Running head: RE-IMAGING PLACE AND COMMUNITY IN RURAL IRELAND

"New Ecologies between Art and Rural Life:

Towards a Collaborative Re-Imaging of Place and Community in Rural Ireland"

"*Irish Families and Globalization: Conversations about Belonging and Identity across Space and Time*, Groves Monograph Series, Pub. University of Michigan Press. 2014

©Deirdre O'Mahony 2014

Centre for Creative Arts and Media, Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT) Ireland

Deirdre O'Mahony is an artist, writer, curator, and academic. She has published paper and essays, exhibited in national and international exhibitions, and received numerous arts awards and bursaries, residencies, and international fellowships.

mailto:deirdre.omahony@gmit.ie

Keywords: trans-disciplinary, public art, rural, community, archive

Abstract

The X-PO project explores the regionality of the West of Ireland in the Burren, County Clare. Using artistic activism and trans-disciplinary visual inquiry to consider contemporary ecological and social pressures, it interrogates the mechanics of local belonging and its dynamic connection to national and global contexts. The opportunity to rent a defunct post office created a public space to reflect on a bitter environmental dispute that left a legacy of mistrust and silence. Called X-PO, its intention is to enable the collective articulation of community history/histories both within and beyond the community. Stimulated by materials found in the building, a programme of exhibitions by contemporary artist initiated conversation and dialogue which triggered further collaborative projects between different disciplines, sectors, and groups. In addition, X-PO creates a space of engaged activity giving space and time to collate and archive its materials, recall and renew memories, histories, and thoughts about future possibilities.

This chapter considers the role of contemporary social and dialogical public art practice in the West of Ireland and changing rural landscapes. The wildness, culture, and tradition of the landscape have drawn artists to the region, and it has played a crucially important role in Irish art over the last hundred years (Scott, 2005). Until recently, aesthetic representations of the West have functioned as both source and symbol of Irish national identity (O'Mahony 2006, 2012). Catherine Nash (1993) argues that the cultural importance of the West is underlined by its double function as a representation of the nation state and as a signifier of difference within Ireland. Even today, the West is repeatedly presented as "outside time, separated from normal temporal development" (p. 86). Rural landscapes are in transition from sites for food production to culture and leisure sites. Within rural development policy, access to nature via the rural landscape is increasingly being seen as necessary to the health and wellbeing of urban populations as well as providing tourism revenue for otherwise relatively unproductive landscapes that no longer fit new Common Agricultural Policy objectives in Europe (see European Commission, 2012). Invariably there are tensions between the perspectives of aesthetic viewers and cultivators, and in my academic research and artistic practice I have tried to make visible the complexity of unconscious agendas at play.

The central question addressed in this chapter is whether a collaborative, trans-disciplinary mode of visual inquiry--a dialogical aesthetic--might actively examine and engage with the matrix of human and natural histories and practices that shape a place and its context. The research considers the potential of durational art practices to animate a participative discourse on the social and cultural changes underway in rural places and regions and to acknowledge the complexity of actors with a stake in the landscape.

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first outlines the particular context for this research: the townland of Kilnaboy, situated in the internationally renowned landscape of the Burren region of North Co. Clare on the Irish Western seaboard. The second section outlines the strategies used to animate a former post office as "X-PO" as a point of contact

and social interaction between different publics and allow room for an extended, collective discourse on the future of the region. The final section draws conclusions about the use of dialogical aesthetics as a way of making visible what people think and feel about the changes in the social cultural and natural landscape.

Context: "Community" and "Publics"

Fig. 1. Mullaghmore Mountain. January 1993.

Photograph courtesy of the Peter Rees Archive, 2008.

The Burren is an area renowned for its barren beauty--a limestone desert, one of the finest examples of glaciated karst topography in Europe. Although often described as a natural wilderness, the landscape is actually a direct consequence of human interaction with the land. There is evidence of animal husbandry and farming since Neolithic times, and the area possesses the highest density of field monuments in an upland area in Ireland, encompassing a record of human settlement spanning at least six thousand years (Aalen, Whelan & Stout 1997). Tree clearance and strip-grazing were practiced into the Bronze Age, and it seems probable that excessive grazing or agriculture in prehistoric times led to the soil erosion which resulted in the characteristic limestone pavement (Roden, 2001). The diversity of the Burren ecosystem and rich pockets of plant life between the limestone pavements lend itself to a particular form of animal husbandry known as inverse transhumance that is specific to the

region. Winter grazing kept the hazel scrub and high grasses in check and ensured the rich profusion of flowers in the springtime when the cattle are moved back to the lower slopes. It is tough and sometimes unforgiving land, and agricultural practices have evolved over many generations to make it productive.

The beauty, wildness, and extraordinary wealth of archaeological monuments in the Burren have drawn successive waves of artists and interested outsiders, often driven by agrarian romanticism or *nostalgie de la boue*, utopian idealists driven by a desire for ecological self-sufficiency and a deep affinity with the place. Sometimes referred to locally as "blow-ins", the first wave was in the late nineteen seventies and was generally accepted and welcomed during a time when the West of Ireland was depopulating rapidly. The second wave came from the UK in the 1980s and mid-1990's when legislation came into effect in the UK targeting squatters, New Age travellers, and rave culture. These travellers were familiar with how to practice activist, DIY resistance to the erosion of the freedom to assemble in public spaces, and brought their knowledge of eco-protests to Ireland. In the early 1990s, the demographic profile of those settling in the rural West changed once again. As the economy improved, many who left Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s returned, and brought with them a more distanced perspective on place and identity informed by the diaspora experience (O'Mahony, 2012). Until the early 1990's, social relations between the different waves of incomers and locals were good, and the hospitality and neighborliness associated with rural Ireland were still commonplace. However, a contentious decision concerning the siting of a visitor and interpretive centre in the Burren National park activated an environmental and rural development conflict at an international, national, and local level that played out for over a decade and divided the various communities in the area.

Eileen O'Rourke's paper *Landscape Planning and Community Participation: Local Lessons from Mullaghmore, the Burren National Park, Ireland* is a detailed study of the conflict including interviews with farming families in the Burren (O'Rourke, 2005). In the late

1980s the State Office of Public Works (OPW) began to consider the construction of an interpretative center near a mountain called Mullaghmore, two miles from Kilnaboy. There was no local consultation, a process explained by O'Rourke as in line with the normal OPW way of doing business at that time (Phillips & Kelly-Quinn, as cited in O'Rourke). Lines were drawn very quickly, the actors in the dispute were polarized and those against the development were accused of working against "community" interest. Opposition to the proposal prompted virulent and sometimes violent responses characterised by issues of "control, identity and power relations" (McGrath, 1996).

O'Rourke maintains that for the vast majority of the pre-Celtic Tiger generation the Burren region signified poverty, marginalization, and emigration: "a poor land and a poor living" (p. 486). "(R)eal power rests in the clientelistic and associated paternalistic relationships woven into the fabric of society and everyday life" (p. 487). An ambivalence on the part of the farming community towards the rural vernacular landscape can be traced to the deference encouraged by those in authority, agricultural agencies such as the Irish Farmers Association, towards "experts"-- academic and agricultural authorities brought in to explain to the indigenous community why the Burren was a unique place and how it should be managed. The privileging of such outsider expertise and the disregard of local "tacit" knowledge has been the cause of deep resentment in the area. This has been further complicated by top-down, hierarchical decision-making by national governments and state agencies such as the National Parks and Wildlife Services (NPWS). For many of the artists and newcomers to the area Mullaghmore was a "sacred" transcendent space, "whose essence and magic lay in its remoteness and undisturbed atmosphere" (O'Rourke, p. 93) W.J.T. Mitchell calls this the "contemplative" approach, one which privileges "the presentation of an image designed for transcendental consciousness – whether a 'transparent eyeball', an experience of 'presence', or an 'innocent' eye" (Mitchell, 2004, p. 1).

Dissenting voices were labeled "yuppies, hippies, outsiders" (Doolin, 2002, p. 240).

Those who claimed authority to speak for the community demanded that their priorities take precedence asserting "the right to self-determination" (O'Rourke, 2005, p. 490). In this context, community was delineated by a symbolic boundary, hostile to what was positioned without and based on a presumption of consensus within--in Stuart Hall's words, "an expensive and sometimes violent and dangerous illusion" (Hall, 1990, p. 186, cited by Rose, 1997). As the dispute escalated, loyalty to a singular, "fortress" notion of community superseded the private fabric of neighbourliness; community interests were deemed to be fully represented by the existing local social and political hierarchies.

The conflict lasted ten years, cost several million Euros in legal fees, trial and appeal costs, and resulted in the construction and destruction of two car parks and a sewage system on the site. It raised questions about definitions of community, ideas of belonging, and democratic decision-making that remain pertinent to rural places, particularly beautiful landscapes carrying excessive cultural baggage. Who constitutes the community and how to define belonging were questions that were never really addressed in the aftermath.

Philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy's theory of "inoperative" community is useful in this context. Inoperative community "constructs difference differently, in its unworking of social identities" (Rose, 1997, p. 200). Idealized notions of a pre-modern, authentic, traditional community or *gemeinschaft* culturally embedded in representations of the West of Ireland and, indeed, the singular fortress notion of community that played out in the Mullaghmore conflict, represents his idea of "immanentism", an uncomplicated and transparent idea of "being-together" (Nancy, 1991, p. 10). For Nancy there is no universal "we", rather, "with" is at the heart of Being (Nancy, 2000, p. 95). He argues that an inoperative community is always in the process of becoming (1996). "Being" only comes into play in the presence of another singular being. "'Being' ex-poses itself, then, as the between and the with of singularities" (1996, p. 86). Nancy's call for rethinking community suggests a form of

collective praxis, a projective enterprise that might allow for the formation of a provisional, contingent idea of community (Nancy, 1991).

Cultural theorist Simon Sheik argues that given the fragmented public sphere where spaces and/or formations sometimes co-exist, overlap, and compete with one another, it is more accurate to speak of “publics” than “public” or indeed community. He proposes that the public sphere be considered a collection of “counter-publics” (Sheik, 2004, p. 2). Counter publics make no claim to be universal, rather they attempt to put forward a specific but plural, public sphere that consciously mirrors the modalities and institutions of the normative public, but directed towards other subjects or imaginaries. This was a useful concept as I considered the complexity of actors, agencies, and agendas in the Burren. Given the long history of conflict, my question was whether a dialogical aesthetic process might better acknowledge and represent the fragmented, multiple publics affected by the changing, de- territorialized fluidity of contemporary life.

Practice and Publics

In 2007 I completed a temporary public artwork in Carron, County Clare, called Cross Land, an exploration of the regulatory, ecological, and physical effects of recent changes in farming practices that involved a dialogical process between agencies, landowners, scientists, business interests, and local inhabitants (O’Mahony, 2007). In *The Three Ecologies*, Félix Guattari conceptualized just such a transdisciplinary, “praxic opening-out” as a way of creating space for different understandings of the relationship between the individual, society, and nature (Guattari, 1989/2000, Genesco, 2006), and working with farmers, scientists, and agricultural advisors, I gained a new understanding of how to expand this practice. The loss of place-based, tacit knowledge through successive “progressive” agricultural policies and the effect on the local environment required a durational aesthetic engagement, making connections between and across disciplines, institutions, agencies, and actors. Cross Land indicated the potential of a collaborative methodology that might begin to unpack the power

relations affecting subjectivities in the West. Extending and developing that process meant being visibly and publicly grounded in the Burren. Lucy R. Lippard argues that if artists are participants as well as directors in a collective or collaborative process of defining a sense of the "local", new imaginative spaces can open up for envisioning the collective desires and expectations, disagreements and conflicts that form the strata of power relations within communities (Lippard, 1997).

The next step for my research was the formation of a public, interstitial, open space. An idea for such a site began to form as I was driving past the former Post Office in Kilnaboy, and I decided to re-open the building as a social and cultural exchange point. My question was whether a new form of landscape aesthetic could activate a participative process and acknowledge the changing human and natural ecologies of the Irish rural landscape. With Grant Kester, I concluded that an intersubjective, dialogical aesthetic process offered the best route to examining that problem (Kester 2004).

X-PO: Activation

The former Kilnaboy Post Office overlooks the ruins of the old Kilnaboy church and the main road to the market town of Ennis. The project began in July 2007 at the conclusion of the Cross Land project. Sheik's idea of a counter-public mirroring the institutions of the public sphere was mobilized as the functionality of the former post office was re-directed from a local/global interface to an exchange point between different publics. Tailored to the context, its function changed whilst remaining sufficiently familiar within the cultural life of the area to make interested participants feel project welcome. All too often, inappropriate models of cultural institutions are transposed onto rural public sites, which then remain underused and ignored by an alienated audience.

With X-PO, the intention was to give space for collective reflection about the future of rural life and landscape, outside existing sectoral interests and without prioritising any one community. Uncovering past networks of social exchange and local knowledge has relevance

today as practical applications of that knowledge may well, in the future, hold the key to sustaining both rural and urban life (O'Mahony, 2013b). Homi K. Bhabha argues that the postcolonial perspective forces us to rethink the profound limitations of a "consensual and collusive 'liberal' sense of community" (cited in Rutherford, p. 211). For Bhabha, a way of addressing the "tennis match" of binary oppositions is:

> ...thinking about the general as a form of contingent conditionality, or as an "interstitial" articulation that both holds together and "comes between" -- not only in the sense of being a space or mode of passage but in the colloquial sense of "coming between," that is, meddling, interfering, interrupting, and interpolating: making possible and making trouble, both at once (Bhabha interviewed by Mitchell,1995, p.110).

Such a process might bring together traces of different discourses and meanings, giving rise to new insights, discourses, and representations.

The X-PO project unfolded in three stages. It began with the documentation and collation of an archive of the contents of the post office and a programme of artworks by contemporary artists that addressed relevant issues in rural areas. In parallel with these events clubs and social groups were activated, and, arising from these interactions, further archives that related to the personal and collective history of the site were re-presented on site. Funding from the Arts Council covered the renovation of the space and the programming of the first six months of the project. The eventual aim was that X-PO become a self-sustaining social and cultural contact point for the area.

Archive 1: The Mattie Rynne Archive.

John Martin "Mattie" Rynne was postmaster of Kilnaboy for over fifty years. From all accounts, he led a solitary childhood, and ill-health led to his removal from school at the age of twelve. He took care of his mother until her death in the 1960s and lived alone in the building until his death on January 17, 2000. The postmaster was a circumspect and discreet

man who insisted his customers wait outside the post office while he dealt with each individual, and the Post Office in Kilnaboy used to be the busiest in North Clare. While people waited, local news was exchanged. He left the Post Office building to James Maher, who was the last postmaster of Kilnaboy, and it closed in 2003. The building remained shut until 2007 when it was re-opened as X-PO.

My first action was to document the contents of the post office, both the public office space and the private living space. The private half of the house was left much as it was when Mattie died. The post office still contained his many books and journals, manuals, and tapes. I cleaned, collated, and catalogued the contents. The collection of books, papers, objects, and his own archive of newspaper clippings revealed an intellectually curious, private man who was passionately interested in the world at large. Mattie's lights shone late into the evening as he communicated to the world beyond Kilnaboy on his short-wave radio, indicating a desire to communicate with the world decades before the advent of the Internet. The unmistakable tones of BBC World Service presenters resonated in the background when doing business in the post office.

I cleaned the years of dirt from the rooms and was moved by the poignancy of some of the books: books on ballroom dancing and yoga, the heart and spiritual healing. Mattie wrote crosswords and in 1956 won the Sunday Express prize of £200, easily a year's salary at that time. Documents and old jotters contained essay assignments for correspondence courses run in the UK in the 1960s: there were writings on numerology and essays on "The Social State" and books on history, politics, astrology and self-help. There were course books for in "Radio Inspector and Practical Equipment" and "Advanced English". The objects also told a story. There were eighty-five cassettes of recordings made by Mattie from BBC language courses in French, German, Italian, Dutch, and Spanish going back to the early 1970s. Mattie had an electronic calculator and an electric shaver made out of Bakelite before anyone else; he loved technology and had manuals on radio engineering and electronics. Photographs

taken in the 1940s and found in an old broken teapot show a stylish man in sunglasses, a blackthorn tree and a dry-stone wall in the background.

The Life and Times of Mattie Rynne included a wall-drawing made by me with soot from the kitchen stove and suggested a way of living that was fuelled by self-directed intellectual enquiry. The installation pointed to an almost Beckettian, existential quest to find meaning in a circumscribed experience and a resistance to a boundaried, exclusionary idea of community where all know their place. Lucy R. Lippard points to the appeal of such collections "caught *en dishabille*" that speaks to the collective unconscious, and it prompted reflection amongst visitors, both local and from further afield, on the social role of the rural post office and the loss of neighborliness in everyday life (Lippard, 1999, p. 108). The installation also spoke to more than one man's story; it showed a resistance to what philosopher Jacques Rancière calls the "police"—"that which upholds consensus and defines who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do and on the time and space in which this activity is performed" (Rancière, 2004, pp. 12-13).

Fig. 2. The Life and Times of Mattie Rynne. Installation detail. Photograph courtesy of Peter Rees, 2008.

The first three months of programming at X-PO introduced the notion of local knowledge archives. My relationship with various publics began to develop as a reciprocal

and mutually informative exchange process. The space began to function as a cultural site and a social interstice as clubs and groups formed. Singing and mapping groups began to meet weekly, in time joined by a craft group. Talks were programmed on subjects ranging from self-build houses to caving, and individuals with particular skills and interests began to share their knowledge.

The Life and Times of Mattie Rynne suggested a form that archival representations of local knowledge might take, foregrounding the potential of archival processes to challenge dominant and essentializing narratives (Byrne & O'Mahony, 2012). Hal Foster (2004) points to the creation of archives by artists, not as databases but as "recalcitrantly material, fragmentary rather than fungible" (p. 5) and calling for human interpretation. The archival installation suggested a possibility for spectators to become active as interpreters, a possibility that was embraced by several of the groups who used the space on a regular basis. For one group, the Rinnamona Research Group, exhibition-making provided an opportunity to speak back to the accounts given by anthropologists Arensberg and Kimball in the published works of the social anthropological strand of the Harvard Irish Survey.[1] The process is discussed and described in depth in papers co-written with Dr. Anne Byrne called "Family and Community: (Re) telling Our Own Story" (Byrne & O'Mahony 2012) and " Revisiting and Reframing the Anthropological Archive" (Byrne & O'Mahony 2013).

The Mapping Group Archive

In Ireland, the oral history of place, *dinnseanchas*, encompasses the knowledge of family, kin relationships, and place names, and the stories, both mythical and factual, that they evoke. This knowledge of how particular sites were worked and occupied is still used by older people through the practice of oral "tracing" in rural Clare. The practice is one that formed a

1 In the 1930s, Ireland was the focus of an extensive survey by scholars from Harvard University, a detailed study of family and community in three rural locations, one of which was Rinnamona in Kilnaboy parish. The resulting publications, *The Irish Countryman* by Conrad Arensberg and *Family and Community in Ireland* by Arensberg and Solon Kimball, (1940, 1968, 2001) are considered to be "classic" scientific texts and remain influential within sociological and anthropological academic spheres (Byrne, Edmondson, & Varley, 2001).

significant part of communal life until the early nineteen-sixties and the arrival of television in rural Ireland. Neighbour visited neighbour and spent evenings mapping genealogical connections. Lippard has noted the "as yet unmined" potential of collaborative mapping within public arts practice and this proved to be the case with the mapping group (1997, p. 288). They were the first "club" to form at X-PO, meeting every Tuesday evening to compare and exchange information on the ruined houses of the parish. Their intention was to examine and trace the occupancy of the fifty-three townlands in Kilnaboy Parish, going back to the earliest accounts and comparing these with the oral *dinnseanchas*. Their name, "the mapping group", was a way of creating space for the fledgling club. There are many noted local historians in the area who are considered authorities in the field, and it was a way of both differentiating and creating space for their research. In the beginning there were three regular members of the group, Francis Whelan John Kelleher, and Peter Wise, along with several other occasional members. Whelan has been collecting stories of the placenames and ruined houses in the parish for many years. He was inspired by the example of a Rinnamona man, Paddy Cahir, who interviewed older people who still remembered the tracings of family and kinship and kept records of the occupancy of houses in the parish. Paddy Cahir's father, Johnny Cahir, was one of the "young men" described in *Family and Community in Ireland*.

I was invited to work with the group as they made their first public exhibition in the front post office room at X-PO. The group set out to try to recapture lost place names and local knowledge and redress the effect of the great nineteenth- century drive to cartographically record Ireland. The Ordnance Survey of Ireland (OSI) maps of the townlands of Ireland were made between 1833 and 1846 and yield an astonishing wealth of detail:

> ...an almost perfect, not to say "objective" and "microscopic" record of the location and shape of every house, field, tree and shrub, of mass-paths, boreens and roads.… Most particularly townland and parish boundaries are defined and made so

> seemingly permanent on the map, complete with the script of the agreed, anglicised form of the place-names… (Smyth, 2007, p. 6)

In discussions on how this work might be presented at X-PO the group realised the enormity of the task and focused on the largest townland, Commons South. In modern Irish visual culture, map images can be read as innovative and oppositional and, in this local context, foregrounding the oral narratives of place was of primary importance. Claire Connelly, after Nash, has noted the capacity of maps to highlight relationships of power; they occupy a less romanticised relationship to territory than landscape, which in the West, has its iconography of cottages, cloud skies, and hills (Nash, 1997; Connelly, 2003).

Beginning with the OSI map of 1842 and the Griffiths Valuation documents of 1855, the members of the group conducted interviews, surveyed documents, and compared oral history with documentary evidence. Francis Whelan has been gathering "field notes" in diaries for many years, and these were scanned into the X- PO computer and added to the archive. This information was recorded as an audio discussion between Francis Whelan and John Kelleher that named the occupants of every house in the Commons South. The recording was played in the old post office room, and copies of the historical accounts of occupancy were posted on clipboards.

The power and authority of the OSI maps shifted as the "audiencing" of the group's work became an open-ended story of place. Over the exhibition period, the group amended and changed the story as visitors brought new information and the "official" survey map was overlaid with a fluid, changing narrative. Foucault prioritises genealogy:

> Genealogy does not resemble the evolution of a species and does not map the destiny of a people. On the contrary...it is to identify the accidents, the minute deprivations - or conversely, the complete reversals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to have value for us (Foucault, 1984, p. 81).

The importance of identifying the "accidents", "reversals", and "faulty calculations" to which Foucault points, was embraced by the Mapping Group. Although they operated from the premise that they wanted to fully document and pin down the history of occupancy of the townland, it became clear that with the changing story and sometimes conflicting accounts of occupancy, such a pinning down of people to place will never fully happen.

The absence and loss of information becomes an important signifier of the loss of cultural memory of place. Many of those displaced and lost in the Famine years are visible on the OSI Map of 1842 and absent from the subsequent Griffith's Valuation documents of 1855. In the local, oral knowledge so carefully gathered, they become present once more. Names are remembered in these stories. "Séan Ó' Conchúir: Died during the famine - snail shells and bits of turnips found in his house" (Kelleher, O'Mahony, & Whelan 2008, p. 20). The stark facts call to mind Colm Tóibín's comments on the paucity of personal material about the Famine despite the copious documentation of the administration of relief, "how little it tells us in the face of what we imagine for ourselves just by seeing a name with a fact beside it" (Tóbín, 1998, p. 33). Coming together on a weekly basis, the group was able to piece together some of the fragmentary narratives. Hitherto unseen cartographies were made visible on the new map and became a tool with which to express alternative accounts of possession and loss. This articulates a desire to assert and reclaim authority over the representation of land that extends, as Connolly notes, "beyond the transfer of titles and deeds into the realm of representation, metaphor, and cultural identity" (Connelly, 2003, p. 30) A great deal of discussion has taken place on the impossibility of ever "fully" completing the work; this has not stopped the group, now expanded to six members, from continuing the research.

An Udder View: The Peter Rees Archive.

The fourth archive that emerged though X-PO was that of local photographer and truck driver Peter Rees. Like his father, Rees collected milk from farms throughout North Clare and was known throughout the county for his distinctive appropriation of the Coca-Cola logo on

his Udder Cola creamery trucks. Passionate about photography from an early age, Peter carries his camera in the cab of his truck and has documented the social events, incidental happenings, and changing landscape of the parish on his daily run. “An Udder View” was a collaborative project between Rees and me. His collection is a ready-made archive of parish life organised chronologically in albums in a small office in his house. Several evenings a week over a four-month period, we went through one hundred and twenty-three albums, selecting approximately a thousand photographs for the exhibition.

Whether driving his truck or through his involvement in the local organizations, Rees has served as the unofficial recorder of the public affairs of the parish. He has documented meetings, boat festivals, cattle auctions, housing developments, political rallies, the school fancy dress parades, pranks played on newlyweds, the decade long history of protests at Mullaghmore--the daily life of a rural locality. We reviewed several methods for exhibiting the images and eventually decided to scan and reprint selected photographs, re-presenting the archive in two forms: in albums and projected as a slide show offering an opportunity for both a public and a private reflection.

This slide show was chronological and punctuated by recurring events: First Communions, the annual commemorative road-race for Olympic local hero Sonny Murphy, the “living crib” at Christmas outside Kilnaboy Church, football matches, the protests both for and against the interpretive center. It was very uncomfortable for many to be publicly reminded of those days, yet the overwhelming response was positive. The exhibition gave space to publicly acknowledge a contentious past. An unexpected dimension to this work was Rees’ mobilization of volunteers, family, and friends to host and audience the exhibition. The documentary film of “An Udder View” gives some indication of the temporary community that came together for the exhibition. Rees’s authority over the mediation process was clear. For the three-week duration of the exhibition he and his wife Kathleen hosted the slide

show talking about the stories behind the images. X-PO became a hub of conviviality as memories were prompted while people viewed the photographs.

Fig 5: Peter Rees An Udder View. Installation May 2008.

Photographs from the Peter Rees Archive.

The public representation of private images opened a space for reflection on the present-day reality of Irish rural life and landscape, demonstrating that stories of the past can create a context to acknowledge difference and serve as a resource to stabilize the uncertain present. Calling for spectators who are active as "interpreters" as art historian Claire Bishop proposes, after Jacques Rancière, that "the politics of participation might best lie, not in anti-spectacular staging's of community…but in putting to work the idea that we are all equally capable of inventing our own translations" (Bishop, 2006, p.16). During the exhibition, the line between artist, author, spectator, and audience became blurred as visitors participated in the active translation from image to story to conversation and reflection.

Conclusion: Between One Thing And Another

Miwon Kwon suggests that efforts to re-think the relationship between art/site/community can be seen as "both a compensatory symptom and critical resistance" to post-modern conditions (Kwon, 2004, p. 160). She proposes finding a terrain between mobilization and specificity as a way of de-coupling place from identity, of being "out-of-

place" with consciousness and precision as a form of resistance to the places we occupy becoming undifferentiated and serialized. (p. 160). X-PO is an "invented" community. It came into being through a dialogical process of inter-subjective communication between diverse participants drawn together, however briefly, within the space. As such, it represents Nancy's idea of inoperative community as a collective artistic praxis; one that does not prescribe or describe community but comes to provisional understandings of community as a continuous process of "un-working" (Nancy, 2000, pp. 153-154). It is tempting to include Mattie Rynne as a co-collaborator in this process; his belongings signposted a way of being-together that, Janus-like, faced inwards and outwards, looking at the local and the global.

At the conclusion of the first, artist-led phase the primary objective of the project was that X-PO become a self-sustaining social and cultural space. I stepped back from active management and held two public meetings to discuss if and how the project should proceed. A group of interested individuals--some "local" locals, some incomers--took on the management, funding, and running of the space in September 2008, establishing a membership structure and constitution. Clubs and groups use X-PO on a weekly basis from October to June, when it closes for the summer as it is the busiest time of the farming year. Exhibitions and installations continue to take place, and during the monthly talks, people continue to freely exchange knowledge, from bronze-casting to dry-stone walls to Holy Wells. The space receives small amounts of public funding for specific events but the main reason it remains open is because it is desired; participants are willing to give voluntary labour and financial contributions and run fundraisers to cover the costs of the building and insurance.

X-PO is very public; it performs a kind of coming-together that is based on the here and now, not on a priori relations or on inherited standing in the community. While many in the area have warmly embraced the project, by its very existence X- PO has challenged and provoked opposition. As "art", run by me, it did not threaten existing local hierarchies;

however, now that it is run by the users of the space, incomers and locals, it has begun to be contested, and this has led to ongoing discussions on local democracy. Despite, or perhaps because of that, it remains open, its very precariousness has made participants reflexive and appreciative, drawn together by a desire simply to be there. Now in its seventh year it continues to function precisely because it lays no claim to be representative--it is rather the act of participation that is at the core of the project.

X-PO has had to perform across multiple registers within the particular localized, spatial context and the wider cultural economic and cultural public sphere. While it has drawn attention to the extraordinary wealth of local knowledge of local heritage, participants have resisted the temptation to develop it as a local heritage agency. Instead, it presents, performs, and describes the richness of place-based knowledge from multiple perspectives, micro and macro, on its own terms. Kwon warns that place-based artistic projects can all too easily instrumentalize cultural authenticity and local specificity, adding value to the marketplace appeal of picturesque sites. Given the economic downturn, this could easily have been the case with X-PO. However the users of the space have chosen not to follow that path. Instead, in Dean MacCannell's words,

> …the place (has) became more than a spatial coordinate, a spot of protected intimacy for like-minded individuals. It became, in addition, the locus of a human relationship between un-likeminded individuals, the locus of an urgent desire to share - an intimate connection between one stranger and another, or one generation and another, through the local object (MacCannell, 1999, p. 203).

References

Aalen, Whelan and Stout Eds. (1997) *Atlas of the Irish Rural Landscape.* Cork: Cork University Press.

Byrne, A., Edmondson, R., & T. Varley, T. (2001). Arensberg and Kimball and anthropological research in Ireland: Introduction to the third edition. In C. Arensberg & S. Kimball, *Family and community in Ireland* (pp. 1-101). Clare: CLASP.

Byrne, A., & O'Mahony, D. (2012). Family and community: (Re) telling our own story, *Journal of Family Issues, 33*, 52-75.

Byrne, A., & O'Mahony, D. (2013). Revisiting and reframing the anthropological archive, *Irish Journal of Anthropology, 16*, 8-15.

Bishop, C., (Ed.) (2006). *Participation documents of contemporary art.* London: Whitechapel Gallery/MIT Press.

Connolly C. (2003). The turn to the map: Cartographic fictions in Irish culture. In V. Kreilkamp (Ed.), *Éire/Land,* (pp. 27-34). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Doolin, L. (2002). Ordinary people and the mountain. In J.W. O'Connell & A. Korff (Eds.), *The book of the burren* (2nd Ed., pp. 240 - 242). Kinvara: Tír Eolas Press.

European Commission. (2012). *The common agricultural policy: A story to be continued.* Luxembourg: Publication Office of the European Union.

Foster, H. (2004). An archival impulse, *October, 110*, 3-22.

Foucault, M. (1986). Nietzche, genealogy, history. In P. Rabinow (Ed.) *The Foucault Reader* (pp. 76-100). London: Penguin.

Genosko, G. (2006, April). *Prospects for a transdisciplinary ecology.* A keynote paper presented at the meeting of the Royal Society of Arts (RSA), London.

Guattari, F., (1989/2000)). *The three ecologies* (Trans. I. Parker & P. Sutton). London: The Athlone Press.

Hall, S. (1990). Cultural identity and difference. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, culture, difference* (pp. 222 - 237). London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Kelleher, J., O'Mahony, D., & Whelan, F. (2008). *Tracings, narratives and representations of Kilnaboy*. Kilnaboy: X-PO.

Kester, G. (2004). *Conversation pieces: Community and communication in modern art.* Berkeley: University of California, Press.

Kwon, M. (2004). *One place after another: Site-specific art and locational identity*. Cambridge MA: The MIT Press.

Lippard, L.R. (1997). *The lure of the local: Senses of place in a multi-centered society.* New York: The New Press.

Lippard, L.R. (1999). *On the beaten track—Tourism, art and place*. New York: The New Press.

MacCannell, D. (1976/1999). *The Tourist: A new theory of the leisure class.* London: University of California Press.

McGrath, B. 1(996). Environmentalism and property rights: The Mullaghmore interpretive centre dispute. *Irish Journal of Sociology, 6*, 25-47.

Mitchell, W.J.T. (1995, March). Translator translated: W.J.T. Mitchell talks with Homi Bhabha. *Artforum,* 118 – 122.

Nancy, J-L. (1989/1991). *The inoperative community*. (Ed. P. Connor, trans. P. Connor, L. Garbus, M. Holland, & S. Sawheny). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Nancy, J-L. (2000). *Being singular plural* (Trans. A. O'Byrne & R. Richardson). San Francisco: Stanford University Press.

Nash, C. (1993). Embodying the nation – The West of Ireland landscape and Irish identity. In B. O'Connor & M. Cronin (Eds.), *Tourism In Ireland: A critical analysis* (pp. 86 - 110). Cork : Cork University Press.

O'Mahony, D. (2013). *SPUD*. Retrieved from http://www.deirdreomahony.ie/images/SPUD project description Sept. 2013.pdf

O'Mahony, D. (2012). *New ecologies between rural life and visual culture in the West of Ireland: History, context, position, and art practice.* Doctoral thesis, University of Brighton, Brighton, England.

O'Mahony, D. (2007). Cross land [artwork]. Republic of Ireland: X-PO. Retrieved from http://www.deirdre-omahony.ie/public-art- projects/cross-land.html

O'Mahony, D. (2006). The trouble with beauty: Ethics, aesthetics and ecology and the landscape of the West of Ireland, *Visual Artists News Sheet, 4*, 2.

O'Rourke, E. (2005). Landscape planning and community participation: Local lessons from Mullaghmore, the Burren National Park, Ireland. *Landscape Research, 30*, 483-600.

Rancière, J. (2004). The politics of aesthetics *(Trans. G. Rockhill).* London: Continuum.

Roden, C. (2001). The Burren flora. In J.W. O'Connell & A. Korff (Ed.) *The book of the Burren* (2nd ed., pp. 31 - 46). Kinvara: Tír Eolas Press.

Rose, G. (1997). Performing inoperative community. In S. Pile & M. Keith (Eds.), *Geographies of resistance* (pp. 184 – 202). London: Routledge.

Rutherford, J. (1990). The third space: Interview with Homi Bhabha. In J. Rutherford (Ed.) *Identity: Community, culture, difference* (pp. 207-221). London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Scott, Y. *The West as Metaphor*. Dublin: RHA Gallery.

Smyth, W.J. (2007). *Map-making and Ireland: Presences and absences, (C)artography: Map-Making as artform.* Cork: Crawford Art Gallery.

Sheikh, S. (2004). *In the place of the public sphere? Or, the world in fragments.* Retrieved from http://republicart.net/disc/publicum/sheikh03_en.htm

Tóbín, C. (1998). *The Irish famine.* London: Profile Books.