretched stockings of paint.

All of these works occupy a territory between objects and paintings where the processes employed to generate them are prioritized. They are all highly crafted objects with a particularly significant relationship with time. By placing them in this underground space they have activated a narrative beyond the time

they have taken to evolve internally as works and connected to the sense of human time passing. These are not works where the 'meaning' of the work offers itself up to be easily read. They are generated from the impulse to make a mark, ritualize this process through repeating that mark, to the point where the mark making achieves the ambition of a resonant artwork: a successfully incompetent sign. Underground, in a subterranean architectural matrix below the surface of the city, the contemplation of the surface and depth, the marking of paint, wood and metal force a material confrontation that opens a suspension of time and place.

"Language shows clearly that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theatre. It is the medium of past experience, as the ground is the medium which dead cities lie interred. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging ... he must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over the soil. For the matter itself is only a deposit, a stratum, which yields only to the most meticulous examination what constitutes the real hidden within the earth...."

Walter Benjamin
From *Berlin Chronicle*

Tania Kovats, 2007