

# Rural lifeworlds; an artistic practice of *scratching the surface, tilting mirrors* and *place-making* in rural contexts.

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The word 'landscape' entered into our lexicon of consciousness originally as a technical term for painters to describe the artistic presentation of a scene. The word 'performs' in our minds eye bucolic scenes whereby idyllic rural image montages are built up, offering a tranquil depiction of animals, perhaps a river, rolling hills and trees. This 'chocolate box' treatment of an idealized landscape offers us a fetishized view of landscape as stasis, untouched and unspoiled by hu(man). My formal art training acknowledges this process of translating from three-dimensional 'real life' onto a two-dimensional picture plane as a false and inadequate representation. Having a clear and distinctive foreground, middle and background one can never represent the other fully, or indeed, as simply. *Scratching the surface* critically, landscape provides, according to anthropologists P. J. Stewart and A. Starthern a 'contextual horizon of perceptions ... in which people see themselves to be living in the world'<sup>1</sup>. It codifies (a) history they say, as seen from the viewpoint of personal experience, in the world, which I am part of.

Over the past twenty years, I have come to realize that artistic practices of place-making cannot happen quickly nor in isolation. There demands a cross-fertilization of disciplines, that have both fed and have emerged from my social practice with for instance; art theory, sociology, philosophy, anthropology, ethnography and cultural geography to mention but a few. I have adopted processes of deep collaboration in rural contexts over long periods of time resulting in a trans- and inter- disciplinary practice. The process of *tilting the mirror* to capture and reveal another viewpoint utilizing methods of historical research, archiving, deep mapping, community activism, pedagogical initiatives and dialogical /discursive enquiry simply positions me *in relation* to my subject of enquiry, my constituents and their lifeworlds, whilst acknowledging my own. By seeing, hearing, talking and listening, gathering stories in/from/about place(s) *that place* rural lifeworlds in the more *messy* and complex 'real life' landscape reveals multiple picture planes. Not so easy a composition to communicate back. Ontologically driven, my enquiry looks at history and memory recall to explore economic, political and social events in time that impact the 'perceived vision of landscape' and moreover the 'perceived placement of (rural) people' (Stewart and Starthern) within these settings.

In the past, I have synthesized my research through sculpture, installation, photography, sound and context specific/ephemeral works in place. More recently the durational aspect of working in the public domain has led me to actually *place* myself in a given context over long periods of time. My research, distilled through text-based works - film, audio, photography and community events. Disseminated back in the locale, in places where the research developed, findings are interpreted and communicated back to the people/ audience who have contributed to the research as active participants, collaborators and co-producers, creating, in accordance with Edward Soja, a '*thirdspace*' - a space for interrelations - providing a meeting ground, a site of hybridity, a *space* which connects the past with the present and the future too.

The following text (mildly edited and amended) was written as a reflective document resulting from an intensive research residency under the thematic 'Art and Agriculture' at The Leitrim Sculpture Centre, June and July 2015. **'The Milk Well and The Tea Well'** originated *in place*, in the rural uplands of north-east Co. Kilkenny, where I live. There, two pre-famine sunken stone-lined wells lie giving their naming to the emergent work.

## The Milk Well and The Tea Well



Fig 1. The Milk Well and The Tea Well, Cassagh, Co. Kilkenny, C-type print © P. O'Connell 2015

“Whilst focusing my attention on the environs of north County Leitrim, an area spoken of by Arthur Balfour, Chief Secretary of Ireland in a speech delivered in Liverpool in 1890 as being “..on the verge of want..”<sup>iii</sup>. The research findings *boomeranged* at local, regional, national and EU levels. There were three main strands to the project undertaken; each looking at the specificity of rural culture and its complex relationship to identity politics and indigeneity through – historic enquiry, methods of milk preservation and the local /social economy. By drawing on history and trace memories to evoke ways in which we might better *place* rural *lifeworlds*<sup>iii</sup> (Habermas: 1987) as directly experienced by individuals, subjectively, in and through their everyday life, the project – The Milk Well and The Tea Well models itself in accordance with Edward Soja’s ‘thirdspace’<sup>iv</sup>. Providing a meeting ground, a site of hybridity, a *space* for a “meeting up of histories” a definition put forward by geographer Doreen Massey, a *space* which connects the past with the present and the future too.

This northwest region holds with it a particular nexus of cultural and economic aspiration, a region where one system of inscription has (either) successfully (or not) made way for another – part of the continuing ‘existential story’ that Kearney speaks of. A major contributing factor to this story was the establishment in 1959 of The Shannon Free Trade Zone. This saw the world’s first Free Trade Zone set up near Shannon Airport.<sup>v</sup> The consequence of such incentivized corporate invitations and farming disincentives through quotas meant that there was a considerable migration of farmers away from the land and into factory jobs<sup>vi</sup>. Impacting the once common practice of dairy farming within the region, petering down to only two dairy farmers remaining in the north Leitrim region today. The 1960’s – 1970’s were a pivotal time in Ireland as preparations were being made to enter the EC (later EU), farmers were incentivized to opt for a dry stock farming practice, encouraged by, for instance:

“The **Beef Cattle Incentive Scheme** [which] has been largely responsible for the shift from milch cattle to suckling herds.” in and around 1973 – 1974.

Excerpt taken from the Leitrim Guardian, 1988, p.46 entitled “Another closure in Leitrim but thanks for the memory Longfield” by Edward Kiernan.

The farmer was paid £16 per suckling cow, thus affording them more time to work away from the land.



Fig. 2 Manorhamilton Mart 13/7/15, 35mm slide projected © P. O’Connell 2015

*‘The cow was the mainstay of the people in the country. The cow helped to bring the people through hard time, and the loss of a cow was a huge loss – you know, very hard replace. And people survived on mountain farms if they could keep two or three cows, and they’d sort of survive by bringing a drop of milk to the creamery and keeping hens and maybe sellin turf and puttin in nearly an acre of crop, you know, ... spuds, and... sellin the eggs and havin eggs for the house, and keepin a few pigs ... maybe a pig to sell and a pig to kill for the house, and turkeys at Christmas ... and all that. It was all self-sufficient, they’d have their own vegetables as well, but they worked extremely hard’.*

Charlie Cullen, excerpted interview conducted as part of The Milk Well and The Tea Well research at LSC residency studio 15/7/15



excesses of milk brought to the co-operative creamery thusly providing a much needed extra income for the smallholder. The size of the larger well (fig. 1, left) accommodates only one creamery can/churn – indicating the ownership of only one or two cows. Built for the sole purpose of preserving milk and for water consumption<sup>viii</sup> the image *reveals itself* (Berger: 1995, Barthes: 2006). The relationship between the photographic image and its referent provides a questioning relation between it and the viewer, providing “another way of telling” as Berger suggests. This tells of a time/pace in history – before the ever present pressures of ‘acceleration’ through mechanization with an emphasis on ‘increased yields’ which, if we scratch the memory surface historically led to:

*“... farmers [in the 1980’s were] being paid to produce goods for which there was no market and which were then bought up for intervention storage and later [for] sale at (lower) global market prices. .... This basic system led to the infamous “butter mountains” and “[milk] lakes of the 1980’s”.*

<http://www.ecpa.eu/information-page/agriculture-today/common-agricultural-policy-cap> [Accessed 4/7/15]



Fig. 5 Killasnett Co-Operative Agricultural Dairy Society Limited, Supplier’s Pass Book donated by Seamus O’Hara, photograph © R. le Gear 2015



Fig. 6 Manorhamilton Mart, 13/7/15, 35 mm slide projected, © P. O’Connell 2015

Looking at the subject of milk preservation historically has implicit with it questions surrounding mechanization, accelerationism, labour and gender (Massey : 1994). Exploring these through an archival lens opens a *space* where notions of time, agency and hope open up to emerge as “new forms of resistance” as Gregory Sholette suggests, an acknowledgment of who we are and where / how we exist. Acting as a conduit it mediates broader agendas relating to farming practice, the aforementioned policies moulding the local, regional and common farming practices decided upon at European level, it is especially pertinent today in light of “the recent elimination of milk quotas in 2015 [which] ... provide(s) Irish dairy farmers with the opportunity to expand production for the first time in 30 years ...”

Taken from <http://www.glanbia.com/about-us/our-history> [Accessed 20/05/14]

Consequently this has led to protest marches by farmers 1/9/15 congregating in Dublin, at government buildings. Their demands, as set out in the Treaty of Rome CAP<sup>ix</sup> objectives in 1958, “to ensure a fair standard of living for the agricultural community”– requesting that

milk prices be regulated in a fair and equitable fashion so that the recent removal of quotas and encouragement “ to increase productivity” along with the past asymmetrical cycle of incentives which led to an ‘over supply’ (not in line with consumption needs), will not result in the ‘butter mountains’ and ‘milk lakes’ of old.



Fig. 7 Killasnett Co-Op Dairy Society Ltd., 28 lb. butter boxes, installation LSC Gallery, Manorhamilton, photograph © P. O’Connell 2015

I focused my field research on and was guided by individual personal ‘recollections’. The project’s ‘aesthetic retrieval’<sup>x</sup> through auto-ethnographic methods<sup>xi</sup>, focused not on a limited nostalgic retrieval as Fredrick Jameson puts forward, rather it paid attention to, but was not wholly based on, historic facts. It opened up “ordinary space”<sup>xii</sup> and was biased towards the act of remembering, an ‘enigma’ of memory as Ricoeur calls it. The excavation of memory is channeled through stories, collected orally. Through dialogical means *informed consent* was sought from individuals, negotiating broader access through a collective ‘call out’ channeled through media platforms<sup>xiii</sup> – radio; Shannonside 104.1FM, in print; The Leitrim Observer. Stories were willingly told to me by local people / people in the locale resulting with numerous offers of information, undertaking accompanied ‘deep mapping’<sup>xiv</sup> journeys, a demonstration of butter making, interviews and audio recordings being carried out in my studio at LSC and conducted at creamery sites / *places of preservation*. With a view to better understanding the relationship between the empirical agency of the story and the phenomenological agency of remembering the re-telling of stories, those re-told to me, collected, interpreted and pieced together became the main guide and research component within the project.

“Instead of prioritising the moment of display” in and of itself, or indeed longer-term projects over shorter intensive ones, or, temporary versus permanent artworks – what Claire Doherty and Paul O’Neill refer to in *Locating The Producers* when they call for “short-term and durational projects to be realised as part of longer-term, cumulative engagements which recognise the process through which small-scale, limited constituencies gather for a

finite period of time around particular projects". The exhibition here, allows for, and acts as an "open-ended, accumulative process of engagement"<sup>xv</sup> whereby there was clear evidence of participants/collaborators/co-producers and extended families willingness to engage with the work in the exhibition space, having gained a sense of empowerment by/through the process of engagement. The resulting 'discursive exhibition'<sup>xvi</sup> – a form of *new* "New Institutionalism"<sup>xvii</sup> articulates both my solicitude and criticality that evolved in the locale over an intensive, embedded, committed period of time that had no predetermined outcomes or pseudo-ethnographic intent at the outset. In keeping with Barthes's "stereographic" reading of the text "the reader [in this case the viewer/participant] is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination"<sup>xviii</sup>. The *space* spoken of here engages the viewers as 'actors' changing their position from passive consumer to active participant (Castells; 2009, Nancy; 2008), opening up a critical space for imbuing both micro and meta-narratives – a dialogue with oneself, acknowledging our individual personal histories and within that a subjectivity of emplacement<sup>xix</sup>, creating a *thirdspace*<sup>xx</sup>."

Pauline O'Connell

[www.paulineoconnell.com](http://www.paulineoconnell.com)

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Stewart P.J. & Strathern, A., 2003, *Landscape, Memory and History, Anthropological Perspectives*, (London, Sterling, Virginia; Pluto Press), p.4.

<sup>ii</sup> Morrissey, J. (ed.) (2001), *On the Verge of Want : A Unique Insight into Living Conditions Along Ireland's Western Seaboard in the Late 19th Century*, Crannog Books, Ireland.

<sup>iii</sup> “A *lifeworld* (in German *Lebenswelt*) is the term used in phenomenology for the world as it is directly experienced in our subjective everyday life, that is, in our everyday situations and relations (as opposed to the world as the object of scientific study). The lifeworld is made up of different aspects of our experience—imaginal, social, perceptual, and embodied—and is often thematically framed in terms of lived space, the lived body, lived time, and our lived human relationship with other beings”. Taken from an article written by Dr. Iain Biggs “*Incorrigibly plural*”? *Rural Lifeworlds Between Concept and Experience* for *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* Vol. 38, Nos. 1+2 (2014).

<sup>iv</sup> “as a Lived Space is portrayed as multi-sited and contradictory, oppressive and liberating, passionate and routine, knowable and unknowable. It is a space of radical openness, a site of resistance and struggle, a space of multiplicitous representations (...) It is a meeting ground, a site of hybridity.” excerpt taken from *Locating the Producers: An End to the Beginning, the beginning of the End*, by O’Neill, Paul and Doherty, Claire.

<sup>v</sup> The Shannon Free Trade Zone provided for lower tax rates and incentives such as tax exemptions for foreign companies to set up in the region- along the western seaboard. This political strategy set a precedent of courting foreign corporations with economic stimulus resulting with one such company coming to Hazelwood in neighbouring County Sligo. SNIA, a Milanese chemical and weapons producer operated from 1969 – 1984, it was later decommissioned, re-tooled in 1987 and re-inscribed by another company SaeHan Information Systems making magnetic VHS tapes until its almost overnight closure in 2005 with the introduction of the DVD.

<sup>vi</sup>(source; “Impact of Agriculture Schemes and Payments on Aspects of Ireland’s Heritage” © An Chomhairle Oidhreachta / The Heritage Council 1999)

<sup>vii</sup> Stewart, Pamela J, & Strathern, Andrew, (eds) *Landscape, Memory and History, Anthropological Perspectives*, Pluto Press, London, sterling, Virginia, p. 6



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- viii The Tea Well is a receptacle containing water that was used for making tea.
- ix CAP – Common Agricultural Policy
- x Fredrick Jameson, Postmodernism, or The Culture Local of Late Capitalism p. 66
- xi Auto-ethnography is one of the approaches that acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research" from *Auto ethnography: An Overview*, Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams & Arthur P. Bochner, *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, Vol. 12, No 1 (2011) p. 2.
- xii Doreen Massey, 2012, *For Space*, (London, California, New Delhi, Singapore, Sage Publications Ltd.), p.13.
- xiii Interview by Charlie McGettigan on Shannonside Radio 104.1FM 15/7/15, newspaper article in The Leitrim Observer "The Milk and Tea Well Creamery Research" 15/7/15 p.11.
- xiv Deep Mapping originated with Mike Pearson, Michael Shanks, Clifford McLucas, and the radical Welsh performance group *Brith Gof*
- xv See Bruce W. Ferguson and Milena M. Hoegsberg, *Talking and Thinking about Biennials: The Potential of Discursivity*, The Biennial Reader, eds. Jelena Filipovic et al. (Ostfildern, Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010), pp. 361-375.
- xvi "discursive exhibition" coined by Claire Doherty and Paul O'Neill in their book *Locating The Producers*
- xvii New Institutionalism and The Exhibition as Situation, (ed.) Claire Doherty - *new institutionalism*, a buzzword of curatorial discourse poached from social science classifies; curatorial practice, institutional reform and critical debate concerned with the transformation of art institutions from within.
- xviii Roland Barthes, 1977, *The Death of the Author, Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath. New York, Hill and Wang, , p 118 in *The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism*, Part 2, Craig Owens, in *October*, Vol. 13. (Summer, 1980), pp. 58-80.
- xix *Emplacement* suggests the sensuous interrelationship of body-mind environment, see Sarah Pink, *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, 2009, London, California, New Delhi, Singapore: Sage Publishing.
- xx *Thirdspace* is based on the work of a number of social scientists, most notably Henri Lefebvre. Lefebvre introduces Thirdspace in a slightly different form and under a different name: 'Spaces of representation and can also be seen as 'lived space'. It is the idea of *Thirdspace* as the space we give meaning to a rapidly, continually changing space in which we live. It is the experience of living.