

Time Capsule

Jimmie Durham

Gilad Efrat

Carlos Garaicoa

Silvia Gruner

John Kindness

John Leños

Orlan

Nadín Ospina

Shuli Sadè

Dina Shenhav

Dimitris Tsoublekas

David Wakstein

ART IN GENERAL

Introduction and Acknowledgments

It was about two years ago that independent curator Tami Katz-Freiman, who recently returned to Israel after living and working in Miami, proposed the exhibition *Time Capsule* as a curatorial project to Art in General's Open Submissions. We selected the proposal during a time that was relatively peaceful compared to the current state of political affairs. The direction of global politics today makes the focus of archaeological inquiry and national identity in many ways more resonant. Yet, the themes addressed by this exhibition transcend the current climate of political strife.

In *Time Capsule*, Tami Katz-Freiman addresses the concept of archaeology, a practice saddled by issues of identity, property, and heritage. Many of the artists in the exhibition sharply satirize the treatment of archaeology as a discipline and study, but behind the lightness of their mockery lies a harsh and inevitable critique of the passage from object to artifact.

By exploring the reclassification of objects within the space of the gallery, this exhibition further reflects upon the contemporary dialogue within and between museums. As reported in a December 11, 2002 article in the *New York Times* ("U.K. Museum Takes Stand on Disputed Art"), eighteen museums joined to protest the return of statues taken from the Parthenon and brought to the British Museum two centuries ago. Now deemed "essential to the museums that house them," these remnants have become imbued with a new meaning beyond their archaeo-historic significance.

It is this novel significance and function of objects deemed artifacts that *Time Capsule* aims to shed light on. Once placed within a gallery or museum, objects take on a symbolism that is far more complex than their original function. The works included in *Time Capsule* speak, individually and in relation to one another, to this assignment of history and its contemporary revisions.

First and foremost, I would like to thank Tami Katz-Freiman for her willingness to expand this research topic and for making herself available for many exchanges and discussions that added immensely to the curatorial process. I would like to thank the artists: Jimmie Durham (Germany); Gilad Efrat (Israel); Carlos Garaicoa (Cuba); Silvia Gruner (Mexico); John Kindness (Ireland); John Leaños (CA); Orlan (France); Nadín Ospina (Colombia); Shuli Sadé (NYC); Dina Shenhav (Israel); Dimitris Tsoubekas (Greece); and David Wakstein (Israel). Their insight into archaeological discovery and preservation is greatly necessary. Additionally, I would like to thank Ofra Ben Yaacov, Debbie Berman, Renée Schreiber, and former Consul for Cultural Affairs Rafi Gamzou, all of the Consulate General of Israel; the New York-Israel Cultural Cooperation Commission; and Art in General's Board of Directors and staff for their support with this ambitious project. In particular, I would like to thank Naomi Urabe, Curator/Programs Manager; Jeanine Oleson, Programs Coordinator; Jeremy Jones, Preparator; and, lastly, Jennifer Gootman, Communication Coordinator, who had the responsibility of overseeing this publication.

Holly Block

Executive Director



"The 'past-present' is part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living."

Homi Bhabha, "Beyond the Pale: Art in the Age of Multicultural Translation," *Kunst & Museum Journal* 5, no. 4, 1994, p. 20

Time Capsule: Archaeology in Contemporary Art

Tami Katz-Freiman

Don't Fuck with the Past, You Might Get Pregnant is the name given by Mexican artist Silvia Gruner to a series of works where she is seen flirtatiously fumbling an object resembling a ritual figurine or an ancient phallus. Interaction between a contemporary artist and his/her past, excessive rummaging in the aura of history, can get you in trouble, she says, and you may find yourself pregnant against your will. In the same amused tone, one may say that all the artists participating in *Time Capsule* have, to a greater or lesser extent, fucked with their past, and consequently, they are all pregnant; they all carry the fruits of that meddling.

A dialogue with the 'glory' of the past, with the heavy load of history, has always been an integral part of the artistic practice. Many generations of artists have confronted their (national) collective pasts, whether through images and myths derived from history, or through metaphors pertaining to time, memory, and perpetuation.

Why Archaeology?

The artists participating in *Time Capsule* have chosen to address the past through archaeology—the scientific study of bygone human culture and behavior and a discipline determined by an understanding of history. Unlike earlier artistic trends that reveled in the past as part of a nostalgic yearning for lost times and unlike romantic artists who lent an ambience and patina of ancient majesty to their depictions of the past, the artists participating in *Time Capsule* employ archaeology as a strategy. They use it as a tool for a disillusioned and critical scrutiny of the past, and, at times, as a punching bag on which to thrust social, political, and cultural criticism pertaining to the present. Archaeology allows these artists to perceive the past as a multi-layered mass, a stratified text which bears the latent text of the present.

The artists in *Time Capsule* view archaeology as a key image, a fundamental metaphor, and a conceptual axis around which their work evolves. Some of them allude to either

real or made-up archaeological sites; others employ archaeological findings, fragments that are presented as ready-mades (whether real or fabricated). In any event, the discipline of archaeology enables them to move freely along the temporal axis—from a reflexive gaze at an ancient past marked by the aura of its antiquity to preoccupation with current themes such as fetishism, tourism, colonialism, consumerism, urbanism, globalization, appropriation, recycling, and nationalism. It is the tension between identification with archetypes and myths of a glorified past and subversive, ironic, and critical attitudes founded on the rift between past, present, and future that distinguishes these artists' work.

Archaeology as a Metaphor

According to its dictionary definition, the goal of archaeology as a science and a methodology is to trace, study, and preserve the history of mankind. The field attempts to account for sequence and transformations, similarities and differences between human cultures, based on physical material. Ever since its formal advent in the nineteenth century, spurred by the discovery of the Roman cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum, the discipline has been divided into specialized sub-categories. The meaning of the term "archaeology" has since greatly deviated from the practical scientific function it embodies.

Freud exhibited a metaphorical use of archaeology in the beginning of the twentieth century when applying it to a reflection of the strata of the human psyche. His predilection for Bronze Age archaeology, his passion for collecting antiquities, and the elaboration of his psychoanalytical technique led him to his famous analogy between the practice of the psychoanalyst, who digs and uncovers strata of the unconscious buried within the human psyche, to that of the archaeologist.

In his 1969 book, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, French philosopher Michel Foucault formulated a metaphorical analogy that is well known in contemporary culture.

Alongside metaphors of space: site, territory, field, displacement, horizon, and archipelago, Foucault made metaphorical use of the archaeologist's practice as part of his philosophical preoccupation with layers of knowledge in various disciplines, strata that do not necessarily maintain a linear continuum. Thus, diggings, excavations, and layers have become pivotal concepts in the historical discussion that allows forward and backward time travel.

Based on Freud's metaphor, and from the standpoint of a postmodern understanding of narrative, truth, and history, art critic Donald Kuspit coined the term "archaeologism," likening post-modernism itself to an excavation. Kuspit regards archaeologism as a method of establishing meaning from the discursive and fragmented depths of the unconscious, identifying the preoccupation with archaeology in the late 1980s as a major aspect of post-modern artistic practice.

The Burden of History and the Post-Colonial Position

While the Foucaultean interpretation provides a necessary base for understanding archaeology as cultural metaphor, *Time Capsule* strives to focus the discussion of archaeology on its more distinctive and concrete meanings—specific sites and artifacts. Most of the artists participating in the show hail from countries whose histories have had clear repercussions on life in the present. Artists who reside in countries such as Greece, Mexico, Colombia, and Israel are accustomed to the feeling that there are uncovered strata, of history buried under your feet everywhere you tread.¹ For these artists, archaeology itself is a tool that embeds a manipulative potential by its very ability to constitute a sequence or indicate a historical break.

Other disciplines that touch upon archaeology, such as ethnography and museology, are also invoked as a strategy for self-reflection from a post-colonial perspective. Mexican-American **John Leños**, Colombian **Nadín Ospina**, and Native American **Jimmie Durham** refer in their work to the interpretation given to archaeological finds and their confinement within glass showcases in museums, where they are condemned to eternal life outside of time and place. These artists critically observe the theoretical

methods used to study non-western societies under a scientific guise. In their works, they propose another model of historiography formulated as a parasite or as an alternative to the one and only hegemonic narrative.

Archaeology, like ethnography, is a discipline made possible by nineteenth-century colonialism, whereby the ancient past is perceived as belonging to "mankind" rather than to specific nations. Under this pretext, many treasures and assets throughout the world have been "rescued" from places considered underdeveloped countries, and put for "safekeeping" in the enlightened hands of western institutions of preservation. That ownership was until recently perceived as a natural, self-evident right and these artifacts were denied the ability to be comprehended within their authentic cultural context. Greek artist **Dimitris Tsoublekas** and Colombian **Nadín Ospina** address this very issue in their work.

Archaeological Reclamation

The public debate over Greece's efforts to repatriate the original marble friezes—better known as the Elgin Marbles after Lord Elgin removed them from the Parthenon and transferred them to the British Museum in 1816—is widely known. **Dimitris Tsoublekas's** photographs of the Parthenon—in which the grand archaeological vestige is digitally cloned with urban bourgeois images such as synthetic turf, elegant granite, parking lots, and escalators—comments ad absurdum on the fact that the site itself contains only imitations of the friezes. The Greek struggle has become a symbol and a test case for the moral and constitutional issue pertaining to the question of ownership of cultural assets and their repatriation that extends to other key exhibits similarly obtained from various countries. Prominent museums in Europe—the British Museum, the Louvre, and the Berlin Municipal Museum—are replete with archaeological artifacts from Asia, Africa, and Oceania, obtained when these European countries ruled over those regions.

Large museums in the United States, laden with cultural treasures from South America, as well as Indian artifacts and ritual objects that have flooded them in recent years,

¹ *Time Capsule* is a mere porthole exposing the scores of issues and problems triggered by archaeological discoveries throughout the world. It spans but an inkling of the diverse material found in this field. Artists from Italy, Egypt, and the Far East would have undoubtedly contributed a great deal to understanding the problems involved in archaeology from a current post-colonial point of view.



now face public criticism concerning similar claims. The American Law of Antiquities was enacted in 1906, declaring the rescue of antiquities as a prerequisite for any construction work. The urban boom in the Southwest exposed many layers of cultural findings. Mexican-American **John Leñños's** fictitious historical narrative of Chicanos in the region of Aztlán, and Native American **Jimmie Durham's** *Pocahontas' Underwear* reflect upon these issues of appropriation and interpretation.

In Latin America as well, many contemporary artists delve into archaeological themes. The popular folkloristic value, alongside the poetic, conceptual, and empiric power inherent in objects that were lost and recovered in archaeological excavations has incited the imagination of many artists. Colombian **Nadín Ospina**, who transforms pre-Columbian ritual objects into populist American icons, sheds a grotesque light on the industry of fakes and forgeries associated with pre-Columbian archaeology. Mexican artist **Silvia Gruner** undermines the sacred nature of ritual figurines, shattering earthenware with iconoclastic grace, thus reinforcing our fetishist approach towards these artifacts.

Archaeology and Politics

In Israel archaeology is a major ingredient in the political realm.² Informed by national, ideological, and theological interests, archaeology has a central place in the public debate. Archaeology has been perceived as central to Zionism in searching for and constituting a collective national identity, and Zionist mythology harnesses the biblical past for the sake of the present and future. The findings of archaeological excavations have been studied according to their consistency with biblical text. In recent years, as part of the tendency of de-mythification that characterizes post-Zionism, the voices of the “new archaeologists” are questioning the historical value of the

biblical stories that they perceive as myths meant to fabricate an impressive story of creation for the Jewish people.³

Thus, archaeology in Israel is no longer considered a romantic-exploratory activity in the service of national revival, but rather a poignant parable about the turbulent present. The attitude of contemporary Israeli artists towards their roots and history is intricate and politically charged. Their bond with the archaeology of their region cannot be confined to the restoration or reconstruction of the past. Rather, it serves as a means for articulation, often touched by irony and pessimism, of their own visions of the present and the future.

Dina Shenhav and **David Wakstein** embed images originating from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through the ancient technique of mosaic, thus indicating the relevance of archaeology to the current context. **Gilad Efrat** offers another option for traveling forward and backward in time by juxtaposing paintings depicting ancient archaeological sites in the land of Israel, taken from a bird's-eye view, with paintings portraying the ruins of Dresden following its bombing in World War II.

Authenticity and the Archaeology of the Future

Beyond the aforementioned critical and ironic aspects, the artists in *Time Capsule* are also fascinated with the creation of a cultural-historic context, the storytelling, and the invention of meaning for material culture that is involved in the discipline and practice of archaeology. Irish **John Kindness** expresses his enchantment with classical images by depicting a scene from the Hercules stories as an analogy for the political conflict in Ireland and the struggle against terror. The artists in the exhibition correspond with their predecessors, while, at the same time, toying with the option of fiction and forgery, thus somewhat disrupting the aura attached to the original artifacts. The subjectivity involved

² In January 2002, a sum of 25 million NIS was allotted for the resumption of the archaeological excavations in the Old City compound in Jerusalem, an area purchased by the State of Israel from the White Russian Church. This was part of a policy of altering the demographic balance between Jews and Arabs. Through this act, the right-wing Minister of Tourism, Benny Elon, wanted to display a continuum of Jewish presence throughout the Old City of Jerusalem—yet another means to strengthen Israeli autonomy in parts of the city that the Barak government had been willing to hand over to Palestinian autonomy. In the controversy created around these excavations, Arab MK Taleb A-Sana asserted: “The Arabs are the ones who live here, not the Jews. How long have you been here? 3000 years? We have been living here long before Abraham, and even archaeology won't help you. The Jebusites and Canaanites were here 5000 years ago. You are the invaders, not the Arabs.” (Nadav Shargai, “Archaeology is the Continuation of Politics,” *Haaretz*, January 8, 2002.)

³ In 1999, Professor Ze'ev Herzog, an archaeologist, published his controversial article, “Archaeologists Agree—The Bible Era Never Existed,” where he systematically rejected, based on the lack of archaeological evidence, the biblical description of the creation of the Jewish people. (Ze'ev Herzog, “Deconstructing the Walls of Jericho: Archaeologists Agree—The Bible Era Never Existed,” *Haaretz*, Weekend Supplement, October 29, 1999.)

in interpreting and assigning authenticity has prompted some of the artists to invent perfectly fictive archaeological sites (**John Leños, Shuli Sadè**) and to create a new identity by fabricating artifacts that would serve their artistic intentions (**Nadín Ospina, Jimmie Durham, Silvia Gruner**).

The question of authenticity is at the very heart and core of the practice of archaeological deciphering. The recently publicized identification of the alleged ossuary of Jesus's brother, James, caused a storm in international archaeological circles due to reservations regarding the validity of this identification. This incident sheds light on the immense power of archaeology and its manipulation in the context of faith, religion, economy, and politics.

What is to become of the objects exhibited in *Time Capsule* when they are uncovered under ruins in two thousand years? Will future researchers think that **Orlan's** stone and flesh clones indeed existed in reality? Will **Nadín Ospina's** pre-Columbian sculptures of Bart Simpson and Mickey Mouse be read as twentieth-century ritual idols? Will the archaeologists of the future lend historical value to Pocahontas's underwear á la **Jimmie Durham**? What will become of archaeology in the virtual era?

Archaeology of the Present: Memory, Nostalgia, and Ruins

About a month after the collapse of the World Trade Center, an image of the removal of a gigantic skeleton of one of the buildings' facades starred in the media. The similarity to the silhouette of the Roman Coliseum was chilling. Many wondered where this giant vestige would be transferred and what was to become of America's ruins. The public debate about the nature of the World Trade Center memorial evoked questions pertaining to the memory of the past and the swaying impact of the ruins. Could Ground Zero be considered an archaeological site?

Even though *Time Capsule* is not explicitly concerned with memory and perpetuation, these discursive fields are embodied in the very notion of archaeology. The perception of ruins as materials of the past, as a locus that conceals historical memory, as playing a role in the construction of national identity, and as a site of collective memory are points of departure for this project. Civilization's ruins

archive the past, only to be unearthed, rediscovered, and reexamined years later like a time capsule. Cuban artist **Carlos Garaicoa**, who presents today's crumbling Havana as an ancient archaeological site, embodies another time capsule in his photographs of ruins.

There is something demanding and mysterious about ruins. They stand silent like a riddle awaiting a solution, like a question awaiting reply. It is the meaning that "artifacts" are imbued with that changes over time. The significance attributed to these objects gives them historical value and makes them the bearers of formative messages for modern times. It is this very meaning that the artists participating in *Time Capsule* strive to excavate and explore.

When the future is touched by horror, the past looks better than ever...

Tami Katz-Freiman is an independent curator, art historian, and art critic based in Tel Aviv, Israel. From 1979 to 1989, she held several positions at the Tel Aviv Museum, including curator. After working as an independent curator in Miami, FL (1994-1999), she moved back to Israel, where she continues to curate and teach. She has written articles, essays, and reviews for *Studio Art Magazine*, *ARTnews*, and *Art Papers*. Katz-Freiman has curated exhibitions internationally including *LandEscapes: A Multi-Site Exhibition of Contemporary Israeli Art* which traveled to Drexel University, Moore College of Art and Design, and The Gershman Y (all in Philadelphia, PA, 2002) and will travel to Long Beach University Art Museum, Long Beach, CA in fall 2003; *Havana Nagila: Cuba-Israel Dialogue* (the first Cuban-Israeli cultural exchange project), for three major Tel Aviv galleries and the Tel Aviv Artists' Studios Gallery (2000); *Mount Miami: American Artists in Tel Aviv*, Tel Aviv Artists' Studios Gallery (2000); *Phantoms: Tsibi Geva and Jose Bedia*, Art Focus, Jerusalem (1999); and *Desert Cliché: Israel Now—Local Images*, co-curated by Amy Cappellazzo, which traveled to Bass Museum of Art, Miami Beach, FL (1997); the Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York University, New York, NY (1997); Nexus Contemporary Art Center, Atlanta, GA (1998); and the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, CA (1998). Katz-Freiman currently teaches at Camera Obscura School of Photography and Filmmaking in Tel Aviv.

