

Streams of Consciousness – a reflective account of publication

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List of illustrations

Introduction

2020 has been a momentous year, but not in a good way. The restrictions on movement and gathering of people and the closure of venues have fundamentally affected everyone's lives, and those working in the arts, who are predominantly independent workers, have been particularly hard hit. It is in this environment that I – in company with many others - have been faced with the challenge of publishing a new body of work as a virtually unknown photographer.

I am most fortunate that I am not dependent financially on income generated from my photography work. Nevertheless, I have tried to approach the sharing and publication of my work in a professional manner, with the determination to make a mark as an artist, not as a student making work for academic purposes. This was in response to advice received early on from my tutor. The one rule I made for myself was that in competitive situations I would not seek to promote my work to the detriment of anyone who needs to make their living from photography.

My first choice of publication was an exhibition, but this year that has been virtually impossible. Ironically, the only way it would have been possible was virtually – as an online exhibition. Since the physical manifestation of my work was important to me I did not take this route. Instead, with my tutor's encouragement and support, I made an 'artists book' – a hand-made large format book which does have the advantage of being a long-lasting object as opposed to the ephemeral nature of an exhibition. As well as sharing this book by video, I have sought to share a physical representation of the work as widely as possible by producing low-cost replicas of the book, which I have sold via the internet.

Body of work

The body of work which I have produced for the final part of my BA at OCA concerns the Irish Border in the context of Brexit. What began as a conventional documentary project in the road trip tradition became a more conceptual body of work rooted in the small streams and rivers which form a large part of the border. I feel that there were four main achievements in my realisation of this work and its publication: focussing down from the original scattergun approach to a tightly-edited set of images; the use of text to complete the discourse begun by the images; the physical realisation of the images using the medium of Irish linen; and the production of an artist's book as the final publication of the work when an exhibition became impossible due to the Covid-19.

The use of linen as a medium for the reproduction of the images was an integral part of the concept from an early stage. My original intention was to hold an exhibition consisting of large, 2m high hangings to create an immersive experience for the viewer.

Because the aspect of publication was for me integral to the work, I overlapped the 'Sustaining your practice' module with 'Body of work' and regularly discussed the realisation of my concept with my tutor. It was my tutor who suggested I consider some sort of book in parallel with the exhibition idea. He helped me to set realistic expectations of achieving such an exhibition within the timescale of the course.

Rather than see the exhibition as an essential outcome, he persuaded me to see the development of the work in stages – as prints, as a book and potentially as an exhibition after graduation. Rather than just a re-imagining of existing work, this plan also allows for further development of the work itself, both in the light of

audience reaction and the evolution of events relating to the Irish border.

Stages of publication

Portfolio reviews of the work

Before publishing my work, I obtained some feedback on the content and presentation of it in the form of portfolio reviews. Because I had a particular resolution in mind, with photographs and text presented in a book and eventually at an exhibition, I created a portfolio in the form of a PDF which was laid out in a similar way to that in which I envisaged the book being arranged. Pre-lockdown, I was also able to do two face-to-face portfolio reviews. One of the main things I took away from these was to reconsider the amount of text I was including - I needed to strike a balance between contextualisation and accessibility. My idea was that a reader would skim the headlines at first reading and then hopefully return to the text for more in-depth information, but I could see that I needed to be careful that the volume of text did not break up the flow of the book too much. A positive thing I took away from the reviews where I was able to present the physical work was that the printing on linen was a successful way of adding meaning to the work. I also learned that different reviewers would bring their own pre-conceptions to the review – their comments would a) depend on how I positioned the project to them; and b) their own practice and view of the documentary image.

Figure 1 shows one of the images printed on linen as submitted in my final 'Body of work' assignment. Figures 2 to 4 show the evolution of the text page accompanying this image as it evolved through 'Sustaining your practice'.

Publication proposal

By now it had become clear that an exhibition of my work would not be possible in the foreseeable future. My publication proposal was therefore based on the production of a hand-made book, and in parallel I had to consider how I would get an audience for a one-off book. The solution I proposed was to place a small number of books in tourist venues along the border. The quantity of books would have to be small because they were very expensive to produce, being hand made in a large format and printed on linen.

Draft publication

In order to share my draft publication with my tutor I produced a video showing how I planned to construct the book, and how my ideas had developed from the initial work I had done on a possible book during the Body of Work course. A significant aspect of the redesign was reducing costs so that I could make more than one copy of the book in order to fulfil my publication proposal. This was to be achieved a) by doing more of the work on the book construction myself; and b) by using a local bookbinder rather than Bristol Bound. The former was inspired by a conversation I had with Dewi Lewis when I interviewed him for Photo Meet. The latter reduced travel costs and also solved the problem of movement restrictions during the pandemic. Originally, I only envisaged the book as a pre-cursor to an exhibition, and perhaps this was still in my mind. My biggest takeaway from reviewing this proposed publication with my tutor was that I should see the book as a resolution of the project in itself, not as a substitute for an exhibition. Making the video was a learning process in itself, and on a practical note, I began to appreciate the

technical aspects of producing and sharing a video: while my instinct would be to concentrate on image quality, my tutor pointed out that the sheer size of the video file I had produced could be a probably in sharing effectively via the internet.

Consequently I am spending some time investigating compression techniques and evaluating how similar videos are presented online.

Final publication

Having decided that the book I was to produce would be the definitive outcome of my project, it was important to me to put the work in front of as large an audience as possible. As well as the time and cost involved in producing the books, another handicap was the continued restriction of travel for tourism – more or less a ban. A practical solution occurred to me partly as result of receiving the ‘festival in a box’ published by Photoworks in October and later interviewing Shoair Mavlian, the Director of Photoworks. What I was struck by was Shoair’s view that it’s not always necessary to produce expensive realisations of work. I quote from the interview: Up until then I had the idea fixed in my head that my work had to be produced on linen as that was part of the concept. I had not considered a conventional paper book.

Now I decided to turn the concept on its head and produce the lowest-cost version of the work I could, while maintaining good quality in the reproduction of the images. In this way I could not only overcome the restrictions imposed by the pandemic but I could reach a much larger audience than with my ‘artist’s book’.

The key for me would be to make the artist’s book, which I could share by video and eventually in exhibition venues, and then produce smaller ‘replica’ versions of the book. The replica idea – as opposed to simply producing a paper-based book -

would crucially allow me to reference the story of Irish linen, an important part of my concept.

Marketing and sales

Having decided to sell my book, I had to consider how to market it. I studied the way others were selling low-volume self-published books and I could see two main routes: a) use of a fund-raising site such as Kickstarter; or b) publicity via social media with direct personal sales. Social media would typically also be used to promote a Kickstarter promotion, but the difference is that a Kickstarter campaign aims to raise a certain amount of money. Crucially, no money is received by the campaign organiser unless the target is met. Other sites such as Indiegogo do allow for partial payment but they are still aimed at raising money in advance and in all cases some of the money raised goes to the company running the campaign website. The approach of direct-selling seemed more appropriate to my needs: the financial outlay would be fairly low and not having to pay any commission would help me in my goal of keeping the selling price low.

In order to sell via social media I would need to get reasonable coverage of my posts so the first thing I did was to spend some time increasing my Facebook circle of 'friends' and, in particular, building up more Instagram followers. I then began a series of posts on Facebook and Instagram building up to the release of the book. I was initially using images I had made during the project but which were not included in the final work and also experimenting with hashtags which might draw attention to my posts.

Finally I announced the book in a Facebook post on the 21st December and received 18 orders within two days. After the Christmas break I will promote the

book again, using some of the positive feedback I am getting from those who have already received the book.

Feedback on publication

Feedback from those who have bought my 'replica' book has been very positive.

This is a selection of comments from social media:

'I just received a copy of David Fletcher's limited-edition photobook on the story of the Irish border. It is extremely well done - concept, photographs and text.

Beautifully made.' @mickyatesUK, Visiting Professor Leeds University Business School.

Conclusions

What have I learned from the process of publishing my body of work? I would summarise it as follows:

1. There is more than one way to publish work – an exhibition is not the be-all and end-all.
2. Don't fix your ideas too firmly at the beginning of a project. Have a clear idea but be prepared to adapt both to advice and to circumstances.
3. Take on board advice but don't lose sight of your concept.
4. Social media is crucial to getting publicity for your work.

I continued to seek opinions on the work as it progressed but I will single out two people. My tutor was instrumental in convincing me to focus on producing a book

and not holding out for an exhibition. His encouragement and assurance that I was on the right track were invaluable. I showed the work twice to Martin Parr – in its form as linen prints at the end of my ‘Body of work’ course and in the electronic version of my final book for ‘Sustaining your practice’. His initial comments were favourable, but he felt there was too much text. Other reviewers also commented on the amount of text and by the time Martin saw the final version, there was a lot less text, and I felt I had better integrated the text by using translucent pages. Martin still felt there was too much text. However, at this stage I stand by my concept and I feel justified by the reception the book has received. The final word is that Martin has asked for a copy to include in the library of the Martin Parr Foundation. I certainly don’t suggest that he was wrong about the text, but I do hope this at least shows that I got something right.

Illustrations

