RESEARCH ARTICLE

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From Myth-Work to Grief Work: Encountering and Re-Versioning the Folkton Drums

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Abstract

Is there a sense in which archaeological artefacts can be activated within the present, perhaps even to call forth different futures? This article involves a personal account – alongside archaeological analysis (and some theoretical speculation) – of an encounter with the Folkton Drums and how a kind of "re-versioning" of them in and for the present allows other affects and meanings to foreground themselves. At stake here especially is a relationship to grief, but also the way in which landscape and community are linked to different devices – such as the drums – both in the past but also in our contemporary moment too. The essay moves between an academic/scholarly mode and a more auto style of writing – the rationale here being that the work of the drums is itself of an intimate and personal character and thus, to a certain extent, calls for a different kind of engagement and writing that is appropriate to this work.

Keywords: care of the dead, Folkton Drums, grief work, landscape, magical mode, myth-work, re-versioning, therapeutic aesthetics

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Introduction

Is there a sense in which archaeological artefacts can be activated within the present, perhaps even to call forth different futures? The following essay involves a personal account – alongside archaeological analysis (and some theoretical speculation) – of an encounter with the Folkton Drums and how a kind of "re-versioning" of them in and for the present might allow other affects and meanings to foreground themselves. At stake here especially is a relationship to grief, but also the way in which landscape and community are linked to different devices – such as the drums – both in the past but also in our contemporary moment too. The first half of what follows introduces the drums and my own relationship with them, alongside the re-versioning just mentioned. The second half uses this discussion as a platform to speculate on how archaeological objects might operate as possible triggers/props for a therapeutic aesthetics and, indeed, a kind of time-travel. The essay moves between an academic/scholarly mode and a more auto style of writing – the rationale here being that the work of the drums is itself of an intimate and personal character and thus, to a certain extent, calls for a different kind of engagement and writing that is appropriate to this work.[1]

Unearthing the Drums

The Folkton Drums are three small chalk artefacts found in the late nineteenth century in a Neolithic child's burial near the village of Folkton in North Yorkshire (Figure 1). They were placed next to the body of the dead child – presumably an individual of high status in that culture – with the smallest of the drums at the head and the other two at waist and hips. They are cylindrical objects – "drum" describes their shape rather than their function – with very slightly concaved tops and a smaller domed protrusion or boss, giving them the appearance of lidded vessels. There are various carved markings on the surfaces of the three drums: concentric circles or a star/cross design on the tops and different chevron and lozenge markings around the sides. Some of these markings resonate with similar markings found on Neolithic "Grooved ware" and in tomb passageways, which has allowed an approximate dating of the drums – recently updated with carbon dating from a similar burial with another drum (which I will get to in a moment) – to *ca.* 3000 BC (so around the same time as the building of Stonehenge). However, the most remarkable thing about the Folkton Drums are other abstract markings on what must be their front areas: lines and dots suggestive of eyebrows and eyes, and a diamond or lozenge shape that could be a mouth. This kind of object, with its suggestion of a face – if that's what the marks demarcate[2] – is nearly unknown in prehistoric Britain,

1. There are precedents for this turn to an auto style of writing within archaeology (and, especially, contemporary archaeology). A good example is Hein B. Bjerck's essay "My Father's Things" (Bjerck 2014). As well as disclosure and the use of personal photos and the first-person pronoun in this account of the scene of the essay's title, this work is also a very moving account of how we might come into relation with grief and, following this, the afterlife of things – and especially their affective resonances (or how they can all of a sudden summon a past). These are all themes which my own essay turns to.
2. There have been suggestions that the eyebrow markings are in fact birds, or that they represent male sexual organs, with the diamond mouth representing the vulva. For myself – and this could be

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FIGURE 1. The Folkton Drums (© The Trustees of the British Museum, London)

FIGURE 2. The Burton Agnes Drum ("The World of Stonehenge" exhibition at the British Museum, London, 2022).

although there are examples of contemporaneous pots that have been unearthed with similar faces from elsewhere in Europe (Wilkin 2022).

More recently, two further carved drums similar to the Folkton Drums have been found. One was discovered in 2015 alongside a small chalk ball and bone pin in a site at Burton Agnes in Yorkshire (so not so far from Folkton) (Figure 2). As with the Folkton

a modern projection – the idea that they are eyes and a face is more plausible (although I will briefly return to the idea of a different perspective – a "looking down" from above – in my coda).

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Drums, the decoration on the sides of this fourth drum is divided into four panels: two narrow, two wider and with the same – or similar – cross motif on top and chevron and lozenge designs on the sides, albeit in this case there are no eyes or eyebrows. The Burton Agnes Drum was also found in a grave, this time of three children of different ages, the youngest two holding or touching hands and the eldest child with arms around the other two. Carbon dating of material from this burial suggests an earlier date than was first thought for the Folkton Drums, again *ca.* 3000 BC. Three drums for one child, one drum for three children. The fifth drum was found earlier, in an excavated chalk pit in Lavant, West Sussex, in 1993 – so at a considerable distance from the other drums – but it has either fewer markings, or the markings have been worn away. Or perhaps this particular object was unfinished? At any rate, from shape and proportionate size it has been argued – and I will also return to this below – that the five drums constitute a series.

Vessels or Entities?

Seeing the Folkton Drums and reading the account of where and how they were found I have the intuitive sense that these objects are *for* the dead child they were buried alongside and, as such, that they are to do with grief. Is that the grief of the ancestors, or my own projected on to them? Can I be sure that there was sadness associated with this burial? After all, perhaps the burial, for those people way back in prehistory, involved something besides or beyond any grief.[3] Perhaps. But then, this is a child's grave, and a child has parents. One cannot but presume that the drums were placed into the grave by them, or by other family members at least. So, the drums have this sadness to them – or not just sadness, but a complex affective charge that involves sadness mixed up with other emotions, too. And then, alongside this – or as part of it – there is also the mystery of what the drums were for and, indeed, the potential meanings we might ascribe to them. Before anything else there is, then, this associative atmosphere around them that is to do with their look, and especially the representation of faces; the fact that there are three of them of different sizes; and, of course, the way they have been placed carefully in a child's grave. In terms of the last point there has clearly been a conscious intention to place the drums touching – or in very close proximity to – the child. So perhaps to keep them company – or look over and after them somehow – as they journey into the land of the dead? The complex affective/hermeneutic atmosphere that surrounds them is then to do with grief but also, it seems to me, care. The drums represent a care for the dead.

But then, there is still more to this knot of meaning and affect. For example, there is the fact that they were buried, but have now been unearthed by us – found in our landscape – as if they are an earth-terma (to borrow a term from another culture), hidden teachings or, at least, a kind of transmission to us from another time. They announce the absence of their maker and, indeed, the culture of those people (as well as of the child), but they also have this presence here and now. Or, put differently, they are part of that past, but are also part of our present moment and, once again, of the landscape that we move in and through. Indeed, they also do something to our sense of time, and thus also to our relationship to the past. They perform a kind of collapsing of the former

3. Even a sacrifice?

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that allows an intimacy with the latter. And then there is the question of what they are *for* us – I mean, as well as being residues of the past that have survived (or as part of that).

As others have suggested – and as I have mentioned above – the drums appear to be vessels, or representations of vessels (even funerary urns). Indeed, it is this moving between being what they are and what they represent that also constitutes their curious and compelling character. After all, they are vessels that cannot be opened (and if they could be opened what would be inside them?). The suggestion of faces on the Folkton Drums, though, also means they are like entities. And, of course, they are entities that are mute. Not just because they are themselves inert objects, but because it is not clear that they have mouths (or if the mouths are open). In any case, there is a sense that they are themselves beings, or representations of beings. And then there is the further fact that we are also entities that are vessels with an inside and an outside. The drums seem to gesture towards this understanding, as if they are a model of our own subjective set-up. This is also evidenced in the way the smaller drum – and the drum at Burton Agnes – were positioned within the grave by the head (the drums also being like heads to some extent). The period in prehistory from when the drums originate was the beginnings of the importance of moveable and, indeed, technical objects (or what the philosopher Gilbert Simondon [2011 (1958)] has called "technicity"). However, in relation to this (or as part of it), perhaps it was also the beginning of an understanding of an inside and an outside? An idea of the body, for example, as container for something immaterial. Perhaps also the sense of there being a subject as separate from – and different to – the object (however rudimentary that understanding might have been). For myself, the Folkton Drums seem to encapsulate or gesture towards this understanding – an understanding that somehow makes them both strange and alien but also profoundly human.

Devices

I have read in discussion threads online (so not in archaeological papers) that others have suggested the drums might be storytelling devices, or that the different markings might be prompts for a narrative.[4] As such, the drums would, perhaps, have been turned in the hands and interacted with in this way. This feels right: that the markings suggest a kind of interaction or reading – although I'm not sure the latter is exactly the appropriate word here. At any rate, it seems persuasive that the markings are not simply decorative but had significance (as evidenced also by the way in which similar markings have been

4. I am reminded here of Donna Haraway's comments on Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction", in which the idea of a container (rather than a weapon or other tool) becomes an important story-telling device:

> Ursula Le Guin taught me the carrier bag theory of storytelling and of naturalcultural history. Her theories, her stories, are capacious bags for collecting, carrying, and telling the stuff of living. "A leaf a gourd a shell a net a bag a sling a sack a bottle a pot a box a container. A holder. A recipient." So much of earth history has been told in the thrall of the fantasy of the first beautiful words and weapons, of the first beautiful weapons as words and vice versa. Tool, weapon, word: that is the word made flesh in the image of the sky god; that is the Anthropos. In a tragic story with only one real actor, one real world-maker, the hero, this is the Man-making tale of the hunter on a quest to kill and bring back the terrible bounty. This is the cutting, sharp, combative tale of action that defers the suffering of glutinous, earth-rotted passivity beyond bearing.
>
> (Haraway 2016, 39)

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found at other sites – including faint scratches on the base of the drums that resonate, for example, with markings found at Maeshowe chambered cairn in Orkney). Related to this – and perhaps also to the way they are in a child's grave – is the suggestion that the drums might have been pedagogical devices in some sense, which is to say they were for the children they were buried with also in life (I will return to this idea of the pedagogical device below). This would make sense in terms of the Burton Agnes Drum and the way it was buried with the small ball, which would seem also to be for a child (although, again, this could be projection). There have also been suggestions – a little more speculative – that the drums are somehow astronomical devices. This would tally with the way larger monuments from this time relate to solar and lunar events (and star constellations, too). And then there are also those equally compelling devices that have been found that are from a little later in prehistory than the drums; here, I'm thinking of the Nebra Sky Disk, a metal plate with various details affixed to it that clearly had some kind of function – representational but perhaps pedagogical or predictive too – connected to the sun, moon and stars and the changing seasons.

In an account of the Burton Agnes Drum, Neil Wilkin, curator of the relatively recent "The World of Stonehenge" exhibition at the British Museum (where the drum was first publicly displayed), suggests (Wilkin 2022) that the top features a possible solar or star representation, and that three drilled holes also on the top might represent the three children's burial or even three stages of life (there are also other markings on the top of the drum – curved lines in different stages of completeness – that gesture in this direction). But perhaps these holes also have some other function related to the status of this object as a device. Indeed, are the pin and ball that this drum was found with components of this device? Or are they simply other important – or precious – objects (precious because they belonged to the children, perhaps)? Once again, these objects seem to be *for* the dead children. Wilkin is especially eloquent on how the ball when held in the hand brings to mind that it was once held in a child's hand, and thus how – like other forms of material culture – it can, as I gestured to above, collapse time (again, feeling seems to be the method of time travel here). At any rate, as well as funerary objects or entities the drums have been seen as different kinds of devices in this sense.

Other recent interpretations of the drums have also suggested that they are devices, in this case measuring ones (Teather *et al.* 2019). The circumference of the different drums would appear to tally with a certain recognisable unit of measurement from that period of prehistory – what has become known as the "long foot". The drums – all of them, the Folkton three, the Burton Agnes and Lavant ones – can be positioned as part of a series of proportionate sizes in relation to this unit of measurement. It has been suggested, then, that the drums were portable measuring devices that would, for example, enable the accurate positioning of stones in a circle (a piece of cord could have been wrapped around the circumference to then work as a measuring technique). As this analysis suggests, there has sometimes been a presumption within archaeology that those aspects of more portable material culture – such as the drums – are separate from and more incidental to the larger monument complexes present in out landscape. However – and as the article from where this analysis is reported suggests – perhaps this is not the case, and there is, rather, a strong and as it were reciprocal relationship at

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work between objects and landscapes. It has also been suggested that chalk is not an ideal material from which to make these portable measuring devices (its relative softness means it wares down easily) and, as such, the drums might themselves be representations of what were originally wooden devices (that were, perhaps, also lidded vessels) which, of course, have not survived. This would mean, once again, that they are already representations of another kind of device.

Following some of my earlier comments (and to shift to a more speculative register), perhaps, more generally, we can understand the drums as devices for the dead? This would accord with recent interpretations of Stonehenge, for example, as being a monument to the ancestors because it is made of permanent material. In this interpretation, other monuments such as Woodhenge are seen as having been for the living (made as they are from what was living material). This is complicated, though, by the drums being made of chalk rather than stone, but certainly, there has been evidence found elsewhere that wood was the material of choice for boats, buckets, and the like. It would be strange if a utilitarian object were to be made from chalk (again, any cord wrapped repeatedly around the drum would rub out the markings). Or, put differently, the drums do not seem themselves to have been utilitarian objects (if there was indeed a difference between different kinds of objects in this sense). At any rate, in these different accounts of the drum as device there seems to be an intrinsic connection between object and landscape. In the aforementioned accounts of monument complexes there are, for example, suggestions about our ancestors ritually journeying from the region of the living to the region of the dead (literally walking the landscape). Perhaps the drums are also part of that journey? Or at least, they are perhaps kinds of a device that foregrounded the presence of the dead within the landscape of the living, as well as, perhaps, the presence of the living in the landscape of the dead.

Re-Versionings

I am certainly not the first person to have been drawn in by the drums or to have made the kind of observations and suggestions that appear especially in the first couple of sections of this essay. Many have been affected by the drums that are now on display in the British Museum. Once again, they have this complex meaning and affective charge – or, nor meaning exactly, but, again, a kind of cloud of associations around them. For myself, I was first introduced to the drums by my twin brother Tom, who gave me a box he had made for my fortieth birthday, inside of which was a black and white image of the largest of the three drums. That box with its image now sits on my desk. It keeps me company as I write this and has itself accrued various objects and images to it (Figure 3). I hadn't intended for this to happen or, indeed, reflected much on this process until Tom called my attention to it. The accrued objects and images are from my own childhood. A card with a figure and landscape that I was given by my parents for my thirteenth birthday. A photograph of me from roundabout the same age, by a standing stone. A crescent moon horse brass that in fact was in the box that Tom gave me, but that is also from that time – another kind of residue or reminder – from when we were both on the edge of adolescence (and, indeed, spending much of our time out and about in the landscape of the North Yorkshire moors where we were growing up).

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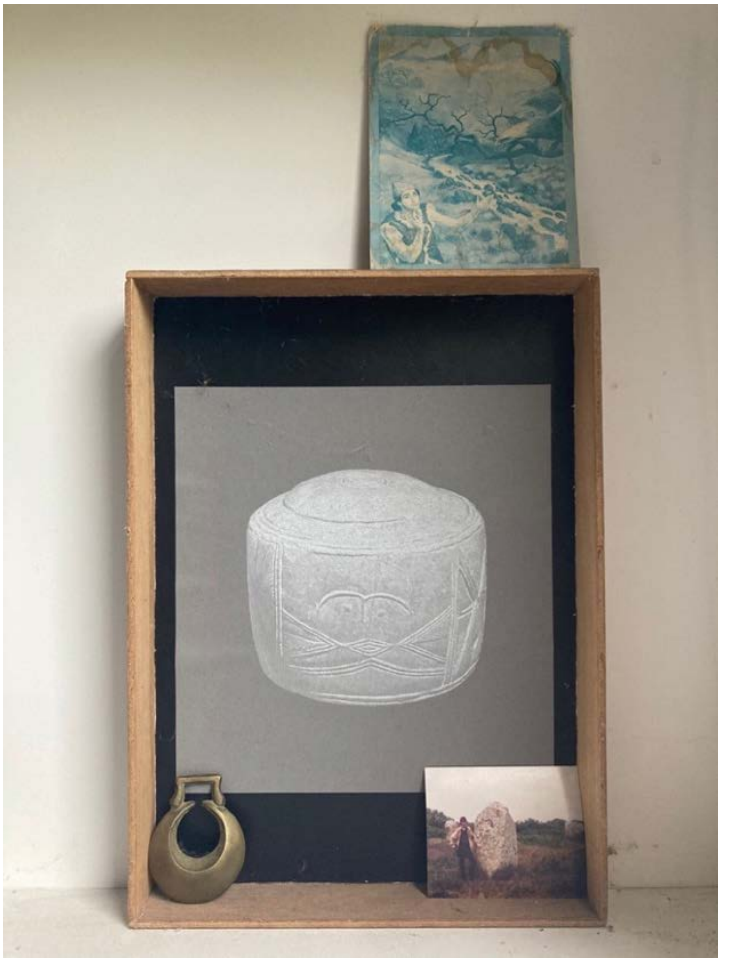

FIGURE 3. The Folkton Drum Box (and accrued objects) on my desk (author's photo).

Tom's own relationship with the drums precedes mine then and, indeed, has prompted various art works by him. This includes a screen-printed poster based on a drawing of the largest of the three drums, done in collaboration with the artist Anne-Marie Copestake and as part of the "Poster Club" collaboration (Figure 4) – an image I borrowed for the cover of my recent fiction book (O'Sullivan 2024a) – and a work by the artist group Neuschloss that Tom is part of.[5] The Neuschloss work – which incorporated the same image of the larger drum that I have, alongside a technical set-up with recorded field sound and speaker (Figure 5) – involved connecting the drum with institutions

5. The relationship of art and archaeology – or even more especially of contemporary art's turn to the ancient past as a kind of resource for making work – is extensive, and my essay attends to only one example of this relationship (Neuschloss and the Folkton Drums). For a more general overview, see Lucy R. Lippard's important work *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory* (1983). See also my essay on 'Archaeofictioning' (O'Sullivan 2024b, 127–138), which considers in more general terms how the past can be a resource for imagining and building other worlds, especially when this is related to (and activated in) more performance-based practices.

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and mental health (and especially the university "staff wellbeing centre" from where the recording was made and whose logics it attempted to reverse). In another recent essay I have suggested that this complex set-up involved a kind of "care of the imagination" that was itself an example of what I called "archaeofictioniong" (O'Sullivan 2024b, 127–138). Certainly it involved a turn to the past as resource in and for our contemporary moment. The Neuschloss installation involved a further sculptural object based partly on the largest of the three drums: a strange ceramic object made, again, by the artist Anne Maire-Copestake (Figure 6). Like the original drum, this one is also difficult to fathom – although it connects to or resonates with other objects and scenes: as well as referring to the drum, it was based on a defunct control box for a former stair lift that was in the initial space this object was presented within (so, once again, a particular kind of institutional setting). With what might be called these different "re-versionings" it seems to me that the drums continue to do their work – or, we might say, are activated – within the present.

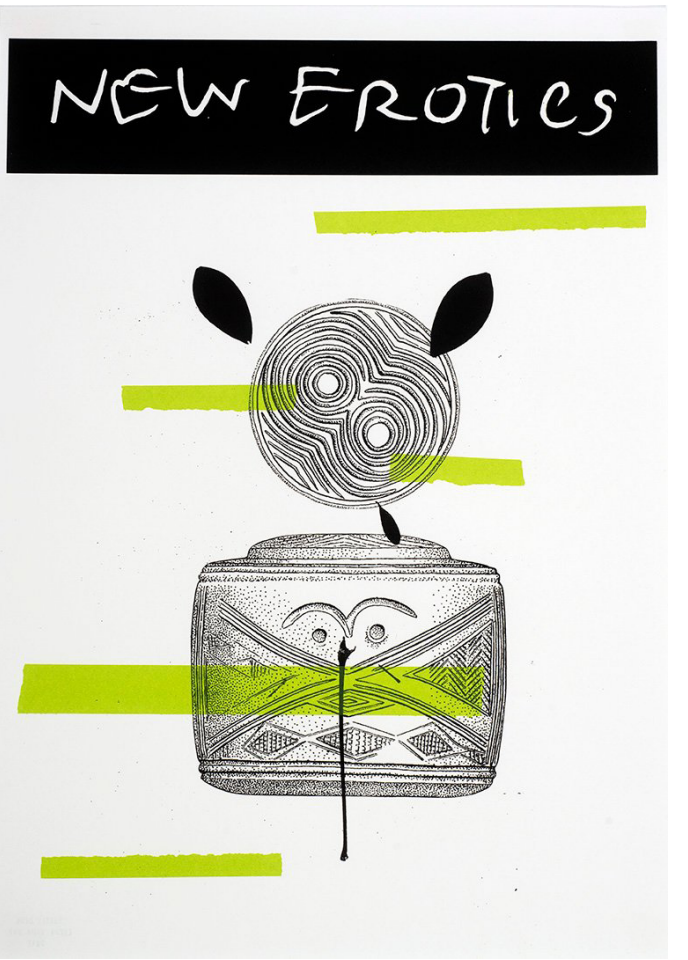

FIGURE 4. Anne Marie-Copestake and Tom O'Sullivan, "Poster Club" project (new edition, 2017; original drawing © The Trustees of the British Museum, courtesy of the artists).

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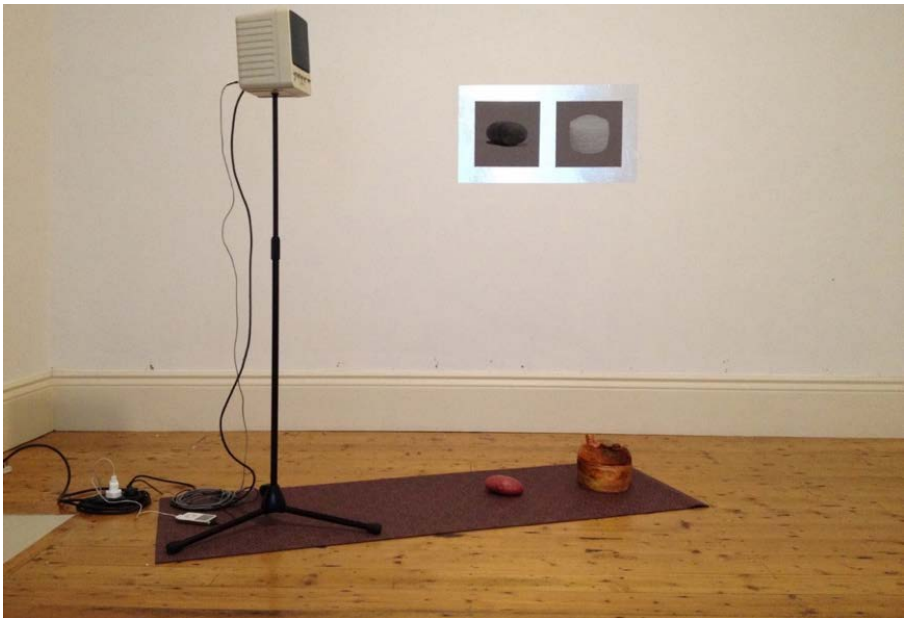

FIGURE 5. Neuschloss (with contribution from Anne-Marie Copestake), *Think Smarter Gateway Error*, 2017, installation view (Room 113, Newcastle. Photograph by Tom O'Sullivan, courtesy of the artists).

FIGURE 6. Neuschloss (with contribution from Anne-Marie Copestake), detail from *Think Smarter Gateway Error*, 2017, installation view (Room 113, Newcastle. Photograph by Tom O'Sullivan, courtesy of the artists).

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A relatively recent archaeological analysis using new imaging technology (known as photogrammetry) has demonstrated that the drums were themselves re-versioned, or that there was a process of "erasure and revision" in terms of the carved designs that are on them (Meirion Jones *et al.* 2015, 1091). The imaging technology shows up various marks and details of the surface that are more typically invisible (including those marks on the base that I mentioned above). It's not clear if this re-versioning was over a period of time or was part of the initial making of these objects, but certainly these new archaeological approaches, which emphasise the business of making – the *process* – over the finished object, have foregrounded a kind of processual nature to the drums which chimes with the way in which they have been re-versioned by contemporary artists. In fact, the analysis mentioned above suggests the objects evidence a logic of "improvisation and experimentation" that is also characteristic of contemporary sculpture (it also turns to the writings of Tim Ingold, himself influenced by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in order to make its argument about thinking with and through material) (Meirion Jones *et al.* 2015, 1093). This analysis and argument about the drums is part of what seems to be a contemporary move in archaeology to suggest that the "meaning was in the making" rather than in any finished site or object, the latter being more or less the default modern understanding.

In passing, it is worth highlighting that it is technology that allows this take on these objects. Or, put differently, advanced devices – in this case imaging ones, but we might make the same claim in relation to dating technology too – are allowing a perspective on other devices from our past. Science operates as a kind of probe into that vast area of prehistory which, by definition, is unknown. In fact, reading some of these recent archaeological accounts, I am reminded of the passages on "Solaris studies" from Stanislav Lem's science fiction novel *Solaris* (Lem 1971). There are different schools of these studies described in the book – initiated by the discovery of the alien planet – each of which attempts to work out what's happening on the surface of the planet that is so unfathomable and impenetrable (although it is equally clear that *something* is going on). There is a definite intention at work on the planet Solaris or, at least, activity that appears to have an intentional quality (although, once again, is this the projection of the human scientists onto the planet?). Archaeology can sometimes feel like it is akin to these disciplines.[6] Or as if it operates itself as an exploratory probe sent out into the unknown,

6. In passing, I want to note Stuart McLean's anthropological writings that work to bring fiction, broadly construed, into productive relationship with that discipline (anthropology being a close cousin to archaeology in many respects). For McLean it is especially the way in which art and literature – and the "what if" – might open up anthropology to the more-than-human and, indeed, to taking seriously the human relation to the more-than-human. To quote McLean from the prologue of his own collection of essays – or field work reports – that are both accounts and examples of this kind of "engaged creative practice":

> Taking its cue from art and literature as much as from the sciences, anthropology might understand itself less as the study of an objectified humanity than as the open-ended, performative exploration of alternative possibilities of collective existence – of new ways of being human and other than human. (McLean 2017, x)

It is also in this sense that for McLean, "anthropology's most radical potential consists – and always has consisted – in its capacity to undermine conventional distinctions between documentary and fiction" (McLean 2017, xi). There is something similar at stake in what I present here, not only in the

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albeit here it is not an alien planet – or, as is the case with science more generally, an unknown real – but rather our own deep human past that is being probed. And then there is also the way that other technological devices can activate the drums in the other direction, as it were – so towards the future – as is the case with the Neuschloss piece I mentioned above which, once again, very much has the feel that it is *for* our present moment and, indeed, a possible future (and what seems to be a crisis in mental health care in particular). Here, paradoxically, technology (in this case sound and recording equipment) operates to open up what is perhaps a pre-technical way of being in the world (or what Simondon [2011 (1958)] names as a "magical mode").

Therapeutic Aesthetics

To return to my own personal investments and complex emotional response to the Folkton Drums: these enigmatic objects did not have this immediate effect on me. I was pleased to get the box from Tom, and have had it displayed for some time, but the image of the drum – again, the image I have is of the largest of the three drums – was more that of a curious object than anything else. Slowly but surely, however, this object has worked its way into my thoughts and dreams. It has increasingly taken on more of a presence in my life. Or, we might say, it has become part of the landscape I live in and through. So much so that sometimes, when heading to London to teach, but with some time on my hands, I have found myself going again to the British Museum, just to stand there and look at the drums for a while through the glass of the cabinet they are displayed in. It's never clear to me why I go to look at them or what I'm expecting, but go I do. It is as if the drums have hooked me and are reeling me in somehow. In fact, my sense is that the drums were waiting for an opening/pause or for a particular scene to be set so that they could capture my attention and begin to do their work.

My recent interest in them, I think, coincides with two things (that is, beyond my ongoing interest in archaeology and, indeed, in the past as a kind of resource for our contemporary times). First, having children myself, and especially now that my two boys are around about the same age at which the child at Folkton was buried; and then also – and more recently – my own struggle with anxiety and, indeed, growing awareness of my own and others' mental health. My anxiety is certainly linked to the sense of my own and others' finitude. Or, put differently, behind the anxiety there is some sadness and, I think, grief. My sense is that the drums have operated as a kind of retroactive prompt for some of this feeling, but also that they can offer up a way of being with some of these difficult emotions too. Which is to say, for me too, the drums represent – and in some way operate as – a form of care for the living as well as the dead (and, as such, perhaps point towards the possibility of some repair work, too). Again, it's not entirely clear to me how this works, but it is clear that these objects offer up something meaningful, or of value. They are somehow *for* me and for our contemporary world more generally. It

turn to art (and what I all re-versionings) as a way of opening up our relation to the past and, indeed, possible futures (thus summoning other communities)—but also in the way that objects like the Folkton Drums already seem, to me, to blur that distinction between fact and fiction in their ambiguity and indetermination (they are, in McLean's terms, fabulatory objects that call for further fabulatory gestures).

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is this *feeling* about the drums which, more than anything else, prompted me to write this essay. After all, I am not an archaeologist, so cannot contribute in any meaningful way to an archaeological understanding of these kinds of object. But I am concerned with art objects and aesthetics – and, indeed, with how certain objects can operate as devices, prompts and props (more of which in a moment) so as to bring something else into existence or even gesture towards another mode of existence from within this one.

And then there is the important fact (or third component to my interest in the drums) that the image – and thus the drum – was given to me by my twin, Tom. Tom has his own recent health issues and, I think, the drum, for me, is also a kind of representation of him (and what I perceive as his vulnerabilities) in some senses. A metaphor, then (Tom is like the drum), and a metonym (the drum is part of Tom's world that is now in mine). There is more to say here about the complexities of being a twin, and, for example, how my reflections on Tom are also perhaps reflections on myself (so the drum is also an image of myself). Connected to this is also the way different objects and figures come to occupy different places in our imaginative landscapes and, in my case, a shared imaginative landscape (a phrase Tom has used to describe our adolescence in North Yorkshire). And then also, how this might itself suggest that landscape can be involved in a certain kind of therapeutic approach to mental health (I have written more extensively about this idea of landscape and therapeutics in a recent essay – O'Sullivan 2024b, 57–68).[7] Indeed, what is the relationship between an external (real) landscape and an internal (imaginative) one? Are they in some senses reciprocal? Certainly an external landscape can inform our internal one. But then there is also a sense that our internal landscape determines our external one. After all, the device that we are – the fiction we have of our self – partly produces the world we move in and through insofar as it necessarily foregrounds certain features and figures, for example. We are a drum within a drum in this sense. Laying things out in this way – in terms of landscapes and objects/props – allows a certain kind of perspective to be set on what might be called "the landscape of the self". A view from above, as it were. It also allows us to take some distance from what can be difficult or all-consuming affects, which then also allows some other work to be done – possibly even transformative work. For myself, the drums have the potential to be part of this practice, a kind of therapeutic aesthetics or, as I have called it elsewhere, myth-work.[8]

7. There has been other more "hands on" contemporary archaeological work carried out for what might broadly be considered therapeutic aims. I am thinking for example of Rachael Kiddey's "Homeless Heritage Project" which, as well as archaeological excavation, map making and presenting objects, also involved its subjects – the homeless – as collaborators and colleagues. At stake here was using the various methods of archaeology – and of cultural heritage work more generally – specifically to empower stakeholders as well as to educate the general public and contribute to policy change. In her article "From the Ground Up" (2017), Kiddey reflects in detail on how each phase of her entho-nographic/archaeological research was intrinsically involved in questions of diversity and inclusivity – and, more generally, how this work then allowed participants to come into a more positive and productive relation to the landscapes they lived in and through, as well as to their own and others' remembered pasts.

8. I use this term differently from Maria Walsh, who in her book on *Therapeutic Aesthetics* develops a theory of the latter – as "pharmacological and as a micro-resistance within neoliberal cognitive capitalism" – in relation to contemporary artist film and video works (Walsh 2021, 6).

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From Myth-Work to Grief Work

How then might the drums be activated further, not least for this aesthetic and therapeutic purpose? Or, perhaps, "activate" is too strong a word for the kind of agency I have in mind here and that the drums seem to gesture towards. Rather, how might we allow the drums to continue to do their work, especially when we do not know exactly what this work is (after all, it is not only conceptual or discursive)? It seems clear to me that various artistic takes on the drums – including the ones I have mentioned above – are partly about this reactivation and re-versioning of the drums for the contemporary. Certainly, they involve the register of affect and the imagination rather than only the symbolic/discursive. Once again, these art works are not "interpretations", but kinds of aesthetic re-versionings. For myself, incorporating the drums – or that particular first drum I have the image of – within a fiction that I have recently written (the book that I mentioned briefly above) – has also operated to activate them further. In fact, the incorporation of the drum as a kind of prop came late to *The Ancient Device*, a book which was as much an autofiction as anything else (and a tentative example of the landscape/therapeutic work – the myth-work – I also mentioned above). The title of the work referred to all sorts of mechanisms of representation within the fiction, not least the fiction of the self and the writing of fiction itself (and the relationship between these two). But it is also clear to me (looking back, as it were) that the ancient device was a name for the drum too, which, in that fiction, operated as a figure within the narrative and as a kind of anamorphic device. Which is to say, that when the correct posture is taken towards it (within the fiction) – or it finds itself in the right scene – then it brings with it a world. A world of the past – so a kind of temporal anamorphosis – but also various emotions that are, in my case at least, often confused and sometimes obscure.[9]

Relatively recently, I have attempted to address further, or rather perform, some of these ideas in a more pedagogical setting. For a talk at a conference at Goldsmiths where I teach – on "Time Machines" – and as part of a conversation with two colleagues, Ayesha Hameed and Henriette Gunkel, I showed an image of the drums and played a track, "HRDY GRDY", by the musician and composer Jen Finer.[10] The choice of the track was intuitive. Somehow the drone-like track, which, as the title suggests, was composed of a hurdy-gurdy instrumental, had the same affective resonance as the

9. It has occurred to me that my anxiety has an anamorphic structure, insofar as it is a feeling of things being not quite right – so, a smear or a shadow within my reality. And when a certain posture is taken this is seen for what it is: a fear of death and sense of grief (as such, we might say the drums are a little like the anamorphic skull in Holbein's *The Ambassadors*).

10. On a final-year undergraduate course – on Occulture – I have also brought in images of the drums more directly to a teaching setting. Part of the idea here was to use them as a way in to talking about our relationship with the past (and specifically residual culture / magical thinking), but also as a way to introduce ideas of care and repair (of ourselves and our world). Important in that particular seminar was that the drums allowed or prompted some disclosure (which seems, in this context, a key prerequisite for any work of care and repair). Certainly, the drums worked as weird pedagogical devices in that particular setting. In that seminar, one of the students had a friend in the Design Department at Goldsmiths who subsequently made a small model of the largest drum, which then became like a dice or tabletop role-playing game figure. This also relates to my sense that myth-work can involve a perspective down on a given landscape as if it is a tabletop (see also my comments about both teaching and tabletop role-playing games in O'Sullivan 2024b, 101–114, 153–164).

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drums – or, at least, it was as if both spoke to each other somehow. Ayesha, Henri and I hope to do something with the transcription of that discussion, so I won't repeat lots of that material here, except to say that it was clear to me in that presentation that the various components that I put on display related to my interest in myth-work – again, broadly speaking, practices of creative self-care (and self-determination) – but that this might also (in this case) be named grief work, when the latter is partly about being with the emotions that arise when we encounter grief or when it subsumes us. And then also seeing what, if any, information lies beneath this grief or is attempting to come through. In terms of the drums – and to return to the point I made earlier – are there different landscapes that can become foregrounded through our interaction with them (landscapes of the past and landscapes of the dead)? In the conversation with Ayesha and Henri we linked individualised feelings of grief with more collective grief – and, indeed, with grief that travels across time. The drums (alongside the other devices – images, texts, and sound – that Ayesha and Henri also brought to the conversation) prompted this more collective work of reflection which also, as Ayesha's choice of time travel device foregrounded, involved working at different scales of grief and tracking across those. Indeed, for Ayesha, this personal grief work had an implicit political aspect to it precisely *because* it was personal. For Henri grief also had a political importance, linked as it was in her choice of time travel device to the legacies of colonialism. It was important – for that conversation – that we did not just talk about all this but presented it too. Or, more specifically, it was important that we allowed the devices to do their work before we embarked on any conversation. To transport us then (and the audience there), at least for a brief time. It was our intuitive sense, corroborated by this event, that it is affect – emotion – that allows for the opening and also the passageway through which this travel can take place.

The drums can then contribute towards a kind of grief work that is also a desire – of the living – to have a relationship with the dead. In that sense they are gifts or offerings (to that child, but then also – as I have suggested above – to us too). Indeed, it would seem – from the evidence found in and by monuments and in tombs – that our ancestors had their own ongoing relationship with their own ancestors (bones have been found that seem to have been ritually moved from place to place. for example). And then there is also the persuasive idea mentioned above that the stone monuments in our landscape are themselves for the dead. Our ancestors had a living relationship with their ancestors that was played out on and in their landscape. Or, put differently, the dead had a presence and an agency of sorts within their culture and society. Again, perhaps this also relates to the drums and how they are for us today. They are from the dead as it were – from that other realm – but they are also about our dead and even our own death. They are somehow reminders that we too will be buried. And then – as was pointed out to me at the Goldsmiths conference – they are also made of chalk, which is itself made of the shells of dead animals and micro-organisms. There is a sense of death – and mourning – here that goes beyond the human or, rather, links the human to the wider nonhuman landscapes we live in and through. Indeed, the larger sense of grief that many of us feel – connected to the vicissitudes of the Anthropocene – is also somehow connected, for me, to the work of the drums.

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Landscapes and Time-Travel

In some other recent writings, I have suggested a kind of equation between landscape, device and community, as if any one of these three terms can be brought about by the combination of the other two (the context for the development of that idea was more contemporary art works and communities). Certainly, the drums and the landscape – in this case the monument complexes of Britain – work to conjure or summon forth a community. A community that was there in the past – but perhaps a future one too? Indeed, might the drums still have this function, if combined with a certain kind of landscape? Or, if looked at – and again activated – by a certain community (of the ill or the anxious for example)? In the latter case, might they open up another landscape from within this one? It is here that we can return to my intuitive sense that the drums are for us – or can be made to work for us. They allow other things to foreground themselves if we take on the correct posture or "see" them in a certain way (again, they seem to be anamorphic objects in this sense). In the conversation with Ayesha and Henri that I mentioned above, I linked this to a Bergsonian idea of the "survival of the past" and with the further idea that a pause or gap in our more habitual/reactive mode of being can allow this past to manifest itself in the present (Bergson 2004, 133–178). It is as if the drums can be understood as this gap or hole in our own contemporary scene or can operate like that if we attend to them in a certain manner. They are located at the inverted apex of that cone of memory that Henri Bergson diagrams and writes about in *Matter and Memory* (Figure 7, based on Bergson 2004, 152). For Bergson it is this pause (at that point) in

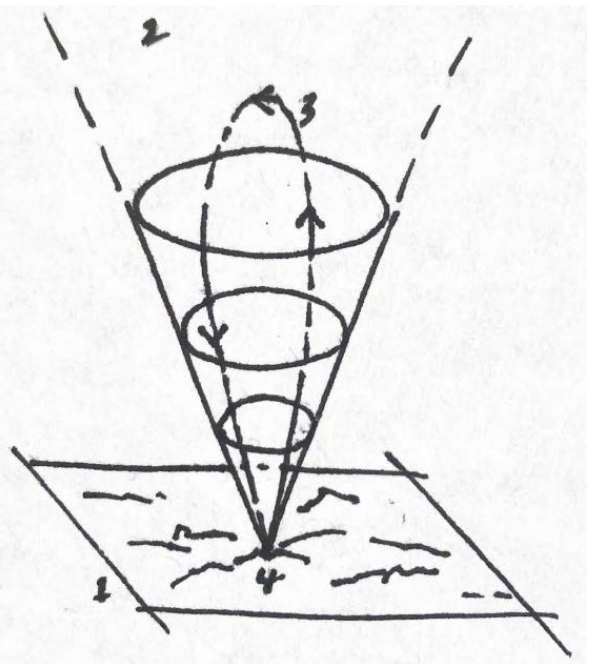

FIGURE 7. Diagram of *Activation of Device*. 1: Plane of Matter/Landscape; 2: The Past/Virtual; 3: Time-Travelling Circuit; 4: Ritual/Performance/Device (based on Bergson's cone of memory; author's own drawing – O'Sullivan 2024b, 52).

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the sensory-motor apparatus – located on the plane of matter – that allows memory and the past sometimes to manifest or foreground itself. But here the actualisation of the virtual past is accompanied by the actualisation of other emotions, too. The drums operate as a kind of cut into the present and as a summoning of those other states and feelings. Put differently, they are evidence of another way of being or gesture to another world that is nevertheless here situated within our own cultural and symbolic set up. They offer this outside perspective from within a mode of existence that can seem, well, all-pervasive and all-consuming (what the cultural critic and theorist Mark Fisher [2009] calls "capitalist realism"). How do you locate an outside? Where are the exits from the world you are in, and also the interior device that you are? Perhaps it's a case of finding something on the inside that points to an outside and even, perhaps, opens a gap so as to allow travel there. Are the drums an example of this portal and loop/circuit to an outside that is here, located in our inside?

Grief work, like myth-work, needs prompts (for other emotions). It also needs props (to act something else out). Devices, then, that are both prompts and props. But this also means we need to be receptive to the work of the drums. We need to entertain the possibility that we don't know what they are or what they can do. We need to be open to the kind of work they might call forth. To see them as objects that perhaps operate beyond a strictly archaeological or scientific register (or that have a kind of function that is outside of this approach). And, indeed, that it is this affective and indeterminate quality (the latter producing the former perhaps) that marks them out as special. Is this to say nothing more than that the drums are aesthetic objects as well as archaeological ones, when aesthetics – following Simondon once more – operates as a future-orientated reminder of a previous and more magical mode of existence?[11] There is, then, perhaps a secret resonance here between what the drums were for those people in the past (magical objects or entities) and what they can be for us (aesthetic props or triggers). I have used the term "therapeutics" above, but, in fact, this does not seem entirely correct. The drums are not only about the fiction of the self we already are – they are not about treating that fiction or making us "well" exactly – but also about gesturing to other fictions. In fact, it is this, it seems to me, that also characterises their aesthetic character. They operate to show us that there is something different than what we more typically see and feel. They show us that our contemporary world is not everything. As well as a hole or cut, they are then also fictioning devices that allow for this other perspective to be set, or what might be called this stationary travel to take place.[12]

11. To quote Simondon on this definition of magic and aesthetics (and the difference of these two to our own technical/religious mode of existence):

> We suppose that technicity results from a phase-shift of a central, original and unique mode of being in the world, the magical mode; the phase that balances technicity is the religious mode of being. Aesthetic thinking emerges at the neutral point between technics and religion, at the moment of the division of primitive magical unity: this is not a phase but, rather, a permanent reminder of the rupture of the unity of the magical mode of being and a search for a future unity. (Simondon, 2011 [1958], 408)

12. David Burrows and I develop this idea of fictioning in our book of the same name (Burrows and O'Sullivan 2019). There, it is used to gather examples of contemporary art works that instantiate or embody a different fiction/reality – when these include other kinds of relations and imaginaries – within the world.

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Coda: The Care of the Dead

I sometimes feel as if I am inside one of the drums or as if the drum is a representation – or model – of my own world. It is as if I am walking around and around the circumference, perhaps even slowly descending in a spiral towards the centre. The inside walls of the drum are like my horizons, painted with sky, hills and trees. And in that theatrical set up I encounter other objects and figures along the way (other signposts and indicators). And then there is that other perspective, of looking down at the drum. A bird's eye view from outside and above. Seeing the world within the drum, then, but also the drum as an object or prop within a landscape (or even on a tabletop). The drums are something in this world but are not entirely of it – and thus they are able to transport me to an elsewhere. And then there is also the grief that is part of this travel. Grief about loss and saying goodbye. About endings and deaths. The death of a child and the desire to maintain a contact with those that have gone. And, perhaps, to give something to that child on their journey? A gift that then becomes a kind of gift to us. Unearthed, the drums are now set up to do some other work. Signs, then, and teachings of an oblique sort for our own end times and especially contra *the necropolitics that reigns. A care for the dead (and the living) rather than a carelessness. A foregrounding of vulnerability. Here they are then. Residues that survive. What would the drums say if they could speak? Nothing. There is nothing for them to say. Their presence, silent, watching is enough.*

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