

## Ordinary subjects which in their ordinariness are extraordinarily representative.

This talk originally was given as part of 'Towards a Museum of Contemporary Farming' at the Science Museum, London on June 23<sup>rd</sup> 2016. The event was designed and chaired by artist Georgina Barney and hosted by the Science Museum and Katrin Bohm's Haystacks, rural international art discussion group.

The evening examined the museum's 1950s dioramas in the Agriculture Gallery: as a guest speaker I was invited to suggest a contribution towards a possible new 'Museum of Contemporary Farming' to reflect upon the way agriculture has been represented in the public realm, and might be in the future.

Hello, I am Kate Genever. I'm an artist and a farmer which, according to my Dad, also a farmer, makes me a Fartist.<sup>1</sup>

I have written this talk and due to also sorts of stuff – including trying to bale between the down pours, I haven't managed to learn it so I apologise in advance as I'm having to read it. What I'm going to do is do a quick canter through some ideas, show you 2 examples of my work, offer a further bit of thinking and then sum it up beautifully - I hope.

*Ordinary subjects which in their ordinariness are extraordinarily representative*<sup>2</sup> is a line from John Berger in the book *About Looking*. It refers to the content of some Paul Strand's photographs: people and the land, their doings - how they-go-on-in-the-world stuff. I think this is what I'm interested in as an artist: people, land, doings.....



Instar: 90cm x 90cm. Watercolour.

A recent watercolour painting I made shows ceramic shards/crocs found in the fields at home. What I like is that those shards, originally hewn from the earth into pots, were cast aside when broken back into the soil. It's an act of recycling – they reveal our/the world's

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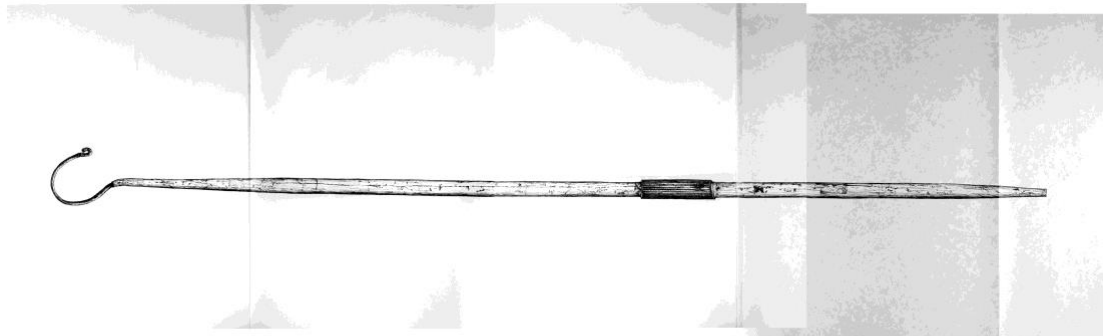
<sup>1</sup> Farson was a colloquial name given to Parsons who also farmed on church land – Glebe farms

<sup>2</sup> Berger. John. *About Looking*. Vintage International New York. 1991. Page 46

continuum. A metaphor further encouraged by their composition, suggesting perhaps the very start or maybe it's the very end? Most of the fragments feature rural landscapes or plants, lots are of the Willow pattern. One viewer commented how they *like the idea of not only fragments of fired earth being worked back into the ground, but also fragments of images of rural idylls being worked into the ground too, and then dug up again. It sets up a tension between imagined rural representations and actual experience.*<sup>3</sup> I called the painting Instar, which is the word for the developmental phase in an insect's life when it casts a skin to transform into something new. I think we are always Instar.

The anthropologist Tim Ingold<sup>4</sup> is the only academic, I've found, who seems to see 'what' its like. What's the 'what' you ask...? The being both an artist and a farmer. He recognises the: how we do; the one foot in front of the other; the making things work, responsive nature of it all. I used to think what my Dad did, what I did, what other farmers did as being creative, born of bodging or making do. I now think this word or description is not quite enough, a better description is *Improvisatory*. He, me, we, all improvise, are always improvising. Improvisation is about feeling and knowing and responding and comes-from really dwelling somewhere<sup>4</sup>.

Ingold says, and I paraphrase: *There is no script for social or cultural life. People have to work out as they go along. They have to improvise. There are 4 main points to improvisation: It's generative, it's relational – it's responsive to others, it's Temporal - meaning it can't be collapsed in an instant and finally it is the way we work*<sup>5</sup>.



Crook. 76cm x 2.3 m. Ink on Paper.

Here is a drawing to think on that point: it's our farm crook, used mostly at lambing time. It like many other tools used at Croft Farm was made by my Dad. It's a converted Javelin: an aluminum javelin with an added wrought iron loop. It was born after we tidied one of the many stuffed to the edges sheds. We were trying to clear out to make way for something else and I said *what the hell do we need this for?* A few days later the crook appeared. We laughed and have used it ever since - it's long and light, plus if you can't catch the lamb you can always lob it at it!

But why is the crook important here? Yes it's a beautiful 'made' thing that could have only come from our yard at that time because of need and in response to our experiences, our lives.... But it's important because it allows us to think on this place [The Science Museum] and proposed new museums and new collections. The Science Museum is for me a whole place of mostly improvisations. It's full of stuff that has come from people working things out

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<sup>3</sup> Ben Stringer. 2017

<sup>4</sup> Edward Casey. *The Fate of Place*. California. University of California Press. 1998. Page 282

<sup>5</sup> Tim Ingold and Elizabeth Hallam. *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation*. Berg. Oxford. 2007. Introduction page 1

as they go, based on an often innate, embodied knowledge grown from being truly embedded in a place or industry. As Ingold says the *improvisational world is one that is crescent rather than created, in that it is always in the making*.<sup>6</sup> For me that's what the Crook talks of and what a contemporary farming display should talk of, should declare.

Another anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, a British man who apparently got stuck on Papua New Guinea between the wars wrote a book in 1922 with a great title – *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. It's about the Kula and their boats. One bit in it that seems important and relevant tonight given what I've just said is: *A canoe is an item of material culture and as such it can be described, photographed and even bodily transported into a museum. But and this is the truth too often overlooked - the ethnographic reality of the canoe would not be brought much nearer to a student at home, even by placing a perfect specimen right before him. The canoe is made for a certain use and with a definite purpose; it is a means to an end and we who study native life must not reverse this relation and make a fetish of the object itself.... for a craft whether bark or wood, iron or steel, lives in the life of its sailors and it is more to a sailor than a mere bit of shaped matter*.<sup>7</sup>

Which as a text became fundamental in my reasoning for not collecting the real objects, the real crook. Instead I draw the tools I find: they can carry on then in the world being used, lost, worn out etc. I hope the 'more' that Malinowski talks of is the love, use value, favourite-ness expressed through the care in which I look, how I draw and the stories I glean of the object. This is what I think Malinowski meant - the 'what's missing' is all the stuff around the boat, the person, their emotional connection to their tools, their stories of life of making or knowing the river and so on. This approach asks us to think deeply about the connectedness, between man, land and doings... - without this the boat is a readymade only.

I had a revelation, a realization, as I wrote this talk, that ultimately it doesn't matter what we show in the new 'Museum of Contemporary Farming' - whether things are old or new or representations or real - because we can never really reveal the love, care, value, usefulness, the relationships, the connection, the experience and understanding between a man, his tools, the land and his doings. And therefore, I propose for inclusion not a specific object but an approach or a focus, that of *Improvisation*. I suppose what I'm saying is, that what needs to be present and perhaps what's impossible to capture is the life around a thing, the land or the industry....the idea that everything is connected, the feeling, the love, the disappointment, success, failure, the coping and way of working born from knowing and going on. It goes back also to Ingold and the idea that the world is always in the making. As such *Improvisation*, which *celebrates the freedom of human imagination to transcend the determinations of both nature and society*<sup>8</sup> is the perfect accession-able idea. Or as Helen Mirren playing Sofia Tolstoy in the film *The Last Station* says to her husband - "You are the work of my life and I am the work of yours"

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<sup>6</sup> Tim Ingold and Elizabeth Hallam. *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation*. Berg, Oxford. 2007. Introduction Page 5.

<sup>7</sup> Malinowski. Bronislaw. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. Illinois: Wakeland PressInc, 1984. Page 105.

<sup>8</sup> Tim Ingold and Elizabeth Hallam. *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation*. Berg, Oxford. 2007. Introduction Page 8