

SUNKEN VELVET UNIVERSE

SORCHA MCNAMARA

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This essay follows a 3-week residency, *The Black Holes*, organised by **Totaldobze Art Centre**, (Riga, Latvia) in November 2022. The residency is part of a programme of activities for the Creative Europe project, **Artist-Run Network Europe**. **Sorcha McNamara** was selected by **Ormston House** and her participation is further supported by the Arts Council of Ireland.



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Image credit: Sorcha McNamara

An early autumn day; leaves scattered.

Three figures walk blindfolded along a curved forested path. Two actually. The third walks a distance behind, unblindfolded, looking on.

This was my only visual reference to the Black Holes residency, prior to arriving at Totaldobze Art Centre, a cultural space housed in the former Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, Transport and Aeronautics of what was once Riga Technical University. The building itself is as imposing as it sounds – 15,000 square metres, 5 floors high and over 200 rooms contained in grey concrete. The day I arrived, it was cloudy.

I was here to take part in workshops of an improvisational and collaborative kind with six other international artists. Though exactly what these workshops would entail, I did not know. What I did know was that I wanted to invite new ways of working into my art practice – ways that involved working with others somehow, or more accurately, being open to diverse voices and allowing them to influence my process as a maker of things. With this in mind, I approached this residency unattached to any particular outcome, a mindset I thought suitable for such an undertaking.

Once acquainted with the building, the city, and each other, the nature of our workshops was revealed to us slowly, gradually, always remaining that bit elusive and mysterious, never really reaching an end goal. But this was to be expected. I had anticipated – even hoped for – a certain level of experimental wackiness to play a part in the experience of this residency. As an artist (and a non-artist), I've always been a little allergic to the formulaic, the linear, or the logical, and was beginning to sense that my own practice – still in its formative, developmental stage – was in danger of falling into repetitive modes of making. Whether I was aware of it or not, my interest in Black Holes as a residency project stemmed from a desire to explore the space of the ridiculous as much as a desire to make new connections.

Our workshops, which were moderated by a cohort of invited guests each week, included such activities as experience-collecting (in the form of senses, objects, or otherwise), colour-hunting, game-building, a series of warm-ups and body movements that I particularly enjoyed (although, as one who has maintained a lifelong aversion to anaerobic exercise, I dislike being reminded of its benefits and its ability to make one feel good – the awareness of my lack of athletic prowess was less enjoyable), and a myriad of silent walks, both around the neighbourhood of the building and in the wider countryside. Here it was for the first – and possibly last – time I experienced seeing snowfall on a beach: a sunken velvet universe of cold on warm. Strangely, something of the untainted quality of the Latvian wilderness reminded me of the boglands back home in East Mayo. While vastly different in scale, the essence of each place felt remarkably similar, something not easy to capture in text.

Earlier on in the process, there were word gatherings of our collective joys and frustrations – both in life and in art – which were charted in chalk on a black painted wall. One question that came up somewhat inconspicuously within those joys and frustrations was whether or not one separates life and art. One person very much did; another said he wished he could. We didn't go into this in further detail but it was interesting to think about as the days went by, and even now, after the fact. Life as art seems like a lot of hard work – yet art as life seems altogether more breathable, or necessary, somehow.

There is a strange responsibility placed on artists for time; and with this, a guilt that is felt when there is a lack of material output. How our time was spent, how our time was wasted, and how time passed through us were recurring themes over the course of the residency. As a maker of things, I still felt inclined to measure the 'success' of my time here by the objects I found in various rooms across the building and by the ephemeral material gathered from certain workshops – the likes of papers, tokens, notes, and foraged finds. I wanted to present this stuff in such a way that demonstrated evidence of a process, something like a deconstructed cabinet of curiosity.

But perhaps this missed the point of a project such as Black Holes. By its very nature, a black hole is invisible, hidden. A place where, once you get too close to its centre - its why, its raison d'être – you risk crossing a point of no return, a point where no light can escape. Perhaps the success of a residency such as this should instead be measured by the amount of safety that we felt in each others' presence, or the amount of warmth, openness, non-judgement, humour, silliness and camaraderie experienced overall.

With this, I'd like to think it won't be the full stop on my relationships with these people, that something more can be formed, built, nurtured, continued and held in such a way. It's a process that may take years to come to pass, but it's one I hope will be worth the time, energy and endurance.

Sorcha McNamara, 2022/23

Sorcha McNamara is a visual artist living and working in Mayo, Ireland. She holds a BA in Fine Art from Limerick School of Art and Design (2019) and is currently completing her MA in Art + Research Collaboration at the Institute of Art, Design & Technology, Dún Laoghaire (2022-2024). Situated somewhere between the anti-intellectual and intensely cerebral, her practice engages with deconstructive methods of painting, acts of material resourcefulness, and site-responsive drawing with objects, space and light.

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