Alice Lyons's *Viewfinder*, The Barracks, Cootehall, County Roscommon. Photo: Ros Kavanagh.

Gareth Kennedy
Inflatable Bandstand (Ten Year Crescendo)

Anna Macleod *Rain Catcher* 2008.

Anna Macleod *Rain Catcher* (detail).2008.

Gareth Kennedy *Inflatable Bandstand (Ten Year Crescendo)*, Killargue.
Performance with Cathal Roche

Christine Mackey – Trade Off event at The Dock, Carrick-on-Shannon. Part of Mackey's
Agressive Localism project.

AFTER workshop – 'rethinking suburban housing.'.

Judicious Irony

COLIN GRAHAM PROFILES 'AFTER' A SERIES OF PROJECTS ACROSS LEITRIM AND ROSCOMMON REACTING TO ASPECTS OF RURAL CHANGE.

THE AFTER project, an initiative of the TRADE programme in Leitrim and Roscommon, consists of five artistic reactions to key aspects of change in rural Ireland in recent years – population shifts (including both depopulation and the accumulation of housing in new clusters); the cultural dispersion of communities, and the blurring of the very idea of the rural. Such changes are, above all, characterised by the speed with which they have happened; and the visible changes which they have made on the agricultural landscape and social environment of parts of Ireland, which remain geographically distant from cities – but on which the veneer of the urban and suburban has begun to settle.

The AFTER projects (www.after.ie) were gathered together under the watching eye of artist-in-residence Alfredo Jaar (along with Rebecca Fortnum and others). Jaar's art is interventionist and politically engaged –boldly using, traversing or imitating public space. The most spectacular example of such work is *The Skoghall Kontshall* (2000) in which he built and then burnt a wood and paper building in a Swedish town long associated with paper-making. This kind of site-specific – and architectural – work is reflected in his residency as part of the AFTER project, in which the five artists – Carol Anne Connolly, Gareth Kennedy, Alice Lyons, Christine Mackey and Anna McLeod – adapted, altered or created work within public spaces in order to highlight the devaluation of the potential of shared, civic geographies. Collectively, these projects can be read as looking backwards critically to the mismanagement of prosperity. But perhaps inadvertently – given the long lead-in to these projects – they also point forwards to the uncertainties of a coming austerity. And as they do so, each in their forward-look, has within it the seeds of some hope or possibility, social or environmental.

In the case of Christine Mackey's *Aggressive Localism* the seeds are both literal and metaphoric. Mackey's *Aggressive Localism* takes two forms, one a provocatively gentle intervention in the landscape, the other involving community participation. Mackey planted native Irish wild-flower seeds in various marginal, almost dead places in Carrick-on-Shannon – cracks in pavements, a roundabout, walls. The deliberate cultivating of the wild parallels, of course, the eventual flowering of the plants in a 'rural town'. And while Mackey's use of wild flowers might tend towards the whimsical, it is the placing of them in the spaces of urbanisation which gives the project its bite. Her subsequent 'seed site movie' has the added piquancy of showing how the planting which she undertook in a corner of a car park flourished and then fell foul of weed-spraying, wryly encapsulating the paradoxes which jostle in process of the urbanisation of the rural and in particular the way in which the suburban ideal needs to control or expunge the wildness of

nature. The same telling but melancholy fate happens to her circle of planting in the gravel of an undeveloped site which, by the end of August, has been mechanically eradicated. Mackey also distributed balls of clay filled with seeds to participants who then sign a contract to plant them wherever they wish. These seed balls can be thrown on any patch of ground, making them the gentlest of exploding bombs aimed at the banality of tarmac and concrete, and all that it forgets.

Mackey's work points towards a key concern which sits awkwardly inside and outside the 'development' of rural Ireland in recent times, that being an awareness of 'environment' as a notion which can embody both a nostalgia for past simplicities and a solution to contemporary problems through new technology, which itself might harness old knowledge in a new way. Similar environmental concerns animate AFTER pieces by Carol Anne Connolly and Anna McLeod. Connolly's *Broken Appliance Depot*, as the title suggests, reuses old domestic appliances, most beautifully in creating a solar-powered, fluorescent light installation at the site of a proposed, and locally contentious, ESB pylon. Connolly also used a newly built but unoccupied house to stage workshops on the reuse of modern materials and renewable energy, and to host a talk by the innovative architect Dominic Stevens.

Anna McLeod's *Rain Catcher* takes up an equally absurd aspect of our wasteful and throwaway society, contemplating the eccentricities of water as a resource in a wet climate. Her research images show a water tower (à la Bernd and Hilda Becher), rusting roadside pumps and ad hoc agricultural piping. And these images then lead towards the final installation piece, placed outside the Dock, which will collect rain water and turn it into potable water. It is crucial to the pieces by both McLeod and Connolly that they are able to create art which intertwines technology with a civic function and thus gesture site-specifically to a constructive localism, while asking the local to reimagine and take control of its future.

Alice Lyons is a poet who, almost uniquely in Ireland, has worked extensively and ingeniously to place her poetry in artistic and public spaces (her *Staircase Poems* in 2005 and 2006 in the Dock , and her recent poem *Developer Braggadocio* being good examples of this work). Her piece for AFTER evocatively situates a poem entitled *Viewfinder* in a shed beside the now partially used Garda barracks in Cootehall, County Roscommon. This particular barracks is one in which the father of the novelist John McGahern was stationed, and the barracks feature throughout McGahern's fiction. Lyons' poem alludes to McGahern's short story *Korea*, in which a boy squats in a shed overhearing his father's conversation. *Korea*, a chilling story, connects rural Ireland with emigration and world politics and Lyons' poem

cleverly recapitulates this movement in the story in her poem, its siting and the mirror on which it is printed, as the text refers to the new housing, across the river and facing the barracks. These houses have 'views', and Lyons' piece draws the attention of that view to the barracks (and its history) and then, through the mirror and the poem, asks that viewpoint to reflect on itself and what lies 'beyond' the mirror. The superficial simplicity of the piece weaves together past and present, land and time in an epitome of the way in which the overall AFTER project (subtitled 'Responding to a Changed Landscape') aspires to heighten perception of the changed ways in which rural Ireland is constructed.

The final artist taking part in AFTER is Gareth Kennedy whose project is *Inflatable Bandstand (10 Year Crescendo)*. The bandstand has been erected and then deflated at various places in Manorhamilton, Drumshanbo, Killargue, Carrick-on-Shannon and Roscommon town, most often on carparks or on barren, disused land. Like Christine Mackey's choice of sites, Kennedy's work creates a kind of ghostly presence in blank modernity, in this case the ironic spirit of a civic and genteel culture, signalled by the very idea of the bandstand. The bandstand's ephemeral and temporary nature reminds those who see it perhaps of a passing circus, but also of the lack of communal amenities and gathering places in their town. Kennedy himself suggests that the temporary structure has something of a folly about it, and the folly's hubris is nicely celebrated and undercut by the shape and transience of the yellow, bouncy-castle-like prop. As part of the performance of erecting, using and putting away the bandstand (and the process of inflating the bandstand and taking it away is integral to the idea), a musician performs a piece of music composed by Ian Wilson, structurally based on the rising fortunes of the Irish economy (hence the 10 year crescendo).

AFTER is an adventurous and brave project. Each part of it, and the collective whole, sympathetically attempts to understand its locality and the impact of more global, economic and environmental changes on that locale. The artists involved deploy irony and a belief in artistic practice as a way to interact with a community. The irony involved is judicious enough to provoke consternation, laughter and reaction without the patronisation of non-gallery visiting audience. To achieve this, and still continually critique the recklessness of developers and the subsequent 'dormitisation' of rural towns, makes AFTER a genuinely unique and collective endeavour. It might be regarded as a model for future projects, making the often empty rhetoric of 'art in the community' meaningfully rich.

Colin Graham