

Art in Public: *Cross Land: a discussion initiated by Deirdre O'Mahony* 23 June 2007.

## **Visual Artists' News Sheet**

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### **Gathering Insights**

The cross lands gathering took place on part of the Shifting Ground<sup>1</sup> initiative was a discussion amongst local stakeholders, focussed on the future of the Burren

On Saturday 23 June a public stakeholders discussion, entitled *The Cross Land Gathering* was convened in connection with artist Deirdre O'Mahony's project *Cross Land* (1) – which considers issues of agriculture community, ecology and tourism. The meeting was prompted by the inauguration of 'Branding the Burren' – official initiative of Fáilte Ireland's Development Scheme Fund in partnership with Clare County Council, Shannon Development, National Parks & Wildlife Service and Burrenbeo. Chaired by Ed Carroll from City Arts, the gathering of interested parties, including artists, farmers, publicans and other members of the local community (2) took place at the Carron Research Centre, Carron, Co. Clare in order to consider this development and other initiatives effecting the Burren area.

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Proceedings began with discussion of the 'Branding the Burren'(3) initiative as outlined by project manager Carol Gleason who provided the gathering with an overview of the project, now retitled 'Environmental Protection of the Burren through Visitor Management Initiative' due to feedback from the initial consultancy meetings.

Local artist Chris Wallis felt that any managerial input to the Burren was "a kind of colonisation" and that the Burren would be "happy left on its own". Countering this view Colin Johnson, another artist, noted that that the Burren had been an actively managed environment over many years – in other words, 'letting the Burren get on with it' involves people. This point was backed up by Brendan Dunford of BurrenLife, who cited research that showed that 'moderate' environmental management encouraged the maximum species diversity. Likewise, Carol Gleason posed the rhetorical question "when had people been taken out of the idea of ecology? Were they not part of it?"

Fiona Woods of Shifting Ground, a partnership project between Clare County Council and GMIT researching art in rural contexts, raised the issue of the models of decision making. She put a question to meeting – how do we to step back from purely monetary models, that define communities as no more than 'service providers'? In artist Deirdre O'Mahony's view; as far as she could see, the full-time farmer was the most endangered species on the Burren – since joining the EU the farmer has been portrayed as living on grants and got little sympathy from the wider public. O'Mahony argued that the move away from notions of land-use for farming to leisure was bringing about a totally new situation. Jay Koh who had experience of working on community art projects in difficult situations – from Malaysia to Myanmar, pointed out that history was linear – there could be no turning back the clock; while at present farming is subsidised in Ireland, tomorrow it could be Poland that sees its agriculture heavily subsidised and controlled.

Chair Ed Carroll moved the discussion onto what farmer's sons or daughters might see for the future. Farmer Patrick McCormack returned to the problematics of the purely monetary model – noting that while many of the current generation of farmers still worked the land for love, they would probably be the last. By way of emphasis he quoted from Barry Lopez's *Arctic Dreams*, "Western Culture has tainted the vision of the indigenous peoples". He felt that attitude was the greatest problem – giving the example of farmers who were taking 70% grants for slatted (cow) sheds whether they were needed or not. This had a knock-on environmental effect – unnecessary sewage flowing into rivers and lakes that were once the mainstays of Ireland's fishing-tourism. Carol Gleason underlined this point, stating that "tourism exists" and that the crux of the matter was to find out best how it could be managed.

Paddy Matthews, Fáilte Ireland's Environmental Officer said that some people working in tourism tended to a 'callous' attitude to landscape – seeing it as 'product' and the consigning the farmers' role as merely producers of this landscape-product. He noted that more progressive current thinking conceived of conservation as a creative activity, which aimed to engage visitors. Indeed, he pointed out the creation of his own department with Fáilte Ireland was an acknowledgment that tourism needed to enter a dialogue with other sectors and constituencies engaged with the local landscape and environment.

Chair Ed Carroll, speaking about the 'Ground Up' (4) public art program, described it as a process of allowing "ventilation" – as opposed to confrontation; and perhaps letting people have a glimpse 'over the hedge' at new ideas or ways of proceeding. In particular, he pinpointed Carol Gleason's Visitor Management Initiative as a possible model of a more responsible kind of tourism.

In terms of the 'branding' of the Burren – it seemed that eco-tourism offered some kind of way forward. Colin Johnson foresaw problems to do with providing access – quipping that the Burren's brand in the past might well have been a 'No Trespassing' sign! Fiona Woods noted that all kinds of tourism, even the most eco-sensitive had impacts on communities and landscape. She cited the example of a similar project in the Lake District in the UK that had seen a lot of people making lots of money; but with the result that local workers could no longer afford to live in the area. Planning was also a problem in the Lake District, with local people unable to build. Carol Gleason said that during her research, as soon as the environment was mentioned, people wanted to know if it was going to be used as a weapon against planning – with many people citing areas that had been destroyed by holiday homes. In light of this discussion, Ed Carroll put two questions to the group who benefits? Who does not have a voice?

In response, Patrick McCormack stated that the people who look after the land do not have a voice; and added that the Burren must be conserved for the people who live here – tourism must come second. Artist Maria Kerin was of the opinion that tourism, even eco-tourism, must not be imposed or led from the outside, instead small, local interventions would be influential and beneficial. Following further discussion, the consensus was that the paramount questions were who has power? who can make a difference? who has a voice?

Carol Gleason emphasised that her project was about consultation – and as such people had a *responsibility* to participate. On the other hand, Fiona O'Dwyer was more sceptical about the idea of consultation – noting an example of trying to get a local playground constructed. In this case the County Council enacted a 'consultation' process but nothing happened. Anne O'Connor felt

that while you could attend all the meetings you liked; it always comes down to economics in the end. Consultation must be 'lived through'. Tokenism or paying lip service to consultation is dangerous, said Eileen Healey, adding that "we must look for winnable victories, building with very small steps". Ruairí Ó Conchúir also underlined the need for community engagement, recommending that state and semi-state bodies should engage the people of the Burren in a process of *active* participation. He also pointed out that Burren farming has a representative voice – but many choose not to be represented by organised agriculture.

Jay Koh was interested in the fact that only a small number of farmers were represented at the meeting. He asked why Ground Up had not connected with local dissenting voices? From his experience, artists working with such people create more sustainable modes of education and action – whereas artists who are effectively just working 'top down' leave nothing when they are gone.

Brendan Dunford from BurrenLife (5) thought 'branding' wasn't necessarily an entirely negative proposition – it could be harnessed to reflect and promote new approaches. Paddy Matthews illustrated the changing direction of the Tourism sector, by highlighting that Fáilte Ireland had recently opposed holiday homes in Sligo because the water treatment plant wouldn't be able to cope. He added that tourism, if well managed could be used to advocate better rural facilities and infrastructures.

Closing the discussion Ed Carroll invited all present to describe their hopes for the future for the Burren. Amongst the aspirations were: changes in education that would help foster a solid vision and sense of place in future generations; low input sustainable farming maintaining the land; a changed, locally based, tourism model; some kind of sensible and sensitive planning system at County Council level; networking and continued communication within the locality.

## Phillip Gaston

Deirdre O'Mahony's project *The Cross Land* is a large scale artistic intervention in the landscape. It's process and outcomes raised awareness and became the catalyst for *The Cross Land Gathering*. Through the Shifting Ground and Ground Up projects The Cross Land will continue to mark the spot where the stories of the Burren can be heard. The four arms of Deirdre's coppiced 60 metre cross indicated four major perspectives from which the future of the Burren could be perceived: agriculture, community, ecology and tourism. The wide-ranging discussion touched on all of these topics.

The participants were Eileen Healey (artist), Colin Johnson (artist), Deirdre O'Mahony (artist), Chris Wallis (artist), Fiona O'Dwyer (artist), Fiona Woods (artist), Maria Kerin (artist), Brendan Dunford (BurrenLife), Anne O'Connor (BurrenBeo), Patrick McCormack (farmer), Robert Cassidy (Publican & Businessman) , Carol Gleason (Environmental Protection of the Burren through Visitor Management Initiative Project Manager), Paddy Matthews (Fáilte Ireland Environmental Officer), Jay Koh (Artist), Ute Bohnsack (REPS planner) Ruairí Ó Conchúir, Philip Gaston (writer).

Brendan McGrath and Associates have been appointed to prepare a signage plan for the Burren and to develop a Burren brand. These are two key components of the Burren Initiative, a Fáilte Ireland Tourism Development Scheme project being carried out by Clare County Council, in partnership with National Parks and Wildlife Service, Burren Beo and Shannon Development. The branding exercise aims to develop a Burren brand that is distinctive and memorable, that will be supported by the local community and will become an effective marketing tool for local service providers. For information and community feedback on the program to date see <http://www.shiftingground.net/Brandingtheburren.htm>

The Arts Office of Clare County Council initiated Ground Up to foster a new type of engagement between Public Art and rural contexts. The program was developed in three stages and the Cross Land was the final commission of the program.

BurrenLIFE: A project is to develop a new model for sustainable agriculture in the Burren in order to conserve the habitats designated under the European Habitats Directive. <http://www.burrenlife.com>