Review article

Contemporary art and archaeology: reflections on a relationship

RENFREW, COLIN. *Figuring it out: the parallel visions of artists and archaeologists*. 224 pp., plates, illus., bibliogr. London: Thames & Hudson, 2003. £32.00 (cloth)

In the spring of 2007, the British Museum held an extra-ordinary and unusual exhibition: an installation by the Benin-based artist Romuald Hazoumé, mounted as part of the commemorations for the 200th anniversary of the British Parliamentary Act for the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. The work, 'La Bouche du Roi', which was produced by the artist between 1997 and 2005, takes as its starting-point a 1789 woodcut prepared for the anti-slavery campaigner Thomas Clarkson; the woodcut shows the cross-section of a slave ship, filled with human bodies arranged in rows, layer upon layer, and covering every possible available space. As you enter room 35 of the rotunda building in the Great Court of the Museum, you see this woodcut exhibited in the foyer, together with a video showing the artist talking about this work. But it is upon entering the main exhibition room that a shocking experience awaits you. On the floor, arranged much like human bodies, or rather corpses, there are 304 cut-out plastic petrol cans (the artist's favourite material), or 'masks', as the artist prefers to see them: he retained the top part of the can with its 'mouth' and its handle or 'arm', and he arranged them in rows, following the plan of a slave ship, much like the bodies in the eighteenth-century woodcut. Some masks have around their arms bracelets of beads, some little wooden statuettes, some are painted, some carry feathers. Amongst the cans, in the place where the masts of the ship would have been, there are three assemblages of upstanding empty green bottles of gin; there are two more rows of bottles lying on their side, a gun, bowls of cowrie shells and beads, spices, tobacco leaves, textiles, mirrors. At the back end of the 'ship' there are two elaborately decorated masks, one yellow and one black, and a small scale in between them. From underneath the layer of masks, as if it was coming from the mouths of the cans, you hear voices, laments, singing. On a previous exhibition of this work at a Houston Museum, the visitor could have also sensed the odour of spices and tobacco, but also of humans packed forcefully like sardines: sweat, urine, and other bodily odours. In front of the installation at the British Museum a film by the artist is projected, showing motorcyclists modifying, with the help of fire, plastic petrol cans (to enlarge them and thus increase their capacity) like the ones used by the artist; these cans are then often used to transport oil illegally between Nigeria and the Republic of Benin.

This is much more than an art installation; it is a cenotaph or, better, a mass grave; it is a disturbing encounter with history, with slavery and colonialism, but also with neo-colonialism and human greed and exploitation today. The artist wants to see plastic cans, worked to their limit by the oil traffickers, as the slaves of the past but also as the exploited and weak people of the present day. His yellow and black masks stand for specific historical personalities: the yellow for the white ruler who was imposed on Benin by the French in the 1700s, and the black for the king of Benin. His indictment is not only of the Western colonialists, but also of the Africans who consented to and collaborated in slavery. In a museum which has been for far too long the embodiment of colonial desire, the materialization of the grip that objects hold on people (Gosden 2004), this subversive work makes a powerful and evocative intervention. The objects in this case are

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not the high art collected by British and other Western connoisseurs, but the humble discarded objects that operate here not as metaphors of people, but as real bodies, real people, with mouths and arms, with voices, with bodily secretions. Discarded, modified, and re-used plastic cans, alcohol, tobacco, spices, oil; the whole history of colonialism, the contemporary history of neo-colonialism, could be written as a history of these objects and substances.

This installation can be seen as a framework through which to reread and rethink the ideas contained in Renfrew's book. Those who follow developments in contemporary archaeology will not be surprised to see a book exploring such a theme; other similar studies have appeared in the last few years, and a number of field archaeological projects have established collaborations with contemporary artists, inviting them to comment, through their work, on the process of excavation, or on the material archaeological past (cf. the studies in Brodie & Hills 2004). Renfrew, however, must be credited for being at the forefront of this trend, and one of the first to point out the fruitfulness of such collaboration. Through his initiatives as Master of Jesus College Cambridge, and later as director of the MacDonald Institute of Archaeological Research, through his association with a number of contemporary conceptual artists, and through his writings, he has encouraged other archaeologists to explore this link. This book, which is a semi-popular and semi-academic account, started its life as the 2001 Rhind Lectures, delivered to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, in Edinburgh. In it, Renfrew claims that the archaeologist, much like a visitor at a gallery of contemporary art, attempts to make sense of and to figure out the material world in front of them, be it an art installation, or the objects, the artefacts and buildings unearthed from an archaeological excavation. But he also alludes to another kind of relationship: the archaeological process, according to the author, can be seen as art production, through the features created on the ground by expositing old structures and creating news ones, but also through material practices, such as photographing archaeological features, objects, and landscapes and producing texts about them. In that sense, Renfrew comes close to discussions which see archaeology more like a craft, and more broadly as cultural production in the present (cf. Hamilakis 1999; Shanks & MacGuire 1996).

Armed with this conviction, Renfrew embarks on a journey to convince both archaeologists and contemporary artists that they stand to gain a lot from a close collaboration and interaction. He, for example, asks archaeologists to be 'open to the full range of the sensory experiences that occur during the excavation process' (p. 25), a call that an increasing number of archaeologists as well as artists would endorse. But this book can also be read as the journal and testament of the author's personal journey: from a key advocate of the functionalist and positivist 'New Archaeology' in the 1970s to a crusader for the self-styled and little imitated 'cognitive processual archaeology' in the 1980s and 1990s, to the present, as yet unclassified approach. Renfrew prefers to use the concept of 'material engagement' for this recent departure, a concept which he has elaborated in other recent writings (e.g. Renfrew 2004). Renfrew's encounter with contemporary artists has led him to endorse concepts such as materiality, embodiment, memory, and sensory archaeology, ideas that several other anthropological archaeologists have been fruitfully exploring for at least the last decade. While these archaeologists came across these concepts in their encounters with material culture studies and with phenomenology, Renfrew became convinced of their usefulness indirectly, through his conversations with contemporary conceptual artists and their explorations of the sensuous human body. It therefore appears that this book represents a rapprochement of previously mutually exclusive and contrasting archaeological views: a cognitivist neo-evolutionist and largely positivist worldview, and a materialist and phenomenological one.

But appearances can be deceptive. Renfrew has many and interesting things to say in this book on the Western canon of high art and its tyranny, on the process of display, on social memory, on the aesthetics and the attraction of the object. He explores these topics using a relatively small group of primarily Western artists, with Mark Dion, Antony Gormley, Richard Long, Andy Goldsworthy, David Mach, and Eduardo Paolozzi being the most prominent. Yet he still feels obliged to place his narrative within an overarching, universalist, neo-evolutionist scheme. In that, he follows the psychologist Merlin Donald (1991) and his scheme of cognitive phases which he sees as corresponding to different 'stages' of human and cultural evolution: episodic culture (Australopithecus), mimetic culture (*Homo erectus*), linguistic or mythic culture (*Homo sapiens*), theoretic culture (a stage corresponding to the development of writing, seen as an 'external symbolic storage'). This evolutionist sequence is also more or less followed in the book, with the first chapter starting with human evolution, and the last addressing writing, as well as other expressions of the 'theoretic' culture such as money.

It is this desire on the part of the author to fall back on this neo-evolutionist framework (see, e.g., Gamble 2004, for a critique) and his reliance on psychological ideas that make this overarching narrative problematic. Despite the author's overtures towards the archaeology of embodiment and of the bodily senses, there is little exploration of the

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embodied and multi-sensory and sensuous nature of materiality here, nor does he engage with the discussion on the agency of objects and the recent anthropological critique of aesthetics, despite his brief reference to Alfred Gell (1998; cf. Pinney & Thomas 2001). Nearly all the works discussed are appreciated exclusively or primarily through vision. The work of Bruce Nauman, an artist who would have given the author a great opportunity to explore aurality and kinaesthesia (cf. his *Raw materials* – Bauman 2004), is discussed here primarily with reference to the 'power of the written word' (p. 177). Renfrew rightly attacks the Western canon of art and its ocularcentrism, but the examples he presents do not diverge radically from that canon; they do not challenge the dominant Western production of the human body and its sensory existence, a production that was based on a middle-class, sensory hierarchy and on notions of bodily respectability. Consider the artist Sissel Tolaas, for example, who works primarily with smell (e.g. Arning 2006). In her work *FEAR of smell – the smell of FEAR* she sampled the bodily odour of fifteen men of various backgrounds who were all at an emotional state of fear. She then reproduced these odours using gas chromatography (a technique now used in archaeology to detect organic residues), mixed them with white paint, and painted with it a white gallery room. During the exhibition, the visitors were entering an apparently empty room but they soon realized that they were in a room filled with diverse human presences. They were then encouraged to scratch the walls and experience the various odours, leaving at the same time their own odours in the room. If the dominant Western modernist tradition had declared a war on smells (cf. Urry 2000: 99, citing Bauman), if smell is still seen as a 'lower' sense, and if racial and ethnic stereotypes and insults often take olfactory overtones – think of the 'smelly' immigrants who sometime offend the sensitive noses of some Europeans (cf. Classen, Howes & Synnott 1994; Jütte 2005) – works such as this challenge not only the artistic canon but also the race and class foundations of Western modernity and its sensory hierarchies. They are also about otherness, a concern that is fundamental to archaeology, which engages with other places and other times, being, however, firmly embedded in the contemporary social and political milieu. In sum, this important book can serve as a springboard from which to discuss a potentially extremely fruitful link, and, as such, it deserves to be read widely and discussed; yet, as Rancière has recently reminded us (2004), art is inherently political, since both aesthetics and politics are about what he calls 'the distribution of the sensible', what is seen and heard and what not, and who has the ability to determine the visible and the invisible, the audible and the inaudible, the tangible and the intangible. This book fails to see and to address this link: in other words, it falls short of delivering a fundamental and radical critique of the Western conceptions of art, of addressing otherness, and of challenging the sensory–biopolitical basis of the dominant Western modernity, all prerequisites for an engagement with contemporary archaeologies of the body and of materiality.

In finishing, it is to the work of Romuald Hazoumé that I want to return, for it brings together and embodies all the points that I have been making in this piece. His work is archaeological in more senses than one: he finds, collects, and reworks abandoned and discarded objects and artefacts, objects that embody histories, times, and relationships, desire, power, and exploitation. He recognizes the evocative and symbolic power and agency that these objects and substances hold, their ability to embody and act like humans. He then places them into new contexts and draws new associations and links amongst them, much like an archaeologist who retrieves objects and produces and reconstitutes them as 'archaeological record', as museum pieces, as scientific material. But unlike much of contemporary archaeology, Hazoumé refuses to follow a linear temporality, a sharp separation between past and present and an artistic (or archaeological, for that matter) practice that treats history as simply commemoration, aesthetic value, or reservoir of didactic statements and empty moral clichés. To these common artistic and archaeological practices, he juxtaposes a material past that is still present, a subversive gesture that demands from the visitor to experience history and otherness in its fully embodied and multi-sensory form (recall the bodily odours that emanated from the Houston version of this installation). In other words, he says to both contemporary archaeologists and contemporary artists that their dialogue and potential collaboration will be vacuous and ineffectual if they do not dare to confront and subvert dominant aesthetic, bodily, and sensory conventions, race and class hierarchies, respectability, and political order.

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