

THE IRISH TIMES

As Ireland begins its presidency of the EU the focus might be on the political developments, but we should soon find our attention diverted by the artistic programme that accompanies the six-month term. Almost €4 million is being spent on an ambitious and impressive series of events that aims to celebrate the Irish presidency by highlighting the countries that will join the union on May 1st. There will be concerts, exhibitions, funfairs and interactive art spread across the night sky, as well as the obligatory fireworks. A programme intended to complement the presidency may end up creating the lasting memories of our term.

Ireland's six other presidential stints have been culturally modest affairs. The previous presidency, for instance, was opened by a concert by The Corrs in Meeting House Square, in Temple Bar. This year the ambitions are far grander. Previous presidencies have committed varying amounts to promoting Irish artists at home and in Brussels, for example; now we will both send artists abroad and welcome to Ireland artists from accession countries.

"It came about because the Taoiseach was particularly anxious that we would welcome the new countries in an appropriate manner," says John O'Donoghue, the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism.

The host towns

- Bray, Co Wicklow, will host Cyprus**
- Cork will host Slovakia**
- Drogheda, Co Louth, will host Latvia**
- Galway will host Estonia**
- Kilkenny will host Lithuania**
- Killarney, Co Kerry, will host Czech Republic**
- Limerick will host Slovenia**
- Letterkenny, Co Donegal, will host Poland**
- Sligo will host Hungary**
- Waterford will host Malta**

"He asked us to bring forward proposals for a programme of events and activities that would help forge new friendships and connections. It was felt that it was important to promote Irish arts abroad and to celebrate the cultural diversity abroad in our own unique way. If we stuck with politics it would be a very boring celebration and presidency and welcome for the accession countries."

It's also about getting a wider message across to the new member states. "We have found, when talking to these countries, that they feel they have a challenge in maintaining their languages and arts, of holding on to their cultures. Ministers from these countries have stated again and again that it's a worry. But they have had to hold on through more trying and difficult circumstances than now, and what could not be defeated by guns or bombs is not going to be defeated by this."

"It's often forgotten that these countries look to us as an example of what can be achieved. It reassures their populations that it is possible to preserve their identity within a large economic union. And by expressing ours it gives credence to that argument that it is possible, even after 31 years of membership of the EU, to preserve our identity."

The main events at home will occur around the accession date, with the first event beginning the previous week. While Europe looks towards Dublin Castle, Dubliners will be looking to the

sky as the Mexican artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer brings his *Vectorial Elevation* event to the city for two weeks. Described as the world's largest interactive artwork, it consists of 18 searchlights pointing skywards, their beams visible from 10 miles away. The public will choreograph the lights by creating designs on a website; the site will also use four webcams to relay and record the spectacle of each design's 12-second life. When *Vectorial Elevation* was brought to Vitoria, in Spain, in 2002 the website received 3.1 million hits.

On April 30th Dublin will be treated to a large fireworks display to mark the arrival of midnight across the EU's three time zones. The next day has been christened Day of Welcomes, and 10 Irish towns will each host an accession country, having created an event to welcome it (see panel). The Department was keen to involve towns around Ireland, not just Dublin. "The host-towns idea, of course, had been so successful in the Special Olympics, so it appeared to be the right way forward." Each town has received €50,000, which it must match. "We wanted to showcase the entire country to the accession countries and the world, to show that this is what the new Ireland is about and not just about the capital."

Dublin will host a Fair Day, at which all 25 existing members of the EU will be represented by stands. It is seen as mirroring the tradition of the fair as a place to welcome arrivals to a town and to learn about them. The day will culminate in a rock concert in the centre of the city, although details are yet to be confirmed.

St Patrick's Festival, the organisation that has run Dublin's official St Patrick's Day events since 1996, will manage Day of Welcomes and *Vectorial Elevation*. Having broadened its scope to the regions in recent years, it will also manage the input of the 10 towns. "It's important to remember that the Irish have a reputation for being the best at throwing a party," says O'Donoghue, "so it was important that we had the best administration expertise available."

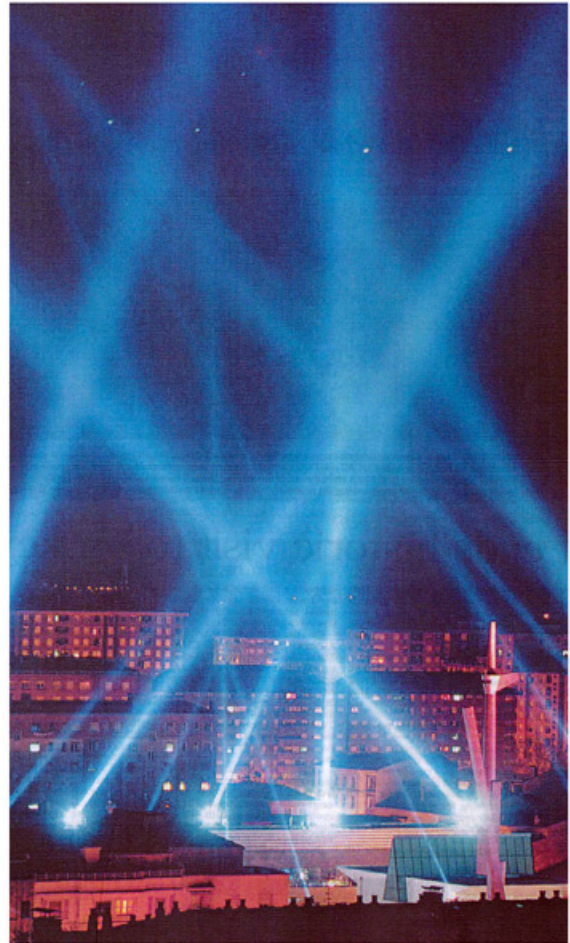
The visits from accession-country artists will be a key element of the presidency. The Abbey Theatre, for example, will feature Polish, Hungarian and Slovenian companies. Dublin International Film Festival will screen films from the countries and West Cork Chamber Music Festival will include a visit by the Vilnius String Quartet. The Department's tactic has been to work with festivals and other organisations rather than arrange all of the events itself, encouraging co-operation and then giving assistance.

It has adopted the same philosophy with the artists who will represent Ireland abroad during the presidency, first [...]



Ireland's presidency of the EU is accompanied by arts events that might produce a memorable six months, writes **Shane Hegarty**

How Europe could light up the country



Reach for the sky: the artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer lit up the Spanish city of Vitoria, above; this year his work will illuminate Dublin. Photograph: David Quintas