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SPECIAL ISSUE: *Mapping an Altered Landscape: Cultural Policy and Management in Ireland*

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I'm delighted to be here today and to be part of this forum and I'm looking forward to everything that will unfold, particularly the perspective of artists who are among us.

I'm not an artist but I work primarily as a concert producer so I am positioned just downstream of the artists, and I guess my perspective is informed by them in many ways. I'm going to leave it to others here today who are eminently more qualified to parse what exactly has happened in the field of policy formation since 2008 and examine the chicken's entrails as to what will happen in the decade to come. I won't tell you the exact changes that have taken place in policy, structures and management practices as Pat and Kerry have charged us to do, but, in the words of the great song collector, Frank Harte "I am going to try and tell you how it has felt".

I want to be honest and forthright, and I think it's hard to talk about changes in policy when you feel you have been working in an area that has been devoid of one. But that's okay I guess, because, we are not the only ones. If this was a conference about housing policy and we were hearing from actors in that field, people like Peter McVerry, I think they would be saying the same thing. So housing policy and cultural policy, both essential to active citizenship and both fallen prey to the neo-liberal vocabulary that has infected the groundwater of our democracy, both characterised by an inertia over the last decade, the sad harvest of which we are now reaping. And they are symbiotically linked too, because artists, the overwhelming majority of whom earn less than the average industrial wage, need a roof over their heads just as much as the next citizen. But if not actually making policy, we have talked about it a great deal over that period.

In the National Campaign for the Arts, which I helped found in 2008, it often felt like we talked about little else other than the policy horizon. 2008 seems a long time ago now, full of apprehension but optimism too, as we felt the seismic change on the immediate horizon, which was characterised by the imminent arrival of the IMF [International Monetary Fund], was to be the catalyst of profound and positive change in Ireland and that the arts would play a central role in that.

In September 2009 after the first Global Irish Economic Forum in Farnleigh, that roll call of totemic figures like Dermot Desmond, Neil Jordan and Martin Cullen, then Minister of Arts, Sport and Tourism, were all avowing the importance of culture in the economic heavy-lifting to come. I was writing in the *Irish Times* about how culture might fix our ills. The sub-editor called it '5 Ways That Culture Can Save Us', which was a little bit histrionic but I wrote about its importance to our reputational capital, its place within the SMART economy and cultural tourism, how it can be a driver of employment and how it could help mend our broken national psyche. I believed in that then, and I want to believe it now, but six years of austerity later and I'm less convinced by my own assertions. I think that they were well-meaning but I think that they were naïve. As could be said of Minister Deenihan's statement (yesterday) re Culture

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2025 and the stall that it sets out, where it says: “The National Cultural Policy will illuminate the intrinsic value of the arts, creativity and our dynamic nation’s intellectual achievements. It will demonstrate how culture can expand and enhance an inclusive society by delivering arts education, providing career pathways and developing avenues for expression of our citizens, driving innovation and contributing to our economic wellbeing”.

I think it’s understandable because I think culture is like a sort political catnip sometimes. In a society as traumatised as ours, it’s kind of understandable and seductive to see culture as a panacea that can cure many of its ills. It’s what the UK academic Tom Fleming calls “the grease and the glue” argument. The grease that lubricates the economy and the glue that holds society together. It feels like culture groans under the weight of all this magical thinking, asphyxiated by expectation and the onerous task of actually proving that this is so is easier to talk about than making it a reality. For me, I’m increasingly drawn to Allen Ginsberg’s statement about the work and ultimately that work is about “easing the pain of living and everything else is a drunken dumb show”, and there has been lots of painful living here since 2008 and we do the drunken dumb show better than anyone else, I think.

The truth is that in the years since 2008 we have been living through a cultural policy interregnum and there is a profound cognitive dissonance between the rhetorical flourish of our cultural aspirations and our capacity to make them real. We have developed a culture of boosterism that is at odds with our ability to make a change in the light of the immense technological, economic, political and social change that we are living through. It’s like a hymn sheet that speaks to a deep insecurity about culture and it impoverishes us all; politicians and civil servants, but also academics, policymakers, artists and audiences.

I found myself reading Anthony Burgess’ fantastic forward to *The Dubliners* that was published in the *Irish Times* over the weekend. Burgess keeps returning to a theme of paralysis and that Joyce was trying to [...] something cathartic about writing about catharsis and I can’t help thinking that perhaps we are in another state of paralysis now. So writing in the *Irish Times* more recently, in February this year, in response to the latest brouhaha, The Abbey – because there is always one – and the cultural dirty bomb that went off in Limerick over Christmas, it was clear my fervour had dimmed somewhat, and I wrote as follows:

Now we are taking the policy edifice down, one stealthy budget at a time, our sector lacks direction and thought leadership, flapping in the headwinds of a crisis, there is dissonance between the cultural pieties and the reality on the ground. At every opportunity we proclaim the arts’ potency as an agent of change, we assert the artist’s inalienable right to speak truth to power, on cue our politicians intone the names of the artistic dead and the urgent societal change they forged. But 18 months out from a certain commemoration, it’s hard to identify a constituency as politically captured, as timorous, as the funded arts sector – either those supported through the Arts Council, such as the small organisation I run or those further up the food chain such as the National Cultural Institutions. We talk about the importance of the arts in the national conversation, yet the national conversation about the policy that would shape the arts themselves is barely audible.

So here we are convened again for that very conversation. We will push the policy boulder up the hill, we will try and unravel the Gordian knot of cultural policy and the myriad competing interests that it tries to serve.

We all know each other here, and we’ve all done this before. Perhaps we will be better served by being a little more realistic in our expectations. We could start by clearing out the Augean Stables of the debased language around cultural policy by acknowledging that we need to be more honest with each other, less hierarchical, less deferential and less authoritarian. We need to be more porous; we need more of the liberated thinking Mr. Quinn spoke about (a few moments ago).

And I just want to finish by telling you what I have been doing since 2008 – one of the things I

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have been doing is running a festival called 12 Points, a developmental festival for young European jazz ensembles. It's very small but it has proved very effective in its field. In the cultural scheme of things here, I think that abstract art-forms such as jazz, contemporary dance or visual arts exist in the shadow of our narrative traditions like theatre and literature. We have a distrust somehow of the abstract, and in the 1930s we went so far as to try and ban jazz. But 'over there' in Europe, they have been a little more receptive and our moderate Irish festival has enjoyed great success. So the location rotates: it is in Dublin in the odd years and in the even years it is in a host city and the most recent edition was held in April this year in Umea in Northern Sweden which is the current European Capital of Culture.

Previously, it has taken place in Stavanger in Norway and Porto. The next edition away from Dublin will be in 2016 and will shortly be confirmed and will probably be in Valencia, Spain - with Calatrava's extraordinary architecture that is the Palau de les Arts [...] I hope it comes up today, the infrastructural question. For example, when we brought the festival in to Porto in 2012 we were in Rem Koolhaas' Casa de Música [...] I'm full of conflict about these huge architectural programmes and in most places a lot of them are hitting the skids now because of austerity.

But I do think that while the rest of Europe has just been getting on with the business of 'refreshing', if you like, its cultural infrastructure after the post-war period, it strikes me that what we've been doing here is just bickering about what to do with the GPO. I think what's interesting about the 'infrastructural question' is that it is kind of a litmus test of the political ambition and sincerity around these big policy questions – because these are immensely challenging projects but the legacy implications of them are profound. So over the course of doing this I visited a lot of European countries, bringing young artists to them and going out and talking about the festival and it's been a great opportunity to do a kind of 'mystery shopping' of other people's cultural policy. I guess having done a lot of that I feel in a lot of things we are kind of languishing mid-table. We are not, for example, like Macedonia where the model looks extremely patriarchal and speaks to the way we did things in the past here. And we are definitely not like the Scandinavians where their model, as in many areas, is something we aspire to. And I'm not dramatising or glorifying what I see in those places – the cultural debate in those places is equally robust, it is equally competitive for resources and many of the same tensions play out between the old and the new. But what I do see, particularly in Scandinavia where we've hosted the festival several times, are clear rules about accountability, transparency, less double-speak, less dog-whistle politics, less patronage and clientelism, and less of the historical fetishism around the arts. Generally a climate of more candour and more openness.

And while I'm out there, like them, I marvel at our small island with its cultural resonance and amazing durability. It looks very beautiful when viewed from the continent – like many of us, I get to bask in the halo effect of being from here and I give thanks to the people who supported me along the way, agencies like the Arts Council and Culture Ireland. But when I come back I feel that slightly oppressive cloak of austerity and the nature of our discussion and the nature of our vocabulary and the nature of our dialogue around cultural policy and I wait to hear that term that I have grown so tired of, which is the bit about how culturally we "punch above our weight" because I think we punch beneath our weight and I would hope today that we engage in a really honest discussion about what is 'the right weight'.

*Gerry Godley is Principal & Managing Director of Leeds College of Music, the most plural of the UK's nine conservatoires, offering intensive and specialised learning to 1200 students in jazz, pop, music business, music production, classical music, film music and new music. Prior to his appointment in Leeds, he was director of Improvised Music Company (IMC), a not for profit organisation for jazz and related music, established by Irish jazz musicians and supporters in 1991. Today, it is Ireland's largest specialist music producer and resource organisation with a hands on involvement in many aspects of music making throughout the island from festival programming,*

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*concert promotion, touring, recording, education and audience development. From 2007-2014, he was Artistic Director of the annual 12 Points! Festival for young European jazz ensembles. He has previously served as secretary of Europe Jazz Network, a 75 member organisation of jazz festivals, venues and national organisations active in 23 European countries. He is a co-founder of Ireland's National Campaign for The Arts, and is also active as a broadcaster, presenting Ireland's only national world music programme, Reels to Ragas on RTE Lyric FM.*