Making Senses of the Past. Towards a Sensory Archaeology

As archaeologists, we have become accustomed to recording and interpreting sites and artefacts at a very visual level: we draw plans and sections, take photographs, and read and write reports. There are specialists to study ceramics, lithics, and architecture, who produce descriptions, identify typologies, and suggest interpretations. However, buildings were constructed to be experienced, not just described; artefacts were meant for handling, for touching, for making sounds, for producing or consuming food and drink. And yet such experiential aspects of past lives have been neglected by the majority of archaeologists and academics. This conference will provide a forum to investigate the potential of sensory archaeologies to expand our ways of thinking about both material culture and societies themselves in the past.

Our senses are the medium of our interaction with the world around us and as such are key in creating and maintaining identity. This sensory understanding of the world is not simply a physiological matter, but is culturally determined and reflected in material culture (Gosden 2001:163). The five senses recognised in the modern Western world (taste, touch, smell, sight, sound), which seem so natural to us, are not the only possible ways of engaging with the world. Different societies have been shown to recognise varying numbers of senses and have different sensory hierarchies (e.g. Classen 1993; Houston and Taube 2000). Descartes’s dualistic division into a rational world of the mind and an irrational world of the body/senses contributed in no small measure to the rise of sight as the main sensory apparatus of the western world (although such primacy of vision can be traced as far back as Aristotle). Certainly, visual acts are part and parcel of traditional archaeological practice, and have been instrumental in shaping the discipline as it now exists. The other unquantifiable senses of smell, taste, sound, and touch have been marginalised as unmeasurable ways of engaging with world, and therefore as unthinkable for archaeology, thus leading to a silent, odourless, disembodied and sense-less past.

During the last decade, a trend has emerged within sociology and cultural studies to explore the roles of the senses in society. Classen (1993; 1997; 2005) and Howes (1991a; 2003; 2005) have been at the forefront of this new paradigm, and their work has been influential in the rise of a new approach to the past, a sensory archaeology. Articles advocating a sensory approach to artefacts or monuments can be found scattered throughout archaeological journals, and Hamilakis is currently working on the first book to address the potential and the challenges of this new methodology (Archaeologies of the Senses). Other scholars have previously commented on the need to re-embodi and re-sensualise the past (e.g. Kus 1992, Meskell 1996; Joyce 2005), but such a field is still in its infancy. The recent launch of two new journals dedicated to sensory studies and cognitive explorations of archaeology and anthropology (Senses and Society and Time and Mind), is an indication of the recognition that such approaches can provide valuable insights into past societies, if mediated through a historically-located perceiving body. In the popular domain, books such as Perfume (Patrick Süskind) or Toast (Nigel Slater), and films like Babette’s Feast (1987) and Eat, Drink, Man, Woman (1994), highlight the power of sensuality. A recent call for museums to promote an embodied engagement with their material culture (Classen and Howes 2006) may lead to greater expansion beyond display cases towards incorporating less ocularcentric ways of sensing the past (as already evident in some museums, or indeed with experience-based tours such as at Jorvik Viking Centre in York, UK). Despite this rising tide of cross-disciplinary sensory studies, there has not yet been a conference dedicated to archaeologies of the senses. Therefore should CAI decide to support this project,
the event itself and the arising publication, will be very much at the forefront of this new movement, providing a valuable review of both the current place of sensuous scholarship within archaeology, and guidelines on best practice for the future.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that as archaeologists we cannot dig up smells or tastes, so what form has this sensuous revolution taken? A forerunner of sensory archaeology can be identified in the application of phenomenology to the past. This approach, with its emphasis on experience, inhabitation, and embodiment, was embraced by British prehistorians in particular (e.g. Tilley 1996, 2004; Thomas 1993; Bradley 1998; Brück 2005). Following the ideas of Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger, it heralded a new way of thinking about monuments, the landscape and the people therein, yet tended to prioritise vision above other senses, focusing on concepts of intervisibility and lines of sight, for example (although Tilley 2004 moves towards rectifying this). However, according to Pallasmaa (2000: 78), every experience of architecture is multi-sensory, and while sites such as Avebury (UK) or Mnajdra (Malta) were constructed with a visual statement in mind, their effects on other senses may also have been an integral part of their design, and so should not be ignored by archaeologists. As Watson has noted, recognising the sensory qualities of places has the potential to aid us in our search to understand their uses and meanings (Watson 2001: 297).

Feld succinctly comments that “as places make sense, senses make place” (Feld 1996: 91), and explorations of past soundscapes are perhaps the most well-known attempts to find a sensuous past. Indeed a recent publication has focused exclusively on just this approach (Scarre and Lawson 2006). Experimental archaeology has always captured the imagination of academia and the public alike, and recreating the sound of Bronze Age trumpets, as performed at WAC 2008 in Dublin, can help put the noise back into a silent past. Moving from sound-making devices to exploring the effects of sounds within structures has yielded a number of interesting studies suggesting places were meant to be heard as well as seen (e.g. Devereux and Jahn 1996; Watson 2001; Watson and Keating 1999). Natural places have also been exploited for their aural effects, including noise-distortion, amplification, or echoes (e.g. Dams 1984; Holmberg 2005; Loose 2008; Reznikoff and Dauvois 1988). The role of sound in rituals is almost universal - bells, drums, voices, rattles have all been essential elements across diverse societies - and warfare too has vivid aural accompaniments (e.g. the whistling draco standards of Dacians). Finally, it is important also to remember that many of these auditory experiences would have had other measurable, physiological effects on the body (reverberations, pulses, heartbeats, breathing), and so can further stimulate other senses (e.g. Tuzin 1984).

Other past sensory experiences have also been investigated, although less often than acoustics. Hapticity (sense of touch) has the potential to add a new dimension to our understanding of buildings and artefacts. Were materials selected for how they felt as much as how they looked or for technological reasons? MacGregor’s analysis of carved stone balls considers these artefacts from a haptic perspective (MacGregor 1999), while Ouzman (2001), Cummings (2002) and Dawson et al. (2007) also focus on the importance of feeling the world. In a similar vein, it is essential to consider not just the sensory impact of the finished artefact or structure, but how this would affect the performative aspects of creation - are materials chosen for specific tactile qualities which demand a certain kind of bodily engagement (Lazzari 2005: 142)?
Olfactory stimulation and perceptions of smell in past societies are perhaps the most difficult to access. However, olfaction can be a fundamental way of knowing the world, e.g. among the Ongee (Classen 1993). Houston and Taube (2000) have demonstrated the importance of smell in ancient Mesoamerica, and many societies, past and present, communicate with divinities, spirits or other worlds with aromatic aids (Howes 1991b). There have also been calls to consider the olfactory dimensions of buildings and spaces (Drobnick 2005). Perhaps the most interesting aspect of smell is its close association with experiences and their accompanying emotions (Classen, Howes and Synnott 1994: 2). Odour, memory and meaning are closely linked, and it has been suggested that somatic memories of communal events were essential in creation and maintenance of power dynamics (Hamilakis 2002a).

Somatic memories also apply to taste, to the acts of eating and drinking, to intoxication, and to the environments within which these embodied acts occurred - as humans, we remember through incorporation (Stoller 1997: 59; also Sutton 2001). The social and political significance of food and feasting is a well-documented phenomenon (e.g. Dietler and Hayden 2001; Wiessner and Schiefenhövel 1996). Archaeology has moved on from its traditional concerns with subsistence to recognising the presence and importance of commensal events in the past, reflected in the surge in publications and conferences on this topic (e.g. within the field of Aegean archaeology alone: Halstead and Barrett 2004; Parker-Pearson 2003; Wright 2004; Mee and Renard 2007). However there is a need for a new focus now on the multisensory aspects of consumption (Hamilakis 2008) and on the role of the substances themselves not just in gastropolitics but in everyday life.

Although this conference aims to explore beyond the hegemony of vision, it would be fruitful to include papers which address the issue of deeper cultural resonances behind visual appearance. For example, the study of colour as a meaningful attribute of material culture has produced very interesting results (Jones and MacGregor 2002; Gage et al. 1999). Hosler has shown that achieving gold and silver colours in metalwork was a way of recreating the sacred in West Mexico (Hosler 1995, 1994). Qualities of raw materials apart from technological advantages must be considered - the “brilliance” of quartz was a tangible and meaningful attribute leading to its selection for tools in diverse societies (Taçon 1991; Whitley et al. 1999). Pearls and obsidian in Mesoamerica have been discussed by Saunders for their similar glittering properties (Saunders 2001; 1999). Building on this appreciation of the powers of colour and other innate qualities of material and artefacts, it is possible to consider the synaesthesia effect, where something seen by the eye conveys sensations to the nose, ear, or mouth, as explored for Mesoamerican society by Houston and Taube (2000). Hosler refers to “metal sound-and-colour objects” (1995: 112), while I have published on the synaesthetic effects of certain Minoan ceramic vessels (Day 2006).

There are some inherent difficulties encountered within sensory archaeology. We live in a 21st century sensorium which (unconsciously) influences the ways we can understand the past. Gosden has suggested that to appreciate the sensory worlds of others we need to unlearn our sensory education with its prejudice towards vision (Gosden 2001: 166) - but can we ever leave it behind? Interpreting the past will always be subjective, and we will never know exactly what a Mayan temple smelled like, or how wine tasted to a Roman emperor. Such personal experiences are not the goal of sensory archaeology however, but the aim is rather to incorporate a consideration of embodied practices and sensory ontologies into our investigations to enhance
our interpretations. This approach cannot provide definite answers about how buildings or artefacts were used in the past, but it does encourage recognition and discussion of the complex relationships between people and the world around them, and as such is a valuable addition to archaeology. The other main challenge is whether it is possible to convey archaeologies of the senses without a reliance on logocentric discourse (Hamilakis 2002b: 103). Is the traditional monograph the best way to present results which are so heavily dependent on other ways of knowing? It is intended that such challenges will underlie the discussion at the conference, and that stimulating and rewarding debate, if not answers, will be forthcoming.

Potential Conference Topics
No conference so far has addressed sensory studies from an archaeological perspective, and therefore the list of potential themes for discussion is vast. This list is far from final, but some common threads for exploration which cross geographical and chronological boundaries include:

- sensory aspects of the production and consumption of material culture in the past
- sensory archaeology as a paradigm for exploring ritual actions and performances
- the role of memory and the senses in the creation/manipulation of power dynamics
- eating, drinking, feasting and intoxication as embodied practices
- the recognition of sensory hierarchies in past cultures
- the multisensory qualities of colour and synaesthetic approaches to artefacts
- is sensory archaeology a valid methodology?
- the presentation of new results of sensory archaeological projects
- how best to disseminate information on sensuous pasts (museums, publications, tours?)

Conference Structure
The conference would run over two days in spring 2010, with approximately twenty speakers. Sessions would be organised on a thematic basis, but until abstracts have been received from the speakers, the exact breakdown of each session cannot be known. Titles, abstracts and timetable would be posted in advance on the conference webpages. Due to the diversity of areas in which the speakers work, I would aim to provide maximum time for each to explain their projects, methodologies, results, and the inherent challenges of their work to the audience. To this end, each session would include a small number of speakers, followed by time for questions and general discussion, moderated by the session chair. Coffee breaks and meals would provide a chance for further interaction and discussion among the participants. On the first evening, there would be a keynote address, followed by a dinner. A proposed outline of the conference schedule is:

- Day 1: Welcome / Session 1 / Coffee / Session 2 / Lunch / Session 3 / Coffee / Session 4 / Break / Keynote Address / Dinner
- Day 2: Session 5 / Coffee / Session 6 / Lunch / Session 7 / Conference Closing / Coffee

While the invited speakers will be expected to attend all the sessions and actively contribute in discussions, I would also support publicising the event and accepting other attendees, for a small registration fee. This money would help cover conference costs. In particular, I would be keen for postgraduate students to attend. It may also be possible to arrange an (optional) excursion to a local site which would be of interest to conference attendees.
Suggested Participants

Included below is a list of suggested speakers, although this is only a sample of potential invitees. The suggested participants’ interests cover a broad geographical range, from the Aegean to Mesoamerica. They also incorporate diverse material specialities (monuments, rock art, figurines) and chronological periods. Some scholars are from beyond the traditional boundaries of archaeology (Classen, Howes, Sutton, Feld), but their work has been hugely influential in the adoption of a sensory approach to past and present societies, and their participation can only enhance this event. Indeed, this interdisciplinary mix of speakers is key to making this conference a success, as it will provide a forum for exchange of ideas between scholars who all have a shared interest but so far have not had the opportunity to meet together and discuss common goals, methodologies, or problems. Some of those included are based outside the USA, and so their participation would obviously depend on funding becoming available, either via CAI or their home institutions. However I feel it important, at least in the planning stage, to “aim high” and then adjust later as necessary. I also believe it would be rewarding to invite a speaker who works in museums, where a sensory or interactive approach to exhibits is increasingly popular. In this instance, I would make contact with SIUC University Museum and the Field Museum in Chicago to find a suitable speaker.

Constance Classen (Concordia)  Steven Feld (New Mexico)  Dorothy Hosler (MIT)  
Brian Hayden (Simon Fraser)  Paul Devereux (Princeton)  David Sutton (SIUC)*  
Karen Holmberg (Columbia)*  James Wright (Bryn Mawr)  Chris Gosden (Oxford)  
Richard Loose (Independent)  David Howes (Concordia)*  Chris Tilley (UCL)  
Susan Kus (Rhodes College)  Brian Boyd (Columbia)  Sonya Atalay (Indiana)*  
Karl Taube (U.C. Riverside)  David Whitley (California)  Lynn Meskell (Stanford)  
Rosemary Joyce (Berkeley)  Michael Dietler (Chicago)*  Peter Dawson (Calgary)  
Yannis Hamilakis (Southampton)*  Ruth Tringham (Berkeley)*  Museum Rep. (Illinois)  

I would advocate Hamilakis as the key-note speaker, and potential session chairs are marked with *. Early career scholars are indicated by •, but I would plan to increase the number of these, following recommendations of some of the senior academics on the list.

Publication

Assuming that all participants are willing to have their paper published in the arising volume, it may be necessary to select those for publication due to contraints on book size, costs etc. The first post-conference job therefore may be the determination of which papers to include in the book. I would work closely with the session chairs to make the selection and so ensure that the final volume is of the highest standard. Participants would be given two months to turn their paper into a chapter, incorporating any of the points arising at the conference that they feel to be pertinent. The volume structure would be thematic and mirror that of the conference sessions, and I would write a general introduction. A synthesis/methodology for going forward would be included at the end of the book, written by one of the session chairs or the keynote speaker (to be discussed with them at the conference). This book would therefore be the first companion guide to sensory archaeologies. Of course, the ultimate challenge of sensory archaeology is to present research in an accessible format which breaks away from the ‘tyranny of the gaze’ and relies less on printed texts. At this juncture, it remains unclear how such a goal could be achieved, but then again, investigating a “sensuous scholarship” (Stoller 1997) is one of the aims of the conference, and so perhaps the answer awaits in 2010.
Bibliography


Aegaeum 23. Liège and Austin: Université de Liège and University of Texas at Austin, 179-199.


