

Searching For a Place in Common

There is no communion, there is no common being but there is being in common.
Jean-Luc Nancy

On Sunday 20th July opened at the X-PO, *Surfacing*, an exhibition of paintings, drawings and photographs by Deirdre O'Mahony. The artworks drew their inspiration from the nearby Inchiquin lake and particularly from the ambiguous beauty of the pollution related bloom of algae which was threatening to suffocate the lake ecosystem. The images played off a traditional sense of beauty against its socio-economical context in associating beautifully crafted images and a potentially controversial content: the reform of agricultural practices for instance.

This engagement with issues relating to rural communities was consistent with previous art exhibitions programmed at the X-PO such as Eileen Healy's *Farming – a Visual Stuttering*, Jim Vaughan's *Local News* or Amanda Dunsmore's *Mr and Mrs Krab's Utopia*. These works though not made specifically for the place took a reflexive quality in this rural context in keeping with the emphasis laid on the discursive possibilities of the artworks in the X-PO programming. Looked at from a response point of view, the most striking feature of the opening of *Surfacing* was probably in the swelling flow of people attending the show and chatting outside around the tables that had been set for tea and cakes on this cool summer day.

This focus on social interaction is one of O'Mahony's stated aim of the project which while placing an ambitious art exhibition program at its heart, was 'to reactivate the kind of incidental community exchange and contact point that was once commonly associated with the day to day business of rural Post Offices all over Ireland' (O'Mahony project description) thus firmly forwarding the social rather than the aesthetic content of the project.

The initial impulse for the X-PO local exchange project was in response to O'Mahony previous experience with *Cross Land*, a public artwork for Clare County Council. The need was felt to develop a long-term participation of the audience¹ and to palliate to the lack of public spaces in rural areas to exhibit as well as meet the public. Thus, the building of the former Kilnaboy post office was rented out on an 11 months lease and renovated to be used as venue to both art exhibitions and community events. By the end of its tenure in July, the X-PO had hosted seven exhibitions, artist's talks, AGM from several local associations as well as a cookery and botanist clubs.

Deirdre O'Mahony describes the X-PO as 'a public art project that seeks to actively engage rural communities by giving space and time to review, recall and renew core community values and priorities'. This description articulate two issues which if they pertain to much contemporary public art are here addressed in their own terms; one is the ambivalent notion of autonomy or non-autonomy of the space which it hopes to create: 'by giving space and time to review, recall and renew'. The second issue, which the project attempts to engage with, is the definition of community.

Since the 1990s there has been a resurgence of art practices aiming to break away from the perceived isolation of contemporary art from everyday life. This question of the desired (or not) autonomy of the artwork has been an ongoing controversy since the early 20th century, generally pitched against art practices more politically or socially engaged. Art attempts to participate in society have taken many forms, from the outrageous events staged by the Dadaists to the performances and happenings of 1960s counter culture. For the last fifteen years or so, art has moved toward collaborative practices with the public, the 'new public art'² and the relational as the site of art such as the practices which were described by Nicolas Bourriaud in *Relational Aesthetics*.

Most of these practices, which Stewart Martin regroups as 'anti-art', have laid claims to work toward an alternative model to consumerist society. However they face the recurring problem of dissolution: 'The anti-art position has had to confront the extent to which the dissolution of art into life is not simply emancipatory but a dissolution of art into capitalist life'³. Thus art projects often have to struggle between the risk of isolation and that of dissolution and have to negotiate a position for themselves.

When O'Mahony was looking for a place for her project (to use as a public space), the location and history of the former Kilnaboy post office made it an ideal candidate. Not only had it been the site of those informal social relations that she was seeking to re-activate, but it was also the bearer of the larger issue of the future of rural post offices in Ireland. Kilnaboy post office was shut down after some struggle in 2003, as have been hundreds of post offices throughout Ireland in recent years. This trend is part of a larger transformation of the role and shape of the state, withdrawing from the provision of services, which are handed over to the private sector, and moving toward a purely regulatory function⁴. The withdrawal of the state has meant that many post offices were no longer sustainable and closed down.

This logic, however, overlooked the many social services, hardly quantifiable but nonetheless very real, that were carried out to the rural communities through their post office. It is this social dimension of the place that O'Mahony's project is addressing and interestingly it is becoming more widely acknowledged as for instance, in Bishop Dr Dermot Clifford's address to the government: "The local Post Office is a vital link between the citizen and the state and in many places it is the only link left"⁵. He suggested that, to stop the decline in number of local post offices, 'the remainder [to] be developed as "the heart of communities" delivering services to the elderly, the disabled, the unemployed, carers, one-parent families, and those without a car or public transport.' He further added 'that post offices have an "existence value" which symbolises the continued well-being of the local community'⁶.

It is the old dichotomy between exchange and use values being played out once more (although we have been told time and again that the free market will take care of it all). Thus through its history as a rural post office a certain idea of social relations was already embedded in the site itself and the ease with which the people of the area found their way back to the building is suggestive of the social lack that was felt by its closing down. If the achievements of the X-PO project were to be gauged solely by the public engagement with it, it would be an unconditional success. Which is no small feat in an increasingly dispersed neighbourhood.

The history of the site was further drawn upon in the exhibition program from the very first show *The Life and Times of Mattie Rynne* in December 2007, dedicated to former postmaster John Martin Rynne. The exhibition consisted of his archived belongings, which O'Mahony had excavated while renovating the building. They were documented and presented like so many remains of a lost civilisation. It is part of the project to constitute an archive of existing local knowledge through collecting stories and memories of the place. This archival work has been furthered by the members of the Mapping Group, by Peter Rees photographic recording of the daily life of Kilnaboy and the Rinnamona Research group through their researches in the stories and histories of local families and buildings. Their findings were composed into exhibitions in May and June 2008. O'Mahony's ambition for the collecting and archiving of this knowledge is that practical applications of it has 'the potential to serve as a model for re-imagining contemporary rural communities' (X-PO pamphlet). Furthermore, it is a stated aim of the project to make these archives accessible to all free of charges, thus opposing the prevalent logic to use genealogical database as a source of touristic revenues which was denounced by Fintan O'Toole: 'The big mistake we make about genealogy is to imagine that it is basically about tourism [...] But actually genealogy is about culture'⁷. In the same vein, none of the artworks exhibited at the X-PO are on sale, they might however be exchanged for some other production (such as jam) or a service.

In this context, O'Mahony also declares that: 'it is hoped that this "thinking space" will serve as a counterpoint to nostalgic perceptions and representations of the West of Ireland, and challenge notions of what constitutes authenticity in a public space increasingly defined by the tourist market.' (XPO pamphlet)

All these elements tends to singularise the X-PO as a place apart, ambitioning to function in a different way and thus calling to mind the image of the 'islet of resistance' or 'interstice' which Nicolas Bourriaud developed in his writings on Relational Art:

*The interstice, presents the possibility of functioning differently. In a world more and more homogenized and subject to a single law, it is important to support spaces which try other things.*⁸

Bourriaud further adds that in multiplying these spaces 'we multiply the possibility of another dialogue emerging one day'.⁹ The notion of developing islets of resistance within the existing system was inspired by Karl Marx but also by Francois Lyotard. He developed the idea that we no longer had to invent a new world from scratch but that we should use what already exist; that it was less a question of rebuilding but one of trying to inhabit these places differently. From these ideas Bourriaud developed his definition of the artist's work:

*The role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist.*¹⁰

All these resonate in a tempting way with the X-PO; the idea of resistance to a homogenizing system, that of suggesting other possibilities of exchange or to inhabit a space differently all seem to find particular empathy with the project.

However resisting this idea is the fact that the X-PO, and it is one of its achievements, has found its place in the life of the community, partaking of its dynamic and difficulties. It has become a feature in the calendar of everyday life: it hosted the Christmas tree, it is used by local associations and it is now functioning under the management of a team issue from the community. It also inherited some of its conflicts, which surfaced around the formation of a management team for instance. For better or for worse, the X-PO is tightly linked with the life around it, and has thus escaped the fate of many art projects, namely isolation. Whether it will be able, building on its singularities, to preserve its difference or better still to disseminate its disruptive potential around, or will dissolve into the system, remains to be seen.

Another issue faced by the X-PO, and by most new public art projects, is the notion of community and what is meant by it. Leaving aside the issue concerning the type of community dealt with, the term is often used as a desirable and unquestioned horizon. Much of the work of philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy has been to investigate the idea of community. He develops the thesis ‘that at the core of western political thinking, there is a longing for an “original community”’. It is the longing for an immediate being-together, out of the idea that we once lived in a harmonious and intimate community, but that this harmony has declined throughout history’¹¹. This cosy pre-modern society stands for the opposite of the anonymous modern society ‘full of selfish individuals’, mother of all evils¹². This longing has more to do with a mythical past than as reference in history:

*As such, this nostalgic imagination is innocent, but when it becomes the starting point for a politics of community, the innocence disappears. We should become suspicious, of the retrospective consciousness of the lost community and its identity.*¹³

Beyond the illusions of a lost original community and the alienation of modern capitalist society Jean-Luc Nancy’s writings does not offer any easy answers but keep probing that in-between and tentatively explore its possibilities as the place to be invented.

Interestingly, from its opening day, in December 2007, the X-PO was placed under the tutelage of the suggestive figure of its former postmaster John Martin Rynne. He was a native and life-long resident of Kilnaboy, operating its post office for fifty years. The show consisted of memorabilia from his life in the building – his residence being under the same roof as the office – which were still there when O’Mahony rented it. The idea in exhibiting these belongings was to trigger memories and stories of Mattie Rynne from the public. He seemed to have been a very appreciated figure of Kilnaboy, renowned for his discretion regarding private affairs, which would come to his knowledge in his day-to-day business. The show also disclosed that, unbeknown to most of his contemporaries, he was a short wave radio buff and had taught himself several languages to be able to communicate with others throughout the world. There is something intriguingly Beckett-ian in the figure of Mattie Rynne – and not just the hair. It may be in his capacity to convert the very limits of a circumscribed existence into a site of ever expanding exploration. The parallel also probes some less consensual possibilities of Mattie’s life; Beckett’s characters – and to an extent Beckett himself – belong to a determinate territory and at the same time stand apart,

on the verge of society. If Mattie Rynne, unlike Beckett's characters, had a definite insider status, one can't help wonder why he felt such a need for an elsewhere through the radio and the learning of languages. That he kept this activity from the knowledge of most, somehow reveals a not-so-integrated figure as at first appeared. The figure of Mattie Rynne thus serves as a muted reminder that traditional communities are not only the place of conviviality and meaningful social exchange but also, and to many, a place of oppression and exclusion.

The re-imagining of rural communities would have to acknowledge the past in all its conflicting inheritance. The necessity of such task was pointed out by Gavin Murphy after commenting upon the mixed reception of *Keepsakes*, a project by Ronnie Hughes for the public art programme in Sligo, that 'the project did not idealise a community but instead revealed our own struggle with our baser needs'. He further argued that 'if public art is to be of value, it can be found in how it can articulate the dynamic between memory and forgetting.'¹⁴

In her work on the definition of the political, Chantal Mouffe insists on the importance of antagonism in democracy and denounces consensus as a form of repression. From this idea she develops what she calls an agonistic model of democratic politics within which art practices have a crucial role to play:

Clearly those who advocate the creation of agonistic public spaces, where the objective is to unveil all that is repressed by the dominant consensus are going to envisage the relation between artistic practices and their public in a very different way than those whose objective is the creation of consensus, even if this consensus is seen as a critical one. According to the agonistic approach, critical art is art that foments dissensus, that makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate.¹⁵

Rural communities are facing many challenges regarding economical choices, environmental issues or shifting identities all of which are ultimately political and a place like the X-PO could be the arena for some of these conflicts to be recognized and played out. In acknowledging the past in a reflexive manner and in keeping possibilities open, maybe a new form of being in common can be articulated. Beyond the specific issues faced by rural communities, at a time when economical and ecological developments are increasingly challenging the validity of mobility, the need to probe the possibilities of community and the idea of 'sedentarity', maybe a matter of larger concern.

The most recent and largest work exhibited by Deirdre O'Mahony seems to offer a mirror of sort to these tensions. It is a large photography of the lake Inchiquin at dawn, wrapped in a light mist with, half hidden on its wooded shore, a 1930s Bauhaus-designed house. The image presents us with, seamlessly joined, a traditional landscape and an icon of modernity thus suggesting that tradition and modernity can always find new ways of being together but also that no unifying narrative can ever embrace the variety of the possible.

¹ O'Mahony project description: 'I was commissioned to do a temporary public artwork *The Cross Land* and the slow process of engagement; allowing local knowledge to shape the final outcome, signalled a potential methodology, given a suitable site, for long-term reciprocity, of exchanging skills and knowledge in a non-hierarchical manner became central to my practice.'

² 'This "new genre" of public art, according to critic Suzi Gablik, "takes the form of interactive, community-based projects inspired by social issues." In fact, the new public art might be more accurately termed the new community art to the extent that questions raised by the interaction of the artist and particular, often urban, communities have played a central role in its evolution.' Grant Kester, 'Aesthetic Evangelists: Conversion and Empowerment in Contemporary Community Art', *Afterimages*, January 1995, p.5.

³ Stewart Martin, 'Critique of Relational Aesthetics', *Third Text*, Vol 21, issue 4, July 2007, pp 373.

⁴ John Mulloy, 'Making a Show of Ourselves: Globalisation, National Identity and Community Arts', ESAI Conference paper, NCAD, March April, 2006, p.3.

⁵ 'Bishop in Pos Plea', *Sunday Mirror*, May 11, 2008.

⁶ 'Keep Our Post Offices As Civic Centres, Say Bishop', John Cooney, *Irish Independent*, May 3 2008.

⁷ Fintan O'Toole, 'Genealogy is about people, not profits', *The Irish Times*, April 12, 2008.

⁸ Nicolas Bourriaud, "'Islets" and Utopia', *L'Humanité*, 22 February 2002, English translation by Timothy Comeau, <http://www.goodreads/bourriaud.html> [June 2008]

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ *ibid* p.13.

¹¹ Ignaas Devisch, 'Jean-Luc Nancy', *The Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/n/nancy.htm> [15.07.08]

¹² *ibid*. The modern society, the *Gesellschaft*, stands for the opposite of the warm and cosy pre-modern community, the *Gemeinschaft*. According to this line of thinking, we live now in an anonymous society full of selfish individuals and the close communal ties are no more than memories. This leads not only to the disintegration of society, but also to violence, the decline of norms and values, and so forth. The only solution to fight disintegration is to turn back to the period where the communal ties were present, or to strive for a future community where the former ties are restored.

¹³ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.

¹⁴ Gavin Murphy, "'Once Again, Comrades ...': Amnesia, Memory and Public Art' from a transcript of a talk given in GMIT in November 2005 for *Shifting Ground*.

¹⁵ Chantal Mouffe, 'Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces', *Art & Research*, Volume 1. No. 2, Summer 2007, <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/mouffe.html> [July 2008]