Time to Destroy

An Archaeology of Supermodernity

by Alfredo González-Ruibal

The archaeology of the contemporary past is becoming an important subfield within the discipline and one attractive not only to archaeologists but to social scientists and artists. The period that started with World War I, here identified as "supermodernity," has been characterized by increasing devastation of both humans and things and the proliferation of archaeological sites, such as battlefields, industrial ruins, mass graves, and concentration camps. The mission of a critical archaeology of this period is not only telling alternative stories but also unveiling what the supermodern power machine does not want to be shown. For this we need to develop a new kind of archaeological rhetoric, pay closer attention to the materiality of the world in which we live, and embrace political commitment without sacrificing objectivity.

The archaeology of the recent past is an important subfield within the discipline (see Gould and Schiffer 1981; Schiffer 1991; Rathje and Murphy 1992) that has grown exponentially during the past decade (Schnapp 1997; Buchli 1999; Olivier 2000; Buchli and Lucas 2001*a*; Saunders 2002; Schofield, Johnson, and Beck 2002; Schofield 2004). The disciplinary boundaries of this kind of archaeology and those of anthropology, sociology, contemporary history, art history, history of architecture, material-culture studies, and technology studies are unclear, and the projects that can be labeled archaeology of the recent past are likewise varied in object, scope, and theoretical grounding. Thus, some studies that use the term "archaeology" seem to have only a slight connection with archaeological practice and much in common with material-culture studies (e.g., Buchli 1999). However, certain questions seem to recur in many of these works: Why do an archaeology of the present? How does it differ from other practices and modes of knowledge? What is the nature of our evidence? The need for filling the "black hole" (Rathje, LaMotta, and Longacre 2001) between the archaeological past and the present has been acknowledged by many archaeologists (see also Hicks 2003, 316–17), but many issues surrounding the subfield and its objectives await further debate. Ultimately, the question of the archaeology of the recent past raises many themes that have to do with archaeology in general: memory, history, time, evidence, ruins, decay, materiality, narrative, and politics.

This article is a reflection on the archaeology of the recent past with special emphasis on the archaeological record produced by the destructive impact of what I will call "supermodernity." "Supermodernity" (*surmodernité*) is a term applied by the French anthropologist Marc Augé (2002 [1992]) mainly to the late twentieth century, characterized by the revolution of speed, new modes of communication and transportation, and new spatial relations, including the emergence of a new category of place: the *non-lieu,* the negation of place itself, whose main characteristic is being transitive and largely asocial (e.g., airports, freeways, undergrounds, malls). The supermodern is equivalent to the postmodern, postindustrial, or late capitalist of other writers, and, although Augé is mainly thinking of Western cultures, its effects, through globalization, are obvious in the world at large. I have chosen the term and elaborated on its implications for archaeology for several reasons.

First, unlike "post-," "super-" implies not overcoming but exacerbation, exaggeration (Augé 2002 [1992], 36). "The short twentieth century" (Hobsbawm 1994), which started in 1914, was a period of extreme, baroque modernity, modernity qualified or upgraded rather than modernity overcome. As such, it was a quite coherent, self-contained period. The apogee and decadence of industrialism, colonialism, and neocolonialism, the world wars, the environmental crisis, and the heyday of globalization are among its defining features. An archaeology of supermodernity explores the material nature of these excesses and especially the devastating global consequences of supermodern exaggeration.

Secondly, it is necessary to expand supermodernity to fill

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the gap left by historical archaeologists. Conventionally, historical archaeology studies the past 500 years of human history, a period that coincides with the birth, evolution, and expansion of Western capitalism and modernity (Hall and Lucas 2006, 51). However, historical archaeologists tend to concentrate on the period from the early sixteenth to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (e.g., Deetz 1977; Johnson 1996; Tarlow and West 1999; Leone 2005), usually leaving most of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to students of material culture—although, especially in the United States, there is a growing number of practitioners turning their attention to more recent periods (e.g., Mullins 2006).

Thirdly, this forgetting of the recent is not only due to the peculiar nature of supermodernity or the absence of time depth. Paradoxically, it is because we have a living memory of the recent past and are personally involved in it that archaeologists have condemned supermodernity to oblivion. It seems that, for both scientific and personal reasons, we cannot study what we or our relatives have directly or indirectly experienced. The events of supermodernity are often lived as an individual and collective trauma in the present, partly because of their destructive nature (consider civil wars, dictatorship, or terrorism). It is therefore not easy to talk about them, whereas more remote historical episodes—such as the 1848 revolution or the Franco-Prussian War—have usually lost the power to affect us so poignantly. Nevertheless, the 50 or so years usually conceded to the archaeology of the recent past seems too short a time span and one that is ever-changing. As I have said, it is not only our memories but the social net of memories in which we have been educated and socialized that counts, including the tales and experiences transmitted by our parents and grandparents. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, then, it seems appropriate to extend the archaeology of supermodernity to most of the past century. The archaeology of supermodernity is the archaeology of us who are alive (no other archaeology can claim that) but also, more than any other, the archaeology of trauma, emotion, and intimate involvement (see Campbell and Ulin 2004).

Supermodernity, like modernity in general (González-Ruibal 2006), is characterized by destruction as much as by production or consumption, with the difference that the destruction is usually overlooked. Thus, Buchli and Lucas (2001*b*, 21) state that "production and consumption arguably form the central poles of contemporary material life, indeed the material basis of social existence in capitalist and socialist industrialised societies." If modernity in general brings destruction, supermodernity produces it on an extraordinary scale. The most extreme example that comes to mind is nuclear war, but, as Serres (2000, 32) has pointed out, supermodern daily life brings more damage to the world than several world wars together. If sociologists and anthropologists study production and consumption, archaeology, the science of ruins and the abandoned, of fragments and death (Pearson and Shanks 2001, 91–93), seems especially well suited to working with destruction: the realm of abjection (Buchli and Lucas 2001*a*, 10–11). After all, one of the peculiarities of archaeology is that it usually works with abandoned, ruined places—what we call archaeological sites. I am not saying that the archaeology of the recent past should be restricted to this kind of site, that an archaeological methodology can only be deployed in these contexts, or that all modern archaeological sites are derelict, ghostly places. Nevertheless, I will focus on traces of supermodern destruction because I consider that they manifest something crucial about our era, provide relevant political lessons, and are a counterpoint to the kind of research developed by other disciplines, such as anthropology and material-culture studies. Also, by "destruction" I do not mean only sudden and absolute devastation (like Chernobyl). Many destructive processes brought about by supermodernity are relatively slow and gradual: consider the formation of postindustrial landscapes (like Detroit) or the abandonment of rural areas due to the urban exodus.

In this article, I will tackle four main topics in the archaeology of supermodernity: mediation, materiality, place and memory, and politics. I have selected these topics because of their strong connections, their relationship to destruction, their theoretical possibilities, their impact on other fields, and their implications for archaeology as a whole. Through them I will try to address the following questions: Why pursue an archaeology of supermodernity? In what ways can archaeology meaningfully engage with the recent past? How can we avoid falling into banality and mere aestheticization? And how can we develop a politically engaged and critical practice?

Mediation

How should we as archaeologists translate the recent past? I will describe two ways: storytelling, which is currently the most usual procedure for the mediation of the past in our discipline, and making manifest, a mode of translation which, unlike storytelling, is not based on literary rhetoric.

Much historical archaeology is justified by the belief that we need alternative stories—that oral and written data do not tell us everything about the past, that there are other things to be to learned from artifacts and other experiences that have to be accounted for. During the past decade, the idea of narrative has been growing steadily in the discipline (Praetzellis 1998; Joyce 2002). Archaeologists, especially historical archaeologists, think that writing stories is both an epistemic and an ethical imperative (Given 2004). "In small things forgotten" (Deetz 1977) we find the voices of the subaltern, the Other, those who have no voice in official records (slaves, women, blacks, the colonized). Archaeology, then, can also provide alternative accounts of supermodernity by focusing on destruction and the abject, the less gentle face of the world we live in. I will outline three scenarios in which archaeology must produce alternative narratives: (l) genocides and political killing, (2) wars that leave no documentary record or of

which the memories are highly contentious, and (3) the subconscious—or unconscious—in culture.

It is not surprising that extrajudicial killings and genocides have produced a heftier literature than other themes (e.g., Grassland 2000; Schofield, Johnson, and Beck 2002; Koff 2004). Archaeologists are currently requested to work by international organizations in a variety of contexts: from the location of bodies of American soldiers in Southeast Asia to the excavation of mass graves in Argentina, Guatemala, or Yugoslavia. In most cases, the facts that led to assassinations have been concealed or distorted by dictatorial regimes or war circumstances have prevented the recovery and proper burial of the deceased. Here the stories that forensic archaeologists produce have to do with the circumstances of death. Certainly, not all forensic work can be called archaeology. This kind of research would benefit from a stronger archaeological sensibility, one that goes beyond tombs and skeletons to address whole landscapes of death and repression (Funari and Zarankin 2006). At the same time, we should bear in mind that the exhumation of people assassinated for political reasons is not always inspired by the necessity to know the real story or a story that is different from the official account. In many cases, mass graves are excavated because of a need for restitution, which is a need for presence, not meaning.

The second scenario in need of alternative archaeological narratives is that of wars that leave few documentary traces such as most conflicts in the Third World today. Here, written documents are scant or absent, narratives are usually distorted and imposed by dictators, and sometimes the events are played down or concealed by the Western governments involved (Rathje and González-Ruibal 2006). In places like the Democratic Republic of Congo, where the most horrible recent war raged between 1998 and 2002, archaeologists and ethnographers will have to join forces to tell the story of the disaster. We tend to think narrowly of forensic archaeology as the excavation of human remains when we consider both genocides and wars. Yet forensic practice is much more than identifying corpses. It is about documenting the scene of a crime and reconstructing a story from the remains: all the surviving traces of a destroyed village, a battlefield, an abandoned house, or a factory after an industrial disaster. The difference between forensic science and archaeology, though, is that the latter is interested not just in the micro-event per se but in contextualizing it in the wider political and social panorama as well as in the long term. With the remains of an ambush in the late 1980s on the road that leads from Ethiopia to Sudan through the region of Metekel, for example, we have no bodies, but we do have four trucks and an anti-aircraft gun, all perforated by shrapnel (fig. 1). We can reconstruct the event forensically and tell the story of a government convoy that was destroyed by guerrilla fighters during the Ethiopian civil war (1974–91). We have gruesome details such as the rocket-propelled-grenade hole in the back of the driver's seat in one of the trucks, the fuel deposit blown up by a piece of shrapnel, the dozens of shell casings dispersed

Figure 1. A Soviet anti-aircraft gun (ZSU-23) destroyed in an ambush during the Ethiopian civil war.

by the explosion, and the anti-aircraft gunner's seat, pierced by countless fragments. We have evidence that will not appear in the usual historical narrative but helps to create a strong sense of presence. At the same time, however, we can relate this micro-event to the global politics of the time, involving the cold war, development policies, nationalism, peasant societies, the history of ethnic and political conflict in the Horn of Africa, and modern technology. Suddenly, this is not just another tiny story but an event made globally significant. It all depends on how we tell it. Archaeology, then, can do more than produce alternative stories: it can also tell stories in an alternative way.

The third case is the unconscious in culture: things that we take for granted or care little about. This is not necessarily related to supermodernity's destructiveness, although it may be so indirectly. William Rathje's study of modern rubbish, for example, has proven that archaeology can tell a completely different story, a story that makes a big difference in ecological and economic terms and alleviates the collateral damage produced by supermodern consumerism (Rathje 2001; Rathje and Murphy 1992). However, we can doubt whether Rathje's production of alternative truths is really framed as a story, as understood by most archaeologists. Many of Michael Schif-

fer's investigations can also be considered alternative tales about American society through material culture, be it the electric car or the portable radio (e.g., Schiffer 1991).

The problem with narration as the privileged means of mediation is that it has led us to overlook other possible modes of engagement with the materiality of the recent past. We need alternative ways of translating the remains from the past (Shanks 2004; Witmore 2004*a*), and this need is especially urgent because, given the overabundance of historical information, there is a risk of saturating memory with a proliferation of narratives and details, which may eventually neutralize and trivialize the past, and because the evidence is often very particular in its abject detail and its traumatic political implications.

These issues appeared clear to me when dealing with the remains of a World War II battlefield on a hill near the town of Mankush in western Ethiopia. Here there was an Italian military camp whose function was to defend the frontier with the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan when Ethiopia was occupied by Fascist Italy (1935–41). The place was bombed in 1940 prior to the invasion of Ethiopia by the allies, an invasion that culminated in the defeat of Mussolini's army in East Africa by the end of 1941. Today the Italian trenches are remarkably well preserved and full of food cans, sheet metal, bayonet scabbards, radio parts, shell casings, and even an automobile (fig. 2). This base did not play any significant role in the East African theater and is not even recorded on some official maps (Ufficio Storico 1971). However, there is a fair amount of published textual information about the site and its occupants, and archival research would turn up more. It is obvious that as archaeologists we can tell something else from the ruins, construct other tales. But do we really need more narratives about World War II, probably the best-researched period in history? Do we need more fine-grained information about each and every event of the conflict? These are questions that are pertinent not only for that historical episode but for the recent past as a whole. Do we always need more stories and more voices? Furthermore, is the proliferation of stories and perspectives always progressive and positive, as the post-processualist advocates of multivocality claim (e.g., Bender 1958; Hodder 2000, 2004)? Is the struggle for liberation simply reducible to a "right to narrate" (Žižek 2004, 190)?

I think that archaeology's mission with regard to the most recent past is not necessarily or uniquely to provide new and different accounts, more data, and more interpretations. Manifestation (*sensu* Shanks 2004) can be at least as important as the construction of narratives in the usual sense of the term, and it has the added advantage of being less likely to result in the saturation of memory. Making manifest implies "remembering" things (Olsen 2003) and being less a historian than an archaeologist working with material remains that are not reducible to text. In the case described above, what we need is perhaps a rough material image of the daily banality of war as expressed in those archaeological vestiges in the middle of nowhere to be contrasted with the fierce fascist rhetoric of the time. This is not a tale but an archaeological

Figure 2. A Ford abandoned in the Italian military camp at Mankush (Ethiopia) by Mussolini's troops.

disclosure of the nature of fascism. In a sense, we do need a kind of narrative, but not the one modeled on literature—translating things into words—that seems to be so popular in our discipline nowadays (Joyce 2002). Manifestation is especially important in supermodernity. Facing the devastation and pain brought about by failed modernities, more than an explanation what we need is a kind of revelation—another way of seeing Auschwitz or Belzec (Kola 2000), not another tale about what happened there. As narrators, archaeologists can hardly write a story that matches Primo Levi's, but we can produce something else.

As Buchli and Lucas (2001*a*, 25) remind us, the archaeology of the recent past works with the "unsayable," the "unconstituted," what lies outside discourse. It works with trauma, destruction, and pain: war, emigration, totalitarian regimes, social engineering, inhuman development, industrial disasters, (post)colonial failures. Archaeology must deploy its own rhetoric, a rhetoric that preserves the "thingliness" of the thing without being trapped in a verbal discourse and does justice to the troubling nature of the record we work with. Sontag (2003, 89) said, "Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us." The archaeology of supermodernity should be able to haunt us (Shanks 1997*b*). At least, it has to summon up the presence of the past in a vivid way. This also means a rhetoric that is based less on completeness—the aim of many narratives—and more on the acceptance of the inherently partial, fragmentary, and therefore uncanny nature of the archaeological record (Lucas 2005, 127–29). This has been aptly put by Eelco Runia (2006*b*, 309): "Presence is not the result of metaphorically stuffing up absences with everything you can lay your hands on. It can at best be kindled by metonymically presenting absences." Presence is not brought about by stories: "The things that stick do so because they do not connect to something already in the mind . . . they just float around." There are many points in contact here with archaeology: metonymy, absence, things on the margin.

Martin Heidegger's (2000) theory of art may provide good arguments for an archaeology of the contemporary world that takes into account the essential incompleteness of its material record. For Heidegger the essence of the work of art consists in the disclosure of Being, truth as revelation (*aletheia*), but the work of art is not a simple act of absolute openness. It opens a new world and at the same time sets forth the earth, which stands for what cannot be known. World and earth—revelation and concealment—are in constant opposition, in a battle (pp. 26, 37), but they also depend on each other. One of the effects of a work of art is the disturbance of everything familiar around it: it shows us that "the ordinary is not ordinary, it is extraordinary, uncanny" (p. 31). As does the Heiddegerian work of art, the archaeology of the recent past brings both disclosure and concealment: the unsayable. It shows that even in a period as well documented as the twentieth century there are areas of darkness—events that cannot be completely unveiled, things that we cannot comprehend despite all the research, all the data, all the archives that we may have. Converting archaeology into a discipline that aspires to totality and completeness robs it of its power and its essential nature, which lies in working with "the radical undecidability of the past" (Edensor 2005*a*, 330). Archaeology respects the earth and works with it, both literally and from a Heideggerian point of view.

A Heideggerian approach implies a particular way of making things manifest—a different way of engaging with the materiality around us (and in us). This implies making the most of our archaeological sensibility (Shanks 1992). Yet resorting to Heidegger's theory of art, to artistic creativity (Shanks 1997*a*, 1997*b*; Pearson and Shanks 2001), and reflecting upon the coincidences between the work of artists and that of archaeologists (Renfrew 2003) do not have to imply transforming what we study into an art object and ourselves into artists. There is a risk in aestheticizing and romanticizing modern ruins, converting them into playgrounds. In my opinion, this is the impression produced by Tim Edensor's (2005*a*) otherwise excellent work because of his emphasis on the sensual and aesthetic (even enjoyable) aspects of ruins. A playful, picturesque, and largely acritical view of ruins has been developed by some artists, mainly in the United States (e.g., Gottlieb 2002; Ridgway 2003; Plowden 2006). Some unfortunate syntheses of art and science have also aroused concern among critical intellectuals such as Žižek (2004, 150), who bemoans the creation of a "New Age monster of aestheticized knowledge."

I think that it is more appropriate, given the political and traumatic nature of many supermodern ruins, to explore them from the point of view of alienation (see Buchli and Lucas 2001*a*). This, however, does not preclude the cross-fertilization of art and archaeology: there are many artists who, rather than drawing upon mere nostalgia and romanticism, have explored the political side of destruction and abandonment, among them Camilo José Vergara, Manfred Hamm, Jason Francisco, Joan Myers, Edward Burtynsky, Jeff Wall, Mikael Levin, and Joel Sternfeld. It is easy to find many striking connections and a similar poetics (Shanks 1997*b*) between the work of these artists and a critical archaeological project of supermodernity: we are both interested in trauma, memory, absence, death, decay, and evidence. Mikael Levin, for example, works with the absent memories of Jewish life in central Europe. He has photographed the almost indistinguishable archaeological remains of some concentration camps (Baer 2002), a task also performed by Jason Francisco (2006) (fig. 3). Francisco addresses questions of home, place, history, and memory by shifting his gaze from people to things and engaging with the historical experience in the twentieth century. With their exploration of absence and blurred evidence, the art of documentary photographers recalls at the same time the nature of contemporary archaeology, which works with fragments and oblivion, and the Heideggerian battle between world and earth.

But what is the task of the archaeologist? With Žižek's

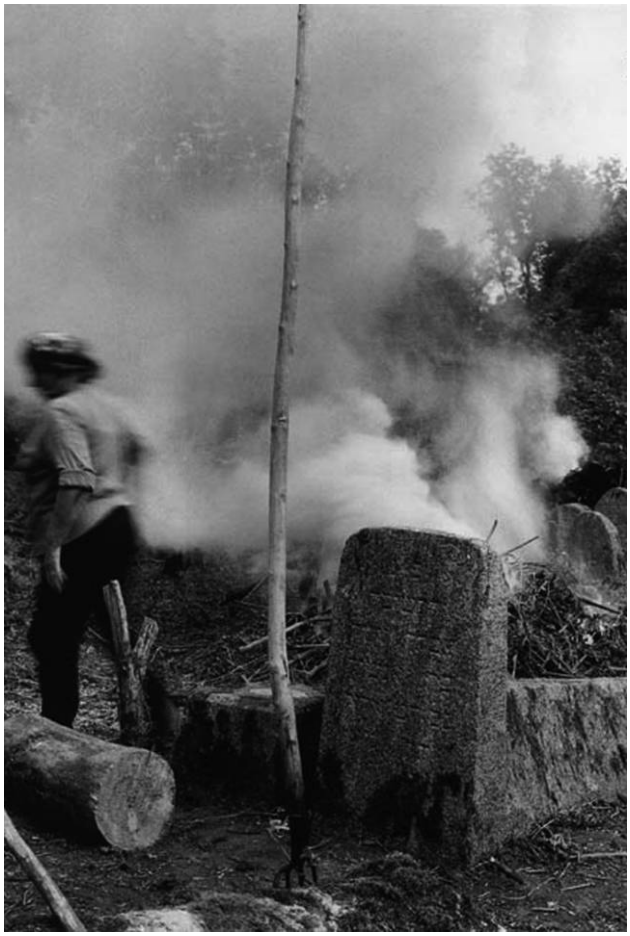

Figure 3. A Jewish cemetery, Berdichev (Ukraine). © Jason Francisco, reprinted by permission from Francisco (2006, pl. 42).

caveat in mind, I am not proposing here that archaeology be turned into art, thus replicating the move of the archaeologists turned writers. As archaeologists, we have our own rhetoric, a Heideggerian way of manifesting Being, between the world and the earth. We work between revelation—how this truck exploded when driven over a landmine (González-Ruibal 2006, 186)—and concealment—why this house was abandoned (Buchli and Lucas 2001*c*). We are trained to read material traces and engage in meaningful and original ways with the qualities and textures of things; we know about material culture and history, and we have developed a methodology for documenting and interpreting the past. This methodology is so powerful that some artists are basing their work on it (most famously Mark Dion [see Renfrew 2003]), and writers such as Foucault and Freud constantly used archaeological tropes in their writings. Both artists and archaeologists are concerned with documentation,[1] but we archaeologists are specialists in it. Our mode of revealing truth includes a variety of sources (more than any other discipline) that is broadening with the development of the audiovisual and digital media (Olivier 2001, 399; Witmore 2004*a* and *b*; Webmoor 2005; Van Dyke 2006). Many archaeologists are now using traditional and new modes of representation in a more creative fashion (e.g., Hodder 2000; Pearson and Shanks 2001), but traditional means of archaeological documentation (drawings of artifacts, plans of structures, distribution maps, graphs) may have extraordinary power when applied to the recent past (fig. 4): they can help to display that past in new ways (Lucas 2005, 126–27). The combination of old and new media is expanding the possibilities for translating the qualities of things (Witmore 2004). Given the abundance of data and the peculiar nature of the archaeological record of supermodernity, the archaeology of the recent past should benefit even more from these new modes of engagement with the material. Modernity has created a sharp, asymmetric divide between rhetoric and truth that has to be overcome (Ginzburg 2003 [2000]): the two are not conflicting. In fact, rhetoric helps to mediate the past in richer ways. The conflict is within truth, where disclosure and concealment struggle.

To sum up, the archaeology of the contemporary past can provide alternative stories about recent events, but it can also—and it must—mediate the recent past in ways that make presence manifest and keep memory alive. This implies exploring other ways of engaging with the materiality of the contemporary world and working in the gray zone between revelation and concealment.

Materiality

The archaeology of the contemporary past has to do justice to the enormous relevance of things in our recent history. This means, in the first place, paying more attention in a symmetrical way to the collectives of humans and things that are involved in the historical processes that we study (Latour 1993, 1996; Law 2002; Netz 2004; Olsen 2003, 2006; Witmore 2007) and, secondly, taking into account the materiality of the world we live in—an issue that is achieving more and more importance in the social sciences (Graves-Brown 2000; Demarrais, Gosden, and Renfrew 2004; Meskell 2005*a*; Miller 2005; Tilley et al. 2006). Many people outside archaeology are becoming aware of the importance of materiality in our supermodern existences: a widespread new material sensibility (Shanks, Platt, and Rathje 2004) is reflected, among other things, in a growing interest in the most mundane things.

With regard to the increasing relevance of material culture, Bjørnar Olsen (2003) has made the point that humans and things are inextricably linked and that it is the anthropocentrism of the social sciences that prevents us from seeing the collectives of humans and things that really exist (also Latour 1993). The fact that humans and objects are enmeshed in hybrid collectives is more obvious than ever in the supermodern world, among other things because people are well aware that they no longer master the artifacts that they produce. Sometimes we feel that we are controlled by our own

1. See the Presence Project, an initiative involving artists, performers, and media students, coordinated by Michael Shanks (http://www.presence.stanford.edu).

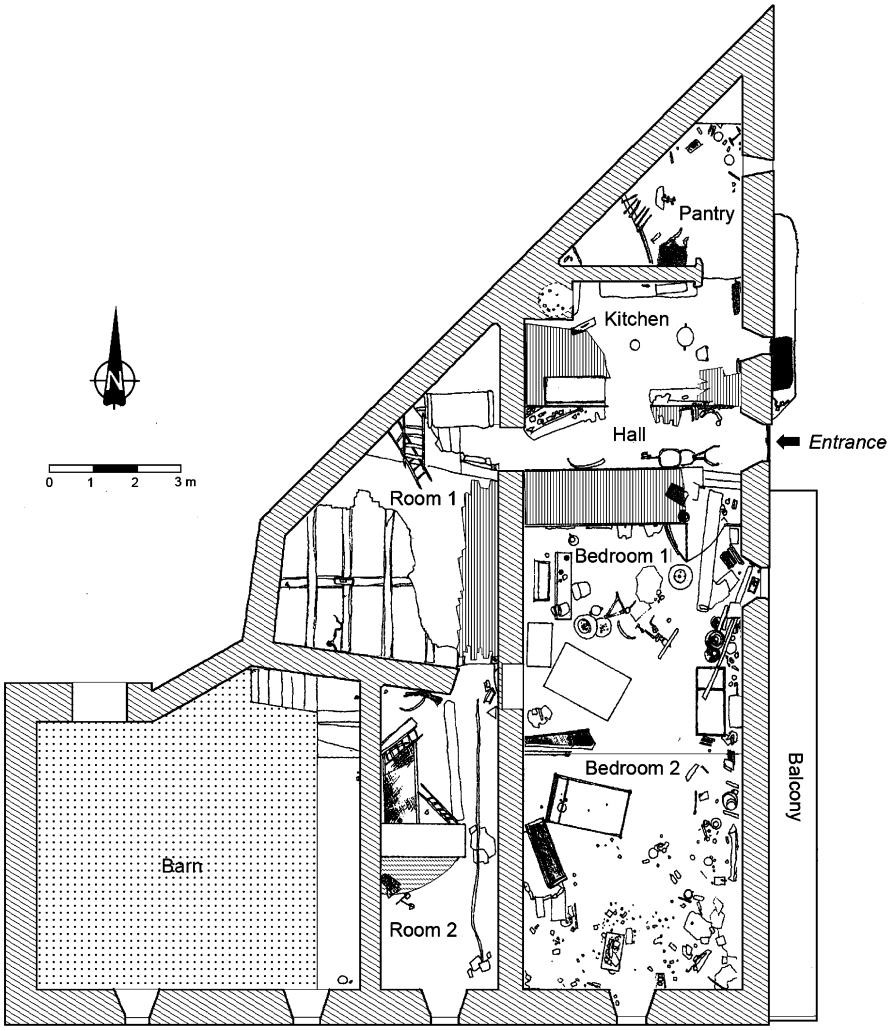

Figure 4. Archaeological plan of an abandoned traditional farm in Galicia (1960s) with distribution of artifacts (González-Ruibal 2003, 121, fig. 41).

things, to the point that they can kill us, exterminate us all—consider the sci-fi dystopias typical of supermodernity. As Virilio and Lotringer (1997, 66) have noted, "Knowing how to do it doesn't mean we know what we are doing." World War I is a case in point: a nineteenth-century society with nineteenth-century ways of conducting war awoke with horror to supermodern conflict by means of supermodern *matériel* culture (Schofield, Johnson, and Beck 2002). The horrendous casualties of this war can only be explained by an imbalance between people and things—things going way ahead of people. This kind of situation and the proliferation of "intelligent" artifacts may explain archaeologists' recent interest in the agency of material culture (e.g., Gosden 2004). According to Olsen (2006), the human trajectory since its origins is one of increasing materiality, in which more and more tasks are delegated to nonhuman actors. Supermodernity, however, has given rise to a novel sort of object—what Serres (1995 [1990], 15) has called "world-objects," "artifacts that have at least one global-scale dimension (such as time, space, speed or energy)." Many of these world-objects, such as missiles or military satellites, are very coherent with the supermodern global capacity for destruction.

The presence of material actors is obvious in politics. Supermodern politics is more than ever entangled in things: monuments, military camps, model villages, capital cities, roads, ballot boxes. Foucault (2000, 210) foresaw the parliament of things before Latour: "Government is the right disposition of things . . . but what does this mean? I think that it is not a matter of opposing things to men but, rather, of showing that what government has to do with is not territory but, rather, a sort of complex composed of men and things." Political changes usually involve a new ecology of things and people. What is usually forgotten is the role of abandoned or destroyed things in these new ecologies—the production of

destruction (Virilio and Lotringer 1997). The "right disposition of things" for the Serbian Chetniks in the Balkan war included the killing of Islamic monuments (not only people) (Hall 2000, 188). For the bloodless modernist Utopia of the Galician peasants in Spain, change entails the destruction of the vernacular past (González-Ruibal 2005*a*). The same goes for the futuristic Italian fascism (Ghirardo 1989) and many other modernist dreams. These new ecologies usually mobilize fragments from the past and make them present only to raze them to the ground: The sixteenth-century bridge in Mostar became a very contemporary artifact in the recent conflict in the Balkans, and the same can be said of the mosque of Ayodhya or the Buddhas of Bamiyan (Meskell 2002, 564–65; Golden 2004, 184–86).

The production of destruction, with its effects on the collectives of humans and things, is especially obvious in times of war and political revolution. During the Spanish Civil War (1936–39) a new series of actors appeared on the political scene—not just supermodern weapons (bombers, machine guns, tanks) but also asphalted roads, telephones, the radio (Thomas 1976, 1004), and portable cameras that recorded the conflict (Sontag 2003, 21). Thomas has pointed out that the history of the conflict is the history of the abuse of technology. The most advanced military technology shattered a countryside of peasants, plows and oxcarts, as Robert Capa's photographs captured so well (Capa 1999) (fig. 5). An archaeology of the Spanish Civil War (González-Ruibal 2007) has to take symmetrically into account the materiality of the trench, the roadside where people were executed, the sickles with which anarchists killed landlords and priests in Andalusia, the mass graves filled by the Fascists, and the German bombers that razed Barcelona as actors in the conflict (cf. Olsen 2003). The destructive clash of industrial technology and nonindustrial communities is characteristic of the relationship between people and things in supermodernity. We find this time and time again in the Vietnam War (Hickey 1993), in the civil war in Ethiopia (González-Ruibal 2006), and in the most recent slaughters in Darfur. The archaeology of supermodernity studies the unequal collectives (the peasant and the Kalashnikov, the hunter-gatherer and the chainsaw) of our globalized world.

An archaeology of the supermodern, however, has to go beyond merely taking things into account. It has to go a step beyond technology and material-culture studies. For an archaeology of the supermodern the "background noise" (Witmore 2007)—garbage, ruins the asphalt on a road, a pile of bricks, an empty shell casing, a rusty tin can (fig. 6)—is everything. This is not only a rhetorical call for revaluing the margins and reading between the lines in the postmodernist way. As a matter of fact, it can turn out to be a strong critical claim. Anthropologists, although more concerned than ever with space (Gupta and Ferguson 2002, 65; Delaney 2004, 35–75), are also more than ever separated from the materiality of space itself. The deterritorialization and multi-sitedness of contemporary ethnography (Clifford 1997) has also worked for the disappearance of matter: houses, streets, and towns figure only as nodes anchoring ethereal networks in the media world of transnational diasporic communities. The spaces of globalization (finanscapes, mediascapes, ideoscapes, etc.) defined by Appadurai (2002) and the "placeless, timeless, symbolic systems" that inform the network society delineated by Castells (1998, 350) are virtual worlds, devoid of matter, in which ideas and capital seem to flow. "Utopian digital futures . . . ignore the escalating divisions in wealth across the world and almost all the economic and social consequences of globalization" (Hall 2000, 152). Likewise, the digital wars broadcast by the media seem to have dematerialized conflict and made it obscenely spectacular (Sontag 2003, 110), thus neutralizing pain and violence. Paul Virilio commented as early as 1984 that "a war of pictures and sounds is replacing a war of objects (projectiles and missiles)" (quoted in Virilio 2002, x). But, as Hall (2000, 183) points out, "there [is] no virtual escape from an AK-47." An anthropologist well aware of the critical relevance of the material, Michael Taussig (2004, 25), notes that "the materiality of the material world and of the workaday world is far too easily taken for granted, especially in societies with advanced technology. What is required now as the world lurches toward ecological and political self-destruction is continuous surprise as to the material facts of Being." It is necessary to go down to the ground and describe stinking rubbish, blown-up mosques, and hastily buried corpses to destroy the virtual myth, because the world is still about material things. Archaeology reminds us that there is a chaotic material reality behind the clean and invisible networks of globalization and the digital media, a materiality that is not reducible to social constructions and symbolic meanings.

Place and Memory

The matter of the archaeology of supermodernity is found in very diverse kinds of locales. Three sorts of places, chosen for their different relations to memory, will be considered here: places of abjection, *mnemotopoi,* and *lieux de mémoire.*

Most of the things that the archaeology of the recent past deals with belong to the realm of the abject (Buchli and Lucas 2001*a*). A quick inventory would include trenches, mass graves, landfills, bomb craters, derelict factories, abandoned railways, ruined houses, bunkers, nuclear testing grounds, concentration camps, refugee camps, and places devastated by industrial disasters or racial riots. These different kinds of archaeological sites can be found in Kabul, Fresh Kills [New York], Srebrenica, Chernobyl, Bhopal, Detroit, Baghdad, or Los Angeles. The archaeological scars of supermodernity are, in a sense, akin to Marc Augé's non-places: "If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place" (Augé 2002 [1992], 83). Heritage that is not positively used in the construction of collective identity has been variously defined

Figure 5. A Spanish peasant, in traditional attire, using a machine-gun in 1936. © Robert Capa/Magnum/Photos/Contacto, reprinted by permission from Capa (1999).

Figure 6. The interior of a house abandoned in Galicia (Spain) by emigrated peasants.

as negative (Meskell 2002), ambivalent (Chadha 2006), or hurtful (Dolff-Bonekaemper 2002). Sites that can be described as such are not all necessarily places of abjection: only those sites whose existence has been erased from collective memory, about which nobody is allowed or wants to speak or whose existence is denied. Places of abjection are sites where no memorial is built and no commemorative plaque is to be found. If supermodern anthropology deals with non-places, archaeology has to deal with landscapes of death and oblivion (fig. 7): a no-man's land too recent, conflicting, and repulsive to be shaped as collective memory. This is the natural space for an archaeology of supermodernity's destructiveness. Nevertheless, some places of abjection may become important locales for collective recollection. In this way, they become *mnemotopoi,* places of memory.

Mnemotopos is a word coined by Jan Assmann (1992) and inspired by Halbwachs's work (1971) on the sites of pilgrimage in the Holy Land. Thus, if a place of abjection is a locale beyond social remembrance, where memory is erased, condemned to oblivion. or put in quarantine, *mnemotopoi* are the material foundations of collective memory. They are not necessarily different, typologically speaking, from places of abjection. It is the way particular locales have been constituted in relation to a group's identity that grants them a particular status. However, they include new categories too: monuments, memorials, historical buildings, and places where something socially significant happened, something that left a collective memory trace: an Olympic stadium, a boulevard, a concert hall. Among contemporary *mnemotopoi* we have the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C., Auschwitz's concentration camp, and New York's Ground Zero (fig. 8).

Both the *mnemotopos* and the place of abjection are locales where a nonabsent past resides (Domanska 2005, 405). This is not necessarily the case with the *lieu de mémoire.* A *lieu de mémoire* is like a well-worn metaphor, a cliché that claims to encapsulate memory but has been too internalized, historicized, and trivialized by society and the state to be able to display any true, living memory—the national flag, the national anthem, Victor Hugo, the Tour de France. In a sense, it bears a dysfunctional fossilized memory in a world where the past is reworked by the social sciences and spontaneous memory has been eradicated (Nora 1984, xxiv). Many *mnemotopoi* are eventually condemned to become *lieux de mémoire*—the matter of history and historians, already detached from socially significant recollection—and, even worse, *lieux dominants,* places at the service of power (Nora 1984, xl). Olivier (2001, 186) has pointed out that the state tends to absorb these sites into a monument apparatus designed to sustain an ideological discourse.

Most places are in constant ontological change. Their transformations depend on the materiality of the locale as much as on the social context, the historical circumstances, and the multifarious interests embedded in them. Places of abjection and *mnemotopoi*, as materializations of a nonabsent past that

Figure 7. Overgrown trenches from the battle of Brunete (1937) near Madrid (Spain).

Figure 8. New York's Ground Zero.

cannot be controlled or subjected to a definitive interpretation, are more prone to sudden change (Domanska 2005, 405), but *lieux de mémoire* are also characterized by constant metamorphosis (Nora 1984, xxxv). As may be easily supposed, the role of archaeologists can be fundamental in changing the status of particular sites. The cold-war sites in the United Kingdom (Cocroft and Thomas 2003) are a good example of places of abjection that are being inventoried, classified, studied, and, therefore, ontologically transformed into *mnemotopoi*, soon to become *lieux de mémoire.* As Runia (2006*a*, 18) points out, the more a monument is interacted with, the more it loses its presence and becomes a platitude.

Battlefields are a good example of the nature of the archaeological sites of supermodernity. Consider two different battlefields of World War II: Kiev and Omaha Beach. The latter is clearly a *mnemotopos*, a key place to remember fundamental events in recent Western history—events that are still part of the living collective memory of most people in Europe and North America. Even if our memory is affected by a historical mode of reasoning and academic scholarship, there is still some room for spontaneous recollections in places like that. Going to Omaha Beach is still like going to Auschwitz—a sacral, deeply moving pilgrimage. However, the site is in danger of becoming a historical cliché, a *lieu de mémoire.* It has been monumentalized and aestheticized to enhance and redirect remembrance (fig. 9). In a few decades it will have probably an effect on our consciences similar to that of the Roman Colosseum or the battlefield at Waterloo. Once their terrible connotations are lost or diminished, these sites become places of leisure, with scarcely any sinister aura. The war remains around Kiev, in contrast, are still closer to a place of abjection than to a *lieu de mémoire.* The battlefield and the subsequent places of the Jewish genocide are sunk into oblivion, and tons of war debris, human remains, mass graves, and structures remain more or less undisturbed except for the occasional looter. The trenches and fortifications have not been constituted as a place of collective remembrance, probably because of the difficult politics of memory in a country that has suffered a long-lasting totalitarian regime (Khubova, Ivankiev, and Sharova 1992; Sherbakova 1992). A similar case in point is that of Spain, where most archaeological sites from the civil war have been condemned to oblivion because of the silence imposed by a long-lasting dictatorial regime and an imperfect democratic transition (González-Ruibal 2007).

However, many places cannot be easily classified. As has been repeated ad nauseam, different groups usually perceive the same place in very different ways, and these multiple perceptions are sometimes contentious: it is not only multivocality but multilocality as well (Rodman 1992; Bender and Winer 2001). This is all the more obvious in the supermodern past, in which personal memories are still very much alive. Examples include the conflicting readings of a cold war military base in Britain (Schofield and Anderton 2000) and the multiple subaltern interpretations of Cape Town's District Six in South Africa (McEachern 1998; Hall 2000). Nevertheless, it is not always the way to remember a place that is at stake

Figure 9. The American cemetery and memorial at Omaha Beach (Normandy).

but whether a locale should be remembered at all: consider the remnants of the Berlin Wall (Klausmeier and Schmidt 2004). Settlements with ruined vernacular architecture in Galicia are for many former peasants a dystopia about which they prefer not to talk. They are often isolated from new urban-style sprawls (fig. 10) and concealed behind façades of modernity—rows of modern brick-and-concrete houses along the roads (González-Ruibal 2005*a*). They convey a powerful message of poverty and underdevelopment for those who, until a few decades ago, depended on the plow for their survival. Nonetheless, they are also *lieux de mémoire* for many educated urban Galicians: the sturdy vernacular house is a symbol of national identity as much as the anthem and the flag (*lieux de mémoire* in Nora's sense), and it has been constructed as an everlasting ethnographic element, a metaphor for "Galicianness," by local anthropologists (González-Ruibal 2005*b*, 140–42). These conflicting views on the archaeology of the recent past produce heterogeneous built environments, environments as heterogeneous as the narratives about that same past: thus, there are villages with some houses refurbished in pseudo-vintage style by urbanites and others, in ruins, whose former inhabitants have decided to build modern residences elsewhere. Dystopia and Utopia may coalesce in the same spot.

What is the role of the archaeologist facing the spaces of supermodernity? Archaeology, as Laurent Olivier (2000, 2004) has pointed out, is closer to memory than to history. But if it wants to aid memory it must help to preserve something of the uncanny in the places that it studies, especially when it is dealing with the ruins of supermodernity's destructiveness. Many archaeologists agree that sites that are not subjected to conservation policies are usually the most evocative at all (Schofield 2005, 171). Rescuing particular locales—a battlefield, a mass grave, or a prison—from oblivion is not enough. Archaeology has to guard against their trivialization and preserve their aura. It must keep memory in place, but at the same time it must work against the saturation of memory. This issue, what Nora (1984, xxvii) calls "le gonflement hypertrofique de la fonction de mémoire," is particularly worrying with regard to the recent past. Memory has two enemies: oblivion and the overabundance of recollections (Terdiman 1993; Matsuda 1996; Connerton 2006). By producing too much remembrance, archaeologists—and historians—run the risk of blunting memory and making it banal. This is perhaps the risk of Omaha Beach or Auschwitz. Thus, Nora (1984, xxvi) says that the annihilation of memory is linked to a general will for documentation, whereas according to Augé (1998, 23) oblivion is necessary: some things have to be forgotten if we want others to be remembered.

When dealing with a period so well-researched and documented as the past 100 years, the danger of saturating memory, evening out the past, and choking the relevant with the

Figure 10. Ruined houses and granaries, concealed by overgrown vegetation, in Galicia (Spain).

trivial is even more threatening, but not many archaeologists seem to worry about this. It is not clear to me, for example, why we should document the over 500 remains of war planes from 1912 to 1945 that are known to exist in Britain (Holyoak 2002) or the 14,000 anti-invasion defenses in Britain from World War II (Schofield 2005, 57). Do we need 500 microhistories about as many micro-events? What are the effects on collective memory of the preservation, restoration, and display of thousands of pillboxes? Although new ways of documentation and management are being developed (Schofield, Klausmeier, and Purbrick 2006) the risk of saturating and trivializing memory remains. Sites that are overdocumented and manicured lose their aura and their political potential. Against the deritualization of our world, which allows *lieux de mémoire* to deaden the past (Nora 1984, xxiv), archaeologists should return ritual to the landscape (e.g., Pearson and Shanks 2001, 142–46).

The other danger for memory is its absence or denial. Saturation leads at best to hollow clichés—*lieux de mémoire*. Oblivion favors places of abjection. If against the overabundance of remembrance archaeologists should develop new strategies of management and documentation that help preserve the aura of a place, against silence and trauma they must bring forgotten places back to public attention, denounce absences, point out contradictions, encourage recollections, and foster discussion (e.g., Ludlow Collective 2001). In sum, archaeologists have to help produce landscapes of countermemory (Hall 2006, 204–7).

Politics

The archaeology of the recent past has to be political—all archaeology is, but forgetting politics is inexcusable in the times in which we live (Fernández 2006). Actually, most archaeology of the recent past *is* political, independently of the archaeologist's intentions. How can we survey a concentration camp, excavate a trench or a mass grave, or study a derelict ghetto without getting involved in politics? By focusing on the destructive operations of supermodernity (war, failed development projects, mass emigration and displacement, industrialization and deindustriaIization) archaeology can be an original critical voice in the social sciences.

It has been pointed out above that archaeology is about memory and presence. Summoning presence is perhaps the strongest political act that an archaeology of supermodernity can perform. According to Runia (2006*a*, 5), "Presence . . . is 'being in touch'—either literally or figuratively—with people, things, events, and feelings that made you into the person you are." As opposed to this need for presence, Paul Virilio thinks that the situation in the late twentieth century is characterized by the "politics of disappearance" (Virilio and Lotringer 1997, 89), including wars concealed from the media,

Figure 11. Containers from an abandoned development project in Benishangul-Gumuz (Ethiopia).

invisible bombers, and the missing bodies of political opponents. Archaeologists have to make things visible and public (Ludlow Collective 2001; Leone 2005; González-Ruibal 2007).

However, how we make things public is not a matter free from contention. Archaeologists tend to think that challenging official narratives implies showing all the data available and producing alternative, more complete narratives. Žižek (Žižek and Daly 2004, 141–43) has criticized the right to narrate that suspends the notion of truth and, particularly, the "universal truth of a situation" (for example, the idea that the Jews were in a position to articulate all the truth about Nazism). Žižek (2004, 190) also outlines two different critical attitudes, exemplified by Noam Chomsky's commitment to show all the facts versus Gilles Deleuze's pessimism. Referring to Nazism, Deleuze said: "All the documents could be known, all the testimonies could be heard, but in vain" (quoted in Žižek 2004, 190). The disclosure of the unspeakable performed by archaeology can be politically more powerful than many traditional ways of narrating facts. We show evidence: we bring presence to the fore and put the corpses on the table. This critical process can be considered desublimation (Žižek 2001, 39–40, 89–90). It can be argued that desublimation is incompatible with the theory of art delineated by Heidegger, which sublimates some beings. However, I think that we can combine Heidegger's idea of disclosure with the political potential of desublimation. It is not the whole "fantasy of the real"—as Žižek puts it—that archaeology can desublimate but the political fantasy of the real. This is done by transforming the sublime Thing of politics into the abject, tangible thing in itself. Žižek (2004, 149) resorts to Duchamps's famous urinal to show the work of sublimation: an ordinary artifact of abjection has its materiality transubstantiated into the mode of appearance of the Thing. Archaeology's political task is just the opposite: to show that the Urinal is a urinal: a revolting thing. Thus, the sublime Thing of Order and Progress can be shown to be in archaeological terms a quite abject thing, the ruins of a devastated Indian village in the Brazilian Amazon; the sublime Thing that was the idea of Revolution can be shown to be a frozen Gulag in Siberia, and Development, a sublime Thing of neoliberal global politics, may be no more than an abandoned steel container rusting in a forest in Ethiopia (fig. 11). Crude materiality, as unveiled by archaeology, desublimates the ethereal Thing. Art and archaeology work in a similar ways, making us look at objects in a different, disturbing way.

I fully understand the concern of some archaeologists, especially those who are responsible for heritage management, with showcasing the bright—or less dramatic—side of twentieth-century archaeological sites. Admittedly, archaeologists affiliated with English Heritage are among the first to have called attention to the most recent archaeological sites (cf. Schofield 2005, 115), and there is no lack of critical statements either (Schofield and Anderton 2000; Schofield, Johnson, and Beck 2002). At the same time, though, Schofield (2004) says that "we should no longer view the twentieth century merely as a pollutant, something that has devalued or destroyed what

went before." Unfortunately, such a positive view runs the risk of sanctioning what we have done to the world and to ourselves during the past century. A nuclear silo is not a late medieval cottage, and, although violence and power are encapsulated in almost every human product of the past 5,000 years, things have never before been capable of destroying the world itself, and the agency of hybrid collectives composed of humans and things has never been so thoroughly destructive (Serres 1995 [1990]). We need to use archaeology as a tool of radical critique, opposed to ideological mechanisms for sanitizing the past. Those mechanisms may lead us to forget politics (the implications of the past in the present) and, in the worst-case scenario, to produce obscene theme parks. Sanitizing our object of study is in fact an operation inherent in archaeology as a discipline (Buchli and Lucas 2001*a*, 9–10), but in dealing with the recent past we have to be careful not to transform the cleanliness and distance it creates into ethical passivity and detachment. Cocroft and Thomas's (2003) book on cold-war sites in Britain raises a whole series of ethical and political problems: structures designed to produce mass destruction and horrific physical damage to innocent human beings are described with scientific aloofness and enthusiastic technical detail. Lack of politics is always conservative politics: the worrying impression is that we can learn more, in a profound sense, about the dramatic twentieth century from a photograph by Mikael Levin or Camilo José Vergara than from archaeological research on the recent past.

The emphasis on the *construction* of landscape (see Bradley et al. 2004) as something positive or at least creative is in line with a romanticizing acritical perspective that is strongly rooted in some British archaeology—and not only archaeology (Woodward 2001). The emphasis on destruction that is defended in this article, although probably less fashionable (and certainly less useful in heritage management), aims to keep critique alive. It is not antimodernism, though, that is postulated here, since antimodernism tends to be extremely reactionary, but amodernism (Latour 1993), as beautifully deployed by Michel Serres (1995 [1990]) in his "natural contract"—a pact with nature that subverts modernist relations of domination and extends the social contract to nonhuman beings.

The array of possible criticisms is as wide as supermodernity's misdeeds: from the modernist kitsch that razes vernacular spaces to the ravages of war that wipe out entire nations. Archaeological critique can be a counterpoint to a certain tendency in material-culture studies toward triviality and banality, a tendency inherited from cultural studies and some postmodernist thinking. It is not that archaeology is free of trivialization: even highly controversial matters such as the excavation of mass graves sometimes verge on voyeurism and sensationalism. However, the tendency toward trivialization is clearer in material-culture studies. In line with the Baudrillardian claim of the death of production, material-culture studies shifted from production to consumption (Miller 1987). Another critical turn has been proposed in this article: from consumption to destruction. Destruction is very often caused by consumption: the vegetarians eating soy in a European metropolis unwittingly foster the destruction of the Amazonian rain forest, while the consumption of diamonds in North America favors the dreadful mutilation of several thousand Liberians (Campbell 2002). Should we just investigate how Americans use their innate human creativity to reshape the meaning and social uses of diamonds or explore the bloody genealogies of precious stones? As an archaeologist, I feel more inclined to carry out the second task. Although most work on transnational commodities and globalized commodity chains is largely celebratory and optimistic (see Inda and Rosaldo 2002: Foster 2006), some anthropologists are leading the way in denouncing sinister trade networks (Scheper-Hughes 2000), and some anthropologists and archaeologists have voiced criticisms of the depoliticizing effects of the "creative consumption" paradigm (Wurst and McGuire 1999; Graeber 2004, 99–101), but the mainstream social sciences are ensconced in this paradigm and not very willing to change (cf. Tilley et al. 2006). Without having to return to production as the only focus of attention. I think that archaeology should focus on the other side of the enchanting "shiny peanut" that Daniel Miller (1997, 1–3) finds accompanying beverages in Trinidad: a less shiny image of indentured labor, depopulated rural landscapes, abandoned factories, urban slums, ever-growing landfills, depleted natural resources, and even lunar warscapes. In this way, archaeology may offer a counterpoint to the excessive optimism of globalization studies (e.g., Foster 2006; Miller 2006). Following a sort of Foucauldian procedure, archaeologists must trace the genealogies rather than the biographies (Kopytoff 1986)[2] of things, going from consumption to production but also from consumption to destruction and exposing concrete structures and relations of power on the way—what Taussig (2004) does with gold and cocaine in Colombia. These genealogies, however, are not only Foucauldian—in their interest in relations of power—but also sociotechnical (Latour 1996; Law 2002; Witmore 2007) in that they deal with collectives of humans and things (diamonds, mercenaries, machetes, Kalashnikovs).

This critique does not mean that I consider some material-culture studies worthless or that the heritage managers' concern with the recent past is futile. Their contribution to archaeology is beyond doubt. It is because I see a troubling lack of political commitment in many works—in contrast to much historical archaeology (Delle, Mrozowski, and Paynter 2000; Hall 2000; Ludlow Collective 2001; McGuire and Wurst 2002; Leone 2005) and anthropology—that I demand a closer look at supermodernity's politics of destruction: archaeology, with its focus on ruins and abandonment, may be the discipline

2. The difference is pertinent: the concept of genealogy transcends the life of an object and relates the thing to artifacts, people, ideas, and institutions in the deeper past and expands its links to other collectives synchronically.

best-suited to dealing with the (politically) abject of our recent history and our present.

Conclusion: Beyond Archaeological Therapeutics

The archaeology of supermodernity, that is, of modernity become excessive, is different from any other archaeology. It is not to be mistaken for an attempt to separate past and present: the past percolates (Witmore 2004*b*). There is no archaeology of the twenty-first century but only an archaeology of the twenty-first and all its pasts, mixed and entangled (Olivier 2000, 393, 400; Witmore 2004*b*, 2007). The particular character of the archaeology of supermodernity can be, nonetheless, reasonably argued: the traumatic nature of the recent past, our intimate implication in its events, and the disturbing nature of its record, whose historical proximity makes it so raw and traumatic. In this article it has been suggested that it is precisely this particular and at the same time all-embracing character of the archaeology of supermodernity that makes it a privileged space for reflection on certain concepts that concern archaeology as a whole: mediation, materiality, place and memory, and politics.

From World War I to the Chinese Three Gorges Dam, the archaeology of supermodernity is the archaeology of superdestruction of life and matter. From this perspective, my stance is admittedly pessimistic. It is not, however, a paralyzing pessimism but one that triggers action. This action can be translated simultaneously as archaeological therapy and archaeological critique: a way of dealing with a traumatic past, bringing forward presence and managing conflicting memories. It has been proposed here that the mission of the archaeology of supermodernity is not only telling other stories, although these are extremely important in many cases. What is usually most necessary is making manifest—a revelation that allows the return of the repressed, the unsayable (Buchli and Lucas 2001*a*). It is from this point of view above all that archaeology can perform a therapeutic—as well as political—function. Making manifest means performing the political act of unveiling what the supermodern power machine does not want to be shown: the corpses in a Bosnian mass grave or the ruins of Bhopal's factory in India. This is in fact what the descendants of those killed in the Spanish Civil War want: not so much historical explanations or alternative stories as their relatives' corpses (Elkin 2006; Ferrándiz 2006)—not so much meaning as presence. Only these acts of disclosure can bring healing to those who have suffered supermodernity's violence. Primo Levi committed suicide because he could not *say* "Auschwitz." The question is, then, can we archaeologists help to perform a therapeutic task by making manifest what cannot be said?

At the same time, archaeology is not only about healing but also about critique: exposing the dark genealogies and destructive operations of the contemporary world. For many Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina (Crossland 2000) it is not all about recovering their relatives' corpses. They understand that therapeutic closure mean political closure (amnesty and amnesia), too. They want to keep the political struggle alive, and for that reason some of them controversially oppose the recovery of the bodies of the disappeared. In my opinion, therapy and critique are not incompatible. Archaeology should provide peace and reparations for the victims and no truce with the perpetrators of crimes against humanity.

The problem with some archaeology of the recent past, however, is that it is either too archaeological, in that it only wants to document and catalogue the things of the past, or not archaeological enough, using the recent past as an excuse for innocuous creative engagements with material culture and landscape. My point is that both approaches, although necessary and innovative, may work against a politically conscious archaeology and diminish the true radical potential of the discipline. To make the most of archaeology we have to overcome the Anglo-Saxon dualism of scholarship and commitment that Pierre Bourdieu and, before him, the critical-theory school (Horkheimer 1999) so often denounced. Bourdieu (2002, 475) called for the restoration of the French tradition of the engaged intellectual, but this is actually a tradition that can be found elsewhere in Mediterranean and Latin American archaeology, anthropology, and history (for archaeology see, e.g., McGuire and Navarrete 1999; Falquina, Marín, and Rolland 2006; Fernández 2006; Funari and Zarankin 2006). In this tradition, scholarship and political commitment are one and the same (Bourdieu 2001; Fernández 2006). Like Bourdieu (2004, 44–45), I want to be "someone who helps a little bit to provide tools for liberation"—an ambitious task, perhaps, but worth trying.

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regarding critical theory. Jason Francisco allowed me to reproduce one of his photographs (fig. 3). This article has benefited from the ideas and criticism of several referees. All errors and misinterpretations are my own.

Comments

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I endorse González-Ruibal's important manifesto calling for a radical archaeology of ruination. His passionate argument identifies the baleful depredations wrought by short-term capitalism, monumental consumption, colossal waste, and military depravity embodied in ruinous forms. In the absence of other evidence and in response to the obliteration, obfuscation, and forgetting of atrocity, ruins serve as sites at which abject and awkward presences might be conjured up to shout back at power.

However, although González-Ruibal's refocusing on the violence that inheres in ruination is necessary and innovative, I am alarmed by his circumscription of the realm of the political and the assumption that *all* ruins epitomize tyranny, violence, "development," incarceration, and bloodshed. The significance and effect of a ruin depend upon its specificity: its former function, (changing) spatial context, ever-transforming materiality, and aesthetic form. An overarching approach, redolent of a puritan politics of the left, that recognizes only the abject evades the excess of meaning and matter that is always present in ruin and sidesteps the potential for a politics of pleasure, alternative aesthetics, and mundane resistance to the regulatory strategies of power.

First, in my own work—labelled by González-Ruibal as "romanticizing"—I emphasize the sensual materiality of industrial ruins (Edensor 2007). Despite the turn to materiality across the social sciences, a tendency to minimize the "thingliness of the world" and thus marginalize the playful, experiential qualities of space persists. In ruins, a host of alternative sensual and expressive experiences might be elicited through the stimulus of unfamiliar materialities. Indeed, ruins frequently function as sites for adventure and wild play that may not be available elsewhere. Traces include graffiti, dens, smashed objects, impromptu soccer goals and targets, used spliffs, and beer bottles. Moreover, ruins may serve as locales for sensory engagement where bodies confront strange textures and perform unaccustomed manoeuvres, unmonitored dances, or sprints. These initially unfamiliar liaisons with things bring to light a sensory alienation from a material world largely shaped by the commodity form as inviolable, valuable entity and by space that is overtly or covertly policed or regulated by internalized norms about what social practices, forms of comportment, and clothing styles are "appropriate." Furthermore, decay and the absence of upkeep mean that ruins offer an alternative aesthetic realm in which things constantly move, wantonly commingling, changing their shape and form, and offering themselves to a gaze that cannot pin them down—an aesthetic realm at variance with normative spaces of overdesign in which material and aesthetic order must be continually maintained (Edensor 2005*a*, 2005*b*).

Now, while a populist tendency in cultural studies optimistically ascertains everyday heroism in mundane shopping, youth subcultures, and tourism, the sensory, aesthetic, and playful engagements depicted above do not seem akin to what González-Ruibal calls "innocuous creative engagements with material culture and landscape" that undermine the potential for archaeological radicalism. Rather, they enlarge the scope of such a politics.

Secondly, González-Ruibal asserts that an overproliferation of narrative accounts can "neutralize and trivialize the past," but this surely depends upon the qualities of the stories concerned. Alternatively, while *lieux de mémoire* can appear surrounded by fixed and clichéd narratives, such reifications are continually susceptible to the extra and excessive, whether in the slipperiness of words or in superfluous materialities. Accordingly, dissonant storytelling, rather inarticulate, sensual, and conjectural in form, can emerge at ghostly, ruinous sites, where disparate fragments, peculiar juxtapositions, obscure traces, involuntary memories, uncanny impressions, and strange atmospheres cannot be woven into narrative seamlessness (Edensor 2005*c*). Connected to "spectrality and figuration," such stories are disconnected from "historicism and teleology" (Neville and Villeneuve 2002, 5–6), stimulated by empathetic and sensual apprehension, and intuitive and affective rather than empiricist or didactic. In foregrounding the ambiguity, polysemy, and multiplicity of sites we might "disrupt the signifying chains of legitimacy built upon the notion of inheriting a heritage" (Landzelius 2003, 208) by imaginatively surmising about a past and a place in a way that radically decouples meaning from matter and space.

I certainly go along with González-Ruibal's desire to produce non-narrative manifestations featuring mundane materialities, whether these constitute vile ensembles or objects that become unenchanted when removed from their normative ideological and spatial context. However, the material revelation of place is also capable of defamiliarizing the world at hand beyond the reach of narrative. But where ruinous places *are* narrated and curated, they need not be understood as inevitably evading critical analysis. While it is imperative to narrate the concealed traces of genocide and war, other stories, as Caitlin DeSilvey (2007) has shown, must "make do" with the fragments at hand (my fig. 1), melding the factual, the sensual, the mysterious, and the conjectural, and thus acknowledge the complexity of weaving contingent historical tales and the creative and catalysing agency of the researcher.

Figure 1. Industrial ruin. (photo Tim Edensor)

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Archaeology is now defined not as the study of the past but, as proposed by Shanks and Tilley (1987) two decades ago, as the study of material culture and power relations (*archē* means both "rule" and "origin"). As a discipline, it is considered in various quarters as part of anthropology (as in North America) or of history (as in most of Europe), but in any case it is no longer considered a handmaid (Funari, Hall, and Jones 1999). This is not to say that there are no exceptions to both statements, but in general archaeology is widely accepted as a useful way of understanding social life and changes in society past and present. González-Ruibal goes beyond this to stress the unique role archaeology can play in the study of our own times. Drawing on Marc Augé's concept of supermodernity, he interprets postmodern times as a time of destruction and judges archaeology particularly suitable for the study of ruins, reminders of oppression. More than that, he suggests that archaeology, concerned with power relations, cannot escape engagement with living, suffering people and must act to provide reparations to the victims. This has in fact been part of the work of archaeology in a number of countries, not least in those formerly ruled by dictatorships such as those of Latin America (Funari and Zarankin 2006).

Overall the argument is convincing, and my only two minor comments refer to the definition of an archaeology of supermodernity and the political aims of archaeology. González-Ruibal rightly argues that historical archaeology is not usually concerned with the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. However, as he admits, historical archaeology is no stranger to present-day archaeology and is increasingly concerned with it. I am not completely convinced that our day should be characterized as a time of destruction: it is also a time of diversity. If the archaeology of supermodernity deals only with unequal collectives and violent clashes, how are we to study all the rest of the material evidence? Through material culture studies? I would prefer that historical archaeology remain the discipline concerned with all these subjects, including destruction. Dealing with material culture and documents, it covers both the past and the present (Little 1992).

The diversity of our time has to do with gender, ethnicity, identities, religiosity, and much else. Archaeology, as a politically engaged discipline, as González-Ruibal acknowledges, is directly concerned with the study of these features of social life. Diversity is linked to conflict and destruction but not only or necessarily so. The domestication of Barbie (Pearson and Mullins 1999) and gender roles in university material culture in Latin America (Freitas 1999) are just two legitimate archaeological issues that go beyond destruction to include diversity. Furthermore, these archaeological studies refer to conflict and oppression and address the specific constituencies of the oppressed. They are political, but they do not restrict our postmodern experiences to material destruction, important as it may be. Diverse constituencies are the key interlocutors of archaeologists aiming at a public role for the discipline. Public archaeology enables the discipline not only to critique our own time but also to change it by interacting with these diverse social segments (Merriman 2004). Archaeology can be a liberating tool for a plethora of different people, from women to students (Bezerra 2005), from gays to natives and maroons.

These are, however, minor differences. The main point is not at issue: archaeology does concern us, archaeology does foster critical thinking and action. González-Ruibal contributes to such an engagement with power issues today.

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González-Ruibal's discussion of "supermodernity" advances an archaeological theory of late capitalism in important ways. By insisting that materiality is outside discourse and by show-

ing that our contemporary world is ever-more-immersed in "hybrid collectives" of people and objects, he maps out a mode of analysis that is rich in its potential for both interpretation and political intervention.

South Africa—as González-Ruibal notes—is a good case study of the nexus of production, consumption, and destruction that runs as a thread through modernity and post-modernity. The project of discrimination by race on a grand scale, grounded in British imperialism and given the force of law in apartheid legislation from 1948 onwards, belongs with the other national projects of high modernity analyzed by James Scott in *Seeing Like a State* (1998). The core legislation of the Population Registration Act, the Group Areas Act, and the Immorality Act classified by race, determined where people so classified could live, and mapped this landscape of discrimination on the body by legislating rules of sexual congress. The organization of space that resulted continues to shape the South African city today and will do so for generations to come. There are few better examples of the way in which production and consumption—the apartheid economy—were linked with destruction. A continuing mark of apartheid's destruction are the *non-lieux* of the South African city: boundary zones between formerly segregated suburbs, transport networks intended to manage racially segregated labour, and security installations (Murray, Shepherd, and Hall 2007).

While this has yet to be widely recognized in the formalities of disciplinary discourse, the apartheid project has generated the kind of archaeology of supermodernity that González-Ruibal so ably maps. District Six, close to the center of Cape Town and a largely barren scar more than three decades after the bulldozers flattened the houses of more than 60,000 residents, is an appropriate icon for this archaeology (Hall 2001). But District Six was one of many sites of forced removal in a country where issues of land and property restitution remain largely unresolved and a political time bomb. Such places have generated powerful counternarratives that deny closure through nostalgia—the misuse of discourses of heritage that deny the continuation of the past into the present (Boym 2001). Examples are Cape Town's District Six Museum, with its continuing challenges to complacency (Rassool and Prosalendis 2001), and Marlene van Niekerk's remarkable *Triomf* (1994), which uses fiction to illuminate the destructive vortex that followed the demolition of Johannesburg's Sophiatown.

At the same time, though, these counternarratives are being swamped by an aggressive commodification of the past that owes more to Las Vegas than to Auschwitz. Heavy investment by multinational corporations in themed entertainment destinations, malls, and tourist venues has turned the "South African story" into lucrative retail opportunities (Hall and Bombardella 2005). Visitors to Cape Town can now experience District Six as a themed mall in a massive casino complex a short drive from the center of the city. From Cape Town they can fly north to the Lost City, a fantasy five-star reconstruction of Rider Haggard–style lost civilizations of Africa. Johannesburg offers Montecasino, a Tuscan-style fantasy that can accommodate 10,000 visitors at a time and is the centerpiece for a cosmopolitan-Mediterranean style of urbanism that implies new history created to fill a void (Hall 1995, 2005).

González-Ruibal offers us an intriguing prospectus for an engaged archaeology that continues the work of critiquing this juggernaut. His argument that narrative alone can both "saturate memory" and result in trivialization is compelling. I would add to this caution the risk of appropriation so vividly illustrated in the ways in which heritage is being subverted in South Africa. Once we have done our work of writing stories of the past, how can we control how they are used and for what purpose?

González-Ruibal gives "manifestation" as an alternative, "re-membering things," working with material remains that are not reducible to text, keeping the "thingliness of the thing," doing justice to the troubling nature of the archaeological record. In the South African context, this opens up the challenge of noting "places of abjection"—the physicality of poverty and social marginalization, the destruction wrought by AIDS and tuberculosis, drug addiction, and crime. Such thingliness demonstrates in tangible form the bare statistics of post-apartheid South Africa—that over these first decades of democracy unemployment and income inequality have increased, rendering South Africa one of the most unequal countries in the world (Seekings and Nattrass 2005). Digital media offer the possibility of the re-presentation of such places of abjection without verbal narrative, allowing things and landscapes to speak for themselves in a way that challenges the closure of the "South African story."

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A paper about contemporary destructiveness is timely not only because we are destroying more (and better) than ever before but also because the notion of destructiveness has not yet been sufficiently theorized. González-Ruibal is entirely right when he suggests that "some things have to be forgotten if we want others to be remembered," questioning whether the conventional emphasis on preservation, restoration, and display is really always appropriate (see also Holtorf 2005*a*). One important aspect is missing, however, in his account, and that is the role of rescue archaeology. By far the largest branch of archaeology, commercially conducted archaeology rescuing remains and information from imminent doom is intimately linked to destruction and, indeed, presupposes it. Destruction is thus not only the hallmark of supermodernity but also the precondition for archaeology in our era.

It is healthy to ask, as González-Ruibal does, what precisely the purpose of contemporary archaeologies of the present and recent past might be. Is there much an archaeologist has to

offer to the way we understand the twentieth and twenty-first centuries drawing on our own memories and an abundance of written sources (see also Holtorf and Piccini n.d.)? If nothing new is likely to be gained, it makes little sense simply to extend paradigms and approaches derived from the study of other periods to our own time. González-Ruibal's proposal of using archaeology "as a tool of radical critique" offers one answer to this question and is therefore relevant and necessary. What surprises me, however, is the exclusivity with which he calls for this particular programme while roundly dismissing some other approaches that he associates with triviality and banality.

Similarly, while it is useful to study destructive practices in detail, it is odd that other phenomena of the contemporary world such as theme parks should be dismissed as "obscene" before their study has even commenced. After all, our own age and kind of society can be described not only in terms of supermodernity but also in terms of "experience society," "dream society," and "experience economy" (Schulze 1993; Jensen 1999; Pine and Gilmore 1999). Surely theme parks are at least as significant for understanding our era as battlefields or concentration camps (Holtorf n.d.).

Having said this, I do not want to take anything away from González-Ruibal's passionate plea for archaeology as a political force that brings healing to victims of violence and exposes destructive operations in the contemporary world, hoping to contribute in this way to world liberation. Although his ambitious and uncompromising agenda remains to be proven in sustained social practice, I hope that he will be able to make a difference along the lines suggested and eventually come to write a book as impressive as Mark Leone's (2005) recent account of many years of social engagement through archaeology.

What is problematic in González-Ruibal's approach is not his zeal but that in his enthusiasm he almost casually surrenders important achievements of archaeological theorizing. The textual metaphor may have its flaws, but it did make archaeologists aware of the need to *read* the remains of the past, for meaning is made by the observer (reader) and not by the thing (text) itself. His assertion that archaeologists "are trained to read [*sic*] material traces" is very revealing, for it shows that comparing material remains with text is a prerequisite for self-aware interpretation. He knows full well that things do not speak for themselves, even though he implies otherwise. Formulating an argument and interpretation in words is not being "trapped in verbal discourse" but exploiting its opportunities, as his own writing exemplifies. When things such as photographs, battle trenches, or mass graves haunt us and summon a powerful presence, it is precisely because they evoke stories that could be told and sometimes have been told with words and not because they somehow disclose "the unsayable" or convey something of their "materiality" and "thingliness."

Related is another faux-pas: Archaeologists are indeed good at documentation, but, whatever Foucault or Freud may think, they do not "document and interpret the past." They document the *remains* of the past in the present, and these things still need to be interpreted. Apparently González-Ruibal (unlike Dion) is not thinking of this crucial difference when he ascribes to documenting archaeologists a "mode of revealing truth" about the (contemporary) past. In other words, if archaeology's task is "to show that the Urinal is a urinal," it is not unveiling its "crude materiality" and something profound that lies beyond verbal discourse about either Duchamp or his art but replacing one narrative about a given material object with another. That the urinal is "a revolting thing" is not its repressed and unsayable truth but a meaning conveyed through a story about the conventional use of urinals that onlookers like González-Ruibal have in their minds.

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González-Ruibal's piece forms a needed definition of the archaeology to be done on us and for us—a logical and welcome extension of historical archaeology and modern material culture studies in that it suggests how to reveal the social processes behind waste and destruction. Given this aim, we need to define the objects that archaeologists observe. Making the processes manifest means using the thingliness of objects to reveal political lies by providing historical explanations for destructive acts. González-Ruibal argues that such a procedure can be restorative, even therapeutic.

Some of the argument in this piece depends heavily on Žižek (1989), who speaks of three kinds of objects and calls them processes, not just things from the ground. The first is the void or absence. The void (p. 194) reflects our assumption that something must have been there in the past when we lack knowledge of what actually was. A void becomes a mystery—the mystery of the Maya, the mystery of Peru, the mystery of Easter Island. The void is not real, and neither is the mystery; the quest creates it. The void exists once the question is asked, not before. The object is called into existence by the desire and the effort to fulfill it.

If the state stands for freedom, social justice, or (in the East) socialism, these are largely ideological—deeply held but essentially deceptive. The void is created by the quest for them. The assumption that there must have been a moment when, for example, democracy or a classless society could occur or be real creates the void. When we observe some object, such as Colonial Williamsburg, that represents the ideology of democracy, it can fill the void and allow us to sense the sublime: real democracy or real socialism.

In archaeology since the nineteenth century, the sublime object of ideology has been the quest for a story of human origins that would secularize human beginnings, challenge hierarchy, and enhance democracy. The quest creates a void

that is filled by fossils: "miserable, radically contingent corporeal leftovers" (Žižek 1989, 195) but close enough to represent the ideology (empirical proof of nondivine human origins that could be understood by anyone) that the ideology can be considered real and thus sublime. It is not that the representation is a lie but that the search itself can lead to misrepresentation. Some part of the exploration of human origins has led to racism.

Žižek's second object is a huge, vile leftover that just sits there, unavoidable. He points to the *Titanic* (1989, 71); I like Pompeii or the Roman Forum. These unavoidable objects represent two parts of a process. They allow for the hope that a lost age can be retrieved, and they provide the pleasure of actually seeing into the past, its wonders, people, lost and mysterious ways, or the original stages of our own life and times, but better. But within the object is a corrupt, vile view of an impotent class leading a society to the destruction embodied by the ruin itself. Every one of González-Ruibal's suggestions is one of these objects: an indictment of society, a vast, vile ruin, including toxic waste dumps, strip mining sites, and landfills made to look like parks.

Žižek's third object (1989, 186) is a circulating or index object. It is a leftover of something that was structured but is now gone. It is both an object itself and an imagined structure of relationships that has to have existed to explain why the circulating object exists. For example, the Neander skull is an index object, and the structure is *Homo erectus* or at least "Neanderthal Man." For González-Ruibal, index objects include cocaine, drug use paraphernalia, and the dollar bill.

All three of Žižek's objects place archaeology as a process within object relations, allowing us to see it as an ideological tool or as revealing the nature of our society. Žižek's ideas, used by González-Ruibal, help us to see our objects of study more clearly and more fruitfully.

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While González-Ruibal has no detailed case study in this paper, his own impressive publications are testimony to the rich possibilities of his approach. What would be persuasive is a clear methodological statement—an outline of how other projects might follow his lead and how they might productively tack back and forth between material remains, archives, museums, histories, interviews, ethnographies, and so on.

González-Ruibal takes his lead from Marc Augé and his influential work on non-places, and, while I endorse the way he develops his own projects, I have always taken issue with Augé's assertion that airports, undergrounds, and malls are asocial places. Certainly, an ethnographic approach would challenge such a position and, if we take airports as an example, would easily demonstrate that such places are redolent with memories, emotional outpourings, and deep sociality. Augé argues that a space that "cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place," but exactly what in the archaeological repertoire falls into such a category? In fact, González-Ruibal's examples explicitly demonstrate this not to be the case.

I am strongly supportive of González-Ruibal's own work for its solid scholarship, innovative interdisciplinarity, and political commitment, but I find myself at odds with some of those he acknowledges as influential. Given the serious political context of his work, some discussion of theories of art appears misplaced. One example is the nod to Heidegger's theory of art and those archaeologists who subscribe to the notion that art and archaeology do the same work in the world. We are far from artists in many regards; we do not artistically design the material residues of the past, our field sites are not primarily a forum for aesthetics or contemplation, and, as González-Ruibal himself demonstrates, in the life-and-death situations he is uncovering genuflections to the intellectual realm of art objects border on a form of nostalgia and longing that is surely not his intention.

With González-Ruibal, I remain unconvinced that excavation of mass graves, for example, using archaeological techniques overlaps much with archaeologies of the contemporary past. As he says, not all forensic work can be called archaeology, but what exactly is the difference in terms of the political position espoused here? Can the excavation of dead GIs abroad for the U.S. government be called archaeology? Or the work conducted at Ground Zero? Perhaps not, but they employ our methodologies. What are the scholarly and political contributions and the ethical stances taken, and what, if anything, can archaeologists usefully add other than technical skill? While I have witnessed presentations that show gruesome images of war graves of the recent past, replete with personal effects that elicited highly emotional audience responses, clearly we have to move beyond purely documentary and potentially voyeuristic accounts and make real contributions to the actual stakeholders. Here we could learn a good deal from our Latin American colleagues.

In many respects an archaeology of supermodernity is not so very different from much contemporary archaeology in that there is a solid focus on "mediation, materiality, place, memory, and politics." Is it simply that the archaeological context is pushed forward in time? How different is it, for example, from the work conducted in District Six in Cape Town? My sense is that the work González-Ruibal highlights here is an outgrowth of earlier projects that focused on the volatile and negative heritages of repressive regimes, often with therapeutic objectives for living communities. As in all historical archaeology, the material remains shed light on events that are not the subjects of the written record or have been obscured or silenced for political reasons. Is this kind of work a more volatile version of Deetz's attention to small things—the empty shell casing, the rusty tin can? If so, what are its particular benefits and direct impacts? How does it

critically situate us in terms of our ethical contribution and responsibility? Some might counter that we are meddling in affairs that are beyond our disciplinary scope and that we are ill prepared to deal with the consequences, notably for others who are left to bear the brunt of them while we retreat into our scholarship. González-Ruibal is extremely well placed to discuss and illuminate these urgencies.

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González-Ruibal's article makes an important contribution to the identification of a new field of research concerning the archaeology of the contemporary period. During the past ten years an increasing number of articles and publications have indeed been devoted to the archaeology of the very recent twentieth-century past. Most of them deal with the remains of dramatic events which still occupy a crucial place in the "living memory" of present-day communities, particularly those linked to the two world wars and to the various dictatorships. One should in fact refer to them in the plural as archaeologies of the contemporary past, approaches to this past, still a burning issue in collective memories, being so diverse. Nevertheless, all these publications have something in common; they all go beyond the traditional boundaries of research in archaeology to include areas which are a priori alien to it. Is, for example, research on the remains of victims of massacres, the most recent of which were committed only a few years ago, a task for the historian, for justice, or for the archaeologist? Or is it for all of them at once? Breaking down the barriers which have hitherto isolated it in the study of the distant past will require archaeology to re-evaluate its role with regard to other disciplines that examine the recent past, in particular history and sociology, and to recognize its powerful links to the transmission of collective memory.

It is precisely these questions that are explored by González-Ruibal. The originality and the relevance of his work reside in the fact that he approaches the nature of an archaeology of the contemporary past from the starting point of the archaeological remains to which it applies. What, therefore, are these archaeologies of the contemporary past exactly the archaeology of? In other words, do the archaeological remains of twentieth-century events tell us about a specific history, that of our world? The period which began with World War I is profoundly marked by destruction and ruptures. In less than a century whole sections of the material universe have completely disappeared or are in the process of disappearing because of urbanization and industrialization. In bringing about the deaths of tens of millions of human beings, the great collective traumas, notably represented by the two world wars of the twentieth century, have profoundly changed the identities of the national communities concerned and impaired the transmission of their cultural heritage. As González-Ruibal emphasizes, the archaeology of the recent twentieth-century past is indeed that of a "destructive modernity."

The objection that will inevitably be raised to such a stand is that the massive eradications of population and extensive destruction of landscapes are not limited to the period which began with World War I. To see this one has only to think of the violence with which the colonial societies of antiquity—the Roman empire in particular—or those of the modern period, notably in Africa and America, imposed their ways of life on the territories and peoples under their sway. It is the *change of scale* created by the industrialization of this violence that distinguishes the completely new period which began with the twentieth century. World War I was the first experience of the industrialization of war, which brought into being weapons of mass destruction produced and distributed industrially. The Nazi extermination camps were the first attempt to rationalize and industrialize massacres which aimed to transform their victims into industrial material. The nuclear war tested at Hiroshima and Nagasaki prefigured a type of war then unknown, consisting of the total destruction of the enemy territory made possible by the advanced technology of the industrialized countries.

The industrialized world of the twentieth century not only produced destructions greater and more widespread than any which had gone before—whose methods, for the most part, now seem archaic and amateurish in comparison—but also gave rise to what the German philosopher Walter Benjamin calls "a destruction of experience." The dehumanizing disasters of the past century—from the war in the trenches to the explosion at Chernobyl—had one thing in common: their scale was so exceptional and their reality so alien to any previous human experience that it was impossible to bear human witness to them or to transmit any experience of them. As a result, history collapses, blocked in the perpetual present of the globalized world. The following question therefore arises: is it possible to construct an archaeology of a period which destroys history?

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The concept of supermodernity, as presented here, is a way of thinking about the twentieth and twenty-first centuries through the agency of destruction. Indeed, destruction is a core definition of supermodernity for González-Ruibal, who seeks to add theoretical refinement to and obtain analytical purchase on the empirical remits of archaeologies of the contemporary past. I welcome this attempt to engage with and carve out a distinctive identity for a kind of archaeology that has roots in but moves beyond historical archaeology. González-Ruibal raises many important issues, but I limit myself here to destruction by conflict—particularly World War I—

because this is my own area of research and because, in his view, this is where supermodernity, ushered in by industrialized technological warfare, began.

The statement that supermodernity is what others call postmodernism and that it is mainly concerned with Western ideas and behaviours requires a closer look. If supermodernity was born between 1914 and 1918, it involved an international cast of subaltern actors. Not only was it called "The Great War for Civilization" (i.e., white, Western, and imperialist) but it drew in an allied army that was multiracial, multiethnic, and multifaith. Supermodernity was born equally of the behaviours, beliefs, woundings, deaths, and aspirations of indigenous peoples from Africa, India, the Middle East, Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Canada, the Caribbean, Vietnam, and China. The legacies of this fact have so far hardly been acknowledged but are visible in the material culture of the Western Front (and elsewhere) preserved on archaeological sites, in museum exhibitions, as souvenirs, and in a diversity of oral traditions.

The example of a World War II Ethiopian site illustrates the thorny issue of what and how much to investigate of the recent past (in time of war). The site is pristine and full of material culture, but its investigation, it is suggested, would only produce another narrative in an already overnarrativized war. In fact, we have little modern scientific archaeological evidence from World War II and almost none from Africa, and investigation of this site would be uniquely interesting and valuable. The implication that the plethora of World War II narratives precludes the need for more is surely mistaken. Most are grand syntheses, regimental histories, or memoirs, not firsthand excavations conducted in the light of and enmeshed in local and contextualizing oral histories and traditions. The transmutation of war matériel into indigenous artefacts embodying memory, trauma, and renegotiated postwar identities is but one aspect of this.

A few years ago, military historians dismissed the need for an archaeology of World War I on the basis that their accounts told us most of what we needed to know. This view resurfaces here (albeit in a more sophisticated form) in the statement that memory becomes saturated and trivialized by, for example, documenting all trenches or air crash sites. While an interesting idea from the armchair of theory, this is not a view shared by families whose war-dead relatives may be reclaimed from lists of "the missing" by such investigations. Such was a recent case on the Somme, where two German "unknown soldiers" were discovered, their families traced, and closure and respect finally achieved by their reburial in a German war cemetery after some 80 years.

While the excavation of a World War I trench is an ephemeral act, it can create a temporary place of memory as it briefly collides with the recognition by battlefield visitors that the human remains might be their own recent relatives. These places are more visceral than London's Cenotaph or Washington's Vietnam Memorial. They can never become large impersonal *lieux de mémoire*, as they are quickly covered up and returned to cornfields. Emotionally and symbolically, the dead continue to nourish the living.

I cannot agree that sites that are overdocumented and sanitized for public presentation lose their aura and their political potential. The well-manicured Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) cemeteries draw hundreds of thousands of visitors to France and Belgium annually, spawn local remembrance-themed retail outlets, hotels, and souvenirs, and serve as the focus of innumerable educational projects and emotional encounters. In 2003, red-paint anti-war graffiti were daubed over some of these memorials as a French reaction to the British role in invading Iraq. In Iraq itself, several CWGC cemeteries (from both world wars) became foci for violent political dissent and were seriously damaged by those opposed to the British presence.

I agree that the archaeology of supermodernity is, in part, the archaeology of superdestruction and its complex material legacies. Nevertheless, if it is largely concerned with trenches, graves, ruins, bomb craters, and concentration camps, this is what the nascent subdiscipline of twentieth-century conflict archaeology is already addressing. González-Ruibal has made an important contribution here, and it is perhaps no surprise that the archaeology of destruction should itself be contested as it struggles into life.

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González-Ruibal's essay contributes new ideas and fresh insight and critique to the archaeology of the contemporary past. He takes us beyond our archaeological comfort zones ("data," "the field") to present a compelling and theoretically grounded assessment of the challenging and relevant discourse that he refers to as supermodernity. This is not to say that such theoretical considerations have not been addressed previously: Buchli and Lucas's (2001) and Graves-Brown's (2000) collections, for example, have inspired and encouraged others to emerge from the deeper past or from other disciplinary backgrounds to cast an archaeological eye on the present, while organizations such as the World Archaeological Congress have focused on the contemporary archaeology of indigenous peoples, exploring how archaeology can be appropriated to promote, advance, and achieve political and economic goals (Killebrew 2006). The aim in all of this is to render the familiar unfamiliar, to challenge the taken-for-granteds of our everyday encounters with memory, place, politics, and materiality—supermodern daily encounters that, as González-Ruibal points out (after Serres 2000, 32), brings more damage to the world than several world wars put together—and to introduce alternative stories, told in alternative ways. "Time to Destroy" is a refreshing new departure that examines the very particular dimension of supermod-

ernity's destructiveness, explores the transdisciplinary tendencies that these studies of the contemporary past have introduced (art and archaeology, for example), and questions the validity and relevance of studies that are sometimes seen as rather apolitical or at least depoliticized. González-Ruibal is right to make these assertions and offer new challenges.

"Time to Destroy" is, however, an archaeological critique. It questions the clarity of the disciplinary limits of this kind of archaeology, noting some studies that have only a slight connection with archaeological practice; there is also the question of data and a belief that archaeologies of the contemporary past are in danger of saturating memory, choking the relevant with the trivial. Finally, it emphasizes destruction as a means to keep the critique alive, contradicting, for example, the emphasis on the construction of landscape that the author sees as adopting a romantic, acritical perspective.

I agree with most of González-Ruibal's assertions and viewpoints but not all of them, and perhaps it is our respective conceptions of what is meant by "archaeology" or "archaeological" that underlies this difference of emphasis. To me the contemporary past is fascinating for the diverse range of researchers and disciplines for whom this modern material culture has relevance. Artists, for instance, typically have an eye for the subtle material traces and what they tell us about the history of sites and landscapes and of those who lived there (Schofield 2006, 2007). Artists are not archaeologists and would never describe themselves as such, but their films, photographs, and other forms of representation clearly constitute an archaeology of the places they seek to interpret. To my mind, the attraction of this field of research is the absence of disciplinary boundaries and the prospects for cross- and transdisciplinary collaboration (and disagreements). In contemporary archaeology the disciplinary limits are unclear—and thank goodness for that.

González-Ruibal questions the validity of a number of projects and approaches and in so doing, I think, misses a key point: that, for better or worse, cultural heritage management currently relies on data as the essential basis for informed conservation. In the UK, decisions are taken about development proposals on the basis of information contained in locally held historic environment records; designation decisions require sites to be demonstrably of "national importance" or "historic interest," and for this records (or data) need to be robust enough to withstand close scrutiny and challenge. For this reason alone we need data, and the more the better.

There is also the question of popular interest. In 2000 an opinion poll was conducted in England on the historic environment. The main result was a recognition that the past ("heritage," "archaeology") has overwhelming public support. It also emphasized how important the recent past was, especially to younger people, for whom the heritage of the past 50 years mattered most of all (MORI 2000). It is right, then, to argue for delineating a specifically archaeological approach to the recent past. But we should also recognize a further set of responsibilities and motivations amongst heritage practitioners—to document, to understand, to value, to promote, and to reflect. These two discourses can and should coexist, informing each other to build an increasingly political and socially relevant archaeology of supermodernity.

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Some years ago I read a story about an Afghan man gathering trash in the desert who was mistaken for Osama Bin Laden by an American satellite and minutes later killed by a missile (he probably never realized what was happening). Reading González-Ruibal's paper reminded me of that story as a representation of supermodernity, the spread of alienation and destruction in a globalized world.

González-Ruibal's work allows us to think about several questions. When do we start to study a particular phenomenon? In general, it is when something appears strange or different, capturing our attention. In contrast, the archaeology of supermodernity questions things that are so familiar as to be invisible or beyond question. As Foucault points out, our commitment as social scientists is to identify the mechanisms of power reproduction in daily life. The archaeology of supermodernity involves a critical archaeology of change.

I also find interesting the idea of using objects as a kind of language, one even more effective than words. For example, in the course of the excavation of a clandestine detention center associated with the military dictatorship in Argentina, the archaeologists found a ping-pong ball. They initially thought that it meant nothing, but it became one of the most precious objects in the collection in the eyes of the center's survivors. The executioners had set up a ping-pong table there, and the prisoners, who were blindfolded, continually heard the sound of the ball. In this way, the "presence"—following the idea of González-Ruibal—of the ball represented the remembrance of the atrocities that took place at the center.

González-Ruibal's paper is excellent, and we need more like it.

Reply

I thank the commentators for offering so many thought-provoking insights and criticisms. One of the main questions that arises from the comments has to do with the scope of the archaeology proposed in the article: Is all the archaeology of supermodernity necessarily an archaeology of destruction? The answer is a qualified no. With Schofield, Holtorf, and

Funari, I am for diversity: there are many things to study in the contemporary past, and there are many ways to do it. Holtorf and Funari point to important areas not related to destruction where archaeologists can provide new approaches. They can join forces with material-culture students to explore consumption and production without disregarding conflict and oppression—as Funari notes. I wanted to emphasize in this article the outstanding relevance of destruction in our times, first because of its political implications, second because it has tended to be overlooked by social scientists, and third because archaeologists, because of their training, are more "at home" working with fragments and ruins. Archaeology, then, seems especially well suited to dealing with the remnants of supermodernity.

However, I do not want to put all the emphasis on destruction. The title of this article is taken from the famous verses of Ecclesiastes (3: 1–3): "All things have their season, and in their times all things pass under heaven. . . . A time to destroy, and a time to build." I like the idea of destruction and construction as inseparable events. This may go back to the Neolithic tells, but it is in the past hundred years that the two have become more clearly intertwined, to the point that it is hard to dissociate devastation from production. This relation is eloquently expressed by W. G. Sebald (cited by Olivier), who writes (2005, 91–92) about an interview with an officer of the U.S. Air Force after World War II. The journalist asks the officer whether a large white flag hung on a church tower would have prevented the bombing of a city. After discussing military logistics, the officer ends up saying that bombs are "expensive items": "In practice, they couldn't have been dropped over mountains or open country after so much labor had gone into making them at home." "The result of the prior claims of productivity"—concludes Sebald—"is the ruined city laid out before us." South Africa's apartheid, as Hall notes, is another good example of the links between destruction, production, and consumption: if asked, apartheid authorities would claim that they were *building* a new society, but the building took place on the ruins of District Six, Sophiatown, and many other neighborhoods razed by the racist regime.

We can study Barbies, as Funari reminds us, but even that might be linked to destruction in a way. Plastic dolls are not as good a case for following the route to destruction as automatic weapons and Nile perch, for example (Sauper 2005), but they too consume natural resources, natural resources often come from developing countries, in developing countries environmental and social issues are usually ignored with the complicity of the West, etc. So, in a sense, all archaeology of supermodernity is ultimately an archaeology of destruction. At both ends of the chain we find waste: landscapes devastated by overexploitation on one side, landfills on the other. Also, as archaeologists, we should contextualize historically the hyperconsumption trends of our times, demonstrate their contingent nature, and warn about their long-term implications (Rathje and Murphy 1992).

To be sure, there are plenty of things to explore beyond destruction: material-culture studies reveal the world of social and cultural diversity in which we live. This diversity, as Funari and Holtorf remind us, is a legitimate object of research. For me there is no such thing as a trivial—much less obscene!—topic of investigation; it is the way we approach it that may trivialize it. Holtorf's (2005*b*) penetrating study of archaeology and popular culture is anything but shallow. I am not so sure, though, about much research on modern consumption, the conclusions of which very closely resemble the slogans of big companies.

Edensor criticizes not the emphasis on ruins but the idea that all ruins "epitomize tyranny, violence, 'development,' incarceration, and bloodshed." To tell the truth, most of the modern ruins that came to my mind are related, in one way or another, to one of the phenomena he mentions. However, he is right in pointing out the potentially subversive aspects of playful engagements with ruins, which I have not contemplated. I am now exploring the ruins of the prison of Carabanchel (Madrid), inaugurated in 1944. Since its abandonment in 1998 it has become a multifaceted place where the history of repression and imprisonment is being challenged by manifold artistic, playful, economic (looting), and political interventions. In a sense, all these actions are helping us to see the prison in a completely different light (fig. 12).

The role of art seems to be a contested issue. Meskell criticizes the reverence for art, whereas Schofield is an enthusiast of finding inspiration in artists. I would like to clarify that my use of Heidegger has nothing to do with aesthetics (and I do not think that Heidegger's theory of art has much relation with aesthetics either!). What I find interesting is the idea of disclosure through the material, which I find similar in art and archaeology. The artists that I mention may be a good source of inspiration for archaeologists, and, conversely, archaeology can be a strong influence for many artists. It should be a bidirectional relationship.

The concept of non-places is also a thorny one. What is a *non-lieux*? Is it a useful label? With Meskell, I admit that malls or airports are not necessarily devoid of sociality. Yet, despite its ambiguity, I think that the term is useful: there are asocial spaces created by supermodernity. From an archaeological point of view, the battlefields and mass graves of the Spanish Civil War were forcibly erased from our cultural memory for a long time and only during the past few years have been gradually rehabilitated as important, although contested, landmarks in our history. The fact that the discovery of mass graves and trenches in Spanish neighborhoods has come as a surprise to most of the population shows the extent to which those sites were actually non-places. Admittedly, the concept of a "place of abjection" that Hall uses is probably more appropriate than "non-place": many sites that lie on the margins of social interaction or that are packed with negative meanings are anything but forgotten. Chernobyl is an open scar, spatially marginal but central to the social memory of the populations affected by the nuclear disaster. Ground Zero

Figure 12. The panopticon of Carabanchel prison as seen from a gallery today.

is a place of abjection, but it is also a site of deep sociality—hardly a non-place.

A set of issues has to do with commodification. Hall brings up the problem of positive rewritings that often plagues the ruins of the recent past. In the case of Africa, this commodification usually takes the form of "imperialist nostalgia" (Rosaldo 1989). In other places, it means trivialization: killing the aura, sometimes with negative political implications. Saunders disagrees that the aura is necessarily eliminated by certain interventions on archaeological sites. He refers to the case of World War I, which he has examined in a wonderful book that was not available to me when I was finishing the article (Saunders 2007). The same is true for the sites of the American Civil War (Lees 2001), which attract millions every year. I have acknowledged the strong impression created by a place like Omaha Beach and its cemetery, but Saunders is right to say that I have played down the power to arouse emotions of manicured battlefields as opposed to sites that have not been altered. The problem, however, persists with the way in which conflict is sublimated and naturalized in some of those sites—a matter of ideology (see Leone's comment). The crude image of shrapnel, mud, and shattered bones furnished by archaeology is quite different from the immaculate crosses, national flags, public ceremonies, and well-kept lawns that characterize many sanitized places of slaughter. They may be equally moving but for different reasons. Abjection and deranged politics unite apartheid South Africa and World War I Europe. In both cases, we witness attempts to conceal the most indigestible part of those historical episodes in public presentations. Historical contingencies and flawed human decisions are transformed into natural disasters, in which nobody is to blame and everybody is to be remembered as a hero. Politics are whisked away. The aura of the place may not disappear in District Six or the Somme, but what is offered for public consumption is the fabricated aura that Hall bemoans. For me the issue is how we can keep the ephemeral but powerful and challenging act of the excavation in a trench alive—how we can avoid transforming the disturbing German mass grave excavated at Gavrelle into the naive banality of the Tommy café-museum at Pozières (Saunders 2007, 109, 191).

Holtorf and Saunders suggest that, because of my emphasis on materiality and mediation, I undervalue narratives and the textual. Edensor also stresses the importance of telling stories, notwithstanding the central place of materiality. One of the problems with a paradigm shift in archaeology is how quickly we throw everything that came before into the trash bin. When my colleagues assert that there is more to understanding than meaning, I want to believe that we can retain meaning as a legitimate field of enquiry in archaeology! Telling alternative stories is still necessary, and so is interpreting material culture. I do not want to suggest otherwise. (Re)interpreting things is crucial in some contexts to grasp the tragedy behind ordinary objects: this is the case with the ping-pong ball that Zarankin mentions. In any case, an attempt to go beyond conventional storytelling should not leave us stuck in mere

fascination with forensic documentation, as Meskell warns. Our mediation of the past has to be framed historically and anthropologically. As Leone asserts, we have to provide "historical explanations for the destructive acts." At the same time, Saunders is right when he says that most of the writings about World War II are "grand syntheses, regimental histories, or memories." I see this in myself as I engage in the publication on the World War II site that I mention in the article. Most of the things that I would like to know are not to be found in documents. The stories that emerge from the archaeological remains are truly fascinating. Abandoned things, as Zarankin and Edensor remind us, can generate disturbing stories and intense recollections.

My point in relation to storytelling is that we have to examine the political implications of the proliferation—and leveling—of narratives, the problems with memory, and the marginalization of the material. The saturation of memory is a real problem, but it has less to do with telling alternative stories than with our preservationist thrust. We feel the need to document and classify everything. With the growing public interest in the most recent past (mentioned by Schofield), we are also becoming aware that the past is a "renewable resource," as Holtorf (2005*b*) has written. Schofield rightly reminds us that documenting is not a choice, however, and that heritage management "relies on data as the essential basis for informed conservation." Before we decide what can be destroyed and what not, what becomes collective memory and what is forgotten, we have to identify and document all the pillboxes of World War II in Britain, for instance. The problem is making inventories and typologies an end in itself—as happens with many other periods.

Holtorf stresses the fact that we cannot get rid of meanings: using the example of the urinal, he says that what I am actually doing is categorizing it in another way, which is quite true. The process of rendering the familiar unfamiliar that Zarankin and Schofield point to as constitutive of the archaeology of the contemporary past involves resignification and hermeneutic interpretation. What I am trying to do is to get rid of the extra layers of meaning, ideologically laden and perverse, that, as Leone, says, so often mediate and distort our relations with things. These extra layers of meaning detach us from things and transform them into esoteric, awe-inspiring beings. Materiality—the physicality of poverty and social marginalization that Hall describes in South Africa, for example—has to come as a real, heavy blow. In a way, I just want to pay heed to Heidegger's phenomenological motto: "to the things themselves!"—the things that hurt and make one sick. Independently of how we categorize things, there is something in our relation to them, as Edensor points out, that has little to do with discourse and a lot to do with corporal, sensual experience. This I would like to recover in battlefields, prisons, and ruined factories, which are much more than a metaphor of supermodernity. With Edensor, I would like to disrupt the signifying chains of legitimacy built upon notions of heritage by engaging with matter, fragments, and spectral traces.

Meskell wonders about the particular benefits and direct impacts of an archaeology of the sort proposed here. One benefit is indirect but fundamental: for a long time, archaeology, along with other intellectual discourses, has been in the service of power and the status quo. It has been used to support colonialism, racism, dictatorship, aggression, and social inequalities, as Leone remarks. More and more archaeologists—Leone was among the pioneers—are now using the discipline to criticize society, believing that science is a useful tool not just for describing reality but also for transforming it. All of the commentators can be counted among those socially aware scholars. This work may not be very rewarding at the individual level, but as a collective I think that we can contribute to a better world. Of course, there are things that we do at an individual level that have more direct, although geographically limited, repercussions: Hall (2006) helps to construct landscapes of countermemory in South Africa, Funari and Zarankin (2006) denounce dictatorship in Latin America, Leone (2005) rewrites the sanitized history of the United States from Annapolis, and Meskell's (2005*b*) archaeological ethnography exposes the negative effects of South African heritage policies among minority groups. All these undertakings produce real benefits to local communities. There is always the risk of pontificating and then retreating to the safety of our ivory towers, as Meskell says. My recent experience with the Spanish Civil War (González-Ruibal 2007) has taught me that the academic refuge is not always available. Although the research itself is rewarding because of its positive impact on local communities, it has exposed me to problems that I have not experienced before, including legal prosecution.

Another point has to do with the originality of an archaeology of supermodernity. I agree with Leone that it is a logical extension of historical archaeology. Also, mediation, materiality, place, memory, and politics are matters of interest shared by most archaeologists, as Meskell notes. At the same time, they are issues that concern colleague historians, anthropologists, and sociologists, and, as Olivier remarks, they force us to reevaluate the role of archaeology with regard to other disciplines. The idea is precisely to claim, as others have done before, that archaeology can be applied to understanding the problems of our world today. From this point of view, supermodern archaeology is like prehistoric, classical, or historical archaeology: the variety of sources available, the stakeholders we deal with, and the problems inherent in each period determine the way in which archaeology is carried out, but it is archaeology all the same. An archaeology of supermodernity can be defined as an archaeology of the contemporary past (Buchli and Lucas 2001*a*) that has ideology (as masterfully glossed in Leone's reading of Žižek), structural violence, globalization, and destruction at its heart. It is therefore an archaeology of conflict, as Saunders points out, but in the broadest sense of the word (to include conflicts produced between humans and nature). I acknowledge a huge debt to the archaeologies of contemporary conflict practiced mainly by British scholars (e.g., Schofield 2005; Saunders

2007). One of the distinguishing characteristics of an archaeology of supermodernity, as Olivier notes, is the change of scale: "whole sections of the universe have completely disappeared" in the past hundred years. Since 1945, human beings have been able for the first time in history to eliminate human life on earth. We produce and destroy industrially and on a global scale: this change of scale, which collapses the global and the local, is eloquently expressed by Zarankin with the example of the Afghan man killed by an American missile. All this asks for another way of mediating the past, one in which the conventions of naturalist narrative are not enough (White 1992) and, in Edensor's words, "dissonant storytelling, rather inarticulate, sensual, and conjectural in form, can emerge." Oliver brings up the insurmountable paradox: can we create an archaeology of a period which destroys history? How are we to bear witness to something that makes bearing witness impossible? My reading of Agamben is that bearing witness is indeed possible. Agamben (2004, 13, 33) considers the "unsayability" of Auschwitz a "cheap mystification" and a dangerous one. We have to say "Auschwitz"—but in another language. The witness utters his or her testimony in a speech beyond language. This broken, obscure, and ambiguous babble that Agamben identifies with the pure testimony of the drowned is also the language of archaeology.

—Alfredo González-Ruibal

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