



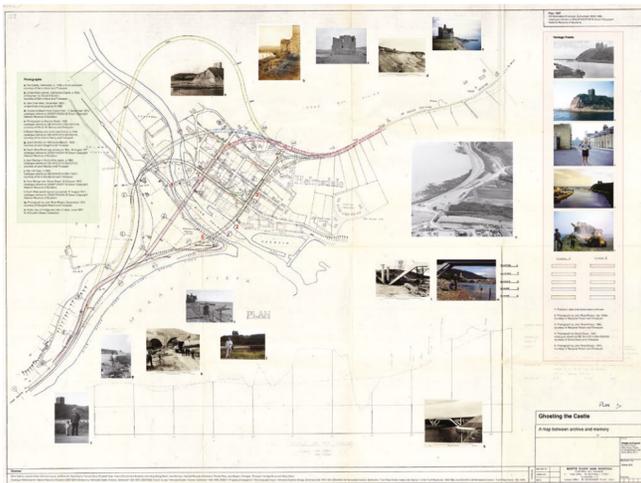
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SHIFTING PHOTOGRAPHIC GROUNDS NICKY BIRD IN CONVERSATION WITH ANNEBELLA POLLEN

The notion of shifting photographic grounds is central to Nicky Bird's projects. In conversation with the author Annabella Pollen, whose research is concerned with the themes of archives, material culture and photography, the artist reflects on the processes of her work.

AP: The title of your Street Level exhibition is 'Legacy'. It is a fitting word for a retrospective of more than fifteen years' work.

NB: The title communicates my recurring themes: history and memory, people and place. Each project centres on small or taken-for-granted sites that have ambivalent cultural status: fishing villages or utilitarian bridges as examples. These have not always been considered as sites of heritage in its monumental sense. 'Legacy' asks what we remember and who gets to create history. Some of the material I work with is also quite unassuming: postcards, amateur slides, family snapshots. It falls into the category of what you call the 'non-canonical'.

AP: I've similarly been interested in researching cultural material deemed marginal but which can be hugely productive as a means of communication. As you show, talking to people about personal photographs opens up extraordinarily rich discussions about memory and identity, especially in relation to places that have passed.

NB: Whether my research begins with or arrives at photographic images, the photograph is always central. In some cases, I work outwards from collections and in others photographs come later. For example, *Heritage Site* (2014-2016) was triggered by an Edwardian postcard in a private collection and the story of a house now buried under the Five Sisters Bings. *The Decorators* (2019-2020) started with a demolished pottery factory, where two industrial kilns remain among housing and wasteland. In conversation with Mairi Fortuna, a former ceramics decorator, she produced a colour photograph she had taken as a 17-year old in the factory yard. From the late 1960s, it features three decorators, all women, standing around an open window. A man looks out of the window, directly at the camera. This photograph had compelling pictorial qualities and came with stories about life-long friendships and gender dimensions in the workplace. Working out the relationship between such stories and photographs galvanises my projects.

AP: All your projects include personal photographs, archival material from local authority documents to genealogical records and the participation of community collaborators.

NB: My methods vary according to project. *Travelling the Archive* (2015-2016) worked with the Joan Wilcock collection of 35mm slides and a local history group in the village of Kyleakin on the Isle of Skye. An English tourist and regular visitor until the early 1970s, Wilcock photographed Kyleakin people and children. I wanted to bring the collection out of the Skye and Lochalsh Archive Centre and return it in various ways to Kyleakin. The collection had a very strong link to living memory. I retrieved contextual information from a group who put names to faces and also reflected on the historical changes they had witnessed. The slides formed a portrait of an island community before the bridge to the mainland was built. The collection was at the heart of social gatherings culminating in an event that projected selected images in key locations, guided walks and a souvenir booklet created collaboratively.

AP: Is your art practice the project development as well as the parts that look most visual?

NB: I think so. My role as an artist is often to act as an instigator, to help these processes happen. The art is the catalyst as well as the result. For some participants, the final artworks might not be the most important outcome: the opportunities to reflect on local histories and share personal memories might be what they value most. I also convey the wider themes to audiences not personally connected to the original materials and that has been really important when putting this show together for Street Level.



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AP: That private / public dynamic is significant. The layering of voices and official and unofficial narratives gives your projects their particular power. In 'Beneath the Surface / Hidden Place' (2007-2010), well-worn photographs of the former inhabitants of spaces now dramatically altered visualise places as palimpsests. They remind us that locations are always more than topography. Spaces are socially produced. I value that you share co-authorship of the composite images with the photographer of the print you incorporate.

NB: Since about 1996, I've worked primarily with other people's photographs as starting points. My work is not autobiographical, although my motivations – about who and what deserves to be culturally valued – comes into play. I really cherish photography's relationship with oral histories. It enables people to piece fragments together for themselves to reflect on what the past means in the present. Listening is a core strategy. It helps me understand what is meaningful for participants so I am not the sole driver. From there I work imaginatively with imagined places that no longer exist.

AP: 'Ghosting the Castle' (2017) does exactly that by compiling memories of Helmsdale Castle, demolished in 1970. While there is a commemorative stone marking where the 15th century castle once stood, your map provides alternative perspectives and new routes. I was moved by the way that the ruined monument, now gone, was depicted in personal photographs almost as a member of the extended family, or as another home alongside terraced houses. It shows how history is integrated into everyday lives. You approach the term nostalgia with caution but the reflexive aspects of nostalgia critique a simple understanding of the past as a better place. Sophisticated art practice, such as yours, can use these aspects to create critical engagement.

NB: Nostalgia plays a role in how people look back, but nostalgia is not only about sweetness. It has bite. My collaborators often talk about loss. This can be a physical change to a landscape but also the domino effect of what else gets abandoned when areas are developed or gentrified. Change is not neutral. I've worked with people who are insistent that stories need to be told and places and people need to be remembered. I provide a space to give status and visibility to those memories. That's why the statement in the exhibition, 'We are social history' is so important. It was made by Ruth McDougall one of the project participants in *Travelling the Archive*. It encapsulates how people make history, and how their experiences should be valued.

Nicky Bird considers contemporary relevances of 'found' photographs and latent histories of specific sites, investigating how they remain resonant. Her work incorporates new photography, oral histories and collaborations with people who have significant connections to the original site and its photographic archive. Alongside commissioned projects, she has exhibited nationally and internationally, published essays on themes of erased place and digital exchange of photographs. Nicky is a Reader in Contemporary Photographic Practice at The Glasgow School of Art.

Dr Annabella Pollen is a Reader in History of Art and Design, University of Brighton. Her publications include the books *Mass Photography: Collective Histories of Everyday Life* (2015), *Photography Reformed: New Visions in Contemporary Photographic Culture* (2018, co-edited with Ben Burbridge) and chapters in *The Handbook of Photography Studies: The Companion to Photography and Photography Off the Scale* (all 2020).

1, 2 — Nicky Bird, *Travelling the Archive*, 2016 / 2020
With Kyleakin Local History Society: Kyleakin, Isle of Skye
Featuring the Joan Wilcock Collection, 1959-1973
Courtesy of Skye and Lochalsh Archive Centre

3 — Nicky Bird, *Ghosting the Castle*, 2017 / 2020
Photograph by John Ross Polson, late 1960s (detail)
Courtesy of Margaret Polson and Timespan

4 — Nicky Bird, *Ghosting the Castle: A Map between Archive and Memory*, 2017
With Timespan Heritage Group: Helmsdale, Sutherland

5 — Nicky Bird, *Beneath the Surface / Hidden Place*, 2007-2010
With Mary Kennedy: Lethanhill, circa 1930s / 2008

6 — Nicky Bird, *Sites of Personal Archaeology*, 2005-2010 / 2020
Photograph of John Yeoman and his brother, circa 1930s
Courtesy of East Lothian Council Museums Service

7 — Nicky Bird, *Heritage Site*, 2014-2016 / 2020
With The Calder History Group: West Calder, West Lothian

8 — Nicky Bird, *The Decorators*, 2019-2020
Photograph by Mairi Fortuna, late 1960s
Courtesy of Mairi Fortuna

Front — Nicky Bird, *Beneath the Surface / Hidden Place*, 2007-2010
With Lesley Weir: Ardler, Dundee, circa 1977-78 / 2007

Back — Nicky Bird, *Heritage Site*, 2014-2016 / 2020
With The Calder History Group: West Calder, West Lothian



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