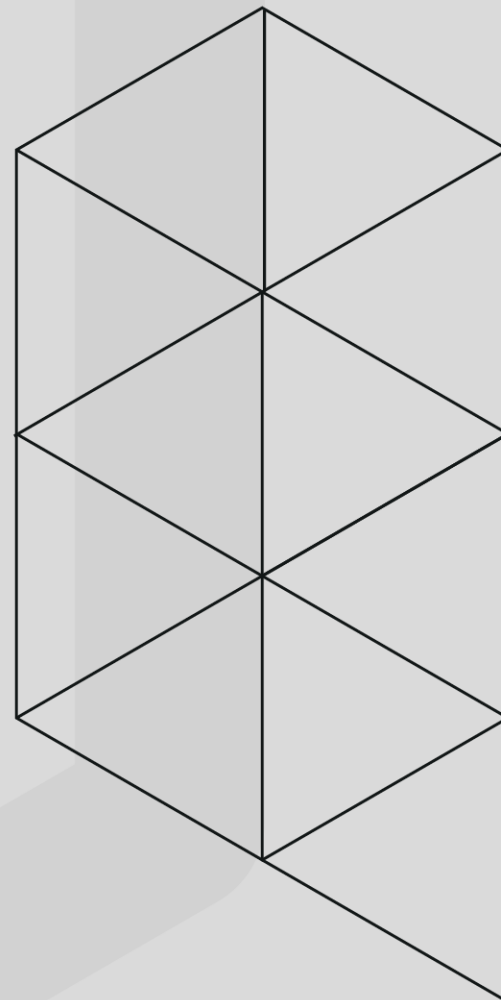


What Does He Need? Reflections on a cross-sectorial and transdisciplinary project unfolding in public

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What Does He Need? Reflections on a cross-sectorial and transdisciplinary project unfolding in public

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Figure 1: What Does He Need? public poster project, Fiona Whelan, Brokentalkers & Rialto Youth Project, The LAB gallery, Dublin, December 2020. Photo by Louis Haugh.

Introduction

What Does He Need? is a long-term project led by myself (artist and writer Fiona Whelan), theatre company Brokentalkers and Rialto Youth Project – a community organization based in the southwest inner city of Dublin, Ireland. Established in 2018, What Does He Need? explores how men and boys are shaped by and influence the world they live in. Operating at the intersection of collaborative arts practice, performance, qualitative research and youth work, What Does He Need? aims to create significant public dialogue about the current state of masculinity (see whatdoesheneed.com).

Background

The project emerges as the most recent chapter in a long-term cross-sectoral collaboration between myself and Rialto Youth Project. Established in 1981, Rialto Youth Project holds a distinct position in the Irish youth sector in their recognition of the systemic oppression of working-class young people and their families. As an organization, they refuse to endorse the state's depoliticized register of the young people they work with as 'disadvantaged', instead adopting more defiant language as they articulate in their mission statement the oppression and marginalization of working-class communities (see rialtoyouthproject.net). In response, their organizational practice works to bring about social change, resisting approaches to overcoming inequality that are individualistic and simplistic.

Since immersing myself as an artist in residence with the organization in 2004, the last sixteen years has seen us co-develop creative approaches to exploring and responding to complex systemic power relations with young people and adults living and working in Rialto. Through a series of durational projects largely responding to class and gender inequality, my practice strives to highlight and unsettle power relations through collective processes. These processes typically build from multiple shared testimonies in which lived experiences of power and inequality are explored by groups, later manifesting as visual, performative or dialogical encounters in which systemic power relations are publicly exposed and interrogated. Simultaneously, a form of relational power associated with collaboration is harnessed. These iterative projects are all connected and can be seen as chapters in a longitudinal practice, situated and emergent, unfolding in public in real time.



Figure 2: What Does He Need? Map of nine boys created in Rialto, Dublin 8. Drawing by Fiona Whelan.

While an earlier project, *Policing Dialogues* (2007–11), examined policing as a very visible form of power, the subsequent project *Natural History of Hope* (2012–16) focused on invisible and intangible forms of power, revealed in the overlapping realities of class and gender inequality. Following multiple manifestations from the *Natural History of Hope* project staged locally over four years, in 2015 myself and Rialto Youth Project invited Brokentalkers to collaborate with us as the project was at a critical juncture with regard to how best to realize a major public manifestation. As a theatre company, Brokentalkers are known for their original and accessible live performance, emerging from collaborations involving a range of other arts professionals as well as an engagement with community groups and non-professional actors (see brokentalkers.ie). The resulting collaboration between myself, Brokentalkers and Rialto Youth Project led to the staging of the performance *Natural History of Hope* in the Project Arts Centre in May 2016. The performance was presented by a cast of 30 women who guided a mannequin called Hope to survive and, if possible, to thrive against a backdrop of complex social themes (see Whelan 2019; Two Fuse 2018).

Through verbal, visual and performative methods, the *Natural History of Hope* performance highlighted the lived experience of gender inequality by multiple generations of women. Interconnected spoken narratives were accompanied on-stage by a series of metaphors intended to give visual form to often invisible power relations that shape life experience. For example, patriarchy was represented as a

wolf re-appearing on stage throughout the performance. The constant threat of male violence was represented by a shadow, which also continuously returned in different form. Intending to avoid any overly simplistic or reductive analyses, these stark presentations of male power and influence in women's lives were tensioned on-stage by the birth of Hope's son, a beautiful baby boy who she adored and for whom she envisaged a great future. *What Does He Need?* – a project subsequently developed by the three collaborating partners – now picks up on that tension, seeking to explore the multiple forces that shape the lives of boys from birth to adulthood, and how they, in turn, interact with and shape the world they live in.

Making boys as a method of engagement

The central methodological device in the *What Does He Need?* project is the co-creation of boy characters by different groups, who take collective responsibility for naming their boy and guiding him through life, exploring his needs and experiences as he interacts with the world around him. In each case, the boy character is from the same place as the group, which positions the boy's life in a specific context, harnessing local knowledge and supporting the possibility of local solidarities. This boy-making process amplifies the exploratory value of arts-based methods. To date, the process has taken two forms – a one-day immersive workshop for adult groups including youth workers and community workers and a weekly programme developed for children and young people.

1. One-day immersive workshop

The one-day immersive workshop was developed over the course of 2018/19. The methodology for the workshop, which is at the centre of this transdisciplinary collaboration, was developed over a year by the artists, engaging with partners in Rialto Youth Project, and further supported via a Brokentalkers residency, supported through Create/Collaborative Arts Partnership Programme (CAPP) and '*...the lives we live*' Grangegorman Public Art, which presented the opportunity to seed the cross-city nature of this project. Led by Brokentalkers (Gary Keegan and Feidlim Cannon) and myself, each

workshop brings together a group of adults who are tasked with creating a boy, naming him, describing him as a young child and journeying with him as he encounters a series of complex dilemmas at different stages of his life from birth to adulthood. Combining visual and performative elements with the expertise and reflections of youth workers and community workers, the workshop explores a range of themes, including power, dominance, suppression of vulnerability, male violence, male suicide, pornography, money and status. In response to scripted dilemmas presented by a disembodied voice, the groups engage in conversation, discussing their boy's needs, occasionally interrupted with a live script, which has captured and represents key discussion points. This dialogical process often highlights perceived differences between a boy's needs as identified by adults in the room as against what some imagine he might feel he needs to do in a given moment, due to a range of social norms he may not be able to diverge from.

To date, there have been eight iterations of the workshop, developed through a cross-city collaboration, seeing the project partners connect with the Children and Youth Action Group of the North West Inner City Network. Different workshops have experimented with different group profiles with regard to the age, gender and relationship of the group, as well as group size, workshop duration, content, form and the setting – working in community centres and art spaces. Boys that have been created by adult groups include 'Jack-Sue', created by a group of conference attendees as part of Create's Collaborative Arts Partnership Program's 'Practice and Power' event in June 2018; 'Luke', created – while I was in residence in the Irish Museum of Modern Art in summer 2019 – by a team of youth and community workers from the North West Inner City Network; and 'Finn', created by a group of adult men living and/or working in Rialto, who came together in the F2 Neighborhood Centre in December 2019. It is our intention in the near future to produce this workshop as an immersive sensory encounter, which would include the development of a purpose-built mobile set with audio-visual components. We would hope that this could tour to different locations, to open up complex conversations with a diversity of different groups, to collectively unearth insights into how men and boys are shaped by and influence the worlds they live in.

What Does He Need?



Figure 3: *What Does He Need?* Immersive workshop, Fiona Whelan & Brokentalkers, The LAB gallery, 2018. Photo by Fiona Whelan.



Figure 4: *What Does He Need?* Immersive workshop with Dublin 7 community workers, Fiona Whelan & Brokentalkers, Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2019. Photo by Susanne Bosch.

2. Dedicated programme for young people and children

In 2019, myself and youth workers at Rialto Youth Project developed a more programmatic approach to engaging groups of children or young people to collectively make a boy as a means of exploring how a boy's world shapes him and how he shapes it. As with the adult workshop, the boy characters are always from the same area as the group of young makers, creating the conditions for their lived knowledge to bear on his life. In addition, the programme is more explicitly pedagogical than the workshop, underpinned by strong youth work values, seeking to support young people to understand the complexities of their gender and class position.

The programme developed organically starting with a weekly session led by myself and two youth workers with one group of young men (aged 16–18). The group created a boy called Stevie through conversation, drawing and writing processes, resulting – after a number of months – in a poem detailing the group's sense of the challenges the boy would face and their advice to him in meeting those challenges. In 2020, the 'Stevie' poem was developed into a short animation in partnership with Paper Panther Productions. (The poem and animation will be presented publicly in 2021.)



Figure 5: Cali, created by Rialto Youth Project young men's group aged 14–16, 2020. Drawing by Fiona Whelan.

Building on the perceived success of the process with the first group of young men, a core team of staff from Rialto Youth Project was established, who undertook with my support to lead a similar process with four further groups from Rialto ranging in age from 5 to 16. The process resulted in the development of four more boys and engaged with themes such as relationships, dominance and violence, gendered identity, search for dignity and respect, social conditioning, bullying, poverty and survival. What differed in these processes to the one in which Stevie was developed was the absence of an artist or writer in the sessions, each process instead being led by the core staff of the organization. In some cases, drawing or writing were developed between sessions by me or other artists to stimulate and enhance the following week's discussion. These four programmes were interrupted by the Covid-19 lockdown in March 2020; however, reflection and evaluation of the processes that underpinned them is live and ongoing, as we work to recognize some core principles and components that are essential to this method's application. Also interrupted by Covid-19 restrictions was a planned development of the programme to include two groups in the northwest inner city of Dublin.

Four features of the methodological device

Hannah Arendt recognizes that every person is both 'a beginning and a beginner' ([1961] 2006: 169), born with a capacity to begin something new, a concept that she conceived of as 'natality' (Arendt 1958). With each birth, something indeterminate and unpredictable is set in motion, harbouring the potential for a reconfiguring of what is possible.



Figure 6: Francis created by Rialto Youth Project male staff group, 2018. Drawing by Fiona Whelan.

The first feature worth noting in the methodological device of boy-making is that the boy character is born and developed through a collective process. This feature of collectivity sees different groups work together to guide their boy in the face of multiple complex power relations and imagined dilemmas. The polyvocal and agonistic nature of their dialogical processes sees members of a group argue for or negotiate a position with and in response to others' views, while the group collectively strives to find agency for their boy against a range of often invisible power relations experienced as social norms. In these processes, natality is put into play by a collective effort, the group exchange important in highlighting the relationality of life and of power and inequality. This approach affords groups the opportunity to collectively learn how it is that we interact with and shape the world around us.

The second feature of the boy-making process that is crucially important is its place-based nature; so in each case, the boy that is created is from the same place as the group, drawing on the knowledge and lived experience of his makers, who have a relationship to that place. This approach elicits a pedagogy of place, harnessing specific contextual knowledge and exploring the intersection of social context and forms of masculinity while also opening up the divergent experiences of one place. Importantly, the project overview communicates a focus on how 'boys are shaped by and influence the world they live in'. The word 'world' is significant here as it is also intended to acknowledge the formation of a boy or

man beyond simply his geographic place to consider other significant aspects of the boy's life that contribute to his formation.

Another important feature of the boy-making process is the focus placed on a boy's needs. As groups are guided to discuss specific experiences in his young or adult life, they are tasked with seeing behind the boy's behaviour to explore his needs, opening up a more complex conversation on social formation, often engaging with more systemic themes including gendered identity, the influence of class and/or race positionality and the importance and challenges of belonging to different social groups. The tension between the boy's needs and the group's desires for him also creates an interesting point of discussion, particularly if some desires are seen to cause harm to himself and/ or others in his life.

The final notable feature of this process is the fictional nature of the boy that the various groups are co-creating. He is a character, born from a process of exchange within a group, and yet his imagined life is shaped by the lived experiences and knowledge of his makers. This staging of a fictional life born into the real world creates the potential for conversations to move between reality and the imaginary and engage in the political imaginary – a worldmaking practice where the future is not foreclosed. Through a collective generative action, which harbours the potential for a reconfiguring of what is possible, alternative futures can be publicly imagined.

What Does He Need?



Figure 7: *What Does He Need?* Public Poster Project, Fiona Whelan, Brokentalkers & Rialto Youth Project, The LAB gallery, Dublin, December 2020. Photo by Louis Haugh.

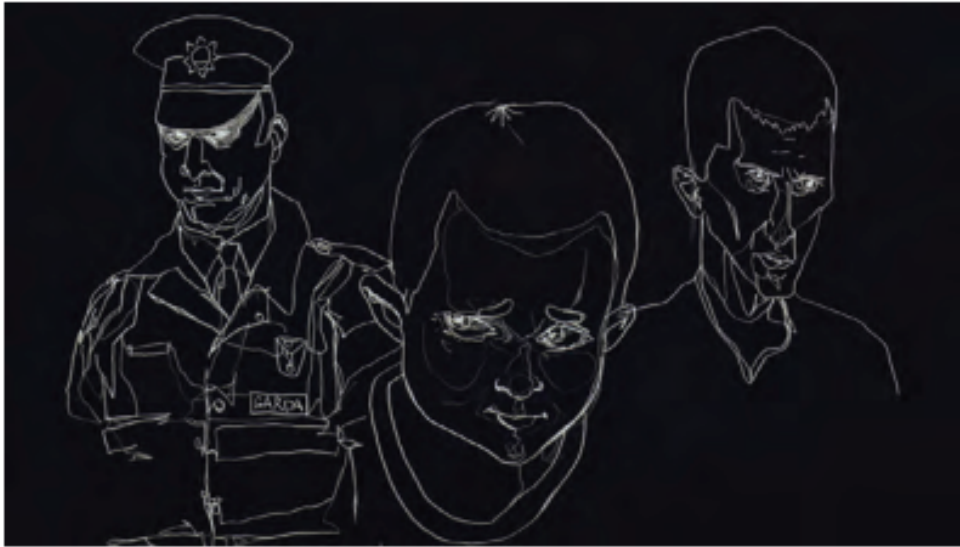


Figure 8: Video still from Stevie animation, Rialto Youth Project & Fiona Whelan, 2020. Drawing by Aoife Balfe



Figure 9: Video still from Stevie animation, Rialto Youth Project & Fiona Whelan, 2020. Drawing by Fiona Whelan.

A public dialogue on masculinity

While operating as a democratic form of public engagement, the boy-making processes can also be seen as a collective research action. Responding to this accumulating body of research, the *What Does He Need?* project further manifests in public through artistic and pedagogical responses, which in turn create new layers of public engagement for the project. 2020 was planned to be a major sharing of this research to promote a further layer of participation and engagement. This was due to start with a performance *To Be Frank* billed for April 2020 at the Project Arts Centre in Dublin, Mermaid Arts Centre in Wicklow and the *Everyman* in Cork, but the performance never saw the stage due to the Covid pandemic and subsequent Irish lockdown in March of that year. The team then turned their attention towards a planned exhibition and major pedagogical response due to take place in September/October 2020 at The LAB gallery, but this was similarly affected by the closure of cultural institutions in Dublin in September, as the capital advanced to a level 3 stage of restrictions ahead of the rest of Ireland. Adapting to the new realities of living with Covid, the *What Does He Need?* project is now planned to manifest in a phased way. This began in late 2020 with the launch of the project website. Through a current partnership with The LAB gallery, other emerging manifestations include a public poster project, philosophy sessions for male leaders and an audio walk.

School of Stevie

While some of the groups making boys were generated through the *What Does He Need?* project as temporary communities, others were pre-existing groups rooted in their local context. The young men (aged 16–18) who made Stevie were one such example – their sustained relationship to the Rialto Youth Project creating the possibility for phases of engagement to emerge through the process. The project started with the creation of Stevie through a creative process involving conversation, writing and drawing (with youth work support from Michael Byrne and Thomas Dolan). The process produced a poem called ‘Stevie’, which tells the story of a boy who understands what poverty and systemic neglect feels like as he struggles to maintain dignity and respect in his life as a young man. Later, an animation based on the poem was developed as a second

phase of work, narrated by a wider group of local young men, creating another layer of participation. The narrative of the 'Stevie' poem and animation emerges from the voice of young men and details a boy's personal engagement with a very immediate world he encounters daily, such as his neighbourhood, school, family and peers. In response to the poem, myself and the manager of Rialto Youth Project, Jim Lawlor, developed a third phase to the project in order to amplify the macropolitical context in which the boy's life exists.

This phase began with the stripping back of the poem to its nouns – the people, places and things that make up Stevie's world, as identified by his makers. During the Covid lockdown in spring 2020, the project generated another layer of public engagement as myself and Jim sent an invitation to a wide range of diverse individuals associated with those elements of Stevie's world, inviting people to write to Stevie. Importantly, we were not asking them to write Stevie a personal letter, seeking to avoid an individualizing or overly sentimental set of responses that personal letter writing could have elicited. Instead, each person was asked to adopt a noun in the poem that they could identify with and write to Stevie from that position. To date, Stevie has received 48 letters from sources including the flats, weed, school, the police, Mountjoy prison, Nike, bed, spiderman and Stevie's loyal Jack Russell.

In *Letting Art Teach* (2017), educator Gert Biesta argues for a world-centred education built on a dialogical matrix that teaches you that you are not in the centre of the world but you are part of the world and, importantly, you are not alone in it. In meeting the world, you can meet many forms of resistance, but Biesta argues that encountering resistance is the educational moment, and the space of dialogue is the educational form.

In making Stevie, the young men spoke their truth to the world. Now, through the addition of letter writing, the 'world' in all its elements is speaking back. Recognizing the potential of an educational moment to be harnessed in the next phase of letter reading by young men in Rialto and a subsequent right to reply to the world, myself and Rialto Youth Project are now fully committed to the development of a new project *School of Stevie* – a multilayered artistic and pedagogical response to the plight of so many young men whose lives exist at the

intersection of class oppression and dominant forms of masculinity. This new project will continue to amplify the cross-sectoral alignments that are central to the *What Does He Need?* project as it intersects collaborative arts practice, performance, qualitative research and youth work.

Troubling empathy and inclusion

The editors of this publication pose two questions, asking: ‘How does art, design and architecture enable empathetic and inclusive ways of living together?’ and ‘How do these spatial practices affect public exchange and opinion formation in urban spaces?’

As described here, a wide range of methods of public exchange exist in the multiple layers of the *What Does He Need?* project – some short term and others longitudinal. Presently rooted in one urban context (with additional cross-city engagements), the project works to uncover the micro and macro power relations that shape the lives of boys and young men. This includes the more visible forms of power that emerge in a boy’s relationship to his parents, school, the law and the state and the invisible forms of power experienced as social norms that continuously shape his understanding of what is acceptable and expected. In addition, the project nurtures new creative modes of exchange – polyvocal and dialogical in form – where opinion formation occurs collectively in new ways. While one could claim that this goes some way to promoting ‘empathetic and inclusive ways of living together’ in the world, I would like to engage cautiously with the values of ‘empathy’ and ‘inclusion’.

In my longitudinal practice collaborating with Rialto Youth Project for nearly seventeen years, I have come to recognize my core commitment as the instigation and development of processes exploring and responding to the theme of power. I position this commitment in opposition to the contemporary ethics of social inclusion, which has unhelpfully become an (often simplistic) antidote to histories of social exclusion (Whelan and Ryan 2016). My issue with the language of ‘inclusion’, similar to that of ‘participation’ and ‘integration’, is that it does not always attend to the power structures people are being included into and the power relations that preside over that inclusion. This runs the risk of neutralizing or rendering

invisible the systemic power relations that are the root causes of inequality.

For similar reasons, I am inclined to resist any overemphasis on empathy. There is no doubt that processes within the practice can engender empathic understanding between individuals and groups, but I believe the practice must strive beyond empathy in an increasingly 'personalized culture', which, as Patti Lather highlights, is laden with 'easy identifications and sentimentalizing empathy' (2009: 20). For me the challenge becomes about creating processes that do not just ask multiple publics to see the world from another's point of view but create processes that make visible how we all co-exist in multiple power relations while engendering an active form of response, so people can engage critically with what they are encountering in the pursuit of more equal ways to live together in the world.

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Authors' note – Feb 2024

The above article was written in 2020. In the four years since, the What Does He Need? project has continued to grow in multiple directions including a development of the text based visual art work featured in the article, which was subsequently presented on city billboards in Dublin in 2021; and further developed through a residency, for exhibition at The Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA), Dublin in 2022 engaging many new publics and participants. The one day workshop featured in the article became the basis for a new audio work, launched in 2021, which further informed a new (2-hour) workshop developed at IMMA in 2022, and a theatre performance called Manifest directed by Brokentalkers and presented at Project Arts Centre, Dublin in 2023. The dedicated programme for children and young people that is featured in the article has since been named 'Boys in the Making'. After writing this article, the development of the programme's methodology and expansion was prioritised over the emerging 'School of Stevie' phase of work signalled above. 'Boys in the Making' has been piloted in multiple contexts across the city, supported by Dr. Fiona Whelan and Dannielle McKenna (Manager of Rialto Youth Project). The pilot Philosophy programme for male leaders has also been completed by Dr. Rob Grant. The project has received much media and critical attention. The What Does He Need? project continues to develop.

For further information and reflection, see:

www.whatdoesheneed.com

<https://www.whatdoesheneed.com/public-poster-project/>

<https://www.whatdoesheneed.com/boys-in-the-making-programme/>

<https://www.whatdoesheneed.com/media/>

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