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BOOK REVIEW

Dragoş Gheorghiu: *Art in the Archaeological Imagination*. Oxbow Books, Oxford, 2020, pp. 144. ISBN 978-1-78925-352-89

Art in the Archaeological Imagination was published by Oxbow Books in 2020. The volume is edited by the social anthropologist, archaeologist, and visual artist Dragoş Gheorghiu. It does not shy away from being ambitious, as attested in the blurb on the back of the book:

“It shows that [...] archaeologists, without being inspired by contemporary artists, use creative methods, and their analysis of the art of the Past goes beyond the material culture of the art objects, into the realm of the mental processes of creation.” “[...] the purpose of this book is to present the archaeological research functioning as a sort of artistic creation, proposing new perspectives on the archaeological imagination.”

The book is only about 134 pages of text and divided into an introduction and eight chapters with a total of nine authors. In the short introduction, Gheorghiu says the book is divided into three parts that complement each other, namely “Imagining the art of the past as a magic and innovative experience”, “Experimentation and experience as forms of art”, and “The exploration of the act of creation.” Oddly, this tripartite division is not rendered in the content list. This makes it a bit inconvenient to look up the thematic structure that the chapters are sorted under.

I have previously written an article that explores the entanglement between art and archaeology and how these practices cross over in their engagement with the material environment (Farstadvoll 2019). But compared to my article, the theme of imagination and “mental processes” shows that this book is more *turned inward* towards the psychology and mind of the archaeological subject. This seems like an intriguing starting point; one of the main goals of the book is to explore the role and entanglement of the archaeologists themselves in the intersection and not least creation of art and science. With the proposed explicit focus on the psychological element of art and archaeological creativity, I was immediately interested in how this book would explore the intersection and entanglement between human psychology and the matter of archaeology, namely things and the material world.

The one thing I wish that this volume had dared to do, and perhaps not least had the space to do, is to be even bolder in the exploration of the archaeological imagination. There is expectedly a focus on the prehistoric in most of the chapters, except for some parts of chapters 5 and 7 that take into consideration recent and modern art and artists. Despite the book starting by quoting two of its contributors, Timothy Darvill and Elizabeth Poraj-Wilczynska, about the constraints of cartesian dualism, binary oppositions, and back-projections of modern life on people in the past are gone, the dichotomy of the past and the present is very present in many of the chapters. This is illustrated through a necromantic impulse of bringing back to life and “reverse engineering” human minds, subjects, emotions, and experiences (p.3). This is perhaps a natural conclusion when the past is viewed through

the lens of human minds. If the ultimate goal of archaeology is to reach within the minds of people that have passed away a long time ago, the past is indeed gone and must be revived to be once again observed, or even re-lived.

I will now briefly summarize my thoughts on the chapters in this book, a paragraph for each of them before I end this review with a short conclusion. It is an impossible task to completely summarize every chapter, so my descriptions must be seen as a specific but not a total take on the different chapters.

The first chapter is written by Roberta Robin Dods. Admittedly, I struggled to follow the reasoning and main arguments in this chapter. It is an interesting but very heavy chapter to start this book with. It is laden with a labyrinthine large range of topics, from enactivism and hominid cranial volumes to quantum mechanics, mirror neurons, and the Japanese concept of *ikigai*. At the start of the chapter Dods states that material culture is text, and, for “pre-literate peoples” all material culture is text (pp. 7-8). This is an interesting return to the textual turn that was prominent in the archaeological discussions of symbolism and hermeneutics in the 1980s and 90s. But, disappointedly, Dods does not engage with this debate and the potentially unique differences between the material and the textual. Instead, Dods emphasize ambiguity and superposition through the metaphor of the qbit (quantum bit). Further, Dods tells us that objects are “[...] the deep complex representation of a qbit contemplation” (p18). On the same page it is argued that we live in an ever moving ‘now’ and a ‘here’ that is constantly changing and changing us. It seems like art takes the side-line compared with the bigger questions about when humans became conscious about being in a sentient state or how archaeologists can decolonize our thinking. One of the conclusions Dods put forward is that reflexivity is one of the “gifts” evolution has given us. This chapter is very much a piece of reflective writing that emphasizes the fluidity and sometimes contradictory nature of consciousness, and our role as researchers embedded in the world of the past yet also in a moving present day.

Compared to the previous chapter Torill Christine Lindstrøm takes a more scientific approach to the psychology and cognition of artistic archaeological objects. Nevertheless, when compared to Lindstrøm’s focus in previous writings on the importance of “Occamesque” empirical inquiry and clarity, this chapter takes on a speculative character because it aims to decode “invisible aspects” of objects to envision and understand the minds of people in the past. For example, in the conclusion Lindstrøm argues that “[...] we should try to reach out for the psychological factors, the cognitions, sentiments, and emotions of the persons behind the objects” (p.41). In comparison to Dods’ complex discussion of the intertwinement of cognition and “art-effects”, Lindstrøm’s text reiterates the cliché archaeological trope of the “Indian behind the artifact”. Confusingly, Lindstrøm emphasizes how we can disclose “immaterial culture” through the semiotics of “material culture” while also emphasizing that for example, the brooch does not “represent” the skill of its maker but rather “reveals” it. Applying the verb “reveals” to a non-living brooch is an interesting take on object-agency, but it fits into the idea of how aesthetic experience is an interplay between object and subject. Non-representational theory, despite the opaque concept of non-representation being central for the conclusion, is strangely absent from the chapter. Also, despite the heads up in the introduction and

reservations later in the chapter, the synonymic use of “aesthetic” and “beauty” is unfortunate and imprecise as it makes for a biased and reductive understanding of art. This chapter of the book is an interesting, but a bit contradicting attempt to instrumentalize “artistic imagination” in some way to understand the minds of people in the past. I wonder what would happen if Lindstrøm included a “non-art” object in the claimed objective analysis. And, what would happen if an object of the present day was included, like mass-produced IKEA furniture or ready-made-art?

Iégor Reznikoff’s chapter emphasizes an “anthropological” approach in contrast to an approach that is mediated by machines. To illustrate this, Reznikoff discusses his work with archaeoacoustics and how the human body produces and receives sounds that can’t be replaced nor complexly mediated by machines. The considerations on how cognition and the human mind specifically relate to this experimental acoustic archaeology is almost completely absent except for a couple of mentions of how sound produced by human voices and echoes affect “deep levels of consciousness”. What this entails, such as what “levels” imply, is not described nor explored. The idea and conceptualization of art are a bit tentative, but Reznikoff points out that to do these somatic experiments it is necessary for the researchers to develop their artistic ability to produce sounds. Ergo, to discover and not least experience for example sonorous aspects of cave painting localities, the researcher must first master different ways of artistically producing sounds. A bit offhand, Reznikoff warns us in the conclusion that we must not use “*modern fancy artistic tricks*” in prehistoric studies (p.50). Here I wonder why we can’t have multiple approaches to archaeoacoustics studies, some that employ Reznikoff’s anthropological methods and others that use “fancy” modern machinery. Reznikoff’s attitude might be rooted in the impulse to reconstruct how things were, but not one that gives nuanced details about for example cave painting localities that even its prehistoric artist was not consciously aware of.

Jacqui Wood’s chapter explicitly aims to replicate the mindsets of prehistoric artists, or more precisely, artisans. Replicate is the keyword here and partly follows the theme of reconstruction and experimental archaeology found in the previous chapter by Reznikoff. But, how does one replicate the apparently “immaterial” skillset of a prehistoric artist if only artifacts remain? “The only way to truly research a subject is to look at the artefact and work it out oneself” (p.54). Wood emphasizes that to truly replicate past skills it is necessary to use the exact materials as in the past; analogues are not good enough. In Wood’s reasoning, form and material are the enactments of cognitive processes. That is, artistry is embedded in the affordances and materiality of artifacts and their materials. Skill is, as I interpret Wood, much about being in an attentive dialogue of trial and failure both with artifacts, fragments of artifacts, and the nuances of the materials they are made of. Wood stresses that to put yourself into the mind of a prehistoric artisan you must not have rigid plans, but have an awareness of the right materials. Thus, the “fluidity of mind” is the best mindset if you want to understand and replicate artisans in the past. In the end, Wood focuses much on practicality and technical solutions. The result is that in this chapter, the diverse nature of “art” is overshadowed by “logical” solutions and artisan skill.

As mentioned at the start of the review, Timothy Darvill and Elizabeth Poraj-Wilczynska emphasize that they aim to go beyond the ontologies and positivism that have been dominant in western sciences. This chapter uses the art created by Poraj-Wilczynska to challenge conventional perspectives and open the archaeological imagination of the Neolithic landscape and barrow at and around Belas Knap. This is an interesting take on the relationship between artistic thought and archaeology that is rooted in visual art, like for example drawing and illustration, which are perhaps one of the most obvious overlaps between artistic thought and abstraction in archaeological documentation. This is the chapter in the book where archaeological research functioning as artistic creation is most well-defined and articulated. Instead of thinking of archaeology as a stilted “objective” look at artistic objects/practices, it places emphasis on the artist/archaeologist being there on and in the site, returning to the site at different times and seasons, and not least, creating art. The field walks, recordings, and observation of how modern people and animals/non-humans interact with this prehistoric site illustrate in some ways how an artistic approach to a site gathers different times together in the present. This chapter is also a contrast of, on one side, doing art and on the other explaining art. Art is also framed as a sort of conversation and negotiation with the site: “At times it felt as if the barrow itself was creating the work [...]” (p.89). The chapter does not explicitly delve on “mental processes” or cognition, but it makes it very obvious that archaeological imaginations are very dependent on a direct and embedded dialogue between environment, time, place, things, and not least beings of both the past and present.

Dragoş Gheorghiu is a self-identified experimentalist, which is the basis for this chapter’s focus on visual archaeological experiments. Here Gheorghiu aims to show that one can present personal and subjective experiences to show cognitive analogies between archaeological research and artistic practice. Gheorghiu demonstrates a personal fascination with how the human mind uses the “principle of efficiency” to simplify complex images that are stored in the brain. Further, this is connected to how bodily experience is connected to visual memory – that knowledge is dependent on being in a world that is inseparable from our bodies. It is argued that bodily memory, for example, rhythmic activities, can influence and shape imagery like engraved stones on Neolithic tombs in Wales. It is an interesting hypothesis that the structure, and perhaps physical limitations and shortcuts, can potentially influence what kind of repeating patterns are used in arts, like lozenge and chevron shapes. The chapter lists many examples and different experiments, but is perhaps a bit short, making it very dense and self-referencing. It works more like an overview of previous research rather than a chapter on new and original research. Gheorghiu concludes that art “[...] is an instrument for increasing the capacities of science [...]” (p103). The instrumentalization of art is a point of contention. But what would happen if one turned this conclusion on its head and argued how archaeology instead could be the instrument for art?

In the chapter by George Nash the discussion focuses on the English 20th century expressionist artist James Isherwood and the concept of art as a “social device”. The idea of modernity is put forward as an important social and chronological context, because the author argues that art is something that is influenced by the artist’s surroundings. It is emphasized that the subject matter of Isherwood was often drawn from different “scapes”, like working-class landscapes and urbanscapes, in northern England. Nash argues that there are similarities

between the physical act of painting and archaeology, such as interpreting the past by “peeling back the layers” to create a narrative. And, like with Isherwood’s paintings, the depicted sites bind together the narration through its physicality and stratigraphically layered past. Nash points out that paintings are archaeological objects because they have a unique stratigraphy of symbols, metaphors, and narratives. Nash also mentioned other more personal sides of the artist’s life that influenced the artwork. For example, Isherwood’s paintings sometimes had distorted perspectives and vibrant colours because they were painted under the influence of alcohol. Nash shows an intriguing way of “archaeologically” contextualizing Isherwood’s artworks within factoryscapes and working-class culture, but unfortunately the psychological and cognitive aspects are not explicitly discussed. The concrete and physical aspects of stratigraphy and archaeological methods get a bit lost in the metaphorical interpretation of “layering of narratives” paintings too. Nevertheless, Nash’s analysis of Isherwood’s paintings is one way to demonstrate that imagination is sometimes a “filter” through which the artist’s mental state, self, and world is expressed.

In the last chapter, Ezra Zubrow heuristically explores the demographics of “prehistoric artists” and the challenges of defining what an artist is. This is a rather unexpected article to end this volume with; it is very brief and does not engage with the concept of archaeological imagination, nor does it discuss the mental processes of artistic creation. The chapter has many charts, nine in total, compared to the rather small amount of text. Several places through the text and in the conclusion it is emphasised that “[...] most of the data in this chapter are proxies and should not be used in any way as conclusive.” Zubrow concludes the chapter with the statement that asking the question “what are the definitions and characteristics of the prehistoric demography of artists” was more valuable than the results (p.127). Zubrow asks more questions than are answered, but that fits into this chapter’s heuristic and consequently speculative character. I would have liked the chapter to have been more finished and in line with the aim of the book. It reads more like a research outline rather than a finished and concluding chapter in an anthology. Empirically grounded speculation is perhaps a part of the archaeological practice of reconstructing complete images from fragments. It is true that similarly to art we must accept some form of speculative creativity that goes beyond the data.

In conclusion, the book is demonstrably an exhibition on varied, and sometimes incommensurable, ways of discussing and defining the relationship of archaeological objects, art, skill, human cognition, and imagination. Here we see examples of varied approaches to art and cognition in archaeology, from Lindstrøms scientific and explicitly psychological analysis, to the post-anthropocentric and perspectivist ontologies by Darvill and Poraj-Wilczynska. It is rather difficult to make a single conclusion of an anthology that has chapters with very varied approaches and theoretical frameworks. The book comes across as a session at an academic conference that despite a common theme and topic is characterized by divergent and uncoordinated presentations. Not that this is necessarily a detriment, but it creates an absence of a congruent point and conclusion.

Do I recommend this book? Yes, for researchers and other academics that are interested in the relationship between archaeology and art, material objects, and human cognition.

However, I miss a concluding chapter, where an invited scholar or the editor, would have reflected, summarized, and discussed the different chapters and points. The book has no singular voice, nor a singular answer to its stated goal, but that is perhaps for the best. The “artistic archaeologist” or “archaeologist artist” is imagined in different ways. The ambiguities of artistic objects, sites, and practices is a place that is bound to be caught in vagueness, but with moments of uncanny clarity.

References

Farstadvoll, S. 2019. Vestigial Matters: Contemporary Archaeology and Hyperart. *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, 52(1), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00293652.2019.1577913>