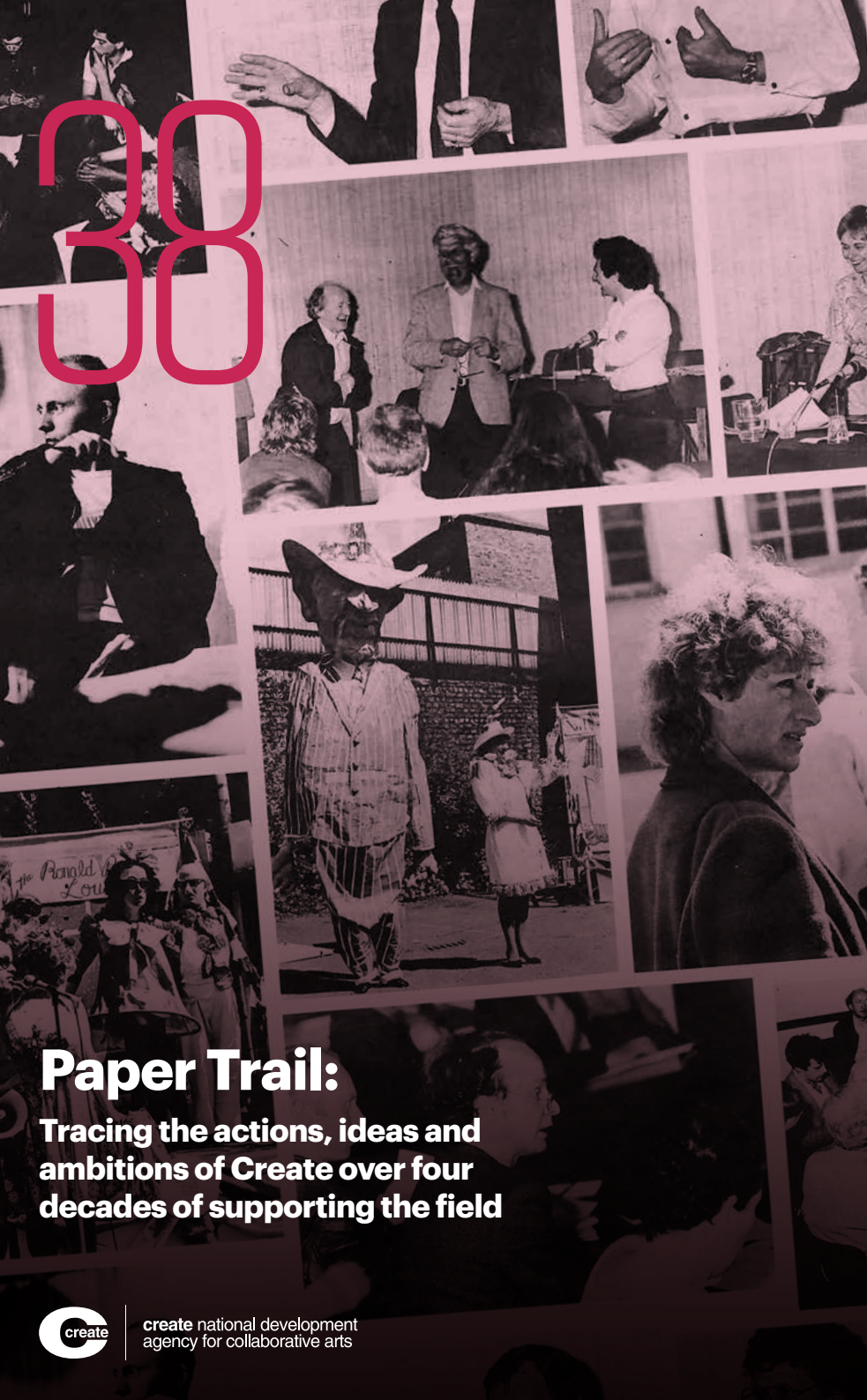




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Paper Trail:

Tracing the actions, ideas and
ambitions of Create over four
decades of supporting the field



create national development
agency for collaborative arts

The Create Reading Room offers access to a wealth of books, periodicals and pamphlets related to the development of social art practice in Ireland and beyond. Comprising a growing collection of 500+ published titles, the Reading Room is a designated space for research in a newly refurbished state of the art facility.

In recent years, Create's Research and Learning Manager, Jennifer Fitzgibbon, has expanded both the library collection and the research associated with the institutional archive and holdings, alongside redeveloping the physical space. In this issue of Create News, Jennifer shares her perspective on Create's history and future as reflected in the shelves.

Paper Trail:

Tracing the actions, ideas and ambitions of Create over four decades of supporting the field

Jennifer Fitzgibbon

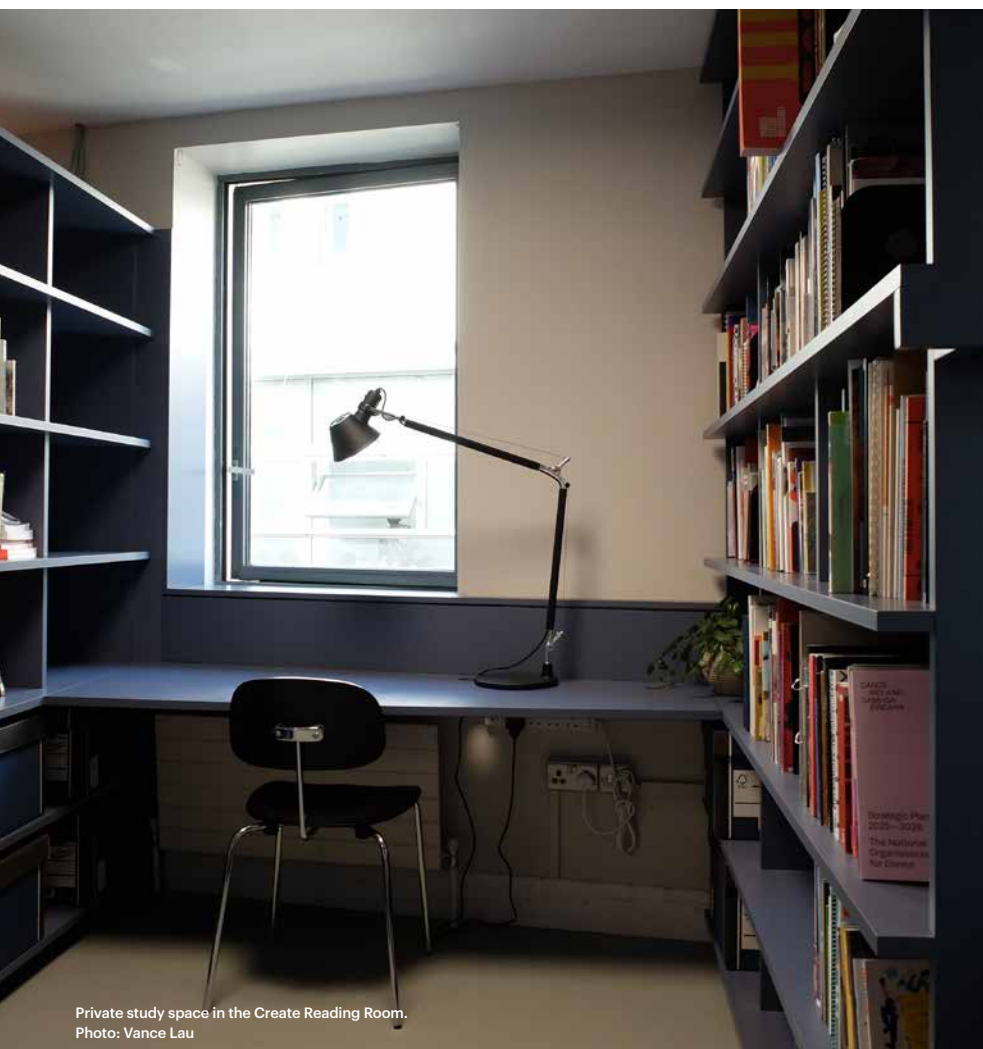
Since 2023, Create has been actively engaging with its archival holdings to better understand the role of the organisation over a four-decade history that charts the wider historical development of community arts in Ireland through to recent developments in the field of socially engaged and collaborative arts practice.

Much of this engagement with the archive has involved processes of gathering, appraising and arranging the collection of printed ephemera and photographs that traces a history of community activism in the 1980s, cultural development in the 1990s and significant changes within the organisation that reflect a broadening of the field of practice since 2000. The archival contents comprise both primary and secondary source material and a new finding aid helps users to navigate the collection of boxes and folders, each containing multiple files, sorted by theme and/or year, which is now safely and permanently installed in Create's refurbished Archive and Reading Room.

This focus on developing a suite of organisational supports for research stems from an ambition to be Ireland's expert resource, network forum and research engine for cultural, cross sectoral and international knowledge about collaborative arts. Create aims to support and generate new research within the field, while also developing opportunities for learning more about what collaborative arts are and how they work, through training and professional development offerings. Foregrounding the development of a publicly accessible archive of collaborative arts is an important cultural investment as the organisation recognises its long history in the field of social cultural activism and the efforts of all those associates and predecessors who have helped shape the field as we know it today.



As with all archives, gaps in the history will be present, which often cannot be known until they are recognised retrospectively, yet the Create archive is a way of understanding the wider social and political contexts that gave rise to the beginnings of the organisation



Private study space in the Create Reading Room.
Photo: Vance Lau

The beginnings of an archive...

The archive was formed by accident of day-to-day record keeping rather than posterity, albeit the collection does show that there was an awareness of the importance of documenting the contemporaneous activities in the many albums of printed photographs, some of which have been diligently labelled. This visual collection documents the many community arts events, festivals and programmes that were facilitated by the organisation in the early years and it is now being formalised into an accessible resource, with further plans to digitise for preservation and wider access. Additionally, the archive contains a significant volume of correspondence and administration, which charts key milestones and challenges faced along the way (for instance in the multiple bids for funding, sometimes awarded, or in the many premises that Create offices have occupied over the years). As with all archives, gaps in the history will be present, which often cannot be known until they are recognised retrospectively, yet the Create archive is a way of understanding the wider social and political contexts that gave rise to the beginnings of the organisation. This impetus to look back to understand the past is also inherently tied to a desire to better understand the future, looking ahead to how Create can robustly support the field in the years ahead.

Foregrounding the development of a publicly accessible archive of Collaborative arts is an important cultural investment and recognition of the organisation's long history in the field of social cultural activism.

Create as we know it today was founded in 1983 under the name Creative Activity for Everyone (CAFE) and its purpose was to be the representative body for community arts in Ireland. It grew out of a meeting called by members of the City Workshop who needed to raise funding to sustain their activities. The subsequent gathering of individuals all working with creative activity within communities soon realised they shared similar aims and difficulties, leading to a call for a representative body that could support the variance of community arts activity occurring throughout the country through core functions of advocacy and visibility. One of the first activities of this fledgling organisation was to host a seminar on 'the place of creativity in the community' which took place over a weekend in April 1984 and was chaired by Michael D. Higgins. A twenty-four page report on the seminar was published following the event which details the hotly contested topics that were aired and debated over the course of the weekend, with contributions from the fields of community arts workers, theatre makers, educators, youth workers, academics and politicians.



Montages from 1984 Seminar Publication



The next major public gathering of individuals and groups with an interest in community arts in Ireland did not take place until the mid 1990s.¹ However, the first ten years following the milestone seminar were focused on advocating for recognition and improving support for the field through training and education.² These years saw the appointment of a full-time worker made possible through membership subscription fees, and with a small grant from the Arts Council, CAFE was able to realise some of its more practical ambitions, such as researching and compiling a cross-border database of information and opportunities that was disseminated through a public enquiry service.

Archival documentation from later in the 1990s suggests that the organisation extended the remit of its activities and projects. A community arts magazine was accompanied by other reports and publications. Conferences and gatherings were organised on a local and national basis. Training included the first accredited national arts worker course in Ireland and a level three training for trainers' award. A pilot aimed at developing the art skills of long-term unemployed people called *Arts Awareness Intervention* (AAI) was run over two distinct phases³ with financial support from the European Commission and the Department of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht. Furthermore, a pilot called The Learning Wheel was a course of training specifically designed for those arts workers without a qualification who were working in community contexts that resulted in the production of a pocket handbook guide and in-depth programme evaluation.

1. In 1995, City Arts Centre, CAFE and the Combat Poverty Agency hosted a conference at Maynooth College with over 200 people in attendance.

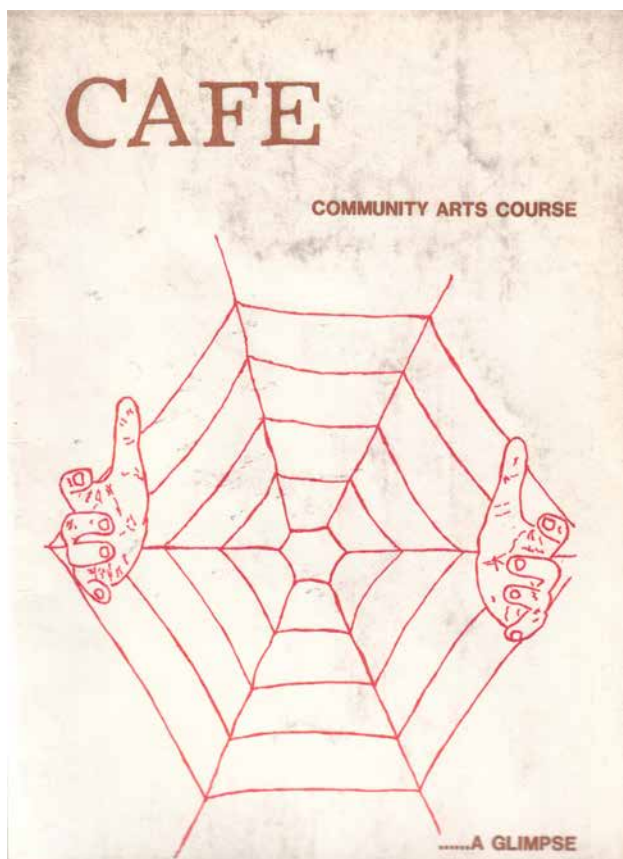
2. Sandy Fitzgerald, 'Community Arts in Context', unpublished transcript of talk delivered at NCAD, located in the Create Archive, SF-18-06.

3. The two phases of Arts Awareness Intervention ran between 1996 and 1998



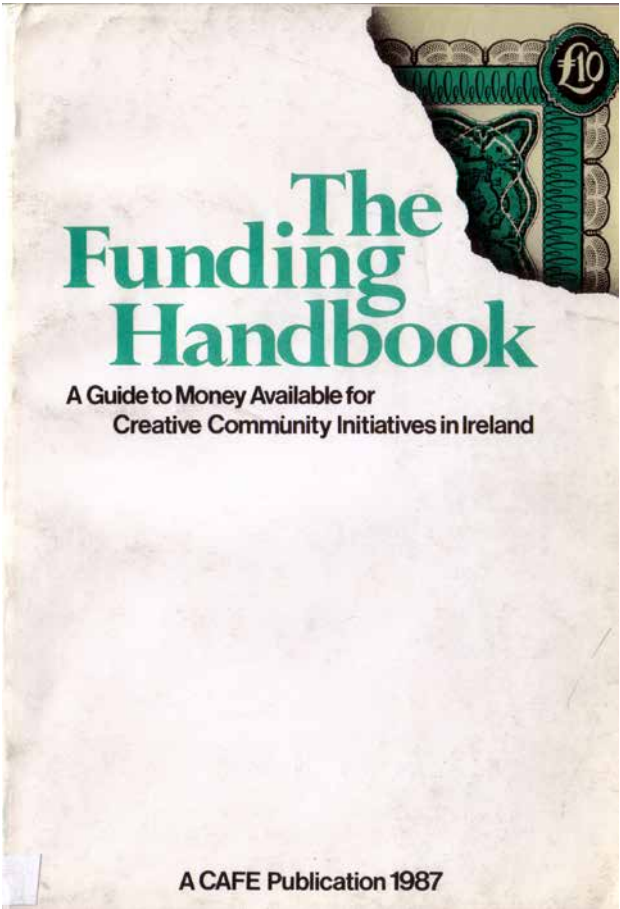
Above: Participants from Tallaght Arts Action speaking at showcase event, c. 1991

Right: National Arts Worker Information Guide', booklet front cover, Create archive, SF_24



Information as Power

It is evident from the printed outputs produced by the organisation over the years that there was a special emphasis on collating information resources and toolkits that could support artists in practical ways. This is especially apparent in the six volumes of the CAFE Funding Handbook, which was a key resource in a pre-internet age and served as the definitive guide to funding sources in Ireland with each volume detailing over 450 sources of support and their criteria. The Handbook was also a useful source of information on charities and the law, fundraising, EU funding, and corporate sponsorship.



First Funding
Handbook cover, 1987

The archival traces from these training programmes, reports, evaluations and handbooks form an important body of primary and secondary source material. When seen together, these documents can help to better understand historical developments in the field of community arts practice and subsequent changes in the field into more collaborative and socially engaged models. Furthermore, key moments of new direction and responsibility are captured in the records of the Artist in the Community Scheme, which CAFE took on the administration of on a devolved basis for the Arts Council of Ireland in 2002. Since then, the scheme has grown significantly in terms of how communities of interest or place are conceptualised while also continuing to grow and diversify the types of support offered.

In 2003 the organisation changed its name from CAFE to Create. This constituted a shift in focus from community arts to 'arts in context', signifying a broadening reach of membership and scope of support services that was now more widely aimed at arts practitioners irrespective of their area of practice or programming policies. Two years later, Create published the art journal titled *Contexts* which underpinned the thinking behind a more inclusive perspective. The journal captured changes in critical thinking, with Declan McGonagle observing that "... a new vocabulary, a new language, needs to be developed around new work which has to be carried out in what is a new world. We should be thinking about civil culture, civil meaning belonging to citizens, and about participatory practices."⁴

4. Declan McGonagle, *The City Arts Centre: It Hasn't Gone Away, You Know*, *Contexts* Issue 1, 2005, pg 18



Archiving the Relational Field

In recent years, Create has adopted a co-creative model that foregrounds participatory engagement from the inception to the realisation of creative projects, such as Creative Places Tuam. It follows that the documentation of these durational programmes has been inspired by this co-creative and participatory approach. The Creative Places Tuam Special Collection records the various events, administration, as well as artist-led and commissioned projects and ephemera that were developed by and with people in the town of Tuam.

Tuam collective archiving
event at the Town Hall.
Photo: Vance Lau.

The newly developed Archive and Reading Room also serve as an incubation space for ideas and critical reflection.

Notably, this special collection was formed collaboratively and it tells the story of Creative Places Tuam by the people who helped to shape the programme. It was formed via a public call-out and in-person event where attendees brought along their items for a collective gathering, appraisal, arrangement and final submission into the special collection. This approach foregrounded the people and organisations who were key contributors to the Creative Places Tuam project over the five years to date. The collection became a constituent community-led archive of personally selected items, physical traces and remembrances that captured a history that would otherwise be prone to slipping through the cracks of time and memory. This record of Creative Places Tuam now resides in the local town library, making it accessible to those who helped to create the collection, while a sister collection is held in Create's Archive and Reading Room. A similar community-led approach will be applied to archiving the arts-related activities that are currently being developed as part of the NEIC [North East Inner City] Community Arts Programme.

New Horizons for Research

Archives are ever evolving, not static, and Create will continue to realise plans for making the holdings accessible, such as digitising and developing a body of new research. The newly developed Archive and Reading Room also serve as an incubation space for ideas and critical reflection, and two recent projects have emerged from this inherently relational space that focus on the topic of artist mentoring.

In 2024, Create commissioned research and reflection led by Ciaran Smyth with assistance from Kate O'Shea and the Artist Mentor Panel to explore the role of mentorship in supporting collaborative socially engaged artists via the Artist in the Community (AIC) Scheme. The purpose of the project was to examine the ideas and practices associated with mentorship, drawing on published data in addition to closely working with the Artist Mentor Panel to reflect on their experiences and insights from their mentoring roles. The research produced a Values Framework that articulates the vision of mentoring as an ecosystem of support with a core ethos of care that underpins the work. The output offers a practical framework and guide, co-developed with mentors, outlining their values and approaches to mentoring, centred on rigorous thinking and deep engagement.

A practical toolkit was also developed in response to learnings from this research process, together with a review of three years of evaluation of the AIC Scheme Artist Mentoring Award and further engaged research throughout 2025. Continuing an organisational tradition of producing practical information outputs, the toolkit has been developed as a companion document to serve mentor and mentee artists who are participating in the award with helpful information, tips, templates, and resources.

The Ailbhe Murphy Research Residency forms another new horizon for research at Create. Awarded in memory of Dr Ailbhe Murphy, visual artist, researcher and former Director of Create, the residency is an opportunity for an artist to engage in depth with the print and archival resources at Create and partner organisations of IMMA and NIVAL at NCAD. The recipient, Vanessa Daws, is a visual artist whose work explores place through swimming. Her art projects invite, involve and collaborate with different communities of interest and place. This interdisciplinary and social nature of her work creates multi layered and expansive outcomes that hope to share the joy of water to a wider audience, and to raise awareness in people's minds of how precious our global waterways are to human and non-human life. Vanessa intends to use this Research Residency to explore our relationship to the water that surrounds us and the creatures in it, from a swimmer's point of view, connecting with the Dublin Bay Biosphere.

The print and archival holdings at the Archive and Reading Room are still being added to. Some areas for future collection development include growth in the acquisition of artist books, monograph publications and archival ephemera, specifically related to the field of collaborative and socially engaged art produced by individual artists and organisations and communities that support these practices. A further ambition of the Research and Learning strand is to build a one of a kind collection of resource material that can contribute to better understanding the past history of collaborative arts practice in Ireland while also offering a roadmap for future practices that engage diverse communities of interest and place.

In Short WHAT WE'VE BEEN UP TO...

Following the launch of our newly redesigned **Reading Room and Archive**, we are now pleased to offer private bookings for artists and others who wish to access the space. We offer three types of access to the Reading Room holdings for individuals: **Self-directed** access, **Guided** access, which includes a short introduction to the library holdings by a Create staff member, and a **Research Clinic**, a one-to-one booking with our Research & Learning Manager to discuss your specific research topic.

In May, we welcomed US-based artist **Josh MacPhee** to the Reading Room, to offer a workshop entitled **Resistance is a Visual Language**. Attendees created political posters during this workshop, which examined key concepts including iteration as creative engine and political graphics as enduring design.

We are so pleased to announce that our Director, Damien McGlynn, has been chosen to take part in the **Alliance for Socially Engaged Arts Fellowship**, which began in mid-June 2025 and runs to November 2026. The Fellowship is a transformative programme designed to connect and support visionary leaders of arts organisations driven by community engagement and social change across Europe. Being part of this Fellowship among respected colleagues is an important recognition of the unique role played by Create as national development agency for collaborative arts. We look forward to benefitting from enriching conversation, collective troubleshooting, challenging provocations and immersive residencies as part of this Fellowship.

Coming soon

Save the date for Create's **National Networking Event 2025**! On the 19th November, we will welcome all those working in collaborative, socially engaged arts practice to the F2 Centre, Rialto, Dublin 8, for a day of exchange and learning.

The title of this year's event is **Collaborative Futures**, and it will examine how we can look to our history to gain lessons for the future of collaborative, socially engaged art practice, building hope through togetherness, community as activism and building movements through collaboration.

Create is delighted to launch the pilot of the **Collaborative Arts Training Programme**, running October to December 2025. This is a practical suite of essential training and professional knowledge for emerging artists, recent graduates and third-level students as well as artists and cultural practitioners who are interested in learning more about the basics of collaborative art practice.

This ground-up course will feature Create staff and guest artists, using presentations, discussions and practical examples. Visit our website to learn more and apply to attend.

Welcome to Create News

This is the thirty-eighth edition of Create News.

Create News is published twice yearly in spring and autumn. It is sent free of charge, features a guest writer or writers and offers the latest information on Create events and services. If you do not wish to receive further editions, please write or email us at info@create-ireland.ie. If you would like to receive a personal copy of Create News please email info@create-ireland.ie and include details of name, address and postcode.

The views expressed in each issue of Create News are those of the individual authors, and do not reflect those of Create as an organisation.

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