ART-IF-AXE? — A TRANS-DISCIPLINARY EXHIBITION AT ARTVAULTS, SOUTHAMPTON

N. Smith, C. Forshaw, N. Ito, G. Tully, S. Wall and F.F. Wenban-Smith

ABSTRACT

An exhibition of artwork inspired by a handaxe was held at ArtVaults, Southampton. This short paper outlines the rationale behind the exhibition, represents some of the artwork, and considers how the exhibition contributed to discourses of archaeology and art.

THE CONCEPT

In September 2004 a group of MA students from Southampton University were charged with creating an exhibition that would explore the relationship between archaeology and art. Central to this project was the idea that artefacts are not just relevant as archaeological exhibits, but can also stimulate different experiences through the medium of art. A handaxe was chosen as the point of inspiration for the contributors as this object has not only great antiquity, but also an ambiguous shape.

THE PROCESS

A number of artists and archaeologists were introduced to a handaxe from the Southampton City Museum and asked to provide for exhibition their creative responses. The invitation asked for personal reactive interpretations to the artefact [different handaxes were given to each participant], submitted in any media and prompted by any aspect of interaction with the artefact. All of the resulting works were displayed in an exhibition “Art-if-Axe?” held in January 2005, at ArtVaults, Southampton.

THE EXHIBITION

The artists chose a range of media including rap, music and temporary installations, some of which unfortunately cannot be reproduced here. Shown in Figures 1 to 9 are some of the artworks, selected on the basis of the existence of reasonable reproductions, rather than any subjective opinion on philosophical or artistic merit. Apologies to those contributors whose artwork has not therefore been included. Descriptions and authorial comments on the artwork are provided below alongside rap artist Nick Name’s contribution.

Pauline Delacour. Lost in time. Ink, 2005 (Figure 1). We become aware of the axe’s presence through its absence, its surroundings make it real. We value objects from the past more and more as we move into future, things that had been lost then found take on a special value even beyond their original purpose.

Ian Tucknott. Smile. Slides, 2005 (Figure 2). Thirty-seven slides, all very similar; grasping at something absent; history perhaps; on the phallus; perhaps allusions to ‘self abuse’ inappropriate next to fairy washing up hand axes; that now too hold a hand axe; not likely; do with them as you please; I suggest as a title ‘AXE’ ONO; arrange in a slide projector

6 All from the Department of Archaeology, University of Southampton, Southampton SO17 1BF.
various ways up; or order it; or stick to a window; or (perhaps more avant-garde) scatter in the corner of a darkened room and supply matches/ burning embers/ and appreciate historical light source for viewing; scatter hold wrappers also for self-referential post-mod statement: all good, good luck, good.

Madeline Gremont. *Triptych*. Pixels, 2005 (Figures 3a, 3b & 3c). Looking into the uses for handaxes and how they could relate to characters in a modern day setting. Taking both an ironic and humorous approach to the idea but also to convey the usages of such a practical item.

Sarah Maccario. *Untitled*. Oil on Card, 2005 (Figure 4). I was inspired by the discovery of a hidden object and the historical and physical presence imprinted on an object.

Ben Piggott. *USE*. Chalk on Concrete Breeze Block, 2005 (Figure 5 & front cover).

Nick Name. *Untitled*. Lyrics, 2005 (below)

I got this ancient artefact passed along to Me by A Friend of Mine that goes to the University of South Hampton I took a look at the artefact and it got my mouth ramblin I wanted to talk about it so I grabbed my pen and started jottin down scripts it seemed to Me this thing could be A piece of history and had to be at least one or 2 Million years old back when Men were beasts savage like back then they didn’t even have a knife but they managed alright they just grabbed their brutal tool to Mutilate fools that crossed into their territory it might be A very different story but still fairly gory by the looks of the rock and Just the way the slab is shaped it looks like it could easily cut stab or scrape they probably used it to kill animals to eat attacked them until they couldn’t stand on their own feet and stabbed them with the long pointy end until their heart no longer beat then it was time to separate the skin from all the Meat so they could hang and dry the hide this was probably done with the knife like side the device could have then got dull From cutting the meat heart and guts it couldn’t perform to its potential So it needed to be sharpened up this could have been done with one or more other rocks hold on…. I’ve gotta stop I mean I could go on for days with thoughts of this hypothesis but I’d rather leave that to the archaeologists

Jeanette Hodgman. *The Rock*. Oil and Canvas, 2005 (Figure 6).
Gillian Robertson. *Untitled*. Ink and Paper, 2005 (Figure 7).
Melonie Schmierer. *Knapping*. Ink on Paper, 2005 (Figure 8).

Nicole Smith. *Looking at bad things hurts your eyes*. Mixed Media, 2005 (Figure 9). The work explores the conventions of archaeological drawings of hand-axes. I have used a page of words that I wrote in response to Paul Nash’s *We Are Making a Brave New World*, 1918, and the idea that he produced this picture because he was felt that it would be an appropriate way to explain the way that his eyes had been affected by the War, and thinking through this, I have tried to make everything about this image unnatural. The only aspect of this work that has not been warped is the ornate frame. I used this to express feelings about the conventions of framing masterpieces in the time contemporary to Nash, and the ideas surrounding archaeology and art. The hand-axe is a masterpiece in itself, and even though it has not been recognised as art, unlike other artefacts of a similar nature, it is interesting to explore notions of art versus artefact. I have cut off and shrunken words and have overlapped them so that they cannot be fully understood and their purpose is unclear. Just as the hand-axe will never be completely understood and we cannot ever really know the story surrounding it. I wanted to make looking at the illustrations of the hand-axe a task that would take much time and concentration on the part of the viewer. They are out of focus and this makes trying to get the information from them almost impossible. Trying to get the facts that the archaeological illustration *should* have within it hurts the eyes of the viewer. Looking at an artefact in such a pseudo-scientific and scrutinising way, as the viewer is being forced to do, detracts from the tactile and art-like qualities of the artefact and is a painful and very unnatural experience.
Figure 3: Madeline Gremont
Figure 4: Sarah Maccario

Figure 5: Ben Piggott
Figure 6: Jeanette Hodgman

Figure 7: Gillian Robertson
Figure 8: Melonie Schmierer

Figure 9: Nicole Smith
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

As every artist reacted differently through their various forms of media, the interpretations that came out of the installation reflected no single, dominating viewpoint. Through the art inspired by the handaxe, it became obvious that a handaxe, as with most archaeological material, has plural meanings. Each artist’s reaction was based on their particular background, personal history and unique encounter with their artefact. When this personal biography comes into contact with knowledge of the artefact and its biography then at this point art can be created, and that is what was facilitated in the installation. The linking mechanism for archaeology and art lies in the meaning that is created through the whole experience, not just from immediate sight (Hooper-Greenhill 2000). The two fields create a congruent focus of interactions and engagements with a material object that at one point in time was a part of our world, as expressed by Renfrew (2003: 137): ‘Humans make the artefacts, and then the world of artefacts shapes the humans’.

At the outset of this project the intention was to question perceptions of the interface between art and archaeology. We can learn more about ourselves, and how we interact with the world by challenging perceived divisions between disciplines. The Art-If-Axe? installation demonstrated, and created, an interaction between the living and the non-living. This interaction was made possible through the bringing together of art and archaeology. Art provided a means of expressing emotions and ideas surrounding engagement with the past and its material remains that are not typically part of conventional academic reports and displays. However, without the creation of emotion we cannot hope to draw people into wanting to understand the past, and therefore the present. The emotions that were created through the interaction of art and archaeology in Art-if-Axe? provided an experience that we hope will radiate out into the wider world and be added to the discourse of current archaeology.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY
