



Ker-Plunk!

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In February of this year the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI) withdrew all their funding for the Ormeau Baths Gallery, Belfast's main contemporary arts venue, forcing the gallery to close and making the staff redundant with immediate effect. The closure came as a shock to the arts community in Belfast, who had no intimation that something of this kind could be about to happen. Throughout 2005, ACNI had been lobbying artists and arts workers to support their own continued existence, in the context of the North's Review of Public Administration (the central pillar in the ongoing devolution of powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly, away from the hundreds of quangos set up under direct rule). ACNI argued that their combination of expertise, advocacy and promotion of artistic autonomy represented the best deal for the arts, the best value to the taxpayer, and the most politically transparent solution. Artists, faced with the alternative of funding being the gift of Northern Ireland's exceptionally parochial local politicians, accepted ACNI's arguments and supported their case. No sooner was the consultation completed than the doors closed on the OBG, alienating ACNI's new friends and undermining what good work they might have done.

What particularly stuck in the throat was the ACNI's presentation of the closure. Two accusations were levelled at OBG's board and management: long-term financial mismanagement, and non-compliance with an ACNI-initiated review of governance and staffing structures that had been made a condition of further funding in 2005. Effectively, the first claim, unaccompanied by any further detail, amounted to a smear; the second was simply inaccurate. Moreover, ACNI's insistence in their statements that the OBG board themselves had decided to close the gallery was dissembling, at the least: faced with the immediate withdrawal of nearly all their funding, the board had no legal option other than to cease trading, as ACNI would have known when they took their decision. ACNI Chief Executive Róisín McDonough's mantra-like insistence on how 'deeply saddened' she was by the closure sounded not just hollow but deliberately patronising, the more information was discovered about the manner of the closure, and the probable reasons behind it.

The trail of events leading to the closure takes us back to 2004 in the first instance; however, discord first arose between ACNI and OBG a little earlier than this, and ultimately, it may be that the closure of the gallery and the sacking of its staff was little more than the settling of old scores and the wielding of unaccountable power.

OBG had been investigated in 2004 following a mistake in the drawing down of Lottery funds. The first investigation was by ACNI themselves; following this a forensic audit was commissioned from Belfast accountants Goldblatt McGuigan. OBG were cleared of any financial impropriety and the incorrectly drawn funds were repaid to ACNI within a few months. This didn't satisfy the Arts Council, however, who proceeded to commission further consultancies on aspects of OBG's functioning: at the taxpayer's expense, a 'Value for Money' report was carried out by BearingPoint between November 2004 and April

2005. Research on contemporary arts provision in Belfast, and the future viability of OBG, was also carried out by Deloitte. Following the first report, ACNI devised a series of demands in September 2005 as conditions for further funding. These included the reconstitution of the gallery's board, a review of staffing structures, and a timetable for implementation. Correspondence between the board of OBG and ACNI, between September and December 2005, shows that the gallery immediately suggested a 'best option' for restructuring, and that ACNI was in support of the steps that had been taken; one letter from Nóirín McKinney, Director of Creative Arts Development at ACNI, to the board of OBG states that ACNI "is completely behind your restructuring plans and welcomes the approach you are proposing".

All of ACNI's demands regarding the gallery were being addressed by the board of OBG – and apparently to the satisfaction of ACNI – when ACNI made its summary decision to withdraw funding in its meeting in January this year (a decision not communicated to the Chair of OBG for a further month). A serious question of probity is at issue here. Can it be appropriate to spend public money forcing the closure of a gallery, paying off creditors, advertising for, employing and training new staff at some undisclosed point in the future, when the conditions for the existing gallery's continuation clearly and incontrovertibly already existed?

The third report, carried out by Deloitte, looked into the future of arts provision in the city, and the long-term viability of OBG in particular. Based on the poor research and inadequate methodology that seems to characterise all such efflorescences of public largesse, the report decided that OBG was not the 'flagship' that New Happy Belfast needs in order to meet the demands of its future. This assessment seemed largely to be based on the absence of a café (such a notable godsend when the fate of Glasgow's CCA was at stake) and a dedicated, separate education space. On the evidence of these deficiencies, and notwithstanding such tedious and largely unquantifiable details like the standard of the gallery's programme, the breadth of its educational and outreach projects, or its international standing thanks to the work of its director, it was recommended that Belfast would need a new gallery, somewhere else in the city. Furthermore, given that OBG is located in such a backwater, directly opposite the BBC, two minutes' walk from City Hall and the city centre, and close to other arts venues, it was recommended that the new flagship gallery should be much more conveniently located – where better, then than the Cathedral Quarter, Belfast's thriving new cultural hub, centred on some wasteground next to a dual carriageway. (The city centre has miraculously moved recently, whilst OBG has stubbornly remained stationary; it was discovered by ACNI's consultants that it is therefore no longer conveniently located; coincidentally, the new city centre is on land owned by private developers and speculators, in a district that has been largely uninhabited for sixty years, since it was razed in the Blitz, but which is now to be most grandly appointed in a neo-Venetian style! This is a little

ironic, given OBG director Hugh Mulholland's role in curating Northern Ireland's first exhibition at the Venice Biennale in 2005.)

Even the poorly executed Deloitte report – any of the artists now working in Belfast could have done a more thorough job – concluded that whatever future decisions may be taken about contemporary arts spaces in the city, there should be no break in provision. In other words, if it was decided to concentrate future provision in the Cathedral Quarter, to assist the private property development which ultimately drives the regeneration of Belfast, the plug should not be pulled on the Ormeau Baths until such provision was actually already established. But then that's the prerogative of the unaccountable public body; having spent around £20,000 on a consultancy, you're not actually under any obligation to act on its recommendations.

This is most interesting when one considers that ACNI has made much of the fact that, over a period of five or so years, OBG had accumulated a deficit of approximately £80,000. This deficit had accrued year-on-year at a roughly even rate, clear evidence not of mismanagement but of the gallery's continued structural underfunding in terms of its very intensive annual programme. Set against the £60,000 (at the very least) that ACNI has spent on audits, consultancies and reviews of the gallery in the last two years, the figure is brought into some kind of relief; and given that provision had to be made for all outstanding creditors on the wind-up of the gallery, and also to pay rent on an empty space for the last three months, we return once again to the question of ACNI's use of public funds.

At the time of writing, ACNI has just announced that it plans to re-open the gallery under its own management, on June 9th. In the long term, ACNI are to constitute a new board to run the gallery, with the Royal Ulster Academy (RUA), Northern Ireland's Sunday painters' club, as the majority stakeholders. Again, how this represents good value, or a commitment to independent contemporary arts provision, or even a passing resemblance to the internationally-recognised programme that OBG had been pursuing, is not made clear. A recent round of 'consultations' with clients over the future of the gallery was less an attempt to engage in frank dialogue and more a cynical public relations exercise: ACNI has said that it "doesn't want to rake over the past", and is clearly hoping that the matter will now go away. As they've demonstrated with their approach to other consultancies, you don't engage in the exercise to begin with unless you know the answer you want to hear. A few artists suggesting that the RUA aren't equipped to programme a contemporary art gallery, or maintaining that they don't want to discuss future provision until the details of the closure are all in the public domain, are unlikely to deflect ACNI from its chosen course. One jester at ACNI even suggested that a few canisters of Zyklon-B might be an appropriate way to deal with persistent whingers.

The opening exhibition at the re-opened gallery includes work from the collection of the Northern Ireland Civil Service. It's lauded by McDonough as exciting contemporary art, which must rank as

yet further evidence of the gulf in understanding between ACNI and those actually practicing contemporary art in the city (Nóirín McKinney said recently on a community TV station that Belfast “doesn’t have the luxury” of the kind of contemporary arts programming that defined OBG; so that’s it – we’re just *not ready* for it! Presumably this includes the work of those artists now finding success overseas but unable to present their work in a mainstream gallery in their hometown). Following this, in July, ACNI are spending £15,000 to bring in a touring exhibition of Magnum photography. This use of funds to buy in some good PR, in what is the quietest month of the year for art galleries, surely can’t be justified. The previous management of the OBG, with all their accusations of financial impropriety, would never have spent such a sum of money on a touring exhibition at this time of the year; for one thing, the Arts Council wouldn’t have let them.

Artists continue to call for the real reasons behind the gallery’s closure to be made public. The mendacious statements so far issued by ACNI have only given inaccurate and misleading information, and freedom of information requests regarding ACNI minutes are expected to shed little further light (particularly if it’s true that the Council were not even presented with a written report to vote on by senior executives). Amongst artists in the city, distrust of ACNI is now widespread. It’s becoming clear that the closure had nothing to do with ACNI’s stated reasons. If it’s been decided to wind down OBG over time, in favour of a recently-announced new arts centre in the Cathedral Quarter, we have to ask whose needs this addresses: the arts community’s, the citizen’s, or the private developer’s (again). The board of OBG decided, in December 2003, not to continue with discussions about moving the gallery to this new arts centre, causing some upset to ACNI plans and apparently occasioning great inconvenience and political embarrassment for the Chief Executive herself. (Purely by coincidence, this was shortly before OBG was subjected to the first of its perpetual evaluations the following year.) If ACNI policy is now being made subservient to the instrumentalised ‘cultural industries’ rhetoric that has been a driving force in our post-Troubles redevelopment, then their claim to be the advocates of autonomous art practice are no longer tenable. And if, as has been suggested, the whole sorry business is simply the final settling of a petty vendetta, arising out of OBG’s jilting of ACNI at the altar of regeneration back in 2003, then the judgement of the Chief Executive herself is called into question.

Also warranting some examination is the composition of the Arts Council. Unlike its counterparts in the Republic of Ireland, Scotland, Wales or England, the Northern Irish Council has no representative with any practical expertise in contemporary visual arts. The local politicians, minor public servants and assorted professionals who shape cultural policy for the North are thus not equipped to assess contemporary art according to its needs and on its own merits. In the absence of this expertise the administration of arts policy is made to fit with political and economic imperatives that have been defined

elsewhere; instead of scrutinising the proposals of its own executive, as it is intended to do, the Council merely rubber-stamps them on the basis of inadequate information. Rather than giving this body the power to lay waste to Northern Ireland’s cultural provision according to its ill-advised whims, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure in the North needs urgently to restructure the Arts Council, and make it at least potentially capable of fulfilling its own stated remit.

