I’m very grateful for the opportunity to speak here, from a perspective within the Arts sector and, specifically, from within Arts and Design education. Hopefully some of the points I will make in what is intended as a framing polemic will set up the more detailed discussions today and tomorrow.

I have believed, throughout my own practice – originally in the gallery/museum sector, here and in the UK, and latterly in education, in the University of Ulster and now in the National College of Art and Design – that it is vitally important for the Arts, in general, and Art and Design in particular, to speak out of its own sector, to speak across boundaries, to speak and be heard in the economy and the society, as well as the culture.

However, I also acknowledge that the right to be heard, which we in the Arts regularly claim, must be accompanied by the responsibility we also have, to build a language – a communication – which is coherent and meaningful in those other sectors, while representing, what we argue is, the value of ours.

So I am interested in dialogue and exchange and the possibilities for reciprocation that come with those processes. I am interested more in the porosity of interculturalism rather than navigating around the silos of multiculturalism or any one dimensional understanding of identities.

While we in this room are interested in mobility, the paradox is that the opportunities for social mobility in these islands across the economic class system seem to be less than they were 40 years ago. Yet, paradoxically, we live in a much more porous and mobile cultural world. So we cannot let one-dimensional economic imperatives alone shut down educational imperatives and limit the potential of people and society.

At the same time we are living in a very anxious world with issues of environmental and energy sustainability accelerating alongside issues of economic un-sustainability. Relieving those anxieties is going to be difficult if we persist in applying received ideas, inherited ways of working and ways of imagining.

We know in Ireland that the economy is being reset and that resetting is going to impact fundamentally on aspects of life, culture and society, including education, in terms of the nature and purpose of education and the expectation around what education should be delivering for society.

I am hoping that the Hunt review of Third Level Education addresses the purpose of education in our society and not just the forms of its delivery. So, the very first question in my view at this time should be “What kind of society do we want”? And only after that, “What kind of economy and what kind of culture will sustain that society”? and then “What kind of educational provision will be necessary to deliver those pillars”? Of course we have to have an economy, but to we have to have a culture as well, because without both we will not have a balanced society. An unbalanced society is on the way to becoming an unstable society.

And if those societal goals ask for an inclusive, transparent and reciprocal, rather than a rhetorical socio/cultural/economic space, then there is a clear role for the Arts imagining the
development and maintenance of such a model. But only if we move away from the idea, which has only relatively recently been embedded in the public mind, that Art and the Arts are somehow decorative and are meant to distract; as if the Arts represent an antidote to reality rather than the means of comprehending and transforming it.

What we call the Arts- telling our stories and making our images- over the longer term of the human project have never been decorative in that sense and are therefore not dispensable. In fact Arts and culture provide a productive arena, for instance, for the negotiation of ethnic/religious/political difference and anxieties, without threat!

I would argue that the peace process in the context of Northern Ireland only became negotiable politically after the issues had been finally articulated culturally and after that discourse had transferred to the body politic. When the underlying issues of identity had been aired and discussed culturally in what I think of as four dimensions!

We know the issues were addressed firstly militarily, secondly economically and thirdly socially, but it was only when artists, writers in particular, generated a language which questioned received thinking about identity, that the politicians were then able to ‘imagine agreement’ [as the loyalist politician, David Irvine, put it] and eventually create the Good Friday agreement, which was, by the way, an innovation because it was the first internationally binding treaty between two sovereign states which was not about territory. It was about mindsets and cultural identities and choice, to be British and/or to be Irish, a co-existence rather than domination.

Several politicians from the North and the Republic who had taken part in the Good Friday negotiations in 1998, acknowledged in a seminar in 2002 that these particular negotiations – there had been several attempts before – worked because they were understood as a cultural process as much as a political process.

This was because a point had been reached in the conflict where the focus moved from the recovery from history of differing unities, which by then were actually no longer on offer, United Kingdom or United Ireland, to a necessary discussion of the possibility of another kind of future based on parity of esteem between communities rather than victory or defeat for one or another community.

And just the imagining of a different kind of future was enough to bring violence to an end, or at least mostly to an end. The absence of that imagining in cultural space, first, - the imagining of agreement – is what makes the conflict in the middle east so intractable, as was perceived to be the case in Northern Ireland in the 1970s.

Now I am not suggesting that the Arts have an exclusive role in this but, in concert with other dimensions of civil society, the sort of alienation and devaluation which comes from the marginalisation which leads to conflict, can be overcome, whether that is on the streets of Derry or Belfast or the suburbs of Paris!

So, if this current resetting has to and is taking place, let’s really reset the basis on which we project and create a future for this society. Let’s think differently and re-imagine; let’s go beyond the received thinking and language of recovery and move to the thinking and the language of ‘invention’.

I believe the period we have now entered is every bit as important and significant for Ireland and, as that period at the end of the 19th century when a narrative of Irish-ness and Ireland
was created in the Arts and transferred to the political sphere. We know it was and is a contested narrative but there is no denying that it had direct impact in reality and nourished a political narrative which allowed for, indeed was grounded in, the participation of those who up to then had no real access to power and were not validated as citizens.

It was this transfer from the Arts/cultural sphere – where people make and do things to add value to the quality of their lives – to the political sphere and on to political action, which led ultimately to the founding of the new Irish state. At that point Arts, Culture and Politics were in reciprocal relationship.

That is definitely not the case today! I believe it is the separation of the political process from the cultural process – from, in effect, a sustainable narrative – that has led and not just in Ireland to the serious disconnect between politics and the public which here is dramatised but not explained by the crisis of the last two years!

The stakes are very high now and I would argue that we are in need of a new narrative, a new multi-dimensional narrative and the Arts/Cultural sector not only has a role in this but those in the sector also have a responsibility to engage as citizens.

A sense of invention rather than simple ideas of recovery must be developed so that the idea of the society serving the economy – which permitted the problems we face to arise – can now be inverted so the economy serves the society in order to revitalise national and transnational narratives.

For me, this requires a refreshed idea of citizenship. What I’m proposing here, therefore, is citizenship as a verb rather than a noun.

The idea of acting as a citizen is not currently foregrounded because we have a rhetorical state alongside a mostly rhetorical culture, i.e. one that does not expect an answer. We are not often invited to act as citizens but the Arts/cultural space is one – maybe the only one remaining to us – where emancipation can be modelled and acted out and then transferred to the socio-political sphere!

It is this potential which makes the Arts/cultural sphere essential and fundamental and which, in my view, justifies public investment in the Arts, in as much as it nourishes a re-imagined wider emancipation.

In Ireland, historically, our concept of nation and our experience of state did not rhyme but collided and, as now, there was no trust. We had the ‘long story’ of the nation and the short story of the state but we could today take the opportunity to renew the state and the role of citizens within it, as we also renew our ideas of nation as an open rather than a closed concept!

So where in Irish terms is the new ‘citizen’s army’ going to come from? I mean a new citizenship in which, as Paul Barry Clarke put it in his book, deep citizenship is ‘concerned with self, others and the world’. A citizenship that is not merely a certification of birth or habitation but an invitation to exercise responsibilities as well as enjoy rights!

It is not likely to emerge from within current political arrangements but I would argue is possible from within the cultural ground of Arts and education!
I am reminded of something which the English philosopher A.C. Grayling talked about at a conference in Dublin organised by the City Arts Centre on reimagining participation in the Arts. He talked about the moment in Greek society when there was a shift from a society which valued the warrior, to a society which valued the civilian, the civil man, the man concerned with society.

First articulated in theatre in the trilogy of plays ‘The Oresteia’ by Aeshylus where the idea of trial by jury, by peers, is also articulated as a transformation from a system of justice based on revenge and vendetta to a system of justice based on law and reason.

We could argue, in Ireland, that we too have come through a similar transformation over decades from revolution to a republic, and more recently, from warrior to civilian and to citizen. But my point is A.C. Grayling’s point that the Arts were invested in that transformation in Ancient Greece and my argument here is that the Arts can now support a similar transformation by investment in a fresh imagining of citizenship, a shift from a vertical, rhetorical, atomised individualism to a horizontal, reciprocal, commonality which embraces the individual but can also be shaped by him or her in relation to ‘self, others and the world’.

The case I am making is about equipping people to participate and it is about the creation of opportunities for people to transform themselves from consumers into participants! The cultural process – which includes the Arts and education re-envisioned as emancipation – should be the provider of vitamins not painkillers in this anxious world.

It should not be about the making of round pegs for round holes or merely the making of new consumers but about the making of new citizens.

Consumerism anyway offers only a quasi citizenship which tends to fragment human society, as if the only value lies in the uniqueness rather than the commonality of an individual’s experience. This has also supplied the dominant model of the creative artist from the late 18th and early 19th centuries right up to the recent past which today is being comprehensively challenged.

We can and do, of course, question such received models within the Arts/educational sectors and maybe also in the socio-political sectors, but these can feel like closed discourses. If we do not speak out of our sectors and in relation to the mass media – where values are formulated and inserted into mass understanding – then the disconnect will continue and we will have citizenship in name only as merely a form of certification.

The way forward from here must be based on a refreshed and remodelled citizenship which is active rather than passive, refreshed by an expanded understanding of a role for the Arts which includes those not already part of the discourse, those not already part of the ‘transaction’, not already part of the ‘deal’. In a way I am arguing for a ‘new deal’.

Let’s not get anxious about the nature of the Arts, the nature of the Artforms. What I am suggesting is a reconnection of the Arts’ aesthetic responsibilities to their ethical responsibilities, not a replacement of one of the other. So much energy evaporates in discussion about the form of the Arts when we should instead think about their purpose. Let’s release our thinking from a trap that the only agency of value is that of the genius producer. Let’s also start thinking about the agency of commonality.
As John Dewey said ‘While the locus of all action is the individual agent, the thoughts and values of that agent are to understood only by situating him or her in the dynamic social context of which he/she is a part’.

Now that we have permission from the Tory party in Britain to talk about society, to say that there is such a thing as society then surely the first question must be what kind of society?, and, in the context of the complete loss of trust between various publics and the institution of the state, what kind of new deal needs to be struck between the individual and the state?, in what kind of space?, and is it on the basis of passive consumer or active citizen?

Again Paul Barry Clarke argues that ‘to act as a citizen, as that is widely understood, is to use that conferred independence in the public domain and orient it towards the common good!’ As opposed to ‘the attainment of life goals as contained within the private domain’, an idea which, as Clarke goes on to argue, has been frequently expressed and re-expressed in the European tradition of thought.

I would characterise that idea of reconnection in society as reciprocal autonomy, and in the Arts as citizen artists operating within a reciprocal field in constant dialogue and negotiation with non-artists.

This reconsideration of the purpose of Art and Design and the increasing focus on social relations and engagement, sustainability and user first design, is a powerful added dynamic in Art and design practice and Art and design education especially at post-graduate and research levels.

In my view, it is more important than ever, therefore, for sectoral and societal reasons, that the vocational is connected to the highest academic levels and that Art and Design in Ireland remains active in the University sector.

This is why the NCAD is negotiating an academic alliance with UCD at the moment and why we are investing in a momentum towards post graduate studies and research by shifting from a four year to a three year undergraduate degree, to move to a 3+2+3 structure in the near future. This simply acknowledge the ways in which education has to become qualitative rather than quantitative, i.e. not based on the ability to acquire and repeat information but more to do with answering the question ‘what will you do with the information you can now so easily access and acquire’?

The internet and mobile technologies are changing how young people think from linear to associative thinking. I would argue that in some discipline areas- governed by received ideas – this poses problems whereas associative or relational thinking has always been part of the offer of Art and design, a viral rather than glacial proposition.

To this end NCAD has always been enthusiastic member of the Erasmus programme with 25% of Third years going on exchange visits each year, with the highest pro rata % update for the programme in Ireland, representing both capacity building and maturation for students and networking for the institution.

If a transfer of this relational thinking can take place from the Arts/cultural sphere to the political sphere in Ancient Greece [from where we have taken our ideas of civil society] – and again in the late 19th century in Ireland [when we imagined a new narrative of Irish-ness] and I
would argue also in the context of the resolution of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, then why not now in this period of crisis.

It is no accident that the idea of citizen and citizenship, i.e. people governed by law and not whim – was articulated first in an Arts setting because what we have come to define as the Arts over the whole human project have always embodied communication, collaboration and participation.

We can’t talk about participation without talking about citizenship and in my view we cannot have a participatory democracy if we do not have a participatory culture. With an invested Arts sector focused on purpose rather than form, the Arts can represent a space of reciprocal transactions i.e. the communication of self of the artist to the ‘other’ of the non-artist. It is important to understand that this does not erase the rhetorical but, where it occurs, situates it and makes it work in a field of reciprocal relations.

This is how museums and galleries, as publicly funded distribution mechanisms, can fulfil their responsibilities as civil institutions to create an inclusive field, even if some artforms are themselves exclusive, but intention is everything.

A useful question to ask in relation to any given action would be ‘is your intention to relate and reciprocate with ‘other’, however defined or is it to disconnect and separate’?

This question is relevant to the issue of dress, informed by religious belief. And I think it is reasonable and necessary to ask this question of individuals and communities especially if we insisting on reciprocal rather than rhetorical processes from government in a democratic state, as well as in culture.

The new deal, represented by the answers to those questions, needs to be no less explicit and no less legible than the desired legibility of qualifications across frontiers.

A new deal also proposes another idea of profit. We, in the Arts, have tended to look askance at the idea of ‘profit’ but here is an interesting thought on this, from the economist Peter Drucker.

There are no more than a couple of dozen companies, worldwide, which are over 120 years old but they all share four characteristics. 1: A conservative attitude to finance, 2: a compassionate management, 3: a human community and, importantly, 4: they make a profit to stay in business, they are not in business to make a profit.

So I want to make clear that in making a case for publicly invested cultural sphere and its role in society, I have no problem with the idea of an invested private sector and no problem with the idea of ‘profit making’. There are many kinds of profit after all, social, community, cultural as well as financial. So, no problem with profit making, but I do have a problem with profit taking. It is not the state’s role to facilitate profit taking. This is trickle down economics by another name and serves the society just a badly as trickle down culture or trickle down education.

Another question to be asked then is what kind of profit is needed to keep this society in business as a sustainable society? And I would answer a fully articulated cultural sphere which nourishes a fully articulated citizenship as well as a functioning economy.
The public investment in these sectors – which under culture, includes education – is simply a guarantee of continuing public value. The reduction or removal of that guarantee of the public investment in culture and education clearly diminishes the society and not just the sector.

We need always to remember that passing on received thinking is not education and we need to challenge the absolutist position that knowledge is fixed and it is simply a matter of pass the parcel or teach to the test.

Education, as a cultural process, i.e. values driven rather than consumer led, is a matter of imagination and invention and in parallel the acquisition of whatever skills are necessary to deliver on that imagining and invention.

If pass the parcel or teach to the test persists it will eventually suffocate the society and we will have no sense of identity, no direction, nothing to offer and no reserves to call upon when crises arise.

Young people have already adapted to new technologies, the internet, and mobile technologies and, as I have said, have moved to associative rather than linear modes of thinking because of constant use of the internet. I am reminded of a British politician who once said ‘when you think of the power of television to educate, aren’t we glad it doesn’t’. So too with the new technologies which are addicted to extending the consumer model of globalisation, yet we should be focusing on its reach and power to educate and emancipate.

To be a citizen is not to have a selfish interest in your future but to take responsibility for realising that future in relation to others and the world. I would argue that is as much if not more an Arts/cultural process as it is an economic or social process.

In order now to create another kind of civil space, a new deal and an active citizenship, we on the supply side have to consider the ‘demand’ side of the equation as well as the supply side. In fact, we have to start with the demand side but a changed and renewed demand side. A way to renew and re-emancipate the demand side is certainly through education but is also through the Arts.