

Frances Whitehead /Deirdre O'Mahony: *Potato/Batata* 2015 \

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Deirdre O'Mahony Projects and Collaborations 2010 - 2015

BCA Gallery August 15 – Sept 5th 2015.

Potato/Batata was a collaborative project between **Deirdre O'Mahony** and Chicago-based artist **Frances Whitehead**, and produced for the Burren Annual 2015 exhibition. Based on the pan-Atlantic diaspora of new world tubers - the potato (*Solanum tuberosum*) and the sweet potato (*Ipomoea batatas*) - the installation reflects the ongoing movement of plants and people that have shaped and continue to shape world agri+culture, the food system and the landscape.



Figure 1 Installation: Display case with books, Frances Whitehead's *Hero's Print*, *Diaspora Papa* map, *Potato/Batata* ceramic plates made for the exhibition and meal, *Unknown* a film work by Whitehead and Sweet Potato plants.

Curated by Deirdre O'Mahony, BCA Gallery.2015. Photograph Martina Cleary.

The conceptual heart of the installation consists of a simple mirrored pair of tuber plantings in the US midwest and in Ireland, each containing the two important but botanically unrelated tubers, the potato and the sweet potato. Sweet potatoes grown in containers by O'Mahony, were installed in the gallery mirroring a potato planting by Whitehead in her research in the USA. A further element of the *Potato/Batata* installation was the production of decaled ceramic plates used for a simultaneous dinner in the BCA gallery and at Whitehead's home in the USA, on Saturday 15th August. Which also referenced research and events by O'Mahony into the historical figure of AA Parmentier, whose actions brought about a change in cultural attitudes to the potato in France in the 18th century and helped break the cycle of continuous famine in France.



Figure 2. *Potato/Batata* Dinner and Skype conversation Photograph Deirdre A. Power

As well as her *Diaspora Papa* map, Whitehead also exhibited *Unforeseen*, a film that draws parallels between the women scientists who helped protect the collection of tubers and other seeds gathered under the direction of the scientist V.I. Vavilov during the siege of Leningrad, and women scientists working to counter the effects of climate change today. Whitehead also showed two prints that further related V.I. Vavilov during his imprisonment by Stalin.



Figure 3 Installation: Display case with Frances Whitehead *Vavilov Hero's* print, BCA Gallery.2015. Photograph Martina Cleary.



Figure 4 Installation: Display case with Frances Whitehead *Vavilov Hero's* print, BCA Gallery.2015. Photograph Martina Cleary.



Figure 5: SPUD Poster of X-PO research, *SPUD The Big Dig*, screen-printed poster for Strokestown intervention. SPUD drawings for a GIY guide to growing, books and bookcase lent by Occupy Space, Limerick. 2015.

Below: Figure 6 M.O.P.E. Photograph, Branding iron and cookie cutter Photograph Martina Cleary



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Hub #1: SPUD

The trans-atlantic collaboration was installed in one corner of the BCA gallery surrounded by hubs featuring O'Mahony's recent projects and collaborations from 2010 – 2015 reflecting upon on sustainability, food security, changing rural/urban relationships and how and in what way, artistic knowledge and practice can directly engage with these issues. This included other SPUD interventions and collaborations made with other artist and curator collaborators or as solo projects.

In 2015 SPUD events looked to the legacy of the famine in Ireland, through projects at the Irish Famine Museum curated by Linda Shevlin and a project development residency at Workhouse Union in Callen curated by Hollie Kearns and Rosie Lynch. A residency at JIWAR, Barcelona was focused on urban migration prompted by climate change and parallels between the violence that structured the economic and social conditions of the Irish Famine and globalization.

One important idea researched throughout SPUD and given tangible form in a branding iron made at the Scottish Sculpture Centre is M.O.P.E. (Most Oppressed People Ever) a term coined in the 1990s that points to miserablist tendencies in Irish culture, i.e. that the Irish were more ill-treated than any people at any time in history. M.O.P.E. was intended as a reminder of the ease with which the Irish State, assumed the role of victim in the post crash

economy and a tendency to passively accept inequalities and injustices that actually, can be addressed, should we so choose.



Figure 7 SPUD Posters of interventions and research 2011 - 2015. Photograph Martina Cleary

The overall SPUD project is represented in many different forms given the particular context. To date this has included Photographic images, posters, food tastings, Parmentier Feasts and archives of books and material objects.

A film edit of completed and incomplete SPUD projects including a 3-D animation guide to making a traditional Lazy-Bed by Cian Brennan based on information from Co. Clare farmers and films made for SPUD London, by French artist Nadege Meriau of potatoes growing underground were projected in a separate space.



Hub #2: T.U.R.F. (Transitional Understandings of Rural Futures):



Figure 8. AIRTIME consists of selected interviews conducted with some of those affected by the loss of Turbary rights at the Peatlands Council Forum chaired by Justice Quirke on 28/2/2012. T.U.R.F. comprises two interviews with Tom Ward and Colm and John Harrigan about how they have been affected by the ban on cutting turf on their land. The only painting in the exhibition, Patagonia Painting no 1 Molds Bog, is taken from a surveillance photograph in a report by Friends of the Irish Environment, and used to report breaches of Natura 2000 legislation to the EU Dept. of the Environment.

T.U.R.F. is an ongoing project on the regulation and consultation around the designation of Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) in raised peatlands that has escalated tensions in the rural Ireland since Natura 2000 legislation passed into law in 2012. This hub comprises two filmed artworks *Airtime* a face to camera recording of 3 minute interviews with turf cutters during the National Peatlands Council hearings conducted under the agis of Justice Quirke in 2012. Also shown was a film, *T.U.R.F.* made with Tom Ward and the Harrigan Family both of whom have been banned from cutting turf since 2012. This is set beside photographic image of turf being turned after the ban was imposed, at the request of Ward. That image has been circulated widely, most recently in an essay by Lucy R. Lippard in a forthcoming book.

Hub #5 Public Work:

Public Work is a new film made for Askeaton Contemporary Arts' Welcome to the Neighborhood (2015) that traces the history of Shannon Development, a now defunct regional quango that continues to haunt the managerial and bureaucratic regimes of the MidWest. The work is particularly poignant in the context of Abandoned Clare which features many businesses set up with funding from the agency. Curated by Michele Hourrigan for Askeaton Contemporary Arts' Welcome to the Neighborhood (2015). Seen here in conjunction with **Hub #3: River Culture**

River Culture was a short, filmed interview with fishermen Peter Butler and Mark Rylands about fishing the River Suir. Both men speak of a persistent disregard by State departments towards evidence presented by local fisherfolk of state or semi-state practices having a detrimental effect on local ecosystems. The film points to place-based knowledge, not as “heritage” but as an active and urgent part of everyday life in the region.



Figure 9. *Public Work* sign and DVD made for Askeaton Contemporary Art *Welcome To the Neighborh* 2015. In the foreground is a TV with *River Culture* behind on the right are images by Tom Flanagan ar Megs Morley from the *Aughty*,film which was screened as the exhibition closing event. Also visible is t documentation of various public art projects and initiatives by artists in rural places.

Hub #4:

Abandoned Clare. This series of photographs has been updated for the exhibition. It comprises 48 framed photographs, evidence of the recent abandonment of rural buildings in County Clare raising questions about the sustainability of many economic development policies in the region over the past five decades.

Abandoned Clare was originally commissioned by Gregory McCartney for Abridged Magazine and funded with an Arts Council project award.



Hub #6 The artist is connected to networks of artists and cultural agencies and this hub is dedicated to models of 'slow' durational practice emerging by artist/curators in Ireland engaging directly with rural contexts such as Callan Workhouse Union; Askeaton Contemporary Arts; Linda Shevlin's work as Curator-in-residence, Roscommon; Aine Phillips for the *Aughty* Project; Ground Up Artists Collective and individuals like Cathy Fitzgerald, Ground Up Artists Collective, Iain Biggs, and Pauline O'Connell and others.

Biogs:

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 *New Ecologies Between Rural Life and Visual Culture in the West of Ireland: History, Context, Position, and Art Practice* at the University of Brighton in 2012 and her research is focused on the relationship between politics, ecology and activism within the rural public sphere. Public art projects include X-PO, a former post office re-purposed as a social and cultural interstitial space which has become a locus for a collective re-examination and re-articulation of place in the Burren in the West of Ireland and is included in Tania Bruguera's *Arte Útil* Archive. SPUD (2011 – ongoing). In 2015 SPUD projects took place in Ireland, USA and Spain as well as new work on the politics of spatial planning for Askeaton Contemporary Arts. She is developing research for a new project in Italy for curator Giacomo Bazzani. She has had numerous national and international gallery and museum exhibitions and received fellowships and awards including a Pollock-Krasner Foundation and major awards from the Arts Council of Ireland.

Frances Whitehead is a civic practice artist bringing the methods, mindsets, and strategies of contemporary art practice to the process of shaping the future city. Connecting emerging art practices, the discourses around culturally informed sustainability, and new concepts of heritage and remediation, she develops strategies to deploy the knowledge of artists as change agents, asking, *What do Artists Know?* Questions of participation, sustainability, and culture change animate her work as Frances considers the surrounding community, the landscape, and the interdependency of multiple ecologies in the post-industrial city. Frances has worked professionally as an artist since the mid 1980s and has worked collaboratively as ARTetal Studio since 2001. She is Professor of Sculpture and Architecture at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.