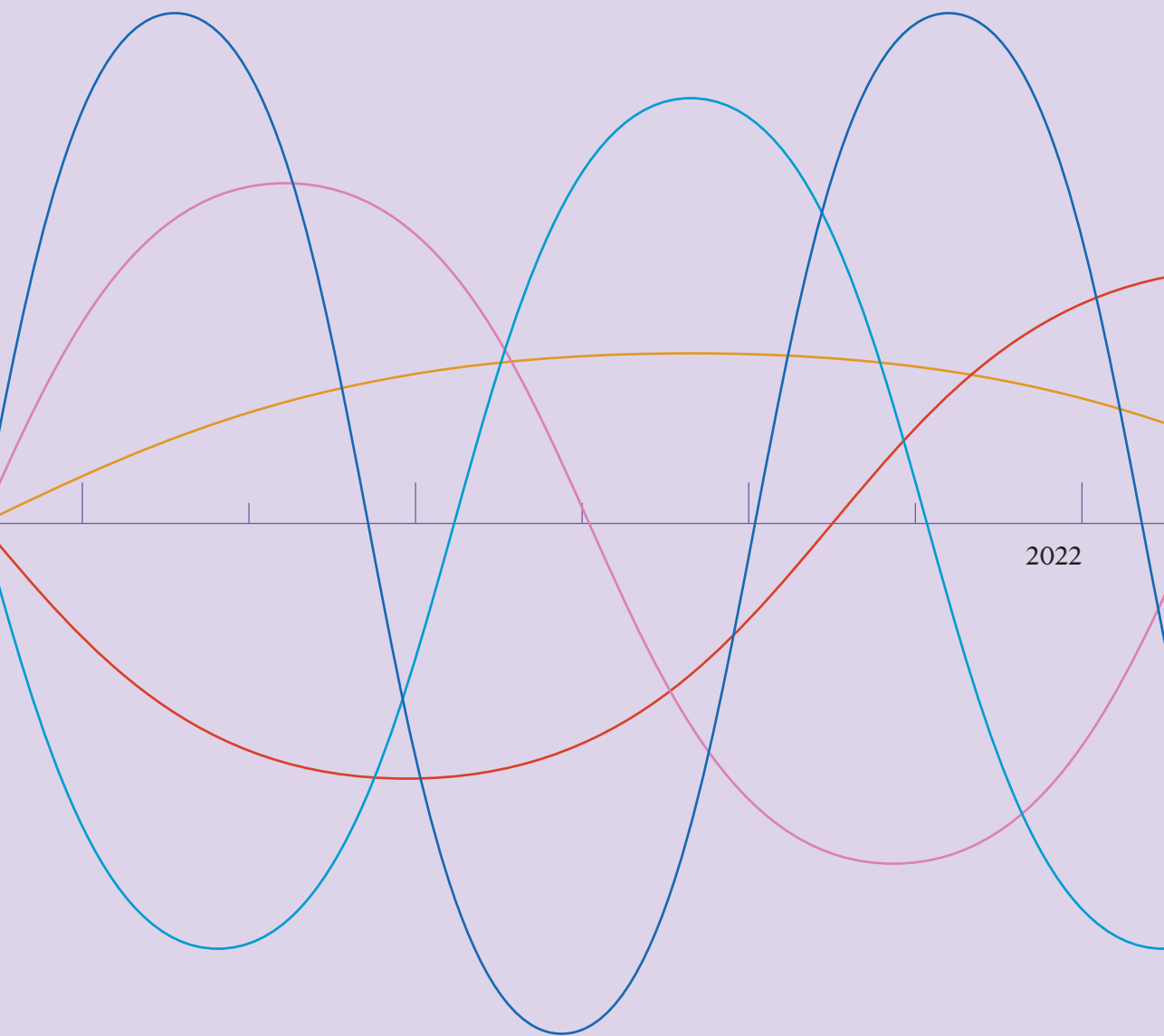


Critical Voices

Guthanna Criticiúla



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Foreword

The Arts Council's 70th anniversary offers us an opportunity to reflect back on the origins of the Arts Council and how far we have come together. From its humble beginnings in 1952 with then Director Patrick J. Little, the Arts Council had one secretary, a messenger boy and a budget of £10,000. The first grant for the sum of £500 was given to the International PEN Congress, representing poets, playwrights, essayists, editors and novelists.

With this *Critical Voices* publication, we turn to our artists as essayists to critically reflect back on their own journeys and experiences, and to contemplate on how far we have come, who we are today and where we still need to go.

I feel honoured to lead this organisation at this time; we are supporting more artists than ever, in more ways than ever. We are committed to equality, diversity and inclusion, and we hold public engagement in the arts with equal significance. We work in partnership with many other organisations, from arts organisations to other public sector partners, to ensure that the arts continues to be understood as the vital heartbeat of our social, cultural and economic wellbeing.

The role of the artist is always to question, to reflect and to make bold steps forward, and I wish to offer my heartfelt thanks to Rita Duffy, Sandy Fitzgerald, Ailbhe Ní Ghearbhuigh, Joselle Ntumba, Beulah Ezeugo and Kevin Rafter for taking the time to critically reflect on the passing of the decades, what matters now and to imagine new horizons.

We have come a long way and we will continue to evolve, to learn and to lead, ensuring that no matter where we live or our personal circumstances, everyone on this island has the opportunity to create, engage with, participate in and enjoy the arts.

Biographies



Rita Duffy

Rita Duffy is one of Ireland's groundbreaking artists, using her work to involve the histories and narratives of different communities in Ireland and all over the world. She became famous with *Thaw*, an art project with environmental concerns aimed to bring an iceberg to Belfast (2004). The *Shirt Factory* project, part of the celebrations of Derry as the first ever UK City of Culture (2013), was an extensive examination of women's labour, through the reinvention of a former shirt factory. In 2016, Rita was invited to co-commemorate the Easter Rising, which brought about *The Souvenir Shop*, a witty exploration of the lived experience of rebellion. In 2019, *Soften the Border*, developed with a small cross-border knitting group at the centre of the Bellcoo/Blacklion bridge, gave voice to the immediate local experience, attracting global media coverage. She is an Honorary Member of the Royal Society of Architects for developmental work in the built environment. In 2020, a documentary of her work was made by the BBC and the European broadcaster, ARTE. In 2021, she completed her Visiting Artist Fellowship at Trinity College Dublin, producing a new moving image work titled '*The Anatomy of Hope*'.

Based in Ballyconnell Courthouse on the border in Ireland, she continues her studio-based practice in 'no man's land', generating socially engaged art projects that explore issues of female identity, history and, increasingly, environmental issues.

In 2018 she was recognised for her contribution to visual arts in Ireland and was elected to Aosdána, Ireland's peer-nominated association of 'people of the arts'.



Sandy Fitzgerald

Sandy Fitzgerald has over fifty years experience as a manager, artist and activist in the cultural sector. He was a founding member, and later Executive Director of City Arts Centre, Dublin (1973 to 2001), overseeing the Centre's development from one room in 1974 to the opening of the largest centre of its kind in Ireland (1988). The programme of City Arts Centre included all artistic disciplines, with a full public programme of visual art, theatre, music, dance, comedy, conferences and special events and was committed to the principles of community arts. The Centre also initiated pioneering educational and accredited programmes in community arts, disability arts initiatives and outreach programmes.

In addition, Sandy was a founder and board member of CAFE (Creative Activity for Everyone, 1984 – 1990), now CREATE, the arts development organisation; board member of the Royal Hospital National Cultural Centre (1985 – 1990), later to become the Irish Museum of Modern Art; board member of the Dublin Film Festival (1988 – 1993); founding board member of the Junior Dublin Film Festival (1990 – 1994); Executive Committee Member of Trans Europe Halles, a European network of independent cultural centres (1997 – 2002), of which he is still an ambassador. He has also sat on a number of advisory and policy committees including the Irish government's Commission for the Status for People with Disabilities and the Dublin City Council Development Board.

Currently, Sandy is a co-director at Olivearte Cultural Agency, delivering training, consultancy and project management across Europe, and teaches on the cultural management masters course at the International University of Catalunya (Barcelona).



Ailbhe Ní Ghearbhuigh

File Gaeilge í Ailbhe Ní Ghearbhuigh as Trá Lí i gContae Chiarraí. D'fhoilsigh Coiscéim na cnuasaigh filíochta *Péacadh* (2008) agus *Tost agus Allagar* (2016), ar bronnadh Duais Uí hAirtnéide air i 2019. *The Coast Road* an teideal atá ar chnuasach dátheangach a d'fhoilsigh Gallery Press mar a bhfuil aistriúcháin le trí fhile dhéag an Bhéarla. Mar chuid den sraith 'File ar Fhile,' d'fhoilsigh Cois Life aistriúcháin léi ar fhilíocht Andrée Chedid. Bronnadh Duais Lawrence O'Shaughnessy uirthi i 2020. Beidh cnuasach nua Gaeilge léi á fhoisliú sa bhfómhar.

Ailbhe Ní Ghearbhuigh is an Irish-language poet from Tralee in Co. Kerry. Her books include *Péacadh* (Coiscéim 2008), *Tost agus Allagar* (Coiscéim 2016), which won the Michael Harnett Award in 2019. The Gallery Press published a bilingual collection *The Coast Road* (2016) which included English translations by thirteen poets. Cois Life published her translations from the French of Andrée Chedid in 2019 as part of the 'File ar Fhile' series. She was the 2020 recipient of the Lawrence O'Shaughnessy Award. A new collection in Irish will be published in the autumn.



Beulah Ezeugo & Joselle Ntumba

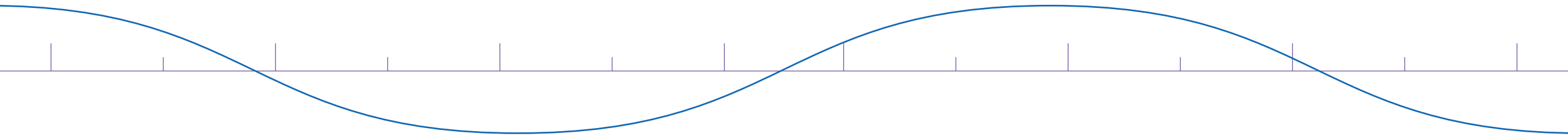
Beulah Ezeugo is an Igbo curator and researcher. Her work centres on Black postcolonial dreaming using collective memory and myth. Her practice is informed by a social science background from University College Dublin and an MLitt in Curatorial Practice from Glasgow School of Art and the University of Glasgow.

Joselle Ntumba is a cultural producer of Congolese heritage and was raised in Galway City. Her work centres on memory work and event programming as tools for community resistance and learning. Alongside this, she has a background in health science from Trinity College Dublin.



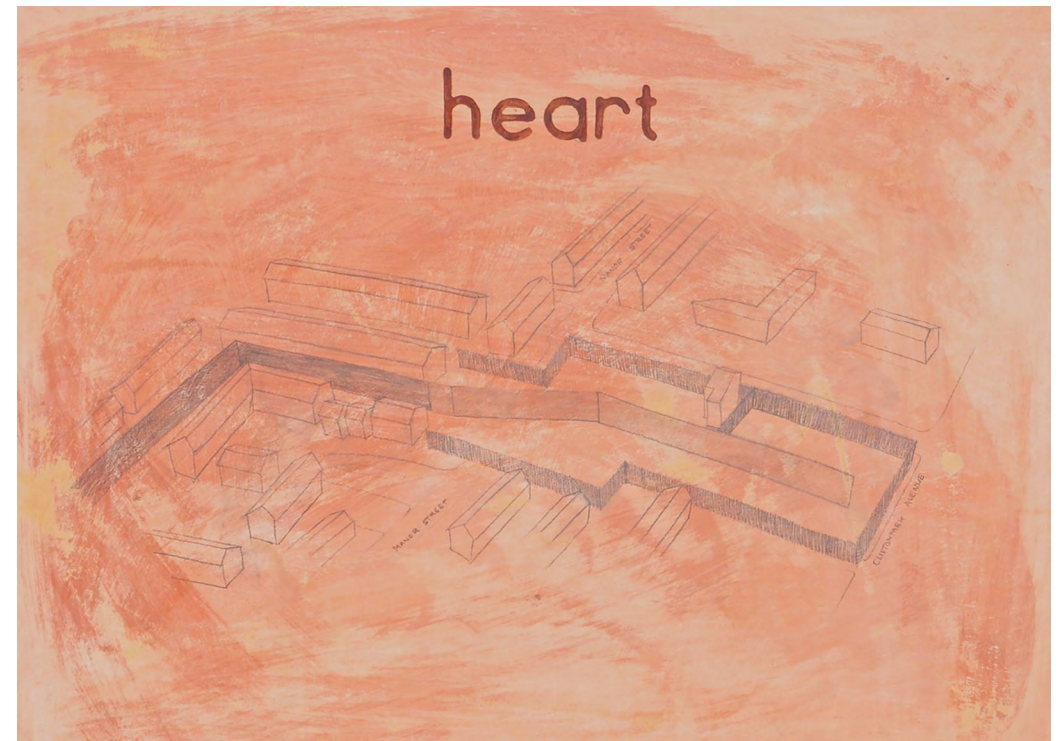
Prof. Kevin Rafter

Prof. Kevin Rafter was appointed Chair of the Arts Council in June 2019. He is Head of the School of Communications at Dublin City University and is the author/editor of over a dozen books on Irish media and politics. Kevin is an experienced independent non-executive director with significant governance, stakeholder and communications expertise, and has a strong track record of regulatory oversight in the broadcast, legal and financial sectors. He was previously a board member of Dublin Bus, Oxfam Ireland and the Galway International Arts Festival and also served as Chair of Culture Ireland. He is also currently Chairperson of the Compliance Committee of the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland. Prior to 2008, Kevin worked as a senior political journalist with the *Irish Times*, the *Sunday Times* and the *Sunday Tribune* as well as editor of *Magill* magazine, while for RTÉ, he presented several flagship radio programmes including *This Week*, *Morning Ireland* and the *News at One*, as well as working as a correspondent for Prime Time. He has a BA (Mod) and MLitt in economics and a MA and PhD in political science, and a Diploma in Corporate Law & Governance.



Portrait of the Artist as a Belfast Woman

My Belfast is a red brick place, with clay-baked walls that change complexion, blushing after a shower. Fear was our neighbour who lived on the same street, with the friendly hand of a daylight greeting, capable, we knew, of who-knows-what in the darkness. Uncertainty and mistrust were carried on the air, sprouting like dandelions in the cracks. A knock at the front door after dark had to be checked – Brindsley Mac Namara's net curtains in the front room took on an urgent Belfast squinting. The shape of a body through lattice, and the quick, silent, visual decoding offered reassurance, discrete and obliging. Catholic father and southern mother was a double hazard.



Territory

I knew an English landscape architect that was employed in the eighties by the Housing Executive to 'normalise' the Belfast streets interrupted by peace lines. A palimpsest of new planting, manageable shrubs skirted peace walls that scraped the sky. His only design brief was 'no right angles for sniper shelter'.

From the maps he gave me, I made a series of graphite drawings on terracotta panels. Seamus Heaney kindly gave me his permission to use his poem, 'Act of Union', and the work *Territory* was created. Streets of red brick houses mirrored by walls, a Belfast fresco in shades of flesh like a cosmetic display of eyeshadow and lipstick colours in curb-stone warnings. A slow carnival of colonial division, unhealthy half-lived lives, collapsing wearily to the heartbeat echo of a bigot's war drum and the narcissism of small difference.



Geansai

Summer holidays were an escape from 'marching season' and my mother knitted ferociously in woolly defiance. Her looming deadline was our annual family holiday down south. One year after considerable industry she produced, right on time for our 11th of July exodus, six aran sweaters. Ivory, white-cabled *Geansai* that reeled us back to where we belonged. A permissible, and unmissable, feminist act of cultural construct, under the neighbours' gaze. I cringe to think how we looked in full Clancy Brothers regalia, marching out and clambering into the packed car.

My father built airplanes that magically landed on water. He told stories that put pictures in my head, and later, I came to realise that these stories were true. One such tale was of his personal eyewitness account, from the time of partition when people on the Lower Falls collectively set fire to their chimneys. Huge clouds of dark smoke protested and signalled distress to Dublin. A scabby old stray dog was caught, daubed with red and blue paint, then chased up the Falls end of the street. Caught again, green and orange paint were added and the unfortunate creature was chased back towards the Shankill end of the street. A confused victim wheezing through a riot of smoke and conflicting colour, trapped in a cruel parallel universe – the Belfast Rainbow Dog.

The Ulster Museum was our weekend playground. One day in the late sixties, on my way home from primary school, I discovered George McClelland's Alfred Street Gallery. I boldly pushed open the glass door and walked into a world of pictures. School bag on my back, I went around the gallery looking at paintings: Gerald Dillon, Colin Middleton, Dan O'Neill – windows into a different world, colour and figures that danced in my imagination. Those windows opened and have never closed. They provided oxygen and allowed me to breathe my own fresh air.

Feeling safe was not my familiar; I lived in constant vigilance. As a natural observer, I was quick to get the measure of situations, and in Belfast it was important to know in which direction to jump. Afterwards, recollecting the images safely in the quiet of my head, trying to figure out what just happened, I determined that there was relevance in addressing what I heard and saw as Belfast erupted.

My journey from the local to the global is the engine that has propelled my flight. Life in south Belfast had its challenges, but my teenage years and the many bus journeys through 1970s Belfast to St Dominic's on the Falls Road, was education in a war zone. In the streets of West Belfast, the clocks ticked a very special time and place. Impressionable



Dessert

and young, I was opening my eyes to a bigger world, and no explanation, no mix of words or music or memories could touch that sense of knowing that you were there, that you were alive in this corner of the world and part of something changing, whatever it meant. There was madness in every direction and at any hour sparks might strike. And they did.

Dessert became an artwork cast in chocolate, first exhibited at the ICA in London, and the viewers were intoxicated by the olfactory effects of its substance. I had persuaded the headmistress of St Dominic's to grant me access to its study hall as a venue for the work during the West Belfast Festival. Here, *Dessert* lay silent and funereal in a Victorian museum cabinet, its viewers whispering that they could read the serial number. Then, from somewhere in my memory came an image. That same wax polished wooden interior opened onto a winter's morning, with girls arriving into school from Andersonstown, having found a Kalashnikov on the trimmed lawn. They carried it up the convent steps and Mother Laurentia, taking the weapon by the dangerous end, walked resolutely back

down the stone steps and on to the drive, where she flung it back over the wall.

In the late nineties, there was incessant talk about weapons and the possibility of ceasefires. I began making drawings of guns, gathering information and circling in my thoughts. The domineering fist of violence and the silencing power of weaponry was on a collision course with the age-old romance of resistance and Irish fighting heroes writ large in our history. By 2000, the ceasefires had been secured and a chance conversation with an RUC detective gave me access to real weapons. I was following my intuition with no clear plan; I purchased latex to make a mould, and on my way to cast it bought Brylcreem at a garage shop in a last minute panic, knowing that I would need a release agent. I was shown into a room that displayed the strangest exhibit I have ever experienced, made all the more severe by its authenticity. On display was one of everything that had been used as a weapon in Northern Ireland: a coffee jar bomb, improvised machine guns, a home-made rocket launcher fashioned from a section of grey plastic pipe that had been

tipped at an angle to reveal the shock absorber, and out of it had slid a packet of McVitie's digestive biscuits. A confection of murderous intent, products of the Northern culture of engineering, ingenuity, lateral thinking, invention and improvisation, Cú Chulainn's weaponry of war with surreal domestic twists. Creativity is in us all and we make choices on how we put this energy to work.

I was handed two AK-47s and a policeman sat in the room with me as I worked. I cast my mould and returned the next day to peel back the white rubber with every detail recorded. I thanked them for the assistance and, upon leaving, I spotted an open room, shelved floor to ceiling and packed tight with manilla envelopes. I was told each envelope contained the ballistic report on every shot that had been fired. A chilling installation of microscopic marks on bullet casings as they began their journey, ripping through cartilage, tendon and bone, splintering lives and onwards ricocheting down through families with the pain and the poison of war.

One school friend, whose brother was serving 15 years for blowing up a car showroom, sat in the same classroom as another whose father, a Catholic judge, was shot dead one morning as his car slowed to drop her and her sister off at the school gate. We shared a classroom with the ringing of occasional sounds of gunfire: shots fired at the fortified walls of the adjacent Springfield Road RUC police barracks. 'Come away from the windows girls', followed by a shuffling of desks and chairs. 'Those boys won't sit your exams for you.'

The plan was to fly high over the small streets and the mappings of prejudice and division. Art education allowed me that passage, and gave me access to the 'super-highway' as described by the Surrealists, an energy that hears the heart's plea and, tracing the globe, takes you anywhere you care to visit from right where you are. Lived experience fed into my work, and I've learned to trust the impulse, discovering



Rise Up Baking Soda from The Souvenir Shop

later that the deeper connections, formed by witnessing the manifestation of an event that folded carefully into my subconscious, transformed and revealed.

We were at school not just to learn. We were there as covert operators to do justice, rise up and overcome the violence of imperialism, bigotry, strange handshakes and the subtle determinations of surnames. Education sets you free – not violence. My mother once told me she had applied for a part-time job at Queen's University's Staff Common Room. It was the late sixties, and to have any chance at getting the position, she dropped the 'y' off of our name, Duffy, and spelt her first name as Moira rather than Maura. This rearrangement of letters, now spelling 'Moira Duff', indicated Protestant Scottish descent, rather than Catholic Irish. She got the job. Recent election results didn't fall overnight from the sky, they were shaped and imagined by individual stories of personal courage and determination, by peacefully finding the right combination to unlocking the door and then keeping it open for others.

The 2016 *Souvenir Shop* project had its beginnings in the shattered foundations of our local co-op grocery. The shop materialised as a public art project from a memory that had bubbled up to the surface:

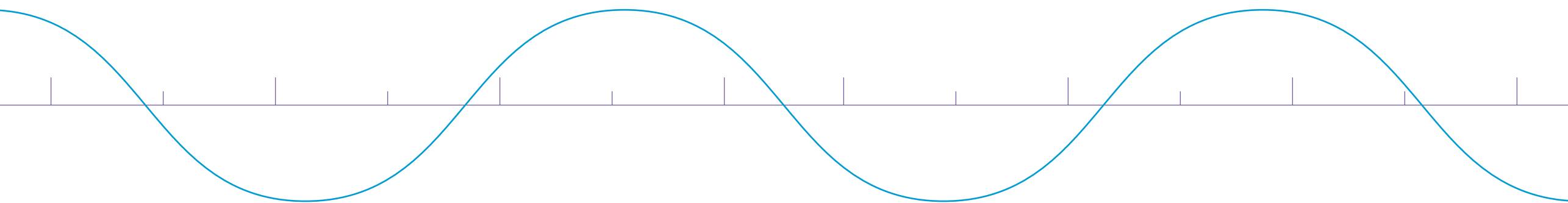
'I stepped off the bus from school outside Hamilton's newsagent's one evening in 1973. It was dark, wintertime and dismal, my only thoughts running to what I'd wear when I'd shed my maroon uniform. Such is the inner workings of the 14-year-old mind. Curiously, metal pedestrian barriers lined the Stranmillis Road, securing a flow of teatime travellers in their cars. I walked towards the zebra crossing – rolled out like a huge black and white rug – leading directly to St Ives Gardens. I stood between the belisha beacons, both feet planted carefully on the curb, and gradually the full spectacle of our local grocery shop in rubble came into focus. My senses took flight. I might have been standing on a magic carpet held in a moment of perfect, surreal motionlessness. Tins and boxes littered the rubble, chaotic shapes strewn over the tangle of pipes and what was left of the shop's alarm. What once opened its door miraculously to 129540 – the magic account number – was in tatters. The initial shock gave way to a simple realisation: someone had blown up the co-op at the end of our street, and the contents were disgorged onto the pavement. A sharp energy fled to my legs – was our house still there? Three doors behind a mountain of debris and groceries, I pushed my hand to the upright front door. What had been there when I left for school was no longer. All had changed, utterly..'

When the event is gone, we are left with stories. With a historical event, we not only have to bear witness – that is, tell what happened and address the needs of ghosts – we also have to interpret and conclude so that the needs of people today, they, the children of the ghosts, can be addressed in addition to the knowledge of history. We need the understanding of art, and stories to identify, even unify, to give meaning. Just as a painting makes sense of colour, stories make sense of life.

I made a choice to make art with support from individuals and arts councils, and I have made it my life's work. Right now, just as the most recent surge of the coronavirus pandemic has ebbed, a war has broken out in Europe and our entire planet is in crisis.

Anxieties are piling up, and yet people seem determined to step stubbornly into some semblance of an outdated normalcy. If anything, this spring is a conflicted and bittersweet season and it is now time to consider how we share this island. There are no borders in the Irish imagination. The arts are a vital force in how we recognise ourselves and each other. On the occasion of the Arts Council's 70th anniversary, it might just be the moment for a bold and brave unification of creativity. By bringing the two arts councils into one, and combining our experiences and strengths, we might look forward together and imagine ourselves better – with art at the centre of our lives, reaching into every village and over every ditch of this small territory.

Sandy Fitzgerald



In 1974, Grapevine Arts Centre opened its doors for the first time in a small room at 53 Mary Street, Dublin. Later that same year, we applied to the Arts Council for a grant. One morning, shortly afterwards, I was on my own in the centre when a young man, glowing with intent and purpose, strode into the space and introduced himself as Colm Ó Briain, the newly appointed Director of the Arts Council. He had crossed the Liffey to see what we were up to for himself.

Looking back on this meeting, it is extraordinary that someone recently charged with developing an organisation like the Arts Council for the twentieth century would take the time out to visit a peripheral project in a semi-derelict building, in an area of Dublin described as ‘Indian territory’ by an evening newspaper in a review of our first exhibition. But Ó Briain did, and we subsequently received our first grant from the Council amounting to a total of £250. What we didn’t realise at the time was that we were now clients of the Arts Council, with the opportunity to receive a grant every year, an eventuality that came to pass over the next thirty years. This partnership with the Council allowed for the centre’s development to a point where it became one of the largest arts facilities in Ireland by 1988 – but it was that first grant that was the most critical, because it gave us the recognition and empowerment to go on, offering tangible support for a young dream, and that is hard to overestimate.

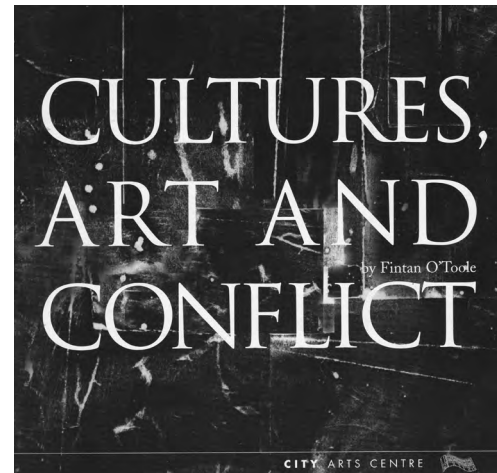


City Arts Centre, Moss Street, Dublin

Dreams are important, both personally and collectively. As Grapevine progressed, we spent a lot of time analysing and building our mission. Perhaps it was our – predominantly working-class – background that made us so concerned with validating our work and legitimising our dream. We lacked confidence because the arts were not supposed to be for the likes of us. Traditionally, ‘arts people’ did not question their right or justification for what they did. There was a sense of entitlement. But over the coming years, particularly when we became aware of the community arts movement in the UK, we felt not only that our work was legitimate, but we began to interrogate the role and purpose of the arts in society. It is to the Arts Council’s credit that they joined us on that journey.

Fast forward to 1984 and to the first all-Ireland community arts seminar, which took place at the North Star Hotel, Dublin, and which Grapevine was instrumental in organising. During this seminar, guest speaker Jenny Harris from the Albany Empire in London said, ‘What cultural democracy is about is learning to tell your own story on an equal footing with all

other stories’. What became clear to us then was that if only artists are ceded the right to represent culture, then the majority of people are denied a voice to tell their stories. It also brought the terms ‘art’ and ‘culture’ into sharp focus. No one seemed to question these terms then or, indeed, now. It may be that the arts are the responsibility of a funding body like the Arts Council, but culture is surely a collective responsibility, a societal responsibility, of social leaders, educationalists, policymakers and ultimately governments, as representatives of the people. Cultural development should be embedded in the services and freedoms that a real democracy espouses, in every aspect of citizens’ rights and aspirations. These were the issues that underpinned that seminar, chaired by one Michael D. Higgins, and gave rise to CAFE (Creative Activity For Everyone), the representative body for community arts in Ireland. The Arts Council granted financial assistance to that first community arts gathering and was already funding community arts activities to the tune of £69,000 by 1984, making it a key player in the debate. But its remit as funders of the arts left the



A commissioned essay, as part of City Arts Centre’s ‘Cultures, Art and Conflict’ programme, that involved participants from Dublin communities, both sides of the divide in Belfast and from Serbia, Palestine and Israel during the 1990s

support for culture in limbo, and as long as arts and culture were synonymous, the tricky questions of cultural recognition and cultural equality could be and still can be ignored.

As Grapevine developed, moving several times into bigger spaces in the city, so did our awareness and connection with other arts and culture activists in Ireland and abroad. By the end of the 1980s, we had moved into a large warehouse space on City Quay and changed our name to City Arts Centre, forging strong relationships with the dockside community there, and at the same time building our international contacts. The rootedness of our work in the local area was the foundation for everything we did – but bridging with sister organisations and projects in Ireland and abroad was vital if arts and culture were to have the impact for the positive change that we felt was possible.

One of the key shifts in consciousness for me was the Balkan wars of the 1990s, and seeing displaced people fleeing as refugees. They had escaped the conflict and had the basic needs for survival: shelter, food, water. But the emptiness in their eyes, the absence of hope, the depletion of spirit, represented something more profound. While the tangible

needs for human survival are essential, the intangible needs are also important: a way of life, traditions, rituals, symbols, community. In other words, culture. Simply existing is not living. We see this again and again, not least with the current conflict in Ukraine.

In 1997, City Arts Centre initiated a project called ‘Cultures, Art and Conflict’. This was an outcome of our work and partnerships in Northern Ireland and the Balkans. We also had a connection to a very interesting initiative in Israel that connected young Israelis and Palestinians. Besides bringing these various communities together to share their experiences through creative projects, we published a number of essays. In a text commissioned from Fintan O’Toole, he wrote that, ‘Differences between peoples are not racial or biological, but cultural’. This sentiment was highlighted throughout the project. Invariably, the young participants from various sides of the divides had never met their counterparts before. All of their fears and prejudices melted away when they found that the other participants were just like them, and that the cultural constructs they had brought with them to the project were just that: constructs.

Furthermore, as part of this project and through our membership of the network Trans Europe Halles, we had a strong working relationship with a cultural centre in Belgrade called Cinema REX. During the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999, we set up a direct link with our friends in that centre and fed a real-time livestream daily onto a screen in City Arts Centre’s restaurant. This was controversial at the time because there was a lot of support for NATO’s bombing campaign, but it was also the case that all Serbians had been demonised, not just the regime. We received some aggressive blowback from some of our users, and even from some of our staff, but it opened up a discussion and provided an opportunity to show that culture should be about human relationships and solidarity, not division, and that the arts should exemplify this.

Artists in War



Program by the Jam Factory Art Center



The Jam Factory, a cultural centre in Lviv, Ukraine, resumes programming amid war

Now we have another war, the barbaric invasion of Ukraine. It just so happens that in my current role as a co-director of Olivearte Cultural Agency, we have worked with the development of a cultural centre in Lviv over the past two years – the Jam Factory. The Jam Factory was set to open this year but has now become a bomb shelter. At this I am reminded again of the importance of culture, as refugees try to escape death and destruction in their homeland. This is why an alternative set of relationships and agile connections are so important, showing that a humanistic approach can prevail over oppressive and hateful contrivances. Culture wars are now being used to divide us politically and socially, giving permission for prejudice to flourish and lies to fester, sometimes leading to unspeakable inhumanity.

We must reclaim culture, by recognising, facilitating and valuing equally all stories, in whatever creative form they are voiced. Culture should be given the central and predominant role that it merits in society. Which brings us to the important question of definitions that was alluded to earlier. If arts and culture are not synonymous, then defining what they mean is a fair question and one that I

have researched, debated and written about on many occasions. While much of the discourse around this topic is abstract and academic, my concern is to show the connection and relevance of culture to the reality of people's lives – to show how art and creative expression can make a difference, and to advocate for the importance of cultural equality and democracy. While artists often cite the necessity not to instrumentalise art on the basis that artistic freedom is the priority, it becomes clear in circumstances where lives are debased or threatened, that with freedom comes responsibility. Yes, I can state categorically that we did instrumentalise the arts in community practice. In fact, our byline at Grapevine was 'Putting the arts to work for the community in ways that are relevant, practical and exciting'. If the artist wanted to create signature works, that is fine, but it was not what we were about. Joseph Beuys articulated this approach more poetically. He proposed the theory that everything is art and that every aspect of life could be approached creatively, concluding that everyone has the potential to be an artist. This led to the development of his theory of 'social sculpture' which proposes that art holds the possibility to transform society, and that an artist can be a 'social sculptor' using language, thoughts, actions and objects to help transform society. In other words, putting the arts to work. With regard to a definition of culture, and after many years of reflection, my simple definition is 'culture is about having a future'. Because, to paraphrase Beuys, the future is created, like any artwork, from abstract to reality. It is a blank canvas and everyone has the ability to decide what to create on that canvas, in the next minute, hour, day or lifetime. This is what cultural empowerment means: the realisation that we have the power to change the future. And if people are empowered by the thought of creating their future, then you begin to see why this is so threatening to those who want control. This is Putin's fear and his reason for oppression at home and in Ukraine. This is why the cultural centre in

Lviv is a threat to his power and, along with every other blank canvas, has to be destroyed. Putin, and all the derivations of Putin, want to destroy the future – where cultural development means to invest in the future.

For similar reasons to Putin's war on Ukrainian culture, community arts was all but destroyed by the neo-liberal agenda, led by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, because they saw it as a threat. What replaced it was part of late twentieth century capitalism driven by an obsession with return on investment (in this case, funding), which resulted in the prioritisation of centres of excellence at the expense of process-based and inclusive platforms, and the promotion of cultural and creative industries. Such outcomes are a form of cultural privatisation that monetise and commodify culture or, at worst, weaponise culture, commandeering it, as representative of nationalistic greatness and superiority. This is our struggle in the modern world: to reclaim culture's role in society, not as an industry or entertainment, nor as a tool for political gain, but as a way of creating a better future.

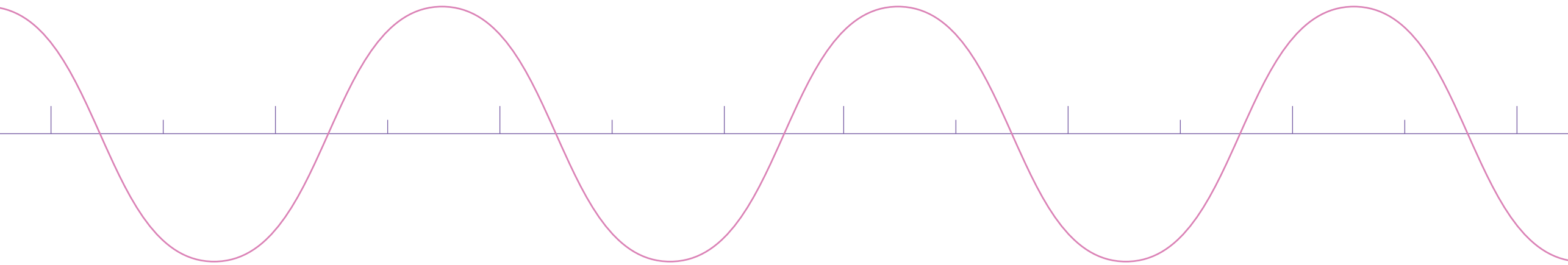
At the moment, the world looks bleak. It is hard not to be depressed by the constant barrage of bad news. But, if you zoom out, there is another reality. Despite rampaging regimes, the demonisation of the other and relentless destruction of the planet, alternative values are informing support for responses to these challenges. We see it on the ground every day, driven by human contact within communities. People working together, supporting each other and finding strength in openness and solidarity. This is particularly strong amongst arts and culture communities. Discussions on the wires talk of processes and projects that will address environmental sustainability, COVID recovery, refugee needs and much more. Collectively this is a movement whereby humanity has a future and we support each other in dreaming this future into reality. While we are fed nihilism across our internet feeds, it is also the case that the web offers the possibility to connect and create together. Every day I see small

miracles, and sometimes it doesn't take more than connecting with others. In 1990, City Arts Centre joined Trans Europe Halles, the European network of independent cultural centres. It was through this network that many possibilities began to open up across Europe, and the strength and power of diversity became real. Again, the Arts Council understood and supported this, not least through its travel scheme at the time. At last count, there are over 200 pan-European networks related to arts and culture, covering everything from festivals (the European Festivals Association) to choral singing (the European Choral Association). As a way of going international, it is an excellent first step to join a relevant network, to engage with a wider consciousness. We are all in this together, and must uncouple ourselves from the triumphalist notions that are looking more and more outdated. We can't compete with nature, we can't exploit the earth without impunity, we can't trample over others imperially, without dire consequences.

In 1989, the Arts Council published the results of its ACE (Arts, Community, Education) action research programme, an example of how central community arts had become in the Republic by that time. In this report it stated that '...the understandings and practices of contemporary culture are so diverse at the end of the twentieth century as to call into question the possibilities of an Arts Council, as constituted, staffed and funded at present, being able to address all of its responsibilities in any meaningful way'. This alludes to the fact that the Arts Council has always been under-funded, under-staffed and marginalised within the policy decisions of successive governments. However, what it has achieved with limited resources and support is astonishing. I go back now to 1974 and how a small grant helped a fragile dream to take root and flourish, creating a safe and open space for other dreams and possibilities. The Arts Council can be seen as a seed funder, implementing the original meaning of the word and function of culture, in its Latin root 'cultura',

meaning 'to cultivate, the tilling of land and preparing the earth for crops'. In this world of much destruction, we need to nurture and protect those who cultivate, be they artists, custodians of dream spaces, facilitators of freedom of expression or simply carers of our imagination. I would argue that the Arts Council is one such nurturing organisation, but it operates in a cultural vacuum that needs the serious engagement of government for a public debate, recommendations and actions to address a cultural vision for Ireland, inclusive of all of its people, into the future. We are a small country that has had a huge artistic impact on the world. We can do the same culturally by recognising the true meaning of culture and by placing cultural development and creativity at the centre of our policies for a sustainable society – socially, economically and environmentally.

Ailbhe Ní Ghearbhuigh



Athshamhlú an Dúchais

Bhfuil sí agat ó dhúchas?

Cad tá á fhiosrú nuair a fhiafraítear an cheist seo? Bhfuil teanga agat ón gcliabhán? Bhfuil ceol ag do mhuintir? An mbíodh cáil na scéalaíochta nó an cúpla steip ar do shinsir? Tuigtear ón méid seo go gcuirtear an teanga, an bua, an cultúr ar aghaidh ó ghlúin go glúin. Cá bhfágann san an té gan cheangal muintire leis an gcultúr dúchais? An bhfuil cead cainte aige, cead ceoil, cead pocléimní ar urlár rince? Tá, gan amhras. Ní le haon dream amháin an cultúr ná an teanga. Baineann siad leis an rud teibí sin ar a dtugaimid ‘ár n-oidhreacht’. In aiste ar fhilíocht na mbard le déanaí, thagair an file Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin don ‘literary estate we inherit’. Níl sa litríocht ach cuid de thailte méithe an eastáit: chuirfinn móinteáin ilchisealacha na hamhránaíochta leis, mar aon le coillte diamhra an bhéaloidis, agus aileach creagach an tsean-nóis. Ní hí an Ghaeltacht *per se* atá i gceist agam anseo, ach dúiche na Gaeilge. Feictear domsa go bhfuil mórán Éireann ealaíontóirí inniu a thuigeann an bhrí agus an bheocht, an cothú agus an lón anama atá ar fáil go fial i ndúiche na Gaeilge.

Tarlaíonn splanc nuair a thagann ealaíontóirí le chéile i mbun oibre. Fairsingítear an dúchas. Tógtar tóchar idir an traidisiún agus an lá inniu. Síntear an tuiscint atá againn ar an ealaín. San ionad ealaíne Triskel a bhíos nuair a rith cuid de na smaointe seo liom is mé ag éisteacht le Nell Ní Chróinín agus Cormac McCarthy i dteannta María Ryan ar an veidhlín agus Kate Ellis ar an dordveidhíl. A luaithe is a thosaigh Cormac McCarthy ar an *groove* ar an bpianó, bhí sé dár dtabhairt chuig fearann eile san amhrán 'Iníon an Phalaitínigh'. Agus *lá bréa aoibhinn margaidh is mé ag gabháil trí Bhaile an tSioda*, a chan Nell go binn, mar is dual di, poncaíocht shioncóipithe na dtéaduirlisí ag spraoi léi. Sheas an t-amhrán agus an t-amhránaí astu féin, ach chuir an ceol nuachumtha gné bhreise leis an bpíosa.

Bhí Cormac McCarthy i measc na gcumadóirí a ghlac páirt sa togra *Róisín Reimagined*, inar athshamhláodh amhráin mhóra na Gaeilge le tionlacan Ceolfhoireann Aireagail na hÉireann. Trí shaothar na gcumadóirí, osclaítear na hamhráin thraidisiúnta amach do sheánraí eile ceoil agus is éachtach mar a éiríonn leo cumasc maorga a chruthú. Is fiú léiritheoir an togra, Dónal O'Connor, a mholadh freisin: ach an oiread le 'Iníon an Phalaitínigh', ní phlúchtar an t-amhrán traidisiúnta; is amhlaidh go séidtear gaoth aduain tríd an gceol.



Róisín Reimagined á léiriú ag Muireann Nic Amhlaóibh i rith Kilkenny Arts Festival, 2021 | Grianghraf: buíochas ó Muireann Nic Amhlaóibh

Ba é ceol Chormaic Uí Bheaglaóich a chuir an cóiréagrafaí Michael Keegan-Dolan faoi gheasa agus a spreag an seó damhsa *Mám*. Tuairt ab ea an teacht le chéile seo idir teangacha, seánraí ceoil, stíleanna rince agus b'as an teannas sin a fáisceadh spréach an taispeántais. Tá cuntas ar an bpróiseas seo ag Pat Collins sa scannán *The Dance* a dhein sé i gcomhpháirt le Keegan-Dolan. Díol suntais gur ainm Gaeilge a tugadh ar an seó, *Mám*, focal a bhfuil bríonna éagsúla leis, ach a shamhláimse sa chás seo mar bhearnas nó bealach thar sliabh, conair nua shamhlaíoch á treabhadh ar shliabh an traidisiúin.

Nil teora leis an saoirse / Ná le cnoca na samhlaíochta a scríobh an Ríordánach agus é ag cáiseamh aonaránachas an ealaíontóra. Nuair a cheolann Iarla Ó Lionáird an dán seo i dteannta The Gloaming, fágtar slí (mám, fiú) do na ceoltóirí a gcuid féin a dhéanamh d'uaigneas casta an dáin. Dán eile le file Gaeilge atá anois mar chuid de stór an Gloaming is ea 'Áthas' le Liam Ó Muirhíle. Próiseas na cumadóireachta is ábhar don dán seo is nuair a chloisim an líne: *Rófhada a bhíos i ngreim ag déantús an dáin* i mbéal Uí Lionáird, tuigtear dom gur fuirist a bheith róghafa le déantús an ruda, pé ar bith an dán nó pictiúr nó dealbh a bhíonn idir lámha againn. Ní mór scaoileadh leis pas beag chun an tslí a dhéanamh don *instinct* (ar aistriú eile é ar an bhfocal 'dúchas'). Tá an dáimh seo a bhraitheann Ó Lionáird le saothar na bhfilí Gaeilge á roinnt anois aige ar ardáin ar fud na cruinne.

Tá ardán eile ar fad aimsithe ag ealaíontóirí Gaeilge ó tosaíodh ar fhadscannáin Ghaeilge a dhéanamh faoi choimirce Cine 4. Ar na scannáin sin, tá *Arracht*, a scríobh agus a bhí faoi stiúir Tom Sullivan. Le linn an Drochshaoil a tharlaíonn eachtraí an scéil, an tréimhse is ainnise, b'fhéidir, dá bhfacthas ar an oileán seo. Snáth rí-thábhachtach i scéal ár ndúchais is ea an Drochshaoil; ní féidir meon an lae inniu i leith na Gaeilge ná i leith an chultúir dhúchais a thuiscint dá cheal. Tugadh léargas ar an teacht aniar in ainneoin an ghátair, gan aon chuid den ngátar a cheilt orainn.



Tommy Tiernan i *Samhlú 2020* de chuid Fíbin | Grianghraf: Maurice Gunning

Fuarthas léiriú iomlán éagsúil ar teacht aniar atá sa chultúr dúchais sa chlár *Samhlú 2020* a craoladh ar an scáileán beag le linn na paindéime. Meitheal ealaíontóirí a bailíodh le chéile chun ceiliúradh a dhéanamh ar an gcultúr dúchais tráth go raibh ardú meanman ag teastáil go géar ón gcosmhuintir. Tá moladh mór ag dul don gcomhlacht Léiriúcháin Fíbin as feabhas agus uaimhian an chlár, a chuir plúr na siamsóirí os comhair an phobail, agus arbh é an mhír le Julie Feeney agus Séamus Ó Flatharta ba mhó a chuir ola ar mo chroí. Raghadh an t-iomlán i bhfeidhm ar níos mó daoine fós ach ardán níos leithne a aimsiú dó. Ach creid é nó ná creid, ní ar son an ardáin mhóir ná cáil dhomhanda a bhíonn an t-ealaíontóir Gaeilge i mbun a c(h)eirde. De ghrá na healaíne a dhéantar é, d'fhonn rud éigin fiúntach a rá; tarlaíonn gurb í an Ghaeilge an meán a roghnaítear. Is í an Ghaeilge a roghnaítear mar go gcreidtear gur meán dlísteanaigh í, gur meán cumhachtach í. Is í an Ghaeilge a roghnaítear mar go bhfuiltear ag iarraidh an píosa ealaíne a fhréamhú sa chultúr dúchais agus, san am céanna, a neadú sa saol comhaimseartha. Má tá teacht ar *Weltanschauung* ar leith sa Ghaeilge – agus creidim go bhfuil – is é sin an rud go

mbítear ag iarraidh a chur in iúl san ealaín, é a shíneadh, nó dúshlán a thabhairt dó. Agus cé nach bhfuiltear ag dréim le lucht féachana ollmhór, táthar ag iarraidh lucht féachana mar sin féin. Tá obair le déanamh ag lucht eagair féiltí, ag eagarthóirí irisleabhar, ag léiritheoirí dánlann, ag na meáin chumarsáide agus eile chun áit a dhéanamh don sárealáin atá ar bun trí Ghaeilge i láthair na huaire.

Thosnaíos an aiste seo ag trácht ar na comhshaothair spleodraacha atá tugtha faoi deara agam le déanaí a d'eascair as an gcultúr dúchais. Ba dheas liom díriú anois ar chás an neach chorr úd - an scríbhneoir Gaeilge - óir is é sin is mó a bhfuil cur amach agam air. Bím féin ag obair i ngort na litríochta, ag treabhadh liom in iomaire na filíochta, beag beann ar éinne.

Níl sé sin iomlán fíor, bíonn aird agam ar dhaoine áirithe is mé ag scríobh. Cuirim dánta chuig mo chomhfhilí, féachaint an bhfuilim ar an mbóthar ceart, nó an bhfuilim imithe ar seachrán. Bím ag iarraidh a dheimhniú nach bhfuil an teanga curtha as a riocht an iomarca agam san ionramháil a bhíonn ar siúl agam léi. Cuid de dhualgas an fhile is ea an teanga a iniúchadh is a chur faoi bhrú, ach tá srianta dofheicthe aici nach n-aithnítear nó go mbíonn siad sáraithe. Gné thaitneamhach – mealltach, fiú – is ea t eorannacha na teanga a phromhadh.

Obair mhall, aonaránach is ea é bheith ag iarraidh dán a scríobh go comhfhiosach, gan trácht ar ghuth fileata a 'aimsiú' is a 'chruthú' is a 'fhorbairt', próiseas a tharlaíonn sa bhfochomhfhios, is dócha. Nuair a bhronnann An Chomhairle Ealaíon sparántacht ar ealaíontóir, tugtar deis dó nó di seal a chaitheamh ag promhadh, rud a iniúchadh, an tslí a bhrath romhat. Tá an triail sin riachtanach d'aon togra ealaíne, cuma an comhshaothar nó obair duine aonair atá i gceist.

Más obair aonaránach í seo, gabhaim buíochas leis na déithe nach scríbhneoir próis mé. Ní mar mhagadh a deirim é sin, ach toisc go bhfuil neart i bhfilíocht na Gaeilge faoi láthair, ní hamháin ó thaobh feabhas na scríbhneoireachta ach toisc a líonmhaire is atá na filí. Ní miste a rá gur furasta i bhfad an dán

Gaeilge a chur i láthair slua anaithnid, seachas píosa próis. Is féidir scéal an dán a aithris as Béarla, mar a dhéanann Bidy Jenkinson uaireanta. Is féidir dul i muinín aistriúchán Béarla i dteannta an bhundáin, mar is nós le Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill a dhéanamh. D'fhéadfaí an dán a cheol à *la* Marcus Mac Conghail. Nó d'fhéadfaí an dán a shníomh isteach i mbuillí hip hop, mar atá déanta ag Séamus Barra Ó Súilleabháin faoin ainm Súil Amháin. Níl sé baileach chomh héasca ag an scríbhneoir próis Gaeilge freastal ar lucht féachana nach bhfuil an Ghaeilge ar a dtoil acu. Ceist eile is ea í ar chóir go mbeimis ag freastal ar lucht an Bhéarla, ach ag ócáidí liteartha, is leasc liom daoine a chur ó dhoras toisc nach bhfuil an teanga acu. Braithim dáimh láidir le mo chuid comhfhilí toisc go bhfeicim iad ag féiltí litríochta, ach ní léir dom go mbíonn scríbhneoirí próis Gaeilge ar chlár na bhféiltí móra (Béarla). Díol trua an méid sin, toisc scríbhneoirí breátha próis a bheith thart faoi láthair, Tadhg Mac Dhonnagáin, Réaltán Ní Leannáin, Eoghan Mac Giolla Bhríde agus Colm Ó Ceallacháin, gan ach dornán beag a ainmniú.

Agus cé nach bhfuil lucht léitheoireachta fairsing ag an scríbhneoir Gaeilge, is báúil agus is tuisceanach an pobal atá againn. Mairimid in éiceachóras leochaileach, gan amhras, atá beo ar thacaíocht an stáit, go háirithe ón gComhairle Ealaín. Gan na ceardlanna a chothaíonn scríbhneoirí, gan na hirisí ag foilsiú na ndrachaí promhaidh, gan na sparántachtaí a ligeann don údar barr feabhais a chur ar shaothar, gan na foilsitheoirí a chuireann na leabhair amach, gan na féiltí inar féidir an saothar a chur i láthair agus lucht éisteachta a mhealladh, thitfeadh an gnó ar fad as a chéile. Táimid ar fad ag brath ar a chéile. Ar scáth a chéile.

Is minic a thráchtar ar 'thobar' an dúchais, ach is teoranta an meafar é sin, dar liom. Tá doimhneacht ann, siúrálte, ach ní thuigtear fairsinge ná ilghnéitheacht an dúcháis. An samhradh seo caite, a bhúil leis an gComhairle Ealaín, chaitheas coicís i mBaile Mhúirne ag foghlaim teanga nua.

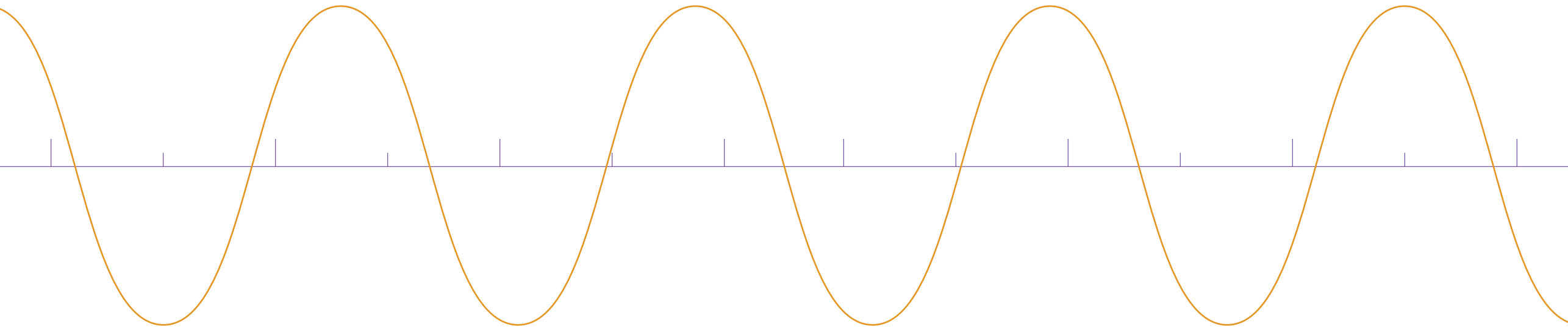
I dteannta bheirt rinceoirí comhaimseartha a bhíos, Siobhán Ní Dhuinnín agus Sibéal Davitt, agus cé nach rabhas ag rince leo, is mó a thugas liom i dtaobh chumas nó 'teanga' na colainne. Dheineas iontas den raon léirithe a bhí ag an gcorp oilte, gan trácht ar an tslí go bhféadfaidís rud éigin a thuiscint *trina* gcolainn. Oscailt súl ab ea é sin sa tréimhse chónaitheach i mBaile Mhúirne. Bhíomar triúr ann ag fiosrú na gcéadfaí sa Ghaeilge – mise mar thaighdeoir agus file, agus iadsan mar rinceoirí. Labhraíomar faoin bpléisiúr collaí sa traidisiún Gaelach, go háirithe san fhilíocht. Agus sinn i mbun iniúchta ar fhocail agus frásaí áirithe, dheineamar iad a phromhadh inár mbealaí féin. Gan aon agó, bhraitheas mo thuiscint ar an ealaín ag fairsingiú agus mé ag faire ar na gluaiseachtaí, agus bhí m'uirlis féin – mo chuid Gaeilge - á hacúlú tríd an bplé. Ba í an teanga a bhí mar bhunsraith na hoibre a bhí ar siúl againn i mBaile Mhúirne ó tharla gurb í an Ghaeilge a labhraímid triúr le chéile. Agus cé nach rince 'dúchasach' é an damhsa comhaimseartha, tuigtear dúinn go mbaineann an obair a dheineamar le chéile go dlúth leis an dúchas.

Tá siúráil agus muinín le tabhairt faoi deara in ealaíontóirí Gaeilge an lae inniu. Tá tuiscint ar leith acu ar an gcultúr dúchais agus meas acu air dá réir. Tuigeann siad an mianach atá ann agus tá siad inniúil ar a gcuid féin a dhéanamh de. Is léir ó *Samhlú 2020, Róisín Reimagined* agus na tograí eile go bhfuiltear ag dul i ngleic leis an dúchas ar bhealaí nua. Crann taca is ea An Chomhairle Ealaíon san obair seo go léir. Níl aon amhras orm ach go bhféachfar siar ar an tréimhse seo mar thús ré órga, tráth ina raibh athshamhlú á dhéanamh ar dhúiche na Gaeilge agus macallaí nua á mbaint as an dúchas. Caithfear éisteacht.



Sibéal Davitt, Siobhán Ní Dhuinnín agus Ailbhe Ní Ghearbhuigh | Grianghraf: Ionad Cultúrtha Bhaile Mhúirne

Beulah Ezeugo & Joselle Ntumba



Reflections on a Diverse Ireland and The Role of the Arts in Celebrating Contemporary Irish Culture

The Éireann and I website opens with an image from 2001, donated by Pastor Larry Ovie. Pictured is a group of choir singers at Galway's first established African Church in the Eglinton Hotel Direct Provision Centre. The choir singers are all Black women, donned in matching cobalt and orange gowns and various trendy hairstyles; blonde box braids, side-swept wigs and bobs, leading an out-of-frame congregation in song. Each with a mic in hand, the passion is clear on their faces. The text overlaid introduces the archive, its goal and its functions:

An archive of black life for Black migrants in Ireland.

Éireann and I is a community archive that chronicles stories centred on heritage, activism, and art.

We are part of a growing movement of grassroots efforts from marginalized communities to collect and make accessible our own experiences outside of traditional archival institutions.

This archive functions as a space where we can make collective decisions about what is valuable for preservation, shape collective memory of our experiences, and control the means by which stories of our past and present are constructed.



First Established African Church in Eglinton Hotel, Direct Provision Centre 2001 | Credit: Larry Ovie

The archive is a creative project led by the two of us (Joselle Ntumba and Beulah Ezeugo). One of our many commonalities includes being migrants from Africa – Congo and Nigeria, respectively. We are members of the generation of young adults who entered Ireland during the early 2000s when migration, mostly by Nigerian and Romanian nationals, surged as a response to shifting global conditions. This new population make-up created two distinct groups; a multilocal, self-conscious social group, struggling to locate themselves between two cultural identities, and an indigenous group who, in response to this change, became preoccupied with reinforcing a dichotomy of us/them. This often meant people who didn't appear Irish were relegated to 'other' or alien. If a story is told enough, it can become a collective truth that is woven into public knowledge and then weaponised by dominant forces.

For example, urban legends of exploitative and welfare-reliant Black mothers directly correlate to a vote by 79 per cent of the Irish public for the government to usher in stricter border controls and revoke constitutional entitlement to citizenship under the Twenty-seventh Amendment of the Constitution Bill 2004. These narratives have a significant impact on our senses of self, and how we as migrants structure our identities. Herein lies the importance of memory work. When creating the archive, we were motivated specifically by the question, 'What do our experiences look like when they are collected, contextualised and curated by and for ourselves?'. In response to this question, we set out to create an archive that was as 'alive', inclusive and polyvocal as possible. The photographs and stories within the archive aim to represent the multiple experiences of the Black diaspora in Ireland.

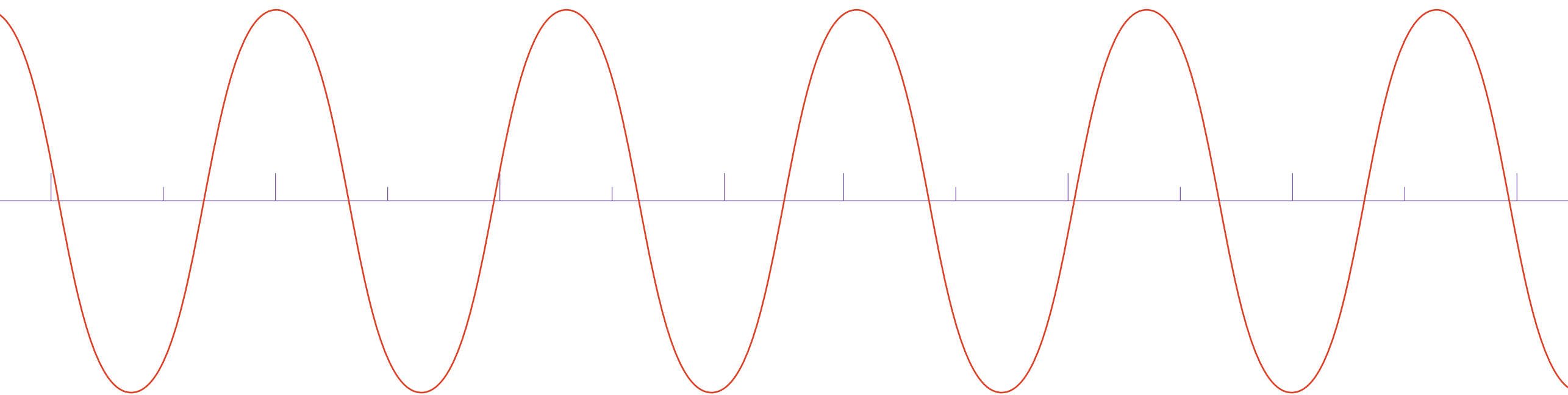
Our first workshop, titled 'Remembrance/Resistance', took place in October 2020. We invited participants to reflect on how, and if, remembering together can function as an act of collective liberation. In the workshop participants were invited to draw on their own core memories centring on culture, migration and community. We explored how storytelling and record-keeping are necessary tools in creating counter-narratives that contest unpleasant portrayals of what it means to be a Black migrant. Through our collaboration on Alice Rekab's FAMILY LINES project in 2022, we led a workshop called 'Race, Place and Belonging' in the Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin. For this workshop, participants were invited to bring an object from their families' archives and contextualise it using other participants' objects, highlighting both implicit cultural connections and shared experiences of movement and displacement. As artists who engage with specific communities, we are required to think carefully about how we host the people we invite into the spaces we create – and as newcomers to the art world, we are constantly reflecting on how we wish to be hosted by the groups and institutions we collaborate with. We find that our work, along with many others', has been swept upwards in the current of new diversity policies that aim to respond to the changing makeup of Ireland and the new demands from marginalised artists. This new welcome is enjoyable; minority artists and people who engage with art can finally see ourselves reflected and have our cultural contributions recognised.

However, the institutional focus on showcasing diversity is not always a good thing, and often it is far removed from the goals of the individuals it ostensibly seeks to benefit.

It isn't unusual that we are granted collaborative opportunities but later find that the same collaborators do not meaningfully engage with our work, its guiding principles or the communities it aims to represent. It is quite easy to feel lumped into the category of 'new Black project', resourced and platformed only to satiate cultural demands post-Black Lives Matter. There is less change where it truly matters. The same people decide the pace of change; who is invited to the table, for how long, and how they are made to feel once they are there. When engaging with the communities we seek to represent, we are cautious of the value of each individual's contribution. This means resisting resting on the archive's ability to visually represent something vaguely progressive. Instead, we seek to fully acknowledge the personal significance of each object contributed, draw out its nuances, and in this process create a collaborative relationship that prioritises a meaningful lateral exchange. In other words, we aim to be both the host and the guest. This work only means something when institutions fully enter a meaningful exchange with both the art workers and the communities they have invited in. Without this, celebrations of diversity can feel tokenistic; it can feel like a request to assimilate, to refrain from challenging notions, in exchange for representation.

Although the arts sector has made improvements, there is still much more to be reformed so that we can fully reflect the diversity of contemporary Ireland. The archive aims to be a testament to our dedication to our families and the preservation of our culture. Rather than victims of dominant structures, we are world weavers, collectively mapping the worlds from which we came to reveal our goals and the path towards which we are headed.

Kevin Rafter



Money doesn't solve every problem but it helps

In *The Alternative*, by Michael Patrick and Oisín Kearney, audiences are transferred to a parallel universe. The War of Independence and Civil War never happened. Ireland is still part of the United Kingdom, and the play opens with the national anthem – ‘God Save the Queen’ as Gaeilge.

The backdrop is a referendum campaign to decide the future constitutional status of the island of Ireland. In a television studio, the Irish-born Prime Minister of Great Britain and Ireland is preparing to make the case for remaining in the Union, in a live debate with the opposition leader who favours independence. The clever twist on real-life events raised smiles for audiences when *The Alternative* premiered at the Pavillion Theatre in 2019 as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival.

The fall-out from the UK's Brexit referendum was playing out in real-time as the Fishamble Theatre Company production made its way to different regional arts venues. Negotiations between the European Union and the British government were underway on a withdrawal deal, a possible exit date and what was then described as the ‘backstop plan’ to avoid a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. A week after *The Alternative* closed its tour – appropriately, at the Lyric Theatre in Belfast – a new protocol was agreed. It was optimistically hoped at the time that the protocol would resolve the Brexit ‘border impasse’.¹

¹ BBC News, *Brexit: What is in Boris Johnson's new deal with the EU?*, 21 October 2019. See: www.bbc.com/news/uk-50083026

² ‘A robust grace’ *Irish Arts Review* (Winter 2004), 72–9

³ ‘Move to advance nation in cultural space’ *Irish Independent*, 26 Jan. 1952

⁴ Correspondence between Costello and Sweetman, 1956, TAOIS/S 15225C. NAI

⁵ Sebastian Barry, *Hinterland* (Royal National Theatre/Abbey Theatre), 2002

⁶ Alexandra Dilys-Slaby, Interview with Michael D. Higgins, Minister of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht between 1993 and 1997, *Revue LISA/LISA e-journal*, 2/4 2004, 211–20

As the referendum debate commences in *The Alternative*, the television moderator announces, 'Voting is now only one day away, in the most important decision Ireland has ever been asked to make.' The play's political leaders argue their respective positions in language very familiar to the UK's real-life Brexit campaign in 2016: 'I ask you not to forget that Britishness is in our history. It's in the stories of our heroes. It's in our blood. That's why we should vote Remain,' the Prime Minister declares. In pressing the Leave proposition, her opponent asserts, 'We can take back control over our laws, our taxes, our borders, and security.'

Work like *The Alternative* is very much in tune with the ambition in *Making Great Art Work*, the Arts Council's strategic plan covering the years 2016 to 2025. Strategic plans can be seen as stuffy and bureaucratic documents, but they have the advantage of offering a guide to travel – where we want to get to; what type of sector we want. The current plan with its emphasis on the role of the artist and public engagement with the arts is even more important when considered alongside policies such as *Pay the Artist*, *Equality Human Rights and Diversity* and *Spatial* (people, places and spaces).

Since my appointment as Chair of the Arts Council in June 2019 I have seen, time and time again, how artists, arts workers and arts organisations deliver on the sentiment in the opening two sentences in *Making Great Art Work*:

The work of artists inspires and reflects the rhythm of the everyday as well as momentous events in public life. The arts shape and challenge us, give us pleasure, help us to know who we are and where we are going: their distinctive, creative power is an essential feature of our consciousness and conversation.

Staying with theatre – and to reference another Fishamble play, *Duck Duck Goose* by Caitriona Daly – the phrase 'the rhythm of the everyday as well as momentous events in public life' is once more made real. The play is about the fall-out from a sexual assault. Jane Scully, a woman in her mid-twenties who works for a financial services firm, confronts one of the men who circulated a surreptitiously-taken graphic photograph of her. When he denies any knowledge, Jane replies, 'Don't you think we don't know? About your WhatsApp group? That we're stupid? All your little pictures. They get screenshotted you know.'

In a related vein, another play from the 2021 Dublin Theatre Festival comes to mind. Phillip McMahon's *Once Before I Go* at the Gate Theatre brought to stage the hidden realities of being gay in contemporary Ireland. Set against the backdrop of the AIDS crisis, Bernard, who is dying from the virus, asks his partner: 'Promise me you won't look at me dead. Promise me you'll only remember me as I was tonight. Tripping through Paris, half pissed, looking fabulous.' On the night I saw *Once Before I Go* there were many tears shed in the Gate Theatre. Ireland would be less of a nation, a country, a place – indeed even less of an idea – without these wonderful works of art.

Yet, art – whether created quickly or over many years – does not come without a cost. Artists have to live. The reality of being an artist is a difficult and precarious life. In the late 1960s, the painter Michael Kane was so 'out of pocket' at one stage that he approached Mervyn Wall, Secretary to the Arts Council, at the organisation's offices on Merrion Square. Wall was positioned in a small office at the front of the building, and was tasked with ensuring that unannounced visitors did not disturb the then director, Fr. Donal O'Sullivan. But Kane was not to be stymied. 'Before [Wall] could do anything I had opened the folding doors, gone in and suggested that they might buy some paintings,' the artist later recalled. O'Sullivan explained that the Council could not under its rules give to an individual and that

purchases had to be for a group. 'I am a group,' Kane interjected, 'I've a wife and two kids.'²

For long periods after independence in 1922 the Irish State neglected the arts and artists. The sector, and the creators of art, however, ploughed on. For the last seventy years the Arts Council has been fighting the corner for the arts in Ireland – more often than not in the face of great resistance to spending public money on the arts.

Established under legislation in 1951, the first full meeting of the new Arts Council was held on 25 January 1952. In attendance were both Éamon de Valera, the then Taoiseach, and his predecessor John A. Costello, who had brought the arts legislation through the Oireachtas the previous year.³ De Valera had little to say of importance, except for assuring the new Council members that they had the support of all sides in the national parliament in their endeavours. Costello was more expansive, lamenting that the arts had 'suffered almost complete neglect' and that it had not been easy to convince people of the value of art, literature, drama and theatre. 'There could be no nationality or prosperity without art,' Costello asserted.

In my new book, *Artistic and cultural matters will have to wait* – *Taoisigh & the Arts*, I consider the place of the arts in the personal and governmental worlds of the politicians who have held the office of Taoiseach, and also explore how artists have responded to these national leaders. One artist who read an early draft of my book commented that it was shocking how afraid politicians are of art.

In the case of former Taoisigh, this situation was not for the want to interact with the arts. W.T. Cosgrave appointed W.B. Yeats and Oliver St John Gogarty to the Seanad. In his life before government, Éamon de Valera actually acted on the Abbey stage (in an amateur production), as did Seán Lemass. John A. Costello was an exception in having a genuine interest in the arts. But even Costello was unable to face down the obstructionist position of the Department of Finance.

When his Finance Minister rejected arguments in 1956 for what was a modest increase in the Arts Council's annual budget, Costello replied in writing: 'The suggestion that An Chomhairle Ealaíon comes within the category of "non-essential" services is one on which I prefer to make no comment – for the sake of my blood pressure!'⁴

A common strand in how these political leaders (and many of their civil servant officials) approached the arts was in terms of seeing arts funding as a luxury that the country could not afford. Later Taoisigh – Jack Lynch, Liam Cosgrave, Garret FitzGerald and Albert Reynolds – made little impact on government policy on the arts.

Charles Haughey was another exception but, as he does in all aspects of Irish life, his contribution to the arts divides opinion. To some he was an enlightened Renaissance prince, a modern-day Medici; for others he suffered delusions of grandeur, someone who sought to satisfy his own vanity and elevate his status through association with artists. He is still feted in many quarters for the artist income tax exemption scheme and the foundation of Aosdána. Yet, when it actually came to increasing arts funding, Haughey lines up alongside otherholders of the office of Taoiseach in failing to deliver for artists and arts organisations.

In more recent times, artists have started to unpick Haughey's controversial legacy. Sebastian Barry's *Hinterland* draws on various aspects of Haughey's career. Johnny Silvester, the main character in *Hinterland*, is a retired politician, elderly, in poor health and subject to on going inquiry into the source of his personal wealth. But there are still flashes of the political leader of old. 'If they want a great national criminal, here I am,' the emboldened Silvester/Haughey proclaims. 'There would have been no modern era, no change, no new world without me... I am the giant of the modern era.'⁵

The stage direction in *Hinterland* makes the arts central to the Silvester/Haughey character. The setting is a private study in a Georgian mansion, outside Dublin: 'many books, and the walls enduring a storm of modern Irish paintings, le Brocqy, O'Malley et cetera.' Throughout the text, the erudite central character references a litany of literary giants – Yeats, Behan, Heaney, Milton, Tennyson and Tennessee Williams. Whether these references are out of appreciation for these artists and their work – or just pure vanity – is for the audience to determine. We see the Haughey character toiling to capture recollections of his father in Northern Ireland in a letter he struggles to write to two elderly aunts. He bitterly observes, 'To think Seamus Heaney turned his Derry childhood into the stuff of a Nobel Prize.'

The arts were elevated to full-cabinet rank in January 1993, with the appointment of Michael D. Higgins as the first senior-level Minister for the Arts and Culture. From then onwards (under the second Albert Reynolds-led government), the Taoiseach-of-the-day no longer had direct responsibility for arts policy. As such, there was far less direct involvement from subsequent Taoisigh. Higgins had a different perspective of the arts to most of his colleagues, irrespective of their party allegiance.⁶ The new Minister met resistance from familiar places in the governmental system including from Department of Finance officials.

I won't recount here the sorry story of the State funding of the arts – and the long litany of unsuccessful Arts Council requests for more money. Almost every annual report over the last seventy years references the low level of funding and the severe limitations on the Council's ability to develop the arts. A commitment to double arts funding – and push the Arts Council's annual budget well-over €100 million for the first time – was made in 2019. But it took the Covid-19 crisis for the importance of the arts to be recognised and, finally, acknowledged in terms of funding support.

In my Introduction to the Council's annual report for 2021, I wrote:

I said on budget day that, 'Money doesn't solve every problem', but this was an important endorsement of the value of artists and the challenges they face. Having €130m as the minimum annual budget figure for the Arts Council beyond 2021 will make a huge impact on so many areas of artistic activity and public engagement.

With annual funding of €130 million in 2022 (having maintained the 2021 level), the Arts Council is in a better place today than at any time in its seventy year history to develop the arts. We are all the better for this outcome.

The case for increased funding was hugely helped by the work of artists during the Covid-19 crisis. The arts was the glorious light in the darkest days of the pandemic. But there is still need to challenge the long-standing and influential viewpoint that State support for the arts is money lost to the public purse. As importantly, there is a need to recognise the importance of a strong, independent influencing voice for the arts. There is huge merit in an independent development agency where funding decisions are taken at arm's length from both the political and governmental systems based on a strategic plan for the sector and avoiding ad hoc-ery and individual whims. Like the Leave and Remain leaders in *The Alternative*, there is a need to continue to seek public and political support for these positions.

