

Towards an Archaeology of the Future¹

by Laura Watts

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I rode the company minibus from the train station to the mobile phone design centre in an unpleasant reverie. As the bus wove sickeningly between seventies suburbia and a faded industrial estate, I remembered...

...The now empty silence of the design studio where I once worked for another telecoms company. Around me are the spot-lit posters advertising future devices yet to be, the masses of accumulated sketches covering the walls of a project room, endless interaction specifications I wrote for future artefacts, the video tapes of animated future lives. For five years I made mobile telecoms futures in this place, in PowerPoint charts, in posters, and hot-headed words. Became bloodied by being taken aside and being told I was too aggressive, too opinionated; I was too young; too inexperienced; if only I wore make-up...

...The minibus pulled up to the entrance of the R&D compound, and the gate rolled laboriously back. The security team in their high-visibility jackets peered at us onboard, then waved us on into the car park, the iron gate rolling shut behind us.

How to now make an interference into those futures of the mobile telecoms industry? That was the worry that haunted me. How to, not just critique and deconstruct those futures, but to form a subversive response to the inevitable: how would you do it differently? As Donna Haraway says "textual rereading is never enough, even if one defines the text as the world"². Instead, she proposes the optical metaphor

¹ This online draft script may be cited or briefly quoted in line with the usual academic conventions. You may also download it for your own personal use. This script may not be published elsewhere (e.g. mailing lists or bulletin boards) without the author's explicit permission. If you copy this script you must include this copyright note. This script must not be used for commercial purposes or gain in any way. You should observe the conventions of academic citation in a version of the following form: Laura Watts. 'Towards an Archaeology of the Future (draft)'. Published by Centre for Science Studies, Lancaster University

² HARAWAY, D. (1994) A game of cat's cradle: science studies, feminist theory, cultural studies. *Configurations*, 1, 59-71.

of diffraction "the noninnocent, and complexly erotic practice of making a difference in the world"³. How to diffract a future and make other possible, more enticing, futures - that was my concern.

This then, was why I was here at this mobile telecoms design centre, a re-construction of my fieldsite near London. I was here to meet someone who could diffract all my ethnographic records and endless experiences of future-making in the industry. Someone who could excavate that partial record of fieldnotes, sketches and artefacts. Someone whose re-constructions of those partial fragments would be always partly imaginative.

Off the bus, I dodged the trees, yellow grit bins, and car park at the heart of the campus to reach Building 3, which housed the industrial designers. Inside there was a moment's tension as the wireless tag inside my badge decided whether or not to admit me through the wall of silent glass... and then I was in.

In the expanse of the four storey atrium, filled with leather sofas, aluminium chairs and a coffee bar, the Future Archaeologist waited for me, as I had decided she must. For this, of course, was not a re-construction of the past, but a collage of my fieldnotes and experiences. My footsteps folded those times and places into a narrative, which I could empirically account for in fragments - for how is any accounting done except by tracing fragments.

I strode across the marble tiles to the Future Archaeologist who sat at the other end of the building, by the far windows. She was wearing mud-encased walking boots, as though having somehow arrived cross-country.

"Ready?" I asked her.

She was drinking from a bottle of mineral water, and nearly choked at my question.

"Hang on! I think your audience deserves some kind of explanation."

"We are a little pressed for time," I reminded her. "But, go ahead, as the imaginary technology, here..."

³ *ibid.*



"Yeah, yeah... just give me a moment." She paused, took another gulp of water. "Helen Verran's work on mixing Australian Aborigine and European pastoralist accounts of land ownership⁴ is the quick route through."

"That's a little fast..." I said, pointedly.

"Well, she is also in the political business of diffraction, but she is trying to make potent imaginaries from two almost incommensurate worlds. To diffract you need two worlds or, at least, two situated knowledges that interfere. And that's why I am here. You know way too much about the mobile telecoms industry and its futures, where as I am situated as an archaeologist. We have different professional practices, a different professional vision, as Charles Goodwin might say⁵. You make the record. I excavate it. You see a mobile phone. I see something shaped like a Neolithic stone axe."

I remembered seeing my phone and a stone axe side by side, and nodded.

"You're not exactly a typical archaeologist, though," I reminded her.

She smiled smugly and sat back, "No, I am part of a recent mutation in the discipline. A poetic archaeologist, as Michael Shanks calls it⁶."

"Okay, fine. Enough of the plot exposition." I was aware of time slipping by. "Let's actually do something. I'll take you on a quick tour of the fieldsite, and then you can do your stuff."

The Future Archaeologist was unperturbed by the urgency in my voice, and idly kicked off lumps of mud from her boots, before finally getting to her feet, and shouldering her rucksack.

⁴ VERRAN, H. (1998) Re-imagining land ownership in Australia. *Postcolonial studies*, 1, 237-254.

⁵ GOODWIN, C. (1994) Professional vision. *American Anthropologist*, 96, 606-633.

⁶ SHANKS, M. (1992) *Experiencing the past: on the character of archaeology*, London, Routledge. The move from authenticity to multiplicity in archaeological accounts is also discussed more widely in prehistory, see especially HOLTORF, C. (2005) *From Stonehenge to Las Vegas: archaeology as popular culture*, Lanham MD, Altamira Press (Rowman & Littlefield).

Rocks - surround the building - a barrier of large pebbles (beach)



Microsoft Access - [findsrecord_dataaccesspage]

File Edit View Insert Format Tools Window Help

finds record

ID: []

date: 22/04/2004

site: []

location: border building

description of context: [Left hand stone pebble border of [] pebble picked off the top

type: artefact

description of find: [quartzite pebble, gitters with mica, yellow-white disk

notes: [of [] pebble and mica shard from mica meeting room

confidential:

storage location: [box 1

finds record 21 of 38

I led her back outside, to face the turquoise glass entrance. We turned and together walked slowly along a sandstone pavement that encircled the building; our footprints stamping through my ethnographic record. The Future Archaeologist pointed downwards at the ditch between the sandstone path and the building wall. It was filled with glistening yellow-white quartzite pebbles, each smoothed as though tumbled by the sea. I tore out the fragment of my field notebook through which we walked and gave it to her:

"Rocks surround the building, a barrier of large pebbles (beach)", the note read.

Glancing nervously at the guards patrolling the nearby gate, I quickly reached down and grabbed one of the pebbles, hefting it awkwardly in my hand. I felt the rough quartz grains against the lines of my palm. The stone was unexpectedly heavy, as large as my hand.

"Hammerstone." Pronounced the Future Archaeologist.

"Huh?" I was taken aback.

"Beach pebbles are frequently used as hammerstones in the Neolithic⁷." She glanced at me with a knowing grin. "You weren't about to make some nature-culture divide between archaeology and geology, were you? Besides, its an artefact now, part of your socio-technical practice as an ethnographer. Hand it over, and I'll make it part of my practice." She held out her hand for the stone and I placed it on her palm.

As she examined the stone more closely, its mica glittering in the white summer sun, I rummaged in my bag for a print-out of the Finds Record sheet that I had compiled. Another record through which we now threaded our way in the narrative. The Future Archaeologist looked up as she saw the entry, for it had been her idea for me to collect artefacts and keep such records, a small interference into my method as an ethnographer.

⁷ For typical excavations of prehistoric sites whose artefacts frequently include hammerstones see RITCHIE, A. (1995) Prehistoric Orkney, London, B.T. Batsford/Historic Scotland. (Footnote added by Future Archaeologist).

"Okay, since you're in such a hurry, where next?" She asked.

"Breakfast." I replied, and indicated the building opposite, Building 1, as it was unimaginatively called; the home of the mechanical engineers. We repeated my dodge around the grit bins and parked cars, and managed to make it past the security desk and erratic wireless door-opening system, into another glass atrium. The Future Archaeologist's boots left a trail of mud and gravel behind us, sticking to my own trail of paperwork and memories. The Building seemed almost identical to the one we had just left, but the far end opened out into a large spot-lit cafeteria, emanating the distinctive smell of buttered toast.

It was something of an Ikea-ised expanse of matching chairs and condiments, the egg-shell blue of my chair exactly matched the colour of the salt shaker (or was it vice versa). But it was not that which caught the Future Archaeologist's gaze. Rather, she was focused on the large expanse of water that bordered the floor to ceiling window, beyond a short area of decking. I tore out the relevant fieldnotes, and noticed that I had, perhaps uncharitably, described it as a 'stagnant pool'. We sat quietly together, faces pressed close to the glass, watching the reeds waver in the light breeze, and the slow undulations of the brown water.

Then the Future Archaeologist turned to me, with that quirky, knowing smile of hers. "This will do." She glanced at her watch, finally sensing the time pressure. "And I had better be going. It's a three day journey from here. Thanks for the tour."

"Go where?" I asked, suddenly thrown.

"The Isles of Orkney, off the Northern coast of Scotland. Will Self did it non-stop in a day⁸. But its sensibly three."

"What's in Orkney?"

"The future, of course." Her smiled widened. "Well, a future. Different places create different practices create different futures.

⁸ See his story of a non-stop drive from Orkney to London in SELF, W. (1998) Tough, tough toys for tough, tough boys, London, Penguin. (Footnote added by Future Archaeologist).

stagnant pool - hemi-wide  deck/walk with frame pots or (grass?)

Don't worry, I'll send you a postcard or two to explain. Think of them," she paused, savouring her next words, "think of them as postcards from the edge of possibility."

And with that she tightened the straps on her rucksack and strode purposefully away. Off to the North, and beyond the North.

These are some of the first few postcards that she sent back to me, for she is still there, and her work is on-going:

1st Postcard

The ferry is where I caught my first sight of puffins, diving in amongst the sea spray, and where these towering stone walls and tumbling waterfalls of the almost-Jurassic Island of Hoy imprinted themselves upon my imagination. You do not stumble into Orkney, as you might stumble from a train or the doors of a 767. You arrive, translated and transformed by the sea, into a land of monuments in stone, and fleets of scuttled ships. Here my mobile phone aches for a simple antenna. Yet this was an epicentre of technology over five thousand years ago. Orkney is a place that reminds me that place matters, for what might be the effects of situated actions in such an extraordinary location?



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Mainland, Isles of Orkney
© Monumental

Felicity Archard

2nd Postcard

First day on site at Sand14, the mobile phone design studio whose practices I am excavating. It's inside one of the greatest prehistoric monument complexes in the world - this stone circle, the Ring of Brodgar, is barely two minutes walk away. All around are eight-metre high monoliths and the remnants of monuments. I can see an ongoing excavation of a prehistoric village from the company foyer. The company building is a dome covered in grass with turquoise glass panels. Rocks surround the building, a barrier of large pebbles (beach). They fill the circular ditch around the dome, besides a sandstone walkway that runs all the way around. You even hammer a stone against a ringing rock as a doorbell!



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Mainland, Isles of Orkney
© Monumental

Future Archaeologist

Rocks - surround the building - a barrier of large pebbles (beach)

3rd Postcard

This is almost the view from inside the huge glass domed atrium in the centre of Sand14. We look out on the other side of the isthmus, across a kind of boardwalk with flower pots and a rather stagnant pool of brown peat waters and reed beds, out across the loch towards the open sea. Spent the morning sitting with my back against these stones, drinking hot chocolate with the anthropologist, design manager and mechanical engineer. They have recently developed a new future mobile device based on an inexplicable Neolithic artefact found on the island. They have promised to find me an image to send to you.



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© Monumental

Future Archaeologist

stagnant pool · hemispherical  boardwalk with flower pots on (guess?)

4th Postcard

This is a Skara Brae object, from the HMSO catalogue Symbols of Power⁹. It's the inspiration for one of Sand14's prototype mobile devices. Imagine holding that exquisite, lucid stone as though you might grasp some designer bottle opener, and then imagine textures and sensations flowing over your palm as colours might pour from a tube of paint, with sounds and voices drifting around you. It is absolutely extraordinary - it's not so much telecommunications as transmutation and translation of sensory experience. This is why Sand14 is here.

⁹ CLARKE, D. V., COWIE, T. G. & FOXON, A. (1985) Symbols of power at the time of stonehenge, Edinburgh, HMSO. Page 57.



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Future Archaeologist

Skara Brae object
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I sit now, re-reading these postcards from the Future Archaeologist. Her accounts are a re-telling of my fragments of evidence of a mobile telecoms design studio, a diffraction of that ethnography into the company, Sand14, located on the windswept archipelago of Orkney. Her work, my work, is a move in ethnographic method not just from authenticity to allegory, but to multiplicity and interference. A move to poetically and empirically re-imagine other possible places for other possible mobile telecoms futures. A move towards an archaeology of the future.