

The International Award for Public Art: Meet the Finalists

# Public Art Review

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## ABOUT PLACE

Putting art  
at the heart  
of placemaking

Cambodia's vibrant public art scene Washington D.C.'s new 5x5 festival  
Mixing past and present at the Golden Gate Charles Landry on city making



\$16.00 USD



ABOVE: Chang's *Looking for Love Again* was commissioned by the Alaska Design Forum.  
TOP: People writing their memories of and hopes for Fairbanks' vacant Polaris Building.

we share more of our ideas for our vacant storefronts?

They've become more emotional as I've become consumed with personal well-being and what it means to lead a fulfilling life. And this has made me look at my neighbors differently. We're not just neighbors in a place, but we're also neighbors in making sense of our lives. How can we share more of our hopes, fears, and stories? We struggle with a lot of the same issues. How can we help each other see we are not alone?

In an environment where taping a flyer to a lamppost is illegal while businesses can shout about products on an increasing number of surfaces, we need to consider how our public spaces can be better designed so they're not just reserved for the highest bidder. With more ways for residents to share with one another, the people around us can not only help us make better places, they can help us lead better lives. ■

## DEIRDRE O'MAHONY: Acknowledging Rural Complexity

Artist Deirdre O'Mahony explores the complicated intersection of public space, civic life, history, and art. In one piece, for example, she reopened an abandoned rural post office as X-PO, a public meeting place that hosted events, installations, lectures, and art exhibits. A key to X-PO—and to O'Mahony's concept of placemaking—is providing a platform for spontaneous collaboration. "I really wanted to allow space where people could share different kinds of knowledge, because it has always been my experience that where different forms of knowledge come together, interesting things happen."

### Public Art Review: Do you have a working definition of placemaking as you approach your work?

Deirdre O'Mahony: For me, placemaking is about actively engaging with the matrix of human, natural histories and practices that shape a place and its context. Placemaking makes these connections visible; it acknowledges the complexity of the social, environmental, cultural, and economic dimensions that affect place.

### How does that manifest in the places you've worked?

Well, you must understand that in Ireland we have a complicated relationship with the land that plays out in recurring conflicts around landscape and land use. These conflicts engender compulsive and passionate responses to particular—and not necessarily picturesque—places: fields, bogs, and so on. These irrational passions are so deeply felt that the Irish playwright John B. Keane wrote a powerful play about them called *The Field*, and the term "Field Syndrome" is sometimes used to describe them.

I live in a very beautiful region called the Burren, in the west of Ireland. When I came here in 1991, I was shocked by an environmental conflict about the construction of an interpretive center. The plan, and the controversy surrounding it, had a profound effect on local relations and raised all sorts of issues. The central question concerned the power relations that governed who drove the representations, cultivation, preservation, and interpretation of place.

Observing this controversy forced me to try to identify a contemporary place-based practice that could begin to address the fragmented and fluid nature of rural society today. Since then, my version of placemaking has tried to *complicate* perceptions of rural life. I want to make visible some of the more complicated reasons behind recurring conflicts about environmental regulation, changes in land use, and the effect of these changes on individual and collective subjectivities.

**So does your work specifically attempt to challenge these perceptions? If so, how?**

I'm interested in how this mix of expectations plays out in the social unconscious in rural areas. As a result, my projects explore an expanded idea of the relationship between arts practice and cultural activism. *X-PO* is a good example of this.

**This was the abandoned rural post office that you turned into a meeting place.**

That's right. In Kilnaboy, in North Clare, I had finished a temporary public art project called *Cross Land* in 2007, and it left me with a lot of unanswered questions about the sustainability of a very beautiful landscape—and one that has been shaped by more than 5,000 years of farming. The question for me became how best to engage different stakeholders in an extended pro-

cess of collective reflection on a sustainable future.

As a public art project, it created a space for the many different “publics” in the locality to meet—much as the old post office had done until it shut in 2002. I really wanted to allow space where people could share different kinds of knowledge, because it has always been my experience that where different forms of knowledge come together, interesting things happen.

I used a mix of processes from installations, talks, curated exhibitions, and events, in order to animate a conversation on what people felt was important in their place. Various groups started to meet regularly. Understandings—of each other and our various skills and practices—developed. Opinions and ideas on the future for the place differed widely. Some participants had a deep knowledge going back centuries; others had limited knowledge but a lot of enthusiasm. Connections were made, friendships were made, and discoveries were made.

**So you kind of turned the space over to these folks, right? What were some of the projects that emerged?**

I curated the space for just eight months, and since then, local users of the space have taken over managing and funding it. Among the events was an exhibit of archival photographs of the parish, which graphically demonstrated the rapidity of

BELOW: Deirdre O'Mahony's *X-PO* is housed in a former post office. BOTTOM LEFT: *X-PO* hosts community events and art exhibits. BOTTOM RIGHT: A portrait of a postman who lived in the building.

