



# The Creative Well Archive





**TCWA**

**The Creative  
Well Archive**

Really Enjoyed  
my time &  
creative well.

- lovely atmosphere →

Loved the  
Experience of  
working  
with Emma +  
Dominic -  
their encouragement

06

Foreword

Carolann Courtney

09

The Creative Well Archive

Dominic Thorpe

17

Title Title Title

Emma Finucane

29

Title Title Title

Lucina Russell

34

Timeline

40

This must be the place for now  
(notes on not being tied)

Marielle Macleman

54

Reflections from the Health Care Worker

Catherine O'Grady

# Foreword

by Carolann Courtney

Arts Health and Wellbeing Coordinator  
with Kildare County Council  
2013 – 2021

## Creating a place for connection and community

This publication, the accompanying archival box and printed works have been collated to mark and honour the time and creativity spent in the Creative Well over its 10 years in Co. Kildare.

Here, you will get to journey with the programme. You will encounter images from our participants and read how The Creative Well developed. This acts as our repository, a physical act of our capturing “All This Work and All This Finding Out” if I can borrow the phrase from our seminar in 2016!

This book offers a trace of the programme from its earliest form of roving workshops to its development into offering a durational and dynamic arts programme; that offered inclusive arts educational opportunities.

You will gain insights from our lead artists who, in partnership with Kildare County Council and our HSE and Riverbank partners created a space for art making for 10 years. Here, we explore how the work was offered to participants in a way that any anxieties people may have had around “Art” could be left behind and a confidence in creative processes and art making was nurtured.

You will hear from County Kildare Arts Officer, Lucina Russell on how and why this programme happened and read a note from former Adult Mental Health Nurse Catherine O’Grady on why she supported its development.

The Creative Well had the ambition to be a community art space that was open to all. During its lifetime the creative team adapted its structures and its offerings to respond to the needs of our participants and nurture growing interests. From curatorial mentorship, exhibition installation, life drawing classes, print masterclasses, painting, drawing and mark making tutorials, incubation spaces to artist lecture series and exhibitions – this archive holds this work, and you will read why and how and where we did it.

The book also offers a new written work from Arts and Health artist Marielle MacLeman who was commissioned to create a response to The Creative Well and mark its 10th and final year in Kildare.

I want to take this opportunity to thank all the people who were involved in this work – both partner and participant alike.

To Kildare County Council Arts Service who invested in this resource and understood the importance of long term development and inclusive communal art spaces for all.

To our partners in the HSE for their invaluable support, especially the health care practitioners who worked with us to deliver the programme in the county.

To all the venues in Co. Kildare that allowed us to rove and dock our workshops in the first 5 years. Thank you for allowing us to take this idea to your communities.

To Riverbank for allowing us to take root and create a hub, a home for the programme to expand, to trial and evolve.

To our artists Emma and Dominic, thank you for creating this method of empathetic and engaging facilitation that encouraged so many for so long. To Eleanor Philips for supporting the studio and concluding the programme so gently.

But most of all, thank you to our participants. To each and everyone one of you, whether you came for 1 workshop or talk or you became a long term studio member, this book is for you. We hope it captures some of the alchemy that emerged during your time with us and that it encourages your creative practice to continue beyond it.

With my deepest thanks,  
Carolann.







# The Creative Well Archive

— Dominic Thorpe

The Creative Well began as a series of three month visual art workshops offered to adults in various parts of County Kildare.

## WORKSHOPS

The workshops were designed to be accessible and inclusive, welcoming participants across a range of ages and with a range of abilities. The aim was to establish a supportive, social and playful space in which each participant's creativity and voice could be encouraged, shared and valued, in the understanding that doing so has the potential to enhance wellbeing.

There can be a common perception that adults do not have a significant stake in processes of play as a means of enquiry and expression. In addition, many (if not most) adults often carry a heavy burden of internalised judgment around their own creativity. This can bear down negatively on attempts at expressing oneself through art. As facilitators, the role of Emma Finucane and I was primarily to encourage and support Creative Well participants to allow such judgment to dissolve (even if only momentarily!). One of the key strategies for doing so was to introduce art exercises in ways that emphasised process over product. Participants were introduced to a variety of visual art processes, such as drawing, printmaking, collage and painting, in ways that promoted exploration and discovery over the pursuit of finished outcomes.

As a result, instead of focusing on what something ended up looking like, we often focused on how the process of art activity felt for participants. In addition, for many people, the words often used when talking about art, including the word 'art' itself, can be laden with the baggage of exclusivity, inadequacy, and problematic ideas of (unattainable) perfection. To counter such negative discourses, we introduced and spoke about art and creative processes in accessible ways. For example, instead of suggesting that 'artworks' be created, we suggested 'experiments' be made. The result was an engaging and supportive workshop in which wellbeing and confidence could be enhanced and voice could be found by re-introducing participants to their own inherent creativity and sense of play.

## STUDIO

The rich and meaningful experiences many participants had during Creative Well Workshops gave rise to an important and recurring question for us; where can adults who wish to explore and experiment with their creativity through visual art be supported to do so for a prolonged period of time? Particularly those who are less interested in learning a specific artform or craft and more interested in allowing their own critical sense of enquiry and possibility dictate where various activities of art take them. Within the visual arts, such dedicated experimental endeavour is generally the preserve of third level educational settings. However, what of people who can't go to, don't wish to go to, or are excluded from third level education?

We tested a possible response to this question through the establishment of the Creative Well Studio. The studio was open for one day per week at the Riverbank Arts Centre. It ran for ??? over a number of years???. Like the workshops, the studio was accessible, inclusive and aimed to establish a welcoming social space in which the creativity voice of each participant could be developed and shared, in the understanding that confidence and wellbeing could also be enhanced in the process. Within the Creative Well Studio each individual was encouraged to pursue self-directed activities and interests. As such, Creative Well Studio sessions were facilitated rather than taught. For example, for some participants this involved needing support with applying printmaking techniques, while others required critical conversations around particular content within their work or conversations around the nature of creativity and creative processes.

Ultimately, the studio facilitated participants to spend a prolonged period of time developing their creative voice in ways that offered the potential to become an important and positive life practice. The development of an art practice does not necessarily involve devoting all one's time to art or becoming a professional artist (although this is a reality for some!). Rather, the 'practice' of art can involve engaging with one's creativity in a critical and dedicated way, to a point where it can begin to inform how one navigates, understands, and finds voice in the world. For some, this can become a challenging tumultuous critical and expressive endeavour. For others, it is a place to breathe and give calm focus to the self, in the same way one might do when engaging in physical exercise.

## EXPANDED ENGAGEMENT WITH VISUAL ART

We also developed an expanded series of initiatives and opportunities, in conjunction with the McKenna gallery at the Riverbank Arts Centre, to give participants an even deeper engagement with visual art and to develop a more vibrant and connected visual art context for the Creative Well Studio to exist in. This expanded series of initiatives and opportunities involved exhibitions, workshops, seminars, artists talks and residencies.

The work of Studio participants was shown at the McKenna gallery (a significant achievement that could be shared with family and friends!). A curatorial program saw studio participants and members of local organisations, such as the local history group and KARE, curate a series of contemporary art exhibitions at the McKenna gallery. This was an opportunity to visit the studios of practicing artists and give serious consideration to how art works are placed in relation to space, in relation to each other, and in relation to particular themes. A series of public talks and presentations by professional artists offered further insight into the working processes of artists.

Focused workshops in a range of techniques, including life drawing and printmaking were also given. A number of seminars were organised that helped to illuminate ideas that were central to the Creative Well, for example, the seminar 'Adults, Art and Play' involved presentations from a range of arts and health professionals. Finally, the McKenna Gallery was opened as a residency space in which professional artists and Creative Well Studio participants could dedicate an intense period of time to their practices.

It was a privilege to support individuals to develop their creative practices. It was also immensely exciting to see the Creative Well evolving to a point where the art and wellbeing practices of participants became an invaluable positive presence within the life of the Riverbank Arts Centre and in the artistic life of Newbridge. I am immensely grateful to the Kildare County Arts Service, the Riverbank Arts Centre, and not least to Arts and Wellbeing Specialist Carolann Courtney, for supporting such a positive intervention.







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# Title Title Title

— Emma Finucane

*Project Artist 2011-2021*

The Creative Well was a ten year partnership between The Kildare County Arts Service, the HSE and Visual Artists. It provided a connection for any adult in County Kildare to the visual arts and art practice.

The origins of this came from a Kildare Arts Service Arts and Health panel that Visual Artist Dominc Thorpe sat on alongside Nicola Dunne (KAS) and Catherine (HSE)<sup>1</sup> where an Arts and health programme named The Creative Well was proposed. In response to this Dominic Thorpe and I developed 12 week visual art workshops as a pilot for the Creative Well. This went on to expand far beyond what we imagined at the time.

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1. Nicola Dunne and Cathrine -dates and titles at the time?

## CULTURAL PRODUCTION, CREATIVITY AND CONNECTION

As the first Creative Well Visual Art Workshops were being developed Dominic and I discovered we had shared research interests. As a society we can forget or have forgotten how to listen. The act of listening was a central concern to both myself and Dominic's respective art practices. These shared concerns subsequently informed the development of the workshops.

I believe participation in creative art workshops have the potential to connect us as human beings. Participatory arts activities provide an opportunity for people self-identifying as lonely or isolated to engage and interact socially and to experience individual creative processes in which freedom, individuality, and emotions can be experienced safely, free from judgement <sup>2</sup> This shared creative space allows us to see beyond the faces, age, gender, and mixed abilities.

It encourages and allows us to listen and see ourselves in others. Honesty and vulnerability are at play as is respect and appreciation for others, for their work and achievements. Here lies the challenge. To create, encourage and maintain this space.

The Creative Well was an opportunity for us as artists to look at how to deepen the connection with the visual arts and participation, cultural production, practising artists, new audiences / communities in Co.Kildare and the Riverbank Arts Centre<sup>3</sup>. Feedback from participants both formally and informally is that the Creative Well was a lifeline. We can evidence this from the written and oral formats given by participants and caregivers over the years<sup>4</sup>. We can now evidence that engagement with artists and fellow participants in creative activities may promote meaningful connections and a sense of belonging, reducing the feeling of loneliness and being socially isolated, which are often associated with mental health problems (World Health Organization, 2019)<sup>5</sup>.

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2. Todd, C., Camic, P. M., Lockyer, B., Thomson, L. J. M., & Chatterjee, H. J. (2017). Museum-based programs for socially isolated older adults: Understanding what works. *Health and Place*, 48, 47–55. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2017.08.005>

3. Riverbank supported us through studio space, annual exhibition opportunities and a year long residency This must be the place.

4. Pages where feedback is and also images of post it notes.

5. WHO report a scoping review Daisy Fancourt and Saoirse ..



The Creative Well was a chance to practice listening and find a connection with others through the language of art, and not only through the process but the shared learning and experience. While connecting with others can be terrifying for some, it's vital and can as we learnt from this project be a lifeline.

### WORKING METHODOLOGIES

The Creative Well was an arts and health project <sup>6</sup> all participants were aware of this. Facilitators and participants did not know who was self-referred and who was referred from a service. Each participant entered the workshops on an equal footing no matter what experience or ability came through the door with them.

The workshops were based on an introduction to Fine Art Print, Paint and Sculpture. Drawing was an important element of all these disciplines and ran throughout. Every 12 week workshop was slightly different, the group at the time and place would dictate its form. All workshops ended with 15min reflecting on the work and processes learnt that day.

Listening and hearing was integral to the workshop methodology, the result of which would dictate the structure of the following week. This allowed the workshops to develop in an intuitive manner similar to an art work. There was a structure in place but we allowed for this to collapse where needed. The space for this collapse was integral to the essence of the workshop, the collapse of structure, the collapse of language, and the freedom and permissions that come with it. A space to create, without formal instruction but with an encouraged intuitive approach to making, discovering, testing and creating. A gaining of confidence and a sense of accomplishment in individual mark making and visual outcomes. We focused on the art process as language exploring what could be developed, translated, communicated. Other key elements were; using good quality materials, peer reflection, valuing and taking the work seriously. Simple yet effective working methodologies.

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6. The workshops were planned to run for 12 weeks and participants' well being would be measured using the Edinburgh Warwick Scale.



There was never a public show of work or an exhibition to work towards as we didn't want the pressure of exhibition to interfere with the experience of the workshops. We did find that participants often took this new language and shared it with others in their communities in other ways, for example running workshops themselves and developing creative programmes for others. (footnote to name some of these?)

### A NEED TO EXPAND THIS NEW LANGUAGE - WHAT'S NEXT?

Increasingly we found that workshop participants developed their own line of enquiry and solid creative practice. There was an appreciation for the role and value of critical reflection as a group and individual. We were constantly faced with the question: what's next? Participants were looking to engage with the work on a more critical and inquisitive level. There was a need for the Creative Well to listen to what it had created. The response was the Open Studio. This offered participants an opportunity to drop in on a Monday to an open studio space to practice but also to assess one to one tutorials. The purpose of this was to define what they were exploring and how to set out to communicate it, how to take risks and engage in deeper critical reflection and questioning.

It was also a space to develop skills in both contextual and art research methods and place themselves in contemporary art practice. The Monday drop in began to also cater for those who had missed the workshops or had happened to hear about the open studio. As participants returned through the open studio and further developed an art practice group exhibitions were held in the Riverbank Arts Centre. Following this a series of initiatives and opportunities including an artist lecture series, curatorial programmes and incubation spaces were offered in partnership with Riverbank as we settled into our year long residency.

### WHAT CAN ART DO?

The Creative Well developed intuitively from workshops to open studio drop in sessions to an artist lecture series, curatorial programmes, incubation spaces and exhibitions. It became increasingly like an alternative art school, an art school based out in the community all over the county of Kildare with its roots in The Riverbank Arts Centre, Newbridge.

As Dominic and I reflected on the development of the Well, the participants' work and spaces we had been responding to; we identified a need to specifically and thoroughly question what we had been doing. We arranged a two day seminar with the support of our partners titled "All this work and All that finding out" alongside a number of creative workshops provided for the general public but also specifically designed for healthcare workers, and Riverbank staff to participate. We focused on Adults, Art and Play and Art Health and the Community. This was our attempt to lay some foundations on which to build multiple debates, discussions and future research about the importance and health benefits of providing programmes like The Creative Well. It was important to us to include the stakeholders to invite them to participate, to show them what we had found out, and to find out for themselves.

It was also an attempt to support and encourage developing creative practitioners and thinkers within the community, many who had been participants themselves, by inviting them to become part of this conversation. There was a greater sense of what the Creative Well had been engaging with in terms of Art and Health practice.

It is important to clarify here that while there was a connection to Naas Hospital and part funded by the HSE, The Creative Well may have been therapeutic for some but it was not Art Therapy.<sup>7</sup> There is a difference between arts and health and art therapy. The Creative Well may have evidenced an improved sense of wellbeing but it did not engage in using art for clinical outcomes which is what art therapy does. There were no art therapists. There was support from appropriate partners where needed for those referred from services. There was support for the artists working from the Arts Service. There was Art. There was excitement and discovery. There was creativity and connection. There was an increased sense of wellbeing. There was cultural production.

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7. There is a clear distinction between arts and health practice, where a key goal is the experience and production of art, and the arts therapies, where the primary goal is clinical. (Arts Council, Arts and Health Policy and Strategy)

It was a chance to practice listening and find a connection with others through the language of art, and not only through the process but the shared learning and experience. While connecting with others can be terrifying for some, it's vital. Feedback from participants both formally and informally is that the Creative Well was a lifeline. We can evidence this from the written and oral feedback given by participants and caregivers over the years <sup>8</sup>

### A PLACE TO PRACTICE

While this is all very positive and worthwhile work it has not always been easy to navigate. There is a lack of affordable creative spaces in our communities. While Dominic and I set about roaming the county running workshops while it was invigorating we found ourselves transforming a room in a library / health centre / church hall / scout den / conference room to studio space and back again. Space posed extreme difficulty for us. Now that I have seen the outcomes both in terms of art production and health outcomes from participation in a programme like this, why don't we respond to this in our local communities?

A shared workshop space, purpose built movable walls, space to store materials. Space to create. A place to practice? We have gyms for everyone, not just professional athletes, why not studios? Professional Artist Studios are few and far between let alone studios for everyone. What do we need to do to embed and connect creativity in our local communities?

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8. Pages where feedback is and also images of post it notes.



## CONCLUSION

My own artistic practice sits within arts and health. I am invested in looking at the role of the artist in society and the role of art in health. Being in the role of the artist in this project sustained and fed my own art practice.

There is a role for an artist in health settings and Projects like the Creative Well have proven themselves a valuable asset to a community. Over the past 30 years, the field of arts and health has expanded across research, practice and policy, and a growing body of evidence indicates that creative activities are “powerful tools” that enhance health, defined as “a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, thus rooting health firmly within society and culture” .<sup>9</sup>

We only need to look at the resources provided by [artsandhealth.ie](http://artsandhealth.ie) to see all the engaging, meaningful and creative projects that have been developed, completed and evaluated to evidence that this practice is alive and well in Ireland.

However, as health and wellbeing contexts continue to be a growing area for practitioners, settings can be challenging where needs and circumstances are complex, and despite the evidence provided, many artists find themselves with little or no support, some resulting in burn out.<sup>10</sup> The practitioner, commissioner, organisational leader, funder and policy-maker all have roles to play in the health and wellbeing of creative practitioners, supporting them in their making of quality work. Considering this, The Creative Well was in the right space at the right time. While partnership with Arts Centres, Artists and the HSE are the basic needs to run a project like this, it's the people within the respective roles that make the difference. The people with the knowledge, vision and courage to drive these kinds of projects. People who understand the needs of all involved. As artists we were funded and given time to lead and develop the work. Support, trust and time was put in place for the artists and participants over the 10 years.

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9. World Health Organization. (2019 p.2). What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review (Report No. 67).

10. NAISMITH, N. 2019. Artists practising well. [Aberdeen: Robert Gordon University]

The willingness to allow creativity to lead, unfold, develop, morph and reappear in many different forms and shapes. The partners listened. It afforded The Creative Well time to reach deep into the county sewing seeds, making connections and finding out what an art project like this can do, what art can be and who it's for. This is the success of The Creative Well. This is the legacy it should leave behind and pass onto every county looking to set up a similar project, which I very much hope it will inspire. I believe our communities would thank us for it.

I hope that as Arts and Health Practice grows and continues to evidence its contribution to the health of our communities our policy makers will take note. Individual artists have, over the past fifty years, pioneered ways of working, creating the expectation and opportunity for art to be present and active in every aspect of life, enriching experience. The arts have opened up to issues of public life, not just in terms of subject matter but also in terms of form, entering into the processes and systems that shape day to day living. This is exciting

If we think creatively we open our minds, we think outside the box, we think differently, we become good at problem solving. We imagine, ask questions and critically reflect. We can apply this to all aspects of life. In her book *Funny Weather, Art in an Emergency*, Olivia Laing states that art can offer us new ways of thinking and open up new spaces, after that, it's up to ourselves as to what we want to do with this<sup>11</sup>. And so I wonder... What will we do next? What will you do?

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11. *Funny Weather, Art in an Emergency*, Olivia Laing, 2019 p.?





*'We often wait for kindness, but  
being kind to yourself can start  
now' said the mole.<sup>1</sup>*

# Digging Deep

— Lucina Russell

*Arts Officer, Kildare County Council*

2011. A knock on the door and Arts and Health Specialist, Nicola Dunne<sup>2</sup> offers an idea. She proposes developing a programme in Kildare based on international models of ‘social prescribing’.

The proposition is that participation in a series of art workshops, or creative practices, could be prescribed, instead of a traditional prescription, or referral to clinical services. The title ‘The Creative Well’ is powerful in itself; the focus on *wellness*, rather than *illness* and, also the potency of the offering– the well of creativity. The programme presents the assumption that participation in the arts *is good for you...* We are mindful though, that perhaps participation in the arts may *not* indeed be good for everyone, or appropriate at a given time. Given this responsibility, it is reassuring to have the support of the HSE<sup>3</sup> to guide us on selection of participants from Mental Health Services in the county, as well as individuals from the wider community in Kildare who independently registered their interest in participating.

This is carried out discreetly and sensitively. It is encouraging too, to have the support of a local authority, both senior management and elected representatives, that trusts in what you do. Knows that you build programmes with thought and integrity. That you do this to support individuals, to build communities and develop partnerships with key agencies and to provide opportunities for artists.

And so, it begins. From, the outset, there is parity between participants and artists, with each open to learning new skills. A vulnerability too. The expectation. That feeling of feeling exposed, a fear of making a mess – A residual response perhaps to childhood experience of the arts, if any at all?

Over time, policies and strategies emerge and adapt, the language around Arts and Health develops to include 'Wellbeing'. Participants and personnel move on. Arts, Health and Wellbeing Specialist Carolann Courtney is appointed, bringing new ideas to further progress The Well. While the project remains rooted in Arts, Health and Wellbeing, is simultaneously emerges as a Socially Engaged Practice, and perhaps extends into the sphere described by Suzanne Lacy as 'New Genre Public Art.'<sup>4</sup>

In recent years, The Creative Well takes place in Riverbank Arts Centre, Newbridge. On Mondays. My office is located in the same building and I am curious (and a little envious) as the smells of oil-based paints wafts down the corridor. I scan the bags of materials being carried in and out weekly, my eyes drawn to the quality of the thick art paper – oh, the Fabriano!). I tend not to call in to the sessions, because when I do, I have a sense that I was disturbing artists at work. Time is short and valuable. The presence of the facilitating artist is precious. There is a sense of industry. Concentration. Diligence. Confidence. Learning and unlearning. But also, fun. The whoop of laughter. The sense of belonging. This community of interest.

Over time, I notice the participants in the café in the arts centre, *not on Creative Well Mondays*. Friendships. Projects. Cups of coffee. There's notebooks. Always notebooks. They call me over. 'We were thinking ...' .



Collectively and independently, participants seek new opportunities for themselves through Kildare Arts Service and beyond. There are public celebrations and sharing of the work through seminar, exhibition and now, this publication. Individuals feel empowered to introduce themselves as artists. They have dug deep into their well. Their wellness. Their creativity.

*And yet sometimes*

*The wheel turns of its own weight, the rusty  
Pump pumps over your sweating face the clear  
Water, cold, so cold! you cup your hands  
And gulp from them the dailiness of life.'*

It seems that this work has come full circle with the 2021 announcement of Social Prescribing services<sup>6</sup> as part of the Slaintecare Healthy Communities, across 19 locations around the country, including Athy, in south Kildare, and so the evolution continues. Looking forward, I wonder what this might mean for The Creative Well and indeed other social prescription models that make provision for the arts and creative practices. Looking back, I'll refer again to Charlie Mackesey,

*Look how far we've come.'*<sup>7</sup>

1. Mackesey, C. (2019) *The Boy, The Mole, The Fox and The Horse*. Penguin Books

2. Nicola Dunne was appointed as Arts and Health Specialist for Kildare County Council from 2007-2013, Carolann Courtney was appointed as Arts, Health and Wellbeing Specialist from 2013-2021.

3. The Creative Well was supported by Catherine O'Grady, HSE, Mental Health Services (NEED TO CHECK WITH CAROLANN)

4. [www.suzannelacy.com/mapping-the-terrain](http://www.suzannelacy.com/mapping-the-terrain)

5. Excerpt from *Well Water*. Jarrell, R. (1969) *The Complete Poems by Randall Jarrell*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc.

6. HSE announce Social Prescribing programme 2021 Social Prescribing - HSE.ie

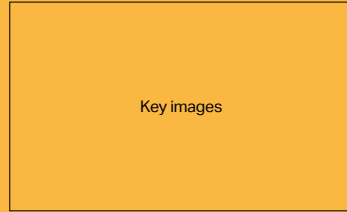
7. Mackesey, C. (2019) *The Boy, The Mole, The Fox and The Horse*. Penguin Books





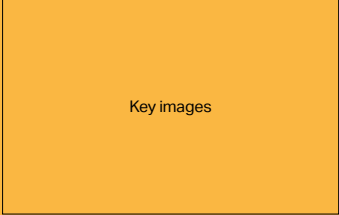
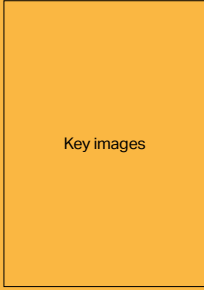
## Intro/Overview: 200 words

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2011

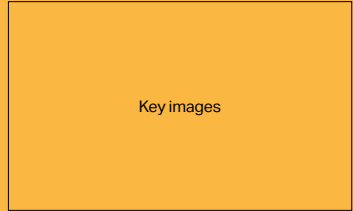
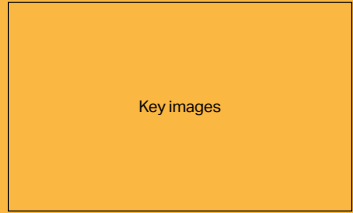
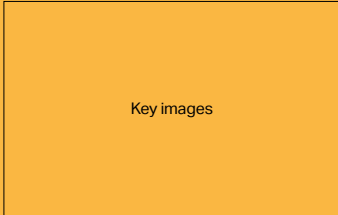
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**This year main points / 110 words or less  
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2013

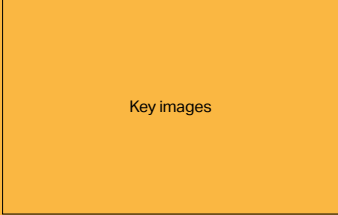
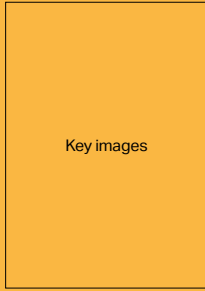
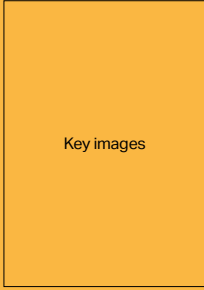
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Key images

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2017

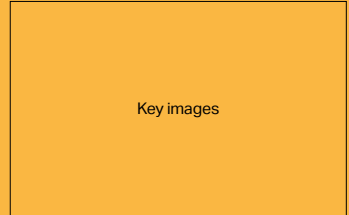
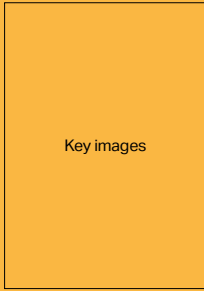
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This must be the place for now  
(*notes on not being tied*)  
— Marielle Macleman December 2021

Of no fixed abode. Not quite adrift but drifting in linoleum depths skirted by blue. Suspended cloth affording scant privacy and incommensurate candour, swaying in the wake of feverish activity. Cubicle curtains defined the physical boundaries of my art workshops for years – a multitude of intangible others having greater bearing on their course. Having to navigate these and having no permanent place became the meters of my practice.  
Paddles, not an anchor.

When not at patients' bedsides, I pitched in various spaces not designed for making art. Working where my hosts stored saline, held meetings, and served dinner, clinical trappings became familiar habitat but precluded the burden of feeling at home. Not belonging never let me forget the magnitude of inviting someone to make their first marks on flawless paper.

In the same way, The Creative Well shared the tables used by scout patrols and coffee mornings. Participants attended workshops in the places they would go to borrow a book, get a blood test, or Zumba. Spaces to connect then disperse. Rooms that belonged to them, if only for a while. With everyone a visitor, artists and participants shared responsibility for the space and what happened in it. All voices guiding process and all hands clearing it up. Not to or for but with.

Before this, a brokering. The careful negotiation of venue and cast so that no one was hurtled at terrain on which they didn't chose to land. Then a communal wayfinding. An ongoing process of strategic befriending and problem solving, of offsetting the drawbacks of a space and of drawing on its assets. Artists know to listen to the people with the keys and cleaning equipment, to seek the keepers of a building's secrets and keepers of the peace.

Seasoned campers, they operate in wipeable, folding worlds without running water, repurposing found objects and protecting surfaces. Spatial pranksters, they think in and beyond the walls allocated to them – spilling out into sunshine and achieving intimacy in echoey halls. Makers of worlds inside chambers. Engineers of places for people to find themselves and lose themselves.

Windowless walls and strip lighting hinder the play of shadows and small rooms preclude large works but, responding to each space and individual, the nomadic workshop artist transcends physical boundaries and hurdles of the mind. Working within their means but refusing to be limited by constraints. Bordered by cloth or mortar, they support a range of entry points, mindful that the wrong one might shut a door for good.

If the practice was always in motion and the place malleable, then the point was not a finished thing. Instead, a process. Held lightly and kept alive. Suspended in chaotic harmony and avoiding inertia. Pliable but untarnished. To save it from collapsing in on itself, its ground was prepared according to unwavering principles. A weeding out of the terminology and preconceptions which stunt growth. A commitment to earn trust, create parity, support curiosity, and encourage play. Only then could ideas meld and materials be manipulated in response to whim and need.

Beginnings spanned a frenetic limbering up to staccato beats with black and measured mixing over two turns of the small hand of a clock – red into yellow into blue. They matched seating arrangements to group dynamics and arranged spare seats in a jumble – stacked for the blind drawing of favela-like lines. Having transformed a space, they unpicked and picked up following camping etiquette to leave no trace and take only memories but leaving indelible impressions and taking with them so much more than souvenirs.

\*\*\*\*\*

Bag lady. Invited for my otherness but cripplingly aware of it. Rehearsing matryoshka-style packing and unpacking for smooth arrivals and hurried exits. Sometimes on wheels, blending with other trundling creatures in the hospital.

Travelling light was once as much to do with fitting in mentally as the girth of my bags but a paring back of language and tools freed me from the weight of being over-prepared – ready for the unknown and seeing things anew. It demanded that I be responsive and make a safe space for others, not somewhere for me to settle. Less being more, I watched participants push the potential of materials and equipment as they adapted to corporeal change. After seventeen years of working in healthcare I was still learning from others how to hold a brush.

Stripped of art lexicon, the brushes of The Creative Well were robbed of their precious or specialist ranking and rendered useable. Mere tools with which to make marks. A hierarchy of art instruments debased. Instead, a focus on how these might be used – unprescribed and exploratory – determined by each participant as they redefined what they knew of themselves and found permission to call their marks art.

If my route to patients' bedsides was sometimes uncomfortable and always logistical, the journeys of The Creative Well were part of its artists' creative process. Starting in motion and determinedly fluid, soaking up whatever spilled in its path and never at risk of growing a skin:

From different counties,  
two artists converging in a car park,  
materials decanted from one boot to another, ideas passed back and forth at speed.  
Pitstops at roadside bushes for branches to paint with,  
beetle shook free to scuttle over dust and tabletop, its trail  
opening a conversation about what makes a drawn line and  
closing doors on conjecture about the ability to draw one straight.  
Straight out the door to work in daylight, gathering leaves to roll with ink.  
Rolls of hygiene paper for GP procedures, mixed with glue for sculpting limbs,  
gift from a caretaker to cover tables.  
Taking care to cover the basics but leaving space to turn the tables and found a shared  
knowledge.  
Sharing spaces with other publics, left as found and kept from knowing talk of their  
traces. Free to thrust paint.  
Artists' talks on paintings tracing decades past and plaster cast reveals of how artists  
work. Free for all.  
*All That Work and All This Finding Out* casting light on thoughts on plaster that *Health is  
not just about the absence of illness*. Noting absence finds a pattern, turning thoughts to  
those at risk.  
Risk-taking and upturning to keep from forming a pattern and nothing of note.  
Nothing without you, informing our actions, listening deeply to what is felt,  
Delving deep into African archives, slideshow responding to shapes in clay,  
shaping a practice showing promise. Sliding doors to future selves.  
Future workshops born of reflection,  
ideas floated and sunk whilst packing solvents and other matter in the back,  
Back on the road and unpacking meaning, making plans to come undone and solving  
the matter of how to undo a thing which was not tied.



To cover such ground at velocity demands the combined experience of a dextrous team. When a good fit, another artist will fill your gaps and smooth your stumbles, take your ideas and run further with them than your eyes could see. More than a welcome accomplice in the practicalities of good practice and meeting participants' needs, the best collaborators test and stretch you creatively, saving your practice and being from becoming fatigued. Still able to enable. Working in tandem usurps the singular authoritative voice of the art tutor or instructor. Instead, two artists figuring things out together and an absence of art tool nomenclature allowed others to feel they could join in, setting a level field on which to play.

Starting in conversation and carried through dialogue, morphing as it roamed, The Creative Well fostered a space for connectedness free from the dynamics of being overfamiliar or routine. A distinguishing and indeterminable feature was its capacity to be all things to all people. An alternative art school for those yet to unlearn everything they learned at secondary, for those returning to their practice in the shadow of art school, for those who always wanted to but never found the time, and for time-served professionals seeking to explore the parameters of inclusive art education in the context of socially engaged practice.

A place where everyone was given the opportunity to expand what they knew of art and of themselves and to feel: 'This must be the place. *I love what I do and who I am when I am there*'. Never at risk of being just one thing or appearing according to prediction or rule. A practice not a service. A conversation not facilitation. A process not a thing. A line not a trail. A medium not a cover. A brush not a branch. A tool not a brush. A paddle not an anchor.



Permission to be still

Permission to explore

Permission to go Big

Permission to use the "Good Paper"

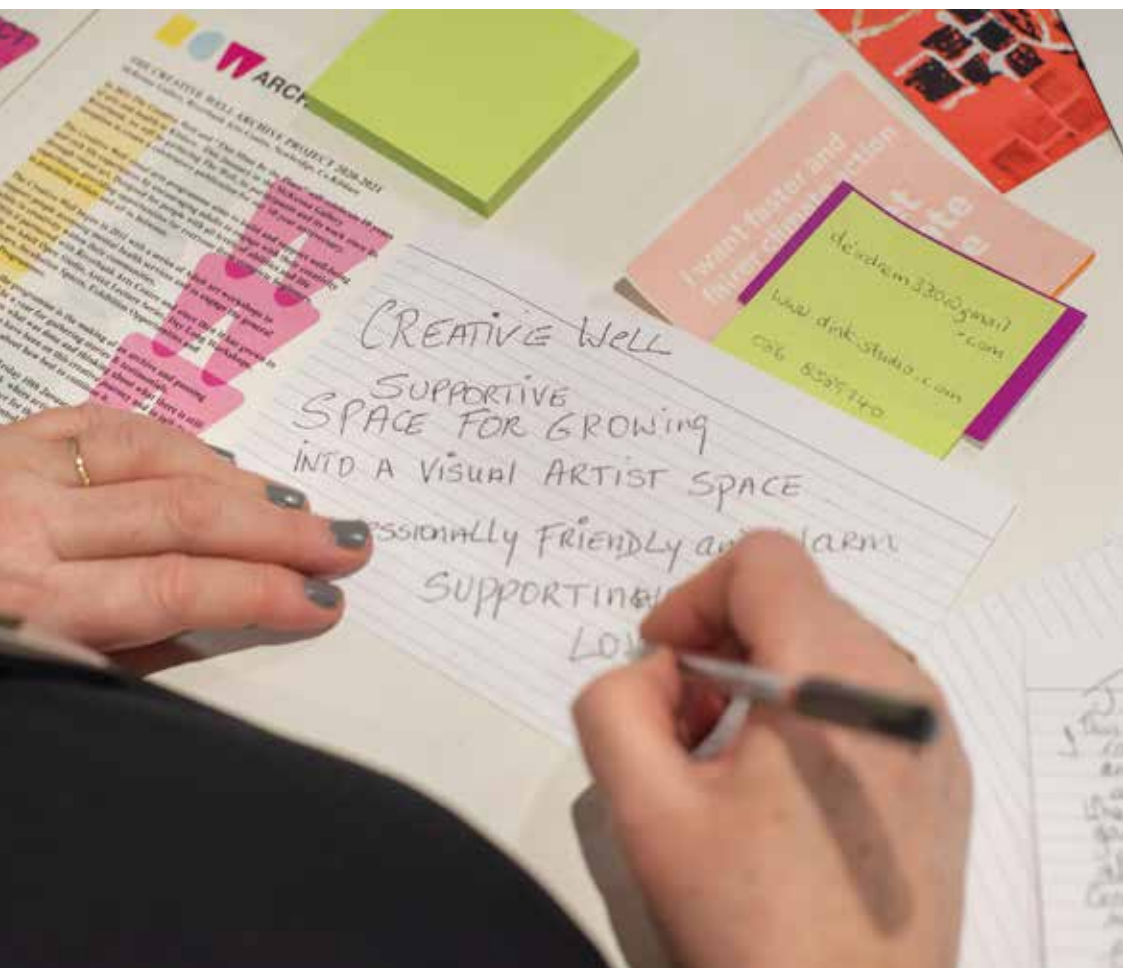
Permission to Play

Permission to have Fun

Permission to be light

Permission to be in Flow!

Time



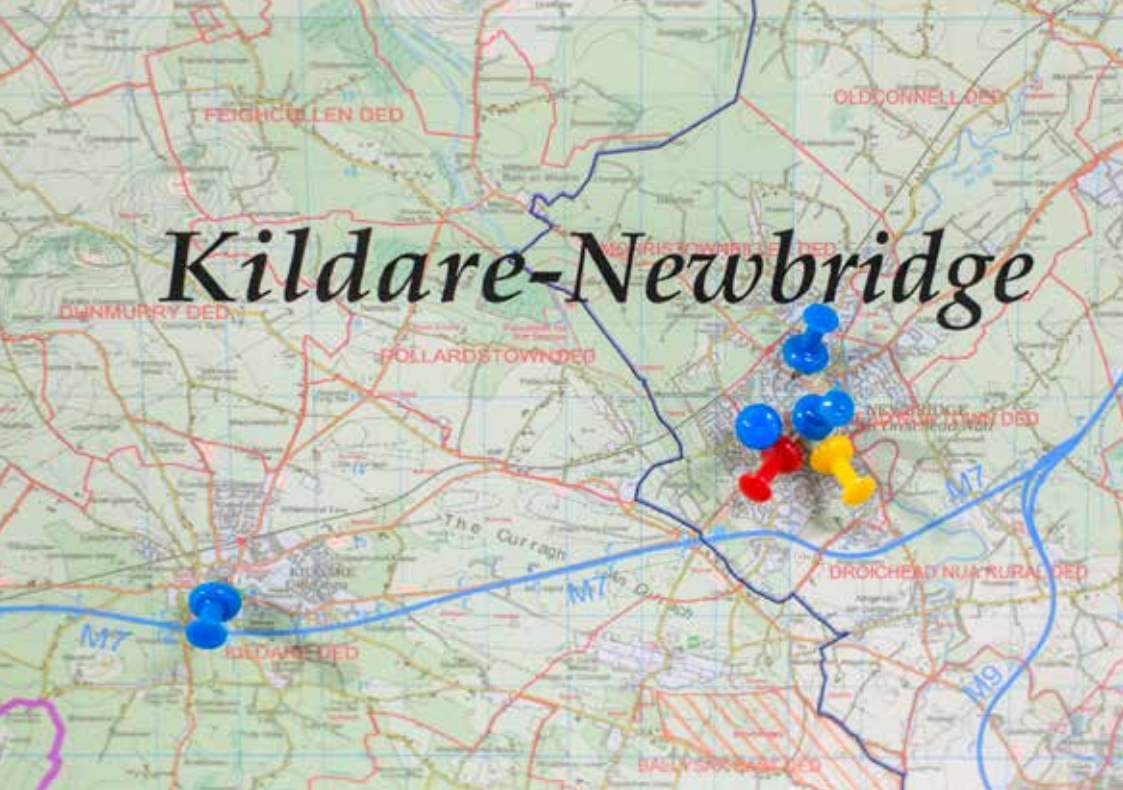






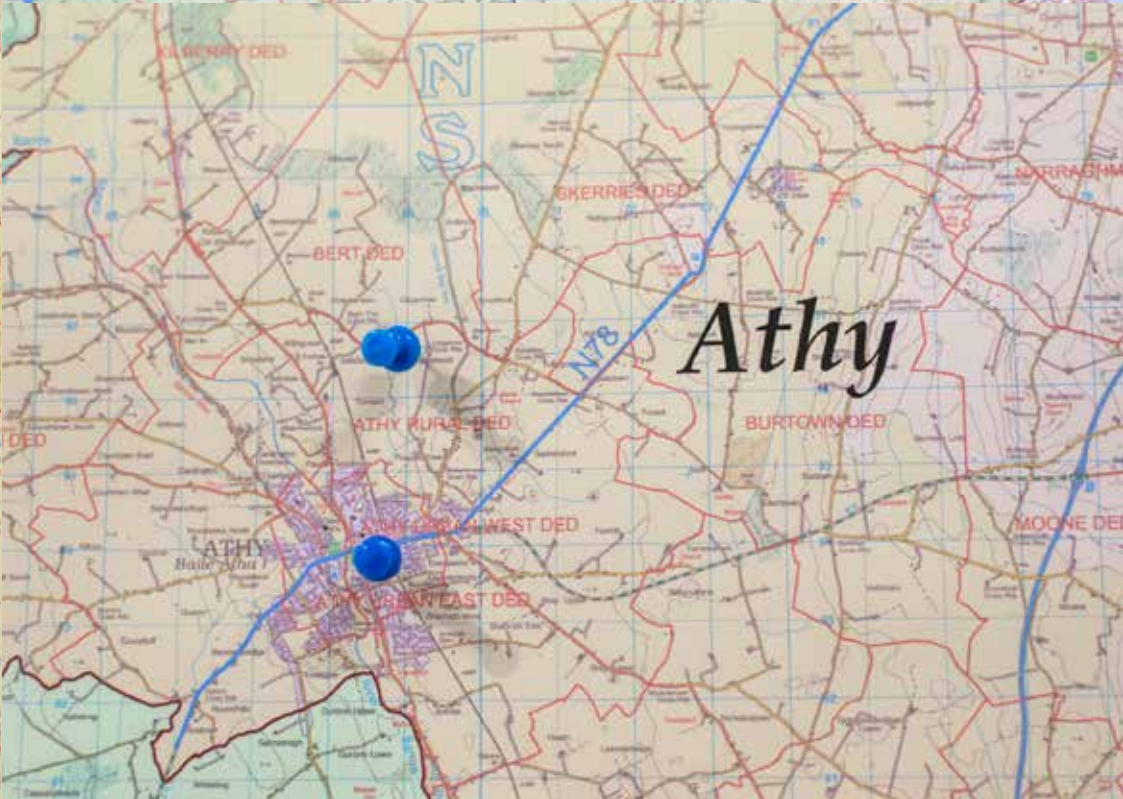
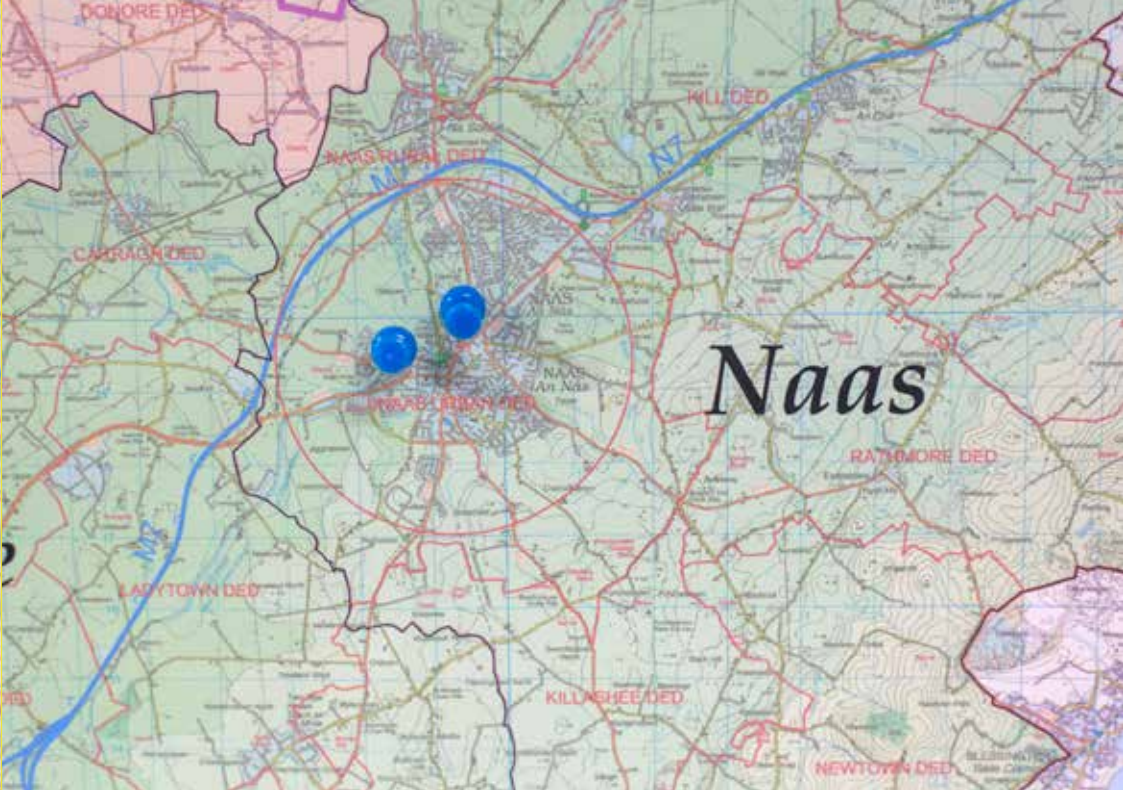


# Kildare-Newbridge



# Celbridge -Leixlip





# Reflections from the Health Care Worker

— Catherine O’Grady

From working with the creative arts in mental health the power of arts to heal and empower individuals on their recovery journey was clear to me.

## THE CREATIVE WELL PROGRAMME

From working with the creative arts in mental health the power of arts to heal and empower individuals on their recovery journey was clear to me.

While working as a mental health nurse in the Kildare services I realised there were no arts programmes to promote positive mental health and wellbeing that you could signpost service users to.

The Creative Well grew out of this identified need. I first approached the Kildare Arts in Health Steering Group of which I was a member in June 2010 to seek their assistance with developing an idea. I wanted to use the arts to promote positive health and wellbeing and as a tool to minimise the risk of social isolation for service users.

This social model of health promotion through open community based arts workshops was innovative and new to County Kildare and to the Mental Health services. This was not a case of “Paintbrush over Prozac” but rather that the Creative Well programme was positioned to complement mainstream interventions such as medication. The primary aim of the Creative Well programme was to develop a social model for supporting mental health and wellbeing through the use of the arts and within the context of local communities.

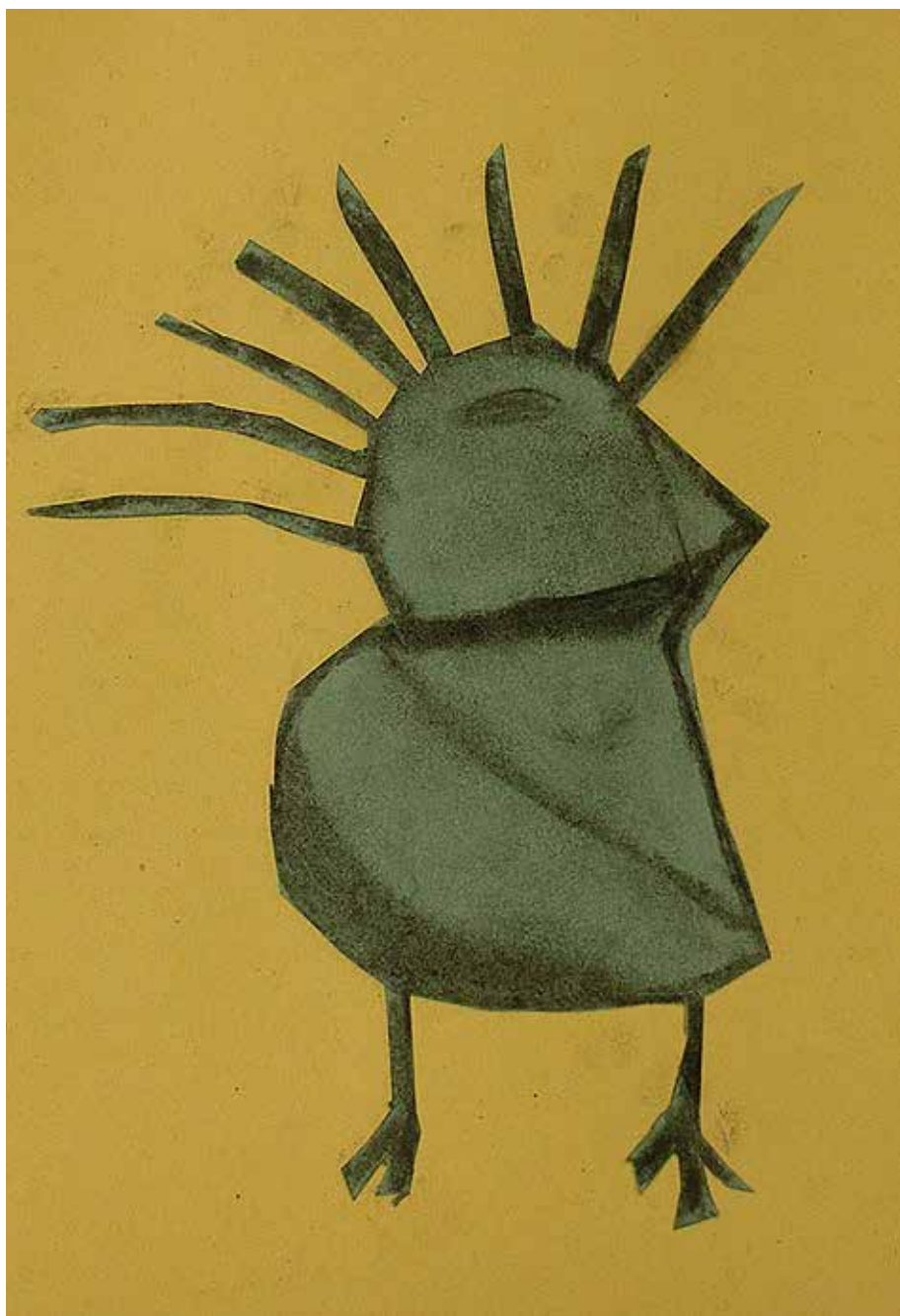
Commencing in 2011, I worked in partnership with Nicola Dunne the Kildare Arts Officer at the time and artist Dominic Thorpe the lead artist, to develop the programme. In the early days the programme evolved from using a number of creative mediums as the programme itself was moved around the county. We met wonderful people during these early days.

As I reflect on the start of the Creative Well and my role in this, I feel extremely humbled to have been part of the journey for some and to have been witness to the power of the creative space to grow and nurture each participant.

The programme itself has equally grown and developed to an engaging and holistic programme. This is a testament to wonderful people such as Carolann Courtney who believed in it and helped it to blossom. My part was small compared to those that shaped and made it what it is today and I am extremely proud to have been part of this journey.

















KCC Arts Service	KARE Central Services
KCC Library Services	SJOG General services
KCC ISP (Integrated Services Programme)	SJOG St. Raphaels
St. Marys Hospital Naas	The Bridge - Camphill Communities Kilcullen
HSE Adult Mental Health Services - Recovery	IWA
HSE Health Promotion	Rosconnell Community Association
HSE Suicide Prevention Officer	The Acre Arts Committee
Naas General Hospital	Eyre Powell Hotel – Direct Provision Centre
Physiotherapy Department	Local Family Resource Centres
Day Hospital	McAuley Place – Naas Na Riogh Housing Association
Lakeview Psychiatric Hospital	TCD
Naas General Hospital Volunteer Arts Committee	Riverbank Arts Centre
Newbridge Primary Health Care Centre	CREATE
National Office of Suicide Prevention	First Fortnight
GP Primary Care: County wide GP's in each area workshops have taken place	The National Centre for Arts and Health – Tallaght
National Learning Network	Play Specialist
Choices Maynooth	KFM
Muireosa Foundation	County and national artists
Moore Abbey	Local community groups and connectors (Trina & Elaine Hanlon)
REHAB	



Comhairle Contae Chill Dara  
Kildare County Council



I felt more  
artist-y!

JH 

