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## A Little Bit of History Repeating Itself

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## **A little bit of history repeating itself...**

*Naomi Sex* The following text pivots around a description of a field-based project I conducted entitled *A Structuring Structure*. As a visual artist, the project saw me employ a quasi-ethnographic approach. *A Structuring Structure* was a project that was produced in conjunction with a wider enquiry and an extensive body of practice-based research I engaged in. The enquiry sought to observe, define and critique aspects of the evasive and invisible character of the art world reputation-based economy. This specific project, *A Structuring Structure*, saw me gain full and unprecedented access to observe the largest and oldest selection of artworks in Ireland. It should be noted that in accordance with the negotiation process required to gain this access, the institution representing this selection process and all parties involved with

the selection process shall remain anonymous within this textual account.

The annual selection process featuring in *A Structuring Structure* does not require the usual artistic professionalistic requirements in order to submit artwork for consideration (i.e. a C.V., an artist statement, or a written proposal). The selection process is over two hundred years old and famously re-enacts the salon-style selection processes of the nineteenth century. In this text, I will describe the process I witnessed making reference to the extensive still documentation I captured and the sound transcribed material I recorded and transcribed.<sup>1</sup>

In order to frame this observation, I will use the theories of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, in particular his theories in relation to the field of artistic power and the forms of capital that fuel that field. In terms of describing the critical and conceptual outcomes of making such an observation I will conclude this text using the above theoretical framing and by making periodic and brief reference to a previous artistic project I conducted entitled *The Gatekeeper Project* which is linked conceptually to *A Structuring Structure*. *The Gatekeeper Project* was a project I curated which enabled a close study and form of interface between a group of formal, academically-trained artists whom I invited to show work alongside more informal, non-academically-trained artists at a event held at the railings of a Dublin city centre park, i.e. this was a typical event where professional artists showed alongside amateur artists (see naomi-sex.com project entitled *The Gatekeeper Project* for more details). Referring to these various practice-based and theoretical elements to form a conclusion to the account, I aim to note a co-dependent relationship between informal art practices, that is, amateur art practices and the more formal professional art practices featured both in *The Gatekeeper Project* and the observation described in the selection process contained in *A Structuring Structure*. Theoretically this conclusion will be aided by the work of Bourdieu and will conclude with the theories of the more contemporary artist and activist Gregory Sholette.

In his publication titled *The Rules of Art*, Bourdieu elaborates on the specific conditions of the artistic and literary field (citing Flaubert as an example). In this regard, Bourdieu refers to a “circle of belief” or a circle of value that is generated over time around the habitus. Within the

contemporary sense and in relation to my research, this “circle,” as Bourdieu terms it, could be subsumed by the term ‘reputation’ and the circle/field that Bourdieu refers to as “an economy.” Bourdieu states:

The sociology of art and literature has to take as its object not only the material production but also the symbolic production of the work, i.e., the production of the value of the work or, which amounts to the same thing, of belief in the value of the work. It therefore has to consider as contributing to the production not only of the direct producers of the work in its materiality (artist, writer, etc.) but also the producers of the meaning and value of the work—critics, publishers, gallery directors and the whole set of agents whose combined efforts produce consumers.<sup>2</sup>

Following this line of thinking, and reflecting on the wider frame of reference in accordance with what Bourdieu states above, i.e., the significance of the structures that bring together value assigners, I sought to capture a sample of such a structure from the field of artistic power, which, as Bourdieu states, works as “a manifestation of the field as a whole, in which all the powers of the field, and all the determinisms inherent in its structure and functioning, are concentrated.”<sup>3</sup> The space I sought out was and is a key exhibiting structure within the Irish art context, one with a history that echoes in the international story of the art academies and the salon shows of nineteenth-century Europe. It operates in many ways as a micro-economy within its own set of parameters and systems.

Once a year this key structure holds an annual exhibition made up of its membership, associate membership, an invited cohort of usually international counterpart members from similar organisations and, most significantly, a large selection of artworks that come from an enormous application of works made to the organisation by a wide cross-section of the artistic habitus. The membership is made up of a group of artists who have gained prestige and various levels of success throughout their careers and who have gone through a series of formal procedures to be elected to the organisation’s membership. Within the membership, there is an elected, titled and defined hierarchy of members who carry out various duties in the running of the organisation, including an elected president, secretary,

1. The full body of transcribed material, which is referred to in this text is available on request from the author, contact Naomi. Sex@dit.ie

2. Bourdieu, P. *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, translated by S. Emanuel, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 37.

3. Ibid.

keeper, treasurer, etc. In accordance with this hierarchy, at formal and official gatherings, the membership wears robes which decoratively and symbolically match their position within the membership. An example of one of these formal occasions is the prize-giving ceremony, which is organised to coincide with the annual exhibition (see naomi-sex.com, project entitled *A Structuring Structure*).

The organisation's art historical context and direct connection with the salons of Europe is pertinent in accordance with the theories of Bourdieu who in *The Rules of Art* refers directly to the mechanics and power that the artistic salons yield. He writes that they are not only places where like-minded artists can come together and become highly organised around their individual forms of practice, but that they also make real "through direct interactions, the continuity from one of the fields of power to the other."<sup>4</sup> In this regard, the organisation's membership and board is made up of representatives of many fields of discipline, including writers, political figures, architects, etc. Cast in the analysis theories of Bourdieu, it is a site of high concentration and volume of social capital. I will return to this point as I describe and unfold the narrative of the project with the aid of the sound transcriptions I produced in conjunction with the selection process.

4. Ibid. 51.

Having reflected on the significance of this annual event in the art world calendar and the kind of value it could bring to my broader enquiry, I contacted the organisation's curator in order to gain permission to observe the selection processes for the annual exhibition of its membership. As it turned out this was an unprecedented request, which then had to go through a formal procedure and an in-depth negotiation process in order for the organisation to grant me the permission.<sup>5</sup> The outcome of this negotiation was positive and I was given permission to conduct an observation of the process on day one of a three-day process. I was also given permission to observe and document the entire preparation for the event, including the hand-in day of artworks, the selection process (just over one day as cited above), the hanging of the artworks in the space and the opening of the event, including the prize-giving ceremony.

5. N.B. To gain permission to use the data collected after the observation and the whole negotiation of the project from beginning to end spanned a three-year period of time.

To set the scene, so to speak, I will footnote a summary of the initial stages of my official observation of the event.<sup>6</sup> The part of the process of

6. On arrival, the

specific relevance to my work and research was the actual selection process itself. It occurred a full week after the hand-in of work. Arriving early at the organisation on the third day of the selection, I was brought to the interim reception space (as described in the footnotes); here there were two rows of chairs awaiting the selection panel that day. The chairs had been placed in two rows by the same team of technical staff who assisted in the hand-in process. I brought sound recording equipment and two cameras in an attempt to capture as much visual/aural information as I could. The panel of members arrived at approximately 10am and took their chairs. The full group was made up of eleven members, seven men and four women, with a minimum estimated age of approximately fifty years old. One of the members of the panel was known to me and began to introduce me to the rest of the panel and took me through the structure of the selection process; he also assisted me with my recording equipment. In terms of the selection process structure, as evidenced in the visual documentation on the website accompanying this submission, the technical staff (wearing white gloves) formed a queue working in alphabetical order taking works from the titled gallery space (see note six) into the interim space, and then taking it in turns to place each work on a large rectangular table lined with protective packaging material. This table was then placed in front of the seated panel.

When an artwork was placed on the table, a vote of initial interest was required for a vote to be taken by the entire panel. If there was no interest in the work from any members of the panel, the work was recorded as 'unaccepted' by the administrator present. It was explained to me that for the sake of diplomacy, the word 'unaccepted' was used instead of 'rejected'. When artworks were placed on the table, a member of the panel called for a vote. The work then required a majority of the panel to vote for it in order for it to be 'accepted'. This meant that at least 10 out of 11 of the panel needed to be in favour of the piece for it to be accepted. If the piece received a maximum of nine out of 11 votes, it was placed in what was called the 'possible' category, which meant it would be put in another category of work, which would go through a second viewing at a later stage in the day.

The day was split into a number of sessions. [...] Session 1 is a session after the morning coffee break, held in the well-lit interim space as cited

curator met me and explained that the annual membership show is the only event which is not a curated exhibition and operates as a separate entity from the other programme of events (which presumably, as one of the head curators, she is more involved in). She then showed me the layout of the gallery space where the main activity took place for the selection process. As evidenced in the documentation shots, the space is a pristine exhibiting space which, as one enters, is met by a main rectangular reception area, with all surfaces mainly white polished or reflective surfaces. To the right of the reception there is a corridor which to its left leads to a medium-sized rectangular gallery space. This space is named after one of the organisation's members. To the right of the reception corridor there is access into an interim space which connects to another rectangular medium-sized gallery space directly to the right of it. The interim space has windows to its left and is filled with natural light, unlike the other showing spaces. It works as another reception area and contains a large dominant staircase, at the left-hand side of which is access to two main, much larger gallery spaces upstairs. After this initial introduction to the spaces and the event, the curator returned to her duties for that day, which seemed to be to assist with the presentation of the event. I settled into the observation period.

At this stage of the process, I was in day two of the handing-in of artworks by the artistic habitus. To cater for this stage of the process, the organisation hired a team of technical and (what seemed like) highly experienced staff who were on hand to help both the administrative staff and the individuals submitting artworks. The hand-in occurred in the main reception area, where a number of tables had been placed by administration staff responsible for accepting the artworks. The tables formed a line to the reception. In front of the line, three orderly queues of individuals holding their artworks remained passing through for the entire time of my observation. As I noted above, to enter a work for consideration, the professionalistic apparatus was not required. However, as I observed, a payment was made for each work and a name and details of the work, i.e., its title, price and medium were recorded by the administration staff who processed those details and then handed the submitted artwork to one of the various technicians who then alphabetically stacked the work in one of two spaces allocated for the purpose. The first was the named rectangular gallery space to the left of reception, the other was in the basement of the gallery space, a large dark windowless space which I will refer to in further detail as I describe my observation of the selection process. As I noted in my field notes

in the footnotes; Session 2 was recorded after lunch in the basement of the gallery space as cited in the footnotes, and Session 3 was held back again in the interim space and was the shorter session at the end of the day, evidencing the second viewing of the ‘possible’ category referred to above.

If casting the panel (made up of the organisation’s membership) using Bourdieu’s conceptual thinking tools, my research could bracket the selection panel as possessors of a high concentration of what Bourdieu refers to as “social capital.”

[...]

Social capital works in a more elusive manner and cannot be as quickly identified or nailed down as cultural capital. On a pragmatic research level, for example, if conducting a questionnaire or looking at an artist’s CV, it would be difficult to pinpoint levels of social capital. Bourdieu uses the term to categorise a kind of value that comes from the complex network and world of social connections, for example, being well connected to influential persons or groups of people who may have influential sway in the field of power. In this regard he says that social capital is “made up of social obligations (“connections”), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalised in the form of a title of nobility.”<sup>7</sup> In the case of the selection panel above, this definition can neatly be assigned to them as they were all given individual titles of nobility, assigned to them by the organisation—based on the organisation’s micro-economy and structural hierarchy, for example, president, treasurer, etc. I could observe the social connectivity quite literally on the day, in that the group were obviously well known to each other and seemed comfortable referring to each other on a first name basis, keenly aware of each other’s opinions, knowledge of the field and each other’s practices throughout the process.

[...]

I want to return to what Bourdieu refers to as a circle of belief that is generated around an artist. Similar to the character of social capital, this works in an elusive manner. How is it possible to reveal and capture what one influential person says about an artist casually or informally among a group of other influential people? It’s the kind of activity that is often made

reference to in the art world but not in any concrete manner. Having the permission to record and transcribe the panel’s selection process meant that in terms of this informal discursive activity, this project became enabled—generating an entity and a text and image-based object, which works as an actual document of this evasive informal discourse.

In Sessions 1, 2 and 3, it is evident that the panel and the technical staff have a good working relationship and that all parties involved have a good knowledge of the processes and stages of the event. The panel is cordial, with the staff members remaining friendly and engaged at all stages throughout the day. There is a sense that everybody has done this before and that nothing too unexpected in the proceedings will take place, with everything being conducted in an orderly manner. With regard to the selection process, throughout the day, the panel consistently ask the technical support or the administrator whom the artist is that they are viewing. The process is not promoted or advertised publicly as an anonymous selection of artwork, nor is it made known to its applicants that the name of the artist will be referred to during the selection process. The anonymity of the process remained a grey area of discussion when I asked the curator on the day of the observation. The name of the artist is placed on a discreet label, which is attached to the back of every artwork submitted. The name is not always visible; however, this information seems to be an orientating yardstick in which begins a discourse around the piece, eventually leading to a selection decision. At no point does the panel select a work for exhibition where they do not make the name of the artist known to themselves—in other words, they never accept an artwork anonymously. In some cases one member of the panel or of the technical or administrative staff will know more than the rest of the panel about the artist once the work comes up for consideration or once the name of the artist has been called out.<sup>8</sup>

In relation to one male artist whose work was considered, in Session 1, one panel member admired the work and was informed by the technical staff that the artist “won a prize last year.” This is an aural indication of the artist’s relationship with the organisation. A coupling of both social capital and cultural capital can be observed, where the artist has previous

and the documentation shots of the process, the technicians handled all of the submitted artworks using white gloves. By the end of this first phase of my observation, the room (in particular the named gallery space) became full of submitted artworks, becoming a viewing spectacle in itself.

7. Bourdieu, The Forms of Capital, in J. Richardson, ed. Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education, (New York: Greenwood, 1986).

8. It should be noted that in accordance with keeping all parties involved in the selection process anonymous, in the transcribed material cited below M denotes a male member of the selection panel, W denotes a female

member of the selection panel and S denotes a Staff member of the organization—all artists and details of their works remain unnamed and not detailed in any way that will aid in identifying the artist who produced them.

connections with the selection process and has not only been accepted by the panel previously but has also achieved the accolade of a prize (boasting his cultural capital). This reminder given by the technician reaffirms the panel members' initial observation of the work and the piece is voted on. One panel member reveals a wider frame of reference in relation to an artist's practice, stating: "He's been doing large drawings for years." Later on in the session, in relation to a female artist, a member of the panel asked: "Who's that?" then answers himself, stating the artist's name and then asks if anyone is interested in voting, saying: "Anyone interested? No?" Another panel member asks: "Do you know her?" and the first panel member remarks, "I do, yeah, she's nice." Although the above may be slight instances evidencing social capital, again in Session 1 there is considerable discursive activity around one applicant who is socially known to the members of the panel and who is himself a member of a related artistic members' organisation:

M: Who's this artist?

M: This is (artist's name).

M: It's very beautiful.

M: He's very good.

M: He is very good, yeah.

M: He's in (names other well-known members' organisation).<sup>9</sup>

W: They are absolutely gorgeous.

S: Okay, we'll vote on this piece here?

In the following discussion, again in Session 1, it becomes clear that the artist in question, whose work comes up for consideration, has been written about in a popular mainstream Irish newspaper, so again a social network of connectivity can be observed. One panel member informs the rest of the panel as follows:

M: Seen that before didn't we?

M: Seen two of his before.

M: There was a feature on him in last Saturday's (names newspaper).

M: A piece on him in the (name of newspaper)?

M: Yeah last Saturday, magazine.

S: (artist's name).

9. This other members' organization is state-funded with a proportion of the membership receiving an annual stipend once they become a member.



SURE,  
YEAH

M: I like that.

M: It's nice.

M: Give it a vote.

S: Four, five, six possible.

In Session 2 in the afternoon, which took place in the basement, as the transcribed material evidences, it took some time before the panel and the technical staff got themselves organised for this session. In general, it was a far more uncomfortable setup and the panel members on several occasions complained about the poor visibility of the work and how cold it was in the space. The basement was large, with numerous cubicles of work, some of which was part of the submitted works for the annual exhibition, but there were also other artworks of members in storage. The process in the afternoon was much the same as the morning session except for slight levels of impatience around the poor conditions and the coldness of the space. In Session 2 another artist is noted by the technician as an artist who took part in the organisation's alternate curatorial programme as follows:

S: She's been up already, (name of artist).

M: Oh that's a beautiful painting, she's a very good painter this girl, (name of artist).

S: Do you go along with that?

M: Sure, yeah.

S: (Artist's name) was in the (name of contemporary curated show) and...

W: I like that.

The above gives an interesting insight into the cross-section of the artistic habitus that submit work for this annual members' exhibition. As an exhibition, it is generally perceived as a show that is more inclined towards traditional artistic ideals. However, the artist noted above is an example of an artist who took part in one of the organisation's curated exhibitions (N.B. see footnotes—the curator informed me other programmes of exhibitions operate separately to this annual selection event). This separately programmed curated exhibition consists of a highly selective grouping of artists; it is widely regarded as an exhibition that aims to promote and forefront the cream of the Irish contemporary artistic crop. In my

observation, artists belonging to these select groupings were a common occurrence; I also observed several works submitted by members of the informally self-taught artistic habitus who took part in the survey included in for *The Gatekeeper Project*. This informal work was also observed by one of the panel members in Session 2 when she makes reference to an artwork that she knows has been made by an artist who shows at the railing events as follows:

W: Fresh off the railings.<sup>10</sup>

Reflecting on this annual selection process, it becomes clear that it serves as a large filtering structure and barometer for a wide field of the artistic habitus—contemporary, traditional, formally taught, self-taught, etc.

In Session 2 held in the afternoon, there was greater concern voiced around the quantity of works being accepted. One of the panel members seemed to be responsible for taking note of each work that was accepted. At one point in the afternoon he announced the following: “We have exactly 100 selected.” This was followed by another panel member asking: “How many should we have?” He answered: “A hundred and sixty-seven was last year.” He reminded the panel on several occasions throughout the day about the total number of works accepted. The second viewing of works in the ‘possible’ category occurred at the very end of the day and was a fast-paced and much more vocal session. The panel member above (responsible for keeping track of accepted works) began Session 3 by again updating the rest of the panel on how many works had been selected so far. In the ‘possible’ category, the selection rules change and the voting system requires only a majority to be accepted. As evidenced in the transcribed material, there is a much more assertive approach towards the selection of works. For example, one panel member declares: “I want that, I want that in, I want that in folks, come on.” In the ‘possible’ category, the panel members are keenly aware of the new voting system and more vocal about what works they want in and more definite second time round on seeing the works and deciding whether or not it should be accepted as the following reveals:

M: The possibles is a great category, you know, when you look at it again?

As well as sound and visual recording in my field observation, I

attempted to construct a calculation over the course of one hour to attain a measure of the decision time taken over each work. This hour of close observation took place in the morning in the interim space: one hundred and fifty-seven works were viewed, and out of this one hundred and twenty-two works were ‘unaccepted,’ twenty-one were placed in the ‘possible’ category, and a total of fourteen were accepted to show. Having timed each decision in that hour, I could calculate that the average time spent making their decision worked out at approximately 14.4 seconds, with the accepted works taking the longest to decide over, at approximately 24.5 seconds. According to my own field notes and experience, the process is intensive and exhausting, and is required to be done over three days. On a practical level, the panel needs to move through the work quickly. That year they were required to view two thousand seven hundred works. At several times throughout the transcribed material, the panel members make reference to how much work they had already viewed; they did this by asking what letter of the alphabet they were on—in other words, how much work they still needed to do.<sup>11</sup> What helped in the speed of the process is that there was no paperwork—as stated at the beginning of this text, it is a process that does not require professionalistic paperwork, which usually consists of a number of documents that would need to be read in relation to each work. What I observed, however, is that even though no actual CV was submitted with the work, an aural CV of sorts was given informally with the works of interest to the panel, i.e., panel members or staff inform the other panel members as to where certain artists were based, what prizes they may have won, other shows they were in, etc. As evidenced in the summary above, this continual reference to aspects of social and cultural capital was pivotal in arriving at a selecting decision.

Most of the works that were unaccepted did not even attain a vote and in some cases in the sound recordings the artists who produced works like this (ones that were quickly processed with no votes) were generally unknown artists to the panel and their works were often met and described in a negative or ironically disparaging manner as follows:

M: Look at the eye socket.

M: Well, it’s a powerful statement, there’s no doubt about that.

10. Ed. The author here refers to the regular outdoor exhibitions where paintings and drawings are attached to the railings at St Stephen’s Green and Merrion Square in Dublin. These are largely informal and amateur associations.

11. The artworks were stored and viewed alphabetically.



M: Too powerful a statement.

M: Yeah, too powerful.

Another example taken from the transcribed recordings is as follows:

W: Oh dear.

M: He's scary.

And in the 'possible' category session, the panel members became more vocal in this regard, as follows:


W: Dear God.

In actual fact, as my calculations and research reveal, it is extremely difficult to achieve acceptance through this selection process. That year (2010) a total of two thousand seven hundred works were submitted, and from the open selection process described above, two hundred and sixty-six pieces were accepted over the course of the three days. That meant that a total of two thousand four hundred and thirty-four artworks were unaccepted by the panel. The curator informed me that many of the same artists submit works year in, year out, never gaining acceptance. It seems like an illogical pursuit when one takes into account what the chances are of a piece being accepted. When the selection process was completed, all accepted works were placed on large pallets for the hanging of the show.

The unaccepted work was placed back in the rectangular gallery space. How to define an artwork in this storage space after its official exclusion from the show awaiting collection?

Is it reduced merely to material and object? It has passed through an average 14.4 seconds of decisive consideration where a potential of worth could have swayed in its favour, but stacked here its value is undefined. In terms of the collection day for the unaccepted works, I was asked to be sensitive with regard to how I photographed applicants collecting their works, as many of the individuals found the collection of their essentially rejected artworks came with a stigma of inferiority, and found it humiliating. In most of the photographs I took the individual faces of people were cropped because of the terms of negotiation I made with the organisation.

Casting this high number of rejected works in the theories of Bourdieu, with regard to his particular reference to the power of the artistic and literary salons, he asserts: "Thus it is that the salons, which distinguish



IT'S NICE

12. Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, 53.

13. Bourdieu, P. *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, edited and with an introduction by R. Johnson, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 30.

themselves more by whom they exclude than by whom they include, help to structure the literary field.”<sup>12</sup> As posited by Bourdieu above, if cast in his theories it could be argued that the small number of accepted works is irrelevant to the organisation’s status in the field and instead it is the large number of unaccepted or rejected artworks that reinforces the position of this organisation within its field of power. In his other publication, *The Field of Cultural Production*, he states: “The literary or artistic field is a field of forces, but it is also a field of struggles tending to transform or conserve the field of forces.”<sup>13</sup> When observing the high number of unaccepted works that every year passes through the selection process above, noting the humiliated feelings of the artists as they collect their works, this could relate to the “struggle” Bourdieu refers to. In a sense, the annual ‘unacceptance’ becomes a conditioned, ritualised struggle, which is sustained. This is true with regard to a process, which has managed to sustain itself for over two hundred years, attracting high numbers of applicants every year. Reflecting simply on the economics of this ritual: for each work that is submitted a fee was applied for administrative costs—€10.00 per work. This gives the members’ organisation a significant income of €27,000 before the show opens its doors to a general buying public. On this level alone, the advantage of sustaining the annual event’s allure for the vast number of unaccepted applicants becomes clearer.

Historically, as the *Salon Des Refusés* exemplifies, the selection of art is a highly contentious and sensitive dynamic. Reflecting on the tone of the discourse of the panel cited above referring more negatively and sarcastically to the works that are not selected, and then the sensitivity of the unaccepted hand-back day cited above, there is justice in the seemingly psychological feeling of inferiority felt by many individuals whose works were unaccepted—their works were deemed inadequate by the panel, and in most cases this view is not articulated verbally or even voted on. For a process that is two hundred years old, this social pattern is set.

[...]

However, if considering Bourdieu’s theories of the field and looking at this scenario conversely, one could actually reveal a type of veiled, hidden dependency in the relationship the organisation, its members and this

selection process has with its large cohort of annual unaccepted applicants.

In relation to this veiled dependence, I will conclude the outcome of the above project by referring to the theories of the contemporary commentator, Gregory Sholette. In and his text entitled *Dark Matter*, in which he refers to “informal” art practices, saying they should be recognised for their “oppositional charge,” which he claims is often “hidden in *Dark Matter’s* gravitational field.”<sup>14</sup> Elaborating further on this perspective, he teases out the relationship between the formal art world and the more informal practices of what he calls “hobbyists” and “failed artists,” which to a certain extent could be assigned to the large cohort of annual unaccepted applicants above. Sholette rhetorically asks what would happen if this form of practice simply disappeared?<sup>15</sup> To answer his question, he refers to a study conducted at Columbia College of Chicago, entitled *The Informal Arts: Finding Cohesion, Capacity and Other Cultural Benefits in Unexpected Places* (2002). Sholette quotes the paper as follows:

The formal and informal arts operate on a two-way continuum upon which information, personal financial benefits and other resources flow back and forth... the informal arts create employment for the professionally working artists, play a “research and development” role, and provide knowledge and committed audiences for the formal arts sector.<sup>16</sup>

Sholette elaborates on the above findings, going as far as to assert that there is a real ‘co-dependency’ that is hidden, yet it bridges the two forms of practice. He points out that informal practices provide employment for the formally trained artists in a variety of ways. He takes into consideration the price of materials, such as paints and canvas, and how the price remains competitive because of sustained interest from informal practices benefiting formal practices. Referring to the study above, Sholette surmises that the “pejorative associations embodied in words such as amateur, unskilled, and dilettante” will require a radical shift in the thinking by those “who mould cultural values,” meaning a changed “emphasis away from a reverence for collectible objects and brand names” and “towards the far more ephemeral practices of creative activity itself.”<sup>17</sup> He proposes that this shift would mean a monumental challenge to the “very heart of the modern art market and its

14. Sholette, G. ‘Dark Matter’, in J. R. Hall, B. Stimson and L. T. Becker, eds. *Visual Worlds*, (London: Routledge, 2005), 98.

15. Ibid. 96.

16. Wali, A, Severson, R. and Tongoni, M. *Informal Arts: Finding Cohesion, Capacity and other Cultural Benefits in Unexpected Places*, Research Report to the Chicago Center for Arts Policy at Columbia College, (June 2002), cited in Sholette, ‘Dark Matter’, 97.

17. Sholette, ‘Dark Matter’, 98.

roots in capitalist society dating back at least to the eighteenth century.”<sup>18</sup>

To conclude, looking again at the selection process I observed with reference to Sholette’s activist propositions in mind, criticism could be applied to a process that continues to re-stage its ceremonial selection process every year, which for all intents and purposes operates as a foregone conclusion: not officially, or perhaps even consciously, but it can’t be denied that by using barometers of social and cultural capital, in many occasions given as a form of aural CV, the selection panel already know what types of practice will be included in their exhibition and what types of practice will not. In accordance with Bourdieu and Sholette’s theories, this selection process needs its cohort of participants, not so much the successful ones, but the failed ones more so—it needs them not only financially but also psychologically in order to bolster its structural position and adequacy within a moving, changing field of power. If the panel truly wanted to make its event all-inclusive, which in many ways it purports to do (by not requiring the professionalistic paperwork usually required for the submission of artworks), the work could be viewed by a panel made up of external members and/or viewing the works anonymously over a much longer time frame.

Having said that, the procedures of this event do offer a refreshing dynamic where work is viewed and evaluated in the real, not through a screen like most documentation of artwork is viewed and evaluated within the contemporary art world. As evidenced in the transcribed material, there is a healthy discursiveness that takes place around much of the work submitted, one that may not articulate itself using a highly critical vernacular. On the other hand, this discursiveness is refreshing, in that it is fluid and not overly mindful of a political awareness common in the professionalised contemporary art world.