

A Conversation Between James Hutchinson, Imogen Stidworthy and Lesley Young

Imogen Stidworthy: The idea of the prize came out of a session in which the participants reflected on what kind of knowledge they thought they lacked, and what they wanted to know. The practicality that had to be dealt with was “what kind of project do we want to make?” but the conversation went way beyond that. The stakes were made very high by what everybody was articulating or defining – it was a very clear list of things that they wanted and what they missed and the prize was a vehicle through which some of these things could be addressed. But within that, there were other pressing individual psychological and emotional needs that were playing a part, the most apparent of which centred around the constant renegotiation of authority. First they had to recognise to what perceived authority they were addressing themselves, and when that became defined, how to manage it. The early art prize models were fairly conventional in their relationship to authority, and included marketing, publicity and administrative processes that fixed certain roles and power positions. The models always acknowledged and supported these positions, and that was something the group didn’t want to do. So part of the process seemed to be about forcing people to grapple with their whole relationship with validation. Where is validation coming from? Where and to whom do they look for validation? Those kinds of questions. They ended up with a model that took them off on their own individual path, having to manage a new dialogue with a new person in their own way, so I wonder how they feel about those questions now.

Lesley Young: The point at which there was a fundamental shift was when we, as a group, “permitted” each other to be autonomous in terms of our individual destinies within the project. This point came when we were on the verge of going down a conventional route, which included trying to use the money we had to generate more money. This question came up, “Who are the artists we each *carry with us* in our practice?” and it could be anyone in the world! We ended up with a number of very nice relationships, which only existed in the heads of the group and somehow encapsulated what they were doing on a day-to-day basis.

James Hutchinson: But when the time came to make these relationships a reality, some people nominated artists who were working in the same studio complex as them, perhaps on the assumption that the rest of the group would nominate more “exotic” artists. So you’d get these so-called local artists being discussed in the same arena as these supposedly more exotic artists. Those people perhaps really thought of it as a prize at that stage, and had thought tactically in terms of the communities they were a part of, whereas others attempted to retain something of the unknown and a degree of rudderlessness.

IS: Remember when we talked about the prize being something like an artwork? The process was really close to that of making art in that you don’t necessarily always know where it is going.

JH: You just have to trust that you’re making judgements that lead somewhere.

LY: Going back to the point about how participants recognise the process that they’ve been through, as a group and as individuals with their nominees; it feels like a book became more and more

essential to show a mirror to all that had been achieved. Something that focuses on the ambitions the group had initially in Kassel and how it played out in the end. Not only were there some very nice and very real relationships within the group, but with the nominated artists too, which resulted in the production of these very interesting mini-projects.

IS: Yes. It became like the prize was the process and the process was the prize, you could no longer separate them. There was no clear goal to which the group was heading, or linearity with which they were moving, but there was still a kind of organising principle which governed the way that each individual worked through developing the prize. Even that was being rearranged and reorganised. It comes back to this autonomy that you talked about, and the fact that everyone has been able to move so far from the original position which was that there are these separate stages that can always be identified and analysed as constituent parts of an art prize. That breaking down of the conventional model that took place over many many months, that opening up of a very performative and temporal space, it maybe needs a book to be able to get some perspective on that. It could be a tool to reflect on this idea that you cannot always separate research from product.

JH: The other thing about the book is that it won't be for sale. It's a small print run and will be shared out among the participants.

IS: That certainly follows the logic developed by the prize. It remains a challenge to the participants, in that if they end up using it as a document that they can give out as some kind of career object, or if they see it as the only thing that has currency after this long process, then it will fail, because it just goes straight back to those approaches and values that were operating at the very beginning. The book will have to be dismantled, in a sense. If people are making their contribution with the feeling that they have to fill space, rather than seeing it as an opportunity to harvest more of a reflection around what they've been through then they'll be missing the point and it will be a real shame – a missed opportunity.

LY: That would be an unthinking approach.

IS: Yes, responding in an unthinking and habitual way to a certain format, and the way that we tend to use books and publications as a way of validating our work, and therefore has a very different role to the work itself. Who's idea was it to limit the print run?

JH: It came out of a set of ideas. Most obviously is that the latter half of the project has attempted to usurp the usual administrative processes – handing it out avoids a whole new administration. But more importantly it reflects where the book has come from. It won't be on a shelf with a price on it for someone to pick up and fail to make sense of, its dissemination requires a conversation and the physical passing on of an object by the person whose ideas it contains. Having said that though, its up to individuals what they do with it. Some may mail it out, or even sell it...

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LY: So Imogen, you've been setting up your installation for the Northern Art Prize over the last week; have the discussions you've had during Centrifuge entered your thoughts at any point since your nomination came up? Or maybe you've just become blasé about the whole thing, because you won the Liverpool Art Prize too!

IS: Yes that's right, I did! I don't think you get blasé about these things - £16,000 is serious money. But it's a standard prize model, The Northern Art Prize, and so far from what the Centrifuge group has tried to do. I did think about Centrifuge though, not only in terms of the structure, but also this whole idea about trying to raise the presence or ambition of the region. The Northern Art Prize does it in quite a blunt, upfront way, but there's this non-regional jury...

JH: Yes, the north is this other issue. I wonder if we might talk about it in relation to the Jan Van Eyck Academy, where you are an advising researcher, and also in relation to what we were talking about before...

IS: ...ah yes, about authority, and validation. This is less about my position at Jan Van Eyck, but on degree courses, and especially when I was teaching in Lyon. Sometimes you find that half your job is doing something you mentioned earlier - and is a complete contradiction in terms – and that is giving people permission to decide for themselves. That seemed to be the first problem you had to deal with; the students would somehow be asking, more or less explicitly, for confirmation that they were on the right path – and, well, that’s the first wrong path! They’re excluding so many possibilities by attempting to anticipate how making certain moves will be reacted to by whomever they see as being in authority. I remember going to something that Becky Shaw organised at Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, in which she invited a number of people who’d been involved in commissions in public spaces to talk about how to negotiate all the different agendas at play in this kind of work. Somebody spoke really eloquently about how we’re always looking for a father figure – somebody who can validate what we do, and we find it very difficult to proceed without what we’ve done being confirmed as OK. It’s something that everybody struggles with, and it is most chronic when you come out of school and everything has been about accepting authority and recognising where the authority is so you can be seen to be fitting yourself into the given structures. I fight it personally. There’s a Dutch printer who taught me at Jan Van Eyck, Willem Oorebeek, who I really look up to. When I’m desperate about how I’m going to resolve something, or when I’m not sure if something is doing what I think it’s doing, my partner teases me about him. “Phone Willem, Imogen” or “Willem will know”...

LY: But that’s a very clear, two person relationship, where you might think yourself into his head and imagine what he might say. But when you’re looking for validation from a more dispersed or abstract set of constituents that’s much more problematic.

IS: Yes, it’s easier when it’s a single figure. Otherwise it’s like gravity, in a sense that you can’t pinpoint it’s exact source and it affects your whole being, permeating your decision making all the way down the line. It’s not only a negative thing, because it’s also about understanding how what you do is received, so you can’t eradicate it completely or you won’t have any outside perspective. But for people in their early stages of art college, when they still have a kind of school mentality, then it is problematic because they find it very difficult to take steps by themselves without checking first or self-censoring.

JH: There’s a lot of talk in the popular press about people being taught how to pass exams rather than being trained to process information. And exam culture as a whole makes an art school a really alien environment – just being given a bit of space and told to make something that we can all talk about can be terrifying. It can be quite hard not to sit there thinking, ‘what do they want me to do in order to give me a First or a 2:1?’ And if you don’t shake this way of working off, it’s easy to see how you get out of there and start working as an artist - particularly in the north where there is mostly only public money accessible to you - and think ‘what do they want me to do in order to give me some funding?’ And before you know it, your practice is not your own, you’re just passing an exam again. It was funny at the beginning of Centrifuge, when we offered the group this money to spend and told them that there were no strings attached, it didn’t take long for people to suggest adding to it by bolting on cash from funders who *would* attach strings...strings that would end up controlling the whole project, as well as adding unnecessary bureaucracy.

IS: Authority is evoked by each individual artist and it’s hard not to succumb too much to these projections of authority or status that so so dominate art. Having an authority ‘figure’, whether that’s a person, a constituency or the Arts Council, really affects how you articulate yourself – it goes so deep. It connects with all the processes that are essential for art making, like formulation and reflection, and ends up informing how you present yourself, or validate yourself, and how you understand your own work yourself. When I left art school in the early 90s, I started reading critical art reviews for the first time, and after a while I got the hang of how art critics were articulating the work they were reviewing. The terminologies, vocabularies and discourses that were circulating at the time really got into my brain, and I remember formulating descriptions of what I was doing, borrowing from their language. It was really crap, but it helped me validate my own work. When you borrow these voices of authority, it can help you understand or it can be a trap. With the art prize, there’s this idea that you might go and choose someone who’s an authority in a very positive sense, their voice and

their work has real meaning for you. It isn't directly determined by *given* structures of authority, whether academic or artworld, but rather it dismantles and reassembles them. I don't know how much of that was strategic or how much of it you could only think of in those terms later, but at the time it was something that was decided, and it performed something really effectively.

JH: It maybe started to become clear after we'd failed repeatedly to find an art prize model that would work for us.

IS: Yes, that confusion seemed to be incredibly necessary. I wouldn't call it failing, but simply not knowing where you're going. This comes back to the comparison with making an artwork. At that point when things can't be defined clearly, that's the point when they can be re-defined, maybe the only point at which it is possible to re-define them. It needs that moment of confusion when it isn't what it was anymore, but it hasn't yet become something. That's certainly how I work as an artist - I start with a set of projections or ideas of how I think it's going to be, and then I have to constantly dismantle and reassemble them and each time I come back with a new way of understanding them.

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JH: How much of an authority did you feel personally in your role as a mentor?

IS: I struggled with it. I came in on different grounds in two ways. Firstly, I was invited rather than applying, and secondly because I had some work in Documenta, and the group recognised that as being an important platform for contemporary art. I was worried because I thought that my position would not be helpful in the kinds of discussions you were hoping to have. I was also aware of the total open-endedness of the project, and that aiming for consensus, or even for coherent threads of dialogue, between twenty very different people is a massively risky, ambitious and exciting thing to do. It actually only struck me when we were sitting in the first discussion in Kassel, that one of the reasons this is amazing is because so many projects are shored up by guarantees but here there were none. So it was really exciting to leave that behind and feel that this was starting off on totally different grounds. In terms of my authority, it made me think about the expectations that are attached to the positions that we create for each other. I thought about this project I did with taxi drivers in Luton; I went through a long process of setting up certain conditions and conceptual structures so on, and all this to end up in a conversation with somebody I didn't know in a situation where the stakes feel very high. It was just me, a white woman, on my own in a Christian Church with this Muslim guy, and in this short space of time that's allocated there's this enormous pressure to have some kind of meaningful dialogue. In Centrifuge, I found myself thinking about the performative aspect. In those few meetings we had together, a lot happened and the dynamic was shifting constantly. As a mentor, you had to be very aware and very involved in the discussions, but always maintain some perspective. And the two of you had to be totally on it, imagining what to bring in at what point and trying to conduct the dynamic, it was really fascinating.

LY: We were part of this other dynamic too, which was the bureaucracy we were part of outside the group. We needed to make sure that the people who'd commissioned us and given us the money were happy with how it was going. It was difficult to find ways to describe it to them, so we would invent these terms...one of them was "responsive management"; I don't know if that's a real term...

JH: One of the administrators at Manchester Metropolitan University, who had to report on Centrifuge to a whole set of other people, used the term "professional development by stealth". There was a whole other set of these terms. So just like money gets filtered on its way down through all the layers of administrators and bureaucrats, the working language was being filtered on its way up. We had to find these ways to encapsulate what we were doing in a sentence that sounded like everything was deliberate, even though in reality we were being guided by instinct. One of the other ones that proved popular, which I'm pretty sure is real, is "soft skills". That's the kind of language that moves with business development money.

IS: Absolutely, some terms are indispensable, such as "holding structure", which Rosie coined very early on. There was nothing fancy about it, but it was so useful and stayed with the group all the way

through. I was at my godmother's house the other day, and she's constantly trying to foist Mary Midgley onto me, so I read a tiny bit while I was there. It was about everyday language. She says that everyday words are not vague words that are waiting to be replaced by precise words at the point at which you're able to articulate something, but they actually have a great value and enormous meaning how they are. And that really struck me, because I realised that most of my life I use words that at some point I think are going to be replaced by more correct, more precise or more sophisticated words, both in general language and when talking about art. We're so used to reading theory and learning that certain words will perform brilliantly for certain things, but I really enjoyed reading something that pointed in completely the opposite direction. Some of the terms we used along the way during Centrifuge and how they've been put to work or made to perform have been really interesting.

LY: Yes, the term "holding structure" seemed so precise that we could always look to it for help. It got shifted around and then nailed down and then shifted around again and so on.

IS: A holding structure felt like a place where everyone could be, without losing their identity. It is a fascinating thing though isn't it, when you're working with a group, trying to work out how much you can plan in advance. When it's supposed to be a collaborative project you just can't conceptualise it to a high degree without it seriously undermining itself. It has to be open ended, and whatever comes out of it has to be the product of that process however complicated and drawn out.

LY: Yes. I think if we'd started Centrifuge imagining that we'd still be here almost two years later....well...the budget would have looked different for a start! The Chinese proverb that goes something like 'the longest journeys begin with the first step' is, well, true! And sometimes it's best not to know the magnitude of something before you start it.

James Hutchinson, Imogen Stidworthy & Lesley Young
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