**Miriam Haughton**

# As much graft as there is craft:[1]

# Refusal, Value and the Affective Economy of the Irish Arts Sector

I'm standing there petrified, and all I can thing to do is sing…singing, while large chunks of burning stage fall around me… and I'm singing…all the lights go out…and I'm singing…its pitch dark…
—Feidlim Cannon, *Meltdown*

**Introduction: A Show of (Dis)Respect**

Kindness may constitute an act of refusal, protesting the exploitation of arts labour and "reinvesting it with the political power needed to counter prevailing political dispositions" as outlined by this special issue call (*Performance Paradigm* CFP, vol 16, 2020). This essay proposes that in 2020, Irish arts sector advocacy and activism operated as a form of kindness, affectively and materially, as demonstrated by its widespread challenge to the first wave of emergency COVID-19 funding announced by the state, which it criticized as unsatisfactory and inappropriate. In so doing, a chink emerged in the normative "cruel optimism" (Berlant 2010) narrative that pervades working practices in the Irish arts sector, whereby the hope for better next year functions to cover the cracks of systemic devaluing of arts labour, experience and encounter. Such cruel optimism, or false hope, is often compounded by the underlying threat of further cuts, should one upset the apple cart by criticising arts management and investment. The recent moment of artist-led refusal resonates with the potential for slippage from the "cruelty of normative optimism" as Lauren Berlant theorises, by opening up "a wedge into an alternative ethics of living, or not" (2010, 105). This is not intended as a wholly utopian critical position, as Berlant prefaces this potential for "spreading" or "increases in capacity to act" by noting that similarly one may confront a downside, as "shifts in affective atmosphere are not equal to changing the world" (Gregg and Seigworth 2010, 13). In short, Berlant's key intervention suggests that attachments that may feel positive, may not be. She argues, "When we talk about an object of desire, we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us." (93) As part of this essay's

analysis, Berlant's seminal insights propel critical thinking of this object(s) of desire (working in the arts in Ireland), and one's relation to it (as a worker), in terms of an endurance in the object that becomes cruel (working conditions in the arts sector), as these attachments will most likely not materialise (better working conditions).

There are historical issues underlying the arts advocacy and activism that led to calls for a boycott of the first state scheme in 2020 (UPLIFT Petition 2020), which are rooted in a plethora of contested arts policies, funding models and infrastructural capacity, particularly since the global economic crash of 2008, which devastated the Irish economy ("The Banking Crisis: A Decade On", Central Bank). In turn, this led to seismic yet arguably irrational shifts in Irish state funding to the arts sector. The arts generates more revenue that it receives via public subsidy ("General Election 2020", NCFA) and any reduction of the arts budget cannot return the Irish state to fiscal health as arts investment is so low that it would not make a meaningful difference ("Council of Europe", NCFA). Thus, there are questions concerning the economic logic for the sectoral funding cuts in recent years, which provoke heated discussions concerning how "value" is constituted and measured in decision-making. The role of "value" in political economy is a fluid discourse spanning at least 200 years, as Antonio Negri observes in his charting of its trajectory via neoclassical, colonial, capitalist, and postmodern marketplace relations. Despite its shifts and affects, Negri finds that "value" has yet to be affectively decoupled from "labour" (Negri 1999, 77). A potential rationale to justify decades of reduced arts investment is that that the work of arts labour is not valued as "work" by the leading political establishment, but more aligned with a hobby or light entertainment. As Negri declares of the value-affect dialectic in power relations "Value is thus assumed by stripping it from labour (…), stripping it, in other words, from affect" (79). In the context of Irish arts labour, the affiliation of joy, pleasure and entertainment with the arts arguably renders less visible or indeed, invisible, the labour that is essential to arts activity, "the graft" that accompanies "the craft" as *Irish Times* journalist Una Mullally coined it (2020). By this imbalance in discourse and public representation, power relations may relegate arts work as less valuable than other industries and economic activities. From this vantage point, the danger is that arts workers are valued as entertainers for social occasions, not vital workers fully participating in the nation's economic and social fabric.

This relationship between value and labour is a fraught one, reflected in Mullally's scathing critique where she declares the state's response signifies "the kind of mindset that fails to see the difference in creative output between doing a jigsaw and writing a play" (Mullally, *Irish Times* 2020). Cultural economist John O'Hagan outlines the economic, social, political and personal values inherent in a strong national artistic ecosystem in Ireland, analysing the varied arguments regarding public subsidy and the public good. In summary, he finds there are three main benefits to public spending on the arts, which are "identity and social cohesion", the development of "experimental/innovative work", and "economic spill-over effects" (2016, 251-254). Indeed, research conducted at the London School of Economics reveals that four of the top six most happiness-inducing activities are arts-related, with the remaining two being sex and exercise ("General Election 2020", NCFA). While both Irish and international research fora produce studies which find the arts are fiscally, socially and culturally productive, it remains a sector regularly exposed to reduced public spending. This suggests that the people and policies measuring "value" are working from a separate corpus of research, not aligned with the

conclusions asserted by O'Hagan, the LSE, and Council of Europe. Yet, it is not clear as to what other measurement systems, research, or value-systems are informing state decision-making.

Gregg and Seigworth's review of the field of affect studies observe that one of the most significant questions affect scholars confront is, "Is that a promise or a threat?" (2010, 10). In the context of this analysis, the promise is the hope that sectoral stability and opportunity will soon improve, while the threat is that it will worsen. The weaknesses within the very structural contours of the Irish arts sector crackle along gig to gig, week to week, year to year, waiting for the machinery of the sector to eventually be addressed at senior levels of governance and oversight. This tumultuous pendulum moving from the potential promise to the potential threat sets the scene for the range of material affects that result from habituated under-investment and the devaluing of artistic creation, encounter and experience, including: one's ability to create work, risk-taking in the creation of work, and the creation of work that critically reflects the full depth, innovation and complexity of experience in Ireland. This affective tightrope weighs heavy on those creating the art but is arguably less visible outside this network. Negri notes that "when we look at things from the point of view of political economy-in other words, "from above"-the theme of "value-affect" is so integrated into the macroeconomic process that it is virtually invisible. Economics ignores the problem without any recognition of difficulties" (1999, 79). What the recent tipping point in artist-led advocacy achieved is a rendering visible of arts value and arts affect, including the impact on artists and arts organizations, particularly to those "from above." However, it remains to be seen whether this increased visibility will be a temporary shift in public and politics discourse relating to the operation of the arts in Ireland, or become more regularly addressed.

This essay will capture the shifting contexts of economic dysfunction inherent in the arts sector, contextualising both historical and contemporary affective relations that propagate its relentless toxicity. It will address the various tensions at play between the state and the arts sector as reflected through an affective economy rooted in political nationalist history yet guided by contemporary global neoliberalism. Kindness, in this narrative, is the rejuvenation of community spirit and collective activity throughout the arts sector in Ireland as the sector challenged the initial support package put in place in April 2020. Furthermore, this essay will examine the response by the Irish arts sector to the state's initial response, observing its impact as a moment of reckoning in the contentious relationship between the arts sector and the modern Irish state since its inception nearly 100 years ago, a political project in which theatre artists were central to its very imagining and creation. Seigworth and Gregg note that "affect is persistent proof of a body's never less than ongoing immersion in and among the world's obstinacies and rhythms, its refusals as much as its invitations" (2010, 1). This essay argues that recent refusals by many among the arts community in Ireland to accept inadequate state support during the first wave of COVID-19 – despite the complete lockdown of the industry – initiated an urgent invitation to reflect and assess the role of the arts nationally, enabling "a wedge into an alternative ethics of living." This possibility for a more affective discourse with material shifts in arts infrastructure has gathered momentum, with the recently appointed Minister Catherine Martin in June 2020 introducing sweeping changes to policy, support and essentially, metrics of value which oversee the management of the arts sector, which I will outline in the latter half of this essay. Thus, the refusal was affective in a particularly generative

manner; it illuminated the habituated discrediting of arts labour, it prompted a revitalised space for debate pertaining to the role and impact of the arts personally, culturally and economically, and it tightened the multidisciplinary channels of industry solidarity and activism – which manifest as "kindness" personally and professionally – that were less in tune before the COVID crisis.

In particular, I open this essay quoting Brokentalkers' online performance *Meltdown* as it so effectively captures the state of play; the widespread despair pervading the arts community at this point of crisis. The performance however, does not create or further the despair. Its particular potency is in the confrontation of the collective difficult reality faced by the arts sector, and the need to articulate this difficulty without fear of reprisal or professional disadvantage. The wider affective power of *Meltdown* signals the roots of revolt, which arguably begin in such humble contexts; two friends having a conversation regarding a problematic situation that requires intervention. *Meltdown* will be analysed further at different points in this study, informed by collective arts advocacy throughout Ireland led by the voluntary collective, the National Campaign for the Arts (NCFA). The essay considers how these events operated not only as performances and actions in and of themselves but functioned as expressions of kindness and hope for the wider arts community. This, in turn, unites those artist and organisations more securely, providing some sense of stability in a world devoid of certainty. However, the affect of hope and kindness in this context will be examined critically, while further context on the recent state of the arts sector throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries must be outlined to preface the scope and impact of the contemporary affective economy of the arts sector in Ireland.

**A Burning Irish Stage in the 21st Century**

For many artists, arts organizations and audiences, Feidlim Cannon's analogy of a burning stage falling around those who remain performing is deeply cutting, yet resonant. However, COVID-19 did not start the fire. The embers were lit in years and decades previous, with the pandemic of recent months propelling those embers into a wildfire spiralling out of control. Throughout the "lost decade" (O'Toole 2018) since the 2008 crash, public services in the main were most brutally "restructured" while emigration of the youth, or the "brain drain", sky rocketed once more. In short, the modern 26-county state of Ireland and the six-county state of the North of Ireland (which remains part of the UK) are familiar with poverty, loss, trauma and crisis as part of both living memory and the historical past. However, this history of crisis is most often characterised a collective experience and a "national" history, though any discourse of nationhood in the Irish context is subject to unresolved tensions. In contrast, this most recent period of national financial difficulty has drawn a dichotomous line in terms of what industries the state deems worthy of protection and what may be sacrificed. These decisions challenge the very concept and practice of community, unity and solidarity among society. As highlighted already, these decisions do not respond to leading economic metrics or research, and in fact, extracts from the economy, as the arts generates more economic revenues than it receives in public funding. One must ask, what concepts of worth and value are adopted by the political establishment and what models of fiscal management are being applied?

COVID-19 is the scenic backdrop to this ongoing tumultuous relationship between the state and the arts. On 3rd April 2020, the Irish Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht at the time, Josepha Madigan, announced a COVID-19 emergency support of €1 million for the arts sector to produce online content to "support the artistic and cultural life of the nation at this difficult time – with a particular focus on wellbeing through personal and community creativity" (Department of the Taoiseach 2020). In total, one scheme administered by the Arts Council would repurpose €500,000 of existing Arts Council monies with an equal amount from the Department of Culture, to provide grants of €3,000 to 330 artists as one-off payment. Acceptance of this "COVID-19 Crisis Response Award" would prohibit artists from accessing social welfare payments including the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) of €350 a week (which over the course of the first lockdown of 12 weeks comes to €4,200, and further lockdowns extending into 2021, amounts to significantly more). Furthermore, artists would not have access to regular business support monies, such as financing available from Enterprise Ireland. Thus, if an artist was to accept this award, they would not be able to access future social welfare payments throughout the various levels of lockdown and restricted movements, and, the payment would be made to an individual and would not support any organisational overheads. The second initiative, to be administered by Culture Ireland, was called "Ireland Performs", similar to "Canada Performs", where artists could create content to be streamed on Facebook. This award privileged those who perform, signalling an absence of planning for those who work as designers, technicians, carpenters, electricians, front of house staff, cleaners, company accountants and so on. It was only relevant to those with sufficient digital skills or those whose work was suitable to be hosted by an online platform for an online audience at short notice – in a country where broadband and high-speed WIFI is only reliable in main urban areas. Hence, these awards made it abundantly clear that the Ministry did not understand the basic functionality of the arts ecosystem in day-to-day practice. These announcements were made as the devastating blow of the pandemic was becoming increasingly clear.

Artists and arts organisations responded to the package swiftly, with many choosing to boycott the scheme to highlight the contentious logistical issues and political ideologies its very design reflected. Thisispopbaby, a leading performance and events company, released a statement calling for "a rejection of the frenzied fetishization of 'productivity' and 'output' in this time of global catastrophe" urging the arts community to "use this period to focus on family and community, and to reflect, process and nourish. And when you are ready, and only then, to begin to think about the art that you are compelled to make." (Thisispopbaby statement, 6 April 2020). The NCFA responded that the package "goes nowhere near addressing the fears and concerns of the arts community in Ireland", providing points of comparison: "Other countries have rolled out significant supports for artists in these challenging times (e.g. Germany €50 Billion, Arts Council England £160 Million, Arts Council Wales £7 Million)" (NCFA 2020). Independent TD (MP) Catherine Connolly declared that the government's arts package reminded her of the condition of "cognitive dissonance", explaining it as "the state of having inconsistent thoughts, beliefs or attitudes particularly in relation to behaviour. So we treasure the arts – and we certainly treasure them on a national basis and international – but then practically we give them very little" (Connolly 2020).

Brokentalkers, a leading theatre and performance company in Ireland that works with community casts, developed *Meltdown* (2020) as part of the Project Arts Centre's "Future Forecast" programme during this time. In short, this online performance captured the personal and professional tug of war and affective anxieties between the immediacy of needing a pay check, a growing sense of fear concerning one's future livelihood, a desire to publicly oppose such an ineffective support scheme, anxiety regarding the potential repercussions of challenging the dominant power structures in place, and an overriding feeling of vulnerability and isolation, significantly exacerbated by the widespread belief in the entire sector being abandoned by the state. Brokentalkers are well-established in navigating testimonies and life experiences of vulnerable individuals and groups as part of their artistic mission and dramaturgical oeuvre. The company regularly explore the multiple perspectives, affects, and politics of complex situations that defy neat resolutions or conclusions. However, artistic directors Gary Keegan and Feidlim Cannon are usually the artists leading a process that focuses on the other stakeholders involved in the production. While they often perform as themselves in their work, their main focus is the performative encounter that emerges from ethnographic research and performances by "real" people. Their cross-disciplinary work has involved working with medics, sociologists, historians, institutional abuse survivors, community groups, and more throughout their 19-year company history, and they have performed in over 20 countries. Some of these people may appear on stage and others directly inform the narrative and design that underpins the final production. Their past performances have drawn on their own memories of traumatic childhood experiences, but the performances always remained more focused on exploring something or someone else, such as the abuse in the Artane Industrial School in *The Blue Boy* (2011), the long-term and intergenerational impacts of family grief in *Have I No Mouth* (2012), and the realities of Irish prison experience in *The Examination* (2019).

*Meltdown* is distinct in that it is about their personal and professional lives now. This time, they do not riff off personal memories as a portal into a wider collective or individual experience. The performance is about their own personal vulnerability, struggle, fear, anxiety, depression, anger and shame, which is not caused by COVID-19, but rather, rendered more acutely visible and collectively affective as a result of it. In so doing, they support a conversation among artists nationally at this time of crisis, offering a glimpse into the vulnerability of artistic livelihoods and wellbeing in a country that regularly devalues the arts sector operationally, yet relies on it promotionally. At that crucial moment, they performed a radical act of kindness to their associates, peers and audiences. They said the things that many are afraid to say for fear of consequences. They acknowledged that regardless of almost two decades of professional success and international standing, they remain financially precarious and fearful for the future. *Meltdown* deftly acknowledges the multiple and conflicting issues inherent in the contemporary relationship between the arts sector and the state in Ireland, and in so doing, allows themselves, their company associates, and their families to be vulnerable through such personal exposure. Their experience reflects many artists in Ireland today. By voicing these issues in their positions as leading established artists in Ireland and internationally, the experiences of many younger artists or less experienced artists were also acknowledged as resonant of the same risks and challenges, but who do not yet possess the same profile and potential audience reach.

In Ireland, it is rare to see two white heterosexual professionally successful men discuss the pressures they are under domestically due to their caring responsibilities. Perhaps this is a conscious decision by Cannon and Keegan to acknowledge the pressures many women face all the time, irrespective of a pandemic; pressure which is rarely diffused or attended to as a national priority. *Meltdown* was theatrical, depressing, uplifting, solidarity-forming, complex, nuanced and empathetic; it became a touchstone for the sector to gather, identify, and harness community spirit at a time when the physical practice of community was under attack. In this, it provided both kindness and hope to the wider community – but not false hope or cruel optimism - and became part of a rejuvenated momentum in the work of national advocacy for the arts in Ireland, which fortunately, has yielded much positive action since the initial government announcement on 3 April 2020.

**Playing Along: Wearing the Green Jersey**

It is rare for any generation to experience two major recessions of both national and global consequence within the same decade, and yet, that is where communities of 2020 now find themselves. The crash of 2008 staggered into uneven recovery by 2013, and the current recession in Ireland was formally announced in September 2020, provoked by the economic damage of COVID-19. For the arts sector, by early 2020 (pre-COVID), state funding had still not returned to pre-2008 levels. How does this inform the operational and aspirational nature of artists and arts organisations? The arts sector maintains a long history of presence and activity that has created meaning artistically and harnessed community in Ireland throughout colonization, civil war and economic hardship. National funding calls often tap into this history, such as with the "Decade of Centenaries" (DoC), ensuring the state's political agenda for international diplomacy, trade and profile is enhanced by its excellence in cultural production. Consequently, the last decade, and indeed the "lost decade", witnessed a sustained artistic interrogation of Irishness, nationhood, citizenship, inclusivity, memory and remembrance culture, partly as a result of the DoC programme funding and partly from a deeply embedded artistic tradition that engages with national identity formation and expression. Arts events and activities that promote an idealised narrative of Ireland can be interpreted cynically at times as "wearing the green jersey." This metaphor is considered applicable to any activity that is supportive of the national interest, most commonly identified by association with a positive narrative of nationhood. Green jerseyism is regularly critiqued for operating as a default position to defend financial misconduct at national levels, more cynically referred to as "Ireland Inc" (Taylor 2016). More recently, "wearing the green jersey" has dovetailed to an extent with the popular concept of "soft power" as theorised by Joseph Nye, whereby the cultural heritage and narrative of nationhood can be convincing rather than coercive in global relations in the pursuit of trade, influence, and international concerns (Li 2018). Yet the role of the arts in contributing to the national interest and elevating the national profile on the global stage runs much deeper than photo opportunities with U2's Bono, Barack Obama drinking a pint of Guinness at the home of his ancestors, or St Patrick Day parades around the world.

Kindness, hope and the affective economy of the Irish arts sector is deeply, politically embroiled in the very concept and call of nationhood. This relationship between the arts and nationhood constitutes a central dynamic in this affective economy, creating a narrative that the arts in

Ireland operate as a significant vehicle for ideological engagement and political possibility, and consequently, are inextricably linked to how Irish communities conceive of their independence from British imperialism. As a postcolonial state, the narrative of nationhood remains unresolved, as the island has been split into two states, Ireland and Northern Ireland, since 1921-22. Brexit, COVID-19, and parochial politics dominate the daily news cycle. Consequently, the concept and narrative of nationhood remains in an anticipatory state, waiting anxiously for change on the cusp of its centenary. Therefore, this narrative of nationhood, in spite of decades of globalisation, remains potently affective in expressions of self, community, history and culture, rendered visible through the arts and indeed, materially produced by artistic encounters, experiences and provocations.

Thus, the affective economy of the Irish arts sector is deeply personal and political at its core, fundamentally linked to a history of national identity formation and regularly spurred on by this heightened political impact. Yet, arguably, the arts sector is simultaneously hindered by this historical and political lineage, as the power apparatuses of nationhood become eclipsed by global neoliberalism. Is the power of the past potentially masking the realities of the present? Do artists and arts organisations believe that the state will eventually appropriately support arts infrastructure through public funds in the future, because of this affective historical relationship? The state's value system is currently led by wealth accumulation for the few at the expense of the many, most evidently reflected in the extraordinary power and privilege of multinationals and corporate interests. Consequently, the aims and objectives of the contemporary state are at odds with the aims and objectives of its arts sector.

**Hope, Kindness and the Affective Economy in Ireland**

In *Hope in An Age of Anxiety*, authors Anthony Scioli and Henry B. Biller chart how such a convergence of change and crisis confronts generations historically. Amidst the darkness and the despair, their research suggests there is also light. This convergence may illuminate new spaces; those that intersect culture, psychology, society, and politics, provoking imaginative possibilities to rejuvenate future trajectories. The arts are always central to this move from fear to hope; leading the very sense of possibility, openness and faith as part of an affective economy that is required for significant and meaningful change. Yet, one must ask what role do hope and kindness play in this affective economy and is it kind to support the hope for better times ahead? Or can one perform a more affective radical kindness by asserting a clear act of refusal that life as we know it cannot continue as it did pre-COVID-19? Why return to a broken system? In this regard, Berlant's theorisation of "cruel optimism" usefully elucidates how one may remain attached to future promises of a better life regardless of a litany of hard facts that suggest otherwise. Berlant details:

> "Cruel optimism" names a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic. What's cruel about these attachments, and not merely inconvenient or tragic, is that the subject who have x in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object or scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being; because whatever the content of the

> attachment is, the continuity of the form of it provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world. (94)

While the economic crash of the early noughties felt like a "meltdown" to borrow from Brokentalkers, from which we would eventually recover, in hindsight, American arts producer Kenneth Foster considers it the starting position for a seismic shift in global economics, politics, and of course, arts and cultural production. According to Foster, this is not a difficult state of play that we must navigate for a limited period of time. Rather, this is a fundamental paradigm shift in the global order. Foster asserts:

> From this vantage point, ten years later, the recession of 2007-2009 seems more than ever as the outward manifestation of a profound societal change that actually has been occurring for some time and that we can no longer ignore as just "the evolving world." Those of us working in the world of arts organizations are facing critical questions, not just of structure and economic survival, but of purpose and meaning. What role can, should and will the arts play in our unpredictable and changing new world? What will it take to sustain our organizations and our communities through this epochal shift? What does the future hold for us? (2018: xiii)

These are the questions that the arts sector must debate with state and society. New shared understandings of the cultural and economic value of the arts sector must emerge for any hope of renewal or sustainable practice. For this to occur, there is a clear dependence on leadership from within the state to reassess the value of the arts sector. As this essay will discuss further on, the most recent change in government (as of June 2020) has produced a cautious note of optimism among the arts sector. On optimism however, one must be critically attuned to how it can operate in suspect ways. As Berlant suggests, the habit of hope can provide a personal reassurance in the short term while further cementing a toxic pattern best avoided:

> […] it is what tells you that you are really most at home in yourself bathed by emotions you can always recognize and that whatever material harshness you live is not the real, but an accident that you have to clean up after, which will be more pleasant if you whistle while you work (2010, 104).

From Berlant's perspective, one could point to the parallels between the work of the arts and the operation of optimism as a parallel to hope. The arts produce meaning for others, but also generate meaning for those involved in its production. Finding meaning and making meaning are inherent to artistic experience. The affect of this experience cannot be quantified, but one can argue that it will bear an organic interior relation to feelings of optimism and hope. Foster speaks to this as he reflects on the economic arguments for the arts he has encountered over three decades of arts management in the US:

> As arts organizations, our core reason to exist is to provide meaning for ourselves and the world in which we operate. It is not to create jobs. It is not to

> build beautiful buildings that revitalize downtowns. It is not to provide social status, generate profits, build endowments or have a string of deficit free fiscal years. It is not to organize or proselytize for a political agenda. And it is surely not to create art for art's sake, however one interprets that phrase. These might be laudable by products of the work we do. But it is not why the arts exist. Art exists to create meaning for individuals, communities and societies. Arts organizations exist to make sure that this happens. (Foster 2018, xiv)

However, applying Berlant and Foster's thinking here, what one now must consider is the point at which the affect of meaning one may experience from working in the arts entices one to remain working in a sector that has become deeply precarious and exploitative. Does the affective encounter of artistic work, consciously or unconsciously, hinder arts workers from contesting sectoral grievances? I regularly see medics, teachers and police organize strikes as one method of forcing the state to enter into a dialogue concerning the very operational mechanisms of their sector, and how those mechanisms affect those workers. Since 2011, strikes, work to rule, and other strategies emerge as annual events in Ireland, ensuring the industry and worker interests remain on a state agenda, and indeed, the value of those sectors remain centralised in public discourse and political debate. In relation to the arts sector in Ireland, I have seen very modest engagement at that level until recently, as a result of performances such as *Meltdown*, work by the NCFA, and the change in government. Inevitably, there may be micro and macro encounters occurring behind the scenes which are not foregrounded in regular media coverage, and yet, without the visibility of any such sustained dialogue to the wider community, how can one interpret the value of the arts by the state as anything other than modest?

If one is waiting for the situation to improve as a result of future promises, one is less inclined to challenge the system in the present. Such promises may prevent workers from leaving the sector and seeking better opportunities elsewhere as they invest their time, skill, labour, and personal feeling that in the next budget, the next government, or the next funding call, the state of the arts will improve. Does hope, thus, operate as a vehicle for cruel optimism to gather pace in the affective economy of the Irish arts sector? Is hope, or false hope, encouraging workers and communities to attach themselves to "conditions of possibility", even though, as Berlant suggest, "its presence threatens their well-being", influencing to a large extent "the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on" in this way? If so, what does radical kindness look like for the arts?

Working in the arts in Ireland for the vast majority represents a precarious condition of employment which by consequence, regularly impacts one's personal life and general well-being. Theatre Forum is an all-island body that provides training, advocacy and support to ensure a sustainable future in theatre and the arts. Their recent report into 'Pay and Conditions in the Performing Arts in 2018', evidence that many working artists earn less than minimum wage. They note that "While the CSO Labour Costs bulletin at the end of 2018 indicate that while economic recovery is benefiting most sectors, both the Accommodation & food and Arts & entertainment sectors continue to fall further and further behind" (Theatre Forum 2018). This 'recovery' for the arts sector is further scrutinised by theatre scholar Emer O'Toole, who has

reviewed six consecutive years of drastic cuts in the Arts Council budget from 2009, mirrored by reduced budgets at local authorities nationally (O'Toole 2019):

> If one calculates arts council funding as a percentage of GDP […], 'recovery' era Ireland is considerably less supportive of the arts than Ireland before the boom, when it was considered a comparatively poor European Union country. Furthermore, according to Council of Europe figures from 2000 to 2015, Ireland's arts and culture expenditure was more than four times below the European average during this period. It is certainly time for a national conversation about how and why Ireland values art. (368-9)

COVID-19 has brought the economic livelihood of the state and the arts sector to the cliff edge at the same time, forcing a conversation regarding survival and sustainability. This conversation must address 'the lost decade' in addition to decades of inconsistent fiscal policy regarding the arts. The impact of these issues is the subject matter of *Meltdown*.

**'I can't play along…': *Meltdown***

> I am personally convinced that participation in cultural and creative activity drives personal development and increases wellbeing. Wellbeing is what we all need to talk about now – the arts and creativity are instruments that we must use to a greater extent than ever before. The creative industries are not just important in themselves but also because they connect arts and culture to economic activity and social wellbeing. (Pascal Donohue, Minister for Finance, Statement 3 April 2020)

As evident from the (then) Finance Minister's statement in April 2020, the state's perspective determines the arts' primary value is constituted as "instruments" to use in the economic interests of the country, particularly in the enhancement of "wellbeing", a phrase regularly involved in the neoliberal economy as a vehicle to sell suspect remedies to an increasingly individualistic society in constant need of improvement. This position is in stark contrast with the message at the centre of Foster's statement detailed previously, that as an arts sector "our core reason to exist is to provide meaning for ourselves and the world in which we operate." Read together, these vastly distinctive and frankly oppositional positions tell us that the arts exist on a spectrum of interpretation regarding their role, function, value, and impact in contemporary western societies. At one end of this spectrum is the position of Foster, and the other, the contemporary Irish state. One cannot assume there is agreement or mutual understanding that bridges these various perspectives, and a major task for the future is to initiate a robust dialogue that might identify mutual terrain or future possibilities for a stronger arts ecosystem. Both these perspectives highlight a managerial focus; Foster as an arts manager for over 30 years in the US, and Donohue as the Finance Minister in Ireland. While their perspectives differ radically, both positions are designed to measure income, expenditure, participation, and consumption. *Meltdown* captures the voices of the artists and those working in the arts sector, and the affective toil these commercial systems of measurement and management can result in, powerfully expressed by Cannon:

> I can't do this anymore actually…play along…the act that we're expected to put on…that we should trust them…them…them…the people in power, the government…the same shite for the last 10 years, we value you, we see you, we hear you, we will do right by you…just not right now, next year…just let us into your photograph there, just let us quote your poem, just let us leverage your art to promote the country abroad…we just keep going, keep going, and they know we'll keep going… (Feidlim Cannon, *Meltdown*)

When Cannon declares he can't do this [make art] *anymore*, what is signified for the arts community in Ireland is that he is referring to the intergenerational arts crisis of recent decades, in addition to the COVID-19 crisis. In short, he cannot continue to invest personally and affectively in false hope, or cruel optimism, as an ongoing prevailing narrative habituated over time. Cannon cannot continue to work in a climate of extreme uncertainty and crisis. For the arts sector in Ireland, COVID-19 is not only a sectoral emergency, it's the *latest* sectoral emergency. *Meltdown* tapped into this tipping point felt by many. The stakes for the arts sector concerning the trajectory of this national and global crisis are markedly distinct from many other sectors, including how they are responded to at official levels, and thus, isolate it further from "national" solutions or nation-building dialogue. Indeed, a form of apocalyptic energy became palpable in the online artistic content and activism generated during Ireland's lockdown. *Meltdown* premiered as part Project Arts Centre "Future Forecast" programme launched, asking:

> Can imagining the future be a collaborative act? What happens when we can't agree on what to do next?  MELTDOWN is a failure to respond - to a clear brief. A failure to do what's expected. A failure to do what we agreed to do – because we had more important things to do, because we hoped no one would make a fuss. MELTDOWN is a response to a failure. A failure of those in power to do what they said they would, because they hope no one will make a fuss. A failure to do what they need to do in order to allow the arts and artists to sustain and flourish in this country. COVID or no, we are in a crisis. The future for artists is uncertain. And that is perhaps the one thing we can agree on. (Future Forecast, Project Arts Centre, 2020)

This performance was live-streamed and thus did not 'end' when the performers left the virtual interface. It was recorded and hosted by the Project website, available for ongoing public viewing free of charge.

Co-artistic directors Keegan and Cannon's premise centres around an online production meeting with the intended objective to prepare a new script resulting from a COVID-19 arts commission. Early on, Cannon wraps his duvet over his head, and begins to read a 22-page script he wrote throughout the night that gives an account of a man on stage singing, while the theatre around him burns. Throughout the meeting, his co-artistic director and friend, Keegan, performs the voice of reason and of hope. He interjects, "It wasn't the brief, we were given a brief, remind ourselves what we're supposed to be doing here", but Cannon remains firm in his approach,

retorting “yeah well I can’t see any hope” (Brokentalkers *Meltdown*, 2020). Keegan reiterates the consequences if they do not produce work that corresponds to the brief; “we are running the risk of not getting paid if we put this forward…I need the money”. Mentioning “the money” comes soon after he mentions homeschooling with his children and doing the grocery shopping for his elderly parents. Clearly, a network of vulnerable people are reliant on him and by extension, the survival of the arts sector. Cannon however, has gone past the point of compromise, and it is perhaps this point of no-return that has become more reflective of the sector collectively in recent months. He states, “When I look into the future, I see the decimation of an entire industry. So I think the tone is appropriate. … I don’t want to make a piece of work that says everything’s going to be ok…it's not as if we weren’t struggling before all of this.” Like so many artists and workers, Keegan looks to how the individual may survive the system, clearly too exhausted to put further energy into changing the system, “No but we have to adapt, we have to look at how we’re making our work and we have to be able to change… We have to be able to respond to what’s going on.” Keegan’s response may initially appear as pragmatic and reasonable, but examined against the backdrop of the “lost decade”, Mullally’s contention that “Politeness has got the arts community nowhere. Year after year, artists are demeaned, tossed aside, exploited and ignored” (*Irish Times* 2020) is a more convincing position. However, in that shared space of pent-up frustration, stress, anxiety and worry, articulating the potential death of the sector operates as more of a release than a threat. *Meltdown* faced the dragon, and breathed out some fire of its own.

*Meltdown*’s towering impact for its digital audience was an expression of kindness; it did not provide false hope or cruel optimism that the sector would recover, but it did perform strength and solidarity. It did not make promises or threats, but it did create space for the distinct, overlapping, and at times contradictory affective emotions and possibilities confronted by the arts sector and wider communities. It acknowledged and addressed the painful narratives of many generations who have committed to working in the arts sector, despite regular infrastructural deficits that come with a personal price. In so doing, it propelled many viewers to further support sectoral advocacy at local and national levels with the shared objective of reclaiming its place in the national agenda and stage of belonging. *Meltdown* articulates the imminent questions at the centre of this arts crisis: how can theatre art manifest and make meaning when the physical performance space is empty and the live audience prohibited? How might we imagine and re-imagine artistic endeavours when the act of mass gatherings can cause further outbreaks of the virus? The digital sphere is a significant strand of this debate, but it is reliant on access to WIFI and technology. Economically, it lacks the commercial spill-over generated by live performance events. Phenomenologically, the digital sphere may be a useful strand for communication and dissemination of content but it is not a substitute for the actual live encounter, personally, physically or professionally. If it were a convincing substitute, there would not be ongoing societal challenge to the rules of lockdown and the public would be fully satisfied with birthdays, social events, weddings, funerals and all communications to occur online permanently. In Ireland, this is certainly not the case.

COVID-19 arts commissions, like most COVID-19 funding, asked for solutions, for better infrastructure, for online content to pad the vacant hole of live cultural experience, and of course, for reassurance and positivity for the future. These are short-term and ‘Plan B’

commissions, intended to keep the cultural fabric intact until societies and economies may return to 'business as usual', if that happens. There is nothing necessarily wrong with these messages, and indeed, often these messages are required to keep society from descending into chaos. Yet, the arts sector's response to the impact of the pandemic and the problematic support package announced by Minister Madigan on 3 April 2020 propelled a shift in arts discourse widely and swiftly, as outlined in this essay's introduction. The NCFA published its 13-point "National Arts Recovery Plan" on 27 May 2020, outlining the immediate emergency funding of €20 million required for sectoral stabilisation, as well as a suite of initiatives relating to tax incentives, insurance, building rates, and capital investment that could inject stability into the sector, paving the way for a recovery. On 16 June 2020, Bloomsday (see Bloomsday Festival) an Taoiseach at the time (the Prime Minister) Leo Varadkar and Minister Madigan announced €25 million in extra support for the Arts and Culture Sector, in addition to the initial funding of €1 million offered in April (Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, 16 June 2020). This represents a 24-fold increase in emergency funding within a three month period. Two weeks later, a new coalition government formed heavily dependent on the participation of the Green Party, a political party whose goals and objectives regularly align with those promoted by the majority of the arts sector. As part of this change in government, Green Party TD Catherine Martin became the new Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media.

**Conclusion: Change, or Loose Change?**

An injection of "pocketmoney" (Mullally, *Irish Times*, 2020) on 3 April 2020 did not appease the arts sector. This sectoral challenge to the state emergency package, or refusal to wear this shade of green jersey, can be theorised as an act of radical kindness by rejecting the latest offer of false hope. This false hope, in the contemporary Irish context, arguably encourages arts workers to attach themselves to the future promises that Berlant warns of. Instead, the sector must strategize for a different kind of future. This paradigm shift is most evident in the voluntary advocacy led by the NCFA, which drew from European and Irish research to document the major economic, social, and cultural value that the arts sector contributes to society and thus, harshly critiqued the reduced state investment in recent years. Online performative interventions by individual artists and organisations, such as Brokentalkers' *Meltdown*, furthered this momentum by capturing the historical and current pressures informing the affective economy of the arts in Ireland, particularly for those who are too professionally precarious to critique state policies in case they suffer further consequences to the modest funding or opportunities currently available.

At this point of conclusion it may seem out of place to ask how did the arts sector come to occupy such a precarious position in the first instance, and yet, this question is deeply relevant. The global momentum of neoliberalism and its impact on arts and culture is critiqued widely by leading scholars globally and by no means specific to the Irish arts sector (Diamond, Varney, Amich 2017; Harvie 2013; Harvey 2005). However, further specific Irish context can illuminate the power relations informing this ongoing crisis. In a 2013 discussion paper commissioned by the NCFA and conducted by Dr Tara Byrne, she traces the historical issues pertaining to arts leadership within government, suggesting that the Ministry for Arts is not valued as strategically important and thus, politicians offered the ministry have little influence on the national agenda

(Byrne 'Discussion Paper, 2013). Her analysis reviews the various politicians who have inhabited the arts ministries, finding them ill-qualified for the role, with the exception of Michael D. Higgins, Ireland's current President and a former Minister for the Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht (1993-1997). Byrne's report analyses wider public commentary that suggests the role of Arts Minister is handed to those considered less capable or effective, detailing how "the career path of a new culture minister was cast in "a negative light', represented a "a poisoned chalice", "the end of the political road" and was the "last step before departure from the Cabinet" (Bacik, 2008 and Byrne 4-5). In short, the arts ministry is conceived of and interpreted as a demotion. Byrne reviews the "downward career trajectory of six (former) arts and culture Ministers following their departure (none was awarded another ministry and three resigned from politics)"(5).

However, on 27 June 2020, a new tripartite coalition government formed. A former English and Music teacher, Catherine Martin of the Green Party has furthered the national conversation regarding the role of arts to Irish society. Within weeks of her appointment, Deputy Martin established task forces to examine the night-time economy and the arts and culture recovery. Their report "A Life Worth Living" recommends a Universal Basic Income (UBI) pilot targeted at the arts (Martin "We can protect our artists"), recently approved (Crowley 2021). Interim funding was also announced, including: €10 million pilot Performance and Production Support Package, €3 million TV Drama Fund, €10 million Culture Fund, and further capital funding of up to €6 million to accelerate the redevelopment and renewal of National Cultural Institutions (Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, 24 July 2020). In total, "The additional monies allocated in this Jobs Stimulus package bring the Arts Council's total allocation this year to €105 – some 40% higher than in 2019" ('Jobs Stimulus', Dep of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht'). Furthermore, the coalition government announced its first budget for the coming year on 13 October 2021. This budget includes record funding of €130 million for the Arts Council, with a further €50 million support package for live entertainment (Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, 2021 Budget). The state dialogue delivering this ground-breaking economic support for the arts speaks to the role of the arts in the crises of nationhood once more. However, this government is new, dependent on a tripartite coalition constituted by fundamentally oppositional political beliefs, and many doubt its long-term stability.

To conclude, this essay perhaps finds more questions than answers at this point of major social crisis, tragedy and potential transformation. The analysis finds that the arts sector performed radical kindness to their own community by a collective refusal to accept the initial emergency package and a rejuvenated advocacy approach. However, there is a wider question pertaining to the viability of this strategy in the medium and long-term. Performing radical kindness for many artists and organisations includes the production of creative work to provide meaning, comfort, sustenance, stimulation and escape for communities during these multiple interconnected economic, ecological, social and biological crises, irrespective of funding models. Yet, will continuing to provide one's artistic service, without proper pay, appropriate working conditions or any assurances of change, contribute to the normalisation of exploitation in the arts sector? Or perhaps, does it situate the role of the arts as something fundamentally outside of everyday economies, whereby the need to be creative is inherently ontological, evidenced throughout millennia in its various legacies from cave art to Greek amphitheatres, which will always find new ways to manifest and provide meaning despite fresh challenges? Perhaps the

answer to all is yes, and the challenge will be learning how to accept and navigate the contradictions that this presents. As the arts sector struggles to survive ecologically and economically one hundred years on from the national struggle to survive politically, the arts community in Ireland is involved in rigorous debates concerning how the state values the sector and the potential ways to strengthen the ground on which to work, as an artist in the twenty-first century.

**Notes**

1. Una Mullally, 'Politeness has got the arts community nowhere', Irish Times, 13 April 2020: https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/una-mullally-politeness-has-got-the-arts-community-nowhere-1.4227335. Accessed 22 April 2020.

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