

**‘ARCHAEOLOGICAL SENSIBILITY’ CONFERENCE
SESSIONS & ABSTRACTS**

SESSION 1: AESTHETIC ENGAGEMENTS

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“The Poetics of Archaeology”

Archaeology is a science and epistemological debates on archaeology have centered on how it produces knowledge, the kind of knowledge it produces and its limits and possibilities. From the 1970s onwards, archaeologists have been also concerned with the narrative qualities of the discipline: archaeology as storytelling. More recently, the aesthetic qualities of archaeology have been explored through a dialogue with contemporary art and artists. In this presentation I would like to defend that there is a way of bringing together epistemology, narrativity and aesthetics: poetics. I argue that archaeology is first and foremost a poetics, ruled by a regime that is simultaneously aesthetic and epistemological. I will illustrate my argument with some examples from my work on the poetics of things and places that break the divides between historical, contemporary and prehistoric archaeology.

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“Cinema as Archaeological Practice?”

Cinema, a modern technique and medium, an art of the present, has felt the need, from its very beginnings, to reconstitute ancient worlds, to draw from history, mythology, and classical iconography an artistic legitimacy that was contested. It also served to demonstrate its spectacular, unprecedented powers of re-presentation, of animation of the past. We know, early on, how much cinema drew, directly or through the mediation of painting, on archaeological discoveries to re-stage the past. By contrast, especially in the second half of the 20th century, many filmmakers turned to the contemporary world, seeking around them the presence of the past: a fragmentary, opaque, insignificant presence, reduced to the traces it had left, and even more so to the ones it had not left. They played with the (im)-possibilities of reconstruction, filming directly (on) archaeological sites, projecting an archaeological imagination onto contemporary ruins. In this way, they questioned the ways in which their medium, itself linked to the imprint, the trace, the fragment, can re-present, make visible, narrate. Can we assume an archaeological sensibility specific to cinema? Or

only specific to certain filmic practices? After proposing a cartography of the modalities by which the relationship between cinema and archaeology can be envisaged, I will put forward the hypothesis of a strong rupture around the Second World War, which opens the way to filmic experimentation that shares with archaeology much more than the reworking of its ‘findings’ for spectacular purposes. I will support this hypothesis with a mainly Italian corpus.

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“Archaeology by Design”

Archaeologists design history as we create the narratives of the past. The rigor of each discipline is manifest in the multiple lines of evidence used to produce critical scholarship. Whether we think of Industrial Design, Communication Design, Graphic Design, or Architectural Design, an archaeological sensibility provides a complementary framework through which to understand the contemporary moment. In this paper, I trace the many ways by which contemporary critical design and contemporary archaeological praxis share strategies, tactics, and sensibilities. Utilizing two case studies of curating design at international biennials, this paper provides some pathways by which archaeology and the field of design can intersect, overlap, and inform each other in interesting, critical, and future oriented ways.

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“The Sensing of Landscape”

The process of ‘sensing’ a landscape entails many aesthetic parameters of human consciousness, from the realistic to the surreal. But landscape is as evocative as it is political. In the age of a computational planet, what does it mean to sense a landscape as a digital media object? I answer this by charting a visual culture of remote sensing for analyzing strategically important archaeological landscapes in Afghanistan through training and conversation with archaeologists. From charting historical migration routes to analyzing changing infrastructure during the 2001-2014 US-led war, this research explores a series of remotely-sensed landscape visualizations created via training and conversation with archaeologists, surveying techniques of remote sensing and its visualization with tools that supersede human sensing capabilities. How may we think of archaeological sensibility when

excavating virtual soils? The answer requires tackling the liminality of digital, image-like worlds where mediated perceptions of landscapes aid the creation of evidence for sites that are physically inaccessible to fieldwork. The entanglement of aesthetics and objective knowledge marks this foray into a landscape of data that is composed of digital, virtual, and computable surfaces with imaginations of territory, topography, and terrain that have a materiality of their own, despite being intangible.

SESSION 2: HISTORIES OF THE FUTURE

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“Waste: From Prehistory to Dystopia”

What is the value of waste from a scientific standpoint? Despite their dramatic nature, questions surrounding governmental politics of nuclear waste disposal appear to be treated as a distant problem, left for future generations to deal with. Nonetheless, in order to understand why such questions can be treated as minor issues, it seems crucial to contextualize them within a ‘geology of imagination.’ Such a conceptual framework would enable the study and analysis of stereotypes and other forms of ‘ideological fossils.’ According to folk psychology and dictionaries, the notion of waste, which might be viewed as one such fossil, serves to qualify items which are no longer required, objects – or facts – which can be discarded. The history of Prehistory spans over approximately 200 years, yet the undeniable popularity of the discipline owes both to the striking scientific discoveries it has yielded and to fictional productions curated by the cultural industries. Although famous archaeological discoveries pertaining to Prehistory involve early human burials and prehistoric paintings, less popular finds such as wasted materials (flint cortices, leftover items) might be summoned as equally informative, providing extremely important clues to prehistorians. Many video games embed representations of Prehistory within dystopian narratives. How do they articulate the notions of waste and recycling? In real life, nuclear waste represents a source of danger which appears to be discarded publicly: the very notion is treated as ideological waste. This analysis of the notion of waste will address ecological, historical and ideological issues, providing a concrete case study for a ‘geology of imagination.’

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“Icescapes of Nunatsiavut: Archaeological Attunements to Weather and Place”

Archaeology has been held out as a discipline particularly well-equipped to investigate both anthropogenic climate change (through the environmental long durée) and place (through the hyper-local intimacy of archaeological deposits). In this paper, I propose an attunement to ‘weather’ – the short-term atmospheric conditions that structure both daily life and social relations – as an archaeological sensibility. Focusing on one community in Nunatsiavut, the Inuit self-governing region above Labrador, Canada, I argue that the contrasting ways that Inuit, militaries, and archaeologists have engaged with the dynamic weather of the circumpolar north can nuance narratives of climate doom. Foregrounding weather allows us to consider the subjectivity of the effects of the Anthropocene, and to confront both belonging to and estrangement from places undergoing intensive environmental shifts. How has this belonging to and estrangement from place-through-weather played out historically in Nunatsiavut? How are Inuit using materially-minded methodologies to document shifting icescapes and the increasingly-strange weather? What can weather as an archaeological sensibility reveal about the past and present politics of melting materialities?

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“The Great Deceleration: On Ruination and Revolution”

What would a genuine climate revolution mean today, after past revolutions have crumbled, the climate crisis is accelerating, and global capitalism continues fostering growth and fossil fuel extraction, all but guaranteeing that the planet will burn? While this is a daunting question, in this essay I examine how the radical sensibilities generated by the climate crisis are attuned to the negativity of ruination and to the generativity of practices of deceleration and degrowth. In particular, I explore what could be called an archaeological sensibility toward revolution in the era of the climate emergency, i.e. attentive to cracks, ruptures, rubble, motion, and interruptions. My inspiration are Walter Benjamin’s ideas about ruination and revolution, which led him to articulate – contra Marx’ vision of revolutions as “the locomotive of history” – that we should perhaps think of a revolution to prevent catastrophe as humanity “activating the emergency break” on the runaway train of progress. I explore this question via the struggles by land and water defenders in western Canada (where I live) and the Gran Chaco region in northern Argentina (the country I’m from, and where I base my research), which include grassroots efforts to interrupt the ruination by extractive industries. The dramatic intensification of growth, high-speed planetary

connectivity, and urbanization that over the past three decades has transformed the world and created half of the carbon dioxide currently in the atmosphere has been aptly called ‘the great acceleration.’ This paper explores how radical activists attuned to the ruination generated by this acceleration, and seeking to “activate the emergency break,” help us envision a future climate revolution as ‘the great deceleration.’

SESSION 3: CONJURINGS

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“Archaeology as a Spiritual Practice”

What would it mean to admit – to grant admission – to the fact that archaeology can be a spiritual practice? While archaeologies of the contemporary have disrupted assumptions about the legitimate temporal domains of archaeological inquiry such that its scope is no longer limited to the life-worlds of the dead and the deep past, hauntings never seem far behind. If anything, recent work on dark heritage and traces of trauma doubles down on shadows and vibrations. What happens if we take seriously the social lives of the dead, or our own longings for healing, as factors in archaeological practice? While postmodern theory has loosened the grip of scientific conceits that archaeologists once held firm, the field’s recent investments in the New Materialism have not necessarily loosened the grip on the old material-spiritual binary inherited from the Western philosophical tradition nor, I will argue, anxieties that what archaeology does has something in common with shamanism, necromancy, and alchemy. I will present a history of the intersection of the occult and archaeology, and examples of recent archaeological work (mine and others) to assess the intellectual risks and benefits of lifting the taboo against the ‘woo-woo.’

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“Traces and Habits: Rethinking the Archaeological Insensible”

This paper considers the archaeological sensibility in terms of the secular modern inheritances that critically frame and discipline its traces. By questioning the nature of the archaeological trace, this paper asks what do we presume these traces can and cannot

disclose about archaeological subjects? Conversely, on account of these commitments, what remains archaeologically insensible?

Archaeology partakes in the modernist suspicion of surfaces; it provides the archetype of the excavation of meaning. This archaeological sensibility extends, most notably, to the psychological diggings that attend the Freudian mnesic trace. This paper asks: how might the archaeological sensibility be reoriented if these divided aspects of the trace, material and mnesic, resolutely held apart, were instead united? I consider these possibilities from the vantage of the habituated subject; a problem at once for archaeology, for psychology and for modernity. Through examples selected from an archaeology of conversion to Islam in North India, it provides discussions of a different conception of the trace, the *āthār*. It presents the possibilities of an archaeological sensibility oriented otherwise, through archaeologies of envy and care, of moral striving and mineral promise.

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“More-than-Human Memory: Engaging the Non-Human in the Aftermath of Genocide”

‘Memory’ has been predominantly theorised in its human associations, through studies of subjectivity, the psyche, and their social contexts and extensions. And memory’s entanglements in histories and aftermaths of mass violence have been significantly explored through the concepts trauma, loss, and melancholia, all terms referencing human interiorities as situated in past experiences of political violence, in their ongoing reverberations. In this paper, I explore memory’s “‘more-than-human’ dimensions, proposing to contribute to human-centred memory studies through an attentiveness to memory’s inscription in ‘non-human’ spaces and materialities, including its ‘supra-human’ dimensions incorporating the supernatural. The story of Musa Dagh in south Turkey, where a major defence was enstaged by Armenians against the Ottoman army’s genocidal onslaught in 1915, lies at the heart of this paper, ethnographically trailing through this mountain’s current and contemporary state. As I will argue, by reference to my work in Musa Dagh, in addition to the anthropological and historical, an archaeological and geographical imagination are required in a study of memory in the aftermath of genocide that incorporates its more-than-human dimensions. The paper concludes with an analysis of memory in its multiple dimensionality, including the human, the non-human, and the supra-human, in the aftermath of genocide.

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“‘Respecting’ the Border Dead in Catania: Affective Engagements with Disregarded Material Traces”

In late 2017, a small group of locals involved in migrant reception with the Red Cross in the port of Catania (Sicily) joined forces in order to find ways of ‘respecting’ the dead border crossers arriving on European territory alongside their living counterparts during the Search and Rescue operations that have formed part of the landscape around the Mediterranean for several years now. Respecting the border dead soon became working on a database project aimed at giving back a name and a biography to the unknown bodies buried in the ‘migrants square’ of the local cemetery. The project differed from the (inter)national forensic protocol that had already been set up to examine the human remains recovered after one of the largest shipwrecks in the central Mediterranean that, on 18 April 2015, claimed the lives of approximately one thousand people. It is different insofar as it is a grassroots initiative, does not involve any substantial funding or the expertise of forensic pathologists, and has not developed in the media limelight but rather in the shadows.

The ‘forensic imagination’ that unfolds within this project run by a small team of lay people implies a particular way of looking at and thinking through material entanglements. An approach emerges that entails a slight shift away from the “corporeal epistemology” (Klinenberg, “Bodies that don’t matter” [2002]: 121) guiding human rights practitioners worldwide, as it does not place bodies at the heart of the inquiry – indeed, it does not study them – but focuses rather on the traces associated with them, left “only at the point of their instantaneous contact with power” (Foucault, “Lives of infamous men” [1967]: 161). Putting together fragments of objects eroded by salt water and disparate documents lost in the dusty drawers of institutions such as the flying squad or the municipal undertakers can sometimes give a name to the bodies. Identifying the deceased means returning them to their families (even if only symbolically, in cases when the remains are not repatriated). It is also a way of compensating for how little credence states give to the testimonies of the survivors of border crossings (when they listen to these voices at all).

By exploring the perceptions and practices, but also the creative and affective understanding of materiality, at play in this project my intention is to bring out some elements that might help identify the contours of an *archaeological sensibility* outside the academic world.

SESSION 4: CURATIONS

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“Anathema: Sacrificial Practices and the Sense of Ruins in the Archaeological Near East”

The early Neolithic of the Near East is famous for its well-preserved sites, many of which are the result of repeated practices of destruction and closure. Such an active production of significant remains is hardly surprising in a land that is to be inhabited by a long series of societies with an acute sensibility toward monumental history, the materiality of what remains, and associated agencies. But in these early days of sedentary life, the intention of destruction and the efforts of conservation often intertwined in remarkably ritualized episodes of violence. Sacrifice emerges as an obvious analytical frame to interpret these counter-intuitive practices of destroying-while-preserving, which convert the negativity of destruction into an apparently positive outcome. The notion, however, doesn't address the archaeological logic of accumulation. It fails to acknowledge the existence of ruins.

I propose to go back to the biblical background of this discussion. Instead of looking at the traditional notion of priestly sacrifice, as exemplified in the Leviticus, I will explore another modality of 'sacrificial' violence, one that has been neglected by anthropological theory. Deuteronomist historiography refers to the intentional destruction of cities and people by the Semitic roots HRM, translated into 'anathema' by the Greek of the Septuagint. The event purposefully produced remains that cannot be touched, being sacred (*sacer*) by the very act of is condemnation (*facer*). Unlike priestly sacrifice, it does not take place at a sanctuary, but defines the sacrality of a place. The archetypal case is given in the Book Joshua by the tell of Jericho : an accumulation of mostly Neolithic ruins.

By no means do I suggest that the notion of HRM – no more than priestly sacrifice – directly applies to the prehistoric periods. But the duration of visible remains in the biblical landscape provides us with a glance as to how ancient people have articulated an understanding of depositional practices and intentionality to deal with similar objects than modern archaeologists. This, I contend, may supplement us with an archaeological sensibility that is often missing in contemporary approaches to monumental past and ritualized violence. At the very least, I suggest that it opens the same kind of cross-cultural comparison that the sacrificial model has offered. But with an archaeological twist.

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Letting Be(come): Curating Decay at the Museum

Based on an ongoing transdisciplinary project at Medical Museion in Copenhagen entitled *The Living Room*, we will discuss interventionist and non-interventionist strategies of curating decay in the museum's collection. We will explore the interplay between non-interventionist strategies (focused on observing objects as they are drawn into cycles of deterioration and regeneration) and alternative interventionist strategies of accelerating decay (through 'active life-support' that disturbs the presumed organic course of deterioration). In our discussion of two installations – The Slow Show and The Worm Dome – we will reflect on the fiction of human 'non-intervention' and also the unpredictable agency of organism and environment. We will discuss how the intended distinction between strategies of observing vs. accelerating decay is breached by the emergence of possibilities which cannot be contained or predicted. In conclusion, we will reflect on how this work poses potential modes of action and attention in a climate-changed world defined by the tension between human intervention and inaction.

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"The Making of a Maroon Archive"

Maroon studies typically begin with the term maroon as firm ground. However, just as 'maroons' may never have subsisted on stable physical plots, they never occupied fixed conceptual ones either. Various studies of the material and social practices of marronage have been developed in expert and innovative ways. Yet, missing is an analysis of the material development of a maroon colonial archive, as both a body of evidence and a system that governed what could be recorded. This paper seeks to examine a segment of the colonial Mexican population loosely glossed as 'maroons' as objects of colonial knowledge production and interrogates the maroon social and political category as a modern construct. In colonial Mexico, this formation began to take shape in the 17th-century and can be traced through an examination of colonial documents. For colonial Veracruz specifically, I argue that maroons and archives were co-created as a way for colonial officials to render a novel

colonial ‘crisis’ – the “fujitibo” – intelligible, immobile, and conquerable. In the interest of colonial and capitalist order, the mutual projects of knowing and conquering black fugitives converged, as colonial officials began to systematically interrogate captured maroons in Veracruz, creating a vast archive in the process that contours academic understandings today. The first record on maroons in colonial Veracruz was the result of the inexperience of local government in managing a growing maroon population.

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“Estelas en el Río”

The Usumacinta River is a body of water that today marks the border between Mexico and Guatemala. In pre-Conquest times, its waters and sediment-rich soils provided both sustenance and transport routes that were key for the development of Classic Maya civilizations. In the more recent past, and for the same reasons, the river’s basin has served as a site of colonial and imperialist extraction, namely of natural resources like tropical woods, rubber, and chicle, but also of ancient vestiges. These mostly stone monuments were rendered desirable, as well as portable and available for extraction, by another side of the colonial project: the archaeological imagination and its own practices of excavation, appropriation, and relocation.

At the crossroads between ethnography, history, and aesthetics, I am interested in privileging the material elements and territorial fluctuations of the river itself – its waters, rocks, and sediments –, as well as engaging its human and non-human residents, to ask how its flows have retained, but also resisted, regenerated and reverted this history of extractivism. For this, I piece together archival sources as well as other kinds of traces that might reveal how these ancient objects’ removal – many looted and stolen, some taken legally by state agents and international museum curators, others yet abandoned or lost in the river’s waters – have indelibly marked and continue to weigh upon the region’s present.
