![Blue Drum]

Wild Country:
Art,
Community
and the Rural

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Introduction

Arts-based community development has many problems, not the least of which is describing what it is that its practitioners are trying to achieve. As soon as we try to do this, we head into very boggy terrain, such as the age old debates over the importance of process (community) versus the importance of product (art), and then stagger into the brambles of just what is a quality arts experience anyway? Because the underlying philosophy of 'community arts' has always been based on a pragmatic approach – 'whatever it takes to get the job done' – we lose sight of just what 'the job' is. It is clearly beyond the scope of a little document like this to clear this cluttered landscape, so this is to be read as not so much a blueprint as a test survey, putting down some markers and asking questions.

One particularly soggy area is the queasy relationship between the people doing this work and

the State. Is arts-based community development simply part of *governance* – the means by which the bureaucracy has spread the system of government throughout the society? Or is arts-based community development the heir to the struggles for cultural democracy of the 1960s and 70s? These are not necessarily either/or questions, but they point to the possibility of betrayal inherent in the word *collaboration* – which side are you really on? Not being clear about this then leads to a lack of clarity about the role of funders, of artists, of community development workers and of participants.

Exclusion is central to the formation of both community and the arts, through the generation of social and class distinctions. It will be argued that the Irish nation-state is a racially-defined agent of global capitalism ('the *Irish* economy'), and that the artworld, part of this system, neutralises opposition by substituting art for political action. As the nation-

state constantly re-defines itself through the production of citizens and 'non-nationals', could the focus of arts-based community development on 'community' and 'difference' support this process? We will begin with a brief look at 'art', move on to 'community' and the 'rural', and return to 'arts-based community development'.

1. Art: Expression, Practice, Distinction and Autonomy

Much of the theory that has traditionally been used in community arts is the visual art theory developed by the American Pragmatist philosopher, John Dewey in the 1930's. Dewey argued that a 'true' belief is one which leads to successful action - the truth is 'whatever works'. Dewey's *Art As Experience* (1934) viewed art as expressing the life of a community in a universal language, open to anyone prepared to enter into the spirit of the relevant

community. He stressed that *experience* is the aim of art, and emphasised the instrumental aim of improving our immediate experience through sociocultural transformation, the integration of art and life. Creating an object of art is an act of *expression* - not just an emotional discharge, but the 'meaningful embodiment of an experience' in a medium such as paint, wood, sound etc. Most importantly, the "actual work of art is what the product *does* with and in experience", something quite distinct from the product itself, and naturally leading to an emphasis on the process, the experience of making and doing art.

After World War II, art theory became dominated by discussions about art's formal qualities, but in the 1980s there was a revival of Pragmatism, which opened aesthetics up to the idea of a 'dialogic' practice. This 'new aesthetics' can be seen in the writing of Nicholas Bourriaud, whose *Relational*

Aesthetics (1998) suggests that we should judge artworks on the basis of the inter-human relations which they represent, produce or prompt. This theory reflected much of the art practice of the mid 1990s to early 2000s. One weakness of a lot of this work was that the sociological role of 'art' tended to get forgotten, especially the fact that access to the arts are key markers of status and exclusion in society.

The classic examination of this is Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*, (1979), where he argues that there two core 'dispositions' concerning the arts, the 'Aesthetic' and the 'Ethical' dispositions. Which one you have depends on your level of education and your social class. The 'Aesthetic disposition' belongs to the dominant, educated classes and values form over the subject, creating 'difficult' works of art. This reinforces the autonomy and 'universality' of the arts and their divorce from daily life in a culture of

elitism. By contrast, the 'Ethical disposition' stems from "a deep-rooted demand for participation", and rejects the refusal of the aesthetic to engage in the human. It values subject-matter over form and celebrates notions of collectivity.

As a result, your 'taste' and your level of participation in the arts serve to show what class you are, what your social status is. This use of culture as a mark of *distinction* from those of 'lesser taste' means that the cultural elite will inevitably be opposed to cultural democracy, while the 'marginalised' equally come to regard art as the preserve of the elite. 'Avant-gardism' can then be seen as displays of artistic power by 'transgressing', incorporating more aspects of society into 'art'. Thus the arts can be seen as effectively a form of cultural exclusion.

Despite some thirty years of 'community arts' activity in one form or another, "taking part in the

arts in Ireland varies depending on your level of education, socio-economic status, the area in which you live, and your age." (NESF Report No.35: *Arts, Cultural Inclusion and Social Cohesion*, 2007) This suggests that something more is needed than what has gone on to date if this situation is to change.

One argument is that 'community arts' therefore needs to break the link between the arts and the distinction-making uses made of them by those on top - which implies "nothing less than a social and cultural revolution." Otherwise 'community arts' risks becoming another form of cultural paternalism, as "all forms of cultural paternalism have in common the belief that art is a social good that should be made available to the community at large." (Tom Duddy, "The Politics of Creativity", *Circa,* 67, Spring 1994).

A core issue here is the idea of *autonomy* (individual freedom) and art. Traditionally the artist

has been seen as an autonomous individual, somehow outside the norms of society. Not alone this, but art itself has also insisted on its autonomy, its separation from the rest of the world. The argument is that this is art's only way of *being* political. "Art is not political owing to the messages and feelings that it carries on the state of social and political issues. It is not political owing to the way it represents social structures, conflicts or identities. It is political by virtue of the very distance that it takes with regard to those functions." (Jacques Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 2004) The risk is that art that pretends to be critical can be just an aestheticisation of clichés and problems, "a fast and cheap alternative to political debate and activity." (Catherine David, "Aesthetics and Politics" in *Cork Caucus on art, possibility and democracy*, 2006) "If the work is shown without any prospect that it will have an effect, its display becomes mere

performance and its viewing a form of entertainment." (Julian Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated: The Story of Contemporary Art*, 2004) Thus we can see how the development of 'relational aesthetics' may have served the State, neutralising opposition by substituting art for political action.

2. Community: Autonomy, Structure and Identity

The idea of the struggle between the Aesthetic and Ethical has been applied by Zygmunt Bauman to the concept of 'community' (Bauman, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*, 2001). 'Ethical' communities are ones where obligations run deep, and it is difficult to leave. There are two main types of ethical community:

> *Community of place*: Territorial coalitions of diverse local interests; Structured, traditional, hierarchical; Conflict is resolved through

negotiation or ultimately delegated violence; Exit is difficult and high-cost.

Community of kin: Clan-based social structure; Structured, traditional, hierarchical; Conflict resolved through negotiation or ultimately direct violence; Exit is extremely difficult and very high cost.

Where two such systems co-exist, there is often conflict, as can be seen in parts of rural Ireland where the 'settled community' (a community of place) are extremely hostile to Travellers (based on a community of kin system). By contrast, 'Aesthetic' communities have shallower bonds and are often short-term, and are usually based on a 'community of interest'. They represent the interests of a particular group, and conflict is resolved through negotiation or ultimately dissolution. Exit is easy and low cost - you can simply leave the group.

The basis of community is the idea of collectivity, the relation of the individual to the group. This is the function of community, to *provide* identity and

security and facilitate collective action. The security is provided through a structure based on tradition and hierarchy, strongest in ethical communities. Community is based on exchanging liberty for security, swapping *autonomy* for *structure*, thus entering into the collective and finding safety there. This is at odds with the whole direction of capitalism, which has been to transform us into individual consumers, unable to resist collectively. As a result, most philosophers regard 'community' as 'inoperative', aspirational, a metaphor of the future or simply impossible in the contemporary world (e.g. Jean-Luc Nancy, Bauman, Giorgio Agamben, Etienne Balibar, etc.).

However, the theory of Liberal democracy remains based on the autonomous individual (the citizen), engaging freely in a political 'community' (the State).

In order to claim the right to participate, the individual must satisfy the requirements of nationality, age and full legal agency. This excludes young people, legal and illegal immigrants, asylum seekers and other non or 'semi' citizens. Citizenship is increasingly being used by the State as a form of social control, and notions of 'cultural citizenship' explore the idea of people creating society and meaning in the cultural marketplace, unmediated by the state – but confined to citizens.

There is clearly a tension between the *autonomy* of the citizen and the *structure* provided by the state, a tension mediated through the laws – but also through money. As Alexis De Tocqueville (an early theorist of democracy) said, "When all the members of a community are independent of or indifferent to each other, the co-operation of each of them can be obtained only by paying for it: this infinitely multiplies the purposes to which wealth may be

applied and increases its value." (*Democracy in America*, 1831) Thus 'community' becomes a service to be provided – and paid for – like any other, but dependent also on the initial condition of citizenship. This mechanism combines an illusion of autonomy for the citizen with a structure of governance through the medium of money. It is the basis of the capitalist economy based on a network of competing ethnically-defined nation-states composed of individual citizens. This has solved the problem of how to combine mass consumerism with an individualistic society, and has the added advantage of creating a body of Others, who can be exploited with impunity as they do not have 'civil rights' (the rights of citizens).

Questions then arise as to the role of culture in such a structure. One suggestion was that "We should be thinking about civil culture, civil meaning belonging to citizens, and about participatory

practices." (Declan McGonagle, "The City Arts Centre: It hasn't gone away, you know", in *Contexts: Arts and Practice in Ireland*, No.1, 2002) This clearly feeds into the idea of the State itself as being in control of the culture, as the very category of 'citizen' is dependent on the existence of the State. This is more than just a quibble about exclusive language, therefore. It is at the core of the question whether arts-based community development wants to be simply part of *governance* – or whether it sees itself as a force for social change, up to and including opposition to the State?

Another issue is the role of minorities and their right to community and identity. Do we grant minority 'communities' external rights – can 'they' speak with a collective voice to the majority? Who gets to be a representative of a community? What about the internal constraints within a community: *must* the internal lives of communities mirror public

norms of equality, nondiscrimination, due process, etc.? If yes, does this invite state institutions "to colonize social life in the name of progressive public ideals"? (Rosenblum and Post, *Civil Society and Government*, 2001) If no, do we run the risk of the 'Medusa Syndrome', where "acts of recognition and the civil apparatus of such recognition [...] ossify the identities that are their object"? (Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity*, 2005) If I am recognised '*as a*' Traveller/ Asylum Seeker/ Disabled person or any other category, can I ever escape being talked to 'as a' – and just be myself? With the emphasis on 'diversity' in much arts-based community development, are we simply cementing people forever in their 'target groups'?

3. The Rural: Identity and Modernity

In an Irish context, the 'rural' was traditionally seen as the 'cultural heart' of the nation. But just

what is the 'rural'? Definitions range from describing it as a "territory without services" (the American Rural Sociological Society), to the classic 19th century distinction between the modern goal-oriented world of the urban *gesellschaft* (society) and the organic, tradition-based rural *gemeinschaft* (community), to the contemporary 'metro' and 'nonmetro'. If rural people do live in world of at least fewer services, are they somehow different kinds of citizens, less 'civil', perhaps even 'wild'- just like the landscape?

This has historical resonance with the colonial period of the early 17th century, when the Plantations used a metaphor of gardening, and 'the natives' were described as "weeds" that if unchecked would overgrow the good corn, the "civil persons". (Sir John Davies, *A Discovery of the True Causes why Ireland was never Entirely Subdued*,1612, quoted in Clare Carroll "Barbarous

Slaves and Civil Cannibals: Translating Civility in Early Modern Ireland" 2003) Although the Irish were regarded as a people without history before the conquest, there was of course a history, much of which survived in 'unofficial culture', in the form of folklore. UNESCO has defined 'folklore' as "the totality of tradition-based creations of cultural community, expressed by a group of individuals and recognized as reflecting the expectations of a community in so far as they reflect its cultural and social identity." This definition reflects the notion of a 'cultural community', having its own expectations and a social and cultural identity, somehow standing apart from the rest of the world. Central to this vision is the idea that people in rural areas somehow live in more 'real' communities than those in towns or cities.

   At the same time, there is an acknowledgement that much of rural life is in crisis, with globalisation

decimating the agricultural basis of the rural economy. This has led to calls for 'rural regeneration' through a 'return to community'. Included in this programme of community development and regeneration is an agenda of self-determination and autonomy: 'Autonomous development involves local people taking control of their development agenda. It is the ultimate form of empowerment'. (Croagh Patrick Heritage Trail leaflet, 2009.) There are several issues here, not least the fact that such 'autonomy' is only possible with the assistance of a plethora of 'agencies', both local, national and, increasingly, international. Also, just who is 'local'? Could such calls be masking the increasing reach of globalised capital, giving legitimacy to the role of the state in intimate areas of people's lives? This rather abstract sounding question becomes very real when faced with the input of Shell into 'community projects' in North Mayo, for example.

Stuart Hall (in "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular'", from R. Samuel (Ed.), *People's History and Socialist Theory*, 1981) suggests that the State constantly struggles to create and defend an 'official' culture against continually emerging forms of 'unofficial' culture. The impact of state capture of unofficial forms of culture can be seen very starkly in my own local area of south Mayo. In an area of roughly 200 square miles with no town, there are five local halls, all of which used to host amateur drama groups, an annual feis, set dancing and several of them were home to fife and drum bands until the 1970s. With vastly increased expenditure on the arts at County Council level and the arrival of both community arts and Arts Centres in the urban areas, almost all of this activity has died out, with the exception of set dancing in two of the halls. The implication is that 'community arts' may have been part of a disciplining of local popular culture,

confining all arts activity either to institutional settings or an expression of marginality. Can the idea of the rural as a space 'outside' modernity survive 'community development'? What could the role of arts-based community development be in such a process?

4. Arts-based Community development

To return, we can see that there are dragons lurking in some of the bogholes. Rather than trying to define what arts-based community development is (or might be), it might be useful to look briefly at where it came from. The Irish community arts movement rapidly expanded in both quantity and sophistication in the 1980s. By contrast, community development, especially in the rural areas, goes back to the Co-operative movement at the turn of the 20th century. Around 1990, there was an

increased focus on cultural citizenship and hugely expanded state investment in and control of culture. At least partly in response to this, Irish community arts activity divided into two strands: community-based arts development, supported by the Arts Council and the cultural institutions; and arts-based community development, supported by the Community Development Projects, a wide variety of statutory agencies and the voluntary sector. "In the first, there is an emphasis on the use of art as a tool for individual and social transformation, to be placed in the service of the greater social good. In the second, it is the question of extending the boundaries, relevance and reach of art as a domain of practice that motivates the artist." (Ailbhe Murphy, "People, place and the promise of art" in Lisa Spillane-Doherty (ed.), *Drawing a Balance; A Journey in Art, Education and Community*, 2000.)

This division occurred fairly shortly after the Community Development Programme was launched in 1990 by the Irish Government with the specific aim of supporting local groups to overcome problems of poverty and disadvantage – although critics suggest that this is a way of forcing marginalised communities to look after themselves. 'Performing community' in this manner can actually serve to accentuate difference, increase marginalisation and exoticise people – in other words, the 'successful' are always individuals, while the disadvantaged are 'prescribed' community (Taylor, *Public Policy in the Community*, 2003). This maintains the production of difference, seen by many commentators as forming an essential part of the functioning of the contemporary bureaucratic state. This returns us to the tension in community work mentioned earlier between the integrationist approach and the oppositional approach, a tension

whose focus centres on attitudes to the state. With this in mind, I will ask a few questions:

In arts-based community development is the art *expected* to reflect the group experience?

Can you express anything 'individual' through art once you have been categorised and communitised?

Are you reduced to only being a member of a certain group/ a 'participant'?

Does this require culture to emerge from 'identity', an identity imposed by the state and based on stereotypes?

In an article reviewing the politics of community participation since the 1960s, Marilyn Taylor shows how "new governance spaces are still inscribed with a state agenda, with responsibilities pushed down to communities and individuals at the same time that control is retained at the centre, through the imposition and internalisation of performance cultures that require 'appropriate' behaviour." (Taylor, "Community Participation in the Real World:

Opportunities and Pitfalls in New Governance Spaces", *Urban Studies Journal*, No.44, 2007) She suggests that perhaps the most realistic approach is that people adopt "a 'selfreflexive irony' in which participants recognise the likelihood of failure but always proceed as if success were possible, seeking creative solutions, while always acknowledging and engaging with the limits of any such solution." In order to achieve this, I would argue that two things are needed: a clear understanding of what it is that arts-based community development wants to achieve, and a clear understanding of the role of the State in the production of inequality and difference.

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About the Author

John Mulloy worked for nearly 25 years as a community artist engaged in mural-painting, drama, street theatre, puppetry and mask-making, in settings, ranging from formal institutions such as prisons and psychiatric hospitals to entirely informal, spontaneous 'actions'. Anti-racism formed a particular focus for his work over the years, leading to an active engagement with Travellers, asylum-seekers and refugees. Increasing discomfort with trying to minimise the negative impacts of state policy on groups marginalised by the state's constant redefinition led him to research 'Culture, Collectivity and Globalisation', a 2006 PhD thesis at the NCAD. His research focus is on arts-based community development. He is a lecturer in the History of Art and Critical Theory in the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, teaching in both the Castlebar and Galway campuses.

About Blue Drum

Blue Drum – The Arts Specialist Support Agency is working with the community development sector in Ireland, particularly Family Resource Centres and other community groups. The Agency was established in 2001 to address issues of access and participation in arts and culture work. Blueprint is a series of occasional essays commissioned by Blue Drum.

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