

## Deirdre O'Mahony

*Thinking Long: "Slow" Practice in Rural Places.*

Land and landscape continue to hold immense social and cultural significance in Ireland. From the early years of the state up to the present day, the West of Ireland has served to represent and signify authenticity and difference. The recent campaign for the *Wild Atlantic Way*, 'Ireland's first long-distance touring route', has made extensive use of tried and tested tropes to reinforce ideas of temporality, wholeness, and continuity in a region that is experiencing an unprecedented period of social, cultural and environmental change.<sup>i</sup> As national parks are increasingly 'aesthetically managed', and places become destinations to be blogged about in cyberspace, Lucy Lippard recently warned of the danger of 'nature becoming an irrelevant luxury'.<sup>ii</sup> In all the noise and brouhaha around the branding success of the *Wild Atlantic Way* there has been little or no discussion on what stakeholders think and feel about it. Rural development programmes are designed to produce a paradigmatic shift, from the rural as a site for agricultural production to becoming an arena for cultural production, placing a premium on 'indigenous' place-based knowledge to add value to tourism services and food products. However, evidence suggests that farmers are feeling marginalised and estranged by a culture-driven economy that sets a premium on authenticity and 'real' food.<sup>iii</sup>

I live in the west of Ireland close to the Burren in rural County Clare, a 'high-nature-value' landscape with a significant and unique ecosystem. The Burren National Park was also the site of a decade-long, bitter environmental conflict that still reverberates in the area. Similar conflicts erupt regularly in rural Ireland, part of a 'stuck' narrative about development policies that are primarily about the spectacularisation and commoditisation of place. Habitat directives encourage and promote farmers as "custodians" of the landscape but are perceived to privilege habitat over people. I believe that artists can play a key role in this context and this has been the focus the future in rural places.<sup>iv</sup>

In 2007 I decided to re-open a former Post Office as a social and cultural exchange point in Killinaboy in North Clare, close to the site of the conflict. My question was whether a dialogical aesthetic process might offer the best route to examine and acknowledge differing perspectives on the human, social and natural ecology of the region. I named the space *X-PO*, and received a Project Award from the Arts Council that enabled the programming of a series of exhibitions, talks and events during the first year of the project. As curator/producer my interest was in seeing what might happen if this symbolically important space became available once more as social interstice. I made it clear from the start that my direction of the project was for the initial activation phase only, however, my involvement as a participant was not. I live a mile from the post office, and I wasn't planning on moving. I knew that this was a durational commitment, and likely to become a large part of my life.

The exhibitions and installations that followed reflected a number of relevant issues; relations between locals and newcomers, the impact of tourism on small rural communities, the effects of regulation on agricultural practices and the local ecology.<sup>v</sup> Beginning at the most local level *X-PO* showed how exhibition-making can make visible overlooked, often disregarded, histories and local knowledge. At the conclusion of the first, artist-led phase, the primary objective was for *X-PO* to become self-sustaining. I held public meetings to discuss how the project should proceed, and a group took on the management, funding and running of the space in September 2008, establishing a membership structure and constitution. Participants make no claim represent 'community'. *X-PO* simply fulfils a desire - to meet, sing, share knowledge, information or have a cup of coffee. As long as that desire remains, so too will *X-PO*. It is open weekly except in the summer as it is the busiest time of the farming year. In 2016, clubs have been meet weekly including the Burren Ukulele Group (BUG), the Monday singers, an Irish language club and drawing group. Monthly talks on aspects of local knowledge fill the building. The Killinaboy Mapping group are the longest running club, dedicated to tracing the oral knowledge of houses, paths, bothereens and roads in Killinaboy Parish onto Ordnance Survey Maps; an extraordinary achievement done on their terms and exhibited at *X-PO* and

other venues almost every year since the group started in 2007. The project received €500 from Clare County Arts office and €500 from Burren Connect in 2016 with the remaining rent, heating and public liability costs met by user donations and fundraisers.

X-PO has provided space for different publics to come together based, not on a priori relations or inherited standing. It has drawn attention to the richness of place-based knowledge, and allowed this to be presented, performed and described from different, sometimes conflicting perspectives. On a personal level the experience has transformed my practice and generated new strands of research from questions and ideas arising from conversations and interactions in the space. *Mind Meitheal* was conceived as a form of local knowledge exchange to bring new perspectives to addressing in innovative ways, some of the problems facing rural life in Ireland and the process later used to try to answer questions around the regulation of turf cutting. This led to a separate body of work, *T.U.R.F. (Transitional Understandings of Rural Futures)*.

Another project, *SPUD* also emerged from conversations at *X-PO* about ways of growing food. The extent and depth of tacit knowledge shared by some participants led to the idea of a potato project; an accessible entry point for a public discourse on food security, scarcity and production. This has since broadened and developed through local, national and international research. *SPUD* just received a project award from the Arts Council for a film work craft production and food event at *Callan Workhouse Guild* curated by Hollie Kearns and Rosie Lynch.

Models of durational practice<sup>vi</sup> have challenged and interrogated perceptions of rural places and many artist/producer/curators are carrying out important and valuable research, without regular funding or a living wage. Yet audiences and publics are being engaged and empowered in terms that reflect the tasks that LEADER programmes are supposed to perform. It is the exception, however, rather than the rule, if artist/producers receive funding through LEADER.<sup>vii</sup> A way to address this problem is more visibility, however it is almost impossible to get national media coverage of public artworks/interventions in rural areas. Until this invisibility is

remedied, important artworks and projects supported by the Arts Council, will remain largely invisible to the very cohort of readers – policy makers – with the decision-making power to support the wider development of this work beyond the Arts Council’s scope of influence. If we are ever to move on from the ‘stuck’ narrative of conflict around land, landscape and future development, ‘slow’ art practice in rural Ireland will have to be properly sustained and publicly celebrated.

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i The Wild Atlantic Way is lauded as one of the most successful campaigns ever conducted in Ireland by the Irish Tourism Board, Fáilte Ireland. A film made to mark the opening of the route repeats keywords; “raw”, “wild”, “rugged”, “unspoiled”, “untamed” reinforcing romantic, aestheticised perceptions of the West of Ireland.

ii Lucy R. Lippard “Place and History: Writing Other People’s Memories”, *The Intelligence of Place: Topographies and Poetics*, a compendium of essays, edited by Jeff Malpas, published by Bloomsbury Press, 2015, 62.

iii Macken-Walsh, Áine. *Barriers to Change: A Sociological Study of Rural Development in Ireland*. Athenry: Teagasc/RERC, 2009.  
<http://www.teagasc.ie/research/reports/ruraldevelopment/5574/eopr-5574.pdf>

iv Deirdre O’Mahony, *New ecologies between rural life and visual culture in the West of Ireland: History, Context, Position, and Art Practice*. Doctoral thesis, University of Brighton, Brighton: UK. 2012.

[https://www.academia.edu/12370683/O\\_Mahony\\_D.\\_2012\\_.New\\_ecologies\\_between\\_rural\\_life\\_and\\_visual\\_culture\\_in\\_the\\_West\\_of\\_Ireland\\_History\\_context\\_position\\_and\\_art\\_practice.Doctoral\\_thesis\\_University\\_of\\_Brighton\\_Brighton\\_England](https://www.academia.edu/12370683/O_Mahony_D._2012_.New_ecologies_between_rural_life_and_visual_culture_in_the_West_of_Ireland_History_context_position_and_art_practice.Doctoral_thesis_University_of_Brighton_Brighton_England)

v For a short account on the events, archives and exhibitions at X-PO see O’Mahony, D., ‘New Ecologies Between Art and Rural Life; Towards A Collaborative Re-Imaging of Place and Community in Rural Ireland.’ Ed. Readdick, C., *Irish Families and Globalization: Groves Monograph Series*, U. Michigan Press, 2014. [http://www.deirdre-omahony.ie/images/OMahony\\_New\\_Ecologies\\_between\\_Art\\_and\\_Rural\\_Life.pdf](http://www.deirdre-omahony.ie/images/OMahony_New_Ecologies_between_Art_and_Rural_Life.pdf)

vi To name just a few: Askeaton Contemporary Arts curated by artist Michele Horrigan in County Limerick, <http://www.askeatonarts.com/>

*Workhouse Guild*, *Workhouse Union*, *Workhouse Assembly* and *Nimble Spaces* curated by Hollie Kearns and Rosie Lynch in Callen, [Linda Shevlin’s](#) curatorial programming as Curator-in-residence in County Roscommon, the *Ground Up* programme curated by Fiona Woods for Clare County Arts Office and *X-PO* have created critical and discursive space for rethinking rurality.

vii Kilkenny Leader is a rare example of a LEADER partnership that understands the value of what artists are doing in rural areas.