

**Prof. Janis Jefferies, Creative Interpretations: Material Culture and Visual Perception, *Creativity: An Exploration through the Bronze Age and Contemporary Responses to the Bronze Age*, Magdalene College, University of Cambridge, 10 April 2013**

As you turn the pages of the online catalogue of the CinBA Live Project exhibition (<http://www.cinba.net/exhibition>) I want to suggest that we are looking *and* touching: a phenomenological engagement with digital images of new objects made from old. Then, as now, objects tell stories of our relationship to the world and to others, and they offer a material base, not just in terms of production (by hand, industrial or even electric media) but also in relation to how we consume them, long for them, and obsessively collect them, or be struck by:

*the story behind objects, where they came from, what they were used for. A reason for the objects I make to become physical. The blank unknown areas gave me scope to make up a story.*

(Quote from student Eleanor Simms (Manchester Metropolitan University) on her project 'The Fixer and the Wing', CinBA Live Project submission, unpublished, 2011)

In my advisory role as curator of the work produced by the students I was struck by many of the statements they submitted which expressed an interest in the potential of fictional histories beyond the Bronze Age objects of study, and how they talked about their research:

*research (both primary and secondary) was confined to 'hard' materials (fired clay, bronze, bone) as opposed to 'soft' materials*

; an emphasis that:

*As a designer / maker a lot of my ideas / development are very 'hands on' and my ideas change as I make*

; and reflections that:

*The Bronze Age project has given me the opportunity to research this fascinating period of history; a time of great change in the development of materials and culture.*

The important point here is that 'generating physical encounters with matter...provides an often forgotten way into...technical knowledge' and making up stories in our imagination is one way of dealing with worlds we do not always understand.

The students who participated in the CinBA project developed contemporary interpretations of Bronze Age objects from within a range of materials and inspirations mediated by images in Dr Joanna Sofaer's lecture, the resource pack, and 'live' in the British and Scandinavian museums. None the less, and as magically pointed out in Siri Hustvedt's book of essays *Living, Thinking, Looking* (2012:347), if our proprioceptive sense (a stimuli acting upon them, or the nerve impulses initiated by them) is working, what we see has an emotional or

affective value not *after* we have contemplated the object but in the earlier and subliminal stages of vision of things that are triggered by experience, association and memory.

*An investigation into the ambiguous nature of prehistoric artifacts, the speculation and understanding of such object's functions and the material culture embodied within them.*

*Functional objects are universal; produced to serve our most basic physical needs they transcend time, geography and culture. These artefacts facilitate an unspoken human connection with the maker. The display of the prehistoric artefacts in a museum context removes any intended function, resulting in a selection of objects that hold their own aesthetic value, while provoking intrigue and speculation.*

*Through the exploration of utility, intention, aesthetic, context and display, the value of non-functional objects is called into question. Viewers are invited to define and apply their own meaning to the ceramic outcomes, allowing them to develop their own biography.*

(Caroline Allen (University of Brighton) 'Hand thrown deconstructed ceramic vessels reassembled using earthenware and lead free tin glazes', CinBA Live Project Exhibition, 2011).

Perhaps we could say that we respond bodily to its perceived meaning through a conjuring of past experience, embracing the idea that as viewers we are embodied creative seers and this enables us to use creativity and cognitive abilities to make the world.

## **Creativity**

The idea that creativity leads to knowledge gained through practical engagement with the world is one that also takes us back to early modern notions of experimental philosophy (Stafford 1994: 281). Indeed, the idea that physical experience is necessary for an holistic understanding of a material resonates with the American art historian Barbara Stafford's belief that during the eighteenth century, 'ocular, tactile, kinesthetic and auditory skills' (Stafford 1994: xxii) were central to the shaping of knowledge, which was as much about pleasure and entertainment as learning; it was both 'creative and playful' (Stafford 1994: xxv), a form of knowledge that lies between practice and cognition (Stafford 1994: 14). The sooner we acknowledge the range of sensory combinations through which we come to know, Stafford suggests, the better equipped we will become to understand the role of images and indeed objects in society (Stafford 1999).

## **Aesthetic Encounters**

The aesthetic encounter with objects is a way of informing our tactile sense as well as the visual; how the senses are combined in our phenomenological perception of the world refers us back to embodied tactile-spatial experience.

In the late nineteenth century Alois Riegl<sup>1</sup>, an art historian and an early curator of textiles wrote of a vision-based aesthetics that has at heart what Deacon might call “an aesthetics of tactility”. Riegl preferred the word *haptic* to *tactile*, perhaps finding *haptic* more abstract, broader, and less likely to conjure up an image of literally touching. Riegl (1893) developed a notion of *haptic vision* or *haptic looking*, which denotes gazes that move across the surface of things, rather than the fixed and fixing stare of high modernism, perhaps lingering on a specific detail or textured grain. A haptic look is a grazing mobile glance that generates an intimate exchange between artist, work and audience. What is generated is the possibility of an imagined affective touch. What Riegl suggests here is that there is a plane of feeling and potential experience that is distinct from actual contact. A surface texture stimulates sensation on the outside of the body (hence the expression making one’s hairs stand on end), but inside the skin it is introception, an aspect of the haptic sense, which perceives viscosity.

Deleuze and Guattari (1998) extend Riegl’s definition of the haptic, suggesting that *haptic* entails a working together of senses, in opposition to *tactile*, which seems to imply isolation of touch. They further suggest that the haptic entails the faculty of touch in space and time and it is the haptic that changes affective relations. It enables, for example, the perception of spatial depth. It is multi-perspective, surrounding and pervading objects in the world. This centrality of the haptic is even more fundamental in Phenomenology. For Merleau-Ponty, the perception, indeed the make-up, of objects or *things* arises from the body’s interaction with the world. Thinking with the eyes and the hands together generates an embodied experience of space. Forms shape. This causes us to experience embodied perception that highlights how the senses are joined up, particularly of touch and space. Indeed, to Merleau-Ponty (1968) the sensations are undifferentiated. He writes, for example, about Cézanne’s paintings:

*Cézanne does not try to use colour to suggest the tactile sensations which would give shape and depth. These distinctions between touch and sight are unknown in primordial perception. It is only as a result of a science of the human body that we finally learn to distinguish between our senses.*

Here we have the haptic embedded within the experience of engaging with the painting. We are obviously not physically touching the painting, still less the subject of the painting, so the sense of touch must be part of our processing of the purely visual stimulation. Merleau-Ponty, influenced by Gestalt psychology and neurology (2002:266) had a number of things to say about senses and perception. When we experience, we first perceive sensory information with all of our bodies before it is split into the various senses. For example:

*‘hard’ produces a sort of stiffening of the back and neck, and only in a secondary way does it project itself into the visual or auditory field and assume the appearance of a sign or a word. Before becoming the indication of a concept it is first of all an event which grips my body, and this grip circumscribes the area of significance to which it has reference. (2002, p.273).*

In Merleau-Ponty’s unfinished work, *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968), the concept of the flesh, and the flesh of world and body, wrap back onto each other’s realms of perception. In this way, body and world are brought together. I am not talking here about the measurement techniques of psychophysics and neurochemical attributions arising in cognitive science but rather as the Canada-based anthropologist David Howes posits in a

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<sup>1</sup> It is not surprising that in the process of moving towards a tactile aesthetics, Riegl broadened the range of objects to be studied to include the applied arts and ornament to promote cultural pluralism.

series of occasional papers produced by the Centre for Sensory Studies, Concordia University, Montreal in 2005:

*This revolution in the study of perception highlights the fact that the senses are constructed and lived differently in different societies and periods. The perceptual is cultural and political, and not simply (as psychologists and neuroscientists would have it) a matter of cognitive processes or neurological mechanisms located in the individual subject.<sup>2</sup>*

## **Curation**

The value of multi-sensory engagements in learning is increasingly recognized amongst archaeologists, sensory anthropologists and museologists, and many are developing special ‘hands-on’ spaces for accessing their handling collections; too precious to be on display and often too precious to handle. Paradoxically, as initiatives for enhancing tactile and sensory experience are reawakening and exciting visitors and researchers, the sensual relations of material culture appear to be under threat with the emergence of digital technologies, such as virtual exhibitions and online catalogues, that seem to privilege visual experience at the expense of the descriptions given by the artists whose work they profile, including many of students involved in the CinBA project.

As noted by one of the Wolverhampton students:

*The handling session of Bronze Age pots at Blythe House and the visit to the British Museum has been invaluable; it has provided me with the stimulation to design, develop and hand-build contemporary abstract ceramic forms that reflect the importance of these grave objects and rituals within the Bronze Age society.*

But as my colleague Graeme Were has argued (2008), digital technologies facilitate many kinds of connections: connections between museums, visitors and scholars; between different institutions, and between scholars themselves, (Hawkey 2004:3) so that the relationship between the real and the virtual in terms of our analytical engagement offer new ways of knowing and telling. Paradoxically, whilst the apparent emphasis of digital technologies on the visual aspects of digital images, with software tools developed to deal with image resolution, detail, zooming, rotating, etc, seem to run counter to disciplines and practices that embraces the tactile, aural, olfactory as well as visual dimensions of objects, the topological skills, such as the ability to locate and identify pieces of digital heritage, increase with multiple modes and media.

Nonetheless, the computer supports the inherent inclination of memory, via its objects, to store and revise, to download and upload, to recollect, project and invent new tools of investigation. The physical manner in which we interact with objects in an online environment suggests that what we perceive as ‘real’ about

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<sup>2</sup> Mediations of Sensation: Sensory Anthropology and the Creation/Evaluation of Multimodal Interactive Environments (2010-2013). Principal Investigator, Chris Salter, Design and Computation Arts, Concordia University, Co-Researchers David Howes, Sociology and Anthropology, Concordia University. Mediations of Sensation is a research-creation program bringing together artistic work in “multimodal” (many senses) environments using new technologies with anthropological research into the varieties of human sense experience across cultures. The main objective is to explore techniques of the senses found in non-Western cultural contexts and use these as creative, cross-cultural frameworks to inform the design and evaluation of user experience in sensorially compelling immersive environments with new digital media.

images is not its resemblance to something that exists externally to the image but rather a phenomenological engagement, hence my focus on Merleau-Ponty in this paper. This gives us the sense of the image being real. In one sense the material presence (texture, weight, density) is carried by the digital image, but we can take what we see back to the material culture from which the object derived.

As Susan Stewart has observed: ‘visual perception becomes a mode of touching when comparisons are made and the eye is ‘placed upon’ or ‘falls upon’ relations between phenomena’ (Stewart 1999: 32). It is through the coordinated movement of the hand and the eye that one touches the images and touches the materials it documents. In this way makers are both looking and touching: a phenomenological engagement with digital images . Following Stewart again, touch was often thought to be ‘the most important vehicle for our access to reality’ (Stewart 1999: 34), since it directly involved thresholds of subject and object. As with Merleau-Ponty cited earlier, Stewart argues that ‘the act of touching exerts pressure on both toucher and touched and therefore threatens the distinction between self and other’ (Stewart 1999: 6).

*To be in contact with an object means to be moved by it—to have the pressure of its existence brought into a relation with the pressure of our own bodily existence. (Stewart 1999:32)*

The notion of exchange is fundamental; the idea that the object not only touches or penetrates the subject, us, but also that something in the subject is fundamentally moved and altered in the exchange.

Being moved is also expressed in how the students wrote of their experiences.

*Some of the most interesting information regarding social and cultural trends in the Bronze Age comes from the details of how and why these objects were made and whom they belonged to. In this case the most informative analysis has come from burial sites. It seemed to be a cultural norm for those buried to have symbolic, defining and inherently valuable objects buried with them. It is this that allows us to glean more information, not only about community structures, but also about individuals. As part of an initial investigation in a short creative enquiry project I began to question what our relationship with death and burial is in modern western society. Is it a natural part of our lives or has it become removed and almost alien to us? Is the way that people are buried a natural progression of our modern lives? Does it represent our lifestyle and beliefs; is it even personal? I aim to explore our society’s relationship with death and death space through visual and written media. From graves and roadside memorials to Madame Tussauds and diamonds made from ashes, our methods of dealing with death and memorial vary widely. In the Bronze Age, crafted objects were distinctly relative to the individual throughout life and also in death. I hope to offer a way for craft objects to have that same relationship and importance in modern society.*

*In the Bronze Age, crafted objects were distinctly relative to the individual throughout life and also in death. (Quote from Fiona Rourke 'In Memoriam', CinBA Live Project, 2011)*

## **Living in the Digital Age**

Often the day-to-day ‘living’ of our contemporary lives goes unrecorded and is often un-recordable.

However, we do leave the mark of our 'living' in the physical world. The traces of us, embedded in the objects of our everyday, carry within their form the memory of living. Do you remember a time when someone taught you how to do something that seemed impossible at the time--to stand at a graveside, to survive a deep grief, to celebrate a life? Do you also remember watching your own hands, perhaps awkwardly at first, but then with a smoother motion, holding a baby, kneading the dough, mixing the currants into a cake, sewing a bouquet made of beads for a wedding, make a wreath of roses, tending the garden, or making a gift of wood or cloth? (Jefferies, 2005).

When thinking about digital death, from *"In the Bronze Age, crafted objects were distinctly relative to the individual throughout life and also in death"* to *"the ability to locate and identify pieces of digital heritage, increase with multiple modes and media"* we have to consider the relevance of shared data and its impact on our historical and sociological futures. It will not be easy to store or catalogue our digital lives, as we are not simply talking about archiving individual bits of data but networks of data and data networked to people which are in turn networked to communities embedded within complex social systems. The concept of 'intangible artifacts' which was proposed by UNESCO in 1952 may provide another way of approaching this. The idea of 'intangible artifacts' and indeed 'intangible cultural heritage' has since grown as a concept and continues to be a central issue for UNESCO as stated within the 2003 report 'Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage' (UNESCO, 2003: 2). The term intangible heritage refers to "all forms of traditional and popular or folk culture, i.e. collective works originating in the given community and based on tradition" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004: 54). In other words, it refers to the active preservation of mastery and traditions, and applies to the preservation of living social networks (which would include also living systems of online culture such as digital social networks).

This perspective enables us to consider living systems online as part of our collective 'intangible heritage', and gives digital historians the opportunity to view individual artifacts within their original network and to sustain and upkeep the "whole system as a living entity" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004: 53) rather than individual artifacts in dispersed archives or even burial sites. The digitisation of text removes this 'stable object' and thus forces the destabilisation of our conventional understanding of the role and practice of museums, libraries and archives. Concerning digital death, it becomes obvious that there will continue to be a proportional rise in the amount of 'memory objects' being passed on, collected or simply hoarded online.

Digital technologies enable everyone to participate in preserving memories, creating endless databases of life logging, instant news, and galleries of images, real and designed. For example, for anyone who may have picked up the free Metro paper at a London Tube on Friday 5 Apr 2013 they will have been struck by Tariq Tahir's article:

### **British Library to harvest the web for our digital heritage**

Next time you tweet about the weather or 'like' a picture of a kitten, you could be making history. Your actions may be recorded in a ambitious project to document a digital snapshot of the nation. From

tomorrow, the British Library is to harvest British web domains to document current events and the growing collection of online cultural and intellectual works.

Billions of publicly available web pages, blogs and e-books will be amassed along with the print archives. The web harvest will begin with a trawl of 4.8million websites – or 1billion digital pages. It will be five months before the data is processed... (Tariq Tahir, article published Friday 5 Apr 2013, Metro)

The CinBA project gave some students, from a range of craft based programmes, ‘live’ opportunities to produce personal, contemporary interpretations of Bronze Age objects. Now, social media will reframe our understanding and experience of heritage through the idea of ‘participatory culture’ as in the example of the British Library’s project. ‘If you want a picture of what life is like today in the UK you have to look at the web’ and on the other hand if you want to get a picture of an archaeologist’s thrill (and all sensory excitement) when handling a relic of the past, then read Sarah Coxon’s Creativity in the European Bronze Age project blog (started on August 7<sup>th</sup> 2011); you might find your posted reply as part of the Library’s 1 billion digital pages.

The increased interest in increased availability of (where possible) touchable artefacts, providing multi-sensory experiences for museum visitors, of contemporary interpretations of objects often hidden away (too precious to touch, too fragile for display) can be related to the current emphasis on multi-sensory marketing and on the ‘experience’ economy in the commercial sector. Technological developments, in turn, have enabled museums to employ a range of multimedia devices in their exhibits and to elaborate virtual museums on the worldwide web: the BL project will bring to the fore the social significance of different perceptual paradigms of ‘living’ of our contemporary lives.

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