



The Pursuit of Glorious Failure

John Waters



Introduction

The Public and the Arts (2006) study was commissioned by the Arts Council / An Chomairle Ealaíon to provide information on the current behaviour and attitudes of Irish people to the arts.

The study finds that public attitudes to the arts are very positive and that attendance levels are above international norms. Current patterns of attendance, participation and purchase are revealed, as well as private 'consumption' of arts and culture via an increasing range of media. However the study also showed some apparently contradictory findings – the public (as reflected in samples taken by the study) consider the arts to be important, even if they do not personally attend at formal arts events. This has prompted consideration of the many ways in which the arts influence day to day life, albeit sometimes invisibly.

Arising from the study the Arts Council / An Chomairle Ealaíon has asked a range of commentators to give their opinions and perspectives on *The Value of the Arts*. These pamphlets are intended to provoke discussion and to focus attention on the crucial role the arts can and do play in our lives as individuals, as members of diverse communities and as part of our wider society.

The Pursuit of Glorious Failure

There is a device used by landscapers to create a boundary between a landscaped area say, a garden - and the wilderness. I have forgotten what its called, so, in the spirit of the subject, I propose to make a name up. The device takes the form of a wall or a ditch, which becomes invisible from even a short distance, so that, to the casual observer, the landscaped area seems to blur into the wild, as though it were merely reclaimed, and not divided, from it. *Artyfence* seems to me a good name for it.

Art in the modern world is increasingly like an artyfence between the landscaped area of scientific-secular reality and the wilderness of the Mystery. A street, the archetypal locus of scientific-secular reality, represents this idea precisely. Everything is in straight lines. The surfaces are smooth, the corners sharp, the choices straightforward. Right or left? Up or down? If in doubt, consult a signpost, which orders you where to go. The street is an attempt to defy the unpredictability of nature, to conquer the terror of the jungle. Living here, we feel safe, know what to expect. Life is predictable, the dominion of the unexpected considerably reduced. Sure, we like to visit the wilderness from time to time, to look at wild animals and take the fresh air. But soon we have had enough and want to go back to the built-up area. A landscaped garden is an attempt to recreate the street in nature, to capture the essence of the wild without surrendering to its menace.

Art has always had but one purpose: to remind us of what we are, to take us beyond the landscaped, prefabricated reality in which we have chosen to live, and kneel us before the Mystery of our existence. Art speaks to us through the clamour of our social lives, reminding us to look beyond what we *know* to what is implicit in our existence and our natures, to what is wild, untamable and free. Social life, politics, commerce, entertainment, all try to convince us that our reality is knowable, controllable, manageable. Great art, like truthful religion (and they were once one) tells us that this is folly, that beyond our prefabricated, landscaped reality is an infinity of possibility, and that we did not, cannot and will not create one atom beyond what is already there.

This, essentially, is what happens when we read a book we recognise as *original* or see a play that we find ourselves acknowledging as *innovative* or *interesting*. The epithets belong to the language of landscaping but the response belongs to our souls. The artist has taken us beyond the safe, landscaped area and enabled us to recognise ourselves. In the language of landscaping we compare notes, remembering to stay within the codes of the architects. Each of us, in the intimacy of his soul, is touched, moved, changed, but outwardly we speak of intriguing plot devices, innovative chord structures and subtle use of language.

Consider the possibility that everything that touches, moves or changes us does so in the same way. The first time I

heard, on a tiny, tinny transistor radio, T Rex's single *Ride a White Swan*, I did not know what was happening. I had never heard anything like it before: the clarity and sweetness of it, the indecipherability of the words, the coquettish tinge of Marc Bolan's voice, the strange mood interrupted only by the banality of the guitar solo. I was, yes, transported. But to where? T Rex were, as we used to say musically *progressive* and Bolan sexually ambiguous. But the descriptions and the surface appearances were a distraction from the Something Else that was happening. Somehow, in a collision between codes of music as it had been until then, and the infinity of possibility that remained unexplored, there occurred a spark that ignited in my soul as it had in the souls of the singer and musicians who created it. I had the same feeling reading Kafka's *The Trial*, or when I first saw Tom Murphy's *The Gigli Concert*. What do we call this? The element of surprise? Novelty? Talent? Genius? These are the ways in which, latterly, we have come to *understand*, because we will insist on *understanding*.

But all art is abandoned work, failed enterprise. Humility, the admission of defeat in the face of infinity, is behind all great works of art. It is what we see when we are moved by a poem or a painting or a song or a story. We may, delving deep into the language of landscaping, find a different word for it, but this is merely an expression of our superficial need for control in the matter of description. And it can exist in the finest painting or the, yes, humblest pop song.

There is no understanding the unexpected. In approaching the Mystery, the true artist understands that the object of inquiry will recede at a speed exponentially related to the effectiveness of the approach. The more we learn about who we are, the longer our glimpse of what is to be known, the more we understand how futile is our attempt at understanding. Art accepts this but, in accepting it, resolves to continue a search that is ultimately impossible, rather than return to the landscaped area. The fruitfulness of this search resides in its impossibility and what this reveals. In the surprise of the revelation, we glimpse what is unknown, unknowable, but, instead of being downcast by this undeniable failure of capacity and will, are buoyed up. Our very smallness becomes reassuring.

But art, in its modern incarnation, as defined by the phrase *the arts*, seeks, like science and landscaping, to gain control over its subject. We live in a world in which the denial of the absolute realities of existence is so entrenched and determined that artists, too, have been recruited as landscapers to work on an artifice which, instead of opening us up to the reality of the wilderness, cuts us off while maintaining the appearance of connection. The *novel*, which once lived up to its name, is now increasingly about seeking to discover a variation within its own history, as though there were not an infinity of possibilities waiting to baffle us. I go to the theatre to watch a play which, while certainly engaging with the mysterious other, finally allows me to leave the theatre with a mere sense of being *uplifted*.

The reviews next day confirm me in my evasion. Or I hear a song on the radio that causes me to pull over to the hard shoulder and sit wonderstruck for a suspended moment, but yet can continue about my business convinced that the reason I was momentarily slain in my seat has something to do with a clever interlinking of musical traditions. The glimpse is lost. I return to the landscaped area.

I wonder about what we call *the arts*. There is a sense nowadays that *the arts* are something that people need, perhaps in much the same way as they need the odd glass of wine or bar of chocolate. There is a sense, in public discussion, that *the arts* are some kind of added extra to the enjoyment of a civilised lifestyle. At the back of this is a vague hint that what is at stake is something vital, but the only tangible sense of what this *something* might be seems to hover around the concept of civilisation: *the arts* make us better citizens, more civilised and even more interesting.

And this thinking has in turn fostered two dangerous tendencies: one, the tendency towards a public belief that the artist is discrete and elevated from *ordinary* humanity and, two, a politicisation of art which may lead to its destruction. Where once we perhaps legitimately complained about the lack of public investment in the creative life of the nation, we now approach a quite contrary problem in the form of the bureaucracy which sets about the expenditure of public money as though on a moral mission to improve us all. The trouble is that this activity is almost exclusively devoted to creating an artifice, a kind of exotic, colourful

but essentially fraudulent boundary between civilisation and the unknowable, rather than opening one into the other as it was in the beginning. There are many reasons why this is happening. One is that reality is increasingly coming to resemble a newspaper: divided into compartments and departments for easy digestion and comprehension. Here is politics, there business, over there recreation and entertainment. Art is a separate compartment, Mystery another, much smaller one, and our culture is becoming more and more insistent on policing the borders. Another factor is that the secularisation of society has created such a sense of embarrassment about concepts like *mystery*, *infinity* and *the absolute* that artists prefer nowadays to explain themselves in more prosaic terms.

Even if they know what they are doing - indeed especially if they know what they are doing - they prefer not to say. The ideologies of the public realm drive the core impulse of the artist underground. More and more, the artistic community becomes dependent on public monies disbursed not on the basis of need or even inspiration but according to the demands and conventions of landscaping. An artist who blabbed too much about the relationship between art and mystery might find him- or herself sitting lonesome in the wilderness with little or nothing to hold body and soul together.

Art can never become a political imperative because great art always fails and politicians are, by definition, terrified by failure. I have a theory that, sometime in a couple of lifetimes, perhaps around the end of the present century, an

anthropologist will receive a Nobel Prize for a thesis in which she explains that the reason for the collapse of western culture in the early decades of the third millenium will be tricable back to a single-page document known variously as The Treatment, The Outline and The Synopsis. *This document, she will relate, appears to have defined all claims by the early-millennial artist to earn a living. Many artists, indeed, did nothing else, produced no work other than synopses, outlines and treatments, which were studied by bureaucrats appointed specifically because they lacked any experience of creativity. Most of this activity appears to have been wasted, since the artists did not know how to synopsisise their ideas and the bureaucrats knew nothing about art.*

I worry when I hear talk of *public funding of the arts*, not because I do not believe in the necessity for this, but because I wonder if it is not, in its present form, simply a metamorphosed form of censorship. I worry even more when I hear talk of *arts goods and services*, because then I see images of delivery trucks bringing crates of paintings and slim volumes in from the wilderness and wonder how real we can expect this to be.

Great art will only occur if unanticipated and uncontrolled. That is a definition of the endeavour and the very essence of the process. So how can we hope to create great art if we do not simply trust, on the basis of instinct or intelligent speculation, those who are disposed to venture over the boundaries to do whatever their hearts desire? How can we produce great movies, for example, on the basis of a

formula that decides there must be a plot twist on page 17 of the script and a setback on page 70? This is a sure way of producing movies that resemble streets or manicured lawns, telling us what they're going to tell us, then telling us, then telling us what they've told us. Thus, in our lifetimes, has art become indistinguishable from journalism.

The only requirement for the artist is an apprehension of the human situation, which is to say a relationship with his or her own humanity. The artist sees, hears or feels what is real, and reports faithfully the experience, in doing so reassuring us that, as Patrick Kavanagh put it, we are not alone in our loneliness. The essence of the Mystery is within each of us, and the trick for the artist is to find a way of expressing it that will not short-circuit into a conventional wisdom. In mankind, uniquely in the natural world, the mystery of existence becomes capable of expression.

In our essence, we are the question which all art seeks to answer. There is nothing stopping any of us from asking that question aloud, except perhaps fear of what the landscapers might say.

Patrick Kavanagh also used to say that poetry was closer to theology than literature. When writing, he would wait for *the flash*, a sense of something between the words of a poem that came from this other place. His muse, supporter, confidante and brother, Peter Kavanagh, would later describe the process: *The experience, as I see it is really prayer. Patrick believed in the divinity, so what he hoped was to get a flash*

of that beatific vision, that supernatural place. Words are the least important part of it. In a poem, words burn up in a tremendous thread of something unusual.

If the Mystery could be captured in words, it wouldn't be much of a mystery. But words, sounds, movements, can give us glimpses to be going on with. That second-best is all art can ever hope to be, but, oh, what a glorious failure!

John Waters, [April 2007](#)

