AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE CONTEMPORARY PAST



Today I'm in the Clark Center at Stanford, hub of the Bio-X Program – bioengineering and more.

Steve Quake (Stanford Bioengineering and Applied Physics) is hosting a meeting of

The Human Document Project

– [Link]

With us are Laura Welcher (Long Now Foundation), Tim D. White (Palaeoanthropology, Berkeley), Michael Fischer (Anthropological Sciences, Canterbury, UK), Andreas Manz (Korea Institute of Science and Technology, Saarbrucken, Germany), Drew Endy (Bioengineering, Stanford), Miko Elwenspoek (Transducers, Twente, Netherlands), Leo Depuydt (Egyptology, Brown).

The Human Document Project – to preserve one document about humankind for one million years. What form would such a document take? What should be included? Who should do this?

We are talking about writing data into DNA, high density/low density storage, considering the value of time capsules, while considering what the long term future holds.

What might be left of today for the archaeologists of the future?

This is an archaeology of the contemporary past.

Here is what I have to say.

Some is drawn from our forthcoming book – *Archaeology: the discipline of things* [Link]

I am an archaeologist. I sift through the garbage of times long past for anything with which we might connect, for something to say. This is the key to my contribution today.

There is a question I am regularly asked: how will archaeologists of the future look upon times now? What will they make of what is left?

The question, of course, is prompted by a contemporary interest in ruins and remains of the past, some of which are now conceived as heritage, projected into the future.

My answer: how are you so sure there will be archaeologists in the future, that anyone will be systematically interested in the material remains of the past, other than as garbage left behind?

I am going to consider some variations of this question: How might we send a message into the distant future, leave something behind that will endure? What, indeed, should be the message? What might be its reception?

The context of our seminar today, *The Human Document Project*, invites us to be ambitious in addressing this question. What might such a project say about humanity, its record, what we wish to be a legacy of humanity?

These are wonderful questions. They invite us to look beyond the everyday and short term calculation and gratification. They prompt reflection upon our abilities to act on what we believe. There is a very

contemporary question of historical agency, of fate and efficacy, our ability to make a difference to history. Can we change things? This is the matter of our historicity, that is, our sense of the shape of history, based upon what endures as possible evidence. Is it possible to escape the human frame, human memory and mortality, and reach into what must surely be an inconceivable future? Can a message even be sent? What are the constraints? And then, what is it that we believe about ourselves? What do we value enough that we would have it represent our identity for eternity?

This is about scale – bridging everyday experiences, the forces of social change, geopolitical evolution. This is about cultural value accorded to achievement and legacy. These are questions of *heritage*.

Contemporary environmental crises are raising questions of our temporal perspective: the short term calculations of a market economy are seen by many to be in need of correction by a long term perspective that looks beyond the efforts of a single lifetime or even less.

Might we come up with an answer for *The Human Document Project*? I do not think that the project invites the design of a super-robust time capsule, with judiciously selected content, placed in some stable or remote part of the world or on the moon. For me, the importance of this project lies in displaying a serious commitment to these questions, to show they matter, and that we all should care.



Let me begin with a lithic artifact.

At least a quarter of a million years old, this is an Acheulean “hand axe”, though it was not a hand axe and

the name is taken from the place in France where these were first found and recognized in the nineteenth century.

Such an archaeological fragment is an invitation to time travel. How?

The materiality of the artifact connects its maker/user with us here now. They were not human. Something of their world remains. The time travel is the collocation, the co-presence of then and now, through the medium of flint.

Tiny momentary details, flakes removed from a flint core, and aggregations of acts, the signs of wear on the edges: the artifact witnesses connection, the engagements of its maker/user with the material. We might recognize the craft, and the sensory motor skills required to make and use it. It was certainly a communicative act, as much as an artifact made to perform a function: the symmetry is a very distinctive aesthetic attribute. We can say something about its design: forethought, sequence of flaking, ergonomics, anthropometrics, “human” factors. But this one comes not from a settlement, but from a gravel bed in the

Thames Valley, where it was redeposited,. So much is lost, the contexts of its making, use, consumption, discard. There is no particularly rich message.



Contrast a sherd of pottery. It is the base of a small cup, some two and a half thousand years old, found in an ancient Greek sanctuary.

Again, we may recognize a co-presence with the maker and user, rooted in a shared experience of the material. We might recognize skill, even art, in the

making and the form.

While there’s no message inherent in the this sympathetic engagement with the lithic and sherd, we can actually say a great deal about the people who made, traded, and used this pot, because we have enough contextual information about the conditions under which it was made, traded and consumed. We have enough of these sherds, complete pots too, as well as other related artifacts in the human lifeworld to which they belong, that of the ancient Greek city state, to constitute a sufficient sample for efforts to decrypt the cultural code. We can build up quite a picture of the times of the potsherd. Iconography, iconology, the grammar of design, are approachable. Much, it should be noted too, does depend on our relative proximity to the pot. Two thousand years is not a long time, compared with maybe a million for the lithic. Phenomenologically we can assume some shared human experiences of community membership, travel, political affiliation, because, we are quite close, in terms of cultural genealogy, to the world of the Greek city state.

Let me make some more general observations.

The temporality of archaeology, our most intimate human experience of the past, is not date and event, but *actuality* – conjuncture, the articulation of past and present, rooted in the way the past can endure, albeit changed. Actuality is the Greek *kairos* (not *chronos*) – a moment of re-connection, re-collection, when something, such as an artifact, prompts a link between past and present, what I have just called co-presence. Actuality is the temporality of memory practices.

This experience is a function of our human ontology. We inhabit a world that owes its existence to the successive reproduction of generations of people, and to past human works and projects, some of which go back to the beginnings of humanity. We are here by virtue of genealogical descent, biologically and culturally.

So the past is not primarily back there in past times. The past is all around us, in material remains, in our very bodies, by virtue of acts in the past. We are connected.

There is in this articulation a melancholic paradox – the death of ancestors and the past's material decay are the conditions of their persistence. The past is

gone, and, though we may wish to revisit, we can do so only on the basis of remains that must have changed. Forever now beyond experience, we can only know the past because it has changed, has become trace and vestige, and is thus with us now.

The present must decay. Immortality is not an option. Transiency is our condition of being, of the existence of the past in the present. Ruin and decay mean that the past can be a potential subject of experience and knowledge. Things can endure, through their material resistance to decay and ruin, *and* because we can care and protect, attend to old things.

This genealogical perspective is focused on chains of connection reaching back into time immemorial. Our sense of history is little about chronology and clocks; just as our memories are not diaries of dates and attendant happenings. The main features of memory are not plot and event (the drama of historicism), not the narratives of historiography, though we appreciate them. Again, these are secondary constructions. What makes the connection, what brings the past alive are everyday matters, the quotidian, the material textures of everyday life. Most of the past in the present is

trivial and superficial, yet deep in our being.

This is the time travel offered by the lithic and the potsherd.

I think of the fictions of Georges Perec and Alain Robbe-Grillet, indeed those too of Walter Scott, and how they foreground texture and indeterminacy. Consider how photography is a superb witness of precisely the superficial and everyday, mostly irrelevant and redundant noise against which we may wish to see event and drama in the gap between the moment of picture taking and viewing – the actuality of the photograph, the temporal gulf bridged by its materiality.

We mostly experience this medium of noise. Again, historiography is not our experience of history, though we may wish to find some story in the debris that is left over, in the great garbage heaps that the past has bequeathed us. Materiality, flint and fired clay, mediates past and present, and in this we may look to decrypt a message. It is the materiality of communications media that connect us, *not* the messages. Messages are ordered arrangements carried in a sea of noise. The noise carries the message; there can be no

message without the background noise out of which the signal emerges.

As I have just proposed, archaeology is our most intimate experience of the past. Excavation, if you have experienced it, is an encounter with vast quantities of apparent irrelevancy, stuff we are not really interested in, a material matrix or medium of silt, unrecognizable fragments, everyday debris and garbage, significant to us only in its quantities. The forensic challenge is to figure out what is evidence, what might be material for decryption.

The past needs work; the present contains latent pasts ready to be re-activated, re-collected, re-articulated, re-presented in creative work – the craft of science, of archaeology. In this genealogical perspective there are necessary breaks with the past, because memory depends upon forgetting. Memory does not hold onto the currency of the ongoing present, but is conjuncture – when something prompts a connection to be made with what had until then been forgotten, latent or dormant. The past returns in such creative acts, such hauntings that may appear quite uncanny, precisely because of the breaks in the flow of time. The creative act of

connecting past and present is always *conjectural*, as recognized and expressed by the father of empiricism, David Hume, because there are always gaps.

Our co-presence with the past is always founded upon a significant distance. The distance is a function of materiality, *our* materiality, our mortality, a function of decay and entropy. This is part of the magic of the time travel that comes with the archaeological fragment. Some may recognize here Walter Benjamin's notion of *aura* – the proximity of the past in its very distance. The past haunts, because it is the return of the repressed and forgotten.

I have mentioned cryptographic anticipation, that certain conditions need to be met for there to be a chance of reading a message. In ancient Greece, a *symbolon* (from Greek *symballein*—to put together) was an object that served the purpose of establishing connection and recognition between, for example, spies or correspondents. A picture, coin, or piece of pottery was cut in half, and given to two interested parties who had no knowledge of each other. Only if the two halves fitted together were letters delivered or messages exchanged. The *symbolon* depended upon co-

presence, the opportunity to connect, and so established the conditions under which authentic identity and message may be secured.

In quite another perspective, it is the gaps in evolutionary time and the impossibility of establishing chains of evidence, again as recognized by Hume, that has led to cladistics, with its recognition of association and connection over any kind of narrative.

These are some features of an archaeological sensibility.

A quick caricature: the materiality of media is often the message; there are paradoxical tensions between death/decay and persistence, everyday triviality and significance, co-presence and distance, garbage and creativity.

Let’s return to the question of sending a message to the future.

We will not be the first. The archaeological and historical record contains many examples of efforts to transcend mortality and the human frame. I have no

problem in seeing much of this as quite intentional.

Long-term preservation is not a problem in itself. I brought along a flint artifact of an age approaching a million years. The medium can be the earth itself, our own biological material, and I am sure we can be quite ingenious, as have been our ancestors.

I don’t want to get into language and text-based messaging, because I am according primacy to the *materiality* of media in relation to our human ontology or being. The cliché holds that history books are written by the victors. There is also the matter of documentation, the translation of any message concerning our humanity that we might want to send and its reduction to linguistic form. I suggest we cannot reduce humanity to a description of whatever kind, but need to experience the performance of (human) engagement with the world, because to be human is to be so dynamically distributed. How can words or images capture human experience? There is again a tension between symbol and referent, text and life, never mind the challenge of supplying enough of a sample into the future to enable meaningful decryption and reading.

Messages sent to the future, other than in words and imagery? Monuments the world over and for millennia have declared: we were here; look upon our work and despair; look upon our work and admire; we were somebody; this is what we had; this is what we did; we did what we had to do. Most deliberate messages to the future have been about power and agency, property, and empire.

The arts have mostly been the object of patronage, of those who've wished to perpetuate a certain image of themselves. In the absence of much meaning-giving context, artworks do speak of familiar human scenarios and narratives, and we appreciate eloquence and subtlety that escapes words. But art has always been a minority elite interest. It is certainly very special when, as an archaeologist, you find a bronze sculpture; but most of the time you rummage around in garbage.

So might we wish to send an affirmation of human achievement? Evidence of the richness of human experience? A human spirit of endeavor?

Complexity and richness of message are a serious challenge. Let's imagine that a complete set of

Shakespeare reaches the distant future. Would we not need to teach the future first how to read? Even if it could be read, would it be intelligible, out of context? I studied those Greek ceramics for ten years, can read much of what they say about a human engagement with materials, and can identify an iconology and their semiotic field. But much more remains unintelligible. Accept the loss.

And how would Shakespeare measure up against the rest? For there *will* be other remains, very evident to anyone who takes even a cursory look. The biggest impacts humanity has made upon the world are environmental change, and garbage. The record of global warming will still be around, very much so. The scars on the land from mining, extractive and heavy industry, and urbanization, will still be traceable. Will land fill sites fossilize? Or undergo some other metamorphosis? And, of course, there will be radioactive waste.

What would it say to spend effort on preserving the richness of human achievement, however that is defined (by a cultural elite; or should we run a poll?), when that has only ever been a minority experience, when the main work of humanity has been directed somewhat

differently?

Let me briefly recap before suggesting a way forward.

My first message concerns duration. The past is all around us, with us here now, some of it enduring, though altered, in metamorphosis. In just the same way, the future *will* be our legacy; we will be there, even in our absence.

So my second point is about human temporality and the shape of history. Our temporal character is not primarily associated with dates, events, narrative. These are second order constructions, albeit useful and powerful prosthetics. The shape of history is provided by *co-presence*, a function of the enduring past, here with us now. It is about memory: the past re-collected. We don't just need to see the long term. A million years is beyond qualitative comprehension. Good. Put to one side chronometry. The long term is really about co-presence – being here, being there, *with* you.

Both these points arise from our genealogical, rather than historical, character. Chains of connection, re-connection, re-collection, with no necessary narrative

or logic, no teleology, comprise human temporality. Our cities today belong to a five thousand year chain of associations, structures, tendencies, vectors, but with no necessary historical narrative.

Three. A corollary concerns historical agency. Genealogical iteration is the basis of making the future: constant repetition and reworking, re-connection, re-collection. This is a major problem for any project oriented on long term effect – how to initiate and sustain iterative evolutionary chains, something like those centuries of scriptoria, monks copying ancient literatures. Crucial issues concern redundancy (many copies reduce the risk of loss and offer a check on errors), entropy and decay, and outright loss.

Four. What makes the human connection? *Care*. Those monks acted on care. At the heart of sustained projection is care, being with the other, co-presence – we are with you.

Five. We should do our best to celebrate the richness of human achievement, though how really are we to judge the canon of exceptional work? Loss is inevitable, for

immortality is not an option, and the preservation of rich human message requires extensive contextualization, taking into account information decay.

Our best effort may therefore be directed at establishing first the conditions under which co-presence might be recognized – we are with you now, and we cared.

Six. How? Rather than invent a solution, a robust message to reach the future, a message in a bottle, we might *intervene* in what we know to be the long term in our human ontology – creative engagement with the material world, and garbage.

Archaeologically speaking, there are two long term components to who we are in our coevolutionary nature:

tool kits, including language and certain kinds of cognitive processing, prosthetics that bring reach, extension and connection with others, dynamic and performed engagements with the material world;

and garbage.

We make history, the future is open to creative agency, but under conditions that we have inherited from the past. I suggest that the key question in *The Human Document Project* is how we might creatively intervene in the genealogical processes that I have been describing, so that we might establish future co-presence.

First. Find a way of transmitting a tool kit to the future, the way we engage with the world. We will need to indicate how humanity has creatively engaged materially with the world, in the performance of everyday life.

Second. We are not going to be able to remove the pile of garbage that is history, but we can *intervene*. I suggest that such an intervention could be designed to communicate something that we again recognize in the long term archaeological record – *care*.

A work by Alberto Burri comes to mind. The 1968 earthquake in the Belice Valley in Sicily destroyed the village of Gibellina. The artist consolidated the ruins in six million tons of concrete that outlines the old streets.

How might we intervene? Interrupt entropy. Tidy up space garbage. Reface a pyramid. Build a tidy up tool kit into a nuclear waste dump. Include in a strain of bacteria a message conveyed in synthetic DNA. Carve an oversize granite dinner service (food is a key component of who we are). …

The message? “We were here, we were aware, we cared, and we are with you now. You might want to take a look at what we are proud of …”

