On the foot of the recent discussion of excavation in *Archaeological dialogues* (18, 1), Rodney Harrison’s questioning of the viability of excavation and depth as viable tropes for conceptualizing and communicating archaeology’s epistemological processes is both timely and pertinent. Beginning where Harrison finished, his use of Anselm Kiefer’s artistic work as a ‘framing’ device brings me to some intriguing critical trajectories for understanding archaeology’s modern condition and the possibilities for it at this moment through deeper engagements with contemporary art, and visual and material gesture and culture.

Many have argued that art and archaeology share a disciplinary history and a sensibility, rooted in predisciplinary practices of antiquarianism (Cochrane and Russell 2007; Ingold 2011; 2007a; Renfrew 2005; Renfrew, Gosden and DeMarrais 2004; Russell, forthcoming; 2008; 2006; Shanks 1991; Smiles and Moser 2003; Wickstead 2008). The more I reflect on this assertion, though, the more I think that there is a misconception in this proposition that points to a fundamental problem both in the way archaeology is encountering art and in how archaeology (as well as, perhaps, other academic subjects) conducts itself as a discipline. It is certainly true that archaeology is as much a mode of material and visual expression as contemporary art, and it is indeed critical for archaeologists to be reflexively aware of their roles as cultural producers in contemporary society. There is, however, a critical difference between archaeology and art that is rarely discussed within the emerging discourse of art–archaeology partnerships. In art, the artists or ‘makers’ are neither the authorizers of the critical discourse which interprets their work nor the authors of the discipline’s history. In archaeology (and indeed other academic subjects as well), these roles are not clearly established. The producers of archaeology are also themselves the authors of the critical discourse which interprets the material and visual expression of archaeological practice and the authors of their own history. Perhaps some might argue that this is a more holistic approach to cultural production, and this may be the case if we approach archaeology as a separate and distinct discipline and practice. In the creation of ‘art–archaeology’ analogies and the searching for models of working and expression within artistic practice, I would argue that this leads, however, to either a decontextualization of artistic practice (i.e. abstracted from its own critical discourse) or a reification of the archaeologist as a universal arbiter in the discourses of materiality and time or both.

I commend Harrison in his identification and filling of an urgent absence of critical context for the developing practice of archaeology.

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of the contemporary past, and I also commend him for his interpretive engagement with artists’ work in the process of his intellectual inspiration. I do not wish to invalidate these efforts. Rather I hope to continue in their spirit to provide critical context to his engagement with artists’ work to demonstrate how deeper critical engagements with artists as cultural producers within wider critical discourses can enhance such interdisciplinary conversations. Furthermore, while Harrison intended to propose a new trope for ‘archaeology-as-surface-survey and assemblage’, I propose that his paper is also an example of an emerging discursive trope of ‘archaeology as art’.

It is not surprising to read archaeologists responding to and being inspired by Anselm Kiefer’s studio complex at Barjac in southern France, especially given the currency of Sophie Fiennes’s documentary of the site in Over your cities grass will grow (2010). Its scale is sensational and evokes a sense of the Romantic sublime as a way of engendering a humility within our contemporary sociocultural moment. Though Kiefer’s project may evoke a certain humbling in its visitors, it also requires an artistic hubris not dissimilar to that of John Ruskin and his aesthetics of ruins. In this way, it does speak very directly to the sublime qualities of modern archaeology as a means of placing contemporary society at a humble position within the grander cycles and processes of time. It also reveals perhaps an attraction within archaeology to the independent agency of the artist as the maker of worlds.

Harrison admits that his use of Kiefer’s Barjac studio complex is primarily a narrative device and a point of inspiration. So while this leads to a cursory engagement with Kiefer’s artistic career and work, it creates an opportunity for an interesting critical conversation. Beyond Barjac, Kiefer’s work and artistic process are very appropriate for a critique of archaeological epistemologies. Working unconventionally with the traces and fragments of industrial and craft processes (straw, ash, clay, lead, shellac and so on), Kiefer is perhaps best known for richly worked painted surfaces which operate as meditative mediations of memory through materials.

His paintings are often interpreted as unfinished; that is, they do not represent permanent or fixed ideas or material realities. Rather, Kiefer imbeds time as a medium in his works. The material fragility of the substances he incorporates into his paintings shift and change almost imperceptibly over the longue durée, yielding a tense durationality and awareness of not only the fragility of the contemporary moment but also its inevitable transformation over time. His work grapples to manifest an ephemerality of the material object, the monumental and the artistic gesture that transcends the duration of a human life.

In his paintings, Kiefer locates himself as a processer of history through the working and reworking of materials and symbols. Plain or everyday materials are transformed into symbols of historic moments, places and meanings through a literal imbedding within a ‘new’ ground of thick painterly surface. This conscious reworking of historic memory and symbols of place through a construction of internal logic and meaning links Kiefer’s work to what some have termed a style of ‘new symbolism’, with Kiefer said to be its master.

Though working with materials, Kiefer avoids an objective deployment of things and rather approaches history as subject and historical memory as
medium, implicating the viewer in the resolution of the material language of his paintings. His aesthetic, in its destructive and perhaps depressive qualities, elicits emotional responses from the viewer. This is perhaps where his Barjac studio project and his paintings unite in relation to a critical encounter with archaeology. Less concerned with objective narrative, Kiefer utilizes affect as a primary interface with the materiality of his work.

This is perhaps what both separates and unites archaeology and contemporary art. The discourses of aesthetics and beauty foreground the importance of rigorously engaging with affect as a serious component of work. In archaeology, issues of disciplinary aesthetic and critical affect are, at best, secondary to the production of objectives of archaeological excavation, documentation, survey, recording, reconstruction and representation. Archaeology’s epistemological intentionalities are firmly grounded in objectivity and positivism, while art (at least as far as Kiefer is concerned) is largely based in affect. Thus it is understandable how archaeologists in their self-authorized renderings of objective material worlds would find it attractive to establish an analogous relationship between the artist and the archaeologist. Doing so establishes the archaeologist as a critical authority over the objective materiality of the contemporary world while simultaneously allowing for an uncritical utilization of affect in the perpetuation of the aura of modern archaeological process.

Harrison has rightly indicated that the trope of archaeology as excavation is problematic as it has the tendency to impose an incorrect distance between the contemporary agency of archaeology and the rendering of the past. While I am intrigued by his proposition of a new trope of archaeology-as-surface-survey and assemblage, I am hesitant to wholly disregard the archaeological depth metaphor. The archaeological metaphor is perhaps the most immediate and obvious conceptual bridge across numerous modern disciplines. So while I agree that the use of the depth metaphor as an interpretive trope is problematic, I propose that the tremendous social and cultural currency of the depth metaphor has extended the metaphor of modern archaeology to the extent that we should consider it a modern allegory.

The implication of considering archaeology as allegory is that it shifts critical engagement with the rhetoric of depth and layers from objectivity to affect and meaning-making. For example, *The frozen city* (2010) by Simon Fujiwara proposed, through a fabricated archaeology, to reveal the city beneath Frieze Art Fair. Fujiwara’s installation leverages the value of the modern archaeological allegory for the purpose of comment on contemporary art societies and markets. It is a testament to the ongoing fascination within contemporary art with the epistemological structures and conceptual propositions of modern science and the capacity of archaeology to provide visual and material objects as representational expressions of modern society and culture. A decade earlier, Mark Dion’s *Tate Thames dig* (1999) similarly utilized the allegorical value of the aesthetic of modern archaeological process. Taking the form of a mass, participatory ‘excavation’ of the Thames riverbank in London and the formal typological arrangement of the ‘finds’ and exhibition in turn-of-the-century exhibition cases, Dion affected a proposition of the structures of mediation within archaeology as
a formal aesthetic. And perhaps most sensational was the excavation and removal of painter Francis Bacon’s studio from London and its reconstruction in Dublin by curators and conservators at the Dublin City Gallery, the Hugh Lane and archaeologists from Margaret Gowen and Company Ltd in 1999 (see O’Connor 2008).

These appropriations of modern archaeology as aesthetic form and allegory point to a currency of the modern discipline. Unfortunately, it is a currency which has mostly been used by contemporary artists, eliciting provocative responses within the archaeological community, some of whom have voiced concerns over the appropriation of the discipline within artistic practice (see Renfrew 1999, Bailey 2008). However, I would argue that this is not a one-way process of appropriation. The utilization of artists’ processes (especially when abstracted from their critical context) within archaeological discourse is equally an extension of a metaphor for subjective, affective and aesthetic creativity and thus equally a modern allegory. Whether it is Richard Long and Antony Gormley for Colin Renfrew, Anselm Kiefer and Simon Fujiwara for Rodney Harrison or Didier Appelt and Roman Ondak for myself, the appropriation of the artist or their work as an affective framing device for discourse is an allegory for the negotiation of the objective: affective schism within modern archaeology practice.

The assertion of the maintenance of the depth metaphor as allegory in no way precludes the critical development of other modes of discourse such as Harrison has argued in his paper. Rather, it requires that ongoing critical discourse be continued and enhanced. What I would suggest is, rather than asserting a ‘modern’ (i.e. ‘new’) solution to how we should self-conceptualize, that we engage in a sustained critical analysis of the strategies we deploy in establishing our discipline’s epistemological authority and to what extent we are implicated in perpetuating modernity’s ontological foundation in the notion of ‘progress’.

Currently within contemporary art practice, an increasing number of artists are exploring lateral dynamics for disciplinary development, and specifically the possibility for a transgress-based ontology rather than a progress-based ontology. Debates over what may or may not be ‘movements’ have been attempted under the terms ‘relationalism’ or ‘altermodern’ (e.g. Bishop 2004; Bourriaud 2002; 2009). Suffice it to state here that artists are now realizing work which actively resists categorization and transgresses disciplinary boundaries. That said, this lateral slippage is not a flattening of artistic discourse to a two-dimensional navigation of a contemporary surface. Far from it; artists are more deeply exploring the cinematic, durationality and time itself as a medium within their work, exploring the malleability and tractability of time within artistic gesture. Thus it is not a dismissal of bounded depth for mobility on surface. It is a four-dimensional transgression between depth and surface resulting not in fixed gesture but in percolations of time and material (e.g. Witmore 2006b).

I wholeheartedly agree with Harrison’s assertion that ‘what we need more than anything else is a series of detailed, long-term, longitudinal studies which demonstrate the actual contribution archaeology can make to understanding the present, rather than a series of justifications for it’ (p. XX). As with
artistic practice, it is critical that we continue to make work and that our
work engage with our contemporary moment. While I would not call for
justifications as well, I would encourage that we simultaneously develop a
sustained critical discourse around the intellectual strategies, narrative tropes
and aesthetic forms and affects we deploy in our work. While inspired by the
rigour and skill with which contemporary artists negotiate material, time and
affect, we must not allow ourselves to assume an analogous positioning of the
archaeologist within society, without responsibility for critical reflexivity or
historical context. While complex and at times overwhelming, archaeologists
are creators, authors and critics who work with rich and potent affective
allegories of modern objectivity to produce narratives, visuals, performances,
gestures and material expressions of human agency over time. In occupying
our own historical, intellectual, social and cultural context, we can at best
hope to know ourselves and our intentionalities and to reveal both by being
fully present within the manifestation of our archaeological agencies.

Archaeological intervention in the past, present and future tense

William Rathje

I was trained as a processual archaeologist in the 1960s, and as a result my
interests and research, along with the vocabulary I have used to express these,
have followed a different trajectory from those paths that have emerged out
of what we once called postprocessual archaeology. This is not to say that
we do not have common beacons. I believe we certainly do. To this end, I am
writing this dialogue with Harrison’s piece to rename the ‘archaeology of the
contemporary past’ as ‘archaeology in and of the present’ and ‘for the future’.

1

Grounded in the then contemporary methods and theory of archaeology,
the Garbage Project has recorded data in great detail on 192.2 tons of
fresh garbage collected from 20,416 individual households in seven different
metropolitan areas, and has excavated and recorded 45.3 tons of refuse

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1As one small example concerning intellectual genealogy, which Harrison tends to blur in
his article, when I came to teach at the University of Arizona in 1971, Michael Schiffer
was a graduate student focused on the archaeology of the past. I asked students to study
the relation between attitudes, behaviour, and material culture in contemporary Tucson,
so they could understand how archaeology works in describing a familiar contemporary
society. I involved them in the founding of the Garbage Project in 1973 for the same reason.
My friend Michael started his first study of the present a few years later (Schiffer, Downing
and McCarthy 1981) and has continued to make major contributions ever since (see, for
example, Schiffer 1991; 1992; and Schiffer, Butts and Grimm 1994).