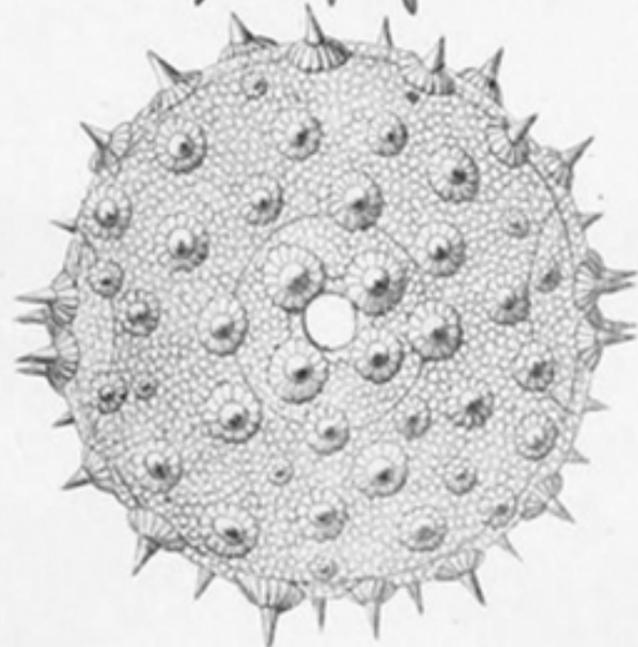
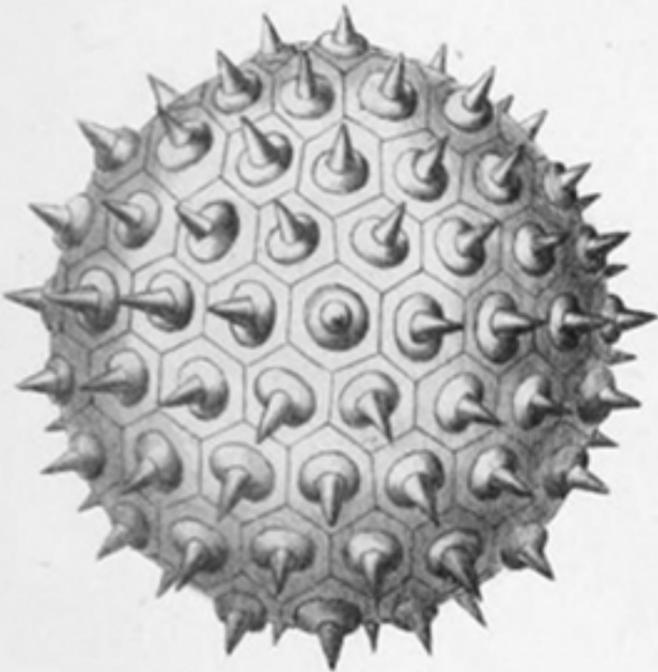
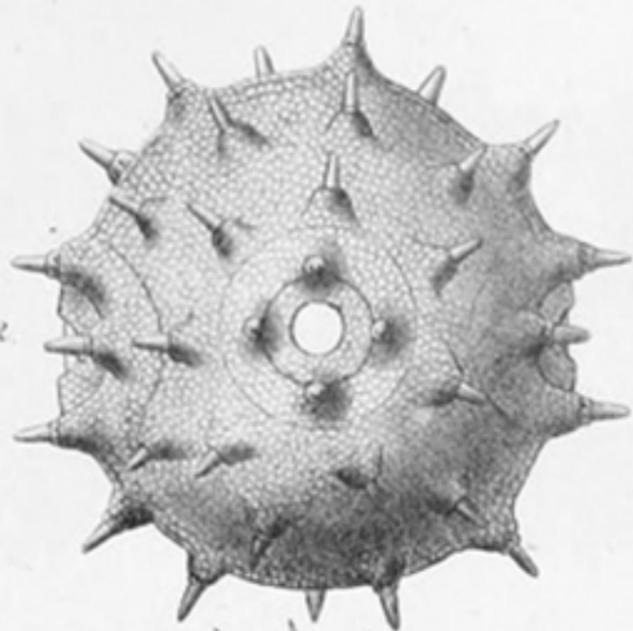
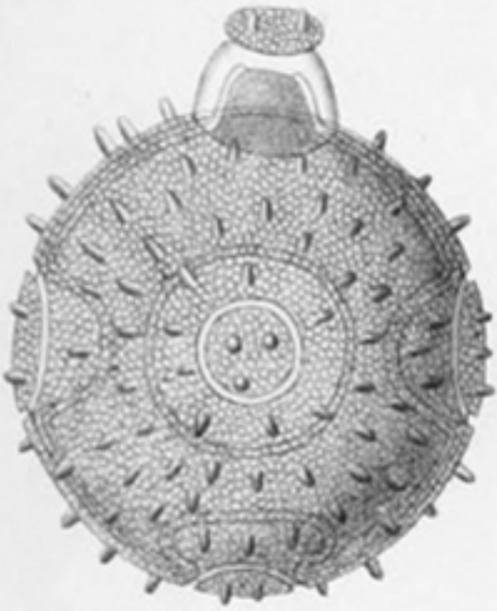


# SeedBroadcast

*Mémoires des Sav. étr. T. III.*

*Fritzsche, Ueber den Pollen. Tab IX.*



# agri-Culture Journal

*Fritzsche et Hammerer del. nat. del.*

*W. Pappe inv. del. del.*

Spring 2015

## **SPUD:** A DIALOGICAL AESTHETIC ENQUIRY INTO FARMING KNOWLEDGE, FOOD SECURITY, SEED HERITAGE AND SUSTAINABILITY **DEIRDRE O'MAHONY**

SPUD combines artistic research and the production of artworks, events, exhibitions, films, collaborations and interventions, to reflect upon farming knowledge, food security, seed heritage and sustainability.

SPUD is a transdisciplinary project between different publics—rural, urban, farmers, artists, academics, cultural agencies and institutions.

SPUD provides a particular, easily understood and accessible entry point for activating a conversation about a wide range of issues.

SPUD reflects upon the particular position of the potato within Irish culture, the Great Famine, and conscious and unconscious attitudes to land, identity and co-memoration.

Deirdre O'Mahony initiated SPUD, slang for potato, as a practice-based art research project in 2011. It came out of a public art project initiated in 2007 in a derelict rural post office in Killinaboy, in the Burren region in the West of Ireland. Repurposed as a public art project, and re-named "X-PO", the space became a site in which to engage the different communities of the locality in a collective, reflective process on the future of a region that was highly contested. (O'Mahony, 2012, 2014) The creation of archives related to the personal and collective history of the locality was fundamental to this process, making visible underlying, often unacknowledged, perspectives around history, representation and participation. (Byrne & O'Mahony 2011, 2013) At X-PO, conversations often revolve around ways of growing food and the extent and depth of knowledge about potatoes shared by some participants led to the idea of a potato project - SPUD.

O'Mahony and Chicago-based artist Frances Whitehead both share an interest in the role that artists' knowledge can play in devising pragmatic, innovative solutions towards shifting mindsets and attitudes towards climate change and sustainable food production. (Whitehead 2013) has worked for a number of years with the International Potato Centre, CIP, a

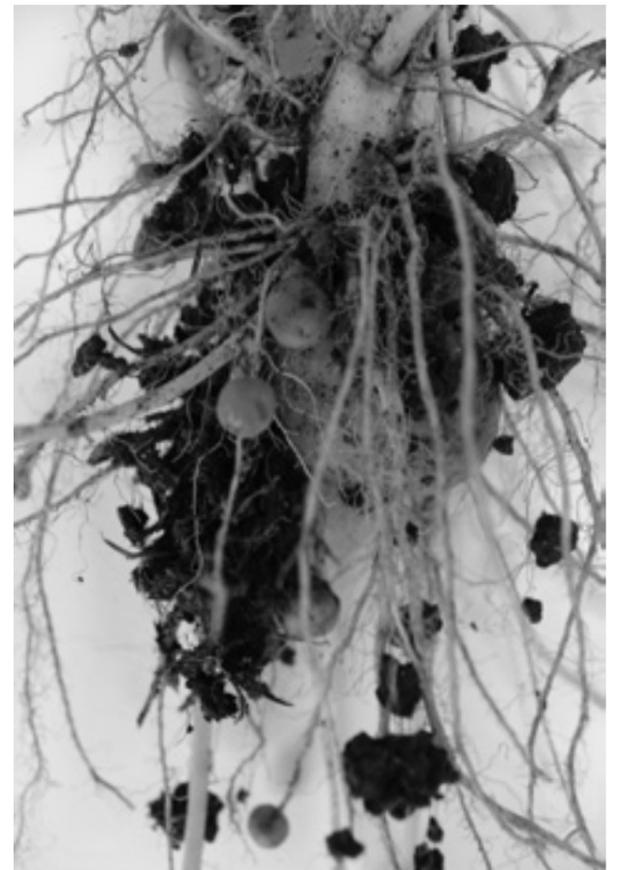
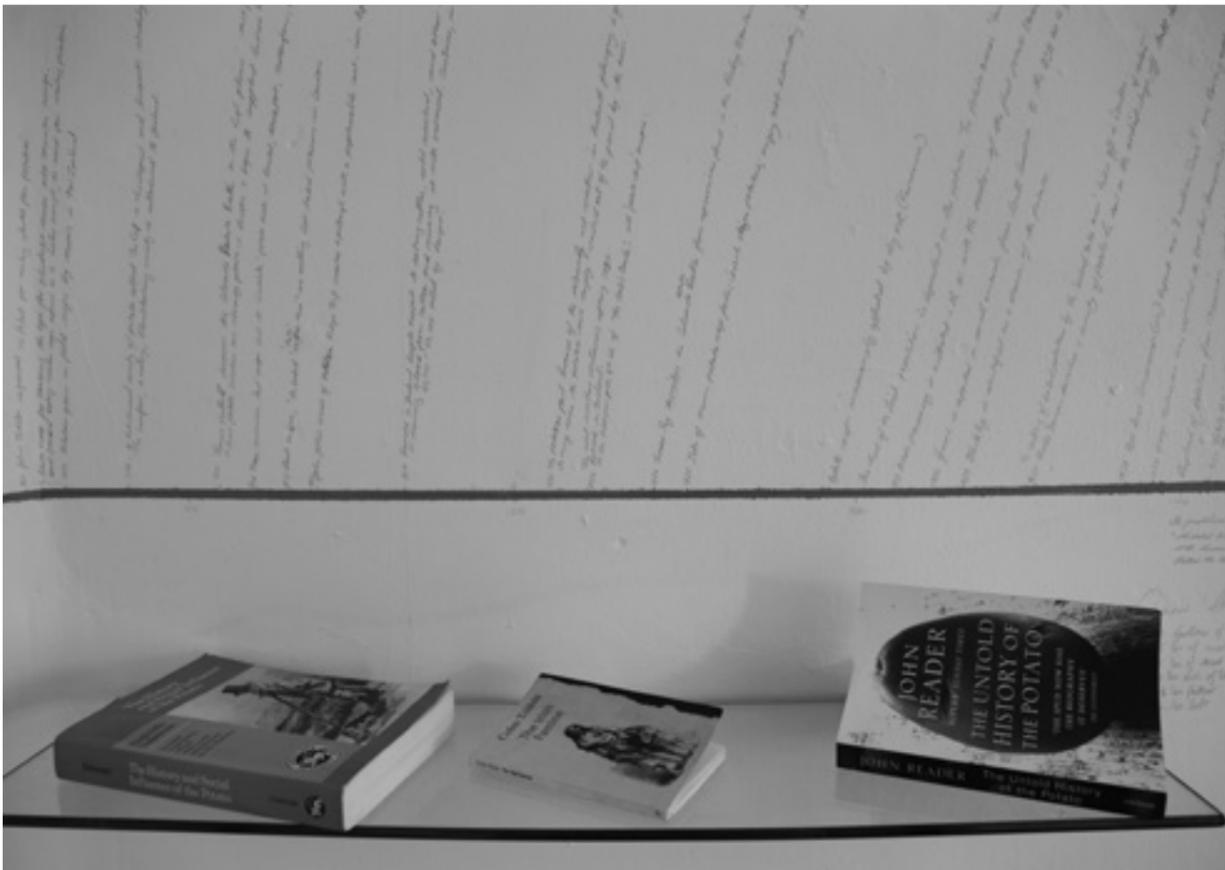
research-for-development organization based in Lima, Peru. Both artists pooled research, sharing ideas on potato cultivation and its contemporary relevance to food security, particularly in cities. The history and social influence of the potato has been a source of a considerable amount of research within environmental and development studies, largely driven by CIP. SPUD now adds an aesthetic dimension to this discourse, connecting rural knowledge to urban sites through culturally driven knowledge transfer and reflecting upon the continued importance of tacit, cultivation knowledge to the most pressing problems of contemporary life. In *Notes of a Potato Watcher*, James Lang argues that potato projects teach a simple, but crucial, lesson: how to address basic problems with practical solutions.

Village culture recognizes that solutions must be tailored to fit the circumstances. Whether the problem is seed production, controlling crop pests, genetic improvements, or storage, the key is to take the diversity imposed by place, by farming traditions, and by ecology as a starting point. (Lang, 2001, 5)

It is impossible to think about the potato without thinking about the Great Irish Famine. Visual expressions of that history have tended (with



<sup>1</sup> CIP'S MISSION IS TO INCREASE POTATO PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES WHILE PROTECTING BIODIVERSITY THROUGH THE INTRODUCTION OF IMPROVED POTATO VARIETIES.



exceptions) to point back to that narrative as one of abject victimhood. SPUD is an attempt to present a more nuanced reading, pointing to future implications of the loss of tacit, 'ground up' agricultural knowledge, the importance of seed diversity and the continued global relevance of the potato. SPUD proposes a different model of co-memoration to the traditional memorial. By looking back to the Great Irish Famine, and forward to future food security, SPUD seeks to perform as a catalyst for an imaginative rethinking of the way that we engage with one another as global citizens.

The main weakness of the potato remains its susceptibility to disease, particularly blight. This is driving research into disease resistant varieties and is one of the reasons that the SPUD project is focused on seed collections and the great seed-saving expeditions of the 20th century. Research is underway to develop genetically-modified varieties that can withstand disease, avoid spraying, and provide varieties that can adapt to changing climatic conditions, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and China. EU research trials and trials by CIP, are underway in Ireland and South America and in the USA GM varieties are in use for many years with some seed-stocks developed by Monsanto. Trials in Ireland generated a

huge public response and an important thread of this SPUD research is to provide a context in which to unpack some of the underlying anxieties, and paradoxes implied by both the pro- and anti- GM lobbies.

The cultivation of the potato has changed global history. From its initial domestication in the Andes over 8,000 years ago, its diasporic spread from the southern throughout the northern hemisphere and in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, tipped the global balance of power to Europe and the USA. (McNeill, 1999) Perhaps now as humans are tipping the ecological balance and having more of an effect on nature than was previously ever thought possible, it is time to re-examine our relationship with food production? The humble potato might yet hold the key to providing secure food supplies for precarious, ever-expanding urban populations, after all the potato is destined to feed humans on expeditions to Mars and if so, why not right here, right now?

For details of past, present and future SPUD Projects see [deirdre-omahony.ie/public-art-projects/spud.html](http://deirdre-omahony.ie/public-art-projects/spud.html)



<sup>2</sup> FOR AN EXCELLENT OVERVIEW OF THE ECOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL ISSUES AT PLAY SEE THE AGRICULTURAL LAW BLOG WHICH REGULARLY EXAMINES SOME OF THE COMPLEXITIES ARISING IN FOOD PRODUCTION TODAY, INCLUDING THE BROADER LEGAL AND ETHICAL ISSUES. [AGLAW.BLOGSPOT.IE](http://AGLAW.BLOGSPOT.IE)

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