

SCALE AND METAPHOR: THE ROLE OF THE BODY IN THE PERCEPTION OF SCALE

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Abstract: Combining my sculpture training with my professional experience in the museum and science communication areas, in this paper I explore and develop the potential role of contemporary sculpture in communicating archaeology in the museum context. I study the way how contemporary art — particularly sculpture — can be included in archaeological research about the human representation in prehistory as well as the value that this transdisciplinarity can bring to this particular field of study.

Keywords: heritage studies; Art and Archaeology; science communication; prehistoric figurines.

Resumo: Conjugando a minha formação em escultura com a experiência profissional na área da museologia e da comunicação de ciência, no âmbito do presente artigo, exploro e aprofundo o potencial papel da escultura contemporânea na comunicação de arqueologia em contexto museológico. Estudo a forma como a prática artística contemporânea — em particular a escultura — se pode integrar no trabalho de investigação arqueológica sobre a representação humana na pré-história, assim como a valorização que esta transdisciplinaridade pode trazer a esta particular área de estudo.

Palavras-chave: estudos patrimoniais; Arte e Arqueologia; comunicação de ciência; figuras pré-históricas.

Focusing on scale issues of human representation, I aim to develop innovative museum strategies which, because they include the display of contemporary sculpture in archaeological contexts, can trigger the agency of the visitors so that their experience becomes more active, free and subjective. Archaeology (as well as the other human and exact sciences) tries to communicate with an ever growing and less specialized

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audience¹. According to this, museums and archaeological settings — as privileged places of dialogue between the discipline and society — should provide active and significant heritage-related experiences². However, I think that the traditional display methods are not always up to this challenge and end up creating limiting environments that do not stimulate individual thought³. Therefore, new creative approaches in the exhibition program could positively enhance the archaeological experience of the public and at the same time contribute to a new way of safeguarding heritage.

Over the last two decades, dynamics between sculpture and archaeology have been shifting from the more traditional relationships based on formal analogy and mutual inspiration to other — much more interesting in my opinion — relationships that maximize and explore the potential of joint research projects carried out by transdisciplinary teams of artists and archaeologists⁴. The simple reciprocity relationships between the two disciplines are becoming much more complex interactions, where both disciplines address the same issues and adopt working methods of each other⁵. I believe that the growth of this trend reflects similar developments that have been happening in cognate disciplines such as anthropology and corresponds to a significant expansion of the relationship between art and science in the field of academic research.

Contemporary sculpture has been changing into what we can describe as a wide research program that takes a critical look at what we are. Characterised by a multiple or expanded nature, it becomes more and more culturally and socially relevant. The exploration of ways of thinking, communicating and displaying characteristics of contemporary art expands the notion of art beyond visual representation, and makes it an interesting form of research and communication for the other fields of knowledge⁶.

The transdisciplinary research I propose makes room for artistic production and scientific reflection. In the process, it brings together initiatives of several research areas (sculpture, archaeology, museums) and puts on an equal footing different positions, practices and methodologies of the arts and the sciences⁷. One of my main concerns is to perceive sculpture as a form of research while trying not to fall into the appealing and simplistic claim that all art is research, nor into the threatening abrasion of art that results from its subordination to scientific standards. I believe that this path stimulates the exploration of the specific potential of art in the context of research as well as the conscious pursuit of new forms of knowledge.

¹ MATSUDA, 2009: 90-97.

² MERRIMAN, 2009.

³ SKRAMSTAD, 2004: 118-132.

⁴ BAILEY, 2014a: 231-250.

⁵ REA, 2011: 19-30.

⁶ FERNANDES DIAS, 2011: 103-129.

⁷ PALMER, 2004: 145-156.

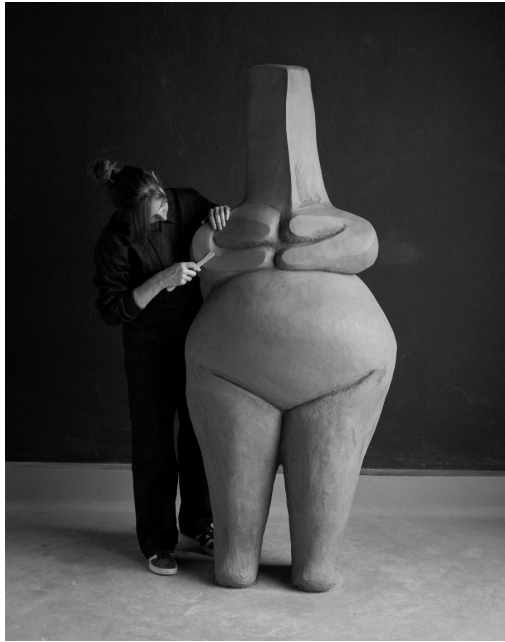


Figure 1. Work in Progress, Sara Navarro (2019).
Photograph: Michael Vieira).

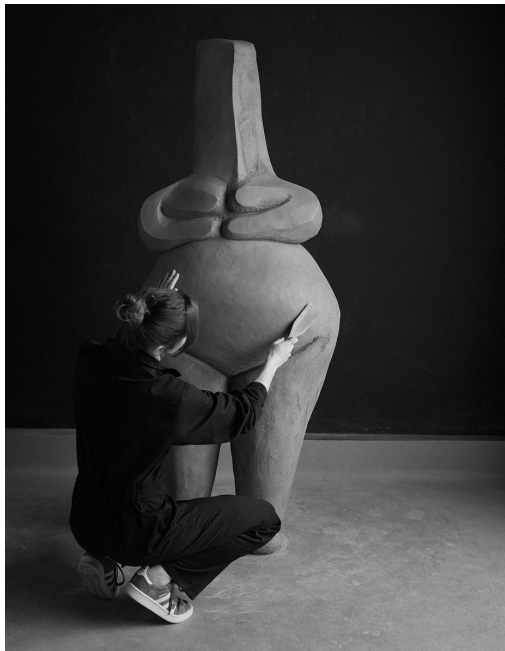


Figure 2. Work in Progress, Sara Navarro (2019).
Photograph: Michael Vieira.

Based on previous experiences, I believe that the display of contemporary works of art in archaeological settings can be, besides good to look at, good to think about⁸ insofar as it changes the place and challenges the visitors, re-orienting them towards an innovative commitment between the contemporary and the archaeological character of the space. To display is to suspend, is to take the objects away from their original context and make them available for contemplation and thought. More than a static object that is locked in its material boundaries, the sculpture represents in this context a path, a movement between matter and the memory that inhabits it.

Due to the unparalleled visual experience they create and the way they fill the exhibition space, the three-dimensional works of art (contemporary sculpture/installation) lead to a strong physical interaction with the public and at the same time have the power to activate their agency. This way they bring vitality to the museum experience and can lead the visitors to more active, free and subjective interpretations⁹. Sculpture makes it easier for visitors to be physically involved, confronting them with its presence and leading them to discover its shape, its matter, its detail. These aspects may draw and keep the attention of the visitors, encouraging them to independently explore the meanings of the work and of the archaeological context where it is displayed¹⁰.

Due to its important ability to raise doubts (and not give answers), contemporary sculpture makes the viewer work. By placing visitors in the context of a live archaeological setting, the exhibitions that I propose challenge the visitors to think, seeking the meaning of the material traces that are in front of them. Triggering original dialogues between the visitors and the material traces of the past, contemporary sculpture may, for instance, steer them to important topics, concepts or materials that are usually dormant in the museum space or archaeological setting¹¹. Aiming to get an active answer from the visitors, the exhibition of contemporary sculpture in archaeological settings contributes to an inclusive discourse within the scope of heritage-related practices, a discourse that seeks the equivalence of thought between the public (visitors) and the experts (curators) or between the non-archaeologists and the archaeologists¹².

With this ongoing research project, I try to offer an overall view of the implications of scale in human representation in pre-historic times, by analysing not only the contextual matters of size and scale of the artefacts but also the metaphors that arise when we reduce or increase the scale of a representation¹³. What is reduction and what is exaggeration as ways of representing or meaning? What changes when we change the

⁸ WALLIS, 2011: 133-160.

⁹ ACHESON ROBERTS, 2013: 1-21.

¹⁰ ACHESON ROBERTS, 2013: 1-21.

¹¹ ACHESON ROBERTS, 2013: 1-21.

¹² ACHESON ROBERTS, 2013: 1-21.

¹³ STEWART, 1993: 104-125.

scale of human representation? What is the relationship between the different scales of human representation and the viewer? The change of the scale of human representation, from miniature to giant, will be viewed in this project as something that can both bring the visitors closer to and drive them away from the sculpture (representation) thus eliciting new symbolic relationships between matter (object) and meaning (narrative).

Focusing on the study of particular examples of anthropomorphic figurines that are characteristic of the Neolithic in central and eastern Europe, I move away from the more traditional arguments connected with the gender categories that link these representations to mother goddesses or to fertility cults. In my opinion, they lead to oversimplification and end up restricting their study. I am not interested in discussing their role as ritual figures, toys, portraits of ancestors or teaching tools. I am interested instead in exploring the rhetorical power that the body, and therefore its representation, has as locus of identity¹⁴.

My training in sculpture leads me to see any representation act as an interpretation act where, through a given medium, the authors decide on the basis of the model what they should or should not represent (Figure 1 and Figure 2). In this sense, I do not see the pre-historic anthropomorphic representation as a representation of something but rather as a representation towards something¹⁵. This aspect gives it an agency ability inside which it acquires the ability to act, affect or build different meanings according to the different conditions of the viewer/handler. To research through sculpture is to study the assumptions and the systems that are the building blocks of the way we see the world. Always taking art practice as the starting point, sculpture is viewed here as both material object and intellectual research.

In a research that moves away from the archaeologic context, with this paper I hope to contribute in an original way to the transdisciplinarity between art and archaeology. I view this proposal as a complex and challenging type of research that uses objects of the past with a view to their contemporary transfiguration¹⁶. In short, I propose to go beyond the more usual narratives of art as archaeology or archaeology as art (traditionally based on formal analogy and mutual inspiration). I propose to explore the potential of work that goes beyond what is traditionally understood and accepted as either artistic research or archaeologic research. A new vision that benefits from the end of the need for interpreting or representing the past in order to open up a whole potential of creative action on these particular traces of the past.

¹⁴ BAILEY, 2014b: 31.

¹⁵ BAILEY, 2012: 249.

¹⁶ BAILEY, 2017: 691-701.

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