

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a bouquet of flowers. The bouquet includes white roses, pink carnations, and orange lilies. The hand is positioned on the right side of the frame, holding the stems of the flowers. The flowers are resting on a dark, textured surface, possibly asphalt. The background is a blurred green landscape.

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Art and Social Action

International education in
collaborative and socially
engaged art



create national development
agency for collaborative arts

Create's role as a national resource organisation for collaborative arts has naturally led to a long history of engagement with third level arts education in Ireland. Our organisation has developed alongside the offer of third level institutions and the practice of those working in the sector over the past forty years. In simplistic terms, Create often acts as a bridge between formal education and professional practice, supporting recent graduates and other emerging practitioners to develop their methodologies, their critical thinking, and their networks of support and guidance.

We are conscious of the need for Create to provide the right supports for collaborative artists at all stages of their careers and journey with them through the myriad challenges and developments that emerge at various points. In this context, we have recently been taking part in the Social Art Educators' Forum, a newly established global network initiated by colleagues including Dr. Loraine Leeson, based in Middlesex University in the UK. This has already helped to build new connections with international educators and practitioners that will inform and shape Create's future programme of work. It's also been a useful mechanism to reconnect with those we've collaborated with previously, like our colleagues from SPCUNY, who we invited to contribute to this publication alongside those involved in the new MA/MFA Art and Social Action at NCAD, in which Create is a partner.

At a time when we are actively reflecting on the history of Create and its institutional archive, we are ambitious about building on this learning, looking to the future and interrogating how we can contribute to the development of the next generation of collaborative socially engaged artists who are representative of the world we live in and equipped to tackle the many, and nuanced, issues that concern our society.

Damien McGlynn,
Director of Create

Front Cover:
Image from artist Brianna Harlan's project *black love blooms*.
Courtesy of the artist and Social Practice CUNY

Art and Social Action

International education in collaborative and socially engaged art

Dr. Gregory Sholette, Co-Director SPCUNY

It took time, skill, and determination to re-envision previous iterations of NCAD's socially engaged art curriculum and transform these into a full-fledged masters-level program in the School of Fine Art entitled *Art and Social Action*. Artist and educator Dr. Fiona Whelan worked in close collaboration with the school's Head of Sculpture and Expanded Practice, artist Brian Hand and their colleague from the School of Visual Culture Dr. Emma Mahony, in order to satisfy an increasingly visible need for a sustained curriculum focused on learning transdisciplinary skills, participatory practices, community care, and social activism. The new program debuted in Autumn 2023 at a moment when the need for such teaching has become so evident within the broader canvas of contemporary art education.

It was with a kindred frame of mind that, working together with my colleagues Chloë Bass, Maureen Connor, and Tom Finkelpearl, we developed a similar experiment in social practice pedagogy in New York City over that past decade. At first our pilot project Social Practice Queens was confined to a studio concentration located within the Master of Fine Arts Program at Queens College, City University of New York (CUNY).

More recently, thanks to the invaluable support of the Andrew W. Mellon foundation's Arts and Cultural Heritage Program, we expanded its scope by inviting participation from students and faculty across the university system's 25 campuses, launching Social Practice CUNY (SPCUNY) in 2021.

What these ventures in Dublin and New York attest to equally is that conditions have become favorable for such socially engaged art pedagogy to emerge and become sustainable, but not as something strictly novel and unprecedented. Educational projects like NCAD's Art and Social Action, or SPQ/SPCUNY affirm a phenomenon set in motion decades ago by many predecessors in the fields of art education and community arts (see Sholette and Bass 2018). Some names stand out of course – John Dewey and Joseph Beuys, Suzanne Lacy and Create – but the strength of this educational movement rests just as much with the many unnamed and unlauded counterparts of these leaders around the world.

What follows are some select reflections on the state of socially engaged art education as NCAD's new program launches, and as SPQ/SPCUNY begins its fourteenth year of teaching.¹

Dr. Fiona Whelan, Programme Leader MA/MFA Art and Social Action, NCAD

The most memorable and profound pedagogical spaces for me have always been those with diversity – across discipline, sector, background, where my own positionality, skillset and lens on the world differs from many around me. Personally, these spaces have been most typically found out in the field, working as an artist in community-based contexts. Spending significant time in such environments as an artist offered me learning about my own and others' formation and motivation, exposed me to sites and forms of community organising and durational lived practices of care, solidarity and activism, but most importantly created the conditions for generating ambitious collaborations across discipline and knowledge.

Building on a previous MA programme at NCAD which was positioned at the intersection of socially engaged arts and education² (see Whelan, 2019), the new MA/MFA Art and Social Action has been purposefully developed to support and nurture trans-disciplinary and cross sectoral practice, calling on practitioners engaged in any and all art forms as well as activists, educators, community workers, youth workers - those whose practices respond creatively to social issues, spatial injustices and civic life through community collaboration, public intervention or collective action.

“The most memorable and profound pedagogical spaces for me have always been those with diversity”

1. The SPCUNY team consists of Gregory Sholette, Chloë Bass, Catherine LaSota, Tom Finkelpearl, Ting Y. Lin, Cory Tamler, Amir Farjoun, and Maliyah Mohamed

2. In the School of Education at NCAD, the MA Socially Engaged Art and Further Education ran from 2013-19; The GDip Community Arts Education ran from 2001-12.



The NCAD MA Art and Social Action group playing 'World of Work' with artist and NCAD lecturer Michelle Browne. Photo by Fiona Whelan.

Teaching a group with different disciplinary backgrounds can of course present its own challenges, as no shared references, educational experiences or understandings can be assumed, so it takes time and some flexibility as educators³ to create the conditions, programme and assignments that recognise different forms of knowledge and nurture the potential in the encounter between students, while supporting each person's particular practice development. But as we get started with the first student cohort of the new MA/MFA Art and Social Action at NCAD, I'm excited by the potential of this pedagogical experiment rooted in a shared interest in the capacity of creative practices to engage with, disrupt and respond to multiple social contexts, phenomena, communities and publics, and in nurturing the capacities of collaborative, activist and socially engaged practices to imagine our world differently.

Chloë Bass, Co-Director SPCUNY

One often overlooked struggle – or, to state things more positively, one open opportunity – within the field of teaching socially engaged art is social engagement itself. We discuss the challenges and beauties of working with communities that reach beyond our school settings, but we often, accidentally or unconsciously, ignore the social dynamics inherent to working within a classroom, particularly a classroom that is part of a larger hierarchical structure of a program or department, within a college or university, and the long and complex histories contained within each of these structures. I do not believe that the dynamics that stretch across these intersecting fields will ever telescope into one streamlined experience ethically, politically, or personally (not to mention aesthetically), and it is not my goal to encourage such a form of false optimism.

3. The 2023/2024 teaching team include Dr Fiona Whelan, Brian Hand, Dr Emma Mahony, Gareth Kennedy, Michelle Browne, Sarah Edmondson, and Vagabond Reviews (Dr Ailbhe Murphy and Dr Ciaran Smyth).

However, I do believe, and have seen the clear rewards, that we can focus on the importance of connection *within* the group of students as essential to a classroom that's also focusing on connections between the students/ artists/school and external communities. The questions that we ask our students to take into account as part of their practices ("what makes people feel comfortable in this setting?" "which kind of messages or gestures encourage participation, and which provoke alienation?" "how does this particular social space or group function as an element of the larger work at hand, and where is there contradiction?") are questions that we ourselves also must ask in our syllabi, our classroom structures, our opportunities for feedback and dialogue, our time taken to foster connection for the pure purpose of connection. I know that I, personally, have often felt the tension within asking students to do engaged work in the world when I know that they are not given the same opportunities in the classroom. It seems like a real missed opportunity not to work to create these opportunities in the classroom; it also seems like a missed opportunity to assume that prescriptive solutions (happy hours that disregard hierarchy, social times that take place only on the grounds of the school) offer real forms of connection. My interest lately has been somewhere between the practice of pedagogy and the practice of art: how, as the teacher (one form of leadership) and artist (a different form of leadership) of the classroom can I leave space, as I might within a *project*, for different social attempts to emerge?

In the 2022 - 2023 academic year, when I served as the Chair of the Queens College MFA Program alongside my work as co-director of SPCUNY, the students and I set a motto: no bad days. What this meant was not that bad days were 100% avoidable individually (after all, we have many of those, for a variety of reasons), but that we would attempt not to let our individual bad days create bad days for the group. It was one way to move towards who we are as people, not just who we are at school. I'm happy to say that as a group, we achieved it. I wish your group the same: here's to no bad days.

Tom Finkelpearl,
Teaching Scholar-in-Residence SPCUNY

Teaching Social Practice in our post COVID, politically fractured world is a challenge and opportunity. Last academic year (2022-23), watching my students inventing new ways to interact, discovering for themselves Augusto Boal, experimenting in everything from sleep to cooperative monetary exchange reinvigorated my belief in the potential of the field. Social Practice education has a lot to learn from activism, and a lot to teach other branches of pedagogy.

Prerana Reddy, Former SPQ Instructor and former Queens Museum Public Programming and Community Engagement Director (2004-2016)

Projects that I co-created with the Queens Museum and SPQ built on the Museum's mission of bringing our institutional assets to the community in a respectful and useful way, and without always requiring people coming to the museum to interface with us. Working with Queens College CUNY this approach really got students to address the big ethical questions around social practice. How are you bringing project partners together? What decision-making roles, forms of acknowledgement, and power are various collaborators having in the project? How does one document the project and its impacts, and how can or should it be translated into exhibitions? With regard to our 2012 SPQ collaboration Transforming Corona Plaza, we really appreciated the flexibility that came with creating something that didn't have a precedent or that was going to be one size fits all for every MFA certificate candidate - each artist could adapt their skills and interests to a variety of real-world opportunities.⁴

4. Adapted from a 2021 Interview with SPQ Alum Brianna Harlan to accompany the Queens Museum exhibition, Art as Social Action: 10 Years of Social Practice Queens. For more about Transforming Corona Plaza see: <https://queensmuseum.org/program/corona-plaza-es-para-todos-making-a-dignified-public-space-for-immigrants/>

**A Pollicino, 2021 Social Practice
Queens/Queens College MFA graduate**

Social practice came at an interesting time for me after navigating the fluid identities of artist, educator, and activist for over a decade, as well as a deliberate rerouting of my life after gender questioning in 2017. At SPQ, rethinking what it means to work and giving value to experimentation revived my motivation and the sheer enjoyment of learning. Perhaps in reaction to past criticism of social practice art and activism, my cohort was specifically concerned with positionality, reflexivity, and the effects of community engagement. Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings defines sociocritical literacy as “the ability to take learning beyond the confines of the classroom using school knowledge and skills to identify, analyze, and solve real-world problems.” Where I previously sought to blend research into my creative practices, I now have the welcome challenge of bringing what I developed within my art practice to my PhD research in Theory, Organization, and Policy at Rutgers University, Graduate School of Education.

**Dr. Emma Mahony, Lecturer in the School
of Visual Culture and programme contributor
on the MA/MFA Art and Social Action, NCAD**

‘Our world is one in which carelessness reigns’ declare The Care Collective in their 2020 Manifesto. This phenomenon became particularly visible during the recent coronavirus pandemic, but even before this, right and centre-right governments across the world had slashed spending on the care sector, its staff and its infrastructures. In the place of state provisioned and affordable care, we are invited to buy the market alternatives and are reminded that we are each responsible for our own ability (or failure) to thrive. However, this onus to care for oneself and one’s family makes no allowance for structural inequalities such as race, social status, cultural, social or economic capital, age, health or ability (Butler 2015:12).



Moreover, right wing governments increasingly espouse a rhetoric of only caring for ‘people like us’ and keeping the ‘other’ out by building walls, tightening borders controls, practicing apartheid, and making asylum procedures more rigorous. Their politics of exclusion, hatred and paranoia poisons citizens against caring for the ‘other’, particularly immigrants and asylum seekers, by depicting them as a threat to their own survival (The Care Collective 2020: 8). More recently, we have witnessed how the humanitarian tragedy in Gaza, which has led to accusations of genocide, has fomented a culture of draconian censorship by States supporting Israel.

“Social Practice education has a lot to learn from activism, and a lot to teach other branches of pedagogy”

In response to this crisis of ‘carelessness’, and this climate of censorship, critical reflections on themes of ‘care’, ‘compassion’, and ‘courage’ shapes the curriculum on the MA/MFA Art & Social Action. Through practical and theoretical modules, students are supported to address their critical positions in relation to the crises humanity faces: the crisis of care; the crisis of democracy, the financial crisis, the environmental crisis, and possibly the most detrimental of these crises – the crisis of the social imaginary – namely the growing incapacity to imagine the world otherwise.

It is in addressing this crisis of the social imaginary that practitioners of art, design, architecture, activism and community and youth work come to the fore. In a world polarised and paralysed by neoliberalism and ravaged by war, the arts have a unique ability to draw our attention to ethical issues, to trigger critical dialogue about injustice, and to foment compassion that, in turn, spurs its publics to political action. More crucially, however, every project our students initiate has the potential to test out another possible and more just world.

This programme will support our students to practice compassion, courage, collectivity and *interdependence* and to imagine a world where care – for each other, for non-humans and for the planet – is front and center. And to do so from within a social reality where, as Judith Butler puts it, ‘the conditions for acting together are devastated or falling away’ (2015: 23).

Brian Hand, Head of Department of Sculpture and Expanded Practice, NCAD.

Over the past seven years I have seen how NCAD has unique capacities for extending and deepening partnerships with local community based organisations. The geographical location in the Liberties in Dublin’s densely populated inner city is a key part of its uniqueness. NCAD has been on the site of the old Power’s Distillery for just over 40 years and it has no plans to leave. The new campus development plan has focused attention on the many ways a new campus design and infrastructure can increase local access and visibility to life on campus. A key tenet of NCAD’s current mission goal is to connect and be connected at a local neighbourhood level. So space, time and facilities are nicely aligned here for NCAD to excel at genuine, cooperative long term relationships with partners like the Rialto Youth Project, Create, the Robert Emmet Community Development Project, the Bridge Project and SICCD (South Inner City Community Development Association). But the campus plan and the mission statement admit that community engagement and partnership is still either underdeveloped or not consistent.

The community based organisations in Dublin 8 share this assessment as well. Much more could happen to increase student enrolment from the city neighbourhoods and towards making a more diverse and representative community of learners (both full time and part time) at NCAD. For the student body, although only on campus for a few formative years, there are now ‘real life learning’ and meaningful experiences with community partners that are familiar and are in mutually beneficial relationships with our teaching teams and our courses and curriculums.



The commencement of the new MA/MFA Art and Social Action within the School of Fine Art shows how NCAD can now academically support students to learn and become engaged with local struggles against the general enduring causes and effects of social/economic alienation in the south inner city. The diverse students on the new MA/MFA in Art and Social Action are currently supporting research, for example, into community archives with SICCCA and migrant rights and experiences with the Robert Emmet CDP. In addition, other students' interests are directed at rural and ecologically framed art and social actions across the island. There is a lot still to do and that is where this new course and its community of practice want to be and want to be hopeful despite the challenges.

“For me, collaborative practice gives art a sense of purpose when I can’t find it elsewhere”

**Steph Saidha, Current student
MA Art and Social Action NCAD**

In today's contemporary art scene, which can often feel exclusive and inaccessible, socially engaged art stands out by prioritising people and communities first. This rejection of the idea that art is reserved for select circles only is something I really value about collaborative and socially engaged practice, and played a large role in why I wanted to study on the MA in Art and Social Action programme at NCAD. When considering the future of my practice after my undergraduate degree, the importance of accessibility to art and everyone's right to enjoy and make art, kept coming up. In my opinion, socially engaged practice reminds us of this, in a scene that can be otherwise restrictive and unapproachable.

For me, collaborative practice gives art a sense of purpose when I can't find it elsewhere. It allows for the creation of spaces and processes that encourage people to come together to explore important community matters, and in doing so promotes honest reflection and the discovery of shared experiences.

As an artist in the field of participatory practice, I am committed to community engagement and the production of social spaces. However, in order to continue working in such a way, it felt crucial to seek further education and training, particularly when considering the importance of upholding ethical standards while working with community groups. The rigour, critical frameworks and networks that this MA programme provides is the exact support my practice needed to grow and develop.

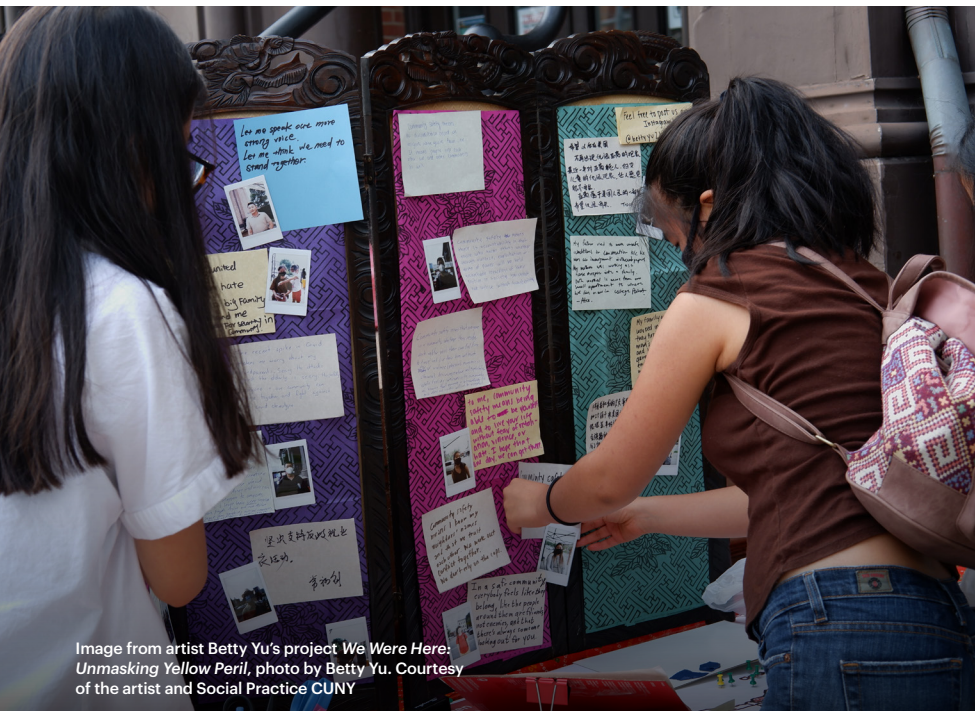


Image from artist Betty Yu's project *We Were Here: Unmasking Yellow Peril*, photo by Betty Yu. Courtesy of the artist and Social Practice CUNY

Having spent a full academic year on the Dublin 8 Neighborhood Residency during my BA at NCAD, I experienced the value of having a trusted mentor leading the programme, and knowing the same staff and supports would be in place, gave me a lot of confidence going into the new Masters programme. As my time on the MA programme continues, I am also looking forward to building new connections and really strengthening my practice and engagement skills, and meeting and working with new peers, visiting practitioners and communities.

Ireland's higher educational institutions offer a number of courses and opportunities for students to immerse themselves in the principles of socially engaged and collaborative practice. This list provides a non-exhaustive selection of courses across the country.

- Higher Diploma**
Munster Technological University
Certificate in Socially Engaged Theatre,
level 8, 1 year
- BA**
NCAD
Dublin 8 Neighbourhood Residency, an
elective offered as part of the Studio year to
BA Fine Art Students.
- Postgraduate**
Munster Technological University:
Crawford College of Art and Design
MA in Arts and Engagement,
level 9, 2 years (part-time)
- Munster Technological University:**
Crawford College of Art and Design
Certificate in Creativity and Change,
level 9, 1 year

- NCAD**
MA/MFA Art and Social Action,
level 9, 1 year FT/2 year PT
- Technological University Dublin:**
School of Creative Arts
MA Art and Environment,
level 9, 1 year
- PhD**
Technological University Dublin
The Centre for Socially Engaged
Practice-Based Research
- Graduate School of Creative
Arts and Media (GRADCAM)
- NCAD, UCD and other Irish universities also
support PhD students with a socially engaged
practice.**

Critical Friends Collective

The Critical Friends Collective is a network of professional practitioners with socially engaged, participatory and collaborative practices who have graduated at a Masters level. This peer support group meets regularly, welcoming invited guest speakers, and engages with research projects including a residency in Create's library and archive. Find out more at Instagram: @criticalfriends_collective.

References:

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The Care Collective (2020), *The Care Manifesto*. London / New York: Verso.

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In Short WHAT WE'VE BEEN UP TO...

We are happy to announce our membership of **Coalition 2030**, Ireland's national advocacy and engagement coalition for the Sustainable Development Goals. Sustainable Development means meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. A very significant part of Coalition 2030's work is to advocate for improved governance, financing and implementation of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, through advocacy, reporting, policy proposals and submissions. As Coalition 2030 states, "Culture is the 'missing pillar' of sustainable development, shaping the way we understand our lives and contributing to the achievement of many of the Sustainable Development Goals".

Create is pleased to announce **Evelyn Broderick** and **Kathryn Maguire** as the recipients of **2023 Artist in the Community Scheme Bursaries**. The purpose of the bursary award, part of the Arts Council's Artist in the Community Scheme, which is managed by Create, is to support and nurture professional arts practice, for an artist in any artform who has a track record of working collaboratively with communities of place or interest in the making and interpreting of art. This is a developmental bursary aimed at practitioners who are facing particular barriers and/or challenges in developing their collaborative socially engaged arts practice. We look forward to supporting Evelyn and Kathryn as they begin their bursaries in 2024.

The first of our Continued Professional Development (CPD) workshops for this year takes place on the 3rd April. **Planning, Printmaking and Publishing for the People** explores the creative intersection between socially engaged planning, print and publishing with **activist Mpho Mokotso and artist Kate O' Shea**. Drawing on Mpho's experience in activist practices, town and regional planning, and development studies and Kate's heart-led practice of collectively seizing the means of production and strengthening networks of solidarity, this workshop will explore the creative potential that lies at the intersection of grassroots urban planning, social space building and DIY publishing practices. This session will introduce people to key art and activist projects by both practitioners and will involve a hands-on workshop weaving together socially engaged planning, print and publishing.

Coming soon

The **Catalyst Residency**, offered in partnership between Create and Fire Station Artists' Studios (FSAS), offers a socially engaged artist from an under-represented ethnic background a one-month residency in Dublin 1 during June 2024. The residency is intended as an artist-led incubation period which allows them to develop their practice and their networks with targeted support from the residency partners.

Welcome to Create News

This is the thirty-fifth edition of Create News.

Create News is published twice yearly in spring and autumn. It is sent free of charge, features a guest writer or writers and offers the latest information on Create events and services. If you do not wish to receive further editions, please write or email us at info@create-ireland.ie. If you would like to receive a personal copy of Create News please email info@create-ireland.ie and include details of name, address and postcode.

The views expressed in each issue of Create News are those of the individual authors, and do not reflect those of Create as an organisation.

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