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

## Alan Counihan

ARTIST

The comments and points I am about to make have been shaped and experienced as a maker of art, neither as a producer of product nor as an entrepreneur, over the past 25 years. Even where critical or questioning I hope that they will be seen as constructive; it is how they are intended. We have been invited to address the fitness of purpose of current cultural structures and their responsiveness to change. I do so in light of personal engagement with cultural structures in recent times – I do not claim that they are representative.

Responding to Emily's invitation, firstly in the context of public art – the art that we have to live with in our public and civic spaces. This is a field in which I have had much experience both nationally and internationally over the years. That experience includes a contribution to the development of the public art guidelines that seem to be frequently flaunted by local authorities and other commissioning bodies in this country. I won't bore you with an overly long history of unfortunate experiences in the field - and they are not confined to Ireland - but three examples might be illustrative.

A selection panel of which I was a member was warned in mid-process by a fellow panellist that selection of a particular work would not sit well with the Borough Council of which he was a member. When that work became the unanimous choice of the panel the commission was indeed withdrawn.

More recently, in a competitive process for which I had been invited to submit, my own design proposal proved the unanimous choice with the selection panel. Within a week I was advised that the local authority would not ratify the selection of my submission, nor award the commission. An FOI search revealed no obvious breach of protocols that might have led to the decision. Clearly unhappy with the result of their own process the Local Authority was prepared to waste €20,000 rather than accept the chosen work. Twelve months ago, using the same funding allocation, that authority sought submissions for a monument to local sporting heroes – a result they must have hoped for in the first instance. It will soon be installed.

Thirdly, last month I was made aware of a brief for a National School – I wish the Minister of Education was still here – that stated a preference for designs which included the construction of a shelter for the pupils and a screen for the school's waste bin.

Guidelines for the commissioning of public art are, as these instances show, clearly ineffective. They should now be replaced by conditions. Selection processes should be overseen by agencies such as Visual Artists Ireland or the National Sculpture Factory. Funding should only be released to a commissioning body upon due diligence reviews of process and protocols. Surely the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht and the Department of the Environment, as legislative bodies, can tackle this situation.

Financial Support and Funding Challenges: For artists whose work takes place outside of commercial gallery contexts, and who prefer to avoid the public commissioning process,

Contribution

Alan Counihan

sourcing support for self-generated projects or events can be a taxing, time-consuming process. This is especially the case if attempted without the assistance of gallerists or curators. Those tugboats that pull our liners out to sea – or is it the other way around?

An example: In 2009 I initiated a creative process titled the *Townlands Project*, an exploration of the rural landscape I inhabit and of the community within which I live; a celebration of place in historical and contemporary contexts. The tools of exploration were to be those of drawing, photography, theatre and poetry while the process of engagement was to be community-based and collaborative. An approach was made to the Heritage Council seeking support but that body, quite understandably given the relative size of its budget, advised that the most appropriate funding source for a work to which art processes were central, was the Arts Council. A bursary application to the Arts Council to develop this work was unsuccessful. A New Work application was also unsuccessful.

Determined for this process to succeed, we went ahead without support. The reaction from the community was so positive that in 2010, the county's Heritage Office, and the Heritage Council, came on board to support the project as did the local Arts Office. Additional support was sourced through the county's LEADER Partnership Programme in 2011 and a Fund-it campaign in 2012. In all, the project entailed three exhibitions (to date), a theatre production, an oral history collection, a short film, a symposium and a major publication.

In 2012 I initiated another work, *Personal Effects: a history of possession*, based on the personal effects of dead or discharged patients from Grangegorman Mental Hospital. Once again support was declined for a bursary to research the archives of the institution and the social context of confinement of those deemed to be mentally ill in Ireland over the past two hundred years. Support for a Project Award to realize the work through installations and exhibitions was also declined. Nonetheless the project has come to fruition from my own resources, through another Fund-it campaign and, at the last moment, from the Health Service Executive. There will soon have been three installations of the work in 2014, a radio documentary with RTÉ is in progress and there will be a publication in 2015 based on the process and its research.

I did inevitably wonder why the Arts Council declined support for these projects? Perhaps mining the heritage of a rural landscape and community was deemed insufficiently contemporary in its process and expression, the subject matter too rural, the audience reach too parochial. Perhaps the exploration of institutional abuse of the mentally ill seemed too dark a subject or its proposed methods too conservative. Perhaps the quality of the applications was considered poor although the feedback from the Council suggested otherwise and, as the fortunate recipient of several large grants over the years, including two from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation in New York, I can effectively present process and practice.

I recount these histories not to air personal grievance but to answer a question asked earlier by Emily our moderator in correspondence prior to this conference: 'Are the aims and philosophical values shared, in your opinion, by working artists and those who fund their work?' Clearly, in my case, they are not shared. That said, the Arts Council working within a severely restricted budget, continues to support much remarkable work and many fine artists. Difficult choices have to be made in each funding round and I am hopeful that none of them are lightly made. Although my own projects have not found favour I have been privileged to participate as an invited artist in many residencies, performances and events that could not have been realized without the Arts Council's aid.

But I want to wrap up with some questions of my own. In a very small country where the network of production has a very tight mesh, is it not inevitable that a circle of familiarity exists

Contribution

Alan Counihan

between artists and arts administrators? Furthermore, if they are contemporaries and educated within the same institutions is it not inevitable that certain forms of art and arts practice will be favoured over others? Are the arts and the selective criteria of the Arts Council shaped by the same educative influences? Are these influences and the criteria they might foster self-perpetuating? Is it a policy of the Arts Council to support the work of emerging artists over older, more established or mid-career ones, even if serious artists of all ages consider their practice to be one of continual growth and emergence? Is there an unstated sentiment that the appropriate body to support more mature artists is Aosdána rather than the Arts Council's heavily subscribed funding streams? Is Aosdána itself in need of reform? Would a reduction in its numbers along with the numbers of years during which members can participate render the support more accessible to a wider number of artists? Would not the replacement of the present process of election or selection by existing members render the process and the academy itself less open to the charges of elitism, nepotism and, once again, the golden network? Is funding by the Arts Council for visual arts also measured by the same economic metric as that of its governing department? How is value for money return measured – in economic, in social or in cultural terms? Why is there not a more symbiotic relationship between the Arts Council and the Heritage Council, within the same department? Is today's contemporary art tomorrow's cultural heritage?

Please consider this: What needs to be done? But perhaps, more importantly, what needs to be undone?

*Addendum:*

*Having been invited to make a presentation to the conference in the context of a working artist's engagement with cultural organisations and agencies it is only possible to respond honestly and with any conviction out of personal experience. After some years of unsuccessful applications to the Arts Council it is clear that the aims of my own practice and the values which inform it find no favour with that organisation or, more specifically, with the selection panels of my discipline – comprised of fellow artists and arts professionals – that clearly have preferred tastes for certain types of contemporary practice and practitioners. Given the reduction in funding streams of recent years my experience is hardly uncommon. While I make no claim to represent the opinions of others they have helped to shape the questions I have posed.*

*A working artist since 1990, much of Counihan's early work was created in the public realm in the USA, U.K. and Ireland. The exploration of places, communities and their histories has always been central to his practice. In works that engage with place, communities and the resonance of human habitation he creates site-specific responses primarily through the medium of sculpture in both public and private spaces, in wilderness or abandoned landscapes. He also maintains a studio-based practice creating works for exhibitions and installations in gallery and non-gallery contexts in Ireland and abroad. In 2009 he initiated The Townlands Project, an exploration of an Irish rural landscape and its habitation through exhibitions, installations, oral histories and film. The project is celebrated in the book *Townlands: a habitation* (Two Streams Press, 2012). In 2012 he initiated The Personal Effects Project, an exploration of the history of Irish institutional care for the mentally ill based on belongings of dead or discharged patients from the Richmond Asylum/ St Brendan's Hospital, Grangegorman, Dublin. Widely exhibited in 2014, this project's process of social activism and engaged citizenship has now expanded to include the legacy of five other asylums in the south-east of Ireland through the support of a 2015 Artlinks Bursary Award. He has been fortunate to receive several other substantial grants and awards over the years including, twice, the Pollock-Krasner Foundation Award. A radio documentary of the Personal Effects Project is currently being recorded by RTE for broadcast in September 2015. Alan Counihan website: <http://www.alancounihan.net> and <http://personaleffects.alancounihan.net>.*