

Chapter 2

Colin Renfrew: A Conversation

Colin Renfrew

Ian Alden Russell | Andrew Cochrane (IIA): You've written some of the earliest works that explore the relationships between art, art history and archaeology. In this book, there are a number of younger practitioners adopting creative practices in their archaeological work. We want to try to find ways to frame the type of work they're trying to do. We think that perhaps some reflections from you on your life and your work might help us think critically about how we're encountering contemporary creative practice today.

Colin Renfrew (CIR): Right. I am not sure that I have great advice to offer, but my own experience certainly has been mainly in the university world, most recently at Jesus College. When I was in Southampton (from 1972 to 1981), there was a very good development, the John Hansard Gallery, which would be analogous in a way with Kettle's Yard in Cambridge but Kettle's Yard has many special merits, one of which is Jim Ede's wonderful collection.

The John Hansard Gallery doesn't have a permanent collection and is very outward looking and energetic. As a small university gallery in the early days before it had its own premises, it had to run very hard to keep going. It kept on having good exhibitions by younger artists which were always exciting and which I was very interested in.

That's where I first met David Nash for instance. It's where I first met Richard Long. Long did a work called 'Chalk Line' which initially I found enigmatic. I think of Richard Long's work as an economy of materials and economically formed. I was very fascinated by that. Although he doesn't talk very often about his work, and he didn't talk about his work on this occasion, it was arranged that he would host a slideshow to which he set music, mainly by Johnny Cash, that sort of thing.

He simply showed the sequence of his slides, for about an hour. He didn't say anything at all, so the art was speaking, the work was speaking in a sequence, and it was absolutely breathtaking. Initially, I'd found his work, as I often do with all

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Fig. 2.1 Richard Long, *Chalk Line*, 1979, chalk stone. University of Southampton. Courtesy: The artist. (Photograph by Colin Renfrew)



Fig. 2.2 Barry Flanagan at work Jesus College, Cambridge (c. 1992). (Photograph by Colin Renfrew)



abstract art, slightly enigmatic. By the end of that slide presentation, it was enigmatic no more. That was a wonderful experience. I have been a great admirer of his work ever since. The same was true for David Nash, an artist I met at that time alongside others including Barry Flanagan.

When I was an undergraduate here in Cambridge (1958–1962), there was a very lively Visual Art Society. I remember, I already knew William Turnbull's work and we invited him to speak to the Visual Arts Society. There was an Arts Council gallery then which had really very good exhibitions, and I started writing art reviews for the university newspaper *Varsity*. That was when I first met the work of Schwitters, Kurt Schwitters. I was really very impressed by the beautiful little exhibition that they had. And I learnt more about it just by writing the review.

I got on the right wavelength with Schwitters and with quite a few other artists whose work I reviewed. This was for me a very profitable experience which I think would be open to any student in a contemporary university. There are always student newspapers and reviewers are needed (Fig. 2.1 and 2.2).

It doesn't surprise me that many artists get fascinated by the practices of archaeology because of our special involvements as archaeologists with material things. Mark

Dion is a wonderful example of someone who's interested in the practice of science and the practice of investigation. The sometimes obsessive qualities of archaeology are exactly suited to his interest in the obsessional qualities of scientific research.

IIA Like Simon Callery's work at Segsbury Camp?

CR That's right, yes. He became fascinated by the visual qualities of the material, and that excavation happened to be on a chalk surface. He got really into the material qualities of the chalk and the way it determines, first of all, I suppose, the buildings that were being put up in prehistoric times, and then the way the archaeologists had to respond to it.

He did some really beautiful works which arose, I think, from the archaeological context. I don't think he would have had that experience if it hadn't been for that circumstance.

When an archaeologist opens a trench, it's well defined. It's very often rectangular.

That is the focus of the archaeologist's optic. He has to decide where he's going to dig or might dig, and then he opens a trench. That is the theatre of operation, and everything can become very detail-oriented. Suddenly, you're doing microscopic things in this trench. The focus of the lens of the archaeologist's microscope is there.

Simon Callery, I think, had that experience in the archaeological trench. The chalk surface was presented to him, and then he just saw how that evoked a response in him. It was really the chalk's surface that took him, I think. It's not for me to speak about his work with authority, but he really got off on that and did some lovely works for which that was a very important component.

The same happened, I think, to Cornelia Parker. She went on some excavations, and found the experience interesting, and did some work arising from it. Most artists have to have a rather obsessive quality. They have to think, 'That's what I am interested in'. The world is there before them, and they focus on something and, 'This is what I am doing' and 'I am going into this'. That is a feature of much of her work. There is a strong analogy between the archaeologist's trench as the theatre of endeavour and the choice that the artist has to make: 'This is what interests me, I am focusing on this'. Then of course, the artist's imagination takes off and does many different things.

In a sense, so does the archaeologist's imagination, if you think about the progress of archaeology as a discipline over the past 50 years. Much of it still happens in that trench. The trench isn't really very different today: that is still the point of departure. It's still often a rectangular trench, but what you do in that trench is now very different—sampling and analysing soil profiles, or selecting samples for pollen analysis or for radiocarbon dating.

You really have to go in and take this tiny sample, and then count the beetles legs, or whatever your specialism is. Very often that's what the artist has to do. The artist has to say, 'That's the aspect that interests me, and I'm going to deal with that'. I think that's one reason that many artists get fascinated by the archaeological process because we're both obsessive in rather analogous ways (Fig. 2.3).

Fig. 2.3 Antony Gormley installing *Learning to Be* (1992) in the Fellows' Garden, Jesus College, Cambridge for *Sculpture in the Close*



IIA Earlier you mentioned your early encounters with Richard Long. Was this roughly 1960s or early 1970s?

CR Actually it was early 1970s, about 1973.

IIA So this was around the time you published 'The Arts of the First Farmers'

CR That was a little earlier, in 1969.

IIA That is interesting. You can read many archaeological narratives and see the influences of their parallel interests outside of the discipline. But what's surprising is that some archaeologists we know are fascinated with art in their personal lives, and they're constantly going to art galleries. Their knowledge of art and contemporary art history is phenomenal. Yet, when you read their published papers, their archaeological work, you might never know that until you meet them socially.

It seems to us though, somewhere along the line you made a decision, and your interest in art started coming through in your archaeological work. We wondered, was that a conscious decision?

CR Certainly *The Arts of the First Farmers* was an exhibition held in Sheffield in 1969 for which I wrote the catalogue. That was before I was aware of Richard Long's work, but I was already very interested in contemporary art, and an admirer of Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko. One of the things that drew me to the subject of my doctoral work (which was in the Cycladic Islands), was the impact of those marvellous Cycladic marble figures which I had seen in Paris—above all the wonderful Early Cycladic head in the Louvre (which dates from about 2,500 BC).

Before the time I was doing my National Service (1956–1958), just before and just after, I had very fruitful times in Paris. I went to Paris to try and learn some more French. My parents very kindly financed that. I spent a lot of time pacing through the Louvre and also in the Rue de Seine where a lot of the art galleries were.

I started to form a small art collection at that time, mainly lithographs. I'd found out that if you didn't have much money at the time, there were these wonderful exhibition posters—*affiches*—to be bought. The artists in Paris would do their own posters, original lithograph posters. You could buy these *affiches* as they were there to advertise the exhibition. Sometimes the artist would sign a few copies for sale. I have a beautiful poster signed by Matisse for one of his exhibitions—it is an original lithograph. That's when I really started collecting, so I did have a strong interest in the visual arts before Cambridge.

It was in the Louvre at that time that I spotted some of the figures including the beautiful Early Cycladic head. That is the large life size head which Brancusi saw and which inspired him in some of his early works. I was aware of that already before I came up to the University in 1958 (where I started reading Natural Sciences and later switched to Archaeology). Perhaps it was in my mind after I graduated and had to choose a subject for my doctoral research.

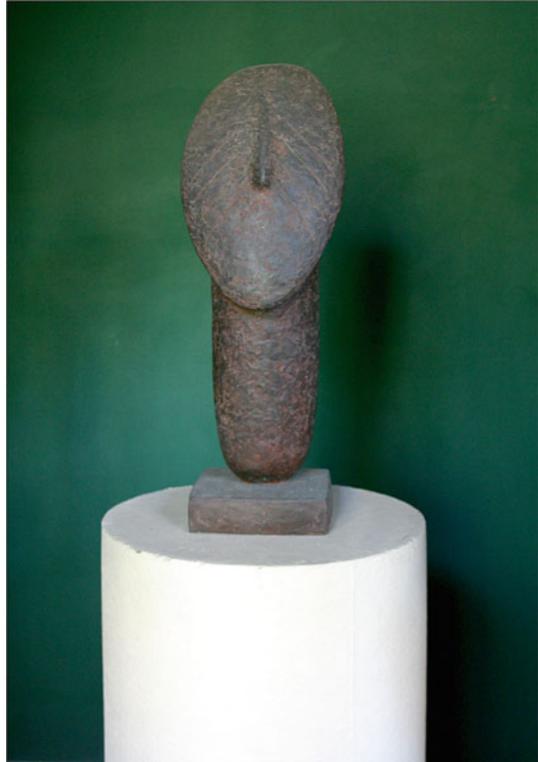
That is a big question, at that point: what to do research on. As you know, if you're doing an undergraduate degree and you think, 'I'd like to do research,' the huge question is: 'Well, what am I going to do research into?' Sometimes you just take advice. So Glyn Daniel, who was my Director of Studies, said 'You know I think you should research into the origins of the megalithic monuments of Europe'. That could have been interesting, but I decided it would be more productive to study a particular subject area you could really know about.

I'd been, by that time, on an excavation in Greece (at the early Neolithic site of Nea Nikomedeia) and had seen the National Museum in Athens. They had formidable collections of Cycladic materials about which very little was known. What Gordon Childe had written in 1925 hadn't really been changed very much. There was a subject there waiting to be tackled. This was so particularly because there were lots of claims being made about how the early Spanish Copper Age had been influenced by the Cyclades, and how the Vinča culture of the Balkans started because of contact with the Cycladic islands. There were many diffusionist assumptions around at that time, which was before the radiocarbon revolution took effect and fresh thinking needed to be undertaken.

I did have those interests in early art as well as contemporary art by then. It was the case; I suppose that the Sheffield exhibition arose from our travels. It was in Yugoslavia that Jane and I got to know Radoslav Galović, who was a specialist in the Vinča culture. We were able to invite him to come to Sheffield to speak. Then it proved to be feasible to put on an exhibition of sculpture of the Vinča culture. The Director of the Sheffield City Museum at that time was Geoffrey Lewis, a very lively man and he was very supportive (Fig. 2.4).

There were these amazing, really very large, terracotta figurines then being found in what is now Kosova, at that time still part of Yugoslavia. We had a wonderful exhibition. Some of them really are formidable works of art. Obviously, you can look at any prehistoric products and think of them as works of art (even if it's slightly meaningless to say so, since they're made for their own purposes, and not to satisfy modern aesthetic criteria).

Fig. 2.4 William Turnbull, *Head*, 1987, bronze. Cloister Court, Jesus College Cambridge. (Photograph by Colin Renfrew)



Some of those Balkan figurines do have really wonderful plastic properties and it's not difficult to see them as works of art. That was a very interesting exhibition and I was very pleased to write the catalogue.

It was actually one of the best exhibitions of prehistoric art ever held in Britain, I think. Until the recent 'Power of Dogu' and the 'Ice Age Art' shows at the British Museum, there had not been an exhibition of prehistoric art in a museum in England on that scale ever.

IIA Their fascination is unfortunately reflected in the art market also.

CR That's right. In fact, I've always been puzzled and remain really puzzled, about why those Cycladic figures... why they are to the modern eye so successful.

Why they were creating works, which appealed so strongly to the modern eye, to sculptors like Brancusi, and the other early moderns in the early twentieth century? It is all the more bizarre, when we now know that they were painted in a way that would certainly have, to our eye, detracted from the wonderful whiteness of the surface.

There is an enigma which I've addressed several times, really, and not with a very coherent conclusion. What is it that is so wonderful about these figures?—And I do still feel that.

Fig. 2.5 Richard Long, *Turf Circles*, 1988, excavated turf. Fellows' Garden, Jesus College, Cambridge. Courtesy: The artist. (Photograph by Colin Renfrew)



That of course can be controversial. Chris Chippindale and David Gill wrote their very good article criticising the elevation of these things to the status of works of art which fuelled the pricing of them in auction and which has undoubtedly fuelled the looting of archaeological sites, to their great detriment.

I agree with much of what they say there but I have never really been able to find myself guilty for thinking of them as beautiful. I think that Gill and Chippindale are just straight wrong when they say, 'That's not relevant, and that's not interesting'. They are archaeological works: you should respect them as archaeology, and be aware that the archaeological context is crucial. If you find them amazingly beautiful, well, that is interesting too.

That doesn't mean you should dig them up illicitly and put them on the market. As you may know I have become quite critical of that process but I don't think it's a sin to find the Louvre head beautiful. I do indeed find it very beautiful and I'm still puzzled by what it should be that makes the product of that particular culture so very beautiful to our eyes. For, undoubtedly, they were seen quite differently then.

I've remained interested in Cycladic archaeology. I've been active in that field ever since. There is no doubt I think that the aesthetic qualities of that work troubled me then and troubles me still and I find it's still a very interesting and active question. It is relevant also in the present. If you look at modern sculpture, why do we find the work of Brancusi so wonderful? Or in the contemporary world, just what is it that makes some of the work of Richard Long so arresting?

It is no doubt the very simplicity of the work, which is a part of its beauty, though obviously all of these terms need analysing. That remains a really good question: what is it that makes a work of art so compelling? One of those elements is the simplicity. If you look at the male torso by Brancusi or 'A Line Made by Walking' by Richard Long, it's breathtakingly simple.

This could be true also with a painting by Rothko or by Ellsworth Kelly. If you look at a really successful Ellsworth Kelly work, you're just amazed at how commanding that is, with the most simple of components (Fig. 2.5).

IIA Absolutely. Coming back to these Cycladic figurines, one of the things that is amazing in your career is the way you've dealt with this material and grappled with these questions and how that has inspired and continues to inspire people to continue to explore these questions. I guess to bring you back to the World Archaeological Congress (WAC) that happened in Dublin. You shared the stage with one gentleman who very specifically was inspired by your work and thinking about Cycladic figurines as art, which is Doug Bailey.

The perspectives that you brought that day, were wonderfully collaborative and also dissonant—a very interesting series of propositions. One of the things that we wanted to hear your thoughts on is some of Doug's propositions about archaeologists who have been so inspired by their enigmatic qualities and looking at the way that they are rendering images or working with materials and space and are starting to explore their creative possibilities.

In a sense, finding a third way between art and archaeology. These hyper-practitioners are starting to think about a transdisciplinary practice between artistic practice and archaeological practice. In a sense it's a frontier. It's an undisciplined space, and there are limited critical writings about archaeologists doing this. Indeed, it's not as substantive as the critical writing about artists who express archaeological work. You are one of the few people who have highlighted it.

We're just wondering if you have reflections on these new movements in archaeology that are inspired in part by those initial questions that you introduced to the discipline?

CR I start off with a cautionary view. I want to get away from those artists who are just taking visual motifs from what they find. It would be very easy to remember an artist who has been to see Irish megalithic art with those wonderful spirals and so on and who's been impressed by them and does some striking lithographs which are inspired by the spirals from Newgrange.

In some cases that can be described as superficial. They've seen these lovely motifs, and they think, 'We'll do this'. It's like for instance, when you go to Orkney, and there's some very fine modern silverwork in Orkney, and they make some very beautiful broaches and so on that are inspired by megalithic art. I think often works very well and it is a lovely thing to buy. I'm delighted to buy it. I think it's a nice piece of craftsmanship, but I don't necessarily admire them very highly as a work of art. It's simply a decorative thing which would be useful to make a nice tie pin. That's fine if you want a nice tie pin.

For me, it's more interesting to think about the artists that get involved in the archaeological experience or are involved in some way in the process or in the thought processes, so it's not just a superficial visual similarity. We were just talking about Simon Callery's work, which I don't think is superficial at all. He suddenly sees the fascination of this chalk material and does all kinds of interesting things with it. I admire that very much.

Another artist I've worked with a little is Kate Whiteford. Sometimes she can veer towards just the motifs that attract her, but that's not what impresses me in her work. She became interested in the processes of aerial photography and in the visual

qualities which aerial photographs can have, and so she was interested in how things look from the air and how one can see traces in the ground. She wasn't seeking to analyse those patterns. She was just interested in the process. We did some work together on that. I wrote an essay, and she created some very beautiful images. We called the volume: *Remote Sensing*.

That was somehow closer to the point of what she was interested in and what I was admiring. That she was fascinated by the process by which aerial photography is informative about the archaeology and what it is exactly, what qualities are those that are registered on the aerial photograph. Then she did some watercolour drawings which accentuated those properties which she found attractive. They are not necessarily those that would be most informative to the analytical archaeologists, but I think that's where it gets interesting.

Another example would be the work of Jean Dubuffet, who used very fascinating materials and did wonderful paintings when he was exploring the properties of mud. I don't think he was directly inspired by archaeology, but he could've been by the material properties of the things which archaeologists work with, which in a way is what Simon Callery was doing. I find those very stimulating. I do like the way that Aaron Watson works, where he's intrigued by the megalithic monuments and things about them, for example their aural qualities. He's sort of musing around these monuments and reflecting on them in a way which I find very interesting.

There is a romance in ruins which I don't disrespect. It produced some charming work in earlier days. I have a little watercolour of Stonehenge from the eighteenth century which I much value, but I don't think . . . well, it's fair to say I wouldn't much value a watercolour of Stonehenge made now. Yet when I remember the marvellous series of lithographs of Stonehenge by Henry Moore, I admire how he became so fascinated by the robust qualities of the stone. I'd like to have one of those. I like them. That's not being very consistent, but really, all I'm saying is some of that romantic stuff can be a bit superficial. Archaeology is clearly about learning in new ways about the past and about human experience in the past, and some of these works we've just been speaking of are really illuminating about that, and some are just sort of a wallpaper decoration. The wallpaper decoration has to be very good before it attracts me.

IIA You mentioned the work of Aaron Watson, and he's a professional archaeological illustrator as well as an artist. He's one example of an increasing number of archaeologists who are involving creative practice in their archaeological work. We wondered, what do you make of all that?

CR I find it very interesting. First of all, I admire good archaeological illustration. Archaeologists like Barry Cunliffe are themselves fine illustrators. He was very impressed by Heywood Sumner, an illustrator who did, in his own style, beautiful works which I too much admire, and I can see why Barry Cunliffe was inspired by him.

A good style of archaeological illustration is much to be admired, so I respect that. But when the artist is being more than an illustrator and is trying to say something about the monument, then that artist has a real difficulty in overcoming the romantic

qualities in many archaeological monuments which we all sense. They're very old, and they are often very simple, and they're also very ruinous. They offer the pleasures of ruins. Somehow the contemporary artist has to get beyond that.

You have as an artist to be exploring more than just that. I think Aaron Watson in some of his work is doing that. He's thinking about the monument, maybe making you aware of things you haven't seen before in that monument, and so you're really getting something out of his work that isn't just his work as an illustrator. I admire good illustration, but it has to be, for me, a rather accurate illustration. If it's illustrating them, I'd like to be able to think that's a good record. When he's going beyond that and doing something which is responding to the monument and not necessarily accurately illustrating, it has to take you into the experience of seeing the monument, experiencing the monument and make you feel as a viewer of his work, that he's making you feel and see things you haven't felt and seen before. That's when I admire it.

The real snare for a contemporary artist working with the archaeological process is that they can just get caught up in the romance—sometimes, superficial romance of what they're illustrating, and then it all becomes rather unexciting. It's the difference, for me, between John Piper whose work I rarely admire, and Paul Nash, that wonderful painter who sometimes used the landscape and the archaeology in the landscape as his starting point. Somehow he seemed to say much more.

IIA To bring you back to another part of the WAC, and to inverse some of the dynamics we've been speaking about—one of the components of the WAC's Archaeologies of Art theme was the plenary discussion of the excavation and reconstruction of Francis Bacon's studio, organised by Blaze O'Connor and Ian. It was this wonderfully unique situation where the archaeologists were brought in to create a new view or to cast light upon a different perspective of an artist's work. The excavation and reconstruction happened over a decade ago. What were your thoughts about it at the time?

CR I thought it was terrific, and you're quite right. The archaeologists brought something necessary which was competence, really. The archaeological contribution was one of competence, of being able to go in there and take it apart in a responsible way so it could be put together again. That's one of the aspects of being responsible, but also it's a matter of being able to deal with the chronology with great accuracy. In that respect, it's not so unlike some aspects of forensic archaeology. About 30 years ago, the police realised that there's something about people's back gardens and digging up to find dead bodies that they could very well ask an expert to do. (I'm not talking about the forensic archaeology of war crimes and so on, which I think is very important, but I always find troubling because it is dealing with horrific events at such a scale. I respect forensic archaeology, but sometimes it's so painful that I don't enjoy the forensics.) But if we're talking about a good grizzly murder where somebody murdered his wife and buried her, and then 20 years later you're going back over it, then I admire the skills of forensic archaeologists. I can't understand why the police in early years made such a mess of it. In a way, it's the same skills that have been brought by archaeologists into Bacon's working studio, and it is a wonderful thing to

see archaeology being properly applied, since one of our preoccupations is time sequencing, so one can establish the sequence (usually in reverse), and establish the sequence in which things happened.

You can go right through and see what Francis Bacon was doing, what he was reading, what he was eating, all kinds of things, finding bits of discarded underwear, many different dimensions. That's a beautiful bit of archaeological work, and so it highlights the circumstance that a studio like that is genuinely a large part of a life's work, a product of a life's work. Even if the paintings have gone somewhere else, his active life was carried out in that studio and to be able to retrace that and open up and illuminate it is, I think, a wonderful thing. Naturally, his works are what speak and what was intended to speak, but if you really think he was a great artist and that his artworks were great then it's just fascinating to learn more about how they were arrived at.

Of course, there's all the business about the pigments, grinding and mixing, and where he wiped his paintbrush and so on, but it's much more than that. If he was living so actively in the studio and so many parts of his daily life were somehow involved in that studio. I think you have to think that the artist is worth the trouble, or it would become a rather arid exercise. So you really have to respect Francis Bacon's work to make it worth the trouble. But since I do, I think it was very much worth the trouble.

I don't think any of Michelangelo's studios have been preserved, but actually at Olympia, there is the workshop of Pheidias, the great sculptor who created the chryselephantine statue of Zeus, one of the wonders of the Ancient World. It has been excavated by the German Archaeological Institute. They found fragments of the obsidian which he used for the eyes of Zeus, the fragments of the ivory of the chryselephantine statue and bits of the moulds for the gold castings that were put on. So there is a piece of archaeological work on the studio of Pheidias in fifth century BC, and it's not really so different from the studio of Francis Bacon.

Of course, that relates to the field of contemporary archaeology too. Bill Rathje's Garbology project was one of the first to use the techniques of archaeology to study the present day, and that is of course, one of the really strong contributions of contemporary archaeology. One of the most interesting aspects of archaeology is to study the materiality of the present time in the literal sense of the material, objects that are used in the present day. The techniques of archaeology are very illuminating there, and so archaeology clearly doesn't have to be directed just at the remote past. It's a very interesting perspective to say: 'Let's be very concrete'. If we're talking about, say, modern garbage, let's study it carefully and see what the reality is from that perspective. It may not be the only valid reality, but it's a very concrete reality. I think that the archaeology of the present day, an approach which has come about over the past 20 or 30 years, is really fascinating.



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