

A project proposal

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Abstract

This is a proposal for a conceptual art work that effects a critique of the Open Call Competition as it impacts on the class of emergent artists. The conceptual approach is emphasised by the use of unplayed National Lottery scratch cards as the sole medium of value transfer in the project. At all times, before being awarded to winners in the competition, these remain unscratched and unevaluated. The judges and curators in the competition will be required to accept reimbursement of expenses in the same terms.

Keywords: conceptual art, lottery, open competition, scratch cards

Background and Context

The economic events of 2008 have closed down many sources of funding for the Arts and (adding in the UK the added impact of university education fees debt) sharpened a desire for recognition among artists coming through art colleges.

The open art competition has long been perceived of as a route towards recognition and acceptance, the Royal Academy of Arts has run a summer competition since 1769: however the Impressionists and Fauvists of the 19c saw themselves as being disadvantaged by an existing art establishment in control of the Paris Salon. We study the principal actors in this format.

To start with, we have the entrants in a competition. These will typically be recently trained, artists coming out of art college, or possibly still students; they can be called emergent, and are definitely not in representation arrangements with galleries.

Facing these entrants are judges. These are busy ambitious people and artists with their own practice: in the case of the Royal Academy, these are establishment figures in the British Art world. The 2014 Summer Show will be capped at 12,000 entries from which a long list of 4,000 are to be delivered to London and will be judged in their physical form.

Where the work will be exhibited a curating team will take an overall lead in selecting work to fit the advertised scope of the competition, the traditions of the gallery and the

physical placement of the selected work in the gallery. These curators have their own practice and in addition have a knowledge of locations in which art may be shown.

Working closely with curators we have professional gallery owners or managers of publicly run exhibition spaces. These people are looking for results, even commercial success and sales or non-commercial measures of success such as audience feedback and public footfall.

Competitions without a long historical tradition may be brought into existence by professional curators wishing to extend their knowledge of the players in the market by advertising open calls for new work.

A critical factor for the emergent artist is that the judging process be blind, that is to say that the identity of the artist is not known at the point of judging the value of the work. It must be accepted that to the judge the value of knowing the artists name and background will help situate the judge's view of the value of the work. To a curator or potential gallerist the value of the artist's identity and CV will help establish a commercial success of a show based on work. We therefore have a contradiction between the unknown emerging artist and a judging community which wishes to make judgements based on known values.

There are clear expenses in the selection process for a competition and research shows that in 2012, 32% of open calls made a fee charge. There is a real debate about the ethics of a publicly funded gallery making charges for submission of works to a call. Jonathan Parsons (ASPEX, 2013) notes that the public funding can extend to the curation and display of works but if it were to be expected to cover the judging process the funds would quickly run out. It can be reasonably expected that the submission rate for a free call will be higher and thereby increase the load on the judges.

As a counterexample we might reference a call by the Cartazini Gallery. In this example the judges of the competition reduced their work load by formulating the call, in its first round to a lottery based on a random selection of email addresses submitted by potential entrants (Cartazini, 2013).

Even before the economic collapses of 2008 the gap between artist's earnings and earnings in the arts industry was widening to the detriment of artists. Research, quoted in (Jones, 2013) "shows that full-time earnings in the arts have risen by 6.8% in the last five years, while part-time earnings – one might surmise these to include freelancers and artists – have decreased by 5.3%." Some voices would express opinions that an element of sharp practice has entered this field (Bamberger, 2011).

A natural application of *caveat emptor* will mean that an artist should examine the credentials of a calling gallery or calling organisation with some idea as to the likelihood that her work is first relevant to the call, secondly suited to the named judges and thirdly the gallery is known to show work similar to the artist. A blind judging process and the level of the submission fee are important secondary concerns.

The Internet has made it possible to reach out to artists In common with other lines of business and advertise open calls. The physical exhibition of selected work has been joined by websites that offer on-line exhibition or commercial opportunities to display work for sale on commission.

A valid question attaches to the effectiveness of these channels, this will depend on the brand value of the website offerings. For instance Saatchi Online offers facilities for the display and marketing of individual artists' work (Saatchi Online, 2013). There are many similar, overall there must be limits to the success of these. In any case the ability of the artist to 'game' the search engine through keywords and tags on these sites and to guide a buyer to their own display is key to any individual success.

The Szpilman Award (Szpilman Award, 2013) sought submissions of ephemeral artwork, "works that exist only for a moment or a short period of time" . This author responded by submitting (Fosco Fornio, 2013) an unplayed lottery ticket and a supporting statement to cause the judges, in an instant to note the critique of the open competition and their fleeting anticipation before exercising the card. This was not a successful submission.

Proposal

To an emergent artist the Open Competition may seem akin to a lottery: there is the sense of paying money out to receive a rejection note which is paralleled in the hope expressed in purchase of a lottery ticket and the disappointment of the declaration of the draw. The proposal is to make a conceptual art work in the establishing and execution of a democratic and egalitarian Open Competition funded on the putative value of unplayed "virginal" UK National Lottery scratch cards. In detail, the submission fee for this competition will be made by the entrant purchasing a required number of these cards and sending them, untouched with the artwork for judging. At no stage while the cards are held, in escrow by the organisers, will the cards be played or in anyway defaced. The judges and curators will agree to accept recompense for their services in an agreed proportion of the submitted cards. There will be a blind judging process from which a list of winners will be drawn. The prizes for the competition will also be made as unplayed cards. The cards must be seen to retain the contingent value at which they were purchased until the prize winners, the judges and curators individually exercise their option to scratch them privately. Any winnings from these awarded tickets are not of interest to this project.

Objectives

We see three distinct objectives targeted at the different participants and applicable at differing times in the process. Initially, we are making a critique of the way in which

emergent artists must submit to an arbitrary judgement on their work which may be based on factors beyond the objective quality of the submitted work. Second, we are inviting the professional and established artists, judges and curators to engage in the same lottery as the entrants. Third, the selected prize winners will be required to measure material success in the same contingent terms as all other participants, the recognition of the objective value of the work cannot be diminished. A fuller discussion of the intention and value of these outcomes follows.

Research Design and Methods

The design of this project will have a large number of serial dependencies and these are presented in the order that can be foreseen at this moment. We separate these into concerns of team building, logistics and delivery; it is as well to be aware that the team-building step will bring forward judging and curatorial strengths which will affect the final shape of the project.

Team Building

In as much as this project sets out a critique of the Open Call it may be perceived as a criticism of the arts establishment. It will be essential in all the ‘selling’ steps below to defuse these perceptions. Some early choice of a sympathetic ear, an establishment ‘insider’, will help in the creation of an alternative network and may make or break this project.

Within this tangle of interests, the relationship of established artists as judges with venues and curators will need to be balanced. A key point here is the perceived quality of the venue and of selection by respected judges: these have an authentic worth in terms of their contribution to a winner’s curriculum vitae. As organisers, we must reach for the highest quality within the scope of our personal network to extend our network as far as possible: a possibility exists to make an early call for judges and curators who are receptive to this structure. The selection process here will be greatly driven by issues of curriculum vitae and is in no sense a blind decision.

Although the judges and curators will have material living costs, they may be amenable to joining in this venture for more or less altruistic reasons to offset these. On the other hand the venue being a commercial organisation and with corporate accounts is least likely to view the contingent value of a lottery scratch as useful. It is possible that we will need the persuasive powers of an established artist to win around their representing gallery.

The judges and curators and the venue will be *ex officio* members of the consortium. The proportions for the division of the lottery tickets between winners and *ex officio* members will need to be decided.

Logistics

A legal study should be undertaken to check if there are any problems with the use of National Lottery Tickets and or whether the competition can be incorporated in such a way as to guard against litigation. We will develop the terms and conditions for the competition, the entrants will be required to sign off on these. The terms and conditions will likely be used to formulate any legal entity that may be required to handle disputes.

Delivery

A decision on the theme and any title of the competition and then as to media to be submitted will be driven by the expertise of the judges and curators, the organisers will defer to this level of knowledge.

With these factors in place, the organisers can price the entrance fee in multiples of £2 lottery tickets and the choice of lottery game to mandate; set a timescale for the call and judging process against a known exhibition opening date

At this point we will make a call on well known sites, e.g. A-N and Wooloo. In addition to the entrants accepting terms and conditions, the entry form will contain a questionnaire which explores the entrants's motives in joining the competition: among other things to assess the perceived value in the judging panel and the venue. Other questions need preparation to understand entrants' response to submission fees.

The competition will need to be run and a selectors panel convened after the closing date. The winners should be notified and their allocation of tickets mailed to them. We are from this point in the more familiar territory of setting up a physical show.

We should analyse the questionnaires and report any significant findings in e.g. Artists' Newsletter.

Outcomes

Major milestones are first, the identification of the professional partners in this scheme. Within 4 weeks of inception.

Next, the formulation of the 'rule book' and the design of the 'call to artists' and questionnaire. This may proceed in parallel with the above but with the intention of absorbing as much professional advice as possible. About 4 weeks elapsed and completed about 6 weeks after inception.

Last, the call at 7 weeks after inception and declaration of result at 10 weeks.

Value

The beneficial outcomes that may be anticipated in this project may all be judged educational and formative: initial descriptions of this project were described as complex and, or the project itself was complex. The present formulation of the plan will make headway against that criticism, while identifying the points of needless complexity or moving towards being able to better express the plan and to move its ‘sale’ onwards.

Selling a conceptual artwork to potential gallerists and judges is a novel experience for emergent artists who may have never actually sold a physical artwork.

The characterisation of Open Calls as lotteries would be all too apt unless some participant in this project were to win a prize. It may be significant to note Osborne, 2010 who has made a different use of Lottery Tickets *Fig : 1.* .



Figure 1: Alice in Lotto Land, ©Rosa Osborne 2010

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