

# THE DIG

## IS ARCHAEOLOGY THE NEW ETHNOGRAPHY?

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### INTRODUCTION

*Archaeology is the study of the human past, using stuff.*  
(King 2005:11)

It is archaeology's use of stuff in studying, understanding and building up pictures of cultures that first drew us to it. Archaeology provides us with a practical approach to 're-instating the missing masses' (Latour 1992) in market research. We remain astonished at how market research has failed to deal with material culture. The irony of this cannot escape you: an industry that is largely concerned with the consumption of things (commonly referred to as products), yet takes as its singular unit of analysis 'consumers'. This was what we meant when we accused market research of 'consumercentrism' (Blyth and Roberts 2005) as well as its outright discrimination against the stuff and substance of consumption.

Archaeology is different. In archaeology objects (artefacts) provide important evidence as to the shape and formation of past societies and cultures as well as the social practices of individuals. With a few notable exceptions little archaeological investigation relies on the capturing and interpretation of the written or spoken word provided by research subjects. Archaeology produces knowledge about the past, and informs our understanding of the present, through a range of techniques that uncover and piece together the meaning of things. Thanks to archaeology we can have a good sense, for example, of what it meant to be a Roman centurion languishing in the steamy baths of Harrogate or how he took the fight to the Celts and Picts.

In this paper we want to argue for appropriating a selection of archaeological methods, perspectives and

metaphors. We suggest that through borrowing from archaeology we can enrich our research strategies. In its broadest sense we want to deploy archaeology and archaeological methods to bring things back in to market research. In so doing, we argue that archaeology can:

- Add metaphorical and practical tools to our work as researchers;
- Add new fieldsites to our studies and with it new questions;
- Understand better the dynamics of everyday practice;
- Enrich our view of the processes of product innovation and diffusion.

Our call to swap the viewed group, depth interviews and for that matter ethnography for picks, trowels and shovels is a strategic intervention in market research discourse; an industry which continues to eschew the material in favour of the cognitive, cerebral and psychological. No doubt in so doing we're bound to inflict all matter of violence on archaeology; our apologies for that. There's also a full and frank confession towards the end of the paper, but that's for later.

### DOING ARCHAEOLOGY

*Excavation has a unique role to play as a theatre where people may be able to produce their own pasts, pasts which are meaningful to them, not as expressions of a mythical heritage.* (Tilley 1989:260)

In March 2003 we were granted access to an apartment in the Northeast of Milan, Italy to conduct an archaeological excavation. The apartment was still

occupied although the occupants were not present during the excavation. The project was conducted as if it were a normal archaeological site, starting as usual with the base planning of all the rooms and surrounding spaces (balcony and garage). The complete site was photographed, prior to the excavation starting, to ensure that any subsequent disturbance of the deposits by the project team could be accounted for. The team comprised a mix of researchers and marketers. Each member was clearly briefed as to the importance of full and thorough recording of the site. Team members were asked to keep a diary of their thoughts throughout the excavation.

What characterised this study is the archaeological context in which the work was done. There were no informants, just the material culture which they had left behind, however momentarily. Still more, this particular study differed from more conventional archaeology in that the site was a recent, contemporary site; far from ancient. This does not, however, work to invalidate the approach. On the contrary, whilst 'old archaeology' is about making the unfamiliar familiar, this project sought to make the familiar unfamiliar (Buchli and Lucas 2001), turning the everyday into the archaeological.

The project started as both a methodological conundrum and a business opportunity. The opportunity lay in what is termed 'compliance' in medical and health care research and policy. In short people don't do as they're meant, or told. The specific issue that we were interested in was the regular replacement of toothbrushes. A number of manufacturers have attempted to address this issue: Oral-B's indicator brushes with their blue filaments that gradually change colour through use are a good example. Manufacturers know that increased 'compliance' provides the opportunity for improvements in health as well as business growth through, for example, an increase in consumption.

Just as people may not do all that they are told, they do not always report exactly what they actually do

in practice. Understanding the gap between actual behaviour and reported behaviour was not going to be readily achieved through simply asking people. Moreover, whilst the toothbrush was recently identified as the invention that most people (in North America) could not live without (Lamelson-MIT Invention Index Survey 2003), it is emblematic of the mundane and everyday, whilst also being for some an intensely personal tool and associated practice. Together these elements make tooth brushing, and more specifically toothbrush replacement, a 'difficult' research problem. To gain insight in this area, a radically new research approach was required. Hence our turn to archaeology. Through the material culture we encountered we sought to answer the puzzle: how can rates of toothbrush replacement be increased?

Following the initial mapping of the site we focussed our efforts on the bathroom, kitchen and the outside areas. Our sites were chosen on the basis of:

- Where toothbrushes had been found in previous excavations;
- Where similar artefacts – e.g. other brushes – had been found (toilet brush, floor brush, etc.);
- Where, we hypothesised, similar practices to tooth brushing were carried out (i.e. connected to for example, ideas of health and hygiene, routines, use of other handheld tools – knives and forks, etc.).

Returning to the site, there was a staged process of excavation, initially asking how the space was used in the apartment. Specifically concerning brushes and toothbrushes: what was the artefact distribution; what was the context in which they were found; any clues as to the patterning of acquisition (receipts, secondary packaging, shopping lists). Subsequent to the dig, all items were returned to exactly the place found. Following the excavation a series of workshops were convened with the full project team as well as the occupants of the apartment. This was a time for us to share our findings and feelings, and generate 'toothbrush narratives', as well to construct a series of scenarios. Archaeology as process provided a framework through which we could

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encourage dialogue on the most mundane of articles, encouraging all to self-critique their own perceptions of meaning and significance concerning this seemingly most simple of tools.

A full report on the study is due. For the time being we want to point to a particular finding. Examination of the quantities of toothbrushes found throughout the apartment, as well as the balcony and garage suggests, rather surprisingly, a pretty even distribution. In total 11 toothbrushes were found: five brushes were found in the bathroom (one unused and still in its original packaging, one laying horizontally on a shelf, the remaining three in a plastic beaker, stored vertically, bristle end up), three in the kitchen (all in a plastic container, laying length ways), two in the garage (again lengthways but this time in a toolbox) and one on the balcony. Except for the one toothbrush still in its pack, all the toothbrushes showed visual signs of wear – including the splaying of the bristles – although to varying degrees. They were also found in a wide range of colours. Sampling of micro-deposition on the brushes revealed a stratified layering of deposits on some of the brushes. For example, one of the toothbrushes excavated in the garage showed strata of: toothpaste and plaque and food deposits followed by a chemical silver or jewellery cleaner. Finally a layer of a silicon lubricant was found – the type used to lubricate automotive parts.

That some of the toothbrushes had non-tooth brushing related deposits, together with them being found in places not generally associated with tooth brushing led us to conclude that the toothbrush had a ‘career’ of its own. Toothbrushes do not ‘run out’ like toothpaste, but take on new roles (hence there being 11 brushes in a two-person household). The particular toothbrush discussed above, we would, surmise travelled from the bathroom to the garage via the kitchen (the jewellery cleaner found on the brush was stored under the kitchen sink). Each time the same object, the toothbrush, participated in a different practice – from tooth cleaning to jewellery cleaning, through to automotive servicing. Returning to our puzzle, how can rates of toothbrush

replacement be increased, the answer might therefore be not to demonstrate the need for replacement, through for example the splaying of bristles, as this was largely uniform across our toothbrush sample. The issue of replacement seems more dependent on rates of disposal rather than purchase. One possible answer, we hypothesise, is to hasten and proliferate secondary jobs for toothbrushes, perhaps even designing them in, thereby accelerating the toothbrush’s career progression and allowing it to take early retirement on the balcony in the Italian sun.

**ARCHAEOLOGY AS METHOD**

Our brief dig into archaeology goes far to explain why we want to posit archaeology as a methodological future for market research. For in archaeology it is not humans in themselves that form the object of study, but rather the stuff they have left behind, lost abandoned, ate, disposed of, worshiped etc. From this stuff a picture is developed, but it is the stuff that forms the entry point and primary unit of analysis. With this in mind we can sketch out how differently archaeology approaches things to market research. (See figure 1.)

Compare this with market research that would probably look more like this: (see figure 2.)

In other words, whilst market research reads from the social to the material, archaeology reads from the material to the social. Archaeology provides a distinctly anti-consumer research – hence its attraction. But to argue for anti-consumer research is potentially heretical in a market research industry that positions itself as, and prides itself on being, the voice of the consumer. It is a claim that requires explanation, which is where we go next.

**CONSUMERCENTRICISM AND DISCRIMINATING AGAINST THINGS**

*Given the inherent ambiguity of all reality and the nagging suspicion that we always exist on the edge of existential chaos, objects work to hold meanings more or less still, solid, and accessible to others (Molotch 2003: 11).*

FIGURE 1  
ARCHAEOLOGY

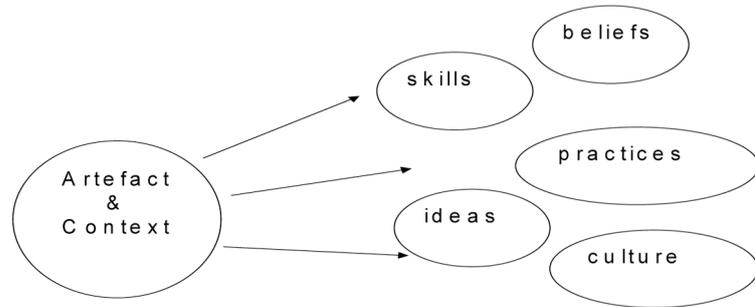
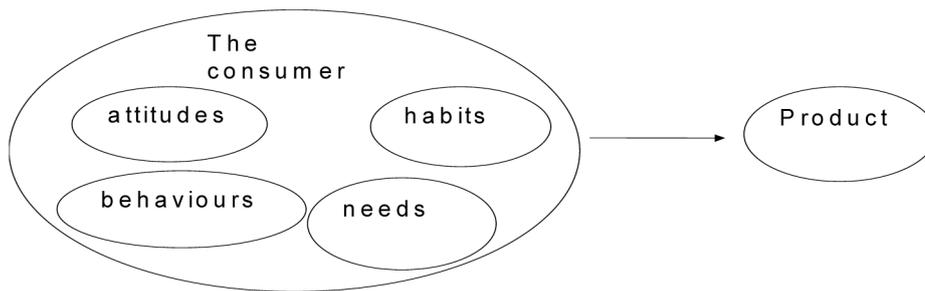


FIGURE 2  
MARKET RESEARCH



Life is quite unimaginable without things. Whilst mundane objects often go unnoticed they also work to structure our daily lives. Yet whilst they have a dramatic impact on our lives, things appear as somewhat separate from the social world. This separation is further entrenched through the practices of market research. Were we to represent this split diagrammatically and map onto the territory that is occupied by brands it would probably look like this: (see figure 3.)

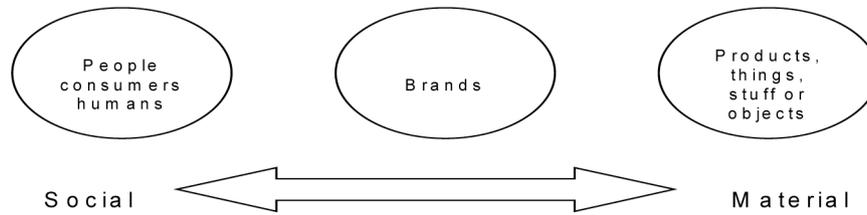
Consumers are unequivocally social whilst things or products are physical and material. Put another way, consumers belong to the social world and the human or social sciences, whilst products belong to the natural world of physics and chemistry the natural

sciences. This distinction is captured in the following quote from Bruno Latour – simply replace the social scientist with the market researcher:

*If a cyclist falls off his bicycle because it has hit a rock, social scientists confess, they have nothing to say. It is only if a policeman, a lover, an insurance agent or the Good Samaritan enter the scene that a social science becomes possible, because we are now faced, not only with a causal sequence of occurrences, but also with a string of socially meaningful events. (Latour 2000:108)*

Our grievance is quite simple: in our industry’s focus on the consumer as the primary and sole unit of analysis we are prevented from adopting more sophisticated and powerful analyses of the relationships between the

FIGURE 3



social and material, the cultural and technological, the brand and the product. Does the brand, for example, necessarily adhere to the social world of consumers? Common sense suggests otherwise. The sturdy weight of a Nikon camera, or the design and finish of Apple’s products, suggests that a brand experience is in the product. Brands are material, not just image.

Our fetishism for the consumer, or what we’re calling consumercentrism, is largely explained through our academic heritage in the social sciences (psychology, sociology, philosophy and anthropology). Through our practice we continuously create a distinction between the material and the social:

- People buy the ‘stuff’ that clients make. It is their relationship with, motivations and attitudes towards, experience of and opinions about this stuff that we are regarded as having expertise in not the stuff itself.
- The ‘stuff’ is the client’s job and they can do this better because of our expertise in understanding people.
- People can talk but ‘stuff’ does nothing. Insights on ‘stuff’ can only come through talking to or observing people.

In short, market research is an industry dominated, methodologically, by people and focused on producing insights and understandings about people. At best it is people and their lives that we’re interested in unravelling and making sense of; at worst abstracted consumers who are deemed to do nothing else but shop.

Or that’s the official story. In our practice we mix our metaphors, swap categories and merge common distinctions between humans and non-humans: the temperamental computer or stubborn printer, the client’s automatic response to the mechanical debrief. Moreover, to develop new perspectives and insights qualitative researchers regularly ask consumers to anthropomorphise objects, to instil and animate them with human qualities and characteristics (e.g. brand personality exercises).

This tendency to socialise stuff in order to make it capable of interrogation or comprehensible is a further example of the way we systematically try to remove ‘things’ from our analytical frame of reference – or at least conceal their thingness. It is as if we depend on the turning of things into people as it makes the ‘things’ about which we want to know, knowable. If they remain objects (objective!) there seems little to say bar that they function correctly.

What is not revealed through this language is the wider network in which the human and thing are operating, nor the capacity for the thing or object to be productive and constructive to, as Woolgar (1991) puts it, ‘configure its user’. Let’s, for example, consider doing the laundry. Washing machines demand things of their users: making specific purchases (detergent, conditioners), sorting clothes and selecting the right programme. The meaning of “clean” is negotiated with the machine. It is neither a given nor purely a ‘cultural’ concept in the mind of the consumer. It is inscribed in the machine. You could argue that washing machines (and other apparatus such as

pre-wash stain removal sprays and detergents), devices for making clothes whiter than white, exist to create dirt and soiled-ness. They then deliver against this created need, by making our clothes 'clean'. Washing is not a purely social experience, but relies on a socio-technical network of machine-user.

Taking this one step further, there's no such thing as pure social relations, but only socio-technical relations. This is a major challenge not just for the market research industry but for social theory more generally because, hitherto, both have largely ignored things. To bring things back in we need to adopt a position of symmetry in the analytical treatment of human and non-human actors alike (or actants, as non-human actors have been termed in this literature (see for example, Akrich and Latour 2000). Thus the starting point for analysis is not how humans use stuff (their behaviour), or how stuff shapes society, but the networks, flows and movements linking humans and non-humans. Latour recommends that as researchers we should look to "see only actors – some human, some non-human, some skilled, some unskilled – that exchange their properties" (Latour 1992:236).

What this view of social reality involves is that we surrender our view that individuals, consumers, people are capable of doing certain things but other entities are not. In its place we want to suggest the importance of focussing not on what entities can do what, but instead on description of action. For example, this challenges us to think not of the "computer user" – the individual who uses the servile machine – but instead to consider the "computer-user" – the more fluid combination of the individual who works to complete an activity and the computer that structures or shapes that activity and the way it is organised and conceived. This is in some senses counterintuitive as it threatens a cherished view of the consumer and humanity – we are in control, omnipotent over the machines or objects we create and suggests that things frame or in some ways configure our actions.

*In this post-modern world, then, nothing about entities is fixed. Worse, nothing about them is certain. That they are a thing, that they constitute an entity is as problematic as assigning certain capabilities and characteristics to these things. (Woolgar 1991:65)*

Agency, in summary, is not a capacity but 'a relational effect that is generated in different configurations of (human and non-human) materials' (Mulcahy 1997).

Such a de-centring of the consumer also involves a challenge to the hegemonic view within market research that consumers have needs that are met through the provision of a particular product or brand. Take an entertainment example. The emergence of home cinema technologies, with new amplifiers and collections of sub-woofers and speakers, has been fed by, and has encouraged, the parallel rise of the DVD. In the process the configuration of the sitting room (speakers behind the sofa), the gender relations of the space (more 'boy toys'?), and the nature of cinema-going as well as staying-in have all been transformed. The technology has changed social practice and changes in social practice impact the spread and use of the technology and home entertainment. Objects in this way make more than meet consumer demand.

A recap may be in order. We have argued that market research needs to eschew its fetishism for the consumer and bring things in. This is not, however, a call just to include things in its research agendas but to reflect on what we believe to be the dubious value of enforcing distinctions between people and things. We have aimed to demonstrate how people shape objects and objects shape humans. But more than that we have argued that any distinction drawn between them is shifting and variable. It is in this 'middle kingdom' (Latour 1993), the land where the distinctions become redundant, where our research should be focussing. Failing to do so will inevitably mean missing 'where the action is' (with apologies to Dourish: 2001)

## THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL MANIFESTO

The practical surfacing of the material through archaeological methods (the dig) as well as the centrality of the material within archaeological discourse, are our big

finds. But how would it change what and how we do things within market research. In an attempt to flesh this out in concrete terms we offer an archaeological manifesto.

### THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL MANIFESTO

Market research discriminates against things. Archaeology recognises the centrality of the material things for our culture – hence material culture. Archaeological approaches start with the assumption that to understand either humans or the objects with which they live, we must study them in relation to each other.

**Archaeology makes the mundane extraordinary.** The material world surrounds us, so much so that in our everyday lives we tend to overlook it. Too often we leave it unquestioned. Market research is good at gleaning insight in and around certain types of things, which are connected to powerful imagery. It is less good at understanding how mundane things structure everyday practice.

**Archaeology recognises the materiality of culture.** Culture does not just exist in people's heads or in their social relations with others. Societies and culture are complex knots of the social and material. We need to better understand the materiality of physical objects in their relations with people. Put another way, archaeology assumes that things make social relations durable. The Roman bath complex suggests, and supports, particular views about the body, gender and sexuality in Roman times.

**Archaeology appreciates the stuff and substance of things.** Market research has fallen for a view of the world where signs, symbols, image and meanings dominate. It has no language or theory of materiality. Archaeology is however a reflexive process through which artefacts, once unearthed, are 'materialised', in that they are created through the interpretation of the archaeologist, who thinks through their form, function and image. What's important here is not some essential thingness of the artefact, but how this is conferred through the archaeological process and how this is always open to contestation and change. In this way it avoids the dubious and erroneous distinction between object and sign; product and brand. Archaeology can handle stuff.

**Archaeology understands that things are related to one-another.** Market research so often misses that things are used in the context of other things, practices and people. Archaeology recognises that these different elements depend on one-another. The Roman bath relies on the provision of water and heat, which relies on streams and forests, as well as lumberjacks, axes and so on.

**Archaeology recognises that 'the same thing' changes over time and space.** An earthenware pot might have a different functional purpose or symbolic significance in different times and places. Archaeology works on the understanding that things embody shared understandings of reality.

**Archaeology is not dependent on the spoken or written word.** Rathje's (1996) garbageology is a headline grabbing demonstration of material culture as a source of consumer data and insight. In his archaeology of landfills he describes the laborious hand sorting of 'bits and pieces of garbage' in place of surveys, industry documents and governments statistics. In so doing he's been able to tease apart and reveal what things say about what people do or did from what people have said about what they thought they did.

**Archaeology can help us to uncover practices that have been relegated to history** – at the level of either collective or individual consumer practices. The exercise bike that, used no more, is consigned to the attic. Or, in the kitchen and suggestive of changing culinary tastes and practices, the tongue press for preparing that delicacy so familiar to past generations. In so doing we're reminded of the dynamic relation between objects and consumer practice. You just try and press a tongue without a tongue press!

## THE CONFESSION OF THE POTHUNTERS

Archaeologists have a rather derogatory term for those individuals without proper archaeological training and credentials but who dig in archaeological sites. The term is 'pothunter'. A pothunter usually keeps or sells what they find and because of their poor training they frequently destroy more than they find – be it stuff or the information represented by the stuff. Rarely are their notes of a publishable quality.

Before anyone who knows anything about archaeology exposes us for what we really are, we confess: we're pothunters. Well, of-a-kind anyway. That neither one of us has any training or background in archaeology, we're quite happy to accept the label of pothunters. Our status as stumbling amateurs and charlatans is likely to be compounded were we to confess that the fieldwork described above concerning the toothbrush was completed with no mention whatsoever to archaeology as method, methodology nor theoretical framework. That project was completed by a mixed group of individuals from a variety of backgrounds including sociology, anthropology and geography. What united them was an interest in material culture and a certain sympathy for the arguments behind our anti-consumer research. That is not to diminish our belief that archaeology offers an extremely valuable approach to market research, not least in its ability to deliver new understandings of the relationship between people and the material world, through its uncanny ability to make the familiar strangely unfamiliar.

Fear of being outed as pothunters is only part of the reason behind our confession. It was always our intention to deploy archaeology strategically as part of our attempt to reinstate those missing masses and thereby de-centre the consumer in market research. Archaeology proves that things are relevant, interesting and empirically analysable. The end.

## WELL NOT QUITE ...

Returning to the manifesto, the final tenet stands out as different from the others, not simply because it

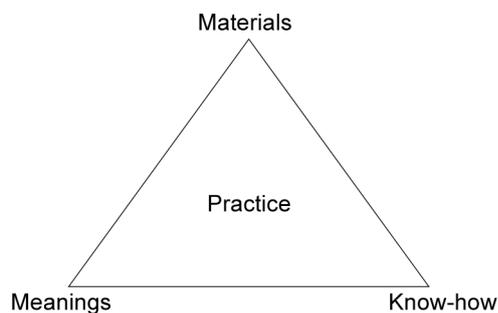
is the only tenet to address the pressing of tongues, but because conceptually it shifts ground away from stuff and things to practices, without re-instating the consumer as sovereign. This is an important development because the idea or concept of practice allows us to grab what have hitherto been described, rather esoterically, as networks or flows between humans and non-humans alike.

All human activity and existence can be explained through practice. Everything we *do* be it sailing, shopping, playing football and so on maybe thought of as a practice. Certain types of practice belong to certain fields (Bourdieu 1992), which gives them a certain logic and coherence. The practice of playing football, for example, belongs to the field of sport. There are two crucial points that need to be grasped. First that practices are routine, shared and habitual activities that require a certain technique or know how. Football for example is played in the same way day-in day-out, to a certain set of shared rules (some written some otherwise). The second is that practices rely on being done – or if you like – performed. Again returning to football if no one did it, it wouldn't exist. Through playing with the football, they are reproducing the practice of footballing.

Sticking with the football analogy, we can start to appreciate the role of objects within practice. Reckwitz notes: 'Carrying out a practice very often means using particular things in a certain way. It might sound trivial to stress that in order to play football we need a ball and goals as indispensable 'resources'' (Reckwitz 2002:253). This leads us to a working notion of practice as being about the 'active integration of materials, meanings and forms of competence' (Shove and Pantzer 2005:45). But in our desire to tease out the individual components (things, images and know-how), we should not overlook that practice relies on their active integration. Neither of these particular elements belong to humans or non-humans alike. To be clear an individual cannot alone do a practice. In fact, to focus on an individual doing

something misses the point entirely. Don't think of people or things as the unit of analysis – think of practices (or the doing) and their constitutive elements. Consumers in this way are not users, but carriers of practice, creative practitioners and, importantly, but 'one dimension of the reproduction of practice' (Shove and Pantzer 2005:45). Innovations in practice (and therefore products?) would thus emerge from new configurations of these elements or the introduction of new elements. (See figure 4.)

FIGURE 4



We should not underestimate what such a re-orientation would mean. For market research it represents a paradigm shift. Such shifts are never easy. To help we have appropriated archaeology and its unique privileging of material culture. Drawing further on the work of Shove and Pantzer (2005), going forward, such a re-orientation would mean:

- Not thinking in terms of new product innovations, but innovations in practice;
- Accepting that whilst producers may provide all the constituent elements that they can (for example, image and materials), that it is how all the elements are brought together through practice, that matters;
- Recognising that practices are dynamic in that they require continual reproduction. Whilst producers may provide and promote a number of the elements, they cannot make the practice happen (for example, we can't make tooth brushing happen) – that's up to the practitioners.

Practice-based market research would involve re-inventing and re-making our profession, culture and organisation. This would not be on the basis of methodologies and methods that start from the position that brands, products and consumers are different and require different research approaches. Practice-based market research instead could be organised on the basis of fields of practices with a wide assortment of research approaches. Such a shift would mean that we focus not on the consumer, but specific instances of consuming; not on the shopper but the practice of shopping and so on. Of course, at least for the moment the archaeological manifesto still stands. It was always going to be necessary to surface the materiality of culture before moving onto practice. But it's in practice-based approaches where we ourselves want to end. We hope that archaeology will help us to get there – so our thanks and our apologies, from two self-confessed pothunters.

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