

For pits' sake





# For pits' sake

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## CD

Two pits like two red burning devil eyes, that seem to look inside our souls loom upon the hard-packed ground of the school yard, and for their sake we stay until late into the night, leaving our thoughts to wander in the heat emanating from the glowing coals. Thoughts about history, the Neolithic, ovens, children and ceramics. Thoughts about a small group of people gathered from all over the world so as to be able to rediscover a long-lost history. Tiredness slowly creeps in and then calm engulfs us all. All vision seems to be focused inside the ovens and the fire breaks down the last remaining drop of day time energy.

I alone circle around them like a gondolier, rowing with a long stick in the red flaming embers. Words are lost in the heat of the fire. It burns and burns for hours the clay moulded by us during the day. I lay alongside them pieces of wood as an offering. I am devoured. Again and again so that the embers can grow and the two dragon eyes gain in strength. The clay pots submerged in the red steaming lava crackle slowly and tunelessly in the night. They are the atoms caught in the dance of transformation, step by step, from alpha to omega.





I wonder if morning will catch us and the memory of the past day will loom over me. I extract from it fragments of an incredible day, a tumultuous day, full of children. Day started with excitement and expectations. For the sake of the ovens we get up and dig deep, to be able to rebuild maybe the simplest model ever created, a hole. In fact, we get greedy and we dig two so that the pots can get enough air to breath. Being the magicians that we are, we use our powers to give them oxygen to breath underground through three long and thin canals that reach the surface. Then we give them our clay pots to hold and to cherish. The sparkle lights up and becomes a roaring flame and everything becomes distorted. The transformation begins with fire and it's going to take some time.











Fire, our friend, thought of and placed wisely in the shape of an oven lives its life modelling others. It conferred upon people a different meaning. It gave people a philosophy of life and a new purpose to humanity. Over time it granted us our daily bread and heat and it enriched the clay giving it a new found beauty.

Ovens, from their primarily pit-like shapes to the more refined types we know today, make more and more miracles come to life.



## SM

There is nothing simple about a pit.

Despite being the best part of a year in the planning, having the collaboration of a team of archaeologists, school teachers, technicians and artists, and with good weather (for most of the day), modern tools, and plentiful food and drink, there was nothing simple about it at all. It was hard physical work, emotionally charged, there were moments of despair, uncertainty, disagreement and frustration; it was exhausting. That said it was ultimately incredibly rewarding for all involved. It's amazing how much sociality can be generated from the simplest of interventions into the ground: pits.



Surely it's just a case of digging a hole in the ground isn't it? You would think so. After six years of excavating early Neolithic pit features at Teleor 003, just outside the village, you would think we would be reasonably prepared and know what to expect. In addition, in 2004, Loe and Bram, two of our ceramic specialists, had successfully fired pots in a pit in an experiment by the banks of the Clanița River. It all seemed quite straight forward and simple then. So, it's not as if we did not have any experience with this kind of thing. But this event, this intervention, was on a grander scale and on public display within the school grounds. This time the village was looking on. With all the flyers and posters advertising the event in the previous weeks, and the local press now covering our workshops, we really had to get this right. Oh, how we hoped we would get this right and that the weather would be on our side.



So the inspiration for this pit event? Well, for some of us archaeologists, it was born from thinking about Teleor 003 and the early Neolithic, following so many discussions on site and in the museum. What are all these pits about? So much was invested in pits time and again, over hundreds of years, how do we get our heads around that? Then there were the summer solstice parties in Cardiff 2008-10, with a fire-pit; we made a movie, a pit-story. So maybe this event could take it further? What is it actually like to plan, dig, use, discard, and remember a pit? What impact does a pit have physically, emotionally, socially, temporally, spatially and in memory? Of course we are not Neolithic, and the answers we crave will not come from such an event, but it may make us think in new ways, make pits more tangible, more alive.

Before the pits there was the making of the clay objects to be fired, but you know about that already.



For just two small pits, two small holes in the ground, there ended up being far more planning and people involved than we had envisioned. Just the planning and supervision involved the following: one museum director, one school director, at least six school teachers, three school technicians, one village mayor, one supplier of clay lining, one supplier of wood, two museum drivers, one ceramic artist and at least six archaeologists. Then the participants: 30+ school children, numerous children's parents and guests, and the other five members of our team of artists and archaeologists. And then the materials: two hire cars, one van of wood, many bags of clay lining, many digging tools, pit-ventilation materials, two barbeques, several tables, many chairs, rope fencing, a music system, and a lot of food and drink. Not sure who was in charge of the weather, but, for most of the day, whoever that was did a good job.





There were the logistics of moving wood, of organising people, of moving delicate ceramics, and, of course, of imposing suitable measures for health and safety purposes (probably not something high on the Neolithic agenda).

There were misunderstandings on the day on the procedure for constructing the pits. This resulted in tension, and some heated discussion. There were inevitable time delays; everything was running late, when will it be ready? Moments of frustration. It's all getting too complicated; we don't even know if this ventilation system was ever used, will it ever work? All these changes, transformations, are intervening in our original idea.

We'll go and dig our own pit then, and do it our way. Well we started, but we didn't get very far: ground too hard, sun too hot, the wrong tools. Ok, provided it's a truly a team effort, let's go back to the other pits and lend a hand. Ultimately, and thankfully, a compromise.



Such a sense of relief when, finally, we added the pots and the fires were lit. Of course, no sooner was everything up and running, the weather turned, an absolute downpour, a meteorological intervention. But it did not last long. When the rain stopped, the feast began, with eating, drinking, singing, and dancing. And later that evening, after the children had left and many others had been ferried home, some of us stayed late into the night watching and tending our pits, drinking beer.

The next day, so hot, too hot, rope off an area, keep the children out of harms' way. Painful, smoky, dusty, burning – I hope this has worked. Anticipation, suspense, what will come out? I hope for the children's sake at least some pots have survived. I can see them... It seems to have worked, relief! Such relief.











Just a hole in the ground?

Our pits inspired an intervention into media. We now have thousands of photographs and many hours of video and audio recordings that document the event, press releases that report on the event, and the posters and flyers that advertised the event. Not sure what we will do with all these media, but some of them have been used in exhibitions at the museum, in project books, a project DVD and on the project website. The rest, well, we will keep them, one day they will come in useful (just like all those other countless digital photographs). Like the pottery born of the event and now on display at the museum, the other media are something we were able to take away with us, we can re-visit and manipulate them and we can use them to remember and re-think our pits. But the ultimate media were the pits themselves; they mediated ideas and they provided an intervention into communication. Such a wide range of modes of communication became possible by digging those pits; we are still exploring those communication possibilities now.



And so from the pits as media were born other media. Remediation: how a form of media draws upon, emerges from and transforms an earlier form of media. Stone and wooden tools refer back to the human body; clay back to wood and stone; metal back to stone; drawing back to carving; photographs back to drawing; video back to photographs. All our media refer back to our pits and all our pits refer back to Neolithic pits and they refer back to... So, it would seem that not much has changed, only the media.

Metal to dig, wood to burn, fuel to light, barbeques to cook, tables, plates and cups to present, display and consume, gloves to extract. The transformation of clay and an intervention into technology and materials, in so many ways have our pits permeated our lives in these last few days. And there's more...

The transformation of energy. During the course of our workshop our pits ignited potential and kinetic energies of various kinds. Those energies were transformed, enjoyed, marvelled at, feared, and endured. Mental energy expended in the planning, organisation and supervision of the event. Physical human energy expended in the digging of the pits, the building of the fires, the placing of the pottery, the lighting and tending of the fire, the removal of the pottery after firing, the back-filling of the pits. The fire itself, a physical energy transforming wood, charcoal, cardboard and paper into heat. The heat from the fire then transforming the physical chemistry of the pottery. And through a feast, we replenished, recharged, ourselves as we watched the flames dance before us.









Digging down to build up, transforming and manipulating gravity and verticality. To build our pits we dig down, with gravity on our side. Using shovels we raise up the soil (spoil?), against gravity. Within the pits we build up the wood for the fire, against gravity. Once alight, the flames and smoke rise, against gravity. With time, the contents of the fire gradually die down, with gravity. Finally, with our help, the pottery rises up from the pits, against gravity. Gravity and verticality, there is so much about pits that enable us to experience and explore these concepts, these forces.





So our two pits were interventions into the museum, the school, the village, into ground, media, technology, energy, verticality and gravity, and then finally into memory. Once you know about them, they don't go away. Even when back-filled, buried and the surface ground used for something else, they don't go away. Even if you have no real interest in them, you don't understand them, they don't go away. In fact we did bury our pits, we even had a ceremony, and they are in the burial ground of the schoolyard, where many other things are left, lost or retired. You can bury a pit in the same way that you can bury a person, an animal, a tool, a gift or an offering. And they don't go away. Our pits are gifts to ourselves and to Măgura. They could be excavated in the future; we know they are there and the whole process could start again...



Many people got many different things from our pit event; many others probably got very little, if anything, from it. For some it was engaging, educating and exciting, for others irrelevant, inane or perhaps irritating. I doubt there can be a consensus. I doubt there is any need for a consensus. No size fits all pits.

For some of us, having now intervened into pitting, the event has transformed our ideas about pits. Pits encourage doing, action, verbs, all those words that end in 'ing'; digging, building, placing, lighting, watching, tending, eating, drinking, singing, dancing, shouting, arguing, burning, removing, rejoicing, backfilling, exhibiting, writing, reading, remediating, remembering. The simplest of monuments can articulate such a complex interplay of social actions and relations. There is so much more to think about now that we have intervened.













I am almost certainly thinking about this too much, but I do it for pits' sake.

Just a hole in the ground? Certainly, but there is nothing simple about a pit.









