Slow Research

DEIRDRE O'MAHONY OUTLINES THE IMPACT OF CURRENT RESTRICTIONS ON HER VARIOUS ARTISTIC PROJECTS.

THIS YEAR HAD promised to be busy. In early March I finished the project, 'Forest Culture: Tangeled Web' for my exhibition, 'A Space for Lismore' at St Carthage Hall, Lismore (29 February to 8 March). I was also preparing for the launch of my first book, *SPUD 2009 – 2019*, at Workhouse Union in Callan. Then, the COVID-19 lockdown was announced, and the book launch was postponed. I had spent almost a year thinking about how best to represent a ten-year project and somehow condense the research, conversations and collaborations into a single publication, all within a limited budget. Once the live launch was cancelled and it was clear that arts venues were closing for an indefinite period, I decided to launch the book online.

'SPUD' began at 'X-PO', a project I initiated in a former post office building in North Clare in 2007, in order to give space for public discussion on the future in an environmentally sensitive, often contested, landscape. At 'X-PO', conversations often revolve around farming and ways of growing food. This changed the focus of my research, and for the past decade, I have been exploring the politics of farming and agriculture. As an ex-urbanite, my knowledge of gardening and growing food was limited; however, the extent and depth of tacit cultivation knowledge shared by some participants at X-PO and discussions I had there about the best way to grow potatoes, led me to think about using the tuber to talk about modern attitudes towards traditional agricultural knowledge, which nowadays is often perceived as a kind of 'stupid' knowledge. From those early conversations the project grew, driven by questions arising from different encounters and public events. Over time the project extended into potato plantings in the grounds of the Florence Trust (London, 2013) the National Famine Museum (Roscommon, 2015) and the Irish Museum of Modern Art (Dublin, 2016). The latter projects introduced me to the Irish Loy Association, who became collaborators in the spectacular decorative potato beds planted in the grounds of IMMA. 'SPUD' culminated with a moving-image installation called The Persistent Return (2018). The two-screen, moving-image installation was commissioned by Workhouse Union through an Arts Council Project Award and co-produced and exhibited at VISUAL Carlow and the Natural History Museum Leeuwarden in a programme, curated by potato farmers for the European Capital of Culture in 2018.

My intention for the publication was for it to document this kind of 'slow research' process. It is a document of the various events and exchanges that took place around the project, many of which happened outside institutional venues. It also serves to acknowledge and thank those who participated in different projects over the years. I was fortunate to be able to draw upon the expertise of many arts professionals working in Callan to help with the book. Writer Sinead Phelan helped to distill descriptions of complex, nuanced projects into 150 words. Designer Kaye Toland (who was part of the *Bring Your Own Chair* residency at Workhouse Union) helped structure initial ideas for the book. Curator and art historian, Catherine Marshall, went through my archives for her essay, which considered 'SPUD' in relation to colonial history and the biopolitics of social engineering during the famine. Cian Brennan designed the final book and also made a short film for social media, while Eilís Lavelle and Rosie Lynch gave continuous feedback and support. I wanted the book to hold a trace of the material presence of the potato, so it was case bound in a fabric covered with potato starch. The design, layout and paper all suggested melancholic modernity, with the colour plates towards the end channelling the resilience of tacit knowledge.

In 2018, I was awarded the Irish American Cultural Institute's O'Malley Art Award, which is given biannually to a selected Irish artist. I wanted to mark this achievement and acknowledgment of my practice by using the award to help with the book's production costs. Once the book was printed, and I was faced with an indefinite postponement of a live event to mark its release, I decided to launch the book online instead. It was all done very quickly. I gave people the option of using PayPal or direct bank payments and processed the orders. The post office in Callan was kept busy, as I posted disinfected envelopes daily. There was a lovely synchronicity in the key role played by the post office at the start and end of the project. So far, the response to the book has been very positive.

As for the rest of my projects, I have another publication, called *Untitled #6*, which is being produced by Michelle Horrigan and Sean Lynch at Askeaton Contemporary Arts. This book will be edited by Sean and designed by Wayne Daly, with a planned launch towards the end of the year. The starting point is a painting of mine called *Untitled #6*. This painting was bought by Shannon Development for their collection in 1997 and then later resold at an auction in Limerick as part of the company's breakup in 2016. The publication includes an interview between Sean and I, along with other interviews and materials from my archive.

My work from the 1990s has also been of interest to curator Merve Elvern, who is including another group of my paintings – an installation called *Erratics*, originally made for the Guinness Hopstore in 1996 – as part of the guest programme for the 39th EVA International in Limerick later this year. We are currently discussing how best to present this work, given the changing circumstances of exhibition-making, post-COVID-19.

A commissioned audio work for Saolta Arts/Galway University Hospital Trust and Galway 2020, called *POST_* was due to be launched in early July but has now been rescheduled to Autumn. The work uses ambient sounds from locations in the West of Ireland and a fictional narrative to evoke the particular character of the land, as well as unconscious, interior associations and memories of place and home. Images of the recording locations will also be exhibited across the Saolta Group with QR codes linked to the audio artwork. *POST_* was always intended as an online artwork but has now taken on a deeper resonance, giving imaginative space to listeners to access particular landscapes and places without physically travelling to them. A larger exhibition, titled 'Call if you are passing…' that was also due for exhibition in 2020 but is now provisionally scheduled for Spring 2021. My Kilkenny Arts Office residency at Centre Culturel Irlandais in Paris, which was due to take place in April, is also being rescheduled.

These cancelled events, rescheduled dates and of course, lockdown isolation, have made me reflect on my artistic work and what that means right now. I continue to worry away at questions that insist on attention, whether in the studio or in the garden – a place that more and more feels like my studio. It is never a comfortable process, but it is all I can do… to put one foot in front of the other…

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Deirdre O'Mahony, *The Persistent Return*, 2018, installation view, VISUAL Carlow; photograph Ros Kavanagh, courtesy of the artist

Barbara Knežević, *Scapes; Rose Quartz*, 2019, sculptural concentration, dimensions variable; courtesy of the artist and Berlin Opticians Gallery

Notes on Artistic Agility

MAJA ĆIRIĆ RECOUNTS HER TRIP TO BELFAST AND DUBLIN LAST YEAR, AS VAI'S CURATORIAL RESEARCH AWARDEE.

A REQUEST TO respond to a crisis is not something unfamiliar to me. Being a Serbian citizen, a state of emergency is an old acquaintance that provokes trained survival instincts, but bizarrely, a degree of denial-induced disengaged conformity. Amid the COVID-19 related alarms, I replayed the artistic practices that were revealed during my VAI Curatorial Research trip to Dublin and Belfast in June 2019. It was immediately clear that the agile and resilient Irish art world was capable of adapting to trauma. If we presume that COVID-19 is about some force majeure, then these artists offer valuable lessons in adjusting to extreme circumstances.

When I met Tara McGinn at the VAI Belfast office, she had just graduated from the MFA at Ulster University. The video work presented in her graduate exhibition highlights museum artefacts as digitally deposited 'museological armour'. Instead of being mere objects of attention, she treats these artefacts as estranged subjects that return our gaze by means of digital upload. Under the assumption that it is unnervingly easy to rewrite history, McGinn presents institutional online archives and open-source images that viewers can download, remix and repost as content. Monuments in physical spaces become "absent, petrified, decapitated" in the digital realm. The cohabitation of the existential and digital realm is manifested as being simultaneously inside and outside. Referring to a recent essay by Rachel O'Dwyer, McGinn considers the digital space as "ether" and presumes that digital artefacts occupy a similar imagined space.[1] Playing with the politics of bodies tvravelling through fibre optic cables, McGinn detaches from embodied institutional interpretations.

Susan Buttner's studio at the RHA in Dublin was filled with small to mid-scale installations, giving insights into her high productivity. In one video, a woman explained the pain provoked by the mesh placed into her body after an operation. Buttner would listen to the recording, making notes on the sensations she perceived and placing them around the walls of her studio, translating these feelings into the materiality of her modular objects, assembled with contrasting materials – soft and hard, small and big, sharp and round, manufactured and handcrafted. The process of mirroring

bodily sensorial experiences and translating them into form is present, both in her object-based media and performances. She is an artist of emphatic morphology. Her artistic practice is a delicate evaluation of power relations, revealing tensions and forces by combining static elements, while highlighting the borderless, transgressive aspect of institutional critique.

Deirdre O'Mahony is a rational and pragmatic political artist, in the sense that she not only deals with the politics of immediacy, but is deeply engaged in representing and defending the durational history of the land, from the point of view of rudimental agriculture. The numerous community-based art projects she has initiated over the years – such as 'SPUD', 'Speculative Optimism' and 'Abandoned Clare' – mostly relate to the 'politics of nurturing', both human and land-based. These environmentally-conscious projects are embedded in local modes of production. Social and environmental issues are treated discursively, with the aim of preserving and cultivating abandoned beliefs. Her pivotal project about potato-culture, 'SPUD', focuses on mindfulness, otherness, reimagination, preservation, equality and justice, while exploring microstructures, such as seed sovereignty, and macrostructures, including the land. She aims to reintegrate and revive practices that have been neglected or abandoned for their perceived weakness. In O'Mahoney's new book, *SPUD 2009-2019*, Catherine Marshall's essay rightly points out that O'Mahony's artistic practice "flies in the face of imperial and corporate authority and reinvests it in those most disempowered by imperialism and agricultural capitalism".[2] Land, as a point of entry, reinforces direct exchange and subverts the profit-oriented culture. By going back to the roots, O'Mahony forgrounds locality and avoids the traps of globalisation – an essential position, not only for survival during an emergency, but also to foster meaningful forms of belonging.

They say that the earth would totally recover in a few years, if humans were to stop their regular activities. Barbara Knežević's environments are offered as a stage for new materialism, based on the premise of healing and restoration, in which the human point of view is only one of many. Her studio at Fire Station Artists' Studios was filled with crystals, gemstones, ceramics, air plants and images of Greek goddesses as a preamble for her artistic research. These healing materials have microsensory, restorative potential, while the entanglement of these objects breaks with existing hierarchies and material predictability. Objects are rearranged according to various co-relations and parameters, such as colour, producing harmonious new abstract environments as impositions of counter-order. Rather than reproducing existing relations, Knežević's assemblages aim to stimulate and restore co-habitation, while subverting previously dominant hierarchies.

The decline of the sublime in contemporary society is more than a mere ideological difference, imposed by the urgencies of immediacy or the utilitarian function of networks; the need to look for the sublime may be diminished, but it is not extinct, because it is essential to the arts. Paul Wegener's film, *Der Golem*; Hans Poelzig's IG Farben Building; Robert Schumann's *Quintet*; Gaetano Donizetti's opera, *The Elixir of Love* – these are just a few historical references among the delicate specificities that Niamh McCann – who considers herself a landscape artist – uses to construct a fluid ground in which "whimsical objects have cultural agency". It is due to this abundant field of sophisticated references that her landscapes are elevated higher than the average ground. Such elevation was embodied in a parachute from 1948, presented during her exhibition, 'La Perruque', at The MAC in Belfast Belfast in 2016. Her landscapes are like the poetry of cyclical motions that "inflates, deflates, slightly exhales" multiple narratives. The verses of McCann's poems are grounded in institutional values, represented both in important buildings and the historical artefacts preserved within them, as embodiments of symbolic layers. In these vast layers of history lies awe-inspiring emotional complexity; even patriarchal and conflicting issues are treated delicately. Emotions are emphasised as a common denominator of all humans. The sublime is found within the complex semantics that describe both tangible and intangible instituted values. These landscapes help us to understand Kant's serene interpretation of the sublime, as well as Irish political theorist Burke's more thrilling notion of the sublime that overpowers reasoning as we previously experienced it.

As a nurse, working on the frontline during the Troubles in Northern Ireland, Bernadette Hopkins has looked the cruelty of conflict directly in the eyes. Today, the Donegal-based artist is awakened and engaged. She continues to question the fragile and the conflictual, presently related to the unjust extraction of land inhabited by rural communities, through toxic gold extraction mining. Her community-based social practice could be considered participatory art, because the audience becomes her collaborators; together they co-create a critical mass of conscious citizens, fighting against the reproduction of relations of domination. She is also an activist on a mission who intensively exposes herself to dangers by provoking the powerful. No matter how marvellous the west of Ireland landscape looks, it is not immune to the interests of capital. Invested in a series of daily gatherings, Hopkins makes visible corrupted entanglements. If there was not the political awareness of Hopkins and alike by the means of art, the so-called periphery outside of mainstream structures, could be viewed as the space that is calculated as empty of power in deregulated contexts. However, participatory art is a mode of responsible empowerment, provoked by survival instincts at the border. The problem with participatory art, as argued by Claire Bishop in her milestone book, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and Politics of Spectatorship*, is that it is rarely the subject of art criticism, thus deepening the class difference. I would argue that the agency demonstrated on the frontline performs a valuable function, if not in total empowerment, then in pointing to inequalities and injustices.

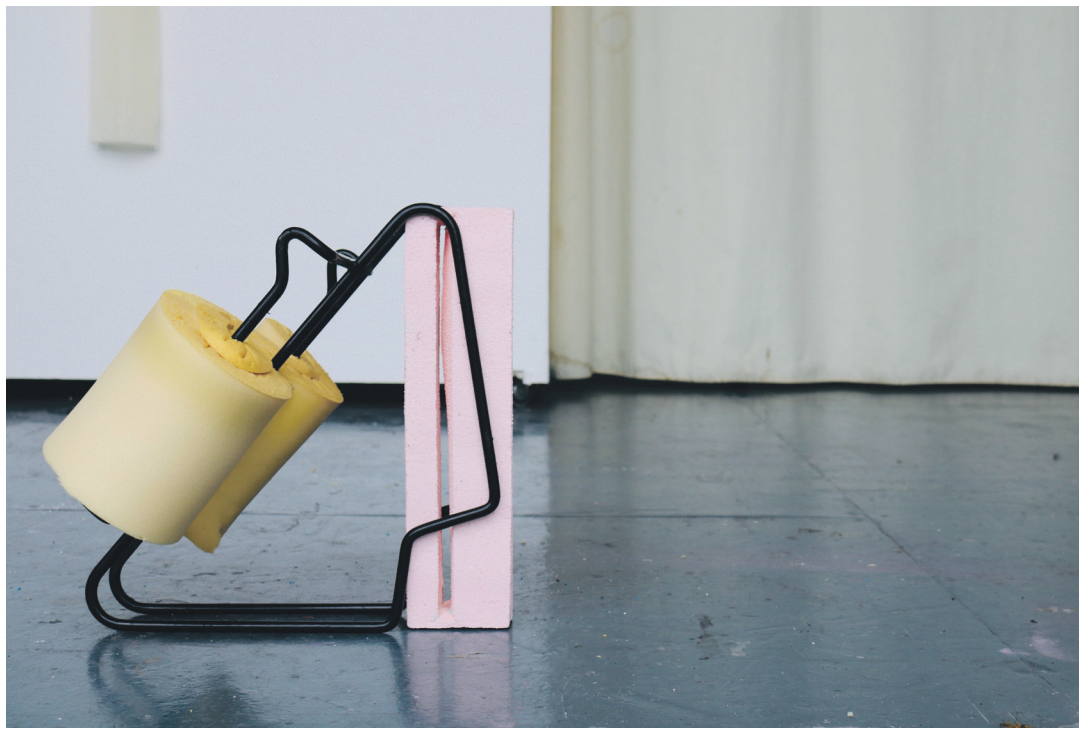
From reflections on marginal contexts and the legacy of modernism, to an investigation of physical artefacts and the aspirational healing of art institutions, what these artistic inquiries have in common is a re-examination of existing infrastructures. Rather than producing sporadic moves, these varied practices are longrunning and durational. They are not neccesarily focused on protesting for a better world, but on improving conditions within the one that currently exists.

Maja Ćirić is a Belgrade-based curator and art critic with experience in leading and contributing to international projects.

Notes

[1] Rachel O'Dwyer, 'Ether – can an artefact be immaterial?', NCAD ACW website: ontologyoftheartefact.xyz

[2] Catherine Marshall,'Honour, humanity, hunger and the policies of extermination', *SPUD 2009–2019*.



Susan Buttner, studio works, RHA Studio Residency, 2019; bicycle rack, foam, jesmonite, 30 × 30 × 30 cm; courtesy of the artist

Niamh McCann, *Vase #1*, wax, box steel, lily (replica plinth Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane's own), 50 × 18 × 23 cm, installation view, Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane; photograph by Ruairí Conaty, courtesy of the artist