

Burning Down the Temple

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This speech was made by Willie White, director of Project Arts Centre in Dublin, in the frame of the the conference "*The Role of Arts Centres in Civil Society*" at the Axis Arts Centre, Ballymun, 1 March 2003 in Ireland.

A publication is also available, please contact the City Arts Centre for further information.

It was easy for me to see my own preoccupations reflected in a symposium on '*The role of cultural centres in civic society*.' I had only recently started work in Project, Ireland's longest established arts centre. Significantly, the Civil Arts Enquiry, as City Arts has described itself during the explorations for its New Vision, had located what could have been an otherwise habitual process of self reflection in the idea of a civum, a group constituted by citizens, elaborated into the array of relationships that form a city. Immediately two of the assumptions of the rubric for the symposium were activated for me. In our conception of culture could we continue to give priority to ideas of central or hierarchical places of activity or value? I do not believe that is any longer possible to describe our city as a simple relationship between centre and periphery. It is a fact that the citizens of Dublin do not require its city centre in order to be culturally active, most evidently with the development of many formal art spaces in the greater Dublin area in the past five years. Further, in choosing to propose civic society as opposed to the familiar and traditional idea of '*community*' as a constituency a process of redefinition and reengagement appeared to be underway. .

First, a quick history of Project Arts Centre, which was established as a multidisciplinary artist led initiative in 1966. Project acquired its first premises in 1967 and after itinerant early few years by 1974 found itself in a former factory in Dublin's city centre, which it eventually purchased with the assistance of the city's local authority. The three main rooms of the building were converted to accommodate visual art, theatre, music, dance and other art forms. This premises was demolished in 1998 to make way for a purpose built arts centre developed with European money. The new building represented a terminus for the arts centre - after thirty years of making do with converted buildings the longstanding inadequacies of Project's physical infrastructure were to be resolved in a multipurpose, purpose built facility. Whereas previously different activities had competed for and compromised on space there would now be three designated spaces of which two actively resisted prescriptive nomenclature. (The designation of the gallery was a concession to the fact that the previous visual arts space had doubled as a theatre foyer.) The experimental ambition of Project, which dated back to a time when it was effectively the only alternative space in the city, had seemed to fit with the run down improvised nature of the old building. What of this atmosphere would now be lost in a new building despite its liberal quotation of the industrial architecture which had preceded it on the site.

Project is located in Temple Bar, Dublin's designated and engineered cultural quarter, although it predates the formalisation of such an idea in the early 1990s. In assessing the consequences of this idea for Project one wonders if can radicalism be domesticated and if attempts to fix or to prescribe the '*alternative*' fatal. The cultural quarter it appears has been overtaken by what is politely described as 'social culture'. Dublin's version of cosmopolitan cool and sophistication doesn't look very attractive early on a Sunday morning as you step over the debris of the previous night's activity. I might well ask myself were I stand in front

of the building where I work on the previous evening if most of the people who pass by were even aware that we existed at all. It was with those types of questions in mind that I attended the symposium.

Sandy Fitzgerald, founder member and former director of City Arts Centre, opened the symposium with a useful identification of three possible stages in the trajectory of arts and cultural centres. In the beginning they are fuelled by an ideology and culture of radicalism and opposition, they propose and provide an alternative to the status quo. Since their activity has no real precedent and therefore no home they must convert available buildings for their uses. As time goes on and as the enterprise endures it begins to develop an infrastructure, to become organised and to become recognised in order to avail of funding or to discharge its tax liabilities. Inevitably the centre becomes some kind of a legal entity. The activity that had begun deliberately outside society now finds itself incorporated into its structures. The third stage is that at which Project finds itself. An organisation that originated sentimentally as well as chronologically in the 1960s is potentially in crisis. Having arrived at our destination we then discover that the map has shifted and we wonder how we have gotten lost along the way.

Declan McGonagle signalled precisely these changed circumstances in his presentation. He identified in contemporary arts discourse a fundamental departure from the linear progression that could be traced back to the 15th century. He offered that it is no longer productive to understand art in terms of a dialectic relationship between the establishment and the avant-garde. The new dispensation consequently requires a new model, new paradigms to triangulate our contemporary cultural topography. Declan proposed a reconfiguration of cultural value away from traditional ideas of hierarchy. Instead of emphasising the uniqueness of artist one could shape a more participatory culture by emphasising the commonality of the artists' experience. The artist has historically been proposed as genius, autonomous, self sufficient, hermetic and this definition sits well with traditional ideas of cultural value. Those of us involved in contemporary arts are already concerned that this definition generates a relationship where citizens are reduced to mere consumers of a commodity. Reassuringly, for my own situation in Project, Declan declared the futility of 'burning down the temple', however he required the priests to acknowledge that theirs was not the only way of explaining the universe. He also suggested that the language with which arts centres have been making their arguments to government and to citizens has reached the end of its utility. Certainly in the case of Ireland, these arguments have not been effective in securing either funding or participation. Given that funding responds to, understands and promotes established models we must assume the responsibility for generating the arguments that will displace this orthodoxy and rigidity. Professor Anthony Grayling gave a paper on the civilising power of art. In a magisterial treatise he elaborated on the role of art in constituting the citizen and identified the first civilising moment in the progression in classical literature from the writings of Homer to those of Aeschylus. The Homeric citizen was self-interested, defensive and aggressive. By the time of the third episode of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, *The Eumenides*, these antisocial impulses have been sublimated into civic structures. The furies in the play are domesticated by being brought into the cultural realm through their celebration in the temple. In Grayling's formulation art serves to instruct and to constitute good citizens and orderly societies. Problems can be referred for artistic arbitration, a process that hopefully fosters pluralism, rather than the Homeric impulse to annihilate one's enemies. Despite the persuasiveness of Professor Grayling's metaphors and the facility with which he surveyed the historical and cultural expanse of his material I still had some reservations about what sounded like a traditional definition of culture and its artefacts. Against my own interest in ideas of artistic excellence I was not completely convinced by this, dare I say it, elitist proposal. It did not seem sufficient to advance the new cartography.

The location of the symposium in Ballymun was potent. All around us were derelict concrete tower blocks, evidence of the failure of a utopian planning ideal that had not taken into account the *'existing habits of living'* of citizens, as Ciarán Benson, had described on the first morning of the symposium. Given that this failure has been acknowledged and that Ballymun is to have a second chance, the Axis arts centre is well placed to provide a forum for the regeneration of the area as are the other arts activities in the surrounding area. In the presentations on Ballymun's new story there was a strong sense of its citizens shaping their own future in collaboration with the planners towards creating a more sympathetic and positive environment in which to live. By involving the community in the development and siting of work funded under the percent for art scheme the arts have become involved as an ally in development and regeneration rather than as mere window dressing or public relations. Public art is often associated with monumental works adjacent to motorways and addressed to passing traffic. In Ballymun public art has been more introverted and has been made on a more intimate scale as a meaningful contribution to the self-image of a community that has previously missed out on cultural opportunities.

What was becoming clear to me was that in order for people to participate in the cultural aspect of regeneration and indeed a commonality of cultural experience they had first to be empowered. It was on this crucial process that Niall O'Baoill of the Fatima Project gave a useful case history. Fatima, like Ballymun, was another post war local authority development that had been beset with the consequences of poverty. Fatima, despite the relatively small size of its community, was notorious in the media. This and other environmental factors engendered in its citizens an understandable feeling that they were repressed, patronised and, despite the media attention, ignored. What people in Fatima did was to take control of their future and began to build a capacity for self-sufficiency. They evolved their own networks, their own way of working and began to tell their own stories. As part of this process people made art projects about the painful history of crime and drug addiction and its consequences for their community. This manifested in a spectacular celebration *'Burn the Demons: Embrace the Future'* where the people of Fatima built and lit a huge bonfire marking their emancipation from the negativity of the past. Interesting for me in this was the fact that no official cultural centre was required for this process. Like Ballymun the activity in Fatima was of necessity introverted - *"No bigwigs, no press, no messing."* was the slogan. One of the object lessons from the Fatima Project was that unless citizens are empowered as people who have an interest and stake in creativity it will be difficult to extend participation beyond those groups currently active or involved in the arts. I was becoming more sceptical about the polarity that has been presented between community and establishment arts practice, between process and product.

Later that day a panel discussion led by Dermot McLaughlin, Liz Culloty and Kensika Monshengwo, developed this idea by turning to the issue of the engagement and connectedness of the arts and cultural practice, who the arts include and who they touch. In the light of previous discussions around empowerment there were necessary questions as to whether the dominant arts culture comprised the intimate conversations of an elite, reflecting only their sensibilities and preoccupations? Where the public were engaged by practice was there too much emphasis on the artefact or manifestation itself and should more attention be paid to the matrix of social interactions of which art and culture form a part? There was again a caution against the use of arts or culture as a superficial tool of regeneration. One new site for artistic engagement that was already establishing itself was the fact of Ireland's increasing ethnic diversity. For a state that has so long been preoccupied with the identity politics of nationalism, an engagement with interculturalism, for example, might lead us productively towards pluralism and participation. In doing so it might also contribute to a more useful and more contemporary idea of what it means to be Irish or to be in Ireland. If we value narration,

telling stories about ourselves and to ourselves then it seems incumbent on us to increase the opportunities for our citizens to activate their imagination, for us all to see things differently.

It is not possible to draw the many different strands of the two days' proceedings into a neat conclusion. The questions raised generated not answers but more questions. We are still trying to describe the new paradigms, their non-orthodoxy and non-rigidity. I should also qualify my account by acknowledging that I have not had space to include here a sense of the contributions of colleagues from the other member countries - characteristic Irish self-obsession? However, one simple statement which returned me directly to my own situation came from Sigrid Niemer of Berlin's UfaFabrik. '*Culture,*' she proposed '*is more than the arts, but the arts are a part of culture.*' Something useful to remember.

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AIMs

- To develop an international database of cultural places around the world
- To develop substantial support for new-born cultural places
- To organise meetings and seminars on contemporary issues linked art and social change
- To be a representative for independent cultural centres towards institutions

MISsions

- To identify and give visibility of these spaces and projects regarding to their uniqueness and diversity
- To support and accompany the development of these spaces / projects by encouraging know-how, skills and people exchanges
- To favour knowledge and understanding of independent cultural projects
- To create tools for analysis and make them available for project holders and institutional partners
- To contribute to ease the role of the cultural centres towards an urban development
- To give value to the architectural heritage worth of the spaces
- To develop the sustainable durability of spaces and projects
- To be a communication tool for artistic projects based on a commitment to communities and people, working in the field of education, transmission, solidarity and the appropriation of artistic, social and political practices
- To whip up actions of solidarity and cooperations between artistic projects and places around the world

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