

Smelly socks make great art

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Cork city is the exhibition space for the annual ArtTrail, with site-specific works and audio-accompanied walks turning the urban space into a canvas for experimental art, writes **Rosita Boland**

I AM RUNNING THROUGH an empty warehouse, trying unsuccessfully to avoid the large loaves of bread being thrown at me. It can only be art. This is part of Bern Roche Farrelly's engaging *Conductor* installation in the old Sawmills building on Cork's Copley Street, as part of this year's ArtTrail. First established in 1996, the trail features site-specific work around the city. Funded by the Arts Council and Cork City Council, this year the theme is "Multiple Endings", and the organisers Sharon McCarthy and Kevin Tuohy got more than 130 proposals from artists both inside and outside Ireland.

Bern Roche Farrelly, a performance artist based in London, was one of the successful applicants. His space is a window of the former Sawmills building, the glass of which is completely covered in black text on see-through plastic. There are 100 different pieces of short text in total, visible from both sides of the glass. As I take notes, people on the street are staring in, reading the texts. Some of these read as follows: "Hold the soil and call it food"; "Compare this brick to those in the building"; "Lay the map on the floor so that north is facing south"; "Profess to have read the whole book".

On the window ledge and floor are a number of objects that accompany the piece, among them a map of Cork city, charcoal, a dictionary, bags of topsoil, a globe and loaves of bread.

What does it all mean? "The piece is called *Conductor*," Roche Farrelly explains. "There's the meaning of conducting an orchestra, and also being a conduit between things; in this case, between the text and objects." What he wants is for the audience to create an additional dimension to the project, by responding to the instructions on the texts, and using the supplied objects. One of them reads: "Throw the bread *at* one another". And thus we start tossing weighty loaves of bread at each other, like jugglers, until Roche Farrelly reminds me that the line is "Throw the bread *at* one another". Hence I am suddenly racing around the warehouse dodging missiles of bread, to the amusement of everyone present. Behind this highly entertaining diversion lies the real focus of Roche Farrelly's piece: paying close attention to things we usually take for granted, and thus gaining a fresh perspective on them.

"I hope the people who see this will start to question the way language maps itself on the physical world, and how our world is mediated through language." There will be three volunteers on site at *Conductor* during ArtTrail to engage with the public. There are several other pieces at the Sawmills and, collectively, the experience of exploring them adds up to something both exciting and meaningful.

Design students from Coláiste Stiofáin Naofa, overseen by artists Eli Caamano and Fergus Somers, have been making furniture on site from a variety of materials. These include reclaimed furniture, objects found in skips, felled wood and unseasoned wood. There is a section of the Sawmills filled with the oddest and most intriguing Alice-in-Wonderlandish chairs, benches, stools and cupboards.

"It's about using a number of different materials to create endings," explains second-year student Aoife Browne, as she walks around a chair that was made from material found in a skip. It sits on rockers salvaged from the headboards of a child's bed. There are also traditional three-legged stools, using legs from broken chairs; chairs made out of tables, benches made from wardrobe doors and drawers, and tables from pallets. Those I sit on – gingerly – are entirely solid and comfortable.

Jonnet Middleton from England has come over with a plastic sack full of tights she has not thrown away in 20 years, which hang like banners from a corner. She doesn't throw clothing away, and has not bought any clothing, either new or second-hand, in five years. Her project is the Sock Exchange (futuremenders.com). On a tangible level, it involves socks. Dozens of them are strung up around the room, and can be traded like commodities. There is a special section for smelly socks, which are more or less the equivalent of junk bonds.

The public are invited to bring along socks that need darning; needles and instructions are provided on-site. "They can leave them there; put their name and address on them and let them get floated on the Sock Exchange, to see if their sock will have gone up in value before the end of the week; or they can darn their own socks on site," Middleton says. "My piece is about turning consumers into producers. Darning is an insignificant act on one level, but it unlocks your mind into thinking about what you could do next."

The socks that the public bring, and that get darned on-site, will go on show in the window of Mercury Goes Retrograde on Drawbridge Street.

Washington-based Siobhan Rigg's project is an aural one, based on the streets and waterways that surround the Sawmills. You can either download her aural walking tour as an MP3 file at sarigg.net, or borrow one of the devices held at the Sawmills. There is a map that goes with the audio walking tour. Rigg is fascinated by the melting of the area around the Arctic Circle, and has used analogies with the Arctic in her audio to show how a city changes as inexorably over time as melting ice.

The idea is that you walk the half-hour route with the map, stopping at 12 different places to look at a particular view, listening to Riggs meditation on what each vista represents. "It's about taking the landscape of a city and looking at the changes that are made to it by economic forces over years," she says.

On an external corner of the Sawmills, overlooking Union Quay, US artist Karen Brummond is watching passersby stop and stare at her work. It is a corner site of a derelict building, and she has covered the entire facade with pixelated images of the building itself.

"I call them time-based drawings," she says. Brummond took photographs of the facade, digitally edited them, and then blew them up. Each A4 page is a separate file. The resulting methodical gray and white effect on the wall is strange and haunting.

"Most people want to know what it is," she says, as cars slow down so the driver can stare. "I've had some people apologising to me, saying they don't think they're creative enough, because they don't 'get it'. But they do. It's about paying attention to our surroundings, and thinking about them differently."

Although Brummond has worked in this way on several other projects, which are meant to disintegrate as they weather, the Cork project was only up for one day. "Litter wardens," she reveals ruefully. "I've never had to take my work down anywhere else for this reason."

Artrail.ie runs until December 6th, and includes a number of other installations, talks and workshops around the city. There will be an auction of the furniture made by the Coláiste Stiofáin Naofa design students at the Sawmills at noon on December 3rd, with all monies raised going to the Cork Simon Community.