Public Archaeology
Arts of Engagement

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Cover image: The Heritage Graffiti Project during creation (Photograph: Ryan Eddleston, reproduced with permission)

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Why do you do public archaeology?

                                          What other kind of archaeology could there be?

Any archaeological practice should be 'public archaeology'. As a discipline focusing on the universal inheritance of our shared past, how could anyone, in good conscience do otherwise? It is impossible to be a considered archaeologist without considering public archaeology in practice. Public archaeology forefronts the engaged, political practice that occurs every time we undertake archaeological work. To hoard material culture or knowledge might seem attractive to some, but such an approach is ultimately self-defeating. Not least, because after the initial excitement discovering something — identifying a pattern in data, finding something through the process of excavation, or making an intellectual connection between two bits of an archive — the next most exciting thing is sharing that knowledge with others. Because in emphasising contemporary archaeology as person-centred, practice-based and creative, there is the potential to subvert existing narratives and power structures. If one accepts the futility of hoarding — stuff or ideas — then a logical corollary is that there is power to develop a discipline and subvert gatekeepers through openness and engagement.

These twin ideas — of engagement and creativity — are the most powerful themes in this volume. They are reflected across the different contributions, and it is exciting to see such stimulating variety here. As there are diverse projects, people, and purposes in archaeological work, so public archaeology *should* always be highly varied and creative in its practice, and this is why public archaeology covers such a range of themes in this collection and likewise in other recent works. But, the ethical context of archaeological practice is also central to the ethos of public archaeology. This is why public archaeology has distinct flavours in different parts of the world, because the existing power structures that it needs to challenge are distinct. The intersection between engagement, creativity and ethics is important because the most eloquent solutions to engagement *are required* to be creative and playful. In making methodological openness central, with an emphasis on playful and creative processes, we can de-centre the gaze, the narratives, the research aims, and the practices from the narrow focus of traditional academia. Playfulness and creativity facilitate engagement. Engagement subverts established disciplinary 'just so' stories or practices. This applies as much to school children's visits to archaeological sites, archaeological video game design, engaging with different communities and so on. It also applies to the origins of this volume.

It is very important to understand that this volume grew out of an undergraduate conference held as a taught component in the University of Chester Archaeology degree programme. It is particularly exciting to read students and others offering challenging approaches to inclusion and practice *in all contexts* through art/archaeology interactions. As such, this volume is testimony to its editors' commitment to a creative and playful approach. Such perspectives might seem ill-defined, or unimportant when first encountered, but this kind of 'soft' practice can challenge and change disciplinary boundaries. In emphasising new and experimental forms of public archaeology, we are changing the practitioners as well as our practices. Public archaeology as political practice therefore represents the latest development in the discipline as part of a wider history of the *social* construction of science and scientific knowledge.

What does 'good' public archaeology look like? Does it matter?

If the themes of creativity and engagement should therefore be central to the ethos of public archaeology, is it necessary to identify and value good practice? As an archaeological scientist, I believe that data are powerful, and using assessments of different projects and practices will be a necessary part of any undertaking. However, there are tensions between the importance of creativity and playfulness, and exercises in quantification and review. As essential elements of any project good governance, some forms of evaluation will be required. Developing better understanding of practice, through self-reflection, assessment and monitoring should be essential. But these must be designed with the specific goals of the project as central.

Good public archaeological research will be very different at different times and places. Recognising the importance of a deeply transformative experience for an individual is as important as the passing enjoyment of many people in a different context. This is important however because assessment exercises can feed directly in project funding, commissioning, and continuation; the ways in which public archaeology projects are measured and classified as part of management or assessment exercises represents an most important challenge and opportunity for the discipline. Poorly designed assessment exercises have the potential to constrain creativity and diversity. There is potential tension here therefore between the experimental, innovative and ethical ways that public archaeology should be undertaken, and the potential for the banality of bureaucracy to constrict these approaches.

In Britain certainly, the current social care crisis, and the growing 'neutral-isation' or instrumentalisation of 'public academia' in higher education for 'impact' presents a dangerous trend that may have implications for public archaeology. How do we negotiate the growing outsourcing of social care butting up against an emphasis on academic social impact? What ethical considerations need to be made about desires for public academia, perhaps done for best intentions, but wholly unfit to plug the gaps of local government funding cuts? Negotiating the instrumentalisation of the engagement with 'the past' in the present represents *the* most intractable issue in our contemporary political context. A self-aware reflection on practice will be critical to resist these processes. Retaining an emphasis on creativity and engagement will be essential, together with the recognition that assessing 'good' public archaeology needs to be as diverse as our practices. As with taste, the 'best' public archaeology will depend on its audience, context, politics, timing, originality, and commitment of its practitioners. Perhaps it would be easier to assess 'less successful' public archaeology using the specific research aims of the practice, and using the assessment criteria of:

- ethical practice;
- creative practice;
- engagement evidence;
- variability in production?

Such assessment criteria may provide a means to identify the instrumentalisation or the constriction on public archaeological practices by established institutional priorities. By identifying the key themes of creativity and engagement, this volume therefore evaluates the most important themes in terms of the ethics of *all* archaeology practice into the future.