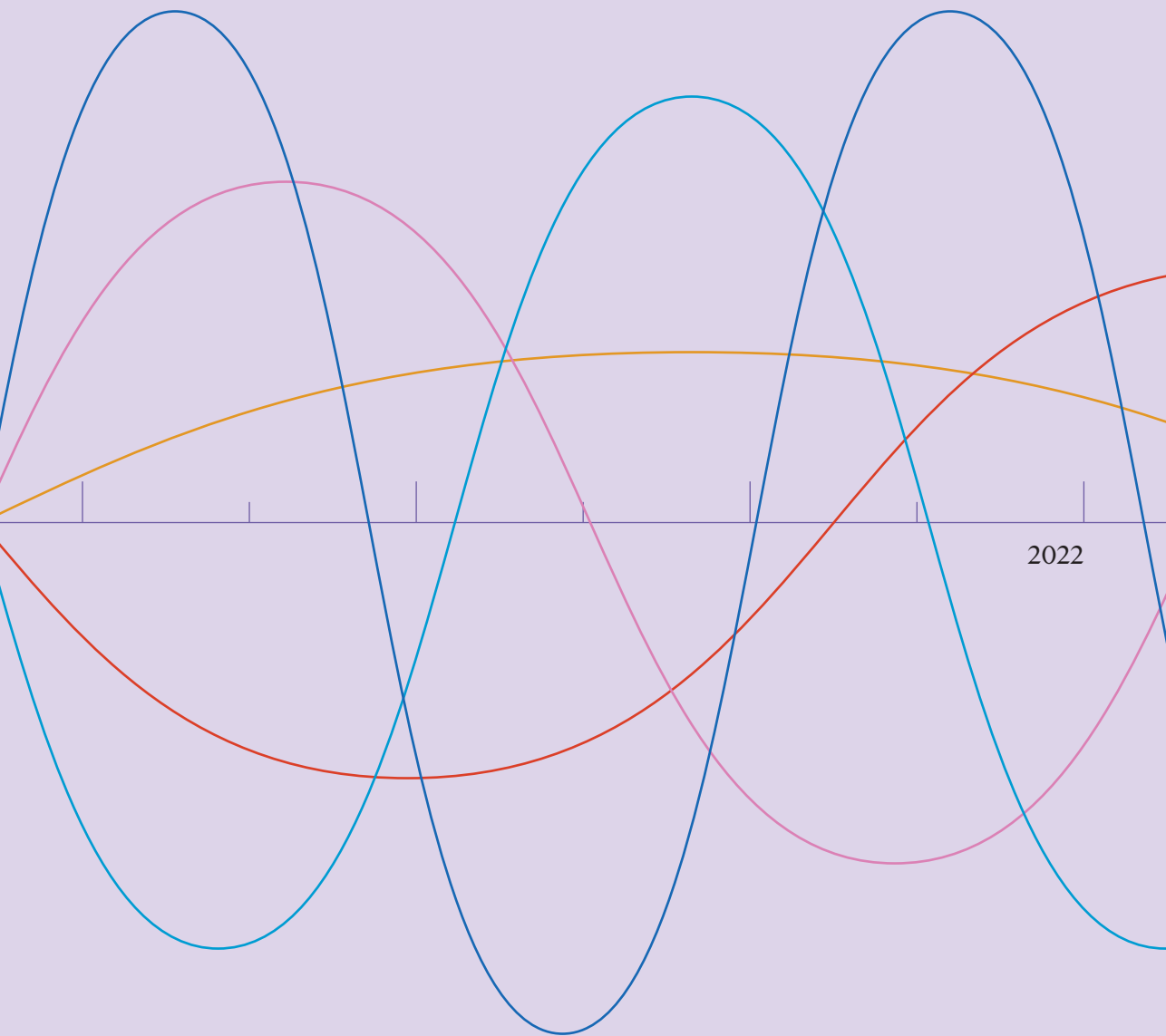
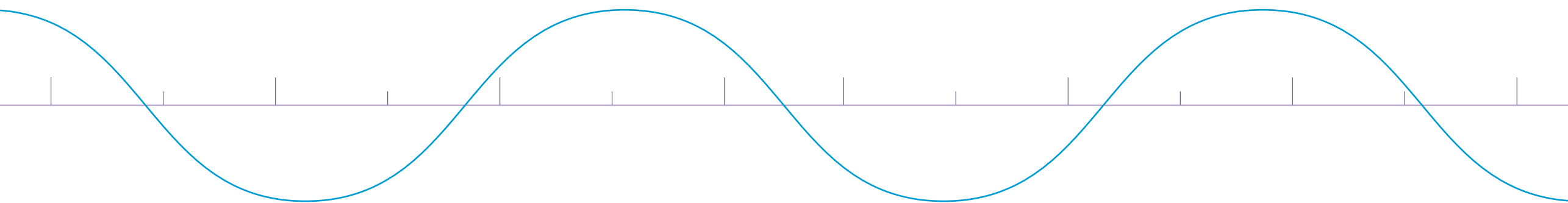


Critical Voices

Guthanna Criticiúla



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.

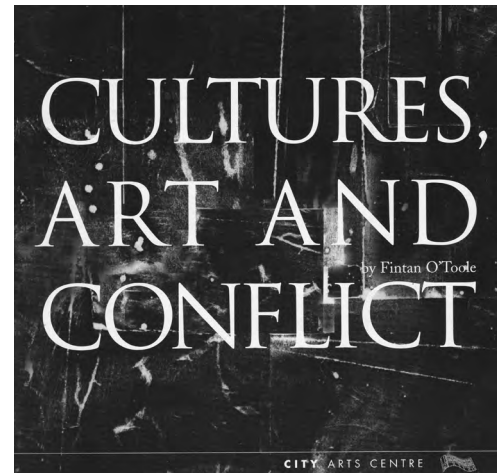


City Arts Centre, Moss Street, Dublin

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.

