

*Mycelial Thinking
and Doing:*

*Kate O'Shea's
Socially Engaged Art
Practice*

by Áine O'Brien

One early encounter with Kate O'Shea's art practice literally took the form of a 'stepping into', when she transformed a room at the 2023 Summer School on Collaborative Practice and Social Change into a multi-layered, many-peopled archive. Prints, books, zines, posters, fabrics and other memorabilia filled the school space with a sense of calculated chaos.¹ From that moment, I understood O'Shea's practice as spanning and circling a full 360 degrees. Her work resembling a '**living archive**' in the way Stuart Hall first coined the term when reflecting on the challenges of documenting the Black and Asian artist diaspora:

The very idea of a living archive contradicts [a] fantasy of completeness. As work is produced, one is, as it were, contributing to and extending the limits of that to which one is contributing. The living archive cannot be complete because our present practice immediately adds to it, and our new interpretations inflect it differently (92).

Stuart Hall, 'Constituting an Archive',
Third Text, 2001

In O'Shea's practice the 'living archive' is literally a performative (protective) holder of objects recording place-based experiences; in every sense an organism capable of re-routing/rooting through intricate historical and social patterns of entanglement and disentanglement. The figure of the **Mycelium** which guides this practice is the ideal travelling companion for a re-imagining of what is an archive, conjuring a dramatic image of unpredictable fungi continuously seeding and co-creating relational networks of mutuality and exchange, enacting a politics of mycelial thinking, solidarity, collective problem-solving, activist dreaming and doing.² We hear or can imagine this mycelial

social movement in the acoustic that draws us into the space of the gallery at VISUAL, invoking the subterranean sounds and visceral maps of the fungi further punctuated by the voices of O'Shea and collaborator, Siobhán Kavanagh.

At the core of this immersive **utopian entanglement** is a collaborative ethos and aesthetic honed in a DIY tradition yet simultaneously (perhaps surprisingly) aligned with the values of artisanship and craft. Having originally migrated from architecture to printmaking, O'Shea has long been preoccupied with printing (infra)structural shapes that appear to either connect or disconnect or build themselves anew through repeated cycles of reuse and repair. We see this excavational imagery in her printmaking and in the '**soft architecture**' that she has constructed via a maze of fabrics hanging throughout the gallery space, sourced and transported by her from different places. Some evoking the celebratory tradition of the labour activist banner, with the singular (yet interconnected) words displayed: 'LAND', 'IMPERIALISM', 'ENTANGLEMENT', 'NETWORKS OF SOLIDARITIES'.

Having been away from the solo workshop space for many years, O'Shea returned to Cork Printmakers in 2024 to produce the monoprints that form part of the freestanding wooden structure in *Mycelium*. The intensity and depth of the layering on the prints is reflected in the larger fragmentary shapes and shadows on the fabric banners, and there's a carefully honed continuity and discontinuity in this infrastructural juxtaposition, described by O'Shea as a form of 'embodied making'. The archive books/boxes designed by Elize De Beer on display in the gallery are available for people to explore, containing the traces of production that often remain hidden or are discarded. These handwritten notes and scraps of conversations, the casual yet intentionally curated ephemera are essential to making sense of O'Shea's DIY aesthetic of reuse and repair.

At the centre of the exhibition are giant letters transparently floating, asking the simple yet loaded question: HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH? These letters, designed and co-produced in collaboration with signwriter Tom Collins in Limerick, are strategically open-ended, provoking, nudging, encouraging us to take stock of the limits of local and global systems that are dangerously teetering on the brink. The everyday impact and consequences of **extractive capitalism** for a range of communities and ecosystems is not spelled out – there is no prescriptive formula implied – rather it is a performative gesture or invitation from O'Shea to pause and reflect on a question that is beguilingly plain yet alarmingly, increasingly urgent. In its evocative tone, this open question also invokes the inevitable burnout and invisible labour of the long-term community activists working in local neighbourhoods, and the subsequent personal and practical challenges of socially engaged artists who are working alongside activists in communities of place.

Echoing Hall and in its episodic structure, there is no clear beginning or end point to this mycelial archival **ecosystem**, since O'Shea connects place-based struggles of diverse communities while exploring themes of land, diaspora, displacement and **repeated legacies of colonialism** – whether working in collaborations with community housing activists living in Dublin 8, or with land activists on the Isle of Eigg and Govan Hill Baths in Glasgow, or with First Nations artists and activists on Whadjuk Nyoongar Boodjar, Western Australia (to name but a few). O'Shea reflects in a recent conversation: 'I understand my practice as a meeting point for different archives, to hold different forms of social imagining over time, not merely through one-off projects and commissions'.³ There is an indisputable aesthetic of 'care' evident as O'Shea single-handedly carries **precious archival cargo** with her whenever or wherever she is workshopping or exhibiting. In this respect the various archives that are housed under the ongoing project *Mycelium* find safe refuge in a durational socially engaged art practice.

In another conversation O'Shea explains what she means by the 'archive of archivists':

My practice is focused on making spaces for the 'archive of archives' to grow alternative histories. The questions for me are not narrowly about the physical and digital material that I have gathered but how do we begin to 'archive the archivists'? Importantly, the 'archive of archives' isn't located in a particular building, place, language or geographical entity; rather, it exists across historical timelines, between place-based struggles and un-archived histories, challenging the accepted wisdom that there are no alternatives. I imagine it as a mycelium-like structure moving in-between the hearts of people and places, who resist the erasure of themselves by the everyday impact of social injustices and colonial legacies.⁴

The spine of *Mycelium* is the 50-metre fabric, which meanders through the gallery space at VISUAL, seamlessly documenting the process of 'archiving the archives and archivists', travelling across parallel and overlapping timelines, places and people. This archival thread imbues an aesthetic shaped by a powerful **practice of generative generosity**. It is choreographed and routed/rooted through many different forms and rituals of 'radical friendship'. The narrative has been specifically designed for *Mycelium* at VISUAL, yet the use, reuse and layering process continues, since the digital file from a previous 50-metre print – produced during O'Shea's residency at Fremantle Arts Centre in association with IMMA in 2025 – becomes the primary base for Carlow in 2026 (the fabric is printed by Janine and Mladen Milicich at Digital Printive, Boorloo (Perth), Western Australia, who also made the clothes that are on sale in the VISUAL shop).

As Hall suggests, the living archive ‘cannot be complete because our present practice immediately adds to it’. Likewise, the central thread running through the space of *Mycelium* cannot ever be completed, since it is an open-ended homage to the artists, activists and communities that O’Shea has collaborated with, whose work and energy form part of a wider collective of changemakers and social dreamers. The fabric is positioned at an accessible eye level, whereby we are invited to enter into and trace the intricate threads of collaboration, to the invisible labour and social relations that are diversely – beautifully – inscribed into the fabric, to draw our own connections, disconnections, reorientations and to imagine new ways of being and living together. As O’Shea puts it: ‘[T]he “threads of social relations” are really important to me and these are all people and places that have transformed me and how I work and play in the world, in different ways.’⁵

It is fitting that O’Shea’s *Mycelium* at VISUAL sits alongside the open call exhibition *Artworks 2026: Hold This*, opening possibilities for exchange and collaboration and for the imagining of unexpected alliances and networks.

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Footnotes

- 1 The ‘Summer School on Collaborative Practice and Social Change’ is a yearly programme delivered by Create and the Learning Lab Agency (funded by The Arts Council of Ireland)
- 2 On Mycelial Landscapes, see: <https://emergencemagazine.org/conversation/mycelial-landscapes/>
- 3 In conversation with O’Shea, May 2026
- 4 Á. O’Brien and K. O’Shea, ‘An Epi-dialogical Mentoring Conversation: Inventories of place and practice’. In *Contemporary Socially Engaged Art Practice in Ireland: Modalities and Counter-Narratives*, ed. A. Grossman et al (Cork: Cork University Press, forthcoming, 2026), 306
- 5 In conversation with O’Shea, May 2026