

**IN CONVERSATION:
MATTHEW EDGEWORTH AND MICHAEL JONES MCKEAN, 2008**

This published conversation with archeologist Matthew Edgeworth, a PhD Research Associate in the School of Archaeology at the University of Leicester in the United Kingdom took place via email during the first week of January 2008. The resulting text appeared in the exhibition catalog "The wake, the saint, the sound, the branch" published to accompany the eponymous exhibition at Project Gentili, in Prato, Italy.

MATTHEW EDGEWORTH: Looking at your sculptures reminds me of being on an archaeological excavation. Artifacts and natural objects from different times emerge to form a new and original assemblage in the here and now. Highly artificial utilitarian objects contrast with materials that have an earth-like roughness. The juxtaposition of ancient and modern things, mixed up with our own gear and equipment, is very reminiscent of what archaeologists encounter on a dig. Torn out of their original context of meaning and use, the discovered objects invite us to ascribe meanings that take account of their incongruous collectivity as well as their individual identities.

In creating these sculptures, were you conscious that you were in some sense taking on the role of archaeologist, making meanings about the past in the present, or the present in the past..?

MICHAEL JONES MCKEAN: I see what you are suggesting; it seems we're both trying to notice and worry about objects, wondering about their potential, what they could be. But your question, for me, is really about gaps. When I imagine borrowing the mechanics of archeology to think about work that was created using a different logic suddenly all these cracks appear. Ideas that felt solid are suddenly unreliable, open for suggestion, compromise. The work becomes vulnerable. I think an archeological model provides an interesting scaffolding to support the work, but it also has the possibility of acting like a rogue wave, positively de-centering everything. In the work I'm proposing some plastic methods for organizing disparate collections of objects, styles and materials in order to speculate about meaning itself. These methods aren't beholden to utility or linearity or even hard and fast agreed-upon logic as the governing forces behind the inquiry; the reasoning is more elliptical, rhyming, and flexible.

I'm interested in ways people figure out objects. One approach is to mentally upload all our conceptual tools and theoretical equipment, to drag all our cultural, personal and ideological baggage with us to interrogate an object. In this case a work acts as a surface to throw our speculative assumptions against - as these assumptions rebound they get recalibrated, confirmed, contested and adjusted. But when this process is complete we may walk away with a better grasp of our own ideas than with a deep and sensitive understanding of the object we tried to fix our gaze on. I think this method has its place, it just seems steeped in a strain of formal academism that's been a long-held default strategy for looking at stuff.

Another approach to looking at objects is to mentally shelve all our collected baggage, to actually try and clear out space in our brains for the poetic possibility of a new thing to exist. If we can succeed, we momentarily visit a place where meaning exists on its own terms. I think this is very complicated, risky and by design difficult to sustain because we can't just borrow a pre-existing theoretical armature for help; we have to use the work.

Of course my descriptions of these two models are simplifications, but it's clear that each requires a different practice and ethics. They each route images through a totally individual coordinate pattern in our brains resulting in inquiries with completely different characters and syntax. The difficulty is trying to juggle both simultaneously, to get them to run parallel to one another. This requires some dexterity.

ME: It's similar in archaeology as in art. Much of the time (in our everyday mode of archaeological perception), we tend to treat material objects and patterns as though they really are 'objective' and

separate from ourselves. We observe and record and describe 'what is there', almost as though objects can speak for themselves about the past. Like you say, it's a default strategy. But our own cultural knowledge - our habitual ways of seeing and doing and understanding things - is still there in the background. It's still influencing every aspect of the encounter with material things.

On the other hand, as an anthropologist I'm also interested in how we use our cultural knowledge to figure out what objects are. I've tried experimenting with the very different perspective of an ethnographer looking at archaeological encounters, as if from outside. But as I've discovered, it's very difficult to be an archaeologist and an ethnographer at the same time! And it's not easy to find that momentary place where meaning exists on its own terms! Like you say, the trick is using both methods simultaneously, so that one doesn't lose sight either of the object or the subjective and social processes of construction that go into the making of the object. But this really is one of the hardest things to do.

I think this one reason why I find your sculptures intriguing. Not all are fully formed. Some are almost in the process of taking shape as the perceiver moves around them. And mixed up with this shifting objective reality are the very bits of equipment that go into the making and maintenance of it - not just the artifacts of a constructed past, but also and especially the wires and plugs and iPods and other stage installations that are very much part of the constitution of the object in the present. How do you as a sculptor resolve the paradox that on the one hand the objects we find in the world seem to be ready made and complete unto themselves, separate from the present day subject or observer, while on the other hand they seem to need us and a whole battery of our cultural apparatus to (more or less tacitly) give them form and meaning?

MJM: Your question makes me think about the last time I was in New York and saw the new wing of Greek and Roman statuary at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Standing in front of these sculptures made elegantly plain to me a sophisticated and durable built-in conceptualism.

Imagine a sailing ship carrying goods and a marble statue sinking off the coast of Italy in a storm around 200 B.C. The boat and its cargo are lost, forgotten. Over hundreds of years the statue's gilded and polychromed surface is washed away. Sometime in the 15th century the ship's cargo is accidentally discovered by spear fishermen. Free divers are hired by a salvage company to swim 50 meters down to the bottom of the ocean and dredge up its contents. A nearly intact statue is raised to the surface. The work is sold to a rich merchant who admires antiquities. The object changes hands twice in 60 years and eventually is given to a museum where its few broken parts are mended and its entire surface is cleaned and polished. It is put on display. Artists and scholars come to see it. They make drawings of it, measure it, make plaster casts of it, write poetry about it, debate its merits, all the while trying to understand how the Ancients were able to make such a thing. During wars the sculpture was hidden and protected. After years in storage it is forgotten. Eventually, the small museum sells the work to another. It travels across an ocean where it lives sometimes in public, sometimes in private. It is analyzed by academics, archivists, geologists, archeologists and historians. It is photographed and x-rayed. Years later its propriety is questioned. The work travels back to the Mediterranean on a ship designed with rooms that control moisture and air temperature. Oils from human hands never touch it.

I tell this story because during this time frame the specificity of the work's meaning has changed, yet meaning itself has somehow remained resilient. The sculpture is no longer *about* Dionysus in any usable way, at this point it reveals more about our collective agreement of its cultural value. But more importantly it also still manages to grip our attention because something about the object itself, in spite of everything, is capable of sustaining our imaginations and rewarding our gaze. Incredibly its meaning is still largely undetermined, way outside our fixed and tidy narratives that attempt to package it. It's actually become mystical.

This is really about our complicated and peculiar ritual of looking at objects and its deep connection to pleasure. A version of this story could just as easily be told about a mass-produced napkin with a printed image of a buttercup on it as it can about a sculpture preserved from antiquity.

ME: Moments of extraordinary pleasure taken in an object occur often in excavation. As you say, it's not just the classically beautiful object like the marble statue. Often it's a very humble object like an arrowhead or even a sherd of pottery with a distinctive pattern or shape, or some other distinctive trace of human workmanship. Unlike in your example of the much traveled and culturally embedded ancient work of art, however, there is in excavation the additional factor of sudden emergence. Like a meteorite from outer space or a time machine that suddenly materialises in the here and now, these objects suddenly emerge into our cultural space from their former state of hidden-ness in the earth. It may be a child or a volunteer who finds it and takes delight in it, or it may be a trained archaeologist. Finding such objects from the past is the essence of the archaeological experience. One moment the object is not there, the next moment it is suddenly and immediately present in fully-fledged being. There is the sense of closeness to the person(s) who made or used or owned or threw away the object in the distant past, almost as though only a very short time has elapsed between them touching it and you holding it in your own hands. There is something very special about these moments of discovery, these sudden encounters with an object world almost before we've had a chance to assimilate it into our conceptual schemes or to assign conventional cultural values. But can it ever have that pristine freshness about it again when it has been washed, scrubbed, studied, drawn, labeled, photographed, encased?

MJM: Trying to imagine an *a priori* encounter is very complicated for me, but maybe the bridge I can make has something to do with *beauty*. Despite how played out and bemoaned the *concept* of beauty is, the *moment* of beauty is totally undomesticated because, as you say, it's an extreme, original encounter. It can't be graphed algebraically or philosophically determined. It's a fragile poetic anomaly too unstable to be transferred as our psychic registration can never be fixed or frozen. In this respect I think our relationship to beauty has everything to do with our habits of consumption. After we experience this extreme moment we need it again.

ME: There's a deep paradox here because on the one hand beauty is culturally defined and everything to do with habit. On the other hand the experience of beauty as you describe it is a stepping outside of our customary ways of seeing. It is to see things anew. To be astonished. To see what has become mundane as it really is – extraordinary.

Perhaps recently unearthed archaeological objects may strike us as beautiful precisely because their original cultural significance and context has been cleared away, and the imposition of our own cultural values has yet to fully take place. The thing for an instant appears as close as it will ever get to just being 'itself'.

Of course we have talked as though beauty is just a matter of visual aesthetics. But you as a sculptor and I as an archaeologist also encounter materials and patterns all the time that are not just 'there' in their entirety all in one go. They have to be moulded into shape or worked with tools in order for them to properly emerge and take form. Or they have to be perceived by walking round or through them, peering round corners or delving into hidden recesses. And these can be experienced as beautiful or delightful too, or might otherwise stimulate our interest / curiosity, but somehow our relation to such unfolding things is far more tactile and embodied – a matter of actively touching and exploring as much as looking. Many archaeological patterns of evidence are like this. Complex series of interlocking features such as pits and ditches and house platforms and postholes only take form as they are actually being dug, just as a sculpture only emerges from a raw material as it is being kneaded or carved or otherwise worked with hands or tools. Is there not a deep correspondence here, perhaps, between archaeology and sculpture?

MJM: Yes, there are absolutely moments where our disciplines comfortably overlap and common entry points that emerge where we can neatly borrow vernacular strategies and language from each other. As interesting as this kind of correspondence is, there's also a certain inevitability in it, especially when we align two fields that both deeply fetishize objects and things. Perhaps it illustrates a generational condition of privileging interdisciplinary and collaborative practices as status quo. As I'm starting to see it, one of the challenges is to try to find new terms that re-articulate the specifics of a given discipline; to me there is still something speculative and radical about how "form" and "surface" convey meaning in an object.

The discussion of archeologically is relative in my work. I want to consider a silver and chrome 1982 Sharp GF-777z boom box or vintage Ocean Pacific windbreaker on the same field hierarchically as a 5,000 year old meteorite from Argentina or a replica of King Tutankhamen's funerary mask. I'm curious how you understand the specifics of your own archeological practice in relation to "new" things. For instance, a first generation iPod feels almost 5,000 years old, but it imports, quite efficiently, a lot of information about its time.

ME: Archaeology comes from the Greek word 'archaiologia' which means the study of antiquity. However, this doesn't necessarily mean the study of artifacts from the Hittite empire or old Inca sites. As you rightly point out, a 2001 iPod or mobile phone can seem truly antique to us - all the more so for the fact that we have memories and associations of the time that is gone. In similar vein, an underground nuclear bunker from the Cold War is as much a relic of a former age as an ancient Egyptian tomb. Archaeological theories about material culture - for example about how the distribution of artifacts within such subterranean structures might reflect or symbolize or create wider social and political realities - are applicable to both. The methods and techniques we use are sometimes even more relevant to recent things than to old. It might be said, for example, that the Berlin Wall has suffered so much more from the ravages of time than the Great Wall of China, that it has more to offer an archaeological analysis. Archaeology is about the present and the recent past just as much as it is about ancient times.

The upshot of this is that archaeology as a discipline is constantly shifting the boundaries of its domain of study forward in time, to accommodate the ever increasing categories of things that are becoming 'past'. Like a dragon chasing its own tail, it has even had to face the fact that the very practice of archaeology itself leaves traces in the ground which can and often are apprehended by archaeological means. An archaeological site comprises more than just the objective material evidence of the past. Mixed up with old walls, postholes, potsherds and other archaeological artifacts emerging from the ground are the traces of the archaeological excavation itself - the trenches and sondages and sections and smoothed surfaces through which the more ancient evidence is being brought to light. Then there the tools of excavation such as the trowels, spades, wheelbarrows, total stations, finds bags, recording sheets, cameras, vehicles, site huts, computers, mobile phones and other paraphernalia - not to mention the team of archaeologists themselves with their distinctive and unusual fashions of dress. Archaeological theories of material culture, in my view, should at least in principle be applicable to the whole array of surfaces and things and actions, all mixed up together as they are.

Which brings me back to the aspect of your work which strikes such a chord with me - the assembling together of artifacts from different times in particular arrangements. The conjunctions and/or disconnections between these things, their disparate meanings and affordances, have archaeological resonances. I agree there are limits to any analogy between sculpture and archaeology, both of which have their own quite distinctive practices and rationales. Yet there is a still a sense in which I believe the archaeologist is a kind of sculptor. And however we characterize the artist, is it not the case that the person who subsequently views / explores / interprets the sculptures really is a kind of archaeologist, adopting a similar stance and approach towards material things? Can the putting together by the viewer of the fragments of pasts that you have provided - assembling them in perception into some sort of coherent whole in the present - be characterised, do you think, as an archaeological act?

MJM: Although I'm absolutely quoting archeological tropes, it doesn't make sense for me to make this characterization. It smoothes things out too nicely. But the way you described the dig offers up some parallels to my work in relation to archaeology. Similar to your description, I like to imagine my work skidding across time, gathering up stuff into unifying constellations with the intent of articulating potential in objects and styles, materials and their arrangement. This image of the dig site is really a bizarre field of evidence that points toward the possibility of a larger narrative or allegorical structure. These kinds of places appeal to our imaginations as much as they do to us analytically.

In imagining this excavation there are imperceptible moments as we scan over the tools, the pipes and mounds, and ditches and tents and shadows, when suddenly the focus of our gaze shifts. The site flattens out, and the objects in relation to our body become aligned in a momentary geometry linking us to this field in four dimensions. These once discreet objects melt into a totality which reports back to us, telling us something about ourselves, about being human, about our yearning and active minds, about failure, our hopes for the future, about being careful. In objects and statues and boom boxes and the fleeting symmetry inside an archaeological dig site is all this latent information that has the ability to recalibrate our modern ideas through ancient, ancestral channels; to re-articulate our involvement with forms and meaning. I think this is important for both sculpture and archeology.