

Statement

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Chair Designate – Arts Council

Joint Committee on Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht

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Introduction

Thank you to the Chair and Members of the Joint Committee on Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht for this invitation to meet with you.

I am delighted at having been nominated by Minister Madigan to serve as Chair of the Arts Council. I am looking forward to starting in the role shortly.

I will be the tenth person to hold this position since the Arts Council was established under the 1951 Arts Act.

No organisation plays a more important role in supporting the arts in Ireland than the Arts Council. This position was set out in the original legislation in 1951, re-affirmed in the 1973 Act and again in the 2003 Act.

Background

As Head of the School of Communications at Dublin City University I currently lead Ireland's largest university centre for media and communications with almost 1,000 students, recently rated amongst the 200 best globally in these subject areas.

I was previously Head of the Department of Film and Media at IADT, Dun Laoghaire.

Prior to 2008 I held senior editorial positions with a number of media companies including RTÉ News & Current Affairs and the *Irish Times* during a 14-year career as a political journalist.

More recently, I have added significant experience as an independent non-executive director across several boards in the state and not-for-profit sectors.

I served two terms as a board member of a leading commercial semi-state company – Dublin Bus from 2013 to 2019 – where I was also a member of the Audit and Risk Committee.

I have also served on the boards of Oxfam Ireland and the Galway International Arts Festival. The latter organisation produces one of Europe's leading arts festivals as well as developing/producing new work that tours nationally and internationally.

I have extensive experience working in the role of Chair including as Chairperson of the Expert Advisory Committee of Culture Ireland – which has responsibility for promoting Irish arts worldwide – and as Chairperson of the Compliance Committee of the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland.

I have also further deepened my understanding of governance processes through ongoing training, including successfully completing the Diploma in Corporate Law and Governance at the Law Society of Ireland and shortly the Chartered Director qualification from the Institute of Directors.

I should note that in accepting the position of Chair of the Arts Council, I have already resigned from a number of roles to remove any possible conflicts of interest.

Arts Involvement

My involvement and interest in the arts sector arises in part – as I have just said – from my role in education but also from my longstanding personal interest in the visual arts, theatre, literature and film; and also from my work as Chairperson of Culture Ireland and a board member of the Galway International Arts Festival.

In my previous career in the media sector – while I primarily worked as a political journalist – I also produced and presented a number of radio documentaries on visual artists.

Going back a little further – I originally trained as an economist. My final year undergraduate project was an econometric study of the price of the paintings of Jack B. Yeats; the findings of which I now have no recollection. At that time I was also a volunteer on a community radio station in Dublin City – Anna Livia – where I worked on the station's arts programme.

Role of the artist

In preparing for today I read the Oireachtas debates on the original Arts legislation from 1951.

In a Second Stage debate in the Seanad, one member told the House:

‘The definition of artist nowadays is a man with long hair or a woman with short hair; they seem to need no other qualifications than that. When I see pictures exhibited by a lot of modern artists, I wish that we had not any modern art. They are not paintings; they are not pictures. If anything at all, they are a puzzle.’¹

There’s little in the contribution I would agree with. But the last point – art as a puzzle: yes. Art – be it a painting, a poem, a dance, or a musical composition – should puzzle. It should challenge us as people. Make us reflect, think. Inspire us.

I am a great admirer of the work of Michelle Rogers – a wonderful painter from Co. Louth who now lives between New York and Rome. In 2016 she was invited to sketch the signatories of the Paris Agreement at the United Nations when countries agreed to address the challenge of climate change.²

In her drawings she sought to capture the hands of the 175 national representatives who signed the climate accord. Michelle Rogers said of this work:

‘It was quite painful to do because it took hours, even though each individual signing took two or three seconds. I wanted to draw every hand that I could.’

The outcome was quick drawings of the signatories’ hands. It’s been said they look in a way like a flock of birds. It is art that captures history.

One of the successes of the Arts Council over almost 70-years has been in ensuring recognition for the critical importance of the artist in Irish society; acknowledging the intellectual, creative and imaginative contribution artists make to Irish life.

The Arts Council works tirelessly to ensure that artists are supported in all aspects of their artistic practice and at all stages in their careers. Individual artists are supported through a range of schemes including bursaries, projects, Aosdána and the Next Generation Award.

However, it is a reality that being an artist is a difficult and precarious life. Despite the many available supports through the Arts Council, more

needs to be done to support the living and working conditions of artists, from performing to creative artists. The Arts Council will have more to say about this in the coming months.

Role of the Arts Council

In those Oireachtas debates in 1951 it was originally proposed that the amount of money provided for the activities of the new Arts Council would be limited to £20,000 (pounds) per annum.

Thankfully, following discussion in the Dáil the financial provisions in the legislation were changed so that there was no ceiling to the amount of money that would be granted to the Arts Council, which would also be independent in allocating its funding.

Then Taoiseach John A. Costello noted that this represented a fundamental principle in the legislation. He said:

‘art and all works connected with artistic activities, while being encouraged to the greatest possible extent by the State, should never be controlled by the State.’³

In the period since those words were uttered, Ireland’s international reputation as a creative country has been built on long-standing state investment in both artists and arts organisations overseen by successive Arts Councils.

A small grant to a fledgling theatre company in Galway in the 1970’s supported the development of a world renowned theatre powerhouse that is Druid Theatre Company. A bursary in the 1980’s to a young emerging novelist named Anne Enright helped to lead to a Booker prize winner and the inaugural Laureate for Irish Fiction.

Some years ago Anne Enright wrote about the lessons of being a writer. She had heard of people taking a year off to write a novel. And she thought:

‘I worry that a year might not be enough. You must fail as a writer for much longer than that... before you know what failure is and what use you might make of it.’⁴

She admitted that she didn’t realise that when her first book fell apart, that every book falls part. As she put it, that’s the gig of the artist.

So it is remarkable that from such struggles great work is so frequently created.

At the Arts Council, novels are not written, poetry is not crafted, dance is not created.

As a state body, the Arts Council as a body corporate is imbued with a passionate love for, dedicated commitment to and a deep experience of all the art forms. It disperses public money, provides expert advice and delivers practical support. Transparency and accountability are two hugely important values in all this work.

Key to the success of the Arts Council in delivering on its role is its capacity to work in partnership; across government and with other partners and stakeholders, and in particular, with the local authorities.

Partnership is important.

Paul Durcan – who the late Seamus Heaney always addressed as ‘Poet Durcan’ – is one of my favourite poets.

I was still a university student when Paul Durcan published his collection, *Crazy About Women* – which arose from an invitation from the National Gallery of Ireland to write poetry inspired by the Gallery’s collections.⁵

On my desert island list of things to bring, the first book would be *Crazy About Women*. A work of considerable beauty that reminds me always of the value of partnership.

Public Access

I also strongly believe in public access to the arts. Everyone in this society should be able to have the unique personal experience that comes from the arts; of being inspired, challenged and confronted by the work of our artists. And people should be able to enjoy the arts in their local communities.

Public access is central to the remit of the Arts Council, as is a strong commitment to providing experience and practice in different art forms for people across all of Ireland.

This commitment is seen in support to over 48 local arts centres – supported by the Arts Council – all across the country.

The positive impact of this type of activity is also evident in Arts Council funding last year to over 170 festivals attended by over 0.5m people.

But there are still communities for whom access to the arts continues to be a challenge.

A large number of people still experience barriers to engaging with – and participating in – the arts. Perhaps because of their socio-economic background, their location, their ethnicity, or through lack of accommodation of a disability.

Priority must be given to ensure everyone living in Ireland has a sense of ownership of publicly funded arts. And also that the art they encounter is relevant to contemporary society and its people.

Working to eliminate these barriers will be a central priority for the Arts Council.

As Chair Designate of the Arts Council I would again like to thank the Chair and Committee Members for inviting me to meet you today. I now look forward to formally taking up my role and to engaging with you again in the near future.

ENDS

¹ Seanad Éireann, Arts Bill, 1951 Second and Subsequent Stages, 2 May 1951. See <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/seanad/1951-05-02/5/>

² Michelle Rogers, 'Irish artist's UN moment sketching climate change history.' See <http://michellerogers.com/news/>

³ See Seanad Éireann, 2 May 1951.

⁴ Anne Enright, 'Author, author: Life Lessons,' *Guardian*, 22 November 2008. See <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/nov/22/anne-enright-writing-author>

⁵ Paul Durcan, *Crazy About Women*, National Gallery of Ireland, 1991.