



SPUD

The Future is in the Ground

A collaborative research project between Deirdre O'Mahony(Ire) & Frances Whitehead (USA).

With
Tom Keating, Michael Malone, Johnny Quinn and Francis Whelan of X-PO.

All proceeds to X-PO
Project Kilnaboy Co
Clare, Ireland
<http://www.x-po.ie/>



Collated by Deirdre O'Mahony for Grizedale Arts Frieze
Artfair Project 2012.
<http://www.deirdre-omahony.ie>

The Future is in the Ground.

SPUD came about as a consequence of the X-PO project, a public artwork started by Deirdre O'Mahony in a former post office in the Burren in the west of Ireland. The aim was to make room for the many different "publics" in the rural locality to meet much as the old post office had done until it shut in 2002 and allow space where people could share and exchange different kinds of knowledge in the hope that interesting things might happen in the process.

Various groups started to meet regularly. Understandings—of each other and our various skills and practices—developed. Opinions and ideas on the social, cultural, ecological and economic future for the region differed widely. Some participants had a deep knowledge going back centuries; others had limited knowledge but a lot of enthusiasm. Connections were made, friendships were made, and discoveries were made. By its very existence X-PO has presented a challenge to some organisations and provoked opposition. It is very 'public', it performs a kind of coming together that is based on the here and now, not on *apriori* relations or inherited standing in the community/ies.



L to R: Francis Whelan, Michael Malone and Tom Keating with a collection of tools traditionally used in the cultivation of potatoes.

Conversations at X-PO often revolve around ways of growing food, particularly potatoes. This extended into the particular uses of tools, and skills, how to "read" the soil in order to plant and harvest at the correct time. The extent and depth of knowledge led to the idea of making a pamphlet on growing potatoes. As increasing numbers of GIY rural

and urban gardeners turn to smallholding, the potential was clear for this kind of specific, tacit farming knowledge to be made visible.

Co-incidentally artist Frances Whitehead who is based in Chicago, met O'Mahony in 2009 and both artists recognized a parallel interest in the politics of food production and sustainability. Whitehead was already working with CIF in Peru and when the invitation came from Grizedale to participate in their project for Frieze it was clear that this was an opportunity to reflect upon the two stories of potato cultivation, in Peru and Ireland, and simultaneously make the specific, tacit knowledge and culture of potato cultivation available to those interested in growing their own food.

<http://www.x-po.ie/>

Peru - Potato Research Summary

The potato is an extremely tolerant crop, one of the reasons (in addition to its high nutritional content) it has gained popularity cross the globe, especially in developing countries with landscape unsuitable for farming. The potato's temperament and the farming practices used to cultivate it, are derived from its origins in the Andes mountains. The potato can grow in rocky soil, at high altitudes, on mountainsides and cliffs, and will thrive through a frost. In addition "growing potatoes did not require horses, oxen plough or mills, just a spade and plenty of manual labor.¹" The tools that the Inca's used to farm potatoes, "... a variety of species of wooden spades and digging-sticks²" are essentially unchanged, even to this day.



Tacilla

<http://www.mot.be/w/1/index.php/Reading/Chacuitacilla>

The agrarian calendar is a central part of Andean culture, particularly the Incas, who "... synchronized the seasons and crop cycles with the yearly movement of the stars.³" The yearly cycles of planting and harvesting are still accompanied by traditional rituals, although the descriptions of these rituals are scarce. However, one event that was described in several sources is the plowing the land and preparing it for planting. "Teams of seven or eight men, accompanied by the same number of women, would work in line to prepare fields. The

men used foot plows, *chakitqlla*, to break the soil. The women followed, breaking the clods and planting seeds. This work was accompanied by singing and chanting, striking the earth in unison...⁴" In addition to the yearly crop cycle, Andean farmer rotate the use of their land, allowing fields to lay fallow for 9 years. The potato is "... Grown in rotation with indigenous quinoa and kanihua, on land lengthily fallowed and fertilized by herds of domesticated llama and alpaca⁵."



Women take a central role in the cultivation, and preservation of potato species. Since industrialization of Peru, their role has been emphasized, because

http://www.perutoptours.com/index041ualc_chacuitacilla.html

¹ Smith, Andrew F. *Potato A Global History*. London: Reaktion Books, 2011. Print.

² Salaman, Redcliffe. *The History and Social Influence of the Potato*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1949. Print.

³ Lang, James. *Notes of a Potato Watcher*. Texas A & M University Press, 2001. Print

⁴ Hielke De Jong. "Potatoes and the Arts" *Smart Spud*. Aug 20. 2012 .

<<http://www.spudsmart.com/featured/potatoes-and-the-arts--spud-smart-exclusive--2012.html>>

⁵ Reader, John. *Potato a History of the Propitious Esculent*. Yale University Press, 2008. Print

men typically work on commercial farms or in urban centers. Women are responsible for the household, including the food supply, and hence why they have become the experts at potato farming. ‘The pattern in Andean agriculture is cultivation in small plots . . . More like gardeners than farmers’ this is true for Andean’s today, and families typically have gardens that grow several species of potatoes at once, as a food source and sometimes for sale. The diversity of the Andean potato is extensive and unique, and women have been credited with selecting and preserving potato species seeds, as well as trading them among each other.



[http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2008/06/13/spud spat are potatoes roots i
n peru or chile](http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2008/06/13/spud_spat_are_potatoes_roots_in_peru_or_chile)

“In many households, women manage those components of the farming system that contain high levels of biodiversity such as home gardens - and make extensive use of gathered species and tree products. Women also make extensive use of wild patches and marginal areas within community lands where they gather traditional vegetables, condiments, and other (medicinal) plants that are crucial for the nutritional well-being and health of rural families throughout the world. In this way, rural women practice “in-situ conservation” in their home gardens and fields as well as in the common property resources (woodland, wetlands, etc.) that they utilize for wild plants and other products.¹” Discussions about women are usually accompanied by relaying the famous tradition of the “wedding potato,” a knobby potato that a woman must peel in a single slice, so show her suitability as a wife.

¹ “Farmers rights in the conservation and use of plant genetic resources: a gender perspective” *FAO Corporate Document Repository*. Aug 20.2012.
http://www.fao.org/docrep/X0255E/x0255e05.htm#P131_23245

Potatoes have traveled across the globe, due to their high nutritional content, and their ability to tolerate extreme climates and landscape. Much research has been done to improve potatoes yield in countries such as Uganda and China, most of the recommendations, simple and sustainable, correspond to Andean farming practices. Lang writes extensively about this in "Notes of a Potato Watcher," as he describes how potatoes have faired in countries across the globe. In describing China's challenge to grow potatoes he says, "(referencing China) low yielding field must be salvaged . . . By building terraces, erosion control, improved drainage, crop rotation ect.¹" These recommendations directly correspond to traditional farmer techniques developed by the Andeans.



Climate change is a major threatens to the potato crop in Peru. The melting of the Andean glacier shifts the agrarian calendar, temperature, water supply and even light conditions (due to the reflection off the glacier). "In the past 40 years, Peru has lost nearly a quarter of the glaciers in the Andes to rising temperatures . . . The weather used to be so regular that he knew just when to plant each variety of potato. Now he says nothing is predictable. It's warmer, yet there are early freezes, and the rains don't come when they should."² In addition, erosion has increases due to famers deciding the shrink their resting time or their fallow fields to increase production.

<https://secure.flickr.com/photos/iied/5216953867/sizes/l/in/photostream/>

¹Lang, James. *Notes of a Potato Watcher*. Texas A & M University Press, 2001. Print

² Joanne Silberner. "In Highland Peru, a Culture Confronts Blight", 2008. *National Public Radio*. Aug 20. 2012. <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=87811933>>

Potato growing in Ireland.

History of the Potato (after Bourke)		
ORIGINS	1590-1675	Supplementary food and famine stand-by; concentration in south Munster; garden crop; no serious disease.
SPREAD	1675-1750	Winter (September-March) food of poor and supplementary diet of all classes; early planting; field crop; 'black' potato since c.1715; spread into Connacht and Leinster; widespread adoption of lazy bed; one meal a day.
ZENITH	1750-1810	Staple all-year diet of poor (labourers and small farmers): accelerated genetic evolution and hence adaptability; Apple (c.1760) and Cup (c.1800); spectacular expansion; clearing crop in tillage rotation and rise of cottier system: later planting; use as reclamation agent; dominance in south and west; two meals a day.
DECLINE	1810-1845	Increasing monocultural dependence; adoption of inferior varieties especially Lumper c.1810; degeneration of existing varieties; elimination of oats and milk out of diet of poor except in north-east; spread into high mountain and wet bog; increasing susceptibility to disease; three meals a day; Blight 1845.

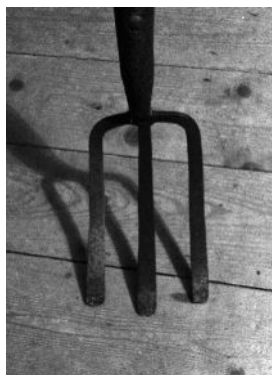
Source: Crowley, Smith and Murphy, Eds. *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine*. Cork: Cork University Press, 2012.

Potato growing in Ireland after the Famine

Family and Community in Ireland

The potatoes demand the greatest attention. A fortnight after they are planted, they must be manured well with manure brought from the pile near the cattle cabins, and the ground must be leveled so that the plant will not go to stalk and thus fail to produce tubers. A fortnight more and the ground must be "softened" and the earth round the plant, which now shows its first leaves, must be "stirred." By the time May is reached, the potatoes must be "landed." Earth must be taken from between the long ridges in which the potatoes are planted and heaped up over them from each side. Thereafter nothing remains until the harvest but a summer spraying against blight.

This account of the importance of the potato in rural life in County Clare is taken from a book called *Family and Community in Ireland* by Conrad Arensberg and Solon Kimball. In the 1930s, Ireland was the focus of an extensive survey known as 'The Harvard Irish Mission, conducted by scholars from Harvard University. The sociological strand of the survey produced two publications; *The Irish Countryman* by Conrad Arensberg and *Family and Community in Ireland* by Arensberg and Solon Kimball. The latter is considered to be a 'classic' scientific text and remains influential within sociological and anthropological academic spheres, describing in great detail the lives of those in three small communities in rural County Clare, one of which was Rinnamona near Kilnaboy. The local response to both texts was mixed. For an account of a collaborative project at X-PO, which presented an alternative account of life in 1930s Rinnamona see the X-PO website.



Tools owned by Tom Keating and Francis Whelan used for growing potatoes in the gardens and haggards of County Clare at the time that Arnesberg and Kimbell wrote their account of life in rural Clare. The three-pronged fork lifts the potatoes without damaging them. The thin bladed spade is almost identical to the Peruvian foot plough



Hand-Sowing Potatoes: Suitable for growing in small gardens.

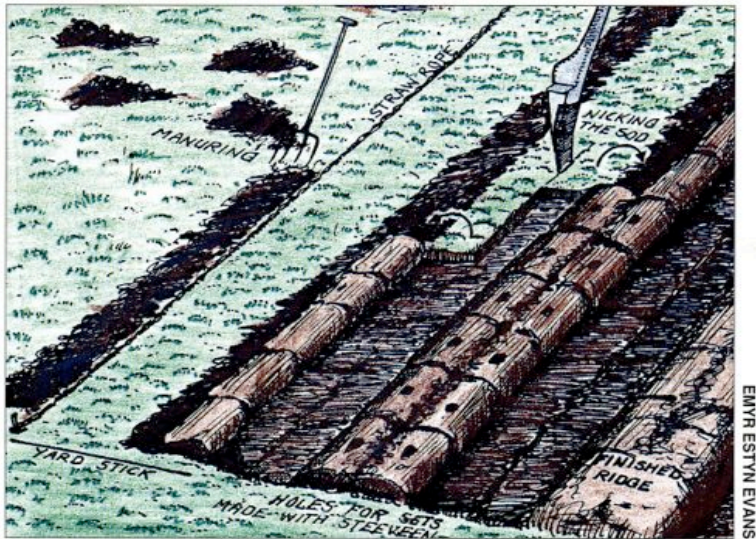


Illustration of traditional “Lazy Bed” system for hand-sowing potatoes suitable for growing in small gardens and used in some parts of Ireland in the 1900s.

Using súgan (straw) ropes, the line of the initial bed is pegged out and manure laid along it. Sods from either side of the bed are then lapped over the manure, leaving a trench on either side. With their grassy side downwards the sods create a flat-topped manure sandwich. A thin bladed spade, (the loy) is used to construct the bed. Dibbing sticks (Stíbhín, cipín) are used by the planter (gogaire) to set the seed potatoes into the ridges. The completed ridges and furrows are of equal width. In the following year, the furrows are dug.

E. Evens *Ireland and the Atlantic Heritage. Selected Writings.* (Dublin: 1996)

p.201. Cited in Aalen, Whelan and Stout Eds. *Atlas of the Irish Rural Landscape.*

Cork: Cork University Press, 1997, p83.

Planting Potatoes, the system used in Kilnaboy County Clare:

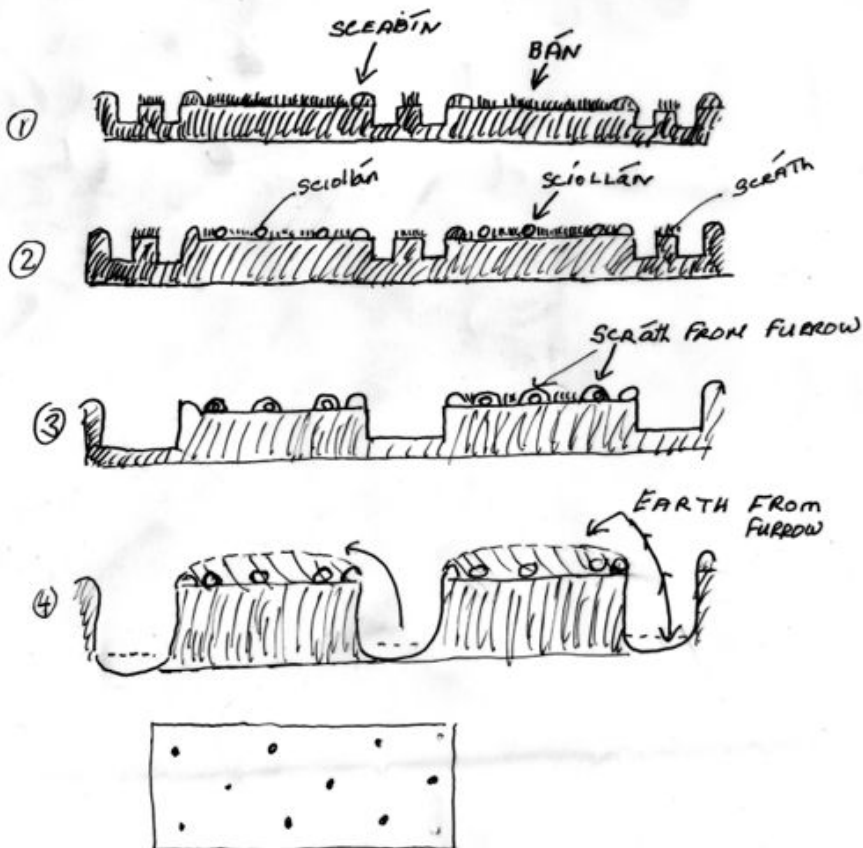
Start planting after St. Patrick's day; March 17th depending on the weather.

Take the seed potato or 'sciollán'. From one fair size potato cut 2-3 sciollán – small pieces each with an eye. The spud, when it's damaged, grows quicker.

In the garden take a section of ridge scráth the length of the spade - the bit you hinge over - the scaibín, and turn it over - hinge it, to make a sandwich of grass. There wouldn't be room for three potatoes in a row so they were staggered - laid out on a diamond 16 inches apart. If there wasn't much soil they'd leave more room between them.

off the waste bit with no eye in it and feed it to the hens or pig. Those leftovers were called 'sciológs'. Sometimes they would throw a bit of lime over them in the bucket.

The women used to spread the spuds with a bag apron or 'práiscín' made from a coarse bag, you split one side and tie it round the waist and catch the front and then spread them walking backwards. Then put a bit of the scaibín the size of the palm of your hand over each of the spuds.



Drawing by Tom Keating showing the stages of making a lazy bed and the layout for spreading the *scioláns* or seed potatoes, which gradually get covered with the soil from the furrows. This is the style of ridge used locally in County Clare. The style changes from location to location depending on the soil.

The potatoes would be sown in the 'haggard' the land adjoining a house or cottage. After a week or ten days when the shoots come up, a little bit of farmyard manure is spread over the green grass and cover the whole lot with earth taken from the furrows. That kills off the vegetation and you are more or less finished with it then until the plants are established.

**Some words for cultivating potatoes in Ireland.
Tom Keating, Michael Malone and Francis Whelan**

Scráth: The surface grass.

Fód: Sod of earth.

Scaibín: a ridge of sods made by just cutting the scráth on three sides. Then hinge it to form a ridge. Turn the hinge of the fód/sod so that both grassy sides are face to face.

Bán: Unploughed green field is known as bán, breaking new ground is known as ploughing bán.

Súgan: Straw used to make ropes.

Haggard - or 'ceap' - a piece of enclosed land.

Sciolán = seed potato = from one fair size potato cut

2-3 sciolán – small chits each with an eye.

Landing – Plowing system for planting potatoes.

Scuffling – breaking up the ground with a scuffer pulled by a horse.

Praiscín = Bag apron made from an old potato or flour sack. The women hold with split tied around with loop of fabric walking backwards sowing potatoes 16 inches in every direction.

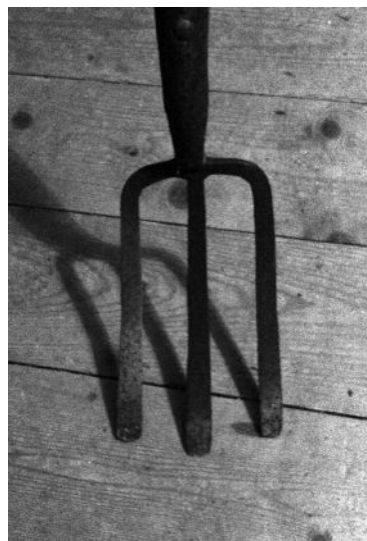
Crotháins - Small potatoes.

Sciológ- the bit of the seed potato with no eyes in it that is thrown away.

Peac - the sprouts or shoots that come from potatoes in storage, must be removed they draw all the good from the spud



Francis Whelan 'landing' the spuds March 2011.



Tools owned by Tom Keating and Francis Whelan used for growing potatoes in the gardens and haggards of County Clare at the time that Arnesberg and Kimbell wrote their account of life in rural Clare. The three-pronged fork lifts the potatoes without damaging them. The thin bladed spade is almost identical to the Peruvian foot plough

The Blight:

You're sure to get blighted if you didn't spray with bluestone and washing soda. The first dry day when the plants were 7-8" it's time for the spray. Bluestone and washing soda, the washing soda helped it to stick to the stalks, otherwise the bluestone would wash off. There was nothing available only that. They only did it twice, it was probably a better mix. Now I would do it five or six times. Did you ever try the blight resistant ones? They tell you that but if you get a year like this they never work.

Fertiliser:

Back in our grandfather's day they went back to Barrtrá (by the seashore) to get seaweed – they only had two or three cows so they had to get seaweed as fertiliser. The people living further away from the sea, they used to cut ferns and burn them, a poor bit of field they'd skin it altogether and burn the scráth.

Varieties:

Early varieties sown after St Patrick's Day and ready by the end June - St John's Day.

Hibernia and Leaguer- They are both the same spud. When you cut them there was a circle, a purple ring inside the skin.

British Queens – white, early, second early and late varieties.

The Irish Apple.

The Yam: Variety grown in the late 1800's.

Duke of York – white

Marris Piper

Old Varieties: Lates.

Kerr's Pink: Lovely light flavour but very prone to blight. They wouldn't hold for the winter. They put out the 'peac' - the sprouts or shoots that come from potatoes in storage. You have to pull the peacs off - they take all the good from the spuds - all the flavour.

Arran Victor- Pink kind late.

Arran Voran: Big one, long - yellow

Ulster Commerce – yellow

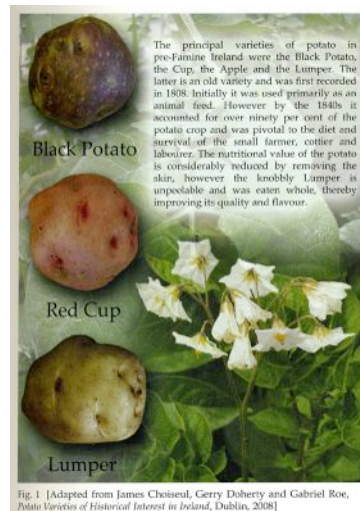
Surprise.

Golden Wonder: Very popular, sores very well up until late spring before the new crop comes in.

Ulster Torch,

Home Guard,

The Lumper - *Bhoma* – more long than round, a heavy spud for eating grow big.



Old varieties of Potatoes grown in Pre-famine Ireland. Source: Crowley, Smith and Murphy, Eds. *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine*. Cork: Cork University Press, 2012.

Storage:

Dig the potatoes. Make a long pile 100cm across and cover them first with straw. (long ago it used to be ferns or cut scráth) Cover them with several layers of plastic up like an 'A' roof.



Frances Whelan's stored potatoes March 2011. Note the layers of straw and plastic. These potatoes survived the very cold winter of 2010-11.

Cooking:

June / July: The first early spuds you'd make colcannon or 'pound' - loads of butter and the tops of spring onion - not enough flavour off the young spuds so that is why the scallions are added.

X-PO Frieze SPUD cakes

500 gm floury potatoes

1 egg lightly beaten

Salt and pepper

50 gm plain flour

Scallions/chives/parsley

Butter for frying

Boil the spuds. Leave to stand without a lid for 5 mins. to dry off. Mash well and mix in egg, flour, herbs, salt and pepper. Take a dessertspoon sized piece of dough and shape into a ball. Flatten and fry on a griddle on a medium hot stove until cooked fully. Serve with butter.



Deirdre O'Mahony is an artist and lecturer in the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology. In her latest research she has been exploring three themes, all arising from her earlier work on the perception and representation of rural land/scapes. This concerns first, the mechanics of belonging in rural communities, secondly, the creativity of tacit, practice-led knowledge and thirdly, the relational dynamic between the local/rural and the national/global.

Solo exhibitions include *Abandoned Clare* X-PO 2011, *re-presentations*; the BCA Gallery 2009, *Viscqueux*; Galway Arts Festival, 2006, *Wall*; Context Gallery Derry and LCGA, 2002 and *WRAP*; Galway Arts Centre in 2000. Selected group exhibitions include *Hybrid* Denver USA 2012, *TRACE* Limerick City Gallery 2012, *10,000 to 50*, IMMA Dublin 2008 and *Eire/Land* McMullen Museum Boston, 2003. Public art projects include SPUD & FARM *Mind Meitheal* ongoing, recent public works include *T.U.R.F (Transitional Understandings Of Rural Futures)*, *Abridged: 0 – 20 Abandoned Clare*, 2010-11, funded by the Arts Council, *X-PO* 2007-8 funded by the Arts Council and *Cross Land*, 2007 commissioned by Clare Co. Council.

O'Mahony has received numerous awards, both national and international including a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Fellowship in 1995 and visual arts bursaries from the Arts Council of Ireland/An Chomhairle Ealaíonn, 1997/2001 and 2010. She is presently completing her PhD at the University of Brighton and is a lecturer in the School of Creative Arts, Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology., Ireland.

Frances Whitehead is a civic practice artist working to contribute to sustainable futures. Understanding the imperative for artists to operate in a larger society, she develops strategies to deploy the knowledge of artists as change agents, asking, *What do Artists Know?* A series of linked civic initiatives include *The Embedded Artist Project* with the City of Chicago Innovation Program, *SLOW Cleanup*, a post-normal phytoremediation program for abandoned gas stations, and an urban agriculture strategic plan with the Municipality of Lima, Peru. Whitehead also writes and presents on the tacit knowledge of artists and the epistemology of art practice.

Currently, Whitehead is Lead Artist for *The Bloomingdale Trail Project*, an infrastructure adaptive reuse project in Chicago, and serves as Advisor to re-imagine the Skullykill Center for Environmental Education, the largest private green-space in Philadelphia.

Whitehead has exhibited widely, including the *UN COP15* Copenhagen; *The Museum of Arts/Design*, NYC; *Vinnistu Art Museum*, Estonia; *Museum of Contemporary Art*, Chicago; *Centrum Rzeźby Polskiej*, Oronska; *Brooklyn Museum of Art*; and *The Drawing Center*. Citations include *ART21:Blog*, *The New York Times*, *Carbon Arts Melbourne*, *Art/Design/Politics*; *Sculpture Magazine*; *Art in America*, *Artforum*, *Frieze*, and the *Discovery Channel* television.

Whitehead is Professor at the *School of the Art Institute of Chicago* and founder of the *SAIC Knowledge Lab*.

