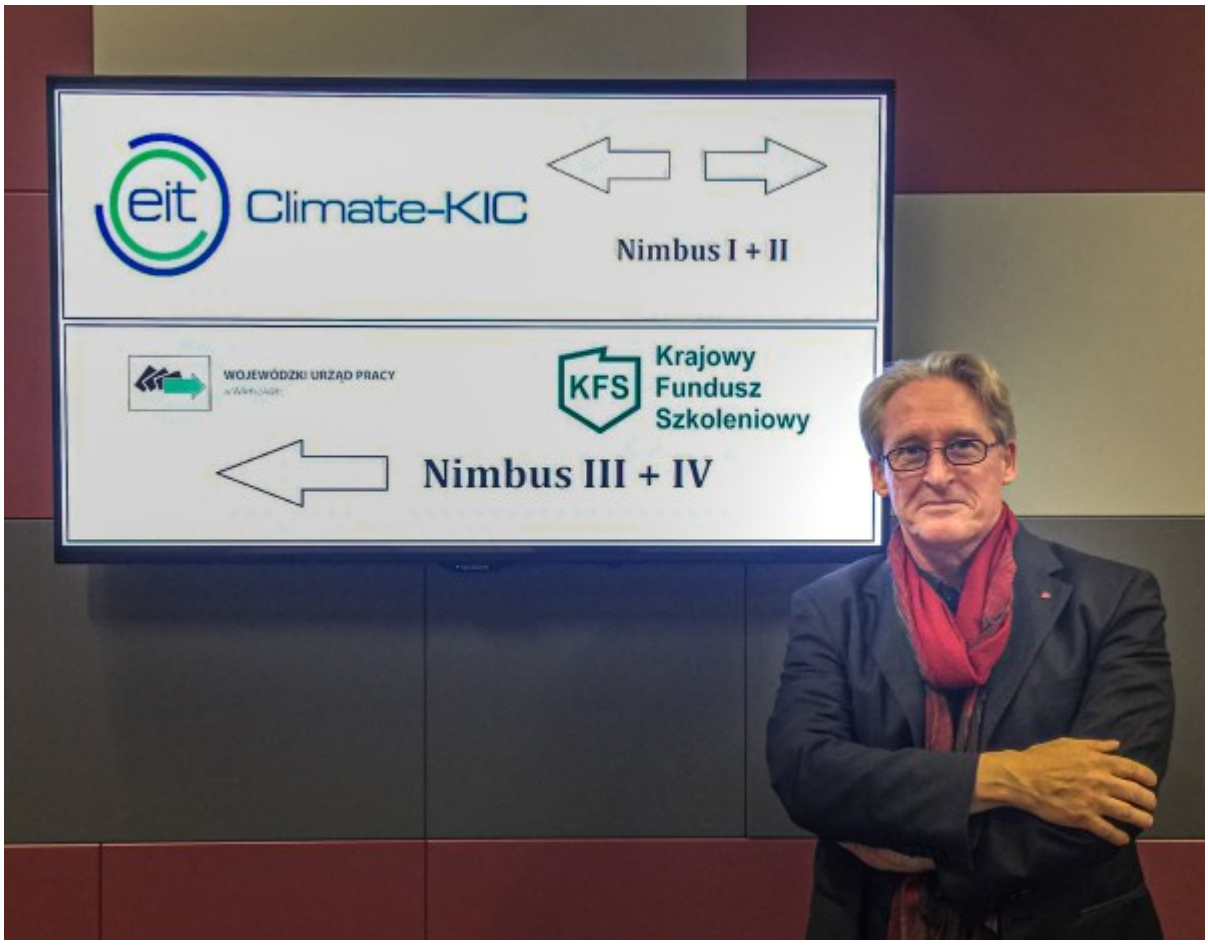
UPDATE — THE ACTUALITY OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL PAST



I have contributed little to this site since 2016. I have been writing (Greece and Rome: a new model of antiquity [Link]), running experiments in fieldwork (Project Borderlands [Link]), exploring applied archaeology (with a host of organizations and corporations), asking questions of the proper role of the academic, the researcher, the scholar.

In this contemporary condition of global stasis, COVID-19 virus and all, I am back to pick up where I left off.

Stasis? An artificial pause or hiatus, an interruption of normal flow, and, for Thucydides, writing of war,

plague and democracy in fifth century Athens, a state of political crisis.

[Link – a talk for SAP in Moscow, April 2020]

Research Creation

By 2013 we published an account and manifesto for archaeology and how to study things (Bjørnar Olsen, Christopher Witmore, Timothy Webmoor and myself – *Archaeology: the Discipline of Things*, University of California Press 2012). *Archaeology in the Making* (Routledge 2013), was the outcome of a long-running project in science studies; in a series of conversations held in the lab from 2002, we presented the human face of crafting knowledge and what actually goes on in a disciplinary field such as archaeology (it's messy, pragmatic, personal and political). *Archaeologies of Presence: Acting, Performing, Being* (edited with Nick Kaye and Gabriella Giannachi, Routledge 2012) reported on a five year investigation of presence, absence, liveness and mediation in performance, the fine arts and beyond, and in the company of a remarkable group of artists. For me it was a project exploring the archaeological imagination; my book under that title came out in the same year (*The Archaeological Imagination*, Left Coast Press, 2012). It was also the fruit of my support for transdiciplinary projects, here art/archaeology.

[Link – Academia.edu – for publication downloads]

Questioning heritage

Focused on the emergence of a new sector in the heritage industry, the Revs Program at Stanford [Link], from 2011 to 2015, connected the past and the future of the automobile. With changing experiences of mobility and the rise of the robot car, mobile media devices, and shared mobility services, questions are raised of what might be done with the remains and legacy of a century and more of car manufacture and car culture in the carbon economy that has run its course in modernity. We rehearsed issues in the curation of "active matter", exploring just what is an automobile: its ontology is surely more than the coachwork and powertrain on four wheels. We also sought to understand the trajectory of automotive design such that it should inform the future of automotive systems – hindsight into experiences of mobility informing foresight.

The concept of heritage is most often understood as cultural property, something, tangible or intangible, that one owns and has a right to own through inheritance, by force of identity, who one is and is descended from. Our deep immersion in the contradictory worlds of car collectors, corporate design studios, automotive history, people's memories, and the consequences of more than a century of gasoline consumption reveal the inadequacy of this concept in its partiality and promotion of disabling and conflict-ridden policies and politics. In asking what might be done with old cars and everything that goes with them we are dealing in *relationships* between pasts, presents, and futures. In this way the Revs program was about the *actuality* of the past, relationships, connections, engagements, as we work with what remains with a view to futures, planned, wished for, hoped for. Heritage, concerned with property and values, is but one kind of such relationship.

This key insight about the presence of the past and what we make of remains and legacies has come to be at the heart of another project, still ongoing. Gary Devore and I had decided we needed a text book for our Stanford class on Graeco-Roman antiquity, couldn't find one to suit, and so set about writing one ourselves. Our aim is to explore the actuality of antiquity as we seek not to convey the wonders of ancient Greece and Rome (again), but to create fresh relationships with what actually remains, and given two millennia of both adoration and hatred of what Greeks and Romans have come to stand for.

Meanwhile, Gary and I, and many lab members of our lab, have also been part of the excavations of the Roman outpost and town of Binchester, in the far north of empire. It began as a study of towns, cities and empires, through one remarkable instance (our book on Greece and Rome is, among other things, an account of experiences in the urban body politic). For me, this has grown into a study of borderlands, of bordering, edges, boundaries, transgressions, passages and resistances, in one of the most remarkable of archaeological landscapes.

Buildings along Dere Street, Roman province of Britannia, Binchester excavations, 2015.

Design and foresight

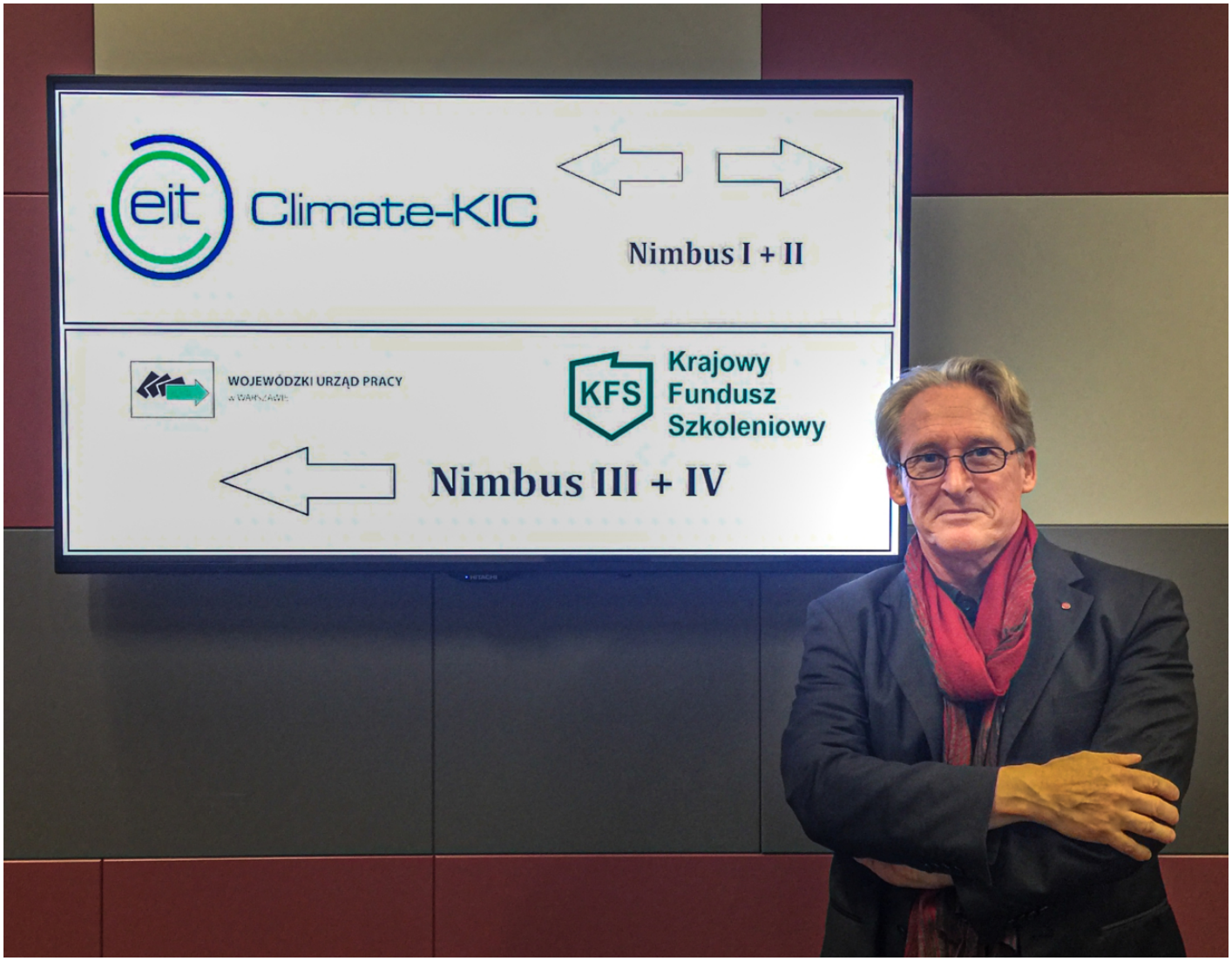
Actuality refers to dynamic connections between pasts and presents, seeking hindsight that we might achieve foresight in designing and building better futures. Back in the days of Stanford Humanities Lab (to 2009), Bill Cockayne introduced me to strategic foresight as a complement to the design thinking I was encountering in our school of engineering (through Larry Leifer, Center for Design Research, and David Kelley, Stanford d.school and the Revs Program). A project with Daimler Chrysler to design a concept car for the future based on archaeological/ethnographic research into experiences of mobility (Detroit Motor Show 2009) has led to a cascade of projects in strategic foresight and design thinking with many organizations, communities, corporations (and our group Foresight and Innovation remains very active – [Link]). Currently the lab is working in and through SAP on next generation design thinking and what we are calling business archaeology – shorthand for mobilizing (archaeological) hindsight that we might enhance our capacity to face uncertain futures with creative innovation [Link].

Some of the most inspiring connections have been in the Netherlands, and particularly Rotterdam. A decade of work with Rotterdam International Advisory Board (to 2017) was about helping this diverse community and municipality, city and port, navigate challenges and opportunities – urban futures. My role, as I took it, was to draw on the archaeology and history of urban dwelling to bring the human stories to the foreground of our concerns, and with a creative planning toolkit drawn from strategic foresight and design thinking.

Workshop on Foresight and Design Thinking, Groot Handelsgebouw Rotterdam, April 2017, with Janne Vereijken (Rotterdam Businesswoman of the Year 2018)

Projects with Museum Boijmans van Beuningen and the Dutch design community have introduced me to the ways that speculative design can be such a fount of cultural inspiration and hope. The museum itself, in its ongoing development, has become a model for the museum of the future, energizing what I am calling here the *actuality* of the past. [Link]

Asking questions of the proper role of the academic, the researcher, the scholar. The mindset I have described here, focused on the concept of actuality, is about ways that we explore, enhance, create dynamic connections, exchanges and flows – relationships and processes in toolkits and competencies, ways of managing projects, of attending to experience. This is quite opposed to barricading ourselves in the silos, the fortresses of disciplinary procedures and credentials, expert bodies of proprietorial knowledge.



Running a workshop on innovation for Climate-KIC, Warsaw October 2016. “EIT (European Institute of Innovation) Climate-KIC is the EU’s largest public private partnership addressing climate change through innovation to build a zero carbon economy. We address climate change across four priority themes: urban areas, land use, production systems, climatemetrics and finance.” – [Link]

Pragmatics – pragmatology

There is such strong foundation for this pragmatic, this pragmatist stand. I have found myself over the last few years returning to favorite philosophers old and new who offer wonderful ways of fleshing out this mindset. I had forgotten until recently how actuality and potential for action was a topic shared by both Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin. Richard Rorty did such a great job of revitalizing Dewey’s pragmatism and Wittgenstein’s dissections of the fallacies in Cartesian dualisms, mind and body and all the rest. Bergson and Whitehead deal in the flows of experience, while Heidegger lays the foundations for understanding being-in-the-

world that takes us way beyond the experiencing subject-self, reconnecting us with lifeworld. Process-based philosophy is epitomized for me in Gilles Deleuze. We are part of the world we seek to understand: this is a message of science and technology studies, notably Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers. To shift us beyond the narrow confines of anthropocentric humanism and the old notion that we take the role of observer in representing the world, towards more creative experiment we have Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing, Yuriko Saito, Michel Serres and Connie Svabo.

Three summary pointers.

- Be sensitive to locale. Universal knowledge – knowledge that exists beyond temporal and spatial location – is untenable.
- Seek verbs not nouns. Look to flows of experience, exchanges and transactions, energy dynamics, lifeworlds constantly in creation.
- Take a pragmatist stand. Seek opportunities to intervene, comment, make a difference, in actuality, sensitive to opportunity (kairos), the current conjuncture.

Three questions of What?

- What do we have to say now, in these circumstances? For whom?
- So what? Who cares? Why would anyone be bothered?
- What next? Where’s this taking us? To what end?

Historic Vehicle Association of America – pop-up museum in Manhattan. December 2016. Archaeology as orientation on future automotive design