

Nicky Bird

"What strikes me is the fact that in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life. That art is something which is specialized or which is done by experts who are artists. But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life?"

Michel Foucault

Nicky Bird investigates the contemporary relevance of found photographs, and hidden histories of specific sites. She has explored modern histories through photography, bookworks, the Internet and new media. She incorporates new photography with oral histories, genealogy, and collaborations with people who have significant connections to the original site, archive or artefact. Recent work includes *Tracing Echoes* (2001), *Question for Seller* (2006) and a major photographic commission from Stills Gallery, *Beneath the surface / Hidden Place* (2007-10).

For a period of months, Nicky has collaborated with the Peter Potter Gallery for *Archaeology of the Ordinary*, which received full funding from the Heritage Lottery Funding earlier this year. As part of the Gallery's *Lost Landscapes* programme, the project was conceived to interrogate the kind of archaeology that is often overlooked: that is the archaeology of ordinary lives. Nicky undertook a period of research and worked in close collaboration with archaeologist David Connolly and Maggie Struckmeier, who have expert knowledge of the archaeology of the region. Connolly and Struckmeier shared the story of Papple Farm Cottages, where during an archaeological survey the pair discovered hand-written messages on the cottage walls. This fragile graffiti was left by Irish itinerant workers in the 1940s-50s. For example, a K Boyle inscribes "we left Papple Farm on Thursday the 30th September 1954".

With these intriguing messages as a point of departure, Nicky took up the theme of farmers, their family history, and the role played by itinerant (or migrant) workers in East Lothian. This summer, she met with people who had stories to tell about the history of East Lothian farming, as well as their descendants. With the cottages in a state of dereliction, the recovered objects seen in this exhibition are remnants of a working life that has now changed beyond recognition.

The Surface of History

Like the strata of a rock, human history consists of layers. The archaeologist investigates these layers through excavation, going deeper through history. The nearest histories to us are on the surface, yet to be frozen in time for future generations to discover. And yet, archaeologists have a discourse with our recent past, as do historians, artists, writers and everyone interested in the evolution of our culture. We might be better equipped than ever before in terms of both knowledge and technology to record our history, but we also live in the most challenging era for this process to take place.

The objects in this exhibition are the archaeology of living memory, and yet they reflect a kind of life that has already surrendered to history. They are ordinary objects on the surface, but they demonstrate something important: *that the objects of human life are resonant, telling, suggestive*. It is in our hands to conserve the objects which future civilisations will learn from, but the detritus of modernity also needs analysed and recorded, made permanent through words, images and data. We have the most sophisticated tools for creating histories that the world has ever seen, and we must not overlook the ordinary.

We have just witnessed the fastest century humanity has ever experienced. In the space of a hundred years we have developed sophisticated transport, weapon and communication technologies which would, a mere century ago, have been the stuff of fiction. At the same time, the modern world follows the God of the New, our society a mechanised monster of consumption, our technologies and ideologies subject to constant update and improvement. Disposable culture leaves complex and enduring waste behind. The archaeologists of the future will deal with a history of plastics, metals and glass, of hard and enduring objects used only for days, weeks or months. Consider the objects in this exhibition as the archaeology of modernity; caught in a state of abandonment, existing but not functioning, like flies in amber.

Contemporary Art as Archaeology

At first glance, contemporary art and archaeology seem to run in opposite directions: archaeology concerned with human history and prehistory, contemporary art concerned with the most current creative ideologies of modern culture. However, history is not distant from us, a separate entity - rather it is joined to the present moment like a shadow. Once an artist makes a single mark on a page, it recedes into history, and thus even contemporary practice itself is concerned with history. Furthermore, beyond the issue of history versus contemporary, there is a deep and rich relationship between the practice of the artist and that of the archaeologist.

1) Site

The archaeologist, and the artist, mark out a site for investigation. The cultural landscape has the layered complexity of the archaeological site, and both the artist and the archaeologist have to read the features and finds within this.

2) artefact

Artists and archaeologists understand the narrative, symbolic and historic qualities of an object. On a practical level, some of the most telling objects discovered by archaeologists were created by artists of previous centuries. On a philosophical level, both search for an artefact that expresses, or contains, meaning.

3) excavation

The surface of a cultural landscape suggests what lies beneath: but any idea or concept needs interrogation in order to be fully realised. The artist's practice, like that of the archaeologist, is one of excavation and discovery.

4) history

What the archaeologist discovers through the investigation of sites and the recovery of artefacts forms the basis of historic propositions. What the artist discovers through the interrogation of a concept or process forms the basis of creative propositions.

For both the artist and the archaeologist, sites and objects are worthy of interrogation in order to further our cultural understanding.