

DIG IT UP AND PUT IT IN A BAG

Marit Paasche

In Fontainebleau, France, time feels like both a landscape and memory: to walk around there is to dwell in eras that saw the creation of objects like gogottes and calcites, fantastic forms in limestone tracing back to the Oligocene or Mesolithic period. Gogottes consist of quartz crystals and calcium carbonate and formed when superheated water was extruded through crevices into a basin of extremely fine white silicate sand. The swirls and eddies of the water became fixed in the gradually concreting stone, creating the most peculiar and perfect formations. They look like manmade sculptures, but they are not.

The antithesis of the gogottes’ gently curving lines is the regular, geometrical look of the calcites. Outlines etched into the walls of many caves during the Mesolithic period are closer to our time, but still silent in a strange way. Human beings communed with nature and its rocky formations differently back then; understanding how seems imperative. Yet the earth has orbited the sun countless times, and the landscape seems indifferent to our queries. We do not exist, as far as rocky formations or the past are concerned.

II.

In 1929, Niels Bohr wrote: “We must, in general, be prepared to accept the fact that a complete elucidation of one and the same object may require diverse points of view which defy unique description.”¹ The cross-disciplinary project *Matter, Gesture and Soul* investigates the extent to which points of contact between contemporary art and archeology are possible. The project has established a collaborative environment for artistic, poetic, and scholarly work in response to prehistoric “art.” The framework is loose, and the participants are respected and recognized artists and academics.

For something to qualify as research in the traditional sense, it must be *scientific*, that is to say, based on scientific principles and methods. According to its etymology, the term first appeared in 17th century France in relation to the natural sciences, but it also has roots in the Greek word for knowledge.² Its history recognizes that research also accommodates a more general production of knowledge, and that it is therefore legitimate “to consider art as a species of knowledge”. Nevertheless, the wide disparities between art, geology and archeology as disciplines are difficult to ignore; some of these disparities have to do with the questions posed and methods for obtaining answers, while others are about the use of *pronouns*.

Bohr’s statement evinces an openness to complete elucidation, although a variety of perspectives makes it difficult, if not impossible, to describe a specific thing in any consistent way. If we replace Bohr’s thing with a prehistoric image or object and examine that object from the vantage points of the different disciplines involved in this project, it becomes clear that art’s great and defining strength is that it is subjective and driven by a *first-person truth*. “Pure” scientific disciplines more often rely on a third-person truth which can indicate or offer an ostensibly more objective form. “Hardcore” scientific methods are also more prevalent in archeology: analysis of satellite imagery or use of multispectral light-imaging technology, for example.

¹ Hustvedt [2016] 2017, p. 343

² Merriam-Webster, 2021

Art’s first-person truth is more ambiguous in form and does not offer concrete evidence or definite answers. It can get caught up in and by its material, contradict itself, make subjective descriptions and contort itself around logical problems. Art can also ask entirely unrelated questions. Art’s first-person truth is not free, however, as some believe; it is responsive to everything around it and subject to trends and tendencies. In 2009, the curator, critic and philosopher Dieter Roelstraete published an interesting essay titled “The Way of the Shovel: On the Archeological Imaginary in Art” in which he maintained that contemporary art’s self-preservation strategy has been to ascribe itself a protective function: contemporary art has turned to the past, and it uses history as its raw material.

In this connection it is interesting to point out that contemporary art’s relation to historical facts has been strong, as is the case with archives and archival work. Excavation is often used in contemporary art, both as metaphor and method, along with approaches or devices like recreation and reenactment. Where history-telling is a theme, linguistic clichés flourish as well, such as “history’s darkness” or the idea that something can be “brought into the light” or “reawakened.” Romanticism’s (and psychoanalysis’s) desire to arrive at hidden truths has, in other words, kinship with art in which the historiographic and retrospective perspectives are emphasized.

Roelstraete makes good points in his effective and polemical text, but with the following paragraph he really captures my attention:

“The reasons for this oftentimes melancholy (and potentially reactionary) retreat into the retrospective mode of historiography are manifold and are of course closely related to the current crisis of history both as an intellectual discipline and as an academic field of enquiry. After all, art’s obsession with the past, however recently lived, effectively closes it off from other, possibly more pressing obligations, namely that of imagining the future, of imagining the world otherwise ...”³

Much historically oriented art has been marked by nostalgia, yet that is far from the whole truth. Studying history is essential to understanding hierarchies of power, privileges and structures, their traces in our own era, and biases that inform our interpretation of discoveries from the past. Findings and new insight from feminist research, queer studies, post-colonial studies and intersectional studies support this. Here is one example. Many Viking graves were discovered in the 1800s, and those containing weapons were automatically assumed to be men’s graves. This was the case with “the Birka grave,” an archetypal, high-status warrior grave discovered near Stockholm in 1885. The assumption proved to be wrong, however: a woman had been buried there. Recent research has shown that although the notion of female Viking warriors was an established one and can be found in older literature, it had been both idealized and mythologized, for example in descriptions of so-called “shield maidens.” As a result, the idea of an actual female Viking warrior had not fully resonated before now.⁴

Archeology and art history are both replete with white, Western researchers who have studied other cultures or cultural expressions and drawn their conclusions based on a specifically Western set of biases. Roelstraete’s conclusion that art’s obsession with the past precludes it from envisioning the future is too categorical. One of the great revelations of the turn toward history in recent decades is that the reciprocal influence between history, the present and thereby the future has become so obvious.

3 Roelstraete, 2009, p. 3

4 Price et al., 2019, pp. 181–198

III.

*whatever returns from oblivion returns to find a voice*⁵

Nature has been our companion throughout humanity’s existence on earth. Abalone shell, ochre residue, the geometric markings on the rocky formations at Fontainebleau, cave drawings in South Africa, the passage tomb at Newgrange, and spoors of our more immediate past all testify to the myriad ways human beings have interacted with each other and their physical surroundings. What we are in relation to our surroundings has not changed, but our conditions for survival have most definitely gone through fundamental transformations.

In confronting the greatest challenge to humanity in our time—changing the way we impact the earth’s ecosystems—we must call into question our customary ways of responding to reality. We are digging up the past in search of a new future, we dig to learn to see, listen and think in new ways. All research disrupts thought. That is the point. But we also know that when ideas find a voice and step out into the world as knowledge, it is frequently the result of collective effort that spanned a gamut of disciplines.

Art is a discipline that collects and presents without the strict premises, methods, or requirements of scientific inquiry. Art can perhaps be compared with a stretchy string bag, a tote or carry-all in which all our findings and processing can be gathered and carried further, another iteration of human beings’ perpetual need for containers, as described by Ursula Le Guin in her essay “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction”:

“If it is a human thing to do to put something you want, because it is useful, edible, or beautiful, into a bag, or a basket, or a bit of rolled bark or leaf, or a net woven of your own hair, or what have you, and then take it home with you, home being another, larger kind of pouch or bag, a container for people, and then later on you take it out and eat it and share it or store it up for winter in a solider container or put it in a medicine bundle or the shrine or the area that contains what is sacred, and then the next day you probably do much the same again ...”⁶

We dig, we reap, we put stuff in our bags and move onward. Now and then we feel the need to stop for a moment, empty our bags of their contents and share them with others as we discuss the days to come.

5 Glück, 1992, p. 1

6 Le Guin, 1986, p. 168



Notes

I have borrowed the term *first-person truth* from Siri Hustvedt’s discussion of the relationship between branches of sciences and pronouns in the essay “Borderlands: First, Second, and Third Person Adventures in Crossing Disciplines.” The quote from Bohr is as it appeared in this essay.

On Merriam-Webster’s website, we find “*Scientific*: borrowed from Middle French and Medieval Latin; Middle French *scientifique*, *scientifique*, borrowed from Medieval Latin *scientificus* ‘producing knowledge, relating to knowledge’ (translating Greek *epistēmonikós*), from Latin *scientia* ‘knowledge,’ science + *ficus*.” Additionally, it states that “The Medieval Latin transition in the sense from ‘producing knowledge’ to ‘relating to knowledge’ (in the text of a translation of Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics*) is described in detail in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, third edition.”

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Anyone who has common sense will remember that the bewilderments of the eyes are of two kinds, and arise from two causes, either from coming out of the light or from going into the light, which is true of the mind’s eye, quite as much as of the bodily eye.

Plato, *The Republic* ca. 375 BC

CAVE DIALOGUES

Geir Harald Samuelsen

Prehistoric pictures, engraved or painted, are gestural signals from ancient minds without letters. We often use the word *art* to describe those early traces of the human creative impulse even though our knowledge of them is limited. It is not strange that we do so. The prehistoric traces are often beautiful, and they tend to radiate a mesmerizing aura. The *how* and *when* of prehistoric art are interesting and approachable questions. The answers can tell us something about the cognitive skills and craftsmanship of the ancient creators and sometimes also the context. The *why* surrounding the prehistoric painted caves or stone engravings is a much more open question, triggering a broad range of speculation, interpretation, inspiration, artistic amplification, and aesthetic dialogue for the spectator.

Haptic Research

For me, the curiosity towards prehistory was sparked by an encounter with ancient stone engravings in Fontainebleau, France. I had climbed in the area for 20 years and had a vast amount of experience in scaling the sandstone boulder formations. But I had no experience in interpreting the petroglyphs, neither scientifically nor artistically. The most natural and productive way for me to approach these mysterious signs was to let myself be inspired to make art. Through making art, I figured I could merge the haptic knowledge I unconsciously already had embodied through my climbing with an artistic approach to the prehistoric engravings. In that way I might add an aesthetic layer to the already existing documentation and interpretation of the signs. Perhaps then I could open a new space of meaning to accompany the historical aura of the signs. Metaphorically speaking, I could add yet another layer to the Fontainebleau Palimpsest.

This added layer would not only be inspired by the engravings themselves, but by the climbing as well and the totality of impressions from the surrounding nature and from the insights on prehistoric art as it presents itself to us here and now. The creators of these specific engravings could not read or write, so whatever meaning they had in mind, it was probably connected to materiality, gesture, and direct experience. I like to think they were approaching experiences of transformation and change.