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Re-Representing local knowledge: *Tracings, Narratives and Representations of Kilnaboy*.

Irish society has been shaped by dominant narratives such as identity, nationalism, tradition and modernity, Catholicism and familialism.ⁱ The potential of archival art practices to, in Bhabha's terms come between, interrupt, disrupt and meddle with essentialising and dominant narratives of place became evident through the opening installation of *The Life and Times of Mattie Rynne*.ⁱⁱ Hal Foster points to the creation of archives by artists, not as databases but as 'recalcitrantly material, fragmentary rather than fungible' and calling out for human interpretation.ⁱⁱⁱ Analysing the 'archival impulse' in contemporary art, he sees it first as a desire to make often displaced or lost historical information physically present through the use of found material objects, images and texts, and 'retrieved in a gesture of alternative knowledge or counter-memory.'^{iv}

This was the case when the opportunity arose at *X-PO* to re-examine and re-frame one of the most influential and authoritative texts on rural life in the West of Ireland. In the 1930s Ireland was the focus of an extensive survey, known as 'The Harvard Irish Mission' by scholars from Harvard University who conducted a detailed study of family and community in three rural locations, one of which was Rinnamona in Kilnaboy parish. The resulting publications, *The Irish Countryman* by Conrad Arensberg and *Family and Community in Ireland* by Arensberg and Solon Kimball are considered 'classic' scientific texts and remain influential within sociological and anthropological academic spheres.^v The local response to both *Family and Community in Ireland* and *The Irish Countryman* was mixed. The books were widely read in the local community and for some, the revelation of the private lives of forebears was unexpected and unwelcome. In an attempt to limit the harm within the locality the texts were rarely discussed openly. Despite the insights they offered to recent local history, the memory of the study and its findings

lingered, the books were ignored and a communal silence fell over the anthropological study.

Anne Byrne is a sociologist and in the course of her research came across some of the original diaries kept by Solon Kimball when he stayed in Rinnamona. Handwritten in pencil on a fading school copy book, Kimball gives an intimate record of a rural community in the 1930s. He details the evening gatherings of the older men whom he refers to as 'the Rinnamona Daíl.'^{vi} Byrne made contact with some of the successors of the Rinnamona Daíl - Mary Moroney, Sean Roche, John Ruane and Francis Whelan, and they came together in early 2008 to read through the diary and decide how to use the material. Two of the group were already actively using X-PO and having seen the opening archival installation, they asked if I would join them making a public re-presentation of their story of Rinnamona in the 1930s. This invitation to join the group offered a different way to 'define artistic work in relation to social praxis and the issue of identity: an art that focuses, not on the relationship between artist and audience but on the atomized power of individual relationships within the social whole.'^{vii}

A full account of the history, academic context, exhibition-making process and re-presentation of the project is given in a paper co-written with Anne Byrne called *Family and Community: (Re)Telling Our Own Story*.^{viii} The paper reflects upon the collaborative research processes that brought together the different disciplines of an artist, sociologist and local knowers. I brought my aesthetic skills and competencies in the manipulation and reproduction of material information to the table; reflexively and consciously aware of myself as a politically situated, cultural actor within the group. Working with an anthropologist forced me to re-think and reflect upon this kind of ethnographic field work. Here, Foster was particularly important, cautioning against some of the pitfalls in artistic engagements that follow the ethnographic model. 'Few principles of the ethnographic participant-observer are observed, let alone critiqued and only limited engagement of the community is effected. Almost naturally the project strays from collaboration to self-fashioning, from a de-centering of the artist as cultural authority to a remaking of the other in neo-primitivist guise.'^{ix} We were all aware of the shadow cast by Arnesberg and

Kimball's well-intentioned but nonetheless for some, essentialising, representation of the Rinnamona community.

The authority and ownership over the exhibition-making process, audiencing and subsequent representation as an academic paper rested with the group. A key priority of the successors was to ensure a correct and accurate representation of the community in the 1930s. Photographs of all the members of the Rinnamona Dáil were sourced, scanned and reproduced.^x The indexical power of photography, the 'material trace' and 'disturbing presence of lives halted' that Barthes noted, lent the images and their re-presentation the authority to interrupt the anthropological text.^{xi} The role of photography as a mechanism of surveillance in the exercise of disciplinary power has been well analysed in relation to Foucault's ideas on Power/Knowledge, the memory of being measured and photographed by the physical anthropological strand of the Harvard Irish Mission was recalled with ambivalence by one visitor to the exhibition.^{xii} The collation process was a collaborative effort that allowed for the production of what Kester terms 'empathetic insight'.^{xiii} He argues that this can be produced along a series of axes; through creative listening during the first stage of a project when the diaries were read aloud in private homes in Rinnamona, at the site of production between the artist, anthropologist and collaborators in the exhibition making process and in the audiencing of the work between the collaborators and the communities of viewers, local and academic.

The research, exhibition and mediation of this work interrupted the dominant representation of Rinnamona by Arnesberg and Kimball without fetishising their knowledge or its public re-presentation and created a more complex understanding of the ramifications of academic representations of local cultures amongst a broader public. The importance of the project rested in the collective reflexive process that publicly complicated the old anthropological oppositions - what Foster calls an 'us-here-and-now versus a them-there-and-then'.^{xiv} Andrea Fraser points to Bourdieu's insistence on a reflexive methodology that takes into account 'the full objectification, not only of an object, but of one's relation to an object- including not only the schemes of perception and classification one employs in one's objectifications, and not only one's interest in

objectifying, but the social conditions of their possibility.^{xv} In the case of this project, reflexively re-deploying the anthropological narrative for communal use has broken a silence, the Rinnamona community is no longer bound by one version of themselves nor is their own story 'removed' from them as in dominant representational practices or narratives. The interaction and the transdisciplinary meeting of the three 'knowledges' of sociologist, artist, and the local knowledge (in Gaelic *dinnseanchas*) of the research group members, combined to collectively tell a story-narrative of a people and place, rooted in history but connected to contemporary familial and community relationships. The re-telling of the story through the archival exhibition made visible the hidden story and as Rancière notes, '(A)n emancipated community is in fact a community of storytellers and translators.'^{xvi} The exhibition provided the opportunity for face-to-face interaction with visitors; to tell the story directly is a powerful practice, so too is being publicly heard and seen. The capacity for this mode of public re-presentation to frame narratives from alternative perspectives and the local response to the exhibition demonstrated the transformative power of this mode of collaborative exchange. Paraphrasing Claire Bishop's observation on Jeremy Deller's *Battle of Orgreave*, the exhibition re-staged the community modelled by Arnesberg and Kimball and played it out in a different key.^{xvii}

ⁱ Anne Byrne and O'Mahony, Deirdre, "Family and Community: (Re)Telling Our Own Story." *Journal of Family Issues*. Sage, Jan 2012.

ⁱⁱ See footnote 7 Chapter 8, W.J.T. Mitchell, "Translator Translated: W.J.T. Mitchell talks with Homi Bhabha," 110

ⁱⁱⁱ Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse." *October* 110, Fall 2004. 5.

^{iv} Foster, 4

^v It is difficult, if not impossible, to think of another ethnography from a different country which so profoundly affected the analysis of that country's society that all subsequent research for a generation had as its central focus, the testing of the ethnographic model of the original.

Thomas Wilson quoted in Byrne, Anne, Edmondson and Varley, "Introduction to the Third Edition" Conrad Arensberg and Solon Kimball, *Family and Community in Ireland* (Ireland: CLASP, 2001) LIX

^{vi} Dáil: Gaelic for Parliament or governing body.

^{vii} Steven Henry Madoff, "Service Aesthetics, on personal Transactions in Art." *Artforum*, September 2008, 165.

^{viii} Anne Byrne and O'Mahony, Deirdre, "Family and Community: (Re)Telling Our Own Story." *Journal of Family Issues*. SAGE, 2011.

^{ix} Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*. 1996. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001) 196.

^x There were certain individuals for whom no photographs existed, and where possible details of group photographs were cropped and enlarged. The resulting portraits were often blurred and indistinct, and I discussed the possibility of making drawings that would stand as a more symbolic, layered representation. This was rejected as the successors were concerned to stay with the reality of the family photographs and present them just as they were, taken in that moment in time, without another layer of representation or interpretation.

^{xi} Laura Mulvey, *Death 24 x a second: Stillness and the moving image* (UK: Reaktion Books, 2006).

Citing R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982) 57.

^{xii} David Green points to the importance of photography in relation to Foucault's ideas on power and knowledge, 'part of the mechanisms of surveillance and the normalising of disciplinary power.' The Physical Survey of the Harvard Irish Mission was led by Earnest Hooton, as discussed in Footnote 6, Chapter 2. He is best known as the author of two controversial publications concerning the relationship between personality and physical type, *The American Criminal* (1939) and *Crime and the Man* (1939). The survey carried out measurements on some 12,000 individuals, mainly in rural Ireland where Hooton people were 'less likely to be mixed with recent foreign blood that would be the city dwellers.' Hooton, Earnest, Qtd. In Anne Byrne, Edmondson, Ricca and Varley, Tony, "Introduction to the Third Edition". Conrad Arensberg and Solon Kimball, *Family and Community in Ireland* (Ireland: CLASP, 2001. Previously Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1940, 1968) XXIV.

David Green, "On Foucault: Disciplinary Power and Photography", *The Camerawork Essays*, (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1997) 129.

^{xiii} Kester 115

^{xiv} Foster, *The Return of the Real*. 191

^{xv} Fraser, *Museum Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser*.. 86.

^{xvi} Jaques Rancière "The Emancipated Spectator." *Artforum*, May 2007.

^{xvii} Bishop, "The Social Turn and Its Discontents", *Artforum* Feb, 2006, Web, 183