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# Two Options for Aosdána: Be Reformed or Be Replaced

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# Two options for Aosdána: be reformed or be replaced



**Ian Kilroy**  
**Opinion**

**Aosdána is an outdated elite  
that fails to serve as genuine  
assembly of intellectuals  
feeding in to society at large**

There is an inherent snobbery in prizing the creative artist's work over other, more humble *métiers*. Because artists can focus the powerful light of the imagination, their power is sometimes accompanied by a belief that they are a group apart, a Druid class of seers, a Brahmin caste.

In Irish culture's conception of the artist-seer, this narrative runs deep. It's a powerful archetype employed by artist and politician alike: from Yeats in his Thoor Ballylee to Charles J Haughey, dreaming a new Republic into being on the prow of the *Celtic Mist*.

Aosdána, the elite body of Irish artists, is trapped in this 19th century conception of the artist. It is an understanding rooted in romanticism and preserved in high modernism: both anachronistic lenses through which to view reality.

A self-electing club that holds annual private meetings, Aosdána was set up by Haughey in 1981 as a sort of Académie Française for Ireland. With a membership of 245 – across the disciplines of the visual arts, literature, music, architecture and choreography – it has an annual budget of €2.7 million, the bulk of which goes to supplying an annual stipend of €17,180 to 151 of its impoverished members, whose

income is less than €25,770 a year. Earn just €26,000 a year and you do not qualify.

It is funded by the taxpayer through the Arts Council, and is in receipt of the second-largest grant of any arts body in Ireland. Unlike most corners of Irish life, it has been spared the cuts most have endured since the IMF arrived in 2010. In fact, Aosdána's expenditure appears to have gone up from 2012 to 2013.

The problem is that Aosdána only exists as a body one day each year: at its annual general assembly (this year's meeting is on April 29th). Only half of its membership bother to show up for this one annual commitment and very little comes out of its secret conclave – except, that is, the election of new members. This lack of transparency is difficult to justify in contemporary Irish life.

## Golden circle

And even those new members do not enter art's golden circle through a process of application. They must be proposed by those that know and like them within the ranks of Aosdána. "Non-creative" people are excluded.

It's a self-perpetuating elite – an elite that does not count some of Ireland's finest artists and thinkers in its ranks: writers John Banville and Emma Donoghue, director Garry Hynes, and philosopher Richard Kearney, for example.

Not that these exceptional people have been rejected for membership of Aosdána. They are not members for various reasons: not wanting to be part of the club, for instance, or simply not even being considered to begin with, as they do not fit the limited criterion of membership – that you be a "creative" artist. Aosdána doesn't easily admit younger artists, nor does it reflect the ethnic and cultural diversity of contemporary Ireland.

As Aosdána's Mary O'Donnell recently wrote to this newspaper: "It is not designed to assist people starting out". Rather, membership is a badge of prestige, while for most members, it is welcome financial support in precarious circumstances.



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The whole enterprise is based on the belief that artists are a set apart. Unlike craftspeople, interpretative artists (like actors), or less valued workers, creative artists are somehow different. They are dreamers. They conjure the future. They intercede on our behalf with the great unfathomable mystery of life. They are a priest class or an aristocracy – and an aristocracy does not have to be concerned with things like open, democratic accountability, or the crass mercantile measuring stick of "productivity".

Aosdána doesn't publish, exhibit or perform as a body. It's not available for consultation on matters of public interest, and it rarely offers its view on issues of public importance. If its main function is to distribute funds to struggling artists, then it's simply like another quango, another administrative layer whose function could be solely performed by the Arts Council through grants and bursaries.

Aosdána should be reformed; otherwise it is better replaced. First off, it should be reduced in size. L'Académie Française, on which Aosdána is modelled, has a maximum of 40 members at any time. Aosdána allows up to 250. For a small country, it's hard to justify this number. Ironically, reducing its size would increase the prestige of membership.

Secondly, it should serve as a genuine assembly of intellectuals. It should be a true academy, admitting philosophers, interpretative artists and scientific thinkers, and offer its wisdom, through publication and exhibition, on matters of social, political and cultural concern. This would harness its expertise in a way that is not currently happening.

The Académie Française is charged with publishing a dictionary and acting as a consultative body on the French language. Aosdána is not required to do anything specifically. As a result, it does little.

## Struggling artists

Thirdly, its function as a channel for funding genuinely struggling artists should be absorbed by the Arts Council. The council is already charged with providing stipends and bursaries. Indeed, it's already the Arts Council that distributes this money, but under the aegis of Aosdána.

Finally, it's important that a renewed Aosdána should feed into the political process. Some of its membership should take seats in a reformed Seanad Éireann, bringing to that assembly some of the wisdom that a reflective life engenders.

The romantic cultural nationalism that bore Aosdána is outdated. It isn't that we don't need thinking elites in a democracy, rather it's that intellectual elites should not be above and beyond the rest of society, and should be of some practical help to the society that in turn supports them.

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