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A 100 % Unique Press Conference

The Aesthetics Group:

Mick O'Hara, Elizabeth Matthews, Jeanette Doyle, Colm

Desmond, Connell Vaughan, Cathy O'Carroll*

GradCAM, School of Creative Arts, Dublin Institute of Technology

Professional Curator, Kate Strain

This event was staged at the Dublin Institute of Technology, Grangegorman on the occasion of the European Society for Aesthetics 7th annual conference on Saturday, June 13TH 2015 at 2 pm. It was performed by members of the Aesthetics Group and Kate Strain. The Aesthetics Group would like to thank GradCAM and particularly the Dean of GradCAM, Dr. Noel Fitzpatrick.

CHARACTERS:

MICK, FUNDING CRITERIA

ELIZABETH, ECONOMY

JEANETTE, THE AMATEUR & THE EXTRA

COLM, THE IRISH CONTEXT

CONNELL, AUTONOMY

CATHY, CRITICAL POSITION

KATE, EVENT ORCHESTRATOR

(Also present throughout is a roving professional press photographer.)

A bright room with 40 seats filled with conference delegates facing a long covered table with three empty seats, behind which there is a projected image on a screen of the Aesthetics Group logo [FIGURE 1..

* Email: aestheticseminargroup@gmail.com

On the table are three name plates, bottles of water branded with the logo and stock images of microphones.

*Music begins: Take That "Could it be Magic?"
Music abruptly ends.*



FIGURE 1.

KATE: [from left side aisle, standing beside table]

Hello everyone. You're all very welcome here today – we're delighted to mark the launch of a new text by The Aesthetics Group, the title of which is: TURN TURN TURN: CIVIC INSTRUMENTALISATION AND THE PROMOTION OF AUTONOMY IN CONTEMPORARY ARTS FUNDING. Can you all hear me?

You'll find a copy of the text in your Conference Reader, or 'Book of Abstracts', please feel free to "Return Return Return" to it as many times as you like.

For those of you who have already read the text, we enthusiastically invite your questions and responses, for which we will make time momentarily. This is after all, a press conference. And for those of you who have yet to read the text, we are delighted to present here and now a brief but comprehensive (and illustrated) overview of ALL the ideas, theories, criticisms, arguments, and positions contained within the text. We don't have long, and of course, time is money, so we'll be speedy and concise in our delivery.

So allow me to introduce 'myself'. I'm somewhat of an outsider, or professional mediator in this situation. My name is Kate Strain, and I'm a curator.

The Aesthetics Group invited me to transform their text into a presentation event. That's what today is about. The Group is made up of Michael O'Hara, Jeanette Doyle, Connell Vaughan, Cathy O'Carroll, Colm Desmond, and Elizabeth Matthews. Uniquely, this text has been collectively penned by all six of them. Today, for convenience, three members of the group will 'represent.' And relay to you now the summarised, but none-the-less 'key' points of their findings.

I'll be on hand to field questions and keep time, and do the technical stuff.

So without further ado, I'm delighted to introduce Mick. I mean Michael O'Hara. Mick is just something we call him informally. Mick, ...Michael's going to speak about a major topic of the text, and that's FUNDING CRITERIA.

A panel of Mick, Jeanette and Elizabeth, in this order, enter from the back of the room, they each take a seat behind their corresponding name plate. A series of projected still images controlled by Kate accompany and punctuate what follows.

MICK: Thank you Kate.

[In an earnest tone reads] Specific criteria help to inoculate us from the virus *[the projected image turns to a new slide: FIGURE 2]* of aesthetic judgement that can infect arts funding decisions and arts policy more broadly. They give us a clear head and healthy constitution, an ability to act.

We must be able to assess what an art work is/is not *[new slide: FIGURE 3]*, what an artist is/is not, what an amateur is/is not.

The question of quality is the question of how good something is.

Positive instrumentalising, aesthetic judgement, funding policy is a known unknown – we work in accordance with strict guidelines that will enable the growth of a cohesive, sustainable and culturally 'rich' society.

The question of artistic expression is, as I understand it, one of 'freedom'. The magical quality of an artwork is transformative. *[new slide: FIGURE 4]* It relays something that defies explanation, resists lucid expression remaining somewhat other-

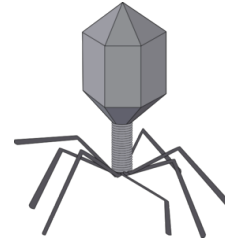


FIGURE 2.



FIGURE 3.



FIGURE 4.

worldly. It cannot be rationalised in the service of an idea. ‘It’ can consume us.

CONNELL: [*Interrupting from audience*] So how do you recognise it?

MICK: [*gesturing to Kate*] Can we have the next slide there please Kate?

KATE: [*moves to next projected image: FIGURE 5*]

MICK: Thank you Kate. [*looking as if this answer’s Connell’s question*]

‘Change’ is a good thing and structural change must start from the top. [*new slide: FIGURE 6*] But we need a policy, a roadmap. [*new slide: FIGURE 7*]

[*becoming visionary – starry eyed*] We need a set of criteria that can enable ‘real’ change. The Arts in Ireland cannot be insulated from such change. Remember great and excellent art triggers change.

These criteria have been tailored for every eventuality promoting debate and conversation – a measure of good democratic decision-making. Remember that criteria can change too.

The promotion of the arts is culturally significant. It connects people but such connection can erode autonomy.

Going forward we must appear to be transparent, fair and above reproach and cannot dwell on the what, the where and who of autonomy and instrumentalisation. We must press on! [*new slide: FIGURE 8*]



FIGURE 5.



FIGURE 6.



FIGURE 7.

CONNELL: [*interrupting from audience again*] Excuse me but I have a question. – I’m thinking about Autonomy... What do you think about -

KATE: [*Interrupting*] No! We must ‘press’ on. Thanks Mick.

We’ll have time for your questions later. Maybe we can go now to Elizabeth, to hear a little more elucidation on the groups position on Funding.

ELIZABETH [*calmly*]:

It is important to look at arts funding in terms of the overall global economic situation, which influences policy making and creates the parameters for funding decisions in all areas, including the arts. [*new slide*: FIGURE 9]

Hence, art like all areas of society can be understood as co-opted by policy makers who, today, view cultural production first and foremost in terms of its economic benefit: how it can serve the purpose of cultural production with an eye to immediate, measurable benefits toward an economic recovery, and how, dollar for dollar, [*new slide*: FIGURE 10] such benefits can be achieved in the most economic terms.

COLM: [*Interrupting from audience*]

Point of information – It’s actually the EURO we use here...

ELIZABETH: [*patiently*]

OK, thank you.

As I was saying: Such is the bottom line when it comes to funding decisions today, theoretically. It must be pointed out: the arts can never be reduced simply to terms of economic impact. [*new slide*] But in the given economic climate, and the direction of overt instrumentalisation



FIGURE 8.

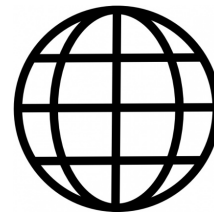


FIGURE 9.



FIGURE 10.

toward which funding decisions have turned, they cannot be entirely removed from such terms, in the Neo-liberal economy.

How the sovereign power ‘permits’ artistic activity to occur, or conversely ‘excludes’ it from the existing structure, by means of implementing selection criteria, has an impact on audiences, on society [new slide]¹ as a whole, and on the range of expression allowed to artists.

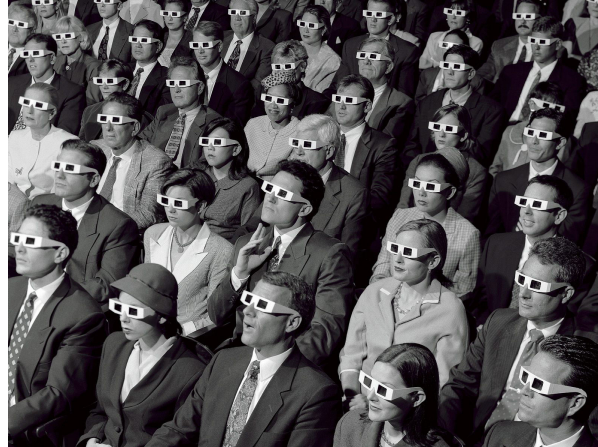
The question remains, will art for art’s sake continue to exist, [new slide]² even as it is excluded by the prevailing social structure?

KATE: Thank you Mick and Elizabeth, we will now hear from Jeanette.
Mick and Elizabeth depart, leaving Jeanette alone centre stage.

JEANETTE: [in a deadpan manner]
EXTRA EXTRA!! Read all about it!

Read all about our position.

1



2



Bloody Amateurs ... [*new slide*]³

Read all about our considerations.

Do you want to be considered?

Do you want a role?

A supporting role.

Unsupported.

Opposite of the real. [*new slide*]⁴

The real thing.

The real original. [*new slide*]⁵

Do you want to play?

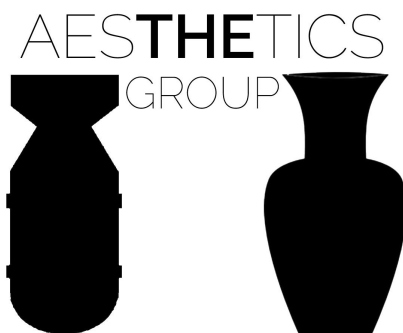
3



4



5



We'll call you into play.

When we need you.

When we need to mobilise you. [*new slide*]⁶

Amat.

To love.

Do you love us?

Can you connect with us?

We who are ambitious.

We who have been validated.

We who have been given permission. [*new slide*]⁷

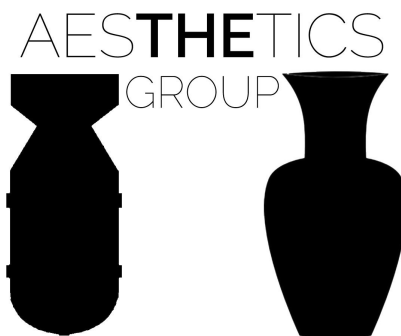
But no payment.

This is validation.

You watch.

You judge.

6



7

The Aesthetics Group

A 100% Unique Press Conference

On our watch. [*new slide*]⁸

Are you an extra?

Or a participant?

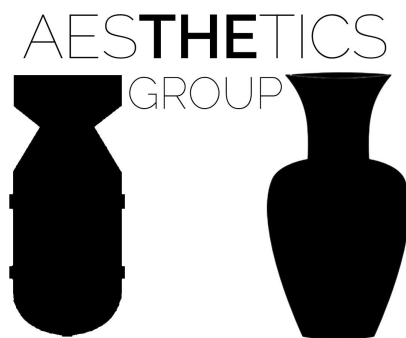
Do you have a voice?

One that we allow.

This is our own.

We own.

Our own intentions.



8



The Aesthetics Group

A 100% Unique Press Conference

You participate.

Perhaps

We are amateurs.

Who have been given permission.

This is our turn.

Magically we transfigure into professionals. *[new slide]*⁹

Who have not been paid.

We profess.

Our profession has been put to purpose.

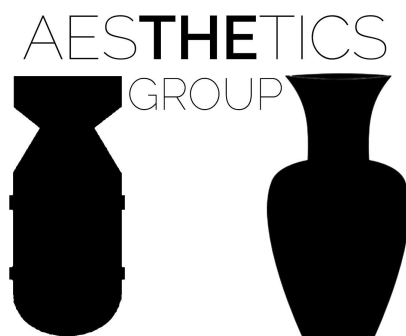
We practice.

Over and over and over again.

Over and out. *[new slide]*¹⁰

Colm and Cathy join Jeanette at the table and turn the nameplates to reveal their names.

9



10

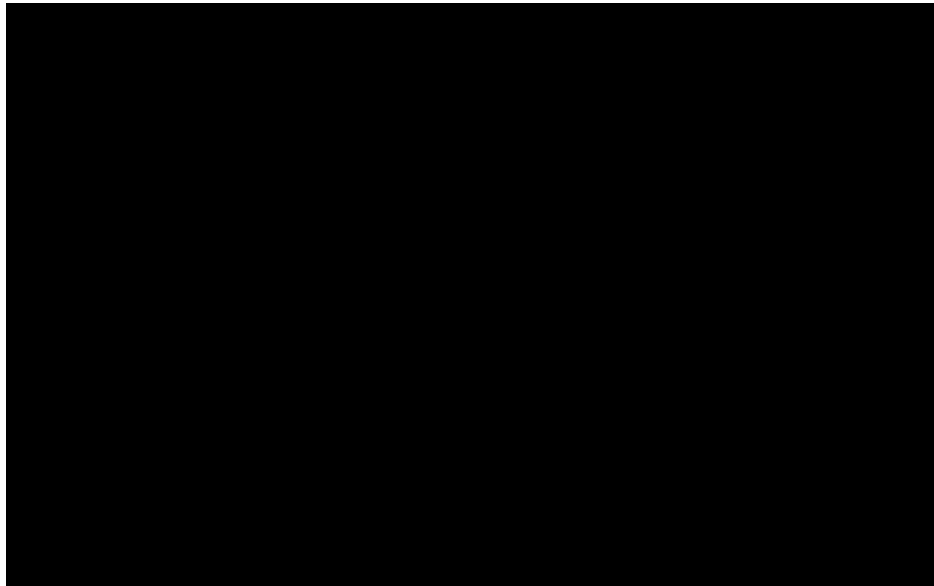
COLM: [*with relaxed authority*]

The elusive National Brand:

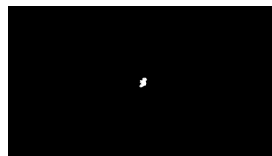
...it's been a long time coming but we have persevered in our search for the National Brand. [*new slide*]¹¹

At the start we were romantically autonomous [*new slide*]¹²... and we were creative. We were free ... but we knew there was a brand out there, somewhere, that we could aim for if only we could find it ...

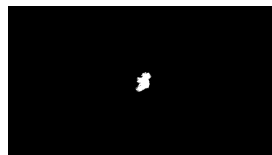
... soon we became publicly engaged ... creatively accessible, ... we realised



11



12



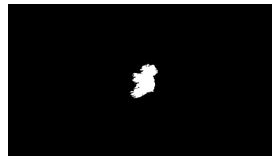
what we should have known all along, that we had an obligation to society if only we could find a way to brand it ... [new slide]¹³

.... then we became more romanticised, but this time we got things in return ... significant patronage from a significant person, tax exemption status (very useful given our high income status), a real part in the national image how visual is that?! [new slide]¹⁴

Now we were truly linked in standing tall, but we still weren't quite sure that our Brand was fully complete.... [new slide]¹⁵

..... next thing, we were ethically and socially responsible we had a clear vision [new slide]¹⁶ perhaps social cohesion could be our brand, since we were representative and participative we should have known ... [new slide]¹⁷

13



14



15



16



17

... then suddenly we were well off, we were über tigers ... [new slide]¹⁸
we had money to create 'work of excellence' ... and there were all these
criteria we could work towards..... [new slide]¹⁹

Now we know that we can play our part on the national stage, [new slide]²⁰
..... we have become the true economic creatives, [new slide]²¹ ... we can
help to secure private investment, and we can be measured against this
.... [new slide]²²

18



19



20



21



22



We may have no resources (a minor matter) ... but we realise that we have achieved a REAL National Brand... [new slide]²³ and we can be so proud of that...it's the real business.....! [new slide]²⁴

CONNELL: *From audience, agitated.*

I'm sorry to interrupt but this is important, I've got three questions...

Question 1, 'Where' does your autonomy derive from? 'Who' permits this?

Question 2, To what use will you put this new 'autonomy'?
[*Thinking of labour*] What 'work' will it do?

And finally, [*thinking of consumption*] how are we to 'read' this text autonomously?

The panel look at each other puzzled.

Silence

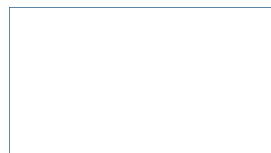
CONNELL: [*exasperated*] Am I going to have to answer these questions myself?

Silence

²³



²⁴



CONNELL: It seems so. [*Turning to Jeanette*] Jeanette, do you mind if I...? [*points to seat*]

Jeanette shrugs and leaves her seat. Connell takes her place, turns the nameplate to reveal his name, changes his eye glasses for a set hitherto hidden on the table.

[*New Slide*] ²⁵

[*Forcefully proclaiming*] First. We can [*coughs*] guarantee quality because we are [*coughs*] autonomous. We are not puppets of institutional instruction. Our autonomy has not been instrumentalised. It is real. [*coughs*] Magic. And most of all our autonomy will never be instrumentalised to sell our work.

[*New Slide*] ²⁶

Second. Henceforth our pharmacological ‘policy’ is to stage and restage new forms of [*coughs*] autonomy. The criteria for such work will derive from self-legislation agreed by majority and in accordance with our existing commitments to international partners.

²⁵ I. We can (not) guarantee quality because we are (not) autonomous. We are (not) puppets of institutional instruction. Our autonomy has (not) been instrumentalised. It is real. (Not) Magic. And most of all our autonomy will (never) be instrumentalised to sell our work.

²⁶

I.

I. We can (not) guarantee quality because we are (not) autonomous. We are (not) puppets of institutional instruction. Our autonomy has (not) been instrumentalised. It is real. (Not) Magic. And most of all our autonomy will (never) be instrumentalised to sell our work.

I.

2. Henceforth our pharmacological *policy* is to stage and restage new forms of (supposed) autonomy. The criteria for such work will derive from self-legislation agreed by majority and in accordance with our existing commitments to international partners.

[*New Slide*] ²⁷

[*With Pride*] Finally. ‘We’ have proven in this paper that autonomy, particularly aesthetic and academic autonomy, is [*coughs*] possible through our excellent and exceptional work. You can [*coughs*] recover autonomy by following the accepted criteria.

Silence.

CATHY stands up, moves around the table and stands facing the audience.

CATHY: At this point I would like to add my voice to the debate. [*a beat*] To speak my truth. [*pause*] I disagree. I did not consent to the terms or structure of this debate, because for me it is lacking a gap [*pause*] a space [*pause*] some critical distance, [*beat*] that would allow each of us, in this room, here and now, to interpret what we see, hear and feel, according to our own experience. [*beat*] Without mediation.

²⁷

I.

I. We can (not) guarantee quality because we are (not) autonomous. We are (not) puppets of institutional instruction. Our autonomy has (not) been instrumentalised. It is real. (Not) Magic. And most of all our autonomy will (never) be instrumentalised to sell our work.

I.

2. Henceforth our pharmacological *policy* is to stage and restage new forms of (supposed) autonomy. The criteria for such work will derive from self-legislation agreed by majority and in accordance with our existing commitments to international partners.

I.

3. We have proven in this paper that autonomy, particularly aesthetic and academic autonomy, is (im) possible through our excellent and exceptional work. You can (not) recover autonomy by following the accepted criteria.

I will therefore now present [*beat*] a gap. [*long pause*]

[*With a pedantic tone*] This, will not ameliorate the situation,
This, will,
End it.

With this Kate passes a piece of paper to Colm indicating that he should pass it on to Cathy. He passes it to Connell who reads it and then hands it to Cathy, who looks surprised.

CATHY: *Reading from paper, puzzled.*

“Please interpret the following according to your own internal criteria, ignoring all further instruction as to how to proceed [*pause, looks back at paper*], thank you.”

The screen displays the logo of the aesthetics group. Colm and Connell join Cathy standing. First Cathy, then Connell, then Colm turn, hands clasped behind their backs, to face this 'flag.'

There is a long uncomfortable pause, a silent 'game of chicken' between performers and audience, which is eventually relieved when Kate restarts the music.

Kate then turns to face the audience, breaking out of character and laughing lightly.

KATE: Thank you for attending this unique press conference. As you might have guessed, at this point, we won't be taking any questions but please feel free to stay and mingle. [*new slide*]²⁸

With this the panel turn, relax and disperse into the audience.

END.

²⁸

