

APPLIED ARCHAEOLOGY — APPLIED HUMANITIES



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Newsletter 2024 Stanford Archaeology Center

Archaeological mission and vision? Ivory tower as lighthouse?

In a recent newsletter for Stanford Archaeology Center [\[Link\]](#) I talked of slow archaeology, of the benefits of long-running projects that afford time for unfolding reflection. Three interrelated projects remain ongoing. A kind of archaeological triptych.

– **A prehistory of Graeco-Roman antiquity.** Modeling: against narrative. An episodic and synoptic treatment of Graeco-Roman antiquity through scenario modeling. With Gary Devore.

– **Theatre/Archaeology: Performing Remains.** Pragmatics: against method. Case studies in performance design. With Mike Pearson.

– **A Border Archaeology: northern margins.** Trespass and transgression: against place. Archaeological itineraries in northern Europe.

Fifteen years in the making, these projects in the archaeological imagination are a milieu within which I follow digressions and deviations to confront matters of common and pressing concern in publication, conversations, through conferences and symposia, in collaborative projects with colleagues in the academic and corporate world.

In another newsletter in 2022 [\[Link\]](#) I flagged up how I see archaeology to be less about the past-in-itself, and more about past-present connections. This is to see what we do as archaeologists as a kind of memory practice, with a percolating temporality of *actuality*, of present-pasts, and of *kairos*, the concept of opportune moment, that nudges us to be aware of the timeliness of our engagements with the remains of the past.

These standpoints and concerns came into much sharper focus this year. I have long spoken about *applied archaeology*; it is clear to me that such an archaeology-for-the-present-and-future is a model for a related field of *applied humanities*. Both involve a reanimation of what can be summarized in a concept of archive.

What has all this actually looked like?

I find myself ever more deeply involved in projects concerned with how we share and learn skills and competencies oriented on future well-being. A book on such matters, *Creative Pragmatics for Active Learning in STEM Education* (edited with Connie Svabo, Tamara Carleton, and Chungfang Zhou) [\[Link\]](#) is receiving great responses. Projects focused on building communities of learning continue with the corporate world, in conferences and symposia, and in the discussions current in the research network that includes my studio/lab. A long investment in the archaeology of landscape is bearing fruit in a new book with Gabriella Giannachi (*Archaeologies of Nature: from Landscape to Climate Breakdown*) that mobilizes an archaeology of arts practices, from prehistory to contemporary art, to offer action-oriented responses to climate change.

Of note here is the ongoing collaboration with FNUG (Forskningscenter for Naturvidenskabelig Uddannelse og Formidling), the Center for Research in Science Education and Communication at University of Southern Denmark, directed by Connie Svabo. A shared interest is typically labelled *impact* – how the academy connects with society more widely. More than this, for me, the center is a hub of extraordinary *transdisciplinary* expertise and creativity that exemplifies the value of collaboration in scholarship.

More than ever it is clear to me that we cannot afford the luxury of hyper-specialized research. Better put – specialized deep knowledge must be accompanied by lateral address, collaboration and communication across disciplines. Such a disposition is captured well in the concept of the “T character”, where drilling down in research is capped by a capacity to connect (my memory tells me it was Tim Brown who introduced the concept in his book with Barry Katz, *Change by Design*, (2019) – the connection with design practice is appropriate, because the academy *engineers* knowledge).

What role for such an academic? What mission for archaeology? What vision for the future? In the ivory towers of academia? Of course the academic might hide indulgently and hope for protection in a precarious world. Or, rather, one might treat the tower as a protected viewpoint from which to make forays, to survey the world and offer commentary and critique, maps and directions – ivory tower as lighthouse. Applied archaeology, applied humanities – where the effectiveness and value of such wayfinding is not just short op-ed opinion, but interventions founded in high-quality scholarship.

(One also knows what happens when there are no stable beacons of navigation.)

In the wake

Between 1979 and 1993 I worked with Chris Tilley (Cambridge, Wales, and University College London) in studies of contemporary beer can design, prehistoric pottery and monumentality, heritage and museology, theory and method. Our books published in 1987, *ReConstructing Archaeology* and *Social Theory and Archaeology*, launched our academic careers and caused some commotion in archaeology.



Photo: Beer bottle design in prehistoric Sweden. Shanks and Tilley on the Øresund ferry in 1988. (Photo credit: Karin Tilley)

Tilley's untimely death at the age of 68 in March 2024 prompted me to look back over his academic life [Link]. I must have spent a month rereading his books. I found myself following his ideas yes, but there was also a nagging question in my mind. How are we to value the life of an academic researcher? Does it lie in original findings? In the number of books, publications, citations? In the ideas? In academic memes and isms – fashionable phrases, concepts, approaches that catch on? In honors and awards made by the establishment?



Photo: Land and photo engagement. The chambered tomb of Orenäs, Sweden 1988. (Photo credit: Michael Shanks – from the Tilley archive)

Many have claimed to be influenced by Tilley's phenomenology. My close rereading of his books led me to ask what this means. It is clear that Tilley's work is indeed much cited, but rarely in any detail (I found only a couple of close engagements with his fieldwork). How much of his work is read? Many of his books are difficult to access. How long is to be the life of his books on the shelves of academic

libraries?

There is an academic melancholy to this question. I am deeply fascinated by Tilley's phenomenology and have a cherished and personal connection with his work. Yet I found it quite impossible to read the long descriptions of megalithic-encounters-in-the-landscape, of viewings of panels of rock carvings that feature so prominently in his books. I skipped over the detail. Maybe it was his style that didn't grab my attention. Maybe there is a broader issue about academic writing, about reading and citation.

The percentages may vary (between 70% and 90% for the arts and humanities), but it is very clear and uncontroversial that most academic research is never cited (we might harbor hope that no citation does not mean no reading). Do we need the percentages? Witness the experience in any university library – the miles of academic texts, testimony to life sentences of academic labor, and most of which, yes, will be hardly read. Is this what we work for?

Bruno Latour made the case (in his *Science in Action* (1987)) that academic writing may seek citation, but is designed not to be read. What does this mean? Surely the job of academics is to write and read. One might challenge the assumption that close reading is the complement to academic writing if we acknowledge that the apparatuses of scholarship, including style and citation, work to assure any reader that they need not read too closely to accept what is offered in the way of synopsis and conclusions. In taking up an academic text one might note a tight style that anticipates questions and critique and offers sufficient qualification and conditional context ("only if these conditions are met will what is proposed be a candidate for approval", for example) to justify a quick perusal rather than a close reading. I have suggested in a recent essay on social theory in archaeology [Link] that much academic debate is organized around summarizing labels ("isms", positions, approaches, paradigms) that reduce and simplify, without the need for close reading and commentary. Tilley = landscape phenomenology, a development of post-processual archaeology. Period.

Another way of expressing this is to hold that what matters in the pragmatics of the academy is not so much what we write, but the way we act. This is more than McLuhan's "medium is the message"; it is about the performance of scholarship.

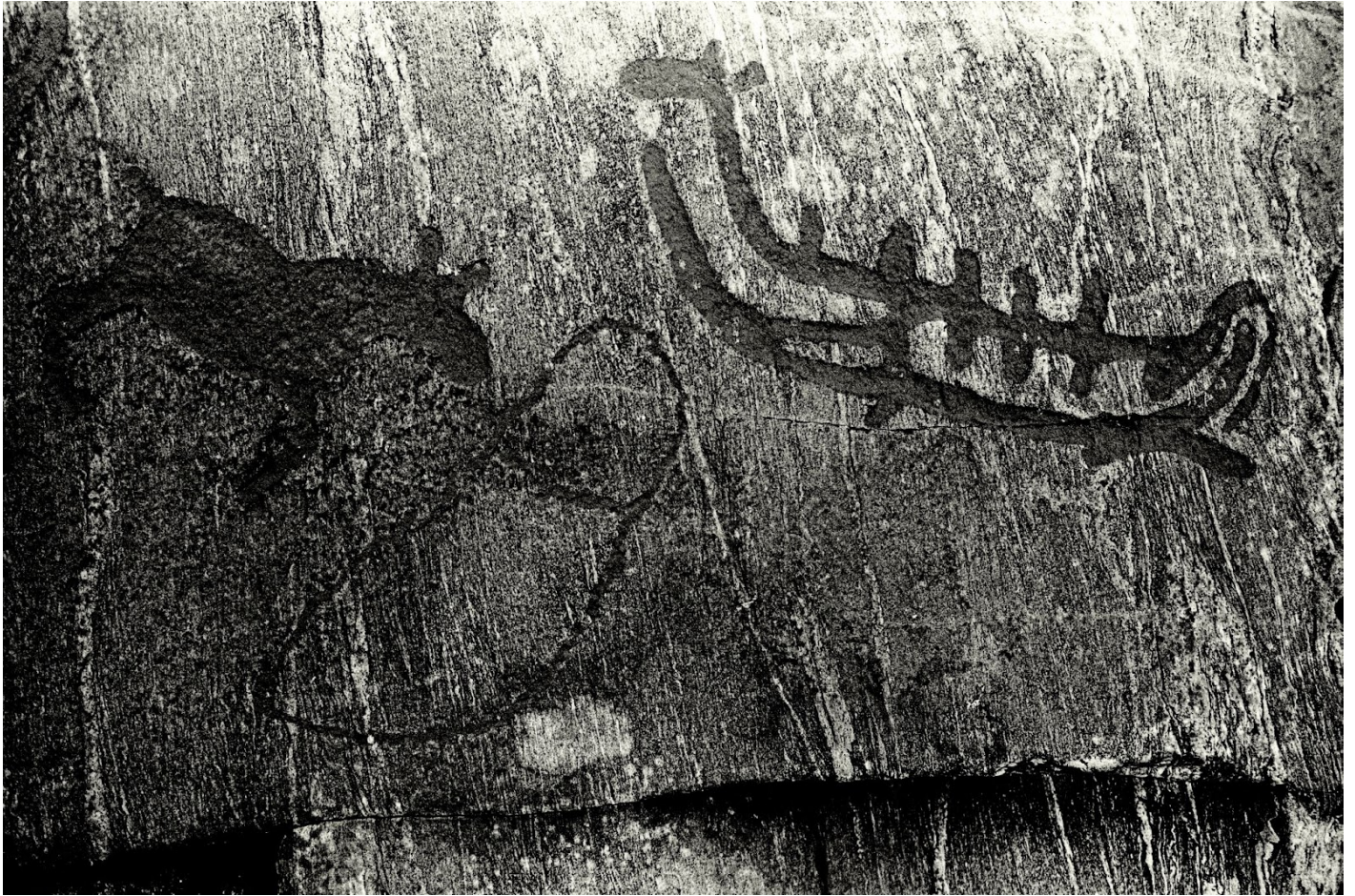


Photo: Elk – ship – boot. The prehistoric rock-art site of Nämforsen, northern Sweden, in the wake, in the steps of antiquarian Gustaf Hallström. Tilley's aesthetic in a river bed. August 1988. (Photo credit: Michael Shanks – from the Tilley archive)

Tilley's was a life-long project in what we can call environmental aesthetics. Aesthetics, for me, is the key here. Value not in *what* Tilley said but in the *ways* he engaged with places and things, and with colleagues, friends, students, strangers. Tilley dealt in relationships with environment; respect and acknowledgement of diverse voices; developing secure foundations of knowledge, in experience, modes of engagement with the world, representation and report.

I attended a symposium at University College London in November 2024 [\[Link\]](#) to celebrate his life and work. Over and over again one heard of his attitudes, manner, the way he worked and was part of institutional life, and his life beyond. Tilley was skeptical of too-easy answers delivered by institutional authority and reached out to everyone with infectious energy in an open invitation to seek authentic vital experience together. This is a most valuable legacy.

In a book of interviews with 20 or so archaeologists called *Archaeology in the Making* (edited with Bill Rathje and Chris Witmore and published in 2013) [Link], this key insight into the value of archaeological practice and experience was clearly affirmed. Do archaeologists dig up the past, create theories and follow methodologies in movements of ideas and accounts of the past? This is how most textbooks describe the discipline. Just as in my rereading and reflection upon the work of an archaeological friend, Chris Tilley, archaeology is much better understood as what archaeologists actually do – work with what remains in all sorts of ways, and as part of communities and institutions of learning.

The concept of archaeology

Our academic research communities today tend to be globally distributed, especially because of digital media. The extended research community to which my studio/lab belongs is much concerned with the *concept* of archaeology.

Bjørnar Olsen, a colleague from Tromsø in Norway, was back at Stanford in Spring 2024. We were working on this topic and here is a summary of what we are holding forth.

Archaeology is not history. While historians typically focus on how and why the past unfolded the way it did, archaeologists work with what remains. As a kind of genealogy, archaeology traces the connections that tie the past to the present while denying the historical continuity and linearity of an unfolding story. Emphasized instead are discontinuities, ruptures, as well as underlying energies.

Archaeology's focus on remains makes central the concepts of archive and curation. Its methodology is concerned with how the past persists and returns, transforms and evolves, haunts and orients us in the now and for the future, as well as how we might deal with concern and care for those remains.

As a kind of memory practice, archaeology draws on the concept of memory found in Proust and Freud. In “rubbing history against the grain” we share much with Walter Benjamin's opposition to historicism through his immanent materialist critique, his own kind of archaeology. There are affinities also with the genealogy and archaeology of Nietzsche and Foucault. Discourses, modes of production of knowledge, are characterized by discontinuities, matters of power and agency, and

historical contingencies. By uncovering these infrastructures archaeology provides tools for critically remodeling contemporary values and practices.

Such an archaeological orientation aligns with cutting edge approaches in new materialist and pragmatist philosophies, science and technology studies, critical theory, performance studies, and media and communication studies. A comprehensive exposition of such connections can be found in Laurent Olivier's wonderful book *The Dark Abyss of Time: Archaeology and Memory* (2011).

And such a concept of archaeology is intensely personal. Another death in summer 2024 was that of my father at 90 years. In his home of 47 years were gathered the things that accompanied him through his life, that he had selected, cared for, arranged and rearranged. A ship-model-in-the-making and yet to be realized, a care-worn garden with an old vine in a shattered glasshouse, a calendar of anticipated events on the wall, records kept of prescribed medicines, photos of moments spanning decades and many places, curated cared-for memorabilia, upcycled ships' parts, a standard lamp of style circa 1960s, CDs and DVDs ranging in date of manufacture from the 90s to the present, in music and film from medieval to contemporary 2024. And more. The value, for him, in small things remembered. They bear witness – but not to any history, any coherent narrative – in small things forgotten. No history, but archaeology – yes. [Link]

Archaeologies of nature



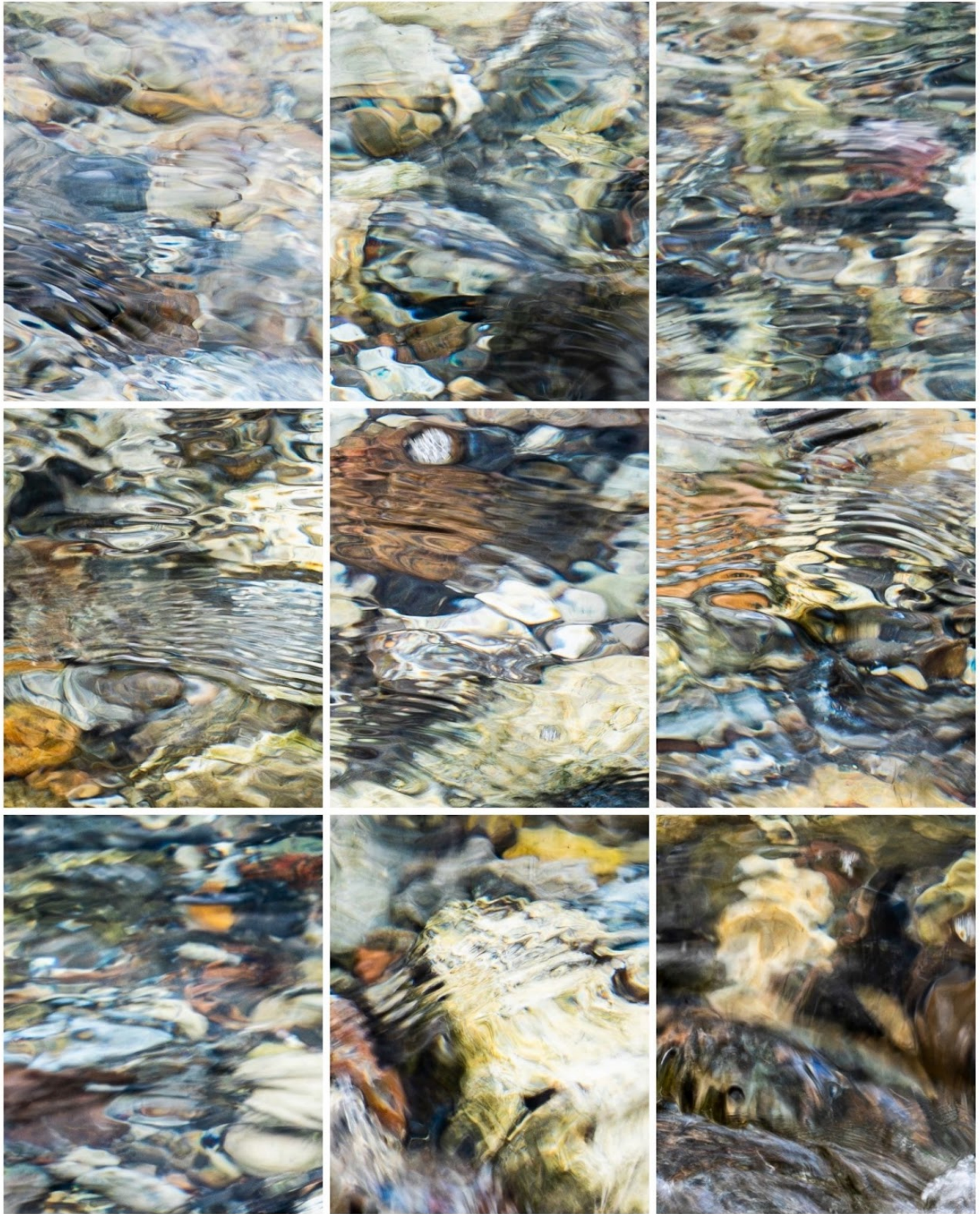


Photo: Environmental aesthetics. How might an archaeologist visit an ancient shoreline? Photo Grid 17: Nyborg Strand (Fyn, Denmark) 2024 September 12 09.29.02

Central European Time. AI assisted amplification. (Photo credit: Michael Shanks)

Another collaborator of long-standing, Gabriella Giannachi, from Exeter UK, was in Stanford a couple of times over the year as a guest of my studio/lab and of Ng Humanities House, where I am resident faculty. As of the end of 2024, we have nearly completed a manuscript of a book, out now with Routledge for review for publication.

Here is a brief summary of the project.

Archaeologies of Nature: from Landscape to Climate Breakdown

In the contemporary concern about climate emergency, the science and policy, the pragmatics and debates, nature is a key concept. Implicated are matters of cognition and perception, how we think about and sense the world around us, matters of relationships and connections with other species and environments, of science and knowledge building, of action and impact, and deep existential questions of how we conceive of humanity itself.

In this book we propose a radical reexamination of the concept of nature, refreshing and renewing with a view to how we might act for the future. Artworks have long explored human relationships with nature. We engage with artworks, reframing key artistic practices that have involved the concept of nature, spanning prehistoric rock art, landscape painting, to activist contemporary art that deals with climate change.

Our approach and methodology are new. We present an archaeology of art practices. Ours is not an art history that tells a story of art and nature organized by date and movement. Instead, we take the past to be all around us, immanent in the present, just as what has happened geologically, in prehistory, in the past continues to be a fundamental part of what is happening now and offers orientation on future possibility and potential. Archaeology is a kind of memory practice. Through close and comparative examination, we animate an archive of artworks, prehistoric to contemporary, exploring the stratigraphic foundations of the present, and the energies and processes that have brought us to where we are and where we might go.

Thinking through artworks, treating arts practice as research, we show how the concept of nature is affiliated with environment, ecology, weather, climate, earth, dwelling, inhabitation in an expanded semantic field of complex living and adaptive systems. This foundation takes us beyond an arts-science binary into futures-oriented strategies and tactics.

We use an archaeology of artworks to refresh the concept of nature as an aspect of envioning – the vital processes of our lifeworld conceived as a complex living adaptive system. Our archaeology reveals what is immanent, already present in our long inhabitation of the planet, as explored in artworks. In this we offer orientations, practices, policy, and a concept toolkit.

In the wake of Benjamin and Foucault we are reclaiming the concept of archaeology (just as Alfredo González-Ruibal would have us do in his 2013 edited book *Reclaiming Archaeology: Beyond the Tropes of Modernity*).

The book animates an *archive* of artworks. Gabriella and I have just been commissioned to write a book about archive, archaeology, and AI. Manuscript due end of 2026.



Photo: Archaeologies of nature. 法隆寺 – Kochidani Amidaji Temple (1609) – north east of Kyoto. (Photo credit: Michael Shanks)

Pedagogies for the anthropocene

I have always treated pedagogy and the design of curricula and learning programs to be critically important. How might we make our learning more effective? Ready-to-hand and fit-for-purpose. Matters of inter-generational communication. Archaeology, an archetypal transdisciplinary field, simultaneously art, science, humanities, project management, cultural production, is such fertile ground for exploring and testing pedagogies that prepare us for the future in all its uncertainty and precarity.

Initial responses to *Creative Pragmatics for Active Learning in STEM Education* [Link] are very positive. The book is supported by ESERA (European Science Education Research Association) and the Novo-Nordisk Foundation (that funds much research in education and pedagogy). My favorite endorsement has come from Andrew Pickering, the philosopher and historian of science. His inspiring work in science

studies makes the case that research and knowledge building (the engineering of knowledge) are well conceived as performance. He introduces our book as follows:

How would you teach STEM subjects in a way that foregrounds not finished and ready-made science but science-in-action? How might the findings of Science and Technology Studies translate into teaching? – Creative Pragmatics is the answer!

At the beginning of 2024 Riel Miller came to stay at Ng Humanities House. Ex head of UNESCO's program in Futures Literacy, he hosted a series of talks and workshops over more than a month that introduced Stanford students to skills and competencies, cognitive toolkits appropriate to creatively realizing future well-being, de-colonizing the future.

Sabine Remdisch (Professor, Leuphana), an expert in the psychology of leadership, continues this year as Visiting Scholar in my studio in the Archaeology Center. We hosted several symposia through 2024. Our project is to reach out through applied archaeology and humanities into the corporate business world. We are supported in this by the German government; Oliver Schramm, Consul General of the Federal Republic of Germany opened a symposium we held in March.

With long-standing collaborator, Tamara Carleton, I hosted a conference at the Archaeology Center in July for 70 members of the eMBA program at the University of Zurich. Here we explored what might be called business archaeology as design foresight – a way of gaining actionable insight into matters of concern. Tamara rolled out her book *Building Moonshots* (written with Bill Cockayne, another member of my studio's research community for over 20 years) – design foresight aimed at a realization of big-picture vision for the future.

Learning Community has come to be a key concept for me in this convergence of method and epistemology, creativity and innovation, organizational culture and modes of leadership, ontology and design. It has been the research focus of the ongoing project with Connie Svabo's Research Center in Science Education and Communication (FNUG), at University of Southern Denmark, and with Aisin Corporation

in Japan – applied archaeology and humanities scaled-up to address the needs of a corporate community of 120,000. With Kimihiko Iwamura, a thought-leader in innovation culture and emeritus Senior Fellow at Stanford mediaX, we ran workshops throughout the year, and in November hosted a colloquium for the Japanese members of the project at Innovator's Garage in Nagoya.



Photo: Innovator's Garage Nagoya, Japan, November 2024 – a studio space to design the future. Aisin Project Athena – business archaeology delivers culture change. (Photo credit: Michael Shanks)

More than ever the role of the academic and of scientific research is under scrutiny. I am encouraged by the energy and enthusiasm for fresh application of fields of scholarship associated with archaeology, with an archaeological sensibility, through the archaeological imagination – big picture thinking rooted in the minutiae of everyday life. What Joseph Cornell called the eterniday.