

Foreword to *Art Prize*

This book is the result of the hard work and long-term engagement of a group of young artists and organisers based in the north of England. The group was brought together through an experimental professional development project called *Centrifuge*, which was created in early 2007 by The Salford Restoration Office on behalf of Manchester Metropolitan University and Northern Edge. The challenge was to find a way to help art school graduates who had chosen to base themselves in the north develop the skills that would help them operate confidently and critically, and to encourage them to find space for themselves and their ideas in a challenging and unpredictable professional climate.

The group of (initially) twenty practitioners was assembled through an open call. It met for the first time in Kassel, the individuals getting to know each other by spending three days together viewing and discussing Documenta 12. By this point, they had all been made aware that a significant amount of the Centrifuge budget had been made available for them to spend, *as a group*, on a single undetermined (and not limited in any way) project that they would begin to develop while they were in Germany. Two artists, Imogen Stidworthy and Dirk Fleischmann, acted as moderators in the discussions on what the group could do to, either to keep their ambition high or to pull them back down to earth. When the group returned to the UK, they were given around six weeks to finalise what their project would be, and then six months to carry it out. This timeline, of course, stretched out ever further as the twenty (now fifteen) wrestled with the task in hand.

The intention with *Centrifuge* was to privilege good ideas and generate an interesting group dynamic rather than centre on the daily grind elements of art practice. The aim was to generate an environment that encouraged the development of soft skills, such as persuasion, negotiation, critical analysis, recognising what is possible or not, what is appropriate or not, generating networks through a shared interest and experience and attempting to find a voice within a structure which is not solely yours to control. When in Kassel, the group discussed what they would like to achieve through the development of their project and came up with a number of ingredients that addressed such issues as collectivity (power and responsibility), how to re-locate their individual practices and connect intelligently to other places, provincialism (and how to avoid it), how to generate broad and deep networks for knowledge sharing, and many more. The task of devising a holding structure for all these wants was hugely problematic – but it became clear that the *opportunity* to problematise was too good to pass up on, and the group settled on a format that a clear majority were uncomfortable with, but felt excited by the discussion it would generate. And so the Art Prize was born.

Over the following months the group met regularly to present, discuss, argue; to deflate and re-inflate. The merits, deficiencies, politics and hierarchies of other prizes were examined - from The Nobel Prize to Miss Landmine, from The Turner Prize to The Szpilman Award - and a process for generating a new model for an art prize began. There were many models proposed, and all collapsed under their own weight. The group never quite found a model that they could stand by, and became restless and frustrated. Dirk had often insisted that the group seek a “wonder” and that they’d know when they found one, Imogen pushed hard for the group to question to whom they were responsible

and who they were looking to for validation. The latter point was particularly pertinent as many of those participating had, in the past, been the recipients of public funding that had required them to behave in a particular way or generate projects that met certain targets. *Centrifuge* simply required them to generate knowledge and experience but, curiously, the group regularly imposed familiar restrictions on itself, even when it didn't mean to, as if it couldn't work without the idea of guidelines, audiences and funders. It was clear to us at this point how all encompassing the influence of the public sector has on the mindset of young artists working in parts of the country where there is little, if any, alternative ways to make money from their practice than through public bodies. To an artist like Dirk, whose work explores and occupies economic structures, this was extremely puzzling - somehow, *Centrifuge* had become a vacuum, rather than a free space to play in.

At this realisation, the group began again and decided to rely on their wits. It was pointed out that in addition to the public funding mindset, there was an inherent conservatism to the approach we had taken to constructing our "alternative" prize models. The group had consistently attempted to generate the prize from the top down, placing themselves in a position they believed was occupied by others who weren't normally artists – discussing what the prize itself should be, how it should be judged, how it should be announced and so on. Regardless of how superficially different to other prizes theirs might be, it would be fundamentally the same – a group of nominees competing with each other to be the "best" at something that is decided in advance for a prize that is normally money, but could be something more "interesting".

The solution to this problem was simply to abandon all the proposed constructions and begin a process that fitted the temporal structure of an art prize, but without any plans having been previously made. The group would use the knowledge and understanding they gained from their discussions to improvise their way through the process. Each member of the group made a nomination, someone (not necessarily an artist, although the majority went down this route) who they wanted to meet, and then got in touch and planned a visit. The reasons that each participant had for making contact with their nominee ranged from the altruistic to the selfish to the conceptual. Some wanted to reward their nominee, and offered the opportunity to design a bespoke prize; some wanted to work with their nominee to direct the remainder of the process; some wanted a simple exchange of ideas or to find out more. Soon it became difficult to tell at what point in the process the prize was being "won", or whether nominees who proposed projects were repositioning the group as a funding body, or if nominees were using participants as cheap/free labour. None of these situations could be described as *wrong*, and there were many more situations that were sometimes quite emotional - these will become clear later in this book, but virtually all the responses that the participants got from their nominees continued to problematise the process - to throw up more questions than answers. Because there was no guiding principle, nor concrete prize, it soon became apparent that we would only know what the whole process looked like when it was over and too late to change it. The group hit issues that prevented it from settling into a traditional structure. Despite having no judging process in place, a judgement day was agreed and all group members agreed to bring something to the table to discuss. Even this was scuppered when two proposals clashed in advance. Ahmet Öğüt (nominated by Evi Grigoropoulou and Tom Watson) had proposed that the group pay for his mother, who had never left Turkey, to visit his wife's parents who lived in Helsinki (they had not met before). Ahmet would arrange a passport, visa and travel and the group would give him the money to do this. Since Ahmet's practice requires him to be operating outside Turkey the majority of the time, there was a small window of time in which he could do this, so he needed an answer before the judgement day. The clash occurred with a proposal made by Gintaras Didziapetris (nominated by Rosie Farrell), that the group spend the entire budget by investing it to generate a prize fund for *next year's* version of the prize. These descriptions do not do credit to the expanded versions of the proposals, but the clash is clear – one of the proposals needed to be rejected before it even reached the table, a problem that cannot be ignored as this is this would mean to reject Ahmet without a discussion. The ensuing discussion resulted in Ahmet's mother getting to visit her new family in Helsinki, and Evi and Tom have documented the project later in this book. Rosie's contribution is more oblique, and it is for the reader to decide how she feels about the process that ended Gintaras's involvement.

The judging process, and criteria, remained unfixed as judgement day began, although the group was clear that Ahmet's proposal would not be the only one realised (this was an issue that led to Gintaras's proposal being rejected - despite the implication of a further set of winners in his proposal, the group did not want to see their proposals passed up on in favour of future, unknown recipients). The language in the judging meeting remained that of winning and losing, though the agenda of the group had changed to how the discussions they had been having could be manifested in further actions carried out by nominees, or by physical objects. This book was a result of that meeting, and the project pages that it contains are representative of the relationships that the group formed with their nominees. It has been left to participants as to whether they want talk about winning and losing on their pages, whether to deal with the process, or both. Many, it seems, have chosen to retain some ambiguity, so it may not be entirely clear to readers who has "won" and who hasn't.

It has been necessary during Centrifuge to constantly remind ourselves that "art prize" was a format designed to help the group examine, pull apart and reassemble networks, power-structures and bureaucracies, and by doing so to understand the systems they find themselves operating within as artists or organisers. The project has been at its worst when this has been forgotten and the usual conventions have been adhered to with only minor alterations. However, such difficulties have been a necessary part of the learning process, even if that has meant some casualties along the way (fifteen of the original twenty have contributed to the production of this book). Without failing repeatedly, it would have been trickier to spot the successes, not least because none of the participants or organisers has been involved in the production of an art prize before. Even now, as we are assembling this book, to be titled Art Prize, we have to keep reminding ourselves that, although it could be argued to the contrary, there were no winners, nor was there ever a competition – there was simply a process through which some discussions took place that will be formative for many of those taking part, that there was a lot of travel, and meetings with artists that changed the way many of the participants think. Some will go on to develop projects with their so-called nominees, some will become friends, and some will never see nor hear from each other again. This book is for those who took part, the final holding structure that represents all the thoughts, discussions and arguments, even if it doesn't always spell them out explicitly. It exists to remind the participants that although the (art)world they live in appears to be set up as a competition, the conventions are theirs to use and to change as they please.

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