The Queen’s Gambit was written when Walter Tevis’ previous novels were known more for their film adaptations - The Colour of Money, The Hustler and The Man Who Fell to Earth. The novel follows the life of Beth Harmon, an orphan who is discovered to be a chess prodigy, from the age of 8 through to adulthood. The book was praised for the accuracy of its portrayals of the professional chess circuit and the internal workings of the mind of a chess player (Tevis himself was a class C chess player). The screenplay of the book has had a troubled past, with Tevis himself writing a synopsis and script in 1984. Most recently Heath Ledger had been working on it as his directorial debut at the time of his death in 2008.

Portrait (for a screenplay) of Beth Harmon is an ongoing project inviting artists to read the book and is a way of expanding the character of Beth. Beth Harmon was fascinating, but she only existed on those 243 pages of the novel. Beth’s chess is subtle and intricate, like chamber music. She has a visual sense of the powers the pieces exude over the board as she moves them into place and once the rules are mastered there’s a sense of moving freely and her play becomes beautiful. In the Queen’s Gambit Walter Tevis invites us to hear Beth thinking. We are aware of how Beth’s mind is supple, reactive, alert to possibility. We are also worried for her, the fear of failure is ever-present.

In turn the exhibition becomes like Beth’s mind, a space in which reading and thinking are opened out. Each artist has responded by making a new piece. Ideas are still felt to be fresh here. The invitation to make a portrait imposes a loose framework for artists to work amongst and perhaps suggests a different approach to making. It could be a small detail from the text that provides the impetus: a metaphor of a polished diamond, a vivid creme de menthe green, a sample from the West Side Story soundtrack or a piece of clothing Beth might wear. There are also moments when we glimpse Beth’s likeness: one work imagines a casting call for her role while another briefly adopts her persona.

The works in this exhibition are an evocation of Beth Harmon, they begin to set the scene but they won’t elucidate as the blurb of a book does. They are not in themselves portraits, but studies, notes in the margins, dog-eared pages and collected Post-it notes towards the idea of a portrait. Each piece will have its own backstory. Avenues might open up, or else close in, like a tough chess game.
Participating Artists: Richard Bevan & Wolfram Wiedner, Erika Blair, Bronwen Buckeridge, Alejandro Cesarco, Alice Channer, Lucy Clout, Mike Cooter, Melanie Counsell, Haris Epaminonda, Matt Fitts, Anne Hardy, Etan Ilfeld, Lauren Keeley, Gareth Long, Sara MacKillop, Lorna Macintyre, Jonathan Monk, Madeleine Pledge, Laura Reeves, Giles Round, SMT, Hayley Tompkins, Rhianna Turnbull, Phoebe Unwin, Stuart Whipps, Lillian Wilkie