

Whose Culture Is It?
Social Inclusion and Cultural Diversity in
Ireland's Cultural Spaces

Report

on a

Seminar

organised by the Council of National Cultural Institutions

on Friday November 19th, 2010

at the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin

Sarah Finlay, February 2011

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Introduction

This report documents and responds to *Whose Culture Is It?*, a seminar on the issue of Social Inclusion and Cultural Diversity in Ireland's Cultural Spaces which was organised by the Education, Community and Outreach working group of the Council of National Cultural Institutions. Hosted by the Chester Beatty Library on 19th November 2010, the event was attended by almost 100 individuals working or studying in the field of arts and culture. Of those listed as attending¹ 25 were students (mainly graduate); 20 were identified as being from the arts sector; 15 from museums ; 8 from the heritage sector; 8 from third level education; 5 from other cultural institutions ; 2 from ethnic minority arts groups and 15 people were unidentified.

The report presents a brief summary of each of the papers given; a consideration of the principal themes and concerns addressed; and some proposals to the sector with regard to further embedding the issue of cultural diversity within the core of its work .

¹ These figures represent those people who registered for the seminar. The list of actual attendees, which is slightly smaller in number and different in make-up, was not available

Summary of Papers

(i) Mark O'Neill, Head of Arts and Museums, Glasgow City Council. Keynote Address

Beyond Cultural Welfare: embedding access in the core of museums.

Considering the three basic museum models,² as well as the policy and practice of Glasgow City Museums, a strong case was made for today's museums to be responsive, flexible and visitor-centred. For museums to offer a meaningful experience, access must be integrated at a strategic level in all structures and activities. Engagement with the public must be the responsibility of all staff and core displays need to be built on accessible principles.

The Display Philosophy of the Glasgow Museums proposes that

- There are many definitions of culture
- Communication is in dialogue mode
- Displays are selective, object-based, visitor-centred and have a narrative structure

Consultation is essential to the visitor-centred museum. Audience surveys, including information on social patterns and building usage, are useful tools; as are community forums and advisory panels on areas such as education and disability.

It is also important to create learning experiences for staff. In Glasgow, curators work with advisory forums and target groups in the creation of a variety of outreach and community-based projects.

Storytelling is a principle element of the museums' practice. Functioning at many levels and cutting across disciplines, it aims to work with people's imagination and inherent meaning-making capacity.

In adopting the Social Justice Model, the museum prioritises human interest over disciplinary interest. It locates the object in a wider context and acknowledges the non-rational and spiritual, as well as the darker side of life and human emotion. Seeking to represent cultures from within as well as without, it assumes that all cultures exercise reason and value beauty, but not that the Western version of these has a monopoly on truth.

² Unlike the Elite and Welfare Models of Museums, which tend to idealise their functions and collections and exclude the visitor, the Social Justice Model, adopted increasingly today, seeks to integrate museums in society.

(ii) Alan Kirwan, PhD researcher at the School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester.

Irish Museums in the construction of a diverse and pluralistic society.

The main point of focus of this study is the social roles which museums have in contributing to cross cultural awareness and mutual understanding in an increasingly multi ethnic and multi cultural Ireland. Key for the sector are the implications which the study holds for Irish museums with regard to audience perceptions.

Kirwan's research is the first to analyse feedback from ethnic minority visitors to museums and galleries in this country. Carried out between 2007 and 2010, it sampled 107 individuals, 43% of which were non nationals (ethnic minority), 37% of which were Irish (ethnic majority) and 20% of which were tourists. The sites selected were the Chester Beatty Library, the National Museum at Collins Barracks and Waterford Treasures.

The study considers how different audiences view the social value of museums to society and in particular the process of social cohesion. Also under consideration were the ways in which understandings of difference were constructed and communicated and how this was played out in the context of both Irish and non-Irish national identities. Interesting to note was the fact that the Irish respondents saw diversity in terms of past diversity (i.e. history), whereas the ethnic group clearly considered is as a current reality.

In the UK, research indicates that ethnic minority museum visitors wish to see how their own cultures are represented. In Ireland, where the ethnic minority population is more recent, visitors were more interested in how the Irish represented themselves and were, in many cases, keen to make links between their own colonised past and that of their new country of residence. In this regard, many respondents were unaware of the level of British presence in Irish history and expressed the view that there was perhaps too much emphasis placed by the displays on 'military dominance'.

Many ethnic communities mourned the lack of reference to their own cultures and felt that opportunities had been missed in finding creative ways to compare their cultures with that of this country. For those communities whose cultures were represented, there was at times both a challenging of its authenticity and a feeling expressed that they had been misrepresented. In this context, there was much questioning of what was put on display and who has the authority to speak .

At the same time, there was a widely held view that museums could be useful forums of debate, with regard to issues of identity, citizenship and human rights.

(iii) Jenny Siung, Head of Education, Chester Beatty Library.

Thoughtful and Respectful Engagement: Intercultural Dialogue and the Chester Beatty Library.

The Library defines intercultural dialogue as, “a means of encouraging thoughtful and respectful engagement between one or more persons from different groups through a variety of activities allowing for a deeper and better understanding of each other and their cultures.”³

This presentation described the ways in which the Chester Beatty Library engages with its audiences, in particular those communities represented within the collections. The need to consult and work with these communities is central to the success of the Library’s education programme which includes guided tours, lectures, workshops, demonstrations, films, family days, outreach and music performances. Embassies and Cultural Associations are useful points of contact when beginning to identify and engage with new communities. An active volunteer programme, comprising 35 individuals of mixed ages and ethnicities, is an important support to the educational programme at CBL.

Story telling has been a central feature of the programme, allowing children in particular to learn about and share their diverse cultural background , resulting on occasion in an ease of constraints between children of different ethnic backgrounds in a school context.

The Library has developed a number of successful projects in partnership with other museums abroad . The most extensive of these was MAP for ID (Museums as Places for Intercultural Dialogue, 2006-2008) which involved 35 case studies from Europe and the US and has been well documented both online and in book form. ⁴ Such documentation is a significant resource for those working in the sector. However, although useful ideas and information can be shared in this way, it is important to develop one’s own projects in the context of the existing environment.

Collaborative projects such as those described remind us that dialogue takes time and requires a clear and ongoing commitment from all parties involved. ⁵

³ <http://www.culturalpolicies.net/web/intercultural-dialogue.php>. Another useful resource is <http://www.interculturaldialogue.eu/web/index.php>.

⁴ [http:// www.mapforid.it](http://www.mapforid.it) ; *Museums as places for intercultural dialogue: selected practices from Europe*. Edited by Simona Bodo, Kirsten Gibbs, Margherita Sani, Published by the MAP for ID Group, 2009

⁵ Other partnership projects include *Museums Tell Many Stories* (2005 -2007) and *Virtual Collection of Masterpieces*, an online Learning Zone resource currently in development with partner museums in Leiden, Singapore and Seoul.

(iv) Orla Moloney, Head of Arts Participation, The Arts Council.

Developing and implementing Cultural Diversity Policy – opportunities and challenges

The Arts Council has recently developed a policy and strategy for cultural diversity in the arts in order to inform its own work over the coming years and to support the wider arts sector in developing its thinking and practice.

Research carried out in the development of this policy ⁶ indicated that the principal barriers to cultural diversity in the arts in Ireland were:

- *Lack of knowledge and capacity among those charged with arts provision at both local and national level.*
- *Lack of clarity about the arts agenda vis-a-vis the cultural diversity agenda.*
- *Lack of funding and support for intercultural arts practices.*
- *Overdependence on short term projects and ‘celebratory’ approaches.*

There are four key principles which underpin the Arts Council’s Cultural Diversity Policy:

- *Cultural Diversity as an enrichment of the arts*
- *An intercultural approach*
- *Plurality*
- *Cultural Diversity as an adaptive process*

The Arts Council has developed a five year strategy with regard to Cultural Diversity, aiming to enhance both its own capacity and the capacity of the arts sector. It involves three overlapping areas:

- *Structures and Operations*
- *Resources and Supports*
- *Partnerships*

Detailed information regarding this policy and strategy can be found in the relevant Arts Council publications.⁷

⁶ Documented in *Cultural Diversity and the Arts Project: Towards the development of an Arts Council policy and action plan, 2009*, www.arts council.ie

⁷ *Cultural Diversity and the Arts*, The Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaion, 2010; *Cultural Diversity and the Arts: Language and Meanings*, The Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaion, 2010

(v) Helen O'Donoghue, Head of Education and Community, Irish Museum of Modern Art

Come to the edge...projects and programmes involving other voices at IMMA

Museum education programmes must meet the needs of the whole community. In order for this to happen, there needs to be a clear understanding among those working in the institution of the barriers, both attitudinal and physical, that can and do inhibit significant numbers of individuals from participating in the arts. There needs also to be a political and social willingness on the part of the institution to meet this challenge at all levels of its operations.

IMMA's Education and Community Programme aims to foster within society an increased awareness and understanding of the visual arts by creating innovative and inclusive opportunities for people to engage with the Museum's exhibitions and programmes, both as audience members and participants. It also seeks to create opportunities for meaningful exchanges between artists and the public. The Programme is informed by models of practice which are designed to meet the needs of specific groups and to address targeted education needs. These models are documented and evaluated and their outcomes inform broader provision across a wide range of programmes. An artist-centred /artist-led approach characterises the work undertaken, with an emphasis on participatory, collaborative and socially engaged practices.

A range of programmes were introduced, representing a variety of approaches of engagement. These included projects with schools, community groups, partnerships with other agencies, as well as working with a wide range of groups and individuals, young and old, both locally and nationally.

A collaboration with Focus Ireland, which began in 2004, represents a significant development of a curatorial model, originally initiated with a group of young people in Waterford in 1999. Staff and clients of Focus Ireland familiarised themselves with the museum by partaking in one of the *Focus On ...* programmes, designed to engage individuals with the museum as a resource. Simultaneously two curators from IMMA worked with the Focus Ireland group to form a curatorial team, to consider and select work from the collection relating to the concept of Home. The resulting exhibition, *Hearth: Concepts of Home*⁸, became the focus for a wide range of education and community programmes, designed both to engage the museum and its public in a fundamental societal issue and also to engage the participants in the process of learning more about art and about how exhibitions are made, presented and mediated. It is worth noting that this project was not about categorising or focusing on the difference

⁸ *Hearth, Concepts of Home from the IMMA Collection in collaboration with Focus Ireland, published 2006*

(between those who have homes and those who do not); its intention was to raise awareness of the universal issue of the right to housing for all members of society.

(vi) Niall Crowley, Independent Equality Expert

An Equality Competent Arts Sector

An equality competent arts sector is one in which diversity is valued and acknowledged as being relevant. The sector needs skills and knowledge to be able to respond with flexibility to diversity and to advance equality in all aspects of its business. Equality must be achieved in terms of who is employed, who and what gets promoted and who gets access.

In order to address the question 'Whose Culture is it?', we need to consider

- Who gets to make decisions in arts organisations and cultural spaces
- Who do we consider to be culturally different
- What adaptations are required by cultural diversity

The challenge to the arts sector is to engage in a dialogue that is intercultural, inclusive of all ethnic groups, with an awareness that there is always a potential for stereotyping and racism; a dialogue in which everyone - majority and minority alike- is challenged to change.

We need to embrace the diversity within ethnic groups as well as the diversity of ethnic groups. Other 'identities' such as age, gender, socio-economic status, disability and religion are all important in terms of how we see ourselves and live in the world.

There needs to be a planned and systematic approach whereby equality shapes the governance of arts organisations. Genuine shared decision making can only arise out of informed policies, supported by training for all staff.

In acknowledging the unequal society in which we live, the arts sector can be a champion for equality , thus seeking to influence and shape the societal context.

Themes and Concerns

(i) Context

Cultural Diversity has always been a feature of Irish society. Its current expression, however, is undoubtedly more alive and prevalent than in previous times. The 2006 Census recorded that over 10% of the capital's population were non-Irish migrants, (167,663 out of 1,162,831 residents). Although not recorded, (and contrary to the myth that migrants return to their country of origin in a recession), it is widely acknowledged that this figure has increased dramatically. In 2009 approximately 10% of the country's population were nationals of other countries, comprising 188 different nationalities, with approximately 6% of these being non-white and non- Anglophone. In addition, .5% of the population recorded by the 2006 census identified themselves as Irish Travellers, although Pavee Point and the Irish Traveller Movement claim that the real number is considerably higher.

Further figures reveal the cultural inequalities inherent within our society. In 2009, when 10% of the population were identified as non-nationals, less than 10% of the workforce was unemployed. Of this number 18.3% were migrants. A 2005 Central Statistics Office survey on Equality revealed that non- Irish nationals were more than 1.5 times more likely than Irish respondents to report discrimination in the workplace and 2.5 times more likely to report discrimination when looking for work.

Significant to this perspective are the cuts made in 2008 of 43% to the Equality Authority Budget ; 35% to that of the Irish Commission for Human Rights; the closure in 2008 of the Combat Poverty Agency and National Cultural Committee for Intolerance (NCRI) and in 2009 of the National Action Plan against Racism (NAPR).

These facts clearly highlight the inequalities and discriminations which currently prevail in Irish society. It is in this context that the cultural sector in Ireland is invited to meet, embrace and prioritise cultural diversity in all its aspects.

(ii) Access

There was universal agreement that in order to achieve equality of access, appropriate policies and practices must be embedded into the organisational ethos. The all too familiar model whereby access is solely of concern to those involved in 'educational' or outreach activities is likely to fail in terms of creating access that is equal and inclusive.

The issue of equality of access needs to be addressed and integrated at all levels of arts and cultural organisations i.e. all aspects of policy, planning, programming and

participation. Key to the successful implementation of such a strategy are the appointment and training of both board members and staff.

Current research indicates that lack of knowledge and information has been a significant barrier to creating equal and culturally diverse access to the arts in Ireland. Many arts providers admit that they find it difficult to obtain information on local populations and to devise effective ways to reach, communicate and support diverse individuals and groups.

(iii) Intercultural Dialogue

The need for a dialogue that is intercultural and inclusive of all ethnic groups, majority and minority, was widely recognised; a broadly accepted working definition of intercultural dialogue being

*'a process that comprises an open and respectful exchange between individuals, groups and organisations with different cultural backgrounds or world views. Among its aims are: to develop a deeper understanding of different perspectives and practices; to increase participation (or the freedom to make choices); to ensure equality; and to enhance creative processes.'*⁹

In acknowledging that there is always potential for conditioned stereotyping and discrimination, such dialogue needs to be monitored on an ongoing basis. Mutuality of exchange and equality of engagement are key elements in avoiding the trap of tokenism.

Research carried out by the Arts Council in the development of its policy on cultural diversity revealed that many arts providers in Ireland lack knowledge about, exposure to and critical engagement with culturally diverse arts practices beyond Western Europe and North America. On the other hand, Alan Kirwan's research indicated that Ireland's newer residents and citizens were particularly interested in learning more about Ireland's history and culture, and were clearly interrogating the expression of legacy and nationality that was being represented .

(iv) Multiplicity of diversities

We can tend to see cultural diversity as a diversity of nationalities. The reality, however, that there is as much diversity within ethnic groups as of ethnic groups. In the Irish context alone , Travellers and Irish Language speakers consider themselves as culturally different to the majority . Age, gender, socio-economic status, disability and religion are also important 'identities' for all citizens. Those working in the cultural sector need to be mindful of this reality.

⁹ <http://www.culturalpolicies.net/web/intercultural-dialogue.php>

(v) Cultural Diversity as an Adaptive Process

Like the creative process, cultural diversity is constantly evolving. The cultural sector needs to be responsive to this process, acknowledging that this may mean changing the way things are perceived or done.

Way Forward

Following are a number of observations and suggested approaches which may be worth considering in the context of CNCI's ongoing and future engagement with and support of cultural diversity in its work.

1. Working in partnership with the Arts Council

In its recently published strategy, the Arts Council has committed itself to working in partnership with a number of organisations on a range of activities and approaches in order to develop good practice in the area of cultural diversity. CNCI is named as one of the key agencies in this context. The areas of activity identified for support and development are as follows:

- To share research, information, guidelines and case-studies in the area of cultural diversity
- To devise supports for effective communications as a means of enhancing access and participation of minority cultural and ethnic communities in all aspects of the arts
- To promote the diverse character of the arts in Ireland and complicate the simple, celebratory image of this diversity
- To explore existing mechanisms such as magazines, festival programmes, and other critical forums for diversifying and enriching critical discourse around the arts in Ireland
- To extend existing training opportunities, placements, networking and mentoring programmes to assist arts managers and practitioners from minority ethnic communities to access professional opportunities and peer critique, and identify additional capacity building initiatives required
- To extend networks of cultural co-operation and exchange that will raise awareness and understanding of contemporary professional arts practices from Africa, Asia, Latin America, Middle East and Eastern Europe

CNCI is well placed to work with the Arts Council in sharing its resources, knowledge and experience towards developing these areas of interest, which will undoubtedly support and enhance the work of the cultural sector. The area of communication and information would seem to be of particular relevance to the work of CNCI and its members (c.f. 2 below)

2. Consultation , Dialogue, Communication and Information

a) There was a marked absence of non nationals at the recent seminar .¹⁰ It is suggested that CNCI organise another forum on the subject, with a definite focus on the inclusion of members of socially excluded and minority ethnic communities. In this way, a more balanced and equal exchange of views and ideas is likely to be achieved.

b) There is clearly a need for further consultation and dialogue with an increasingly diverse audience. Cultural organisations may need to be more active in seeking feedback from diverse communities in order to better inform their policies and programmes. Means of communication may also need to change. The rapidly increasing use of communication networks such as Facebook and Twitter could certainly be capitalised upon in this context .

c) Schools are probably the most culturally diverse spaces in Ireland today. Many cultural organisations are already actively engaged with young people through a variety of education and outreach programmes and are thus well placed to enter into more active dialogue with this very significant audience. Again, the newer technologies are obvious mode of communications, of which there are many interesting models of practice¹¹.

d) Regarding museums in particular, those with collections and displays pertaining to other cultures should ensure that they enter into dialogue with the members of the relevant communities regarding the content, interpretation and display of these objects.

e) In addition to the possibility of comparing elements of Irish history and culture with that of other countries, cultural institutions could do well to make more of the diaspora/emigration experience , this being one with which many cultures identify.

f) As well as suggested guidelines for good practice, there are many interesting case studies documented in the area of cultural diversity.¹² CNCI, through its own

¹⁰ Only two of those in attendance were identified as being from minority ethnic communities

¹¹ c.f. www.culturelink.org > activities > conferences;

www.ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/dialogue/catal_dial_en.pdf; www.issues.tigweb.org/culture

¹² c.f. www.mapforid.it and <http://www.culturalpolicies.net/web/intercultural-dialogue.php>

national and international network, could work effectively, in association with the Arts Council, (which has already carried out significant research in this area¹³) in the creation of a web-based resource relevant to the cultural sector in Ireland .

In conclusion , there is a wealth of exciting opportunities and challenges being offered by the current cultural expansion in Ireland. The cultural sector is ideally placed not only to meet these challenges but also to act as a champion for cultural diversity, thus working towards the creation of a society that is more equal, just and harmonious.

11 *Cultural Diversity and the Arts Project: Towards the development of an Arts Council policy and action plan, 2009* , www.artscouncil.ie