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Array collective (2021 Turner prize winners): in conversation

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Jane Morrow (born Derry, Northern Ireland, 1983) is a visual art curator, writer, PhD researcher, educator, and advocate now based in Belfast. She is an independent visual art curator and PhD researcher with a specialism in artist and organisational development. Jane is interested in infrastructure for artists, working across network and production contexts, and through creating formal and informal developmental platforms for practitioners. Resourcing, nurturing, and profiling others' practices has been a longstanding facet of her approach. Her practice-led PhD research focuses on the precarity of artists' studios and workspaces; labour and practice, collective and co-operative models, and permanence and peripateticism. She has held numerous strategic, programming, and fundraising roles for galleries, initiatives and individuals around the UK and Ireland, and also develops independent and collaborative projects. Her writing is regularly commissioned by arts press and featured in peer-reviewed journals. Jane also occasionally teaches on undergraduate courses at Belfast School of Art, and on the postgraduate course in Arts Management at Queen's University.

Array Collective are a group of individual artists rooted in Belfast, who join together to create collaborative actions in response to the socio-political issues affecting Northern Ireland. In December 2021, they won the Turner Prize, an annual award made to artists born, living, or working in the UK, for an outstanding exhibition or public presentation of their work anywhere in the world in the previous year. In 2021, and for the first time, the Turner Prize shortlist¹ consisted entirely of artist collectives, representative of the solidarity and community demonstrated by artists in response to the pandemic. Array Collective are the first winners from Northern Ireland.

This conversation took place in Belfast on 14 September 2022.

Introduction

JANE MORROW (JM): You are all individual artists who contribute to Array Collective and you are also researchers. Can you tell me a little about your specific fields of research and how they manifest in your own practices and as part of Array's work?

LAURA O'CONNOR (LO'C): I'm interested in performative femininity, and the narratives around how women should behave in society and in the media. My PhD research

focused on how art practice can infiltrate social media and enable a level of subversiveness online, where I used technology and live performance to play around with audience and experience. In recent years, I've been more specifically looking at the treatment of women in Ireland whose bodies are controlled by the state – how women's medical data is stored, tracked, and used – and drawing on my own body data to create sculptural and video pieces. That extends into one of my main roles in Array Collective, which is around creating the films and performing to camera, as well as influencing the theoretical direction around the treatment of women in Ireland under state and church control.

EMMA CAMPBELL (EC): I've been involved – as an artist and an activist – in the abortion rights movement in Ireland since around 2010. My research focus is on art activism and how it can be effective or affecting. My practice is mostly photographic, with a little bit of performance, and some public interventions. I'm trying to address what [renowned feminist scholar] Rosalind Pollack Petchesky identified as a gap in visual knowledge and visual spheres in terms of pro-choice imagery, and how we might counter the negative and dangerous depictions of foetal imagery on the pro-life side. It's also about my interest in collective practice because of my activism work, and because a lot of my research has focused on photography collectives. All three of us contribute quite heavily to the admin and organisation of Array, but my theoretical contributions bring in activism directly to the practice of the collective, as well as through highlighting how important art is to movements and how activist communities need artists.

ALESSIA CARGNELLI (AC): My research focuses on different types of feminist-informed methodologies, particularly in the context of artists' collectives across different places and times. Within my current PhD research, I'm looking at artists' collectives that were active in the late eighties and early nineties that were mostly women-led and self-organised. They were established to resist the social and political situations at the time, the institutions and predominant culture and stereotypes. I suppose my work in Array – and as an artist living in the city – is a response to issues that affect me and my peers. My practice allows me to experiment in ways that I might not be able to through my research, connecting different places and times, and slogans in my native language with like-minded movements in Ireland from the sixties or the seventies.

Paying artists and studio subsidies

JM: To set the scene, my first questions are around studio subsidies and pay for artists. In Northern Ireland, we don't have a specific "paying artists" policy; until March 2022, there was no mention of paying artists in Arts Council policy at all. A crisis within the studio sector has also emerged, through a lack of recognition, value and ongoing disinvestment within the arts infrastructure. Why do you think that is?

EC: I think it's a general trend in the UK, Ireland, and Western Europe, but particularly in the North of Ireland. There is a tendency to focus only on issues which are easily co-opted by sectarianism, and therefore other social issues that aren't as easily divided or controlled in that way are abandoned. I just don't think the arts are valued – visual art, in particular – in the same way here as, for example, sports, which are quite heavily funded as they are

often seen under the auspices of peacebuilding. The amount of money allocated to sports and peacebuilding is phenomenal in comparison to the amount of money given to support arts and peacebuilding, for instance. So, it's a question of value. Especially where parties like the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) are very deeply associated with right-wing, conservative outlooks and aren't known for their cultural diversity.

LO'C: I think that idea of what culture is works on two different levels in the North of Ireland, because culture in an "orange" [unionist and politically right] or "green" [nationalist and politically left] sense is so specific. And it's also viewed in this odd, immutable, static way, like it is fixed and can't change and must be represented in these very particular ways. I also think that there's an assumption, around visual arts, that sub-standard will suffice; we get offered the worst buildings, or we're given grants for buildings that last for very limited amounts of time.

AC: There is also a tendency here towards seeing visual artists as a tool, where we are useful for outreach projects with certain disadvantaged communities for one day. Our work is really used as a tick-box exercise, as something that can magically make change happen. But if you want to use art as a tool for change, it needs to be funded and there must be a legacy.

LO'C: It was the same situation in Derry, around the UK City of Culture [in 2013]. It seemed to be "we'll have a big opening, and we'll have the fireworks and we'll do all the big exhibitions", but then nothing has any legacy, which leaves all the messaging around it feeling like little more than lip service.

EC: There's also an overarching problem, globally, since around the 1990s, where there's a kind of managerialism that's seeped into the art world, where all the money that maybe could have gone to artists and to artistic production has been funnelled into managers and curators and PR people. And it has led to the institutionalisation of artists in educational establishments, where they don't have to worry about money, and then they lose sight of what it is to be an artist. The lack of class awareness around artists, alongside the cost of university education and disinvestment in arts education is a more general, widespread issue. Array becoming a collective was one of the ways of trying to deal with that because we're sharing resources. Artists' studios in general are a way of dealing with that. But there is also a lack of understanding about why artists would work together. "Why would you share resources? Why can't we speak to the same person every day? Why can't we have a meeting with all of you, at one o'clock in the afternoon with no notice?" In places like this [NI], with large working-class communities and socioeconomic deprivation, most of us are doing this because we have a compulsion to do it, not because it's a luxurious hobby.

LO'C: Unfortunately, our success [as Array Collective] has validated that. Which is unfortunate, because we're not working in a good studio [building], we don't have good facilities. We each have four jobs and kids and everything else. There was genuinely a moment where [our installation for the Turner Prize exhibition] wasn't going to happen, or that we almost weren't going to be able to finish it because we couldn't get any funding

from the Arts Council [of Northern Ireland]. We started by speaking to them directly, but we eventually had to go over their heads to government departments, and we could only get in contact with them because we had experience of lobbying for other reasons. If we hadn't secured that extra funding, we wouldn't have made the show that we did, and we probably wouldn't have had the success that we did.

AC: What we need to be clear about is that, in Northern Ireland, the only way that artists can exist is through public funding – we don't have the same levels of sponsorship as elsewhere and a commercial art market system doesn't really exist here. There is pretty much one public funder, and it's either them or nothing.

JM: In your experience as a collective of 11 people, have you ever received adequate remuneration for your work as a group? Do you feel like your individual contributions are understood in terms of paying artists campaigns? Or are you offered less than what would be acceptable fees for individual artists when you're working together?

EC: Well, there's a huge variation. It depends on the organisation.

LO'C: Though when you take the Turner Prize as an example – yes, it's great to include collectives! – but any sense of the fees for the individual members of those collectives, or the distribution of those fees, was definitely an afterthought in terms of how much money it would cost for everyone to be involved and to make the work. We had to fight for money for us all to be able to travel to Coventry² and to stay there to install the work. In a lot of cases, if we do something, we take a fee and then split it 11 ways.

AC: I think that, at the start, our reason to work as a collective was to share resources and that's kind of the only way to survive. But now, it's kind of the opposite, where most spaces or institutions are either not equipped or they're not willing to adequately pay to support a collective of 11 people.

EC: It doesn't mean the work is 11 times better! [laughs]. When we do talks, for example, we'll get paid for the amount of people who turn up, or we might have to split the talk fee between three people. Occasionally, organisations are good at recognising this – like the British School in Rome, The British Council, and Creative Europe in Ireland. And Arts Council Ireland make you ringfence artist fees into applications for big projects, which doesn't happen here in Northern Ireland. The argument around whether those fees were enough is another matter ...

LO'C: I did a calculation for the Turner Prize fees to establish how much we should have been paid for our individual time. I included all the days that we had all worked, and it turned out that we were only paid for two or three days each per week. The difference between what we should have received and what we did receive was a crazy number – it was hundreds of thousands.

JM: I'd like to return to the topic of studios for a moment, specifically in relation to public funding and broader conversations around cultural value ... artists' studios cannot be

measured or evaluated by traditional means or how those means are understood – such as ticket sales or audience footfall. Would you agree that studios have a different kind of currency? That their value lies elsewhere, through the provision of space and the communities of artists they enable?

EC: I just think that you wouldn't ask the same questions of a karate team. Not that there's something wrong with your question, but that there's something wrong with the outlook here. Like, why is sports considered to offer better intrinsic value than arts? Why is sport reported in the news every night, and the arts aren't? There are whole artistic movements that wouldn't have come about without high levels of public support, like social realism. That was a vital, dynamic and new way of thinking about things – of using film and using photography in a way that spoke to everyday life, and it was precisely because higher-level education was free. People from working-class backgrounds could participate in that education and were subsequently awarded grants by local councils to take on buildings without having to calculate or justify just how many pounds worth of mental health value they contributed to the economy. It prompts bigger questions about the value of the economy versus the value of people's passions or survivability or their quality of life.

LO'C: Isn't the problem that there's this idea that the taxpayer is paying for us to enjoy our hobbies and stay happy?

EC: Well, when I mention survivability, I am also thinking of the huge proportion of artists who are neurodiverse and disabled; a much higher proportion than the general population. You could argue that there is discrimination in not funding the arts, because you're actively discriminating against types of activities that would diminish a whole demographic, in a way that wouldn't be acceptable for sports funding. On top of that, we as taxpayers also fund weapons, and nuclear power. We fund lots of things that are actively harmful to us personally. So why on earth can't we fund things that are beneficial? We gave £1.5 million to Royal Down Golf Club, one of the richest sports facilities in the whole region. And we can't give £1,000 to an artist, without a ton of checks and balances? It's ridiculous.

AC: There is still this misunderstanding that art is a sort of hobby, a passion. It's never considered to be work. And the shift in communicating that and the understanding around that really needs to happen.

EC: A recent, and really good example of why culture is so important is the new Disney live-action film, *The Little Mermaid*. The actress cast as the main character is Black, which has caused a global outpouring around the politics of race, and a discursive gap has been opened. And if art wasn't powerful, then that wouldn't have happened. We have communicated visually for a lot longer than we have had written language.

LO'C: I think society doesn't make the connection between the "stuff" that's on the TV, or on the billboard, or any of the "stuff" – the visual language – that we are surrounded by in our everyday lives. People do not make the connection that the reason that that "stuff" exists is because we go to art college, and we sit in studios all day creating it. It's

about acknowledging the creative process. And how do you measure that? Do people really want numbers and measurements for how creative you are, or if you're sitting in your studio all day or how all this work is being made? Because if they can't see the work being done and they can't see the things that you're producing, then they wonder why you are getting the money to do it.

AC: It comes back again to trust. Artists are not trusted. They need to be constantly monitored to make sure they are being responsible with money and time and space. And of doing their job, because it isn't recognised as such.

EC: I think it is an ideological challenge for society to recognise that, because we do open up discursive spaces, and challenge discourse and introduce nuance. We are independent thinkers, and to go back to sport again – I promise I don't hate sportspeople! – how much are they really challenging any kind of status quo? But we must understand that this lack of advocacy and understanding is on purpose. It's not an accident. They're trying to make sure that there are no unconstrained artists making public statements willy-nilly.

JM: To return to the finances that you mentioned, Array consistently appears at the very bottom of the Arts Council's annually funded client list with the lowest level of funding awarded in the entire region. Do you have a sense yet that the incredible recognition that you have received for your work through the Turner Prize will translate, or has been translating, financially into any kind of increased annual funding?

EC: Yes and no. We still have to make a case for our existence. We feel like we are possibly getting a bit more, but – realistically – we're still just begging for scraps. We're also part of an ecology of artists' studios and artist-led spaces in Belfast, and we're all treated as if we are all from the same household, with our funding allocated through [that household's] purse strings. If we get funding, then who misses out? Each of the collective members are part of other arts groups too, so even if Array's funding was to increase we feel the impacts of those decisions. There's certainly been no lobbying on our behalf. There's not been anybody stepping in, except yourself and maybe a few others who have actively sought to support us.

LO'C: We're also only able to apply for a certain amount of money each year because the building that we're in hasn't required much. But we were also told not to apply for much because we wouldn't get it. There was also the mentality that we were safe, because we didn't ask for too much. A few years ago, we were being pushed to move into a bigger, super-group studio. For us, both in terms of our identity and our position in the city, we didn't want to do that. Our studio rent had been pretty low for a long time, but we had to fight for it not to be increased. All the bureaucracy that we face now around trying to find a new space is overwhelming. Schemes like those set up by Belfast City Council require business plans in order for us to apply for a grant to possibly get an empty space in the city, space that will then inevitably be redeveloped in a couple of years anyway. Those processes are not designed for studios.

EC: There are no employees in Array. So, whoever's leading on these applications and business plans and arranging meetings ... that has a cost implication for our capacity and resources. Staff in arts centres and theatres are different – they can collect data on annual turnover and so on to put into business plans. We can't collect that much data for what we do.

AC: It's a system that is designed to like keep people in a permanently unstable – yet grateful – status. But it results in a constant state of emergency, where nothing is even medium – let alone long-term.

EC: It costs us money to constantly be in this cheapest, lowest-common-denominator situation. There's definitely an expectation – from people outside the art world or in property – that when you're Turner Prize winning artists, you could afford a higher level of rent. And, inevitably, we can't.

JM: Belfast City Council have recently introduced some new support mechanisms on a pilot basis, which some of us have fed into through consultation exercises. How significant do you think it is that a local authority has taken on support for studios?

AC: Well, I guess we will see if and how these bodies can work together. There is no reason why they can't. Obviously, our studio system really benefits the city and the arts. So, it's a good step, but it's just one step.

EC: It was also tiny pots of funding and, whilst we applied for as much as we could, we still only got two thirds of what we applied for.

JM: Can you outline some of the issues that you face in terms of the precarity of your studio space? Does it confound the expectations from, for example, visiting curators, that you have to operate in such poor conditions?

EC: Imagine moving house, then multiply that by 11. We need a big space to work together. We need storage, we need light, we need to be accessible. So those requirements already make it difficult, but we also have a tiny budget from Arts Council. It's a big task and you almost need somebody to work on that on a dedicated basis. At the same time, to prove our worth, we're doing interviews and exhibitions and art projects. And it's not just us that moves, our stuff does too – all of the things that we've made, and all of the things that we need to keep, just in case we need to make more things, and the technology – then it becomes really expensive. It's short-sighted to expect artists to go into properties where the lease is for 9 months and then we need to move again before we acquire tenancy rights. If Array ever do manage to get a building, then what about all the other studio groups and grassroots organisations? We shouldn't be the only ones. Everybody should be entitled to a space to work in. It's not that much to ask.

LO'C: I look at some of the bigger studio groups that are currently moving or have just moved, and they're going into buildings that were previously abandoned by other organisations, and it's just bizarre.

EC: It's complete madness. [Studio and project space provider] Platform Arts were rushed out of their building a few years ago, and it's been empty ever since. It's in the middle of a street that really needs an organisation like that. There used to be such a buzz in that area because Platform Arts and organisations like Catalyst Arts and Pollen were all right next to one another.

LO'C: There seems to be an accepted culture around evicting artists and studios and then doing nothing with the space, and it's just accepted. We are constantly apologising to people, curators, who want to see our space. We take time out of our jobs to try to make the place look the best that it can.

EC: We know that councils in Northern Ireland have power to seize assets that aren't being properly maintained and they just don't use that power. I just worry that with so many landlords in government, any legislation or policymaking will always have protection of the landlord and not the tenants in mind. You see protected long-term leases in other places. Some of the bigger cities in, for example, Spain, have lifetime leases.

JM: How significant is a city centre site for your practice and forms of social engagement?

LO'C: I think it's really important for the groups that we work with.

AC: Exactly. People coming for workshops or before protests can gather here with their placards.

EC: And it's also important to be able to participate in Late Night Art³ to remind people that we exist. I also feel that it's a symptom of a healthy city to have artists in the centre. I think that the Belfast School of Art at Ulster University should have some responsibility in terms of trying to grow a culture of artists in the city centre; a lot of its research reputation for the arts is predicated on that. Many of the people that have come through the art college are still practicing as artists in the city, but the university doesn't take much part in supporting the artists' studios outside of the actual university building, even for its PhD or Masters students. There's just a lot of short-sightedness, and it's not just the arts, the city has a housing shortage too, but quite often we seem to be canaries in the coal mine for those broader issues.

Artist-led activity

JM: Obviously you have all been very busy since your Turner Prize win in December 2021. Do you have any sense of a changing tide in how artist-led or studio-led activity is now viewed in Northern Ireland?

EC: Personally, I think there was great interest immediately after we won, but my experience in activism tells me that you have to keep on top of people, or they just forget about things. As we've said, we're quite busy and there's no one else who is constantly lobbying publicly for artists, studios and artist-led spaces. That's how campaigns work, through people being forefront in the media constantly communicating what they need. We

don't have the time or energy to do that, and nobody else is doing it. I do think showing *The Druithaib's Ball* at the Ulster Museum⁴ will help.

LO'C: There is that sense of striking while the iron's hot, because you're a hot topic for a couple of days and you get lots of emails and then it dies down. There are so many artists displaced at the minute. Like [110-member-strong Belfast-based organisation] Vault Art Studios, for example. Given the reach of their work ... it just doesn't make any sense that they would not be offered a building immediately. They are facilitating a huge number of opportunities and community events, and with the range of artistic disciplines that they represent, it should be a no-brainer really. And yet, we still need to argue for it constantly. We're just not top of anyone's list of priorities and that has snowballed into a massive issue.

EC: When I have my abortion campaigning⁵ hat on, what you must do is look around for anything at all that's happening. We often joke that we can turn any subject or any conversation around to be about abortion – that's what a lobbyist or campaigner for artists needs to do. In Northern Ireland, for us to get the support we need, we need to be the most annoying person in any room – that's how campaigning works. You don't leave them alone until you get what you want. It should be the role of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. It's not, but it should be. They should be on social media every day, changing any cultural messaging into an opportunity to say "here is why and how we should support the arts". But that's not a job that anybody will pay *me* for, because they don't want artists to do that. For five years, I campaigned – for free – for abortion rights here.

JM: We've discussed how your work is remunerated, but have there been any changes to how it is profiled and – specifically – how it's been encouraged to continue by funders, such as arms-length bodies, local authorities or government? Has that happened yet, and do you expect it to?

EC: Array are big in Japan! Last year, we were in two Japanese magazines, including *Vogue!*

JM: Wow, I didn't know that! *Japanese Vogue* has nothing on *Cultural Trends* though, right? Are there any gallerists queueing up? Have you been offered keys to this, or any, city?

EC: I think there's been a big difference in how we've been received and profiled from people outside Northern Ireland, but not necessarily people inside Northern Ireland.

LO'C: We haven't been offered representation or anything, and we certainly haven't been invited to represent Ireland or even Northern Ireland at the Venice Biennale⁶ yet!

EC: We're regularly invited to give talks, but those who largely ignored us before still aren't scrambling to include us in projects. I think our exhibition at the Ulster Museum will raise awareness of our work and all these issues again.

JM: Array are currently exhibiting *The Druithaib's Ball* at Galway Arts Centre. The curator of this exhibition, Megs Morley, is also the initiator of The Artist-Led Archive⁷, an artist-led

initiative which began in 2006. How significant is it for you to contribute to the artist-led discourse across the island and further afield?

AC: It's very important to us. The island of Ireland has a very strong and rich history of artist-led activity, which is often overlooked, unrecorded or unrecognised. There will be a publication released next year⁸, and it will be amazing for us to be part of that history and contribute to making it more visible both in and outside of the island of Ireland.

LO'C: I've been told that there used to be a lot more North–South artist collaborations in the times prior to the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. In a weird way, opportunities seem to have gotten worse since then. The possibility of forthcoming Shared Island⁹ funded projects is encouraging though. It would be good to represent the island more as a whole, in terms of its artist-led activity.

EC: There is definitely an issue around posterity and archiving for artist-led groups. It's a queer and feminist issue as well. If our histories aren't properly archived, then they disappear, and people forget about them and about us. Artist and activist groups just don't have the time or resources because they are fighting on other fronts. Hopefully, because Array's installation has been acquired by the Ulster Museum, a lot of the detail for that piece will be recorded properly in a way that we never could.

AC: When I started researching artists' collectives, I came across so many archive boxes that were basically empty. Artists – and particularly activists – still keep things in their houses because of institutional distrust.

EC: Archiving differs according to cultural priorities too – Amsterdam has a really beautiful feminist archive, which is well-staffed in a beautiful building. Whilst the feminist archive in the UK was basically just sitting in an attic for years before it was moved to a basement. Those are ideological decisions.

Interpretations of array collective's work

JM: Through your exhibition for the Turner Prize, the profile that you have offered to issues of social injustice in Northern Ireland is unprecedented, but not always well understood outside of Northern Ireland. In December 2021, I co-authored an article¹⁰ outlining the England-centric and poorly informed view that many art critics took of *The Druthaib's Ball*. Since then, have you noticed any change or more nuance in critics' interpretations of your work?

LO'C: Some of the interviews we've done recently have zoned in on the drama of that.

EC: The majority of articles were generally complimentary. People who are interested in the kind of things we do are the ones who continue to approach us – activist publications, community engaged practitioners ... and *Japanese Vogue* [laughs]. We were approached by a New York Times journalist a couple of times, but we just ignored him.

LO'C: When critics or journalists focus on that stuff – like how we “built a pub out of cardboard” or whatever they think it is – they’re just looking for attention. They’re just cheap digs that provide headlines.

EC: And different critics from the same paper will have vastly different takes on it – like the vastly differing responses from The Guardian’s columnists Jonathan Jones and Charlotte Higgins.

AC: Art historians, or those who write more reflective pieces really get it and that makes a difference to us. They’re also more likely to ask for our opinions and quotes, and it’s been great to have those conversations.

LO'C: I remember that the Irish Independent got in touch and specifically wanted to talk to Stephen [Millar, Array Collective member] because he’d said on the radio that he’s both an art therapist and a painter. It was obvious that the reporters for that piece wanted to go a bit deeper into our independent practices and have richer discussions rather than the general kind of tabloid headlines.

EC: Stephen and I also did an interview for BBC Northern Ireland, and the cameramen were visibly shocked when they went to our studios. The best way to describe their expressions is ... “haunted”. They just couldn’t believe the facilities and couldn’t believe that we were actually working there. Though that interview felt like a fully engaged conversation, we could imagine people at home watching it and wanting to ask the same questions that Mark Carruthers [BBC journalist] did. There has definitely been some local interest in the issues with studios here, but, at the same time, you always have to prove why your work and space is important.

JM: What has it meant to have your work acquired into the collection of the Ulster Museum? For example, do you feel that it is significant in terms of museological concerns around the queering and decolonising of collections, or of institutional critique?

EC: We’re very grateful, for sure. But, to reiterate what I said before, we now worry about the work we’ve made that hasn’t been bought and therefore hasn’t been archived and stored properly. We worry about things being ruined in our studios. Though the museum haven’t actually acquired the entire installation, so not everything that featured in the Turner Prize exhibition is currently in a temperature-controlled environment. I had to go to the studio a few days ago to check if someone had broken in, and I was really panicking but nothing had been disturbed.

LO'C: It’s really significant that the museum has invested in such a big visual art piece, and that it will become part of their collection. Hopefully parts of the installation will be displayed in future as part of other exhibitions to keep that dialogue and social engagement alive in the museum.

AC: We’re still in discussion about the way that the piece will be shown and in which spaces we would like it to be shown. We really like the idea that the piece, and the

sibín [Irish for “pub without permission”, the largest element of the installation] specifically, was born out of artist-led culture and not of large institutions. We want there to be scope in how it’s shown for audience engagement and responses.

LO’C: I think the beauty of that work is that, in creating a pub environment, it creates a space for conversation. It would also be great if the museum could lend it to other institutions, where different perspectives on those conversations can be encouraged. The issues that it brings up are different in every place.

EC: We talked about this a lot as a group. When we think about acquisitions, we are also aware that they might just languish in a room somewhere for ages with no audience. We think that there are multiple parts of the installation that could speak directly to some of the works in the museum’s permanent exhibition. In many ways, the installation represents a cultural moment in time, reflecting on one hundred years of partition on the island of Ireland. And that is a really important reason to have it shown in the biggest museum in the region. The museum’s audiences aren’t necessarily gallery-going audiences, which means that it might be a bit more accessible. Working-class communities are much more likely to visit the Ulster Museum. If I think of my mum, she is happy to go to the museum on a regular basis but gets a bit scared going to art galleries. We want people to feel comfortable there.

AC: But obviously there are contentious things in there too, for some people, and we want that to be uncomfortable for those who don’t recognise us or our rights.

LO’C: We are preparing museum staff – and ourselves – in case there is any sort of public backlash against elements of the exhibition. Given the context of Northern Ireland, that backlash is more likely to happen here than it would anywhere else. Even that is interesting to us.

JM: Social, spatial, gendered, health and economic injustices (amongst others) faced by people in Northern Ireland are embedded in your work. Can you say something about how your work takes the perspective that the artist is a member of society, affected by these issues, rather than the approach where art is something that artists “do” “at” or “on” communities who need to be “fixed” somehow?

EC: Lucy Lippard¹¹ writes about three different types of activist artists. Firstly, those who support the cause, but none of their artwork is related to the cause. Secondly, there’s the activist artist that is brought into activist communities and works alongside them for a short period of time to produce an artifact. Finally, there are the artists who are embedded within the activist community and work from that position. You can be all three, or you can move between them. Array certainly aren’t “community-spotting” and deciding to join a herd. The issues in this region around housing rights, queer rights, abortion rights, environmental issues, gentrification, and mental ill-health affect us all directly. There’s an authenticity to the causes we support.

LO'C: There are multiple levels to how we both experience these inequalities – in our personal lives and how we work, how we create work in response, and then how they affect people around us, in our communities.

AC: Another important point to make is that we often also support other peers or bring them along with us. We bring in other artists a lot. Although we are a collective of 11 people, we're also an extended group as well and *The Druithaib's Ball* illustrates that. Equally, not all collective members are studio holders in Array, some of them work in other studios in the city. But the collective is made up of the people who were always at rallies and protests and were always helping to make protest banners.

Representing Northern Ireland

JM: Have you encountered pressure to be representative of artistic practice in Northern Ireland?

AC: I don't think so. Not least because there are people from Ireland and England, and obviously an Italian in the collective too!

EC: I think that, in the media, there's just an assumption that we're all from Belfast, even though we clearly say that we're not.

LO'C: People seem shocked, but actually this is typical of the makeup of artist groups in the North of Ireland. And I think that's really key because of the different perspectives it brings on the laws and policies here. Even the people that are from Northern Ireland have all lived in other countries for significant amounts of time. Nobody has asked us to feature on the front of a tourism leaflet or anything, which is good!

JM: With such a low level of investment in the arts in Northern Ireland, it is perhaps unsurprising that art or artists from here rarely feature in international showcases. Has there been interest from national or international institutions, collectives or activist groups in working with you?

EC: We were featured in a beautiful big, important periodical about art in Germany. And invited to give a talk in the *Centre Culturel Irlandais* in Paris. But with international work, you can see people start to do the mental arithmetic about how much it will cost for 11 flights, so only one or two of us have been involved in those things.

LO'C: I'm intrigued to see what else might happen. It's actually almost exactly a year on from the opening of the Turner Prize exhibition in Coventry [29 September 2021]. I couldn't be there for the install or the opening because I'd just given birth two days before.

EC: Before the Turner Prize nomination, a couple of people in the group were very, very close to giving up art or giving up art for the second or third time. It's still hard for us to get our heads around it. Almost as hard as getting all 11 of us in a room together [laughs].

We're still figuring out how we operate, and we need to make sure we operate in healthier ways, because everything has been so quick, and we haven't had time to take breaks.

LO'C: Once the museum exhibition opens, we can make time to figure out what our next move is. I think it will be a case of being part of bigger projects over longer periods of time, rather than taking on lots of small things.

AC: That will never happen [laughs].

Notes

1. <https://www.tate.org.uk/press/press-releases/turner-prize-shortlist-announced-0>
2. UK City of Culture 2021, which hosted the Turner Prize exhibition and awards ceremony at The Herbert Art Gallery and Museum.
3. <https://www.facebook.com/latenightartbelfast/>
4. <https://www.ulstermuseum.org/whats-on/druithaibs-ball> The Ulster Museum has recently acquired this large-scale installation for its collection. The work contains over 80 individual elements, including some made by other Belfast-based artists, and will be on display at the museum from February 2023: <https://www.nationalmuseumsni.org/news/turner-prize-acquisition>
5. UK Government to commission abortion services in Northern Ireland, 24 October 2022.
6. Northern Ireland has only been represented by three Venice Biennale showings, in 2005, 2007, and 2009 before funding was withdrawn. As of 2023, the Welsh pavilion is facing a similar fate.
7. <https://www.theartistledarchive.com>
8. *The Artist-led Archive – Sustainable Activism and the Embrace of Flux* will become a publication published by Dirty Books Publishing House in 2023.
9. <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/c3417-shared-island/>
10. Hickey and Morrow (2021).
11. Lippard (2013).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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