

Artist as Listening Post Nicky Bird

Introduction

My practice has usually involved a combination of new and ‘found’ photography, working closely with people who have particular relationships with specific archives and places I have become increasingly aware of the role that listening plays during the art process. The experience of an artist listening is not as straightforward as it might seem. In fact, it is full of ambiguities. The phrase ‘listening post’ with its defensive, even military connotations - implies the gathering of information by surreptitious means. As the dictionary will tell you, this act summons up notions of secrecy, and operation by stealth, or other improper means. The artist’s agenda or motivation for being at the listening post may seem innocuous enough: being motivated by nothing more than the creation of works of art, which eventually go into the public domain, added to the CV and so on.

I will use experiences drawn from two projects, *Beneath the Surface/Hidden Place* (2007-2009) and *Unsorted Donations* (2010). These help articulate two positions of the artist as stranger: one by self-appointment (the self-initiated project), while the other by invitation (the artist residency). While both projects reflect my on-going concerns with the theme of hidden history, my discussion of these positions aims to help tease out wider ethical questions raised by artistic use of narratives, stories, and anecdotes of collaborators told informally during the art process.

At the Listening Post: the Self-appointed Stranger



Lethanhill, Doon Valley, East Ayrshire, 2007

Let us begin with a journey into a remote landscape of bracken grass, farm tracks, and a small dense forest, on a sunny December day. The location, Lethanhill, is in Doon Valley in East Ayrshire, Scotland. It may seem unremarkable but a ruin and a war memorial in the distance are immediate clues to its history.¹To get to these clues and their meaning one is dependent on others, so the two people behind whom I am walking are my guides in more ways than one.

The photographic project *Beneath the Surface/Hidden Place* sets out to locate people as a way of finding family photographs, to explore the physical and emotional effects of economic change and regeneration. This eventually involved close collaboration with individuals and communities across Scotland over a two-year period. The image gives a sense of one of the project’s locations, all of which were on the ‘periphery’ of Scotland’s major cities or rural towns.

Being on the periphery has connotations, including what is outside the photographic frame, which nevertheless, as Roland Barthes has shown,² shape the reading of images and the art process of which they are part. These are narratives prompted by what is now missing from the landscape;

in this case, an entire village. These narratives are solicited by absence but they are also readings of landscapes that combine deep local knowledge with personal anecdotes and family history. They become what Michel Foucault would call the ‘involuntary background’ that reverberates to larger narrative.³ One example is the mining past of Doon Valley, where one of the project’s collaborators was a miner all his working life. The ‘Bings’ – to use my collaborator’s term to describe the mining waste deposited in this post-industrial rural landscape – make evident labour and social histories, even as they are reclaimed by nature. These are held in the above photographic image, although other anecdotes (such as relatives returning the ashes of their loved ones to these sites) have no obvious visible traces.

Locally known as ‘one of the lost villages’, Lethanhill is an example of how stories of private memorial are in turn connected to labour history. My description of this journey indicates how such narratives function: some are on a pictorial level, others more oral. Some translate into final photographs or works of art and many others don’t. These narratives are also not formally recorded and told to – for example – the social historian. The methods of oral history and the ethical approaches that this discipline brings with it, particularly on the issue of informed consent, are absent. Yet they shape an artist’s methodology, at both conscious and unconscious levels.⁴



The inspiration for the journey to Lethanhill is a family photograph that was taken sometime in the 1930s. It is not mine, but that of my ‘collaborator’ Mary Kennedy, the woman in the red jacket. We are going into the forest, returning to the place where she grew up, before the pit was closed and the village abandoned. At the edge of the forest, under Mrs Kennedy’s direction, I set the camera up on a tripod. She is looking at a photograph of her mother, taken before she was born, and studies the landscape for the place where her mother once stood. The first shots are judged to be in the wrong place, so we go deeper into the forest. Mrs Kennedy orientates herself and the photograph of her mother through the small remnants of a building: she does the same thing when we work on the laptop, directing the placement of her family photograph in the new one. From location to studio, this emphasises the artist’s reliance on an insider’s memory, knowledge, and experience when looking at a location when all previous reference points have gone. As Elizabeth Edwards has argued, the family ‘snap’ is not simply a visual artefact: it is a tactile and discursive tool for reminiscence, detection, and speculation.⁵



Nicky Bird & Mary Kennedy: Lethanhill, Dunaskin
Middle Pad, Lethanhill, perhaps c. 1930, Lethanhill, 2008

The twenty-four digital montages that constitute this body of work would have not be possible without collaboration, and a level of co-authorship acknowledges this. It may be tempting to argue that the resulting montages give a visual, aesthetic answer to the question of how one can listen to an other; but the claims of collaboration and co-authorship rapidly bring with them the cautionary voice of Dave Beech; in his thought-provoking article 'Include me Out!' Beech interrogates the terms participation and collaboration.⁶ He is not so much taking artists (such as Jeremy Deller⁷) to task, or critiquing specific works, as raising questions with wider implications as participation becomes common currency in contemporary art practice. Beech builds a framework that includes Clare Bishop, Jacques Rancière, Jacques Derrida, and Judith Butler. In moving through issues such as choice, agency, and authorship, Beech comes to this distinction between participation and collaboration:

The rhetoric of participation often conflates participation with collaboration to head off such questions. Collaborators, however, are distinct from participants insofar as they share authorial rights over the artwork that permit them [...] to make fundamental decisions about key structural features of the work.⁸

Beech finally concludes: 'Outsiders pay a high price for their participation, namely, the neutralisation of their difference and the dampening of their powers of subversion'.⁹ This challenges what may be the assumptions of a 'socially engaged' artist on subjects such as work-as-property, authorship, and aesthetics. By spelling out the differences between participant and collaborator, and defining the participant/collaborator as the outsider, Beech underlines the artist's privileged position, which maintains a conservative status quo and curtails any transgressive potential. So after this bruising assessment, where next?

Let us take Beech's clarity and now shift from collaboration to participation, as we move now from forest to archive, from the self-initiated project to an artist's residency, from photography to sound.

At the Listening Post: the Invited-in Stranger



The Archive, Glasgow Women's Library, 2010

The site-specific sound work *Unsorted Donations* emerged from a part-time six-month artist residency at the Glasgow Women's Library.¹⁰ the time of the residency, the Library was in a temporary location and about to move into Glasgow's Mitchell Library. Originally set up in 1991, the Library has a strong grassroots identity. It is made up of largely uncatalogued donations in addition to housing other resources such as the Lesbian Archive. This photograph shows the particularly challenging context for an artist who would normally look for a found photograph to trigger new work. It is no coincidence that listening – and the medium of sound – rather than a visual artifact had to form the basis for a new artistic strategy as a realistic engagement with archival material was not practically possible.

It became apparent that photography was not going to do it this time. We need once again to momentarily step outside the archive's photographic frame: I am standing with a camera on a tripod, the exposures are long, and I become aware that the archive is surrounded by noise: classes for the life long learners, women learning English, private mobile calls. There are points when listening becomes listening in, I am eavesdropping on the conversations of women unaware of my presence. There are obvious ethical questions, how not to violate privacy, for one. Yet the surround-sound of women's lives seems to resonate rather poignantly with the five-hundred silent boxes.

During a month while I was away ambient recordings were made from the archive three times a week, at specific times. The time, date, and activity were noted in a Sound Experiment Log:

12 February 2010
2–3 p.m.: Volunteer in the archive, moving boxes

17 February 2010
11–12 p.m.: sweeping, spraying, footsteps, staff talking

These written entries convey factual practicalities: the sound recordings evoke an atmosphere of surveillance.



This kind of listening was taking me in the wrong direction. Then the breakthrough comes with an interview with Hannah Little, the Library's first archivist, who has the job of cataloguing, organising, and formalising an organic, eclectic archive that is created by feminism's personal-is-political activism. She walks me through the archive, and afterwards I make these edited interview notes:

March 2010

Not a consistent story. Gaps, Diversions
 Lack of Context. Need to track provenance
 Things getting muddled
 Important stories. Why something is kept. Can we look after it?
 Is it worth keeping?
 Usability
 New deposit. Living Subjects
 Ethics of the kept – privacy, data protection
 What gets weeded out [Appraisal]?
 Some material more vulnerable than others
 Struggle for existence
 Expectations of knowing the archive, impossibility
 Unhelpful, 'unsorted donations', could be anything
 Also don't like: 'miscellaneous'
 Floods – make rescue plan

This extract is more than a loose summary of the interview: it illustrates a scenario in which the artist finds herself listening to the dreams and dilemmas of the archivist. It reminds us that archives are charged places, where the archivist manages practicality on one side and sentiment on the other. I recognise this tension, one that accompanies working with found photographs. In a revealing moment in the interview, I can be heard repeating the words 'miscellaneous, unsorted donations' after Hannah Little has just pointed to the labels on a number of boxes and expressed the problem these words present for her work. Yet at this moment, they are to me as artist productively suggestive. These notes then reveal shared interests, methods, and motivations as well as differences. However, the phrase 'unsorted donations' within these notes brings the figure of the donor (known or otherwise) to the fore. They also indicate another figure, the user. The archivist knows that it is desire and imagination that gets the user of the archive through its door and she is always thinking of users of the future, what they need to find out and why. This is where the donor comes in. The decision to donate shows they too are thinking of users of the future, and how to make the mute

boxes 'speak' was becoming clear:

In a series of one to one recorded interviews, I asked ten women connected to the Library its users, volunteers, staff to bring in an object that was important to them and imagine they were donating it to the archive. A production of a list here (which included a ceremonial military jacket, a dupata, a gold steel watch, and a knitted toy clown) cannot convey the richness of difference in these, carried in voices, accents, and intonation shaped by class, nationality, and so on. One consistent issue worth commenting on here is that these stories about a personal object often included stories about other objects they wished they had kept but had not; this extended the theme of absence and how the residency could work with this.

The participants of what was to become *Unsorted Donations* were to return to Dave Beech distinct from the collaborators of *Beneath the Surface* in that they had no opportunity to direct what would become the 'key features' of the work. However, given the combination of personal stories and for some, the unfamiliarity of becoming part of a work of art, the closing event of the residency in June 2010 had to prioritise the participants who had been so generous with their stories. It felt inappropriate to have an art opening in the usual sense, and most of the participants would have no idea what had been done with their voices and stories until they came to the event. The interviews were edited to very short extracts, installed as hidden sound pieces inside boxes and dispersed throughout the archive: in short, a very different way of listening to the sound of one's voice.

The solution came with staging the work in the archive itself, and a series of 'guests' were invited to make an appointment at the archive. Each guest made her own way through the archive, following the sound of voices coming from the boxes. This is the moment when the participant, now audience member, takes the place of the artist at the listening post. She might hear perhaps laughter, a kettle boiling, a musical jewellery box, along with:

when my mum dies, that's an end of an era and none of us will be back in the house so we are going to take the banister ... and we are going to do something with it ... would it be wrong to divide it up I don't know ... it's all that connection with one touch you are back in the past with people.¹¹

NOTES

1. For another stranger's reading of this landscape, see Ray McKenzie, 'Si Monumentum Requirit, Circumspice: commemoration and loss at Lethanhill', in Nicky Bird, *Beneath the Surface / Hidden Place*, Edinburgh: Stills, 2010, pp. 11–14.
2. See two seminal texts by Roland Barthes [1957, 1980], 'Myth Today', in *Mythologies*, tr. by Annette Lavers, London: Vintage, 1993, pp. 109–159, and *Camera Lucida*, tr. by Richard Howard, London: Vintage, 1993. In the former, Barthes famously discusses the signifiers and signifieds of a *Paris Match* cover with a black French soldier 'saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolour', pp.115–16. In the latter, it is the *punctum*, an incidental detail of a photograph that 'wounds', pp.43–45, and 'takes the spectator outside of the frame[...]', p. 59. Looking at a photograph outside its frame with Barthes is therefore to encounter the process of myth and mourning.
3. Michel Foucault (1966), *The Order of Things*, London: Routledge 2001. Foucault includes in this 'the analysis of impressions, of reminiscence, of imagination, of memory [...]', p.77.
4. Some of these thoughts were initially discussed in an unpublished paper 'Returning home: what do with multi and mute narratives?', for the conference *Framing Time and Pace: Repeats & Returns in Photography*; University of Plymouth, 15–17 April 2009.
5. Elizabeth Edwards, 'Thinking photography beyond the visual?', *Photography: Theoretical Snapshots*, ed. by Jonathan J. Long, Andrea Noble, and Edward Welch, Oxon: Routledge, 2009, pp. 31–48.
6. Dave Beech, 'Include Me Out!', *Art Monthly*; No. 315, 2008, pp. 1–4.
7. Beech refers to Deller in passing. However, Deller's seminal work *The Battle of Orgreave* was reviewed by Beech in *Art Monthly*; no. 248, 2001. There is more to say about participation, politics, Beech, and Deller; so it is pertinent for the reader to keep in mind *The Battle of Orgreave's* companion publication *The English Civil War II: Personal Accounts of 198–85 Miners Strike*, London: Artangel, 2001.
8. Beech, 'Include Me Out!', p. 3.
9. Beech, 'Include Me Out!', p. 4.
10. Sound extracts were played at the *Transmission: Hospitality* conference.
11. Pauline Healey, extract from interview with the author, 2010.