

Threatened by Extinction

Exeter's Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World is threatened with closure, **Clare Blake** looks at why we should fight to save this unique resource

People see beauty in nature. People see beauty in art. For CCANW, the Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World, it has always seemed obvious that the two should be brought together.

In a traditional art gallery there is often a sense of separation created in part by surroundings of chilly marble flooring and pillars and heavy ornamental gilt frames. The message "Don't Touch" comes over loud and clear, but sometimes you feel as though the underlying subtext reads, "Don't Breathe" and so

you tiptoe around feeling oppressed because this is Art with a capital "A".

Not your usual gallery

Not so at CCANW. Perched high on the Haldon Hills above Exeter and surrounded by acres of fir trees it is located in a converted Forestry Commission building that bears a reassuring resemblance (though on a larger scale) to that much loved British institution, the garden shed. Perhaps it is this quality of familiarity that makes people feel so at ease in it for over 120,000 have passed through its doors, many of whom would never have ventured inside a "proper" art gallery.

The interior is not a very large space, but like the Tardis it has the capacity to act as a catalyst on brain and imagination so that ideas ferment faster than sap rising in spring. There's something incredibly organic about the whole experience, and before you know it that initial

"It's a catalyst on the brain, ideas ferment faster than sap rising in spring"

Project Space visit has led on to something else connected to it - a walk, a talk, a workshop or a live event.

I cannot imagine that many visitors to the CCANW 2007 exhibition about Jamie McCullough's magical trail describing cunningly contrived contraptions like the one-way tilted drawbridge were able to resist a voyage of discovery through the bleached silvery wood of



(Above): CCANW's Project Space and stage enjoyed by visitors during 'Art in the Park', August 2009. Photo by Chris Lewis. (Left and right): School workshops regularly use CCANW's Project Space



his "elvish" arch into Haldon Forest in search of remaining features. Equally, who could admire sculptor Peter Randall-Page's 2009 exhibition of drawings and maquettes without examining trees, earth, and stones for structure and mathematical patterns afterwards?

This constant dialogue between art and the surrounding natural world is exactly what CCANW pioneers hoped for when they first



recognised the pressing need for a dedicated gallery and study centre to explore man's understanding of his relationship with nature and the way each impacts the other.

Their vision for such a facility was encouraged by the exciting opportunities opened through National Lottery funding, but it took several years to find the right premises. The CCANW Project Space finally launched in April 2006 in tandem with the new Forestry Commission-managed Haldon Forest Park.

From little acorns...

From modest beginnings CCANW has quickly gained momentum over the past five years and now offers an ambitious annual programme of free or modestly priced events drawn from a wide variety of creative disciplines including film, photography, dance, literature, sculpture, art and craft work, live music and multi-media to form a stimulating

THE ARTS

(Left): Environment Secretary Hilary Benn and CCANW's Director Clive Adams outside CCANW's Project Space. (Below): Wood Culture exhibition at CCANW Project Space

mix of exhibitions, workshops, talks, forums, and creative activities.

However, it is not just a hub for regional creatives and an educational resource for local

“It’s not just a hub for regional schools and communities”

schools and communities, but has a far wider impact in a global context as a significant voice in the ongoing challenge of ecological and environmental issues

With such influence both locally and internationally it seems incredible that all this could come to an abrupt end, yet that is the situation now facing CCANW.

For CCANW enthusiasts the news that its grant application to the Arts Council England had been turned down came as a huge shock somewhat lessened by news of a second chance BUT only if CCANW can raise £20,000 in match funding by the cut-off date of mid March, 2010.



How we can help

For me this story resonates with that of the dodo, a large utterly charming if ungainly flightless bird that stepped out of the pages of history around two hundred years ago. I've often wished that someone somewhere had realised its predicament and done something to save it. But they didn't, and now it's gone along with the Speckled Beauty moth, the Passenger Pigeon, and countless others.

Many people didn't realise the dodo had even

waddled through its flat-footed existence until it did so no longer, and maybe as you read this you're shaking your head because up till now you've never heard about CCANW either.

CCANW Director Clive Adams says there has never been "...a more important time to engage people with the pressing environmental challenges the world is facing today. Education through the arts touches people – creatively and emotionally – in ways that conventional methods of advocacy rarely do."

The need is urgent, and so CCANW is asking everyone who has a passion for the arts, education and ecology to help by making a donation or becoming a Friend of CCANW (just £12 a year). A surge in membership would also send a strong message to Arts Council England and local councils about local levels of support for CCANW.

The dodo died out, but CCANW is still here – just. Let's do all we can to save it while we still can. 🐦



CCANW Events

CCANW Events
Art, Ecology and the Economy exhibition.
Extended until 11 April. Open over Easter Bank Holiday. Free admission.

Lucy Orta: 2nd April – 6th June.

Fashion and the Environment: 12 June – September. In collaboration with the London College of Fashion.

CCANW Project Space, Haldon Forest Park, Exeter, EX6 7XR. Tel: 01392 832277 Email: info@ccanw.co.uk Website: www.ccanw.co.uk.