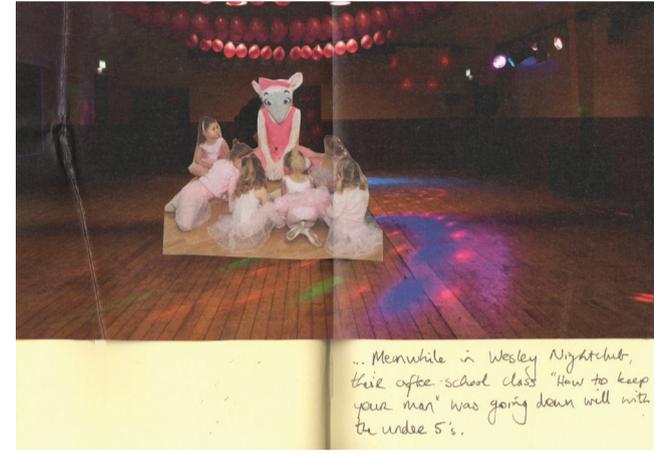


I've Got a Notebook (and I know how to use it)

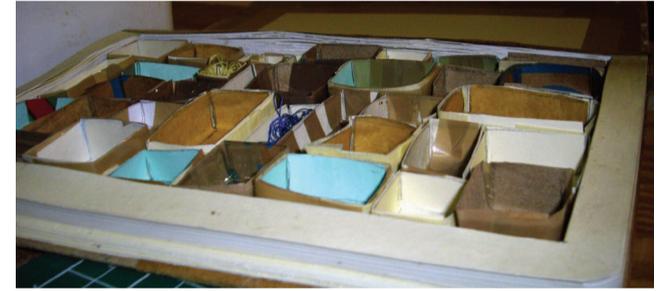
JOHN GAYER DISCUSSES THE ARTIST NOTEBOOK PROJECT 2012, COMMISSIONED BY AND SHOWN AT THE MCKENNA GALLERY, RIVERBANK ARTS CENTRE, NEWBRIDGE, CO KILDARE (12 – 19 OCTOBER) 2012.



Installation view, 'Artists' Notebook Project', Riverbank Arts Centre, Newbridge, Co Kildare., image by Vera McEvoy



Gráinne Tynan, *One Day in Dublin*, 2012



Joan Stack, *Work in process*, 2012

OPEN calls often present tantalising opportunities to artists. Suddenly, they are presented with the possibility of finding a context for their artwork or a prospect so intriguing that it compels them to tackle something they've never considered or had the nerve to do. Such was the case with this year's Artist Notebook Project, mounted by the Kildare County Arts Service. The call, which was issued near the beginning of April, invited artists working in all disciplines and at all levels to fill a standard sized notebook in a creative way. Only the height and width of the volume had to be respected. Otherwise, the book could be filled in any way imaginable. The payment of a modest €5 registration fee ensured that one A5 black hardcover moleskin sketchbook soon arrived via post for each participating artist.

With the deadline almost half a year into the future, more than 100 individuals committed themselves to the project. Faced with 104 pristine blank pages, many of the participants must have had doubts about what they could accomplish and fretted over how their contribution might stack up against the others. For months, the culmination of the project stood as a large question mark, but when the exhibition finally came together in the Riverbank Art Centre's McKenna Gallery, the results proved to be astonishing. In addition to displaying immense diversity in terms of creativity and content, the submissions also demonstrated a capacity for concentration, commitment and bravery. I was left wanting to know more about the project after visiting the exhibition, so I contacted Lucina Russell, Kildare County Arts Officer, and several artists who contributed to the project.¹

While the idea for exhibiting artists' sketchbooks goes back decades, if not longer, the idea of producing sketchbooks specifically for the purpose of building a collection that can be toured seems a much more recent development. Such works, like the ones donated as part of this project, blend aspects of impromptu sketchbooks with much more carefully devised one-of-a-kind artist books. Aware of this development, the Kildare County Arts Office first launched the Artist Notebook Project in 2011. Not knowing how it would be presented or even if people wanted to participate, they linked the exhibition dates to the second annual Kildare Readers Festival. The registration fee was set at €15 and about 50 people subscribed to the project.

The 2012 presentation followed the reading room format developed for the first exhibition. The notebooks were ordered alphabetically by name and secured to tables with elasticised ribbons. Outside of several three-dimensional structures, which – due to their fragile nature – need to be housed in vitrines, the submissions remained fully accessible. Viewers could take a seat and examine any number of them in detail.

Russell reports that the response from contributors and viewers was very positive. Contributions came from artists, amateur artists and non-artists with artistic inclinations from Ireland and abroad. Many spoke of how much they had enjoyed the process. For some, completing

the notebook was analogous to conquering stage fright. In several of the notebooks, contributors wrote: "I've got this notebook and I don't know what to do with it".

One artist proposed that the notebooks pass through a selection process but Russell was wary of curation at this point. People had no idea what awaited them. The breadth of their own ideas surprised them. They found there was a lot to take. People manipulated the paper in various ways, treated the notebooks as diaries, and did collages. From some you get a sense of the maker's personality. Tendencies among the participants and viewers can also be discovered. The notebooks submitted by some of the writers, for instance, were treated more like scrapbooks and visitors interested in writing tended to be drawn to the more literary works. Russell noted that participants also sometimes forgot what they had included (perhaps they had added something too personal) and then changed things. Passages deleted with Wite-out, for example, can be found among the pages.

How and why people chose to participate and what they got out of the project proved fascinating. In an email, the Australian sculptor Carole Driver, wrote: "...it was good to feel part of a group working away in those marvellous Moleskins". Though she has often documented organic minutiae for the purpose of developing sculpture, the process of producing a notebook of drawings enabled her to realise that an organic visual language was being extrapolated from the plant forms. For this experience Driver was grateful. The notebook forms an extension of her Phytomorphs series that will be shown in Alice Springs next year. She also continues to develop the vocabulary initiated through the notebook's production.²

The day-to-day use of sketchbooks and journals attracted a number of people to the project but, unlike Carole Driver, Joan Stack wasn't interested in "chronologically filling each page".³ She is attracted to everyday materials and working in a multi-disciplinary manner and had, at the time of the project's announcement, been making cardboard boxes for use in photography projects. This mindset soon enabled her to see the notebook as a container. She cut a recess into that modest block of paper and filled it with miniature boxes to create something evoking a 'box of chocolates'. Vera McEvoy, who also has a close relationship with sketchbooks, recounts the excitement she first experienced and the difficulties that followed. The realisation that the finished book would not remain a personal filing cabinet for her ideas prevented her from working on it for about two months. Then, with her fears somewhat allayed, she decided to continue, aware that she might not hand it in. The panoply of fibre and printed elements in her work includes fold-out fabric panels and pages onto which images have been sewn.⁴

Paul Quast, on the other hand, an artist who normally avoids sketchbook use, chose to develop a 3D model for the sculpture *Colossus Complex* out of his copy. Though the model proved invaluable in calculating weight distributions and vital pressure points in order to

prevent structural failure, problems arose during the fabrication of the large work, which called for numerous modifications in the model. An additional set of adaptations also ensured that the model folds down to fit the notebook's dimensions. Plans outlining the arduous process of research and development accompanied his submission.⁵

When questioned about the Artist Notebook Project's future, Russell notes that it will be on display at the Droichead Arts Centre, Drogheda, from the 9 Jan – 2 Mar 2013 and that she hopes to line up other venues as well. Though libraries have shown interest in the project, an exhibition would necessitate invigilation, especially when it comes to children. The collection needs to be accessible, but also protected. Some of the works are fragile so finding the right balance is important. While visual artists, writers and film makers took part in the project this year, Russell would also like to get people doing dance, music and architecture to contribute.

I believe this is a good strategy. Not only does it hold lots of potential for diverse creative expression, it will also expand the viewers' sense of what a book can be. The fact that so many individuals responded to the call suggests the genre is worthy of greater attention. The idea obviously peaks people's interest, something coincidentally highlighted by the great response Temple Bar Gallery + Studios' Art Book Fair received upon its 2011 debut. Lucy McKenna, the Assistant Arts Administrator, believes this may be linked to Ireland's literary tradition and close relationship to books, an influence that has spilled into the visual arts.⁶ Though the fair serves art book publishers, it also offers Irish and international artists – many of whom produce small editions of handmade books – the opportunity of finding a market for their work. As such, the two events are highly complementary. Each offers a unique perspective. With regard to the Artist Notebook Project, Russell has been impressed by the dedication and generosity shown by the participants, especially since many found it took much more time and effort than they had expected to complete the notebooks. The artist Paul Woods, who was minding the exhibition on the day of my visit, made another pertinent observation: "This is a very democratic project." With this, I could only agree.

John Gayer is a writer and artist based in Dublin. His writing has appeared in Art Papers, Circa, Espace Sculpture, Paper Visual Art Journal and Sculpture Magazine. His artwork has been included in group exhibitions at the Black Mariah, Cork and Visual Centre for Contemporary Art, Carlow.

Notes

1. Personal communication with the writer, 6 November 2012
2. Personal communication with the writer, 6 November 2012
3. Personal communication with the writer, 5 November 2012
4. Personal communication with the writer, 13 November 2012
5. Personal communication with the writer, 5 November 2012
6. Personal communication with the writer, 12 November 2012