

# National Campaign for the Arts

## **Cultural Policy in Practice**

Response by Sinéad O'Reilly to Prof. Jim McGuigan

Colloquy #3

07/10/13

I have three observations to make in relation to Jim's paper, and it is pulling strands from it into the Irish context, understanding where Irish culture and its policies emerged towards what we have to do to influence it, to some observations of policy in action in Ireland.

To set the context of where I am coming from, my current role as a Local Authority Arts Officer means I am working on both the policy direction and practice outcomes of the arts on a county level; and as chair of the Association of Local Authority Arts Officers on a national level.

At a local level, arts policy is about local responsiveness; it's about recognizing the needs and aspirations of arts organisations and artists in the county, but also those of the community. It is about enabling, brokering, partnering, investing, curating and responding - across many contexts and every art form. In many instances, Local Authorities were the pioneers of projects such as EV+ A, the Earagail Arts Festival, Visual, Cúirt and many others - to county youth orchestras, venue development and artists in schools schemes along with the opportunities for artists to work and specialise in different contexts. There is a lot at stake nationally in terms of cultural value and policy.

The Association of Local Authority Arts Officers is a professional association of 33 Arts Officers nationally, with the collective compounded experience of 28 years of arts development locally and nationally. We work with the Arts Council, the Dept of Arts and other national arts organisations, and we have a developing dialogue with Arts Development UK, our UK counterparts.

So that's where I am coming from; it's an interesting place to be, straddling the arts and politics on a daily level, receiving policy direction and funding from multiple departments and agencies and meeting that in an equitable way and always with a mind on the actual outcome - inspiring artistry.

But, I think to truly understand the Irish cultural policy context and value system, we need to delve back to the Irish Revival period, and if you haven't before, I would almost guarantee the penny will drop to understand why a national campaign for the arts was bound to happen.

The evolving Irish cultural story is one which is imbedded in our political and economic growth. And the story continues to evolve. Irish culture is not something to be picked off the shelf and put on display, a handed down set of elements, a heritage, but an active process of defining and redefining through communication. It is a living breathing entity and policy needs to reflect that first.

If you look at material in relation to the Irish Revival, mainly through Irish, postcolonial and cultural studies, you will see the foundations laid for why cultural policy making in Ireland, is still on the periphery.

The main architects of the Irish Revival were W B Yeats, Jonathon Millington Synge and Lady Augusta Gregory. Together they are credited with some of Irish literature's great masterpieces, and for defining the character of the Irish nation that was waiting to be born.

It was a period that witnessed the birth of the Irish Literary Theatre in 1899, the Irish National Dramatic Society in 1902 and the Irish National Theatre Society (Abbey Theatre) in 1904, all established during the transition from British rule to the political independence of the Irish Free State. So, not surprisingly, the cultural development of this time is not easily separated from the historical, political & social conditions in which it is produced.

Irish writers at the time were living through and in some cases participating in an Irish revolution. Yeats abandoned the insurgent he once had been and became an advocate of Home Rule - yet he emerged as the poet of the Revolution and in 1922, was appointed a senator of the Irish Free State. Sean O'Casey joined the Irish Republican Brotherhood and became General Secretary of Larkin's Irish Citizen Army.

So from revolutionary type beginnings, there were no boundaries between arts and politics, culture and nationalism. One hundred years on, culture is still upholding 'brand Ireland' (that lovely phrase that emerged from Farmleigh by Martin Cullen) but going back to the Irish Revival...

The Irish Literary Theatre's, opening performance in 1899, was the debut of Yeats' *The Countess Cathleen* and featured a cast from London. Its actual debut took place five months earlier, for a select group of Ireland's British administration in their Phoenix Park headquarters. Yeats did not attend, saying that it would compromise him politically.

So, this is one piece of direct evidence of the extent to which the Irish Revival, despite its manifestos, was intellectually, culturally and socially aligned to the policies of reform in Ireland. This advance political preview *may* also have been to ensure that it remained financially, legally and socially viable. Sound familiar?

Cultural practitioners and advocates are still aligning themselves to political, economic and social values in order to remain viable. We are still in an accepting consequence of that heritage - where we are in a cycle of needing policies and advocacy and at some level permission to uphold and justify cultural development.

Recent cultural policy development has grown and stumbled rapidly along with the economy, and we now know too well how the destabilizing of public budgets has affected the prioritising of the arts. Only three years ago, there was even concern about retaining the Ministry for Arts in a cabinet reshuffle. However, that was probably saved at the time as culture and the arts became the Government's - arguably only - good news story in international relations, not merely for its value, but for its economic usefulness in cultural tourism and creative industries.

So, you could argue that culture and society has become a slave to the needs of an economic market in a neo-liberal Ireland and is no longer a site of revolution. Today, arts organisations are responding to the fiscal crisis by promoting cultural product as a survival tactic in a recession. The Arts Council's commissioned Indecon report, measured the economic impact of the arts as a need to start speaking the only language that was being heard, the economic one. But has it implicitly imbedded the arts further into neo liberalist economics?

But, going back to Irish Revival - when Ireland first developed a national cultural awareness and identity - culture and the arts has always been used as a political means to fashion an alternative future.

The first evidence of state support to the arts was a government grant to the Abbey theatre in 1925. Around that time, the aesthetic agenda of the Abbey began to be dominated by new themes of modernization - in particular that a national theatre institution has a role in public education by consolidating and extending the authority of the state. It is no wonder that cultural development and policy in Ireland, is deeply integrated into the economy, either as production or consumption.

Irish 'official culture' and public funding, has come to serve as a symbolic recognition for the arts and their creators, because of its association with the sacredness of the nation. As a result, is the possibility of a critical stance being suppressed or even entertained?

Following the first ever arts grant in 1925, it took 26 more years before the Irish government had a policy on the arts, the Arts Act of 1951, (under DeValera's era) which saw the advent of the Arts Council. Jump forward another 42 years, to 1993 it was not until the establishment of the Department of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht, that planning for the arts in Ireland took a step forward, and gave the sector full ministerial representation. And it was not until 1995 that the Arts Council had their first arts plan. Arguably, most progress was made politically in the arts by Fine Gael and Labour Governments.

Of course, in all this time while policy was in a vacuum, the arts certainly were not. This was era of the Project Arts Centre, Grapevine Arts (which became City Arts), The Druid and many others who got small project funding from the Arts Council.

Then there was ROSC in 88 - I was a 17 year student, about to go to NCAD and this blew me away - no national policy made that happen, it was created by artists who wanted to open up an international visual platform in Ireland and it absolutely influenced visual arts practice in Ireland.

But going back to policy, Ireland has a top-down instruction from Europe, "to promote culture as a catalyst for creativity / in the framework of the Lisbon Strategy / for growth and jobs"<sup>1</sup> Ireland has a weak enough cultural policy environment in which to absorb these EU directives, and its making their integration heavy handed.

I want to also quote two people, to purely demonstrate the imbedded neoliberal discourse surrounding the arts. There seemed to be a requirement to speak this language around 2009, and a lot of arts organisations bought into that, from funding applications to lobbyists.

We want to send a clear message to the world that Ireland is a hub of creativity, innovation and flexible thinking, and a smart place for to invest in the wider creative industries. <sup>2</sup> Pat Moylan (Chairperson of the Arts Council)

This is a dynamic growth sector for Ireland, underpinning our global reputation and opening the door to trade, investment, tourism and jobs." <sup>3</sup>  
Eugene Downes (Director of Culture Ireland)

Culture Ireland also proved useful I think in relation to the Governments Asia Strategy (1999 -2009). How many people know groups and artists who were funded to go to China, Japan or Vietnam?

In 2006, Culture Ireland increased its funding to Asia projects in one year (2005-2006) by 350% €465,610. The biggest recipient of funding to Asia in 2006 was the Druid Theatre who received €100,000 to tour JM Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* to Tokyo. And there it is again, the Irish revival, the origins of our official national culture!

It is theatre and playwrights from the same era, which are now consolidating that identity through funding from Culture Ireland. However, by predominantly promoting specific limited images and cultural products, is a broader, conflicting, complex and

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<sup>1</sup> COM (2007) p242 quoted in *Towards a European Cultural Policy*, August 5, 2008, European Commission PASCAL Observatory

<sup>2</sup> Arts Council Press release, 4/11/09 [www.artscouncil.ie](http://www.artscouncil.ie)

<sup>3</sup> [www.cultureireland.gov.ie/news](http://www.cultureireland.gov.ie/news)

diverse Ireland and Irish identity is being largely undermined?

When our most senior cultural leaders in Ireland are sending out this neo liberal economic message, it will take an even bigger effort by arts advocates and economists to rotate current cultural policy practice towards artistic value and social and cultural relevance, not a predominant market value.

The two contentions are play here are; the impetus by Government to internationally promote authentic images of Irish culture in order to boost our economic potential, and the necessity of arts organisations to speak the language of economics in order to secure their funding. Both tactics are about survival in an economic crisis, therefore neither is sustainable. Further, both are simultaneously suppressing the potential of Irish culture, contradicting that which they both desire.

How can the relationships between culture and economy, artist and policy be elevated to a new level of value? Cultural autonomy seems a way in which cultural policy documents should be approached, and to give it its dues most do respect artistic freedom. But can any public policy be without an economic stranglehold?

The arts are a privileged space for thought and debate about our identities, both individual and collective. Artistic processes continually redefine our stories and our myths. Whether or not they are accompanied by an explicit civic engagement, whether or not they are openly exploited as a tool for dialogue; artistic projects animate exchange and thinking on our collective and individual role in society, challenging our social, economic and political choices.

We must take a firm hold of the Irish question. The debate is necessary, even urgent. The web of tensions is complex, calling into play different forces and numerous actors. There is a need for some real debate, democratic and long term, on our Irish values and on the political Irish project, where culture is as much a building block as a solution.

It is important for cultural policy makers to consider carefully, where the risk of the social and cultural relevance of the arts becoming less important than its economic one, may reflect on what artists are required to produce.

**Sinéad O'Reilly, Offaly County Arts Officer** – has worked in arts management for over 18 years. Currently in her role for 8 years, she previously worked in North Tipperary County Council as an Arts Officer and developing / chairing various festivals and events in the Tipperary/Offaly area. She holds a BA in Fine Art and an MA in Public Cultures Studies and is currently the Chairperson of the Association of Local Authority Arts Officers, a professional network which advocates for increased access to the arts to thrive in all communities and playing a part in national arts policy and development.