

Of the Earth: art, design, writing and the environment
Nicky Bird, Glasgow School of Art



On a Scottish Rural Edge (312 words)

My contribution centres on a specific landmark in Scotland known as the ‘Five Sisters’ on the edge of West Calder, a small town in West Lothian. 240 metres high, the Five Sisters are spoil heaps, products of a long gone oil shale mining industry. They have since been the subject of Land Art, Geo-Science, and community-led town planning.

In 1976, artist John Latham declared these shale bings to be works of art, invoking the name of Marcel Duchamp and the ready-made. His work [Derelict Land Art: Five Sisters](#), 1976, was included in the 2013-2014 Hayward touring show *Uncommon Ground: Land Art in Britain 1966-1979*. In the accompanying catalogue, the curators argue how ecology – understood through Latham’s piece - could now ‘be seen as primarily time-based... rather than merely spatial or material.’ This resonates with recent fieldwork of environmental ecologists such as [Barbra Harvie](#), who have studied how shale bings have become ‘home to rare and protected plant and animal species and are a major focus of identity in the local population.’ The West Calder Community Action Plan 2013-2018 provide further evidence of such observations through its direct community engagement and identifies how the environment of the area is a key theme for future development, with the ‘aim to use the past as a springboard for renewal.’

This indicates the context for my latest photography project currently in development. I have been working in West Calder over the last year, and photography has been a form of fieldwork steered by a particular group from the local community. For some members in the group, the Five Sisters holds memories of a house and its surrounding garden of Rhododendron flowers. This house was not demolished but simply buried in the bings. Consequently, my paper will be attempt to map layered histories, divergent practices and shifting environmental politics that the Five Sisters have come to embody.

Conference themes: The Living Landscape; Materialities; Creative-critical papers

Nicky Bird is an artist whose work investigates the contemporary relevance of found photographs, their archives and specific sites. She has explored this through new photography, bookworks, and the Internet creating artworks that make visible the process of collaboration with people who have significant connections to a hidden history. Her latest project *Peripheral Visions: Photography & Placemaking at Scotland’s Rural Edge* proposes to bring together the themes of land, photography and other interdisciplinary practices to enable dialogue about pasts and futures related to Scotland’s ‘fragile’ rural communities. Recent exhibitions include *Family Ties; Reframing Memory*, The Peltz Gallery, London (July 2014); *Seduced by Art: Photography Past and Present*, National Gallery, London & CaixaForum Barcelona, Madrid (2012-13); *21 Revolutions*, CCA, Glasgow & The Royal Scottish Academy, Edinburgh (2012-13). Published works include [Beneath the Surface/Hidden Place](#) (Edinburgh: Stills, 2010), and ‘Looking a Gift Horse in the Mouth: Generosity and the Digital Exchange of Family Photographs’ in [The Photograph and The Album: Histories, Practices, Futures](#) edited by Jonathan Carson, Rosie Miller & Theresa Wilkie (MuseumsEtc, 2013). Nicky is a PhD Co-Coordinator at the Glasgow School of Art. She is also a member of The Family Ties Network, a research group of writers and artists.

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