

Welcome to the fifth in our series of Ory' Sta Talking on Tuam fireside conversations, a live in conversation with Maureen Kennelly, director Arts Council, Patrick Fox, Director Heart of Glas and Ailbhe Murphy, director Create, titled Creatively Making Place. Introduced by Carolann Courtney, Program Coordinator of Creative Places Tuam

Carolann

I am absolutely delighted to host today, welcoming everyone from the art community, the wider community. Seamus hosting us so beautifully here in Reapy's as well. And so this is the start of actually being together in this place. So, I'm going to hand over to Maureen, Ailbhe and Patrick, today to talk about cultural placemaking and the impact it can have. Thank you.

Ailbhe

Thanks very much, Carolann, as you say it's absolutely wonderful to be here and in person. We've been dreaming about being in Tuam in person for quite some time. So it's an absolute delight. My name is Ailbhe Murphy. I'm an artist and director of Create and we're the National Development Agency for Collaborative Arts. And we're leading out on the Creative Places Tuam program where I just want to give a shout out. We have Vance and Keelin here as well from the team. And we're just delighted to be here. And it's wonderful to see you all here in Reapy's Bar - big shout out to Seamus for hosting us so brilliantly. It's my great honor and pleasure to be in conversation today with Maureen Kennelly, the director of the Arts Council, and with Patrick Fox, who is the director of Heart of Glass, which is the Creative People and Place program in St. Helens in Merseyside. So we were going to weave in and out of the sort of conversations around the strategic importance of creative places programming, what the arts mean, in terms of place based practice. We're going to hear a little bit from Patrick and about what that experience has been like and St. Helens because we're a program that's just starting, they're a little bit in, nearly a decade in and then I'm certainly going to open it up to the floor. Because this is about being in conversation together, about learning and exchanging and influencing each other. So yeah, wonderful. Great. Welcome. So, Maureen, if you don't mind if I could start by asking, asking you in the context of the Arts Council as director of the Arts Council, the Creative Places program is a very significant, initiative. So it'd be wonderful to hear a little bit about like why the Arts Council begin a Creative Places programme.

Maureen

Sure. And I'm sorry, unconscious, I have my back to you. So sorry. I'm hiding Ailbhe on you. So just to say thanks a million to everybody. I'm absolutely thrilled to be here. I have a lot of friends from Tuam and I know many artists, including the wonderful Jennifer Cunningham

down there from and around Tuam. So I'm just really excited to be here and to meet people that I've had the chance to meet recently again, so it's brilliant. And I suppose if you don't mind, I'm going to answer first by kind of reflecting on where I'm from myself because I am from a tiny place called Ballylongford in North Kerry and I'm from the outskirts of that village, I'm two miles away from it, from a farm at the very end of a road. And I felt that I grew up somewhere where nobody knew anything about us. And, you know, we were like five or six hours from Dublin. And I just felt the center of action was just where we weren't certainly, and it always felt, you know, that that knowing how marginalized, you know, growing up in the country is always something that I'm very, very aware of, but I suppose on the other hand, Ballylongford is eight miles from Listowel, which I suppose is a town not unlike Tuam, I would say. And Listowel is home to a festival called Writers Week, which is on the go now for about 45 years or so. And it also has a town hall and Druid came to the store with Conversations on a Homecoming which you will all know about of course, and my mother brought me see that the age of 14 and I started encountering Writers Week when I was about 14 or 15. So I know that the impact of something of the road like that, which even eight miles away when you're growing up on a farm is still an awful long, long away, you know, you're still like, relying on others to give you lifts and all sorts of things, you know, so I suppose that feeling of like culture, bringing me more into the center of things and connecting me into other parts of Irish life and and life beyond Ireland is something that I feel very strongly myself that you know, I know how important today and impact has had on me. So I just wanted to kind of lay that out. And in answering your question as well, a quote that comes to me a lot is from the American poet Louise Glück who won the Nobel Prize for Literature two years ago. And in one of her poems, she says, "we look at the world once in childhood, the rest is memory". So that importance of the place where you grew up is just so absolutely vital that you know, our sense of place. It never leaves us. And artists are so influenced by place and this was, I come most recently from the world of poetry. And every time you wrote a poet's biography, we would say, Seamus Heaney born and Bellaghy, Derek Mahon born in Belfast, you know that it is just absolutely within them their sense of place. And when I think of say I was just looking at I'm very lucky to own a few Jennifer Cunningham's to look at how the sense of place and the sense of childhood is so inextricably linked in terms of her work, and many, many other people, aside from Jennifer here, of course, as well. And so so for the Arts Council, we have a strategy called Making Great Artwork, which people hopefully may be a bit aware of, it's a 10 year strategy. So it runs into 2025, it predates me, I think it's a very good strategy and I want to pay tribute to all those who worked on it in the Arts Council. And we've to what we call pillars. So we have the artist, and we have the public, and that's who we want to look after. And I mean, that makes sense. Those are kind of obvious things to have, I think. But I suppose they're laid out fairly clearly. And in terms of public engagement, that's, that's where this program, Creative Places comes. Because we're aware, you know, and you'll be aware as well, when when you think of the arts in Ireland, you know, the large organizations and the larger cities probably easily spring to mind Cork Opera House, the Abbey Theatre, the Gate Theatre, and whatever else. But really, with making great art work, what we wanted to do was say, you know, every town and village in Ireland, is important to us. And if we want to be real, if we want to be really,

if we want to be really determined, in our goal to achieve public engagement, we've got to be thinking about every single town and village. And like you, we know the impact that culture can have on a place, it can change people, the arts can have a very, very positive impact on our lives. And I guess all of us who are here today, I imagine believe that, you know, you're either working as artists or as community people or as audience or probably a mix of all three, in fact. And you can see firsthand, this has a very, very powerful impact on people's lives. So it's about people, but it's also of course, about place. And it's about what makes us proud of a place, what makes us want to sing from the rooftops about our place, and I guess not to be plamásing you but you know, walking through Tuam, walking up the town and I see Croi na Coille, and I see the Man of Aran like oh my god, that's fantastic to hospice centers of hospitality named after, you know, works of literature. And of course, I'm aware of Yuam because of Tom Murphy's work. And because of contemporary artists, who are from here as well. And the work that has gone out into the world. Yesterday, was a very historic day when the Taoiseach and the Tanaiste and the Minister for Culture announced basic income for the arts, but you may be pleased to know that at the the event the Tanaiste singled out Tola McKay's version of n17 as his big highlight of the pandemic. And so, when you, you know, in all seriousness, when you think a song that has gone out into the world that is there for decades and decades to come, the sense of place and the sense of pride that that creates in us all. And so for us Creative Places, is about looking at the map of Ireland and saying, Okay, where are the places where there's a real coalition of willing organizations and individuals who come together to say, look, we support you, we can make this work. And I know that it was a very, very competitive process for Tuam to come through and Tuam was the very first and now you're being joined by nine or 10 others last year, and then the deadline, I think, is falling next week for another, another fleet of places to come. So, you know, I think the work that you've done in extraordinarily difficult circumstances has been noted. And that's why we have been able to persuade our council and consequently, the government, that Creative Places is indeed a very, very good thing. And that the legacy from it will be seen for many decades to come.

Ailbhe

Super Maureen, that's a wonderful, wonderfully rich answer to a question, because you've evoked a very strong sense of place for yourself and shared that with us, so thank you for that. And then positioned that within very importantly I think the broader Arts Council strategy, and it's really wonderful to hear that our early work together and more importantly, probably the extraordinary energy and cultural practices and community based practices in existence in Tuam have come to the fore and are influencing already the rollout of the program. So that leads me very nicely in to Patrick. So Patrick, was it eight years ago? Would you like to tell us how you started the Creative People and Places program in St. Helens, and it will be good to give a context to Creative People and Places. And maybe then a little bit of a sense of St. Helens as a place.

Patrick

I'll start similar to Maureen I suppose just to give it a bit of a bit of background of my own kind of relationship to arts and culture. So I grew up in Dublin on the kind of cusp of the boundary between Santry and Ballymun. And I know most people in this room will probably know that Ballymun at one point was one of the largest regeneration zones in Europe. So my first encounter with an artist, my first meeting with an artist was community based projects, it was located in place, it was in situations and for me, at the time, it was, you know, I probably wasn't understanding what was happening. But it was, you know, it was a way to access and understand what was happening in the community that I lived in. And some of those bigger, broader themes that I was experiencing, or seeing or witnessing, but actually a different way to access a kind of mode of understanding what was going on. So for me, you know, in terms of my work, since then, it's always been about art and artists and people and place. So that that kind of connection to creating the space for different conversations, different opportunities, different ways for us to understand the world that we live in, or to project a different type of future that we might want to imagine together. So I'm for my for my sins working over in England. I've been over there for eight years in a place called St. Helens, which is a town of about 180,000 people. So quite a large population. And it's kind of equally distance between Liverpool and Manchester. And a couple of years ago, it's celebrating its 100 and 50th anniversary as a township. But it's existed for a lot longer than that. And there's a strong Irish tradition and history there as well. Kind of birthplace of the glass industry, coal mines, pharmaceuticals, a place that was kind of, you know, at the kind of heartbeat of industrial Britain, unlike a lot of places in the kind of North of England has had decades of kind of disinvestment and withdrawal and kind of post post industrial kind of reality that exists now and all the things that come with that. So St. Helens is a, you know, a space where people had been, making and doing and the reason that we're called Heart of Glass is very, very early on and one of the consultation phases for us as a as an organization and a project. And one of the community members that we were working with was talking about the film Heart of Glass by Werner Hertzog a lot of people think we're just massive Blondie fans.

We are, that always features at the Christmas party, but the actual origin story of the name came from this this kind of lesser known film by Werner Hertzog in which a Bavarian glassblowing town. So there's this kind of glass correlation, and the master glassblower dies. And the thing that town is known for the thing that puts it on the map, the thing that everyone pulls together to do is to make this really particular type of red ruby. And when the master glassblower dies, that's no longer within the grasp of the town. So the town goes into this kind of state of hypnotism. Because the thing that brought it together, the thing that gave it a purpose and a function that and a kind of sense of community was no longer available to it. So it felt like a really interesting story about what role arts and arts and culture and artists and our communities could be involved in terms of shaping a new identity or a new set of possibilities for the town. But the kind of origin story of Creative

People and Places which is very similar to the Creative Places program run by Arts Council Ireland, was about just over 10 years ago Arts Council England in similar ways to Arts Council Ireland, we're looking at their investment as a National Development Agency nationally. And they were looking at the opportunities people had to experience or create or encounter arts and culture in the place that they called home. And what they quickly realized is that there was real disparity across the country. And that different investments were going into big cities a lot of the time and then the idea was that those cities would draw people in. And we actually knew that that wasn't the reality of what was actually happening. So they created this program called Creative People and Places. And initially it was a three year program with a 10 year aspiration. And they invited different groups of community members and consortiums to apply for funding if you fell within this kind of threshold of eligibility. And St. Helens was one of those locations. So about 20 places were funded in the first round, and I think it was about 37 million pounds investment at that first instance, I think there's been over 100 million spent to date so he really significant amounts of money. But the idea really was to have different people around the table and to support and things to happen that would be grown in these locations and places, and create the conditions in which work could take place and happen. So I rocked up on my first day with this, you know, really supportive consortium group of people of local artists' collective, community groups, choirs, local rugby club, and I rocked up to a purpose built rugby stadium on my first day of work with a laptop kind of going "Okay, here we go". And let's start from there. And I suppose what I brought to the table, or what I was kind of interested in working with the consortium and the wider community was to create a framework in which we could listen. And we could, we could start to build layers of understanding and meaning and then make work not just to react to what we thought the story of this place was, but to really kind of tune in so not just be part of that parent's life of the place, but to be part of the of the civic life and really to think, you know, who gets to be part of the making of meaning through arts and culture? And where does that belong? Our belief that the answer to those two questions is that everyone should have that opportunity. And actually, it belongs everywhere, and our town is our arts centre. So that just created a whole different set of possibilities. And you know, the early days of the project and organization, and all I can really remember are cups of tea, there's lots and lots of cups of tea and conversations and rooms that you kind of thought, "I'm not really sure why I'm in a waste management meeting, but I know it's probably going to be really useful to be part of these conversations" and and just spending that time and then thinking about what what are the gaps? And what are the what are the different types of supports that we could initiate, what are the things that we need to just walk away from and allow someone else to get on with the job. And we really kind of set out four kinds of anchor points for the program, and the organization, which was around arts, the arts, participation and practice. So we wanted to be part and support of making really important work that had a point of view and stories to tell. And that was was of people and place. And we wanted the arts to be a voice around the decision making table, to be part of the kind of architecture and conversation about what tomorrow might look like, to be a seat around the table. We wanted people to be able to participate in different ways, as collaborators as audience members as volunteers, recognizing that different people will want to be involved in different ways. And then we wanted to think about what are the

conditions that would support practice to flourish? What are the things that people need space, is it time, is it resource? Is it training? Is it CPD gaps? Is it professional development? Is it networking opportunities, and each of those things require different types of support. So for me, when I started thinking there was a three year starter gun, and a potential end line. Without I wouldn't, it wouldn't have meant, that wouldn't have changed anything if what we did was a really nice set of projects, something had to fundamentally shift and something had to fundamentally change. And we've been really fortunate now that we've moved through three cycles of funding, and the program has now become a permanent feature in Arts Council England's portfolio. And it's fundamentally kind of rewritten their arts strategy and really influenced a lot of policy at local authority, within national organizations, within regional organizations and within the policy. So I think what started off as an action research program has kind of created a new pathway and a new way of us understanding the value of arts and culture to every facet of civic life in our country or in the place that we call home.

Ailbhe

Super. So I'm going to come back to you in terms of maybe a couple of strands of work itself. But that's a wonderful evocation of the kind of multi layered and kind of complex matrix that is alive in these projects. And I think that certainly, Carolann will absolutely resonate in terms of cups of tea. And we would say that's an entirely valid research methodology. And it has to happen and it's about spending time so but but coming from that very one to one connection into the broader point, the last point you were making, and this is where I'm going to come back to Maureen now, is that sense that actually the work on the ground could be guided in a particular way nourished and realized in a way that then organizationally Heart of Glass is in a position to influence and and advocate for and generate aspects of policy. And so what I meant, but I just want to come back to Maureen on because I think it's very important is that at the recent Places Matter conference in Carlow, the Arts Council launched your spatial policy. And I think it's a really wonderful document. It's a really important document. And I'd like Maureen if you wouldn't mind just to speak a little bit to that because I actually think that to have a framework like a spatial policy with the commitment from the Arts Council in the Creative Places program, is it is a very strong infrastructure. And we'll come to how does that translate down for artists working in the ground.

Maureen

So we, as you said, Ailbhe we launched it at Places Matter. And we have a simple but I think very beautiful vision really, which says that, and that everyone in the country, no matter where they live, or work or what their background is, has the opportunity to create, to enjoy and to participate in, to experience the arts. And so, you know, again, I suppose it's almost obvious, but I suppose it's, it's the bringing out of it, and the being quite explicit in saying it, that's so important to us. And the third, there are two principles really, that drive it. There's

a principle of social justice, and then what we're calling spatial equity, and I suppose spatial is relatively new term, I suppose in the old days it would have been called a regional policy, I guess. But it's looking very much to how can we influence? For example, the revitalization of our towns and villages, you know, can we look at creating artists workspaces, is that something that, you know, we know that there's a huge problem and challenge that artists face in terms of workspaces. So, you know, that's something very concrete we want to do from it. How can we work to make sure that sustainable design is far more present and prominent in planning? So, you know, how do we work more with architects, with planners, with people in local authorities, it's really trying to strengthen those relationships, you know, and just back to your point, Patrick, of just getting the right people in the room. So that, you know, the arts aren't just here, just as people who are they like doing that sort of thing, that they're actually grown up citizens who have something really intelligent and rewarding and beneficial to offer wider society? That's so I suppose that's, that's at the heart of it, it's really about the idea of creating a citizenry that is informed about the arts, and that the widest possible range of opportunities is made available to them. So that, you know, you're not that young person growing up in Ballylongford thinking, "Oh, well, that's just all for those fancy people up in Dublin, or Cork or Galway", you know, like that, you can actually think, "Oh, well, within my range, it's not an unrealistic thing for me to think I would like to study ballet, or there's a pathway for me to be an installation artist". And you know, we've made lots of strides in Ireland, I think, you know, there's far more provision, but it's by no means adequate. And, of course what's vital to all this is that we get the investment from government, it's all very well having all the policies in the world, as we all know, but if they just rest on the shelf without that investment, and I'm very hopeful that we will have and I suppose not to be trying to make silver linings where there are now, but the pandemic is certainly helping in terms of our understanding of where we are live, and how we all live together as a society, you know, and I suppose the word porous is used a lot. I do think, as a society, globally, now, hopefully, we are more porous, we're more open to each of those ideas, and we're more prepared to listen to each other. And we're more aware of what collaboration really means and what it can deliver for each other.

Ailbhe

I think that that, you know, in the context of the pandemic, certainly local place, one's place, one's immediate locality, we will have to relate to that in a very vivid way. And, and the importance of place, and the importance of local and community couldn't have seemed more sort of resonant over those last two years. And so it was very interesting to be leading out a place based program, how do you lead a place based programme when you can't be in place? But Patrick, can I just picking up, drawing on Maureen's point in relation to that infrastructural policy and negotiating, let's say, multiple players like Council, business, like, the thing about the Creative Places programs is they are, they are, in their essence about arts and cultural practice, but arts and cultural practice does not exist in a vacuum, as you say, it's about the business community. It's about the community development interests, it's about, you know, it's about the total ecology of place. So I just, could I ask you just to sort of

maybe, if you want to even choose a particular project, or just give an instance, where a number of those things are at play, and most importantly, where I want to head to is, what do you think the artists' role? I know, there's a number of artists here, what do you think the artists' role is in all of that?

Patrick

Yeah, I mean, it's an interesting question. And I think, you know, our position or and my position has, you know, people say, what do you exist to do? And what we exist to do is to support artists and communities to make work. It begins and ends there. And that will be led by the people in that space and then that room and what they do together, but obviously the nature of the work is social in nature, and it's connected to other partners, so there will be what we would probably call natural by-products that result as a result of that process. But I think it's really important for us to protect the space of, actually, it's okay for us just to make an artwork, and that's fine, it doesn't have to do anything else. And I think in the UK, and in England, in particular, there's been a lot more of a history of, you know, the instrumentalisation of the artist or the deployment of artists as the fixer or social worker, or to pick up the slack in other services that have been decimated or removed. So I think it's really important to say, that's enough, actually, that that's okay as an outcome. And what we do obviously connect with lots of other people and with different partners, whether it be housing associations with the business community, or you know, local traders and lots of different ways and, and certain parts of the project, there'll be meanings for them, that will be really resonant in their worlds. And that's fantastic. And that's great, because it means there's an exchange that's happened. And so whether that be collaborations across public health, or, you know, we work on a on an annual program, which is, which is called, it's called the Takeover program. And the kind of idea at the very beginning was, what would what would mean if artists and communities have the keys to the town for the day or for a week, what would what would that look like? So it was kind of permission for work to occur or take place in different locations, whether it be the town hall, or local pubs, or cafes, or taxi cabs or bus routes, and, you know, all of these different locations that are non-traditional art spaces, just hosting and creating these different moments. And so there's a taxi firm that we worked with, who had an artist in residence for a period of time. And when you booked your taxi, you got the option to have an artist journey with you for your travel. And this, this artist was really interested in kind of, you know, short term kind of intensive kind of one to one or small group collaboration. So and that taxi company reported that they were getting more bookings for the period of time, or the local hotel, he will have like loads more bed nights, and we have a conference, or the local restaurant that actually extended its opening hours, because there was nowhere to eat after seven o'clock on a Wednesday, and now there's a reason maybe potentially for them to stay open. So all of these things happen, and certain things we'll try and capture, but it's not our reporting criteria to be able to tell that story. But we know it, and we feel it, and I'm looking over at Mark in the corner, he's been working on this for a long period of time, the staff in the charity shops, but know him by name, because we're part of the economy, the life of the

place. And, you know, we're working with the bus companies at the moment around looking at the exteriors of the buses as public art sites. So all the posts that will be going around St. Helens will have commissioned artworks on them that will be developed by artists and community. So just those little infiltrations, and those little ways of kind of just shifting the view ever so slightly, so that something feels different. But cumulatively, it means there's something, there's another energy at play. But then equally, because a lot of the work is or has historically been time based, it's happened in a moment in time and it's gone, you know, we'll get a phone call from someone saying, oh, you know, "I've heard there's some really interesting stuff happening, can I come and visit", and they come on a random Tuesday. And there's nothing for them to see, because it's unless you hit that moment, you can't really duck into it. So we've actually been doing a lot more work that recently because it feels like we've got permission to do that now, which is more permanent based, and is more kind of longer term interventions within the town. So yeah, those connections really, really connect. So you know, whether it's the developing visitor economy strategy that the council have, and that there was never a visitor economy strategy before or the new arts and cultural policy that the council have, or housing associations talking about how they would potentially work with artists in the future and ask well, what would your advice be on artist payment conditions? There's other things happening. And I think I'm saying to Carolann, it's really important that we're not the arts and cultural sector in the town, we're just part of it. And I think that feels really important. We need to be part of something that's larger than ourselves, and not the destination.

Maureen

Isn't it great, isn't it, that thing about making change happen? Like an artist every day wakes up and they're facing like the blank canvas or the blank page and the magic of making those marks and say, Oh, my gosh, you know, here's something magical and I think that when you show that to people outside the arts, and they can see that their town or community can be changed in a very positive way. That's such a powerful thing, I think.

Ailbhe

I think it's, it's also makes me think of, you know, the two main sort of central tenets of Making Great Artwork, the Arts Council strategy, the artists and public engagement, and in the context of something like Creative Places Tuam, public engagement means shaping, shaping the program with Creative Place Tuam with us, with Create. It's not like we roll into town with an already set, we have a set of propositions but it comes to life and it is developed and evolved and finds its form in collaboration. So that to me is a wonderful evocation of public engagement. Thank you all. Thank you all. Help yourselves to tea, coffee, more sandwiches, Seamus. Thanks again. Thank you so much.



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