

# Critical Moss

## Art as Independence



**Aldobranti**



# **Critical Moss**

**Art As Independence**

**a study and photo-fable**

**Aldobranti**

**2020**

**foreword**

In preparation this book was already considering the challenges facing artists responding to geographic distances in their practice before the expression ‘social distancing’ had some currency. For a little while during the Covid-19 pandemic the Art World might suspend its activities and take a cold hard look at itself.

A choice to make work at a distance from the Art World, be this a geographical distance or in an intellectual stance will involve some gains and some costs. This book will explore the structures of that world and may help an artist set on such a move. This may also interest those who have already made such a choice and confirm for them their thoughts and conclusions about those same structures.

This study leans heavily on the sociological contribution of Pierre Bourdieu to an understanding of the Art World, in his terms the Field of Art. Times have changed since Balzac, quoted by Bourdieu [Rules of Art, 1996] could write ‘[the artist] does not follow the rules. He imposes them ...he is always the expression of a great thought and he dominates society’. This study thus argues strongly for a recognition of the capital intensive institutions of the Art World which increasingly drive towards a market economy and so place the individual artist at the base of a food chain.

In any change by the artist there will be a process of taking stock and making a fresh evaluation of the artist’s resources and requirements. The contribution of Bourdieu’s analysis will be to explore and name the relative worth of the artist’s social and cultural capital set against the raw economic force of institutional players in the Field.



## the Critical Moss project

This project began with a question: In the absence of some *critical mass* of local artists how is it that an artist can function without the conversation, critical discourse and the flow of ideas that comes from face-to-face meeting? The findings of an initial survey of nearly 100 artists from 15 countries are published as the book ‘Critical Moss: art beyond the bubble’ [2]; that title reflecting the aphorism that a rolling stone gathers no moss. The aphorism is taken to mean that decisive action must be taken in difficult circumstances to avoid stagnation. The term bubble, a restricted society of people who live and think alike, and rarely venture from, here is a shorthand for the metropolitan bubble, perceived to be insular and self-absorbed.

The term ‘the Art World’ is used freely in this text to describe a social milieu where art is a major currency, where an artist’s success may be developed; and for the UK at least, the Art World is metropolitan in its character meaning London and the major cities. Engagement with the Art World requires investment of time and energy and while the internet makes communication easier the fundamental requirement is to get into face to face conversation with the other actors in the world. Artists who train in a metropolitan art school may remain in the city to develop their place in the art world but in the final analysis costs of accommodation will drive them out. Once they move beyond the suburbs transport costs are prohibitive and the question of what it is to be an artist must be answered. At this point the separation from the Art World may feel like an exclusion and that former contacts have retreated within the bubble.

This text moves on to investigate the reality of a life as an artist outside the bubble and a choice to minimise dependencies on and expectations of a metropolitan art world. The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu[8]<sup>i</sup> provided a framework for a discussion of the Art World and I shall use this to understand what options are open for a practice outside the bubble.

In a historical context the artist made work to explain a deistic concept and, or a subject beyond their self and their society. As time went on, the egoism of a ruler or the commercial success

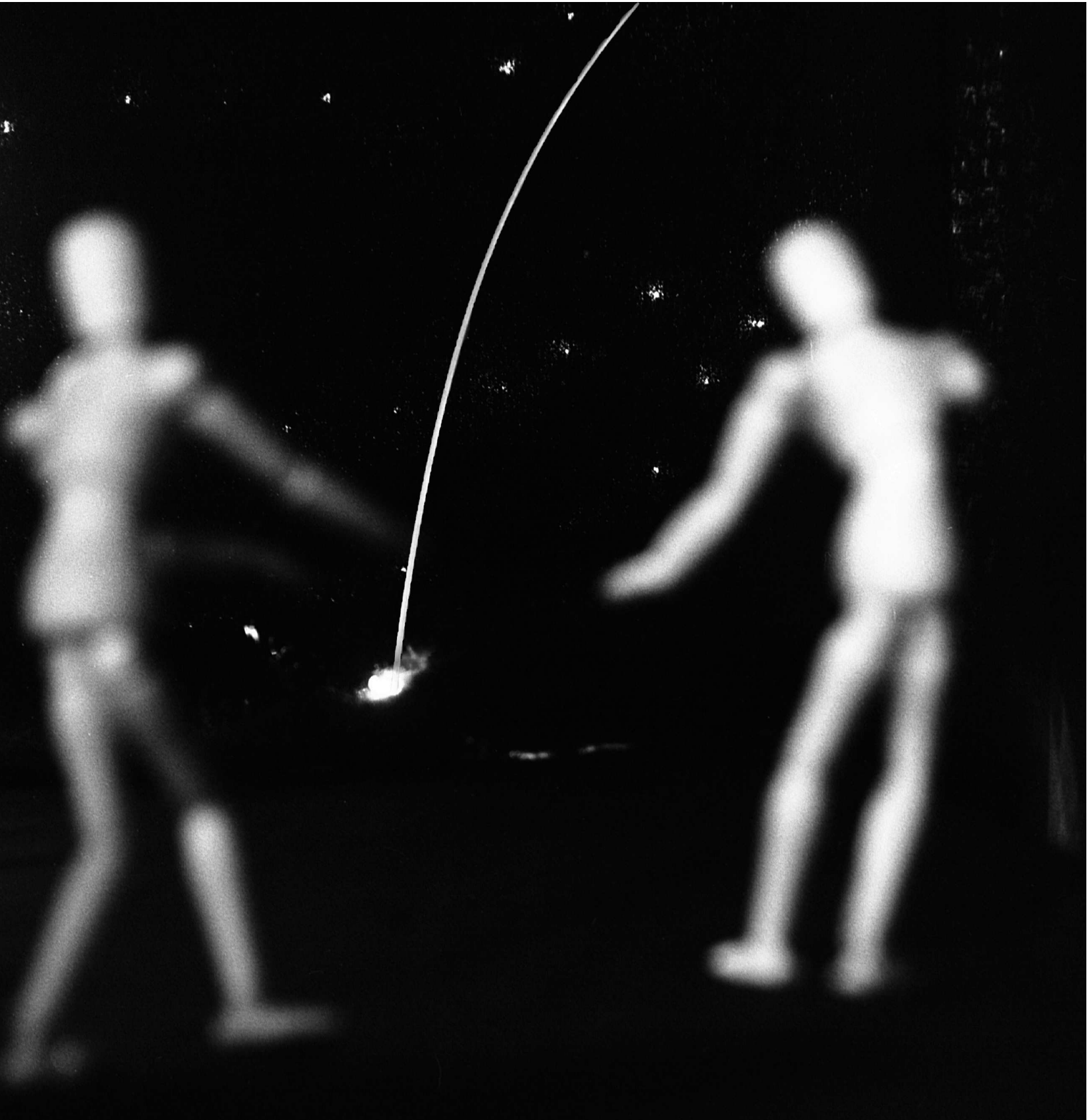
---

<sup>i</sup>Bourdieu’s formulation is not unique[24], and I will at times take liberties in my interpretation and my usage of it.

of a merchant demanded reward through portraiture. In this moment the artist could begin to figure as a star performer and to earn rewards above those of the waged artisan. In the modern age a rebellion against conservative tastes encouraged artists work to explain their perception in that moment to themselves, to be free and autonomous, to express a truth through art. This trend sees art as worth doing for its own sake, art free of external [bourgeois] constraints. But more, in making art there is a hope of recognition, discussion, of acknowledgement and for wider society's engagement with their work. The recognition may even be validated by sales of the work and connections with influential collectors. That these interactions may not happen cannot be explained away by criticism of the art work. The sociologist should start by talking about the interactions which bring other actors, people and institutions each of whom will have an agenda to complete. A gallerist having premises to maintain is concerned to sell. A critic must work from their prior experience, for example the outraged critical response to Manet's Olympia was very different in 1865[9] and reflexively that response seems strange now. The work is not separable from the artist or the context shared with those other actors. The work is what it is; executed when it was, to sell (cats, sunsets ...) or, to discuss (feminism, poverty ...).

Bourdieu sets out 3 major concepts to base his description on, Capital, Field and Habitus. He subdivides Marx' analysis of Capital further into economic, social and cultural capital – economic being the traditional view while social and cultural capital although not valued directly in money terms can be evaluated in their effectiveness when deployed in a Field. Bourdieu is given to adding a sporting or gambling flavour to his analyses and he seems to visualise a playing field with players competing to win using different measures of these forms of capital. The individual takes up a position cf. football's goalkeeper, with a *habitus* which expresses itself in their expectations and behaviour learned through their upbringing and education. The better the fit of the habitus to the position, the more effective is their performance in that position.

For completeness, he introduces terms of *doxa*, the experience brought in the habitus, whereby the player naturalises rules and customs, seeing them as 'self-evident' of the field and *illusio*, the narrative of the contest and the merit in playing the game. In his terminology, individuals take positions in the field and it is the positions that are considered to have won or lost.



The following section will explore Capital in this greater detail and begin with Bourdieu's belief that the probabilities of wins and losses at the roulette table of existence are not completely reflected in the gains actually realised by different strata of society, that there is some friction in the settlement of obligations to the detriment of the weaker party.

## **Capital according to Bourdieu**

During the Industrial Revolution in the second half of the 18<sup>C</sup> it became apparent that a whole new class of wealth was emerging. Unlike the traditional English aristocrat, asset rich but cash poor, strung out on credit secured on the arrival of farm rental each quarter day, these owners of the new 'manufactories' were holding hard cash and becoming richer through growing their capital base. The landed gentry had a resource limited capital base, the number of acres under cultivation. The industrialist could open new factories each week and rapidly begin to accumulate profits upon profit.

The economists of the 19<sup>C</sup> chose to simplify their models, and use arguments of better mousetraps and simple self interest, a roulette wheel of wins and losses to explain this but Marx saw that this growth in the capital base was an accumulation of retained profits maximised by paying subsistence level wages, and characterises Capital by its cumulative urge to acquire an impetus of its own – to grow of itself. An undead, vampiric form, sucking the living blood of labour, the wage bargain vividly described "[wages] given in exchange for labour-power is converted into necessities, by the consumption of which the muscles, nerves, bones, and brains of existing labourers are reproduced, and new labourers are begotten[26]." The Truck System at one remove.

In the 20<sup>C</sup> patterns of consumerism, of contradictions of growing economies and increasing inequalities required explanation, a roulette wheel model of wins and losses was not sufficient. Bourdieu separates financial capital or economic capital from two further classes identified as Social Capital and Cultural Capital[10]. He will refer to these two new classes as symbolic

capital to indicate that they share with economic capital the tendency to accumulate profits of labour and in their symbolic nature a capacity to stand alone and present a non-materialistic appearance, even *concealing* their presence.

Social capital is seen to be “the resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word[10]”. This network is further a social phenomenon, of people and the product of all their relationships. It requires input as much as it delivers benefits. It provides for recognition of the individual in the group and eases their path to the further accumulation of further capital. It requires observance of the rules of the group, which it may well enforce through the withholding of recognition or active marshalling of resources against the offender and under external stress the network will close ranks. Time spent in the service of the network is repaid in status within the group and a greater material share of the accumulated profits. The social network in the end exists to justify the concealment strategies of cultural capital and of course, its own. By upholding the cultural values of the cultured classes it moves beyond reproach the use of those values for gain.

And Cultural capital is the accumulation of knowledge, behaviours and skills that a person can tap into to demonstrate cultural competence and social status. These sub-divisions of Capital share with the traditional view of economic capital the characteristics of accumulation and intergenerational propagation, they serve primarily to attract merit to the holder and disadvantage to the other. They preserve the interests of the holder or the social group by demonstrating and defending a difference to induce their own accumulation, to disrupt the payout in a game of chance and reify the house advantage built in to the casino. Unlike economic capital, they are limited in their heritability and require further effort by their holder to be realised in economic value.

Time spent at an impressionable age in a family, a school, university, a workplace or the military allows for the absorption, the internalisation and normalisation of the values of that environment.



It seems obvious that early learning is most important and the longer that a family can afford for their children to learn, the greater the uptake of those values can be. The total holding in an individual of these values becomes the cultural capital worth of the person. This is Bourdieu's central point: that a class that can afford a full education for its children, will succeed in asserting the limits of a profession, defending these, and reserving to itself the privileges that accrue.

But, further it seems that Cultural capital extends on Marx' identification of an undead nature of Capital with a shape-shifting capacity, to be other than it is.

Because the social conditions of its transmission and acquisition are more disguised than those of economic capital, it is predisposed to function as symbolic capital, i.e., to be unrecognized as capital and recognized as legitimate competence[10]”.

In this view, it is easy to see that the vampire count Dracula can obtain his victims' confidence the more easily presented as a perfect gentleman[18].

And less explicitly, demonstrating the cultural wealth of the English gentleman, the 18<sup>C</sup> aristocrat would continue to wield political power, necessarily hoping that their daughters should make advantageous marriages into new money. Bourdieu with a strong regional accent and working class origins must set out to explore the domination of French society by a metropolitan elite whose competence to form opinion and govern is almost entirely deemed to flow from an education completed in the Grandes Écoles.

He suggests a subdivision of cultural capital into Objectified, Embodied and Institutionalised forms. The possession of objectified cultural capital is signalled by material objects, chosen to indicate a set of values – the right home address, the choice of pictures (preferably inherited) – purchased not for expense but for the demonstration of being in the know. The demonstration of culture then finds its highest success in the private art collection, opened conditionally to the public and in the sponsoring of gala openings of significant exhibitions. Objectified cultural capital can of itself be converted to economic capital and where it has not been passed on as an heirloom requires economic capital to purchase coupled with embodied cultural capital for the awareness to focus on this or that object.

The accumulation of embodied cultural capital begins at home with the accents and manners of the family, with the appreciation of the books and pictures in the house, the choice of school and the excursions and travel beyond. The involvement of the family is the means whereby the cultural capital wealth of the home passes from one generation to the next. It is widely accepted that early exposure to reading and the written word make for the best child experience of early years school life; where parents cannot read aloud a bedtime story the child may be at a disadvantage to class-mates from the start.

Time spent in growing up is awarded with a grant of institutionalised cultural capital be it an Oxbridge degree, a military rank or a prison record. The point being that Cultural capital of itself is valued within the norms of the society in which it is deployed as a bargaining chip – the prison record can be a better indicator of survival in a street brawl than an encyclopedic knowledge of art history. A criminal record is of itself enough hindrance to getting and holding down employment to work towards accumulation of economic wealth and stability of family life. Institutionalised cultural capital is frequently signed by a professional qualification, this professionalism is a key item of value currency wielded in the network of a professional group's social capital and it becomes the network's prime motivation.

To summarise, there is a tension, a balance between an individual's holdings of economic capital and their holdings in social and cultural capital. The economic capital may be used in commerce to grow itself in the usual manner or deployed in a long term<sup>ii</sup> investment programme to enrich the family and its social network.

However it should be noted that the accumulative tendency of economic capital trumps its competitors, deploying a divide-and-rule tactic between the competing demands of holders of cultural capital. By engaging in this tactic economic capital again proves that Cash is king! <sup>iii</sup>

---

<sup>ii</sup>How long a term this investment may be is reflected in the present day where artist descendents of Camille Pissarro stress this descent in a 5th generation[16].

<sup>iii</sup>Since Bourdieu offered his examination of Capital, after 2008 the world has become painfully aware of the dominance of Credit as an overbearing proxy for Capital, greatly magnified in the development of synthetic credit in the financial derivatives markets[35].



### **so, what's an artist worth, then?**

Given that most artists do not make enough from sales of their work to sustain themselves, they must find alternative sources of money – a waged job, a pension or a supportive life partner. The waged job can be problematic, demanding time and attention from the artist, and if in a creative sector a possible drain on the energy required for personal work. The drag on progress here may be internalised as a feeling of not being a ‘proper’ artist.

An artist builds a significant social worth in the experience of art school training, a network of peers who share a common narrative and understand the critique appropriate to this individual artist's work and process. The possession of an art school diploma, institutionalised cultural capital is not itself however any guarantee of economic success and many artists will look to other artists as a source of income in exchange for skills transfer, some others will set up as curators, the charge hands of the labour force if you like. In short, an artist in themselves will have only the cultural capital base built in education. Long term indebtedness, as in student loans is not an attractive prospect and there is some concern that enrolment in art schools may now be an option only for middle-class students.

## **Bourdieu's Field of Art**

A field in Bourdieu's terms is a collection of positions, occupied by individuals or institutions – these institutions themselves having their own substructure – where the positions are competing for capital in its various forms. To look at this in the context of the art world, the point of the game is the accumulation of symbolic capital estimated as prestige in the field.

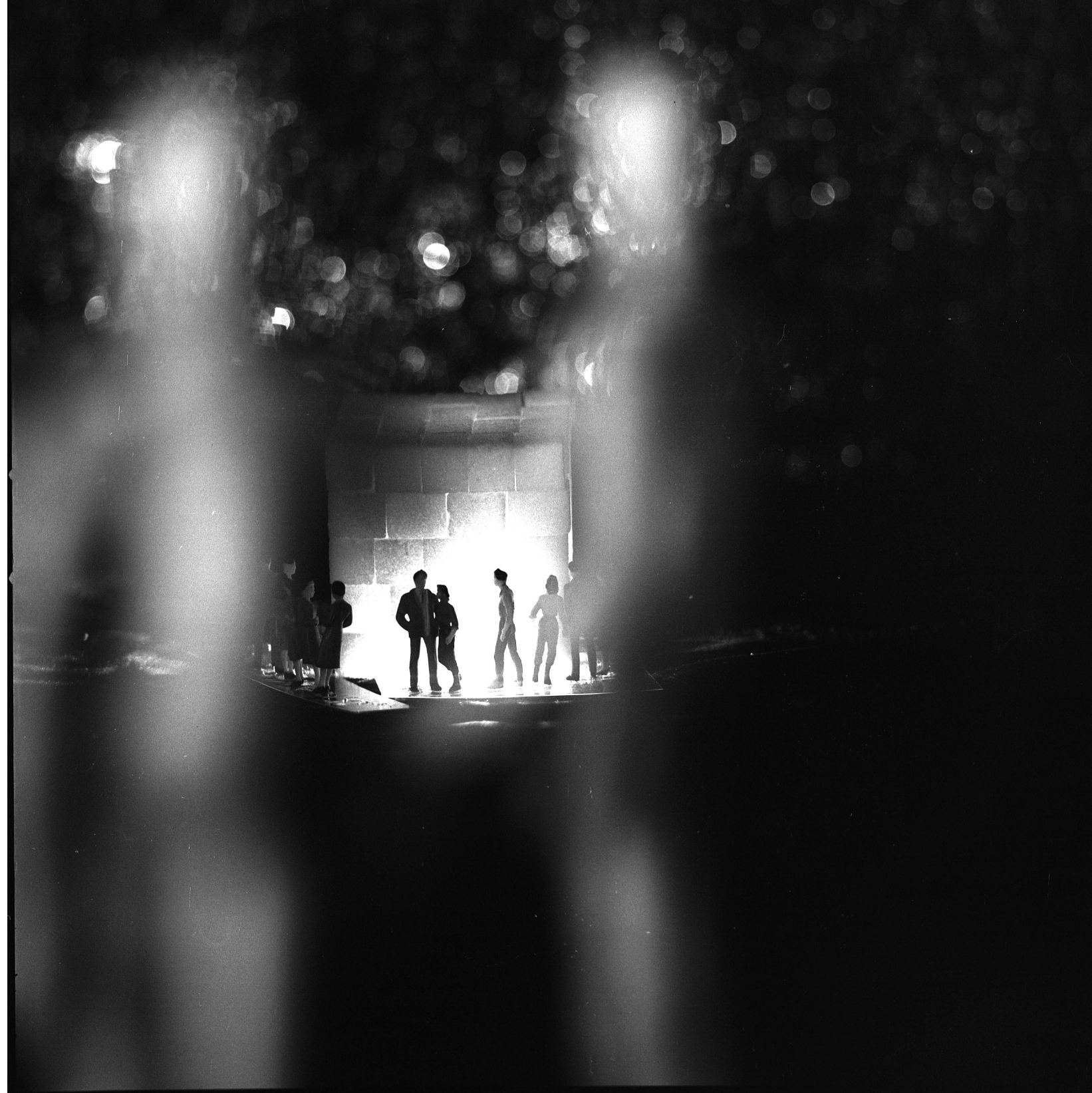
The positions in the Art field can be filled by incorporated entities: thus funding bodies, museums and galleries or, by individuals: collectors, consultants, critics, curators, dealers and historians. But what of the artist? The above list is of those who are in so different a league from the

artist that their game barely needs an artist, indeed the portion of the art market, dedicated to Old Masters and operating as a sub-field is dependent on the long dead. Being in some super league these players are institutional in their occupation of their position with a sense of competition for a ranking within that position, the relative capital strengths of Sprüth Magers or Hauser & Wirth for example. Even in a subfield named for contemporary art it still seems that the value of the artwork is enhanced upon the death of the artist[22], the convenience of the death limiting supplies of work and ensuring against an untoward change in the artist's output.

The art world considered among economic systems of capital generation and capital flows initially evolved in a unique way by its particular use of symbolic capital and the manner in which these (social and cultural capital) conceal their monetary nature to almost present a denial of economic self-interest. Such an economic space must rely on inflows of economic capital, hard cash to sustain itself. The kleptocracy of the failed Soviet Union, the creation of the Euro currency, and the subprime mortgage fire-sale have each contributed to a global low interest-rate world and an oligopoly hungry for new 'asset classes' with the social cachet of art appreciation. Naturally the art consultant, acting as the salesman for the Field is happy to oblige: the sale will exchange economic capital for social capital and the conspicuous membership of the class of 'the great and good'. The media attention to each new record price set at auction will strengthen a public perception of art as a commodity for investment. This new art investor will expect that their investment will be more readily traded and so the art world is moved along by globalisation to become an art market. At each turn the living artist sinks lower in the pecking order in the field of art.

Artists in the field engage at an individual level with a search for two different results. The first, a sense of being recognised, valued, approval in their position, this is termed consecration. Often in conflict with this is a lack of autonomy, freedom for self-direction and a sense of independence. Naturally players with weaker resources of capital will feel these bounds on their autonomy more acutely.

Another point to be made is that in games where the relative strengths of the competitors are not evenly matched the possibility exists for a dominant player to 'move the goal posts', to



change the ‘name of the game’. This will be done to achieve a greater material advantage for the dominant player according to their estimation of their capital and the presumed outcome of a recalibration of their portfolio of capital strengths in a changed game. The artist however is creative, to think outside the box is second nature particularly where the box is not of their making. Fields are not rigid structures and have porous frontiers—this is the risk that an economic capitalist accepts in investing in symbolic capital. The artist is thus in the situation of having to choose between a weak position at the base of a food chain of capital ventures, competing for the symbolic values and the possible economic returns of an established field, or to dodge these constraints and break out for the sunlit highlands of the avant-garde, and keep company with Impressionism, dada and dematerialisation[23]; to gamble for lasting fame and glory and a life-expectancy for the art market to catch up with the ultimate consecration.

Although the name of the game is promoting ‘great art’ [3] it can appear that the characterisation of the art field as a resultant of a struggle between capital positions has removed the need for aesthetic judgement – “is it any good[31]”. I think this is a red herring, for the reasons outlined above: the field of art and its structure of subfields is broad enough, in practical terms for it all to be good, as the art world becomes more the art market the first question is reduced to the economic ‘where are the buyers?’

But moreover, Bourdieu criticized art critics for concealing the social conditions which constituted their object of study – the artist and the artwork – and the artistic perspective that they themselves articulate. The art world is further criticized by Bourdieu for presenting the aesthetic experience as timeless and a-historic, thus promoting an illusion of the “absolute” regarding art[9]. Bourdieu holds that both art and perceptions of art are historical constructs and as such are the result of specific conditions and social processes in the art world.

According to Bourdieu, one cannot separate the field of artistic production from the manner in which art is perceived and related to, for the eye of the beholder is also a product of the field. For Bourdieu, the art work has no intrinsic value and meaning *independent* of how it is viewed, and this is determined by historical and social conditions.

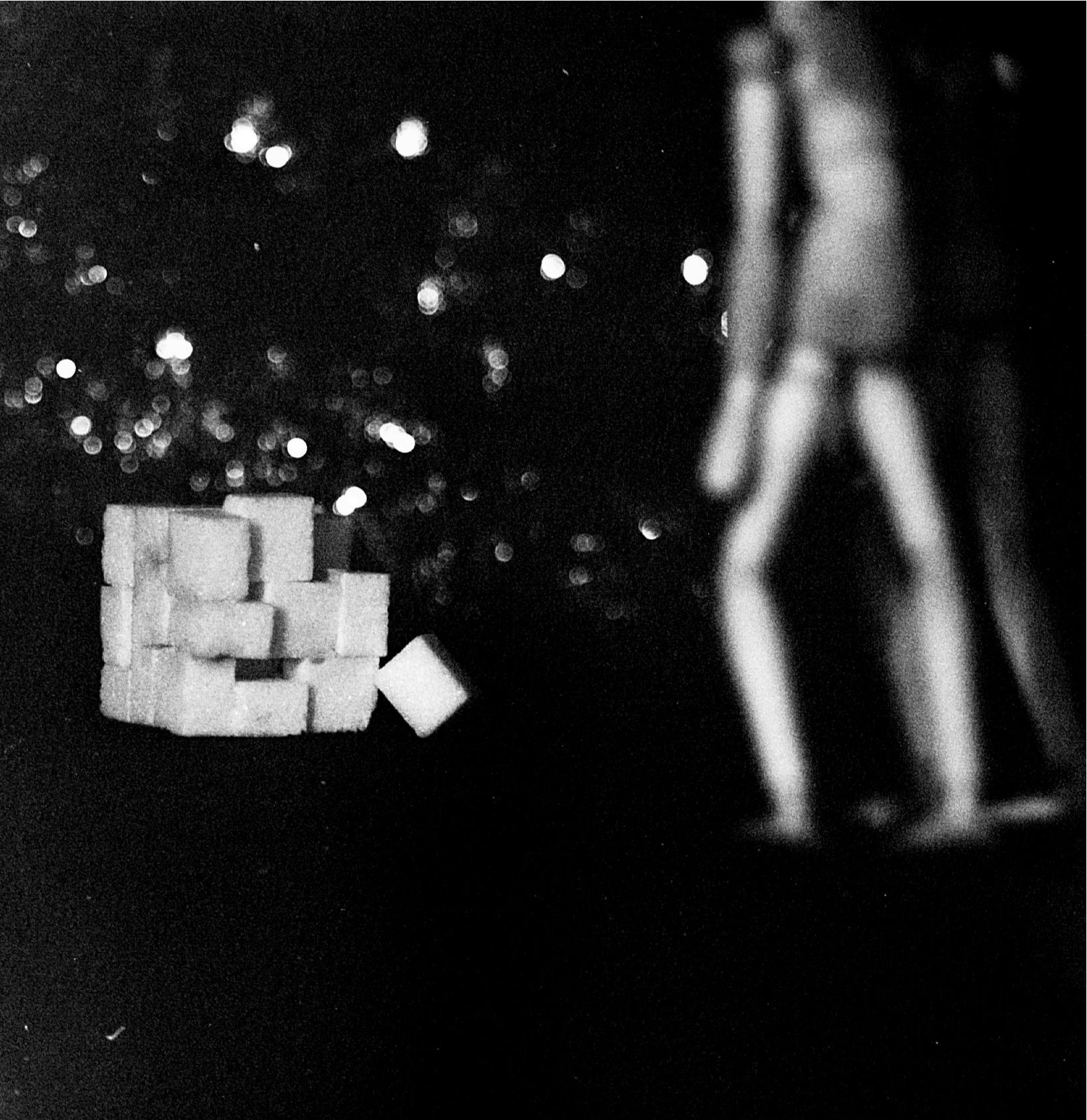
## **the artist in the field**

Bourdieu [10, p.246] examines the employment status of the professional cadre and observes that where they do not own the means of production and they create profits using their cultural capital, they remain the dominated class. Only where the profit results from their specific cultural capital alone, will they make it into a dominant social class. The message seems plain that the greater the dependence on the economic capital investment required in the production process, the poorer is the status of the individual, viz. the artist. The art world institutions deploy economic capital in ways such as gallery buildings and the artist must factor this into a reckoning of their personal profitability.

He continues and observes that “as the cultural capital incorporated in the means of production increases ... so the collective strength of the holders of cultural capital would tend to increase—if the holders of the dominant type of capital (economic capital) were not able to set the holders of cultural capital in *competition* with one another[10].” [my emphasis]

## **the play of capital forces**

To summarise then, the artist’s position is marked, as is a football player by other positions in the game. In most cases for the less-established artist these are the positions occupied by curators and art consultants. The economically disadvantaged artist will choose to engage with these as they appear to be and, or present themselves as gatekeepers for deeper sources of social and economic capital. Moving away from the individual artist the intensity of accumulated and accumulating capital increases as it tracks the influence of economic capital external to the field. The curator position is seen to have a deeper knowledge of the possibilities for exhibition of the artist’s work and social capital reflected in the personal connections with gallery directors and dealers. The art consultant establishes their position in social capital through personal connections to collectors as sources of economic capital. The artist has the least flexibility of all players.



Who would be an artist? Bourdieu suggests that individuals find their place in a field, in his terms to take a position best suited to the individual's habitus. The habitus is their social DNA, their ingrained response to the world as they encounter it. It is strongly connected to their embodied cultural capital, being the appearance of their seeming competence and self-confidence in the performance of their role in the position.

So what is the habitus of an artist? First, the cultural capital of their upbringing will have an input: as remarked above the middle-class household will not lack the stimulus towards art, but enrolment in art schools has declined, perhaps as families decide that the art school diploma is not a good indicator for future wage earnings. In the day, an involved bourgeois family could pass on their social capital to an artistic child; the wayward children – Matisse, Derain, Braque – of Les Fauves [literally wild beasts] could be forgiven much because they came from 'good' families. In the present, undergraduate courses in Art History may seem a more certain route to employment with art dealers and auction houses.

Times move on and social mobility presents the institutional players, dealers etc. in the art field with the disruption of artists who do not play the game in the approved way. Artists from outside some narrow social stratum will find themselves in opposition to the social classes who populate the institutional positions. An example might be the arrival of street-art, initially to be roundly scorned<sup>iv</sup>: it is not part of the canon and cannot be discussed by comparison with the like. Scenting the blood of a youth market, Capital rediscovers its vampiric urge for self-accumulation, a gallerist will take a chance, a critic will opine, and it will duly become [art] history. Canonisation for the art work, consecration for the artist.

## **mythtaken identity**

When for economic reasons of survival artists were members of the same families that ruled the country and dependent on the family for a stipend and on its social capital, it was entirely

---

<sup>iv</sup>But not to deny the personal and quiet pleasure in spotting a stencilled rat skulking in a walkway in the financial markets area. And see again the media circus when a Banksie is installed on a gable with attendant disputes of ownership

obvious that the artist was, well ‘house-trained’<sup>v</sup>. Contrast this image of the artist with the modern hagiography of the artist as loner, bohemian, and heroic. A happy pick’n’mix reading of psychological research into creativity seizes on ideas that the artistic persona is

hypersensitive, aggressive, autonomous, and independent, preoccupied with work to the exclusion of social activity, intolerant of order and seeking novelty and change, suffused with intense but chaotic emotions, and opposed to the conventional and banal [34, p.253]

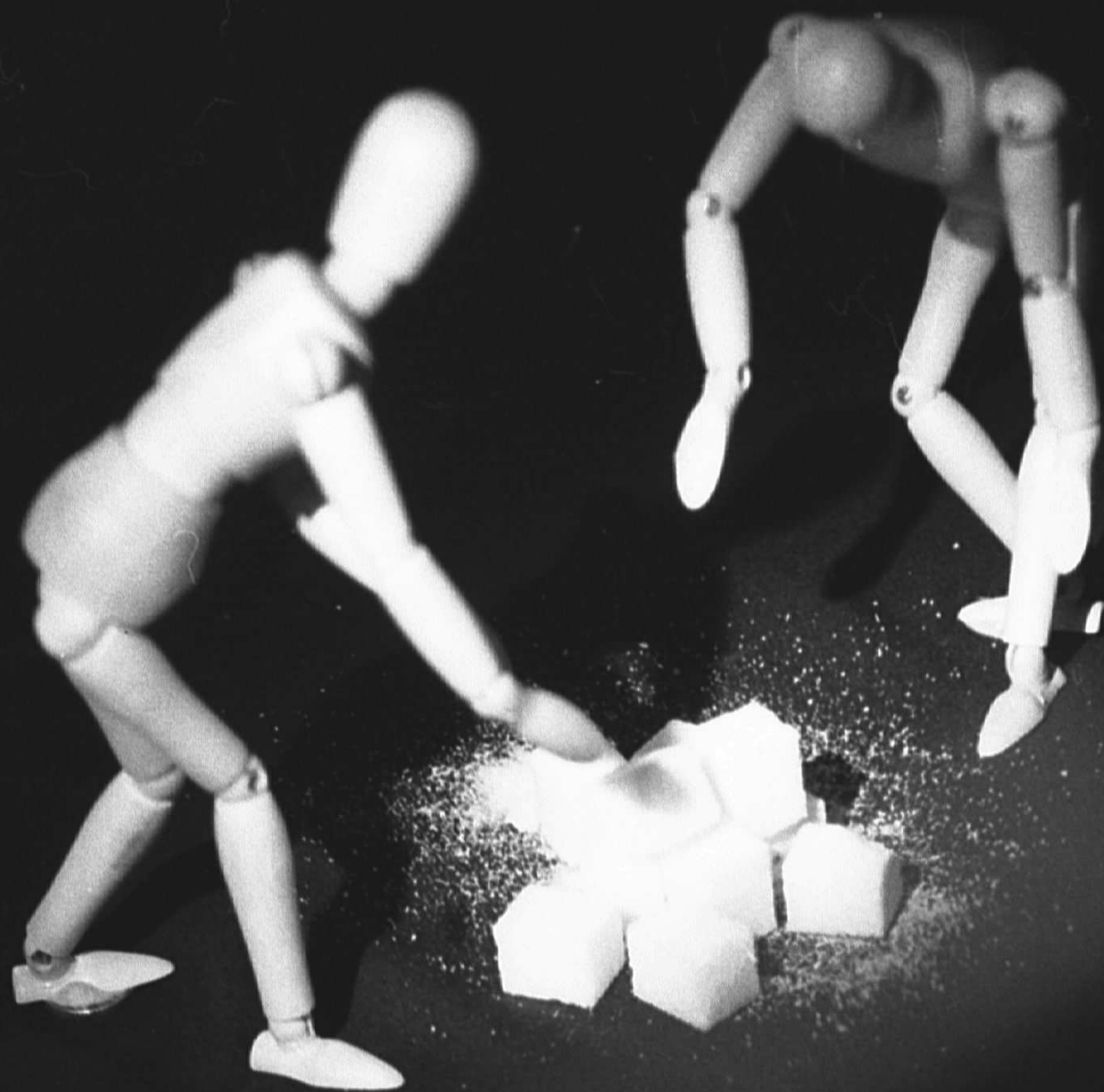
to such an extent that these social difficulties may have become the received view of what it takes to be an artist in contemporary society. To the contrary it has to be observed that economically successful artists now must demonstrate a full-time work ethic: they run a capital dependent business in a capitalist economy in competition with stronger elements of the field. The difficulty with any engagement with the mythic identities listed above as a player in a field outside everyday experience makes it difficult to find solidarities for artists as workers among other occupational groups where many (including artists in part-time roles) are caught in the ‘gig’ economy.

## **an urban view**

The metropolitan view of the outside, the ‘burbs, the rural is rooted in history. The power of the monarch was mirrored and amplified in the magnificence and spectacle of the court. The nobility for the security of the monarch and their own were encouraged to attend court, to further their own causes and to maintain these standards of performance. The economic funds to support this entertainment were raised by rents and taxes on their capital base, held in the form of land. Time spent on their estates hung heavy on the nobility and their ennui was projected onto the rural population who thus became seen as unimaginative, uncreative, and boring.

---

<sup>v</sup>Unsurprisingly, the art of this period is ‘great’, the vision ‘noble’, refined or subtle: equally available as class epithets. Contrast again with the contemporary where work may be described as tortured or born out of raw emotion,



The new capitalists in the UK of the 19<sup>C</sup> were no exception and bought up country estates vacated by those who could no longer afford the ostentation and so aped the behaviour of the ruling class<sup>vi</sup>. The industrialisation of the nation brought industrial pollution of the environment and an economic tension between town and country.

An urban middle-class could know no better and would so maintain the view of the limited social opportunity of the countryside. Again the ownership of land becomes an economic goal, the countryside experiences a depletion of its housing stock by second-home owners, the lifestyle commuter from the country to the city is a new colonialist and the weekender a voyeur. Viewed through rose-tinted spectacles, the historic rural is fetishised; the contemporary rural becomes a location for tourism, a film set and academic projection.

But to remake the point that there is the whole nation external to the bubble, beginning in the suburbs reaching out to the rural. The presence of so much economic capital, like the gravitational field of a black-hole distorts the fabric of a continuum of social space; the centre and its fringes become estranged and different languages are spoken in each. But it is not enough to say that ‘they do things differently there’, power will have its own way and takes a normative stance. That is to say that when the urban meets the rural, the disappointment is felt more keenly by the urban, and the upset more vocal<sup>vii</sup>.

The outside becomes a target for improvement and the language of culture is that of the court, entertainment must be provided. The Art field cannot help here, being a capital accumulation system its centre of gravity must migrate to areas of capital intensification and away from the low capital environment of the world beyond the metropolis. The institutional positions of the art field cannot be translated into the outside, the critic, the gallery, the dealer need the oxygen of the urban. The entertainment offered by the urbanite is urban in character, though the Arts Council attempts to democratise culture the most significant sums (totalling 43%) in Arts Council spending in the rural in 2013-18[4] were for black-tie opera, international music festivals and

---

<sup>vi</sup>To give them credit, they did purchase a great deal of contemporary art, much of which was gifted to the great municipal galleries of the industrial North.

<sup>vii</sup>Overheard: he ‘I haven’t got any signal’. She ‘we’re in the country’. He ‘I haven’t got any signal’.

destinations for coach tours, day trips originating in the city. In this period the areas classed as rural were home to 18% of the UK population and just 3% of its entire spend was targeted to this demographic.

The Arts Council in common with many other sources of funding for the arts, has the structural problems of its internal completeness, its bureaucracy will have its own language and world view. It becomes easier to interact with, and disburse funding to organisations that ‘speak the same language’. Further, the costs of interaction combine with economies of scale to fund the ‘big ticket’ operations and to pass the balance to its ‘National Portfolio Organisations’ who become proficient in managing a year-on-year relationship with the Council and make up an Arts Industry with staff on short-term contracts. The staff must necessarily spend half their time getting to terms with the local and the other half looking out for their next contract.

Heeding a mandate to ‘provide’ art and culture the return on central government funding must be audited, inevitably in market terms of footfall and customer satisfaction surveys. The spending will follow this direction towards the provision of spectacle, crowd-pleasing events, and the financial certainties of a ‘blockbuster’ retrospective of well established names. The success of such events is an encouragement to up-and-coming curators and even small, municipal art galleries and art centres will look to the opportunity to join a national touring show in preference to supporting local artists – challenging works are not shown for apprehensions of controversy or offence.

I have already noted the different exchange values of cultural wealth in different settings. In moving an artist’s practice from the metropolitan art world to a point consciously selected as being on the outside, there must be an equally conscious revaluation of the artist’s capital wealth in its various forms. Some obvious gains may be made, perhaps lower accommodation costs but the overall recalibration, a resetting of their value schemes will not be easy. The learned cultural capital of the artist, already at the base of a capitalist food chain in terms of autonomy is co-dependent on the social capital of their peer group for any sense of prestige, understanding, and consecration of their product.



## **flying solo**

There will be a number of reasons for an artist to decide to live outside of the art world, whether in geographic or intellectual terms. I have detailed the capital heavy structure of the art world with the realisation that the art world is now fully exposed to market economics and a media fixation on the inflows of extreme economic wealth. I have explored the class structures that take control of defining cultural values and which presume a responsibility for generating public understanding of art.

There are economic and social factors for a physical move; in some measure, the artist may feel that the move has been on the part of the art scene, that transport costs from their location are no longer affordable, that the self-regard of the art scene has moved to eliminate them. An ideological separation may result from a distaste for the value system of the art world, some desire to be 'off-grid', or a change in practice that does not match interests with that system. It seems important in any case that the change be seen in the positive, that the artist is not isolated or alone but rather to be independent and liberated from imposed expectations.

In any case, in such a move, physical or mental there is a need for a taking of stock, an audit of the capital wealth of the individual. The artist is like any other endowed with a measure of cultural and social capital. Their social capital is tied up in their personal network, their cultural capital is expressed in their self-presentation, Bourdieu's habitus – the way they have learnt to be artists. Neither of these resources of wealth are fixed in time and the ability of the individual to make friends and to influence people will make any upset to their social network less disruptive. However cultural capital is revalued when its convertibility to economic wealth is questioned. It is like any other commodity in a market priced by sentiment, in a consensus; where it is used as security in any bargain its value may go down as well as up.

HG Wells' short story 'The Country Of The Blind' [1904] brings to mind that the ability to see and be seen to perform as an artist may not be a particularly valuable attribute. Responses gathered for the book project 'Critical Moss'[2] reminded each other that in areas with low

populations of artists, it should be a priority to recover a sense of connection with the people that we find there, to build social capital over artistic credibility<sup>viii</sup>.

Establishing oneself in a new community is well expressed in the metaphor of putting down roots. The roots nourish the plant, equally the roots will stabilise the soil against erosion in challenging environments. In this context, in particular plant species with a rhizomatic root structure are notable as their propagation can proceed by root growth below ground and beyond disruption by wind or water. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari[13] promote the notion of taking action through rhizomatic growth processes having no sense of origin, drawing attention to the absence of hierarchical structures (*arborescence*), regrowth from fragments affording resilience to damage<sup>ix</sup>, and a freedom from reductive causal analyses based on beginnings and endings.

The adoption of rhizomatic strategies for a new practice in a low capital intensity setting now seems more appropriate, it contradicts the competitive struggle to survive induced by the capitalist systems; to aim for the forest canopy, competing for the limelight, and a narrow understanding of prestige. Furthermore, the modernist, avant-garde is addicted to novelty, seeming to justify it by a narrative of progress of knowledge, akin to scientific progress; art is not moved on like this, remaining a personal process, there is no meaning in seeking to build on others' work.<sup>x</sup>

A further difficulty is the wider perception of the artistic persona[5], with a restricted sense of the range of artistic activity: on first introduction the artist often faces the question 'painting or sculpture?'. This sense of being a separate creation makes social integration more difficult, to

---

<sup>viii</sup>In some communities there are experiences of artists arriving in search of low rental accommodation and studio space, exaggerating social differences, and kicking off a process of gentrification leading landlords to raise rents and/or demolish the housing stock to the punishment of the long term residents. It is little comfort when the artist crowd moves on.

<sup>ix</sup>I am not so sure that I approve of Ground Elder (*Aegopodium podagraria*) in *my* garden

<sup>x</sup>Deleuze & Guattari write at length of nomadic virtues; these seem to be quite compatible with a rooted existence in a stable community. In their terms, the Nomad is contrasted in their use of space, consider Australian Indigenous peoples, with the State which delineates and constrains movements through space.



work against a media driven myth of the artist, and faced with the hard work of an externally imposed expectation to be ‘hypersensitive, aggressive, autonomous, and independent, preoccupied with work to the exclusion of social activity, intolerant of order and seeking novelty and change, suffused with intense but chaotic emotions, and opposed to the conventional and banal’. These traits would seem more effective methods of causing offence, creating social distance rather than reducing it.

It is probably easier to try to be ordinary and to normalise a perception of the artist as human, in distinction to a notion of bringing art into the area, delivering a democratisation of culture. It is more effective to explore cultural democracy[1] and recalibrate a sense of what it means to be imaginative and engaging in a local community in excess of what is deemed to be creative and aesthetic in the art world. The major thrust of the project 64 Million Artists is to develop local leadership. Setting aside an arts education and supporting rather than leading would be a more powerful stance.

In parallel with this sense of social involvement the artist’s own sense of a live practice must be sustained. One fact to be born in mind is that beyond the art world the opportunity to grow economic capital from producing and selling artwork is naturally limited. This practice will therefore need to be fitted in around other sources of income but the reduced amount of time available can sharpen the mental focus on the work and bring work closer to thoughts resulting from the change in life. It seems also likely that a change in the balance of process versus product will happen: this will contradict public expectation of artistic product found as art-object.

The Critical Mass project began with the premise that a practice needed some critical mass of interaction to drive it forward. With low numbers of artists within earshot, and perhaps lower numbers of artists who ‘get’ the work, the options are concurrently, to naturalise the work in the wider world by talking about it in an everyday language, and to retain or embed in the artwork the evidence of the ideas and words that led to its creation. To rejoin the day-to-day, expanding the notion of the artist identity to encompass ordinary people, talking in non-excluding, jargon terms about work that does not need excuses for its creation or continued existence in the present setting. If the conversations that were current in the creation of the work can be brought to life again in the viewing of the artwork it can be a test of its accessibility in the wider audience.

Where the work can be seen to be playful, interactive, and engaging yet open-ended it would seem to align with Nicolas Bourriaud's description of Relational Aesthetics[11] which encourages the artist to step aside from a starring role and rather find a stance as a catalyst in a process of gaining acceptance for a piece of work. To quote Bourriaud at more length: he identifies

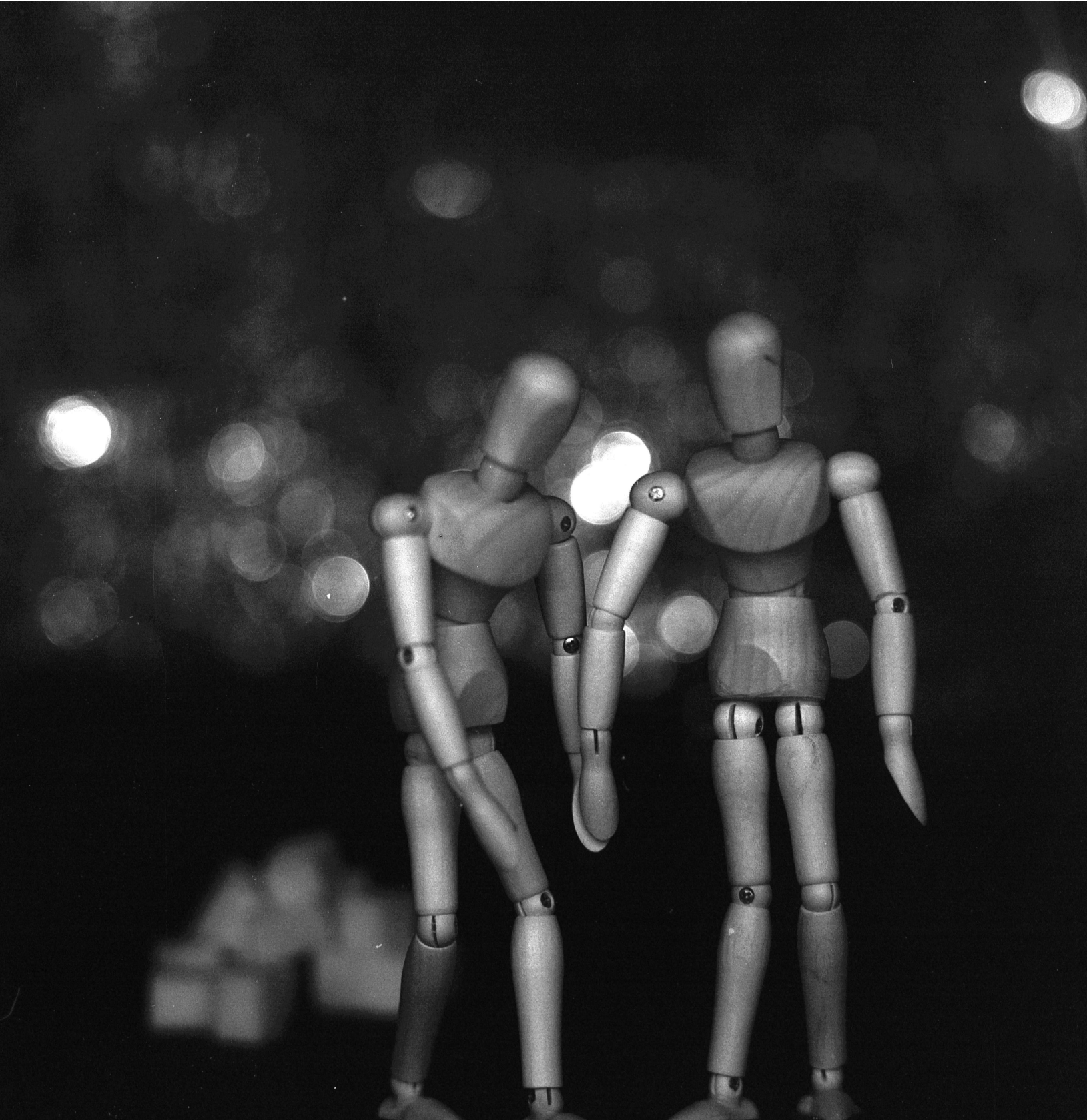
“...a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space.” *and* “the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real.”

There are of course counters to this philosophy of practice, Clare Bishop points out a potential ego-trap,

“An effect of this insistent promotion of these ideas as artists-as-designer, function over contemplation, and open-endedness over aesthetic resolution is often ultimately to enhance the status of the curator, who gains credit for stage-managing the overall laboratory experience. As Hal Foster warned in the mid-1990s, the institution may overshadow the work that it otherwise highlights: it becomes the spectacle, it collects the cultural capital, and the director-curator becomes the star.”[7]

This could be the merit of practice in a setting of independence, of low intensities of cultural capital where the curator and the critic cannot flourish. Instead, a practice which identifies the artwork as a transitive verb, an actor between an intention and an action can articulate the contradiction seen in the differences in the public's willing response, involvement and participation in music and [some] theatre compared to the reverential quiet and stillness of the art gallery[30].

Bourriaud's intention is to create art that builds relationships between people, modelling the viewers/participants in the art work as co-equal with the concept in the art work, co-equal with the creation and by extension with the author. The author begins intentionally with the thought and the words of a conversation with the creation, echoing into the lifetime of the artwork. He asks the question



“Does it [the work of art] give me a chance to exist in front of it, or, on the contrary, does it deny me as a subject, refusing to consider the Other in its structure?[11, p.56]”

So what do I as an artist do to offer this inclusivity, this intersubjectivity to an Other? Out of the noisy chatter of a busy art world, I am back with only personal resources and forced into an obligation for self-definition. Paul Ricoeur[32, p.165] would point at the need for an open and honest presentation of myself, without pretence. The honesty is to be based in accountability for my actions; refining my sense of self-worth in the direction of constancy, reliability and honour. The openness is on the one part transparent language and on the other, an understanding of, and availability to arguments for change. For we visual artists or at any rate we artists who function in the visual it seems plausible that in some way we are measuring ourselves up to the adage that ‘an image is worth a thousand words’. Perhaps like me, we find writing so many words is a challenge, perhaps we take this task on to provide the image and spare our viewers the trial of reading so much.

But if there is truly any rate of exchange between words (assembled from alphabetic characters) and marks marshalled into an image I think it fair to consider the words that never make it into print, their place being assumed by an image. I want to consider what has become of these words.

Unless automatic drawing as practiced by the Surrealists is more widespread than we know, that they existed at some stage in the creation of our artwork is extremely likely.

Their first spring towards lips was in our thoughts as we moved to make the work, the thoughts and words with which we urged ourselves out of bed and on into the studio. Later they had a place where we talked ourselves through the critical process; where we considered each line, each colour, each lighting angle or the cut frame in a sequence.

These words were always our words, private, personal to us, they made some presentation of ourselves. The artwork is ours, the words used in its construction are ours but in the main they

are lost in a developing texture of our sense of self, of persona, of identity. They are the story we tell of ourselves. Who we are.

By separating the edifice of our work above these words, by accepting a fungibility of the words into an exchange value for the artwork, diminishes ourselves to be the narrating engine that produces artworks. It has to be acknowledged that the author of the artwork has no rights in the stream of words that are present in the viewer's interpretation and when the work is finished and gone we are left alone with ourselves, the white noise of the cosmic background radiation, the echoes of the big bang of creation.

Now is the time to find those words. But in particular to find the words that did not get exchanged away with the finished work, the questions unasked, the choices undecided, the words that were unspoken, unrealised, unheard and unheeded, unthought; the un-words, so many of them indeed except those that were understandable. To stress again that if we bind ourselves too much to the words of the exchange we make the same artwork as before, like a phonograph needle in a scratched disc we become stuck in a rut. The words in question are the words that did not become lost by the finished exchange; these are the words of the creative process running, the words of self doubt and inner critique. Accessing the lost words is difficult when all in the garden is lovely – the work is finished so let sleeping dogs lie, they are often unwelcome. To recall that the myth of Narcissus is really about the fate of Echo: his gaze into the forest pool was noisy with the inner narrative of self-regard, the voice of another could not be heard over this din.

Quieting ourselves we should look for those un-words: we need to suspend the narcissism of our narrative identity and listen for the echoes of our creative stream. What Other is calling and from how far away? Psychoanalysts offer sources of thoughts, the subconscious, and actions and Jung's Shadow[21, §422] archetype comes to mind as perhaps that unreliable creativity, that unconscious process, that doubtful uncertainty of ourselves that we should most wish to drown out in noise; that we loudly proclaim our narrative identity to hold in check, to suppress and finally to cast into darkness as unacceptable. But we can see that Narcissus could not, would not save himself and find the well of creativity that comes from listening.



And when we do not willingly settle down to listen we will less comfortably find that moment when the creative engine stutters and the inspirational fuel gauge falls to the empty mark. Here is a time when perforce other voices make themselves heard but a chance to hear that part closest to us, our twin, our Shadow, quite as resilient as ourselves and perhaps more so. Unlike a stranger we can safely rebuild our sibling bonds and relearn our private languages but like a stranger we now need to listen and exchange and trade experience.

I should not wish to axiomatise the existence of an Other from the nature of the archetypal Shadow. It may just be that our first rejection of the subconscious has exiled it into strangeness, foreignness perhaps Otherness, our reconciliation with our Shadow brings to life tales of foreign parts and wonderful customs. These exotic things may be enough of the Other for the time being but the opportunity to enrich our soundscape is not to be missed. Perhaps the Other is nearer than we know. Perhaps the recovered relationship with our subconscious Jungian Shadow makes for a coextensive quality of relationship with all the Other.

And what was I thinking when I last edited this document, my word flow died on that line above? I began to edit the text but I was changed in the moment of losing my words onto the page. I am not the same without them, the other took them and ran with them, they come back to me now as that other's words yet they were mine. I make the other's words mine again – I am become other-like.

## **A manifesto for independent artists**

- We affirm that we are artists, we make work to support our understanding of ourselves, in the world, and now.
- We make work that is performative: as social action and with the intention to effect change.
- Our practice is intentional, not the production of commodity but rather to draw attention and thoughts to ideas, qualities, and states of affairs.
- We will explore ideas of intersubjectivity, in contrast to the solipsism of individual experience, emphasising our inherently social being.
- We will embrace the freedom to choose
  - a scale of operations, to access a way of living;
  - to model an action rooted in the whole of human relations;
  - to move beyond the comfort of a self-identifying bubble;
  - to reach for a sustainable set of artistic practices that do not perpetuate the power of one class to define what is and is not art.

## References

- [1] 64 Million Artists. *Cultural Democracy in Practice* | Arts Council England. <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication/cultural-democracy-practice>. (Accessed on 02/11/2020). Sept. 2018.
- [2] Aldobranti. *Critical Moss : art beyond the bubble*. Fosco Fornio, 2019.
- [3] Arts Council England. *Great art and culture for everyone*. [https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Great\\_art\\_and\\_culture\\_for\\_everyone.pdf](https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Great_art_and_culture_for_everyone.pdf). (Accessed on 01/30/2020). 2013.
- [4] Arts Council England. *Rural Evidence and Data Review 2019*. Apr. 2019. URL: [https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Rural\\_Evidence\\_Review\\_2019\\_0.pdf](https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Rural_Evidence_Review_2019_0.pdf).
- [5] A Bain. “Constructing an artistic identity”. In: *Work, employment and society* 19.1 (2005), pp. 25–46.
- [6] J Beuys and V Harlan. *What is Art?: Conversation with Joseph Beuys*. Clairview Books, 2004. ISBN: 9781902636597.
- [7] C Bishop. *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*. [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1095&context=gc\\_pubs](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1095&context=gc_pubs). (Accessed on 03/04/2020). 2004.
- [8] P Bourdieu. *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*. Meridian (Stanford, Calif.) Stanford University Press, 1996. ISBN: 9780804726276.
- [9] P Bourdieu. *Manet: A Symbolic Revolution*. John Wiley & Sons, 2018.
- [10] P Bourdieu. “The Forms of Capital”. In: *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. Ed. by J Richardson. Greenwood Publishing Group, Incorporated, 1986, pp. 241–258. ISBN: 9780313235290.
- [11] N Bourriaud. *Relational Aesthetics*. Collection Documents sur l’art. Les Presses du réel, 2002. ISBN: 9782840660606.
- [12] R Davis and A Tilley. *What They Didn’t Teach You in Art School: How to survive as an artist in the real world*. Octopus Books, 2017.
- [13] G Deleuze, F Guattari and B Massumi. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Continuum Impacts. Bloomsbury Academic, 2004.

- [14] J Derrida. *Violence and Metaphysics*. Trans. by A Bass. RKP, London, 1978. Chap. 4, The Violence of Light.
- [15] D Elder-Vass. *Profit and Gift in the Digital Economy*. Cambridge University Press, 2016. ISBN: 9781107146143.
- [16] *Genealogic | Stern Pissarro Gallery*. <https://www.pissarro.art/genealogic>. (Accessed on 03/04/2020).
- [17] S Gibbons. *Cold Comfort Farm*. Penguin Modern Classics Series. Penguin Books, Limited, 2020. ISBN: 9780241418895.
- [18] M Grabias. “Cothic and Horror in contemporary cinema and television”. In: *Dracula: An International Perspective*. Ed. by MM Crişan. Palgrave Gothic. Springer International, 2017.
- [19] BC Han. *The expulsion of the Other*. Polity, 2018.
- [20] T Jeffries. *Is the Countryside the Future of the Art World? | Frieze*. <https://frieze.com/article/countryside-future-art-world>. (Accessed on 01/29/2020). Nov. 2019.
- [21] CG Jung. *Full text of "The Collected Works of C. G. Jung : Aion"*. [https://archive.org/stream/collectedworksof92cgju/collectedworksof92cgju\\_djvu.txt422](https://archive.org/stream/collectedworksof92cgju/collectedworksof92cgju_djvu.txt422). (Accessed on 01/03/2020). 1951.
- [22] R Kraeussl. *The Death Effect: not so fast*. [http://www.art-finance.com/AA\\_2013\\_June.pdf](http://www.art-finance.com/AA_2013_June.pdf). (Accessed on 01/30/2020). June 2013.
- [23] LR Lippard. *Six years: the dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972*. Vol. 364. Univ of California Press, 1997.
- [24] H van Maanen. “Pierre Bourdieu’s Grand Theory of the Artistic Field”. In: *How to Study Art Worlds: On the Societal Functioning of Aesthetic Values*. Amsterdam University Press, 2009, pp. 53–82. ISBN: 9789089641526. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46n0p3.6>.
- [25] G Marcus. *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*. Faber & Faber, 2014. ISBN: 9780571261208.
- [26] K Marx. *Capital*. 1867. URL: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch23.htm>.

- [27] A Maude-Roxby, K O'Dell and B Clausen. *Live art on camera: performance and photography*. John Hansard Gallery, 2008.
- [28] D McGarvey. *Poverty Safari: Understanding the Anger of Britain's Underclass*. Pan Macmillan, 2018. ISBN: 9781529006353.
- [29] More Than Ponies. *Art and the Rural Imagination*. <https://www.morethanponies.info/ari>. (Accessed on 01/29/2020). Jan. 2020.
- [30] B O'Doherty. *Inside the white cube: the ideology of the gallery space*. University of California Press, 1999.
- [31] *Rewriting the Rules of Art: Pierre Bourdieu's "Manet: A Symbolic Revolution" - Los Angeles Review of Books*. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/rewriting-the-rules-of-art-pierre-bourdieu-s-manet-a-symbolic-revolution/>. (Accessed on 01/29/2020). Nov. 2017.
- [32] P Ricoeur and K Blamey. *Oneself as Another*. Gifford lectures. University of Chicago Press, 1994. ISBN: 9780226713298.
- [33] G Ritzer. *Enchanting a Disenchanted World: Revolutionizing the Means of Consumption*. SAGE Publications, 2005.
- [34] A Steptoe. *Genius and the mind: studies of creativity and temperament*. Oxford University Press, 1998.
- [35] Y Varoufakis. *And the Weak Suffer What They Must?: Europe, Austerity and the Threat to Global Stability*. Random House, 2016.
- [36] D Vessey. *The polysemy of otherness: on Ricoeur's Oneself as Another*. 2002. URL: [http://www.davevessey.com/Vessey\\_Ricoeur.html](http://www.davevessey.com/Vessey_Ricoeur.html).

Cover photograph: The Offering (2020) Aldobranti

Back Cover photograph: #1261 (2019) Aldobranti

My thanks are due to all contributors to the Critical Moss project. Their input has greatly helped me articulate my thoughts here. I wish to note my gratitude to Dr Fiona Harvey for many helpful discussions.

All photographs by Aldobranti, black&white images on analogue medium format film. Typography in L<sup>A</sup>T<sub>E</sub>X. Page design in Scribus. Fonts are Gill Sans and Times New Roman.

© Copyright 2020 Aldobranti. All Rights Reserved.

Published in the UK by edizioni Fosco Fornio.

Printed by Mixam, Watford

Aldobrandi





... recall that the myth of Narcissus is really about the fate of Echo: his gaze into the forest pool was noisy with the inner narrative of self-regard, the voice of another could not be heard over this din ... Narcissus could not, would not save himself and find the well of creativity that comes from listening.

This study explores and names the relative worth of the artist's social and cultural capital set against the raw economic force of institutional players in the Art World.

ISBN 978-1-9995847-3-3



9 781999 584733

*edizioni*  
**FOSCO FORNIO**