

# Derry on its Hobby Horse

Colin Darke, March 2003

Derry's artists got together with some friends on 7th March to make some art together. We collaborated to make a large sculpture from art publications and carried out a performance piece which referred with a touch of irony to Anthony Gormley's "Field for the British Isles".

Not the best art any of us has ever made, certainly, but we were still delighted with our efforts.

The work was part of a day-long protest against the closure of Derry's Orchard Gallery, organised by a group of artists living and working in the city. We had just three weeks previously formed ourselves into a campaign group, calling ourselves Derry's Artists for Derry's Art (DADA) and this was our first public act, having previously written a letter of protest to Derry City Council, with a couple of copies to the Arts Council of Northern Ireland.

(Funny how a name can determine behaviour—when discussing the form that the protest should take, we found ourselves arguing whether we were being sufficiently DADAesque in our thinking. This approach to deciding on stunts designed to attract the media is in itself, of course, very unDADA; Tzara said in his *Dada Manifesto, 1918*, "The magic of a word—DADA—which for journalists has opened the door to an unforeseen world, has for us not the slightest importance.")

After more than twenty-four years as the central focus for contemporary art in the city, the Orchard Gallery has become the victim of short-sighted bureaucratic philistinism. The gallery's doors close at the end of the financial year and from April Derry will be a city with just one gallery—the Context, sited at the Playhouse Arts Centre. The Orchard will be replaced by the "Orchard Agency", aiming to find alternative venues for exhibiting work, along with commissioning public art works around the city. A fine idea, and one which we of course support. We always have supported this initiative, as the Orchard has included this approach almost since its inception in October 1978. Dressing up an old and up-and-running idea as something new and innovative is an old political trick, and it's more than a little insulting to think that we might fall for it.

The Council published a 'Draft Cultural Strategy' last year, written by the Orchard's first director Declan McGonagle (who has also run London's ICA and Dublin's IMMA). McGonagle had previously produced another report for the

Council, relating specifically to the future of the Orchard and outlining proposals for the development of contemporary art in the city. The second report acted as the basis for a consultation period, with public meetings held around Derry to discuss the proposed strategy.

As is so often the case with such initiatives, the consultation process was poorly publicised, and few of us were even aware that it was taking place. The Orchard's administration are claiming that artists simply did not bother to involve themselves with the consultation process; yet the gallery, which holds all of our names and addresses of in its mailing list, never thought to canvas our opinions directly on the proposals made in the Draft Cultural Strategy. Even if we had taken part, the information contained in the second report was inadequate for any real discussion, as its visual art element always referred, quite naturally, to the first report. This would, of course, be fine, if this document were available.

Not so. Requests for copies of the original document, outlining plans for the Orchard and the proposed expansion of visual art provision, were met with the response that it was 'not in the public domain'. Having commissioned a proposal for a cultural strategy from someone with artistic development and integrity as the basis of his thinking, the City Council has removed these qualities, in the interests of political and financial expediency.

At the time of writing, this report remains invisible, but we shall be receiving our copy soon. We do know that it includes proposals for the Orchard Agency, a new Orchard Gallery and a Derry Biennale. What we are getting is the first—the cheapest and least innovative—and with no information on what it will contain or how it is to be organised.

Derry City Council has behaved abysmally here. It has removed an institution which has made an enormous contribution to the artistic identity of Ireland, it has distorted Declan McGonagle's efforts at developing the arts in Derry and it has alienated the city's art community from its visual art programme.