Navigating the journey from conflict to interculturalism:
The Arts in Northern Ireland

Report on the 6th Intercultural Practice Exchange

14th – 16th November 2012, Belfast, UK

This event was organised by Platform for Intercultural Europe in collaboration with Arts Council of Northern Ireland
OVERVIEW OF THE EVENT

The Sixth Intercultural Practice Exchange, entitled “Navigating the Journey from Conflict to Interculturalism: The Arts in Northern Ireland” was held between 14-16th November 2012 in Belfast, Northern Ireland, United Kingdom. It was organised by the Platform for Intercultural Europe with its local member, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland.

70 participants, of whom three-quarters were local (as intended) and one quarter drawn from outside Northern Ireland, including PIE members and contacts from Sweden, Spain, Italy, Serbia and Hungary. They enjoyed a three-day programme of presentations, panel discussions and excursions to examples of arts practice and social events. Events commenced on Day One with a supper reception for participants at MacNeice House, the headquarters of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, which provided the opportunity for both a contextualisation of the programme by the co-hosts and networking.

Day Two of the Exchange focused on “The Role of the Arts in Post Conflict Northern Ireland”. An exploration of the social, economic and political impact of the Arts commenced with a welcome by Sabine Frank (Secretary General, Platform for Intercultural Europe) and Roisin McDonough (Chief Executive, Arts Council of Northern Ireland).

Session One comprised of a presentation on the “Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report, Number One” by Dr Paul Nolan (Research Director, Community Relations Council Northern Ireland) and a subsequent discussion moderated by Nick Livingston (Director of Strategic Development, Arts Council of Northern Ireland). The session used a combination of official statistics to highlight the emerging and remaining economic, security and social challenges for peace and community cohesion, 14 years after the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement.
Session Two comprised of a series of presentations moderated by Sabine Frank under the heading: “How the Arts Contribute to Transforming Society in Northern Ireland: Examples from the Digital World and Public Realm”. Nóirín McKinney (Director of Arts Development, Arts Council of Northern Ireland) gave an overview of the content and process of the Arts Council’s “Troubles Archive,” which houses a compendium of cross-disciplinary art works and accompanying essays. Fionnuala Walsh (Head of Community and Participatory Arts, Arts Council of Northern Ireland) introduced the “Reimaging Communities” programme – a partnership between local government, statutory service providers and arms length bodies which provided the opportunity for a number of communities to work with local artists on the replacement of existing and sometimes contentious public art. The process of engagement and production undertaken were explained further by Conor Shields from the Community Arts Partnership and artist Lesley Cherry.

Session Three comprised of a series of excursions under the title “Looking at Transformative Arts Practices”. These included sessions on:

- “Connecting Creativity – Community Arts Practice in Northern Ireland”, with Conor Shields at the Community Arts Partnership;
- “Music and Community Bridging”, with Paul Kane and Dr Suzel Reily at the Oh Yeah Music Centre;
- a session on site specific theatrical works created by the Kabosh Theatre Company in “Theatre Outside Theatres” which also comprised of a short tour of the Peace Wall with Paula Mctetridge and Laurence McKeown;
- as well as a session on “Traditional Songs and Story-Telling within Contemporary Visual Arts Practices,” which showcased the work of Phil Hession at the Lawrence Street Workshops.

A drinks reception and tour of Parliament Buildings, Stormont was hosted that evening.
Day Three of the Practice Exchange was entitled “The Role of the Arts in Promoting Inclusion from an Equality Standpoint”. It commenced with feedback on the previous day’s excursions. By way of feedback on the excursions, Guido Orlandini (Intercultural Communication and Leadership School), Dušica Parezanović (Cultural Centre Rex Belgrade/Trans Europe Halles), Aleksandar Brkic (University of Arts in Belgrade), and Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio (University of Barcelona) each drew on examples of arts projects from within their experiences in other jurisdictions for comparison.

Session Two was a Panel Presentation, “Overview of the Equality Landscape: The reasons behind the introduction of legislation and its impact on arts organisations”. Moderated by Rani Kasapi (Riksteatern Sweden) the session provided three perspectives of the impact of Northern Ireland’s equality legislation. The compliance duties were outlined by Roisin Mallon (Equality Commission Northern Ireland). Dr David Hill (Crescent Arts Centre) provided a chronological example of how a commitment to and compliance with equality of access had been applied in the physical refurbishment, design and programming of a major arts and educational establishment. John Gray, social historian, provided a commentary on the uncertain road Northern Ireland has travelled to achieve robust equality legislation. His key example was Belfast’s Linen Hall Library but he drew on knowledge from a wide range of academic and cultural institutions.
Session Three was again a Panel Presentation, “Local Politicians share their views of the impact of local and regional arts. The Role of the Arts and the Challenges facing Northern Ireland” and moderated by Chris Torch (Intercult, Sweden). There were presentations given by Councillor Máirtín Ó Muilleoir (Sinn Féin), Dominic Bradley MLA (Social Democratic Labour Party), Chris Lyttle MLA (Alliance Party). This was followed by a series of questions and answers. Mike Nesbitt MLA, the leader of the Ulster Unionist party was unable to attend owing to urgent party business. The representative from the Democratic Unionist Party, Councillor Christopher Stalford was also unable to attend.

A conclusion to the events was drawn by Roisín McDonough (Chief Executive of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland).
INSIGHTS GAINED

The Intercultural Practice Exchange was in effect a series of debates on the role of the arts in post-conflict Northern Ireland:

“Breaking away from narrow perspectives and embracing a wider culture.”

The Intercultural Practice Exchange took place in the MAC a newly built city-centre venue. The conference provided an opportunity for practitioners, academics, the community and voluntary sector, statutory service providers and politicians to reflect on the role of the arts in the post-conflict development of Northern Ireland. Local participant Amos Greig embodied the challenge at the heart of the process when he described himself as “someone who came from an enforced narrow perspective ... seeking to break away and embrace a wider culture.” Practitioners from outside Northern Ireland were keen to see how the post conflict situation in Northern Ireland related to the situation in other European places such as the Balkans. Participants from Northern Ireland and abroad were keen to profile their own work and to sow the seeds for new international collaborations.

“Supporting the arts as an act of democracy”

The event was developed jointly by the Platform for Intercultural Europe (PIE) and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI). Roisin McDonough, ACNI’s Chief Executive, acknowledged it as an opportunity to advocate internationally for “the arts to be supported as an act of democracy.” The ACNI/PIE collaboration enabled an exploration of policy and legislative frameworks for equality in Northern Ireland, as well as programmes and projects for arts promotion cast in their context. Showcases for the latter were drawn principally from the portfolio of work supported by ACNI. They were considered in light of practices elsewhere familiar to participants from other jurisdictions.

From reconciling majority communities to recognising the complete spectrum of diversity

The comparative reflections revealed that ‘interculturalism’ – to the extent that it is a policy concept in Northern Ireland, has until recently focused exclusively on addressing the segregation of the two white majority communities - Protestants and Catholics - through intercultural initiatives. Unlike in other European regions, those from minority ethnic and faith communities brought by migration in particular have tended to disappear into a statistical vortex. Their contribution to the arts and to local as well as global interculturalism has tended to be invisible, and in some instances, silenced. Furthermore, the small numbers of hate crimes reported to the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) do not reflect the traumatic impact on minority communities already living in a conflicted society with contested public spaces. Without their voices being heard, in this instance through arts practices, their sense of belonging remains at best ambiguous and
begs the question, posed by Sabine Frank, PIE’s Secretary General, “is it people’s roots, their love of the place they live in, or the contribution they make to society which determines their perceived belonging?”

In responding to legislative and policy imperatives for equality - with good community relations at their core, post-conflict Northern Ireland emerges as a society where the hearts and minds of policy-makers and arts professionals alike are committed to enhancing collaboration and interculturalism in and through the arts. This commitment is crucial for the remaining task of opening up (sometimes still contested) cultural spaces to communities with roots outside the local and of making them more ‘user friendly’ to all members of civic society, while also paying attention to potentially unifying or divisive details such as minority language and landscaping.

The power to set arts agendas and its control

The role of the state and policy-makers in determining the public arts agenda was considered throughout the event. Similarly, there were points made as to how those who are marginalised in communities (whether through age, gender, ethnic or national background) can be consulted or more adequately incorporated in discussions about public art in their communities. There was much discussion about the incorporation of those whose voices are silenced by gate-keeper political activists in the post-conflict environment. Also discussed was the control by and dependence on the state for determining which large-scale artistic show-pieces become representative of public art and art in communities.

The Practice Exchange briefly considered the attempts to ensure authenticity in the performance of social and political subject matter.

A field for more work: grappling with the diversity of diversity

The need for policy makers to guard against essentialising and homogenising communities and to recognise instead multiple ethnicities, allegiances, nationalities and diasporic growth (though often evident in artistic collaborations) was mooted. Likewise, the need was identified for artists as inter-cultural collaborators in communities to engage with a host of factors including gender, age and the environment’s natural and manufactured resources. A conversation was begun about artists’ role as ethical interpreters, as recorders and subverters of authenticity, of tradition and of the ownership of events in the context nation building informed by interculturalism.

CONCLUSIONS

The exchange provided a space to reflect on the transformative practice of artists and arts organisations in relation to conflict and cohesion. Emerging from these explorations came a clear message of the community benefits that the arts can bring in regions and for groups fractured by a number of factors such as inequalities, a lack of connectedness, and where the traumas of the past are being played out in public spaces. From the
interplay between local and international participants there emerged a need and desire for strong political leadership to develop international policy that would explicitly draw on the learning from Northern Ireland. In Northern Ireland, opportunities to create and experience the arts, from within a framework of equality and good relations, provides a democratic voice for those who have previously been silenced within society. This has particular pertinence for other countries emerging from violent conflict and there are lessons to be shared. However, the Northern Ireland example is equally interesting for those states and countries where ethno-political nationalisms and faith-based communities can find their cultural norms at odds with statutory frameworks as a result of changing demographics. The challenge remains for audiences and practitioners alike, in particular for artists working in marginalised communities, who need to find a balance between artistic freedom and pursuing community development objectives. The nature of the representational and abstract messages that the arts can bring provides a rich and fertile opportunity for values of interdependence and integration to be embedded in communities locally and internationally.

ABOUT PIE’S INTERCULTURAL PRACTICE EXCHANGES AS A SERIES

Practice Exchanges for Intercultural Capacity-Building are an activity format of the Platform for Intercultural Europe which is based on the policy paper it elaborated through public consultation in the course of 2007/8: “The Rainbow Paper. Intercultural Dialogue – from Practice to Policy and back”. This document contains four chapters of recommendations, which the Platform for Intercultural Europe put forward at the end of the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008. The Practice Exchanges are designed to address the issues of the Rainbow Paper’s chapter II on building capacity for intercultural dialogue in (civic) organisations. This chapter makes recommendations on reviewing staff compositions and governance structures, serving constituencies, growing intellectual resources and advancing through comparison in a European perspective.

A number of Practice Exchanges have already taken place, each in collaboration with a local member of PIE:

- **In Malmö, southern Sweden on 15/16th July 2009**: This brought together professionals from artistic and cultural organisations from across the Nordic region. It was hosted by the Nordic Forum for Interculture.

- **In Vienna, Austria on 20/21st November 2009**: This brought together representatives from the cultural sector and from minority and migrants’ rights organisations. It was hosted by IG Kultur Österreich.

- **In Rome, Italy on 28/29th May 2010**: This brought together representatives from trade unions and other civil society organisations. It was hosted by the Italian Trade Union Confederation CGIL.

- **In Sidcup, London, UK on 15/16th December 2010**: This brought together theatre practitioners, arts consultants, anti-discrimination activists and academics

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1. See http://www.intercultural-europe.org/site/rainbow/about
to discuss the position of ethnic minorities in the arts in the United Kingdom. It was organised in collaboration with Border Crossings and hosted by the Rose Bruford College of Theatre and Performance.

- **In Ljubljana, Slovenia on 30th November/1st December 2011**: This brought together representatives from media training programmes for young Roma, youth community projects, protagonists in the debate on the building of Ljubljana’s first mosque, and politicians at the time competing in national elections. It was organised in collaboration with Kud Pozitiv and Exodos Ljubljana, and hosted by the Municipality of Ljubljana.

Reports of previous Intercultural Practice Exchanges can be found on PIE’s website: [http://www.intercultural-europe.org/site/taxonomy/bydate/intercultural-practice-exchange](http://www.intercultural-europe.org/site/taxonomy/bydate/intercultural-practice-exchange)

**Basic Concept of Intercultural Practice Exchanges**

The core topic of Practice Exchanges is the intercultural adaptation of civic organisations to growing population diversity, which is a result of migration and/or the existence of indigenous minorities. However, depending on local specificities, intercultural project work, especially if it is conceived as a contribution to systemic change, can also be the subject of Practice Exchanges.

Given the Platform for Intercultural Europe’s political role in the EU cultural policy domain, we are particularly interested in relevant practice in the cultural sector, but especially where collaborations with other sectors are evident.

The concept of Practice Exchanges recognises the urgent need to enable and facilitate dialogue about how different people and groups make sense of their experiences. This concept builds on the principle that intercultural dialogue is a democratic process that requires and enhances participants’ competences for democratic engagement. Furthermore, the Practice Exchanges reflect the obligations and aspirations of the European Union by valuing diversity and by seeking common solutions, which can be also adapted to local situations.