

# RUTH TRINGHAM, PERFORMANCE AND CREATIVE CONFIDENCE



Over twenty years ago I was in Paris as a Fellow of the Maison des sciences de

l'homme at the Centre d'archéologie classique and the Centre Louis Gernet (Alain Schnapp, François Lissarague and colleagues), combining the connoisseurship of ancient Corinthian ceramics with my discovery of French anthropology of science and technology (Bruno Latour, Pierre Lemonnier, Michel Callon, Sander van der Leeuw, Anique Coudart).

It was there that I first met Ruth Tringham, and we've been in many of the same crosscurrents in archaeology and anthropology since: embodiment (how the material body is implicated in archaeological reconstruction), performance (mobilizing the past in the present, acknowledging performativity, how performative actions, behaviors, gestures define identity, how discourse produces the phenomena it regulates), and (digital) media (how we might represent the past-in-the-present).



Ruth Tringham, Paris 1991, with Jean-Paul Demoule and Alain Schnapp

This week at the annual meetings of the Society for American Archaeology [Link] I was in two sessions. One was about performing the past in the present. The other

was a celebration of Ruth's career, her extraordinary journey through the analysis of micro wear on stone tools, household archaeology in prehistory, reimagining the past's human dimensions, storytelling – whatever might be necessary in a critical making of the past.

A few years ago Chris Witmore and I interviewed Ruth for our book with Bill Rathje – *Archaeology in the Making* [Link]. This was one of a series of conversations with archaeologists that offered a different view of the discipline. Far from conforming to the description of methods, theories, and discoveries that feature in text books, it was clear that archaeology is much better conceived as a rather messy process of active engagement with the remains of the past, always located, site specific, sometimes deeply personal, sometimes institutional. It was gratifying that this confirmed a position I had outlined with Randy McGuire in the 90s – that archaeology, what archaeologists do, is well conceived as a craft. Back then we were drawing on the likes of William Morris's socialism and making a stand against alienated labor, with archaeology conceived as a mode of production of the past [Link]. Our book can be read as a contribution to science studies – showing how knowledge is forged, fettled, built, engineered.

Ruth shared with us her own efforts to establish her standpoint as creative author, an archaeological agency, if you like. She's an example to us all. What I recall vividly was how she described her encounter with John Berger and Jean Mohr's wonderful collaboration and book *Another Way of Telling* [Link]. For, beyond the implications for the way we treat the past, our conversations in *Archaeology in the Making* showed how an orthodox narrative of what happens or is supposed to happen in archaeology can shut down possibilities, defining and rationalizing what really goes on in our archaeological experiences. Ruth and the others (including Alain Schnapp, Mary and Adrian Praetzelis) told quite different stories, retaining the richness and elaborating archaeological experiences.

What does this mean for the way we do archaeology?

Certainly we should explore the history of the discipline as a history of practices and experiences as much as a history of theories and discoveries (there's something of a start to this in my book with Olsen, Webmoor and Witmore – *Archaeology: the Discipline of Things* [Link]). Some archaeology programs run courses in professional

practice, covering research and project management. Nevertheless, management, and particularly the different ways of managing projects, are much neglected.

Beyond method and theory **we need pragmatics – critical awareness and principles of how to operate as an archaeologist.**

What does such a pragmatics look like?

I explored some aspects in my book *Experiencing the Past* [Link]. Now I am more inclined to give the answer – design thinking – [Link]

The gathering on Thursday evening was to explore the performance of the present past. Organized by Katie Chiou (UC Berkeley), Bryan Cockrell (UC Berkeley), Marguerite DeLoney (Stanford), and Di Hu (UC Berkeley), it was quite an inspiring display – experiences of “the field”, engaging with subjectivity, reenacting making (lost wax casting as chaîne opératoire), the drama of an archaeological project, alternative narrative forms, fact and fiction, parodies of archaeological work [Link]

Why performance?

Elsewhere I have connected performance and design [Link]. Here let me pull together some thoughts that came to mind as I watched the contributors to the session.

### **Orientation on action**

– the underlying argument is that archaeology is what archaeologists do, and that our attempts to work with what remains of the past should be aimed at understanding, explaining, or simply making manifest the processes, experiences and practices (social and cultural, as well as natural processes like ruin) that resulted in the remains that have endured into the present.

### **Mindful of process**

– the making of things, of the past-in-the-present, science in action.

Performance is a powerful concept to apply to this orientation on action and process.

Invoked are matters of

- mimetics – how to represent (the past)
- mediation – the relation of script or document to action
- reenactment – repetition or iteration so as to understand or re-present
- dramaturgy – the arrangement of plot and action
- scenography – setting, architecture, context, mise-en-scène and the articulation of place/event
- improvisation – adapting training and skill to unscripted action
- tacit embodied knowledge and memory – habits, manners, apprenticeship, techniques of the body involved in any action or performance
- memory – as in “theatre/archaeology” – the rearticulation of fragments of the past as real time event
- performance as a third space – where experiment and trials may be attempted
- rhetoric, as the practice of discourse – involving the likes of “narratio” (narrative), dispositio (arrangement), elocutio (delivery) and tropes such as parody, satire, irony
- simulation – illusion and engagement
- presence
- co-presence – being mindful of others – collaborators, cocreators, audience
- aesthetics – think, sense, feel, evaluate – experience

What’s the key to successful pragmatics?

- Start not with abstract principles, but *in medias res* – thrown in the midst of things
- Sociality – a team that gets on with each other
- Where “in medias res” refers to “res publica” – the commons or commonwealth, what we share as community
- Above all the creative confidence to explore, play, risk, fail, and try again

It is such creative confidence that is so present in Ruth’s work.







Not seen

Annie Danis, University of California Berkeley

“Not Seen” is a sound composition of field recordings of 8 years of archaeological excavations across two continents that explores the sonic and affective dimensions of archaeological practice. Layers of recorded sound make an argument through performance for the recognition of the role of new media archaeology, not only as a form of documentation or a tool for engaging broad publics, but as a process of knowledge production in its own right. Riffing off Ingold’s recent call for an anthropology as the “education of attention” this piece is the starting point for a discussion of archaeology as the education of the senses.

Seen

Annie Malcolm

“Seen” will be movement-as-analysis, a dance presentation performance alongside Annie Danis’ “Not Seen.” Danis and I will de-, or re-construct the process of the creation of her sound sculpture. We will create a script that mimics the structure of the sound score, and I will interpret that script, making a movement vocabulary which I will perform to the sound of “Not Seen.” In this project, we are interested in the question of using form to make process transparent, and also the idea that in the ethnographic (archaeological) encounter the event has always already been missed, and any analysis is a series of second missings. The work explores the methods through which both performance and sound are used to make an argument.

Here is the session abstract –

Enriching the metaphor of archaeology as craft (Shanks and McGuire 1996), this session will embrace the role of the archaeologist as participant and performer in the process of data recovery and interpretation (Inomata and Coben 2006; Pearson and Shanks 2001). Presenters—as well as the audience—are encouraged to

'perform their data, its analysis, its interpretation' during the session. Suggestions include dramatic readings, live music, and experimental replication. Presenters should offer remarks that justify the choice of particular media for the performance. These remarks and discussions throughout the session will serve as opportunities to consider the contributions of explicit performance to the general (session-wide) and particular (presenter) craft(s) of archaeology undertaken. Furthermore, critically examining the archaeology-craft metaphor, we will question the alignment of archaeology with technology; does archaeology have its own chaîne-opératoire, and, if so, what are its stages and their attendant products? We also aim to explore whether explicit performance can facilitate a re-orientation of the discipline as more three-dimensional, advocated in the past on behalf of emotion (Tarlow 2000) and materiality (Hurcombe 2007). Finally, we will recognize the ethical implications of archaeological performance: does it reify the objectification of archaeological materials? Alternatively, does it advance the conceptualization of archaeology as imagined and archaeologists as social constructions (Matthews 2004)?