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Philosophical Dialogue and Socially Engaged Art



create national development
agency for collaborative arts

Dr Robert Grant is a philosopher, educator and author who has in recent years contributed to What Does He Need, a long-term collaborative project exploring how men and boys are shaped by and influence the world they live in. He is a founder member of Philosophy Ireland. He wrote, directed, and presented a documentary for RTE television about teaching philosophy in schools and recently published his first book, a children's novel aimed at bringing philosophy to young people. We asked Rob to expand on the use of philosophical listening and dialogue as it applies to collaborative, socially engaged arts, in this, our fortieth issue of Create News.

Cover image:
Rob Grant presenting at Boys in the Making conference, NCAD, Feb 2025.
Photo by Evanna Devine.

Philosophical Dialogue and Socially Engaged Art

Dr Robert Grant

My connection to socially engaged art came between 2020 and 2025 when I occupied the unique position of philosopher-in-residence for the What Does He Need? (WDHN) project. Developed by artist and educator Fiona Whelan, Rialto Youth Project, and Brokentalkers (Dublin-based theatre company) the project generates public artworks, dialogues, youth work programmes, performances, and workshops that seek to “explore how men and boys are shaped by and influence the world in which they live”. I was invited to collaborate on developing a philosophical dialogue strand within the project to respond and engage with emerging themes.

I had been engaged in the practice of philosophical dialogue for a number of years through a project I cofounded called hearlisten. The project aims to bring people together to explore fundamental, existential questions by creating spaces where the assumptions, contradictions, and complexities in our thinking can be revealed. It is a community building project that invites multiple perspectives to shed light on difficult problems. Our hope at hearlisten is that out of a state of attentive uncertainty, a deeper understanding of ourselves, each other, and the world can emerge.

Hearlisten was borne out of a sense that our communities lack the opportunity for purposeful critical reflection on deeply held beliefs, opinions and attitudes. Our public discourse is shaped by too much reductive simplicity, too many certainties that go unchallenged, and too many assumptions that go unnoticed. We felt that the discipline of philosophy, and the method of dialogue, had something to offer here, something beyond the traditional third-level academic philosophy degree.

Through hearlisten, we have established communities of philosophical inquiry in schools, prisons, community centers, activist circles, cafes, direct provision centers, homework clubs, and youth projects. Much of this work has taken place in partnership with Rialto Youth Project, who then brought us into the WDHN project.

I worked with a core team from WDHN to develop two series of dialogues, which I facilitated, the first in November 2020 with groups of male community workers, convened by Jim Lawlor, and the second a set of weekly dialogues in the NCAD gallery in 2025 during a month-long exhibition of the Boys in the Making programme (a central strand of WDHN) with groups of teenage boys, young adults, and older men.

Philosophy is particularly well-suited to the practice of dialogue given the open-ended nature of its questions. These are questions that cannot be settled by empirical observation; you cannot Google or Chat-GPT your way to a final answer as to what a perfectly fair society would look like, or whether artistic quality is objective, or whether the universe had a beginning. By their nature, these questions are always open to reasonable disagreement, while their magnitude means multiple perspectives are necessary to map their possibilities.

So when we considered the application of philosophy to a project about masculinities we first had to find the right questions, ones that were in the orbit of contemporary masculinities, but that were open-ended enough to allow for productive dialogue. In order to do that, we engaged with the many themes and emerging insights generated from the wider What Does He Need? project. Out of this review, we generated a set of philosophical provocations used to motivate dialogue with the groups. For example, 'it is a man's *responsibility* to *protect* those he *cares* for', or 'men are not as *strong* as they used to be', or 'to be a man is to *act* like a man', along with statements on the themes of violence, identity, weakness, and power.



Dialogue space created by Space Forms, developed in collaboration with Fiona Whelan and Dannielle McKenna for Boys in the Making exhibition, NCAD Gallery, 2025. Photo by Evanna Devine.

These statements invited participants to take an initial stand on a particular issue. But once the conversation started to flow the focus inevitably shifted to the assumptions and contradictions behind those ideas: what is strength? What is care? Where does responsibility come from? Is admitting weakness a sign of strength? Do we perform our masculinity? Who protects the protector? Through these more abstract discussions views on masculinities began to emerge, but not in a reductive or prescriptive way. We were not seeking to arrive at a clean definition of masculinity, but creating an opportunity for our habitual ways of thinking to be disrupted.

Feedback from the sessions reflected that the opportunity for men to speak together about vulnerable issues related to their masculinity was both welcome and rare. There was an appreciation for how liberating it can be to voice your opinions in an environment that felt psychologically safe, with no risk of dismissal, ridicule or humiliation, all of which can be particularly risky within male peer groups.

Once this critical openness is established in philosophical dialogue, a softening of once strongly held views becomes possible. It is as if beliefs and opinions no longer need to serve as defensive armour against potential attack to one's identity. They can instead be separated from one's sense of self, and released into the space in the knowledge they will be held as curious objects for genuine inquiry.

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Creating such an open space for ideas is not the same thing as allowing all opinions to go unchallenged. The subtle skill of facilitation is to maintain this openness while embedding the philosophical principle that views must be justified with reasons, and therefore can be challenged when reasonable to do so. This cannot descend into moralising or policing thought, (e.g. 'You cannot say that. It is wrong and inappropriate'), as this can lead to defensiveness. When someone shuts down, goes silent, or nods along while keeping their thoughts to themselves, the dialogue descends into a hollow performance, and any hope for a glimpse of truth is lost. Part of taking someone's ideas seriously is the reciprocal obligation to offer thoughtful critique.

This is why the act of listening is so central to hearlisten's practice of philosophical dialogue. We call it, after Gemma Corradi Fiumara, *radical listening*, in the sense that it attempts a reversal of the predominant cultural conditioning under which we live. That cultural conditioning assumes listening as a reactive and passive state: we should only listen *once* we notice something interesting being said. We should only pay attention if we think it will be worth it. But what if it is *only by listening* that something interesting can be said? What if listening is the *precondition* for meaningful communication, rather than a reaction to it? Listening comes first in dialogue. It is an active state, one of directed attunement towards the inner life of the other.

Living in a culture saturated with the incessant noise of innumerable messages, instructions, tips, pitches, news, slogans, temptations, and so on has resulted in a form of benumbment (to be rendered numb). Of course it makes sense to tune-out, to act deaf in such an environment, until it feels safe to hear. It is a survival strategy. But it robs us of the possibility of deeper, more meaningful interactions that can only occur when the listening ear takes the risk of coaxing forth those truths that are not always ready to be spoken.

To do this requires the assumption of an equality of intelligences, as articulated by Jaques Ranciere. That is, to operate on the assumption that everyone has thoughtful and insightful contributions to make, once they are listened to. The dialogue then becomes an experiment: what might be achieved when proper attention is paid to complex ideas by groups of equal thinkers? Equality is not something to be *attained* at the end of the intervention, it is something to be actively *practised* throughout.

Having gone through the experience of bringing philosophical dialogue into a long-term, multi-layered socially engaged project that also positions listening centrally, there were some points of reflection that emerged in how to engage with communities. These points recurred throughout the project as tensions to be navigated. The strength of this particular collaboration was that there were a diverse range of skill sets involved throughout: young people, artists, educators, youth workers, academics, community workers.

One assumption with hosting dialogue, is that there is often an intention – implicit or explicit – to change people, into better thinkers, more responsible citizens, more capable students, and so on. Similarly, in socially engaged art, this assumption can also exist, for example, that there may be a desire to change people into better men, more caring, responsible, and so on. Given the current debate over cultural views of masculinities and the influence of the manosphere, this would be an understandable goal.

The issue with this pre-determined ambition creeping into any project is that it forms an *unequal* relationship from the start. It assumes that the philosopher (much like the artist, teacher or community worker), arrives with unique access to certain knowledge or awareness, and engages with the community to explain or demonstrate that awareness to the participants. Throughout the process, the participants are supposed to be transformed, from ignorant, to knowledgeable. Or unfree to free, in the case of those communities assumed to be trapped under some oppressive ideology and in need of liberation from the outside.

On this view, inequality of intelligences is built into the relationship from the start. That unequal relationship subordinates one intelligence to another, implying that without the help of the superior intelligence, some people are incapable of knowing things for themselves, of seeing things as they are. It divides the world, in Ranciere's words, "into knowing minds and ignorant ones, ripe minds and immature ones, the capable and the incapable, the intelligent and the stupid" and leads ultimately to a dependency or enforced stultification. It includes, according to Paolo Freire, "a lack of confidence in the people's ability to think, to want, and to know."

We reject this notion of hierarchical inequality of intelligence, and let go of any attempt to engage in behaviour change. This became a central and ongoing conversation throughout this collaboration between myself and the WDHN team. We regularly returned to conversations about intention, motivation, and purpose and had to consciously reject any premise of hierarchical inequality of intelligences and recognised that participants were perfectly capable of accessing whatever truths that were necessary for them. My role, as philosopher in residence, is ultimately about drawing attention to difficult problems and holding a space where people can listen, to themselves and to one another.

Listening is not about fixing, changing, extracting or using. Listening is fundamentally a recognition of another's humanity.



Public interaction within the Dialogue space created by Space Forms, developed in collaboration with Fiona Whelan and Dannielle McKenna for Boys in the Making exhibition, NCAD Gallery, 2025. Photo by Jamin Keogh.

There is an irony at the heart of this approach, however: by letting go of any attempt to change anyone, you open a space where change becomes possible. Gert Biesta, in his book, *The Beautiful Risk of Education* describes this paradoxical approach as proceeding with “an ironic awareness of its own impossibility”. That is to accept the impossibility of changing or educating someone, is the only way that any change might happen, when you remove attempts to control, shape, manipulate, and instead engage as equal co-inquirers seeking to find the truth.

As a philosopher, the ephemeral nature of conversation is central to my work. Dialogue exists in the present moment as a live face to face event that dissipates upon conclusion and exists through time only in the experience of the participants. This characteristic is important to maintaining the integrity and safety of the space for participants to openly explore difficult ideas. I came to see that in socially engaged art projects, dialogue can hold an additional role in generating insights that can be captured and worked with by a group to create artworks, that have potential to speak truth to another public, who can in turn be invited to listen.

Exploring the intersection of these approaches, we did experiment with live documentation by an artist during the dialogues staged in NCAD. Artist Aaron Sunderland Carey, who works on the WDHN project, was part of our sessions, and would write, draw, and sketch his impressions of the conversations as they unfolded, capturing fleeting moments, comments and abstract images. Some of these anonymised quotes were used when presenting the work back to a public audience during the Boys in the Making conference in NCAD, with permission from the groups themselves. And of course I am writing about the work here in these pages.

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I think sharing the work and the method that is co-produced in such a project is important. But it has to proceed in the constant awareness of the primacy of the relationships developed with the community in question. And the care and protection of those relationships has to trump any impulse for artistic or intellectual presentation. What I learned from the WDHN project is just how aware, and how vigilant a project has to be in order to ensure that these relationships are treated the right way. The work of Fiona Whelan and her longstanding partnership with Dannielle McKenna and Rialto Youth Project showed me how this is possible, but also what it takes to carry that practice throughout a long-term, multi-dimensional project like WDHN. Ultimately, this is a continuation of the centrality of listening to any collaborative work, philosophical or artistic. Listening is not about fixing, changing, extracting or using. Listening is fundamentally a recognition of another's humanity.

The important thing in human relationships, as Hans Georg Gadamer put it is "to experience the Thou truly as a Thou, i.e....to listen to what they have to say to us", and not reduce them to an 'it', an object to be used, shaped, controlled or manipulated. Without the kind of openness that listening fosters, "there is no genuine human relationship". For Gadamer, "belonging together always also means being able to listen to one another".

Recent work

In June 2026, Rob Grant, Dannielle McKenna and Fiona Whelan planned and hosted a CPD entitled "Introduction and Overview of the Practice of Listening" with Heart of Glass (Merseyside) and Create, drawing on the knowledge generated in the collaboration outlined above. This one-day professional development opportunity explored the practice and significance of listening as a conscious and purposeful act. It formed part of a wider Creative Youth Practices Professional Development series which was a critical engagement with the methodology and emerging themes of the Boys in the Making programme. This three part CPD programme, an international learning and exchange residency, was developed through the International Residency Initiatives Scheme, 2026, supported by Arts Council England, Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Arts Council of Ireland.

References

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- Fiumara, G (1995) 'The Other Side of Language: A Philosophy of Listening', Oxon, Routledge.
- Gadamer, H.G. (1989) *Truth and Method*, Sheed and Ward, London.
- Ranciere, J. (1991) *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Stanford University Press.

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

On the 23rd of June 2026, we welcomed guests to join us as we launched our new Strategy for 2026 to 2031,

People Practice Progress: Building Sustainable Futures.

Our Director Damien McGlynn was joined by chair of Create's board Kevin Murphy, CEO of the Playhouse Derry-Londonderry, Ann O'Connor, Head of Participatory Arts at the Arts Council, and Silvina Sisterna, artist and member of Create's Artist Mentor Panel. We invite artists, academics, community members, partners and more to journey with us as we implement this Strategy over the next five years.

Create is pleased to announce **Jijo Sebastian and Sophie Hutchinson** as the recipients of the **2026 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; 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 are delighted to announce **Lyónn Wolf** as the successful recipient of the **Co-Create PhD in Socially Engaged Art and Counter-Narratives**, offered in partnership with the National College of Art and Design (NCAD). Lyónn Wolf is an artist and writer currently engaged with de-productive trans and class poetics. We look forward to supporting Lyónn's research as a Co-Create partner with access to our Research and Learning programme activities and our Reading Room and Archive.

Coming soon

Create's **Networking Event 2026** will explore the topic of sustaining collaborative arts careers through a series of conversations with leading voices in the field, who will share their personal and professional experiences and discuss the challenges and opportunities facing collaborative artists working in Ireland.

The programme of the day will include contributions from **Jasmina Ibrahimovic** from Rotterdams Wijktheater and the International Community Arts Festival (ICAF), who will present on her work with her local communities and what it means to host a global gathering of participatory, collaborative and socially engaged arts practitioners. We will also discuss different models used by collaborative artists to sustain and evolve work over time and in new contexts, with contributions from the **Boys in the Making** team, **Our Place** and **Run of the Mill Theatre**. And we will explore how artists pivot and manage shifts in their practice and career, and hear from a range of funders about how they see their role in sustaining collaborative arts careers in the future.

The event will take place at Dance Limerick's Performance Space at St John's Church, John's Square. Book your ticket on our website!

Welcome to Create News

This is the fortieth 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.

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