

# Artists erect 'warning signs on the landscape'

MARESE McDONAGH

THE PURSUIT of profit has inspired dramatic physical changes in the Irish rural landscape which is being "destroyed in front of our eyes without mercy, without shame", according to an internationally acclaimed artist.

New York-based Alfredo Jaar was launching a project in counties Leitrim and Roscommon at the weekend as five local artists unveiled their impressions of how the recent economic boom – and its demise – has transformed the landscape in the two counties.

The proliferation of new housing developments, many of which remain unsold and unoccupied, was a recurring theme in the public art project *AFTER*, but issues such as water contamination and energy needs were also addressed.

One sculpture, *Viewfinder*, is on display in a shed outside the barracks in Cootehall, Co Roscommon, where John McGahern spent part of his childhood and which is now surrounded by housing. It incorporates a mirror reflecting the old and new Cootehalls and a poem by Alice Lyons about greed which refers to the McGahern short story *Korea*.

New Jersey-born Lyons has lived across the road from the barracks for 10 years and is scathing about much of the "inappropriate development" in the village – where free cars are currently being offered with houses in one largely unsold scheme. But she insisted that the purpose of the project was to raise questions and try to ensure that mistakes were not repeated.

Lyons estimates that 100 houses were built over two years in the small village during what she terms the "goldrush". "When the houses started to go up we were all punch drunk – we could

## Rural renewal

The Rural Renewal Scheme, which includes Carrick-on-Shannon, began in 1998 with the aim of "invigorating the Upper Shannon region" and offers investors tax breaks to invest in property in Leitrim and Longford, and parts of Cavan, Roscommon and Sligo.

not respond fast enough. There was no time to reflect or to organise". Local people were as concerned as "blow-ins" about the rapid transformation but for "complicated reasons" felt powerless, she said.

Another artist Carol Anne Connolly rented one of the many unsold houses in a new development in Boyle to host workshops on issues such as how to build a hen coop or construct a small wind turbine.

Connolly also erected a solar-powered light installation – made from recycled materials – in a field outside Boyle where the ESB proposes to erect pylons against the wishes of the landowners.

"Throughout the country there are so many empty retail units, as well as houses, outside towns, and I wanted to think creatively about how they could be used now" said Connolly who said it was important not to be negative.

"It is important that these empty spaces not become a waste of materials or time".

Last week almost 100 people turned up in a field owned by Michael and Martina Roddy at Grange, Boyle, when Connolly unveiled her light installation to pinpoint the site of one the proposed pylons.

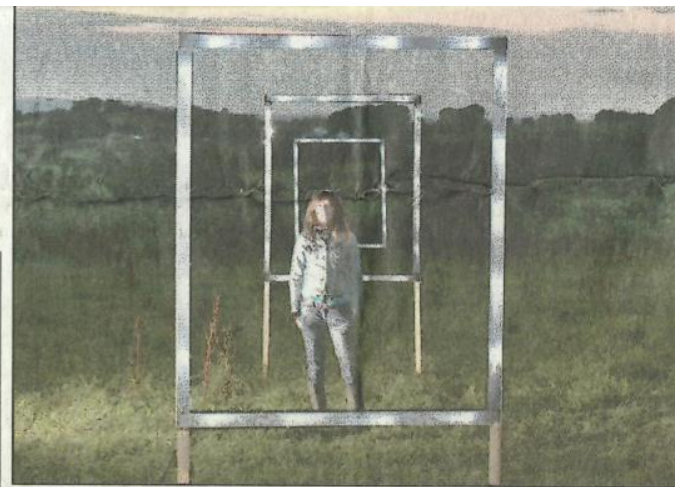
Campaigners in the area are opposing a planned 65km high-voltage power line from

Flagford, Co Roscommon, to Srananagh, Co Sligo, which they have urged the ESB to place underground on health grounds

Another "public art intervention" in the project is *Rain Catcher*, a sculpture by Anna Macleod which will remain outside the Dock Arts Centre in Carrick-on-Shannon until September 20th.

As well as being a sculpture, it has a practical purpose as it has a solar filtration system which makes the rain water safe to drink. Carrick-on-Shannon comes under the Rural Renewable Scheme.

"My take was water and what happens, for example, when people build on flood plains," said Macleod. "I live in Leitrim and God knows we have plenty of rain



Artist Carol Anne Connolly at her solar-powered light installation on the site of a proposed ESB pylon at Grange, Co Roscommon

and we also have the Shannon which is a precious resource."

But yet there had been a boiling water restriction in her village for some time, she pointed out. "Where are we going wrong? Look at all the rain".

Other projects include an inflatable yellow bandstand representing the Irish economy

designed by Gareth Kennedy while Christine Mackay planted native Irish wild flower seeds at several locations in Leitrim.

Chilean-born Jaar, an architect who first came to Ireland last year to act as facilitator for this project, said the five artists had erected "warning signs on the landscape".

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