Alternative, Mainstream, Mainstream Alternatives:

The viability of the artist-led initiative

On Saturday 6th February, Variant held a discussion in the Ormeau Baths Gallery, Belfast, under the title 'Alternative, Mainstream, Mainstream Alternatives: The Viability of the Artist-Led Initiatives'. The publicity material for the discussion raised the extensive gentrification schemes undertaken in Dublin's Temple Bar, and now underway in the Laganside area of Belfast. Both have been sustained, at least in part, by co-opting a 'cultural' agenda. Mindful of the contemporary position of the artist as agent in social processes, we provided a platform for artists and artist-led initiatives to debate the assisting of such property speculators through their activities, examining the viability of an 'alternative/ mainstream' dichotomy, in a climate of supposed consensus politics.

The discussion was chaired by Val Connor, Visual Arts Director of the Project Arts Centre in Dublin. The three featured speakers were: Orla Ryan, Dublin based artist and writer; Toby Dennett, public art consultant and former committee member of Catalyst Arts, Belfast; and Martin McCabe, lecturer and founder of Critical Access, Dublin. The discussion was organised by Daniel Jewesbury who is based in Belfast. What follows is an edited transcript of the event.

Toby Dennett: Looking at the events that led to the setting up of artist-run spaces in Belfast, there was a feeling that if the platforms needed were not in place, and the opportunities were not coming through the channels that should have been supplying them, then we had to create these for ourselves. This moved on quickly and became a realisation of the potential of initiating our own agenda. This was a sustainable option which wasn't just about the provision of appropriate places to platform contemporary art. There was a shift from the feeling of obligation to the realisation of the potential to effect a much wider arena, the whole issue of actually making art.

Another important element of artist-run spaces has been the ability to curate with a lot more insight and vision—artists are, in most cases, going to be two steps ahead of the average gallery, curator or programmer, and could take more risks and be more ambitious. They're not up against the constraints that conventional galleries are up against. The concerns that are relevant to artists and their working practice can be examined by them curating, opening up an extra dimension to the avenues of their work as an artist. There is, however, a potential problem. When the control that an artist has in their own work, setting their own agenda, is employed in their work as a curator, the individual elements of other artists' work, which you're trying to platform, can be smothered. The work or the show can simply become a readymade for the artist-curator.

On the question of sustainability, artist-run spaces are becoming more and more mainstream, and that's being picked up as a kind of cultural branding, especially with 'arts and culture' now seen as a viable economic option. I'm referring specifically to some of the gentrification schemes currently underway, particularly Laganside's adoption of Cathedral Quarter [an area of Belfast, where Catalyst Arts is situated] and the extent to which artists and artist groups should or could co-operate with this. I don't think we should see Laganside as a threat just because they're big business; the real fear is of losing autonomy and having your reputation let down by a surface gloss that does not reflect reality, and being trampled in the process. I think artists have always had ambitions that reach beyond their ability, due to funding constraints, and would love to see major investment following on from the reputation they have established in the area, but they fear it's all going pear-shaped as has happened so often before.

Artist-run spaces need to look hard at how they deal with this problem. The traditional methods of sticking to your guns and fighting your corner by continuing to produce good projects, as if this will in some way make Laganside sit back and say, wait a minute, we should let these guys run the show, they seem to know what they are doing—it simply won't happen that way. We're trying to lead by example, saying, look this is what good practice is, this is a viable way of working. This has worked to some extent and has been recognised in many quarters. However, the private sector and public corporations seem quite uninformed. Examples of good practice are only recognised at a surface level, and the complexities that go to make that up aren't necessarily understood. So the usual way of proving critics wrong, by showcasing good work, leading by example, just doesn't apply here. It's also related to the fact that these bodies, although seen as threats, are not critics of the way artist-run spaces operate in any ideological sense. They only see them as commodities; the whole area is seen as a single unit or industry. That is a worrying point. No amount of good press is

going to get you anywhere, it only increases your value as a commodity.

Having said that Laganside can do great things for Cathedral Quarter. Artist-run groups have been struggling for years with financial problems, lack of audiences and a run-down environment. They need the investment that the potential Laganside development can offer. Laganside are not the real threat; they're not buying all the property and pricing artists out of the area. They want to keep artists there because they're an asset to the area. The danger is the developers that Laganside are trying to encourage to take the area on; so the battle is to ensure that some form of clause is inserted into the development contracts that takes into account artists' needs.

The relevant groups would do well to change their usual stance and act more as political-type lobby groups, either by themselves or through the Visual Artists Association of Northern Ireland (VANNI). It's a difficult situation, everyone's unpaid, and who wants to take on that task of researching documents, going to meetings, campaigning, lobbying. It's a shit job, but you have to play by their roles if you really want to make any impact. At the end of the day, Laganside are a public body and they're afraid of bad publicity, especially if it's directed towards lack of accountability and lack of consultation, or not fulfilling their statutory obligations. They spend a lot of money trying to persuade people that this is not the case but unless someone spends the time looking at this and investigating the channels through which decisions are made, and acting on this, then the whole process is going to go on without you. You have to get the people who matter on your side, to enlist the Arts Council, the City Council, who unfortunately are also under pressure to go for the grander plans and big publicity.

At the end of day, you do need Laganside. The basic question is whether the artist-led organisations feel they have the will and commitment to go down that road. Maybe they decide it's the last thing they want to do and just carry on regardless, if need be relocate to a new area, or use some other strategy for continuing to work. By definition the nature of artist-run initiatives will constantly change as they respond to the cultural/ political/ economic environment. That's their strength, that's what artists created these platforms for in the first place.

I don't think organisations want to be alternative for the sake of it. The mainstream has always wanted to be alternative; films are marketed as cult-classics before they're even released. That artist-run spaces are becoming more mainstream in terms of getting recognition and acceptance, as being viable, almost enhances the alternative slant they are being labelled with, but when you get into that sort of arena it gets less to do with substance and an aspect of dumbing-down comes into play. To avoid being tarnished with that artists may feel a move towards a real alternative stance is needed.

Orla Ryan: The alignment of alternative/ mainstream has a certain 'given-ness' about it, making it highly suspect. Alternative to what? What mainstream? Is there just one? As meta-narratives these terms are pretty useless unless we clarify the theoretical ground from which we speak. How do we fit the artist into this landscape? We're faced with the problem of defining 'artist'; we could ask for example is an artist an 'artist' when she is curating a show, working in an administrative role, as a social worker or critic? What is the reasoning behind the

artist subject-position being the over-riding role?

The handout for today's discussion asks: "...How useful are terms like 'alternative' or 'avant-garde' in the current climate, as yet another generation of artist-run projects become elevated to the cultural 'mainstream'?". I would question the transparent assumptions inherent in a term like 'generation'. The idea runs something like this: young artists start off being idealistic, socially motivated and 'alternative' until their careers take off and they are "elevated to the cultural 'mainstream'". Such a linear conception of alternative practices reduces the discursive potential of 'alternative'. We need to be reflexive in asking whose interests are served by maintaining such a linear model?

I believe artists occupy a multitude of different spaces, some 'mainstream' and some 'alternative', within a process of to-ing and fro-ing. If you keep the discussion so close to an idea of 'generation' what happens is in effect a collapsing; an artist such as Martha Rosler, is canonically documented and therefore one could argue is 'mainstream'. She shows work in a commercial gallery space in SoHo, New York, again suitable for a positioning as 'mainstream', but within 'this' space she remains a distinctly alternative voice.

Accepting the 'artist' role as the predominant indicator of difference, we should investigate whether that role brings a different theoretical model or sensibility, that in some way offers an 'alternative' approach to the 'singular' role of curator or administrator. Does the crossover cause problems of interpretation, creating a certain slipperiness that refuses the parameters of what 'artist' is supposed to mean?

There have been many examples of the cul de sacs that can arise when the artist enters different spaces (institutional or otherwise), where the political/ social/ critical discourse under negotiation is displaced by the artist as 'author'. Institutions often seek to legitimise themselves by using particular artists for the social issues they are seen to represent. That said, we have to distinguish between an artist who incorporates the multitude of roles in their actual art practice and those artists who occupy different roles but keep them, in some way, separated.

It seems that artist-run spaces are the particular initiatives being targeted in today's discussion, yet this centring has a déjà vu quality to it. Is anybody in any doubt, including the people involved, that these spaces are feeder operations for the larger institutions? This emphasis also limits a critical engagement with other recent artist-led initiatives, less upfront, who silently align themselves with powerful or semi-powerful institutions.

I'm hopeful for a discussion on artists as active agents who have what I would refer to as 'available knowledges'. Depressingly in an Irish context there is always a sense of reinventing the wheel; it is this historical amnesia which also allows artists, artist-led initiatives, the larger institutions and the Arts Council off the hook. The history of these power relations always remains an oral one and as a result remain hidden.

One current example is Arthouse and its origins five years ago. I really believe Arthouse does not know where it's going and this has both positive and negative repercussions for artists who work with time-based media. If Arthouse is an interface between artists and industry, we need to take a look at what model of the artist, if any, it is expounding.

To begin an analysis of the complex relations and conflicts involved in Arthouse's establishment would necessarily involve looking at artist-led initiatives such as Random Access, The Sculptors' Society, the Artists' Association of Ireland (AAI) and Blue Funk; examining also who was on the first board of Arthouse, not to mention who let the architect away with that building! We might also want to ask when, if ever, we will have the opportunity to read the report on Arthouse commissioned by the Arts Council?

To conclude on the point of the artist as 'double agent' in her relationships with various organisations, I would ask whether artists' refusal, at present, is not the strongest way to show up the structures and operation of power?

Martin McCabe: When Critical Access came about, two local precedents were being discussed, Catalyst in Belfast and Blue Funk in Dublin. They'd set out to do something not necessarily remarkable, but certainly

different in terms of the context of the Irish art scene. We thought we could learn from them and their mistakes. Looking back over the last four or five years, I see Critical Access as being marked by partiality or failure, whereby any of the great ideals which were set out initially have not really been delivered on. The reason we came about as a small collective—generally of practising artists, with people involved in management, administration and arts education— was our experience dealing with a bigger,more professional, arts organisation, the Sculptors' Society of Ireland. We wanted to move away and so hijacked the Random Access project and took it with us. Morally we had ownership of the project. We had to run it on our own without a space, an office, phone or fax, and our contact address was constantly changing. Certain members of the committee were well known personalities and had profiles in the wider arts establishment; and slowly but surely we coalesced as a group whose agenda was driven by the artist-run initiatives, certainly not interested in looking at a space and having a stable reference point, maybe sharing Blue Funk's ideological imperatives in terms of trying to alter the co-ordinates on the Irish art scene, particularly in Dublin. It was essentially a way of generating new types of art formations or opportunities through dialogue and discourse around contemporary art practice. The importation of what was happening in the UK and America seemed to be a way of throwing what was happening locally to a wider international frame.

In order to receive funds from the Arts Council we had to rigidify ourselves, incorporate ourselves as a legal entity which presented itself as 'organised'. It was strange how the Arts Council of Ireland was very interested in us, very attentive to our needs. I don't think we had a huge problem with that, because there was certain rhetoric identifiable in the Arts Council, a change in the understanding of community and community arts; we fulfilled a bit of that because we explicitly positioned ourselves on that edge between the gallery-based system and the community arts situation. They gave us £12,000 to begin with, to see through two projects that we had on paper.

At the same time we were working in Temple Bar, doing public discussion and forums. Sometimes we'd go outside Temple Bar; we were kind of playing a to-ing and fro-ing game, because we were conscious that Temple Bar was quite amorphous, I think the Italians call it a tangentopolis, a notion of an octopus which is willing to absorb and co-opt groups of artists like ourselves, so we tried to skirt around that. We were always looking for a place where we could site ourselves momentarily. The bigger picture here is Temple Bar Properties, with their gentrification, with their use of the gallery spaces, and the way Art House was developing.

So there's an historical narrative taking place here but it keeps falling off the edge, it keeps failing. Part of the deal there is generally the conditions, the determinants which operate, in the widest frame of Irish culture, Irish politics, Irish art at the end of the 20th century. More locally it was about that struggle to set up something that was different from the mainstream. I think we were conscious of the fact that we could be easily sidelined and marginalised and yet at the same time we were trying to make a difference, to have some notion of efficacy. Part of that is our interest in education and arts pedagogy in particular, so we were running a programme of discussion forums which were not really being facilitated by anyone else. Since that happened it's been taken up by Temple Bar Galleries, because they've seen this audience open up for that type of discourse.

One problem that needs to be marked at this stage is that issue of personality difficulties, about amassing of body of people together to organise, on top of other commitments, and the division of labour between the committee themselves, and how to administrate this. For instance, the Waiting Spaces project we did had nine public artworks in a mental hospital, and two in social welfare offices in Dublin, at the same time. It was a hugely ambitious project amongst six or seven people who were doing it part-time and getting no pay, and were struggling enough in their day to day living. I'm always awe-struck by the success that other artist-groups have because they always manage to maintain themselves at the same time as reaching some sort of critical audience, maintaining some sort

of dignity in the face of all of this, because behind the scenes things are going haywire.

Another project was Articulate, in Art House. It was about breaking open a hermetically understood notion of art practice, we were trying to introduce other types of discourse, from the legal, or medical, or social policy angle, in terms of the discussion about rape and sexual abuse. This was very much a self-developmental thing, it was about educating ourselves as to how we were going to investigate the system in place.

Of course our last thing was the Littoral in Ireland/ Critical Sites conference in Dun Laoghaire last September. It was very much an effort to set up a stall that was outside the mainstream in terms of the type of discussion that was being had, and yet we realised when it was going on that it was something that the major arts administrators, the major interest groups, the power blocks within the arts system, the Arts Councils, were very interested in.

Val Conner: I'm interested in the notion that an artist curating or administrating is more virtuous, more of an 'honest broker' of power, money or information than, say, a professional curator or art administrator; is that necessarily so? When an artist curates or administrates, do they retain their originary identity as an artist, does this act as an insurance policy against their new personality as arts administrator, curator and so on? It's as if the artist occupies an almost innocent place, and from there this person can then go forth and role play, learn the inner workings of the administration and so on, that otherwise are seen as in conflict with them as an artist.

I think it's interesting to talk about this idea of leading by example, the notion of setting a good example, whether as an artist or collective of artists, the idea that there is an ethical, social role, to input into social and cultural policy. Can you make deliberately aggravating public work, deliberately aggravate your peers and deliberately say no? Orla talked about refusal; in any sort of generally liberal democratic society, is this notion of complete refusal at all possible?

On that idea of agents and agency, it struck me with reference to Critical Access that the enthusiasm displayed by the Arts Council in Dublin may have come from their recognising Critical Access as an opportunity to invest in an educative agency.

Gavin Murphy: I'd like to ask each member of the panel to describe what they think an alternative or oppositional culture might look like, given that the mainstream in the talk here, the Arts Council, seems more than willing to fund the projects that you are talking about?

OR: I think that when the Arts Council start pouring money into artist-run initiatives that's the time to be self-reflexive.

Chris Bailey: Are you saying then that the art has to exist without money?

OR: No, I'm not. I think you can be alternative for particular moments, for particular situations, then the thing disbands or moves on, and that way it can be really effective.

MMcC: It's important to remember that whole point about working in terms of understanding local struggles, certain sites, the notion of contingency; alternative in Warsaw, and alternative in Tokyo, and alternative in Dublin are not the same thing. The notion of an alternative art practice is not about medium, you could even argue it's not about content, it's an understanding of where one is positioned at any given time in terms of the nexus of different forces. I wouldn't push the boat out in terms of Critical Access's activity being alternative, but it was something extra, I don't think we had this banner which we huddled underneath.

VC: Is there a conflict between ideas about being 'pro-active'—the term is thoroughly integrated into arts planning and writing, to be most general about it— and notions of being 'reactive'? Now at the moment maybe there's a third term, 'non-active'. Is the idea of the 'pro-active' one that still has any currency any more? Have we lost sight of the possibility that a reactive practice does perhaps enable you to have a sustainable activity, where you can shift from being one thing to another, to dealing with various groups of various interests? How do you manage a situation where you deal with very official funding bodies or

developers but on the other hand do work that is critical?

Daniel Jewesbury: Can we take it that once you have set yourself up with any degree of permanence you become an institution, is that the qualification of moving into this nebulous thing that is the mainstream, that once you have any permanent kind of funding you are an institution and that there is no differentiation between institutions as such? I'm struck by what Martin just said, about Critical Access existing as an extra thing, it's not necessarily always the case that you are undermining the rigid and authoritarian structures that tower above you, rather you're something supplemental.

MMcC: It's the notion of some multiplicity or multiplication of possibilities rather than 'you're either in or you're not'. Trying to function both as something that was contingent and critical, and at the same time dealing with a funding body, was a task we just couldn't forge. What Val was saying, about the notion of the artist as the honest broker—to suggest that all artists are good people is crap, obviously nobody's saying that, but the idea that an artist would respect another artist is a little more difficult. We did try and do that, in our dealings with artists. We tried in some way to address the issues, the problems, so we saw ourselves as being a mediating layer between artists and other institutions, and we thought we were artist-centred, we believed we understood those terms.

Peter Richards: Catalyst continually applies to funding bodies and it has a permanent base; but the people who run it are in there to facilitate the organisation. You've talked about individuals of Critical Access being prominent figures, and not having a space, whereas in Catalyst the people were important, but not as important as the organisation. So it was continually changing, the attitudes and ideas were shifting, but it had a way of obtaining funding through its reputation...

MMcC: The brand.

PR: Yeah, it's a different type of institution, it's not an alternative, it's different within the same thing, a different approach to the institutional body.

OR: Critical Access, from what I'm hearing, was trying to present a critical response to different subjects. It's interesting that the Arts Council will fund that but if you were presenting an institutional critique, of the structures of power in culture in Irish society, would Critical Access have got funding for a project like that? I doubt it. We can't think about the funding bodies or the spaces we occupy as being neutral.

PR: How interested do you think the Northern Irish Arts Council are in the reports and projects we write up? I don't think they really look too much at what we write. I think they just say, all right, same again, give you the cash they think they can afford, let you get on with it, and then file your reports.

OR: As long as you don't rock the boat.

VC: We've talked about Catalyst being more than just another place to have a show, that there's a discussion, facilitating meeting between artists who are carrying out these functions as well as making their own work. There's the notion of professionalism; is that only permissible in the terms of what's now a recognisable format, the artist-led initiative, that formal kind of structure that the Arts Council would recognise, other artists would recognise.

Dan Shipsides: It has a perceived feel-good factor about artists working with other artists, collaborating, but that moves into your Euro-supercurators, who see themselves as working with the artists, for example Manifesta, that's a kind of mainstream alternative if you like. I don't think it's always a good thing, that

perception of artist-run spaces always being so 'benevolent' to the artist. In Catalyst, you just work as a facilitator, whereas the artist can direct the shots. If the mainstream is pseudo-alternative, Catalyst is like that on a small scale.

Brian McAvera: There's a confusion here about notions of change. Any movement that has traditionally been described as avant-garde has actually changed the way we look at things, it has brought some kind of new process in. That's totally different from the kind of institutional changes that some of you are talking about which is about the betterment of the artist's lot, the way in which the artist can actually effect change in terms of their conditions. If you want to improve artists' conditions, change is a very slow accumulative process, and the only way to do that is through artist organisations. I would suggest, especially to the Northern Irish artists who are here, that the one thing that has kept them firmly under the thumb is the lack of a substantial artist organisation which can actually have real weight. We do not have in Northern Ireland an artists' organisation which has had the clout to go and take on the government. What we had historically, and what I suggest is quite deliberately organised in terms of the various structures which are in place in Northern Ireland, is a fracturing of the artists into ever smaller groups and cliques, and unless that process is reversed you'll never get change.

Brian Hand: I think this is a real problem about making art, about thinking about an audience, about thinking about who's funding you and realising the totally conflictual nature. I wouldn't take the sphere of art-making out of the context of a social, economical, political sphere, they're intermeshed and I think that the kind of abstract idealism of the autonomous transcendent artist is very close to a free marketeer perspective, which is that the market is some sort of regulatory body which doesn't need human agency, that we can only fuck it up if humans get involved, the market can control itself. Any of us who live in this society know it's a complete myth, that the society is more extreme as years go by and nation states continually manipulate markets; there's no such thing as public good. I think we live in a much more at-each-others'-throats environment than most of us recognise, and it should be okay to say that. Talking as a member of Blue Funk, trying to get money from the Arts Council of Ireland was impossible and that's not because we didn't make an effort. I don't think there's an easy linear progression for artists out of this mess. I think we live in a mess and maybe have to recognise the mess.

PR: Maybe I was being a bit crass with what I said about the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. They do give out money but there doesn't seem to be any particular strategy, they don't particularly review what they give the money for. That's what I was suggesting rather than that they just hand out Christmas presents.

BH: The role you are supposed to fill, be it alternative, be it an artist-led initiative, that is a qualitative statement of what you are. I think the quality issue of what the Arts Council give the money for is the most difficult question to ask. How do they measure it, what understanding do they have about quality, is it based on audience? If you put that question to them they just collapse. They have no concept of what the quality issue means.

TD: The situation isn't all down to the problems with the Arts Council, they obviously only receive so much budget per year and part of their major strategy is to support places like the Ormeau Baths Gallery, and the amount of money that takes up leaves a very small amount to be spread between a large amount of groups. What can you do about that?

Eoghan McTigue: One of the reasons why I think we're in a different situation here is because the likes of Catalyst Arts first of all gets most of its money from Belfast City Council and not from the Arts Council, that's a new initiative. The City Council have become a lot more pro-active in funding spaces, projects, organisations. You can go to the City Council and present them with a project, it isn't already going to be valued or assessed under these problematic criteria. I think there's a good relationship between artists and the City Council where they're developing the City and you can find space to work or run projects, it isn't always co-opted by the idea of regeneration. I think if you start continually looking at where you're getting money from you're going to run into a stalemate, where you can't move forward.

VC: Toby, could you tell us a bit about the lobbying process because I think that's another potential. To come together, to start to talk about a lobbying group, really shifts the understanding of the politics of the situation and also makes it very explicit. The Arts Council down in Dublin, as far as I know, still print on their literature that they're resistant and impermeable to lobbying. So you're already disenfranchised from making representations and asking for the accountability that in every other aspect of our lives we're increasingly told to expect.

TD: Your main source of funds are the people you're trying to change; the City Council have been very supportive. The purpose of lobbying is to make a change and then to change the direction that funders might take. I think you've got to accept that and you can't just say that you're becoming mainstream if the things that you're lobbying for actually happen.

BMcA: I believe that artists should lobby, but the general point I'm trying to make is that individual artists lobbying on their own are simply played off against each other. It's no accident the Arts Council continually give a little bit of money to x,y and z because it buys them off. You have a lobbying organisation, the AAI, you have another potential lobby in VAANI. I personally think the two should be linked because it's lunacy on an island this size to have two organisations which are theoretically fighting for the same thing. That organisation, given a proper weight of members, is then in a position to access money that does not come from the Arts Councils.

BH: What's their bargaining power?

BMcA: Their bargaining power is the number of their members who are classed and employed as professional artists.

BH: So they say, sorry we're going to give it to the farmers, to the postmen, they're going on strike tomorrow, you're not. That's the point.

BMcA: You're assuming that one group is automatically played off against the other. What we should pick up is the fact that artists, and culture in general, are amongst the biggest contributors to the economy. There are statistics to this effect, the Arts Council down south actually did a survey, demonstrating that money going to artists and arts organisations created more jobs than any other area.

BH: Where does 'culture' begin and end? You say culture, but what is it? Artists make spaces, they move into parts of the city and within ten years that space will be redeveloped, and there will be people who make millions of pounds and they're not lobbyists, they go around with brown paper bags with money in them that they give to politicians, they ensure that the whole thing is oiled.

Aisling O'Beirn: I think attention is being drawn to it on our side because Temple Bar is marketed as a cultural sector now, and it started off that artists

moved in there because rents and rates were cheaper than any other parts of the centre of Dublin. And now it's a big cultural centre that's used for tourism.

BH: I can understand it as a tourist sector but to understand it as a cultural sector is quite hard. This phrase used today, the 'culture industry', is hilarious in my opinion. This is a phrase that was invented in the 1950s as a totally damning critique of what 'culture' was about, that it was an industry, it was systematised. And yet the Arts Council and Temple Bar Properties came together in 1994 for this big conference called 'The Cultural Industry', and now you'll hear this phrase used all the time. It's a nonsense.

MMcC: Can you set up a superstructure, a representative body like the AAI, which can represent artists in all their diversity, the people who want to work outside of the gallery system?

BMcA: You're missing the point. The job of an organisation like the AAI is not to promote x,y or z, it's to promote all artists and to get them the conditions, the money or what ever.

BH: That 'culture' is totalising and is used to efface the injustices, to efface the glaring conflicts, that becomes more of an area of critique for artists; that culture itself becomes the focus, where other spheres are using culture to mask their own selfish profits, not that 'culture' wraps itself into a ball and then goes off to government.

MMcC: You're quite right, in that there are some artists practitioners who wish to dissipate or dissolve that rigid, reified notion of professionalism that has been proposed, saying let's dispute that concept, let's see culture in the much wider frame, as the stuff of everyday life.

OR: There's this suggestion that all artists have to stick together and support all artists, and I have a problem with that. I don't want to support all artists, there's work that I'd rather wasn't around. In terms of Temple Bar and Laganside, I think that artists in Dublin had access to information about this gentrification process through what happened in SoHo in New York; I don't think we're all so closed off in Ireland that we didn't have access to the political discussions that were going on in New York, so I find it hard to take in Dublin when people say, "We didn't know it was going to turn into this". I'm beginning to see that possibly the same thing is going to happen here and it's very important to think about available knowledges when you're wondering what these development agencies can do for you. What are you actually going to create with it?

TD: The knowledge of the arts which the development organisations have is very little, and the arts groups can actually get in there and make these decisions.

DJ: I'm aware of the comparisons between Belfast and Dublin, but it's worth remembering that Temple Bar Properties owned all the buildings and land and have had millions coming in from Europe from the start, whereas Laganside has an income of around a million pounds a year and isn't a large property owner itself, so there are some not so subtle differences between those developments. Belfast City Council and the Arts Council here just issued a report they commissioned on this issue, written by Maureen Macken, who was formerly involved with the Arts Council. There are certain proposals/ recommendations put forward concerning what the future of this sector is. It's not so much the fact that there are direct comparisons between what happened in Temple Bar and what happens up here, it's that the terminology is being borrowed from Temple Bar in a completely unreflexive way. It's surprising to see that language articulated again here and with such a tenuous basis for it.

BH: Why is that surprising? Who owns this terminology? It's the easiest line of access to the market, it's always the same language, it always follows the quickest course. It's not going to go out of its way to do some massively expensive research; it's always going to find the quickest route.

DJ: I accept that, but I'm surprised that there's not even an attempt to cut it to any kind of cloth. It's a totally borrowed terminology and a totally borrowed methodology in terms of how the area can be developed and how 'culture' will fit into that, bearing in mind the amount of debate that was generated by Temple Bar. Maybe it's not debate that's out in the open, maybe to a large degree it's suppressed or repressed.

TD: Maybe it works in that there's people going into Temple Bar spending money. So that's why it's adopted.

VC: I'd like to recap on the notion of a generational denotation of politics, as some kind of lifetime time-line which goes from young to old, inexperience to experienced.

DJ: I accept absolutely the criticisms Orla makes of that terminology, but I'd add the clause that within the local situation, Belfast, there has always been an idea of a generational division, and a selective amnesia about what existed five years ago. That's potentially a problem with a group that sets itself up as an artist-led space to exist for perpetuity. That selective amnesia is very much here; if we look at the structure of the studios in Belfast, and where Catalyst came from, the idea that Catalyst was the first thing that had happened in Belfast is quite widespread, even amongst people who have worked closely with Catalyst. It's an enormous problem if we're having a debate that someone had 12 years ago.

VC: Is it impossible to suspend disbelief for long enough to take an action that sees itself as a refusal, as outside of the system? Can that kind of moment happen now? Will there ever be such a moment? There are lots of revisits to notions of 1968 currently, where it's represented as some special moment for revolution; whether it was or wasn't, it's reproduced as a tourism of the imagination for everyone that was never there. I'm still coming back to whether you must accept consensus.

BH: There has been progress on one level. To take the term 'the culture industry,' when it was devised by Adorno and Horkheimer it meant the entertainment industry; they valorised avant garde modernist art practice that had never been contaminated by 'culture', they just turned a blind eye and played their end game: Rothko would just never be appropriated. Now we're 50 years on we see this completely turned on its head and I do think this sense of not being innocent anymore is really pervasive. There is no innocent view, people couldn't have been talking about this 30 years ago because so many things have happened, and we can't deny that there are totalising projects that attempt to try and move into our spaces of human freedom.

One of the big things not mentioned here today is the whole audience question. That was a factor that came out of 'Littoral', certainly from Grant Kester's paper. One of the most interesting things he was trying to say was how to make a new paradigm shift within an art practice that moves from an anti-discursive aesthetics to an inter-discursive aesthetics.

MMcC: It suggests in terms of the discussion here that there is a history to be written, which would incorporate the political economy of visual culture, of visual arts in Ireland in the '80s and '90s. It would talk about Temple Bar Properties and the agenda there in terms of the pursuit of urban regeneration. It may also include something of a discourse that we're having here in terms of how artists have been

positioned, at any given moment to accomplish certain ends. Going back to the thing about SoHo and the way artists have been used as the cutting edge of gentrification, it's well documented elsewhere, but maybe now it's happening here we might need a localised version. Something like that might be instructive and useful in how this thing will move forward. There's a dearth of critical writings on these types of formations; it's part and parcel of what we're living through at the moment.

Following this initial platform, Variant is to establish an e-mail forum to further develop the discussion. If you wish to participate in any way contact <variant@ndirect.co.uk>.