From Turf To Tools: Fieldwork through practice.

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From Turf To Tools is a project devised by artist Eden Jolly and the Scottish Sculpture Workshop (SSW) in Lumsden, Aberdeenshire and is the the fourth of a series of projects at SSW called *SLOW PROTOTYPES* that examine how an institution which is primarily about 'making', can inform and change understandings of the material, culture and history of the rural locality. On the face of it, *From Turf To Tools* appears a simple idea, the replication of an axe carried on the shoulder of a man that is carved on a standing stone taken from a Pictish site in the village of Rhynie just over the hill from the SSW in Lumsden. In 2013, an archaeological dig on a nearby site unearthed fragments of clay moulds, a pair of foundry tongs and a bronze pendant, and this prompted site archaeologist Gordon Noble to visit the SSW to see a working foundry. Artist and technician at SSW Eden Jolly did a trial smelt for the archaeologist. Both men were surprised by how contemporary the archaeological finds looked alongside the tools and moulds in use at SSW and the exercise helped give shape to an idea that Jolly had been thinking about for some time; a project that could not only investigate connections between artisanal knowledge and artistic practice but might also better inform public understanding of the complex mix of social and cultural subjectivities, agencies and agendas at play in rural landscapes.

Jolly has little time for boundaries whether in the contemporary artworld, or around lands reserved for the privileged few. At the SSW symposium to introduce the project in August 2014, he spoke about his fury when as a child, growing up in Northumberland a 'No Entry' sign denied him access to a favourite field. That attachment to the right to roam and access to the countryside underscores the ambition and scope of *From Turf To Tools*. It is not simply about replicating a tool but, by asking how a craftsman from 700AD might navigate the land use regulations, the planning permissions, the extraction of fuel, the excavation of raw materials and then exercise the skill and knowledge to make a ceremonial axe today, the project demonstrates the obstacles, contradictions and paradoxes inherent in our contemporary relationship with land and landscape. Eden Jolly and Nuno Sacramento brought together archaeologist Gordan Noble; master blacksmith,

Darrell Markewitz and partner Kelly Smith; archaeologist Gordon Noble; artist/writer Maxime Hourani and myself to produce, reflect upon and mediate the project. *From Turf To Tools* provides a way of demonstrating and understanding history through material, artisanal, skills and tacit knowledge. Moreover, it has created space for contemporary artists, artisanal craft, academic and practice-based forms of knowledge to make connections and new understandings that go beyond disciplinary boundaries, and address some of the ways in which forms of knowledge are prioritised and fixed into place.

Paralells between distant local places interest me. When Nuno Sacramento gave a presention on the *SLOW PROTOTYPES* project at Askeaton Contemporary Arts in Ireland, I could see how *From Turf To Tools* might serve as a model for examining politics and subjectivities around nature, land use and access, all issues I deal with in my work. Landscape occupies a particular position within Irish culture and visual representations of the West of Ireland have helped to reify Irish identity, serving a double function as a symbol of the nation state and a signifier of difference within Ireland.[i]

I live and work in a very beautiful part of rural Ireland, on the west coast in the Burren, County Clare. A paradigmatic change is under way in rural Ireland as State and EU policies move away from subsidising small farms and actively promoting culture as the driver of uneconomic small farm, rural economies. In *Our country's calling card. Culture as the Brand in Recessionary Ireland* Rosemary Meade argues that discussions around culture, innovation and entrepreneurship in recent years have largely ignored the role that 'unbranded' culture can play in complicating the hegemony of tourism-driven, festival-based culture.[ii] Complex models of culture and creativity have emerged in rural places over the past decade, led by artists and artist-led initiatives motivated by a belief that public art can activate, investigate, critique and celebrate places generally thought of as marginal or peripheral.[iii] These are vital expressions of resistant culture going far beyond reductive narratives of 'brand Ireland', creating democratic spaces in which to engage different publics, make visible dissent and challenge singular and reductive perspectives on landscape and land use in rural places. The unacknowledged post-colonial legacies at play

during interactions between the public and the State need space to allow the kinds of reversals, setbacks and dis-continuities that happen when engaging with questions posed over time and funding and sustaining this work is not easy; both the Arts Council and local authorities have taken annual budget cuts in recent years and a public service hiring freeze has taken a toll on staffing. In times of austerity as the country rebrands itself the default position is to revert to the comfort of the tried and tested tropes of landscape (authentic, Gaelic, wild, rugged, raw, untamed, etc.) reinforcing assumptions about temporality, wholeness, and continuity in a region that is actually experiencing unprecedented social, cultural and environmental change and making a case for art that is not about reductive narratives of the Wild West however its dressed is a difficult sell in these times. [iv]

Turf Wars

Yet, conflicts and antagonisms around land, community and democracy in rural Ireland today have become a cultural refrain. Most recently a conflict around a ban on turf cutting in some raised peatlands has escalated, politicising the owners of small farms in the beautiful, but ecomonically unproductive, West of Ireland. This has been the context for my practice. Prompted by a long local environmental conflict, this developed as a critical response to the erasure of rural public space and the need to engage different publics in a collective discourse on the social, cultural, natural and economic future of the Burren region.[v] The conflict brought home the need to reflexively engage with and examine the reasons behind unconscious antagonisms around land use, particularly as the effects of climate change are felt in increased flooding, contaminated water quality, coastal storm damage, loss of species and habitats, become a source of deep anxiety and concern for the future.

Participative decision making does not come naturally to Irish State agencies: top-down decision-making has been the norm, and a cause of many environmental conflicts around the regulation of landscape. This has led some sociologists to invoke DAD, – decide, announce, defend – to describe their modus operandi when dealing with stakeholders.[vi] European legislation designed to protect landscapes and habitats is now the law, however Sharon Bryan argues that the way that this legislation is implemented is largely down to individual member states. She notes that in Ireland a combination of uncertainty, fear of mis-interpretation and possible

fines, has meant that policies around landscapes and habitats tend to be *over* enforced. This political dimension of landscape, she notes, '…effectively displaces people-on-the-ground. The translation of place to habitat takes nature out-of-place and out-of-time: it reduces places to only that which can be viewed through the lens of "science"'.[vii]

In the turf conflict landowners argue that they are being penalised for having cared for the bogs, now amongst the last remaining examples of raised peatlands in Europe, while decades of industrial peat extraction by Bord na Mona and Caoilte, both industries that are part-owned by the State, have turned large tracts of blanket bogs in the midlands into a post-industrial wasteland. The inequalities and contradictions have exacerbated the conflict and politicised participants. Within the claims, counter-claims and perceptual frames of the various actors - the scientific lens that excludes place-based knowledge of habitats; the "spiritualist" lens invoked by conservation groups who see nature as 'other'; the cultural lens that cannot see beyond past and present human practices - the role of peatlands in sequestering carbon and the global issue of climate change is being lost. There is little public awareness of the effect and contribution of peat extraction on global warming and climate change.

Artist/producers and cultural agencies have a key role in these kinds of contested situations. Bruno Latour argues that in order to bridge the disconnect between the size of the problems we face and our limited grasp and attention span we need to connect the tools of scientific representation with those of Art and Politics, taking the big questions from a small, local point of entry.[viii] By mediating and mapping the actors, legacies, power relations and institutions – what Doreen Massey calls the 'geometries of power' - governing space and place they enable perspectives and voices that are not heard, to become present, a way of re-thinking the local and the global as space-in-common.

I was approached in 2011 by a group representaing turf cutters to hold a *Mind Meitheal* (Meitheal is the Irish word for shared collective labour) a process conceived by me as a form of transdiciplinary knowledge exchange that makes space for situated, place-based knowledge to link with academic, cultural, scientific and institution-based knowledge. I began the *T.U.R.F. (Transitional Understandings of*

Rural Futures) project in 2012 in order to track and trace the process of protest, quasi-judicial hearings and to create space through the *Mind Meitheal* process for where different publics could engage with cultural and pedagogical institutions in order to examine questions arising from Natura 2000 legislation. A key question raised by turf cutters was how the legislation was enacted and implimented in other parts of Europe and whether turf cutting is permitted in other EU states. When I heard about *From Turf To Tools* I applied to visit the SSW, and was subsequently invited to write about the project.

As an artist, albeit one who occasionally writes, it is curious to find myself in this mode - a "writer". I find myself in an awkward space, haunted by a fear of fixing actions into text, of staking claims, naming names and getting it horribly wrong. It is only by thinking of my role as a form of ethnography and responding reflexively that I begin to make some sense of why this project is so engaging for me. Being out-of-place, as a "writer", albeit within the context of an artist residency that is familar, forced a kind of reflexivity I found disconcerting. Yet cast in an unfamiliar role, that of 'writer', and the project's conceptual focus on 'making' made me rethink my ideas about tacit knowledge, and the 'use-value' of residencies in rural places increasingly framed by notions of heritage, authenticity and place-based identity.

Making Good.

Doing well - making well - is a quality understood in rural places. Iron smelting, forging and metel casting has a long tradition at SSW going back to founder, Fred Bush's time as director at the workshop. However all institutions need to reflect and renew the reasons for being, just as all craftsmen need to renew and practice skills in order to evolve. As art practice has changed, so too the role and function of a place like SSW within the political ecology of the region cannot but be called into question and this is what makes *From Turf To Tools* so interesting. For it is not simply about re-enacting a process of tool making, nor is it a reification of the artefact. It provides a conceptual structure wherein experience-based decision-making, bodily practices and technical understanding can be re-directed towards a critical examination of the power relations governing the human, social, and natural ecologies of the region.

Jolly claims that SSW has always been 'apart' from everything else in the

artworld and academic institutions in the region.[ix] Yet, its history and longevity show an ongoing demand for the kind of technical expertise and material facilities it offers. Part of his personal practice involves running smelts onsite in remote places, often in the company of George Beasley, a long-time member of SSW who, with his wife Judy, plays a key part in the workshop life. Beasley's practice also involved public smelts, part of an international conference-based discourse on iron pours and he has a particular interest in the performative possabilities of the smelt. *From Turf To Tools* created an opportunity of extending the spectacular into the dialogical, making use of the performance of practice to open a conversation around public access to land and land use.

For the first, technical part of *From Turf To Tools* SSW invited a group of archaeology students, artists, and local makers to assist on the technical research process and experience the intimate relationship between problem solving and problem finding, technique and expression, forging and making the axe. A lot of learning happens at SSW. It requires attentiveness, commitment and readiness to 'engage, pick up a shovel and get stuck in'.[x] The group - Uist Corrigan, Thomas Stackhouse, James McCarthy and Dirk Sporleder - worked under the guidance of Jolly and artisanal master-craftsman, blacksmith Darryll Markewitz. Markewitz and Jolly both teach best practice, communicating clearly and effectively with the apprentice smiths in what was often potentially dangerous work.

Markewitz went to art school in Canada during the 1970s and came to blacksmithing through historical re-enactments. Always a maker, he had a desire to make and forge authentic historical replicas of tools. He brought his formidable knowledge of historical technologies to the table, and in the process challenged some of the archaelogical assumptions about the purpose of tools and their historical signifigance. Without Markewitz's transdisciplinary expertise - 'reading' the peatlands for clues during a field trip in order to locate bog ore deposits and making an analogue equivilent using Spanish red oxide and flour, much of the process would have lost its relevance.

The first replica axe forged by Markowitz threw up some interesting questions about material and process-based knowledge, and interpretations of the axe's function. Was it a tool for use in rituals, or a weapon? Once re-made, the

toolmakers thought that the heft and feel of the axe was consistant with being swung underarm like a pendulum, for use on a horse in battle or hunting. The archaelogist leaned towards a ritual use. Whatever interpretation, the axe provided new insights into a fragmented historical period. It also pointed to differences between forms of knowledge, speculative and embodied, and how these enter the public sphere. The first week's trials examined the kind of raw materials, fuel and technologies used by the Picts and included tests into the use of a peat-fired, Aristotle furnace. Temperatures of over 1200^{o} were reached, which proved that turf could reach the required temperature, something Jolly was sure would happen.

The trials culmenated in a public smelt, orchestrated and conducted by Markewitz and his crew of apprentice assistants. By the time of the public smelt they were a unit, taking turns striking the bloom with synchronised swings of the hammer, 'doing well, working together, listening, interacting', all of which Richard Sennett argues, corrosponds with an idea of good citizenship.[xi] A choreography of practice that depends on trusting in the competence of your fellow workers, as well as good direction from the master blacksmith.

Soft Subversions

Within all the rhetoric of innovation and creativity used around the culture industries, the capacity to acquire insight through making is one rarely referenced today and this first strand of *From Turf To Tools* has cleverly re-positioned making within a deeper dialectic - the interrelationship between skill, deskilling and re-skilling.[xii] Within today's post modern landscape, the project's re-enactment unpacks the way that value - research or practice based, cultural or academic – has become visible through both material skills and de-materialised labour. In the process, it has re-defined a far broader role for SSW as a residency situated in a rural area. The untangling and exposition of an interconnected web of culture, skills, resources and landscape, waysigns a direction for post-referendum methodologies and post-colonial legasies. Now, more than ever, we need micropolitical processes like *From Turf To Tools* so that the challenges and inequalities presented by globalisation and climate change can be acknowledged, recognised and analysed. Felix Guattari reminds us that this kind of analysis has the potential to produce the 'soft subversions and imperceptible revolutions that will eventually change the face of the

world, making it happier.'[xiii] Not such a bad ambition in these times.

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i Catherine Nash, "Embodying the Nation – The West of Ireland Landscape and Irish Identity." *Tourism In Ireland: a critical analysis*. Eds. Barbara O'Connor and Michael Cronin (Cork: Cork University Press, 1993) 86.

ii Rosemary Mead "Our country's calling card. Culture as the Brand in Recessionary Ireland", *Variant* 43, Spring 2012, 33

iii Asketon Contemporary Arts, curatorial residencies by Megs Morely (Galway) and Lind Shevlin (Roscommon), *Workhouse Assembly* and *Workhouse Union* projects by Rosie Lynch and Holly Kearns, and my PhD research project, *X-PO* to name just a few.

iv The longest coastal drive in the world, the "Wild Atlantic Way" is presently in use to promote the region. The marketing replays every cliché of the sublime landscape: '…the last frontier against a marauding Atlantic'…'where you can journey along the nation's soul, 'the Ireland you imagined' etc.

v A revived, former post-office in Kilnaboy, North Clare was the first outcome of this research. As "X-PO" it was re-opened as an interstisial space in 2007 and run by participants since 2008. See See http://www.deirdre-omahony.ie/images/OMahony_New_Ecologies_between_Art_and_Rural_Life.pdf

vi DAD was a term originally coined by sociologists T.F. Yosie and Herbst, TD. *Using Stakeholder Processes in Environmental Decisionmaking. An Evaluation of Lessons Learned, Key Issues and Future Challenges*.. It was coined in relation to the Irish State Office of Public Works (OPW), now the National Parks and Wildlife Service, (NPWS) who have a long history of non-engagement with the public. A decade long conflict that arose from a decision by the OPW to locate an interpretive center, which polarised the various communities in the region, was the catalyst for a shift in my practice from site, to context/public practice.

vii Sharon Bryan, "Contested boundaries, contested places: The Natura 2000 network in Ireland". *Journal of Rural Studies* xxx (2011) 1e15. 3

viii Bruno Latour, *Waiting for Gaia. Composing the common world through arts and politics.* A lecture at the French Institute, London, November 2011 for the launching of SPEAP (the Sciences Po program in arts & politics)

ix Eden Jolly interview with Deirdre O'Mahony at SSW, 28th August 2014.

x Ibid.

xi Richard Sennett, *The* Craftsman, (London: Penguin, 2008), 10.

xii John Roberts, "Art After Deskilling", *Historical Materialism 18* (2010*),* 92.

xiii Felix Guattari, *Soft Subversions* (Cambridge: MIT/Semiotext(e) Forign Agents Series, 2009), 306.