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Culturally reimagining education: Publicity, aesthetics and socially engaged art practice

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ABSTRACT

This paper sets out to reimagine education through a cultural perspective and explores education as a performative practice that establishes certain borders of 'public' belonging. Wide-spread debates about the public dimension of schools and universities have focused on how economic rationales need to be replaced with alternative visions of education. This paper seeks to contribute to this revisioning of the public in education by reclaiming education as a specifically cultural endeavour, one tied to practices that are at once both performative and aesthetic. To this end, I draw on theoretical notions of publicity that highlight its performative character. I then offer a reading of a socially engaged art project in order to suggest ways in which this performative character of publicity can be seen to be educational. This paper argues that education itself emerges through various cultural enactments that delineate the contours of who counts as a public and who does not.

KEYWORDS

Public education; aesthetics; socially engaged art practice; Paulo Freire; Jacques Rancière; voice

This paper sets out to reimagine education through a cultural perspective. I do so as a way of exploring it as a performative practice that establishes certain borders of 'public' belonging.¹ Wide-spread debates about the public dimension of schools and universities have focused on how economic rationales need to be replaced with alternative visions of education. Such visions frequently build a notion of the public into the work of education itself and largely focus on reconceptualisations of what schools and universities do (e.g. Collini, 2012; Holmwood, 2011; Masschelein & Simons, 2013). This paper seeks to contribute to this revisioning of the public in education by reclaiming education as a specifically cultural endeavour, one tied to practices that are at once both performative and aesthetic. To this end, I draw on theoretical notions of publicity that highlight its performative character. I then offer a reading of a socially engaged art project in order to suggest ways in which the performative character of publicity can be seen to be educational. This paper argues that education itself emerges through various cultural enactments that delineate the contours of who counts as a public and who does not. That is, I explore the idea that such enactments actually serve to 'claim' a public: they perform in iterative ways to establish the parameters of belonging, identifying some people as belonging 'within' a public and some as located 'outside' it. Such claims, of course, are sometimes made by political elites, at other times by states through their policies, and at other times, as the art project reveals, by those whose voices have rarely been heard.

The paper first, outlines the cultural perspective I am drawing on, followed by an account of why such an exploration is timely within current public educational trends. I explore the performative dimensions of publicity and link this to the aesthetic dimensions of education. The paper then examines how a

particular socially engaged art project (*The Day in Question*, 2009) stages a form of cultural practice which resonates with the view of education I am arguing for here. My intent is not so much to analyse this project in traditional interpretative fashion, but to trace the educational elements at work therein that can contribute to a cultural reimagining of education.

Two cultural images

This paper begins by putting into relief two powerful images that reposition education as a practice that is fundamentally connected to cultural and aesthetic expression. The first image of education comes from Paulo Freire (1989), who posits ‘cultural action’ as lying at the core of a revolutionary educational project. Cultural action implies both a political aim and a deeper understanding of the idea that in order to effect political change, meanings, symbolic expression, customs and languages must be transformed. Indeed cultural action for Freire is the deliberate reorganisation of modes of understanding and being, where new practices challenge the limitations of inherited thought and action. Culture in this sense is about a practice (not about artefacts), and linking education to such practices means seeing in it the movements of body and thought through which we come to inhabit the world and come to recognise our place (or not) within it. For Freire, culture has an existential as well as social and political component; engaging in cultural action means establishing a possibility for freedom for the subject as well as for society as a whole.

The second image comes from Williams (1958/1989) and his idea that ‘culture is ordinary’. Unlike Freire’s emphasis on the revolutionary potential of culture, Williams articulates that its ordinariness embodies both what we hold as custom *and* what we create anew. Williams writes:

A culture has two aspects: the known meanings and directions, which its members are trained to; the new observations and meanings, which are offered and tested It is always both traditional and creative ... We use the word culture in these two senses: to mean a whole way of life—the common meanings; to mean the arts and learning—the special processes of discovery and creative effort. (Williams, 1958/1989, p. 5—ellipses added)

While this definition of culture can seem rather commonplace from our vantage point nearly 60 years after its initial conceptualisation, Williams’ insistence on the conjunction between our common, traditional meanings, on the one hand, and generative forms of creativity, on the other hand, nonetheless, remains fresh in an educational policy context, where the latter is frequently used as justification for maintaining (as opposed to engaging with or challenging) the status quo. For example, as we see in various educational policy initiatives, such as the European Commission’s Education and Training 2020 objectives (European Commission, 2015), terms, such as the ‘new’, the ‘creative’ and the ‘entrepreneurial’, act to serve the traditional interests of capital and labour markets. Thus, the appeal to ‘newness’ is motivated by and frequently contained within the larger aim of creating a ‘productive workforce’—that is, for preparing students for a world defined primarily along conventional economic lines (Todd, 2016).

More importantly for my purposes here, Williams’ focus on the doubleness of culture—as preservation and custom, on the one hand, and creativity and renewal, on the other, allows for a positioning of education at the crossroads between the two. While this may seem at odds with Freire’s emphasis on challenging established customs as a way of freeing ourselves from oppressive conditions, I think that the two together allow for a more nuanced picture of what education actually *does* as well as what it *can* do. In other words, their views of culture allow us to hold the tension between practices of education as they already exist and the purposes of education as something more than preservation of custom. Moreover, the explicitly emancipatory emphasis of Freire’s idea of culture speaks more directly to how reorganising traditional meanings and symbolic forms of expression actually effects change in the world. There is thus, an explicit aesthetic to Freire’s work that complements what is at stake in seeing educational practices as ‘ordinary’.

I open with the ideas of ‘cultural action’ and ‘culture as ordinary’ as points of departure here, in order to put what follows into a certain tonal field, much as an artist primes a canvas to give a certain luminosity, or in my case, perhaps, a darker undertone to the overall work. Thus, reinvestigating contemporary education from a cultural perspective means grappling with the primacy of education in creating opportunities for renewal and change, even as education is also framed through the conservation

of tradition. As Bergdahl and Langmann (2017) note, this double task of conservation and renewal demands a rethinking of tradition itself as that which undergoes continual change and reformation as it comes into contact with new ideas and ways of being.² In my view, this means that inherited modes of thought and action can be seen as the raw material that is adapted, engaged, questioned and resisted through education. That is, education does not merely 'transmit' something but is composed of processes that allow for creative reimagining and for revolutionary forms of cultural action. Seen from this perspective, education participates in a never ending task of reproducing culture *whilst simultaneously* generating the conditions for its renewal. What I call attention to here in this paper is how the creative side of this task is central to understanding how change and transformation are educationally possible.

Most importantly, in light of my topic here, viewing culture as 'ordinary' as it is also a site for 'action', enables us to reframe how it is we understand the public character of education. A cultural perspective enables a recasting of publicity as a specifically cultural practice—that is, it enables an understanding of the public (or publics) in terms of performative practices that make specific claims about participation, claims that are counter to dominant modes of inherited thought and meaning. As I detail in the following section it is precisely this 'cultural edge' of education which has waned over the past few decades, particularly when we consider that the 'claiming' of what counts as public by state policies has become frequently tied to market interests. Instead, what I will be developing below is the idea that publics and public education themselves are claimed not by policy or state edict, but through action and narration, which makes publics themselves eminently educational in character.

Why culture? Why publicity? Why now?

The linking of education to cultural life is not new. Since antiquity, the very concept of education, or *paideia*, has been intertwined with cultural processes of transmission and the establishment of a citizenry, as the famous classicist, Werner Jaeger (1939–1945/1965), argued in his three-volume work on the subject. However, the terms of education have only been connected to a broader notion of the public since the late nineteenth, early twentieth centuries with the establishment of mass education programmes in western nations as central to the cultural formation of its citizens. That is, states began to 'claim' public education through a variety of practices, organisations and policies in the pursuit of this formative role, which primarily took the form of common schools. Alongside this emphasis on formation has also grown the idea of education as a process of cultural, social, and self-transformation. Whether through classic German notions of *bildung* (Kant, 1803/1906; von Humboldt, 1793/2001), American notions of 'democratic education' (Dewey, 1916/1997; Roland Martin, 2002), or notions of 'emancipatory education' emanating from critical educational movements—such as Freire's (Freire, 1989; Giroux, 2005)—the idea of education has not only been about cultural reproduction but has also been tied to production, change and freedom.

Since its inception, then, the claiming of public education as both formation and transformation has been fraught with a number of tensions around its purpose:

- (1) that between educating the masses in order to preserve order in society and educating them to create a learned, participatory public citizenry;
- (2) that between education's role in conserving cultural tradition and its role in promoting agents of free thought and change;
- (3) that between education's task in fulfilling private interests and its place in serving the common good;
- (4) that between the ideal of education being available for all and the reality of exclusion conducted in its name.

Such tensions have played a role historically in shaping who was counted as part of the 'public' and the role education played in constituting these lines of inclusion/exclusion.

What I wish to suggest, however, is that these tensions seem to have become heightened over the past two decades, both due to the globalisation of educational reform and to the increased value

placed on the idea of education as serving an economic function. The cultural role of public education is thus, being redefined in relation to its significance for the marketplace and labour force. Claims to public education are being increasingly shaped by global policy initiatives, and governments are using education to respond to these marketisation trends, based on league tables, high stakes testing and privatisation (Ball, 2015; Olssen, 2004; Ozga, 2012; Sellar & Lingard, 2013). Cultural theorist Stuart Hall's classic understanding of the role of public education as that which allows us to bridge spaces between groups in order to create opportunities for 'public thinking' has been seen by some critics to have become eclipsed by a focus on the economic productivity of the individual (Roman, 2015). Mannion, Biesta, Priestley, and Ross (2011) also draw attention to the shift toward the economic in the focus of public education and argue that the emphasis on developing individual competences that is a feature of current education discourse risks neglecting the social and political aspects of education—and, I would argue, the cultural aspects as well. Moreover, they claim that this undermines the role of public education in developing an understanding of democratic citizenship since this is only achievable through social collaboration and not through private interest. The increasingly individualised nature of education can thus be seen as a threat to the key aims that have traditionally been at the heart of public education: those to do with democracy and civic life.

Another challenge currently on the agenda concerns the *scope* of public education within these current global trends. That is, who is served by public education? and to what degree is education 'public?' The point, named by some, is that if communities do not have a voice in public education (Mathews, 2013), then there is a danger that the 'public' served by public education will only include those that fit narrow images of the citizen and further marginalise persons who are ethnic minorities, refugees, economically disadvantaged or disabled (Gillborn, 2005; Parreira do Amaral, Stauber, & Barberis, 2015; Reay, 2001). It is the voice of the marginalised that is most at risk of not being heard within dominant claims to public education, particularly when those claims are being governed by an *instrumental* value of education: a cultural transmission model narrowly defined by its usefulness to the economy (Todd, 2016).

Thus there is a real, tangible risk that public education is being divested of its cultural aim of *transformation*, while maintaining its primary focus on *formation*, and its scope is being reduced to a 'public' that is increasingly being defined by economic interests. That is, the conserving tradition side of education is eliding the more generative, creative side of renewal. Now, as in the past, claims to public education continue to exclude and marginalise certain individuals and groups along economic, social and religious lines, even if they do so differently than they did in the past and in different contexts. What is needed is a thorough rethinking of public education as a *cultural* claim that is both inclusive of diverse communities and transformative in its practices. Yet rather than assuming anyone can 'give' voice to another (Apple, 2011), what is needed is a rethinking of the conditions, both theoretically and performatively, that enable communities and their members to enact their own voices and reimagine publics for themselves. Moreover, in so doing, and I am following both Williams and Freire here, such practices need to be seen as educational at bottom. On this view, public education is not a concept to be defined, but is an 'ordinary', on-going practice to be enacted, performed, and thus, reimaged.

Education and the cultural aim of freedom: An aesthetic issue

I turn now to explore the idea that the creative, transformative aspect of education is primarily concerned with claims to freedom. As Gert Biesta and Carl Anders Säfström outline in their *Manifesto for Education* (2011), education is at its heart a process concerned both with freedom and transformation. That is, schooling is best understood as a particular 'form' that education can take, as Masschelein and Simons (2013) put it, while education is the process through which a subject becomes emancipated (Biesta & Säfström, 2011), or through which, the subject becomes a subject (Todd, 2011). Biesta holds that the aim of education cannot solely be concerned with socialisation or qualification (which are necessary aims), but must also be interested in subjectification and freedom. That is, education is a process through which a person becomes a subject who is able to interpret the world, make decisions

about one's own life project, and act in relation with others. Thus, education is not only about passing on cultural tradition, but about creating transformative possibilities for engaging that tradition meaningfully. Similarly, scholars whose work draws directly on Jacques Rancière (1998), such as Lewis (2012), Bingham and Biesta (2010) and Säfström (2011), view emancipation in terms of being able to make claims in which one's voice moves from being simply 'noise' to something that is heard and listened to. What this shift from schooling to education enables is a way of understanding voice as something that is 'asserted' by a subject in such a way so as to produce her own freedom. In this, schooling may or may not practice 'education' in this sense; it is merely a social institutional form through which this aspect of education might become a possibility. Education as the practice of freedom, to put it in Freirean terms, requires expanding the conditions through which individuals and communities foster the potential for *freedom* through being able to *enact* and *voice* their claims as a public. Not unlike Austian speech act theory, or Judith Butler's ideas of performativity, the very claiming of publicity—the utterance that says 'I am included in a 'public' we—performatively instantiates the public. The public—or should I say a public—is brought into being through its claims. However, as noted above, it is not just voice that is important but being heard and listened to.

Outside the field of education, Warner (2002) makes a significant distinction between the different ways 'publics' have been formed: from the idea that they are singular entities ('the public') to plural formations that can emerge as a result of discursive practices. For Warner, publics insofar as they seek to address those who have been marginalised, become 'counter-publics'; for him, these movements constitute an imaginative element, 'a poetic world-making' (p. 82). Butler (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013) extends such discussions in terms of seeing politics (and not only publics) as performative acts that work in and against existing normative structures to claim something new. Such claiming for Butler is connected to corporeal acts of narration. Such narrative acts, are, as Couldry (2010) notes, grounded in the very experience of voice. Borrowing from a title of one of Butler's books, Couldry says that 'voice is the process of giving an account oneself' and advocates for adopting it as a cultural and political value committed to establishing opportunities for people to exercise their voices on their own terms (p. 100). As such, voice has become central to the shaping of political possibility and act as Butler puts it 'as invitation[s] to hear something unexpected' (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013, p. 73). Critically, this hearing is absolutely crucial for constituting any kind of change.

More importantly, following Rancière (2009), there is an aesthetic dimension to this political enactment of voice since one must both imagine the form through which one will make one's voice heard and change the conditions through which others perceive or sense the world—that is, how others 'hear' it. Such claims, for Rancière, are fundamentally about altering our sensibilities and altering what it is we take for granted. This is what he sees as being the challenge of art: to 'redistribute the sensible' in such a way so that freedom appears for the subject. For Rancière (2009), the very promise of aesthetics is the 'promise of emancipation' (p. 41) and the grounds for democracy.

From within the field of education, Tyson Lewis (2012) draws attention to this connection between Rancière's understanding of democracy and aesthetics in making a case for its importance to education. He depicts Rancière's position thus: 'Democracy is fundamentally poetic for Rancière because it concerns the sudden "appearance of the people" [1998, p. 99]—a people that remains no longer in their "proper space" within the sensible boundaries and borders of the community' (2012, p. 5). As Rancière (1998) claims, an appearance is not an apparition, but an intervention into the conventional ways in which a collective 'we' understands 'our' reality. He writes: 'Appearance is not an illusion that is opposed to the real. It is the introduction of a visible into the field of experience, which then modifies the regime of the visible' (p. 99).

For Lewis, this means that democratic education has an inherently aesthetic dimension. Its very purpose lies in being able to reposition, reorganise, and reorder sensible experience. It echoes what Spivak (2014) calls in another context the 'uncoercive rearrangement of desire' as a goal of education: that is, through entering texts and reading them literally, our very sensibilities and desires shift their conventional moorings. One discovers through this close reading a reordering of common understanding and a desire for something new. Lewis (2012) writes:

It is my assertion that all democratic education is likewise an aesthetic experience that teaches us to redistribute the relationship between what can and cannot be seen as well as what can and cannot be heard. This means that an aesthetic dimension does not have to be added onto education (in the form of arts programs), but rather that it is imminent to democratic education as such. (p. 9)

What I wish to suggest here is that it is not only through democratic education as a unified practice—in schools and elsewhere—where this transpires. Rather, I see that when the redistribution of the sensible occurs, education has happened, and the appearance of a ‘public’ emerges, to put it in Rancièrian terms. That is, what I wish to emphasise here concerns the idea that when voices begin to be heard (or when things previously invisible are put into our field of vision) then ‘publics’ are claimed; and education as a process of freedom becomes a cultural, performative act as it becomes a political one. Education is ordinary, to put it in Raymond Williams’ terms, in the sense it is an enactment that is not rarified in its engagement of custom and creativity; as well it echoes Freire’s claims to cultural action in the sense that it contributes to freeing the subject by enabling that subject to re-assemble their sensibilities and place in the world within new horizons of possibility.

My reason for emphasising the cultural and aesthetic dimensions here is to link creativity to politics and ethics (although a fulsome treatment of this topic is beyond the scope of this paper). As Lewis (2012) rightly alludes to, aesthetics are often reduced in education to mobilising links with ‘established’ forms of culture (visual art, music, drama) instead of seeing education itself as embodying cultural forms of its own—that is seeing education as having profoundly an aesthetic effect. This does not mean that such endeavours do not have important roles to play. Arts-based initiatives are thought to lend themselves to exploring aspects of human experience that are otherwise not accessible to traditional ways of conducting pedagogy and research (Barrett & Bolt, 2007; Leitch, 2006). However, what I think Lewis brings to the fore is that the very *form* of education lends itself to viewing it in aesthetic terms. While I agree with Lewis in emphasising the aesthetic, I do not think it happens ‘within’ an educational context (democratic or otherwise), but that the aesthetic is itself part of what education *does* as a cultural practice of freedom. The aesthetic, insofar as it encapsulates a form of experience where what is given (the sensible, inherited tradition) becomes ‘rearranged’ ‘redistributed’ ‘reorganised’ into new forms of meaning, plays a significant role in viewing education in terms of its task of renewal. Thus, while education is also about conserving tradition through its aim of socialisation, the aesthetic dimension allows us to consider both a reimagining of and possible resistance to that tradition as a key feature of educational practice.

However, educational practices are not only to be found in more traditional sites of schools and classrooms. Socially engaged art practices are a form of contemporary art practice that play a significant role in the realignment of educational spaces and artistic projects. They invite a new category of collaboration, which Claire Bishop (2012) calls ‘experimental pedagogies’. These pedagogical art projects work with, against and within various educational spaces, challenging the pedagogical traditions upon which they rest. But as Bishop cautions, echoing Lewis here, such projects often unintentionally privilege art over education: ‘art is given to be seen by others, while education has no image’. Bishop (2012) insists instead on keeping an eye on the ‘dual horizon’: ‘faced toward the social [educational] field but also toward art itself’ (p. 274). Thus, it is important in exploring the cultural and aesthetical dimensions of education not to turn education into art, or art into education, but to engage in the imaginative spaces that can be created in bringing socially engaged art practice into conversation with educational practice—specifically with the task of renewal of and creativity with tradition and conventional ways of being in the world.

Claiming a public? Claiming a space of freedom?

I turn now to describe a socially engaged art project led by Dublin artist Fiona Whelan in order to reflect on the performative aspects of publicity and the role education plays therein. What captured my interest in this work was Whelan’s sensitive rendering of the event, and the collaborative processes leading up to it, in her memoir, *TEN: Territory, Encounter, Negotiation* (2014). There she details a more

than 10-year long engagement as an artist in residence with the Rialto Youth Project (located in an area of inner city Dublin). She explores the aesthetic, political, and ethical dimensions of collaboration in ways that foreground precisely some of the elements I raised above with respect to culture, education and publicity. Crossing the borders of art, critical pedagogy and activism, she engages with youth in designing projects that are not based on the production of artefacts, but on the process of narrating, listening, and imagining. *What's the Story?* was a four-year collective project that had many phases and ended in a series of public events in 2009–2010. In her memoir, Whelan emphasises the importance a notion of duration had to the project: of spending a significant period of time with youth; of her own transformation in her work with others over the course of these years; of the learning and unlearning that goes on in such tightly entwined spaces of collective enquiry and shared experience. Her method of working with the community was an emergent one, conducted through continual conversations with the people involved. Based as it is on open-ended collaboration, the art project itself could not be scripted beforehand, but was forged in the decisions of the collective as a whole. Focused on the theme of policing and power, Whelan's collaborations traverse the ethical, political and aesthetic realities of young people's lives and offer a glimpse into the educational processes involved in resymbolising significant moments of those lives. Below, I focus on one of the events from 2009, entitled *The Day in Question*.

After a few years of working with the stories that focused on moments of feeling powerful or powerless, the collective decided to voice their stories publicly. For this particular event, stories around the youth's experiences with the Gardai (police) took centre stage and the texts were worked on collectively over the course of many months. The narratives ranged from extreme feelings of helplessness to outright rage; from stark images of physical brutality to the disruption of a fragile space of safety. Taking these stories into a more 'public' forum had the purposefulness of the kind of cultural action that Freire speaks to; the move was meant to disturb the relations that had developed between the community and the Garda and which had by now become established convention. The question for Whelan was not whether the narratives could be spoken, but how to create conditions through which they could be heard—effecting, as I see it, a 'redistribution of the sensible' in Rancière's terms. As Whelan notes, she was compelled to move from a politics of expression toward a politics of impression, where listening would become a defining feature of a relational space.

This particular piece stages a reading event with members of the Gardai, but not those who normally police the area. Since many Garda who appear in the stories would have been familiar with the youth and their families—raiding their homes, picking them up off the street and harassing them—inviting them in to such an event would have exposed the youth to potential retribution. Instead, it was Garda trainees who were chosen. After much negotiation, a space was chosen that was not within the realm of the familiar for the either the youth or the Garda (a lecture room at the Irish Museum of Modern Art). In order to break the traditional adversarial positioning of the two parties, the seating was triangulated (Figure 1). The Garda removed their hats and belts and sat down on one side of the triangle. The collective sat on another side, while 15 others were invited to 'witness' on the third side. Rather than have the youth speak their own stories to the Garda, only to risk having them rebutted in debate-like fashion, each story was read aloud by one of the Garda, with no time given over to discussion in between the stories. This meant that each narrative became almost iconic, standing alone, on its own, representing a singularity. Yet, the sheer number of them also produced a collective insistence to be heard. Here, are two such stories:

The first raid was the worst. I was actually woken up by the Garda and told to get out of me bed. I didn't know what was going on. I was still half asleep. I felt like I was about to get sick or something and I walked out to the sitting room and me Ma was in tears and the whole gaf was just being walked all over by Gardai with a sniffer dog and everything. I was told to sit down. I couldn't do anything. Our mobile phones and all were taken off us ... All my Ma and Da ever done was went out and worked for what they have and supported their children. Now there is Guards just coming in and making them feel like nobody. Everything they worked for is nothing. (Anonymous 2008 in Whelan, 2014, p. 134—ellipses in original)

It's nearly 2009. We are going back to the early nineties when my Ma used to have to lift me over drug users. She used to have to step over them to lift me out the door. I know it's not that bad now but seeing people sell drugs



Figure 1. *The Day in Question*, by What's the Story? Collective, Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin 2009. Video still by Enda O'Brien. Copyright Fiona Whelan and Rialto Youth Project.

openly and seeing queues of cars queuing up to get drugs, it's ridiculous. It's horrible ... Let's be honest, the Guards could fix it. They just drive in and search kids and search the wrong people. The reason the Guards don't do so much about it is because they are trying to keep the problem confined to one small area. They think it is better to have the problem in Dolphin House [the estate where many of the youth live] then spread around ... I'm so angry. I just keep the anger, it keeps me real. There is some days that I want to just scream. (Anonymous 2008 in Whelan, 2014, p.135—ellipses in original)

After the stories were read, silence ensued. Committed to an ethics and politics of listening, Whelan opened the discussion with getting the Gardaí to articulate how they were feeling. From Whelan's perspective, the point of the discussion was not to reach some consensus, but 'to unearth the complexity behind the stories that had framed the event' (p. 138). Conversation led to some accusations and prejudicial statements from both sides and yet, according to Whelan, a deeper understanding of the experiences of both Gardaí and youth began to emerge. The witnesses spoke last, providing an important third party perspective: the stories, their telling and the listening that emerged could become reflected on in ways that lifted the encounter beyond the polarised boundaries of identity.

My intent here is not to judge to what degree such an event produced 'true' understanding or long lasting change in the community (it did lead to the development of a training course in community relations for the Garda, but one that has yet to be fully implemented), nor is it to assert that all such socially engaged art practices are automatically committed to cultural and aesthetic forms of expression that are educational in the sense of engaging, resisting or adapting conventions and inherited traditions. Instead, the piece occasions a consideration of education as a cultural practice—one committed to emancipation and transformation in reframing and reengaging conventional modes of being.

Culturally reimagining education

By way of conclusion, I want to address how *The Day in Question* acts to position education as a cultural process of renewal, even as it engages with inherited ways of being in the world, for the youth, in particular. This project reveals the importance of creating alternative spaces where claims to 'publicity' can be made. That is, the actual staging of the space in this piece creates an opportunity for the youth to claim a voice—but only if that voice can be heard. Too often youth and other marginalised groups can and do exercise voice (sometimes violently) but it is not one that has any meaningful interlocutor and often falls on deaf ears. Instead, the form of the piece in the design of the triangle seating, engendered a space

where the stories became something other than individual 'representations' of the youth themselves; rather, they became part of a re-symbolisation of experience that challenges accepted and dominant views of youth in these communities. However, the issue remains as to whether youth's voices are 'heard' because or in spite of their stories being spoken by others, namely the Garda. Or perhaps they are not 'heard' in the same way by the collective, the Garda or the witnesses? While we might never be certain of the answer, the issue that *The Day in Question* flags is, more importantly, how to think about the *relationship* between voice and listening within the materiality of space. Spaces set up distinctive forms of embodied relationality that are able to suggest (if not guarantee) certain possibilities for voices to be heard. The space in *The Day in Question* plays with the conventional adversarial relation between youth and Garda by inserting a third dimension (the witnesses). The physical space thereby, at the very least, facilitates a shift in the customary alignment of power even as it recognises the authorial position of the Garda displayed by their uniform. The aesthetics of space therefore makes possible a certain kind of conversation, even as it does not entirely denude the conventional recognition of power.

The processes leading up to this event (and not necessarily the event itself) can be seen as educational in that they act to support the youth's articulation of their experiences. Whelan's work with the youth over a long period of time, the discussion and conversation she engaged in with them, the process of writing and rewriting their stories is nothing short of the kind of cultural action that builds on the very 'ordinary' processes of narration and story-telling. These practices set down the conditions (although do not secure) the subjectivation and transformation of youth, enabling them to reinterpret their situation in new language, thereby creating alternative meanings out of the customary grammar of victimisation and blame. The stories expose the singularity of narrative in their claiming of a particular vantage point. That is, each narrative reveals an identification that cannot be read through the label of 'social disadvantage' (which is simply an abstraction from their lives as they are lived), but instead is one that speaks about the specificities of their experience, as it is lived and embodied.

The Day in Question suggests that the telling of stories can shift our discursive understandings, our affective affinities and our modes of thinking. That is, it enables what Rancière refers to as a 'redistribution of the sensible', making it evident how aesthetics and the project of freedom can come together in ways that, while messy are nonetheless productive in allowing for emancipatory action. That is, such a redistribution is dependent upon a shift in common understanding that introduces something 'new' into the field of the customary. However, this can only take place, as Whelan rightfully acknowledges, to the degree that this newness can be heard. Caution needs to be exercised so that the listening I am speaking of here does not get turned into yet another 'skill' with a set of behaviours attached to it: nodding, arms folded, cocking the head, leaning forward—as though embodying these sufficiently leads to a new formulation of the sensible. Instead, listening is the other side of voice, and a redistribution of the sensible can only occur when listening has become an active quality of experience.

Finally, I view *The Day in Question* as being suggestive of how claims of publicity are made educationally. The claiming of voice in a context of listening calls into being a particular collective (in this case the youth from the neighbourhood) in the moment of articulating their stories together. What draws these different youth together is not their common (categorical) history of 'disadvantage' or 'deprivation' or 'underprivilege'—this is the terror of identity politics—but a common project of working toward change for something much larger than themselves as individuals. The stories written, worked on, shared, rewritten, voiced by others and listened to by witnesses, create a multi-dimensional whole in its seeking to imagine and instantiate itself as a 'public'. Thus, it is not so much that youth call themselves into being as a public, but that their voices are the nexus around which the potential for becoming a public revolves. The claiming of a public voice requires, as I have suggested, a complex interplay of space, listening and redistribution of the sensible. It is not enough simply to say something; rather it matters how it is said, who says it, who hears it and why. This interplay positions education as a cultural and aesthetic practice that offers another understanding of its 'public' character than the usual ones described (common schools, state funding and the good of society). That is, the public dimension of education is not simply made by decree; rather the public emerges in the very practices that 'claim' it as such. As discussed above, these practices are educational, embodying performative and aesthetic

dimensions that entail a reengagement of tradition and convention, while creating possibilities for new meaning to arise. Thus, reimagining education from this cultural vantage opens up questions about what kind of publics our educational systems serve and how these systems might better facilitate practices of freedom through which new publics can emerge.

Notes

1. I want to thank Cliona Murray for her research assistance and to acknowledge the reviewers' comments, which I found helpful in shaping this keynote presentation into a more readable article for publication.
2. Hannah Arendt (1968/1983) points to this dilemma of education exceedingly well in her 'Crisis of Education' essay. However, I am turning to cultural theory here in order to suggest that the dilemma is not merely concerned with removing politics from formal education, with which Arendt is ultimately concerned, but about the explicit role education plays in the formation and transformation of culture itself.

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