



## 'Just about coping': precarity and resilience among applied theatre and community arts workers in Northern Ireland

Jennings, M., Beirne, M., & Knight, S. (2017). 'Just about coping': precarity and resilience among applied theatre and community arts workers in Northern Ireland. *Irish Journal of Arts Management and Cultural Policy*, 4, 14-24. Advance online publication.

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

### **Published in:**

Irish Journal of Arts Management and Cultural Policy

### **Publication Status:**

Published online: 01/05/2017

### **Document Version**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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## ‘Just about coping’: precarity and resilience among applied theatre and community arts workers in Northern Ireland

MATT JENNINGS, MARTIN BEIRNE, STEPHANIE KNIGHT

**Abstract:** *In March 2015, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI) cut grant funding to some arts organisations by 40-100%, in order to manage an 11% reduction from the Northern Ireland Executive (NIE) in its 2015/16 Budget (ACNI, 2015). This was despite a high-profile ‘13p for the arts’ ACNI campaign, which had lobbied the NIE to preserve existing levels of arts funding (estimated at 13p per capita per week), already significantly lower than in other parts of the UK (‘far less than the 32 pence per week spent in Wales’, Litvack, 2014, online). Alongside cuts to spending on Social Development, Health and Education, and a reduction in European Union Peace funding, these have reduced the financial support available to applied theatre and community arts practitioners in Northern Ireland, despite such initiatives as the 2013 UK City of Culture programme. In these increasingly precarious conditions, how can community-based artists survive?*

**Keywords:** Precarity; resilience; community arts; freelance workers; Northern Ireland; applied drama.

### Introduction

This article investigates the personal, political and artistic strategies developed by freelance and full-time arts workers in Derry/Londonderry, Belfast and rural Northern Ireland. Robert Hewison (2015, p. 231), analysing the social and cultural fallout of neoliberal arts policy in Britain over the last 20 years, calls for a ‘reconstruction of the public realm’ and a ‘revival of the local, the diverse and the different’. According to Isabell Lorey (2015, p. 110-1), ‘de-territorialized networks’ of resilience can emancipate us from the ‘subjugating anxiety’ of ‘governmental precarization’. This article explores responses to such ‘subjugating anxiety’ and the development of ‘diverse and different’ local practices that could support a ‘reconstruction of the public realm’.

This research is part of a broader project examining the capacity of artists and artistic communities, specifically within Scotland and Northern Ireland, to survive financially, psychologically and creatively in the context of austerity and precarity. The aim is to develop a clearer understanding of the measures by which artists sustain their practice or ‘stand their own creative ground’, while continuing to support themselves and the communities with whom they work.

This article is based on the findings from an ethnographic study of a core group of 18 community drama, dance, music and visual arts practitioners in Northern Ireland. Practitioners with at least four years’ worth of professional experience of community arts facilitation in Northern Ireland were asked to take part at the personal invitation of the author. Originally from Australia, Matt Jennings has been living in Derry/Londonderry and collaborating artistically with many of these practitioners for over 15 years. Formal research on the topic of precarity and resilience was conducted from January 2012 and until August 2016 and consisted of semi-structured interviews; follow-up questionnaires; participant and nonparticipant observations of practice; and seminar discussions of arts management and cultural policy (Beirne et al., 2017).

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### **Context: Community Arts, the Peace Process and UK City of Culture 2013 Derry/Londonderry – 'Legenderry'**

For the artists participating in this research, the wider political context and related funding policies have been crucial in both supporting and constraining their creative work with communities. Since 2010, there has been a shift in policy focus towards economic regeneration and public health; previously community relations, social cohesion and peace building were the key priorities. Local, national and international bodies have funded arts projects intended to address conflict and sectarianism in Northern Ireland, with varying degrees of success, since the beginning of the 'Troubles' in the 1960s (Maguire, 2006; Grant, 1993; Neill, 1995); at the same time, prior to 1998, grassroots community-based artists and theatre-makers had been at the forefront of providing hope and inspiration, supporting critical resistance to violent oppression and sustaining local economies (McDonnell, 2010; Maguire, 2006; Grant, 1993).

These sectors were united through a cultural strategy of conflict transformation following the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) of 1998. The 'peace process' and its subsequent funding (or 'peace dividend') provided opportunities for arts organisations, communities and individuals to develop new collaborative work and cross-community relationships (Jennings, 2009, 2012; Jennings and Baldwin, 2010). This 'peace industry' drew down an unprecedented level of funding for social development and conflict transformation in Northern Ireland, particularly from the European Union, which invested over €2.2 billion in the region between 2000 and 2006 alone (Commission of the European Communities, 2008, online). Significant amounts of this funding were spent on community arts projects, although the exact amount is impossible to calculate as money was allocated and accounted for according to policy objectives, rather than modes of delivery (Jennings, 2009, 2012).

In 2013, Derry/Londonderry hosted the inaugural UK City of Culture (UK CoC). This event represented a significant turn in the cultural strategy of Northern Ireland – away from centrally funded social development and peace-building programmes and towards corporate 're-branding', tourism promotion and public relations approaches (McDermott et al, 2016).

Derry/Londonderry was announced as the winner of the bid for the inaugural UK CoC on 16 July 2010. The announcement of the successful bid was made exactly one month after the publication of the findings of the Saville Tribunal, clearing the 14 civilians killed by British paratroopers at a civil rights demonstration in the city on 30 January 1972 ('Bloody Sunday') of any wrongdoing. On 15 June 2010, David Cameron had called on the country to 'come together to close this painful chapter on Northern Ireland's troubled past' (BBC News, 2010, online). The announcement that Derry/Londonderry would host the UK CoC event promised renewed hope for the future: 'But if that event [the Saville Tribunal] closed a dark chapter on the past, tonight's opened a bright new one to the future' (Belfast Telegraph, 16 July 2010).

In the run-up to the event, marketing material rebranded the city as 'LegenDerry', a move designed to generate a 'step change' whereby the city could tell a 'new story' (McDermott et al, 2016). A celebrated promotional film for the city's UK CoC bid featured Seamus Heaney, quoting from his poetic work *The Cure at Troy*, calling on the viewer to 'hope for a great sea-change on the far side of revenge' ('Voices', 2010, online).

The expectation in the city itself, bolstered by the ambitions stated in the bid document, was that this event would provide substantial funding and paid work for local artists and arts organisations (Boland et al, 2016). However, the UK CoC title supplied no specific external funding mechanisms of its own. It was primarily a branding exercise. Phil Redmond, chair of the UK CoC selection panel, told the Liverpool Post that: 'principally, it is merely the badge of authori-

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ty around which people can gather to work collectively and collaboratively... the badge should come with no extra funding, encouraging people to collaborate with what they have, not what they would wish for' (Fealty, 2012, online).

This condition was significantly different from the European Capital of Culture designation, which provides EU grants to support the event (Boland et al, 2016). As such, it entailed a 14-month UK cultural programme being delivered by one of the poorest cities in the UK, at its own expense. In 2012, 41.5 % of the population under the City of Derry and Strabane District Council was recorded as 'economically inactive' (DETNI, 2016, online).

For the UK CoC project, primary public funding was made available from within existing Northern Ireland funding. For instance, £12.5 million was granted by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFM DFM) in June 2012. Various other funding streams provided support for the programme; but throughout the event, local businesses, community groups and political representatives expressed disappointment and frustration at 'the inability of City of Culture to immediately increase employment rates' (McDermott et al, 2016, p. 622). In 2015, three years after the CoC, the rate of 'economic inactivity' among the population of Derry and Strabane was still 41.6% (DETNI, 2016, online). While this cannot be blamed on the UK CoC programme, it could not be claimed that the impact of the event included a legacy of substantial economic improvement.

Boland et al (2016) have pointed out that it was always unlikely that the CoC event would deliver significant economic development in the region, in the context of the global economic downturn and national austerity policies:

In truth, CoC was never realistically going to be a panacea for deep seated and entrenched socio-economic problems in a deprived and peripheral economy (p.14).

Similar cultural events, such as the European Capital of Culture, are frequently burdened with 'excessive expectations' of their capacity to deliver significant economic impact (Boland et al, 2016, p. 13); as the official evaluation report on the Derry/Londonderry UK CoC event states: 'If a major event of this nature is expected to have a major impact on the local economy, it needs to be part of a broader strategy with supporting investment' (Derry City and Strabane District Council, 2016, p. 61).

While the economic impact of the UK CoC event may have been disappointing, the cultural impact of the event seems to have been more encouraging: 'there is clear evidence of genuine transformative change... enhanced community relations and sense of unity; intercultural dialogue and cultural exchange; cross-community attendance at events; increased tourism and spend; shared and depoliticised spaces' (Boland et al, 2016, p. 14).

### Impact on Local Artists

During the UK CoC, substantial amounts of funding were spent on flagship performance events, directed by prestige international artists such as Hofesh Schechter and Frank Cottrell Boyce, and including large casts of volunteers drawn from local community groups (Boland et al, 2016; McDermott et al, 2016). Meanwhile, locally-based artists, who had been working with local community groups for years, found themselves struggling to get paid work.

It was during the year of the City of Culture – where I had no work for four months. At all! And that has never happened in all the years that I've been at it. I've always had something. (Freelance actor/arts facilitator, interviewed 12 May 2015)

Every locally-based artist interviewed for this research reported that, from 2010 to 2013, they

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were asked to work for no pay or low pay on projects associated with the UK CoC, usually with an appeal to local loyalty or the suggestion that the experience would enhance their profile. When local artists were contracted for payment, they sometimes experienced long delays before they received that payment.

In some cases, it was more than a year that people hadn’t received their payments; in many cases, despite repeatedly supplying the relevant information...verbal and written promises were broken about payment coming through. (Freelance writer/community facilitator, interviewed 13 May 2015)

People who had 10, 20 or 30 years of experience, who had been embedded in their communities for years, found themselves struggling to survive. While most of these artists did get some paid work during 2013, all of the interviewees declared that they had all experienced periods without any paid arts work at all during 2014, for periods of up to 3 months.

The big noticeable funding cut was after the City of Culture...Definitely for that year after the City of Culture year, work was just so hard to get. There was nothing...January, February and March [of 2014] it was just absolutely dire. There was just no work at all. (Freelance dancer/teacher/facilitator, interviewed 13 May 2015)

**Artists’ Personal Responses To Precarity Since 2013**

Activity	Number (/18)
Working outside of community sector	18
Working on multiple projects simultaneously	18
Working for low pay/no pay	14
Relying on Partners or Parents	12
Working in other parts of Ireland & UK	12
Working in other disciplines	9
Regular yoga/martial arts practice	5
Working outside the arts	4
Receipt of welfare/tax credits	3

Since 2013, some of these artists have had to move out of their homes, relying on parents or partners for accommodation and financial support. Some have been working outside of the arts in order to support themselves – in 2015, one freelance artist, who had been working continuously up until 2013, gave up her arts career altogether to work in catering. Many have left the region, either temporarily or permanently, travelling for work in Dublin or Belfast, as well as England or Scotland. 15 out of 18 artists interviewed in 2015 stated that they were having to commute regularly to other cities or countries for paid work. All reported that many of their friends and colleagues have migrated permanently, often to England, Scotland, Australia or Canada.

While individual artists might have many reasons for migrating, working further afield or changing careers, the loss of this skilled workforce would present a collective problem for social regeneration, peace-building and cultural policy. Over the years, these artists have built up the specific expertise and relationships of trust with arts organisations and community groups necessary to deliver those kinds of projects. They were often asked to contribute to CoC projects, whether paid or unpaid, because of their ability to organise and inspire local community participants. Their individual capacity to travel for employment may be seen as an element of their ‘resilience’, but their

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long-term departure would be a significant loss to their communities and the arts sector as a whole.

### The Position of the 'Artist'

While committed to community arts practice and the groups with whom they work, almost all of the practitioners interviewed prefer to be identified as artists first and foremost, rather than community development workers. They have been asked to meet social and political funding priorities, but primarily they want to create art. This tension reflects the long-running debate between intrinsic and instrumental approaches to funding and evaluating arts (Belfiore and Bennett, 2008).

Alternative art practice lies outside the framing that we are given by bureaucratic and political practices... The question is, how do we value and what kind of values do we bring to the input and the creative process? (Dancer/Choreographer/Artistic Director, interviewed 18 May 2012)

These artists engage in the work because they believe that art itself is intrinsically important. When asked 'why are you still doing this, when it is so difficult?', frequent responses included because it is 'so worthwhile', because it is 'fun and enjoyable', because it creates 'beauty', because it is 'challenging' and because 'it makes life worth living'. The value of accessible arts practice was seen as particularly significant in the context of Northern Ireland:

I think that what is special about Northern Ireland – it's the arts. And without that, and without how accessible the arts are here, what is there left really? (Freelance dancer/teacher/facilitator, interviewed 13 May 2015)

While valuing art 'for its own sake', these practitioners also express a passionate belief in the social and cultural value of community engagement.

There is the sheer enjoyment, the commitment, the energy, the passion. The skills base and the wealth of talent that there is in this area is unparalleled, to me, in any other community area. And every time you take your 'cynical self' down to do some work or be involved in a project, I think, the sheer joy in it and the energy and enthusiasm is renewed – which is why we are all still doing it. (Freelance writer/community facilitator, interviewed 13 May 2015)

Apart from peace-building programmes, these community artists in Northern Ireland have worked with groups of people with learning disabilities, mental health issues, older people, young people, prisoners, police officer, migrant groups and so on. However, most of these efforts have taken the form of short-term projects, with little long-term legacy.

Working with the adults with learning disabilities, I only had 10 weeks to work with both groups from scratch, to come up with all the aims and objectives throughout and to follow through with I was going to do, right up to a performance with a live audience - theatre, lights, sounds the whole shebang. (Freelance Drama Facilitator, interviewed 22 May 2015)

Some interviewees expressed anger about the 'use' of art – the utilitarianism whereby art is reduced, in some sense, to a form of social work or public relations. Steve Batts, Artistic Director of Echo Echo Dance Theatre, succinctly described the difficulty of trying to deploy the arts as a 'lever' for social development: 'Art is not a lever and people cannot be levered' (interviewed 18 May 2012). While some artists may have been uncomfortable operating as 'levers' for social policy, they have become even less happy at being abandoned to an uncertain fate as those levers are removed.

Some of the more established artists expressed a general sense of demoralisation as public funding has declined:

I think one of the biggest changes has been a huge mood swing – a loss of confidence amongst community artists...A feeling of powerlessness – a feeling that significant achievements that have been made by the community arts have not been recognised. (Freelance writer/community facilitator, interviewed 13 May 2015)

While public funding of the arts may have been problematic in terms of instrumentalism, reli-

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ance on funding has left artists vulnerable when that funding has been reduced or withdrawn. The emphasis of funding regimes on short-term and outcome-oriented programmes has limited opportunities for artists to develop sustainable models of support or alternative sources of funding (Jennings, 2012). In order to be available to work on multiple projects, limited in time, freelance practitioners can be constrained from generating their own long-term projects.

When they are working, they can be overworked. All of these artists reported that they had often worked up to 80 hours a week, juggling 6 or 7 projects simultaneously. This makes it difficult to focus on the needs of the groups with which they are working. But they accept these conditions because they never know when the next paid job will arrive and are afraid to say no to any project. Their anxiety has increased as public funding has declined. They have become a professional precariat (Standing, 2011).

Has work become precarious? Well, yeah (laughs)...because you panic. Everybody I speak to that works in this field feels exactly the same. I think that's strangely encouraging in a way, because you're not on your own, you know you've got this network of people who go 'oh my God, there's no work'...There is so much instability and I understand why so many people can't handle that. But I'm not ready to give up on it just yet. (Freelance Actor/Writer/Drama Facilitator, interviewed 12 May 2015)

### Resilience and Precarity

One difficulty of discussing 'resilience' is that there are different definitions and categories of resilience. These include: personal resilience, in terms of psychological and physical health, well-being and development; economic resilience, in terms of sustainable economies and the capacity to support oneself financially; as well as community resilience, such as the capacity to maintain cohesive, integrated and secure societies.

In relation to the first category, 'personal resilience', Macpherson et al. (2015, p. 2) define resilience as 'the capacity to do well despite adverse experiences'. They conducted a literature review of over 190 books and articles on the topic of resilience, specifically among young people with mental health issues or learning difficulties, and identified that arts participation can significantly increase the capacity of a person 'to feel safe, commit to a group and belong, develop their learning, cope with difficult feelings, help others, develop self-understanding and foster a sense of identity' (Macpherson et al, 2015, p. 4).

In relation to financial resilience, artists can be resourceful at securing their livelihood within challenging economic circumstances. According to a study by Green and Newsinger (2014), numerous artists and arts organisations in the East Midlands of England, who have been working with disabled children and young people, have demonstrated admirable economic 'resilience' since 2010, during a period of politically driven 'austerity'. They have found alternative funding streams for their work and diversified sources of personal and organisational income. However, their client groups and participants have suffered from a significant reduction in services and programmes.

Newsinger (2016) reflects an increasingly critical perspective on the discourse of 'resilience', as it places the burden of managing the impact of ideologically driven political decisions on the people who suffer the most from their consequences, while having the least power to change policy:

Part of the problem with resilience thinking is its role in the de-politicisation of funding cuts, perhaps due to its origin in ecological science...But austerity is not a natural phenomenon; it is a political process that is consciously reshaping society in a myriad of ways to the detriment of those at the bottom, particularly the young and the disabled. So while resilience might be a 'good thing' for individuals and organisations, it does not provide much of a platform from which to question the normative dimensions of austerity, or argue for a more inclusive, progressive arts agenda. Down with resilience! (Newsinger 2016, online)

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### 'Precarity' & 'Precarization': The Artist As 'Limit-Point'

Lorey (2015), in response to the analyses of Paolo Virno (2004) and Judith Butler (2010), distinguishes between 'precarity', 'precariousness' and 'precarization'. Butler describes 'precariousness' as an existential condition, the fact that life entails risk: 'Lives are by definition precarious: they can be expunged at will or by accident; their persistence is in no sense guaranteed' (2010, p. 25); while 'precarity' refers to the contingency of security within a specific system:

Precarity designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death. (Butler 2010, 25-26)

According to Lorey (2015), 'precarity' has been built into capitalism from the beginning. Workers have always been at the mercy of employers and governments. In Western Europe after the 1940s, the invention of the welfare state fostered the perception that the political system was designed to protect its citizens and provide them with the means of subsistence. The decline in the welfare state and the collapse of the regulated labour market has led to intensified 'precarization', whereby 'precarious living and working conditions are increasingly normalized at a structural level and thus become an important instrument of governing' (Lorey 2011, online). This concept of 'precarization' involves the recognition that the state and capital, rather than providing security for workers and citizens, govern through insecurity:

The third dimension of the precarious is the dynamics of governmental precarization. It refers to modes of governing since the emergence of industrial-capitalist conditions and cannot be separated in occidental modern societies from bourgeois self-determination. (Lorey 2011, online)

Both capital and the state derive power by threatening the security of citizens in practice (e.g. through war or austerity) while promising security in principle (e.g. through surveillance):

Precarity also characterizes that politically induced condition of maximized precariousness for populations exposed to arbitrary state violence who often have no other option than to appeal to the very state from which they need protection. (Butler 2010, p. 25-6)

Global workforces, under neoliberal economic restructuring, are now subject to a process of 'precarization'. Job security is in decline; workers' rights are threatened on a range of fronts, from individual contract bargaining to attacks on the European Convention on Human Rights (Lorey, 2011).

The increasing awareness of 'precarization' as a global phenomenon has led people to investigate the means by which artists have managed to cope with precarity throughout their careers. Writers such as Virno (2004) and Arendt (1977) have described both 'post-Fordist' workers and 'political activists' in terms of 'virtuosity' and 'performance', casting both labour and politics as 'performance art' (Lorey 2011, online). Lorey identifies a difficulty with the metaphor:

The concept of "virtuosos" does not apply to all the very diverse precarious conditions, but is restricted to cultural producers, whose function is neither avant-garde nor a paradigm for all precarious workers. (Lorey, 2011, online)

Contemporary fascination with the 'creative industries' and artistic workers (or 'creatives'), at the level of management studies and public policy, has been subject to further critique from political economists such as Frederic Lordon:

A number of recent studies and sociology of work discovered in the figure of the artist a pertinent metaphor, and even more than a metaphor, a common model, for those employees reputed to have personal qualities of strategic importance to the company, notably 'creativity'...this limit-point of employment, has been turned into a general model for the overall project of neoliberal normalisation. (Lordon 2014, p. 123-5)

But if 'precariousness' is a fact of life and 'precarity' is inherent to the political and economic



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system, then the artistic precariat is not a 'limit-point' outside of normal experience. In fact, their example highlights the 'precarity' to which we are all subject. While we might be able to learn broader lessons from the capacity of the freelance artist to cope with 'precarity', due to their commitment, flexibility and resourcefulness, we should also heed the warnings when 'precarization' threatens their survival.

### Tactical Adaptation: Commercialization and Collectivization

While working conditions and work processes for community arts practitioners in Northern Ireland have become more 'precarious', surprisingly few artists have given up altogether. They are not completely burnt out. They are veterans at tackling frustration without despair. They face fear bravely and with humour:

I think it's fairly useless trying to get government to do anything about it - because they're not very likely to listen to some artist saying that it would be nice to have a bit more money to teach dance to some children in Donemana, just because they've never had the chance to do it before. They're off privatising the NHS!  
(Freelance dancer/teacher/facilitator, interviewed 13 May 2015)

These pragmatic perspectives help them try to 'stand their own artistic ground' and preserve their sanity and their work.

In terms of financial resilience, all of the artists interviewed asserted that some projects which had previously been publicly funded have begun charging fees to participants. Organisations, artists and participants also report engaging in fundraising activities such as bake sales, charity raffles and crowdfunding campaigns. While these kinds of fundraising measures might sustain the artist and the organisation, they can exclude the most financially disadvantaged (Green and Newsinger, 2014). These steps have saved projects that would otherwise have perished; but it can mean asking the people who have the least to give the most.

Organisations are increasingly turning towards corporate sponsorship and investment, with some success. However, commercial investment is more sustainable when supported by the state. Sustainable economies – particularly in terms of job creation, quality of life and a cultural offer for attracting new residents and investment – rely on statutory bodies for infrastructural development. In 2016, after the UK arts sector demonstrated the highest levels of economic growth out of all the 'creative industries', the Arts Council England recognised this by providing new funding streams, including a 'new fund... specifically for individual artists to develop their creative practice' (Hutchison, 2016, online).

While sponsorship and user-pays schemes are solutions typically suggested by the 'business model' of the arts as a 'creative industry', the legacy of community arts practice suggests a different approach: collectivisation. Globally, workers' and artists' collectives have been springing up in defiance of austerity and as means of maximising resources for activism, creativity and survival; examples include the precarias de derivas in Spain (Lorey, 2015), Fora do Eixo in Brazil (2016, online) and the Precarious Workers' Brigade in the UK (2016, online):

We are a UK-based group of precarious workers in culture & education. We call out in solidarity with all those struggling to make a living in this climate of instability and enforced austerity.

In Derry/Londonderry, Echo Echo Dance Theatre, for example, has begun providing studios and technical support at low cost for a range of community arts groups and individual artists who can no longer afford to continue elsewhere. Unfortunately, Echo Echo are at risk themselves, following the ACNI funding cuts to arts organisations of 40-100% in March 2015. Since the new ACNI warning of April 2017, all staff have been put on notice.

There are also examples of established artists sharing personal income and resources with

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other artists and participants. These include more established artists sharing their fees with younger artists who have a less regular income – or with participants who had personal costs to cover, such as child care or taxi fares, during their participation. Six of the artists interviewed for this research asserted that they had subsidised projects and participants out of their own pockets.

Some local initiatives have begun to support collaborative activity without recourse to specific public funding. For example, the #Derry Creatives group is an interdisciplinary collective who meet monthly to pool resources and support each other's arts practice. However, the group is led by staff from subsidised organisations, such as Voluntary Arts Ireland and #Brand NI. It is possible to do something with nothing, but it helps to know somebody else who has something.

### Conclusion: A Precarious Future?

Currently in Northern Ireland, there is an increased atmosphere of anxiety and insecurity in the arts sector and society in general; particularly in relation to the potential impact of impending welfare 'reforms' and reductions in public services, following the deal reached between the Northern Ireland Executive and Conservative UK government in 2016. Further cuts to public services could have a disproportionate impact in Northern Ireland, where 28% of those employed are in the public sector, 35% of the population have no tertiary qualifications and 27% of the population is economically inactive (DETNI, 2015).

Perhaps the biggest uncertainty pertains to 'Brexit' – the departure of the UK from the EU – which at this stage has no clear policy framework. The outcomes of the eventual strategy could have a serious impact on the stability of peace in Northern Ireland, as well as its economic prosperity. In the context of intensifying 'precarization', artistic collectives may provide one possible model for survival. In fact, collaborative creativity may be essential for survival.

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*Parts of this article were presented in a seminar and policy briefing, 'Quality of Life: Inclusion and resilience in community cultural development in Northern Ireland', for the Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS) at the Northern Ireland Assembly, 25 January 2017.*

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