

A Partnership Preamble

Some months ago IN2 invited Jim Lawlor, a veteran community leader, youth worker and cultural activist in Rialto, to write an article on partnership in the arts. True to form Jim agreed to the proposition but never considered that this was something he



would have to do on his own. Fiona Whelan, an artist and collaborator with Jim and Rialto Youth Project and the wider community over the past seven years, became implicated in the process. After all what could be more appropriate than a mature set of reflections on the theme of partnership, shared openly and expressed fluently by those most directly involved?

Time passed, a certain self conscious awkwardness entered into the air and deadlines loomed and faded. It became apparent that neither was comfortable with the term or assumption that partnership in the arts was *de facto* a clear or readily achievable goal. It also became clear that, notwithstanding the span of their relationship, full on engagement, constantly negotiated roles, openness – indeed embrace of difference – and the achievement of a significant and celebrated body of work, that there was still a resistance to the designation of partnership in its institutional and idealised form.

A mediator, known to both and not insensitive to either the arts or youth work, was brought into the frame through which a set of leading questions were arrived at. The protagonists were then brought into a small room and cross-examined over a three hour period. Extensive recordings and transcripts emerged but of such biographical and dialectical intensity that no editor could easily land a neat article for IN2.

This process of itself was emblematic of the intent of the article – an invitation to collaboration and intelligent use of various skills sets and resources to make something larger than the sum of its parts.

Ultimately, while all parties were stimulated and challenged in the process of making a partnership article work, what was arrived at was an agreement: to present a set of individual perspectives that would sit beside each other as a testament to the innate complexity of partnership, and the type of personal and professional honesty and risk-taking necessary in countenancing the concept of partnership.

Jim leads out and Fiona takes up and particularises some of the key issues. Partnership in their experience is a practice and a shared, lived experience.

More importantly however partnership remains a live relationship and an ongoing interrogation of what is possible when consenting professionals commit to an interdisciplinary approach to learning – of itself, a rare and revealing thing.

Niall O Baoill

An Imperfect Collaboration

When I think of partnership I consider the complexity involved in having to accommodate the other individual, project or agency who wants to enter that type of relationship. I have to ask myself are we at, or approaching the same level of understanding?

Do we want the similar outcomes? Are we suited to each other?

Partnership is a very difficult process to engage in. Within Youth Work, while youth workers may have the same training, it does not automatically mean they can work in partnership with each other, or in a partnership with young people. To work in partnership demands that we are prepared to understand our attitudes and values, that we can appreciate difference, and that we are ready to meet the challenge by listening with great care and attention.

Partnership is a lived experience, which requires us to be very clear about what we want from a collaboration. It requires that we take the time to explore and understand, to build the relationship and to do that carefully. This is core to what is required whether it is youth workers in partnership with each other, or in partnership with young people, or indeed with an artist or some other discipline.



New Place, Same Face. June 2004

It may seem that I am not a big advocate of partnership, in fact the opposite is true. I believe that great things can happen when we truly enter into a partnership arrangement. The purpose of this article is meant to describe the relationship between Fiona Whelan and myself, and how the way we worked might represent a good example of partnership in action. Maybe it is, or maybe it's not, but one thing is certain and that is we never set out to create a partnership Fiona simply presented herself as an artist who wanted to make art with young people. She had a residency in a community based art studio in our building for six months and we had a big interest in creative processes.

I liked her approach as it was simple and uncomplicated. She was straight forward, independently-minded, open and enthusiastic about the possibilities of working with young people and the youth project in an inquiring and experimental manner.

She had no interest in being a youth worker, she was clear about her identity and for some reason I was very attracted to this. That was in 2004 and Fiona continues to have a presence in Rialto Youth Project as an artist.

The relationship has grown and I believe it has enabled the development of high quality arts processes and significant artistic output in a manner that continues to stimulate and challenge young people's view of themselves and the wider society that they are a crucial part of.

Artists can sometimes be seen as solitary people intensely focused on their art, while youth work is viewed as being primarily about the collective. The coming together of those two processes and the various disciplines within each, may not seem to have much in common at first glance but under closer inspection they turned out to be a very good fit for each other.

When I reflect on this relationship I recall the many conversations that took place between us. I think about how careful we were in teasing out quite complex ideas, and how on many an occasion we had to let those ideas sit within us, to ferment, to settle, to find their own expression in their own way and in their own time. This in my view takes patience and a belief that what we were doing was important and valuable.

The challenges that came with this process forced us both to think and rethink, take on situations whether these were about language, youth work principles, respect, process versus product, collaboration or lack of it, values and attitudes good or bad ones, and so on.



Dolphin as we know it – a model by Dolphin Art Group. Nov 2004

Sometimes it was confusing and frustrating but nonetheless all the better when the fog lifted. The closer we got to achieving good collaboration the more we realised how much we had to learn and we began to refer to our work as the imperfect collaboration.

This practise has produced artworks, critical understandings and learning that I am proud to stand over, that is consistent with the purpose of youth work and that is of high artistic quality, even if I do say so myself.

Some of the work and in particular the *What's The Story Collective* have been liberating to the young people who have participated in them. It has brought the notion of partnership to a new level where power is openly explored and where - more importantly in my view - ideas are shared and where differences are embraced, by young people, youth workers and artists. I think all involved would readily admit they had to make some adjustments to their way of seeing and responding to the world - but not in such a manner that was in any way disrespectful or disempowering - but rather within a collaborative and shared intent to seek out new insights and creative outcomes.

It is clear to me therefore that well conceived artistic processes, aligned to sensitive and courageous youth work processes can make for a very dynamic practise and one I remain steadfast in continuing to imagine and support. An expression of this practise might sometimes deserve to be called a partnership but I don't think it should be claimed lightly or too often. Better perhaps to consider it more like relationship to be endlessly minded and re-invented.

Jim Lawlor

I never use the term partnership

Partnerships as a Term

I've never used the term partnership, in fact I'm immediately distrustful of it. I've been working in Rialto with the Youth Project for over six years and have developed really strong working relationships, and been involved in many collaborative projects but



Wall of Lives mural at Fatima Luas Stop by Fatima Painting Group. June 2005

there were lots of imperfections within that. We are happy to acknowledge them, to continue to challenge our collective practice. The term partnership implies to me something neat and consensual. I am interested in the fluid practice that myself and the youth project are involved in - that it is not set down and worked out, that it grows and shifts as we learn, and that the motivations and roles can be quite different. Perhaps that does

describe a good partnership, but I still resist the term because it sounds institutional to me. It sounds like the kind of term that would get enforced from above.

Language

In reality, a lot of the language that is placed on this field is institutional and seems to come from either the art sector or the youth and community sector. I hear Youth Workers regularly describe Art 'as a tool' for Youth Work, something that they use to carry out their work. What does that say about the Artists they are collaborating with? Are they also tools used to carry out a Youth Worker's job? How is that collaborative when the Artist is already co-opted for the good of Youth Work? And what does it say for the young people receiving art in that context? They get to engage with art only when it is a tool for their development, while other young people in other places get to engage in art for art's sake. That is surely patronising.

Rialto Youth Project are an interesting organisation to me because they often resist practice being reined in and defined neatly. Although they have worked with me, an Artist for years, and have a much longer experience of working with other Artists and art forms, they have never for example taken on the term 'Youth Arts' to describe their work. It is not that there is a problem with an art practice that is for youth or by youth as 'Youth Arts' implies, but in RYP we are more interested in what happens when you bring people together who are different, and encourage them to hold their different motivations etc. The collective practice becomes for the Artist, the Youth Worker and the young people. We believe that such an approach that acknowledges and holds central all our different intentions and desires is most fruitful.

How I arrived – point of departure

When I started in Rialto I presented myself as an Artist. I wanted to work collaboratively in my practice. My previous experience with young people had seen

me in roles primarily as an educator or facilitator and in a position of authority. I was also working in a studio, painting at the same time. The reason I came to Rialto was because I saw an opportunity to be present to young people and the context in which they lived, but in my role as Artist - not Art Worker, Youth Art Worker, Community Artist - just Artist.

What was so exciting to me back then was that when I first approached Jim he was so enthusiastic about me being different and my resistance to the dominant way of engaging with young people. He has never tried to change my title, status or my methodology. I remember explaining the kinds of needs I had as an Artist and how I sometimes work in isolation at home or need to spend days feeding my practice at seminars, or research trips etc. and that I didn't want to have to 'turn up to work' in the morning, that I would prefer to let the stage of work dictate where I needed to be that day. He saw this approach - which was obviously different - as added value and encouraged me to hold that difference. That has not always been easy when you spend years working as the only Artist within such a different practice as Youth Work, but I believe that maintaining that difference is what has made it sustainable for me, and what has kept me six years in one context.



Goodbye installation with residents and artist, Fatima. June 2006

Stages to the Work

In the first year in Rialto in 2004, I was very much outside the organisation. I was in residency in Studio 468, which was in the same building as Rialto Youth Project and I based myself in the studio. I worked with many existing peer groups. The young people I worked with and the primary themes we dealt with in the work were mostly dictated by the Youth Workers, as they had the expertise of the area and needs of the young people.

Once I identified that I wanted to stay based in Rialto in 2005, and the Youth Project were happy to develop the relationship, the practice moved from the Artist in residence role, to a more community based practice paid through the youth project. I would call this the second phase of my work there. During this time I was gaining confidence and understanding of the area and building valuable relationships with people and so I felt in a position to make suggestions and changes, primarily the setting up of the first interest based group in the Youth Project. I was interested in pulling young people together who were interested in painting rather than just working with established friendship groups, myself and Jim negotiated this and it had a knock on effect within the Youth Project who now also run a Drama group and a Music group. At this time I was more integrated into the project. I had no dedicated studio but was sharing community space. In retrospect I would see this phase as a steep learning curve about the local context, the issues that existed and a greater awareness of the lives of the young people who I was working with. Now that I was somewhat more of an insider, I also became engaged in many exciting conversations with the team of Youth Workers around the complexities of collaboration. It is important to point out that most of the team were relatively new in their roles so essentially we all grew in our respective practices along side each other and gained

deep insights into how each other worked. This would stand to us as the years went on.

The third phase to my time in Rialto probably began in 2007 when I made another conscious shift in the way I was working to be more of a self-funded Artist integrated within the youth project but with an ideas led practice. Rather than work with a variety of groups on different projects and different themes and in different mediums, I knew if I was to sustain a practice in one context, I needed to have one project to focus on. I no longer wanted to be bound by a duty to regular groups held each day but wanted to develop stages of work that were in response to an idea. This led to the development of the *What's the Story?* project. Because the project was broadly focusing on young people's stories, it allowed all of the existing relationships with young people to be continued, it could respond and adapt to different needs while remaining as one long term focus for me. It was not until this time that I really considered how long I may end up staying in Rialto.



Anonymous 1st Reading event by What's the Story Collective. Nov 2008

I suppose I had no frame of reference for this. I was only going on a year to year basis until then. The reference I had for an Artist in such a context was a maximum of a years residency. There was an assumption that Artists like me would do another residency elsewhere and continue to move to different communities. Once I established that I was about to build a 3-4 year project in Rialto having already been around for 3 years, I realised the scope for broadening the work and planning clear stages in advance, that would allow for this project to develop in a more interesting way. So in 2007 myself and Jim negotiated around this new project idea and developed 3 stages to the project: Research 2007; Development 2008; and Action/Production 2009/10. I had relieved myself of any obligation to weekly groups. I was dedicated to researching for the project and I was weaving in and out of collaborative processes with many young people and Youth Workers. I was also thriving on the depth of relationships developed and the quality of the debate and the commitment to constantly push the boundaries for collaborative practice. The sustainability of my practice with Rialto Youth Project has relied on Jim's openness, in fact, desire for constant change. He was not keen to institutionalise my practice and had a real willingness to change the conditions to make this work best for all of us. He has a patient and thorough way of asking the real questions about this work and is happy to sit with disagreement and confusion, not eager to pin things down too quickly.

Reflections on Collaboration

Not to get overly caught up on language, although I use the term collaboration to



Section 8 a project of What's the Story Collective. 2009

describe what I do, I get very frustrated when the term is applied to any process done with a group of people, often involving mere consultation or participation. We have by no means developed a perfect collaborative practice in Rialto, in fact we are comfortable in acknowledging the many imperfections we find in the work. I would see two layers to the collaborative element of my work. My practice engages directly with Youth Workers and young people in all stages of work, but I also collaborate with Jim. Our process is not practical and hands on but we talk constantly, back and forth, sharing ideas and opinions, reflecting, catching, learning, debating differences, challenging the other's practice etc. This process is just as integral to the work for me as is the relationship with those who are directly engaged with a project. One key feature to the practice with RYP is time. The

duration has allowed really good relationships of difference to develop. Another key factor is that I am in Rialto as my full time practice, this allows me to be present to people in different ways, not just in groups as is often assumed where all the work happens. There are so many meetings and informal conversations that become the basis for developing the work. Artists don't always get to be privy to that stuff.

Present moment, current cycle of work, collaboration now

This year is really interesting for me. All I have talked about is relationships and how central they are to the work. The reality at the moment is that Rialto Youth Project is in a place of transition. Three of the core team of Youth Workers have left within the last year and the team is also growing. I am interested in whether the learning on collaborative practice is held in the organisational memory or is it gone with the respective workers to their new posts. That is conversation I want to get into soon with Jim!

It is also an important year for the *What's the Story Collective*, which was established in 2008 as part of the development stage of this current project. The collective made up of young adults, Youth Workers and myself as Artist, have worked closely for years now, committing to the development of horizontal working relationships to push the boundaries for collaborative practice. Since the start of 2009, we have had quite a prolific time entering into many public engagements, nationally and internationally, with our work including a series of reading events, films and the development of a mobile structure. On the 14 September this year we will present much of this work in a 6 week exhibition in The Lab in Dublin city centre. I would imagine this exhibition may mark the beginning of another phase in my practice with Rialto Youth Project.

Fiona Whelan

Photographs by Fiona Whelan