

ITINERARY

**Fiona Whelan  
Enduring Place  
Gerry Kearns**

**Rialto**

Rialto abuts the centre of the City of Dublin on its south-western side. When Fiona Whelan came to a studio there in 2004 she felt 'immediately drawn' to this predominantly working-class neighbourhood.<sup>17</sup> Much of its public housing has since been demolished taking the population of the parish from 6,395 with 44% in public housing in 2006, to 3,639 including 24% in public housing in 2011.<sup>18</sup> Whelan came because she 'wanted to make art with young people,<sup>19</sup> and, since 1980, the area had been home to one of the most progressive youth programmes in Ireland: 'In an age of inequality where working class communities are oppressed the Rialto Youth Project is working towards bringing about social change providing an integrated youth service based on the needs of young people and in particular those most at risk.'<sup>20</sup> Whelan had first planned to stay nine months but after a dozen years she is still in Rialto: 'for me, it's an energy.'<sup>21</sup> The exuberance of the young people and the ambition of the artist youth work team have been fed and sharpened through two long projects: *What's The Story* (2007-11), and *The Natural History of Hope* (2012-16).

**17.** Fiona Whelan, *TEN. Territory, Encounter and Negotiation: A Critical Memoir by a Socially Engaged Artist*, (Dublin: Fiona Whelan, 2014) 27.  
Available at [bit.ly/296yYIG](https://bit.ly/296yYIG)

**18.** Central Statistics Office, Ireland; [cso.ie](http://cso.ie).

**19.** Jim Lawlor in Jim Lawlor et Fiona Whelan, "A Partnership Preamble", *IN2* (2010).  
[bit.ly/2jmFNpo](https://bit.ly/2jmFNpo)

**20.** [bit.ly/2iqdQOd](https://bit.ly/2iqdQOd)

**21.** Fiona Whelan, "Understanding Difference", *Practice 1:1* (2009).  
[bit.ly/2iu4uwb](https://bit.ly/2iu4uwb)

**Ideas, stories, art**

Each of these projects of collaborative public art resolves into a chain of ideas, stories, research, and publicity. Whelan speaks of 'the learning in the work,<sup>22</sup> and, reflecting upon *What's The Story*, she shares her 'practice-based knowledge' of how collaboration was realised.<sup>23</sup> Collaborating around 'large ideas' rather than upon the need to produce a particular work gave Whelan a sense of 'excitement and freedom.'<sup>24</sup> The question that drew the group together was the request that they tell of a time when they felt powerful, or when they felt powerless, but beyond the large idea of power, the commitment of all was sustained, also, by an appetite for art and storytelling. Rather than an abstract idea it was precisely this creative dimension, crafting and editing, that brought youth workers, artist, and young folk together, week after week. The stories came from the core group, collected primarily by Whelan, and then shared anonymously within the group over one long evening. A period of analysis identified experiences with the *gardai* (police) as a prominent topic of stories of powerlessness. The core group drew in academics and other experts to nudge along the learning. Soon, the moment of publicity began. Having heard each other's stories, people wanted others to hear them too. They also wanted the listeners to respond and some forms worked better than others. When one exhibition form allowed passive consumption, the young people were disappointed, 'want[ing] a deeper engagement with each visitor.'<sup>25</sup> More satisfying was the public event where invited guests read the stories before each other and in the presence of the anonymous authors.

**22.** Fiona Whelan and Kevin Ryan, "Beating the Bounds of a Socially-Engaged Art? A Transdisciplinary Dialogue on a Collaborative Art Project with Youth in Dublin, Ireland", *Field 4* (2016)  
[bit.ly/2jxNTCr](https://bit.ly/2jxNTCr)

**23.** Fiona Whelan, *TEN*, 20.

**24.** Fiona Whelan, *TEN*, 52.

**25.** Fiona Whelan, *TEN*, 121.

The 'power of re-enactment' came in part from how this anonymity produced a 'tension in the readers and in those whose stories were read aloud.'<sup>26</sup> Further torque was applied when police recruits accepted an invitation to contribute to the project, and in a staged event at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, they themselves read some of these stories before their anonymous authors. This in turn produced a film, and an exhibition and residency with more discussion at Dublin's The LAB gallery, which included an extended invitation to other youth groups in Dublin that collected a further twenty stories, as well as a process to develop new local police training focused on treating young people with more dignity and respect.

26. Fiona Whelan, *TEN*, 111.

## Aesthetics

The learning is far from merely processual. Story-telling, anonymity, re-enactment, and listening, each has affective and aesthetic dimensions that demand and nurture creativity. The authors of the stories wanted them to be heard, attended to respectfully. At The LAB installation, the stories were held in boxes in a darkened room, and visitors could check out one at a time, and then take that story into a illuminated part of the room. Whelan explains that: 'We wanted to avoid any scanning of these personal accounts, preferring that fewer stories were read by an individual visitor as long as each visitor read with a little commitment; these aesthetic decisions would have an influence on the reader's experience of the young people's accounts.'<sup>27</sup>

27. Fiona Whelan, *TEN*, 178.

Against the notion of social inclusion, Whelan offers difference as a more honest description of the power relations within the project.

The triangular form of the seating for the room at many of the public events 'initially evolved from the particular constitution of the Collective'<sup>28</sup> (young people, artist, youth workers) in recognition of their different interests, and perhaps accepting the way each mediates the other. It might seem that there is a sort of equality in a triangle, at least when laid flat, although the separate seating is a recognition of difference. Against the notion of social inclusion, Whelan offers difference as a more honest description of the power relations within the project and explained the triangle's place in representing this recognition: 'Any removal of subject identities represented a risk of suggesting some kind of neutralized equality [...]. So [...] the triangle was symbolically laid flat, highlighting our differences in knowledge, class, background and our commitment to a horizontal process.'<sup>29</sup> This aspiration is more risky in the public events. In one sense, the project must move between studio and stage and in doing so it negotiates two distinct but related realms of difference and power. Kevin Ryan has described Whelan's work as addressing: 'Two forms of relational power: one that articulates inequalities between those who exercise power and those who are subject to power [...] and another whereby power is co-produced through collaboration.'<sup>30</sup>

28. Kerstin Mey, '... But Where is The Art?' *Policing Dialogues Review*, (Dublin: Fiona Whelan and Rialto Youth Project, 2011) 6-7, 7

[bit.ly/2izhKCI](http://bit.ly/2izhKCI)

29. Fiona Whelan and Kevin Ryan, "Beating the Bounds".

30. Fiona Whelan and Kevin Ryan, "Beating the Bounds".

In the gallery, then, inviting the police to the triangle is to hope for a common commitment to a horizontal process of speaking and listening. With the police along one side, the artistic collective sit acutely alongside, and on a third side other invited guests including youth workers, artists, and cultural activists. Each is aware of the other but does not need to look directly at them. They can address a common empty space within the triangle, might project something respectful there. But, of course, once elevated, a triangle has a peak, and outside the boundary conditions of the triangle in the gallery, horizontal engagement is well nigh impossible. The triangle proved a useful symbol to think with giving power, as Ryan noted, a clear 'representational form within the context of [Whelan's]

collaborative practice.<sup>31</sup> Understanding is an exercise of imagination as much as cognition.

31. Fiona Whelan and Kevin Ryan, "Beating the Bounds".

## The learning in the work

The learning in the work is substantive as well as formal, and these are imbricated. Whelan describes going to Philadelphia with a group of young Irish people to work with local youth on a mural project, and recalls how irritated the young people were when Fox News reported of this as a visit from Dublin's 'saddest housing project.'<sup>32</sup> On another occasion, one young person left the project when he heard that Rialto Youth Project was funded only because it served a deprived community of 'marginalised' and 'at-risk' youth, 'labels he found unhelpful and offensive.'<sup>33</sup>

32. Fiona Whelan and Kevin Ryan, "Beating the Bounds".

33. Fiona Whelan, *TEN*, 141.

The power of the mass media to label people produces real consequences.

For members of the project, engaging with various publics highlights differences between how they might describe themselves and how they are perceived by others. The power of the mass media to label people produces real consequences. On another occasion, an irresponsible press report suggested, not that the police had been invited to listen to the working-class stories, but that local youth were trying to help the police in their police work making at least one member of the project 'very uptight and nervous about how my mates would see me.'<sup>34</sup> Within the project, then, people became increasingly aware of how working-class youth are represented and in wanting to speak for themselves they learn not only how better to speak to the press, but perhaps also project what Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge wrote of as a counterpublic, grounded in working-class experience and challenging the illusory social unity expressed in the hegemonic bourgeois public sphere.<sup>35</sup> As Vagabond Reviews, Ailbhe Murphy and Ciaran Smyth commented that in talking back as a subaltern voice, *What's The Story* spoke truth to power in a fashion akin to Michel Foucault's account of *parrhesia*.<sup>36</sup>

34. Michael Byrne, "It's Personal", *Policing Dialogues Review*, 9-10, 9.

35. Oscar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993 [1972]).

36. Ailbhe Murphy and Ciaran Smyth, "Speaking the Truth to Power: The Case of the What's The Story Collective", *Policing Dialogues Review*, 20-21.

## Territory

The research and publicity phases of the project produce their own distinctive learning. In the case of *What's The Story*, this was not only about the pervasive experience of humiliation at the hands of the *gardaí*, but included a heightened awareness of how Rialto could be rendered toxic to its own inhabitants. After the first public readings, Ciaran Smyth identified a core theme related to territory, with stories describing places where people felt safe, felt at home, or where home itself was not always one's own territory.<sup>37</sup> A similar theme emerged in *The Natural History of Hope* where, again, stories were collected and then analysed. In reporting back to the group, sociologist Kathleen Lynch identified 'lack of safe space' as one of the core themes in the stories.<sup>38</sup>

37. Fiona Whelan, *TEN*, 113-14.

38. *Natural History of Hope*, programme, (Dublin: Project Arts Centre, 2016) 7

[bit.ly/2jMviJ5](https://bit.ly/2jMviJ5)

Territory is understood as an area over which one has some control, but we often pass into territory controlled by others.

Commonly, territory is understood as an area over which one has some control, but, of course, we often pass into territory controlled by others. Geographers speak of territoriality as the control of people through the control of space.<sup>39</sup> In his reflection on the stories collected for the *What's The Story* event at Dublin's LAB, sociologist Aogán Mulcahy remarks that the 'relationship between police and young people is [...] about the nature of public space [...] over which the police claim jurisdiction.'<sup>40</sup> *Gardaí* consider it suspicious behaviour to be a young person in a place where drugs are sold, although for these young people that place is their neighbourhood, and thus young people come to accept that they have no right to public space. Taking up the challenge of helping to train police is not only a counter-assertion of humanity in the face of this irradiation of public space, but it is also a wager on hope, however futile that often feels.

**39.** Robert D. Sack, *Human Territoriality: Its Theory and History* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986)

**40.** Aogán Mulcahy, «The Sociology of Power», *Policing Dialogues Review*, 18-20, 19.

[bit.ly/29rEFxZ](https://bit.ly/29rEFxZ)



*The Day in Question*

What's The Story? Collective

Irish Museum of Modern Art

Dublin, 2009

Video still © Enda O'Brien



*The Day in Question*

What's The Story? Collective

Irish Museum of Modern Art  
Dublin, 2009

Video still © Enda O'Brien



*Policing Dialogues*

What's The Story? Collective

The LAB  
Dublin, 2009

© Michael Durand



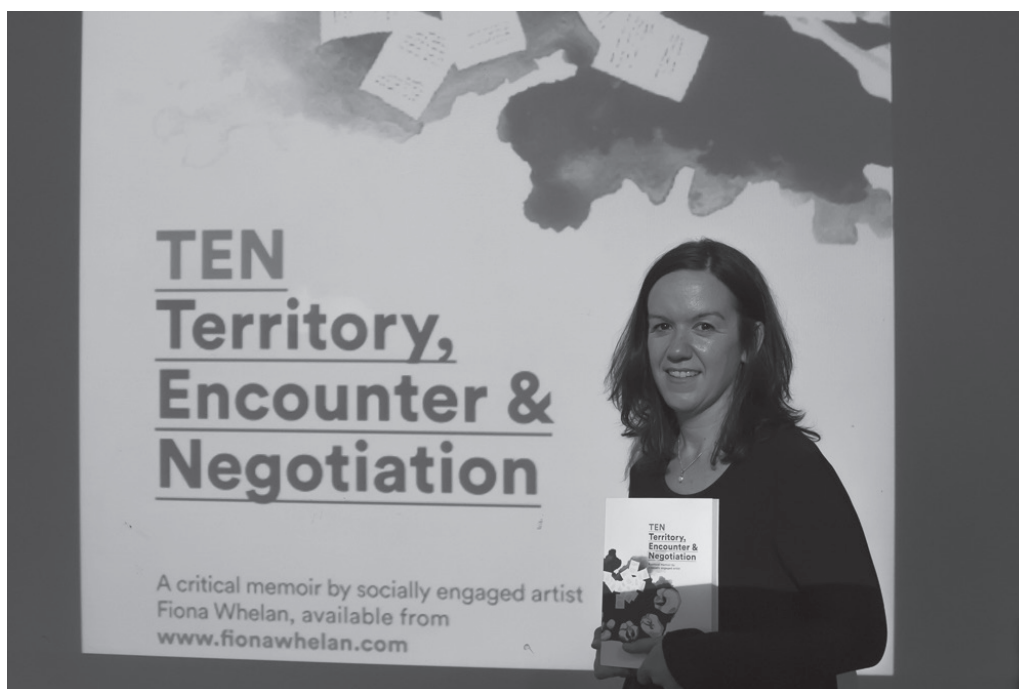
*Policing Dialogues*

What's The Story? Collective

The LAB  
Dublin, 2009

© Michael Durand





Fiona Whelan at the TEN Seminar and Book Launch

NCAD  
Dublin, 2016

© Ray Hegarty



*New School for Girls, Natural History of Hope*

Fiona Whelan and Rialto Youth Project

Studio 468, Rialto  
Dublin, 2015

© Fiona Whelan



*New School for Girls, Natural History of Hope*

Fiona Whelan and Rialto Youth Project

Studio 468, Rialto  
Dublin, 2015

© Fiona Whelan

BIOGRAPHY  
Gerry Kearns



Gerry Kearns is Professor of Human Geography at Maynooth University. He is the author of *Geopolitics and Empire* (Oxford University Press, 2009), co-editor of *Spatial Justice and the Irish Crisis* (Royal Irish Academy, 2015), and author of more than one hundred articles and chapters on Political Geography, Historical Geography and Cultural Geography. His current projects include *The Geographical Turn* with Karen Till about the relations between Art and Geography, historical work about empathy and sexuality in Irish nationalism for Fearghus Ó Conchúir's *Casement Project*, *Making Space of AIDS* about the inventions of metaphors to aid survival during a lethal pandemic, and *Geopolitics after Auschwitz* concerning how we can think geopolitically and critically even when the very subject has been colonized by the worst fascist politics.

Photo : © Karen Till