

## Deirdre O'Mahony - Artist Statement

My research and practice has focused on the role of artists in providing cultural space to examine the complex relationship between land, landscape and ecological sustainability in rural places. My ideas were developed in the West of Ireland as conflicts about farming and land use played out in relation to conservation, regulation and rural policy development. As cultural production – heritage, artisanal food, tourism and festivals - has overtaken agricultural production, beautiful, but economically unproductive regions now depend on “farming landscape” to preserve the aesthetic, heritage or biodiversity landscape premium.

Many of the places that hold particular importance within Irish culture, i.e. the West coast – now branded “The Wild Atlantic Way” – were produced by systems of farming practice derided by State agricultural and scientific policies as useless in the late twentieth century drive to industrialise agriculture. Now, tourism and artisanal, “indigenous” food culture has made such small scale activities more attractive for state agricultural agencies, but many farmers are increasingly withdrawing, disillusioned by the shifting turns in policy and unwilling to self-instrumentalize in order to add place based value to products. The situation is further complicated by the legacy of representations of the West as wild, authentic, ‘other’; the embodiment of community, tradition, stability and continuity replayed today within tourism literature.

In order to unpack some of these themes, both an aesthetic and dialogical frame have been used to introduce complexity, disrupt expectations and challenge perceptions of rural places as simple, slow and of little relevance to contemporary culture beyond a recreational nature-fix. The most urgent question now is finding a pragmatic approach to real sustainability; it is no longer possible to consider landscape without taking account of the real changes unfolding in relation to climate change, and by implication, food security. I try to highlight the unconscious ways in which we are positioned by narratives of the past, and create a more nuanced understanding of the form a sustainable ecology of place might take today. By reflexively using both aesthetic and dialogical tools of representation, my intention is to complicate notions of a nature that is *outside* us and produce an empathic response from viewer/participant.