9.2   The Mapping Group.

In Ireland the oral history of place, *dinnseanchas*, encompasses the knowledge of family, kin relationships and place names and the stories, both mythical and factual, that they evoke. This knowledge of how particular sites were worked and occupied is still used by older people through the practice of oral 'tracing' in rural Clare. The practice is one that formed a significant part of community life until the early sixties and the arrival of television in rural Ireland. Neighbour visited neighbour and spent evenings mapping geneological connections. Lucy Lippard notes that collaborative mapping offers 'a particularly rich vein, as yet unmined' of community-based arts practice' and this prooved to be the case with the mapping group.[i] They were the first 'club' to form at *X-PO*, meeting every Tuesday evening to compare and exchange information on the ruined houses or *cabhails* of the parish. Their intention was to examine and trace the occupancy of the fifty-three townlands in Kilnaboy Parish going back to the earliest accounts, and compare these with the oral *dinnseanchas*. The name, 'the mapping group' was a way of creating space for the fledgling club. There are many noted local historians in the area who are considered authorities in the field and it was a way of both differentiating and creating space for their research. In the beginning there were three regular members of the group, Francis Whelan (also in the Rinnamona Research Group), John Kelleher and a cartographer Peter Wise, along with several other occasional members. Whelan has been collecting stories of the placenames and ruined houses in the parish for many years. He was inspired by the example of Rinnamona man, Paddy Cahir, who interviewed older people who still remembered the tracings of family and kinship and kept records of the

occupancy of houses in the parish. Paddy Cahir's father, Johnny Cahir, was one of the 'young men' described in *Family and Community in Ireland*.

I was invited to work with the group as they made their first public exhibition in the front 'post office' room at X-PO. I was not the first artist to work with cartographic representations of local knowledge in this particular region. Barrie Cooke is a noted painter and exhibited a map of Kilnaboy in his retrospective exhibition in the Royal Hibernian Academy in 2003. Map of Kilnaboy 1954-1984 is a topographical account of the townland encountered by Cooke on arrival in Ireland and made almost thirty years after he stopped living there in 1964. Cooke's house and those of his neighbours, including Paddy and Johnny Cahir, are marked and named.[ii] Timothy Driver, now known as Tim Robinson is an artist and self-taught cartographer who moved to Ireland from London in 1972.[iii] Robinson's cultural excavations in Ireland have taken the form of a series of self-published maps of the Aran Islands and a map of the Burren, *The Burren: a two-inch map of the uplands of North-West Clare* (1977) that is still regarded as exemplary field research.[iv] He wanted to reinscribe the local knowledge of dinnseanchas onto the topographic representation and the map of the Burren is a testament to the tracks, tombs, boundaries, shrines, cairns, homesteads, plantations and turloughs of North Clare. It provides a topographical account that directly embeds cultural memory and identity within the physical landscape, making it impossible to separate the narratives of the land from its physical structure. Robinson's fascination with the West of Ireland was driven by a desire to make amends for the loss of placenames and local knowledge and redress the effect of the great nineteenth-century drive to cartographically record Ireland. The Ordinance Survey (OSI) six-inch to the (statute) mile maps of the townlands of Ireland were made between 1833 and 1846. The scale of the maps extended the statute, as opposed to the Irish, standard measure onto Ireland. The maps yield an astonishing wealth of detail:

> an almost perfect, not to say "objective" and "microscopic" record of the location and shape of every house, field, tree and shrub, of mass-paths, boreens and roads… Most particularly townland and parish boundaries are defined and made so seemingly

permanent on the map, complete with the script of the agreed, anglicised form of the place-names....[v]

In discussions on how this work might be presented at *X-PO* the group realised the enormity of the task and focused on the largest townland, Commons South. In modern Irish visual culture map images can be read as innovative and oppositional and in this local context foregrounding the oral narratives of place was of primary importance. Claire Connolly argues, quoting Catherine Nash, '(B)ecause maps "highlight relationships of power," they occupy a less romtanticised relationship to territory than landscape, "with its iconography of cottages, cloud skies and hills."'[vi] Beginning with the OSI map of 1842 and the Griffiths Valuation documents of 1855, the members of the group conducted interviews, surveyed documents and compared oral history with documentary evidence. Francis Whelan has been gathering 'field notes' in diaries for many years and these notes were scanned into the X-POcomputer and added to the archive. His mentor and the inspiration for much of this work, Paddy Cahir, died the week before the exhibition opened and later, Paddy's field notes also became part of the archive. This information was collated and recorded in the form of an audio discussion and narrative detailing the occupants of every house in the Commons South by Francis Whelan and John Kelleher. The recording was played in the old post office room, and copies of the historical accounts of occupancy posted on clipboards. These recordings are also in the X-POarchives, part of a series of recordings about Kilnaboy.

The power and authority of the OSI maps shifted as the audiencing of the group's work became an open-ended story of place. Tracings, Narratives and Representations of Kilnaboy ran concurrently with the Rinnamona Research Group's exhibition and the group were available to amend and change the story, as new information was added on family relationships in the area. The 'official' survey map was overlaid with a fluid, changing narrative. Foucault prioritises genealogy because it

> does not pretend to go back in time to restore an unbroken continuity that operates beyond the dispersion of forgotten things; its duty is not to demonstrate that the past

actively exists in the present…Genealogy does not resemble the evolution of a species and does not map the destiny of a people. On the contrary, to follow the complex course of descents to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion: it is to identify the accidents, the minute deprivations - or conversely, the complete reversals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to have value for us…[vii]

The importance of identifying the 'accidents', 'reversals' and 'faulty calculations' that Foucault points to, was embraced by the Mapping Group at X-PO. Although they operated from the premise that they wanted to fully document and pin down the history of occupancy of the townland, it became clear that with the changing story, and sometimes conflicting accounts of occupancy, such a pinning down of people to place will never fully happen. The absence and loss of information becomes an important signifier of the loss of cultural memory of place. Many of those displaced and lost in the famine years are visible on the OSI Map of 1842 and absent in the subsequent Griffith's Valuation documents of 1855. In the local, oral knowledge so carefully gathered by Francis Whelan they become present once more. Names are remembered in these stories. *'Séan Ó' Conchúir: Died during the famine - snail shells and bits of turnips found in his house.'*[viii] The stark facts call to mind Colm Tóibín's comments on the paucity of personal material about the famine despite the copious documentation of the administration of relief, 'how little it tells us in the face of what we imagine for ourselves just by seeing a name with a fact beside it.'[ix] Coming together on a weekly basis the group were able to piece together some of the fragmentary narratives. Hitherto unseen cartographies were made visible on the new map and became a tool with which to express alternative accounts of possession and loss. This articulates, as Claire Connelly notes, 'a desire to reclaim land and territory that extends beyond the transfer of titles and deeds into the realm of representation, metaphor, and cultural identity.'[x] Much discussion has taken place on the impossibility of ever 'fully' completing the work however this has not stopped them from continuing the research. Now, in 2012, the group has expanded and they have almost finished tracing the householders in each of the fifty-three townlands in Kilnaboy Parish up to and including the present day. The economic value and 'ownership' of the research came under scruitiny at an early stage and the group decided on an important principle at X-

POthat all archive material gathered in and through the space would be made freely available to interested parties through X-PO.

I curated one of the *Ground Up* artworks *The Blushing Hills* by Sean Taylor, as a third component to *Tracings, Narratives and Representations of Kilnaboy* showing it in conjunction with the Rinnamona Research and the Mapping group exhibitions.[xi] The documentary film showed the flight of a hot-air balloon carrying a piece of text, 'The Blushing Hills' that came from a snippet of conversation overheard by Taylor; a description of the blooming heather of the Clare Hills in September. He decided to float the text on a balloon which would then be encountered unexpectedly by a local audience; the memory of the blue balloon reverberating in the locality in anecdotes and stories. The flight went from Carron, over Rinnamona and Commons South landing near the castle tower of Ballyportry near Corofin giving 'a gentle prod to the imagination' of those who witnessed the event.[xii] The flight took place over both townlands featured in Rinnamona Research group and the mapping group exhibitions. The placement of the piece within a small window in the entry hall to the *X-PO* in this context gave an opportunity to a local audience not only see the work but to also see the land from an aerial perspective. The insertion of the screen in the small window in the hallway between rooms containing the other exhibitions, also alluded to a difference in process observed by John Mulloy, between modes of art practice that represent a *concept* of dialogue; a collaborative, reciprocal mode of research, and one which effectively, and quite literally, *represented* dialogue.[xiii]

Tracings, Narratives and Representations of Kilnaboy opened in mid-May 2008. The process of publicly exhibiting and explaining their research work to the various 'publics' who visited, demonstrated that the Mapping and the Rinnamona Research Groups possess an oral, textual and visual history that is accessible and valued beyond the locality. The groups organised a rota to keep *X-PO* open day and evening over a four-week period and the show was visited by over five-hundred people. The experience gained from the exhibitions developed the confidence of those using the space to continue with a collective process of reflexive recollection. This is not the kind of

'restorative' nostalgia referred to in Chapter 5, but rather a reflective reminder of times when the *meitheal*, the co-operative system of labour exchange between neighbours in rural areas that was outside the economic system, was a common part of life. The archival process, exhibition making and audiencing of this work was a powerful gesture of counter-memory, once more making the phrase often associated with a *meitheal* - 'being of mutual use and benefit to each other' - available as a definition of being-together.

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[i] Lippard, *The Lure of the Local.* 288

[ii] Named on the map are blacksmith, Pat Joe Curtis and his family including PJ Curtis, one of the seven local people who took the landmark case against the State in 1991. As were Michael Kelleher and Connie Egan who taught Cooke to fish and hunt for his food and who were the models for his painting in the National Gallery *The Two Fowlers*. Cooke came to *X-PO* and spoke about his time in Kilnaboy. Many told stories of Cooke's time in Kilnaboy in the 1950s; he was an exotic outsider who lived a life of extreme frugality, even more impoverished than their own.

[iii] Tim Robinson wrote about his experience of moving to Ireland from London where he worked as an artist, 'abandoning a career and a home, each of them close to the sort of cultural centrality, for an ... untried art and a wet rock in the Atlantic.'

Timothy Driver/T.D. Robinson, The View from the Horizon. (Kilkenny: Coracle Press 1997) 16.

[iv] T.D. Robinson, *The Burren, A two-inch map of the uplands of North-West Clare*. (Roundstone: Folding Landscapes, 1977, Revised 1999)

[v] William J. Smyth, "Map-making and Ireland: Presences and Absences.", *(C)artography: Map-Making as Artform.* (Cork: Crawford Art Gallery, 2007) 6.

[vi] Qtd. Catherine Nash "Introduction", *Irish Geographies: Six Contemporary Artists: Pauline Cumins, Frances Hegerty, Kathy Prendergast, Tim Robinson, Chris Wilson, Daphnie Wright.* Ed. Catherine Nash, (Nottingham Art Centre, 1997).

Claire Connolly, "The Turn to the Map: Cartographic Fictions in Irish Culture." *Éire/Land* Ed. Vera Kreilkamp. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) 28.

[vii] Foucault, Michel. Nietzche, Geneology, History. David C. Hoy (ed.) *Foucauld: A Critical Reader.* Blackwell. 1986. Qtd in O'Brien, Kathleen. "GOAL/GOAL:Re-viewing silence in Kilmainham Goal." *Éire/Ireland An interdisciplinary Journal of Irish Studies*. The Irish American Cultural Institute, Visual Arts Issue. XXX111: 3 & 4; XXX1V. 171

[viii] John Kelleher, O'Mahony, Deirdre, Whelan Francis, *Tracings, Narratives and Representations of Kilnaboy* (Kilnaboy: X-PO) 2008.

[ix] Colm Tóbín, *The Irish Famine*, (London: Profile Books, 1998) 33

[x] Claire Connolly 30.

[xi] Sean Taylor, *The Blushing Hills,* DVD (Clare County Arts: Ground Up) 2006.

xii *Ground Up Reconsidering Contemporary Art Practice in Rural Contexts.* DVD documentary interview with Séan Taylor by Fergus Tighe. Ed. Fiona Woods. (Ennis: Clare County Arts Office, 2008).

xiii John Mulloy, 'Making a Show of Ourselves: Globalisation, national identity and community arts". (ESAI Conference: NCAD March 30th-April 1st 2007) 11 – 12.