

Caught Looking

Nicky Hirst

Dash Gallery

April 1993

Between the ages of 2-7 years old Nicky Hirst lived in Kenya. In April 1993 I returned with Nicky to discuss her recent work.

After the eight and a half hour flight from Heathrow, Nicky and I finally arrive in Nairobi where we are enthusiastically Jambo-ed, (Swahili for hello), by our driver who takes us out into the savannah where the recent rains have transformed the landscape into a mass of exotic flowers. As we bump along the dusty roads I dream of seeing hippo's bathing in mud, vultures circling over a distant horizon and lions lazing in equatorial splendour. As a child, this is the landscape where Nicky held chameleons and as we head towards her old house on the outskirts of the city, it begins to dawn on me how even the buildings blend in with their natural environment like a polite collage of local materials.

As we step up to the battered veranda and begin to talk about the Dash Gallery some 3000 miles away, Nicky recalls how she once spoke Swahili – a language completely lost to her now. I begin to realise how sensory her memory is. How she refers to the taste of the fish, the smell of the bougainvillea and the sounds of the bush. Spotting a secretary bird on a telegraph wire, she imagines it tapping into a phone conversation, translating the vibrations between its feet for other birds to hear.

Hirst's acute sensory observations will ultimately feed her work. In this show, for example, a hand clap in the empty gallery has initiated drawings covering a large section of the wall with an illustration of its own audio illusion. Through pattern and repetition the drawings then become tricky. Once hands in the act of clapping they begin to appear as sign language, in addition to which, the reproduction of a nearby box, (concealing an electrical junction in the wall), lends a hi-fi speaker element. Placing the work in a world where speech and nonspeech collide. As with Hirst's rendition of the "notorious 'Rabbit or Duck'", (a visual test with two distinct readings), both representations can be recognised but not without cost to each other.

"What is hard . . . is to swap readings in mid-course and read the design as alternating rabbits or ducks. The difficulty confirms the role which scanning for redundancies plays in the perception of order".

Gombrich, *The Sense of Order*.

The exchange of readings in Hirst's work from one hemisphere to the next, is revealed in the relationship it has to itself and the building. The electrical wiring in one piece might well read broom or alternatively rake, (in which case, both readings are competing internally for each other's redundancy), while the work involving plug sockets is so muted that its ability to go unnoticed induces a higher perception of the building. (Thus competing externally).

Having to scan the building for art, or vice versa, makes even the ubiquitous fire extinguisher a potentially loaded form. Aware of this, Hirst outwits any droll remarks with a Donald Judd impersonation, humorously lopped off to incorporate such a municipal item.

The temptation here is to surmise the work as being site-specific. I ask Nicky to tell me why I think it's not.

"I knew I'd only have two weeks to install the show, therefore I thought I'd make a time consuming piece (Rabbit or Duck) which I could go in there with, and then, out of the corner of my eye I could see how the space operates over the course of a week. So in one case the work was formulated, but with all the others I allowed myself to digress".

One such digression appears above a staircase, (leading to washroom's), which is shielded by a waist high wall preventing people from inadvertently falling down. Those who ascend from below are revealed head first and up to the waist before they reappear, intact, within the confines of the gallery. This has been translated as a woman's lavatory sign, spread over two boxes, indicating that she has been sawn in half or broken by the framing of the wall. Having considered the imminent disaster of being visually decapitated, there is an adjacent box resembling a first aid cabinet, becoming the place where this poor unfortunate can go to be repaired.

At this point in our discussion, we are interrupted by the toot-toot of a car. In the fading light our driver has returned, signalling our departure, and as we leave the veranda I see the moon overhead as I've never seen it before. Due to the temperature and atmospheric clarity of the night sky, even the crater walls are made visible and as the sound of distant drumming wafts over the plain, we remain paralysed in awe.

At the age of 7 Nicky Hirst left Kenya and moved to Leeds.

Gregor Muir 1993.