



AOSDÁNA

General Assembly 19 April 2013

Afternoon session

Introduction by Theo Dorgan

In 1981, on the initiative of poet and writer Anthony Cronin, the then Taoiseach Charles Haughey announced the establishment of an independent affiliation of artists to be known as *Aosdána*. The name of the organisation comes from the Irish words *Aos* and *Dán*, meaning people of the arts.

At present, membership in *Aosdána* is capped at the figure of 250 artists.

The intention was to establish a body of artists who had, in the judgement of their peers, made a significant contribution to the development of their art form. Although the organisation in many ways resembles the traditional European format of an Academy of the Arts, it differs from this model in a number of significant respects.

The principle of peer election underscores the fact that election to this body is a signal honour to the elected artist — one is nominated by one's fellow artists, one is elected by one's fellow artists. This is, of course, a profound vindication for the elected artist — no honour could mean more to an artist than one conferred by fellow practitioners.

The election process is a two-tier one; nominees must first receive the assent of their particular discipline before going forward to the whole membership where a second and final vote is conducted at the annual General Assembly. There is no limit on the number of times a candidate may be proposed for membership. There is no application process for membership; any two members may put a nominee forward for consideration, at first in writing, and then at the General Assembly by speaking to the nominee's worthiness for membership.

The practice of peer election also guarantees the independence of *Aosdána* — insofar as this process insulates the organisation from external interference of all kinds, including political interference.

Aosdána is further protected from undue or improper pressures being brought to bear on the election process by placing it under the administrative umbrella of

The Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon, the statutory agency for the arts whose autonomy is guaranteed by The Arts Act 2003.

Apart from providing administrative support to Aosdána, the Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon also operates a wide-ranging suite of supports for other individual artists, including bursaries, commission awards, project awards and prizes — as well, of course, as supporting a wide range of arts organisations who, in their chosen fields of operation, also offer to artists the opportunity to make a living as artists. It is worth noting that the large majority of awards made by the Council to individual artists are managed by independent peer panels so that the awarded artist, as well as receiving financial support, has also the professional endorsement of being chosen for a given award by his or her peers.

A member of Aosdána is entitled, under certain circumstances, to a Cnuas, tenable for a period of five years and renewable at the discretion of the Arts Council; the Cnuas is designed to afford the member the opportunity to devote herself or himself full time to the practice of his or her art. In practice, depending on the individual's creative cycle, members tend to avail of the Cnuas as needed, and renounce the Cnuas when earnings permit. In practice, also, it has been observed that the Cnuas often acts to foster an incubation period, whereby the artist by virtue of being free to devote unfettered time to the development of her or his work can reach a position where he or she becomes self-sustaining. The Cnuas goes automatically into suspension when and if, at a given time, the artist's earnings exceed a specified threshold.

Finally, Aosdána members are empowered to elect up to 7 Saoithe, the word meaning wise ones. The Saoithe are considered by the members to be particularly distinguished in the practice of their chosen art form. The honour of Saoi is conferred by the President of Ireland and is held for life.

The Saoithe at present are: Seoirse Bodley, Anthony Cronin, Brian Friel, Seamus Heaney, Patrick Scott and Camille Souter.