

# **Artists co-operatives and their potential to contribute to the development of the visual arts sector in Ireland**

**Noreen Byrne, Bridget Carroll and Michael Ward**  
*Centre for Co-operative Studies, University College Cork, Ireland*  
*www.ucc.ie/ccs*  
*email: n.byrne@ucc.ie*

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## **Abstract**

A number of recent reports point to several issues to be addressed for the future development of the visual arts sector in Ireland. Some of the main issues highlighted are, the need to address artists living in relative poverty, the development of affordable studio space, the improvement of the business skills of artists, the encouragement and facilitation of more innovative work, market development and overall increased self-reliance of the arts community in Ireland. This paper presents a brief theoretical examination of the role of co-operatives within the visual arts sector. Within the context of the above highlighted development issues, the paper examines a number of co-operative galleries and artist-run studios in Ireland. The paper also examines the viability of these artist-run organisations. From this exploratory analysis the paper investigates the potential of co-operatives to contribute to the development of a self-reliant and thriving visual arts sector in Ireland.

# **Artists co-operatives and their potential to contribute to the development of the visual arts sector in Ireland**

**Noreen Byrne, Bridget Carroll and Michael Ward<sup>1</sup>**

## **Introduction**

There has been almost no discussion within the literature of the role or contribution of co-operatives to culture or creative industries, such as the visual arts, music, crafts, traditional arts, publishing and writing and so on. However, it is advocated that for this sector to develop economically viable businesses, it is necessary to develop networks, collaboration or form creative clusters (Rosenfeld, 2004; Hitters & Richards, 2002; DCMS, 1998, Torres, 2002). Therefore, co-operatives as collective organisations very clearly have a role to play. While there has been strong development of co-operatives in agriculture and financial services in Ireland, there has been very little development of co-operatives within the cultural sector. However, we are now getting a number of calls to the Centre for Co-operative Studies from artists wishing to form co-operatives. Thus, we feel that work in this area is both academically and practically relevant. This paper will focus on the visual arts. The paper starts with a brief introduction to the development issues in the visual arts sector, followed by a theoretical discussion of the potential role of co-operatives to this sector. The rest of the paper focuses on the study itself which explores the contribution of artists' co-operatives to the development of the visual arts in Ireland, followed by an exploration of their viability.

## **Visual arts in Ireland – a context**

While, the Arts Council<sup>2</sup> (2002) indicates that the Irish visual arts sector has grown in scale and importance and that its infrastructure has improved, it points out that much stills needs to be done. In recent reports commissioned by the Arts Council (Annabel Jackson Associates, 1998; Everitt, 2000a, 2000b;) a number of artists and arts organisations issues<sup>3</sup> have been highlighted. They are grouped as follows;

- The need to improve the working conditions of artists in terms of income and studio space
- The need to expand the market for visual art and also to develop the business skills of the artists
- The need to facilitate and encourage greater innovation

These issues revolve around two main concerns – the need for greater ‘self-reliance’ and greater ‘innovation’ in the visual arts. As the cultural policy in Ireland, as elsewhere, shifts from one of ‘subsidy to investment’ (Durkan, 1994, Everitt, 2000a), this focus is not surprising. Nor is the Arts Council’s vision for the arts, which is as follows;

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is at an early stage of development and the authors would welcome any comments or suggestions. Our contact emails are; [n.byrne@ucc.ie](mailto:n.byrne@ucc.ie); [b.carroll@ucc.ie](mailto:b.carroll@ucc.ie); [michael.ward@ucc.ie](mailto:michael.ward@ucc.ie).

<sup>2</sup> The Arts Council is an autonomous body established to stimulate public interest in and promote the knowledge, appreciation and practice of the arts. It is the Irish State's principal instrument of arts funding and an advisory body to Government on arts matters.

<sup>3</sup> Many issues also raised with regard to the arts council, government support for the arts and so on. However, our focus here is only on those issues which more directly relate to artists and arts organisations.

*“a creative Ireland, where the arts are dynamic and self-reliant, valued and nourished by society and open for all to make and enjoy”.*

## **Development issues for the visual arts in Ireland**

### ***The need to improve the working conditions of artists in terms of income and studio space***

Income: Artists live in relative poverty (Everitt, 2000a). Artspace Studios in Galway carried out a survey which indicated that 80% of visual artists in the West of Ireland earn less than €3,800 per annum from the sale of artworks. Burns (2005) reports that half of the people who are beneficiaries of the ‘Artists Tax Exemption Scheme’<sup>4</sup> earned less than €10,000 in 2001, with the average being €5,213.

Everitt (2000a) indicates that while individual support is required, it would not be in the public interest for the Arts Council to subsidise the shortfall in artists’ income. He argues that this would detach artists entirely from their public and create a ‘dependency culture’ remote from demand. He highlights the need to move towards greater self-reliance.

Studio space: Within a context of high commercial rents in Irish cities and towns, locating an affordable work studio is becoming very difficult for the artist. According to Art Trail capital funding for studio development is ‘vital for the survival of the visual arts’. Everitt (2000b) indicates that a ‘start-up studio’ system is needed. He suggests that this could be through co-operatives, which provide low cost studios for a specific period of time, so as to enable the artist to become established and develop an individual studio.

### ***Development of the market for art and also the business skills of artists & arts organisations***

Development of the market for art: Everitt (2000a) highlights the need to develop the market for the Irish visual arts both here and abroad. He indicates that the Irish market is very small, due to the small population and the high proportion of artists. Another factor may be that there is not a culture of individual art collecting in Ireland, as in other countries (Cork City Arts Plan, 2000).

Artists’ business skills: Clancy’s study (1994:214) indicates that business skills are weak within the cultural sector. Artists also recognise this weakness and repeatedly look for further training in general business skills, funding proposal writing and technology (Everitt, 2000a; Jackson, 1998, Flanagan, 2005). Artists do not receive such business training through their art degrees. Within an Australian context, Myers (2002:79) quotes a submission from an artist, which highlights this point very well;

*“Art courses generally do not set out to enable their students to make a living on their art...leaving potentially talented and successful students without the basic business knowledge to conduct an art practice”*

And while business skills are crucial, it still is only a support to the actual creative process itself. This leads us on to innovation.

### ***Encouragement of greater innovation***

Everitt (2000a) points out that innovation is not the same as quality, nor is it equivalent to the simple production of new work. He indicates that instead it is experimentation, be that ‘technical or formal and the exploitation of new means of expression’. Some claim that the arts sector ‘suffers an

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<sup>4</sup> This is a special scheme for artists, where they are exempt from tax on any income derived from their art.

artistic deficit' in that the programming of arts organisations favours 'commercial, risk-free works over more innovative pieces' (Heilbrun and Gray, 1993 (cited in Castaner & Compos, 2002:29). Everitt (2000a) recommends that there should be greater encouragement and facilitation of innovation in the visual arts in Ireland.

As these issues revolve around self-reliance and innovation, it could be assumed that a natural point of discussion would be the potential of artists run initiatives as part of the solution. However, in any of the reports mentioned earlier there is only limited and cursory discussion of such initiatives. This paper will focus on the potential of artists' co-operatives to contribute to the development of the visual arts in Ireland.

### **Theoretical note on the justification of increasing the role of co-operatives in the visual arts sector**

Frey & Pommerehne (1990:16) discuss art in terms of private and public production. In this context 'private' being the market or the commercial gallery and 'public' meaning the publicly run and funded organisation such as the public museum and the state-funded arts centres. They point out that art that is produced within the market is often disqualified as being 'commercial' and 'lacking innovation and experimentation'. They say that it is argued that the state must intervene to ensure 'quality and respect for art' and to 'correct market failure', encouraging venues to present unknown artists and shows. However, they point to research which found that commercial and subsidised opera houses were presenting the same shows. They conclude that, if public funds are given to correct market failure, one would expect that heavily subsidized opera houses would refrain from the production of popular classics, which draw larger audience and could therefore be produced with little or no direct subsidisation from the Government. In the same vein, Burnside (2003:45) criticises arts' centres for their tendency to focus their attentions on that 'which entertains and brings in revenue' rather than acting as a correction to market failure. Frey & Pommerehne (1990:59) also indicate that in public arts organisations there can be a degree of wastage, where there is less incentive to earn income from the market.

Within this context, artists' co-operatives would appear to have a role to play. They have attributes both of the private and the public. They therefore avoid the wastage often associated with the public but retain the space for experimental and avant-garde work. Tayler (2005:32) indicates that artist-run centres in Canada are 'often the first to deal with issues that only later become part of the mainstream discourse'. Zanasi et al (2000:E1) writing along similar lines indicate that artist-run centres are the backbone of the 'dissemination and practice of visual arts in Canada'. They refer to them as incubators of discussion, innovation, ideas and action, which are to the 'visual arts what research laboratories are to science'. In the same line of thinking, Myer (2002:203) refers to artist-led organisations as 'radical incubators for the art of the future' and are often 'five to ten years ahead of commercial galleries in terms of style and technique' (Joy, 2000: 91).

In terms of efficiency, Jeffri (1980) highlights the significant achievements of artists' co-operatives with limited resources. Jeffri (1980:86) refers to a group of co-operative galleries clustered on East Tenth Street in New York City. She cites Bard who indicates that during the ten years of its existence 'more than 500 artists and possibly close to 1000 artists exhibited on Tenth Street'.

#### ***The co-op idea***

Briscoe & Ward (2005:10) define a co-operative as follows;

“A co-operative is a self-help business or organisation, owned and democratically controlled by the people who use its services and share in its benefits”

Co-operatives are as much about process as structure. In this vein, Briscoe et al (1982:16) write that “co-operation means people working together for their mutual benefit. By combining their efforts, people gain from one another’s ideas, talents, skills and energies. In this way, they are able to achieve things they could not do as well (or at all) alone”.

### ***The co-op idea and the visual arts***

Artists’ co-ops arose in the 1970’s as a response to artists’ dissatisfaction with public museums and commercial galleries, in terms of access and lack of control over their work. Jeffri (1980:86) indicates that the proliferation of artists’ co-operatives reflected a ‘true community of artists working together both against normal procedures of the commercial gallery and toward greater control of their work’. The self-help ethos is clear in the following quote from a member of a co-operative cited in Jeffri (1980);

*“This co-op gave us a forum; it gave us visibility; it gave us an opportunity to do, as a group, what we would have been unable to do as individuals”*

Sharon [1979:4] highlights that artists managing their own exposure is 'one of the significant changes in the social organisation of art since the middle of the 19th century'. She highlights that co-operative gallery ideology emphasizes the liberation of the ‘artist from the middle person’ and the ‘transformation of art from a commodity to a non-commodity’ or at least has helped to remove the ‘immediate connotations of art as commodity’ (Joy, 2003:165). As pointed out earlier, many have highlighted the contribution of the artists’ co-operative to innovative and avant-garde work.

In 1980, Jeffri estimated that there were approximately sixty-five co-operative galleries in the US. This does not take into account co-operative studios. No recent data on the number of co-operative galleries currently operating in the US could be located for this study. Myer (2002) indicates that there are 85 artist-run organisations in Australia – this includes both galleries and studio-spaces. In Ireland, there are only a small number of co-operatively run galleries but there are a significant number of artist-run studios. However, there are no figures available on the exact number. As Kaple et al (1996) indicate this serious lack of basic statistical data hampers the development of these organisations, as well as research on them.

There appears to be only two detailed studies of artists’ co-operatives, neither of which are recent. Sharon carried out her work in 1979 and Jeffri in 1980. Both raise issues of concern with regard to the viability of artists’ cooperatives. Sharon’s (1979) main concern is that of member motivations and commitment. She raises the likelihood of members using the co-operative as a stepping stone back to the established and commercial galleries, rather than working towards creating an alternative. She believes this fundamentally weakens the co-operative. She also raises concerns about the lack of business skills, financial resources and the lack of a systematic critique of the co-op members work. She concludes that the artists’ co-operative as an organisational form is ‘liable to stay’ but it will not replace the commercial gallery. It will instead operate ‘jointly with the existing commercial system’. Jeffri’s (1980) main concern is that these organisations become institutionalised and take on the characteristics of established galleries and spaces thus ceasing to be

an alternative. She indicates that to remain a true alternative these cooperatives must find a balance between ‘expansion and institutionalization’, on the one hand, and ‘retaining close contact and input from artists’ on the other.

So far in this paper, we have discussed the development issues in the Irish visual arts sector and of the concept of artists’ cooperatives. Arising from this discussion, we suggest two research questions;

#### *Research questions*

1. Do artists’ co-operatives have the potential to contribute to the development of the visual arts in Ireland?
2. Are Irish artists co-ops designing themselves for viability and sustainability?

The next section of the paper will set out how we went about answering these research questions.

### **The study**

Seven artist-run organisations were studied. However, we could only locate one registered as a co-operative – Blue Umbrella Gallery in Listowel, Co. Kerry. Other artist-run organisations were referring to themselves as co-operatives, but were either not yet registered as such or, were incorporated as a limited company. One organisation was registered as a partnership. This caused us some concern, with regard to the viability of carrying out a study on artists’ co-operatives in Ireland. However, on further investigation it could be argued that these artist-run organisations are run as co-operatives, in that they are controlled by their members with a democratic decision-making structure but are not formally registered as co-operatives for a variety of reasons. And in fact we found in the literature that artist-run organisations are referred to as co-operatives, even when they are incorporated as something else. It could be argued that this is a very loose definition of a ‘co-operative’ and maybe a possible abuse of this organisational form. However, the co-operative community including researchers and agencies, have turned a blind eye to co-operative ventures in the cultural sector. So one can hardly blame artist groups when they register as something other than a co-operative. Therefore, we felt that it was appropriate to examine a number of artist-run organisations in Ireland, even if not formally registered as co-operatives.

We hope this will contribute to a greater understanding of these organisations, firstly among arts administration organisations in Ireland, secondly among co-operative researchers, and thirdly to guide us in the production of practical material that will hopefully be of benefit to current and future artist -run organisations. This may encourage more of these organisations to register as co-operatives. In fact one of the organisations studied has indicated that they wish to incorporate as a co-op.

*“the co-operative structure would give the artist something to hold on to – help them to get over their individualism and isolation – something standing outside them as individuals – give expression to the potential that was in the group”*

The seven artist-run organisations studied involved artist-run galleries and artist-run studios. There was also one other organisation, which though it did not provide studio or gallery space, did run group exhibitions. For details of the organisations see Table 1 below;

**Table 1 Details of the organisations studied.**

| Organisations               | Nature            | Location               | No. of years in operation | No. of members | Paid- Staff*   |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|------------------------|---------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| Blue Umbrella Gallery       | Gallery           | Kerry, Rural Town      | <1 year                   | 9              | No             |
| Crow Gallery                | Gallery           | Dublin City            | 1 year                    | 7              | No             |
| Limerick Printmakers        | Studios & Gallery | Limerick City          | 6 years                   | 30             | Yes – P/T Mgt. |
| Leinster Printmakers Studio | Studio            | Kildare, Rural Village | 7 years                   | 38             | No             |
| Cork Artists Collective     | Studio            | Cork City              | 22 years                  | 10             | No             |
| Backwater Artists Group     | Studio            | Cork City              | 16 years                  | 27             | Yes – f/t Mgt. |
| Clones Artists Co-operative | Network           | Monaghan, Rural Town   | 3 years                   | 29             | No             |

\* the board of directors in all of the organisations consists of member-artists.

Key witnesses from each of the organisations were interviewed, these involved the founders in all cases apart from Backwater Artists Group, where the administrator responsible for the day to day management of the organisation was interviewed. The interviews were conducted in the artists gallery/studio spaces<sup>5</sup>, lasted approximately one to two hours and were based on a semi-structured interview schedule.

We were also interested in determining how those who were involved in arts administration in Ireland viewed artist-run studios and galleries. With this aim in mind we issued on-line questionnaires to all of the Arts Officers in each Local Authority in Ireland. We had a 27% return rate. We also issued a survey and carried out a follow-up interview with key personnel in both the Irish and Northern Ireland Arts Councils.

Limitations of the study: this study is not a definitive examination of artist-run organisations in Ireland but rather an exploration of a wide range of issues relevant to these organisations. As there is almost no current research on this type of organisation, we felt it was first necessary to do work of a more exploratory nature. We believe this paper has set a context for further and more detailed research.

## The Study Proper

This section will first examine the chosen artist-run organisations in relation to the development issues highlighted at the beginning of this paper. It will then examine the organisations in terms of their potential viability.

### ***Research Question 1: Do artist-run organisations have the potential to contribute to the development of the visual arts in Ireland?***

This research question will be answered under the following sub-questions;

- a. *Do artist-run organisations have a positive impact on the income of artists and on the provision of studio space?*
- b. *Do artist-run organisations expand the market for art and develop the business skills of their members?*
- c. *Do artist-run organisations encourage and facilitate innovation among their members?*

<sup>5</sup> Except for Clones Artists Co-op which were held off site as this group does not have a designated building as of yet.

**a. *Do artist-run organisations have a positive impact on the income of artists and on the provision of studio space?***

In terms of artists' income, our study did not interview all of the members of the organisations. Therefore, we do not have definitive information on whether or not the income of the artist has increased or decreased due to their involvement in the artist-run organisation. However, we can examine the activities of the organisations and make a judgement on how these would impact on artist income.

Many of the members are emerging artists and thus find it hard to gain exposure in public museums or commercial galleries. Therefore, often the first main public exposure of their work is through the artist-run studio or gallery. Many of the studio spaces run annual group exhibitions. The galleries cater for both solo and group exhibition on an on-going basis and some of the work is sold at these exhibitions. The galleries and one of the studios have also built up a database of buyers – one of the galleries has 1,000 contacts on its database. Studio rental and gallery commission is much more affordable, as it is well below market rates. Before the two printmaking studios formed, artists had to incur the cost of travel to other locations for such facilities. The organisations also offer advice at varying levels from ad-hoc to more formalised as well as support to member artists on applying for funding and completing funding proposals. Thereby they help ensure a greater chance of successfully accessing funding for the member artists.

The majority of the organisations studied provide studio space. Backwater Artists Group provides up to 27 spaces and is one of the larger studio spaces in the country. Sometimes there is an issue with studio space provision in that it can become institutionalised with limited revolvment of space. This reduces accessibility for the emerging artist, an issue in Backwater Artists Group and the Cork Artists Collective. Backwater, however, do provide four of its spaces on a short-term revolving basis to graduates. They are also in the process of reducing the term of their long-term spaces – down from 20 years to 12. This issue of space is of less relevance to the printmaking studios as they are not confined to fixed studio space but rather the intermittent use of equipment.

Artists' co-operatives definitely have the potential to contribute to the working conditions of artist, in terms of helping them to build their income and through the provision of affordable studio space. And of course the networking and support from the communal structure of these organisations is also beneficial to the working conditions of the artist. Possibly, the key issue is to ensure that these spaces remain accessible to emerging artists, and thus have a revolving mechanism, while still balancing the continuity for the stable management of such spaces.

**b. *Do artist-run organisations expand the market for art and develop the business skills of their members?***

As indicated earlier, the market for the visual arts in Ireland is small. Therefore, to expand this market; a greater focus on audience development, more strategic marketing and greater exposure for Irish artists abroad is required.

The printmaking studios are greatly contributing to audience development through their regular public and schools-based workshops. Also, prior to the formation of these printmaking studios, artists had to travel a distance to avail of printmaking equipment. As the studios have attracted both local, national and international artists, these studios have created a local market for such work – one that possibly did not exist prior to their formation. Both the Cork Artists' Collective and Backwater Artists also run open studio days. However, these may not attract the wider public and

may be confined to those who already collect art and are in ‘the know’. These open days are only confined to a few days each year. The galleries, on the other hand have full-opening hours<sup>6</sup>, are visibly located on the street and where it is easy for the public to stroll in. Compared to the commercial galleries, the artist-run galleries are unique in that it is possible to meet the artists and sometimes view them at work. This direct linking between the artist and the public, surely makes a greater and more fundamental contribution to audience development than would be the case in a commercial gallery. This is illustrated by the following quote from a key witness from one of these galleries. She indicates that;

*“ this allows a close relationship to develop between the artist and the public.  
In this situation, the work and the artist become less elitist and more  
accessible”*

This direct link between the artist and the audience also helps to reduce the commodity nature of the art. Thus, perhaps, allowing space for the art to be viewed for its intrinsic worth rather than in investment terms only.

As indicated earlier, some of the studios and galleries have substantial mailing lists, which are used to advertise openings and so on. The printing studios have also developed a ‘friends scheme’ to encourage audience loyalty and sponsorship. However, promotion in the organisations studied tends to be carried out on a very ad-hoc basis, mainly due to lack of a designated budget for P.R. and limited skills in this area. However, one of the printmaking studios, produced a very attractive and professional catalogue for a recent show, with funds sourced from KELT, a LEADER (local development) company. However, on a general level there appears to be very little marketing. The following quote from one of the galleries highlights the ad-hoc nature of their marketing;

*“We have no budget for marketing. We use free media. When we have  
an exhibition opening, we contact the free press and send our press  
releases to the others. It is very much trial and error. We are also a  
link on some websites. However we do need our own website”*

Many of the organisations also take part in international exchanges. This creates international linkages and may also help to promote the work of the member artists to foreign curators and art dealers.

While, the organisations do not directly train their member in business skills, the key witnesses felt that such skills are gained through involvement on the board and through their participation in the operation of the organisation. Also, the founders have gained significant business in the setting up of the organisations. One key witness from the Art Council indicated that artists who have gone through some of the better artist-run organisations can make ‘excellent administrators’ and bring a ‘strong arts-led orientation’ into other organisations.

However, these organisations face a huge burden, in that they are trying to develop their own artistic practice while at the same time running a business, with very little training or support. This lack of support, even just in information terms, is evident the following quote;

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<sup>6</sup> The opening hours for the galleries are excellent – open long hours, including Saturday and one gallery, Sunday also.

*“The local Arts Officer knew of arts-related business training that was running locally, but never bothered to tell us about it”*

With such a lack of basic support, it makes it very difficult for these organisations to succeed, even with the valiant effort and energy the artists put in themselves.

***c. Do artist-run organisations encourage and facilitate innovation among their members?***

It is put forward in the literature that one reason that artist-run galleries are formed is to carry out experimental and innovative art that is not yet accepted by conventional arts spaces such as commercial galleries and public museums. However, the drive to produce new or experimental work did not appear to be the main driving force behind the setting up of the artist-run organisations in this study. The primary force in all cases appeared to be the provision of space. However, once these organisations have secured that space, the production of new and experimental work does appear to be an important part of their remit. The printmaking studios also see it as part of their remit to push the boundaries of printmaking and develop innovative methods with this field. Crow Gallery highlights that their gallery is more open to artists to;

*“develop their own style and not get stuck in one style that sells, as you may be in a traditional gallery”*

In the same vein, one of the Arts Officers highlighted the ‘autonomy to develop own style’ as a strength of the artist-run gallery.

As these artist-run organisations are collective in nature, there is a greater chance that artists will work collaboratively on their art from time to time. All of the longer established organisations studied have completed collaborative art projects. Cork Artists Collective are just finishing a large scale collaborative project which involved international exchanges and is currently embarking on further collaborative work in a new project space they have recently acquired. For this project, they will invite in non-members, so as to move beyond the collective and introduce new perspectives. Limerick Printmakers teamed up with another artists collective in the city and worked on a project called ‘Headlines’, which attracted significant media attention. Leinster Printmakers have also just completed a collaborative project called ‘Where Siva meets Medb’. This project explored links between Celtic and Indian mythology. The other organisations have all produced group exhibitions. The following quote from one of the key witnesses highlights the importance of this type of collaborative work to innovation;

*“Collaborative work is very different to individual work which involves personal reflection. In collaborative work you have to put this to one side and the reflection is outside yourself – usually socio-political, this can be difficult for the artist. But the different type of reflection induced by collaborative work feeds back into your individual work – so your personal work benefits greatly”*

In the same vein, Senge (1990) cites Heisenberg, a scientist who states that many of the theories of the great scientists (Pauli, Einstein, Bohr and others) arose out of collective thinking through the medium of conversations. Bohm (cited in Senge 1990:242) in a similar vein highlights that individual thoughts are a product of collective thinking. He illustrates his point as follows;

*“If collective thinking is an ongoing stream, ‘thoughts’ are like leaves*

*floating on the surface that wash up on the banks. We gather up the leaves, which we experience as 'thoughts'. We misperceive the thoughts as our own, because we fail to see the stream of collective thinking from which they arise."*

Thus, artist-run organisations which facilitate collaborative working, or even just collectively working in a space, should facilitate greater innovation and more experimental work than may be the case, if the artists were working individually and in isolation from each other.

According to Sharon (1979:16), another factor crucial to the development of innovative work is artists engaging in systematic critique of each other's work. All of the organisations studied have an evaluation procedure for new members. Evaluation of existing members work is carried out on a more ad-hoc basis, sometimes inviting in external curators and at other times internally evaluating the work. One Arts Officer pointed out that a weakness of artist-run organisations is that they;

*"lack a clear curatorial policy – policy tends to be driven by members needs rather than audience or art form development needs"*

Returning to our research question - "do artists co-operatives have the potential to contribute to the development of the visual arts in Ireland?"- we believe that the artist-run organisations studied make a very real contribution in the areas of artists income, provision of studio space, audience development and innovation. However, with a stronger curatorial policy, better marketing skills and increased support, these organisations could make a far greater contribution.

### ***Research Question 2: Are artist-run organisations designing themselves for viability and sustainability?***

This research question will be answered under the following sub-questions

- a. *Do the artist-run organisations have a coherent vision for the future?*
- b. *Do the artist-run organisations have a good governance structure?*
- c. *Does membership policy of the artist-run organisations build member commitment?*
- d. *Are artist-run organisations building financial viability?*

#### ***a. Do the artist-run organisations have a coherent vision for the future?***

To investigate the organisational vision, we explored organisational identity and future goals, as viewed by the key witnesses. An important part of organisational identity is that it is distinctive from other organisations in the same sector. In terms of the co-operative gallery this means how it is distinctive from the commercial gallery; does it see itself as an alternative. All of the galleries felt that they could be an alternative to a certain extent, not so much as replacing the commercial gallery but to offer something different. The following quotes highlight this view;

*"I don't think commercial galleries will be replaced by artist-run galleries – not sure it would be a positive thing if they were. The commercial galleries are needed for their skills. Artist-run galleries and commercial galleries perform very different roles"*

*"the co-operative gallery offers an alternative option – a more affordable option"*

However, as our three galleries sell their work, they are very much dependant on the market. Therefore, the question is how does the public view these galleries as an alternative. The galleries highlighted the unique nature of their galleries in that they are artist-run and are more accessible and ‘fairer to the artist’ and ‘closer to the customer’ than the commercial gallery. However, if a stranger strolls into these galleries they may not be aware that these galleries are artist-run. In a world of information overload, such facts need to be clearly communicated, nothing can be assumed. The fact that the galleries are artist-run makes for a competitive advantage. However, if not communicated, this competitive advantage is lost.

The following quote from one of the galleries is an interesting example of the gallery trying to work out its identity and its niche;

*“I feel that the gallery is falling between two stools – we are not an ‘arty crafty’ type of place but not up there with the likes of Graham Knuttel (prestigious gallery) either – somewhere in the middle”.*

This grappling with identity is also evident in a quote from one of the studios;

*“the organisation has been static for the last ten years, we are now going through growing pains, trying to culturally reassess ourselves, what is our identity? There is greater pressure on us now to think collectively and have a clear cohesive identity”*

In terms of goals for the future, the two new organisations stressed ‘staying open’ and ‘survival’ as initial priorities. This is understandable as it takes huge energy and effort for any such organisation to survive in the early stages. One of these recently formed galleries indicated that they were currently writing a ‘3-5 year plan and hoping to expand into another building on the street’. Both of the new galleries indicated that ‘footfall’ is less than they had anticipated. One is considering another location and the other is lobbying for improved signage and other improvements in the street on which they are located. Myer (2002:205) in an Australian study recommends that, local government should offer standardised gallery signage within communities indicating the location of artist-run organisations. This would help increase audiences and would be an acknowledgment of the artist-run organisations by local government.

Therefore in terms of organisational vision, those groups studied, while aware of the need to develop their niche within the art world, are still very much focused on the short-term, in terms of survival.

#### **b. Do the artist-run organisations have a good governance structure?**

In all of our studied organisations only the member-artists sit on the board of directors. Therefore, these organisations are very much artist-led. Some of them rotate their board every two years. In the organisations with smaller memberships, the boards tend to remain more static. In Backwater Artists Group extension of the term of the studio space is tied to whether the member has contributed to the operation of the organisation, including having spent time on the board. Limerick Printmakers are very conscious of involving the wider membership in decision-making. With this in mind, they run regular member meetings. Volunteers run all of the organisations except for two, Limerick Printmakers and Backwater Artists Group, which also have paid administrators. Some of

the organisations indicated that the administrative running of the organisation was a burden. The following quote from a practicing artist who is also a central volunteer in running her organisation highlights this very well;

*“you spend too much time on the operational stuff and not enough on your creative time”*

The surveyed arts officers also pointed to this as a weakness of artist-run organisations. They refer to it as the ‘administrative burden’ and highlight that the ‘focus can shift from making or exhibiting to building maintenance and organisational survival’. In all of the organisations only a small number of the member-artists are involved in the actual operation and running of the organisation. This can lead to burnout for those core individuals. One of the key witnesses from the Arts Councils highlighted that in some of the organisations there is a tendency for ;

*“one or two people to be sucked dry – where their own art practice is neglected and all their time goes to keeping the organisation afloat”*

This key witness from the Arts Council indicated that this can also cause a degree of tension when the founding members neglect their own art in the development of an organisation which facilitates the development of other member’s artistic careers.

However, in overall terms the organisations studied are very aware about the importance of member involvement in decision-making. In those with larger membership, the organisations make great efforts to regularly inform members of board decisions and encourage feedback and input from the general membership. However, in the practical operation of the organisation, this seems to be left to only a few core members. This is summarized well in a quote from one of the studied organisations;

*“Everybody is very engaged with offering ideas for the development of the organisation, but only a small number are interested in the practical running of the organisation”*

This is a problem for all voluntary organisations and is not just particular to artists co-operatives.

***c. Does the membership policy of the artist-run organisations build member commitment?***

The number of members in the studied organisations ranges from 7 to 38. The galleries have the smallest number of members, but in both cases they are very new organisations formed within the last year. In both cases, membership has dropped by 1 to 2 people. This is understandable as in the early stages of formation there is a lot of pressure on the members as well as tensions with regard to how the organisation should develop. However, these galleries have recognized that they need a greater number of members to share running costs, carry the administrative burden and to ensure that the organisation remains fresh. The third gallery also provides printmaking studio space and thus has a significant membership through the studio.

One way of increasing the membership is through associate membership. However, some of the studios indicated that this can be complex for the organisations and, requires significant time to ensure regular communication with associate members through newsletters and so on. However, both of the printmaking studios have associate membership and it appears to work well for them. Associate members have the benefit of using the studio equipment from time to time for a small fee. Therefore, as one of the surveyed Arts Officers pointed out ‘members must see a practical benefit’ in membership of the co-operative, associate or otherwise. The organisations are very aware of meeting the needs of their members and attempt as much as possible to design their services around

member needs and provide a practical benefit.

Another way of increasing the membership is through a revolving system in the studio space, while maintaining the membership of those who move. However, this leads us back to the problem of associate membership. Therefore, while a revolving membership is good for the emerging artist it can make management of the organisation difficult and more unstable.

In all the studied organisations there is an evaluation process for new members. The potential members work is evaluated and how they will fit in with the rest of the group is considered. An obligation of membership is to contribute and volunteer time towards the running of the organisation.

Sharon (1979) highlights member motivation as a key factor for the success or failure of artist-run organisation – in other words, are members only interested in the organisation as a first step in a traditional artist career or are they interested in development of a real alternative. Since we did not interview all members, we can only indirectly access member motivations through the perceptions and views of the key witnesses. Most of the key witnesses highlighted that there were mixed-motivations among the members, where half see the co-op as a first step in a traditional career and half are interested in developing a real alternative to the established art world. However, one key witness from a gallery indicated that the members are ‘not limiting themselves to the co-op gallery’. This may indicate the potential for members to act as ‘free-riders’. One of the surveyed Arts Officers indicated that;

*“visual art is a very insular practice and there is potential for the artists to only feed off the co-op when they need it”.*

One of the key witnesses from the Arts Councils indicated that;

*“visual art by its nature is selfish and less communal in nature, unlike other art forms such as music or drama, co-operative ventures may work better in these areas”.*

In terms of the galleries, member motivation is essential – if the members are constantly looking to the outside established art world there is less chance that the co-operative gallery will develop as a real alternative. Within an Australian context, Myer (2002:204) indicated that artist-run organisations are concerned that they may be regarded more in the nature of ‘stepping stone’ or ‘transitory organisations’, rather than initiatives in their own right. If arts funders view co-operative galleries as just a transitory post to the established art world, then members over time also view them in this way. This hampers their development and true potential.

The organisations are designing themselves for greater member commitment, by rotating board positions, holding member meetings, encouraging voluntary participation and by providing practical benefits to the members. However, this may all be in vain if the established art world continues to view the artists co-operative as just a ‘stepping stone’ to the established galleries, thereby seriously eroding member commitment.

#### **d. Are artist-run organisations building financial viability?**

We will discuss financial viability under two headings, sources of income and quality and security of tenancy of the workspace.

## ***Income/Funding***

**Table 2 Organisations studied and sources of income/funding**

| <b>Organisations</b>        | <b>Age</b> | <b>Start-up funding</b>  | <b>Current income/funding</b>   |
|-----------------------------|------------|--|---|
| Backwater Artists Group     | 16 years   | Local Authority<br>Members own funds<br>Friends & Family         | Arts Council – received €37K in 2004<br>Studio Rental   |
| Cork Artist Collective      | 22 years   | Members own funds  | Arts Council – received €23K in 2004<br>Studio Rental<br>Members sharing of costs                                     |
| Limerick Printmakers        | 6 years    | Local Enterprise Board,<br>Local Authority, Local<br>businessman | Arts Council – received €30K in 2004<br>Membership fees & Gallery commission charge<br>Workshops                      |
| Blue Umbrella               | <1 year    | Members own funds  | Friends Sponsorship Scheme<br>Members sharing of costs<br>Gallery commission charge                                   |
| Crow Gallery                | 1 year     | Members own funds  | Members sharing of costs<br>Gallery commission charge   |
| Leinster Printmaking Studio | 7 years    | Local Enterprise Board,<br>LEADER                                | Has received small once-off project grants from Arts Council, LEADER<br>Membership Fees<br>Friends Sponsorship Scheme |
| Clones Artists Co-op        | 3 years    | Members own funds  | Members share in costs  |

As can be seen from Table 2, the printmaking studios sourced similar start-up funding. Both are aware of each others existence and have some contact. They appear to have learned from each other, highlighting the advantage of encouraging networking between artist-run organisations. Both indicated that their Local Enterprise Boards were very supportive of their ventures. The Arts Council appear to be less supportive in the start-up stages of development. This causes great frustration for the new struggling organisation, trying to get off the ground. The following quotes from our studied organisations further highlights the frustration;

*“We went to the Arts Council, but they told us to go away and become established and then they would consider helping us”*

*“the Arts Council don’t know we exist. There is no communication. I feel that the Arts Council, as well as the other support organisations should be contacting co-ops about things that are going on. For example, we had to approach our local Arts Officer, not the other way around, although she knew of our existence”*

The Arts Council points out that it has very limited resources with a huge demand. This is a dilemma for them, in that it can be difficult to support new organisations which may not last and ignore the more established organisations which will have a better chance of survival. The Arts Council would appear to prefer consolidation of the current spaces rather than the development of new spaces.

In terms of income, three organisations have received regular funding from the Arts Council. Other sources of income are - membership fees, public workshops and studio rental. The printmaking

studios also run a ‘Friends Scheme’<sup>7</sup>. Both studios indicated that they were happy with the success of this scheme and that it did pull in a certain amount of income. As galleries or open studios do not charge an entrance fee, it is difficult to generate income. One of the galleries indicated that they are currently considering the options of setting up a coffee shop or subletting space so as to increase income for the gallery.

### **Workspaces**

In terms of their workspace, all the buildings are of a good standard, particularly the galleries which are attractive and professional spaces. One of the key witnesses from the Arts Councils raised the issue that many of the artist-run spaces tend to be poor in terms of health and safety and disability access. This key witness indicated that this ‘creates difficulties for the Arts Council as a public funder’. While the studied organisations do not all have disability access, they would appear to be satisfactory in terms of health and safety.

A key issue in terms of viability is the security of workspace tenancy. These details on tenancy are presented in the Table 1 below;

**Table 3 Workspace tenancy details of each organisation**

| <b>Organisation</b>         | <b>Landlord</b>              | <b>Tenancy Term</b> | <b>Rent</b>     |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| Backwater Artists Group     | Local Authority              | Long term           | Low             |
| Cork Artist Collective      | Community Group              | Long term           | Low             |
| Limerick Printmakers        | Philanthropic<br>Businessman | Long term           | Low             |
| Blue Umbrella               | Private                      | Short Lease         | Commercial      |
| Crow Gallery                | Private                      | Short Lease         | Commercial      |
| Leinster Printmaking Studio | Community Enterprise Pk      | Short Lease         | Near Commercial |
| Clones Artists Co-operative | Do not have a building       | N/A                 | N/A             |

As can be seen from Table 3, there is diversity in terms of landlords and tenancy term. However, those organisations which have the local authority, the community or a philanthropist as their landlords are more fortunate in that rents are much lower than when the landlord is private.

To answer the research question - *are artist-run organisations designing themselves for viability and sustainability?* - these organisations have to constantly budget, work towards generating income and source funding. The issue of income is the primary concern, thereby leaving less time for issues such as carving out an organisational vision, having good governance structures and membership development policies. However, the majority of the organisations are also making efforts to manage these areas. In the early stages, credit unions contacted each other for advice on issues that arose. These artists co-ops have no such network or source of advice or support. If those early credit union volunteers were as isolated as the artists running these organisations, they would probably have given up. Therefore, we believe that the artist-run organisations in this study are making significant efforts to increase sustainability but that it is difficult.

## **Conclusion & Discussion**

This study highlights to us the valiant nature of these organisations - trying to carve out a place for themselves in a very rigid art world - and all on a tiny budget. These organisations are of great

<sup>7</sup> A sponsorship scheme – where sponsors pay a certain amount every year. In return, they receive a box set of prints and a special discount for any work purchased through the studio/gallery. Social occasions are also organised.

value to the artists in terms of helping them to establish themselves, building their income, providing studio space, building their management and business skills, reducing their isolation and providing the opportunity to develop their own creativity and innovation. While there would appear to be quite a few artist-run organisations operating in Ireland, they gain very little acknowledgement for their contribution to the visual arts. While most people are aware of the larger institutions and the commercial galleries in our cities and town, very few are aware of the artist-run organisations operating in the shadows of the others. This is a shame as the latter may often be where the real pulse of the visual arts may be.

To ensure that these organisations develop themselves onto a sustainable foothold, they need a support infrastructure. And while financial support is required, there are other supports equally as important, such as mentoring; networking between artist-run organisations in a variety of art forms; building resource data on these organisations and greater acknowledgement of their existence and contribution.

In terms of financial resources all of the organisations studied operate on very small budgets – some coming entirely from their own pockets. Therefore greater financial support of these organisations would be welcome and beneficial. As the financial resources of the Arts Council are limited, there is a need to look to other sources for possible funding. Everitt (2000) suggests that the Local Authority should play a bigger role, as the artist-run organisations are contributors to the community. Within an Australian context, Myer (2002) suggests that developers in certain areas should be obliged to give over certain sections of their buildings to artist studios. Possibly a rent allowance scheme for artists renting studio space would also be beneficial and could become part of a Local Authorities strategic urban planning.

In terms of mentoring, many of the studied organisations highlighted that they found it very hard to access information at all stages of development. The following quote from one of the galleries highlights this;

*“We were just shooting in the dark. It would be useful if there was one package for people interesting in setting up an artists’ co-op. It was so difficult to get any kind information – we were just getting information by pure chance. Nobody seems to have the information”*

This is not desirable as there is no coherent source of information available to them. These co-ops have to constantly reinvent the wheel and possibly make the same mistakes as their predecessors.

In terms of networking, many of the organisations said that they felt isolated from other similar organisations and that it would be beneficial if these organisations could have some sort of forum for networking. Jeffri (1980) is in agreement and believes that alternative organisations such as artist-run organisations tend to look to the larger institutions for guidance, when they would learn more from other artist-run organisations across different art forms.

Kaple et al (1996) highlight the almost complete lack of statistical data on artist-run and alternative organisations in the US or even just the number of them that exist. This means that there is very limited information or academic research on these organisations. The co-operative sector, including both researchers and agencies, has almost turned a blind eye to co-operative research within the

cultural sector. The authors of this paper did not find any research from a co-operative perspective, other than case study work from the British Columbia Institute for Co-operative Studies, Canada<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that many artist-run organisations do not register as co-operatives.

In relation to our studied organisations, some wished to register as co-operatives but were informed by their solicitors, accountants and local enterprise boards that they would be better off registering as a limited company as they would have limited liability and would be able to apply for funding. Thereby, implying that if they were registered as a co-operative, neither of these benefits would be available. This is partly the fault of co-operative researchers and the co-operative sector itself. Ireland is not the only place where there seems to be a lack of understanding about co-operatives. Jeffri (1980:90) indicates that the Playwrights' Co-operative were told to change their name to the Playwrights' Group by a lawyer who informed the group that 'the only organisations eligible for the terminology 'co-operative' had to do with farmers'. Such a lack of understanding leads to a shrinking co-operative movement and missed opportunities. Creative industries and cultural clusters is a relatively new area of interest for research and urban policy. And while this would appear to be a natural home for co-operative development, with no co-operative sector involvement co-operatives will probably play a limited role either in creative clusters research, related policy or in practical developments.

Finally, the contribution of artist-run organisations should be given greater acknowledgement. A first step could be an acknowledgement of their existence. These organisations should also be viewed as an important initiative in their own right and not as a transition to something else. This has important implications for the resourcing of these organisations, member commitment and the very viability of the organisation to develop itself as a real alternative within the visual arts sector. We will finish with a quote from Levine (1988:31), writing within a US context;

*“Artist-run organisations should be recognized and appreciated for their contribution since their disappearance would cause a serious deficiency in the resources currently available to developing artists in the US today”*

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<sup>8</sup> These can be accessed through the BCICS website <http://web.uvic.ca/bcics>

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## **Appendix One – Contact details for the Studio/Galleries**

- Backwater Artists Group, Wandsesford Quay, Cork. Tele 021 4961002, email: [bag@iol.ie](mailto:bag@iol.ie); website: [www.iol.ie/~bag](http://www.iol.ie/~bag)
- The Crow Gallery, First Floor, 6 Crow Street, Temple Bar, Dublin 2. Telephone: 086 8126342; Email: [administrator@thecrowgallery.com](mailto:administrator@thecrowgallery.com) Website: [www.thecrowgallery.com](http://www.thecrowgallery.com)
- The Blue Umbrella Gallery, 21 Church Street, Listowel, Co. Kerry Telephone: 087 6110499
- Cork Artists Collective, Library House, Dean St, Cork. Tele: 021 4317445. Website: [www.thecollective.ie](http://www.thecollective.ie)
- Limerick Printmakers, 4 Robert Street, Limerick. Tele: 061 311806; [limprintmakers@eircom.ie](mailto:limprintmakers@eircom.ie); [www.limerickprintmakers.com](http://www.limerickprintmakers.com)
- Leinster Printmakers Studio, Marron's Court, Main Street, Clane, Co. Kildare. Tele: 045 868168

