ARCHAEOLOGY, CLASSICS AND CONTEMPORARY ART – THE CONNECTIONS



The interest in the decision to cancel a Stanford acquisition of Dennis Oppenheim's sculpture "Device to root out evil" is growing.[Link] [Link]

Yesterday and today the New York Times has been pressing for interviews and comment – Is this censorship? What does the decision say about Stanford's commitment to the arts? How does the art collection at Stanford work? How was the decision reached? Does the decision say something about the role of religious feeling in an America after 9/11?

I have also been asked several times – What is a Professor of Classics and Anthropology doing chairing the committee that advises Stanford's President on the University's collection of outdoor art?

Quite simply, the outdoor collection at Stanford is a community resource and I serve on a committee as a representative of that community, not as an archaeologist or classicist or anthropologist.

But there is more to it.

Back in 1780 the question would make no sense – all art history was the history of Graeco-Roman art, and all contemporary art was classicist – working on antique Roman and, lately, Greek classical principles, subject matter and ideals. there was plenty of dispute about relationships with Graeco-Roman models, but no doubt that classical antiquity was point of reference.



Jacques Louis David and the French Republic as heir to Rome

I have also long been correcting the idea that archaeology is all about digging up the past. No – archaeologists deal in things and materialities in every sense and reference (or they should, if they don't). Archaeologists are, potentially, the definitive historians of deisgn – with their two million year perspective on the human making of things. Contemporary art and digital technology are mere footnotes in this big history, or they are diagnostic symptoms of a new epoch, depending on the argument …

What is most significant for me, in this question of the connection between archaeology and the arts, is that I am more and more convinced that we are indeed moving into a distinctively archaeological zeitgiest – so many of our cultural reference points are archaeological – the material presence of the past, obsessions with heritage, nostalgia and retro culture, the construction of new historical reference points (material and archaeological) in a secular and commodified world,

a fascination with morbidity (even in its denial) – [Link]

A point to which I constantly return in this blog is that the contemporary arts are tuning in to this new archaeological sensibility and driving it on. The contemporary arts are a reserach program exploring the archaeological character of life today.



Damien Hirst – Resurrection