

## What Concrete Forms Might an Activist Scholarly Archaeology Take? – Two Examples of Experimental Projects

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## What Concrete Forms Might an Activist Scholarly Archaeology Take? – Two Examples of Experimental Projects

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“Prenons garde à ne pas céder à la désespérance, car il ne reste de temps à autre lueur d’espoir“  
(Edouard Saouma, 1993)

“Without being an activist, I would fall into despair...”  
Greta Thunberg (November 1st, 2022; interview on Channel 4)

Since the 1970s, scholars like Donella Meadows, Dennis Meadows, and Jorgen Randers (Meadows et al. 2022 [2004]: 383–454), have been actively proposing actions to guarantee the sustainability for life outside of the ideological framework imposed within the ‘Capitalocene’ (Moore 2016). In this specific context, activist archaeology certainly has a role to play in answering the questions: “is archaeology useful?” (Dawdy 2009: 131), or “why archaeology?” (Tilley 1989: 105; McGuire 2008: xi). The genesis of these questions likely emerges from the aim of millennial and Gen Z archaeologists to use their archaeological skills meaningfully, or at least in a way that does not harm people or the environment and preferably is somehow beneficial to communities. Thus, an activist archaeology is about reorienting the focus of archaeological research and emphasizing action itself as the heart of future research programs (Stottman 2010: 9) or even as a rescue program that seeks social, economic, political, and ecological justice. This active approach challenges and transgresses the traditional bounds of academic archaeology, rather than conceptualizing activism as a potential by-product of archaeological practice (McGuire 2008: xii).

### The Impossibility of an Activist Archaeology?

Recently, Richard M. Hutchings and Marina La Salle (2021: 12) warned the archaeological community about the potential false hopes raised by diverse forms of activist archaeological practices. They suggested that the trend of adding ‘prefixes + archaeology’, such as ‘sustainable’, ‘public’, ‘Indigenous’, ‘community’ archaeology only demonstrated the desperate attempt of archaeologists to survive by correcting or pretending to correct archaeological practices that were abusive, commodified, cynical, and self-serving. If ‘surviving’ means maintaining ‘business as usual’ (i.e., surviving a highly competitive job market), while pretending to serve reparatory claims, then I must agree with Hutchings and La Salle that the archaeological discipline largely deserves to be condemned.

This current trend of ‘prefix’ archaeology can be seen as a form of rebranding of the discipline to make it look ‘responsible’ towards social and ecological issues and embedded in present problematic practices. This is especially the case for those bodies that employ archaeologists or for the institutions that distribute grants and awards such as universities, governments, and private sponsors. As such, typical ‘activist’ vocabulary is used, commodified, and displayed in archaeological research contexts. This is visible, for example, in browsing through random programs of current international archaeology conferences; one might get the impression of a cynical, as well as opportunistic and manipulative choice in terms of research subjects, that just mimic various current activist trends. Sometimes this is not only an impression, as trendy terms linked to ‘sustainability’ will be prominently spread on the screen and in the conference printed program, quoting heavily from decades-old landmark studies, but often without a clear understanding of the concepts at stake, nor any clear intention to implement them meaningfully

with a demanding intellectual, critical process. These ‘prefix archaeologies’ are then only implemented superficially, notably by packing a research presentation with fancy digital illustrations, or even sometimes by professing a state or religious moralist agenda in total contradiction with the emancipatory or collaborative agenda claimed in the first place. In the end, such discourses are meant to please sponsors – or not to upset them – in a career agenda of self-interest and self-survival.

In the meantime, the situation in academia is far from being that low-spirited, as many researchers are choosing not to follow the trends and branded thematic research. They were already or are presently engaged with communities before the so called ‘brands’ existed. Many archaeologists are not only researchers, but also citizens involved in their communities at many different levels, and this permeates their research subjects and projects as well. In this light, doing so-called ‘prefix’ archaeology is not a defensive reaction to an accusation of being per se an assistant of a colonial, capitalist, and extractive society, but rather a pre-existing, ethical, and self-imposed imperative both to research and civic duties. This “political action” (McGuire 2008) often opposes or is at least critical of the values, colonialism, authoritarianism, nationalism, and patriarchy of hyper-capitalist societies and their deleterious effects on any living communities.

## Concrete Examples

### *1. The E-waste Erren River Archaeological Project in Taiwan: Archaeology as Eco-Environmental Activism*

This archaeology research project was conducted by a Master’s student from the Institute of Archaeology of the National Cheng Kung University (Taiwan). Dong-Yo Shih [施東佑] (2022) focused on a recent e-waste industrial toxic heritage located at the banks of Erren River in Southern Taiwan. The Erren River was one of the places for metal recycling activities in the 1960s-1980s that resulted from Taiwan’s booming economy, which durably devastated its shores and the nearby areas.

From my external perspective, Shih acted as an ‘activist archaeologist’ in the sense that the project was born from his own initial engagement as a young citizen in a local ecological activism association (referred to by the term ‘grassroot’ in Taiwan). He developed an evolving, organic, and personal connection with a specific area, its environment, and its peoples. The combination of his study specialization in archaeology with this ‘grassroots’ background resulted in the formulation of his MA thesis project. This project was contextualized within a collective of local citizens consisting of diverse specialists and/or activists in various domains and visual artists, all of whom were dedicated to environmental preservation/repairation.

The strength of his scholarly project resides especially in the use of multidisciplinary approaches and media, which confront contemporary Taiwanese society with the consequences of an ecological disaster directly resulting from the globalized market-economy. It should be noted here that one of the key elements of the success of this project was its financial independence, relying notably on unpaid volunteers and unpaid research by the student/researcher himself. Some of the funds necessary for conducting the project were obtained from the university (through the financial support of the Institute of Archaeology), while some additional funds were obtained from a private corporate sponsor (without controlling the aims and/or results of the research). This configuration allowed the researcher to be critical, and most importantly disruptive, of the capitalist consensus, which was in denial of: 1) the existence of a pollution, 2) the ideological origin of its existence, and 3) its present and future consequences for the environment and for the health of people living in the area.

While the presence of e-waste and the associated activities of metal extractions using chemical products and plastic combustion was known by local populations, the reality of the pollution and its proportions remained an abstraction and was easily hidden underground. The work of Shih gave the e-waste toxic pollution a materiality that could be quantified and interpreted in the general globalized context with the help of qualitative data (notably through semi-directed interviews). Furthermore, as archaeology can be particularly dry or difficult to grasp for the public,

the association of an invited artist reflecting on the archaeological process generated another outcome, more poetic and more accessible to the wider public. The combination of excavation, public archaeology events, community archaeology, and artist performances successfully established a general awareness of the e-waste pollution and its consequences, bringing the e-waste and its toxic legacy directly to the political forefront. In this case, joining forces and crafts to form a collective reflection of the state of the Erren River could establish what we interpret as an ‘activist archaeology’.

## *2. Structural Control and Reactionary Forces – Breaking an ‘Archaeological Ethnography’ and Planned Artistic Performances in Greece*

The Toumba Serron Research Project conducted in Northern Greece since 2019, is an ongoing academic project that is particularly relevant here given the oppositions it has faced. It is a large-scale project embedded within university regulations and largely financially dependent on various national governmental institutions. This dependence, in contrast to the previous case presented above, resulted in all social aspects of the project being cancelled by the funding institutions, themselves essentially a jury composed of archaeologists and other scholars under governmental jurisdiction. Part of the project aimed toward fostering socio-political engagement. The project was threatened with a loss of funding if it did not stick strictly to archaeological fieldwork with its expected scientific practices and analyses. Political actions through artistic performances, a self-reflexive documentary, and archaeological-ethnography plans were thus eliminated (at least on paper) through financial pressure. Still, some forms of ‘action’ were partially maintained, notably through “archaeological ethnography” (Hamilakis and Anagnostopoulos 2009; Stefanou and Antoniadou 2021), but they were hidden from the funding institutions. An archaeological ethnography approach consists precisely in decentering an archaeological project from the scientific study of the past by examining the present of people as well and their interest in the past and integrating them within the project as legitimate stakeholders of the past(s).

Yet, with very limited funding, such ‘prefix’ archaeology implementation depends mostly on the good-will and backing of unpaid or low-paid researchers, as well as the care of the local community through gifts, participation, or lending equipment. This is not necessarily a bad thing, as it can provide much more freedom for collective actions, but it does considerably limit these actions and creates an unfair divide between the funded scientists and the unfunded or badly funded socially engaged actors. This current financial configuration still does not allow the directors of the project to involve a theatrical performance and a film director for the fieldwork due to the lack of available funds. This restriction is based on a reactionary assumption that ‘prefixes archaeologies’ are ‘irrelevant’ or even detrimental to a ‘professional’ archaeological practice, as stated by the committee awarding research grants (in this case, in East Asia). In contrast, the project was initially defined by its directors with the opposite assumption that there are no ethical and professional archaeological practices conceivable today without a significant social involvement of the teams and a clear archaeological problematic serving, not only the construction of knowledge on the past, but also the present and future of local populations.

### **The Current Necessity of an Activist Archaeology**

An ‘activist archaeology’ can nurture, solidify, and justify actions against social, ecological, or socio-political injustices. It can achieve such aims by participating in the building of scientifically rooted arguments, notably by giving an opportunity to establish solid quantitative and qualitative data corpuses. Yet, most importantly, an activist archaeology can give opportunities for transdisciplinary, interconnected and engaged interactions with other citizens involved in curving or fighting back against, for example, the deleterious effects of a mega-development project.

As we saw with the example of the Erren River in Taiwan, archaeology can revive the materiality of pollution related to a global capitalist market logic; it can even go further by measuring it and offering the tools to evaluate its potential effects on present and future human communities and on all living things. While action is triggered by archaeology and the results passed on to the community/group/minority of oppressed, disenfranchised, alienated

people (from their environment), our duty as activist archaeologists is then to move on and start something else somewhere else. If we stick around making such projects a permanent job, we will place ourselves in a position of conflict of interest by making our subsistence rely on the existence of an issue we are supposed to solve or, at least, raise awareness about.

In Ursula Le Guin's novel *The Dispossessed*, individuals accomplish a mission for a community in need according to the crafts they possess and then move on to the next, but it can preferably be a collective, formed by complementary and interdependent skilled individuals, as in the novel of Alain Damasio *La horde du contrevent* (Damasio 2004). As stated by Chambers (2004: 207), "The kinds of career opportunities and challenges that many archaeologists now face might require new skills and areas of specialization, some of which can be provided by their cultural colleagues". Then, the collective should not be composed only of archaeologists, and this is exactly when artists, other scholars, and skilled locals can join forces to intervene when needed.

From my perspective, when a project is completed, such as for the Erren River, with ecological awareness goals reached and tools transferred to local stakeholders to seek for more ecological justice aiming for the full detoxification of soils, the role of the archaeologist would then be to fade away. Yet, a long-term meaningful project also implies keeping in contact with the community as a referent, to accompany them in their journey dealing with their own heritage, as toxic it can be. As stated by Shih,

"The electronic toxic wastes revealed by the excavation will be an important element, or catalyst, for the understanding of local and global socio-politics, creating future opportunities for both reflection and dialogue on environmental issues [in which the archaeologist will certainly participate if requested]" (Shih 2022 – Zorzin, translation from Mandarin).

Even further, an activist archaeology might simply have to be detached from any forms of financial dependences to avoid self-censorship or self-moderating in every situation involving the necessity of a radical action. To avoid the inertia in such situations of dependency, I have already suggested in a previous publication the potential support of the "universal basic income" (UBI) (Zorzin 2021: 11–12). It could be provided by the state, local authorities, or directly by the community concerned by a project, as soon as a communal nature of the activities (i.e. of public interest) can be demonstrated. Such UBI could be granted without obligations of results and without any form of control of the institutions in the nature of the results. Such results may go against the state's policies or interests, as, for example, in the case of Indigenous or environmental claims, where archaeology could provide the arguments justifying radical actions or other forms of resistance.

Finally, what if the very justification of the existence of our archaeological practices could be based on itinerant, ephemeral, and radical actions all serving the common good? What if the usefulness of archaeology is to bring knowledge to communities, and what if this knowledge could support the tools for building collectively a better future? I can foresee that archaeology, as dominantly practiced today, will have no justification if it continues to exist essentially as a vassal of 'extractivism' and development. It will only be relevant and useful to communities seeking for a sustainable future if it becomes socially engaged – an 'activist archaeology'.

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