

COMMUNITY ARTS TEN TEXTS TO GET YOU STARTED

by Sandy Fitzgerald

<http://www.bluedrum.ie/SandyFitzgeraldSelects.htm>

In 2002, when I was commissioned to compile and edit a book on community arts in Ireland, one of the main aims was to counteract ‘...the failure of community arts itself to secure its own memory or to articulate and distribute its values and work through dedicated printed texts’. Why this is important is because validation works by building a history of record. One glance at the art section in a bookstore will tell you this. There are several reasons why the record of community arts is so thin, not least the fact that it is a ‘doing’ practice. People are busy making things happen and there is little time for recording and analysing why they happen. But, like the often voiced call by community arts to make the process as important as the product, equally the theory is as important as the practice, when it comes to strengthening the whole sector and its future. The book I edited was published as ‘An Outburst of Frankness’ in 2004 and, while it did stimulate debate, it hasn’t resulted in a flood of companion publications and my impression is that very little has changed with regard to articulating and disseminating the theory behind the practice of community arts.

This brings me onto my current task of presenting 10 community arts PDFs.

What I have tried to do is pinpoint some key influences for practitioners over the past 30 years. The problem is that many refer to books rather than essays and so I have represented the full text with an introduction or reference article. What is also interesting historically is that the early community arts activists were very influenced by, if not committed to, socialism and the development of community arts runs in tandem to working class struggles. In Ireland this was clearly represented by the housing action groups in Dublin in the 1970s and the civil rights campaigns in Northern Ireland. Many of the early community arts initiatives and people emerged from these and similar campaigns.

As we entered the 1990s, the ideological polarisation of left and right had ended and the new dynamics of globalised markets, communications and media and the bellowing of the Celtic Tiger (can a Tiger bellow? Ireland’s certainly did) brought an end to that phase of community arts development. The new phase, since the 1990s and into this century, seems to be even more a practice than what preceded it, as the sector fractured into many different headings and activities. There has been recording and archiving but more to do with what has happened than why. And it is this ‘why’ question that I think is the most important. Even if the person or group are clear and passionate about why they are doing something, this understanding should be articulated and communicated to the wider world because this is how the validation happens. And it is also how the mutual support happens: campaigning and strength happen.

At least this is my view, and as I was asked to present my personal top ten, I wanted to give you my personal reasoning behind my choices.

TEN COMMUNITY ARTS TEXTS

1. THE BEGINNINGS OF COMMUNITY ARTS AND THE IRISH REPUBLIC

(An Outburst Of Frankness: Community Arts In Ireland, A Reader. Published by TASC at New Island, 2004)

I wanted to begin with an overview and this is my essay, as it appears in 'Outburst'. I only include it because I don't know of any other and I would be very glad to hear comments and/or additions to this essay or, indeed, a totally different view of events.

<http://www.bluedrum.ie/documents/HistoryofCommunityArtsinIrelandSandyFitzgerald.pdf>

2. CULTURE AND DEMOCRACY: THE MANIFESTO

(Published by Another Standard/Comedia, 1986)

The Shelton Trust was a UK campaigning group for cultural democracy in the 1980s and was a major influence and a major support for the fledging community arts in Ireland. This manifesto was really like a bolt of lightning at the time that shot through all of the practitioners. It also gives a good indication of how politicalised community arts was back then.

http://www.bluedrum.ie/documents/AnotherStandardManifestoComedia_000.pdf

3. ENGINEERS OF THE IMAGINATION

(Published by Methuen 1983)

This book was a theory and practice handbook by the UK street spectacle company Welfare State International. This book, along with the company itself, was an inspiration for anyone working at the time in the community arts field. Full of practical tips and full-blown construction drawings, it also had an anarchic view of how and where street theatre and street campaigns should happen. The other towering influence from 1968 onwards was Footsbarn, another street company. Both Welfare State and Footsbarn were models and inspirations for many companies in Ireland, including Macnas in Galway and Beat in Belfast.

<http://www.bluedrum.ie/documents/WelfareStateInternational.pdf>

4. JOSEPH BEUYS

(Article published in City Limits magazine UK, 1983)

Although this is a short article, it is more to represent Beuys in some way because of his influence on the development of community arts, education and the Green movement, all from the perspective of an artist. It is hard to underestimate his impact on culture, even to the present day. And he had a long-standing relationship with Ireland.

http://www.bluedrum.ie/documents/ArtforaChangeJosephBeuys_000.pdf

5. ART AND THE ORDINARY

(Published by the Arts Council, 1989)

In 1985, the Arts Council, in partnership with the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, launched a dedicated programme called ACE (Arts Community Education), which was an attempt by the Arts Council, through action research, to define this new practice called community arts. Art and the Ordinary was the final report of ACE and, as it stated in the forward to that report, 'The brief of the Arts Council...is a complex one. Part of that complexity derives from the fact that in recent years the definitions and the practices of the arts have become more diverse due to a range of cultural and social factors'. I have included here the Preface by Ciaran Benson.

http://www.bluedrum.ie/documents/ArtandtheOrdinaryCiaranBenson_000.pdf

6. PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED

(Paulo Freire, Published by Herder and Herder, 1970)

Another of the seminal texts that community activists rallied around, Pedagogy of the Oppressed laid out an alternative to traditional education and looked to creating citizens who would contribute to and participate in the development of society in a creative and equal way. Here I have pulled a text from Wikipedia, as a way of highlighting the book.

http://www.bluedrum.ie/documents/PedagogyoftheOppressedPauloFreire_000.pdf

7. UNCHAINING FROM THE CHARIOT

(Fintan O'Toole's essay for the exhibition catalogue of 'Celebrating Difference', published by City Arts Centre, 1993)

Fintan O'Toole is one of the most incisive of cultural commentators and from the first he understood community arts, seeing that the discussion is not centred on art but on culture. This essay was dealing with the question of discrimination and disability but he opens it out to cultural discrimination in the widest sense, showing that the root of the problem is a particular discriminatory practice that underlines much of society, the result of very deep-rooted causes.

http://www.bluedrum.ie/documents/FintanOTOole_000.pdf

8. RHETORIC AND REALITY

(Essay by Paula Clancy for 'Outburst of Frankness', 2004)

This essay looks at the history and position of community arts in the Irish State's cultural policy. It illuminates the perspective from the other side of the coin and gives an insight into how community arts were and still are a poor relation in the arts world.

<http://www.bluedrum.ie/documents/RhetoricandReality.pdf>

9. PLAYING BOAL

(Published by Routledge, 1994)

Again I have taken the introduction to this book as a way of recognising Augusto Boal and Theatre of the Oppressed (his book of the same name was published in 1979). This approach to theatre spread far and wide and is known as Forum Theatre, was practiced in many community situations in Ireland. Very influential in developing awareness and issued-based drama, Boal's methodology continues to spread throughout the world.

<http://www.bluedrum.ie/documents/PlayingBoal.pdf>

10. NOTES ON A PRACTICE

(Essay published in 'Outburst of Frankness', 2004)

I chose this because it is coming from an artist and demonstrates how lives are holistic and art is a reflection of this. As Joseph Beuys said 'All art is political' and it is, in the sense that no matter what we put out into the world has an affect, whether we like it or not.

<http://www.bluedrum.ie/documents/NotesonaPracticeBrianMaguire.pdf>