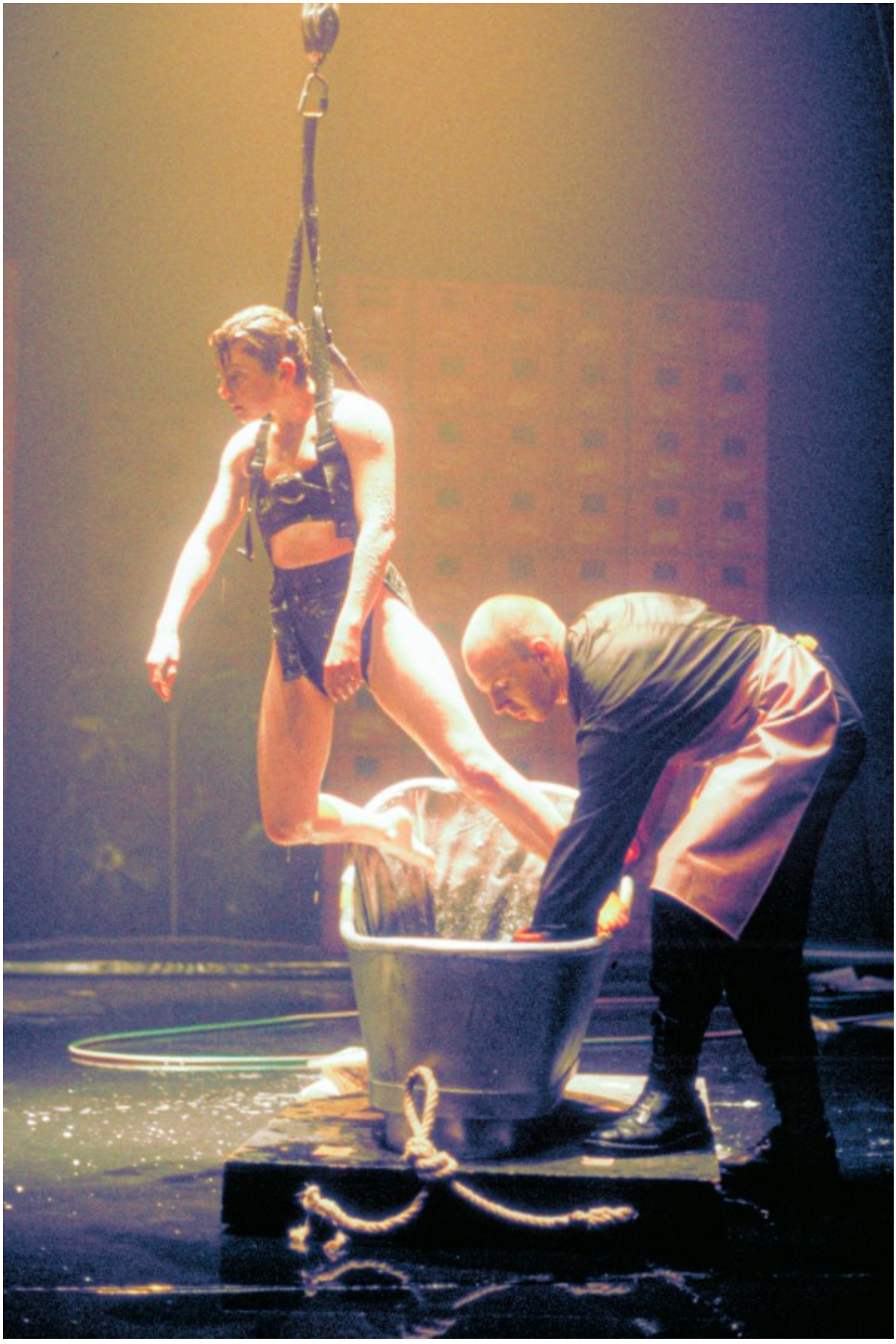
NEWSLETTER — STANFORD ARCHAEOLOGY CENTER



Prospective reflections on 2025-26

Acting with nature – prehistory

My new book *Archaeologies of Nature: Activating the Archive*, written with Gabriella Giannachi, University of Exeter and Turin, is now complete and in production. Open Access – it will be available as PDF in June 2026.

We use an archaeology of artworks to probe human relationships with the environment – how people have got on with nature from then to now, and beyond. We examine how the concept of nature has been imagined, performed, and transformed in artworks across eight millennia. Rather than presenting a linear history, the book unfolds as an archaeology – an excavation of artworks as strata of environmental imagination. The book explores ways that one might connect with the environment in our contemporary times of precarious climate breakdown and runaway extraction of natural resources.

We begin with prehistory, not as a remote "before" but as a persistent, resonant layer of the present – a concept that unsettles the conventional divide between nature and culture, and offers a genealogical complement or alternative to historiographical accounts of "what happened in history".

Informed by new archaeological research we question orthodox accounts of the emergence of agriculture in Mesopotamia, of megalithic monuments built by early farming communities in Atlantic Europe, and of petroglyphs in the bronze age of northern Europe. In so doing we make three key points: the prehistory of settlement is founded upon the confluence, the distributed ontology of nature-culture; place-making and marking-the-land are key modes of geopoetic engagement; artwork is well conceived less as expression, and better as mode(s) of engagement. We argue that nature has always been a relational, performative field – a co-production of human and more-than-human agencies.

In an excavation of past relationships with nature that have endured and experienced metamorphosis, the book moves through six strata, the basis of the six main chapters: Landscape | Presence, Environment | Performance, Ecology | Systemics, Anthropocene | Deep Time, Climate Breakdown | Activism, and Immanent Futures. Each explores how artworks have faced, framed, and acted with (and against) nature – from the invention of a modern concept of landscape in the

Renaissance, through ecological and performative art in the twentieth century, to today's activist and posthuman practices. The book proposes that artwork does not so much represent nature; artwork *enacts* nature. Every artwork we examine is both archive and experiment, a field of correspondences between material and imagination, between what remains and what becomes. In sum there is no need to find answers to the challenge of how to act with nature and the environment. Attunement to the resonances of long-standing relationships offers ready-to-hand modes of practicing ecosophical care in times of crisis.

Ships in an ocean of granite. Madsebakke, Bornholm Denmark. Prehistoric petroglyph. [Link]

We are part of what we seek to understand – against the "reception" of the past

In *Archaeologies of Nature* we offer a genealogy, an archaeology of the concept of nature that takes us to antiquity and beyond in their actuality, their presence-at-hand (and yes, we acknowledge Nietzsche's and Foucault's "effective" histories as archaeological). So last summer 2025 I found myself returning to some poets of

Graeco-Roman antiquity – Horace's rural locales (via a beautiful small-press hand-crafted edition I found in Bell's Books, Palo Alto), to the genre of the pastoral, to Hesiod's *Works and Days*, the concept of *phusis* in presocratic and Aristotelian thought, to an old favorite of mine, Lucretius. After all, one of my academic homes is the Department of Classics!

None of this can be described as a *reception* of antiquity, the term usually used to refer to the study of afterlives of classical antiquity. Instead, I work within and upon the classical lineages of thought and practice that extend through the Euro-Mediterranean tradition and into the plural Atlantic modernities of the present. I am not claiming a kind of cultural inheritance to be defended, nor a canon to be discarded, but a terrain of post-classical legacy – a living field of translation, adaptation, and contestation. Not the "*heritage*" of cultural inheritance and property belonging to "us". These genealogies in poetry and the arts form an inherited *archive* of reason, imagination, and technique through which ideas of the human, the natural, and the political have been continually made and unmade.

There is no past "over-and-done" to be discovered. Remains are all around us. Animate the archive!

This is what we see as immanent critique: to inhabit an archive from the inside, attending to both its generative possibilities and its histories of exclusion and domination. Our methodology is radical – literally – digging into roots that ground not a single stem or trunk, but rhizomatic sideways-creeping, pervasive, irradicable, weed-like root systems. Ecologies of thought and practice (after Isabelle Stengers) – open to transformation – rather than bounded "Western" systems. Working within such critical humanist traditions entails, as Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing remind us, staying with the trouble: engaging the ruins and residues of the classical–modern world not in search of purity or progress, influence and inheritance, but in the hope of cultivating renewed forms of relation, care, and imagination.

Sycamore Gap, Hadrian’s Wall Northumberland UK. October 2020

I returned to the Roman north in a dark moody December 2025, to an iconic landscape setting. Sycamore Gap, as it came to be known, was one of the most photographed places in Europe, made famous in the Hollywood movie *Robin Hood Prince of Thieves* (1991), and featuring in many walkers itineraries along Hadrian’s Wall, one of the largest construction projects of antiquity, a landscape cleansed and conserved in the 19th century, and now on the World Heritage list. [Link]

In the early hours of September 28, 2023, the tree was cut down by Daniel Graham and Adam Carruthers who drove a couple of hours from their modest homes in the local town of Carlisle. The felling gained worldwide attention. What were they thinking, intending? Their motivation seems obscure. They did not make it clear in the hearings. It certainly seems to have nothing to do with the middle-class values of conservation of heritage of the National Trust and its members, the agency that owns and manages the wall. [Link]

December 2025. Done for a laugh, a lark, for a video posted on social media?

But is it such a mystery? Heritage is almost universally conceived as the inalienable cultural property of a community, a people, a nation state. “This is our land, our past.” Those wishing to act aggressively against the owners of such property, those who feel alienated from it, may well seek to damage or destroy it. Statues set up to commemorate the heroes of a community may be toppled in protest against the values of that community.

It’s our past too, not just yours! To do with as we please! In the break-up of Britain, the supposed United Kingdom, perhaps the motivation to cut down this icon of “national trust” was rooted in the same senses of ownership and of cultural inheritance so cherished by those horrified by the felling of the tree.

Atmospheres and geologies – against “entanglement”

So, finishing the book ran alongside my regular fieldwork exploring the prehistoric, Roman, and early medieval landscapes of northern Europe.

I have been *deep mapping* this region for decades now [Link] – reframing landscape as performance, memory, and encounter – a choreography of traces rather than a fixed terrain in what Michel Serres well-described as percolating time and space. A mess of a place, out-of-place. Cliff McLucas, Mike Pearson and I, in theatre company Brith Gof, borrowed the concept from William Least Heat Moon in the 90s to describe aspects of our site-specific theatre/archaeology. A symposium in September 2025, Venice and online, organized by Cristina Manzetti (University of Cyprus), and Valentina Mignosa (Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Digital and Public Humanities) celebrated the concept and field of *deep mapping*. I presented the keynote [Link].

A popular academic metaphor for the way one is mixed up in the natural world, in the world of artifacts, of other people and other species is entanglement. We are entangled in the world, in the past, so it goes. But the root metaphor remains textile: separate strands, threads, or lines become knotted together. This undercuts a stronger account of internal connectedness, in which things do not first exist independently and then enter relation, but arise through shared processes, pressures, media, and transformations. (And as expounded in symmetrical archaeology – *Archaeology: the Discipline of Things*, 2012, with Bjørnar Olsen, Chris Witmore, Tim Webmoor).

Three alternative metaphor families help reframe the issue.

Atmospheric metaphors emphasise medium, tone, pressure, and inhabitation. Terms such as atmospheric inheritance or heritage atmosphere describe how pasts persist not as discrete objects but as climates of perception: ways of seeing, feeling, valuing, omitting, and legitimating. One does not stand outside an atmosphere and inspect its connections; one breathes it. This is especially useful for heritage, where power often operates through mood, taste, silence, hospitality, signage, and "natural" assumptions of custodianship.

Liquid metaphors emphasise flow, mixing, turbulence, and confluence. Confluent historicity names the way pasts, presents, futures, human actors, non-human processes, myths, institutions, and materials move through one another, altering direction and force. Turbulent inheritance suggests temporary forms emerging within historical flow: eddies, vortices, and disturbances rather than fixed nodes or strands. Liquid metaphors preserve difference without presuming separability.

Geological metaphors emphasise pressure, deposition, transformation, erosion, and recrystallisation. Heritage diagenesis is especially useful: just as sediments are compacted, cemented, dissolved, and chemically altered after deposition, inherited pasts are transformed under later pressures of politics, memory, tourism, conservation, and desire. Weathered inheritance similarly names the slow alteration of forms through exposure, use, conflict, and changing moral climates.

Together, these alternatives shift the emphasis from external connection to internal formation. They replace the image of things tied together with things co-forming through medium, flow, pressure, and transformation. In this vocabulary, heritage is not an entanglement of past and present, but their atmospheric, liquid, and geological becoming.

Archaeological sensibilities – against "big history"

Method in *Archaeologies of Nature*, and in my archaeology more generally, arises from an archaeological sensibility – a concept I have introduced and pushed to capture a disposition that attends to, is attuned to traces, remains, and recursions through time. This is working in the archaeological imagination, explored in what Mike Pearson and I called *theatre/archaeology*, and in *archaeography* – where the archaeological imagination meets photography (I delivered a hands-on manual and set of portfolios for archaeography at the beginning of summer 2025 [Link]). A forthcoming Routledge collection, *Archaeological Sensibilities*, edited by François Richard (Chicago), offers a wide-ranging survey of the concept through anthropology, literary studies, the arts and humanities; I contributed a summary commentary on the 20 or so richly worked case studies. It is gratifying to see the concept generating such fascinating work. Stanford's Mudit Trivedi has a lovely essay in the collection.

And so appropriate to an archaeological sensibility are the alternative metaphor families just mentioned. Attunement to atmospheres of past-presences.

Let me be technical again – we are academics after all! Iterative transduction is what one might call this methodology, after Gilbert Simondon back in the 1950s and taken up in work following Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in pragmatist science studies (for example Latour, Stengers, Pickering). This poetics in an archaeological sensibility is a recursive practice in which empirical engagement and conceptual reflection continually reshape one another. The work proceeds by

return. Each (archaeological) encounter begins in the empirical — the found, the seen, the touched — but never ends there. Observation folds into reflection; description becomes inquiry. What is discovered in the field unsettles what was once thought stable in the mind. This is not a cycle of confirmation but a choreography of transformation — an iterative transduction where matter and meaning continually exchange energies. This approach enacts the recursive and iterative dialogue between empirical encounter and conceptual reframing. Knowledge is not extracted but enacted; thinking is a form of fieldwork. Each return to site or concept becomes a performance of correspondence—a way of making sense through the rhythms of attention, revision, and return.

The world is partner, not data. This methodology is a well-understood means of handling complexity, whether it be environmental systems or the irreducible messiness of history. It's a way of connecting micro and macro scales of modeling, reconciling the universal principles of the natural sciences with the specific local contexts of technical application (design), retaining fine-grain empirical detail without reducing to the much-easier-to-handle schematic summaries and correlations to be found in much of "big history".

I push back against "big history" — marketed by the likes of Jared Diamond, Yuval Harari, Luke Kemp, and our own Walter Scheidel and Ian Morris. My quarrel is not with deep time or big questions of the shape of history, but with the genre — the universal synthesis that promises the essence of the human story and its lessons in a single volume.

Such a research and publishing contract forces a set of recurring faults. First, the prime-factor problem: each new historian typically corrects a predecessor only to nominate their own master key — geography, demography, epidemiology, energy, cognition, improvisation, dominance, networking, whatever. Second, the unit problem: the genre needs countable, bounded societies and other such entities such as states, with a birth and a death, yet the better historiography dissolves exactly that object. Rome does not end; it becomes Byzantium, canon law, the Latin Church, the juridical vocabulary of every successor state. Rome, one might easily argue, never "existed". What "collapses" is usually a ruling apparatus — a far smaller claim than civilizational death (Cline on the end of Bronze Age "civilization"!). Third, the aesthetics of survival analysis confer false commensurability on cases that are not of one kind (Kemp compares the so-called end

of the Bronze Age with contemporary Somalia). Fourth, narrative gravity – the tragic shape – bends the evidence toward tidy declines. Fifth, character returns by the back door, collapse blamed on pathological elites, reviving great-man history after disowning it, or celebrating the unnamed masses, for example. Sixth, a supposed origin becomes a moral anchor (such as Rousseau's original Eden). And throughout runs an unfalsifiable functionalism whose deep-time machinery supplies gravitas, **not** evidence (impress one's readers with the vastness and seriousness of one's historical scope). Instead – try stripping the history out and ask whether the present-day argument still stands.

The alternatives I am exploring begin by dropping the contract. The shape of history packaged into 600 pages – no deal. I lean on the specialist literature that already treats prehistory and antiquity as continuity, transformation, and entropic process rather than rise and fall, which makes the natural shape of an archaeological or historical project genealogical. More radically, I seek not a counter-thesis (as did Graeber and Wengrow, for example, in positing heterarchy as the motor of history), but ask which form and genre can hold a plural, multi-temporal past as a complex adaptive system without collapsing it into a single arc. The deep map, the layered atlas, the case study, polyphonic narrative, speculative fabulation, agent-based simulation, itinerary, theatre/archaeology?

It has only been in 2025 that a quest to counter the grandstanding of such historiography has come together, clarified. Our book *Archaeologies of Nature* has turned out to be something of a trial run or experiment, a prototype. So watch out for a trilogy over the next few years: *Prehistory: a Mythography*, *Antiquity: Speculative Scenarios*, *Modernity: an Archaeology*.

Archaeological mythographies – an energy-field of the past-in-the-present-for-the-future

I have just mentioned mythography. Much of what passes for archaeology and history is less rooted in analysis of evidence than one might suppose, or, at least, serves to support familiar myths, by which I mean stock grand narratives of the human story – origins, progress, decline, nature/culture, social and technological revolutions and more. My theatre/archaeology (the rearticulation of remains as real-time event) continues to explore the roots of these myths with experiments in tropes and archetypes, this year with the development of archaeological theatre (photo tableaux and scenarios – inspired not least by Poussin's extraordinary

seventeenth-century classical tableaux).

The cure for bad myth is not no myth — that is not on offer — but myth practiced deliberately, critically, creatively, against-the-grain, and in the plural.

Brith Gof’s Haearn (Iron) (1992) – myths of Prometheus in the past-present vapors of theatre/archaeology. [Link]

Statue-to-be-toppled – Archaeological theatre after Michel Serres.

TVRRIS (tower) – archaeological scenography. Edlingham, Northumberland. [Link]

Applied archaeology, pedagogy and learning – the continuing story

Published in March 2025, *Creative Pragmatics for Active Learning in STEM Education* (edited with Connie Svabo, Tamara Carleton, Chungfand Zhou) [Link] draws on more than 50 years of progressive pedagogical practice in Scandinavia, and exemplified in Stanford's design thinking, to outline programs to build the competencies to be

found in such grounded and action-oriented knowledge building. We launched the book in a plenary session of the annual meetings of the European Science Education Research Association in Copenhagen in August 2025 and at an online symposium in October.

Its praxis continues with *Trans Nation Co-Creation* – a new network of interests in leadership and innovation, led by Sabine Remdisch of Leuphana University, Visiting Scholar in my studio lab. This program of workshops, symposia and publication is now funded by the German Federal Ministry of Research, Technology, and Space.

More funding for research in this field of transdisciplinary art-science-humanities has come to me and Gabriella Giannachi from the Arts and Humanities Program BRAID (Bridging Responsible AI Divides) and the Arts and Humanities Research Council UK. The brief is to write a commentary – *The Archaeology of AI: Robots, Memory, and the Building of Knowledge*. Due in 2027. [Link] [Link]

Acting with the World: Agency in the Anthropocene is the title of a book by science studies scholar Andrew Pickering, also published in March 2025 [Link]. With elegant and compelling clarity he draws on lifelong research and makes the case for a sustainable science to be founded on a balanced, symmetrical relationship with what we seek to know. In contrast to our usual practice of acting-on the world, Andrew proposes a performance model for knowledge where one *acts-with* human, nonhuman and more-than-human agencies. And he has great case studies to show just what he means and what this entails – flood control on the Mississippi River, ecosystem restoration on the Colorado River, the Room for the River project and rewilding in the Netherlands, natural farming in Japan, Aboriginal fire techniques in Australia, and Amazonian shamanism. Our book *Archaeologies of Nature* draws similar conclusions from our excavation of artworks. His book ends with a call to implement ways of teaching the skills and competencies of a sustainable science that acts-with the world; he cites our book *Creative Pragmatics* as offering essential guidance and leadership in exactly such a future-oriented project that combines the arts, sciences, and the humanities.