

**GEIST DES ORTES – SPIRIT OF THE PLACE**  
**Heinrich Böll Residency**  
**a public art project**

Devised and facilitated by Kathy Marsh  
 December 2006 – January 2007



I was awarded the Heinrich Böll artist residency in December 2006. Heinrich Böll won the Nobel prize for literature in 1972. In terms of personal and artistic needs, Achill Island (which means Eagle Island) provided a place where he could distance himself from the aftermath of the second world war. In the book 'An Irish Journal' he gives an account of his time in Achill along with an insight into the social, cultural and economic situation of 1950's Ireland.

Memories of the Second World War, the devastation of post war Germany and the damaging material and psychological effects it had on the lives of people are literary vehicles in his work. His humanist literature employs a language of direct realism. He reveals a sense of the absurd in human actions when played out against a backdrop of tragedy. He offered a voice to the dispossessed and told his romantic stories in a manner which challenged the society he lived in.

*“Art is always a good hiding-place, not for dynamite, but for intellectual explosives and social time bombs. Why would there otherwise have been the various indices? And precisely in their despised and often even despicable beauty and lack of transparency lies the best hiding-place for the barb that brings about the sudden jerk, or the sudden recognition”*

*(from Nobel Lecture, 1972)*

Inspired by the mystical Island of Achill and the artistic legacy of Heinrich Böll, I devised a collaborative public art project which involved working with Claudia Borgna – an environmental installation artist, the Island inhabitants, the RNLI and the archaeological field school who survey the deserted village of Slievemore.



I began by doing sculpture workshops in day centres and with people in their own homes around the Island.

Participants made sculptures based on specific personal belongings. Instead of using traditional sculpting materials like clay or plaster we used kitchen ingredients such as flour, salt, oil and water. In doing so this created a relaxed atmosphere and referred to domesticity, the rituals of everyday life and consumption.

Stories and case histories relating to the objects were recorded. Original objects went through a filtered process of familiarisation and de-familiarisation, presence and absence, evaluation and clinical elevation.

I wanted to reveal the essence of people's cherished possessions, to present something which at the same time is hidden. Hidden because the replica sculptures expressed not the surface experience of the original objects but their charged, inner nature.



(see <http://www.irishartnow.com/downloads/curragh.mp3> for sound file)



Like an archaeologist in a time machine I was mapping an existence of a remote island community before it had disappeared. I photographed the 'charged' sculptures in the deserted village, in referencing the real I exposed an x-ray of the skeletal traces of a human habitation.



Claudia Borgna made 1000 flowers constructed from white plastic carrier bags and fallen fuchsia branches collected from the area around Heinrich Böll's cottage. When asked about her work she said, "Of course, I am keen to build an awareness in the public domain on the way we are living and how it affects the environment, to comment on the conflict between culture and nature. I am interested in the relationship between discarded materials and the environment, how discarded materials and man-made objects integrate with nature to transform the environment and create new landscapes. I regard this process as an *evolution of landscape*, one that is fuelled by our modern lifestyle and which is ruled by consumption. To me the plastic bag is the symbolic embryo which contains our lifestyle and is the vessel that carries it out on its journey. I want

my work to become a virtual lyrical extension of modern life, one that substitutes the old idealised concept of nature with a romanticised modern one."



The sculptures were to form part of a site-specific art installation/happening in conjunction with the RNLI's New Year's Day swim on Dugort strand. Entitled *Geist Des Ortes* meaning *Spirit Of The Place*, the public art event was advertised via flyers and posters which were distributed throughout the island. In keeping with the tradition of making New Year resolutions the public were invited to interact with the installation by picking the flowers and to collectively make a personal wish for the coming year.



*Geist des Ortes* was a fusion of environmental installation and social sculpture. As a rural artist it was interesting to make work in the West of Ireland with a remote island community who geographically live on the margins and are in some way invisible to the majority, the larger society. The Western landscape has been identified as site, source and image of Irish national identity with its whimsical bog roads, turf stacks and white washed cottages nestled under dramatic skies. This traditional identity is being challenged by the local becoming global, landscapes change along with social, political and economic transformation. The hundreds of salt dough sculptures that were scattered along the strand were a symbolic embodiment of the island inhabitants, a physical link between the past and present that would eventually dissolve into the landscape. Compressing history and present reality subverts linear constructs of time.



The roped swimmers were tethered to the island, eagerly waiting for the horn to blast before fleeing the confines of the rope and taking their charging plunge into the vast Atlantic Ocean. Reminiscent of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (image theatre), the sequence of static images captures gauged moments between containment and dispersion. The cathartic journey critically culminates into renewal and hope in an atmosphere of joyful invigoration. The roped swimmers and onlookers are like 'accidental performers'. They are units of a living sculpture, one which explores themes of emigration, environment and consumption, personal and cultural identity, objects and their meanings, transformation and the universal, individual quest for freedom.



I documented the project via letters which I posted home during the course of the residency, they give an insight into being artist, co-ordinator and curator of a public art project. The letters also largely contain descriptions of my daily encounters with the islanders. As a means of transport around the island I used a combination of cycling and hitchhiking, from the rainbow

of conversations I had I was able to go beyond the surface of the place to discover its inner world of characters and historical meanings. An integral part of the project was establishing communication with the islanders (the audience) and to build up a relationship with them. A rural community exists in a state of relative fixivity, when questioning orthodoxies and ideologies in a rural arts context one is accountable in a way that is rarely demanded in the city where the audience is huge and interchangeable. At the next stage I plan to develop a body of work from the material I produced on the residency, to present the rural vernacular in an urban framework and create a juncture for cultural discourse between contemporary rural and urban art contexts.



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