The Brain of the Archaeologist

This book is the encounter of an archaeologist’s camera, an artist’s glance and a historic mound, the shape of which recalls a skull.

“The Brain of the Archaeologist” is a polyphonic book made of fragments of disconnected times, with voices at the crossroads of art, archaeology, and landscape. It is about deciphering landscape and maps, about unearthing signs and symbols. Eventually it is a book about research and creation.

The book offers a challenging view on site and landscape perception as shared by an archaeologist and an artist. This original confrontation enables a dialogue between science and art, and an interaction between peoples with different minds and practices; it is also about cross-disciplinary experiences.

Michaël Jasmin
—
The Brain of the Archaeologist
—
From Field to Sign
—
An Art & Archaeology Dialogue
To Audrey and her poetic ability to illuminate archaic figures

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PART
ONE
CONTEXT
Here and Now

Archeology deals with the most basic questions: when and where do we come from? Where are we? Usually one line is enough to locate ourselves almost anywhere. In the terms of this book, the answer is:

Earth > Europe > Romania > Teleorman county > Măgura village > archaeological tell

**This It Is, Here We Are.**

With some basic knowledge of geography, everyone can locate the first two of these places. The second two parts of the answer require more knowledge of European countries. Perhaps you even need to be from Romania to know where Teleorman county is. What about the last two parts of the answer? If you have never been to this place, there is little chance that you will ever have heard of it. Măgura? An isolated village along a small river called the Claniţa. An archaeological tell? These last two parts of the answer provide information of interest: they locate the village and the place precisely, and they provide data about chronology. We are on an archaeological tell: an artificial multi-layered mound or ancient city, a place with a particular historical dimension, and this explains why such a small Romanian village could be known (at least to archaeologists) on a world-scale.

**What Is This Book?**

It is an original object made of fragments of disconnected times, a polyphonic book, with voices at the crossroads of art, archaeology, and landscape. Both object and voices attempt to recover subjective truths. This book is also about deciphering landscape and maps, about unearthing signs and symbols. Eventually it is a book about research and creation. This book deals with fragments of different times and spaces. It is about heterogeneity of time: Neolithic times and medieval space, of past and present layers, of twentieth century landscape, and of present day transformation of the space. Such a heterogeneity of times at work (in the present) operates as a fascination. Usually, we tend to look at the world through three-dimensional images provided through our eyes. But images of our memories are flat. Thus, this book is about perception, about traditional geometric organization of the space, and about its representation on maps and in pictures. In addition, this book is a personal artistic approach to archaeology and the landscape. By “archaeology” is understood all the artefacts (man-made objects, but also agricultural and landscape transformations) and the ecofacts (any natural transformation) from the past, which are, still in our present above and below the earth’s surface. These layers of different, stacked pasts and stories are woven together. This book addresses various traditions and modes of representation: word and image, science and art, picture and drawing, report and poem. All of these texts and visuals are linked and are different voices which express, which imagine, and which represent a small portion of a landscape in South Eastern Europe, in Romania. This book is a puzzle about space and time. It operates the same way as archaeology does: reconnecting fragments to reach a fact, or a lost unit, or a truth. Voices, times, spaces, scales, and visuals are mixed in a non-linear narrative.
CONTEXT FOR A DIALOGUE BETWEEN ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY

The archaeologist finds objects from the past; the artist creates and invents objects or situations in the present. There appears to be no reasonable connection between these two radically different relations to time. The dialogue developed here is found between these two fields; and questions their practices. To artists, archaeology appears as a particular interest as both a scientific discipline and a field of practice. The interest comes from archaeology’s powerful imagery, from its original field method, and from its procedure of mixing the writing of history, the surveying of space, the representing and the exhibiting of material, and from the event of excavation; it is an interest shared by the public. There is fertile ground for dialogue and interaction between art and archaeology.

In art, is the use of parallel (otherwise archaeological methods) only metaphorical? Of what kind of modern myths these art-chaeological creations are the expressions?

BIOGRAPHICAL ELEMENTS OF MICHAEL JASMIN: ARTIST AND ARCHAEOLOGIST

Michael Jasmin develops on-site artistic intervention, mostly on archaeological sites while they are being excavated by archaeologists. Usually the sites are in European countries (mostly France, Italy, or Romania) or in the Near-East (Israel). One of Michael Jasmin’s novelties is that he is an artist who possesses a scientific background in archaeology. His interventions relay this double perspective. For many years, he has been a field archaeologist researching past civilizations, mainly of the ancient Near-East. Several years ago, he choose to pursue his engagement with archaeology from a different angle: to tackle and question archaeology through the creation of contemporary art. In its originality and inter-disciplinarity, such an approach is difficult to categorize, and its final scope difficult to evaluate. What, if anything, is relevant to science? What belongs to the field of creation? In any single creation, how is one to assess the ratio between these two approaches?

Such a ratio has a wide range of expression. Sometimes the creative aspect is emphasized, and in these instances the installation has a limited connection to archaeology. At another time the archaeological connection is obvious. In this book, the dialogue is between art and archaeology within a project connected to the landscape.

CONTEXT OF CREATION OF MICHAEL JASMIN

The larger context of this approach relates to the research-creation approach. This creative work mixes art and science. Although fashionable, sci-art interdisciplinary projects remain in their infancy. Usually, they inscribe themselves through the cooperation of an artist with someone from one of the hard sciences such as biology, physics, or nanotechnology. Cooperative experiments in the humanities have used sci-art as a new creative methodological tool, though such confrontation and dialogue are relatively rare; the process of weaving together research and creation remains in an emergent stage.

It is also possible to connect the artwork of Michael Jasmin to a land-art perspective, especially when he is using raw materials and dealing with the landscape. Indeed, in some of his installations the notion of in-situ is central to the work and to Jasmin’s approach to it. The approach is less about land-art than it is about culture, man’s relation to the land, matters of perception, representation and methods, and ways of experiencing the past in the land.
THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL ACTIVITY IN THE REGION AND THE SITE OF MAGURA

The Southern Romania Archaeological Project (SRAP, 1998 to present) is a multi-disciplinary effort to examine trends in prehistoric land-use and settlement patterns in southeastern Europe. SRAP is a collaboration between Cardiff University, the Teleorman County Museum, Alexandria, and the Romanian National Historical Museum, Bucuresti. SRAP focuses its attention on the Neolithic and Eneolithic (6000–3600 BC) of the Teleorman River Valley, 85 km southwest of Bucuresti. The Neolithic and Eneolithic were dynamic periods in Balkan prehistory. People first constructed pits and then later built and lived in villages of clay, mud and timber framed houses; they herded sheep, goat, cattle and pig; they made a wide range of stone tools and ceramic pottery and figurines, and they grew wheat and barley. More spectacularly, the fifth millennium inhabitants of the Balkans were the first Europeans to use copper and gold to make ornaments, jewellery and tools. They also imported special marine shells from Greece and used them to make bracelets, rings and pendants. A prime objective of the SRAP is to unravel the beginnings of this dynamic period.

To achieve its research objective, the SRAP has designed a multi-disciplinary programme of fieldwork and analyses combining traditional archaeological field techniques and expertise with a range of specialist techniques from other disciplines. The project methodology uses intensive field walking, soil auguring, pollen analysis, excavation, archaeological survey, pottery analyses, and human and animal bone analyses. This is combined with studies of Holocene river dynamics to understand the history of the river valley, of palaeobotany to understand the presence and use of plants, of micromorphology to understand the formation of archaeological features (e.g. house floors) and of radiometric dating to provide a scientific chronological framework. Alongside SRAP, the Teleorman County Museum and the Romanian National Historical Museum conduct further Neolithic research in the Teleorman Valley with particular focus on the tell at Viţăneşti (dating from 4300 cal BC, Giumelnaţa culture).

The Teleorman River Valley runs for several hundred kilometres through southcentral Romania, emptying into the Danube. As the river passes the modern town of Alexandria, the valley is joined by the valley of the Claniţa River. At the confluence of the Teleorman and the Claniţa the tell village of Măgura (dating from 4300 cal BC, Giumelnaţa culture) marks the importance of this meeting of the rivers (indeed the subsequent Iron Age and modern use of the Măgura mound attests to the area’s importance through the proto-historic and historic periods). There are many other tells up and down these two rivers as well as along the neighbouring Vedea River which also runs to the Danube but farther to the west.

In the Teleorman valley just where it meets the Claniţa today is a wide, open flood plain. Across part of this plain runs a grid of drainage channels cut into the valley floor during the late 1980s in an attempt to create a cotton plantation. The channels are 2.0 m. deep and 3.0 m. wide and in total run for over 4 kms. Most importantly the sides of the channels are exposed and are currently the source of eroding soils; it is these channels which drew the project to this valley. In many places along these channels, one can see cultural material eroding out of the sides and accumulating at the channel bottoms. Much of this material is late Neolithic in date (4800–4300 cal BC, specifically of the Boian Culture). The presence of Boian material in the valley bottom was a surprise and demanded that further investigation focus on the character of the sites from which the material was eroding. This was the main research stimulus which drew the SRAP to this location. The initial SRAP seasons (1998–2000) mapped the spread of these concentrations, opened controlled excavations and began the study of Holocene river valley dynamics. Subsequent SRAP seasons (2001–present) have focussed on the earliest Neolithic archaeology present in the valley at the newly discovered site of Teleor 003 south of the village and dating to 6000–5200 cal BC (Starčevo-Criş to Dudeşti and Vădastra cultures).
The Măgura Intervention took place in the prehistoric and historic landscapes of the village of Măgura and in the neighbouring valley of the Teleorman River in southern Romania. Participants came from the local village, the regional and national capitals (Alexandria and București), and other member states (France, England, Wales). The subagenda for the intervention was to question the political and historical power that people commonly ascribe to historic (and prehistoric) monuments, and to re-assert the value and power of events and activities of a more transitory and temporary nature. The aim was to provide contexts in which the inhabitants of a rural village in southern Romania could become authors, artists, and actors within the creations of their own histories while working in collaboration with personnel from the county museum and from foreign universities. The intervention acts relocated and democratized the authority of making history and of authoring representations. Once taken from the formal institutions of knowledge (the museums, academies, universities) and the institutional authorities (profsors, experts, specialists, foreigners), authority was given to the local inhabitants of the village, with particular empowering of the village children. In bringing artists, archaeologists, performers, and scientists to Măgura, the project provided little instruction and offered no clear expectations. The remit for all was the same: make work that evokes the place and its people in its landscape; wrestle with the concepts of “art”, “transformation”, and “landscape”; question the honesty of large-scale political generalizations (Europe, Romania, the Neolithic, the European Community) in the particularities of the everyday and the routine; interrogate the assumed identity and importance of institutionally acknowledged monuments and modern characterizations of the past. Michaël Jasmin was given no special instructions; no restrictions or limits were placed on his working methods or intentions. “Use your particular skill-sets and experiences, bring your particular expertise to bear on a place and a time.”

DOUG BAILEY

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PART TWO
THE SUN
Claudio Pifferaro is an Italian traveler who visited Romania at the beginning of the twentieth century. He was at that time in his mid-twenties and his main interests were streams and rivers. He used to study their origins and journeys while in his hometown (Rome) and then he would follow their flow and drainage during the summer time. This peculiar interest made Claudio an original contributor to the study of European streams and rivers. He is known for having developed a theory about connecting river fluviation and people’s senses that he termed “stream psychology”. Here are fragments of short notes he left from his trip across the Măgura region in the summer of 1907.

**AUGUST, 11TH 1907**

“... having left the flat long bank of the Danube few days ago, some peasants working in the fields told me I should follow the Vedea river until I reached a small village named Alexandria. I was interested by this name... but as I would learn about this place, nothing in its name could be connected to the great Macedonian conqueror and indeed when I finally attained the place, no trace of antiquities, stones, marbles could be found anywhere. The village is a relatively recent one, named in fact for a Prince of Romania about half a century ago: Alexandru II Ghica. This Alexandru belonged to the famous and noble Ghica family, the same one that just produced Demeter Ghica the great explorer of the wilds of East Africa. I had the chance to read the detailed account of his trip in his recently published book (1898): Cinq Mois au Pays des Somalis. What an adventurer! Exploring, hunting, mapping unknown land...”

**AUGUST, 13TH 1907**

“... I spent a night there in Alexandria, finding a humble dwelling among a poor but hospitable family. The next morning I crossed the Vedea River, a Danube tributary, and walked to the east to reach the Teleorman River. I will follow this one to the north and at some point I will have to go east in order to reach București, the Romanian capital.”

“... All this region, despite its flat appearance is a land of herding and fertile agriculture. In the mid-summer the villagers are busy all over the region in the field for the harvest or keeping an eye on their herds. I felt there a strong call of the river. Teleorman and Clanița, the latter a small affluent, are both quiet, flat, serpentine rivers. The Clanița slowly oscillates with a drainage producing thin waves. It has a refreshing and charming flow, with an extremely sinuous, shy and shallow bed, made of hundreds of small undulations and swampy land. These two snaky rivers are bordered by many villager’s animals and I surprised myself dreaming of the wild African rhino of Demeter Ghica, but had only some sleepy water buffalo as company...”
This is an account of my first encounter of the landscape, the village and the archaeological place when I arrived in the valley. Here are some of the explanations that were given to me...

The Town of Alexandria and The Village of Măgura
The town of Alexandria was a small village created sometime in the second half of the nineteenth century that became one of the important centers of the county. Surrounded by fields, agriculture is its main activity and explains the relative prosperity of the town. The city itself is shaped by rows of concrete buildings from the 1970s and 1980s when Ceausescu’s regime decided to bring together populations.

Not far in terms of geography, just a few kilometers from the city of Alexandria, but so far in time, as it seems, is the village of Măgura. It is as if it comes from another age, where most of the inhabitants are occupied in agricultural activities. So the daily life reality is quite different.

Măgura is about traditional ways of living and activities. It is a mix of traditional acts with present raw materials. In the garden are spread plastic, metal, tiles, or blocks of concrete...

The village appeared as if on the very edge: of modernity, of change, of existence. The carriages pulled by horses are slowly replaced by mechanical cars. The village and its inhabitants will soon be absorbed by the new liberal economy, by the immediacy of the present, by the new technologies, and the new need of consumption... still, right now, in the wet heat of the East European summer, punctuated by loud late day summer storms, it seems to be out of the present.

By connecting the tell with the present day village one can bridge the millennia and have the feeling that all of the Neolithic inventions are still written in the present landscape and in its human occupation: sedentism, domestication of plants and animals, daily life objects made of pottery and in plastic. I had the
feeling that the present landscape was framed by the Neolithic mind, and was almost its direct expression. All around the village in the valley, animals are grouped by species: chicken, turkeys, geese, horses, cows and water buffalo... pigs are somewhere, one let me know, but I heard or saw none of them. Local peasants are the sedentary part of the people but not the only one. A couple of kilometers from the village, in the Teleorman valley, are seasonal shepherds and Romanian cowboys living in their trailers near to their grazing herds.

**LANDSCAPE TRANSFORMATION**

The landscape transformation in the Teleorman valley and around the village of Măgura is an ongoing process not limited to a period from another century. One of the main large-scale landscape transformations that happened before the dictator Ceausescu’s death resulted from his decision to construct a series of steep terraces along the Teleorman and some of the adjacent valleys. Their purpose was to facilitate horticulture such as grape vines or olive trees. The landscape was transformed and altered to create the new terraces. Now widely covered by grass, their shapes led me to think that there were archaeological structures underneath the slopes of these hills. As they are, the terraces are undergoing a process of erosion and some slopes have already lost their step profile for a more natural one.

**THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL TELL**

Both the tell and the village are developed along the southern border of the Clanița river where it connects with the Teleorman river. This spot is almost a famous one, as past people from the Neolithic period (eight to six thousands years ago) settled here for the same good reason: abundance of water and the strong agricultural potential of the Teleorman valley. To me the rhythms of time are sampled in these two different rivers; they are as if a musical score. I felt a deep connection to pulse: not the difference of rhythm between town and the village life, but between the flat and deep rhythms of open space.

The archaeological tell is a small partly artificial elongated hill on the border of the village. Topographically disconnected from it, it has been occupied on and off for the past six millennia. One assumes that the hill is initially natural and partly artificial. Clearly, its height been raised due to long-lasting human occupation over the millennia with villages being built one on top of each other. Today, covered by thick grass, there are
no traces of past occupation. Except for the slope’s steep gradient (which is a sign of the hill’s artificial nature), there are no clues to its antiquity. One of the unusual features of the tell is its present use: the flat summit of it is occupied presently by one of the village’s cemeteries and churches.

THE TELL AS THE ANCESTOR’S PLACE
I was particularly interested in the cemetery and its position on a prehistoric site. I do not know when the villagers started to bury their dead in this place; I guess it must have been sometime in the twentieth century when the village of Măgura expanded. I have seen in several Near-Eastern countries, from Syria to Israel through Jordan and Palestine, that it is a common practice to use archaeological tells as locations for local cemeteries. Perhaps there is some more practical reason; could the earth be easier to dig? The main reason is more likely to be symbolic and genealogical. The matter of interest to me here is the scale of this real or symbolic genealogy. It is a means to affiliate with recent ancestors (thus on a small time scale) as well as connect with a piece of land that is charged with remote ancestors (thus on the large time scale of centuries or even millennia). Both sets of people are now inhabitants of a common, next world. The positive aura of these remote ancestors could make the tell an appealing place for the living to bury their dead, even if, or perhaps because, the place had not been used in the prehistoric past as a cemetery.

MĂGURA - TELL
What does Măgura mean? Tell! Măgura is the Romanian equivalent for “archaeological mound” or “tell” in the Near-East, “tepe” in Iran, “hüyük” in Turkey or “magoula” in Greek. The connection between the village with its most ancient site is obvious, there is a clear parallel between the vocabulary in use and an archaeological genealogy.
Geometric structure made of concrete, to protect a well.

The Grid in Context

Transforming the Landscape through Images and Installations

Art — Archaeology — Landscape

Brown E. Barrow

The Scientific Background of Michael Jasmin is of Particular Interest.

He was invited to participate in art-oriented field experiments in the village of Măgura in southern Romania in the summer of 2010.

What is my point of view on the relation between art and archaeology? How can an artist contribute to the understanding or representation of a region, an archaeological site?

At first I might have been reluctant to attempt such a contribution because (in terms of how archaeology is practiced today), the work would rely more on creativity and imagination than on an objective and quantitative approach.

Archaeology is defined by strict scientifically orientated methods and goals: the idea is that historic truth can only emerge from a scientific study of past remains, and that all other ways of visualizing or expressing the past should be ignored, especially if they are related to the imagination.

Since the seventies, the need for the methods of hard sciences in archaeology has been an essential part of the development of the discipline. In some contexts, archaeology is considered to be merely a subsidiary discipline of history. Working in this light, archaeologists have needed to express their different identity, their self-confidence, and their autonomy. The hard sciences helped archaeologists do this at one time in the discipline’s past.

Today, the pendulum needs to swing in the other direction, towards the humanities. If it does not, then the current trend (of producing ultra-specialized narrow minded students) will continue. I call for a more balanced teaching in archaeology; historically and in its very essence, archaeology belongs to the humanities. The tradition of writing history is at the core and the very origin of archaeology.

It is not my aim to place a creative approach in opposition to a scientific one. When looking at an archaeological site, both views have important roles to play in expressing meanings to us: that is to say, to us as people of the present.
trying to understand, to represent, or to reconnect with people and things of the past. One aspect of the past is its ability to return...to come back from a personal level to a civilizational one.
From this position the on-site art- science experiment of Michael Jasmin is a stimulating work bringing fresh air to the present archaeological landscape. It offers a new insight into representation and a new look at an archaeological site, which in the case of Măgura remains unexcavated.

TIME AND SPACE IN ARCHAEOLOGY
The nature of time is under question in archaeology. How does one apprehend time? Its physical dimension is expressed in the materiality of the object and how one responds to it. Each object or raw material is under the process of erosion and relies on its own rhythm and scale of erosion. In the archaeological field the objects are lines in the materiality of time. Time is a physical process of weakening, ruin, and (mostly) decay. All together these three ongoing processes (which only stop with total annihilation) are the physical effects of time. Anyone dealing with archaeology feels intimately that time is central to the discipline. Indeed archaeology is embodied into the past. The times encountered by the archaeologists are heterogeneous, stratified and interpenetrated. It seems that archaeology is fundamentally and merely about time. Although this is quite correct, it seems to me that space is more fundamental to archaeology than time is. Also important is how time coagulates and physically alters space and matter and mixes with it. The relation of archaeology with the notion of space oriented the project around the village of Măgura. This is a way to remember that before dealing with time, the archaeologist is first of all dealing with the space around him and with its measurement and localization.
The artwork is connected to the notion of space and landscape on three levels: the natural landscape with the regional Teleorman valley (the stream, river, and basic topography), the cultural landscape with the village of Măgura; and the archaeological tell, one of the oldest human places in this landscape, seen as an artefact (i.e., as the expression of a past and present cultural production).
The organization of the archaeological space proceeds with maps and by squaring the field. The gridded map allows one to map and to contextualize. The rectangle institutes measurement. Visually, it constructs the space that is surveyed by the archaeologist.

SPACE AND CONTEXT AT THE VILLAGE OF MĂGURA
A major aspect of the artistic intervention of Michael Jasmin at Măgura is about the importance of the grid in archaeological practice. Grids are widely used in archaeology: from large-scale (invisible) grids that are used to map the sites, to small-scale grids (1-by-1 meter) used to draw excavated objects from the ground. The archaeologist uses at least two separate grid levels. The first one allows us to localize a place on a map by a shared international geographic system as Mercator (UTM – Universal Transverse Mercator) or WGS1984 (World Geodetic System) for GPS systems. The second level of grid is a local one. It is installed by topographers to cover and square the excavated site with a grid (or carroyage), for example 5-by-5 meter squares, in order to localize every excavated area and inside of each to map the objects in archaeological space. These grids construct the archaeologist’s perception of regional and local space. They allow him to organize, separate, and then categorize these spaces. Grids are also the instrument that enables him to contextualize: context is the cornerstone of the archaeological approach for connecting excavated objects. These grids help the archaeologist to construct the space, to build a representation of it, and then to produce the image that presents his working space and its reconstruction of the past.

THE PRESENT USES OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL TELL
The use of the space of the archaeological tell is by itself central to the daily life and the understanding of the village of Măgura. Its unusual shape and its location (close by, yet physically separate from the village) make it something unique and particular. The multiple uses of the tell are significant. At present, the top of the artificial hill has social purposes: a cemetery and a church. Because of this the tell is a place with a very specific dimension (life and death) in the existence of the village people.
INTERVENTIONS IN THE LANDSCAPE

I planned and carried out an on-site installation during a two week presence at Măgura. My intervention in the landscape took on a double dimension: a physical on-site creation and a visual photographic engagement. These two works were closely connected and are about the concepts of space and grid. For me they represent two different ways to intervene in the landscape: by the hand and through the eye.

TRANSFORMING THE LANDSCAPE: 37097.48776

In-context or out-of-context?
The installation 37097.48776 is the application of the concept of the grid. It is playing with frame at the largest scale. By their size, these numbers (5-by-20 meters), their context and environment (on the slope of a Neolithic site) are completely out of context. Paradoxically, at the same time, they are precisely in context: these numbers refer to the spatial localisation on the UTM (Universal Transverse Mercator) grid of the archaeological tell. This work is on-site in a double perspective: by its physical and by its informative aspects. These numbers allow a connection between the local and the global; the connection enlarges the locally-made digits to the size of international scale. This intervention into the landscape with its spatial information on the tell translates a series of numbers into a worldwide reference. The installation 37097.48776 is also in dialogue with a series of four photographs: the conversation is about the ways we look at landscapes. These pictures use archaeological discourse, the grid allowing to spot visually in space and the section to spot in time. The idea behind the series of four pictures is to mix these two elements in order to look at the landscape shown in the photograph as if it was a square to excavate.
BRANDING THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL TELL

THE FIRST LAYER OF THE GROUND IS ALREADY MADE OF SEVERAL LAYERS:
the grass and their roots, then the first archaeological layer (termed top soil) which contains a mix of material culture from all the periods of the tell. My intervention of cutting the ground of the tell’s slope (without dealing with the archaeological layers underneath) is also a way to brand the site. The parallel is with the archaeologist who leaves a site at the end of its excavation: the site is a place left with open spaces of disturbed earth — trenches and pits — that appear as scars on the site in the landscape. I see this cutting as tattooing the earth. It could also be seen as the first step of a landscape transformation.
Cutting the ground is also an action that frames the tell. I give a meaning, or in some way a translation of this man-made mound whose story is difficult, if not impossible for everyone, to read. This new meaning is strictly about the place itself.

TRANSFORMING OUR PERCEPTION: THE GRID AND THE VISUALIZATION OF THE LANDSCAPE
By looking at different places through a grid, or by using an existing grid like strings in the visual space, the four photographs of the village and the tell aim to play with the idea of grid in the present village of Măgura and in its surrounding. By making a translation of the view from on-the-ground to in-front, these images urge a questioning of our way of looking at the landscape.
**LANDSCAPE LIGNS OF FORCE**

**CAN WE SUM UP THE LANDSCAPE IN TERMS OF ITS LINES OF FORCE?**

When we read the landscape, are these lines the expression of specific and distinctive periods? Does the stratigraphy in the ground find parallel in horizontal space? Also, when does the process of transforming the landscape begin? How are we to transform our perception or our understanding of the landscape?

The on-site installation and the picture series are connected by their own way of playing with space: the installation is dealing with scales of perception: it is made to see the digits from far in the valley. The series of pictures would act the same way: when looking at them, some grid or other elements conceal and rupture the look at remote points in the picture. These images which are altered play with a clear perception that we could have of the landscape. The images the archaeologist has of the past are the same: blurred, fragmented, limited... He needs to connect the details to come closer to the full picture.

**BY LOOKING AT THE LANDSCAPE, ONE STARTS TO TRANSFORM IT.**

The construction of perception is different between the archaeologist and the artist. When looking at the landscape the archaeologist is tracking details to reveal man-made past structures. Then he organizes his space’s perception following a chronological sequence. On the other hand the artist has an open perception: structures and shapes are almost standing equal, and details will reveal his personal world. Lines of force and details are visual elements to be developed through a creation process.
WE WOULD LIKE TO SET THE ARCHAEOLOGIST AS A CREATOR OF IMAGES OF PAST CIVILIZATIONS.

When excavating a site, he develops a hypothesis and then a history, and thus elaborates a possible version of what happened in the past. His account starts from documents, most often visual one. So we can perceive him as a creator of images of the past made from his discoveries. On this side, he is close to the artist: both artist and archaeologist express a linked vision or outcome of their present society. When objects that have been discovered from the past are not presented as such, the archaeologist re-creates visually and with words the past. So, to look at the archaeologist as a creator puts into crisis his own standard representation of the past with the present. His discoveries and reconstructed images must be perceived as an invention in both senses of that word: a discovery and a creation.

IMAGE PRODUCTION AND THE OPERATION OF ANALOGY

The production of images is a decisive element in the construction of the archaeological thought process. It is a process of analogy that works with visual comparisons with banks of images. These images are the data stored in the archaeologist’s mind. They are constituted of maps, sections, plates, and photographs. From this position, we could suggest that the most research important tool is the archaeologist’s brain. Research should pay more attention to the relation of archaeologists to their image production. A resulting aim would be to integrate creative processes into archaeological practice and methodology. We should question the production of archaeological images: are they strictly and only scientific? We should also question the editing process in archaeology. How do words converse with images and illustrations? How do they interfere and connect with hypothesis and history writing?

The infinite distance which separates us from what is a few centimeters from the soles of the feet. Stratifications of dust. Stratifications of eyelids. Stratifications of man that became dust, earth, eyelid, to the hidden eye full of the vision of things that happened. Succeed to see the eye of the earth.

Interview of Michaël Jasmin by the art critic Audrey Norcia
(Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne university).

**AUDREY NORCIA**: Why or how did you arrive at this archaeological site in Romania? Can you recall the archaeological remit of the work at the site?

**MICHAËL JASMIN**: I came at the invitation of Doug Bailey from San Francisco State University. We met in July 2008 during the 6th World Archaeological Congress in Dublin, Ireland. Doug and I agree that there is a need to promote dialogue between the disciplines of art and archaeology. The Dublin congress was also one of the very first large events that included sessions allowing scholars to meet and exchange on these new questions. In fact, I have been interested in this interdisciplinary exchange for several years and this notably led me to organize a session entitled “Invented Civilizations”, with the Swedish archeologist Cornelius Holtorf, during the 13th congress of the European Association of Archaeologists in 2007 in Croatia. Anyway, in 2008 Doug Bailey and I both felt quite strongly that there is a real need to develop a dialogue between contemporary creation and archaeological field oriented practices.

**NORCIA**: How did you conceive your intervention. Did you have preliminary information? Which part does the site play in the intervention?

**JASMIN**: I did not try to collect or have preliminary information before arriving in Romania. This was deliberate. I wanted it to be necessary to immerse myself in the place: the site in its context and surrounding. When I work, I discover the site: I open my eyes, I walk, I watch the landscape, its rhythms, colors, shapes, repetitions, main elements, and striking lines. I characterize the landscape by its physical line of forces and by the forces that I feel. I try to sequence zones by period, by dynamism of landscape, and by vegetation. I also make pictures (as on a desk pad and to frame the space). I think about the surrounding space through its shape and the raw materials available, and I think about the way that it can be used as a receptacle for construction and installation: progress can come by removing or by adding materials. Regarding the site itself (the history and memory of the place), its topography, global shape, and even the small meaningful elements are all of importance. I keep an eye out for all kinds of raw materials that are usable. The site’s history and shape are fundamental for the development of an installation; depending on whether it is a village, a quarry, or a cemetery… the installation will be quite different. The place itself is perceived as a base, a repository to ideas, an analogy for raw materials. The shapes, whether obvious or subtle, are always the base for making connections and linking ideas.

**NORCIA**: Why did you stick mainly to the photographic medium?

**JASMIN**: My general work was on the idea of the grid. I wanted to look at the landscape and the village through different filters or grids. This does not help me see the landscape more clearly. In fact, the opposite is true. For me the process works as if it creates an archaeological filter: things are far in time and understanding. I used two grids, one on each side of the camera lens. The first grid was the back viewing-screen of my large format camera; the second grid was a larger metallic grid that I placed between the camera and the object being viewed. If some grid system was already in the view (e.g., telephone wires above houses or the horizontal lines of terraces themselves), then I did not use this second grid. A convergence comes into play, an analogy between the grid and the frame, as between the archaeological grid and the one of the back of the large format camera. On top of this is the recognition that photography is the most commonly used medium for the archaeologist, especially since digital cameras allow us to record everything on a daily basis. Pictures are easy to take (even if they are not of good quality) and they are primarily employed on archaeological sites and for landscape representation.

When I discovered archaeology in the 1990s, there was still the analog camera system in use on excavations... and the moment of taking the photographs was a very important one; everyone stopped working or looked towards the director of the excavations. In some ways it was
a ritual arrest of the time of the present
in order to record the time of the past
that was present in front of us. In some
cases we could even say that excavations
is oriented in order to provide a good
final picture, one that you can publish.
If you don’t have a picture of an impor-
tant structure you are talking about,
and can not show even one picture to
your colleagues, then it is almost as if the
structure didn’t exist. If you cannot show
the site, cannot share your data...then
your argumentation cannot be proven.
The documentational aspect that relies on
the recording reality of the photograph is
fundamental to archaeology. Though this
is the very basic use of the photograph in
archaeology, photography’s role is essen-
tial. Running beneath this is the idea that
the “earth does not lie”, and this is a point
that must be illustrated by the provision
of visual proof.

**Norcia:** Isn’t your approach an archaeo-
logical one? To photograph the site, the
landscape, to intervene into it by remo-
ving a layer of earth, and then to stamp it?

**Jasmin:** No... and yes also! First, I can say
that I no longer look at archaeological
sites in the same way as I did before,
when I was an archaeologist. Creation
has transformed my way of looking at
landscape, at sites, and at things in gene-
ral. The question of the glance is essential
in art of course; but it is also the case
in archaeology. It is for this reason that
I wanted to play with the idea of grid,
glance, view, and frame. And yes, I still keep an archaeological
eye: my look toward archaeological
structures, visible or partially covered, is
still the same. When looking at a land-
scape, I’m enquiring, tracking details
that could give me information about
elements possibly buried in the earth or
partially visible. Mentally, I am adding
what is missing. On the other hand, my
alertness, my availability of spirit, my
opening to visual or formal analogy is
larger. I feel freer to imagine, to project,
to connect, from many elements that
could also be archaeological. I allow my-
self any connections of the site with the
landscape, its raw materials, shapes, and
times: past and present.

**Norcia:** What separates the archaeo-
logist from the artist? Does not the
archaeologist also of necessity have a
sharp eye? Can we speak of an imagina-
tive quality among archaeologists? If so,
why?

**Jasmin:** Yes, clearly archaeologists are
trained to develop sharp eyes. Years are
spent learning what to see and how to
look at place, site, and landscape. These
eyes will perceive and interpret tiny
details that very few people even pay
attention to, or even see. Archaeologists
are trained to keep an objective percep-
tion of places. They have a quantitative
perception, not a qualitative one. They
record measurements, orientation,
size of a site, of a house, of a stone. No
affect, no connection will be allowed with
something that does not look the same, in
size, material, or shape. In some way, the
archaeological way of looking at things
is very restricted, but this is also its
strength. It is the acute glance in its own
small world.

**Norcia:** The grid is structuring the
on-site work and this book. What does it
represent in your imagination and in ar-
chaeology? Is there any influence by your
professional formation on your way to
apprehend the environment, the world?

**Jasmin:** It is a structuring mode of the
world and of thought. The grid can be
connected to the idea of the maze. There
is a repetitive aspect that makes me think
of cellular automation, a process that fas-
cinates me. The grid is also a very organic
process, natural in some way. The grid
is also about frame and window, both
connected to photography or to archaeo-
logical excavation squares. It opens up
perspective and changes scale. The grid
is indeed often associated with the idea
of scale, and so to the idea of “mise en
abîme” (placing into infinity). I have the
feeling it is also present in the way that
the brain works or how it is organized.

**Norcia:** Can you explain the monu-
mental inscription that you cut into the
archaeological tell: what did it say?
**Jasmin:** To raise interrogation. A series of ten digits nowadays recall a mobile phone number... I wanted these numbers to play with a trivial notion.

- There is also the idea that the local can become universal: digits are universally recognized but can also express a universal location, with the UTM coordinates or latitude and longitude for example.
- It is also a work on landscape representation.
- Finally it is a way to mark or brand the tell, as with a tattoo.

**Norcia:** Your present work is rather conceptual. How do you explain this? Why this orientation?

**Jasmin:** My work was more theoretical, more archaeological and experimental than for other installations. The work protocol was on landscape transformation. This work is a way to rationalize the landscape, to dig into the image. The distance maintained is very archaeological: in the space itself, in its representation. The archaeologist on the site starts to elaborate the history of the place from visible unearthed structures to project new ones, at first mentally, then through maps, plans, and sections, and finally by the way of publication. The page of a book (as a grid) is made of words. Words bring together what will develop images.

**Norcia:** Your on-site intervention is completed and made precise by drawings that you did when you went back to France. Did you plan them while you were working in Romania in July 2010, or did they happen later? How do they appeal to you?

**Jasmin:** I thought it to make some drawings during my time in Romania: plans and sections, but I did not have enough time and distance to draw them. They appeal to me because they synthesized, extended, and deepened my perception of the place. Also they add one layer of representation to the other and they possess their own logic and reasoning.

**Norcia:** What did these drawings suggest? Are they supplementary information or, in the opposite sense, are they purely fictional?

**Jasmin:** These drawings contain real scientific data and imaginary and fictional ones. The strong interpretative potential of these drawings is for me the most interesting and important aspect. They are images functioning as doors. Their potential would be to open onto other level of meaning or perception. They are also in dialogue with the words and pictures.

**Norcia:** Is the present installation different from the others?

**Jasmin:** This installation is different because of the intentional archaeological prejudice. There is the idea of dialogue around landscape transformation. Every installation is different in several ways, though still is present the desire to develop something that is firmly connected to each site.

**Norcia:** How do you connect this installation to your other work, especially your other on-site installations? What does archaeology bring to your work on a global scale and in this place particularly?

**Jasmin:** Recently, I made several other on-site installations: near Paris in 2007, in Jerusalem in 2010, and in an apartment in Paris in 2009. These interventions relied on short-term stays, usually one or two weeks, with work on archaeological sites that were under excavation while I made the installation.

The first example was on the site of a future hospital in a suburb near Paris. I developed the idea of a “dig operation” (with the meaning of excavation and surgery). So the earth was considered...
specific installation provoked modern underground imaginary made in caves, quarries, old tombs, and shelters. The influence of archeology on this work is very significant: the idea at the start of this installation lies in the Bronze Age period of the Israel-Palestine region. Small figurines of gods were excavated at several archeological sites. These gods were represented by an animal (for example, a bull representing the canaanite storm god Ba’al) contained in a jar in which a small window had been cut: this small “house” was a model of the god’s temple. Offerings were usually made to these small representations.

In Paris, another recent installation was built in an apartment. Despite this setting, it was an on-site installation staging an “excavation”. The work was about the previous inhabitant of the apartment: a well-known French art historian and philosopher, Georges Didi-Huberman - and about a fascinating book called “Devant le temps” (In Front of Time) that he wrote in his apartment. I was working at night in this empty apartment after the move. Videos were projected on walls that represented bodies on bookshelves as archaeological loculi, words draw from his book, an “excavation” revealed daily life objects: a book, a mask, a mirror...
**Norcia:** Looking at one of your pictures, the one showing the archaeological tell or mound through a grid surrounded by thick dark edges, reminds me of the work “Etants donnés” (1946-1966) of Marcel Duchamp. Do you see any parallel between your picture and the Duchamp installation?

**Jasmin:** As far as I can recall, I didn’t know this work of Marcel Duchamp when I did my picture, even though I consider him a great artist.

After this interview and because of this last question, I became very intrigued by Duchamp’s “Etant donnés”. It is a strange and fascinating work. So I decided to revisit his installation and to produce another picture, using the back viewing-screen of my large format camera which would behave as a new layer of representation...

**Norcia:** What are your future projects?

**Jasmin:** I am editing “Archaeology”, a performance that I recently made in an abandoned railway station in Paris. It is about excavating personal memories and tattoos. The performance is a way to confront and develop a dialogue between visual memories inscribed by ink on the body, the sensory memory (sometimes painful) connected to their making, and finally the intimate non-visible memories in our brain. All these are connected by an archaeological process that brings them back to the light...

It brings together visual, material and sensory memories on the body.

**Norcia:** Usually, you come up with very different techniques (photography, video, installation, sculpture). How do you position yourself among these?

**Jasmin:** The techniques follow from the confrontation with the site, from the message I want to deliver. Depending of the technique, I use analogy to develop different types of images, or types of atmospheres.
we need to reinvest the missing object… What about the objects the archaeologist is dealing with? Not “What do we want from the objects?”, but “What do the objects we look at want from us?” (from Zizek Slavoj). In the present situation, what do the objects from the past, excavated from the earth, want from us? Just a recollection of memory? Let the mundane speak and express itself. Did these objects want a second life in our present?… being exhibited, published or sold? Both the archaeologist and the artist wants to animate these objects, and through them to tell stories. The archaeologist apprehends time as horizontal layered plans. But the dynamism and the effect of time are more surely rendered by the artist. When the archaeologist has to express his ideas, he thinks by plates and A4 illustrations for publication and to spread his views, hypothesis, historical conclusions. Working on a table, he is used to expose his fragments of sherds, or any other broken materials, to make connections between them, to reassemble the fragmented into the united as one “new” object. Below that is the idea or feeling that “truth” is embodied into unity. How to summon the depth, the thickness of time and of the earth? It seems the archaeologist is, in the course of his practice, in the resolution of an enigma he is not aware of.
THE PERVASIVE PRESENCE OF THE HOLLOW HILL

This booklet is the encounter of an archaeologist’s camera, an artist’s glance and a historical tell, the shape of which recalls a skull.

Seen as a hollow-hill, the archaeological tell has strong visionary and imaginative potential: from an empty inside world to a hill grave. As an unexcavated place, the tell appears as a small sacred place, separated on its summit by a fence. The empty hidden mound appears as if it were surrounded by the daily life of the inhabitants. The installation has been sensitive to this peculiar geographic and symbolic organization; it emerges as three circles. The first corresponds to the archaeological tell; it is the place of the past and of the dead. The second is an empty space occupied during the day by herding animals. The third fits with the village’s houses and their inhabitants.

FRAMING MĂGURA

The meaning of Măgura as “tell” or mound is also of importance. The tell is itself telling a story and is about history, as the history of human sedentary time. It contains bones, skulls, and other material culture and memories. These are different contents that can be filled with bodies and images.

The camera is a fundamental item of the archaeologist during his field activity... fixing images to gather memories. These collected images are also the support of potentially significant details, that the archaeologist, or the artist, will use later.

A LANDSCAPE WITHOUT A FACE

From the perspective of the archaeologist and of the artist, it is meaningful to consider the landscape as the earth’s body. The landscape is made of flesh and
bones, of outlines and waves, of belly and cavity. It becomes a matter of desire and projection, where topographical structures are related and symbolic places. Understood in this way, the landscape/body becomes the scene of a dialogue between itself being observed and an active viewer who considers the landscape in order to represent it.

“NO FACE”
Archaeologists are not recovering flesh—just bones... So peoples of the past for the archaeologists usually have no faces. Skulls and skeletons are their daily basis. The discovery of a face is very unusual, most often representations (sculptures, paintings) that then relate to the realm of art history, more than archeology. The harsh fragmented material culture founded by archeologists will recall landscape’s scattered stones and ridges. We could venture that for the archaeologist the landscape would be a body without a face... down into the earth lies the future memories of the archaeologist. And his brain and roots are drawing their sources into the ground. The ultimate invisible landscape attached to the archaeological tell, would be to perceive it as an earth’s womb, regenerating from death to truth and birth.

“ETANT DONNÉS” REVISITED
One of the most relevant examples of excavating an image is the mise en scène created by Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) in the last work of his life: “Etant Donné: 1° la Chute d’Eau/2° le Gaz d’Éclairage” (1946-1966), an installation preserved and exhibited at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/180476.html). This landscape/photographic perception casts light on the Măgura installation and
the present work.
Duchamp stages a visual system about display, about construction of the glance through a window, about spatial organization and management, and about channeling and the regulation of the gaze. Duchamp’s work is also about the multiplicity of the point of observation: someone looking at a representation of a landscape; a body/corps being observed; or the desire of looking at/perceiving/catching/discovering. All these words resonate with precision in the vocabulary of field archaeology and in the archaeologist’s mind.

In Duchamp’s “Étant donnés”, the installation that is perceived seen as one image, is in fact made of several vertical layers or screens: at least four (in fact five if you add the brain/eyes of the viewer). Through the layers or screens, the viewer produces one image that, in reality, is made of separate heterogeneous layers. This work is about the construction of an image specially made for a human brain. In this sense, excavating an image is about looking at a scene in the way that an archaeologist looks at a landscape or an excavation; layers are mixed with heterogeneous time-periods. It is about how we analyze and organize the structure of space, and how we represent it in our brain.

This mental process of analyzing, scaling, and sorting visual layers of time allows us, ultimately, to experience the essence of time. What is at stake here for the archaeologist is the mental structuring of space and time. Feeling the relativity of both, the flow of centuries and of mastering them… these processes raise up the archaeologist and elevate human experience.
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