*Going Underground: Networks, Histories and Knowledges – the SPUD Project.*

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" One day I was showing the sea to a girl who was seeing it for the first time; She declared that she thought a field of potatoes was a far more impressive sight."

Francis Picabia, Yes No: Poems and Sayings, translated by Remy Hall, (Hanuman Book #39, 2001)

*SPUD* is a multifaceted public art project that has emerged through artistic research and collaborative processes to produce space for a public discourse on food production and climate change. Three issues are reflexively considered through the lens of *SPUD*: Unconscious attitudes towards rurality, the land, identity and otherness in Ireland; the relevance and use-value of tacit agricultural knowledge to food production today and the potato’s importance to global food security in the face of climate change. By making use of the potato to map controversies around these threads, *SPUD* points to the complex history and legacy of the potato both in Ireland and within the economic and political dynamics of global food production today. This cartographic process is particularly relevant given the history of the Famine in Ireland. In this chapter I will outline the development of the project, beginning with a local archive of research into potato cultivation in a specific, local context in County Clare and subsequent projects that developed through a network of connections with different publics, artists, agencies and institutions.

Over the past decade my art practice has focussed on activating, investigating and complicating perceptions of rural public space, generally considered marginal or peripheral within a wider cultural discourse. The rural countryside has multiple stakeholders with vastly different agendas and interests and conflicts resurface repeatedly around land and land use in Ireland. In response to this “stuck” narrative and a lack of space for public discourse, my research has focused on ways of publicly re-presenting and reflecting different epistemological understandings of place in order to create new knowledge on the complex interrelationship between human, natural, cultural and social ecologies.

The countryside, once a site of food production, is seen increasingly as an arena of cultural production with tourism and artisanal food production now seen as the drivers of rural economies. Campaigns such as “The Wild Atlantic Way” in Ireland are lauded as an unqualified marketing success; the landscape presented as an unpopulated, “wild” “untamed” object with the added destination value of “tradition” –music, spectacle and festival-based culture. Which is fine, as long as it is not seen as the only cultural model. Sociologist Rosemary Meade notes in discussions around culture, innovation and entrepreneurship in Ireland after the economic crash, the role that “unbranded” arts practices play in complicating the hegemony of festival-based culture has been largely ignored (Meade: 2012). The disparity between both approaches to place – one affirmative

Many artist/producers in rural Ireland have been engaged with durational, and cumulative approaches to situating public art within the social, cultural and natural ecologies of place. In *The Lure of the Local* (1997) Lucy R. Lippard places particular emphasis on visual art practices that can serve as a catalyst for social change. A place-specific public art that is grounded within the ‘social multicentre’ is neccessary to effect change, rather than ‘an elite enclave, sheltered and hidden from public view or illegibly representing privileged taste in public view’ (p.286). Building on ideas put forward by Lippard Paul O’Neill and Claire Doherty note that

This idea of duration, and the transitory attribute of time as a means of structuring the fluctuating encounter with public space, has become a recurring motif in the search for a more profound understanding of place within public art – as that which is always hybrid and neither fixed nor clearly bound to the location’ (O’Neill & Doherty: 2011, p. 5).

Lippard acknowledges the danger of “bad” nostalgia that ‘creates a past that is merely a refuge from the present rather than inherited significance’ (Lippard: 1999, 164). In her keynote address to *The Falmouth Convention*, she proposed that ‘nostalgia… as distinct from sentimentality (which can be all too easily manipulated for ideological motives) is inseparable from memory’, making a case for ‘emotive retrospection’, balanced by local knowledge and critical curiosity. (2010, 1997: 291) ‘Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present’ (1997: p.61). This notion of emotive retrospection is particularly relevant to *SPUD.*

I began a project in 2007 in a former rural post office in Killinaboy, County Clare, renamed “*X-PO*” – a public space in which to interrogate underlying ideas of rural life in the west of Ireland as backward; a rural idyll, separate from normal temporal development. (O’Mahony: 2006, 2012, 2014). The building is on the edge of a karst limestone desert, the Burren. It is a significant tourism destination and a high nature value landscape and was the locus of a protracted, divisive conflict around the development of a visitor interpretive centre that still resonates in the locality. The conflict highlighted issues around belonging, ideas of community and local democracy, *X-PO* was conceived as a place where the different “publics”, locals and incomers, could meet and begin to better understand one another. In part this was a response to the decline in social meeting points; as rural post offices, pubs and local shops close as there is a real need for public social spaces where different communities can meet.

Traditional farming, discouraged for decades by agricultural policies, has only recently been acknowledged as the reason the particular ecosystem of the region is the way it is. After decades of being told they were doing it wrong, ‘farming landscape’, is now seen as the only viable option for farmers in North Clare, a paradigmatic shift from the rural as a site of food production to an arena of cultural production. “Traditional” artisanal food production is also now being given increasing prominence in agricultural policy – a turnaround that has left many farmers withdrawing from engagement with rural development policies. Áine Macken-Walsh makes the case that within traditional farming culture, value and prestige are associated with knowledge that has been developed, in place, over generations through practical experience. This ‘could not be explained through words alone but had to be demonstrated in practice. It applied only to the specific place where it had been developed, and it made sense as part of a wider understanding of one’s relationship to one’s holdings’ (Macken-Walshe, p. 101). When connections between the culturally-rich activities underpinning traditional small-scale farming and new paradigm policies ‘designed to valorise unique local recourses for the purpose of a “culture” economy’, are not being made, it is not surprising that antagonism towards new development policies exists (p. 10). Anthropologist James C. Scott, argues that universalist enlightenment and modernist aspirations often actively suppressed tacit knowledge or *mêtis* (Scott, 1998). ‘Universalist claims seem inherent in the way in which rationalist knowledge is pursued. … there seems to be no door in this epistemic edifice through which *mêtis* or practical knowledge could enter on its own terms. It is this *imperialism* that is troubling’ (p. 340).

*SPUD* was a way of reflecting on *mêtis* and traditional farming. As an ex-urbanite, my knowledge of growing food is limited. At *X-PO* the extent and depth of cultivation knowledge shared by some participants, started the research. The project began by collecting and publishing a pamphlet guide to making traditional ‘lazy-beds’ or potato ridges with three farmers, Francis Whelan, Tom Keating and Michael Malone, who collected and collated words used locally for potato cultivation – words for the particular curl soil makes when conditions are right for digging, words for tools and different ways and types of potato ridges. I quickly realised that the very word, “SPUD” is associated for many, with a kind of backward, unruliness – neither a “proper” subject for contemporary art or cutting edge cuisine. Yet the rich, heritage, cultural and cultivation knowledge and tradition that makes passionate, often irrational advocates of many (including myself) suggested it could be used to consider other questions,exposing, as it does, conscious and unconscious attitudes to land and alterity within and beyond the nation state.

The potential use-value of aspects of this research was apparent. The potato ridge is a truly innovative way to maximise agricultural efficiency, exemplifying *metis*.It produces a high yield in a minimum of space, and is designed for adaption in all soil types. It also provides a way of opening a discussion on food production and food security both in Ireland and beyond. At *X-PO* traditional potato ridges were made in the garden and the information subsequently used in the production of a 3-D animation *How to Make a Lazy-Bed* commissioned from designer Cian Brennan. *Irish Seedsavers* donated a mix of resilient heritage and modern hybrid seed stocks for trial planting and an archival installation held at *X-PO* in 2013.

**Networks**

I met Chicago-based artist Frances Whitehead in 2009. Recognising that we shared a common interest in devising pragmatic, innovative solutions to changing attitudes towards climate change and sustainable food production, we embarked on a conversation through our respective research. Whitehead has worked for a number of years with the International Potato Centre (CIP), a research-for-development organization based in Lima, Peru. We shared ideas on potato cultivation and its contemporary relevance to food security, particularly in cities.

The potato’s perishability means it cannot be commodified in the global food futures market and is not affected by fluctuating market forces. The nutritional value of the potato has long been proved. In conjunction with milk, or a milk related product, to provide all the balanced nutrition the body requires as part of a balanced diet and it still has a key role to play in addressing the global food crises. Developing countries now grow, and eat more potatoes than the traditional potato eating countries. They can be grown quickly bridging the ‘hunger gap’ between wheat and rice. The main weakness of the potato, one indelibly etched on Irish cultural memory, is its susceptibility to disease. Potato blight, *Phytophthora infestans* is the focus of ongoing research by scientists, NGO’s, multi-national companies and institutions like CIP, across the globe.

Whitehead, X-PO participants and I, collectively pooled our research for a pamphlet in 2012. We were invited by *Grizedale Arts,* a Cumbrian art agency, to participate in a project for *Frieze* ArtFair, London. The pamphlet included Whitehead’s research into potato growing in Peru and a rough guide to making potato ridge*.* This work was further developed for *Potato/Batata: A Pan-Atlantic Parmentier* at the BCA Gallery in 2015 which reflected upon the ongoing movement of plants and people that continues to shape world agri(+)culture. Framed by two new world tubers - the potato (*Solanum tuberosum*) and the sweet potato (*Ipomoea batatas*) cultivated in Ireland and the USA, a key part of the collaboration was the production of decaled ceramic plates used for a dinner and Skype conversation that took place simultaneously in the USA and Ireland.

I invited London-based, French artist Nadge Mériau, to contribute to the *SPUD* project. Her photographic works of the potato were exhibited in Tulca festival in Galway in 2012 and seen in an Irish context the images were full of metaphoric richness. For *SPUD*: London, Mériau extended her investigations of the potato during a residency at the Florence Trust. Together we made a potato bed in the garden of the Trust using the field ridge method. Over the growing season she photographed and filmed the growing potatoes with a wireless snake-cam, mapping the invisible networks between tuber, micro-organisms, and plant. Public reactions and responses to the project in London indicated a degree of ambivalence about *SPUD* which has resurfaced over the course of the project. While there has been an acknowledgement of the importance of *mêtis*, including its relevance to rethinking food security in cities, the project touched on attitudes that are rarely articulated but remain powerfully present; a degree of embarrassment, and (for some) shame at the association between the potato, stupidity, and Irish identity.

In 2014 a research residency at *JIWAR* Barcelona provided an opportunity to test the use-value of potato container planting, which produces a large crop within limited spaces. *SPUD: Neighbourhood* public workshops took place at Germanetes Farmers’ Market and at *Jiwar*, culminating in a potato dinner that celebrated the 18th Century pharmacist, scientist and potato enthusiast Antoine-Agustin Parmentier. Parmentier was a pharmacist, agriculturalist, scientist and nutritionist who, when taken prisoner of war in Germany in the 1750’s was fed a diet of potatoes. His good health on his release, convinced him of the nuitritional value of the tuber. As Chief Apothecary at *Les Invalides* he wrote scientific papers, devised recipes, investigated new cooking processes and dedicated himself to changing cultural attitudes towards the potato. On 29th October 1778, he held a dinner with all the courses, from soup to dessert, made from potatoes to promote potatoes in France and at *Jiwar* I used his example to activate a conversation with sociologists, artists, food activists and a philosopher around the potato’s relevance to food security today, including Antoni Miralda founder of Barcelona-based, art/food collective *FoodCultura*.

**Histories**

Other *SPUD* projects include *X-SPUD*, a temporary Famine memorial made for the Irish National Famine Museum. The artwork took the form of two intersecting potato ridges planted in an “X”, strategically positioned on the church lawn between the museum, Strokestown house, and the mausoleum of the McMahon family who were responsible for the deportation and death of up to 70% of those who left Ireland in so-called coffin-ships. Members of the Irish Loy association a voluntary group interested in keeping the knowledge of the Loy – a foot plough, alive, generously offered to show participants how best to use the tool to make the ridges. The planting, called *The Big Dig*, took place on a cold March day using blight resistant *Sarpo Blue Danube* potatoes and was cared for over the following five months by participants. Cold, wet weather during spring and summer was a concern, but the potatoes thrived – an indicator of the resilience of the crop and the method of planting in unfavourable climatic conditions. On August 29th the potatoes were harvested, followed by a celebration lunch of *Hachis Parmentier*. By focusing on the cultivation knowledge still extant in Ireland *X-SPUD* was able to intersect in a meaningful way with the particular context of Strokestown House and the relationship between tacit knowledge, heritage, the Famine’s legacy.

Over 130 workhouses were built in Ireland and used to devastating effect in the exercise of bio-political power during the famine. Callan Workhouse Union (CWU) was set up by artist/producers Hollie Kearns and Rosie Lynch to re-think the function of the building in the context of Callan town and the wider Kilkenny region. I was invited to spend time on a research residency in Callan 2015, starting with a container-based potato garden on palettes that was planted and cared for by residents living near the workhouse. A performative lecture subsequently traced the history of capital through the potato, concluding with a visit to the famine bowl in a disused corner of the building, an abject reminder of the instrumentalisation of labour. The lecture concluded with tasting two soups associated with famine times; Quaker Soup and Soyer Soup. Both represent different ideological approaches to food aid, Soyer soup was designed to provide the minimum nutrition necessary to sustain a body for a day’s work, Quaker soup had significantly more food value and taste and was intended to sustain and maintain health.

The soups were served with bread loaves made with potato and branded M.O.P.E. (Most Oppressed People Ever), a term coined in the 1990s to ridicule claims that the Irish were more ill-treated than any people at any time in history. In this context however, it was presented as a challenge to the ‘stuck’ narrative that post-crash, has become a default political position both in Ireland, and in Irish representations to Europe that Ireland was the victim, and pointed to the need to take responsibility for political failures, inequalities and injustices that were the legacy of a period of unsustainable consumption and excess.

**Knowledge and Use Value**

An opportunity to further develop ideas around the use-value of tacit knowledge came when invited to contribute to a project by Grizedale Arts for the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA). Grizedale used the IMMA residency programme as a base for *A Fair Land,* a project designed for the 17th century courtyard at the heart of the museum. My starting point was the architectural correspondence between *Les Invalides* hospital in Paris, and the museum as *Les Invalides* inspired the construction of IMMA. After the French revolution the Tuileries and Luxembourg gardens were used to grow potatoes with the encouragement of Parmentier, the former apothecary of *Les Invalides* so I proposed to make a potato garden, *A Village Plot,* with members of the Loy Association. The plantingtook the form of a decorative flowerbed on the front lawn, the project design intentionally referencing both land art, and the arts and crafts movement; high modernity and a ‘return’ to a rural vernacular. I saw it as a way of publicly thinking about food security in cities – land-art-as-useful-art ­– bringing agri(+)cultural knowledge and tacit craft skills to the forefront within cultural institutions. The design was taken from Margaret Stokes’ illustration for the title page of *The Cromlech on Howth*, is an early example of Celtic ornamentation used during the Gaelic revival.

Two varieties of potato producing two different types of flowers were grown in the beds; the *Bloomer,* an Irish Heritage variety which produced white flowers, and a blight resistant *Sarpo* *Blue Danube,* which has purple flowers and that the colours with the green foliage would reference the suffragette movement. It was anticipated that they bloom in time for the closing ceremonies of the centenary of the Irish rebellion of 1916, an apt reminder of the role played by the suffragettes. However, hot weather in June caused early flowering and the blooms were over by the time of the ceremony.potato blight struck. Surprisingly, the worst affected variety was the *Sarpo* *Blue Danube* a blight-resistant strain, but the potatoes remained unaffected as all the foliage was removed before the disease spread to the tubers.

An ambition for *A Fair Land* was that the project engage the many publics who pass through the museum courtyard and from the start, *A Village Plot* fulfilled this function in an unexpected way; it was a source of curiosity, and affection. The fact that potatoes were growing in the museum sent a signal that was understood by the communities who use the grounds, but not the museum; the dog walkers, exercise enthusiasts and those who used the gardens every day. People stopped to talk when planting and maintaining the beds, bringing an unexpected social dimension to the work. Members of the Loy Association visited IMMA regularly coming from all parts of Ireland to participate in the planting, care and harvest of the crop. A Parmentier inspired supper of potatoes baked in a fire pit in a bed of seaweed was prepared by and for members of the Loy association, Grizedale arts, and guests after the harvest.

**Maintaining the Trace**

Like many durational public art projects, *SPUD* presents the challenge of finding a representative strategy that retains the trace of the social, when becoming public within the cultural sphere. In order to capture the depth of research and engagement, CWU curators, Hollie Kearns, Rosie Lynch and I put forward an application to the arts council for a new project representing the culmination of *SPUD,* for a new film, which I would make, and objects made with craft workers and produced on residency at the workhouse. These objects reference both the history of craft in Kilkenny and my research and used in the *SPUD* touring exhibition in 2018. The film, *The Persistent Return,* makes use of the potato to speak to our collective history; the driving achievements, ambitions and aspirations that have led to the extension of the human lifespan, and to unspeakable cruelties and human injustices. Faced with the challenges, migrations, wars, and climate disaster, what, if any, is the hope for the future?

Voltaire’s *Candide* presents one answer to this question. Voltaire proposes that irreducible problems and their persistent return are made bearable only by accepting that life is not worth much, and that this “not much” is of the highest value (Woods, xxvi). The philosopher Pangloss’s claim that, “All events form a chain in this, the best of all possible worlds’ is met, and countered by Candide’s response in the final line of the book – ‘That is well said … but we must cultivate our garden.’ For Voltaire cultivating the “garden” means staying with the questions that are thrown up by the persistent return of human intolerance, bigotry and cruelty, seeking answers even when we know there are none. The act of “cultivation” is a work of unrelenting, persistent memory that reminds us of what the world is like and invites us to think about which pieces of it we can change.

*The Persistent Return* points to the paradoxes of grand narratives, making use of the potato as a rude, importunate reminder of the persistent exercise of the modalities of power: Colonialism, Capitalism and Biopolitics, that continues to dominate all aspects of human and natural life and the persistent return of structural inequalities that have produced the great disasters in human history. The stories we tell ourselves about our public past shape how we interpret and respond to and show up for the present. The story of the potato is a way of thinking through the absurdities of grand narratives, to reflect upon small stories of success and failure, when invention and creativity produced moments of resilience that if we care to recall them, can inform the way we engage with the world in the future.

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; *mêtis* in action, observing ‘(W)hether 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, p.5). Micropolitical processes like *SPUD* are necessary so that the challenges and inequalities presented by globalisation - and by extension, climate change, can be acknowledged, understood, analysed and perhaps even produce, the ‘soft subversions’ and ‘imperceptible revolutions’ that Félix Guattari argued, could eventually change the face of the world, making it happier’ (2009, p. 306).

Not such a bad ambition in these times.

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