SPUD: A DIALOGICAL AESTHETIC ENQUIRY INTO FARMING KNOWLEDGE, FOOD SECURITY, SEED HERITAGE AND SUSTAINABILITY
DEIRDRE O’MAHONY

SPUD combines artistic research and the production of artworks, events, exhibitions, films, collaborations and interventions, to reflect upon farming knowledge, food security, seed heritage and sustainability.

SPUD is a transdisciplinary project between different publics—rural, urban, farmers, artists, academics, cultural agencies and institutions.

SPUD provides a particular, easily understood and accessible entry point for activating a conversation about a wide range of issues.

SPUD reflects upon the particular position of the potato within Irish culture, the Great Famine, and conscious and unconscious attitudes to land, identity and co-memorisation.

Deirdre O’Mahony initiated SPUD, slang for potato, as a practice-based art research project in 2011. It came out of a public art project initiated in 2007 in a derelict rural post office in Killinaboy, in the Burren region in the West of Ireland. Repurposed as a public art project, and re-named “X-PO”, the space became a site in which to engage the different communities of the locality in a collective, reflective process on the future of a region that was highly contested. (O’Mahony, 2012, 2014)

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. (Byrne & O’Mahony 2011, 2013) At X-PO, conversations often revolve around ways of growing food and the extent and depth of knowledge about potatoes shared by some participants led to the idea of a potato project - SPUD.

O’Mahony and Chicago-based artist Frances Whitehead both share 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 2013) has worked for a number of years with the International Potato Centre, CIP, a research-for-development organization based in Lima, Peru. Both artists 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. In Notes of a Potato Watcher, 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. (Lang, 2001, 5)

It is impossible to think about the potato without thinking about the Great Irish Famine. Visual expressions of that history without thinking about the Great Irish Famine. Visual expressions of that history have tended (with

CIP’S MISSION IS TO INCREASE POTATO PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES WHILE PROTECTING BIODIVERSITY THROUGH THE INTRODUCTION OF IMPROVED POTATO VARIETIES.
exceptions) to point back to that narrative as one of object victimhood. SPUD is an attempt to present a more nuanced reading, pointing to future implications of the loss of tacit, ‘ground up’ agricultural knowledge, the importance of seed diversity and the continued global relevance of the potato. SPUD proposes a different model of co-memoration to the traditional memorial. By looking back to the Great Irish Famine, and forward to future food security, SPUD seeks to perform as a catalyst for an imaginative rethinking of the way that we engage with one another as global citizens.

The main weakness of the potato remains its susceptibility to disease, particularly blight. This is driving research into disease resistant varieties and is one of the reasons that the SPUD project is focused on seed collections and the great seed-saving expeditions of the 20th century. 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 and trials by CIPL are underway in Ireland and South America and in the USA GM varieties are in use for many years with some 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.

The cultivation of the potato has changed global history. From its initial domestication in the Andes over 8,000 years ago, its diasporic spread from the southern throughout the northern hemisphere and in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, tipped the global balance of power to Europe and the USA. (McNeill, 1999) Perhaps now as 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? The humble potato might yet hold the key to providing secure food supplies for precarious, ever-expanding urban populations, after all the potato is destined to feed humans on expeditions to Mars and if so, why not right here, right now?

For details of past, present and future SPUD Projects see deirdre-omahony.ie/public-art-projects/spud.html

BIBLIOGRAPHY:


Deidre O’Mahony
X-PO

Description:
“The landscape of the west of Ireland has immense cultural importance, serving a double role as a representation of the post-colonial nation state and as a signifier of identity in Ireland. My focus has been on framing landscape and cultivation knowledge as part of an active mode of cultural reflection not a nostalgic reminder of a purer past. Over the past forty years subsidies have driven change in Irish farming, leading to unsustainable surpluses. Paradoxically, those same policies have saved the otherwise economically unsustainable, small farms in the west of Ireland, preserving much of the tacit, place-based knowledge. Legislation and rural development policies now promote the farmer as custodian of the landscape a paradigmatic shift from landscapes as sites of food production to arenas of cultural production. The conservation and regulation of this post-agricultural landscape is often deeply contested. Access to the decision-making processes is limited and conflicts arising from hierarchical attitudes by state experts that ignore or disregard place-based knowledge, are commonplace. I initiated X-PO in 2007 in a former post-office in

Arte Útil
archive nr: 469

Initiator: Deidre O’Mahony

Location: Ireland

Category: pedagogical, politics, environment, social
Users:
Amanda
Dunsmore,
Sennan Kileen,
Michael Fortune,
Jay Koh, Juliette de
la Mere, Megs
Morley, Micky
Donnelly, Jim
Vaughan, Deirdre
O’Mahony, Peter
Rees, Rinnamona
Research Group,
Francis Whelan, X-
PO
Mapping/Irish/Singers/Craft
Groups, Julius
Zus.

Maintained by:
Initial Phase:
Deirdre
O’Mahony, now
maintained and
funded by a team
of X-PO
Participants.
Funding Initial
phase the Arts
Council,
SuperValu, Clare
County Arts Office,
Latterly primary
funding from
participants and
local fundraisers.

Certification:
implemented

Duration:
2007 - ongoing

the Burren in the west of Ireland, a
landscape considered ‘high nature
value’ by the EU. Re-named ‘X-PO’, it
functions as a reflexive space where the
social, economic and environmental
future of rural public life is open for
discussion. Providing social space for
incomers and locals to meet, it allows
different forms of knowledge; farming,
artistic, academic and place-based, to
make unexpected connections and
conjunctions. Participants run weekly
clubs in singing, mapping, crafts,
painting and film. It provides a very
visible
aesthetic, public, space from which to
discuss, disagree and challenge ideas of
consensus within local decision making
processes and offers the possibility of
arriving at sustainable solutions to living
in a changing, socially fragmented
landscape.” (Deidre O’Mahony)

Goals:
Re-activate a former rural post office
through a collaborative exchange
process between artist and different
communities. Establish social and
cultural
clubs for locals and incomers. Create
archives of local, place-based
knowledge. Curate a programme of
exhibitions, events and talks to animate
and activate a discourse that publicly
complicates perceptions of rural life as
simple and slow. Network and connect
with other like-minded agencies and
initiatives. Initiate collaborative
exhibition-making processes and make
place based knowledge visible to wider
audiences and new contexts. Provide a
model of local democracy that can be
applied to other places. Make available
traditional farming knowledge to
contemporary urban publics. Demystify
simple food production.

Beneficial Outcomes:
It is participant-led, self-sustaining and
is now economically self-sufficient after
the initial activation period. It has created four archives that have publicly complicated received understandings of landscape and land use. Provides an open social/cultural space for different publics in the region to meet socially. Provides a space for weekly clubs, occasional talks, film nights, collaborative exhibitions, site or context-specific interventions and events. Embodies the micropolitics of a plurality of voices performing a kind of coming-together based on the here and now, not on a priori relations or on inherited standing in the 'community'. Exemplifies a model of participative action providing space for individual and social empowerment. While laying no claim to be representative. It informs local development policy making by being too visible to be overlooked in consultative fora. Allows open space for disagreement and dissent.

Images:

November 1, 2013

Labor and Lockout …formed part of a nationwide, labour-themed visual arts programme, devised in response to the 1913 Lockout centenary, marking this pivotal moment in Irish labour history with representations of work in contemporary art. The exhibition, augmented by the ‘Land / Labour/ Capital’ seminar (devised in collaboration with Goldsmiths’), reflected on contemporary labour conditions, against the backdrop of ‘precarity’ prevalent under late capitalism.

Deirdre O’Mahony’s installation ‘T.U.R.F (Transitional Understanding of Rural Features)’ addressed the ongoing dispute over turf-cutting in certain Irish bogs designated under the E.U Habitats Directive. A turf stack, constructed by turf-cutter Colm Harrington, was installed in the middle of LCGA’s large permanent collection room, providing a sculptural focal-point and reminder of the material subject in hand. Newspaper clippings, photographic documentation and an array of reading material further outlined the bitter standoff. O’Mahony’s documentary film portrays turf cutting as a self-sufficient, irreplaceable way of life, alluding to wider implications for Irish society beyond the immediate impact on rural communities. Further illustrating the relationship between ‘Irishness’ and the land – as a site of exile, famine, and political conflict – O’Mahony included a selection of 19th and 20th century Irish Landscape paintings drawn from LCGA’s collection. Vivienne Dick’s 16mm colour film ‘Rothach’ (1985) provided a chimerical meditation on the Irish landscape; its cacophonous audio having permeated the senses long before the visuals kicked in. Presenting a slow horizontal-pan across a vast rural landscape, occasional activity is revealed. A child’s fiddle- playing gradually morphs with screechy b-movie drones, suggestive of impending doom. Representations of the Irish landscape in the mid ‘80’s have become synonymous with the tensions occurring at the time between Irish nationalism and the desire to embrace European economic modernity. Proving pivotal to a reading of the exhibition as a whole, ‘Rothach’ functioned as a psycho-geographic map from which all the other artworks could plot their coordinates.

Anthony Haughey’s ‘DISPUTE’ (1913/2013) documents a 272 day strike by workers of Lagan Brick Factory in Co. Cavan, which closed in 2011 due to the collapse of the construction sector. Although redundancy payments were eventually awarded, the workers’ names and years of
service displayed in horizontal uniformity across the gallery wall attested to a greater communal loss concealed beneath the modest victory. Some of the last red bricks produced at the factory were displayed by Haughy, inscribed with words such as ‘justice’ ‘equality’ and ‘trust’, providing an optimistic commentary on the solidarity of struggle emerging out of horizontal formations. The remnants of post-industry are further explored by Sean Lynch in his ongoing ‘DeLorean Progress Report’, recording the aftermath of the former DeLorean car manufacturing factory in Belfast. In tracking the financial paper-trail, the defunct transportation vessels, and the scrapped, lost or re-appropriated fabrication tooling, this most recent incarnation of Lynch’s inquiry occupied the gallery floor, with cables and car-parts strewn around, and a small portable T.V perched on an upturned log, as it might appear in some fella’s garage. Also utilising auto-parts, Seamus Farrell’s ‘Agri-culture’ (2013) presented the windscreen of a tractor, which was driven to Ireland (pulling a caravan) over twenty years ago by a Dutchman who settled here with his family. Farrell engraved the glass with a harp and an Irish passport, memorialising a seemingly borderless Europe.

Tracking heavy industry to the eastern periphery, Darek Fortas’s ‘Coal Story’ (2011) traces the industrial expansion and development of a workers’ Solidarity movement in Poland. Portraits of miners and photo-documentation of incidental objects found at the mine sites, expressed the realities of heavy industry in human terms. Examining how people interact and operate collectively was explored in Deirdre Power’s ‘Seduction of Place’ (2013), examining co-existence and visibility in public spaces, while ‘The Struggle Against Ourselves’ (2011) by Jesse Jones focuses on representations of the body in film, enacted through choreography underpinned by political conditions. Presented as a stack of printed A4 paper, Mark Curran’s dimly lit installation ‘The Normalisation of Deviance’ sought to expose the myth-making surrounding economic ideologies under Global Capital. The sound-scape (an algorithmic composition derived from Michael Noonan’s speeches) washed over the space in an unexpectedly soothing way. As a monument to capitalist abstraction, Curran’s installation revealed the hegemonic forces of finance in every facet of life.

‘The Question of Ireland’ (2013) by Megs Morley & Tom Flanagan is a 3-Channel Film which considers the relevance of Marxism for post-Celtic Tiger Ireland. Scripts were devised by civil rights activist Bernadatte Devlin, playwright Grace Dyas, and sociologist Kieran Allen and performed across three sections by Bríd Ní Neachtain, Lauren Larkin and John Olohan. The use of ‘we’, ‘us’ and ‘you’ implicated the viewer in the unfolding dialogue. In the first act, a seemingly educated, middle-aged woman delivers a soap-box rant about the demise of the Irish Free State and modern-day negative associations of “solidarity” with “conspiracy” and terrorism. Providing an account of inner-city life under the current austerity regime, the second performance by a young Dublin woman portrays “neglected places” and the “dismantling of a generation”, calling on the viewer to actively envisage a fairer future. The third act is delivered by a red-faced, tie-less, rural gentleman, whose breathless, comedic delivery one might encounter in a bar near closing time. Following his animated and poignant descriptions of a “class-war” and the “Gospel of permanent austerity”, the camera pans an empty theatre. Then the lights go out. Who is listening? Where are the citizens? In calling for vision and revolution in local neighbourhoods and workplaces, the contemporary relevance of Marxism for Ireland ultimately lies in a rejection of long-standing hierarchical formations, recalling the main themes that permeates the entire exhibition.
Cumulatively, the artworks in ‘Labour and Lockout...’ extended this ‘national question’, by looking beyond current economic tunnel-vision. Instead, there was a strong emphasis on horizontal formations, materiality, and the tools and products of labour, which attested to meaningful artistic engagement in social and political realities, bearing witness to existing, evolving and alternatives forms and conditions of labour. In the context of the backward-glancing nature of centenary commemorations, this task is as urgent as it is compelling.

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Post Normal Art

by Frances Whitehead

“All that was ‘normal’ has now evaporated; we have entered postnormal times, the in-between period where old orthodoxies are dying, new ones have not yet emerged, and nothing really makes sense... We will have to imagine ourselves out of postnormal times—with an ethical compass and a broad spectrum of imaginations from the rich diversity of human cultures.”

- Ziauddin Sardar, Welcome to Postnormal Times, 2009

So prevalent are the terms “post” and “post-normal” as signifiers for the shifting ground of contemporary thought, that we must ask: “What is post-normal art?”

Thomas Kuhn’s term “paradigm shift” has entered the popular vocabulary, but recently we have seen a resurgence of interest in Kuhn’s thinking, including a reassessment of his ideas about “Normal Science” and the importance of “Post Normal Science”, especially to climate science and policy. Broadened still further by the economic events of 2008-09, the discourse around the “Post Normal” (or New Normal) is being addressed by thinkers from many sectors. The prefix “post” is frequently used to describe the current state of ecological, economic and social-cultural affairs, and implies that we are indeed living in the future of a past era. We invoke our past as part of our current paradigm –Post-carbon, Post-industrial and Post-colonial are inherited cultural landscapes. Interviews with a wide variety of such thinkers can be heard online at The Conversation: In Search of the...
New Normal.

Undoubtedly, Kuhn did not intend the term “Normal Science” to be understood ironically. However, in today’s usage, the idea of the “normal” functions as a trope, an ironic metaphor for the deep fissures and uncertainties in the cultural at large. Given the legacy of the avant garde and artistic experimentation, we sense this irony immediately when we transpose Kuhn's model to Art practice. In this context, “normal” is an indictment of sorts, a failure to contend to what is all around us. We are faced with the curiously problematic proposition of “Normal Art” or the uncertainties and possibilities of “Post Normal Art.”

In the last few years, many artists have opted for the latter, shifting their creative practices away from “The Normal” towards a deeper engagement with systems, complexity, and context, a decidedly “Post-Normal” perspective. While some work with ecological themes of water, landscape, soil, food systems and remediation strategies, much of this new work connects ideas and sites in ways unimaginable a decade prior, bringing the art historically recognized genres of “earthwork”, “eco-art”, and environmental “activism” into connectivity with socio-cultural, rural and urban, art + design practices, principally through collaboration. Meanwhile, the global discourse in this area has adopted the theoretical framework of “sustainability” (even “Post-Sustainability with its focus on adaptation). These multifaceted perspectives see “Post” landscapes as actualizations of cultural paradigms and sites of intervention as Post Normal Art, connecting emerging critical, spatial and civic media and practices, further shifting the cultural quo.

Working through my collaborative studio identity ARTetal, my Post Normal practice has been focused primarily in urban sites. Emerging from the question, “What do Artists Know?” ARTetal has developed entrepreneurial strategies for artists to work at the urban scale and partner with equally adventurous civic partners.

SLOW Cleanup moves Post-Carbon environmental remediation into the territory of Post Normal Science as it engages the Chicago community and leverages underutilized capitals (assets) of space, time, and human capacity.

Environmental Sentinel is a three mile climate monitoring work planned for Chicago’s Bloomingdale Trail, a Post-Industrial adaptation project. Embedded within the landscape design, atop a repurposed railroad embankment, this phenologic planting will reveal the temperature moderating effect of Lake Michigan with a flowering spectacle, and signal
micro-climate changes over the next century. The science will be conducted by *citizen scientists and citizen artists*, Post Normal “Art + Science”.

Understanding that communities of artists and designers are themselves under-utilized resources barely tapped, a Post Normal creative opportunity brings SAIC faculty and students to the service of the City of Lima, Peru with new urban agriculture *programs*. An open source response to Lima’s colonial legacy – a redistribution of capacity – this Post Colonial intervention is also Post Normal *Cultural Heritage*, as the site for the work is the *Cercado*, or historic district.

Introduced to the City of Lima through potato research at the *Centro Internacional de la Papa*, the global *diaspora of the potato* and its relationship to colonialism, tacit and explicit, connects these civically driven, urban interventions to the rural countryside of west Ireland and the Post Agricultural work of artist Deirdre O’Mahony.
Like many post industrial "shrinking" cities, the west of Ireland has steadily lost population from economic policy and emigration, leaving an abandoned landscape and shifting paradigms.

O’Mahony frames her work in this way:

“The landscape of the west of Ireland has immense cultural importance, serving a double function as a representation of the post-colonial nation state and as a signifier of alterity in Ireland. My focus as an artist has been on reframing landscape as an active mode of cultural reflection, rather than a nostalgic reminder of a purer past”
Current (Post) rural development policies now promote the farmer as what O’Mahony refers to as “custodian of the landscape”, a paradigm shift from the rural as a site of food production to an arena of (Post Normal) cultural production. Here O’Mahony initiated and collaboratively runs the public art project X-PO; a “Post” post office.

O’Mahony describes the project:

“Re-imagined as “X-PO” the site is a functioning model of a reflexive space where the social, economic and environmental choices and problems of rural communities are visible and open for discussion. It is a space where different forms of knowledge: social, historical, agricultural and cultural, can make unexpected and transcendent connections and conjunctions. It also enables participants in a fragmented, dispersed social landscape to meet.”

Much like policies in the US, European Agricultural subsidies have supported economically unsustainable small farms in the west of Ireland, paradoxically preserving much of the tacit, place-based, local knowledge around land cultivation. This knowledge is becoming increasingly redundant, forgotten, or outmoded in a “post- productivist” landscape.

In this context O’Mahony has begun project SPUD, a pamphlet guide to making traditional Irish ‘lazy-beds’, a simple and effective way of cultivating potatoes that is also suitable for small urban gardens.

This inversion (or equation) of culture and agriculture, of post rural and post urban, of artist and agri+culturist, connects O’Mahony to urban sites through culturally driven knowledge transfer and the urban forager artist, Nancy Klehm. Both Deirdre O’Mahony and Nancy Klehm work with literal and metaphoric Shifting Ground by action research, a principal methodology of “Post Normal Art”.

Nancy Klehm ventures into the remote areas of cities such as Chicago, Detroit, and Los Angles, leading groups on foraging tours to discover and collect the comestibles of the
post urban wilderness, replete with resilient species, native and non-native alike.

Writing under the moniker of Weedleater, Klehm brings decades of plant knowledge from her extended family of plantsmen and horticulturists to the service of what Klehm calls “homegrown counterculture”. Motivated by a fierce autonomy and deep respect for complex natural processes, Klehm hybridizes art practice with horticulture, direct experience, and deep community in equal measure.
Similar strategies are employed by urban arts groups such as Carbon Arts of Melbourne, Australia, and the rural development organization Littoral in the UK.

We can understand these projects as a constellation of diverse urban and rural practices, which utilize top down, bottom up and hybrid collaborative strategies and partnerships. In this way, Post Normal Art practitioners, including those cited here, work both within and outside of irony, both within and outside of experimental art models, and embrace the “chaos, contradiction, and complexity” that typifies life in Post Normal Times.

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GLASS ART TIMELESS AND MODERN

info@mayer-of-munich.com
book@mayer-of-munich.com

ABOUT PLACE
Putting art at the heart of placemaking

we share more of our ideas for our vacant store fronts?

They’ve become more emotional as I’ve become consumed with personal well-being and what it means to lead a fulfilling life. And this has made me look at my neighbors differently. We’re not just neighbors in a place, but we’re also neighbors in making sense of our lives. How can we share more of our hopes, fears, and stories? We struggle with a lot of the same issues. How can we help each other see we are not alone?

In an environment where taping a flyer to a lamppost is illegal while businesses can shout about products on an increasing number of surfaces, we need to consider how our public spaces can be better designed so they’re not just reserved for the highest bidder. With more ways for residents to share with one another, the people around us can not only help us make better places, they can help us lead better lives.

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DEIRDRE O’MAHONY: Acknowledging Rural Complexity

Artist Deirdre O’Mahony explores the complicated intersection of public space, civic life, history, and art. In one piece, for example, she reopened an abandoned rural post office as X-PO, a public meeting place that hosted events, installations, lectures, and art exhibits. A key to X-PO—and to O’Mahony’s concept of placemaking—is providing a platform for spontaneous collaboration. “I really wanted to allow space where people could share different kinds of knowledge, because it has always been my experience that where different forms of knowledge come together, interesting things happen.”

Public Art Review: Do you have a working definition of placemaking as you approach your work?
Deirdre O’Mahony: For me, placemaking is about actively engaging with the matrix of human, natural histories and practices that shape a place and its context. Placemaking makes these connections visible; it acknowledges the complexity of the social, environmental, cultural, and economic dimensions that affect place.

How does that manifest in the places you’ve worked?
Well, you must understand that in Ireland we have a complicated relationship with the land that plays out in recurring conflicts around landscape and land use. These conflicts engender compulsive and passionate responses to particular—and not necessarily picturesque—places: fields, bogs, and so on. These irrational passions are so deeply felt that the Irish playwright John B. Keane wrote a powerful play about them called The Field, and the term “Field Syndrome” is sometimes used to describe them.

I live in a very beautiful region called the Burren, in the west of Ireland. When I came here in 1991, I was shocked by an environmental conflict about the construction of an interpretative center. The plan, and the controversy surrounding it, had a profound effect on local relations and raised all sorts of issues. The central question concerned the power relations that governed who drove the representations, cultivation, preservation, and interpretation of place.
Observing this controversy forced me to try to identify a contemporary place-based practice that could begin to address the fragmented and fluid nature of rural society today. Since then, my version of placemaking has tried to complicate perceptions of rural life. I want to make visible some of the more complicated reasons behind recurring conflicts about environmental regulation, changes in land use, and the effect of these changes on individual and collective subjectivities.

So does your work specifically attempt to challenge these perceptions? If so, how?
I’m interested in how this mix of expectations plays out in the social unconscious in rural areas. As a result, my projects explore an expanded idea of the relationship between arts practice and cultural activism. X-PO is a good example of this.

This was the abandoned rural post office that you turned into a meeting place.
That’s right. In Kilnaboy, in North Clare, I had finished a temporary public art project called Cross Land in 2007, and it left me with a lot of unanswered questions about the sustainability of a very beautiful landscape—and one that has been shaped by more than 5,000 years of farming. The question for me became how best to engage different stakeholders in an extended process of collective reflection on a sustainable future.

As a public art project, it created a space for the many different “publics” in the locality to meet—much as the old post office had done until it shut in 2002. I really wanted to allow space where people could share different kinds of knowledge, because it has always been my experience that where different forms of knowledge come together, interesting things happen.

I used a mix of processes from installations, talks, curated exhibitions, and events, in order to animate a conversation on what people felt was important in their place. Various groups started to meet regularly. Understandings—of each other and our various skills and practices—developed. Opinions and ideas on the future for the place 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.

So you kind of turned the space over to these folks, right? What were some of the projects that emerged?
I curated the space for just eight months, and since then, local users of the space have taken over managing and funding it. Among the events was an exhibit of archival photographs of the parish, which graphically demonstrated the rapidity of...
change in the landscape. One group used the space to present their version of the story of their family and community who had been the subject of the Harvard Irish Survey in the 1930s. A mapping group spent five years charting every house, new and old, going back to the earliest parish records of 1847.

Is there a common thread among these projects?
X-PO lays no claim to be representative. It is, rather, the act of participation that is at the core of the project. This, for me is the essence of placemaking—an ontology of place experienced in a moment of “being-with,” as Jean-Luc Nancy proposes.

So would you say it’s “neutral” ground?
That’s not quite right. X-PO means accepting difference and disagreement. By its very existence, X-PO has challenged some local organizations and provoked opposition. It is very public—it performs a kind of coming together that is based on the here and now, not on a priori relations or inherited standing in the community. Interestingly, for the purposes of public artists, while X-PO was run under the banner of “art” it was largely unquestioned, even as it questioned some of the fundamental power relationships and assumptions of its rural location. Only after it was taken over by the regular users of the space did it become contested. Still, it survives well and continues to function despite, or possibly because, it is “in dissent” with some local hierarchies.

JEFRÊ: Creating Places, Not Objects
Artist Jefre Manuel, who works under the name JEFRÊ, is a relative newcomer to public art. Three years ago, at the age of 35, the practicing designer had a heart attack and triple bypass. The experience convinced him to retire from architecture/landscape architecture and return to his artistic practice (among other places, he studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago). Today, he’s won a number of large competitions, thanks in large part to his approach to placemaking. “Because of my background in public space and architecture, I’ve never been interested in creating objects; I create places,” he says. “It’s not about a single element, it’s about a collection of elements that make a place.”

Public Art Review: Can you describe your approach to placemaking?
JEFRÊ: For me, it’s the literal definition of the word place. Millennium Park is a place not only because it has iconic sculptures. It also has great civic parks, architecture, and restaurants. And people.

If you think about great cities, when I ask you, “What is your favorite place and why?” you’re not going to say the Sears Tower or the Empire State Building. You’re going to say Central Park or Millennium Park. Those are places. No one single