

# The Trial

JONATHAN CARROLL INTERVIEWS SINEAD MCCANN ABOUT *THE TRIAL* – A SOCIALLY-ENGAGED PROJECT, FILM AND TOURING EXHIBITION.

Jonathan Carroll: *The Trial* is a collaboration with the School of History in UCD. You designed a creative process which enabled men from The Bridge Project, Dublin<sup>1</sup>, to engage with UCD research on healthcare in prison, past and present. How were you invited to make academic research visible using art making?

Sinead McCann: At the time, I was working in a public engagement role on 'Prisoners' Medical Care and Entitlement to Health in England and Ireland 1850–2000' – a five-year Wellcome Trust-funded research project, based in UCD and led by Associate Professor Dr Catherine Cox. This role involved brokering creative projects between theatre makers and artists to critically and creatively engage the general public with academic research. I saw an opportunity to expand an area of interest in my own art practice, so I invited Dr Cox and men with lived prison experience from The Bridge Project to collaborate with me on *The Trial*.

JC: I visited Spike Island prison to view *The Trial*, which proved a very impressive and effective location for your work. You also showed the work in Kilmainham's Old Courtroom, as well as Lifford Courthouse and now, Dublin Castle. How did you decide on these locations and did you have them in mind when making the work?

SMc: *The Trial* is a multi-screen installation exploring health care provision and human rights within the Irish prison system, past and present. Central to the aesthetic and experience of *The Trial* has been the careful selection of site-specific locations with a history of incarceration. It was originally conceived and made for the Old Courtroom in Kilmainham Gaol, where it made poetic and explicit use of the courtroom space. Spike Island has a very recent and long history of incarceration. For this reason, it was suggested by one of men from The Bridge Project, who collaborated on the making of *The Trial*.

JC: The script for *The Trial* was produced through a series of workshops using contemporary and archival material and lived experience. This process involved filtering diverse material to create a workable script and a 22-minute film. Can you discuss this working method?

SMc: The project took 13 months to plan, research, develop and execute. The men who collaborated on the project felt strongly about their healthcare experience in prison and wanted to articulate these on behalf of their community. Some of the men had engaged in drama while in prison, so I was keen to merge elements of discussion, academic research, drama, performance art, writing and archival material, to critically explore this topic in our creative workshops. Theatrical enquiry was one of the formats we used to process this diverse material. While in prison, all of the men sat before visiting committees, answering questions about prison conditions. The format of these enquiries – many professionals on one side of the table and the prisoner sitting alone on the opposite side – became a useful and playful strategy to develop material for the script. We worked with writer and prison researcher, Sarah Meaney, to support us to do this together.

JC: The three characters who appear in *The Trial* each have a distinct style of delivering their monologues. Is there significance behind their levels of anonymity?

SMc: The three characters tell the real-life stories of those who were held and worked in the Irish prison system in the 19th and 20th centuries. Tommy (played by the Fair City actor, Tommy O'Neill) is dressed in a suit and looks at us straight on, with no disguise; Charlie (played by child actor, Charlie Hughes Farrell) is dressed in a school uniform and is seen in profile with his head cropped; while Neili (played by Fair City actor, Neili Conroy) is completely silhouetted. We worked closely with Mary Caffrey and Dan Monk (Sixbetween video productions) to produce the video material for



Sinead McCann, *The Trial*, 2019, installation view, Spike Island; photograph by Jed Niezgoda, courtesy the artist

the installation. The aim was to vividly illustrate the contrast between some of the healthcare accounts of the prisoners (both historical and contemporary) and the official line taken by professionals who worked in the prison system over the years. We achieved this through the considered way we approached the filming and in the complex post-production work.

In terms of how the artwork deals with anonymity, for example, we worked with the 1963 RTÉ Radharc report.<sup>2</sup> This report consisted of filmed and broadcasted interviews with children in St Patrick's Institution for young offenders in Dublin about how they ended up there. In this archival footage, the children's heads are cropped. In *The Trial*, this aesthetic is emulated in how Charlie is filmed. This is intended to be an ironic nod to the era which explores the tension existing in the protection of the children's identity on screen, despite the awful conditions they were experiencing inside the walls of St Patrick's.

JC: The installation of *The Trial* across four screens is very effective. The screens were installed in a very anthropomorphic way at Kilmainham's Old Courtroom, with two of the screens located where the judges would sit and the other two acting more as witnesses. But on Spike Island, the effect was more in the site's history, obviously contained within the walls. What are the stark differences in how the work is read in each location?

SMc: To discern what is on trial – and from whose perspective the story is being told – the viewer has a little figuring out to do. The three characters move from one screen to another in an unsettling way, shifting from the position of witness to judge. In the courtroom, for example, the viewer is at a distance, encountering the screens from below, in a kind of juror's role. At Spike Island, *The Trial* was installed in a 19th-century building, which was previously a prison hospital and later a children's prison. In this context, the four screens stood upright on the floor at head-height. The viewer could stand directly beside them, creating an intimacy, as if there was a person in the room, telling them their story directly. Inviting the viewer into the work in this way plays with ideas of complicity, through their presence as witness.

JC: Tommy O'Neill has experienced prison life – did he contribute his own knowledge in the final work?

SMc: An important decision taken in the development of the

project was to work with an actor who had prison experience. Creative professionals and the men workshopped the performance of the men's monologues with Tommy – during this creative process, he reflected upon his own prison experiences, which were written into the script.

JC: What is the ultimate message of *The Trial*? Is it a commemorative work or does it seek contemporary advocacy?

SMc: Resonating with current issues – particularly regarding mental health within the Irish prison system – the thematic focus of *The Trial* is on the experience of solitary confinement, dealing with separation from family when in prison, mental and physical well-being in prison and childhood experiences of St. Patrick's Institution Dublin. It offers a range of perspectives on healthcare in prison and invites the viewer to reflect on them and to draw their own conclusions.

**Dr Sinead McCann is a Dublin-based artist. She also coordinates curriculum-based, community-engaged projects across disciplines at the Technological University Dublin.**

*The Trial* is created, directed and led by artist Dr Sinead McCann, in collaboration with UCD School of History and The Bridge Project. It was originally core funded by a Participation Award from the Arts Council of Ireland, with further funding from Dublin City Council, University College Dublin and Wellcome Trust.

The three-venue national tour of *The Trial* is funded by the Arts Council's touring and dissemination of work scheme. The exhibition travelled to Spike Island, Cork (26 July – 22 August); Lifford Courthouse, Donegal (29 August – 12 September); and Dublin Castle (26 September – 3 December), where it was programmed as part of Smashing Times Arts and Human Rights Festival Dublin.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Bridge Project supports high-risk male ex-offenders with a history of repeated violent crime, through education and training programmes to support integration back into their families and communities.

<sup>2</sup> Radharc was produced for RTÉ by Radharc, an independent production company run by Catholic priests and lay staff from the 1960s–1990s.