Array Collective

THE GOOSE AND THE COMMON



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KARAOKE





The Goose and the Common

Array Collective presents The Goose and the Common, a new exhibition commissioned by Rua Red. Upending the language of protest, surveillance, defense and displacement the collective invites the viewer to journey through a series of spaces where organising and collaboration are encouraged. As we find ourselves in this polemic moment of “ussuns” vs “themmuns” it is important that we continue to find our voices and make noise. It’s equally important to recognise those who are restricted from speaking up and how acts of solidarity exist beyond the streets. Visitors to the gallery can make use of the wearable pieces and take a moment of rest, work together in weaving or sing out in solidarity. The exhibition takes its title from the 18th century poem The Goose and the Common, a reaction to a colonial legislative act that privatized common land.

About Array

Array Collective formed in 2016 taking part in the almost weekly rallies and protests in Belfast in solidarity around the issues of abortion rights, LGBTQIA+ rights, the Irish Language Act, Palestine, NHS cuts and climate change. The group devised ways of making a scene and using humour and irony to subvert the language of oppression and containment.

Although there has consistently been a need to speak up against atrocities, over the past 18 months there has been a rise in tensions resulting in more than weekly demonstrations. With the increasing threat to public protest and assembly the need for community and coming together is more prominent than ever.

Since 2023 Array have been working with the team at Rua Red around the theme of Stories of Displacement and Belonging – Hospitality/Hostility/Hostipitality and as part of this worked with the Ukrainian community housed in Tallaght resulting in the formation of the Phoenix Collective.



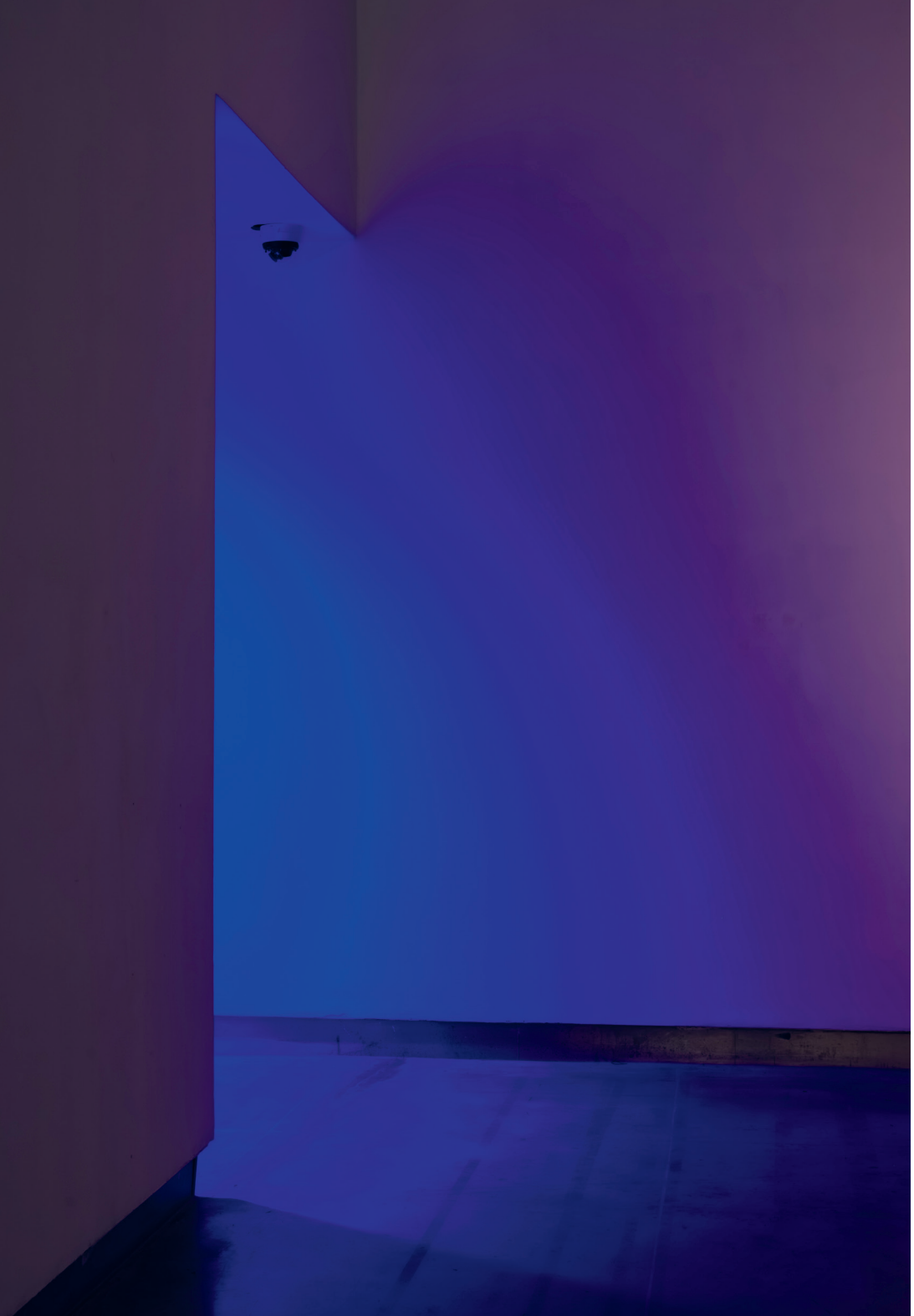
The Goose and The Common
The law locks up the man or woman
Who steals the goose from off the common
But leaves the greater villain loose
Who steals the common from off the goose.

The law demands that we atone
When we take things we do not own
But leaves the lords and ladies fine
Who take things that are yours and mine.

The poor and wretched don't escape
If they conspire the law to break;
This must be so but they endure
Those who conspire to make the law.

The law locks up the man or woman
Who steals the goose from off the common
And geese will still a common lack
Till they go and steal it back

Anonymous



Array Say Relax

Rua Red
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Text
By Sarah
Clancy





Array Collective's new show, *The Goose and the Common* is named after a well-known late 18th-century folk poem which reflected on the 'enclosures'– the massive privatisation and expulsion of the peasantry from what previously were commonly held lands in England. These enclosures saw one fifth of all land in England privatised between 1600 and 1900 and were a chief source of social unrest all through that time.

It's no wonder that the people who comprise the Belfast-based Array Collective chose this title. The word 'commons' means land or resources belonging to a whole community. Array make a 'commons' of their whole art practice. They do this in their individual work and in the Collective. It is evident in their refusal of both the competitive ego-centric individualism that creates social capital in the contemporary art world and the death-drive logic of late capitalism. Theirs is a queer, DIY aesthetic planted within and harvested from the urgent human, environmental, civil and political rights movements of our time.

Although they sprang into public consciousness in 2021 when they were nominated for and won the prestigious Turner Prize, they were already very familiar to artists and to activists particularly in the north of Ireland where they are based, but also in the UK and the south or Republic of Ireland.



In the case of those of us observing them from the so-called activist benches, we knew them from their flamboyant and mischievous contributions to our shared campaigns for LGBTQIA+ rights, for their anti-colonial feminism and determined ongoing commitment to the campaign to secure free, safe and legal access to abortion for women and pregnant people in all parts of these islands.

This context of Array's work is hugely important in responding to it. This is because their work is a performance of their refusal to observe the powerful guard rails set out by state powers and institutions from the three overlapping political entities that come into play in their geographical situation. These are the Northern Irish State, the Irish Republic and the United Kingdom, three very different entities that misunderstand each other completely and each of which have their own methods of repressing, oppressing and silencing challenges to their status quo. In a perverse way, this hall of mirrors context that Array's practice has emerged from makes them the ideal advance party for the current and forthcoming unpredictable times. They have trained for this.

Since the Good Friday Agreement in the north there has often been no direct target for movements for change there to aim at – for years at a time there hasn't even been a government ('Assembly') to

overthrow and even when there was, until 2016 there was no provision for an opposition at all within the actual government structures. When decisions were made in the Assembly they came from a weary, distrustful political accommodation that represented few even if it was better than the war which preceded it. In the post-conflict north any light and air-filled space, any sense of possibility or optimism has always had to come from elsewhere than the grim drudge of institutional politics. It comes from art and culture and music and humour and more riskily, it comes from the streets, home of the protest, the demonstration, the counter demonstration and the riot, all of which can and do serve many masters.

In the context of the north it is understandable that people might be and are wary of 'the street'. To me watching from a few miles down the road and coming from a more head-in-the-sand political context, it appears that Array, the activists and artists they work with and the movements they are part of know instinctively that the streets cannot be left vacant if their society is to thrive - if they are to build a space of rights and care. It is an almost biblical proposition: if the forces of good don't fill the space, dark forces will do so, and so they act to fill them and subvert them with joy, spectacle, colour and wit and a list of demands, to coin a phrase. When they do fill these spaces Array and

their merry band of fellow travellers meet a highly militarised police force who descend like aliens from patriotic Land Rovers. Whether in their riot gear or their ordinary green uniforms or hovering overhead in helicopters, the PSNI project a sinister sense of latent force. They make little distinction between people assembled as part of a campaign for minority rights to be protected and those marching against those minorities. Array's protest aesthetic directly disrupts this projection of repressive power.

In contrast in the south, until the ongoing unforgivable genocidal attacks by Israel on Gaza and Palestine which have brought hundreds of thousands of people back out in regular protest again, with a few notable exceptions progressive social change activists had more-or-less vacated the streets. This coincided with the Covid-19 lockdowns of which much more needs to be said elsewhere. In the South we went from a situation where in 2014 a grassroots movement defeated an attempt by the state to introduce water charges and privatisation (of the water commons). Where, in 2015 an attempt by a far-right organisation to set up a branch in Dublin was easily sent packing in a couple of cheerful hours by thousands of people who'd assembled quickly in response to a call out from ARN an anti-racist network. Where, in 2018 following a decades-long grassroots movement a strong majority of people voted to

remove the constitutional amendment that had been inserted to deny women and pregnant people access to abortion. We went from these successes to a scenario where in 2022 and 2023 the resurgent far right went almost un-protested and unpoliced as they held hundreds of gatherings and demonstrations around the state and one actual bone-fide riot in Dublin.

As well as conducting direct racist and anti-migrant violence, in this short time internationally fuelled far-right activism has ensured that conspiracy-laced strands of regressive, racist ethno-nationalism, misogyny, transphobia and climate change denialism have gained slim but dangerous footholds within Councils, the Seanad, and even our (southern) national government. As a theatre of politics, the streets may be risky, but the cost of imaginative and hopeful people leaving them empty in our unequal societies appears to be extremely high.

Array refuse too, to fall for the cosier aspects of the southern state where we have much better state funding and support for artists. The south is a deceptive place - as a smarter man than me once quipped, it is a place where you have all the human rights you want so long as you don't try to claim them. It's a state built to serve expropriation (if you don't believe me consider that the Irish



Government fought a court case that lasted eight years for the right *not to* accept 14 billion euros in unclaimed taxes from the Apple Corporation). The state here in the south is always willing to spend our own money on temporarily placating us with just enough bread and circuses to quell our pikes and pitchforks so we allow them to go ahead with pulling the commons out from under our feet.

Since I first became aware of Array Collective, it has always appeared to me, even though they are now highly celebrated and valued, that outside of activist circles they might be being heard on the wrong frequency - like a radio from a different room where you can't quite make out the words even though you think you know the tune. Their work seems to be interpreted as humorous, as fun or even worse as a kind of 'Reeling in the Years' of activism with neither the quality of their work nor the layered nature of each of their pieces, shows and performances getting proper consideration. Array Collective's work IS deeply funny and witty of course. The warm humour in it comes though from that risky tightrope walk of an absolute refusal to be repressed or to respect social norms.

Array Collective's work is also deeply serious. To say it is work formed in struggle might sound melodramatic. It might sound like a claim better used for those creating art against a backdrop of

war and repression, art from a prison cell, art from the very brink. But these ghosts are still alive on the streets of Belfast and maybe it is that that has made Array so aware of just how high and personal the stakes are when we allow the slightest roll back on any progress made to date. We need them so badly just now.

Array Collective do create art from and for struggle. That, and solidarity are the oxygen running through and connecting all their work. This has to be exhausting and this brings me to their new show - as Banksy (apparently) said, 'if you're tired, learn to rest, not quit'. The most neglected part of movement building is rest- it's always the last priority when things are urgent. When to step back at all seems to be risking conceding our hard-won spaces, it's very hard to realise that we are in fact not individually irreplaceable. That our care responsibilities, relationships, livelihoods and self-nourishment also matter. For many in our circles failure to rest and lack of support from others for us to rest results in debilitating and confidence-denting burn out often served up with that good old Irish potion - shame. Here in 'The Goose and The Common' Array are inviting us to consider this, to consider that we don't always have to be the ones leading the charge.

This new show takes on the task of examining how we might thrive and care for each other against the

backdrop of the hard-yards, the grind of activism and movement building and how we might give ourselves time for the thoughtful but essential work of world-building. Array Collective are trying to imagine how there can be space in our movements, in the struggles of our lives for the people who are tired, who can't show up right now, how there can be levity, connection, joy, renewal and exuberance in our communities in places away from the pitched and ever more polarised forefront of our campaigns.

In case this sounds too worthy, have no fear, this new show is one Emma Goldman would be proud to invite you to; this way for the revolutionary dancing. In a typically disconcerting and outwardly humorous presentation The Goose and the Common show builds a nest and a nightclub from the artefacts of repression. It raids the PSNI's store cupboard and requisitions the spoils. You'll find soft camo-nets that you can untangle or knit with. Riot shields are stacked and repurposed as a lean-to style shelter where a passing traveller could rest their weary head. Hostile street architecture is remodelled to softly cushion the weary buttocks of anyone who might sit on it. PSNI Land Rovers kick back in rows with their bonnets kitted out perfectly for a human to lounge louchely on. A karaoke station gives everyone a chance to sing from the playlist of activist's favourite songs under shimmering military-helicopter disco balls.

Array are inviting you to a party, but as usual, that's not the whole story.

I read this work as containing a warning that we need to become familiar with proximity to the objects of oppression and that for these coming days we need to learn to restore ourselves in their shadows. It examines how it might look and feel to give ourselves permission to do that, to step away, to imagine, to play, to let loose and sustain ourselves even while the world continues burning (or being burnt). This is an essential question to be asked right now when, on every horizon we, our fellow humans and of course our whole biosphere face a kaleidoscope of very real threats. We cannot face these challenges without building commonly held spaces of care.

In this work which could be read as a reflection on their own journey so far and their view on where we are now: they are inviting us to take our shelter where we can, to live generously with ourselves and others, to rest when we need it, and to sing like hell in the dark. Array say relax, because we have work to do together.

I am so grateful that Rua Red has commissioned this exhibition and extremely humbled to be allowed to consider and write about it. Sometimes things show up just when you need them.


OPEN

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