

AN APPARENTLY SIMPLE THING:
THE ARTIST'S BOOK AND COLLABORATIVE PRACTICE

Glenn Holman

Take a sheet of paper and fold it in half; you have four pages. Take another sheet, do the same again and interleave it with your first sheet; you have eight pages. Continue until you have all the pages you need, add some form of content, either written or imagery or both if you wish and you have a book. Of sorts. Although there is an enormous range of creative interpretations in terms of materials and content, all artists' books at root build upon this apparent simplicity of construction and our cultural familiarity with the book as an object.

The growth of interest in the artist's book over the past twenty years or so has been something of a phenomenon considering that on first sight they can seem a slight and marginal artwork when compared with other strands of contemporary practice. The fact that they have to be handled and engaged with in a tactile manner is central to their appeal. Unlike other forms of contemporary art that tend to keep the viewer at a distance, the artist's book *requires* interaction to activate it and access its meaning. There is something inherently democratic in this requirement to be handled, the act of turning the page makes the viewer part of the unfolding of the work. In this, an artist's book is unique in providing a form of art that allows for the communication of complex ideas in a format that we all understand from our earliest encounters with the book.

It was certainly the democratic nature of the artist's book that led to the founding of *Floating World* by myself and fellow artist Andy Parsons in 2003, with the intention of providing a platform for artists new to the medium. Since then, *Floating World* has developed into a collective of ten artists based in the United Kingdom, Ireland and Japan, each selected to represent the broad range of contemporary arts practice. We all maintain a separate practice in our own specialist area: first and foremost, we are not 'book artists'. It is the book, however, that provides the area of neutral common ground where each of our respective

practices meet. The idea of the artist's book as a catalyst for collaborative practice came, like many of the best ideas, through circumstance and pragmatism rather than any great planning. It began with the sharing of expertise in traditional bookbinding, printing processes and the technicalities of producing work digitally, and has progressively led to greater dialogue between artists conceptually. The focus of what we do as a collective has shifted significantly to encompass the idea of collaboration as a whole and to put this centre stage in our practice.

Since 2009, *Floating World* has actively pursued opportunities to work collaboratively with various galleries and institutions and those outside the mainstream art world; in part to re-position the artists book and to give it the same status as other forms of contemporary practice, but predominately through a growing awareness of the ability of the book format to communicate in a direct and accessible manner.

Beckett Bucket

In 2012, Andy Parsons and I were approached by *Happy Days, the International Samuel Beckett Festival* in Enniskillen to create a book specifically on Beckett: the opportunity for collaborative work was immediately apparent. As with much art made in a public context, we were aware that there is always the inherent risk of imposing a work upon a community that is either indifferent or hostile towards it. In considering the form and content of the proposed work we were struck that our own lack of knowledge of the life and work of Samuel Beckett could well be reflected in those members of the public the festival was aimed at, so we decided to make an investigation of this central to the content of the work. Being able to gather meaningful content in an engaging and entertaining manner required the formation of a sound conceptual framework for the production of the artist's book and a degree of faith from both the organisers and ourselves. Our approach was to create the book in 'real-time' over a two-day period, in a Beckett inspired installation where members of the public were asked about

what they knew of the life and work of the playwright. All responses were recorded faithfully, as records of conversations or in imagery derived from them, regardless of their relevance to Beckett.

This production of the book as a performance seemed entirely fitting for a work on Beckett and the completed work, entitled '*Beckett Bucket*', with its unstructured dialogue, asides and blank pages was presented as an edition in the form of a script that could be re-enacted. Having approached the project with no clear idea of what would be generated, there was great delight in the depth of knowledge of Beckett in those we interviewed as well as the funny, strange, sad and irrelevant observations the process captured. Most significantly, it is not the book we would have made had we simply sat down and created it ourselves. As such, our role as artists was to provide contributors with an opportunity to participate, sometimes unknowingly, in the artistic process.

Blowing Some Dust Off the Archive

Our recent collaboration with the National Irish Visual Arts Library (NIVAL) based at the National College of Art & Design in Dublin and the FE McWilliam Gallery, Banbridge, has been our most important and challenging collaborative project yet. NIVAL is a public research resource for the study of Irish visual culture from 1900 to the present day and holds the world's largest collection of documentary information on Irish contemporary art. The FE McWilliam Gallery features a permanent display of McWilliam's work and an archive of information about the Banbridge born sculptor, as well as a gallery space for temporary exhibitions. As such both the archives at NIVAL and the F.E. McWilliam Gallery have enormous value as a source of research from an academic point of view and our collaboration set out to investigate the richness of the archive as a starting point for the creation of new artworks.

All of the artists currently involved with *Floating World* were asked to

participate and the geographical spread of the artists involved meant that a range of strategies and approaches had to be developed to access and engage with the archives in a meaningful way rather than just respond to them superficially. For artists based in Ireland, and some UK based artists, visiting the archive to investigate its contents was possible. Other artists could only access the materials remotely, via the web, or as in the case of Japanese artist Hidehiko Isibashi, through a sustained dialogue via email. Whatever approach was taken, there was minimal curatorial direction from the institutions; each artist approached the archive from a purely personal and individual standpoint, and in a manner that reflected their concerns and interests. These ranged from purely visual investigations to highly conceptual interpretations of the archive as a multi-layered and shifting source of information and meaning. Those of us able to visit the NIVAL collection first hand were struck by the diversity and density of information within the archive and that there is no apparent hierarchy in the cataloguing and organisation of the objects, with all items being accorded equal significance. Some items have immediate visual or historical appeal, whereas other parts of the collection could be easily overlooked or marginalised.

Investigating the collection by whatever method took on an archaeological aspect: digging down ever deeper into the collection, required each item to be considered with care and ascribed significance. The resulting exhibitions, *'Unfolding the Archive'* curated by Donna Romano, Librarian at NCAD, and Dr. Riann Coulter, Curator of the FE McWilliam Gallery sought to dispel the image of archives as dusty places, full of half forgotten documents and items. As a collective, *Floating World's* approach was to try and blow some of this perceived dust away and respond to the archive in a way that brought fresh insight into the works selected and create opportunities for further discourse and investigation. As such there are benefits both for the artists involved and the institutions in this kind of collaboration. Most significant for the institutions is seeing the archive reactivated and refreshed through the production of new work; through the methodologies used to

respond and engage with it and how this insight broadens the scope and appeal of the collection to a wider audience.

Why the Artist's Book?

In reviewing both of these projects it is legitimate to ask: why base them around the artist's book? Could they have been approached through some other form of contemporary practice equally well? In each case, possibly they could, but both would have had significantly different outcomes as a result. Returning to my original observation, the success of both projects was dependent on the book as a culturally familiar object when compared to other forms of gallery based arts practice. In the case of *Unfolding the Archive*, without the artist's book as a starting point and bridge for the diverse interests and practices of the artists involved, the exhibitions could have become formless and incoherent collections of work, lacking narrative and meaning. The importance of the book as a common denominator between artists cannot be underestimated; the restrictions of the form can in fact be seen as a great liberator.

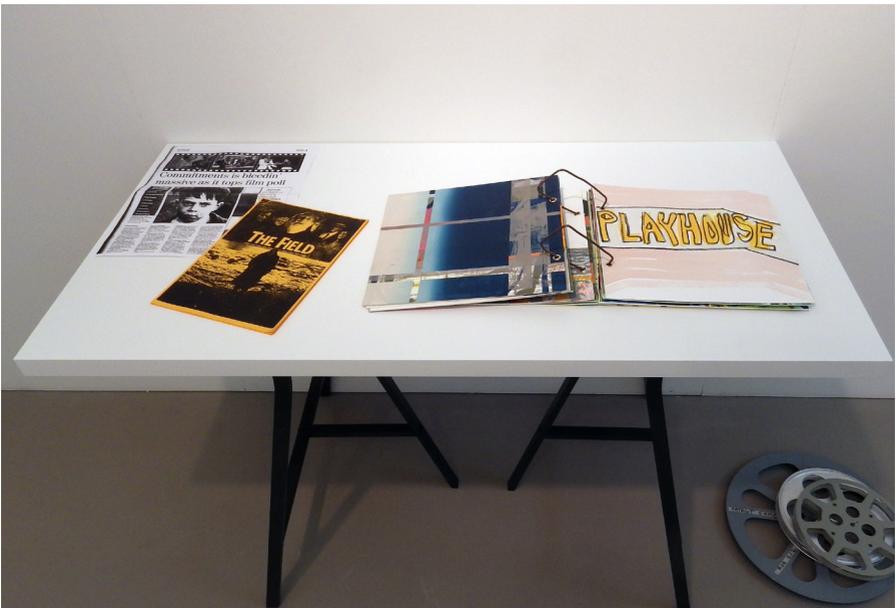
Collaborative practice, it has to be admitted, is never straightforward and it often requires a degree of give and take from all involved and a juggling of people's expectations. The logistics of co-ordinating particularly large projects can require as much creativity and time as making the works themselves, but navigating the potential perils and pit-falls is ultimately worth the effort. The most striking aspect of *Floating World's* collaborations with other individuals and institutions has been the shift in thinking regarding what an artist's book is and can be. The finished work is often far richer and more complex as the result of a greater cross pollination of ideas. For many artists, the idea of releasing control over the content of their work can be anathema and, it has to be admitted, does require an attitudinal reconfiguration of ideas regarding authorship and originality.

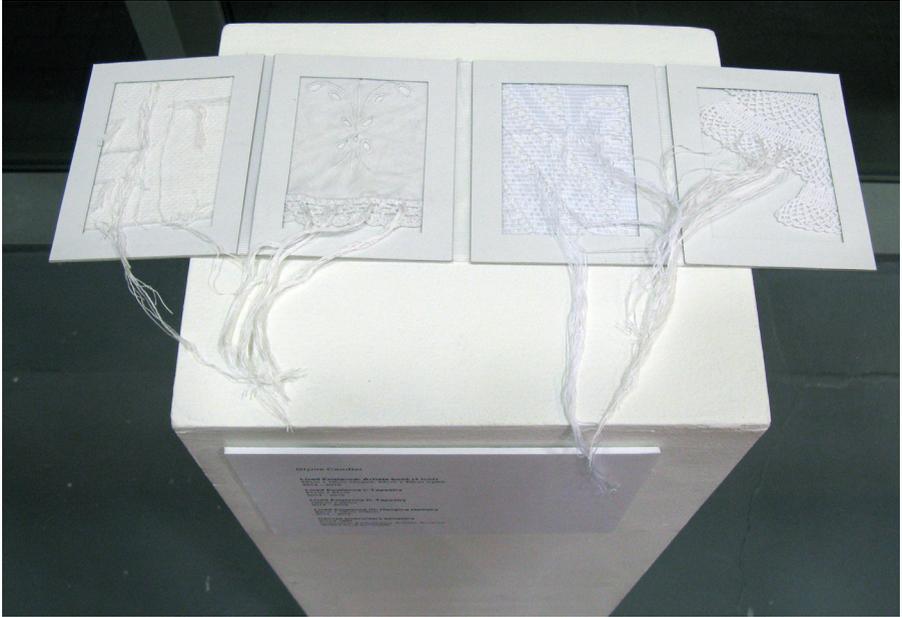
This letting go of total control of the content of the work has led to unexpected developments and discoveries that have profound implications for our perception of the artist's book as an apparently simple object and for our wider practice as artists in general.











Floating World are: Glenn Holman, Andy Parsons, Glynis Candler, Edwin Aitken, Simon Burton, Sarah Carne, Diane Henshaw, Elizabeth Kinsella, Niamh O'Connor, Hidehiko Ishibashi.

www.floatingworldbooks.com



Published by Bank Street Editions as part of the Sheffield International Artist's Book Prize 2015 Catalogue