

# **‘Unfamiliar Voices: A Review of the Legacy of NCAD’s Art Programme in Portlaoise Prison, 1987-2010’**

## **Introduction**

“They don’t want you to think, they want to think for you”

“Who is ‘they’?”

“All of them, the system”

Words of a prisoner

Through its art programme, the National College of Art and Design (NCAD) maintained a presence in Portlaoise Prison for almost a quarter of a century from 1987-2010. This element of the review of that time seeks to provide a context for this work, to capture the experienced quality of education offered by this programme for the range of stakeholders involved, and to offer a set of philosophical reflections drawn from the words of those interviewed in the process of reviewing the programme. These names have been anonymised throughout this document. They represent the wide range of perspectives of those who played an important role in terms of offering, supporting and participating in education in prison including Governors, Prison Officers, Head Teachers, a National Co-ordinator of Prison Education, Practitioner/Educators, Ex-Ordinary Prisoners and Ex-Political Prisoners. All interviews were recorded and all took place outside the prison. Some ex-prisoners undertook their study with NCAD at the beginning of the program whilst others were involved at the close of the program. As such, divergence in descriptions and evaluations of education in the prison may reflect these different periods. All participants had the right of response to the first version of this document. The conclusion will make a series of suggestions as to how the programme might be re-envisioned and re-initiated. It aims to communicate and evaluate the qualitative nature of the educative experience as narrated by key stakeholders thus offering a richer story than one that might be offered through more restrictive criteria of evaluation born of performance and audit based models of education.

In its 1990 document “Education in Prison”<sup>1</sup> the Council of Europe makes a series of recommendations designed to underpin the philosophy of education in European prisons. The principles of education within the prison are premised upon an approach to human beings, pedagogy, methodology and curriculum that draws from traditions in adult education ranging from Mezirow to Freire, whilst also seeking to mitigate the harmful effects of imprisonment. Educators ought to seek ‘normalisation’ – that is, to replicate in so far as possible, conditions in the outside world that can respond to the ‘whole person’ and not just the prisoner, and to operate from principles and practices informed by philosophies of adult education. This can be distinguished from a correctional focus of education, such as that encountered in the US, which seeks to locate and cure the ‘criminogenic’ characteristics of the person in prison, which is witnessed in the rise of, for example, courses rooted in deficit models of behavioural psychology, such as thinking skills courses in the US and UK in particular.<sup>2</sup> The Committee recommends that governments implement policies that are cognizant of the points outlined by the Council of Europe, such as: “3. Education in prison shall aim to develop the whole person bearing in mind his other social, economic and cultural context; [...] 12. Creative and cultural activities should be given a significant role because these activities have particular potential

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<sup>1</sup> (1990) “Education in Prison” Recommendation No. R (89) 12 adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on 13 October 1989 and explanatory memorandum, Strasbourg

<sup>2</sup> See for example the rise in ‘thinking skills’ programmes that stem from work by Fabiano, E. and Ross, R. (1983). *The Cognitive Model of Crime and Delinquency: Prevention and Rehabilitation*. Toronto: Planning and Research Branch of the Ontario Ministry of Correctional Services. For a more critical perspective, see Council of Europe. (1990). *Education in Prison*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe. See also, Wilson, D. and Reuss, A. (2000). *Prison(er) Education: Stories of Change and Transformation*. Winchester: Waterside Press. For an empirical study evaluating the relationship between re-offending and a liberal arts education programme in prison, see Duguid, S. (1998). *Final Report: British Columbia Prison Research Project*. Burnaby, BC: Simon Fraser University Press. See the following article for criticisms of the extension of psychological programmes into the domain of education. Bayliss, P. (2003) Learning behind Bars: Time to Liberate Prison Education. *Studies in the Education of Adults*. Autumn, Vol. 35 Issue 2, p157-172. See also Falshaw L., C. Friendship, R Travers and F. Nugent. (2003). Searching for ‘what works’: an evaluation of cognitive skills programmes. *Home Office. Online Findings*. 206. [www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs2/r206.pdf](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs2/r206.pdf) accessed 20 July 2012. For a response that argues for the value humanities and creative arts programmes see Duguid, S. (2000). *Can Prisons Work?* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

to enable prisoners to develop and express themselves; [...] 13. Social education should include practical elements that enable the prisoner to manage daily life within the prison, with a view to facilitating his return to society". They say "But two overall complementary themes predominate: firstly, the education of prisoners must, in its philosophy, methods and content, be brought as close as possible to the best adult education in the society outside; secondly, education should be constantly seeking ways to link prisoners with the outside." (8). The Council of Europe makes it clear that the deprivation of liberty is the punishment for the prisoner and that prisons damage people. In short, no subsequent punishment beyond that of the deprivation of liberty ought to be inflicted upon prisoners.

The 1985 Whitaker report<sup>3</sup> delineates a set of principles that ought to underpin imprisonment. The first, and perhaps the most important in respect of reflecting upon the role of education in the prison, is that "[i]mprisonment itself should be regarded as the imposed penalty, and nothing should be done to inflict hardship or punishment beyond that which is an inevitable consequence of the imprisonment. Regulations for the management of prisoners should be based on the principle that the fundamental human rights of the person in custody may not be interfered with or encroached upon except to the extent inevitably associated with the loss of liberty itself" (60). This principle was endorsed by the range of stakeholders interviewed as part of the review process of NCAD's programme, and education in the prison was mentioned a number of times as being key to helping the prisoner to cope with his or her sentence; in short, it was of intrinsic value for the person in confinement. As such, there was scepticism that education should or could be harnessed in the service of ends extrinsic to the educative process, such as recidivism, but rather that it was more likely that the indirect benefits of education, including discovering possibilities beyond criminality for ordinary prisoners, bears fruit when the integrity of the educative process and practice is adhered to. The Whitaker Report quotes the objectives of the 1981 Prisons Report stating, "However, no matter how high the level of security in a prison, there is an obligation on the prison system to provide facilities for the offenders which will enable them as far as possible to utilise their time in custody to the best advantage and for their own self-improvement. The aim is to equip the offender with educational, technical and social skills which will help him turn away from a life of crime, *if he so wishes* (my italics). However, even if the offender on release does not turn away from a life of crime, these services can be regarded as having achieved some success if they bring about an improvement in the offenders' awareness of his responsibilities to himself, his family and the community" (188).

As Gert Biesta<sup>4</sup>, Morwenna Griffiths<sup>5</sup>, Pdraig Hogan<sup>6</sup> and others have argued, the increasingly prevalence of the language of 'evidence-based approaches', 'what works', 'best practice', and the desire to quantify, audit and measure education through accreditation, performance outcomes and attendance, reveals indifference to, or ignorance of, the context-specific and creative nature of the educative relation which is always forged between human beings in different situations. These educational theorists emphasise the need to distinguish between 'effectiveness' and 'measurement', and question the likelihood of success and the desirability of a 'what works' approach to education that seeks generic approaches to teaching and learning. This is because such approaches fail to sustain the conditions that develop intrinsic motivation, interest, competence and skill, including the importance of collateral learning and collective enquiry. The relational quality of education is of particular importance in total institutions such as the prison: this includes relation to self, to subject, to teacher, and to the wider society. At a minimum, education can be a significant factor in helping people to cope with the sentences regardless of whether or not they choose to pursue these activities upon release.

The significance of the NCAD programme for certain prisoners is not diminished by the fact that other men with other sentences and other priorities may turn toward, and indeed have turned toward, other forms of educational provision. Indeed a number of participants in the programme were involved in multiple forms of educational provision which arguably have a symbiotic relation with one another. In this respect, it should be noted that the role of NCAD's educational provision was often seen as a complementary facet to VEC provision.

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<sup>3</sup> (1985) *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Penal System*. PL. 3391. Government Publication.

<sup>4</sup> See Biesta, G. (2007) "Why 'What works won't work': Evidence-based practice and the democratic deficit in educational research". *Educational Theory* 57, (1).

<sup>5</sup> See Griffiths, M. (2008). 'Social Justice and Educational Delights'. Paper submitted to the PESGB.

<sup>6</sup> See Hogan, P. (2009). *The New Significance of Learning: Imagination's Heartwork*. London: Routledge.

Interventions supported by the Arts Council included and include workshops in creative writing and a number of the contributors to this report speak of the wide range of activities made available to prisoner-students. These range from making fly-casts to music and drama to talks by invited speakers on subjects such as politics and poetry. Nonetheless, the NCAD programme tended to appeal to a certain cohort of men in the prison, often those most resistant to the regime and to those forms of education that resembled too closely, in their view, traditional schooling, as well as to those who wished to engage in the kind of critical inquiry encouraged by third level study.

It is important to emphasise that this report does not offer a general review of education but represents rather those views of a specific cohort involved in a particular programme for whom the NCAD programme was of great value and importance. The desire expressed by a number of the interviewees for non-accredited education may or may not be mirrored more broadly through the system where the struggle to provide equality of provision to education and access to the same forms of assessment as students beyond the walls of the prison, be it the State Examinations of Leaving Certificate and Junior Certificate or FETAC qualifications, constituted an important milestone in educational provision in prison. The fact that the NCAD programme was offered by practising artists who could speak about their own practice and who were not seen as part of the 'system' but rather represented third level institutions in Ireland was identified as a significant factor in attracting men to the programme. It also appealed to long-term prisoners, the reasons for which will be explored in this piece.

Prisons, like any other institutional space, house a richly diverse population of human beings and the Council of Europe's recommendations ask that the educational needs and desires of all of these men and women who are wards of the State be met. In this respect, NCAD helped the Irish Prison Service to meet the recommendations of the Council of Europe and the Whitaker Report by enabling people to develop capacity in a visual language, by creating the opportunity for critical inquiry with men in prison, by developing a connection with the other institutions and with the wider community, by offering a third level tutorial approach to art that allowed a man in prison to determine the nature of his project and, finally, by aiding men to cope with their sentences. For a number of men, this programme complemented other forms of educational provision available in the prison. The remit of this essay does not permit of a comprehensive analysis of the rationale for providing appropriate, meaningful and diverse educational provision within the prison system, but rather aims to communicate a sense of the experienced quality of education as narrated by those men who engaged with the NCAD programme, as well to convey the perceptions, observations and analysis of other key stakeholders such as the prison officers, the artist/educators, the Governors and Head Teachers. The significance of an art practice in the prison is better understood when one reflects on the broader historical context, the bracketing of the world, and the conditions of lived existence within a high security prison.

## Context

The time prior to the introduction of formal educational provision to Portlaoise prison was a difficult one in many respects, although the absence of formal provision also created the opportunity for comprehensive peer-learning models amongst Republican prisoners that were inspired by practices in Long Kesh. The officers with whom interviews were conducted entered the prison service between the late 70s and early 80s and they speak in detail of this time. The Hunger Strikes and the death of Bobby Sands consolidated significant support south of the border to end partition and the prospect of the war extending beyond the six counties felt real. C2 says, "You have to get perspective, there was a full scale war going on in the North, irrespective of whether you call it the Troubles, and there was a threat of it spilling over here, especially in '81 with the H Blocks. And the government were really trying to keep a lid on the whole thing, but what happened was we were used as the battering rams with the ones [the political prisoners] they had." For those who staffed the prison, this permeated the fabric of their lives. C1 describes that time "Your life outside was restricted because the temperature was very hot. Bloody Sunday had ratcheted everything. We would have been seen as an aid to the British occupation by a large portion of people down here. What saved us was that Portlaoise was the prison town but it became very much an isolated group for self-protection."

For young men from the local area, the first to benefit from the introduction of free secondary schooling, one of the primary prospects for employment at a time of recession was the prison.

“We were a whole group of young lads. Educated for the civil service. I spent three years in the army so I had some preparation but a lot of guys came in straight from school at 19 years of age into this unbelievable environment. The lads might help you around that about the regime that existed around the time. Because of one incident, it ratcheted up the tension”.

The officers involved in Education say that Portlaoise Prison was at that time a tense place, described by the Prison Officers Association at a memorable conference in Blarney, as a ‘regime of terror’. C1 agrees with this,

“We ourselves as young fellas did recognise that what was going on in Portlaoise Prison was a regime of terror. You can’t put any blunter than that. By management, under the instruction of the Government. [...] And obviously we now know it was being played politically. And we as ordinary gobshites, very young men, were being manipulated. And we had to deal with this stuff, coalface, stuff as well like.. plus that along with the extreme hours and the very tense nature of the place, it cannot be described how damaging the place was and the fact that so many of us survived it is a miracle”.

C2 describes that time.

“You would be going into work every morning physically sick because you didn’t know what was facing you. The guys on the other side of the door could get instructions that they should take an action, but you never knew when this would happen. You never actually had a good day until you were gone out the gate. Literally. We used finish at 8.30, and at 8.25 something could kick off. You were working seven days a week, 12.5 hour days, what was it 16 weeks with one day off. [...] There was compulsory overtime and if you didn’t turn up you were fined”

In the absence of counselling or support other than peer support “[w]hen you went out you went straight out to see your loved ones, and you went straight to the pub with the rest of your loved ones, all your mates. And you drank yourself into a stupor”, says C1.

There was a high level of activity both within the prison and outside. B2, experiencing the regime from the other side of the bars, speaks of the tensions of that time.

“Things had been very tense from 1982-85. It was a really bad place to be probably for everyone who was in the building. There was tension over strip-searching. The authorities sensed that there was going to be a big escape with a lot of violence. That was what the officers were being briefed. People who resisted were being physically beaten. The authorities began to carry out searches in the middle of the day. There would have been occasional spot searches. Then they started to come in, in the middle of the day. The issue of strip-searching was less of an issue unless people wanted to go to the extremes of removing your underpants. During the day, there was resistance to that, and we would take the bedding off and batter the doors. It was very tense and we were constantly waiting for the thing to explode.”

C1’s recollections as a young officer were in agreement with B2.

“One of the most contentious things at the time was strip-searching and the abuse of strip-searching. Strip-searching was supposed to be used as a security device, checking for explosives and this, that and the other, but it was used as a control mechanism within the prison. Our role, there was a list every morning, at 7 every morning, you lined up 2 officers and a guard, into a prisoner’s cell, reef him out of bed. He was in an organised group and he was going to insist that it was their policy to resist. It was a boxing match every morning. That was your first job of the day. It was overused as a security device, it was used more as a... it was all in that Blarney conference.”

In addition to the ordinary deprivations and difficulties of the prison environment was an extensive, and in the views of many, brutal prison regime that served to exacerbate tensions within the space of the prison in the wake of a series of escape attempts and an intensifying conflict outside its walls. Nonetheless, the desire to secure the perimeter of the prison also permitted of relative autonomy within its walls and a series of peer-led educational interventions flourished through that period amongst the Republican prisoners. B1 describes his experience of that time.

“Portlaoise would have had 200-300 IRA prisoners when I was there. It was the height of it, after the Hunger Strikes, to put it in context in terms of the history of that time. It was a self-contained structure within the jail. 300 prisoners with a command structure, loose enough, agreed, but with representatives negotiating with prison authorities.[..].

A prisoner would have to align himself. Non-aligned Republicans (mavericks) were in basement, and the IRA occupied the three top stories. The Officer Commanding (OC) would be called, discussion, and then he would be accepted or not. It was a very domestic looking situation, not like a typical prison regime, people with makeshift clothes-lines, domestic stuff, maybe as much like a camp as a jail. The clockwork system and routine and clinicalness did not seem to apply. There would have been lock ups and lock downs, but within times of people outside, there was free association and no work. There was autonomy within that system; people could occupy their minds. There was television in general areas, but only at certain times, and a huge amount of reading, discussion and debate, a monoculture of people who agreed on certain central issues, people who were motivated, idealistic, ideologically driven. It was a revolutionary culture. A sense of humour and notions of self were dismissed and the collective was the driving force, beyond prison life to outside and the world. The ethos was this at the time.

People were motivated to read to see how they could enhance their own abilities toward that end, for re-joining the struggle. It was always around that. Military and political lectures. Anything anyone learned they would pass it on. Languages, perhaps because they were self-study, were popular. Different languages – Irish – 1/3 of the jail was a Gaeltacht – a very bad Gaeltacht – you can imagine the different levels. There were no places to eat – cliques – usually formed around your associations and who you want to hang out with. But in the Gaeltacht because of the need to distribute abilities you had the better speaker, the middle speaker and the worse speaker. It led for very bad conversation, to try and democratise it. There was one group of guys who learning French – typically Irish they dismissed the tapes that were provided with it. So they became very fluent in this language that no-one could speak. We never used to have teachers. A poor woman from Belgium arrived and they arrived to show her how fluent they were and were dismayed to find out she didn’t understand one word they said.

What you knew, you passed on. It would be done formally – people would organise classes and be busy attending stuff. Historical lectures with people, posing questions, to challenge what we thought. And the yard was a debate that never ended. You could have 6-7 hours in the yard. People would go for conversations, 3-4 would walk and have different conversations. That was as much a part of the education system that was there before any qualified educators. Two newspapers – Irish and English language. What went on from them.. Language, history, philosophy – if you read about anything you would go into a big meeting hall. You would have trends, different things at different times. [...] It was very lively. You wouldn’t have a minute. Learning stuff all the time, grabbing at stuff. Usually the more motivated people made the most of what they had, they had a connection with different things. Some people didn’t feel as connected as that so jail would be a very lonely experience for them because it is isolation and deprivation. There was very little feeling that we were being deprived.”

B1 adds,

“The prison authorities were happy to let everything go as long as they could contain the IRA within the prison. The big fear was contact of any sort. They were afraid that contact would lead to security breaches, and there had been lots of escape attempts. There was a limit on what could come in.”

E1 who was the National Coordinator of Prison Education for over thirty years speaks of the period that led up to a civilian presence through formal educational provision.

“My job was to work with VEC, library and other education bodies to provide education. At that time there was a lot of support of from the Department of Justice for education of a very broad type. When I began my work there were no teachers in Portlaoise Prison. The decision had been made it would be too risky to bring teachers [...] I was the first educator into that situation. My background would have been in adult education immediately prior to being in the prison. The prisoners had been pressing for education but the Governor was not in a mind for it. It was a risk factor. Not that he didn’t trust teachers, but teachers could be compromised or pressurised in the never-ending battle to prevent escape. I felt like a doctor. Once a month, fellows would come in and say I want to study French - the Library and School Officers were like pharmacists - I would write the prescription and they’d get the materials in if they wanted to do art or Leaving Cert.

There was more a self-study thing. After about five years the governor thought he might take a chance with teachers, and brought a few people in for evenings.”

Eventually, from 1984, individual teachers began to offer evening classes as education was slowly introduced to Portlaoise Prison. It is difficult to say whether there is a direct causal relation between this provision and the presence of teachers and the easing of tensions in the space, but from 1985 onwards those tensions eased. Nonetheless, the prison remained an oppressive and brutalising space, according to many of the men housed within it, simply because of the full reality of what imprisonment signifies for a human being. The 1985 Whitaker Report offers a picture of life in a closed institution to enable ordinary citizens to better understand the implications of imprisonment.

“The ordinary citizen, with his own home, free to come and go as he pleases, able to choose his company and pastimes finds it difficult to visualise the lot of the prisoner, confined within an forbidding perimeter and bleak environment, shut up alone in a cell for sixteen hours of every day, his movement restricted at every turn by locks and bars, his daily regime one of utter predictability and barely tolerable monotony, deprived of access to a toilet at night, under constant observation and thus enjoying no privacy, his correspondence censored, his visits regulated and supervised, no time in private with loved ones, and in the case of a ‘subversive’, not only frequent strip searching but never an embrace of even a handshake from a wife or child (A relaxation was approved in March 1985 for Portlaoise prisoners.) Such deprivations and constraints are not all a prisoner suffers: they are usually accompanied by social stigmatisation for life, a lowering of dignity and self-esteem, reinforcement of feelings of inadequacy, diminished scope for the exercise of moral responsibility, loss of self-confidence, depression, a stronger inclination towards the criminal subculture and towards institutionalisation and, in many cases, irretrievable breakdown in family life and relationships” (38).

Over a quarter of a century after the publication of this report, unfortunately many of these statements still ring true. This was why the Whitaker report argued that imprisonment should be used as a last resort for serious crimes against the person or property. Put quite simply, prisons damage people. So the question arises: how can this damage be minimised and what role did education, specifically in the form of art practice offered by NCAD, play? Here we must come to understand the *experienced quality* of education.

### **Eyes to the outside world.**

“The system has to change. It has to be totally different. The penal system has to be totally different. It is the carrot and the stick basically. And whereas the punishment of the sentence, the sentence is supposed to be the punishment, in other words the lack of freedom for a period of time, is the penalty, the sanction that has been put on the person. It should stop there, but it doesn’t.”

G1

In light of current debates about historical institutional abuse and a renewed commitment to ensuring accountability of State institutions, it is instructive to listen to the conviction of all parties that the presence of outsiders changed the qualitative nature and dynamics of the space of the prison. The presence of civilians in the prison was mentioned as significant for all parties. For the officers, what mattered was to have an outsider within the institution, irrespective of the form of educational engagement with the prisoners. Other elements may also have contributed to a shift in the atmosphere from one of tension, for example, the recruitment of female officers, and possibly a decision by the command structures in the IRA to pursue a political rather than military strategy. Nonetheless, the movement of civilians through the space of the prison changed the operation of the space. “The presence of the NCAD and the teachers made a fierce difference. It didn’t matter if you scratched your arse all day. It didn’t matter. The most valuable contribution was that you were there and you were eyes to the outside world”, says C1. E2 has written about the shift in the atmosphere in the space of the prison at that time and B2 agrees that from a period of unrelenting tension and violence, the dynamics of the space shifted. He says,

It was not the VEC’s input particularly but as a part of things that began to make the situation become more relaxed. The closed visits were an issue and they began the system of open visits in 1985, more modern equipment for scanning, and the education became more relaxed. I was the Education Officer for 18 months and the OC for two years of that. And we managed to create a situation that was much better for all of the

prisoners and for the people who work there. We had requested education facilities. People wanted to get a qualification in some subjects, really you would need someone *au fait* with the curriculum and teaching of the curriculum. And in that period the OU began a pilot scheme. [...]"

K1 was invited to work in Portlaoise prison through an Arts Council initiative in 1985. E1 believes that this was partly motivated by a sense that not only would K1 offer a valuable contribution to art education with the prisoners but that it would also have a significant impact on his own practice. The dialectical nature of the teaching/practicing relationship has indeed led to a variety of forms of teaching, art making and collaboration between NCAD artists and prisoners. At that time, from a highly restrictive regime, there was a sudden flowering of activity with a range of practitioners in the creative arts entering the prison to run intensive workshops. E1 says of K1, "His workshop went extraordinarily well and he connected with them and they with him, and we thought we have got to keep this going." K1's presence would eventually serve as the catalyst to provide a more comprehensive art programme through NCAD that was premised upon a third level approach to education, although it remained modularised though unaccredited formally for a number of reasons that will be outlined below. E2 has argued that security and education are not necessarily in tension with one another and that prison management ought to conceive of the regime in terms of 'dynamic security' which creates liveable conditions for all housed and working in the institution. The importance of 'dynamic security' is alluded to implicitly by the officers in these interviews. In E2's view, the presence of educators, including female educators, enabled small shifts from a situation of tension and conflict to a sense of greater conviviality in ordinary relationships between staff and prisoners. Prison staff saw that teachers, including female teachers, were able to walk through landings without requiring riot gear and they did not encounter problems. This changed the staff's perceptions of prisoners. Prison officers then came to mediate relationships of teachers and prisoners by passing on messages relating to education, responding to requests, and so forth.

C1 tells us of that time.

"I think it is important to reflect back to what the place was like before education and the restrictive nature of the place. The late 70s, early 80s. A prisoner could not move anywhere without being escorted. You would never see a civilian, a person outside of uniform with the exception of the doctor and the governor inside in the prison block; there was the priest but he would be in uniform. It was a culture shock to even see somebody in civilian attire within the block. It is very hard to explain to people. It is a rectangular box with a big hole in the middle, so you can see everything. The place was black with staff. His notion was numbers, numbers, numbers. The more numbers I have the better chance I have of maintaining security and he also had this notion that if can have some level of tension existing between the prisoner and the officer, in that if the officer was concerned that he might get a box somewhere, he is going to be alert. It seemed to be a policy of his to have that level of tension existing to maintain that level of security. That was the atmosphere that pertained in the place every day. There was a row in the place every day somewhere along the line."

B2 believes that there must have been some kind of realisation by the regime of the benefits of education and of allowing outsiders, civilians, into the prison. Beyond the starvation of sensory experiences and impressions, there had been little opportunity to encounter other humans in a meaningful way. The introduction of teachers led to a change in the atmosphere, becoming over time rather ordinary and normal, in short approximating, in some way, conditions on the outside. On the one hand, the presence of civilians allowed another set of eyes into the institution, but it also gave a breathing apparatus to the men, a 'fuel line' to the outside world.

"There was nobody from outside the jail who came in except prison officers. The very fact that a civilian came in, it was a bit like going to the zoo. 'We have a new animal in today. She teaches English'. It was a male prison and at that time there were no female officers, except the dentist. So the very fact that there were real people from the real world coming in was a novelty, but it also gave, when the novelty wore off, it was a sense of the beginning of normality. The very fact that ordinary people were coming in, going out and coming back in the next week. It was a fuel line to the outside world."

I think the realisation probably sunk for the authorities that it was a much better situation for their personnel to be supervising people who were gainfully occupied and focused on

learning things rather than constant stress and tensions. Security would have been the attitude of most of the staff.

All the classes would be under supervision. You had rooms designated as classroom – at one end there would be a cage and another door in from the landing and there would be a prison officer in so you could see and hear everything going on. In recreational areas there was a cage and so that would have been a restricting factor. Their fear when we asked for something for educational purposes, in the course of time they realised that education was a better place for everybody.”

Republican prisoners pushed for educational provision and the opportunity to gain qualifications. B2 says,

“I think people were hungry for anything, for stimulation and focus and mental activity, so the Irish classes were initially all that we had the facility to provide from ourselves. [...] There was no particular canvas for any particular subject organisationally. It was felt it would be much healthier for people and their well-being and mental well-being to give them stimulation and increase their abilities. [...] [A]s individuals it would be better for them than hibernating and stagnating, and it would be better for the whole community who lived there. If people are in better mental health it is better for the whole community, improving conditions, environment and sense of well-being.”

H1 draws out attention to the importance of the status of the College and the value of creating institutional links and a ‘fuel line’ to the outside world.

“So that was very significant that it gave the prison a status, and it was this college, and that was a big plus psychologically, so it was invaluable simply on that basis. The philosophy of bringing in people from the outside, connecting with the prison, because they are in the prison, they are members of society and prisoners belong to society, and access for organisations like NCAD and other organisations, I always felt that was significant irrespective of who benefited, society benefited because of that psychological thing.”

### **The world outside**

When one enters the world of the prison, the experiences of the world outside shape the nature of the experience, in particular in terms of previous relationships to authority and perceived (and real) authoritarian relationships. Many prisoners leave school early, the rates of functional illiteracy remain high, substance abuse has become ever more acute, and although there is little documentation or research to substantiate this claim, anecdotally many prisoners indicate having experienced or witnessed institutional abuse or have lived through the ramifications of such abuse in family life. In the Whitaker Report, it is suggested that “the retributive ‘eye for an eye’ mentality has yielded to a more civilised approach, reflecting a deeper sense of humanity and compassion and, if only subconsciously, a recognition of the guilt society itself shares for criminality within it” (28). We will consider this in the latter part of this review when reflecting upon institutional life and what might be entailed for society to take collective responsibility for our institutions. Often, confusion is made in public discourse between the language of understanding and that of justification. In this report an attempt is made to understand the genesis of a trajectory that may lead one to reject forms of authority that are born from a mode of thinking that equates society with its repressive apparatus and indifference to the fate of the most marginalised therein. As the Council of Europe acknowledges, it is important to pay attention and allow voice to be given to forms of justified anger. This requirement that one ought to be able to have *and* voice justified anger is outlined in the Capabilities Index which was developed by Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen and is used by the United Nations, in order to articulate a broad set of conditions and principles for a flourishing human life. This also helps in the understanding of why prisoners who refused to engage in any way with formal educational provision by the VEC were willing to become involved in the NCAD programme.

These long quotes from G2 help to paint a bleak and powerful picture.

“They have a system. It is not only with screws. I sussed this when I was in Letterfrack with the Christian brothers and that. That was my learning ground. They used, one brother would abuse a certain amount of kids and they shared them out among them, and the ones that they weren’t abusing they were real nice to. Now they were really nice and they’d be giving them sweets. Each of them had a group so that if you ever said anything

about them they could bring out this other group who would praise them and say 'He was such a nice fellow. He never ever abused anyone'. They always had this group who would cover for them. It is the same through the system through the military to the church to the ordinary screws. Each group and it just came natural to them. I used to start... This is why they hate me in the prison system. Whenever I used to see a screw talking to a prisoner, I used to go over and I'd intervene and I'd say don't be talking to him. I'd say he's nice to you and he's battering somebody else so I'd say don't be talking to him. So in Mountjoy you could not talk a screw, I'd be over. That is the way I always see them. No matter how nice they are to me, they are battering somebody else.

People wonder why people hate them. They used to be baffled. Why are you doing it? You are charged with assaulting 12 screws. There is not a mark on them. You are kicked to bits. And everybody out on the street is praising them and they are all up there as heroes. If you did it, you would be doing 20 year for the hidings. It became a fuckin' battleground. Even if it was stabbing the tyres. We started that off. It was to give people a taste of their own medicine. You lock us up and now we are going to fuckin' lock you up. We are going to put you in fear because you put us in fear. We are going to batter you because you batter us. We are going to give you a taste of your own medicine. There was no profit in it.

Certain estates were visited at night and their tyres were cut. It was the DPP and the people of Ireland versus you. You are happy to see us kicked to bits and our lives destroyed, now we are going to do the same to you and see how you like it. And they didn't like it. You had the people robbing the country fuckin' blind and we were robbing them. And it was to show you don't fuckin' rule the night. The Vietnamese thing - we'll take the night. We used to go out and terrorise them that way. We were actually blaming you and you and you. You became the enemy because you were the people who were cheering these screws and coppers on when they battered us. So that is how it became the us and them. You actually became my enemy. You probably lived in a different world. You were my enemy.

It would have been different for us. We were selected. We were the gene pool for prisons. I float between the two. I have always seen the difference. We used to go in through the areas and we would destroy them. 'destroy them. Flood the country with drugs. Go up and travel around like an ambassador of sin into all the housing estates to tear the fuckin' areas apart. Burn the fuckin' place down. We used to cause so much havoc in the area and they used to come in with all these community centres. We caused all that. If it wasn't for me, you wouldn't have this job. Even when we destroyed the area, they still came in and got their jobs out of it and the only people from the area who got the job was the porter and the cleaner. And this is the way it is at the moment. I am champing at the teeth to get these centres out and get the people to run them themselves but they haven't got the education. And it is back down to this."

He continues,

"I never ever talked to anybody outside my own people. I never knew what you were like, what you were like, what you were like, you were all the fuckin' same to me. You were from the screws' world as far as I was concerned. With this [NCAD] class, the people allowed me in and when I got in, I saw different people. So how could I hate him? And how could I hate the other people so I started seeing different people and meeting different people that weren't fuckin' villains.

Do you remember going up to Dundalk? I remember I walked in among them and I says, 'A couple of years ago I would have been tying you up'. These would have been my perfect fuckin' victims and they were the nicest fuckin' people you could meet. It twisted my head. The gap started to close. It was all down to fuckin' yourself".

When I got out of Letterfrack, I hated everybody. Through hell and high water there was no man going to talk to me and try and put me down. The minute you said anything to me I was on you like a fuckin' mad dog and I would tear you asunder. And I thought I was winning but all I was fuckin' doing was biting off my own face. So I kind of learned from him and that was the start. With that little story. When you are in there and you are in this battle you think you are winning, but you are actually fuckin' losing because you are destroying your own life, kind of. This is what they want. When this goes into your head and you are so young, and it took me a long time. Just when he said that, he went off like a little bulb in my head. Even though it had been there all along but you don't put it together. They didn't fuck me, I fucked meself. So how do you get out of this? How do you get away? I couldn't. I went back in even though it would have been 30 years ago that I started on this road. That in-between gap was a wasted gap because I didn't know

how to get out of it. And this thing [art practice], this was me door, I got out through there.”

C2 also reflects on the role of imprisonment in society and on the ways in which cycles of imprisonment might come to be interrupted, although, part of the difficulty is, as G2 points out, that the system depends on a ‘gene pool’ of people to perpetuate itself. This asks of professionals that they reflect upon their possible complicity in systems that perpetuate the status quo, benevolent as their intentions might be, in a manner that could be discomfiting. C2 says,

“What is the role of prison in society? It is taking people out of circulation for a while. It is basically revenge. There is absolutely no effort at rehabilitation. Absolutely none. And if they had any interest in it, start in time, with the kids.

You have to remember we are talking about prisons. I made a good living out of it, a good pension out of it. Guards make a good living, a good pension. Barristers, solicitors, social workers, priests, doctors, massive mega money being made out of all these guys. If we put a fraction of it into a kid, I wouldn’t be making it, you wouldn’t be making it, so there is a big, big business around all that. I know it might sound cynical but that is what it is all about and there is no votes in a poor child.”

E1 comments, “John McVicar said one time ‘I never rehabilitated, I just got more interested in other things’. The IRA guys would never admit to rehabilitating or changing, but what education did was gave them space to develop other dimensions to themselves in that sense, and one example was in the OU.” This statement says a good deal. Even when one wants a way out or to create a different way of living beyond a cycle of imprisonment, one has to find a ‘door’. In G2’s case this was his art practice. It is important, in this respect, to distinguish the language of rehabilitation from that of transformation.

This is a difficult territory to negotiate, fraught with ambivalence, not only when the increasing emphasis on forms of accredited learning do not, according to a number of prisoners, meet their needs, but also when one reflects upon the relationship between the State and education, as thinkers like Freire, Ranciere, Shor and Apple have done. Are forms of critical pedagogy possible in the context of a prison? J2 says,

“We are placed under tremendous pressure to reform. Most things provided by a Gaoler to a prisoner are for the benefit of the Gaoler. Education is no different. A teacher in a prison is confronted daily with the corrupt and brutal excesses of a hidden State and yet in all their teaching they have failed to expose this hidden world of wrong. [...] Death has convinced teachers that Education (like life) has an inevitable end and that end in prison seems to be in and around a FETAC Level 4. The first thing I noticed in prison was how the most ‘disciplined, revolutionary scholars’ refused to partake in the education provided by the prison. [...] I resist all attempts at gentle reform through mind-altering FETAC level 5. Teachers don’t care and neither should they because we don’t depend upon them for learning. We have learned that a prison education requires a broken spirit.”

B1 offers from his experience and observations a vision of education for those in prison, a vision which presumably would engage populations beyond the prison walls. For him, the properly adult approach to adult education, is to find out what interests someone. Once that has been located, this will sustain the process, but education in prison needs to be thought of, not in terms of core, transferrable or basic skills<sup>7</sup>, but rather as forms of experimentation whereby someone comes to discover worlds of practice and learning that one never knew

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<sup>7</sup> For one critique of the language of core, generic, transferable and basic skills in contemporary educational discourse and policy see T. Hyland and Johnson S. (2006) “Of Cabbages and Key Skills: exploding the mythology of core transferable skills in post-school education.” *Journal of Further and Higher Education*. Vol 22. No. 2. pp. 163-72.

existed. His words resonate with those of John Dewey, a keystone in the primary education system in Ireland.

“I think the education that they need is the one appropriate to their level and it is finding their level. Not providing it for the sake of it. If you want to make an impact on people’s lives you need to talk to them about what they need and they want. It depends. An awful lot of the people in the general prison population are people who have been assaulted by society and have been alienated from it to the point of jumping out of it, and I would say if you want to redress that, rehabilitate, whatever. Find out where they are at. What has been missing. Why the system has failed, it.. it is very personal. An authoritarian approach is dreadful. It will appeal to some but for the vast majority, no.

I wouldn’t have a structured approach although they would look for structure from you. They will look for structure. The conversation starts. It has to be interest-based with activity.

If you can open an appetite for learning, that is half the job. After that their own abilities will take them through it, if they are provided and fed.”

One of the reasons that art practice may have been attractive to certain prisoners could be because it allows for a pedagogical model premised upon self-determination and because the approach in the art school begins with the highest common denominator, rather than the lowest. This is of interest when confronted with a rise in basic skills discourses in prison education globally, including the Irish context, which appear to preclude the possibility that someone struggling with literacy might be able to engage with a third level approach to learning. Like art colleges, prisons house a high percentage of people with a variety of forms of learning disability. Whilst the approach within prison environments have, albeit with benevolent and progressive motivation, become increasingly focused on deficits and lowest common denominator approaches in terms of basic and core skills approaches centred upon literacy and numeracy, the art school works with capacities, developing the capacity for critical thought and passionate engagement through a range of media, and providing support structures to aid with any literacy or numeracy requirements that a student may have, which in turn helps to provide the motivation for deeper involvement in education. In this way the intrinsic motivation to develop these capacities is activated and the interest in the subject matter provides a sense of purpose, sustaining efforts to improve in areas of literacy and numeracy, which are key given the theoretical elements of any art course and the requirements to enter a discursive sphere. In short, the development of the capacity for thought, confidence in speech and writing, and a commitment to creative citizenry provides the foundational ethos for engaging the student in such a way that education is responsive to areas where additional supports may be required. It is conceivable that this approach would work to develop capacities through any subject, be it woodwork, art or cooking, that interests a student, and such engagement might provide a grounded and creative pedagogy for literacy for some students.

### **The time of the prison: doing time**

“With us time itself does not progress. It revolves. It seems to circle round one centre of pain. The paralysing immobility of a life every circumstance of which is regulated after an unchangeable pattern, so that we eat and drink and lie down and pray, or kneel at least for prayer, according to the inflexible laws of an iron formula: this immobile quality, that makes each dreadful day in the very minutest detail like its brother, seems to communicate itself to those external forces the very essence of whose existence is ceaseless change.”

Oscar Wilde *De Profundis*

“And it also has to be a space that the jailers can’t go into. It has to be space of your” own.

G1

The walls of the institutions do not simply constitute a security perimeter but serve to organise space and time in a fashion that suspends the time and space of ordinary existence and forms of conviviality beyond those walls. The impact of a rhythm that at once homogenises time – ordinary prisoners speak of the tedium of always knowing what food you will have on a Monday, Tuesday etc - but also entails multiple sudden disruptions, for example alarms or lock-down, affects not only the body but the psyche of the prisoner. Wilde’s descriptions of the “paralysing immobility of a life every circumstance of which is regulated after an unchangeable pattern” appear severe in the context of contemporary context of prison life in Ireland but the principle remains the same, even for prisoners offered some form of free association. C1 offers this picture of the prison

“And if you are going to the prison, it is a total institution, seeing that you have never been in one, they are a little world of their own, completely in a world of their own, and what happens in the outside world, the clock nearly stops for them, for these people. People could be in for a long, long time. There is one man in nearly 30 years and he is talking about old tractors and nobody knows what he is talking about. [...] He is lost in that, the clock stops for them, the whole world stops for them when they are inside. So when you are listening to what is going on in the prisons, the guys that are inside, the clock stops for them, we are coming in with the world moving on.”

In his 1887 book *In Russian and French Prisons*, Kropotkin echoes these sentiments of languor, apathy and boredom when he writes,

“In a prisoner’s greyish life, which flows without passions and emotions, all those best feelings which may improve human character soon die away. Even those workmen who like their trade and find some aesthetic satisfaction in it, lose their taste for work. Physical energy is very soon killed in prison. I remember the years passed in prison in Russia. I entered my cell in the fortress with the firm resolution not to succumb. To maintain my bodily energy, I regularly every day walked my five miles in my cell, and twice a day I performed some gymnastics with my heavy oak chair. And, when pen and ink were allowed to enter my cell, I had before me the task of recasting a large work - a great field to cover - that of submitting to a systematic revision, the Indices of Glaciation.

And I can think of no better comparison for the state of a prisoner than that of wintering in the Arctic regions. Read reports of Arctic expeditions - the old ones, those of the good-hearted Parry, or of the elder Ross. When going through them you feel a note of physical and mental depression pervading the whole diary, and growing more and more dreary, until sun and hopes reappear on the horizon. That is the state of a prisoner. The brain has no longer the energy for sustained attention; thought is less rapid, or, rather, less persistent: it loses its depth. An American report mentioned last year that while the study of languages usually prospers with the prisoners. They are mostly unable to persevere in mathematics: and so it is.”

Likewise Antonio Gramsci<sup>8</sup> in a letter says,

“Certain days I thought I had become apathetic and inert, but now I see I made an inaccurate analysis. I was undergoing a series of crises of resistance toward the new way of life a prison environment implacably forces on you – the routine, the privations and necessities, the enormous number of minute events that occur day after day, month after month; year after year, with the same mechanical rhythm of sand in an hourglass. Every molecule of me – my whole body, my psyche – was tenaciously opposed to absorbing the external environment. But despite this, a certain amount of pressure succeeded in overcoming my resistance and modified a certain zone of my being. Each time this happened, I underwent a rapid agitation of my entire being in an attempt to ward off the invader” (125).

C2 helps to communicate the impact of imprisonment in a manner that has certain resonances with the Whitaker Report.

“What should the role of the prison be in society? I just see it as taking someone out of circulation for a short period of time. Forget this whole nonsense of rehabilitation because it is a punishment. Your deprivation of liberty. When they are in there try and help them. Do nothing more to punish. If I said to you, you can spend the next five years in the Westbury and you can have as many visitors as you like but you can’t leave it, you

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<sup>8</sup> Gramsci, A. (1993) *Letters from Prison*. New York: Columbia University Press.

can have room service, use the bars, that would be imprisonment; all the conditions are good but you have no choice. We have seen some of the most troublesome and troubled people but when you look in through that little spy-hole and you look at that unfortunate person that is a completely different thing. It is a terrible thing to do to anybody. It is my nightmare to get locked up for a night, never mind five or ten years.”

In conversation, G3 draws our attention to an additional dimension of imprisonment if and when the institution seeks to exert total control, stating, “They are imprisoning not only your body, but your mind and your spirit as well and the State does not have the right to do that”. She adds, reflecting on the NCAD programme,

“I think you were giving them the keys to the door to their own personal space. It doesn’t matter if you can’t leave the cell. When you create art, it is an unlimited world, it is massive. Especially if you are there for a long time. You have given the keys to this magical place. When you are painting, you are gone, you are out of there. That is probably the most subversive and dangerous thing about it; there is no control”.

G3’s words capture the importance of finding a way to exist in time, to disrupt the ordinary flow, or lack of flow, of time in the prison and in so doing one is also resisting forms of control that corrode one’s capacity to *exist*. In Bernard Stiegler’s book *Acting Out*<sup>9</sup> institutionalisation operates as a mode of de-individuation or de-individualisation. To be an individual one needs a milieu – Gilbert Simondon speaks of individual-milieu - but to be in prison is to exist like a flying fish, suspended from its natural element of water. In a space of near total control like the prison, one needs to find ways of individuating oneself. Prisoners have spoken of the dangers of suicide, drugs and depression for people who cannot find enriching forms of individuation or rituals to mediate the life of the prison. One needs a ‘world’ but the ‘world’ is ‘out there’ and hence unavailable. This gives rise to images of the prison as a ship, a bubble, an aquarium, a box, and so forth.

For Simondon, it is an error to speak of the individual as something fixed. The idea of the individual is not comprehensible other than in symbiotic relation with a milieu. Put simply, relationships, touch, moving freely, books, painting, inhabiting the natural environment, light, air, oxygen all constitute dimensions of a human milieu – in other words they provide the material and social conditions that allow us to continuously transform and renew ourselves, psychically, materially and collectively. As humans we cannot imagine ourselves in abstraction from these milieus – material, spiritual, cultural, symbolic, and so forth. The philosopher, John Dewey<sup>10</sup> described life as a “self-renewing process through action upon the environment” and he conceives of social life as identical with communication. He writes, “Water is the environment of a fish because it is necessary to the fish’s activities—to its life. The North Pole is a significant element in the environment of an Arctic explorer, whether he succeeds in reaching it or not, because it defines his activities, makes them what they distinctively are. Just because life signifies not bare passive existence (supposing there is such a thing), but a way of acting, environment or medium signifies what enters into this activity as a sustaining or frustrating condition.” For someone in prison, an activity like painting may come to form a significant element in his or her life, transforming the atmosphere or milieu in a manner inseparable from his or her individuality or singular existence. This should become clear as we encounter some of the descriptions offered by ex-prisoners of their experience of painting and other forms of art-making.

Stiegler recounts his time in Saint Michel prison for an armed robbery. This time brought him to his vocation as a philosopher.

“Studying the senses, Aristotle underlines in effect that one does not see that, in the case of touching, it is the body that forms the milieu, whereas in the case of sight, the milieu is what he calls the *diaphane*. And he specifies that this milieu because it is *that which is most close*, is that which is structurally *forgotten*, just as water is for a fish” (14)

The deprivation of an ‘exterior milieu’ – the world – brought to his ‘interior milieu’ “an incommensurable depth and weight” (17). He no longer lived in the world but in the absence of the world and wove a world from its *remains*, remains still available to him like memories or texts. For Stiegler, we cannot have an interior without an exterior, we cannot have an

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<sup>9</sup> Stiegler, B. (2009) *Acting Out*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

<sup>10</sup> Dewey, J. (1916) *Democracy and Education*. New York: Free Press

interior life without an exterior milieu, so the problem becomes one of weaving or creating this milieu somehow – a difficult task in the prison. In order to avoid falling into decay, Stiegler describes developing a *melete* or technics of the self – rules, maxims and practices - to save himself from tumbling into madness. When listening to the description of men in the prison of their absorption in a practice of art, or an awakening to a world of art, one has the sense that it was through these practices that some sense of the world could be re-figured and with that their interior milieus, their inner worlds. Stiegler found in his solitude this ability to ‘become-other’ that he equates to individuation.

A3 puts this question of *melete* more sparsely.

“That is just to keep the routine. I found that going to educational classes I needed a routine. And going to educational classes, stuff that you did in prison was a routine and it keeps you kind of sane. We all need a routine, we need some structure.”

As Toni Negri<sup>11</sup> reflects upon his imprisonment, he says,

“I believe that our experience which is still so limited, is always an community experience, it is always bound to others. You can’t discover the outside by looking inward at yourself. Rather you discover yourself by going outward.

You are bounded and blocked in space and time. Even in seeing. The most terrible thing in prison is that you can’t see over the walls outside. The view is blocked. The cell and the prison represent exactly what life without *kairos* would be like. If there were no openings, no creative ruptures. If there were essentially no possibilities to create new worlds.

Because you’re not in the cell thinking about yourself, rather you are thinking about your connection to the world, and therefore you suffer from the fact that you’re in the cell. But it is also very clear that often, you succeed in not being in the cell but being outside.

But I believe the problem of the prison is a question of facing it, actually it is a secondary problem. Your body can suffer much but your spirit can be free.”

How one then comes to occupy oneself and occupy time in a different way then becomes a matter of real importance. Transformation does not necessarily occur through relating to oneself or to others directly. The role of *media*, mediate, acting as intermediaries, in the dynamic relation of self to self or self to other. K4’s words communicate this well when she says, “It is easier to talk about yourself, doing it obliquely through a material, it just helps to free up”. In the medium itself lie certain material potentialities, and in media, like film-making, the collaborative endeavour offers the chance for different kinds of relationships between student and teacher. K2 says,

“I am thinking of working with video. He has had to take himself seriously for a long time. Looking at video, we look back at things together. There is an incredible delight when you burst out laughing, and he laughs too, but that is a real living response”

Before we look at the role of art-making portraiture and storytelling in more detail, it is important to offer an explanation of why the pedagogical approach of NCAD was seen by a number of the men to be different to existing provision. These observations are also important when reflecting on ways of preserving an ethos of adult education in the prison when adult education outside has become increasingly understood in terms of accreditation, narrow forms of measurement with a focus on qualifications as a marker of learning. What follows is not entirely particular to the NCAD programme but should be understood as part of a wider commentary on provision of education within the space of the prison more broadly. It should become clear, nonetheless, why the kind of model adopted by NCAD was welcomed by a number of prisoners.

## Education and pedagogy

“There is first the problem of the opening, namely, how to get us from where we are, which is, as yet, nowhere to the far bank. It is a simple bridging problem, a problem of knocking together a bridge. [...] Let us assume that, however it may have been done, it is done. Let us take it that the bridge is built and crossed, that we can put it of our mind.

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<sup>11</sup> Negri, A. (2008) *The Cell*. Dir. Angela Meliotopoulos

We have left the territory in which we were. We are in the far territory, where we want to be.”

J.M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*<sup>12</sup>, p1

The difficulty with working within a total institution that seeks total control is that it is difficult to find ways of creating the conditions for genuine education, and it can seem impossible to imagine that the prison, a publicly funded institution, might become an institution that is more transparent to the world and more open to the world, as well as being accountable in the way in which other public institutions are asked to be accountable. The reactivity of the media and broadly uninformed yet punitive publics can make this particularly difficult. Whilst the Whitaker Report alludes to compassion and humanity, this disposition has become increasingly less evident in contemporary Irish life. Without the support of officers, head teachers and certain governors, it is likely that much of the innovation in education in Portlaoise Prison, in particular in the case of NCAD, would have been foreclosed. Even in total institutions there are lots of ‘grey zones’, understood as potential spaces for agency. In the prison, as in other institutions, these oil the relationships therein and stop the institution from fossilising into rigid authoritarianism. H1 remarks on the privileged position of teachers within the prison. Even if NCAD is given greater ‘outsider’ status, it is important to remember that educational provision is, in the main, offered through an outside body, the VEC.

“I used to always say to the teachers that you are very privileged because of the status you have as being seen by the prisoners as not part of the system. Maintain that but don’t abuse it. The status you have is very privileged because the prisoners do believe in you more, do trust you more and they will open up to you more but that is a privilege rather than a right. It is because you are not linked with the system.”

E1 has been a key figure in articulating a vision for education in prison in both the Irish and the European contexts. He saw the NCAD programme as an extraordinarily successful course that complements wider educational provision. Many of the men interviewed in the course of the review had also been engaged with other elements of education within the prison.

“There were discussions about making it accredited – the general consensus was that some were at core studies level and some were at 4th year level. Aspects of their work could be anywhere in between so it was very *ad hoc* education and most of them were not interested in the accreditation. They wanted to do the courses but not the exams, even with OU. I just have always felt that it (NCAD) was an extraordinarily successful course. Some of the people connected really well with the art and it was a really important process in various ways. Some of the guys were doing VEC and OU and it really complemented these other elements, [...] their talents, interests, and insights, in whatever way appealed to them. Within education there is a shift away from that, including in the prisons.”

E2 describes the principles that did, and ought to, underpin the provision of adult education and comments on the specific contribution offered by NCAD, in part as a function of the perception of it as an independent broker. K2 remarks on this,

“I think all of that creates an environment. There is an element of being an honest broker for all sorts of reasons, be it gang rivalry, difficulties between different groups on landings. There is a legitimacy there to do certain things and that involves a dialogue around the prisoners’ life and story. It is not as though they are not speaking about their lives, they have families, but some of them don’t. There are men there who have been there for 25 years.”

E2 says,

“Who was attracted? It attracted the art students, who were looking for more challenges, higher art, art at a higher level.

It also attracted those who had never touched an art brush, or used a bit of canvas or paint in their life – the beginner.

And another group it attracted, and I thought this was one of the great positives, it attracted the disaffected prisoner, the ones who were alienated from us, the ones we (the

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<sup>12</sup> Coetzee, J.M. (2004) *Elizabeth Costello*, London: Vintage.

VEC) couldn't reach in the prison. And, they seemed to gravitate toward the art programme much as they gravitated toward the drama programme. I often wondered what was it, and even though we were a separate organisation from the prison, I think they still saw me and others as part of the system. Whereas the NCAD did not seem to be that, there seemed to be a whiff of sabotage. The art programme offered a chance to sabotage the system.

What did it offer? A new medium of expression. It gave them a language that would allow them to give secret expression to their anti-authority feelings. I mean, there was no point in putting up on the notice board 'f' the governor, 'f' the officers, 'f' this or that. I think that they got a way of being very anti, of using a language that was subtly anti-system. I remember we did a workshop where we did graffiti and one of the guys, despite the best efforts of the tutor, the lad started 'f' the school'.. This was in the Midlands and of course officers would say that is not very nice, the message was lost on them. They could have used the language in a different way.

I think it gave them freedom, they could make choices, it gave them more choices and a sense of not being controlled by the system. E1, I think you told me this. After an attempted escape attempt in the mid 70s the watches were taken away from the prisoners and one prisoner who was doing OU gave it up because he saw this as a symbol of the total control that the system was trying to inflict on the prisoners. I think the art programme, because this particular prisoner, G1, I think, the minute the art programme came in, it gave him back that control and sense of freedom that he had. The other thing that struck me because I sat in with sessions, K1, used to make a dramatic entrance with his hat and his coat and sit down with all the guys around them. What I came away with from those meetings was the great sense of respect that the tutors had for the work of the lads. The dignity that it gave them. The real respect for what they were doing. The methodology that used I think it was real education, it was the original meaning of education, *educare*, being a Latin teacher in my latter days in the secondary system, to draw out or lead out. I think it brought there was a lot of sensitive facilitation rather than teaching by the tutors. The student could explore and express their innermost feelings. I remember this took a long time before it was attempted done by K3, done as father-son relationships after a long time and she spoke to me a good bit about it because it was a delicate area to open up in a prison. It gave the guys a chance to explore their innermost feelings in a safe and controlled way. [...] The other methodology, they worked with groups and as they developed they did one to one tutorials. It was very much in line with what was going on in the college. So, I think one of the important things, the annual exhibition gave great positive feedback to the participants and affirmed the value and respect the work was held in.

The location, where it took place. It took place in spaces and surroundings they were comfortable with, on their own landings, where they were very much at ease. Fellows who were never much involved in formal education were still getting very good quality education in their own area. The other thing was that you probably draw in officers because they were looking at what was going on and saw teachers coming and going."

The scepticism with regard to forms of education that resemble schooling is understandable amongst those who the education system has failed, but also is also understandable when one lives in a total institution in which the scope for responsibility and self-determination is minimal. Different interviewees speak of the need to provide a broad and diverse curriculum that is prisoner rather than system centred, and that welcomes richer, qualitative forms of evaluation beyond those of formal accreditation. Men describe of what it means to be 'gripped' by something, be it learning bluegrass on the banjo, Hans Kung's theology or philosophy. It is not difficult to observe the development of one's capability, understanding and skill through the practice of undertaking an activity or subject. It is an immanent process that bears its own fruits and rewards whereby increased fluency and enhanced capability is evident to those who participate therein or to an observer versed in the practice of that discipline. Hogan explains this in his critique of 'customer-driven' conceptions of education,

"Similarly absent is any consideration of the discipline of self-evaluation, through which the *quality* which is *intrinsic* to such standards might be articulated and shared, monitored and advanced. More obviously, the preoccupation with 'performance', 'empowerment', 'expectations of stakeholders' and customer-driven quality, bypasses the point that quality in education is essentially a question of the *quality of the pupils' encounters* with the different voices of cultural tradition which seek to address and engage the pupils. Issues which are likewise central to quality in education, such as the recurrent manifestations of emergent identity, the fresh discovery of abilities and limitations, the epiphanies of learning itself, are passed over in silence" (228).

H1 remarks,

“It is the prisoner’s means of communicating. I think that besides wanting to communicate antagonism against the system and express their opposition to the system. There is also a fundamental communications facility in, I think, something like art because you can communicate who am I, what do I believe in, and some of them are not the most articulate in terms of orally but they can communicate a very powerful message or a voice through their art. The other thing that was amazing was the value in terms of self-esteem of visually being able to identify and see the path of progress”.

Padraig Hogan has argued that we need to pay more attention to the qualitative lived experience of the learner and that to maintain integrity in educational practice requires that it be preserved from being colonised by other agendas and from being instrumentalised in the service of non-educative ends. The importance of preserving the integrity of an educational practice is illuminated by the discourse of the stakeholders in the review process. Even if education is seen to be therapeutic by participants, the teacher must not *intend* to mobilise art as a therapeutic tool.

E2 makes an insightful comment in respect of this.

“I remember bringing a video of Teresa Richardson with these 20 big guys, all terrorists in the English eyes, and there she was whipping them all, shouting at them, roaring. Where are the officers? They couldn’t believe this. How come you can justify your existence without trying to change these guys away from their terrorism? This was in the middle of the 80s. What don’t you do something to stop them? If any teacher tried that they’d stop coming.”

Paradoxically, and this seems clear with the comprehensive evaluation of the Simon Fraser University Humanities programme<sup>13</sup> in prison, the funding for which was also cut after a quarter of a century, those practices that did not seek to shape the prisoner into a pre-defined subjectivity were the ones that proved transformative and also led to a decrease in recidivism to a far greater extent than explicitly correctional programmes. It is important to reflect upon this in a context in which the value of adult education is increasingly measured through attendance and certification, leaving little space for alternative approaches to education both inside and outside the prison.

H1 observes this trend in education.

“The expectation of education in prison needs to be clarified. The prison service certainly would only regard it as one-dimensional – How many have you in class?, and, What are you achieving in relation to literacy and numeracy?, and we must prioritise.. and the number in the classroom is more important than what is going on in the classroom so if you stack in twenty people you are wonderfully successful, now they are all doing nothing in it, but it doesn’t matter. Seriously. There is no appreciation of the dynamics of education and what is actually happening what is going on and the value the person is getting out of that and the benefit they are accruing is being overlooked and that is very sad.”

He then states his view even more baldly,

“Equally, you can have some eejit in the prison saying that that one is fuckin’ mad up there, there is chaos in the classroom, not understanding. Governors are doing awful things to education at the moment because some of them are totally obsessed with numbers and basic literacy and numeracy, and that’s it. Even the bloody inspector of prisons is beginning to go down that road going around counting how many you have in the classroom and counting how many teachers you have and when I was up in the education unit there was only four in the classroom. All that aul stuff that is missing the point about what is going on and who is benefitting and what is actually happening in the whole process.”

A1 agrees with H1’s analysis.

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<sup>13</sup> Duguid, S (1998), *British Columbia Prison Education Research Project final report*. Vancouver, BC: Institute for the Humanities, Simon Fraser University. At [www.sfu.ca/humanities/ifeps/PERP6.doc.8](http://www.sfu.ca/humanities/ifeps/PERP6.doc.8), 103–114 [Accessed 31/10/2012]

“Everything is performance based and that performance is the cert at the end of it and that justifies everything else. And that’s ok.”

H1 continues,

“The point is that the guy who comes in has entered into an area where it is about education and based on that you can eventually get around to the stage, you can do something about your literacy and numeracy so it is about building confidence and it is about opening doors for them. You see, that is why you cannot be measuring the benefits of those sort of programmes just narrowly. How many of them graduated?, How many of them got this?, How many of them got on? It is bullshit. You couldn’t measure the value often of those programmes to guys who started off with zero. That is why the course as a third level course, that is why it is psychologically as important as a practical sense, the fact they were going in there.”

C2 felt that part of the problem is that those within prison management and perhaps the Irish Prison Service do not understand or value education, in particular adult education. Moreover in a time of recession, what can be valued and measured is budgetary cost-cutting but not the difference that education may have made to someone’s present and future life. If this is the case, it seems unfortunate.

“Someone trying to move up through the system won’t get promoted if they put forward the educational thing. If they put forward security and this, and if they go on about staff discipline, that attracts the attention of the IPS. If you had ten coming out of Portlaoise fully educated and fully integrated nobody cares about that. But if you could say that you saved €10,000 not educating them you would probably get promoted.”

J1’s analysis is even more stark. He remarks that the question of what kind of education

“is best suited to a prison context is an interesting one. Interesting, first of all, in that before we begin we must first of all ascertain exactly whom we are trying to suit. The state penal institution? Or the prisoner?”

Evidently, the state and its subsidiary prison managements are not seriously interested in prison education. The recent evisceration of the prison educational budget and the longstanding absence of a coherent or progressive educational policy provide clear evidence of their absolute disinterest in prison education. The detention and containment of prisoners – and not their education – remains their primary motivation. Thankfully, we don’t have to spend too long speculating what suits these fine upstanding mandarins.

So then, what kind of education is best suited to the prisoner? It is an interesting question. How best to facilitate the education and development of a person who spends every hour of every day of every year in a total institution? But how can we even begin to answer this question when it is framed in this manner? It is a futile academic exercise. For it assumes that prison education can or will be adapted to the needs of the prisoner. Whereas there is no historical precedent which leads us to believe that this will happen. In actual fact, it is the prisoner who must adapt – at every turn – to the fluctuating provision of penal education.”

C1 feels that the narrowness of criteria of evaluation in education can constitute a real problem since it fails to capture not only the nature of the educative experience but also its significance for a man.

“There are other developments within a prison that are never recorded. All they want to know is he sat an exam and what grade he got. There were two guys who came in years ago. One of them read novels, two of them were doing life, oh he must have read five or six in a week, and the other was 17 when he came in couldn’t read and write. This other guy went out off to Russia. He learned all that on a linguaphone.”

E1 agrees with this point saying,

“I hate this word offender because it sees people in a one dimensional way. I have written stuff on this, so there has been a shift in education toward measurement and core skills and so on, and there is the shift in penal policy that sees people in prison much more negatively and not included in the way they had been before, and both of these things are problems in things like art.”

Men also differentiated explicitly between the kind of approach to film-making offered by NCAD and the kind that would, in their view, rightly or wrongly, be operated by the VEC. This does not seem to be a comment on teachers necessarily, but rather on the system and its priorities. NCAD offered a different experience of making work and the fact that people only entered to teach for a delimited though intensive period of time was important. It kept an image of them as outsiders and presumably can allow people to maintain a sense of freshness and excitement when entering the space of the prison. K2 thinks that the fact that people are not there through the year makes a difference in terms of perception. "There are many people in the VEC offering classes that are not very different to what we are doing. But in terms of that marginal status, we are not there all the time. We are not associated as much with an institution that they have ongoing engagement with." For A1 and others, there is an increasing sensitivity to the non-educative agendas governing educational provision by the VEC. When asked whether they would do a film-making course with a VEC teacher, he said,

"Because of the experience of what is there and what comes out of here. It just wouldn't work that way. It just wouldn't work. It's hard to put your finger on it. What's down there it's not only academic. It is a conveyor belt. Because a teacher will come in and he or she will say ok how many classes, but at the end of it I have to sign a form to say you are going for a diploma because that justifies all the budget, so you talk about money. Oh and by the way if I put you down for a class on the Wednesday but I don't come in, is that ok? That's life. I understand that and it's not a problem. And then you've got someone who comes in from here and you can smell it off them, they want to be there. They want to be there and that is the difference for me".

E2 expands on the way in which this pedagogical practice operated with NCAD.

"I think an important aspect of the staff is that they were primarily artists themselves. They seemed to understand what it meant to struggle with materials, they had gone through it themselves. There was an openness and honesty to share their own work with the fellas themselves. They were also very flexible and encouraged students to share different media".

He outlines the key factors that were marked out the NCAD programme, although these also governed the principles underpinning the approach to adult education in the prison.

"Firstly there was the quality of the people. I think the ethos of it was based on the core principles of adult education. It was student centred. The primary person of importance was the student. I think there was a great partnership there where the learner and the tutor negotiate the process. And that went on continuously. The third aspect, there was respect for the learner's bank of knowledge and experience that he brought to the mix. It was valued for itself".

By drawing in figures with influence on landings, other men came on board and E2 noticed the extent to which the effect of the classes extended well beyond the few hours that men may have been allocated on the programme. This is a significant point often lost on those who try to equate a man's engagement with education with the hours spent in classes or in the school. A subject may, as is consistently highlighted by present and past prisoners, can come to absorb a man but this will not be captured by some of the forms of evaluation imposed by outside bodies. This immersion and interest is, in many respects, immeasurable and intangible, but is no less real for that.

E2 continues,

"The course gained status early on, like the OU. I think not just the painting but the multimedia. It totally absorbed the time and thinking of some of the participants. Not all of them, as E1 said, as they would have been involved in other programmes. But there were a number of them that were solely involved in the art programme and it seemed to totally absorb their thinking and time. I think of one fellow, because of Governor H1 here, who was allowed to bring the video camera into his cell and he wanted to get a picture or a piece of film of the sun rising and shining through the crack in the cell.

It struck me how absorbed he was by the whole thing.

Another one went out to the yard where there was a football game going on and was focused on painting a piece of lichen that was growing on the wall. I think there was uproar with the army, they didn't know what was going on. It seemed to totally absorb

the time and thinking of the prison and that was important for the prisoner because prison could be such a monotonous, dreadful place.”

Finally, notes E2,

“I would say that the NCAD encouraged the students to look inside for inspiration because copying was the looking outside, the *modus operandi*, the whole way for the art programme when they came in. Fellows painting pictures of chickens and hens and lovely rural settings and peaceful scenes and then K1 opened up this thing and they exploded. That’s my memory. It’s all positive. I never saw any negatives at all, except there was always that little bit of tension and it used to come up at staff meetings with me and my staff.”

Of interest here is the language of absorption, echoed by other prisoners, and introspection as opposed to learning outcomes. It helps to communicate the existential significance of the programme for men by offering tools and the bones of a visual language to investigate not only the world, but also themselves. But this absorption also permitted of humour and mischief. A2 says,

“I got the satisfaction out of looking at a finished product. You know when you start, you get into it and even going to the video and looking at the very end product and I got a buzz out of that. I done it and everyone else was saying how well it was done I was still finding faults in it. At the end it was a laugh, copyright A2. I didn’t know what it meant and I still don’t know - MX etc. I had no animals harmed in the film. You have to read it very carefully.

He adds,

“From my own perspective, everybody thinks that an artist is somebody who paints a picture. But I know now that it is not. I am able to create something visual. The VEC don’t provide that. They provide an artist to teach you how to paint. I am not a painter.”

There are learning outcomes, but they are primarily determined in dialogue with the student. This was often through discussion with the teacher who acts as a critical interlocutor or a collaborator. The primary focus for many of the men is one of intrinsic reward through the engagement in education. A1 explains this, “It is an inner satisfaction as opposed to a diploma. The input that I put into it.” And A2 elaborates on this, “From an artistic point when it came to doing this, it is just another part of your brain. You.. it is hard to explain. It is the satisfaction you get from completing a piece. It is hard to explain. I didn’t know you could do this on a visual level.” Film-making and editing can give to some the opportunity to explore a variety of subject matters with humour. “I don’t know. The satirical piece that I did was because I was pissed off at Gerry Adams, knocking out loads of nonsense. It was just annoying. It was only a three minute piece. It is just I get a buzz out of all that craic”, says A2. This other dimension to absorption, so often forgotten in contemporary discourses on education, is enjoyment.

Sometimes, work in art and craft areas allowed for forms of generosity and gift-giving and to re-institute relations with loved ones. This has traditionally been of particular importance for men in Portlaoise prison. These gifts, created by hand, mark time and mark loss. A4 explains, “I done the art to get a Christmas present for my mother. I got a photo of me mother and I had it there and just painted it. And she still has the portrait on the landing. That was why I was doing it. It was expressing something for me ma, showing her I was not some fecker that broke her heart”. The world outside is one in which the absence of the loved one is felt as a puncture, a hole in the world, and so too when that world came to the environs of the prison, the ache to see the other was palpable.

A4 says of the visits from his mother,

“And itching, every screw that came up thinking, is that mine, is that mine, is that mine. Itching to go down to her. Have her little sandwiches made, cup of soup or Bovril.”

“*The anticipation..*”

“She liked the Bovril, she didn’t drink the tea, she liked the Bovril. She’d have her cigarettes then as well. One particular brand of cigarettes that would be sitting there all week and what would take her probably a day to get through was taking her 3-4 or 5-6

weeks to go through them. Yeah I had everything for her in the little box. I had to have everything just right for her, try and make it special for her. I am still trying to do that, trying to find as much time as possible to spend with her. Going walking the dogs. Cos I mean she gave me four years. As we were saying when A3 was leaving. It is not just us that done the time. It's the families as well."

Work through film and portraiture allowed for some of the difficulties and ambivalences around doing time to be interrogated but to do so required an immanent model of education, responsive to the interests and desires of the prisoner, organic in its evolution and open to unpredictability. Curricula, practice and content were co-negotiated with teachers rather than constituting a ready-made body of knowledge to be 'transferred' to the man with more or less efficiency. Another dimension to this practice, essential, it appears, in the work by NCAD, was the capacity to maintain disciplined rigour in terms of developing a practice, but also to allow for unpredictability. Schemata of learning outcomes may make transparent and clarify the kinds of things a learner will know or should not, but in the practice of art this appears ill-considered in light of the processual, experimental and practice-based nature of the activity. Were NCAD staff to have operationalized the expected learning outcomes in an inflexible manner, it seems likely that many men would not have engaged meaningfully in the process. Moreover the significant length of time that teachers worked with men invited sensitive responsiveness and the development of trust which accepted and welcomed a process-based approach that welcomed unpredictability. This excerpt from one conversation illuminates this.

*"Did any of you have any sense of what you were going to do when you started to work together?"*

"Oh Jesus no".

*"Do you think you'd have started if you did?"*

"No. I don't think I would. No. I am glad I did. And it is hugely beneficial and it really has changed me and my relationship with my kids and my family."

Amongst Republican prisoners, there has been some consistency over time in the relation to education. A1 says,

"But what we have is political status, the discipline, we have the education. The first priority of ourselves as Republican prisoners in prison is to escape. That is your first priority. Ok, if you can't do that, educate yourself while you are there and that is the priority. Escape is not possible any more from Portlaoise, unless you have wings. They have fortified it in the last 30 years. So education. That is what we concentrate on. So if a guy comes in and he is not well read or whatever the case may be, you will see it. It will make itself obvious. And over the five year period it is amazing the transformation of someone who has no education to when he walks out that door. And whether he never goes back into any kind of activity, he will be changed and he is given confidence by the way we live our lives in the prison. Not by putting your chest out there, but the way you do your business with the screws, with respect, you speak to them with respect. You are comfortable in your own skin. And it gives a man confidence. And that's good to see. Regardless of the politics of the situation. And you know, and the pinnacle of that for me is sitting down in front of a camera."

Certain prisoners were and are resistant to what they call the VEC model, although for many it is valued on its own terms. Clearly the words of critics do not represent the whole prison population, but they do create a better understanding of why the NCAD programme was attractive to some of the men whilst others forms of educational provision were not, and were even actively resisted. Some men were also resistant to the OU model because the tutors would maintain a certain reserve, even when it came to questions of political philosophy. B1 says,

"Somewhere at some stage, although Portlaoise was autonomous, some of the things in general prison service would apply - female prison warders, some connection with VEC and bringing in outside tutors. There was a lot of debate around that, did we want to be part of their system. Some secondary teachers came along. They were disastrous, totally lost. We were mad to see somebody new, get a conversation and debate going about anything. It was pitiful, they were lost. We couldn't have a debate with them, because we were quite agile at debating at that stage.

*They were didactic?*

Yeah, absolutely. We wanted someone who was going to come in and challenge us. And we could have it all out and talk about it. They were very timid and lame things. People used to just go to keep it open as a possibility and it became a chore. They had a French teacher and she was good, and an economics teacher. I think it was VEC but we didn't know. And maybe at the same time the OU came in. That was funny.

The formal classes I wouldn't have bothered with. It was self-led classes. The secondary school teachers you wouldn't bother with. They had no comprehension of the world we lived in and were afraid to even discuss it. OU - very interesting but very English and very academic and afraid to go beyond the boundaries of passing on information and certainly didn't want to show opinion. They were quite reserved."

B1 describes his philosophy of education in further detail.

"These are people who by the very nature of being in prison have rejected authority, and have rejected the whole pedagogy approach, to be talked down to, taught, I don't believe that anyone can be taught. You can learn and people can help you learn, and people can provide you with knowledge and ability.

It didn't work. Firstly, even to have somebody learn, you first have to make a connection with that person and you have to have a relationship. And it is personal how that works, particularly with people in jails. That if the personal connection is made, the academic part, the knowledge that is being imparted is secondary. There is a trust. You are insisting you are coming from the authority side, and it is a very polarised side, so you are coming from that system. In order to gain that trust and for them to open to you, in order that they will learn, then they must feel that you are on their side almost, without compromising yourself. If I were in the position of an educationalist then I would spend a lot of time around that, and continue to spend a lot of time around that. It is only at a certain point that people are open to possibilities from you, when you have gained that trust. A class kind of approach wouldn't work, though there needs to be some structure.

Peer learning models worked, because you had the trust. We trusted each other and had respect. That's why the knowledge was acceptable. The OU was self-led and very independent. There was very little around that so you could take it off, you could have study groups and debates. That would start from 8 o'clock in the morning, people would have an hour before classrooms, and they would discuss whatever it was to be discussed. Then our system of education would kick in around 10, a language class or whatever classes. They would schedule times to do these different things.

I would have to bring you back to the culture of that time. A lot of people did not believe they were going to live, they would be shot, their lives were geared around what they/we believed was the revolution. This was going to happen and everything was around that. The art was very peripheral.

*Was that sense of vitality and curiosity driven by that sense of finitude?*

You didn't know how much time you would have so you would pack as much in. You were in a place where you can't be impatient. To be impatient would lead to frustration. To be calm, to do with little, to make fascination about the smallest tiniest things, there were only so many things."

B2 describes his understanding of 'schooling' and the way in which his first encounter with K1 disrupted this.

"You expect a school person to be politically correct. A type of person who would say 'Now, I am going to teach you art, and this is what we are going to do', and to tell you what art is, and do a lecture. I think K1 probably started off by saying what do you think art is about and in a conversational way to start to discuss art and his own art. I think he had brought a projector with images of his own works at that time and he talked to us about what his pictures were to him and what he was trying to say. For me, that was the first experience of listening to somebody who had created a painting, a number of paintings, who was the man behind the picture and mind behind it.

And there was a whole new world of understanding art. It wasn't a school mistress telling us what art was. It was the whole concept of his works and his paintings and it was a dawning for me in terms of art. He, as the classes went on, eventually got round to

the technicalities and techniques. You had to look at a thing to see how it was constructed and how the light would be reflected off it.

I had two outside teachers. One was K1 and one was Mr X. I think they worked well with me and I found it fine. I think in prison you have got to establish the rapport. You have got to be somebody that is there to talk to the people and to hear them talking as opposed to being a teacher because people are living in a situation in which their lives are being dictated, their movements are being dictated, their timescales are being dictated and they don't want somebody else coming in and telling them what to do. K1 didn't come in and stand at the top of the class. I think maybe the screws they probably had the chairs in a row for this teacher coming. And wondering what end will he be at. Well if we put the chairs there he will be there and we can watch from the cage. But when K1 came in his appearance was not at all – I am the one in charge. Tell you what we will do, pull round in a circle. He says I am K1, I am a painter and I paint pictures. I am here to talk to you about that, and to paint pictures. And to create that this is something we have got to do together. And of course he was a very interesting person. I think K1 went straight in with his work. So from your first class you were actually, this is what you end up with, here is the product, then he talked about how he got there and some of his life experience. I can still quite clearly see some of the images. There was a girl who had been raped and she was in a closet and was afraid to come out. This darkness here and this is fear. And different emotions. He went straight in there and took you with him. Even though you knew nothing about it, it was as though somebody had put on the light.

He seems to have established meaningful relationships. Implicitly anyhow, he wanted something out of this. It is an experience for him too. In doing that he was sharing his work with us. He was sitting in a circle, smoking a roll up.

*He made clear that there was something he wanted too. Would it be wrong to think of that in terms of a sharing or distributing of authority?*

What he would learn from us would give him an insight by working in this place. Not I need something from you but rather if we could work at this together then we can share these... These were experiences shared with him. The whole thing wasn't about 'I am coming here to teach you to paint'. Rather it was, 'I want to get a sense of your place and to do that I want to teach you about art and to show you how I express myself'

And lots of people who were teaching have a limited amount of time and resources to do their teaching with, if they are going to offload information to the learners they are going to have to do it in a certain way to get it done. They have not got the luxury of just let's start and see how long it takes us. You have to ask K1 what his expectation was when he came in to teach. We didn't have any specific expectations. We didn't have a timeframe by which we had to complete things by, do an exam, get a certificate. He probably knew where he was going but it was just the experience of art and appreciation of art. In the general education world, we don't have that luxury. Here is that class, see what happens, see where we go.

It is only in hindsight that I am saying that. Because not everybody who went to the class had a target. Some would want to get an O level or A level. There was no target and we didn't really know where we were supposed to be going, but we got there anyway.

You had absolute freedom. It didn't matter what shape a thing was if that was the shape you wanted it to be. You just worked with the paint on the paper and something would result. There was nobody to say that's wrong. They didn't know where you were coming from anyways. In other subjects, there were things that were right and things that were wrong, that could be measured, and there were competences. We did wood work but we worked from other templates, it was fairly assembly line processing stuff. The art was the only creative area."

B2 and B1's observations capture the way in which it was not only the subject that hooked people but also the teacher's ability to engage with the students. Part of the practice of working with a student involved giving him the confidence to determine his own project and to make his own decisions. The inter-personal relationship is essential. A2 speaking of K2 says, "I think he captured me on a personal level, and you were able to talk to him. You could freely talk to him across a table where there were no inhibitions. And then the camera came on. I could talk to you." K1 comments on this, "This is interesting to me as a teacher because the idea that a teacher should leave their personality outside the room and not bring it in, that they are kind of a technical thing which the department would like to get rid of." So when

artist/teachers refused to 'leave their personality at the door' this helped to 'woo the sensibilities' of the men in the class.

Part of the job of the School and Library Officers was and is to support prisoners in identifying interests and encouraging them to engage in education. This might be done relatively informally such as noting what people were reading. The role of the Officer had shifted through the 1980s from a much more holistic engagement with the prisoner by working with them in trades and practical activities, such as shoe-making or gardening, to one almost exclusively defined by security. C2 says, "We were pushed into the role of the officer, very much security. It also changed the culture in the prison and the interaction between officer and prisoners." Yet the cultivation of an educative atmosphere always requires support from the prison's own staff. To facilitate this certain officers and governors would take risks and bear the responsibility for that risk-taking. K2 remarks on this, "Someone had your back. If you were going too far you'd be told, ever so gently." To this day - people, teachers, officers and prisoners - recollect the time that K3 brought her dog into the prison. E2, E1 and H1 reminisce over that time, including the trial runs of x-raying another dog to make sure weaponry could not be smuggled in.

E2 began this story by speaking of the quality of the NCAD staff making the project a success.

"The quality of the people delivering it, K1, K3, remember K3 bringing in her dog". To which E1 remarked wryly, "Most of them were half crazy" and H1 said, "Yes, I remember having to x-ray the dog. How to get that fucking dog in."

*"You let in the dog?"*

"I made a lot of blunders in my time."

K3 remembered the enchantment of the men as they spotted this creature, an animal so foreign to the land of the prison, scurrying along the corridor and how men rushed to stroke it and feed it tit-bits.

Bringing in these innocuous elements from the world outside, simple things like a bundle of flowers or a shoal of fish, was a source of enchantment and wonder. This was not unlike the way that Kropotkin describes how a prisoner starved of sensory impressions becomes overjoyed by the sight of a parrot descending in the prison yard.

G1 recounts the story of those days and the thousands forms of micro-resistance that could give colour to life there, even though, such things, for the ordinary citizen, would be innocuous.

"K3 was a Trojan. The governor was terrified of her. She landed in one evening with her dog. She brought the dog in. She left the dog into the cell and left me with the dog. Well I couldn't draw the dog. It was so long since I had seen a dog that I sat there with the dog and I enjoyed the company of the dog and chatted with the dog. Or she would go to the Phoenix Park in the autumn and bring in the leaves. We'd never see those things. She came in one day with a whole heap of flowers and amongst them was a Tradescantia, and I pulled a piece of it, Busy Lizzy. I got a little length it and skived it up my sleeve. You weren't allowed to have jars but I managed to get honey. I got an extra jar and I had it hanging in my cell and there it was growing in my cell. Reilly would never allow a prisoner to have that in your cell. On one occasion there was a search and they looked at this thing on the wall. You can't have that. Who said? Are you countermanding the Governor's order? If he went to Reilly and said G1 has a plant in his cell, Reilly would have said are you questioning my authority and if he hadn't he would have said, how did you allow that in there? Either way big Joe was in trouble. That is the psychology of it".

The kind of education that was resisted by a number of prisoners was 'schooling'.

In K4's view,

"I think in terms of NCAD and its approach, it is coming from an art background and studio background so its approach is probably different to some other disciplines. It has tended to be one to one - that is not unusual in Portlaoise - so relationships really do start to build up. The men play the most important part themselves in what constitutes the curriculum because by its nature the work is self-determined. Art, physically making things, workshops, the realm of creativity. The first prisoner I worked with, started

working with a computer, primarily a more multi-media type course. It became evident that the computer offered a space for him to work in and a world he could control a lot more which is not very different from a studio world. He could make decisions, control. It didn't seem to be on offer in education outside this, especially with regular prisoners because they didn't have access to workshops and to education unless they were escorted to a school scenario outside their cells. With art, that was something at that point they had freedom. At that point everybody.. the political have always had much more control over their educational environment.

To help them to find a way of producing art that helps them with what they want to express, whether it is their own story. Whether some of them not want that at all, or maybe landscape, he won't do anything else and does it beautifully. It is just to find their voice. Techniques yes, they need materials. You need to find ways to get the teachers to bring that in."

K5 observed the way in which the programme allowed for a different relation to self to emerge.

"E2 said that prisoners, a lot of issues, personal issues, came up with prisoners and it seemed to happen in the art class. It seems to be the process of art that brings out, it just makes it difficult. It is the nature of art."

However, there was an agreement amongst all participants that the *intention* of the art classes could not be therapeutic, even if (as they often did) prisoners felt it was therapeutic for them. It was the preservation of the specifically educative and creative relationship that provided a space for those forms of inner transformation documented by men on the programme. When teachers bring a sense of integrity, and when their presence communicates their desire to be there, this matters for prisoners. A1 says,

"See the nature of the work and the conversation that we had and the project that we done, you have to want to be there. It is not like going in and teaching an English class, with respect to that. But you have to really want to do it. Prisons. You can smell it off them, I don't mean literally, when a teacher doesn't want to be there. But you can, and you don't learn properly. And if you can get a sense off someone, just to fill the class time. It is all about trust. Everything is about trust for me. And once you have that then you negotiate where you want to go."

This might be a cause for suspicion in a regime intent on security, but as the men make clear, there is respect for the educative process and care to ensure that people are not compromised. The *relational* dimension of pedagogy is fundamental and initiation into any discipline will demand the development of the pedagogical relationship.

Martin Buber<sup>14</sup> comments on the pedagogical relation and its ethical character as distinct from any moralising function. "But as soon as my pupils notice that I want to educate their characters I am resisted precisely by those who show most signs of genuine independent character: they will not let themselves be educated, or rather they do not like the idea." He adds, "Only in his whole being, in all his spontaneity can the educator truly effect the whole being of his pupil. For educating characters you do not need a moral genius, but you do need a man who is wholly alive and able to communicate himself directly to his fellow beings. His aliveness streams out to them and affects them most strongly and purely when he has no thought of affecting them" (134). K4 clarifies her position in respect of this, "I think it is more, keep it educational. If it is therapeutic, it is only therapeutic in the way that painting to me is. It is not therapy in the way that therapy to a sick person might be. You might find a way of expressing yourself", and K5 notes, "Prison can be one of the most honest places you can ever be. You are stripped bare."

A1 speaks of the process of making film with K2.

"But listen. For men painting stuff to express themselves and taking their interpretation of a painting for whatever kind of work was put out, I am speaking for myself here. To sit in front of a camera and tell my story about my family and my involvement in not just republicanism or politics or the army, just the story of my loss and my kids. A3's is the same story. He is a long-termer like myself. And the effect that it had on you not as a Volunteer, as a Republican, as a man but just as a human being and that all was a

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<sup>14</sup> Buber, M. (1947) *Between Man and Man*, London: Kegan Paul.

learning process. But we could have only, I could have only done that through trust. We built it up over the years. K2 is there now 10-12 years whatever the case may be. And I don't think I could have done it with anyone bar K2, because that continuity and commitment that he gave. We saw that and we gave it back.

He continues,

And also on a personal level. [...] I want my family to understand my story through my words and that's why I put things on video. It has changed me, I mean utterly changed me. I am not saying this because K2 is here. I used it for my own selfish ends and it brought me through this that and the other. My children know more about me through a video lens than I could ever... Because it makes them question. They question me now over it. There is stuff that they haven't seen and stuff that they won't see until I am dead."

At that time, all prisoners engaged in education on their own landings. Now ordinary (or social) prisoners take classes in a school on C Block. K2 felt it was significant to be able to work on the landings.

"It is important in terms of who owns space, talk with, move freely, work in cells at the beginning and that was great propaganda for the programme. Other prisoners would get involved to see the work being done."

Again, the relational nature of education is clear here although it has been increasingly obscured in educational discourse, research and policy. Padraig Hogan thinks that it is to practices of *sharing* and *questioning* "made possible through increases in the relevant fluency" (187) that we should turn in order to understand education, and that these forms of participation identify "ways of being human in which *all* can benefit" (187). Hogan's understanding of the kinds of relationships that ought to be sustained in education are at odds with some of the ways in which adult education is being re-conceived in VEC management which, although it purports to bring learning closer to the learner and presumable empower them with a range of certificates, does not ask the learner what he or she needs, wants or desires. A systems driven approach to education is also not sensitive to the specific nature of education in a prison where one cannot deliver programmes as one might outside: prisoners are sentenced at different times, are at different levels of education, have different desires and interests, may have visits or different commitments, and are not in control of their situation. Education in prison must be responsive to these realities. Hogan writes, that the commodification of culture, including the importation of models like Total Quality Management into the sphere of schooling "trivialise and even disfigure the interplay between personal identity and the voices of cultural tradition; an interplay which we explored [...] as a kind of courtship of sensibility. Similarly, describing this relationship (essentially a personal one of trust) as a 'process' to be 'managed', gives priority to the wrong kind of intercourse, namely a manipulative as distinct from a properly communicative form of action" (225). He argues that this not only fails to respect the integrity of education, but fails to even to acknowledge it. "In this genre, the primary approach to quality is a market-inspired managerialism; a mentality which views practice itself, in any given field, not as the accountable exercise of discretionary judgement, but as a *resource to be managed*" (226).

From a different perspective, the officers also saw a difference as prisoners became involved in education, in particular the creative arts like drama, music and art. C1 says,

"I thought it was great. If you get a guy that is involved in something like that, he is not going to be involved in trouble. You have 30 guys to take care of, 4 involves in music that goes down to 26, 2-3 in art then there is a calming thing on it, instead of 30 guys hitting off one another".

This is echoed by H1,

"Art in general, the creative arts in general, whatever it is, there is a great interest, capacity and potential within the prison population for the arts. I don't know. Is it got to do with suppression on the outside? But for whatever reason, there is an untapped wonderful potential – music, drama, painting, design. They created the most unbelievable design with wire. So there is this natural thing or interest."

What one sees in the men cannot be readily measured, but this makes it no less real. As third level provision through the Open University was opened up to the officers, this also led to changes. C2 says, "There was an interesting dynamic when the OU was introduced. In tandem with the prisoners officers were studying and there would be interaction". Describing the relationships that develop within the space C1 and C3 spoke of trust and risk. "You can build up a certain level of trust because it is mutually beneficially, it is a normal relationship and it is one that still exists". C1 adds, echoing H1, "To operate the way C3 taught me you had to take chances. We had a little garden in the school, and the fountain." The taking of chances by officers would help participants in the NCAD programme to take chances through their practice.

### Observation, Impression and Expression

"[A]ll my links with the outside world seem to be breaking, one by one"

Antonio Gramsci *Letters from Prison*, 156

"It is important simply to resist, it's important. In prison you understand the thousand forms of resistance."

Antonio Negri, *The Cell*.

When reflecting upon differences in prison regimes, the Whitaker report makes an interesting recommendation that, whilst not taken up as a project by the IPS or the Department of Justice, communicated the importance of interrupting the 'grey monotony' of prison life and which captures somewhat the reason that making art work can shift the qualitative nature of the lived experience of the prisoner. It may be worth considering as a project within a re-envisioned NCAD programme.

"Attention should be given to décor and design within the prisons, with maximum use of bright, attractive colour schemes combined with the provision of pictures, prints and wall hangings. The advice and assistance of the National College of Art and Design should be sought. The effect would be a major improvement in the physical environment of the prisons, with consequent benefits to the morale of offenders and staff" (62).

Antonio Negri speaks of both the impoverishment and monastic nature of the space.

"The last time in prison I didn't see any green at all for four and a half years. Because everything was cement. There was no ground or earth that wasn't made of cement. Because it was a special prison everything was cement and iron.

The first time that I put my foot down on the grass, I felt like the astronauts who had landed on the moon. I jumped up and down on the grass because you can't imagine what it means to only have cement around you for so long."

G1 spoke of the writings of Piotr Kropotkin when reflecting on the dull monotony or prison life.

"What is interesting about the art in prison, in the year we got about thirteen hours of art instruction in the year. There were different sections, factions. But that thirteen hours was priceless because it actually opened up possibilities. K1 came in one day and I was really down. 'There is nothing there', I said. 'There is a toilet roll. Can't you paint the toilet roll'. The next morning I came in and when he came back that got me out of the thing that there is nothing to paint. I still have the painting. I have it on the toilet at home. I love the painting.

When I come back in he said, 'You did it! You did paint it!' 'Yeah.' 'But I didn't think you were going to'. There was all that interaction going on. It was interesting. It was, it gave you.. Previous to all of this I had read – there was a great Russian Prince Kropotkin who was a Russian anarchist and he served time in prison. He said the colour of prison is grey but our memories and our imaginations and our creative thoughts are multicoloured. Well if the prisoner is in jail long enough the memories fade, and basically the colours in our imaginings fade in keeping with the prison. Basically, if it ever comes to the point at which the prisoner's thoughts become as grey as the prison, then he is lost. I remembered this. And when K1 came with the possibility of making colours and shapes and seeking harmony in a place which was totally unnatural and totally disharmonious. This was an opportunity in a sense to take me out of where I was and I could escape into trying to

create pieces. And that was what it gave. For me that was the principle thing. I wasn't going to allow myself to become as grey as the place I was in."

To develop our picture of the life of the prisoner it may help to turn to writings of some well-known philosopher-prisoners. Kropotkin wrote,

It seems to me that this depression of healthy nervous energy can be best accounted for by the want of impressions. In ordinary life thousands of sounds and colours strike our senses; thousands of small, varied facts come within our knowledge, and spur the activity of the brain. Nothing of the kind strikes the prisoner; his impressions are few, and always the same. Therefore, the eagerness of the prisoners for anything new, for any new impression. I cannot forget the eagerness with which I observed, when taking a walk in the fortress yard, the changes of colour on the gilt needle of the fortress, its rosy tints at sunset, its bluish colours in the morning, its changing aspects on cloudy and bright days, in the morning and evening, winter and summer. It was the only thing which changed its aspect. The appearance of a parrot in the yard was a great event. It was a new impression. This is probably also the reason that all prisoners are so fond of illustrations; they convey new impressions in a new way. All impressions received by the prisoner, be they from his reading or from his own thoughts, pass through the medium of his imagination. And the brain, already poorly fed by a less active heart and impoverished blood, becomes tired, worried. It loses its energy."

The language used by prisoners to describe the space of the prisoner varies, often mobilizing metaphors of suspension like a bubble, or a boat; in short being cast adrift or in exile from the world. Gramsci says, "Here in my cell the light that filters in is somewhere between that of a cellar and that of an aquarium" (125). He tries to communicate this to his family and to describe the strategies for coping with this and for transforming the dullness of the experience into one qualitatively other.

"You shouldn't imagine, though, that my life continues to be as monotonous as it seems. Once you get used to living in an aquarium and adapt your sensory apparatus to the crepuscular, toned down impressions flowing toward you (always keeping your attitude ironic), a whole world begins to swarm around you, a lively world obeying its own laws and following its own course. It's something like glancing down on an ancient tree trunk that weather has gradually worn away: the closer you look, the more you begin to see. First only a humid mushroom like growth, or a snail dripping a trail behind as it slowly drags along; then, a little at a time, you begin to pick out colonies of tiny insects running about industriously, repeating (125) the same actions, taking the same paths over and over. If you succeed in holding to your original position, there's no danger of turning into a snail or an ant, and it all becomes an interesting way of passing the time (126)."

What then is particular to art practice, be it painting, film, drawing or sculpture is the capacity that the artist/teacher has, often initially through ostension – 'Look at the toilet roll!', 'Draw him!' - to help the student to disclose the world. It may be achieved by offering an entry through visual language to one's inner life or the material environment alike, in ways that reveal and draw out features of what was 'there' but had previously remained hidden or unseen. The very act of observing in this way is part of this practice and process of making work. This is a rather different activity from one, no doubt equally valuable in a different way for other students, of making work from templates or drawing from existent images, because of the sensori-perceptual-motor capacities harnessed in this act, in short, the embodied engagement of the person in the act of making.

Both B1 and B2 speak of the revelation involved in this process. Even though a person may not have experienced an art practice, one comes bound with a set of preconceptions about what art is. For a number of men, these preconceptions were rapidly undone. B1 describes the arrival of K1.

"So K1 arrived and I think we would have gone to see him, what was he like, it was about meeting somebody else from outside, a new perspective. K1 has his own way and he was showing some of his work and what it was. There is no sense of him being.. He was like one of us, it was very obvious that his perspective was working class, his language was working class, so if you are talking too high or too low, it depends on where you are coming from. I think that is how he ingratiated himself, he understood this world of men, the basic parameters of their belief system and shared a language.

I painted with a number of people, I enjoyed it, I got a thrill out of it, it was wonderful, a wonderful thing to be at. I started to look at and see about how – if you are working class

often aesthetics don't matter. Certainly in that world, notions of beauty would be defined in terms of what you could do for somebody else, not in, it was almost. I would bring that back, it was almost a culture of Catholicism, almost that puritanical way, anything that was vain. There was a certain vanity in admiring beauty and wanting beautiful things and needing beautiful things and this was a bourgeois approach to life. I would have started to look."

Learning this visual language, initially through an Expressionist approach to painting, felt qualitatively different to other educational experiences but it also allowed for breathing space within, not only an oppressive regime, but from the dictates of the collective that constituted part of being a member of military grouping.

"A number of people got into it – it was a world with no rules. There was no vocabulary, no structure to the language, and there were endless possibilities of what you might be do with it and I think that was what was appealing..

Art had possibilities from what we were being told by K1, that it is a world of possibilities without being confined. There was no judgement in it. You can make art – it was not good or bad – it was just what it was. A lot of what we had been doing – we had been making judgements. This is good, this is bad, this progressive, this less progressive. This is radical, this is reactionary. Polar judgements. We didn't know about the philosophy of it, people started to read into the criticism of art but generally the practice of art was immune to that. There was stuff, it was anti- the whole world, and that culture was anti-personal, there was no place for individualism, that would have been frowned on as being selfish and greedy and whatever and not going with that whole ethos of you're part of something bigger. There were people dying, there were people getting out of jail and being shot. So the individual and individual life meant very little and to be considering your own preciousness would be seen as a luxury, there is no time for this, the world needs so much, and what you can do to add to this. Quite Catholic. What you can do. Sacrifice of the individual for this better time that would come some other day."

B2 describes his prior understanding of art and the world awakened in him through the classes he took.

"I was unsophisticated because I thought art was about painting nice pictures which people put on the walls. K1, it was about how he was expressing himself through the paintings. He was expressing his own emotions. He talked about the states of mind, but he painted them because of his recollection of the time. [...] It was a whole awakening to art as a means of expression. I had thought that paintings were nice, like a photograph, but there was nothing photographic about anything that K1 painted and it was about what was being said in the painting. So I dabbled, and I did actually complete some paintings."

We will return to this point later but one of the features of this approach involves the sharing of a practice through the doing and describing of it rather than the telling of it, as people were accustomed to in a more 'traditional' approach to teaching art. Much of the craftwork on the landings was based on well-worn templates and offered little opportunity for expression, innovation or creativity. By rendering bare the process and emotions shaping the making of work and the creation of an atmosphere through laying on paint, then moving into developing techniques and skills, the practice was supported and embodied by the teacher. It would be the same with film-making as people engaged in the practice of understanding through exploration. But the practice opened the horizons of the individual by opening up different modes of seeing, observing, sensing, thinking about and experiencing the world. K1's own approach to painting made a particular impact. B1 humorously remarks that, "If we had been the only people in the world left there would have been nothing only expressionism". E2 remembers seeing the change in one man.

"It gave the guys a chance to explore their innermost feelings in a safe and controlled way. I think it gave the fellows a chance. There is an awful lot of anger hidden in here that can't get out, I remember one of the guys telling me that he was getting beautiful photographs of peaceful scenes from Co. Monaghan, rural scenes and painting them and inside he was exploding in anger so when K1 arrived what came out was a great.. It gave them a chance to give expression to pent up feelings that were there inside."

It may help to better understand the extent to which there was experiential shift for the men who became involved in art practice by hearing some of the ways in which they began to see the world and themselves differently and to articulate it through a visual language. The

importance of narrative, storytelling and portraiture in the prison will be considered in more detail below. B1 recalls,

“I liked this idea of painting people, this idea through working through painting somebody, the conversation of understanding somebody. Portraiture. Drawing each other. Somehow to use paint to tell this story. That is where I was at. I became fascinated by the whole process of it, the thrill of it. It was directed emotional response to something, because it was one thing I didn't examine. I didn't think why I was doing it and that was quite liberating to just do that. A sense of achievement having made something and a self-confidence of - I am doing this and I like doing it, I am not looking around me. I started looking at light and windows and the passing of the day through time, that whole place and whole experience, of how time passes and light passed, time locked up and time contained and all of that.

It passes differently at different times. I found myself.. I would look at the cell window and watch the light come through over the day. I would have read and seen time as a time of activity and not as a time of observation. But we got really interested in portraiture and the possibilities of that and understanding possibilities through portraiture. [...] It was an investigation of the world, finding out about the world and I just wanted more and more of that, and to go as far as you could go in the pursuit of that.”

G1's entry into the world of art was not wholly voluntary but he was immediately captivated.

“What brought me to painting. I didn't want to go painting at all. At one stage we had a woodwork shop, we were doing woodwork and carvings and they took it away from us. I was hoping that we might agitate and get it back. So they said there were going to be these art classes and I went along and listened to him and no doubt asked him about getting the woodwork back. So I said, ok sod that. Then the classes were set up to start. In the area I was there were only 20 prisoners and the prison decided they needed a minimum of 4 but they only had 3. So the 3 guys came along to me and said would I come along to the painting class and I said 'No. I am not interested'. And they said, 'If you don't come we won't get the class. At least come and we will get it started'. Then what happened we were brought into a room about four cells – there is a hatch in another cell and a jailer watching. K1 walks in says I'm K1. And eh, he said, here and he took a page out of a big sketch-pad. He said, 'Do you know how to make a palette?'. I said, 'No'. Here, paint, scatters it all over the place.

'Ok. You paint him and you paint him. I will be back in half an hour', and he walked out. And we all looked at each other and said this fellow is fucking crazy and he really was. And we said we will have a go anyway. It was fun. After half an hour B came back in and said, 'Very good. Now what I want you to do is you paint him and you paint him'. Switches it around and I will be back again in half an hour. By that time we were all standing up and the four pieces were scattered on the table. And he picked up the pieces tacked them on the wall, stood back and he went and looked at us and said that's yours, etc etc. And he knew which of us had painted each piece. 'How do you know that?' 'I just do.' And that caught me.

As G2 said, there was no interference and control by the prison. You were locked in and let out again but when you were there, you were yourself. It was a free space and you had a chance to experiment with colour and shapes.”

G2 has described his resistance to the forms of authority symbolised by all aspects of the institution, including the school.

“I saw him (K1). I had been in Limerick and they got rid of me because I was causing all kinds of chaos. I think I had five years to serve. They were saying we are going to this art class. These are all big thugs that I knew and I was saying 'Art class!' These are people you are reading about in the Sunday World. They had the country terrorised. What the fuck are you doing? You are not supposed to be taking part in anything to do with prisons. Just did your time and got out.

Don't be coming near me. I don't want anything off you and I am not giving you anything. Do your time. These were the devils. Wait til you see this fella.

There he is. And I am looking up the landing and I think you (K1) were bouncing off the walls walking down the landing. I used to go down and I didn't paint or anything because I hadn't a clue.. You couldn't take it out of your room. I had the paint in me cell

and I used to paint in the cell and gradually I started in the class. I used to watch, I would be in the corner looking at everybody.

Did we do a sewing machine, boxing gloves...? I started off with a sperm. I used to look at Ronnie Delaney, he ran in the Olympics, and he was a hero for winning a race against 10 people and I beat 350 million and I got no praise. There were no medals for me, just a kick in the bollocks and fucked into jail. So I used to do these sperms as champion sperms jumping over fences and all that. I went from the sperm to a multitude of sperm, then the baby and a big black hole - this is over time. They thought I disappeared for five years in the prisons. I was chopping them up – some of them had faces made of clocks, I put them down as people doing life. They were just a clock. Then just the clock that moved. That would have been G1 doing 40 year. We actually filled the cell in the end. The screws used to come and I would say, 'That's what you done, this is about what you done to people'. I used to keep saying that. I didn't do anything else.

*Did your experience of the place change then?*

I vanished for five years. I used to work from 8pm until 8am.

G3 "They weren't in control of his world any more".

G1 adds, "The only control they had was that they locked him in, checked he was there and opened the door".

In the novel, *Elizabeth Costello*, the main character, Elizabeth, describes the "heavily affective sensation" of being a body, "of being alive to the world". She then remarks that "fullness of being is a state hard to sustain in confinement. [...] [T]he freedom of the body to move in space is targeted as the point at which reason can most painfully and effectively harm the being of the other." She speaks of 'creatures least able to bear confinement' in laboratories or zoos and in institutions where the 'flow of joy' that comes from [...] simply being an embodied being has no place" (78-9). Painting served to open up new modalities of expression, introspection and observation and it operated a form of resistance, offering a capacity to preserve an enlivened sense of self against the forces of institutionalisation and control emblematic of prison life.

This possibility opened through learning 'the bones of a visual language' is a concrete one, harnessing the imagination through observation. B1 says,

"So this was quite different and left a little door for the possibility – poetry and creative writing allowed for a certain amount of that but that was personal expression at another level. This was the first kind of visual.., there was a world of visual expression and K1 encouraged people to introspect and have a psychological approach and there was an open door for that".

Forms of practice are ways of living, of sensing, perceiving, thinking and knowing. If we consider the basic act of ostension – look at that – be it an emotional state or a toilet roll, the act of looking that discloses dimensions of the object and experience that may have been previously hidden or occluded. The grey and routinised nature of the prison environment can leave little scope for new impressions or sensory experiences. If we take seriously the implications for our embodied subjectivity in a state of confinement, we can better understand why even the act of ostension and concomitant observation affected the men who entered these art classes. Through the directive act of ostension by the teacher, one comes to learn and develop a capacity through which the making of some *thing* is a form of manifestation that can only be born of attunement and observation. With this comes a different kind of individuating responsiveness and receptivity to the environment, no matter how bare and impoverished that environment may be, and this has, in itself, a kind of epiphanic character.

The choice by many of the ex-prisoners of the language of possibility and escape communicates both the opening and extension of horizons that develop through the practice of making. This was not an act of *mimesis* or copying but rather encouraged self-determination and exploration. It embodied thinking visually and sonically through mark making, filming or editing. Forms of expression are also ways of disclosing the world and are particularly important when it seems as though there is nothing to see, nothing worthy of attention. Take, for example, watching the light falling on the floor of a cell change over the course of the day. Re-conceiving perception to understand it not as the passive experience of

receiving impressions but rather an act of receptivity can enable features of the environment that were there, but unseen, to come into visibility. Consider the words of Rosa Luxemburg, “Around 4pm, I go down to the prison yard, where twilight has already begun, so that the hideous surroundings are shrouded in the mysterious veil of darkness, but in contrast, the sky still glimmers with a sweet blue light, in which there floats a moon of clear silver” (450)<sup>15</sup>. Art, in particular, invites a wide range of world practices which, as B1 points out, precludes the question of is it right or is it wrong. When one takes out a little jail mirror and paints a rather stern portrait as one tries to see oneself in its reflection this captures far more than the image of a face but communicates the challenges, and even tragic-comic nature, of the environment.

## Portraiture, Identity and Storytelling

“I felt. It was exactly the same process – being in the IRA and being an artist – painting looking at people, observing people, describing people. It is the same process I felt and for me, a good painting as I would see it, shows the humanity of a person, says these people deserve to be treated properly. That’s what the revolution is about.” B1

We can now return to the question of the ‘interior milieu’ or ‘inner life’ of the prisoner and the forms of manifestation of this world. One of the most interesting elements of NCAD’s work in the prison is that it shied away from the un-interrogated expression of a perspective or a viewpoint, but instead fostered critical inquiry and critical self-reflection, mediated through film, paint, ceramics and other media. In an isolated world, people found ways of modulating different forms of relation to self, world and others, in particular loved ones. What did NCAD’s approach make possible for certain men? Could not an art therapist have served the same function?

K2 made a series of films with the men called *When I Leave These Landings*. Looking at the films, presuppositions and prejudices are not immediately suspended. A civilisation of clichés asserts itself and before even listening or looking, we may experience visceral rejection or approval that belies the natural history of our affects: our feelings are not a private affair. The camera rests on the faces of the men for long enough for the body to give itself away and it is in the intimacy of the relation to the camera as a mediating object that the power of the work lies. In a place that takes time, the camera gives time, preserving it. Film seems the most appropriate form of portraiture in the space of the prison where life can seem frozen. The camera does not circulate. No context is given. The man sits without adornment, speaking.

It is difficult work because of the way that memory and perception seep into one another and clichés cloud the ability to experience and respond to the work as a spectator. It is a work of portraiture that exposes the singular being that is its subject, the uniqueness of being that is the human beyond tabloid newspapers, military collectives or bureaucratic unaccountability, the *who* that each one of us is. These men are given proper names. This is a work of storytelling of huge complexity: these documents are love letters to family, they archive a self fearful of forgetting itself in fantasy, they are part of a long story of institutions in Ireland and of political struggles, they speak of utopia, justice, tragedy and betrayal. They speak of the underside of modernity. And they speak of men constituting a sense of individuality in the remains of the world.

Adriana Cavarero writing of Arendt in *Relating Narratives*<sup>16</sup> says that others tell our stories. There is an aspect of our lives that is obscured to us so when our story is told by someone else, its significance becomes clear. She writes, “In hearing his story, then, Ulysses is moved to tears. Not only because the narrated events are painful, but because when he had lived them he had not understood their meaning” (18). The films are not simply the vocal and embodied expression of these men, but we too tell their stories in our response to them. Through the relating of them, in the sense of both relating to the films and telling the stories, the significance of these lives may be understood in a different light, even to those involved. But in a deep sense, these stories are also our stories.

A1 speaks on the process of making work and the specificity of that medium – the time-based medium of film.

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<sup>15</sup> Rosa Luxemburg (2011) *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*. London: Verso.

<sup>16</sup> Cavarero, A. (2000) *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*. London: Routledge.

“See the machoism of going to prison. You know what you are and your politics. It is not about machoism but if I was a nipper, a young buck. I became a poor Republican in jail. Coming through that and learning, speaking about myself, and getting stuff sometimes dragged out of me or pulled out of me which was a good process for me. Going back to my cell and saying I didn’t really tell him that, you fool. You know, literally talking to myself in the cell. For me, it was very cathartic. It just happened for me at the right time.

Talking about putting stuff on video. See you put a man there and say do you want to tell your story. See, it is not a propaganda exercise. It is not about the struggle. It is your story and how it affects you. You can say anything you want. There are no absolutes. Just say whatever you need to say. I can look back on my stuff. I made stuff for me kids to look back on, how I felt and what I wanted to say when I was living it and when I really felt it to get that across.”

One of the interesting aspects of film-work is that it records without interpreting, although it may of course be edited, and it is framed. In human memory we tend to be more selective in what we choose to remember and forget. This is particularly the case when one leaves a routinised space like the prison for the world – one can forget how life there was and how one was, bringing with a danger of myth-making, nostalgia and fantasy, and equally running the risk of simply forgetting. A1’s words describe a refusal to re-write history through retrospective fantasy and demonstrates a determination to maintain an honest relation with himself, a relation made possible through his recording device. The recording does not allow him to lie to himself in the future.

A camera or tape recorder, allows one to recover time in a fashion different from memory. The video camera in the prison ordinarily exists as part of a network of surveillance, but this changed relation toward it generates a different relation to self. It also acts a mediator creating an intimate distance, some would call it reflection, within the subject, and allows for a different kind of relationship to loved ones and possibly to wider society. Even in the speaking to the camera, A1 knows he is speaking to his future self as a past self.

The films are relational documentary archives that do not just function as a mode of self-expression or testimony, but rather seek to communicate with one's self and with others through the film. The fixed presence of the camera over time and the temporal nature of the medium do not operate in the same way as other forms of portraiture, such as painting. As A1 says, he felt that without it, he would become a character, or even caricature, sitting in a pub in years to come, reminiscing and re-inventing the past, having lost any sense of the real lived experience as it feels to him now, for good or ill.

“Instead of sitting on a bar stool 25 years later making up stuff that I didn’t really, shielding stuff from them or embellishing. It is the cold hard, well not hard, but it is how I felt about certain things and to put that down on video. It wouldn’t have been possible to write a letter or a diary or a book or whatever. It is the visual.”

Those recordings would make it more difficult for him to lie to himself about that time and that self, and they would allow his family to experience him, in some sense, as he was at that time.

He describes the process and the reason for inviting other men to become engaged.

“You know the conversations we had in the cell. Sometimes you can have them one on one or there will be an audience of another man and you will speak to another man like you would never speak to another human being, your wife or anyone. And having that conversation, and see for that 15 or 20 minutes in a cell, just touching that sweet-spot with someone emotionally, coming through prison, the loss, what is happening outside and that conversation you are having and then it (clicks) you turn a switch and you are getting locked up and this that and the other and from that going onto, in front of the camera. It is that springboard that gives you that opportunity to sit there, you are on in two minutes. I need to put this down, I need to put this down. I can see it in the stuff. I remember you were sitting there one day and you were driving yourself on. And it was like you were getting it all out and you were saying that and that was your first few interviews and then you sat back and relaxed. And then you just, and the story comes out then and it is not about the politics, it is not about what I done or felt about it, it is about reflection, as K1 said. But it is about loss, and what is not. Absent father, absent husband. You know all this kind of stuff. That all grounds me and I find that fascinating

in different people. That is why I was asking you to go in front of the camera. That is what it done for me”.

Time in the prison goes both quickly and slowly because the days are short but experience is more impoverished and monotonous so they seem longer. The liveliness of that being can be swamped by the revisionism of imaginative memory that seeks to construct other stories. This man’s fear was that that his prison self could be lost upon release, just as Marcel Proust describes his fear of losing his former selves, but whilst the man shared Proust’s fears, his response was closer to Beckett, both of whom remain far from narrative accounts of identity. Whilst he wanted to speak to others, he wanted to do so by speaking to himself with knowledge of his own temporal nature.

Says A1,

“You go in there and it is your story because it was never about the politics or whatever the case may be. It was your story but when a man got going and it clicked and you could see it in him, you could literally see it on the camera and he got into that.”

For K2, the films permitted something of the world of men to be revealed, a world of intimate conversations rather than more conventional images of masculinity. He says,

“There is another thing that struck me when editing the piece. Obviously it is a male world in the prison. Because there are practically no women in there at all, only officers. But then it also struck me that there is not a huge amount of betrayal of it because the pieces are quite intimate. You don’t often see much about men’s life, men’s inner life, I suppose people don’t talk much. We don’t communicate. The work interests me in that way. But that has only happened. This is very interesting to me. The world of men. The men I know. And the kind of conversations. I don’t necessarily see them mirrored in the world”.

The intimacy of men’s lives was not bracketed as beyond the remit of learning or education but rather became part of a process of critical inquiry and reflection, mediated, in the case of those men working with K2, through the democratic and collaborative endeavour of film-making. The men made other choices in respect of subject matter – sometimes humorous, observational or satirical – alongside the more intimate pieces, and there was a sense of accomplishment in mastering the technology, but in this work with K2, the films operated as archives of the self and love letters akin to the kinds of letters written through the 1600-1700s that were semi-destined to entered wider public domains. Again, there is little sense of an autonomous body of knowledge into which one is inducted; rather each man comes with a body of knowledge born simply of having lived.

A1 says,

“Well, there is one thing that my wife said to me and I have said this to K2. I always anchor with K2 because it makes me feel safer. I went on the run when I was 19, sorry 20, I was captured, I went to jail when I was 26, I came out when I was 31, when back in when I was 34, came out when I was 40, went back in when I was 41 and came back out now. And every time I went to prison she was standing behind me and when I came out she was standing in front of me, why I don’t know. I mean anyone in their right mind would have just walked away and you know I wouldn’t have blamed her. Eh so there is a huge amount of guilt. I love my wife, I love her, more than life itself. I know it’s a cliché. But I mean. But I can’t... Talk about loss, and grief. I am talking about grief from that loss and she said something that comes back to me. I am trying to work it into a song. I just don’t know if I can. She says, of all the times you spent in prison I feel as if, as a woman, I was wasted, it was the waste of a woman. It was just a kick in the.. In the way she said it, I really understood.

I think it is about the grief and the loss and trying to pay her back and over those years only she and I know what the loss was and the price she paid for it. I understood it. I was in the IRA. I spoke to you. I mean the deception through the years. My deception, through army business, was magnified for her. She was a very innocent woman. Left school when she was 14-15. I could be a UVF man sitting here and she would still think the same of me. And that is just the woman she is. And it is coming through that loss and coming through prison that that... I know it’s after 17 years it dawns on you. I had no baggage coming out of there. Everything is behind me. There is no more RA, 15th of July. Do you know what I mean? It is about payback really. So.. That’s it. That’s it.”

Film-making, and other forms of portraiture and storytelling, operate as form of communication and can give rise to existential exploration.

To the question,

*“I was just wondering what life would have been like in prison without music, film, drama. What did it give to you in prison being able to have creative means of expression? What if that wasn’t there for you?”*

A1 responds,

“For me it was a huge release. A huge release.”

A2 expands on this, echoing the observations of Kropotkin, Luxemburg, Negri, Gramsci and others.

“It actually puts you outside the walls for a while. Mentally, not physically. Like when you are writing your songs, or when I was doing the acting, or sitting in the studio doing the technical stuff on some of the projects. As far as I was concerned you are just in a little office. You are not in the classroom. You are not in the cell. You are just doing your bit. You are outside for them few hours or a few minutes.”

A4 agrees,

“Like A1 said, it was a release. It was a release for me as well. The longest time that I had to do was when the schools went down for the three months. Cos all you had to look forward then was just your gym, your visits.”

So I had this different sort of personality on the landing. And I had a different personality when I was in the cell with A1 and A2. And when I was in with K2 it gave me a release to be myself and talk about my experiences and it was a release to me.”

B1 commented on the difficulties of having a sense, or even any entitlement to have a sense of one’s individuality within a collective. The practice of making art permitted of a different kind of breathing space within the context of the prison. The politics of appearance operates not only in terms of the projection of the image of the prisoner beyond its walls but also in the way in which men relate to one another, just as in everyday life. A1 comments on this,

“See when I was in the cell talking to you, see when I walk out, I had a totally different personality. Everybody has that. That protection. Everybody has it. You still have that. We are what we are.”

The NCAD staff’s understanding of their role is often couched in the language of portraiture, storytelling, expression and introspection and the difficulties of overcoming ‘ready-made’ responses, affects and clichés in respect of image-making. K5 says, “I would with art facilitate their stories and teach techniques”, and K4 indicates how difficult this can be in a group setting, in particular when one is engaged in genuinely critical and introspective practice; one may not wish to expose oneself and make oneself vulnerable.

So this process is not straightforward. People come to art and imagery with presuppositions about what art is and what it involves, and part of the process involves dismantling these deeply embedded preconceptions and prejudices. K6 says, “I would always like to use art and the engagement to shake up what’s there. I personally felt that political prisoners are trapped in their imagery, not only in prison but very limited in that, what they want to depict in their paintings. I just use this whole creative approach to balance and not repeat the same images. That does not exist with other prisoners. Any thing could be possible. Political prisoners like to picture some Irish scene, often a cottage, or if you could help them do one of their murals, [I tend to stay away from it]. I don’t know what their standard is so we get to know each other through painting. They would tell me things - everything is balaclava. [...] I really think that we can create something that is not at all like that.” K2 thinks that, “this is part of the currency of the prison. For many of the men, that is the visual vernacular that they want to work with. I found that if that if that is what they want to do, then there can be a shift into something else that was not propaganda based. A2 did a great piece slagging off the iconography that went on on the landings. [...] It is really good fun.” For the artists a big part

of the work that they do involves interrogating images and what something is saying or making.

Demands are made of the public, of us, the audience of these works be they paintings, sculpture or film. All parties are brought outside their comfort zones. In K2's films, rather than over-coding the stories of the men, in the bare exposure of voice and body, revealed to us are the knotted vectors of the natural history of humankind as we listen: love, grief, loss, commitment, masculinity, institutions, collective life, liberation, joy, expression, political life, citizenship, representation (political and artistic), mediators, technical objects, violence, Republicanism, betrayal, dissent, the State, military life, bureaucracy.. And we do not know what to do, what to say, what to think. At such moments, the world opens.

Yet, audiences for such work has remained limited for a number of reasons including censorship, the duty of care of the system and prospective responses of both publics and media. If we take it that art-making involves manifestation, critical reception, and analysis as part of its being-in-the-world, ought this integral facet of art be precluded when one is a prisoner? How can one mediate between the outside and inside? Should these stories be heard and ought these portraits be seen beyond the prison's walls?

### **Publics, representation and citizenship**

This review began by contextualising the NCAD programme through reference to testimony and a series of documents that speak of prisoners. It is arguable that in the contemporary Irish context, an institution like a prison, similar to that of other institutions, past and present, from Magdalene Laundries to Industrial Schools to psychiatric institutions, demands of us that in some way we become 'strangers to our present' in order to look at our institutions and practices through a different lens. If deprivation of liberty is the punishment, does this mean that prisoners cannot appear in the public domain? K2 rightly points out that Governors have a duty of care to their wards. Likewise, those affected by crime, in particular violence, may understandably wish to support a form of exile of prisoners that jettisons them from our shared world - prisoners are often situated as strangers at the gates of humanity. Yet, since almost all prisoners in our system will be released we might wonder what kind of human beings will they be after their imprisonment? What kind of human beings would we be? Do we have a society that can once again invite them in our midst? Does it make a difference how prisoners, political and ordinary, are represented during the time of their imprisonment or whether they are afforded to chance to represent themselves, to be visible or audible in ways that illuminate rather than corrode public discourse? Like any kind of critical engagement, we are not asked to agree but to engage. The purpose of what follows is not to participate in a debate about imprisonment but rather to ask what, as members of a broader public and citizenry, are our responsibilities to, and claims on, one another and our institutions?

We may come to wonder whether we know who others are, if we can still identify the strangers at the gates of humanity or welcome readily the exercise of exile. We may ask what are our rights as citizens, including citizens affected by violence, including political violence, to understand and to sense beyond the crude depictions that manipulate the affects when the land of the prison is foreclosed not only physically but in all forms of representation other than the most anodyne or brutal? Can our society hear the voices of those with whom many may disagree? What are the implications of this for our claims to pluralism and democracy? Do I not have the right to be perplexed and troubled? In Grant Kester's book *Conversation Pieces*<sup>17</sup>, he draws on Jean Luc Nancy's concept of community saying "our identities are always in negotiation, always in the process of being formed and re-formed through our encounters with others" (154). We "think, act and speak beyond our *a priori* roles and identities" (155).

In *The Human Condition*<sup>18</sup>, Hannah Arendt describes the conditions for being human, conditions that can be readily destroyed as was the case with the death camps. Each of us is born, a singular being, with an unrepeatable story (natality). We are born into a plurality of other human beings, equally diverse (plurality). And we appear necessarily to one another by virtue of being existents (publicity). For Arendt the necessary richness of political life

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<sup>17</sup> Kester, G. (2004) *Conversation Pieces*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

<sup>18</sup> Arendt, H. (1958) *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

requires that we come together in our rich plurality. We may not agree with one another, but this exercise allows the imagination to go visiting as we situate ourselves and imagine how the world might be from the vantage point of another. G1 observed, "Everybody has their own perspective. There are seven of us here and if we were all to go away and say what we got out of today, I guarantee there would be seven slightly different perspectives. That is the way life is. And that is the way art is". Yet this is not a dull cacophony of voices who demand that 'my' experience be heard, that 'my' experience is authentic, that it speaks a truth, but has the 'right' to remain un-interrogated. Rather this web of perspectives constitutes the fragile subjective 'in-between' of our lives as we commit to one another that we will allow ourselves to critically reflect on our own positions in light of those of others.

For Arendt, this element of publicity is central to being human, and is antithetical to the way in which the camps orchestrated by Nazi Germany, dehumanised and made invisible its occupants. There is a concomitant danger with public discourse about and media coverage of prisoners – the only representation permitted is a criminal one. K2 puts it succinctly, "If you are going to lock them up, criminals in prison need to be constituted as criminals in their representations, otherwise there are questions around the delivery of justice", but attunement to an historical sensibility may precipitate realisation of just how dangerous this can be. Clearly, public discourse and the cultivation of a pluralistic sensibility are not well served by propaganda, intimidation, stereotypes, or unreflective self-promotion. Certainly, it would be problematic were the public domain to be instrumentalised in the service of private agendas. Yet, much of the art-work made in the prison through the NCAD programme communicates a far more complex, difficult and uneasy image of work made by and with the man in prison. One does not know how to respond. And that is discomfiting and perplexing. Perhaps citizens need to learn to welcome perspectives that do not sit easily with stereotypes or which refuse 'naturalised' forms of exclusion. It tends to be more difficult to know how to respond when the image of a monster is supplanted by the presence of a human being.

H1 addresses this vexed issue.

"And from that I twigged the capacity to use art and the creative side. It facilitated bringing people in, to connect the public with the prison and every person who came in saw prisoners in a different light. The same with the exhibitions. Someone comes in who is antagonistic to prisoners and they see a wonderful work of art and they say 'Jesus how did he do it?' There was that huge benefit. I think it was a process in place around nobody owns prisons and nobody should control prisons and breaking down territory is part of education as well.

In relation to security, I believe that there is nothing that can't be allowed on the basis of security. Security can overcome anything in terms of procedures, and having video.. At the moment it is constipated with negativity. Nothing is allowed in. Nothing. If you could record from the moon they would say cut off the moon from looking in. Videos and cameras and all that sort of stuff, I believe there is a happy medium between being able to provide enough security and being able to protect society and also being able to allow an artist in. I never had any difficulty.

You can obstruct anything. And then there is the political risk thing. I think common sense is needed. The problem is if you are too open and too liberal, the reaction is going to be so extreme that it destroys everything. You have to take it step by step. We'd say high profile prisoners who are very sensitive in terms of the victims, you would have to be very sensitive about what would be sent out, especially like child abuse and things like that. You cannot allow the antagonism of the public to completely destroy so I think there is a certain amount of balance and judgement needed. So I think that I'd be one of those who would believe that prisoners are entitled to a voice even though, and I said this time and again to the Provos, that I totally disagreed with what their philosophy was but I never would say that you don't have the right to have that philosophy. And I believe that of all the groups in society prisoners should have a voice and actually there is currently a total resistance to giving prisoners any voice. At the moment the official position is that they shouldn't be seen or heard. I mean our whole philosophy in Mountjoy, we used to bring the press in openly to the drama, bring in live radio and the whole idea was to allow prisoners to have a voice and to allow the public to respond to them and castigate them and say that is unacceptable. But at least they had the voice, unlike the stage now that there is almost no tolerance of any risk. So you let nothing in."

A3 speaks of the role of making film as a way of mediating his identity,

“It gives you an opportunity to talk about it because before you go there you have this whole secret identity and you don’t express it, you don’t tell anyone but once you go through those gates, that identity is known to the world. It is public knowledge. So then you get the opportunity through K2, there is a medium there, to talk about that. And I think you do like to tell a story. It gives you the chance to express that you are not that maniac monster that the media portrays you as. There is another side to you as well. You are a person, you are a family person, you are there just to tell the story and it is a good opportunity to tell that story.”

For A4 part of the project involved,

“Giving other people an insight into why we do what we do. How we felt about ourselves at the time. Gave people an insight that we are not people that go around, monsters with two or three heads. We are humans at the end of the day and we just believe differently and do different stuff to you.”

B2 clarifies very well some of the issues and difficulties at the heart of this idea of publicity as he explores the question of whether the deprivation of liberty means the prohibition of any form of publicity, that is one’s image and/or work entering the public domain or appearing in any way. He likens this to the question of freedom of expression and asks us what we have to fear, making a powerful statement for freedom of expression.

“What is the difference in making a video clip for Facebook and producing a painting that has a message. They both can be forms of expression. Obviously when people are in prison they are denied their liberty, no physical movement, no access to lots of material things and lots of emotional things either. You are denied so many things you take for granted. If is when you are released you realise so many things that you take for granted, a walk on a dry day, when you smell the grass or the dung, hear the birds or the tractor or whatever it is. Just a very basic level, the things that you can’t do and that is your loss of liberty.

It is not as simple as that, saying yes they should be allowed to appear in public or express themselves...[Silence]. Yes, they should. I have not been asked to make that argument before. Why should people be afraid of somebody’s freedom to express themselves? Why are you afraid of what somebody has to say? If you think they are a raving lunatic that nobody supports then why are you worried about what they have to say? Why have they fear? What do they fear? Are they afraid that everybody will want to go into jail? Or do they believe that giving people freedom of expression that they are going to turn everybody else into a criminal? They don’t have much faith in society and people’s values if that is the case. Yes. People should have freedom of expression because what do people have to fear by allowing them to express themselves and if when they express themselves they are judged to be terrible and shocking and whatever, well people will be able to judge that for themselves. It is like, don’t burn the books.”

As B2 says, to forbid freedom of expression is a form of censorship. The experience of art asks us to welcome and dispute the perspectives of others, in particular, and within reason, the stories of those who we may find most difficult to confront. This set of interviews offers divergent perspectives and insights into the lives, practices, ideas and work of the men and women involved, in various ways, in the NCAD Portlaoise Prison programme. The process lends itself to questions other than most familiar to us such as whether prisoners should be afforded rights. What are our rights as citizens to understand our institutions and the people housed in them? Programmes like the NCAD programme can mediate with sensitivity, relations of those inside and outside allowing the broader population of citizens to better understand their prisons and their prisoners.

Much of this review has focused on introspection, storytelling, portraiture, and expression in the making of work within the prison’s bounds. This review is not, as a consequence, a detached form of writing but is born of those stories and images. “[N]o matter how abstract our theories may sound or how consistent our arguments may appear, there are incidents and stories behind them which, at least for ourselves, contain in a nutshell, the full meaning of what we have to say”, writes Arendt (A, 1). Storytelling is the kind of judging that is not secured against questioning. Lisa Disch<sup>19</sup> argues that understanding storytelling as critical understanding constitutes a form of resistance to an ‘abstract, impartial model of critical thinking’ that makes claims to objectivity and authority. Disch says,

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<sup>19</sup> Disch, L. (1994) *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy*. New York: Cornell University Press.

“Visiting differs from Archimidean seeing in that where the Archimidean thinker steps outside the world, the visitor enters into it to regard it from a plurality of unfamiliar perspectives. It also differs from particularist testimony in that the persons who give testimony expect something different from their audience than does the storyteller. A testimonial is self-expressive: it asserts ‘this is the way *I* see the world.’ The testifier wants to be heard or responded to with empathic affirmation. In contrast, a story exhorts its auditor to ‘go visiting’, asking ‘how would *you* see the world if you saw it from *my* position?’ The ‘visitor’ is invited not empathically to assimilate the different perspectives he or she finds, but rather to converse with them to consider how they differ from his or her own” (13).

Disch’s argument is a salient one. The stories that we have heard from stakeholders in the NCAD project have not taken the form of testimony but rather have the form of invitation to a conversation - we are asked to go visiting in order to understand our world more fully. Some of us are better positioned than others to help to bring such stories into the light of the public domain. C1 makes clear the responsibility of those involved in reviewing the NCAD programme to tell the stories that others cannot.

“You have access to information and you have a view of a part of society that we as citizens are responsible for. You are outside of the system so you can bring a different focus or view to the attention of the social commentators.”

For Arendt that publicity, appearing to one another in our plurality and in our singularity, is part of what it means to be human and what we need to be human, and to do so means to acknowledge the diverse and agonistic character of our world as one to be welcomed rather than smoothed over. As B2 asks us, what do we as a society have to fear from unfamiliar voices being heard, or from non-caricatured images entering the public domain? The NCAD programme is uniquely positioned to help us to interrogate our obligations and rights as citizens and human beings to come to understand our common world, to undo coarse and dehumanising imagery, and to mediate the appearance of those often deemed to be ‘strangers at the gates of humanity’ in the public domain.

### **The future of the NCAD programme**

Whilst there is much to recommend the NCAD programme, a number of dimensions of it require re-envisioning. It would seem important to secure future relationships with the prison on a formal inter-institutional basis instead of being mediated through one gatekeeper who holds the vast body of knowledge associated with the programme, including social connections, regardless of how committed he or she is. It is important to develop mechanisms to ensure both transparency and communication. Ensuring knowledge is shared more broadly amongst teachers will allow for a more nuanced and responsive programme that offers teachers the opportunities to share practice with one another and to document learning and knowledge for those who may later become part of the programme. It also offers clarity in terms of practice to other interested agencies, such as the Department of Justice and the IPS, although forms of evaluation ought to be appropriate to the practice of art and should be developed with the primary stakeholders. This includes aiding a greater understanding of the nature of art education, such as the importance of the one-to-one tutorial system and the self-determined nature of art education, for such stakeholders. It should be noted that in a prison like Portlaoise with a highly differentiated prison population, working with individual prisoners is not an unusual practice - the VEC does likewise - and it can hold a great deal of value for the men, many of whom are facing significant sentences.

It is an unfortunate turn in educational policy more broadly that the quality of the learning experience, in terms of knowledge, expression, criticality, interest, passion, and existential significance, is not valued as it ought to be, as more quantitative models of measurement offer easier ways to capture variables such as attendance or certification, however these models often offer little insight into the quality of the learning, motivation, the relation to learning or its transformative potential. Unfortunately, it appears that the adult education ethos has not necessarily been well understood, even by some of those in management in the prison service, and whilst the opportunity to pursue accreditation should be offered, so too ought other forms of engagement with learning and educational practice. Education for adults is not a step-

ladder by which one begins at primary, proceeds through secondary and finally arrives at tertiary. Just as Access programmes exist outside the prison walls, so too is it important to create the opportunity for students to experience a third level approach to education. Whilst a number of the interviewees for this report would never pursue an art education at third level, their testimonies bear witness to the ways in which the experience of making work broadened their horizons, changing their perceptions, sensibilities, and the way in which they looked at themselves, others, the world and art. Adult education seeks not simply the acquisition of skills and competences for the economy, but strives to value education for itself and its transformative power. In this respect, the 'Back to Basics' model is not appropriate for many adult learners, in particular those in prison who are deprived of autonomy, but rather prison education services should be supported in seeking to cultivate creative approaches to education to engage students within the prison context, as has been attempted through DEIS programmes with marginalised students in primary and secondary level, with, it has to be said, a good deal of success thus far.

Yet, it should also be recognised that all the needs and interests of a number of prisoners, often on long term sentences, will not necessarily be met through existing provision, hence the historic importance of the NCAD programme. As was pointed out a number of times, the programme is a programme of which to be proud for those who supported the conditions for the engagement including Portlaoise Prison, the Department of Justice and the Irish Prison Service. It seems advisable that innovative programmes, such as this one, ought to be better mediated in the public domain, and its pedagogical rationale and philosophical principles better articulated and explained to the Department of Justice and the Prison Service. Although the rationale for closing the programme was offered on financial grounds, given the institutional support from NCAD, it seems unlikely that the total full economic costing would exceed more than 1-1.5 VEC staff. It was of clear importance to a number of men on the programme, even if they chose not to pursue the study of fine art at third level thereafter. Education can, and arguably should, be of value for many reasons, including existential reasons, in particular in prison, and not solely economic reasons. When many people find themselves without *meaningful* employment, and this is the case for many Irish citizens, developing different passions and interests can help to sustain one's existence and one's life.

One area that needs to be addressed is that few opportunities were offered to the artist/educators to gather to converse with one another. Working in the prison is taxing and emotionally draining work at the best of times, but in particular when people are dealing with intimate and difficult material, so it would be helpful for teachers to have support mechanisms in place and scheduled group meetings. Since people working in the prison do so on a temporary, part-time and contractual basis, forms of payment should be offered to support professional development as they would be in other educational fora. As the National College, NCAD might explore ways of formalising institutional mechanisms and, where appropriate, offer Foundational level courses for accreditation for those interested, combined with the opportunity to audit modules or to continue to engage with more open and project-based approaches to art-making. It might also consider the opportunities to re-position this programme from one that has historically been rather peripheral to the main functioning of the institution to a programme integral to its own vision in terms of social engagement, participatory art practice and its conception of the 'expanded academy'. Given the 'pedagogical turn' in contemporary art practice and an increasing interest in 'socially engaged' and 'participatory' art practice, a programme such as this could be of interest to practitioners and curators beyond the remit of education. Individuals working on the programme have developed a significant body of knowledge and these opportunities for practice-based research on the part of both prisoners and artist/teachers could be developed. Finally, the College can provide an important form of mediation to help work made in prison to be manifested in the public domain and ought to consider the increasing the opportunities to do so. In so doing, it would need to engage in critical discourse and in dialogue with wider publics.

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