THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

We are all archaeologists now, sharing a sensibility, certain dispositions towards things, creative ways of reanimating the past. This is the archaeological imagination.

Here is a definition.

To recreate the world behind the ruin in the land, to reanimate the people behind the sherd of antique pottery, to bring alive the past-in-the-present, as in an historical novel, to cherish and work upon fragments of the past, what remains of the past in the present. This is the work of the archaeological imagination — a creative impulse and faculty at the heart of the discipline of archaeology, but also embedded in many cultural dispositions, ways of thinking and talking, institutions like museums and archives, commonly associated with the modern world.

The most fertile ground for the archaeological imagination is the heritage industry – businesses, media networks, government ministries of culture and non-government organizations, communities and interest groups that share the somewhat overwhelming concern
with what we have inherited from the past. This vast and sprawling industry is everywhere now – taking in Disneyland, city planning, tourism, the latest car from General Motors that reminds you of the great days of American motoring in the 50s and 60s.

The archaeological imagination is rooted in a sensibility, a pervasive set of attitudes towards traces and remains, towards memory, time, the very fabric of history. The focus of this sensibility and constitutive imagination is the persistence of the past, the articulation of remains of the past with the present, re-collecting, as a memory practice, bringing what is left of the past before the present, making it live again.

Click below for a link to my book of 2012.
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