



The Case for Elitism

Emer O'Kelly



Introduction

The Public and the Arts (2006) study was commissioned by the Arts Council / An Chomairle Ealaíon to provide information on the current behaviour and attitudes of Irish people to the arts.

The study finds that public attitudes to the arts are very positive and that attendance levels are above international norms. Current patterns of attendance, participation and purchase are revealed, as well as private 'consumption' of arts and culture via an increasing range of media. However the study also showed some apparently contradictory findings – the public (as reflected in samples taken by the study) consider the arts to be important, even if they do not personally attend at formal arts events. This has prompted consideration of the many ways in which the arts influence day to day life, albeit sometimes invisibly.

Arising from the study the Arts Council / An Chomairle Ealaíon has asked a range of commentators to give their opinions and perspectives on *The Value of the Arts*. These pamphlets are intended to provoke discussion and to focus attention on the crucial role the arts can and do play in our lives as individuals, as members of diverse communities and as part of our wider society.

The Case for Elitism

The purpose of art is to elevate the spirit, extend the intellectual horizons, and fire the imagination. Throughout history the greatest art has done this so successfully that it still demands undivided attention, grabbing us by the throat and knocking the breath from our bodies. It has literally stopped the generations in their tracks. That is the elite of art, the work that we can all agree has a mysterious, overwhelming transcendence; sometimes it may not actually appeal, but its greatness is indisputable. Most art can only aspire to such monumental effect. The rest ranges from the excellent and startlingly effective, through the disturbing, the beautiful, the evocative, the challenging, down through the stages to the predictable, the banal, and the trite and vulgar. At lower levels art becomes a matter of contemporary dispute between those who want the recognisable and comfortable and those who are eager for challenge. But it has nearly always been the challenging art that has survived its own time. The comfortable, easy reflections have faded and been lost as today's comfortable and easy reflections will probably fade and be lost. But then the arguments remain as to the nature of challenge: is the art good merely because it challenges current opinion, and if so is that enough? Where does the balance lie between progress and the nature of artistic achievement?

Such questions have exercised artists and their audiences for centuries. But in recent years doubt has been cast on the validity of the debate itself in its most fundamental form.

With the new prosperity of the western world, there has been a tendency in Western Europe and the United States to claim that everyone is an artist. The claim seems to spring in part from the longing for a spiritual dimension in daily life as religious observance becomes too demanding for our lazy comfort zones. It has also to do with the determined belief in equality, a fierce resentment that anyone should be regarded as superior. Previous generations gave respect to their artists as the elite who pointed to the stars when even the artists themselves may have been languishing in the gutter. And their work helped the rest of us to raise our eyes at least as far as the rooftops.

But now the improvement in educational provision and what has come to be called “lifelong learning” has created an arrogance of achievement. The work produced in a Senior Citizens’ Painting group is so lauded that nobody sees the necessity of looking at the work in the National Gallery, the Museum of Modern Art, or the better commercial galleries. The Amateur Drama Group plays to a rapturous audience of friends and relations, and those on both sides of the curtain feel that their cultural requirements have been met. It’s easy, it’s enjoyable, it makes no demands, and it is sociologically valuable. But it is not art; indeed it discourages those participating from exploring the world of art. It ends up making art a branch of the social services.

Art is not easy. It is there for everybody, but it requires effort and not everybody is prepared to make an effort. And because we have come to believe (rightly) that everybody has

a right to the glories of artistic appreciation, we seem to have entered an era of compromise and condescension, in art as in education. If art is too difficult, too puzzling, too *different*, for the majority of people, then we insist on lowering standards of appreciation for fear of making anybody feel inadequate. The god of “access for all” has become a satanic destroyer of the imaginative leap. Teenagers want everything in their lives to reflect their own experience; teenagers have always wanted this: we are by definition lazy and selfish when we’re young. But now the people who provide the artistic experience for teenagers are colluding in the narrowing of their horizons to the mirror image of their own lives. There is no encouragement to exercise imagination. Equally, we are accepting in art the destructive influence of the information speed age. The force of technology is so strong and changing so fast, that most of us have to accept in our working lives that everything begins *now*. Older people remember a time when this was not the case, and have some hope of placing a value on the past in their cultural lives. For people under the age of twenty five, *all* history begins now; they have a contempt for the past, and are encouraged in their contempt, artistically as well as technologically. And they are losing out: there is no context for their music or their visual images, no sense of the continuity of the artistic achievement. Above all, there is no sense of apprenticeship, no sense that achievement requires application. And even for older people, the notion of participation frequently replaces the hunger for seeing and hearing the best, and thereby expanding your expectations.

Art providers have become timid: commercial demands are

the excuse for supplying only the recognisable and familiar. The argument is that the gallery or the theatre will be empty if the art isn't figurative or the play is unfamiliar. That is without even beginning to suggest that the leap should go massively beyond concept and proscenium. But many of the providers have public subsidy, and this approach is an abuse of subsidy. Subsidy is not there as a comfort zone: it carries duties of education with it. It requires other, even more mundane duties as well, including one of marketing. The fact that an art centre can remain open even when nobody comes to see a play or an exhibition or hear a recital or concert as long as it has a subsidy has frequently meant that those in charge haven't bothered to market what they are doing, or the work the artists are making. They do not see themselves as artists' agents. Yet if they receive public subsidy that is exactly what they are. And they must provide and market the work that stretches the imagination and appreciation as assiduously as they do the local landscapes painted from photographs. Such work has its place, as do John B. Keane's plays performed by the local drama group. But as long as people believe that such experiences are not merely the highest, but the only worthwhile form of art, art can go no further, and the imagination closes down.

And it is the duty of the Arts Council to demand that the mix is tilted in favour of the great or potentially great art when it spends taxpayers' money. That means a close re- assessment of projects that more properly belong under the banner of the Department of Community and Family Affairs than under the banner of the Department of Arts, and a tilting in favour

of the people who lead the way with great, or potentially great art. The Arts Council has a duty to elitism. This does not mean that it excludes people by its support for only the very best there is. It must trumpet and herald the best so loudly, and push it into the public consciousness so vehemently that the appetite for the best is whetted and the imaginative parameters are burst wide open. The challenge is to strive for the best, and make clear the relevance of both the future and the past : Greek tragedy, Fra Angelico, Edward Bond and Damien Hirst, Tom Murphy and John Field. If we don't demand they be used as exemplars, we are colluding in the death of imagination and reducing the artistic experience to a snapshot of our own moment in our own place.

The challenge is to make people unafraid of moving beyond the comfort zone in art. That begins with recognising that there is bad art as well as good. And *that* means the providers of art and the professional educators and mediators being prepared to make the call. Encouragement should not mean the damning to mediocrity of those capable of soaring, as happens more and more frequently. The State should not subsidise poor art and artists any more than it should subsidise bad schools and hospitals. Art as a hobby is very different from art as a profession. The painting group and the amateur drama association are hobbies; those participating are by and large, not driven to make art as the professional artist is driven. It is the participation, rather than the art, that is paramount. Artists make art because they cannot survive or remain sane without making art. That is the highest definition; they also make art as *their profession*. If they must

work at something else in order to survive, the something else is subsidiary to the making of art.

But even our sympathy with the plight of the artist in society (and for many of them, their standard of living does represent a plight) should not make us endorse inferior art in the names of provision and access. The arts are not there to anaesthetise people who are suffering from the effects of poor housing, inadequate education, or social alienation. Art can do all of those things, but it is far more fundamental; rather than being used as a band-aid for society's ills, it can help prevent the ills and wounds in the first place. But it can only do that when it is seen as fundamental to our core values. It is visibly not considered fundamental at present: the willingness to equate commercial success with quality in art proves this, as does the opposite school of thought which equates lack of commercial success with high artistic value. They are both skewed, and prove just how far outside our core values artistic appreciation is. And this will continue as long as we scramble to impose an "artistic module" from the outside, chasing arts ratings by following rather than leading public understanding and taste, and all the time under-estimating public appetite and understanding. It may be elitist to demand, appreciate, and admire the best, and to deprecate the mediocre. In today's Ireland, it is certainly considered elitist. And we need more of such elitism before we fall further victims to the cult of self-congratulation and the feel good factor. Critical rigour does not signify a national inferiority complex.

Emer O'Kelly, June 2007

70 Merrion Square,
Dublin 2, Ireland

70 Cearnóg Mhuirfean,
Baile Átha Cliath 2, Éire

t +353 1 618 0200
f +353 1 676 1302
Callsave 1850 392 492

e info@artscouncil.ie
w www.artscouncil.ie