

Afterlives of Fragments (Cambridge, 16 May 26)

University of Cambridge, UK, May 16, 2026

Registration deadline: May 16, 2026

Jiayao Jiang

Afterlives of Fragments: (Un)Making across anthropology, archaeology, art and architecture.
Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (CRASSH).

'Fragments' capture the incompleteness and unfinishedness of living and thinking in a fractured world. Amid climate crisis, conflict, technological disruption, and social uncertainty, fragment-s—ruins, partial archives, broken objects, unfinished narratives—persist not only as traces of loss, but also as sites of possibility. They demand renewed attention to what remains, and to what might yet be reassembled, reworked, or reimagined.

Rather than seeking a return to unity, 'Afterlives of Fragments' approaches fragmentation as a generative condition of knowledge-making. We turn to '(un)making' as both an analytic process and a practice, following the movements of matter and relations as they weather, fracture, and transform. By attending to how things come apart as much as how they come into being, (un)making recognizes that creation is inseparable from dissolution. Here, patchwork, montage, and assemblage emerge as critical modes of knowing, encouraging mess, productive dissonance, and open-ended becoming.

Bridging anthropology, archaeology, art, and architecture, we invite scholars, artists, and practitioners to engage with fragments not merely as objects of study, but as ways of thinking, sensing, and collaborating. As part of CRASSH's 25th anniversary programme, the event combines an interdisciplinary panel with an artistic workshop. Together, we seek to imagine how thinking and working with fragments can inspire new forms of inquiry, creativity, and community in a fractured world.

Programme

16 May 2026, 13:30–17:30

Room SG1, Alison Richard Building, Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (CRASSH), University of Cambridge and online

13:00-13:30: Arrival & registration

13:30-13:45: Welcome talk

Director of CRASSH Joanna Page & convenors

13:45-15:00: Interdisciplinary panel presentations

Lucie Carreau (Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge)

'Caring for Fragments and the Void in Between'

Elisabetta Scirocco (Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max Planck Institute for Art History, Rome)

‘Seeking for Fragments: The Fragment as a Tool for Decoding Complexity’

Chika Watanabe (Social Anthropology, University of Manchester)

‘An Anthropology of Survival: A Proposition from Disaster Preparedness and Patchwork Ethnography’

Rohit Jigyasu (International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property)

‘Rethinking Conservation Theory and Practice from the Lens of Uncertainty and Resilience’ (online)

15:00-15:10: Tea & coffee

15:10-15:50: Roundtable discussion + Q&A

Led by discussant Prof. Yael Navaro (Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge)

15:50-16:05: Tea & coffee

16:05-17:30: Art workshop ‘Everyday Ephemera’

Led by Anna Brownsted, Cambridge-based American interdisciplinary artist

More details: <https://www.crassh.cam.ac.uk/events/49751/#abstracts-and-contributors>

Registration will open soon.

Abstracts and Contributors

Interdisciplinary panel (13:45-15:00)

‘Caring for Fragments and the Void in Between’

The Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA) at the University of Cambridge is built on/of fragments. Founded in 1883 to support the teaching of the developing disciplines of archaeology and anthropology, it now cares for about a million objects, photographs and documents – fragments of peoples, places, epochs. In almost 150 years of existence, the Museum’s collections have inhabited many different spaces, passed through many hands, been scrutinised through many different lenses – events have themselves become fragments and generated new kinds of fragmentations. While the public-facing permanent galleries and special exhibitions articulate objects into a carefully curated, narrated and reflective space, backstage, the stores and archives tell a different story. At first glance the collections appear ordered, silent, contained. But opening a box or a digital catalogue record can unleash chaos, cacophony and contradictions.

This presentation draws on first-hand experience of what it means to work with objects and knowledge as fragments and fragmentary, to reveal how the discomfort of incompleteness can become a productive place where new connections are woven, and new approaches embraced. It considers how ‘unfit’ fragments – incomplete, incomprehensible, broken, disarticulated, unfinished, defaced, displaced, dissociated – that are often overlooked, can help us think ‘outside the box’,

both literally and metaphorically. It shows how many different versions of an object can exist simultaneously, alongside each other, overlapping, bifurcating, by reassembling fragments in different ways. This presentation reimagines the museum not as a place of authoritative knowledge production, but as a space of chaotic fluidity and endless possibilities.

Lucie Carreau (PhD) is an art historian specialised in Pacific material culture, with a wider interest in the history of collections and historical museum processes. Over the years, her object-centred and practical approach has led her to engage in both academic and technical roles at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA) at the University of Cambridge, fuelling her historical and contemporary enquiry into the role of museums in the shaping, creation and representation of collections, data and knowledge. Her work sits at the intersection of academia, museum practice, collections care and provenance research.

'Seeking for Fragments: The fragment as a tool for decoding complexity'

Fragments are not merely denied units; they represent a highly effective epistemological and hermeneutic lever. Far from viewing the fragment as a negative entity or a 'minus,' this presentation discusses the potential of the fragment as a 'plus,' as a tool for decoding complexity. It will explore how virtually isolating the fragment as a common denominator among different objects can become the key to understanding complex and stratified realities. By examining the fragment's role in various contexts, this paper aims to demonstrate how fragments can uncover hidden patterns and relationships. The presentation will draw on case studies from medieval art, to illustrate the practical applications of fragment-based decoding. Ultimately, this paper seeks to redefine the fragment as a positive and powerful tool for navigating and interpreting intricate and layered realities.

Elisabetta Scirocco (PhD in Art History) is Senior permanent researcher at the Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max Planck Institute for Art History, Rome/Italy. She is specialised in Italian mediaeval and early modern art and architecture. Her interests revolve around historical spaces and cultural heritage issues, focusing on questions of preservation, destruction, and reconstruction in their various forms. Her research focuses on the reconstruction of lost or fragmentary artefacts in their original spatial context, experimenting with digital technologies for the acquisition of cultural heritage and the modelling of reconstruction hypotheses.

'An Anthropology of Survival: A proposition from disaster preparedness and patchwork ethnography'

Along the Ring of Fire surrounding the Pacific Ocean, people live amidst the prospect of imminent, catastrophic earthquakes. Yet, disaster preparedness educators—local authorities, experts, NGO workers, and community leaders—lament that most lay citizens do not engage much with preparedness efforts. In an effort to increase public engagement, preparedness educators in Japan and Chile, two of the most seismic countries in the world, have turned to the power of play, using games and other fun activities to teach people preparedness skills. In this presentation, I outline what I call 'the logic of fragility' underpinning playful preparedness. Instead of the logic of securitization that tends to dominate preparedness thinking, playful preparedness educators accept that life is fragile, that a disaster, whether from a natural hazard or a personal loss, can devastate us, no matter what we do. Nevertheless, they use fun and playful methods to increase the chances of

survival for as many people as possible. This acceptance of life's fragility—its potential to fracture—while continuing to educate others has significance beyond preparedness. Patchwork ethnography is a proposal to consider how moments when research seems to fall apart—due to caring responsibilities, disabilities, or precarious employment—could be sites of knowledge production. Both the logic of fragility and patchwork ethnography present possibilities for an anthropology of survival, one that takes fragments as the conditions of our becoming.

Chika Watanabe is Senior Lecturer in Social Anthropology at the University of Manchester. Her research and teaching interests include disaster preparedness, international aid, play and creativity, and futurity. Her publications include *Play to Survive: Disaster Preparedness Along the Ring of Fire* (Stanford U Press, 2026) and *Becoming One: Religion, Development, and Environmentalism in a Japanese NGO in Myanmar* (U of Hawai'i Press, 2019).

'Rethinking Conservation Theory and Practice from the Lens of Uncertainty and Resilience'

The presentation challenges conventional conservation paradigms by situating heritage theory and practice within an era defined by uncertainty, rapid environmental change, and escalating disaster risks. Drawing on global examples—from floods and wildfires to sea-level rise and material degradation—it highlights how climate change and socio-economic transformations are fundamentally reshaping cultural heritage values, contexts, and material realities.

Moving beyond static notions of preservation, the presentation argues for a shift toward dynamic, forward-looking approaches that embrace change as an inherent condition of 'living heritage.' It critically examines how traditional conservation frameworks—often rooted in maintaining material authenticity and resisting change—are increasingly inadequate in addressing evolving risks and uncertainties. Instead, it proposes a resilience-oriented framework that integrates persistence, adaptability, and transformability, while also acknowledging the need to prepare for potential loss and regeneration.

Central to this rethinking is the concept of the 'heritage place,' which expands the focus from isolated sites to broader territorial, ecological, and socio-cultural systems. This approach underscores the interdependence of cultural and natural heritage, and the importance of cross-sectoral collaboration linking disaster risk reduction, climate action, and sustainable development.

The presentation further advocates a transition from reactive conservation to proactive scenario-building, enabling practitioners to anticipate multiple futures and define acceptable trajectories of change. By integrating traditional knowledge, community engagement, and innovation, conservation becomes not merely an act of safeguarding the past, but a continuous creative process that shapes resilient and sustainable futures.

Rohit Jigyasu is a conservation architect and risk management professional from India, currently working at ICCROM as Programme Manager on sustainable urban and built heritage conservation, disaster and climate risk management, and post-crisis recovery. Rohit served as UNESCO Chair holder professor at the Institute for Disaster Mitigation of Urban Cultural Heritage at Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto, Japan, where he was instrumental in developing and teaching the International Training Course on Disaster Risk Management of Cultural Heritage. He was elected President of ICOMOS-India (2014–2018) and President of the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on

Risk Preparedness (ICORP) (2010–2019), and served as Vice President of ICOMOS (2017–2020). Before joining ICCROM, Rohit worked with UNESCO, UNDRR, the Getty Conservation Institute, and the World Bank. He contributed to UNESCO's 2023 climate action policy for World Heritage and is the main author of the UNESCO Resource Manual on Managing Disaster Risks for World Heritage.

Convened by

Jiayao Jiang (Faculty of Modern and Medieval Languages and Linguistics, University of Cambridge)

Zihan Xu (Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge)

Reference:

CONF: Afterlives of Fragments (Cambridge, 16 May 26). In: ArtHist.net, Apr 29, 2026 (accessed May 27, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/52335>>.