

SP UD

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SPUD Pamphlet # 2

Initiated/Produced by Deirdre O'Mahony

2012/13

Artist Projects by Nadege Meriau (FR/UK);

Deirdre O'Mahony (IE)

Joint Research with Frances Whithead (USA);

Grizedale Arts (UK);

Exhibition/Events with X-PO, Kilnaboy(IE)

2014/15

New artworks and collaborations with:

JIWAR (ES)

Fr. John Silke (IE);

X-PO, Kilnaboy (IE)

S^{PUD} combines artistic research the production of artworks, events, exhibitions, films, collaborations and interventions, that reflect upon farming knowledge, food security, seed heritage and sustainability.

S^{PUD} is a transdisciplinary project between different publics – rural, urban, farmers, artists, academics, cultural agencies and institutions.

S^{PUD} provides a particular, easily understood and accessible entry point for activating a conversation about a wide range of issues.

S^{PUD} reflects upon the position of the potato within Irish culture including conscious and unconscious attitudes to land, identity and commemoration.



Deirdre O'Mahony initiated SPUD as a practice-based research project in the west of Ireland in 2011. SPUD came out of a public art project called "X-PO", which was activated in 2007 in a former rural post office which was used as a space in which to engage different communities in the Burren region in a collective process for reflection on rural futures. The creation of archives related to the personal and collective history of the locality was fundamental to this process, making visible underlying, often unacknowledged, perspectives around history, representation and participation. At X-PO conversations often revolve around ways of growing food; the extent and depth of knowledge about potatoes shared by some participants led to the idea of a potato project in 2009.

Coincidentally O'Mahony then met Chicago-based artist Frances Whitehead.¹ Both artists shared an interest in the role that artists' knowledge can play in devising pragmatic, innovative solutions towards shifting mindsets and attitudes towards climate change and sustainable food production. Whitehead was working with the International Potato Centre, CIP, a research-for-development organization based in Lima, Peru.²

O'Mahony and Whitehead pooled research, sharing ideas on potato cultivation and its contemporary relevance to food security, particularly in cities. The history and social influence of the potato has been a source of a considerable amount of research within environmental and development studies, largely driven by CIP. SPUD now adds an aesthetic dimension to this discourse, connecting rural knowledge to urban sites through culturally driven knowledge transfer and reflecting upon the continued importance of tacit, cultivation knowledge to the most pressing problems of contemporary life. James Lang argues that potato projects teach a simple, but crucial, lesson: how to address basic problems with practical solutions.

Village culture recognizes that solutions must be tailored to fit the circumstances. Whether the problem is seed production, controlling crop pests, genetic improvements, or storage, the key is to take the diversity imposed by place, by farming traditions, and by ecology as a starting point.³

It is impossible to think about the potato without thinking about the Irish Famine. Visual expressions of that history have tended (with exceptions) to point back to that narrative as one of abject victimhood. SPUD is an attempt to present a more nuanced reading, pointing to the importance of seed diversity and the continued global relevance of the potato. SPUD proposes a different model of commemoration to the traditional memorial. By looking back to the Irish Famine and forward to the future food security of ever-expanding global cities, SPUD seeks to perform as a catalyst for rethinking the way that we engage with one another as global citizens.

¹ Frances Whitehead website: <http://www.franceswhitehead.com/> also her writing on my work is available on <http://www.schuykillcenter.org/art/?p=705>

² See <http://cipotato.org>

³ James Lang, Notes of a Potato Watcher. (Texas A & M U.P.) 2001, 5.

The main weakness of the potato remains its susceptibility to disease, particularly blight. This is driving research into disease resistant varieties. Research is underway to develop genetically-modified varieties that can withstand disease, avoid spraying, and provide varieties that can adapt to changing climatic conditions, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and China. EU research trials are underway in Ireland, Europe and South America. In the USA GM varieties are in use for many years with seed-stocks developed by Monsanto. Trials in Ireland generated a huge public response and an important thread of this SPUD research is to provide a context in which to unpack some of the underlying anxieties, and paradoxes implied by both the pro- and anti- GM lobbies.⁴

The cultivation of the potato has changed global history.⁵ From its initial domestication in the Andes over 8,000 years ago, its diasporic spread from the southern hemisphere to the northern hemisphere in the eighteenth and nineteenth century tipped the global balance of power to Europe and the USA.

Perhaps now as we humans are tipping the ecological balance and having more of an effect on nature than was previously ever thought possible, it is time to re-examine our relationship with food production and consider sustainable solutions to global food crises?



⁴ For an excellent overview of the ecological and ethical issues at play see both Michael Pollen's *The Botany of Desire*, (London: Bloomsbury) 2002, and the Agricultural Law Blog which regularly examines some of the complexities arising in food production today, including the broader legal and ethical issues. <http://aglaw.blogspot.ie/>

⁵ William H. McNeill, *How the Potato Changed World History*. *Social Research*, vol. 66, no 1 (Spring 1999), 69-83

PROJECTS 2013-14

1. SPUD Action + Installation: Grizedale Arts/Frieze Artfair and X-PO



TopLeft: Tom Barry demonstrating turning the sod for a lazy bed. Right: Francis Whelan, Tom Keating and Michael Malone at X-PO, Kilnaboy, Co Clare.

At X-PO, participants produced the information for a GIY guide to making traditional 'lazy-beds'; a simple and effective way of cultivating potatoes that is suitable for small urban gardens. This information was gathered for a SPUD pamphlet which was a guide to growing potatoes and information on local words, varieties and systems used in County Clare. A prototype pamphlet was produced and potato cakes served at X-PO's stall as part of Grizedale Arts' *Colloiseum of Consumption*, Frieze Artfair Project in 2012..



Left: Kathleen Rees, X-PO, at the Grizedale Arts Stand at Feizee Artfair, October 2012. Right X-PO Kilnaboy Spring 2008 Photograph Peter Rees.

In Spring 2013, Tom Keating, and Michael Malone made a lazy-bed at X-PO and an archive of SPUD research collated with Frances Whitehead was installed by Deirdre O'Mahony in the former post office. A lazy-bed was planted at Grizedale Arts in Cumbria using the methods outlined at X-PO. Other local horticulturalist collaborators were key to the SPUD archive, including Francis Whelan who documented his planting of a small field over the season of 2011, and Tom Barry who donated seed potatoes and gave a demonstration to local growers. Irish Seedsavers, based in East Clare, also donated a mix of resilient heritage and modern hybrid seed stocks for trial.



Top: Lazy bed made by Tom Keating and Michael Malone in Kilnaboy.

Middle Right Detail SPUD Installation and Frances Whitehead's *Diaspora Papa Map* at X-PO. Middle left: Kilfenora NS Eco-beo School visit.

Bottom Right Detail SPUD installation X-PO. Bottom Left: Detail SPUD installation. Photographs by Martina Cleary.

#3 Action/Artwork: Spud London: Nadege Meriau (FR/UK), 2013.¹

Nadege Meriau's photographic works of the potato's secret world were exhibited in Tulca in Galway in 2012 and curated by Gregory McCartney. Seen in an Irish context the images were full of metaphoric richness and Meriau was invited to contribute to SPUD. For SPUD: London, Meriau extended her investigations of the potato during a residency at the Florence Trust. With O'Mahony she cultivated a potato bed in the garden of the grade II listed church and filmed and photographed the growing potatoes, stretching the use of the camera as an investigative tool by making use of a wireless snakecam to film and record the potato's secret underworld, mapping the invisible networks between tuber, micro-organisms, and plant.



Nadege Meriau, *Solanum Tuberosum 111*, Lambda print, 32x42cm, 2011 and exhibited at Tulca Festival of Visual Art.

Right Collecting manure for the SPUD: London. Photograph Nadege Meriau. 2013

Both artists shared similar experiences. Both grew up knowing about food cultivation at a distance but never having experienced it firsthand and both know what it is to be an outsider in London. Public reactions and responses to the project in London to date indicate a degree of ambivalence about SPUD. On the one hand there is an acknowledgement of the importance of traditional cultivation knowledge in both French and Irish culture, including its relevance to rethinking food security in cities and the loss of place-based, specific forms of agricultural knowledge and seed diversity. On the other hand it is clear that SPUD also brings to the surface post-colonial subjectivities and unconscious attitudes towards identity, particularly around painful historical memories of the famine in Ireland. The project touches on attitudes that are rarely articulated but remain powerfully present in Ireland and the UK, attitudes towards difference and a degree of embarrassment and (for some) shame at the association between the potato, tacit knowledge, ideas of rurality and identity. Recognising this 'other' dimension of SPUD, through the culturally potent act of making a potato bed, became a kind of mapping of tacit knowledge 'digested' by the city. The Summer Show at the Florence Trust provided a first public platform for Meriau's photographic investigations. A second harvest event in September showed both of Meriau's films of the underworld of the potato accompanied by a serving of potato cakes made by O'Mahony using a MOPE (Most Oppressed People Ever) cookie cutter.

¹ For more about Meriau's work see <http://nadegemeriau.com/>



Top: Nadege Meriau's perspex viewing box for observing and photographing growing potato crop at the Florence Trust, June 2013.

Photograph Nadege Meriau.

Middle Left: Harvesting Arran Victory potatoes. The crop was very small, largely because of the dry site and proximity to the church.

Middle Right: *Sarpo Mira* flowers. *Sarpo Mira* was the other variety grown, the first variety developed by the Savaris Family that proved resistant to blight.

Photographs Nadege Meriau.

Bottom Right: Still from Lifeline 1 film made by Meriau and filmed using a snakecam.



4:Action/artwork: M.O.P.E. (Most Oppressed People Ever) Potato Cakes.

M.O.P.E. was a term coined in the 1990s to point to claims that the Irish were more ill-treated than any people at any time in history and throughout SPUD, O'Mahony has experimented with using the MOPE text on potato cakes – a rather delicious irony.

The first public SPUD potato cake action was at Frieze Artfair when they were made and served at [Grizedale Arts'](#) Colosseum of Consumption, Frieze Artfair Project in 2012. The use of MOPE (Most Oppressed People Ever) Potato Cakes was part irony - the potato cake as a reminder of the assumption of the role of victim and how in the post crash economy of austerity in Ireland the tendency is to define ourselves as victims, passively accepting the inequalities and injustices that actually, can be addressed, should we so choose. As Fintan O'Toole has noted,

National freedom isn't another word for nothing left to lose. It's another word for no one left to blame – no one, that is, except yourself...There is a deep and abiding satisfaction in imagining how wonderful you would be if only those foreign bastards would let you. Being free means having to live with the dawning realisation that you might not be so wonderful after all.²

The MOPE cookie cutter was used for SPUD London and most recently, reconfigured in the form of a branding iron at the Scottish Sculpture Workshop in August 2014.



Deirdre O'Mahony, MOPE branding iron and cookie cutters 2014.

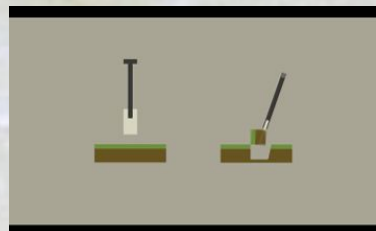


Deirdre O'Mahony, MOPE Potato Cakes 2014.

5 SPUD Animation

A [3-D animation](#) on how to make a lazy-bed using traditional methods shared by Tom Barry, Tom Keating, Michael Malone and Francis Whelan.

Animation by [Cian Brennan](#), original score by Philip Gaston, produced by Deirdre O'Mahony and shown in Dingle during the 2014 Dingle Food Festival.



² Fintan O'Toole, "What new kind of state could Scotland become", Irish Times, 13th Sept. 2014.

6: SPUD Learning Space: Deirdre O'Mahony, Occupy Space Limerick.

Curated by Orlaith Tracy and Barry Foley.

The SPUD Learning Space was part of a group exhibition *Common Ground* by artists who were part of the Ground Up Artist Collective – an ad hoc group that emerged from the Ground Up series of temporary commissioned artworks for Clare County Council. SPUD Learning Space was a presentation of research into investigated forms of potato cultivation. The installation invited viewers to take a pamphlet that further documented ways of growing potatoes drawn on sheets of copied botanical texts glazed with whitewash. Philip Gaston's audiowork *Potato Mash* played softly in the background and some of O'Mahony's book collection on potatoes were available to read, assembled in a bookcases made from recycled wooden palettes.



Deirdre O'Mahony, SPUD: Limerick, installation for COMMON GROUND exhibition, H-Q/Occupy Space. Limerick, 2013. Photograph, Occupy Space

7: Action | SPUD: Morocco Deirdre O'Mahony

Nominated by EVA International Biennial of Contemporary Art

The Anna Lindh Foundation (ALF) Network Activity explored the idea of Art as an Instrument and Expression of Social Change in Taroudant, Morocco, in April 2014. Participants were asked to propose workshops, talks and interventions for the network event and O'Mahony was nominated by EVA International to take part. Taking as a starting point Jean Luc Modene's 1996 site-specific EV+A project, the intention was to restage Modene's *Potatoes* banner on the historic walls of Taroudant. As this was not possible, instead a screening of films and an exhibition took place in Taroudant University Gallery including the SPUD Animation, the *Lifeline* films made by **Nadege Meriau** for SPUD: London, a

poster print of *Diaspora Papa* by Frances Whitehead and documentation of X-PO SPUD research. Potato cakes were also made and served during the exhibition event. One of the outcomes of the event was new relationships with Anna Lindh Foundation members in both Spain and Morocco and a project with JIWAR emerged from connections made at the event in Morocco. (See # 8: SPUD)



Above: SPUD: Morocco. Top Cooking potato cakes in Taroudant. Bottom Exhibition, screening and potato cakes. Taroudant 2014.



Above: 'True' potato seed. Deirdre O'Mahony 2014

8: SPUD Feast: Events and a Film

SPUD Feasts will take place at various sites over 2014 – 15. They will be re-enactments of the potato dinners hosted by French pharmacist Antoine-Augustin Parmentier (1737 – 1883). Pharmacist, scientist, chef and public health crusader. Parmentier is a key figure in this research. While a prisoner of war during the Franco-Prussian war, he was fed on a near exclusive diet of potatoes. His good health on his release convinced him of the value of the tuber as an anti-famine food. Through his academic and scientific research, pamphlets, treatises and cultural tactics - experiments that combined food, science, economics and medicine - Parmentier changed cultural attitudes in France to the potato, breaking a cycle of famine every decade.



Left: Pink Fir Apples and Tibet potatoes harvested in 2013. Above A.A Parmentier. Right: Tutaekuri from Irish Seedsavers grown by O'Mahony.

Parmentier's actions and the events he promoted display striking parallels to contemporary, post-Warhol, art. He gave bouquets of potato blossom to Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, who wore them in her hair, sparking a fashion for decorating fine china with potato flower designs. He persuaded Louis XVI to give him over 40 acres which he planted with potatoes. They were then guarded by day but he instructed the soldiers to withdraw at night. The potatoes became objects of desire, were stolen and thus accepted and assimilated into the peasant's diet. To change 18C perceptions of the potato as variously evil or fit only for animals and the poor he hosted twenty course feasts with dishes made with potato that were attended by influential figures of the day. Parmentier's ability to navigate the treacherous political landscape, through the reign of Louis XV, Louis XVI, the Revolution and Napoleon speaks across time as an example of the patience and effort required to promote progressive research and generate cultural change within a context of challenging political, social and economic circumstances. Now, at a time when rapidly expanding cities worldwide are ever more dependent on precarious food supplies, Parmentier's life and actions offer a possibility of symbolically articulating the continued agri/cultural relevance of the potato as an essential and adaptable world food staple for the future.

The intention in re-staging his potato 'feast' is to prompt a public discourse on food security today. Each dish will reflect upon the questions prompted by the SPUD project, from monoculture to seed diversity and rural-urban migration. The final outcome will be edited documentary footage from different feasts, intercut with slow, poetic passages that visually reference both the rich tradition of still life within the history of painting.

9: SPUD Making Neighborhood: Residency and Project

Hosted by JIWAR with the support of the City of Barcelona, May 2015.

Making Neighbourhood is an inter-disciplinary project residency devised by JIwar Creation and Society (Barcelona International Residence for Artists and Researchers in Urban Creativity) and will now take place from May 1st – 30th 2015. O'Mahony has been awarded a fellowship to develop new SPUD works for a public exhibition along with public presentations on her work. The project is supported by the city of Barcelona and called for artists/researchers interested in contributing to reflection on the idea of Barcelona neighbourhood as a necessary and positive value within the dynamics of the city.

The residency will focus upon rural/urban interrelations, in particular the migratory flow prompted by globalisation and climate change. Barcelona has a long history as a destination for new city dwellers and this intercultural diversity and Grasia's history as a farming community up to the early twentieth century, is central to the SPUD: Neighbourhood proposal.

This will reflect on methods of cultivation and ways of growing food relevant to urban environments. By creating space for diverse cultural inputs through an extended period of development the project will enhance understanding of strategies that can unpack concepts of culture, power, and ethics, re-imagining new associations and forms of belonging within the city.

SPUD evenings will revolve around the cooking and sharing of potato recipes and dishes and the project will culminate in a SPUD: Neighbourhood feast that re-enacts Parmentier's actions. The feast is also an opportunity to share views on the role of durational, socially engaged cultural activism as a necessary counterpoint to 'branded', spectacle and festival-based cultural tourism.



Bloomer potatoes harvested in 2013. Seed donated by Irish seedsavers and grown by Deirdre O'Mahony.

10: SPUD: Economy. Documentary Film and archive.(Work in progress).



Left: *From Courleigh to Creeslough: J. J. Silke and the Irish Seed Potato Industry*. Right: Donegal Potato Seed cart used as for poster advertising Irish Seed potatoes in England in 1934. Photograph by kind permission of Fr. John Silke.

Prompted by the discovery of a book written by Father John Silke, *J.J. Silke and the Irish Seed Potato Industry*, about his father and the Irish Seed Potato Industry in County Donegal, Deirdre O'Mahony is making a film of interviews with Fr. Silke about J.J. Silke's role in the transformation of a small parish in County Donegal through the Seed Potato industry during the period he worked for the Department of Agriculture from 1913 to his retirement in 1949 and his subsequent business as a potato exporter in the 1950's. The film tracks the history of J.J. Silke, his efforts to sustain the small community of farmers in Creeslough, and the subsequent collapse of the industry in the region. J. J. Silke grew a world-record yield of potatoes, more than 35 tons per statute acre in 1929; and was the only Irish man ever to win the Lord Derby Gold Medal, which he did in 1944 for the Doon Eire potato. Fr. Silke has given access to his father's photographs which tracked the achievements of his trials and the transformation of the landscape of Creeslough in the first half of the twentieth century. The film also shows the reversion of the landscape to its current, pre-productive state of rushy field and bogs.



J.J. Silke and his crop of Arran Banner in 1928. Archive Photograph with kind permission of Fr. John Silke.

11: SPUD-X Spring/Summer 2015



Above: Proposed site for Spud: X, Leana Townland, Photograph Deirdre O'Mahony.

X-SPUD will reflect upon Famine as an encounter between the past and the present that is still connected to contemporary life. The project will mark the Great Famine in North Clare through the creation of a temporary memorial in the form of an 'X' shaped, field-sized, potato lazy-bed. This will be made in Spring 2015. The 'X' shape suggests many meanings; it brings to mind writer Lucy Lippard's idea of the 'local' as the intersections of nature, culture, history, and ideology that form the ground on which we stand - our land, our place, the local, – a point that is simultaneously connected to, and isolated from, its surroundings.³ The process will be documented using kite aerial photography, a method previously used for O'Mahony's Cross Land project.⁴



Above: Prototype lazy-bed Kilnaboy 2014. Photograph Martina Cleary.

³ Lucy Lippard, *The Lure of the Local : senses of place in a multi-centered society*. (New York: The New Press, 1997) 7.

⁴ See <http://www.deirdre-omahony.ie/public-art-projects/cross-land.html>

The lazy beds will be made with local participants from the wider communities of the Burren and a programme of events at X-PO and other Burren venues will reflect upon some of the issues arising from the project. The X will be planted with a very successful blight resistant variety which made its way to the Burren via a local resident who brought it from Nepal. Reflecting the global diasporic spread of the potato to Europe in the 16C, the variety has now made its way to Irish seed-savers where it is called the 'Tibet'. The field work of planting, caring and harvesting will become an open reflection on the history, culture and practice of families growing their own food, and its relevance to sustainability, global food security and future seed diversity.



Top Left: Tibet Potatoes after harvest. Right Flowers on potato plant 2014, they grow tall, producing flowers into late September.

Cormac Ó'Gráda argues that unless the traumatic horrors of the 1840's are given their due, 'a more tourism-friendly, heroic, and sanitised version of the ugly history of the Great Famine is on the cards.'⁵ The difficulties presented by reductive, public memorials are yet to be worked through, although Catherine Marshall's essay 'Mapping the Great Famine in Irish Art'⁶ and Emily Mark-Fitz-Gerald's book *Commemorating the Irish Famine: Memory and the Monument*⁷ have both addressed some of the ethical and aesthetic difficulties. In a further text Mark-Fitz-Gerald poses the question of what a transformative ethic of Famine might look like.

I believe it would intersect with past histories of representation without reverting to a simplistic restaging of the encounter between victim and viewer, and in so doing acknowledge the disparity of Famine suffering and its mixed legacy to the diaspora. It would refuse easy sympathies or empathies with their experience, and resist the collapsing of historical difference. As Susan Sontag observed, 'no "we" should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people's pain.' It would be wary of the easy hit of sentimentality whilst remaining mindful that striking an emotional chord remains a powerful mode of viewer engagement. Visually it would present an object or image that invites repeated looking and thinking, not merely a shorthand of ethnic stereotype. Such a work would demonstrate appropriateness to site and spatiality, anticipate likely modes of visitor encounter, yet not overburden itself with over-determining possible responses.⁸

5 Cormac Ó'Gráda, "The Great Famine and today's famines", Crowley, Smith and Murphy, Eds. *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine*. (Cork: CUP, 2012), 657.

6 Catherine Marshall, "Mapping the Great Famine in Irish Art", Crowley, Smith and Murphy, Eds. *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine*. (Cork: CUP, 2012).

7 Emily Mark-Fitzgerald, *Commemorating the Irish Famine: Memory and the Monument*. (Liverpool: LUP, 2013).

8 Emily Mark Fitzgerald, *Famine, Commemoration and Migration*, UCD Scholorcass Series 8, Spring 2013

SPUD will build on an already very extensive, archive of research into the potato and allow the documentation of an ongoing, unfolding, durational, engagement with a very specific place in relation to other global places. Further actions and events are in train and will be documented in future pamphlets. The combined SPUD archive and artworks will be exhibited in Ireland and internationally during 2015 – 16.



Top: First Bolivia Yellowflesh 2014. Bottom Francis Whelan planting at the initial stage of the SPUD project in 2010. Photographs Deirdre O'Mahony.



(c) & (p) Deirdre O'Mahony 2014

the future is at your feet

Deirdre O'Mahony is an artist, writer and lecturer at the Centre for Creative Arts and Media, GMIT, Galway.

She completed a PhD through practice-based research at the University of Brighton in 2012. Selected exhibitions include *T.U.R.F. (Transitional Understandings of Rural Futures)*, a curatorial project for *Labour and the Lockout*, LCGA, Limerick (2013), *A letter to Lucy Pallas* Projects, Dublin (2013), *Hybrid*, Denver USA, (2012). Public art projects include *River Culture* 2013, *Abandoned Clare*, 2010-11, *X-PO* 2007- and *Cross Land*, (2007).

She has received numerous Arts Council Visual Arts Bursaries, Project and Travel Awards and international fellowships including a Pollock-Krasner Foundation award.

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