TEN, TERRITORY, ENCOUNTER & NEGOTIATION, A CRITICAL MEMOIR BY A SOCIALLY ENGAGED ARTIST

FIONA WHELAN

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TEN, artist and educator Fiona Whelan's first book, is an object of multiple kinds. It is a story told in the first person, structured as a chronological account of the ten-year cumulative process in which Irish born-and-bred Whelan became a *socially engaged* artist. During this time, Whelan collaborated with young people and youth workers at the Rialto Youth Project (RYP), a community based youth service in Dublin's South inner-city where, together, they created the *What's the story? Collective*. TEN is also a very careful representation of a complex process of immersion and intervention that challenges the limits between the personal, the social and the artistic. An assemblage of storytelling, commissioned drawing, design, archival and bibliographic analysis, TEN is also a curatorial project that includes as sources, but also displays, diary entries, interview transcripts and pictures. Furthermore, TEN is a document of a time in which disciplinary distinctions between art, youth and social work, sociology, anthropology and other social sciences have become blurry, in accordance with, but also in contestation against, the institutional structures that make those distinctions still possible. It is also a document of the power dynamics between art and artists, their *materials* and *subjects*, their audiences and the spaces and funding institutions that make 'art,' and by extension 'social sciences,' possible as we know them today.

TEN is also an ethnographic representation. Storytelling, and the chronological narrative that Whelan used, reflect her long-term immersion as an in-house artist at the community setting of RYP (39) and the 'slow enquiry-based approach' she required 'to grasp the specifics to a context' (40-1). Whelan's method thus shared features with the ethnographer's. It is clear, though, that she did not see herself as a social researcher. Explaining how the *Collective* used personal stories she explains:

> *I did not see this as socially engaged art trying unsuccessfully to replicate an existing profession in the name of art; I myself would be critical of such an attempt. The social sciences had their own role but here was a creative project, driven by those who had themselves decided to tell their stories, with quite a different function from that of story gathering in formal research [...] These stories would be brought alive over time, analysed, and worked, adapted and built upon. They would be used as part of a major process of representation and representation which was about to unfold (86-8).*

So, what is it that makes the contents of Whelan's story 'Socially Engaged Art' and not just 'Art' or 'Youth work'? In the initial stages of the collaborative work, the 'art' seemed to be present in products such as murals or installations made by her and by Rialto's young people. But the challenge lay in creating 'real learning which will empower them, not just satisfy them each week to keep them coming' (45), in the RYP Director's words. It was as

time passed and relationships of trust became stronger that the collaborative art *material* emerged: existing power relations between artist, young people and youth workers, the members of *What's the story? Collective*. As if moulding or re-shaping them, they created and carefully maintained new parallel relations of trust which allowed more power relations to become *visible* between them and the project director, Gardaí (police), audiences, artists, education and funding bodies, the media, the art world and art critics. The 'art' was thus in the continuous and slow-paced collective recognition of power relations and in the parallel creation of relations of trust. Some of these relations transformed, some did not, and this had a lot to do with how their work was made available for *the public*.

I propose the reader *visit* TEN as an exhibition experiment (following Basu and Macdonald, 2007) that makes *visible* the *invisible*; a sort of laboratory in which 'visitors, curators, objects, technologies, institutional and architectural spaces are brought into relation with each other with no sure sense of what the result will be' (2). The content of the book, the story, recounts how the *What's the story? Collective* made the personal and private available for *the public* only after deep discussion, engaging in a trial-and-error method, and turning those discussions into the substance of their *collective* artistic work. At a different level, the book itself is an attempt to render visible what for many years had been 'invisible' to wider audiences. In this way, TEN reveals a politics of collaboration and authorship at play in exhibitions and publications—technologies that define *who* and *what* the public is, and therefore key sites for the transformation of those definitions. If the contents of the story told in TEN refer to an endeavour that was definitely collaborative, *authored* by different assemblages of people and institutions such as the *What's the story? Collective* (Ch. 2), the story and the book that contains it are not:

Whelan is both the story-teller and the book's publisher. In this way, she recovers, as it were, her identity as artist, acknowledging that while others contributed, it is she who had the last say. In the book she recuperates the authority she gave up by not making public this work as an individual artist and author, an issue she discusses in the section dedicated to the 'Art world response to the exhibition/residence' (206-212).

But if *authorship* marks a clear limit to collaboration, *specificity* creates conditions for further conversation. Whelan states that TEN 'represents a specific journey in a specific context at a specific time, during which a collaborative practice' (17) grew between her as an artist and RYP, but in the same spirit of the series of projects it accounts for, TEN presents material for dialogue, an attempt to share 'practice-based knowledge' (18) and 'to open up new conversations in [her] own field and across sectors' (244). I would add that these conversations may also take place across geography, in spite and because of TEN's very *local* character: The book's five chapters describe successive stages of the work that began in 2004, when Whelan had her first residence at Studio 468 in Rialto. This was soon after she had finished her HDip Community Arts Education Degree (30) at the National College of Art and Design, Dublin, where she later worked during TEN's publication as the Joint Course Coordinator of the MA in Socially Engaged Art. Indeed, I feel inspired by and identify with *What's the story? Collective*'s slow-paced exhibition strategies and their advocacy for engaged audiences (described in detail in chapters 3 and 4) and by Whelan's first person story-telling. My reading of TEN was full of evocations from my own practice as an anthropologist that was trained and worked in the Colombian context, but who is now in the process of obtaining a PhD in the UK. I regard this book as a useful tool for anthropologists, sociologists and social

geographers (particularly, but not limited to the 'applied' branch of those disciplines), as well as for artists, art educators, museum professionals, policy makers, NGO workers and grass-roots activists, social and youth workers (also I look forward to a Spanish-translated version). It provides a hopeful and honest insight for those who, like me, believe in the need for action that involves institutions similar to those TEN and Whelan talk about, but who are also aware of the limits to transformation inherent to institutional structures and to any socially engaged approach.

References

Basu, Paul and Macdonald, Sharon. 2007. 'Introduction: Experiments in Exhibition, Ethnography, Art and Science'. In: Basu, Paul and Macdonald, Sharon (eds). *Exhibition Experiments*, Oxford: Blackwell. Pp. 1-24.