

Brand Ireland: Culture in the Crisis

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Introduction

Since the Irish economy officially ‘fell’ into recession¹ in 2008, Irish community, adult education and participatory arts organisations have become acutely conscious of their financial vulnerability, as the prospect of austerity has become normalised and each new Budget promises to ‘share the pain’ across the society. In winter 2010 the Irish Government was compelled to seek what is commonly but euphemistically referred to as a ‘bailout’ - more accurately a loan with punitive interest rates and harsh conditionalities attached - from the troika of the EU, European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The discourse of ‘There Is No Alternative’ has taken on a particular urgency in Ireland, and the new government parties of Fine Gael and Labour can deny any ideological agency of their own as they defer to the terms of the ‘Memorandum of Understanding’ that was agreed by the previous administration. Again the language of euphemism is invoked and anodyne terms like ‘fiscal consolidation’, ‘budgetary correction’ or ‘adjustment measures’² mask the ugly reality of social welfare cutbacks, the slashing of vital personal social services and the loss of grants to community and youth organisations. As in the mythical ‘Big Society’ of the UK,³ citizens who are recently unemployed, managing on reduced benefits or struggling with outlandish mortgages they cannot afford, are charged with making do, doing without or doing it for themselves⁴.

The withering of the Irish welfare state and public services is given ideological ballast by the chorus of mainstream media commentators who parrot homilies about ‘our’ responsibilities. There are repeated reminders⁵ that we need to cop on and get real⁵: admit that our feverish consumerism fuelled the crisis; shoulder our obligations to our

¹ Kollewe, J (25/09/2008) ‘Ireland falls into recession’, The Guardian, accessed 28/06/2011
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2008/sep/25/recession.ireland>

² Irish Government (3/12/2010) ‘Letter of Intent, Memorandum of Economic and Financial Policies, and Technical Memorandum of Understanding’ accessed 29/06/2011
<http://www.imf.org/external/np/loi/2010/irl/120310.pdf>

³ Shaw, M (2011) ‘The Big Society – What’s the Big Idea?’, *Concept*, 2(2):3-6.

⁴ For example, Junior Minister at the Department of Education, Ciarán Cannon, brazenly advised parents troubled by the introduction of new charges for school transport and the cutting of existing routes, ‘to “pool resources” and return to the days when clubbing together was common practice’. See Lucey, A (29/06/2011), ‘Parents criticise minister for change to school transport’, Irish Times.

⁵ See analysis by Titley, G (14/06/2011) ‘White noise, bleak hope: Irish media in the Crisis’, LookLeft, accessed 29/06/2011 at <http://www.lookleftonline.org/2011/06/white-noise-bleak-hope-irish-media-in-the-crisis/>

Eurozone partners; and win the approval of those indistinct but ever watchful international markets. Activists, dispirited by the war of attrition against welfare and our sense of publicness, might have hoped that the recession would engender a creative questioning of capitalism and its contradictions. But mainstream rehashings of ‘what the crisis means’ have deliberately and systematically avoided their own responsibility to inform, analyse and critique. At best, they have exposed the wrongdoing and sharp practices of a grotesque cast of bankers and developers; at worst, they have propagated the fiction that during the period of the Celtic Tiger, ‘we all partied’⁶

The Irish recession has had profound material and political consequences, but it has also impacted on expectations of how we should think and talk about all sorts of things. For example, one of the primary casualties of the crisis, or so the dominant narrative runs, is Ireland’s reputation. Consequently, everything from the British Queen’s visit to the successes of our golfers is re-framed as a marketing opportunity: potentially adding to or detracting from the global image of ‘Brand Ireland’⁷. I am particularly interested in how the role of culture and the arts is being discursively framed at this moment: how demands for economic and reputational payoffs are being projected on to and internalised by artists and arts organisations. For activists, practitioners and educators who are committed to principles of cultural democracy, this is a particularly worrying development.

Culture as ordinary; culture as resistance

Culture should be understood as a broad and pluralised sphere of activity, which incorporates all forms of expression, communication and interchange that generate meaning in society. Sometimes cultural production results in artworks, things or commodities, but most of the time, as Raymond Williams observed, we experience it as ‘ordinary’⁸ life. As I will show later on, we are currently witnessing the celebration of a narrow and reifying conception of culture in the Irish public sphere; one that seeks to represent culture as a brand signifier for the nation state. Nonetheless, I do not want to suggest that this conception is completely new. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s the promotion of Irish theme pubs, Riverdance, and alcoholic drinks across the globe privileged and exploited particular images of Irish culture, history and tradition⁹. Furthermore, this is not a peculiarly Irish practice. Peter Van Ham has written about the emergence of the Brand State since the 1980s,

⁶ See interview with former Finance Minister Brian Lenihan on Prime Time, RTE’s current affairs show, 24/11/2010.

⁷ See Titley, G (25/05/2011) ‘Reflections on the maturation in Ireland’, Politico, accessed on 28/06/2011 at <http://www.politico.ie/component/content/article/263-crisisjam/7545-reflections-on-the-maturation-in-ireland-.html>

⁸ Williams, R (1989) *Resources of Hope*, London: Verso, p 4.

⁹ See for example, Anthony Patterson’s (2009) article, ‘Brand Ireland’, *Irish Marketing Review*, 20(2): 89-98. Without apparent irony or embarrassment, he suggests that ‘The Great Famine marks another milestone in the development of Brand Ireland’.

and has acknowledged the associated triumph of ‘style over substance’ as ‘image and reputation’ have become key components of the ‘state’s strategic equity’¹⁰. Because brand identities can create trust and distrust in international markets, they have real economic value even if and when they offer illusory or partial representations of the ‘character’ of particular nation states. Anne Allison describes how, in the wake of its own recession in the 1990s, efforts were made to refresh and rehabilitate Japan’s international reputation through the promotion of the ‘J-Cool’ Brand’:

Yielding much-needed capital, both real and symbolic, J-cool refers, somewhat imprecisely, to everything from Japanese video games and vinyl toys to the superflat aesthetics of Murakami Takashi² and Harajuku fashion. As such fads and products circulate overseas, they get reported on, back home, as a sign of Japan’s global reputation for its distinctive brand of youth-oriented cultural goods.¹¹

Even though brand discourses seem ubiquitous and hegemonic, it is also worth emphasising that the hegemony is not absolute. There are still vibrant and resistant forms of culture – culture that tries to evade, resist or name reifying market impulses. Those of us who have directly witnessed what the best forms of community or participatory arts can offer are familiar with cultural practice that is proudly public, critically engaged, collective and which subverts, what Declan McGonagle calls, the ‘genius-producer’¹² model of culture. While it may not always claim such a status for itself, arts practice is counter-hegemonic when it validates the rights of ordinary people to participate in the making and distribution of culture; when it seeks to democratise access and recognition for different kinds of creative expression¹³. Other forms of consciously resistant culture are evident in the exchanges between social movements and arts practitioners – be they film makers, singers, poets. In its weakest form, the ‘cultural contribution’ to activism is reduced to fundraising or campaign PR. At its best, acts of protest and political reclamation also coincide with a cultural reclamation and celebration, such as were experienced with the Old Head of Kinsale picnics or are expressed through the Afri Famine Walks¹⁴. This kind of cultural

¹⁰ Van Ham, P (2001) ‘The Rise of the Branded State: The Postmodern Politics of Image and Reputation’, *Foreign Affairs*, 80(5): 2-6, p 3.

¹¹ Allison, A (2009) ‘The Cool Brand, Affective Activism and Japanese Youth’. *Theory, Culture and Society*, 26 (2-3): 89-111, p 90.

¹² McGonagle, D (2007) ‘A New Deal’: art, museums and communities – re-imagining relations’, *Community Development Journal*, 42(4): 425-434, p430.

¹³ See Meade, R and Shaw, M (2011 forthcoming) ‘Community Development and the arts: Sustaining the democratic imagination in lean and mean times’, *Journal of Arts and Communities*, 2(1): 65-80.

¹⁴ Cork’s ‘Reclaim the Old Head’ campaign, 2001 to 2007, initially incorporated mass incursions into and later – in light of more ‘robust’ policing - gatherings at the gates of the Old Head of Kinsale Golf Course. A traditional *right of way*, the Old Head had been turned into an exclusive private golf club. The campaign urged protesters to picnic and to reclaim their rights to leisure, access to the headland and their memories of daytrips to this exceptionally beautiful location. The campaign, therefore, incorporated a recognition of the centrality of recreation, pleasure and fun in political activism and as worthy aspirations in themselves. The Afri Famine Walk is an annual event that takes place in Mayo to memorialise the Great Famine. It honours the journey made by hundreds of starving people who

reclamation is also evident in the emergence of autonomous social centres and bookshops such as Seomra Spraoí¹⁵ in Dublin or Solidarity Books¹⁶ in Cork. Here people get together to create comparatively uncommodified meeting, eating, discussion and leisure spaces that are not dictated by the conventions of market or consumer relationships. While these vital currents of resistance are important in their own right, they are all the more precious now that the economic crisis has legitimised ways of thinking and talking about culture that are either immune from or actively disregard participatory, collectivist and democratic values.

Brand Ireland – a culture for economic revival?

As noted already, a recurring preoccupation in mainstream discourses about the ‘crisis’ is Ireland’s international ‘reputation’: more specifically, the concern that because the political, banking and property sectors have been so tarnished by failure, Ireland’s status as a place to do business has been damaged. This means that previously less regarded areas of economic activity are now being assessed for what they can offer to the recovery. Significantly, given that we are often presumed to have entered a post-industrial era, the manufacturing¹⁷ and food production¹⁸ sectors have been rediscovered by the Irish media and economic commentators. Similarly, the arts and cultural sectors – what Fintan O’Toole terms ‘all we’ve got’¹⁹ – are now being asked to play a key role in the management and enhancement of Ireland’s image, and in contributing to employment and economic growth. As the following extracts show, media discussions, government pronouncements and high profile corporate-style gatherings – such as the Global Economic Forum of 2009 – converge around the axiom that the function of Irish culture and arts practice is to build the Brand.

[At the Global Economic Forum] ‘Speakers focused on the concept of branding, noting the strength of “Brand Ireland”, but that in today’s hugely competitive environment, resources must be targeted and the message focussed so that Ireland could distinguish itself on the global stage. The arts and culture had a key role to

trudged on foot from Louisburg to Delphi Lodge in search of food in 1849 and it also forges links with current campaigns and cultural movements for change. (See <http://www.afri.ie>)

¹⁵ See <http://seomraspraoi.org/>

¹⁶ See <http://www.solidaritybooks.org/>

¹⁷ Hennessey, N (11/01/2011) ‘Manufacturing to lead recovery’, Irish Examiner, accessed on 04/07/2011 <http://www.irishexaminer.com/business/kfeykflkfau/rss2/>

¹⁸ Lynch, S (16/07/2010) ‘Plan sows seeds for agricultural recovery’, Irish Times, accessed 04/07/2011 <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/finance/2010/0716/1224274815949.html>

¹⁹ O’Toole, F (27/03/2010) Does Mary Hanafin realise she's the minister for all we've got? Irish Times. Accessed 04/03/2011

<http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/weekend/2010/0327/1224267154518.html>

play in this process. Participants strongly argued that the arts are no longer a luxury or a charity, but are a hugely important part of the economy'²⁰

'I believe that being Irish holds a distinct and intrinsic value. Ireland is a brand. People know us. Our country, her landscape and her culture are known the world over. *We must connect with that brand now and use it to give us the competitive advantage in a globalised world that is increasingly the same. We must ourselves portray the positives that others see in us.*'²¹ (My italics)

'My Department has responsibility for the arts, heritage, the Irish language and the islands which I am confident will play a key role in the country's economic recovery. ... While the arts, culture and creative sectors are important for the social, cultural and educative benefits they bring to communities around the country, they also constitute a significant sector of the economy, in terms of contributions to GNP and employment. As such, they can make an important contribution to sustainable economic recovery. Over 3.5 million people visited our national cultural institutions and other cultural organisations supported by my Department last year. The priority in 2011 is to ensure that what the national cultural institutions offer to the public continue to draw large numbers of visitors, both domestically and from abroad'²².

In these comments, which are reflective of the broader debate, we can observe a couple of inter-related assumptions. Firstly, there are no tensions between the needs and values of the arts and cultural sectors and those of a competitive capitalist economy. Increasingly, as McGuigan observes, capitalism projects itself as 'cool': in so doing it claims the language of creativity, innovation and imagination as its own and it 'incorporates' the art and cultural spheres into 'capitalist ideology and market practices'²³. Secondly, alternative visions of culture or of the arts are set aside or trivialised. The rights to access, participation and distribution, which are inherent to the project of cultural democracy, boil down to 'charity', 'luxury', or generic references to social benefits. Thirdly, these discourses are constitutive insofar as they seek to create or call into being a particular kind of arts and cultural sector. Priorities are being set out in these statements – tourism growth, for example – and artists and cultural institutions are being responsabilised to enact them.

²⁰ Department of Foreign Affairs (2009) *Global Irish Economic Forum 18-20 September 2009 Report*. Dublin: Department of Foreign Affairs, p 21

²¹ Cowen, B (30/06/2010) 'Speech by the Taoiseach, Mr. Brian Cowen, T.D., at the announcement of Ireland's next Professor of Poetry - Harry Clifton - Newman House, Wednesday, 30 June, 2010 at 6.30pm' Accessed on 02/06/2011 http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/eng/Government_Press_Office/Taoiseach%27s%20Speeches%202010/Speech_by_the_Taoiseach_at_the_announcement_of_Irelands_next_Professor_of_Poetry_Harry_Clifton_Newman_House_30_June_2010.html

²² Response by Minister Jimmy Deenihan to Dáil Questions 11/05/2011, accessed 04/07/2011 <http://debates.oireachtas.ie/dail/2011/05/11/00018.asp>

²³ McGuigan, J (2010) *Cool Capitalism*, London; Pluto Press, p7-8.

While it would be a stretch to argue that hegemonic discourses are determining the actions and self-images of arts and cultural organisations, their influence within that sector is palpable. On September 16th 2009, Visual Artists Ireland, ‘the all Ireland Development and resource body for professional visual artists’, made a submission to the Innovation Task Force in which it represented improved grants and resources for artists as ‘further support of the cultural identity of Brand Ireland’²⁴. During election 2011 the National Campaign for the Arts, which has become the most high profile lobby for continued public subsidy of the arts, urged voters to remind political parties and prospective TDs that;

‘The arts enrich our lives
The arts enhance Ireland’s image and reputation on the world stage
The arts are a stimulant of and contributor to the smart economy
The arts are a significant employer
The arts drive cultural tourism.’²⁵

In a context of funding retrenchment, where basic public, social and community services are under pressure to demonstrate their worth, it is hardly surprising that arts and cultural organisations would strategically adapt to economic rationalities and represent their purposes accordingly. However, mainstream discourses about culture and its brand consolidation role are somewhat fanciful given the precarious financial status of the arts and cultural sectors. Since the economic crisis began the Arts Council and arts organisations²⁶ have experienced significant losses in funding and there have been threats to the very existence of a distinct government department with responsibility for the arts²⁷. An Arts Council sponsored survey, published in 2010, found that the average income from their arts practice for artists in the Republic of Ireland was ‘€15,000 in 2008, with 50% of artists earning €8,000 or less from their work as Artists’²⁸. Notably, these figures relate to the period before the crisis when Ireland was still, notionally at least, a booming economy. These figures also reflect the broader reality that employment conditions under ‘Cool Capitalism’ and in the creative industries are typically unstable and poorly remunerated²⁹.

²⁴ Visual Artists Ireland (2009) Creative Ireland – Submission to the Innovation Taskforce

. Dublin: Visual Artists Ireland, p 3-5.

²⁵ National Campaign for the Arts (No Date) ‘Election 2011’, Accessed 01/06/2011 <http://www.ncfa.ie/files/2011-messages.doc>

²⁶ Irish Times (01/01/2010) ‘Arts Council Cuts mean 30 groups to lose State Funding’, Irish Times, accessed 04/07/2011 <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/ireland/2010/0130/1224263434306.html>

²⁷ McCarthy, C [chair] (2009) Report of the Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes. Dublin: Stationery Office, p 33.

²⁸ McAndrew, C and McKimm, C (2010) The Living and Working Conditions of Artists of Artists in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, The Arts Council/Arts Council Northern Ireland. Accessed on 02/06/2011 <http://www.artscouncil.ie/Publications/LWCA%20Study%20-%20Final%202010.pdf>

²⁹ McGuigan, J (2010) Cool Capitalism, London; Pluto Press, Chapter 5.

Resisting the Brand

Against Van Ham who claims that brand states, by drawing on the more 'benign' resources of culture, tradition and history, marginalize 'nationalist chauvinism'³⁰, I would argue that Brand Ireland discourses ultimately appeal to a nationalist reflex, an uncomplicated 'we' against the 'they' of external markets. Nonetheless, they do not reflect a collective or common culture. In a way 'Brand Ireland' is just like the 'Big Society': a neo-liberal fantasy that pretends that we can do more with less and that one upbeat and pushy narrative can override the tensions inherent in life, work and community in contemporary capitalist society. As citizens we are obliged to be positive, creative and constructive in the name of financial prudence and economic growth. Arts practitioners and community organisations may feel overwhelmed by and ambivalent about the prospect of outright rejection of these hegemonic discourses, not least because precious funding streams may be contingent on adaptation to the new fiscal reality. However, it is precisely because that fiscal reality seems so deterministic and all enveloping that we need to hold out for alternative and critical conceptions of culture. We need to actively celebrate, reclaim and revitalise visions and values that are present in democratic art movements, activist campaigns and ordinary transgressions.

Against those who seek to simplify and reduce culture to a brand, we need to speak up in favour of the messiness, provisionality and diversity of cultural expression. We need to remind them that the 'arts sector' is not a proxy for creativity in its broadest sense. Genius practitioners and arts institutions are voices within the cultural landscape but we are in that landscape too, whether as activists, community groups or as individualised pleasure seekers. We are not merely tourists or consumers of culture, but makers, doers and communicators. What we do with and to culture might lack the lustre of high art or the spectacle of entertainment, but it matters simply because it seems so unexceptional.

Finally, as Declan McGonagle has observed, culture is always about communication, whatever the medium of expression³¹. Sometimes we may desire to communicate pride, positivity or affirmation to imagined communities or even brand states outside of our own. This may or may not enhance our reputation in their eyes. But culture is also about communicating with each other and ourselves, in ways that can accommodate regret, anger, confusion, anxiety and critique. We will not find spaces for such communication in Brand Ireland - so we must assert them for ourselves.

³⁰ Van Ham, P (2001) 'The Rise of the Branded State: The Postmodern Politics of Image and Reputation', *Foreign Affairs*, 80(5): 2-6, p 3.

³¹ McGonagle, D (2007) 'A New Deal': art, museums and communities – re-imagining relations', *Community Development Journal*, 42(4): 425-434, p430.