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Policy Review: *Creative Ireland*

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Introduction

2018 might seem a bit too late to review *Creative Ireland Programme/Clár Éire Ildánach 2017-2022*, given that the ambitious strategy, was first announced in December 2016 and has thus already been in place for over a year, at the time of writing this review. (1) However, reviewing the strategy now provides a unique opportunity to reflect not only on the policy document itself, but also on its early-stage implementation, and the ways in which its first year has been reported and evaluated by those tasked with its success. In this review, I focus on the original strategy document (*Creative Ireland*), critiqued and analysed in conversation with the 2017 evaluation report (The *Creative Ireland Programme/Clár Éire Ildánach End of Year Report 2017*; hereafter 'EYR 2017' in citations, to differentiate the annual report from the key strategy document).

Before launching into the strategy's five key points, or 'Pillars', the *Creative Ireland* programme document attempts to set out what it means by the titular term 'creativity' (pp. 10-11). This is, of course, not an easy task: entire works have been devoted to the topic, and the meaning of the term can differ greatly among various stakeholders in arts and culture and the academic investigation thereof. Nevertheless, *Creative Ireland*'s definition leaves something to be desired. According to the strategy, 'creativity' is

> the capacity of individuals and organisations to transcend accepted ideas and norms and by drawing on imagination to create new ideas that bring additional value to human activity (p. 10).

This leaves many vital questions unanswered, including whose 'accepted ideas and norms' are to be 'transcend[ed]', and what type of 'value' this sort of creativity adds to human life: is this social value? moral? financial?

It also leaves the link between 'creativity' and arts and culture unclear. In the paragraph following the initial definition, the document states that '[c]ulture and creativity are inextricably linked', but it does not satisfactorily specify how (p. 10). Following that, 'culture' (but not necessarily creativity) is further linked to 'enhancing wellbeing' (p. 11). What we see here is a series of tricky buzzwords, loosely connected, that sound good but ultimately say little about what creativity is or what it does. Defining an already difficult term like 'creativity' by referring to words of even more complex and contested meanings, such as 'value', 'culture', and 'well-being', is bureaucratic speak at its vaguest and most inscrutable.

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Perhaps the most concerning part of this introduction, though, appears in the two short paragraphs where the strategy argues a direct link between 'creativity' and the economy:

> Human creativity is often described as the ultimate economic resource, essential to the prosperity of any business, city, community or country… Culture and creativity are essential features of an innovative, post-industrial economy (p. 11).

The language employed here is reminiscent of Richard Florida's (2002) work on the so-called 'creative class', a perspective that has gained much traction globally, and which casts creativity as 'the driving force of economic growth' and its purveyors as 'the dominant class in society' (p. ix). Florida's approach, while widely popular, is problematic for its failure to engage with class implications, its advocacy for gentrification processes, and, most importantly for Ireland's artists, its failure to take into account the increasing precaritisation of labour in the service economy. In light of this, I think we ought to be somewhat wary of any policy document that lauds the role of creativity in the economy without acknowledging the precarious and underpaid conditions in which many in the creative sector work.

The bulk of the *Creative Ireland* document addresses the programme's five 'pillars', and it is to an examination of these that I turn now. Pillar I consists of 'Enabling the Creative Potential of Every Child' (pp. 22-23). At the heart of this pillar lies the argument that engagement with arts, culture, and creativity carries numerous positive benefits for children and young people, an argument well supported by academic research. The strategy states, 'A key objective of Pillar I is that by 2022 every child in Ireland will have access to tuition and participation in art, music, drama and coding' (p. 23). This is an ambitious aim, but if funded generously and accomplished through mutual engagement with the arts and arts education sectors, it is potentially very promising. If this objective is successfully carried forward on a nation-wide scale beyond the 2022 end of the *Creative Ireland* programme, such a project could prove an important global example of the benefits of prioritising arts education within national policy. The *Creative Youth/Óige Ildánach* strategy, named as the key outcome for Pillar I in the 2017 end-of-year report (p. 4), details how this goal will be accomplished, beginning with a series of pilot studies. (2)

Pillar II, 'Enabling Creativity in Every Community', is somewhat more concrete in the original strategy document (pp. 24-25). Central to this portion of the strategy is *Creative Ireland*'s stated plan to work with local authorities to develop and implement individual Culture and Creativity Plans. According to the 2017 report (EYR 2017, p. 5), one-fifth, or €1 million, of the €5 million budgeted to the *Creative Ireland* programme in that year was allocated to this portion of the strategy. Each local authority was given funding and support 'to enable them to implement their individual Culture and Creativity Actions Plans and an associated programme of events and initiatives'; in 2017, the thirty-one individual local authority plans listed a total of more than 750 events and projects. (3) Pillar II also contains plans for the development and implementation of 'Cruinniú na Cásca' as an annual Easter Monday event 'replicated across the country using the Culture Night model' (*Creative Ireland*, p. 25).

In addition to these initiatives, Pillar II contains what is, to my mind, one of *Creative Ireland*'s most interesting promises. This was the proposed collaborative project with the Department of Social Protection 'to introduce a new pilot scheme to provide income supports to low-earning artists through the social welfare system' (p. 25). In theory at least, this sounds very promising, given the many barriers that confront artists – particularly young artists, migrants, those

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from lower-income backgrounds, and so forth – in establishing their careers. The year-long pilot programme was launched in June 2017 and at present only extends to visual artists and writers. It is intended to cut out some of the bureaucratic red tape for writers and artists applying for Jobseekers' Allowance. (4) I am sure that many invested in the arts in Ireland, myself included, will be watching this pilot scheme closely to see whether it is effective, and whether it is carried on after its first year and extended to those working in other artforms as well.

Pillar III, titled 'Investing in Our Creative and Cultural Infrastructure', notes the importance of 'high quality infrastructure', which, the strategy claims, 'is critical for a vibrant arts and culture sector' (pp. 26-27). The document further adds that 'investment in cultural infrastructure underpins social cohesion and supports strong and sustainable economic growth' (p. 26). This acknowledgement of the importance of infrastructure, and investment therein, sounds promising, though the stated link between infrastructure and 'social cohesion' is a bit unclear and is not expanded upon in the policy document. The specific means by which these aims will be accomplished are also somewhat imprecise; the final three pillars lack the more specifically delineated goals of Pillar II. Nevertheless, the acknowledgement of the importance of infrastructure, and the recognition that good infrastructure requires financial 'investment', seems a step in the right direction.

With regards to infrastructure, Pillar III focuses primarily on the National Cultural Institutions, though it also states that *Creative Ireland* will

> work with cultural institutions and other key stakeholders to develop an overall capital strategy for the cultural and heritage sector, to include digitisation projects and the building of cultural collections (p. 27).

The 2017 year-end report states that *Creative Ireland* has partnered with the National Cultural Institutions to draft a Creative Ireland Programme for each, noting that these 'will be launched in early 2018' (EYR 2017, p. 6). While the individual programmes for each institution do not appear to have been publicized at the time of writing this review, infrastructure funding for Pillar III has been allocated via the recently launched strategy *Investing in Our Culture, Language & Heritage/Infheistíocht inár gCultúr, inár dTeanga & inár nOidhreacht 2018-2027*. The language employed by *Creative Ireland* left me wondering whether these infrastructural promises would extend beyond the National Cultural Institutions, as smaller-scale and localised infrastructure is vital, particularly for making arts present and accessible outside of major urban centres. In this respect, *Investing in Our Culture, Language & Heritage* is promising, as it allocates funds across the cultural infrastructure spectrum (see especially *Investing in Our Culture, Language & Heritage*, pp. 32-33).

Pillar IV, in turn, aims to establish 'Ireland as a Centre of Excellence in Media Production' (p. 28). As stated here,

> The overarching, long-term objective of this pillar is to elevate the creative industries including media, architecture, design, digital technology, fashion, food and crafts … (p. 28)

This is of course a tall order, given the many genres and areas of labour that might fall under

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the label of 'creative industries'. From within this field, the *Creative Ireland* strategy document focuses specifically on 'media production', aiming to fulfill what it calls 'Ireland's potential to be a global leader in film production, TV drama, documentary, children's storytelling, and animation for the screen' (p. 28). The goal is to see Ireland become a global leader in creative media, through government collaboration with stakeholders in both the public and private sectors. In the original strategy, no indication is given as to what markers would make Ireland an international leader in this area, though mention is made of an aim to devise an 'industry-wide plan to ensure strategic coherence around the objective' (p. 28). The 2017 end-of-year report indicates that such a strategy is currently in development, also to be announced in 2018, along with an 'economic report' on the 'audio-visual sector', which is to be 'published in early 2018 in association with a Government plan for the sector' (EYR 2017, p. 6). Neither appears to have yet been published.

In the 2017 evaluation report, Pillar IV's name has been changed to make it more expansive; it is now titled 'Ireland as a Centre of Creative Excellence', in order to, according to that document, broaden its scope and 'encompas[s] all creative industries' (EYR 2017, p. 4, n. 1). While the accomplishments of Creative Ireland toward this pillar in 2017 remain limited to the realm of 'audio-visual (film/TV/animation) industries' (EYR 2017, p. 6), hopefully this name change indicates a movement toward further engagement in other artforms as well. *Investing in Our Culture, Language & Heritage*, mentioned above, is also relevant here, as that strategy allocates €200 million specifically for 'investment in media production and audio visual [sic] industry', citing *Creative Ireland*'s Pillar IV as its rationale (*Investing in Our Culture, Language & Heritage*, pp. 38-39).

So far, we have discussed four pillars about which we might be cautiously optimistic: their language is promising, though I – and I suspect many others – have some misgivings about whether the *Creative Ireland* Programme will actually be able to deliver on its promises. In Pillar V, however, I see a goal that is inherently problematic, in and of itself. Titled 'Unifying Our Global Reputation', this pillar's stated aim is to articulate Ireland's 'values, capabilities and beliefs' to the world (p. 29). By itself, this goal makes some sense, particularly when placed within the context of 'fierce global competition for investment, tourism and export markets', as denoted by the strategy. However, the language used to describe how the programme will go about this is concerning:

> '*Creative Ireland* presents an opportunity to create a ***single proposition*** based on Irish culture and creativity that represents a considered, compelling and imaginative view of how we wish to be seen by the outside world …' (p. 29; emphasis mine).

My reservations about this goal stem, in part, from my own disciplinary background: I am first and foremost an anthropologist, if one with a distinct interest in cultural policy. This idea that culture is singular and monolithic – that one can say definitively what constitutes 'Irish culture' or 'Chinese culture' or 'German culture' – was once popular within the discipline. Today, however, most anthropologists argue that culture is much more nuanced (Eriksen, 2003). (5) A more complex understanding of culture is especially important for diverse and diversifying societies like Ireland's, as a monolithic view of culture can very easily be used to draw problematic boundaries between 'in' and 'out', 'Irish' and 'not-Irish'.

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The gradual fading of diversity language from the *Creative Ireland* document underscores my concerns here. Early in the strategy, the diversity of culture is mentioned as an important aspect of the programme. Among the 'key values … identified in *Culture 2025/Éire Ildánach*', values which 'underpi[n]' the current strategy, *Creative Ireland* identifies '[t]he value of cultural diversity, informed by the many traditions and social backgrounds now in Ireland' (p. 9). However, not long after, the strategy reiterates, and re-lists, the 'values and high-level principles set out in *Culture 2025*', and here the language of diversity is suddenly absent (p. 15). Diversity language appears nowhere else in the document. In the 2017 end-of-year report, moreover, language about diversity, particularly with regard to what constitutes 'Irish culture' and 'Irish identity', is also conspicuously absent. The brief write-up on progress made on Pillar V reiterates the desire to 'create a unified articulation of Ireland's values, capabilities and beliefs' (EYR 2017, p. 6).

As arts managers, cultural policy researchers, and other readers with a vested interest in the arts and in the direction that *Creative Ireland* takes in the coming four years, I think we ought to be deeply concerned about the language utilised in Pillar V – about this seeking after a singular, monolithic notion of Irish culture and creativity, and the presentation of such to the outside world. It is vitally important that, both in the ways we converse with one another (within this Journal and elsewhere) and in the ways we present ourselves to policy makers, we emphasise the value of a more diverse conception of what it means to be an artist, maker, manager, or scholar of cultural policy in Ireland today.

About the author: Dr Kayla Rush received her PhD from Queen's University Belfast in 2018, researching community arts in Northern Ireland. Her research focuses on the anthropology of art, music and performance, with a particular interest in the intersection of cultural politics and body politics. She is also very interested in the study of value-making and evaluation processes in arts and cultural management. Kayla is currently a Research Assistant in the Department of Sociology and Criminology at University College Cork. She has taught in anthropology, history, cultural policy and architecture. She has multiple forthcoming publications, included co-editing a special issue of *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* entitled 'Performance and Politics, Power and Protest'. She is currently working on a monograph, titled *The Cracked Art World: Idealism, Conflict, Austerity*. She is the Digital Editor for the Anthropological Association of Ireland and the *Irish Journal of Anthropology*.

NOTES

1. Creative Ireland is the implementation strategy for Culture 2025/Éire Ildánach, Ireland's Framework Policy for the cultural sector, and notably the first national cultural strategy in Ireland.

2. Derry/Londonderry's UK City of Culture programme in 2013 had similar aims, enacted through its 'Music Promise' scheme. Given the focus on children and young people in the Derry/Londonderry City of Culture strategy, this example provides a useful point for comparison (see e.g. Boland et al., 2018).

3. The individual plans are available on the Creative Ireland website.

4. For the details of this scheme, see Visual Artists Ireland (2017).

5. Eriksen (2003) argues that culture is best understood as a 'process' rather than a 'thing' – as a verb rather than a noun (see also Eriksen and Nielsen, 2013).

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