

**The making of the *Lumsden Biscuit* an international story
Chronicling an artist's approach
by Annie Nicholson | March 2016**

What it's all about?

The launch of the 'Lumsden Biscuit' – a locally sourced and crafted shortbread in the village of Lumsden - illustrates a bold negotiation across traditional food, contemporary art, and rural regeneration and how these came together to create new strategies for ecological awareness and sustainable economies.

Started by Canadian artist, Sylvia Grace Borda, the Lumsden biscuit – is the world's first photo-inspired food product. The artist spent time chronicling and sharing her photographic works, photograms of local flora with the Lumsden community.

In dialogue the artist and the community came together to embrace her unusual approach to use the photogram plant images to serve as imprints for the shortbread biscuit moulds. Borda realized while typically shortbread is not a platform for illustrating landscape or flora there was an opportunity for Lumsden village to present a unique product about its own local area. Thus, what seems as banal images of flora becomes a direct point of dialogue about Scottish ecological environments, community knowledge, and challenging how Scottish traditional food fayre can evolve. Borda crafted bespoke shortbread patterns for the Lumsden community and together the artist and the village have worked to launch the 'Lumsden biscuit'

Why biscuits? Why a Canadian approach?

Biscuits, also known as 'cookies' in English parlance have been under-estimated in their historic and contemporary role in local economic regeneration, the environmental cause and community resilience.

Of note, *Girl Guide cookies* were sold in Canada as early as 1927 as a means to fundraise for young girls and women in the *Girl Guide* organisations to support their community and civic activities, such as local environmental conservation and ecological awareness. In this way, the *Girl Guide* clover-shaped biscuit has also become a platform for ecological debate and discussion – with young guides inviting the commercial producers of their secret cookie recipes to start thinking for instance to source locally produced ingredients, as well as those free from GMO and trans-fat free products.

For the artist the *Girl Guide* biscuit is a unique staple in the Canadian psyche and its connections with environmental learning activities. This extends to the *Brownies* – the younger girls group (ages 7-11) within the *Girl Guides Association*. The Canadian Brownie Law is a testament to the guiding principle of the wider Association, namely, "I help take care of the world around me".

The *Brownie* name is originally linked to the mischievous *Brownies*, who were according to Scottish folklore a set of wee people known for their kindheartedness and civic spirit. The Brownies and their acts of kindness and curiosity were extended into a whole new set of stories by Canadian artist and children's author, Palmer Cox (1840-1924). From 1878-1904 Palmer Cox wrote nearly exclusively about the *Brownies*. Cox's *Brownie* characters also further embraced 19th Century technological advancements from riding hot air balloons to attending the Chicago World's Fair to experience the latest inventions. The Brownies offered readers rhyme, reasons, and adventures. They became in the Western world one of the most popular set of children's characters, and were akin in fame and notoriety to today's Mickey Mouse character.

This highly popular set of characters were selected to become the namesake of Eastman Kodak's *Brownie camera* when it was launched at the turn of the century. George Eastman, owner and Kodak manufacturer, realized that to add appeal to youth, an association with Cox's *Brownie* characters was imperative and in keeping with the Brownies' sense of adventure and exploration of the man-made and natural worlds. Eastman's big sell of the 'Brownie' camera was that it not only could be used by children, but avoided the need for chemical processing. The film loaded in the cameras was simply sent back to a local camera dealer for processing and printing.

The Kodak campaign enabled young and older generations to observe and document their world through this populous low cost camera. Brownie clubs were formed to help youngsters gain photography skills and to enter competitions – many of which focused on the documentation of nature. A Boy Scout edition of the Brownie was even launched in the 1930s to support the association of the camera with discovery and observation.

Thus the story of the creation of the Lumsden Biscuit draws from a rich set of references, that may not be obvious. The Lumsden Biscuit is very much more a tale of careful consideration and planning. Indeed the Canadian influence of the Girl Guide cookie adopted by the artist and Lumsden community, brings to the foreground an environmental awareness that can be associated with biscuit-making and natural and local attributes.

Biscuits and photography come together

A related influence in the development of the Lumsden Biscuit extends to the use of early photography to produce botanical renderings of common British plant species. Anna Atkins (1799-1871), one of the world's first female photographers, used photographic imaging techniques (e.g. the photogram and cyanotype) to record a number of British plant species from ferns to algae. Her pioneering efforts assisted in botanical understanding of plant structures whilst developing a new form of documentary format, the photographic illustrated book.

Like George Eastman's vision that the Brownie camera had the ability to open up photographic recording by a wide public and Anna Atkin's pioneering botanical documentation, Sylvia Grace Borda envisioned the 'Lumsden biscuit' as a new vehicle from which ecological observation and community co-production could be discussed.

In the development stage of the project and with community support, the artist collected local plant species to be recorded through the photogram process. This is the physical placement of a plant against unexposed photographic-paper. As the paper is exposed to light, the plant blocks light leaving a trace of itself onto the paper. The developed photographic paper reveals an outline of the plant and its structural form. Like the process undertaken over 175 years ago, the rendering by photogram is a botanically accurate image with 1:1 rendered scale and a tonal shade image of the plant's true form.

For Borda, she realized the photogram is produced as an image negative and in much the same way that a biscuit mould might be created. Understanding that these two separate processes could be combined, Borda set to reproduce the plant photograms as impressions for mould and biscuit stamps. Scottish botanical illustrator and sculptor, Keith Donnelly, carved the artist's photograms into wooden blocks in order to create an early form of traditional biscuit mould. Donnelly's botanical accuracy and the use of the artist's photograms to be the basis of biscuit moulds has led to a new form of art, the 'edible photograph.'

Using botanical images of local flora, with the exception of the thistle, is relatively contrary to the way in which Scotland's national biscuit, shortbread, has been traditionally designed. Shortbread for century has been a vehicle to celebrate weddings and the new year with images of a stylized thistle typically portrayed on the biscuit round. In community discussion and through trials, both in terms of shortbread biscuit recipes and experimenting with flora designs, the 'Lumsden biscuit' was born.

In the spirit of early photography the biscuit becomes a point of reference on how rural flora might be depicted, and awareness drawn to seemingly un-noticed ecologies. This process similarly places community co-production in the shortbread creation as a platform for dialogue about community values, and pathways to support rural economic and environmental sustainability.

The Lumsden Biscuit starts

The Lumsden Biscuit brings forward Borda's vision to combine photographic histories, contemporary artwork and the capability to explore new ways of incorporating rather than moving away from ecological representation. The Lumsden Biscuit is in part shaped by artistic intervention as a forum for extending

conversations on food production. Equally it is an artwork drawn from observation, and in the way of Felix Gonzalez Torres, can be produced and used by the community to produce 'open multiple artworks' for on-going and renewed display, community celebration, and for distribution.

Perhaps the real legacy of the Lumsden Biscuit is its adoption into the community acting as an agent of change and co-production. It is hoped that as jobs change in NE Scotland, the Lumsden Biscuit initiative may be spoken as one of the projects associated with developing inter-generational opportunities to assist with socio-economic regeneration as well as a platform from which to discuss environmental justice and the arts. Social and environmental sustainable regeneration projects often fail due to lack of funds, time or resources. What the Lumsden Biscuit has proven is community willingness to participate, collaborate, and discover new synergies to self-manage their own resources and environment can be possible at a low-level of funded investment.

At present youth are being trained by village seniors in how to become artisan bakers to produce Lumsden Biscuits. In creating an intergenerational forum and social enterprise through the Lumsden Biscuit, it is hoped youth employment will expand and in due course participant youth bakers will start up their own initiatives that continue to innovate and foster sustainable economic and development approaches in the Village. The Lumsden Biscuit offers much more than what one might think at first glance. Indeed a biscuit can make a world of difference in how we might think about expending energies and prioritising higher goals of how we sustain communities and the environments that surround and define us.

About the author

Annie Nicholson is leading a number of operational projects to regenerate the Village of Lumsden. She sits as a current Lumsden Community Association member. Her interests lie in urban planning to storytelling – she's passionate in ensuring rural communities are recognized as places where people live, work, and thrive.

About the artist

Sylvia Grace Borda is an actively engaged award winning international artist, and lecturer, working both in Canada and the UK. Borda has been producing socially engaged and contemporary artwork for over a decade. She works in photography, video and emergent technologies to study, research, and respond to changing urban and rural landscapes. Much of her work consists of carefully composed images wherein she challenges how art can be made or distributed. She has worked across varying media platforms from stereo-works to creating multi-dimensional tableaux produced and embedded in Google Streetview.

In a recent photographic opus, *This one's for the farmer*, she portrayed the social realities of modern life farming. While Borda uses art history as a foundation to inform her production, she collaborates with communities to accurately produce narratives that become contemporary portraits of our time and provide reflections on wider social conditions.

Key exhibitions and lectures include: Regional respondent for the Venice Biennale Architecture Scotland, The Lighthouse, Scotland's Centre for Architecture (2015), Oulu Art Museum, Finland (2015); regional respondent for the British Council (Northern Ireland) in relation to the British Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale (2014); Finnish Museum of Photography (2014); Camera Histories, Street Level Photoworks, Glasgow (2013-2014); Aerial Fields, Surrey Urban Screen, Surrey Art Gallery, Canada (2013-14); Art House (2013-14), Richmond Public Art Program, BC, Canada; to name a few.

