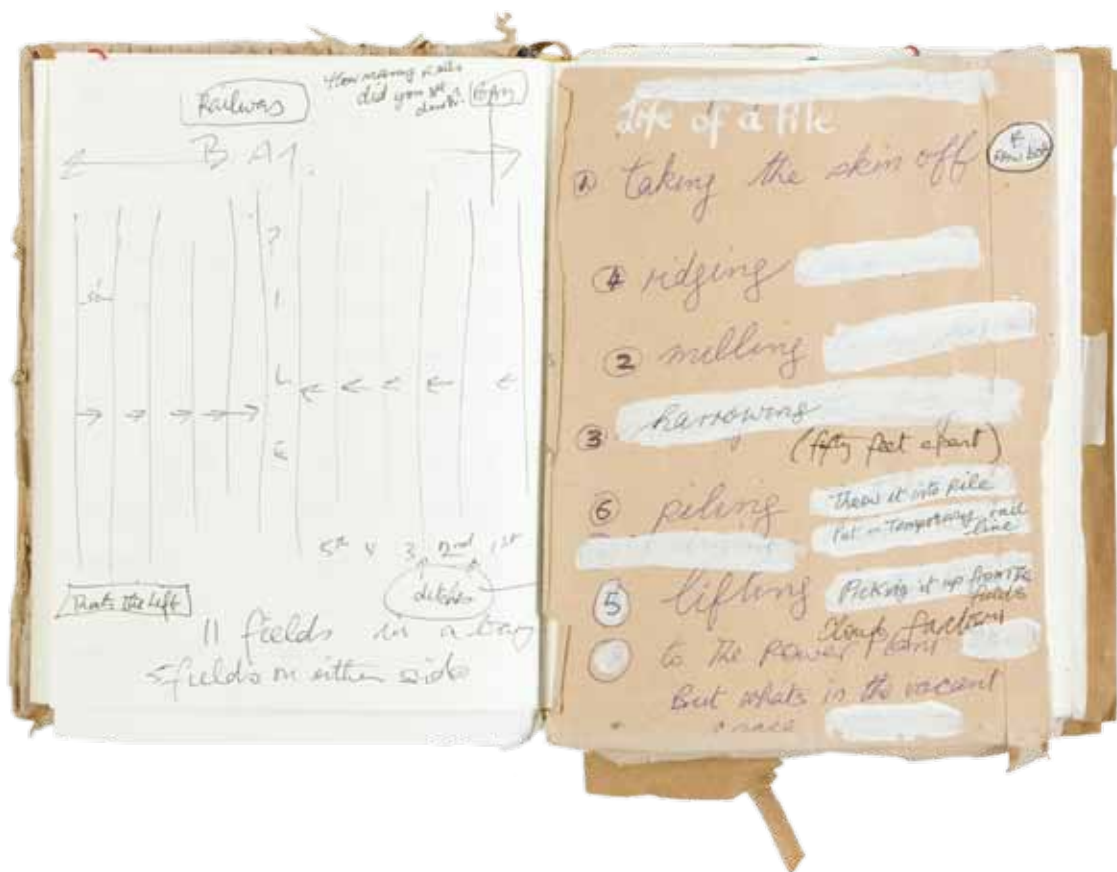




Do Larry, do Chaoimhe agus do Chaitlín



Plot 1 / Ceapach 1

an artists book by Monica de Bath

curated by Maeve Mulrennan

Essay written by Maeve Mulrennan,
Visual Arts Officer, Galway Arts Centre. Ireland

All texts edited by Fiona Fullam, Artist and Writer

Photography of paintings, work book and maps by Paul Mc Carthy

Photographic images and video stills of Site-Actions by the artist

PLOT 1 / Ceapach 1
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video stills

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Lucina Russell, Kildare Arts Officer / An t-Oifeagach Ealaín, Cill Dara

November 2010

When writing this piece, I was particularly drawn to the title of the publication 'Plot 1'. I found myself thinking not of a mapped out piece of land, but of, (to quote the Oxford Dictionary), 'the interrelationship of the main events of a play, novel, film, etc.', putting myself in the role of a spectator. Every time I travel towards the artist's (Monica de Bath's) studio in Ballydermot, Rathangan, I feel a sense of regret around the industrial peat extraction of the Bog of Allen, but feel conflicted about the industrial opportunities provided by its natural resources. The Bog of Allen represents a place of immense beauty steeped in history, which has been shaped by the work in traditional and mechanical turf cutting and in the industrial peat extraction which has sustained generations in West Kildare. This complex setting forms the scaffolding for de Bath's work for over a decade.

In her recent work, de Bath has moved beyond the confines of her temporary workplace in Ballydermot Works. This is a deliberate alignment of the artist among the workstations of the men who work on the bog. She has gathered the stories and experiences of the workers. Her concern with the physical work practices of the workers is reflected in her labour intensive arts practice, be that painting, digging, documenting.

Through her arts practices she has investigated models of diversity which in turn have further informed her work. Though her work practices are considered and demonstrate her interest in the physicality of 'work' practices and processes, buildings and machines, her paintings present a fresh and subtle beauty, like the sweet taste of a ripe blueberry taken from the trial plot.

De Bath's art works examines a distinctive place in a particular timeframe in Ireland. Yet it mirrors other conversations across this country and globally about the loss of an industry to a town and simultaneously, a renewed interest in reclaiming and re-imagining our public spaces.

Certainly her work will inspire its viewers to become active participants.

Note / Nóta

Monica de Bath, Artist / An t-Ealaíontóir

November 2010

Monica de Bath, Samhain 2010

Glossary of Peat Production terms:

Ceapach is the Irish word for plot of land.

Bord na Mona is the Irish term for Turf Board, a semi state company established 75 years ago for the purpose of industrial peat extraction.

Bog is derived from the Irish word bog meaning soft.

Cutaway is the term used to describe a bog where most of the peat has been removed by industrial means .

Re-colonisation of the cutaway refers to the natural processes that work with the nature of the cutaway. Nature is the driving force.

Plot 1 / Ceapach 1 is an evolving body of work. It began with my temporary residency at one of Bord na Mona's last peat production sites in this country. The site and the conversations with the workers began to intrude upon my work. The fact that this particular site will be cutaway in about ten years time begged the question as to 'What will happen with the cutaway?'. Leaving the security of the temporary studio I spoke with workers about the potential futures of the cutaway. Their responses and support enabled me to develop a site-action - a trial plot for growing blueberries in a partially cut away area. The paintings come out of this triangular process of Painting, Conversation and Site Action. They are, to use the words of Hannah Arendt, 'Thought Things' and attempt to reflect (express) the constant tension between making a living and taking care of a finite resource. My hope is that the paintings lead you to a poetic space in which to re-think our engagement with nature.

Plot 1 / Ceapach 1. Cuireadh tús leis an saothar seo nuair a bhog mé go stuidió sealadach i gceann de na suímh oibre is deireanaigh de Bhord na Móna. Ar dtús bhíos ag péintéireacht. Thaitin an suíomh go mór liom chomh maith le cómhra na noibrithe eile ar an suíomh agus chuir sin go mór le mo chuid oibre. Ba amhlaidh go mbeadh an suíomh geartha ar shúil i gceann deich mbliana agus d'ardaigh sin an cheist - Cad a tharlódh don phortach caite? D'fhág mé compord an stuidió chun labhairt le na hoibrithe faoi thocháil an phortaigh. Spreag a gcuid freagraí agus a gcuid tacaíochta mé chun scéim ealaíne a bhunadh - "ceapach triallach chun sméara ghorma a fhás." Tagann mo phíosáí ealaíne ón triantán sin: péintéireacht, cómhra agus gníomhú. Is "rudaí smaointe" iad. Tá mé ag déanamh iarracht a thaispeáint an teannas seasmhach idir an gá le saothar a bhaint amach agus an gá chun conradh a bheith ann leis an nádúr. Tá mé dóchasach go meallfaidh na píosaí ealaíne seo daoine eile fhad le spás samhlaíochta ina dtig athbhreathnú a dheánadh agus aire an duine a tharraingt ar an dóigh chun slí beatha a bhaint amach i gcomhcheol le nádúr.

Thought Things / Ní na smaointe

Right: Untitled / Gan teideal 30 x 30cm Acrylic and mixed media on canvas





Left above: Untitled / Gan teideal 13 x 18cm Acrylic and mixed media on canvas
 Left below: Untitled / Gan teideal 13 x 18cm Acrylic and mixed media on canvas
 Right: Untitled / Gan teideal 30 x 30cm Acrylic on canvas



Above: Untitled / Gan teideal 30 x 30cm Acrylic and mixed media on canvas



Right: Untitled / Gan teideal 30 x 30cm Acrylic and mixed media on canvas





Left above: Untitled / Gan teideal 13 x 18cm Acrylic and mixed media on canvas
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 Right: Untitled / Gan teideal 30 x 30cm Acrylic and mixed media on canvas





Above: Untitled / Gan teideal 30 x 30cm Acrylic and mixed media on canvas



Above: Untitled / Gan teideal 30 x 30cm Oil over Acrylic on canvas

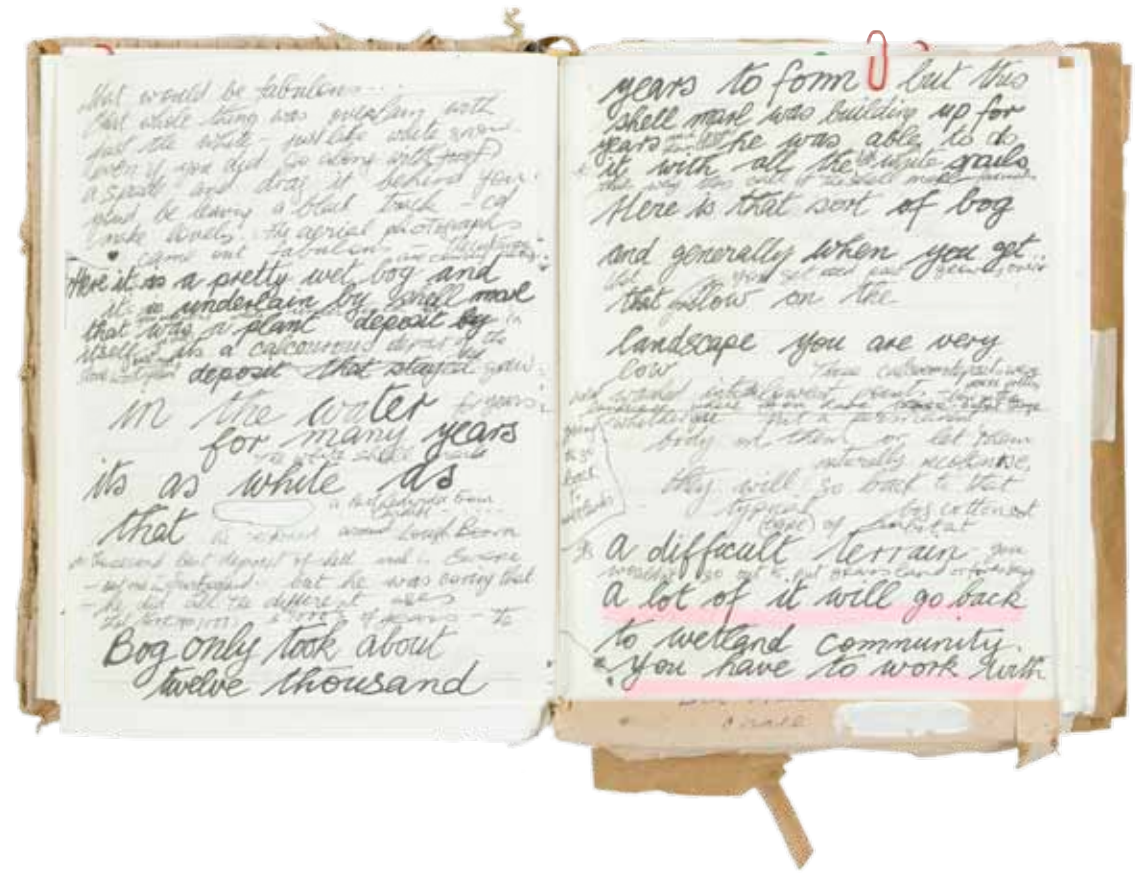
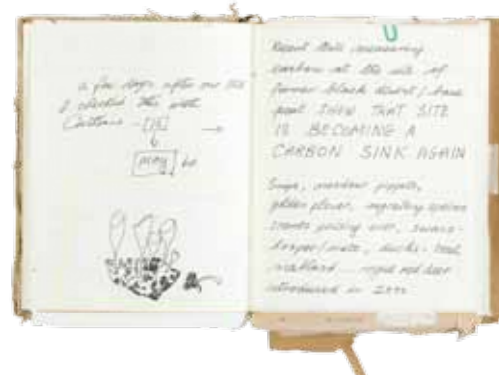
Above: Untitled / Gan teideal 30 x 30cm Acrylic on canvas



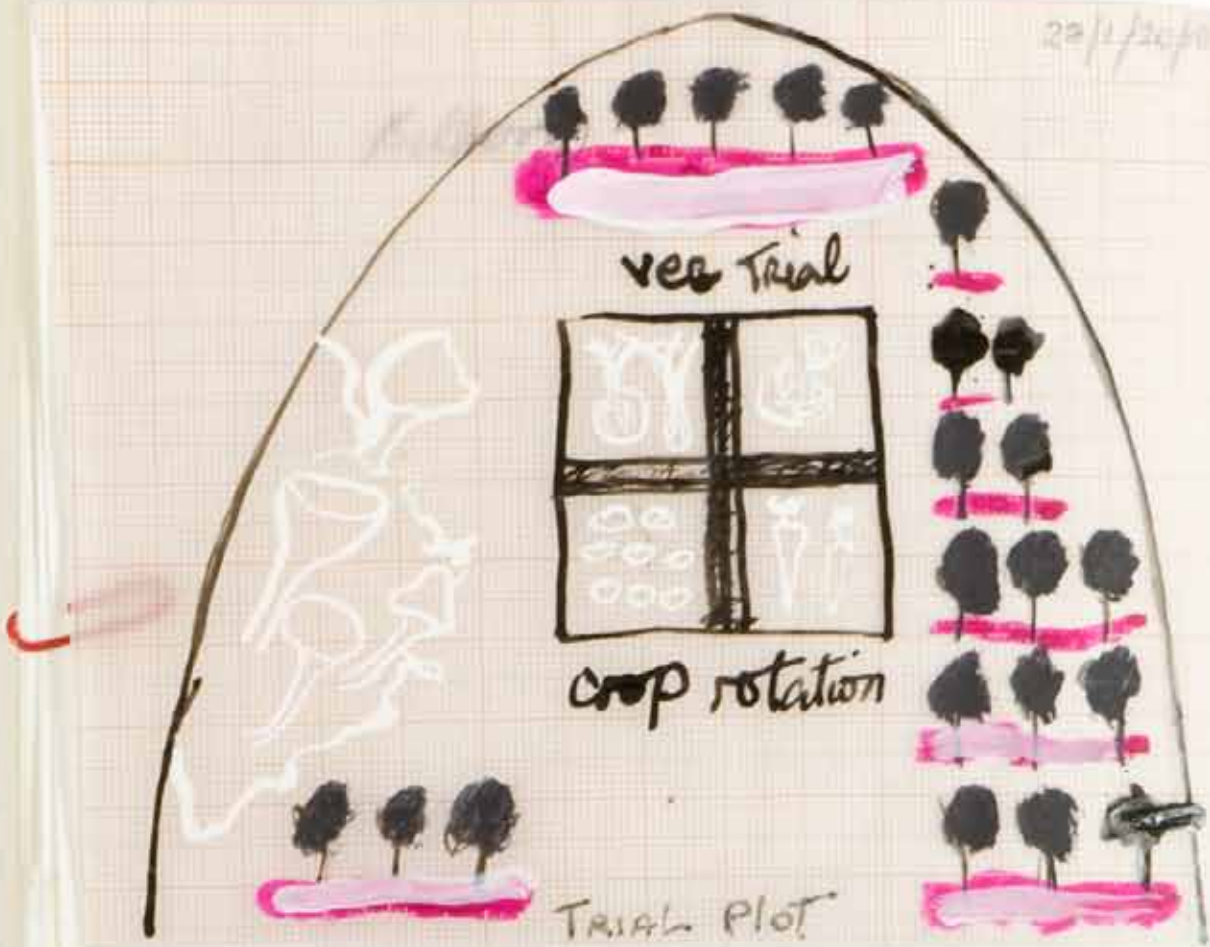


Right: Untitled / Gan teideal

80 x 60 cm Acrylic and mixed media on canvas



22/1/2020



Re blueberries —
 take advantage of frosty weather
 Rotivate it about 16" deep
 (if Veg, second rotivation
 adding lime is important)

(dig down 18" for Blueberries) - maybe
 incorporate 10:10:20.
 go down below the nursery
 Teagasc / FÁS
 must have been
 close of an acre
 planted with blueberries
 what happened?

conversations with Michael Jacob

BW Morag and FÁS
 But project ended - gate
 closed - didn't enter an gate
 might be possible to get
 some from there
 About 10 years since
 anything was harvested
 - started around 1996 -

Collective Consciousness

Maeve Mulrennan / 2010

Durational practice, interactive engagement

Monica de Bath's paintings, actions and conversations with others construct a language of the place in order to investigate and create a new dialogical narrative with Plot 1. In the paintings we see a specific place in a more abstract, universal way, pointing us towards the future, its potential and possibility. The paintings become records of the conversations and are also a 'way in' for the artist to instigate new conversations with the workers and in turn, the audience. Paintings are exchanged for engagement, and are also inserted into the land itself, immediately displaying the difference between language and landscape. This is what de Bath is creating: a language for us to investigate this multi-layered site, as opposed to viewing it as a disconnected landscape. It becomes a subjective place, filled with stories, actions and consequences. de Bath has invested in this space, both as an artist and a 'worker'. As a result we are not just aware of the physical space but de Bath shows us a poetic space, or to refer to Hannah Arendt, "The Space of Appearance":

"It is the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly."¹

De Bath's paintings create, or shape, this poetic space. The origin of the word landscape means literally to 'shape' the

land. It is not naturally occurring, it has yielded to the human hand. Plot 1 has been used, changed, and will soon become used up. What happens next? The land has never given up: it has evolved and managed to replace old eco-systems with new. Through these years of manipulation a lot has happened, so much so that it is nearly impossible to know where one circumstance ends and another begins. Time and place become intertwined, different elements move at different speeds, going off on different tangents or coming back full circle. This place is now at a point where questions are being asked about the future: what is the big plan? What will happen next? de Bath's initial research question was not to see how she could change or affect things on her own, but whether an art practice can contribute to a wider discourse, and if so, how can this be achieved? Shaping her practice in this way is what shapes other spaces, both physical and poetic.



There are many dualities in this investigation: the artist is both subjective and objective, an outsider and an insider; she is dealing with the local and the universal. What is integral though, is the relationship between human and place, and how over time they cease to be two distinct entities and become one and another, impossible to separate. de Bath is the link that connects this insular piece of land and specific way of working to contemporary art practice. Her methodology is to facilitate reconciliation of past and future through interacting with the place and the stakeholders, from the ecologist to the worker. The dialogue is marked by a series of paintings, photographs, conversations, notes and memories, that not only represent her research but contribute something new, laying the next stepping stone for further engagement.

Part of de Bath's research has been to contextualise her practice. There is a growing connection with the Netherlands, both on a contemporary level with artist Wapke Feenstra² who is actively engaging with land, and on an art historical level with the 17th Century Dutch Landscape tradition³. In Ireland, land is something that is always there, it is something to toil over, to fight over, to be colonised, to be evicted from. Through bloodshed and despair the land has always remained, a bittersweet companion to the Irishman and woman. To be tied to the land is a marker of freedom and independence, as in John B. Keane's *The Field*. However it is also a restraint, as in Patrick Kavanagh's poem *Stony Grey Soil*. The Netherlands is in part made up of land claimed from the

sea, inland lakes and bogland. This period of land reclamation was after the Dutch won independence in the eighty Years War, and before the colonised turned into coloniser. It is the celebration of human engagement with place. However the idyllic landscape paintings do not reflect accurately what was actually happening at that time: there is a nostalgia for the land before it was marked by dykes and polders. People prefer to remember a more natural looking landscape. It is similar in the boglands of Ireland: people do not want to look at the cutaway or dark piles on the horizon: it is not an idyllic 'view' or landscape. There is power and motive to change the boglands of the Midlands now that they are no longer useful. This land, which has been molded and re-shaped by man for work, will now go through this process again for leisure and ecological purposes in an effort to make it seem more 'natural'. How do we want to remember the bogs? Is it not better to acknowledge the work and engagement of workers?

"A New Contract with Nature"

"A New Contract With Nature" is the name of Bord na Móna's⁴ policy on where to go from here. It acknowledges that as well as having value as a fossil fuel, the bog also has an ecological value. It has long been known by locals (of which I am one) that the bog is rich in flora and fauna, and as a good system of working the land that is respected in other countries with peat bogs. However alongside this richness is a history of violence (as illustrated by the excavation of the dismembered bog bodies), loneliness, poverty

and alienation. The dark, endless vistas of nothing but soil and sky mirror peoples' psychological connections with the place. The bog is a place where bodies are hidden, abuse has happened and people living alone in houses sinking into the ground are forgotten about. This is represented in Monica's work in such a way that it is not nostalgic or memorialising: it is reconciliatory and looking ahead to the future of the place. A common motif in the painting is the hut: a triangular shaped shelter. There is an ominous, uncanny feel to these huts. They are lonely and contain many secrets, many of them dark and nearly but not quite forgotten by the workers, who have a long term engagement with this bogland. The conversation between hut and plot in de Bath's paintings represent change and a positivity being brought into the Plot by the artist's engagement with it. To quote Bachelard in "The Poetics of Space" - a book that explores the phenomenology of the dwelling - the lone hut in the landscape is luminous amongst the darkness, the "center of concentrated solitude"⁵. If Bachelard's house is a metaphor for the self, then the hut is the encasement for the solitary watcher, the witness, something that has no need for embellishment. This idea of the hut as witness to and the embodiment of solitude connects the hut to images in de Bath's work. In reality, these huts are widely dispersed throughout the bog. In her work the huts appear again and again, as a marker of the isolation of this place - both geographically and also psychologically. This psychological isolation can be intoxicating to a person

who takes a walk through a bog or spends time there alone. The hut embodies the emotion entrenched in the landscape, and also how this place will be alone and left behind, as the perception of this bogland is that its use to industry is nearly up. Irish poet Seamus Heaney's early poetry also explores the connection between the Irish person's psyche and the Irish bog:

"Heaney calls the bog a sort of Jungian as well as a geological memory-bank, a 'dark casket where we have found many of the clues to our past and to our cultural identity'"⁶

Heaney also refers to the Irish people's way of being introverted and looking infinitely downward and inward in poems such as "Bogland" 1975. This ties into the idea of being isolated, which de Bath is aiming to reverse through Hannah Arendt's Space of Appearance and also Irit Rogoff's writings on collectivity. Arendt's Space of Appearance. Firstly, Rogoff wants us to recognise that in seeing art as an interconnective field, there is a potential to engage with it as a form of cultural participation rather than as a form of reification, representation or of contemplative edification.⁷ Secondly, Arendt's Space of Appearance is where men gather and a space which vanishes with their dispersal. Human power corresponds to the human condition of plurality and participation - "What power rests on is being together whereas tyranny rests on isolation."⁸ The recurring image of the hut reminds us of the displaced, the alienated and the tyranny. de

"An unstoried landscape is still somehow not yet a place, a home, a ground"

Bath's practice of connectivity and emphasis on collective activity brings about the Space of Appearance.

The Plot is a very specific place, something normal to those who engage with it on a regular basis, but something exotic to those who are unfamiliar with it. This is not a 'landscape' - something to be viewed by people of leisure and privilege: it is a place that is a site of work and memories for many. It is ever changing, not a static object. This process of labour involves taking away - soil, water, foliage. It is a process of mark making over time: the rearranging /reshaping of land, reflecting what had gone on in the Netherlands in the 17th Century. It is through this long process and engagement with different aspects of space that identities are formed: both the identity of the place and the worker. From these identities - often conjoined - a complex and jumbled series of interwoven and multilayered narratives emerge. This is what distinguishes a landscape from a place. To quote Rebecca Solnit:

"An unstoried landscape is still somehow not yet a place, a home, a ground"⁹

Just because these identities are entangled it does not mean they complement each other: they pull and push, argue and contradict; the official history of a place is often at odds with subjective memory. The geography affects the emotions of an individual and vice versa. This Plot is where men (and it has always been men) toiled the land for fuel, often in extremely labourious and time-consuming ways. Making a pile of peat takes two years and it will go up

in flames in less than an hour. Workers wait for good weather, wait for the right time, and sometimes it simply does not come as in the Summers of 2008 and 2009 for example. Amongst all of this are men, waiting.

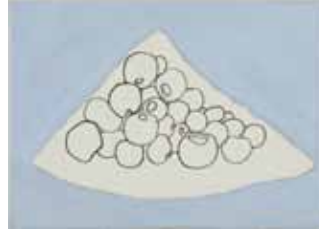
Putting Back

After years of scraping away, it is time for putting back - a reconciliation. This recovery will take time, a concept already etched into the identity of this place. Bord na Móna is being held as a model of best practice internationally, from Eastern Europe and Asia to Canada. From an ecological point of view, many questions are being asked. What to do? Block the drains that workers have spent years unblocking so that it becomes lakes and marshes, or leave it as is and let the bog re-colonise? There are many possibilities and de Bath, through her practice, aims to contribute to this discourse of possibility. There has been a change in values. This place can no longer serve its function as a fuel provider, but Bord na Mona have a contract with this place that goes beyond its present function: they cannot just leave it. There are the workers, what used to be hundreds are now just a few. No one is exactly sure how long the peat production will last, and what will happen to the workers when production ceases. Suggestions for future re-use by workers have been to leave the bog to its own devices to become wild, to let it become a fishing lake (there are already pike and trout in the silt ponds), a reservoir, or a marsh land. Another suggestion is that the peat is deep enough (one metre) to grow trees for



burning instead of peat. However in Bord na Móna's "A New Contract With Nature", this idea is mooted, as it would require further drainage and "continuous and significant investment"¹⁰ What seems to be apparent is that this plot has to have a use, a name and a future, one which does not entail being left idle and abandoned as it is now. It is a question of territory, once acquired, it cannot be given back – someone will always own it and want to quantify its value. What we see from Monica de Bath's practice is that ownership is only part of the story of land: she has made a place for herself in the conversation of what happens next, and has implicated her practice in the contract with nature. Her research methods and aims in her practice are somewhat similar to those of Wapke Feentra's in the Netherlands, who collects soil samples and engages with land. On an art historical level de Bath falls in line with Agnes Denes, using the land and what it can give as an instigator for change. Heather and Ivan Morison's ecologically engaged practice and use of shelters and structures in their work also comes to mind. These artists represent a type of practice that occurs over time and is completely dependent on engagement with nature and man's relationship to it. With regard to the context of painting, de Bath looks to Francis Alÿs. He sees the painting as an everyday artefact, a portable inner space that is constantly interacting with its surroundings. He speaks of how "Through the absurd and sometimes impertinent nature of the poetic act, art provokes a moment of suspended meaning, a sensation of senselessness that may reveal

the absurdity of the situation. Via this act of transgression, the poetic act makes one step back for an instant from the circumstances. In short, it may make one look at things differently.' This is the essence of de Bath's practice: utilizing the acts of painting and conversation to establish a position from which to look at things differently.



Taking the skin off
Milling 3 times
Harrowing 3 times
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11 Fields
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Talking
Exchanging
Painting
Photographing
Observing

De Bath began her engagement with Plot 1 by interacting with the workers of Bord na Móna. The Plot became a space for conversation between de Bath and the workers on the site. This led de Bath to reflect on Hannah Arendt's ideas on the Space of Appearance. Hannah Arendt proposes that the Space of Appearance comes into being whenever men are together "in the manner of speech and action." In reference to Plot 1, the Space of Appearance occurred when the blueberry

...utilizing the acts of painting and conversation to establish a position from which to look at things differently

bushes, were collectively transplanted by de Bath and the workers from an overgrown space into a more suitable space for growing. It was where conversations continued and where de Bath's contribution or 'work' became valuable to the Bord na Móna workers. A trial plot was cleared for the blueberries, and it is planned that other people will grow things here too. The trial plot is an addition to de Bath's practice: it shows a shift in focus, a change in value. It is through the process of work and collective action that de Bath's practice is contextualized. There would be no practice if there were no collective action and engagement with Plot 1. Through her practice de Bath is exploring the possibility of engagement with place through labour, conversation and collective action. She has instigated a self reflective space for the workers to have a say in what should happen to the bog after it is no longer useful to Bord na Móna. She is positioning herself in a space where art is not usually seen or spoken about. She hopes to contribute to the debate on the future of this space through the bringing together of people and also through teasing out ideas of mindscapes through her painting. This place is on the edge: it is both an inventory of the territory of the past and a catalyst for considering the future. The bog, once something perceived to be under attack by machines in the pursuit of fossil fuels is now acknowledged as a place where human exchanges are developed, where there is an emotional connection between worker and land and where memory is interlaced within the bog.





(Endnotes)

- 1 Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition* (The University of Chicago Press, Second Edition, 1985) p198-9.
- 2 <http://www.wapke.nl> (Accessed 11th October 2010).
- 3 Jensen Adams, Ann. "Competing Communities in the "Great Bog of Europe": Identity and the Seventeenth-Century Dutch Landscape Painting", ed. WJT Mitchell in *Landscape & Power* (The University of Chicago Press, 1994).
- 4 For more information: www.bnm.ie "Established to develop Ireland's peat resources in the immediate post War years, it is now active across a range of industries with innovation at its core." (Accessed 11th October 2010).
- 5 Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*, (Beacon Press, Boston, 1994) p 32.
- 6 Meredith, Dianne. *Landscape or Mindscape? Seamus Heaney's Bogs* Dianne Meredith, The University of California, Davis. <http://www.ucd.ie/gsi/pdf/32-2/bogs.pdf> (Accessed 4th November 2011).
- 7 Rogoff, Irit. "Looking Away: Participations in Visual Culture".
- 8 Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*, (The University of Chicago Press, Second Edition, 1985) p 202.
- 9 Solnit, Rebecca. *A Book of Migrations* (Verso, 1998) p74.
- 10 *Bord na Mona - A New Contract With Nature Annual Report 2007 / 2008* (Environment Report) p 15.
- 11 Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*, (The University of Chicago Press, Second Edition, 1985) p 179.



Biography / Beathaisnéis

Monica de Bath lives and works in Ireland moving between the English speaking area and the Irish speaking area of the Gaeltacht. She studied Painting at the National College of Art and Design, Dublin and has an M.A. in Visual Arts Practices from the Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Dun Laoghaire. Amongst the Awards she received from the Arts Council are a Research Award 2009 and a Commission Award in 2007.

Since 2000 she has participated in Artist Residencies supported by The Arts Council and by Offaly and Kildare County Councils. Her paintings and prints have been widely exhibited and are in private and public collections. Works in public collections in Ireland include Bord na Móna, Department of Education, Donegal County Council, Kildare County Council.

Selected exhibitions 2010 include *Collective Contemporary Art* at the RDS, Dublin, *Public Gesture* at THE LAB, Dublin, 2010 and *Country Arts South Australia Visual Arts Touring Programme*, Australia.

Her work has appeared in the following publications: *Where Siva meets Medb* Catalogue, Leinster Print Studio, 2005; *The story of Taipéis Gael*, Meghan Nutall Sayres, Cork University Press, Jan 2007; *The Arts Strategy for Kildare County Council*; *Temporary State Foray and Symposium*, Sally Timmons and Kildare Co. Council, 2007; *Le Chéile* Catalogue County Arts Australia 2009/2010 (Welsh/Irish/Australian collaborative project about land and language) and in *Collective Contemporary Art* at the RDS Catalogue 2010.

Acknowledgements / Buíochas

Go raibh míle maith agaibh go léir.

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