

## Negotiating the territory of socially engaged art

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## BOOK REVIEW

### Negotiating the territory of socially engaged art

**Ten territory, encounter & negotiation: a critical memoir by a socially engaged artist**, by Fiona Whelan, Dublin, Self published. Available from [www.fionawhelan.com](http://www.fionawhelan.com), 2014, 254 pp., €20.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-993 0866-0-1

By focusing on social rather than material outcomes, the practice of socially engaged art has generated much debate concerning its role and efficacy in challenging complex issues of power, class and social change over the last 40 years. Operating within an often contested and entangled history of community art, social activism and direct political action, socially engaged art practice is itself a territory that is still very much under ongoing negotiation. How this multi-formed complex practice sits within the history of art is also under constant revisionist scrutiny, as is its position relative to contemporary art and its accompanying institutions.

Some of the current international debates on socially engaged art practice are directed towards the often well-funded short-term ‘participatory’ art projects that are now very much embedded within mainstream art institutions, biennales and public art arenas. Critics of such short-term projects rightly point to issues of sustainability, responsibility and representation as many such projects arrive into marginal communities amid fierce fanfare, promising creative solutions and promoting cultural events associated with art, yet depart just as quickly, with little regard for long-term social change. How socially engaged art is represented in such arenas is also the focus of much discussion, with many commissioning institutions tending to display a certain aesthetics of consensus, where differences of power, class and race have been temporarily flattened into a performed moment of participation and equality. Such representations of socially engaged practice provide very little clue as to the deeply inherent problematics of power and the resulting contestations and antagonisms that socially engaged art both generates and exposes in its processes, thus excluding more complex and multidisciplinary readings and understandings from such work.

In this context, Fiona Whelan’s critical memoir *TEN: territory, encounter and negotiation* provides a hugely significant and vitally important contribution not only to the field of socially engaged art, but to any practice that attempts to create positive social change by engaging with unequal power relations which have become sedimented not only in social positions and institutions, but also in everyday thought and experience. Taking the form of a memoir, *TEN* offers a distinctly longitudinal perspective on socially engaged art through the distinct and authorial personal story of an artist negotiating a complex collaborative approach to exposing and disrupting power relations within a community. More specifically, *TEN* is written by a socially engaged artist working in a single urban location for over a decade (Rialto Youth Project, Dublin, in the Republic of Ireland), with the focus of the practice to explore young people’s relationships to power and policing.

A far cry from nostalgic recollection, *TEN* moves fluidly between personal memory, critical theory, field notes and interviews to critically reflect and reveal the hidden complexities of practice and multiple perspectives so often erased from public view. Indeed, revealing this vast process of ongoing learning, negotiation and collaboration seems to be the very impetus behind the writing of *TEN*. In her introduction, Whelan describes her early experience of presenting her practice in Rialto to students of socially engaged art only through moments of public success, which generated an unintentionally disempowering effect. In her own words,

In choosing to describe key public moments of the practice, we had rendered invisible some of the complex methodology, the structures that support the process locally, the origins of the collaboration and the types of negotiation experienced; the very nature of durational collaborative work. (p. 17)

Throughout the book, Whelan's position as artist, educator and social activist remains at the core of her reflection as she carefully negotiates her role in the territory of socially engaged art, the territory of Rialto itself and also the wider public, media and art-world spheres that the work gradually enters into over the course of a decade of practice. Notably, Whelan is forensic in her careful consideration and reflection on the multiple mentors, collaborators and the cross-disciplinary interactions and conversations that impacted the pivotal directions of the unfolding collaborative works and projects.

It is in this way we learn about the complex process that led to a project called *What's the story?* becoming established. From its outset, this took a committed durational perspective towards collaboration, moving through three distinct research stages: 'Research and gathering', followed by 'Development', leading into the final phase of 'Action/production' which moved the project from the private to the public domain over a period of four years (2007–2011).

Through the initial Research and gathering phase (2007), the value of gathering young peoples' lived experiences and stories as a way of establishing key themes and issues was identified as a core methodology. Sensitive to the fact that such stories were very rarely expressed, let alone listened to in meaningful ways, Whelan worked with Rialto Youth Project to embark on a number of creative initiatives to invite young people into the process of being seen and heard (Whelan is very careful to emphasise *listening*, and not simply *voice*). The construction of anonymous post boxes, the use of diaries and a mobile 'diary room' inside a converted van which was positioned in various local public spaces inviting young people to tell the camera about their experience, gathered and explored the experiences of over a 100 young people.

Through the Development phase (2008), which entailed analysing this vast amount of research material, Whelan recognised that it was the experience of unequal power relations that was reflected in so many of the experiences and stories gathered. Taking a radical departure from pre-existing structures, Whelan proposed and established a new form of horizontal collaboration – the establishment of the *What's the story?* collective – in which the artist, youth workers and young people were all equal contributors and leaders in the creation and direction of the unfolding project. By placing the exploration of power at the core of the project, questions about the collaborative process itself were quickly raised by the collective form, leading to questions such as 'Who had the most power: artist, youth-workers

or young people?’ (p. 75). Whelan charts her own and her collaborators’ varying perspectives on how this new collective form disrupted pre-existing power and social relationships, and exposed many highly complex issues, nearly derailing the entire project many times.

Remarkably, it was this shift towards more personal explorations of power that forged the collective, leading to much deeper insights concerning the wider systemic issues of power, by sharing personal memories and stories of power and powerlessness. Firstly, these stories were shared among the members of the collective, and then gradually over a long process of dialogue and collaborative work, the collective staged the first in a series of public events exploring power relations: *Anonymous reading, narrative memory*, whereby each of the collective’s anonymous stories were read aloud and shared and explored with the wider community and public.

As the *What’s the story?* collective delved deeper in unearthing the issues of power and policing in their community, it was the exposure of their own vulnerabilities and personal stories that became central in forging their collective resistance in speaking truth back to power. In her 2014 essay *Rethinking vulnerability and resistance*, Judith Butler calls for a radical rethinking of the status of vulnerability within political mobilisations, and from their staging of *Anonymous reading, narrative memory*, staged within their own community, to the *Section 8* project that brought their stories to a wide national and international set of communities and publics via a Ford Transit van ingeniously converted into a mini cinema, Whelan chronicles how the *What’s the story?* collective grew in strength and resolve, resulting in a series of readings and exchanges with the national police force including *The day in question* held in the Irish Museum of Modern Art (Figure 1), and the



Figure 1. *The Day in Question* (video still). Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, 2009. © Enda O’ Brien.

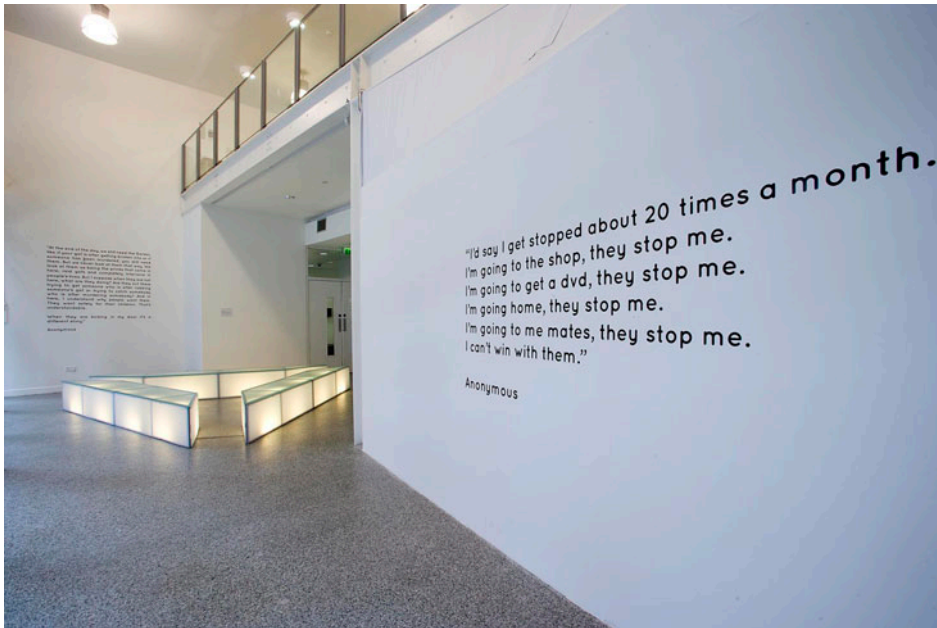


Figure 2. *Policing Dialogues*. The LAB Gallery Dublin, 2010. © Michael Durand.

*Policing dialogues* residency and exhibition in The Lab, Dublin (Figure 2). By utilising the potential of art to imagine and create spaces that allow us to see ourselves and others in the world in new ways, Whelan and the *What's the story?* collective found an effective – that is, dialogical, durational and transformative – way of engaging with the complex power relationships between individual and place and institution, thereby shifting the social relations between the police and young people and generating new forms of collective understanding and political agency through the sharing of vulnerability.

TEN is a book that illustrates how long-term durational engagement grounded in a local site has the potential to have global and international resonance and significance, and it is notable that Whelan concludes her memoir by opening out further sets of questions that invite a cross-sectoral critical reflection to probe the fields of social practice, critical pedagogy and activism.

Importantly (see Figure 3), Whelan demonstrates that the value of socially engaged art practice does not lie in the production of representations of consensus, and that the real value of this practice lies in the imaginative rigour to collectively shift perspectives and social relations by rendering visible unequal power relations, thus exposing them to dialogue, critique, learning and new understandings (Figure 4). One final point – that a review of *TEN* can find an audience in this particular journal – perhaps says something interesting not only about the study of power, but also about how socially engaged art can (certainly in the case of Whelan's work) dissolve the artificial boundaries that still seem to separate politics and aesthetics, social science and art.

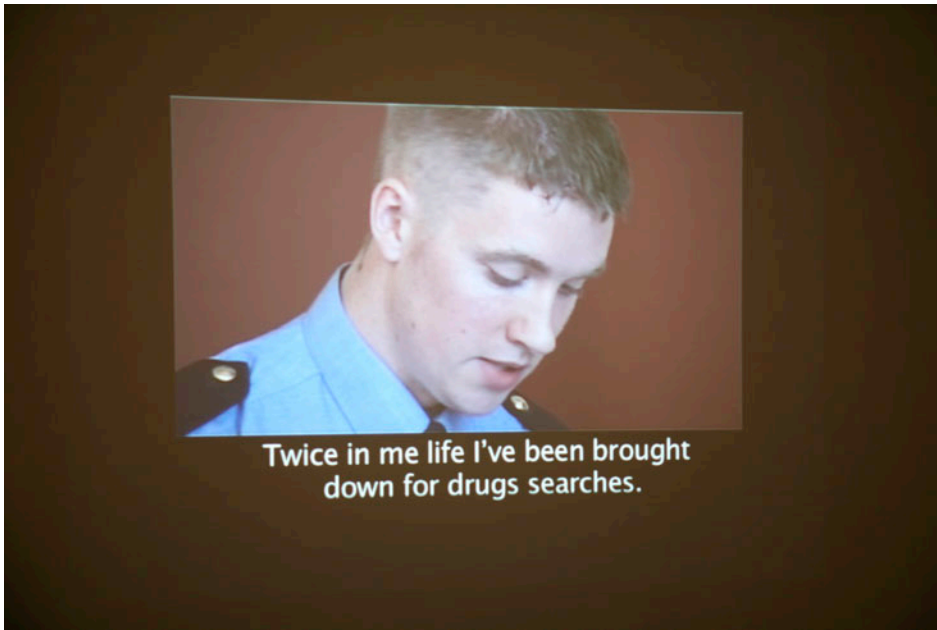


Figure 3. *Policing Dialogues* (video still). The LAB Gallery Dublin, 2010. © Michael Durand.



Figure 4. *Policing Dialogues*. The LAB Gallery Dublin, 2010. © Fiona Whelan.

**Reference**

Butler, J., 2014. Rethinking vulnerability and resistance. *Lecture at the Instituto Franklin*, 24 June 2014 [online]. Madrid: University of Alcalá. Available from: <http://www.institutofranklin.net>.

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