

Drawn to Orkney

Is there a role for visual art in archaeological research, based in perceptual observation rather than documentation or reenactment?

Karen Wallis

In the summer of 2016, I became Artist in Residence on the Ness of Brodgar in Orkney, with the aim of finding out if my artwork could be useful to the excavations. Being an artist, not an archaeologist, I decided to arrive uncluttered by preconceptions about the site. My preparations were practical, ensuring that my clothing was suitably protective and that I had plenty of materials and technology to work with. My recent practice has combined sketchbook drawing and watercolour notes with sound recordings of incidental conversations and ambient noise. I then develop these into installation components, including film that combines drawings with sound.

The first impression on arriving at the Ness of Brodgar, was of a sea of stone laid out chaotically across an enormous trench. To get started, I watched, drew, listened and recorded anything that caught my eye. Through conversations with the archaeologists, I began to understand the complexity of the site and the necessary attention to detail in the excavation process. Talking to other new arrivals, I learned that even experienced

archaeologists find the Ness site particularly complex. It also became apparent that, in the past, the relationship between art and archaeologists has not always been satisfactory, with each side remaining separate. My understanding of a residency is that both sides should benefit and learn from each other. So I wanted to achieve more than a basic opportunity to make work for exhibition, while providing a bit of outreach for the site.

During the last decade, my work has centred on human activity in a specific context, and recently this has included an interest in how current human actions resonate with human activity from the past. In an attempt to combine my research interest with the need for an effective presence as Artist in Residence, I asked the archaeologists for explanations of the excavation process, from the initial removal of topsoil to the ultimate destination of any finds. The journey includes meticulous documentation through notes, photography, digital mapping, and precise technical drawings of each stage of excavation. In contrast, my sketchbook drawings were focussed on the everyday process of the dig; such as the physicality of working on hands and knees in all weather, the huge amount of paperwork and technology involved, and the visual juxtaposition of the ancient site in contrast to the colours and anomalies of modern equipment.

Towards the end of my four weeks on site, it was apparent from positive reactions that my work is in some way useful and beyond mere documentation. But, as yet I cannot articulate the reasons why, or how, I am making a contribution to the excavation. Next year I will get more feedback from an exhibition in The Orkney Museum and a chance for further investigation as I continue as Artist in Residence on the Ness of Brodgar.

In the meantime, the question remains: Is there a role for visual art in archaeological research based in perceptual observation, rather than documentation or reenactment? Discuss.....



Further information on Karen's work can be found at:
Video on Vimeo <https://vimeo.com/191691629>
Ness of Brodgar residency blog
<https://www.a-n.co.uk/blogs/ness-of-brodgar-artists-residency>
Web site www.karenwallis.co.uk
Daily drawing journal on Facebook [Karen Wallis Artworks](https://www.facebook.com/KarenWallisArtworks)
Twitter [@KarenArtwork](https://twitter.com/KarenArtwork)

Figure 1
Hands - film still from a video by Karen Wallis