

**LETTER OF INTENT TO SUBMIT A BID TO HOST MANIFESTA 10, 2014
BELFAST CITY COUNCIL and DERRY CITY COUNCIL**

1. Confirmation of Candidature

This letter is to confirm the joint candidature of Belfast City Council and Derry City Council, Northern Ireland, for the hosting of the *Manifesta 10* biennial exhibition of contemporary visual art in the year 2014.

The two host authorities acknowledge that if a bid is submitted by the deadline of 30 October 2011, this will include the required commitment to the minimum budget of €3,000,000.00 (three million Euros) and the Transfer Fee of €400,000.00 (four hundred thousand Euros).

2. Acknowledgement of Aims

The host cities are aware of, and in agreement with, the aims and scope of *Manifesta*, the European Biennial of Contemporary Art. The bases for this agreement are outlined in the following summary of the aims and objectives of the developing joint Belfast/Derry bid.

To provide Europe with an international platform for contemporary artists who have not yet found their voice or institutional backing

Both Belfast and Derry have a history of commitment to contemporary visual arts, and this has grown considerably over the past thirty years, with the establishment of galleries which show the work of emerging and established artists, local and international. Many of these organisations afford support structures for emerging artists, with remits which inclusively or exclusively offer exhibition space and time to recent graduates and others early in their careers. A Belfast/Derry *Manifesta* would strive to continue and develop this commitment, treating the biennial as a rare opportunity to (1) bring the Northern Irish visual art community to the attention of a large and influential audience and (2) facilitate the sharing of skills and experience through networking between artists at various stages in their careers.

The two cities differ in size and in facilities for the visual arts. Belfast is larger and has a well-established art college within the University of Ulster. It therefore has a larger art community and more galleries/organisations than Derry.

Despite this, Derry's reputation in the field of visual arts is very strong, with the Orchard Gallery (1979-2003) and Void (since 2005) gaining international recognition for excellence. Context gallery's remit is dominated by its commitment to showing emerging artists and has also gained a reputation for excellence.

Belfast's artists have a history of self-organisation, forming studio groups and exhibition spaces, encouraging a climate of mutual support. For both cities, these factors have, within logistic and financial limitations, allowed international relationships with like-

minded organisations. This history provides a base which can be built upon, with *Manifesta* as a catalyst for subsequent developments.

To facilitate artistic exchanges between all professional groups and parties, especially those who have limited access to the market or established institutions

Two factors have created the conditions for a recent process of enhancing communications between arts organisations and other interested parties in Northern Ireland - the current economic crisis and Derry's successful bid for UK City of Culture for 2013. In the first case, the impact of the crisis on the arts has resulted in a heightened need for communication between arts groups, facing budgetary constraints in the coming years. It has become clear that it is necessary for unified strategies to (1) challenge cuts to arts budgets and (2) limit any damages caused by such cuts that take place. In the second case, arts organisations have identified a need to assert their autonomy, to ensure that artistic concept is not swamped by bureaucratic expedience.

These considerations have led to the formation of the Cultural Partnership Forum in Derry, consisting of representatives of arts organisations working in partnership with local government officers, and the Gallery Forum in Belfast, consisting mostly of gallery curators/managers who wish to lobby for continued, and strengthened, support for the visual arts.

Despite its origins in a general sense of anxiety, this climate of cooperation has come at an excellent time, in relation to the formation of the *Manifesta* bid, as it can act as a forum for debate and form the basis for expansion. The bid will be developed with important input from both the Derry and Belfast forums and, conversely, *Manifesta* would provide the potential for expanding the communication and cooperation that they represent.

To respond to a commonly perceived need, by initiating new projects and new forms of artistic practice, to experiment with new curatorial methods and develop new audiences for contemporary art

Discussions with organisations have begun already to identify very different needs of the two cities. It has become clear that both Belfast Derry and are in need of centralised resources for the development of visual art, but specific requirements differ.

- While the management of community arts projects in Belfast is well organised by the outreach programmes of galleries, and supported by the organisations Community Arts Forum and New Belfast Community Arts Initiative, it is agreed that the city would benefit from a resource centre with spaces for art projects and equipment and staff to facilitate them.
- Derry, which has no art college, has the need to establish a visual arts resource which caters for those who wish to take their studies to a higher level. It, therefore, would benefit greatly from a resource centre which enables potential students to prepare for entry into adult education. Void gallery has a small experimental art education resource which performs this function on a limited scale and may be used as a model for the development of a significant resource for the city's aspiring visual art community.

Following initial discussions with arts professionals in both cities it is also becoming clear that the two cities have differing concepts of how the two strands of the *Manifesta*

exhibition might be structured.

- The ongoing development of the old Ebrington Army Barracks in Derry provides, in the form of the parade ground, a wide area which would act perfectly as a location for temporary sculptural works. It has been suggested, then, that for *Manifesta* the accent in Derry might be placed on external works place on this location, as well as further sites in and around the city. There is a building located on one side of the parade ground perimeter, which has been provisionally identified as a site for a gallery/museum. This building, then, may be available for further works. A new footbridge across the River Foyle, joining Ebrington to Derry's city centre, is nearing completion.
- Belfast city centre has a very large number of disused buildings. It has been suggested that the Belfast half of the *Manifesta* exhibition should be held almost exclusively in such spaces. The city's galleries would not be used for the exhibition, with the exception of the MAC, which may act as the focal point (and administrative centre) of the show. This will (1) highlight the situation of the lack of use of the city's building stock (already the subject of campaigns by the Ulster Architectural Heritage Society and Forum for Alternative Belfast), (2) provide the impetus for the change of use of a city-centre building for a community visual art resource and (3) give galleries the opportunity to showcase the work of local artists and generate occasions for networking between interested parties.
- The seventy-mile road between Belfast and Derry (M2/M22/A6) would act as a third exhibition space, with artworks located, for example, at roadsides, on bridges, on roundabouts, in fields, on trees, at bus stops and in picnic areas. Thus *Manifesta* and the art made for it act as a means of connecting two distinctive urban identities via a rural conduit. Visitors to *Manifesta* would travel by road between the two cities and the journey (requiring additional buses) would be a part of the experience, rather than an inconvenience. If possible, buses would also show examples of video art during the journeys.

Parallel Events -

We believe that the provision of parallel events is crucial to the success of *Manifesta* in Belfast and Derry. These would consist of educational/mediation programmes and the *Manifesta Fringe*, holding visual arts (and other arts) events which relate to the context of the *Manifesta* exhibition.

An important aspect of the parallel events would be to create channels of communication between the two cities, with educational and arts events produced through cooperation and mutual support. The journey between Belfast and Derry should act, not as a barrier to this cooperation, but as an intrinsic part of the process. The road, then, should contribute also to the fringe and the education/mediation programmes.

MANIFESTA FRINGE

With the *Manifesta* exhibition taking place almost exclusively in alternative spaces, the two cities' galleries would be free to continue their autonomous programming. It is hoped, though, that they would use the opportunity to exhibit the work of local artists, emerging and established, in order to maximise this chance to enhance the region's

international profile and to expand on the networking that such an event generates.

Visitors to visual art exhibitions, of course, have an interest in other art forms and *Manifesta* would offer an opportunity for other events to take place, perhaps relating to the theme of the main event and the fringe. These could include music, theatre, dance, film, etc. The enthusiasm for the arts which is generated by events such as *Manifesta* should encourage not only visitors but also local people to take part in and attend the wide range of fringe events.

Education/Mediation

Educational projects have in recent years become increasingly important aspects of contemporary arts programmes in Northern Ireland and they would be central to the Belfast/Derry *Manifesta*. We would develop existing programmes, in cooperation with education bodies, arts organisations and community arts groups, and formulate new programmes aimed at all ages and levels.

The University of Ulster has campuses in both cities, its art college within the Belfast campus. The university will contribute to the academic aspect of the biennial's education programme, drawing on its experience of holding conferences, seminars, lectures, etc.

Schools, at primary and secondary levels, have for many years worked with community arts groups, galleries and other arts organisations. Projects have often responded to exhibitions and the form/content of exhibited work. In other cases programmes and workshops have considered social issues, often related to the north's sectarian divide and the legacy of conflict. *Manifesta* should act as a catalyst to build on these achievements.

Extension of the schools education programme beyond the period of the *Manifesta* event is perhaps where the road project comes in. The Belfast/Derry road (with appropriate means constructed for displaying art) could, in addition to containing work during the *Manifesta* event, remain as a continuing exhibiting space for work made in children's educational projects.

Cultural Profile

Both cities have histories of excellence in visual art, but in the past three decades or so its practice and reputation have been greatly enhanced, very often through ambitious initiatives carried out by individuals and groups from within the art community itself and subsequently supported with grant aid from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and the two city councils.

The majority of artists in Northern Ireland have studied at the art college in the Belfast campus of the University of Ulster, which offers art education at undergraduate, MFA and PhD levels. Derry offers pre-degree Foundation Studies in art and design at its North West Regional College. The curriculum at Queens University in Belfast includes some arts, including drama, film and music (including its postgraduate course in experimental Music and Sonic Arts).

There is a commitment to cross-disciplinary practice, with a climate of debate and collaboration across art forms.

Derry galleries, past and present:

- *Orchard Gallery (1979-2003): Established by Derry City Council to exhibit contemporary work by established Irish and international artists;*
- Void (2005-): An artist-led space formed by a group of local artists in response to the closure of the Orchard, continuing the city's commitment to exhibiting artists with high-profile international careers.
- Context (1993-): Located in the Playhouse building, Context's primary remit is to show the work of local and emerging artists, with occasional shows by more established artists.

Belfast galleries, past and present:

- *Arts Council Gallery (1964-1993): Primarily programming exhibitions of artists from Northern Ireland;*
- *Art & Research Exchange (1979-1986): Artist-led gallery and resource centre, connected to Joseph Beuys' Free International University;*
- Belfast Exposed (1983-): Exhibits lens-based work by local and international artists. A second gallery was recently opened in the building, primarily for exhibitions which respond to the organisation's photograph archive;
- Queens Street Studios (1984-): Twenty-two studio spaces, with a small gallery;
- Ormeau Baths Gallery (1993-): Replaced the Arts Council Gallery, with a new remit to exhibit the work of established local and international artists;
- Catalyst Arts (1993-): Artist-led gallery, with a continually changing management team, showing local artists and work by artists-in-residence.
- Golden Thread Gallery (1998-): A diverse programme, showing work by local and international artists at all levels, often juxtaposing work by artists at early, mid and mature stages of their careers;
- Naughton Gallery at Queens University (2001-): Showing fine art and crafts at various levels;
- PS2 (2005-): Studios and shop-front gallery, showing a broad range of media.
- the third space (2006-): Commercial gallery, showing mostly Northern Irish artists.
- Platform (2008-): Studios and gallery, showing primarily sculpture, installation, video and performance.
- The MAC (opening 2012): This will be the largest arts centre in Northern Ireland, with three art gallery spaces, along with two theatres, a dance studio and education/workshop spaces.

Geo-political and Historical Contexts

Previously, the leading industries in the two cities were linen and shipbuilding (Belfast) and shirt production (Derry). The two Harland & Wolff gantry cranes ("Samson and Goliath"), which dominate the Belfast skyline, remain as reminders of the city's shipbuilding tradition, which included the building of the Titanic. The area is currently under development, building a large tourist attraction in what is now known as the Titanic Quarter. The shirt industry continued in Derry until quite recently and many of its factories remain. The large City Factory now houses a part of the North West Regional College and Void art centre.

Northern Ireland's identity is perceived from outside as determined by its sectarian divisions and the near three decades of conflict and violence. To a large extent this is

accurate and the legacy of the “troubles” remains, both psychologically and physically. Some communities remain disconnected from their neighbours, separated, on one hand, by religious affiliation and conflicting national identities and, on the other hand, by the physical divisions of urban landscapes which have to a large extent been shaped by the realities of conflict and ideological difference.

However, since the mid nineteen-nineties, with the ending of hostilities, important and significant steps have been taken to address these issues, especially since the signing of the Belfast Agreement (or “The Good Friday Agreement”) of 1998, by the British and Irish governments and ratified by public referendum. The Agreement has led to improved cross-border cooperation, the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons, the release of political prisoners and the formation of a devolved parliament, the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The two largest bodies in Northern Ireland are (1) the predominantly Protestant unionist community, which supports continuing membership of the United Kingdom and (2) the predominantly Catholic nationalist community, which aspires to a reunified island of Ireland. Since peace, initiatives have been developed to encourage improved tolerance and cooperation - by the state and, perhaps more significantly, by local organisations which both support the interests of their communities and promote new relationships which challenge division.

The arts have played their part in this process. Analysis of the sectarian divide has included the politics of space, considering the impact of architecture and planning on collective mindsets. Across art forms, including theatre, film, festival and visual art, events have taken place, which challenge the social, political and ideological factors which create and confirm the bifurcation of the Northern Irish population. As mentioned above, often art exhibitions have been supported by galleries’ outreach programmes, working with community organisations to develop workshops which explore issues through discussion and art making (in many cases resulting in exhibitions held in community centres, schools or galleries’ project spaces). In recent years this approach has been extended to projects with our growing migrant communities, who have on occasion faced discrimination and intolerance.

The arts, then, are central to Northern Ireland’s social, political and cultural development. Belfast, Derry and the rural expanse between the two cities would create a compelling context for *Manifesta 10* and its parallel events. The people of Northern Ireland (and the island as a whole) often feel, psychologically as well as physically, on the margins of the wider European community. The biennial would enhance its visibility, showcase the value of its artistic community and create a context for further cultural developments.

(To be signed by legal representatives of Belfast City Council and Derry City Council)