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Less than Friends, More than Acquaintances: Artists, Markets and Gallery Openings in New York

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Abstract: This article describes one way that unknown and 'emerging' artists with limited exhibition history or reputation take steps towards developing their careers. Artists cannot apply directly for exhibition opportunities, therefore they develop social associations with gallerists that are described as being 'kind-of-friendly-with'. Using a descriptive ethnographic narrative drawn from a case study of artists as they navigate an evening of commercial gallery openings in New York's Chelsea district, it is argued that establishing a career in contemporary visual art depends on the ability to render one's self visible to other participants in an art world. Rather than viewing the symbolic value of artworks as antagonistic with the economic art market, artists seek to establish social associations in which different forms of value are interrelated. In conclusion it is suggested that this is an art world in which the 'economic world reversed' is inversed.

Keywords: contemporary art, artists, careers, New York, art galleries

Introduction

This article presents an ethnographic account of unknown and so-called 'emerging' visual artists as they engage in establishing loose associations and 'visibility' through co-presence with others at gallery openings in the Chelsea gallery district in New York's art world of contemporary art. Using empirical findings, it is argued that the formation of careers in contemporary visual art ought not to be understood under the guise of the canonical sociological idea of the antagonistic relationship between symbolic and economic capital most famously described by Bourdieu (1983, 1996). Instead, artists actively pursue the entanglement of felicitous and professional associations, by increasing their visibility to other social actors in the art world, especially gallerists, gallery directors and curators. Relying on interviews and an ethnographic narrative, central importance is given to artists' own descriptions of the importance of making social connections at gallery openings using the narrative framing of one evening of such openings. These artists do not disavow the economy, but are cognisant of the importance of commercial galleries for exhibiting and selling their art, with little evidence that this is perceived as antagonistic to their artistic production.

Firstly, a summary is provided of sociological ideas in which different forms of value are treated as antagonistic within the arts. After a brief account of methodology, the article provides a description of a peculiarity that has a significant effect on artists seeking to establish their careers, namely that in most contemporary visual art galleries artists cannot submit their portfolios in hopes of attaining exhibition opportunities, they must find other ways of securing exhibitions. The main empirical section that follows consists of an ethnographic narrative of one night of art gallery openings in Chelsea in which artists describe the essential nature of co-presence and a form of loose 'kind-of-friendly-with' associations that they establish. In conclusion it is suggested that instead of an 'economic world reversed' in which artists deny the economy, artists inverse this process and actively pursue opportunities that are simultaneously economic and symbolic, instigated through social associations.

Perceived antagonisms of value

Bourdieu is perhaps the best known purveyor of a view that there is an antagonistic relationship of different forms of value in the arts, most prominently found in his well-known 'economic world reversed' thesis (Bourdieu, 1983). For Bourdieu, the pursuit of symbolic capital and economic capital are reversed in the field of restricted

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cultural production, a field defined by the 'disavowal of the economy' (1980). This is in contradistinction to the field of large-scale cultural production characterised by 'the conquest of the largest possible market' of consumers (1985: 7). The economic world reversed thesis summarizes the 'structure' and 'functioning' (*ibid.*) of the field as a temporal and hierarchical cycle. At any given moment there is a dominant group of artists with high levels of economic capital, producing art that is consecrated, aka 'bourgeois art' (*ibid.*: 30). At the same time, other avant-garde groups are in the dominated position of the field, in which they work to produce *art pour l'art* in order to accrue symbolic capital. In doing so they are choosing to pursue their vision of art, even if this means they do not accrue the economic capital of those in the dominant position.

Instead of producing for the (economic) market, the dominated artists produce against the market. Using provocative language, Bourdieu describes these artists as seeing 'worldly failure as a guarantee of salvation' (1993: 113), which leads to 'a generalized game of "loser wins"' (1983: 320). Artists seeking careers reject the established generation of artists whose artworks have been consecrated. The dominant group is recognised as having betrayed avant-garde principles, which is marked by their high levels of economic capital. However, cycles of consecration occur in which the generations of the dominated eventually become the dominant – symbolic capital is converted into economic capital over time. Only through decrying the economic capital of their elders, does it become possible to gain symbolic capital, and then paradoxically, to gain economic capital when the bourgeois consecrates the next generation's artworks.

For Bourdieu, symbolic and economic capital are antagonistic for new generations of artists, but convertible over time. Although the emphasis on the pursuit of these forms of capital is most commonly associated with, and critiqued within the work of Bourdieu (for example: Lamont, 1992; Velthuis, 2003), the idea of antagonism between forms of value is not his alone. Ideas about antagonistic forms of value can be found in other work on the historic avant-garde such as Peter Bürger's (1984) influential study that is centrally concerned with contradictions in the symbolic and social values of the avant-garde. He argues that avant-garde movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries were trying to pursue two goals with contradictory tensions: they pursued art for art's sake, aka art's relative autonomy and symbolic value, whilst trying to retain art as part of a meaningful praxis of everyday life – a social value. Rather than revolutionizing everyday life through art, it was art that became characterized by successive revolutions – in which newness is recognized by critique and transgression (Bürger, 1984: 72). More recently in the context of Modern Art and contemporary art, the idea of antagonistic forms of value has been treated by Nathalie Heinich as a 'triple game' in which artists transgress a norm, whether aesthetic or social, leading to a reaction of shock and to eventual consecration (Heinich, 1998). Today, Heinich argues, this triple game has a perfunctory role in forming ideas about newness: rather than legitimately shocking bourgeois publics, transgression has become a obligatory, perfunctory signifier that an artist is doing something new (*ibid.*). Obligatory transgressions signify that a boundary or rule has been trespassed, even in the absence of social actors that prescribe to or defend this boundary or rule. While Heinich suggests this is not necessarily an unconscious act *à la* the Bourdieusian *illusio*, obligatory transgression continues to express the idea of antagonistic forms of value, regardless of whether these are understood as significant or perfunctory.

These three studies share the idea of antagonistic forms of value, drawing largely from traditions with roots in the historic avant-garde. But we can also briefly look to another artistic social type to find the idea of antagonistic forms of value: the bohemian. The advent of the social type of the bohemian in the 18th century, challenged dominant bourgeois society through a lifestyle expressing alternative forms of value (Seigel, 1999). In this antagonism, the symbolic values of authenticity and 'dedicated unconventionality' (Graña, 1990: 3), come into conflict with bourgeois values of market exchange (as well as normative values in the sense of bourgeois norms and codes of conduct). But just as antagonistic relationships between symbolic and economic values are paradoxically conjoined for the avant-garde artist, so does the canonical social type of the bohemian demonstrate interrelatedness between antagonistic values. David Roberts traces the ways that bohemian and bourgeois values were part of an 'antagonistic symbiosis' in which bohemian artists were producing artworks in relative autonomy from bourgeois values of exchange, and in which the bourgeois could express their political progressiveness through art's autonomy from politics (Roberts, 2012: 85). As opposed to Bourdieu's model of capital conversion within one group of social actors, here the symbiotic antagonism of forms of value are separated into two social types: the bohemian and the bourgeois. Nevertheless, the bohemian – a social type often held to be synonymous with artists – is characterised by antagonistic forms of value.

The brief excursions into the world of the avant-garde

and the bohemian demonstrate that while the social type of the artist or bohemian has long been held to be outside the realm of philistine bourgeois economic interest, antagonistic forms of value are brought together through paradoxical means. The remainder of this article draws upon ethnographic empirical research of contemporary visual artists in which it is argued that this antagonism neither resonates nor helps us understand the social world of unknown and 'emerging artists'. The above account of antagonistic forms of value remains relatively common in sociological and journalistic ways of thinking about art, but this article suggests that this does not explain the everyday experiences and activities of artists seeking to establish their careers. Unknown and 'emerging' artists are precisely the group we might imagine to be closely aligned with the Bourdieusian thesis of the economic world reversed, but this thesis does not explain the everyday experience of these artists. These artists do not treat the interrelatedness of economic and symbolic value as antagonistic or paradoxical. But rather, in seeking visibility amongst the throngs of artists in New York, artists seek exhibition opportunities in which economic considerations and symbolic value are simultaneously present. Artists seek to establish proximities with social actors who might enable them to exhibit and sell their artworks, such as gallerists, gallery directors and curators. In these relationships, different forms of value are aligned together without antagonism.

Methodology and context

The following empirical data is drawn from four months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in New York City from September until December 2011. The data was gathered primarily through two ethnographic methods: participant observation of artists attending events such as gallery openings and semi-structured in-depth interviews with forty-one art world participants, including thirty-three artists. This research was conducted in the context of a comparative study of the ways art careers are established in New York and Berlin.

Much has been written on the careers of exceptionally well-known artists, including the patterns of career development as marked by the auction prices of artworks (Galenson, 2000, 2011), the uneven distribution of well-established artists according to nationality (Quemin, 2006) and participation in gallery exhibitions and gallery sales (Velthuis, 2013). On the other hand, sociologists have also been active in studying art careers outside the parameters of professionalized auctions, art fairs and galleries, including research into outsider art (see: Becker, 1982; Zolberg & Cherbo, 1997) and community-based art production that circulates outside the typical art markets (see: Bruyne & Gielen, 2011). This article turns its attention to another group of artists: those who hope to establish careers, yet currently have very limited exhibition history, relatively limited visibility amongst the major actors of an art world and who have limited 'power' in the sense that their reputations alone do not draw the attention of art writers, art sellers and art buyers.

The sample group includes a relatively wide spectrum of artists, with a focus on 'emerging' or up-and-coming artists, as well as unknown artists who want a career in contemporary visual art. The bulk of the analysis is drawn from one evening of gallery openings in Chelsea, but relies also on relevant data gathered from interviews. Selective and snowball sampling were used to find interviewees. Specific artists were sought out for interviews with an aim at having a diverse group of interviewees, including those who are well connected and those who are not, ranging from the marginal to the established. First name pseudonyms are used for individuals.

The contemporary visual art world of New York is not defined by a set of clear parameters, but is somewhat demarcated by artists who are pursuing careers and drawn to exhibiting in galleries and institutions that might lead to further career development. This art world includes professional art writers, art sellers, art buyers and art producers. For the overwhelming majority of artists interviewed, participation in group or solo exhibitions with a commercial gallery is seen as an important step towards a career. It is hoped that these initial exhibitions will be a step towards longer-term cooperation with a gallerist – what is known as being 'represented' by a gallery, part of the 'roster', or 'stable'. While these first exhibitions do not guarantee a career, most artists view them as a crucial step in moving forward, both legitimating their artworks with broader audiences and if the artworks are sold, providing the means to earn an income without relying on conventional paid employment. For the most ambitious artists it is also a vital step towards eventual inclusion into museums and art history, although interviewees would rarely frame their careers in these terms. While a certain degree of calculation is involved in everyday life, the emphasis is not on rational-choice action designed to maximize efficiency, but on the ways these artists seek meaningful social engagement in the art world that will assist them as they seek to develop careers.

Socializing for exhibitions

Both scholarly literature and everyday understandings of visual art tell us what most of us already know: New York is a leading hub in the international art world of contemporary art. Since at least the end of the second World War, it has been commonly held to be the centre of the international art world (Crane, 1987; Guilbaut, 1983). Artists continue to flock to New York. One of the first things they learn upon arriving, if they didn't know beforehand, is that this art world does not allow artists to simply apply for opportunities to exhibit their artwork. It is an idiosyncrasy of most contemporary visual art galleries – and this is not exclusive to New York – that artists do not submit their portfolios to gallerists in order to gain exhibition opportunities. It is an unwritten, but firm rule with very rare exceptions that galleries do not accept unsolicited *curriculum vitae* by artists and do not request artists to submit proposals or portfolios. In an interview, one gallerist stated this to me with great clarity: 'If you send in your portfolio asking for an exhibition, you've already determined the answer – you've already lost.' Instead of conventional applications, artists are almost exclusively invited to exhibit through someone that they know or because of their reputation. This results in a peculiar situation for artists with limited reputations and little exhibition history. If one wishes to be pro-active in finding exhibition opportunities, a level of visibility must be achieved, and this is generally achieved by leaving the studio and meeting people. The primary sites for doing this are gallery openings.

Galleries are institutions where artists exhibit their artworks, gallerists sell artworks and other participants of an art world view and evaluate artworks. They are sites for economic sales and the attribution of symbolic value. In New York, most artists view exhibiting in commercial galleries as a vital step in developing their careers. While artist-run centres and public institutions are by no means absent in New York (see: Ault, 2002), galleries are viewed by artists as the primary means for moving forward. But galleries also contribute another crucial dimension that is the main focus of this article: they are important sites for both socializing with friends as well as potentially meeting gallerists, gallery directors or curators who might offer new exhibition opportunities. Because of the inability to submit portfolios, gallery 'opening' events are the primary sites for unknown artists to begin to increase their visibility. Virtually every exhibition is preceded by an event known under different monikers: an opening, vernissage, or in Britain, as a 'private view' (which is generally open to the public). This is a celebratory event in which the exhibiting artist or artists gather with other art world participants to inaugurate a new exhibition. It will be argued that the everyday experiences of unknown and 'emerging' artists at openings demonstrate that at the beginning of careers, artists do not display a disavowal of the economy, nor do they engage in pure, rational calculations for establishing careers. The opening is an event of co-presence, in which a loose form of association is developed that is necessary for most artists, namely an association of being 'kind-of-friendly-with'.

Day and night in Chelsea

New York's Chelsea gallery district is widely known as the heart of New York's art world, at least in terms of exhibiting, rather than producing artworks. Since the turn of the millennium, when rising rents drove galleries out of district of SoHo, Chelsea has been the centre of New York's geography of contemporary visual art galleries (Halle & Tiso, 2009; Molotch & Treskon, 2009). In comparison to SoHo, a district of both studios and exhibition sites (Kostelanetz, 2003; Simpson, 1981), Chelsea is a site almost exclusively dedicated to art exhibition, with comparatively few studios. The sheer number of galleries in Chelsea is impressive. While there are at least 1500 city blocks in the grid of Manhattan, it is within a mere nine blocks between 19th to 27th Street, in the space between 10th and 11th Avenue that the majority of New York's most prominent art galleries are located. According to data drawn from oneartworld.com's gallery listing, in 2012, Manhattan was home to some 657 galleries, of which 371 were located in these nine blocks. In other words, 0.6 per cent of the city blocks in Manhattan were home to 56.5 per cent of the galleries. This is the gallery district *par excellence* in New York, if not the world.

During the day there is a noticeable absence of street-life on the streets of Chelsea. Unlike bordering streets, there are no bodegas or street vendors here, relatively few cars passing by and limited pedestrian foot traffic. Whether driving, cycling or walking, entering Chelsea in 2011 entailed a sensorial experience of stepping out of part of the city into a specialised sphere of art exhibition. This is not a site for the conventional flâneur looking for vibrant street-life, but a site to move from gallery to gallery. During the day, the streets are quiet and unassuming, as are the facades of many of the galleries. Gallery exteriors seem to resist any overt visual expression, reserving aesthetic experience for the interior. For most of the blocks, each address is occupied by at least one gallery and many buildings contain multiple galleries stacked

atop one another in multiple floors. Until the early evening, this does not resemble the conventional picture of a neo-bohemian arts district (Lloyd, 2005); there are few artists to be seen. The sensorial and visual experience on the streets and within the white-walled galleries leaves no doubts regarding the purpose of the spaces: to exhibit and to sell artworks. The reputation of Chelsea as a professionalized site of business is a sensorial experience, ranging from the visual experience of the streets to the silence inside the galleries.

The sobriety of the day offers a stark juxtaposition to the experience of attending openings at night. Usually for a few evenings each week, over roughly two or three hours, various groupings of artists, gallerists, curators, collectors and critics gather here to attend openings, often moving from gallery to gallery, celebrating the inauguration of new exhibitions, meeting other art world participants and, of course, viewing the artworks. On some evenings there are dozens of openings and the following ethnographic narrative is drawn from one of these nights.

It is a Thursday evening in September when I meet with Octavia, a young artist who earns wages as an assistant to a famous artist, working alongside another ten assistants. She hopes to be able to develop a career that allows her to spend more time working in her studio and less time in hourly paid employment: 'no one wants to make a career out of being the best assistant', she tells me. Octavia graduated from art school four years previously with a Bachelor of Fine Arts at a university in the Midwest, and moved to New York in 2010 after spending two years in Berlin. She has not participated in any exhibitions in commercial galleries, but only in some relatively isolated artist-run spaces, but she hopes to begin exhibiting in better-known institutions.

We begin the night walking from a nearby subway station to the gallery district. On this night, one has the impression of a reunion on a grand scale – there are dozens of gallery openings tonight and hundreds of art world participants are flooding the recently bare streets. September is the beginning of the 'art season', when galleries awake from their brief summer hibernation – galleries are generally closed for August, if not most of July as well. In September they gear up for another year of exhibitions and art fairs. This night is remarkable insofar as one can sense the inauguration of the new season. What is unique about gallery openings, and this night in particular, is that artists and other art world participants gather in high concentrations and close physical proximity with one another on a level of spatial and temporal intensity that is unique to openings. As opposed to the kinds of interactions that might occur at a studio or in casual meetings at bars over for dinner, openings are venues for a wide spectrum of art world participants to meet, pass by each other, engage in discussions, meet old friends and to make new associations.

The labour of small talk

Taxis and chauffeured black cars are dropping off collectors, young artists are arriving on foot or by bike and sightings of art-world celebrities are being reported to me via Octavia, who spends much of her time on her smartphone. As we cross into the gallery district we meet Nick, another young artist who is waiting in front of Metro Pictures Gallery. After a brief hello, Nick tells us that we need to stop in at Metro Pictures, not necessarily to see the exhibition, but because 'I just have to say hi to someone for a second'. Glancing around the gallery, the crowd is spending most of their time in conversations, laughing and drinking wine. Nick quickly moves to say hi to one of the gallery's directors, and judging from his body language, he is at ease with this person – someone who could potentially offer him an exhibition opportunity, at least in a group show, rather than the more prestigious solo exhibitions. They converse over a glass of wine. Unlike Octavia, who is relatively unknown and has had limited exhibition history, Nick is what is known as an 'emerging artist'. He has already participated in group exhibitions in well-established galleries and had a solo exhibition in a less prestigious, but nevertheless, respected gallery that primarily exhibits younger artists at the beginning of their careers. His reputation is minor, he is not famous, but there is a sense amongst some art world participants that he is up-and-coming.

Around the room are small dyadic or triadic conversations and many larger groups of four to eight people. Interlocutors come and go from the larger groups, but most of the younger members of the crowd know better than to interrupt any of the dyadic and triadic conversations. Nick and the director are laughing and conversing, making small talk about other exhibitions, but despite her close relationship with Nick and the potential benefits of meeting this director, Octavia does not join in. She knows not to interfere; Nick is working. It is *faux pas* to interrupt these moments, regardless of whether they are banal small talk or life-changing negotiations with a gallerist, director, collector or curator. In fact, the banal small talk might very well be crucial to a new possibility for exhibiting and could be life-changing, and indeed for Nick, this conversation is clearly something he is enjoying. Octavia is across the room from Nick, laughing

with a group of friends and being introduced to other artists, whereas Nick is deepening his associations with the director. Both Nick and Octavia are engaging in what one art critic calls the 'post-Fordist labour of small talk' (Busta, 2011: 43). While Nick seems genuinely delighted in his conversation, this small talk is both leisure and work – it is difficult, if not impossible to distinguish between the two.

Artists view being present at these events and engaging in small talk as part of the first steps in the process of their careers. Because it is virtually impossible to formally apply for exhibitions, artists develop connections through social associations. Once artists accrue exhibition histories and have a reputation that is known to art critics, gallerists, curators and other artists, these events become less crucial for developing further career opportunities. But at the beginning of a career, these events are essential. During my interivews I spoke with Susan, a forty-year old artist who exhibits regularly, but more often outside New York City, in more marginal art world cities. She offered a concrete example of how being at an opening might help her career: 'If a curator is putting together a group show, say on landscape painting, I am not sure if they would think about me unless they saw me across the room. It is a visual trigger.' Furthermore, she explains that it is not essential to know the curator, but just to know someone who knows the curator: 'But even if they don't know who I am, someone I know might be there and ... grab me and introduce me to that person.' This is precisely the kind of 'weak-tie' association (Granovetter, 1973) that we might expect to find in an art world. There is no Rolodex of artists' names waiting on the desk of a curator; 'being there' is of primary importance.

What is on display at openings is not merely artworks, but the bodies of persons in attendance. They are on display both in the sense of bodies engaged in social performance of, for instance, small talk, but also simply in being a physical reminder to other participants that they exist, they continue to be part of this art world and that they are potentially available for upcoming exhibitions. While weak-tie associations might enable these kinds of connections if an artist is staying in her studio, Susan articulates that these opportunities are more likely to arise by being physically co-present at events. For a curator, it might be easier to remember an artist's artworks with the visual trigger of their presence, rather than drawing upon a cognizant memory of the person and their art. In other words, openings allow for contingent relations to more easily develop into concrete possibilities.

The idea that co-presence in a locale leads to a tacit form of knowledge (Gertler, 2003) shared amongst social actors has long been understood as a key element of studies of social interaction (see: Zhao, 2003). The co-presence of physical bodies at openings signifies to others that one is involved in the art world – not necessarily generating a strong connection, but affording a tacit understanding of interconnectedness. Physical proximity allows for both kinds of concrete connections described by Susan, as well as more tacit forms of understanding that participants share general affinities. As opposed to Nick and Octavia, Susan explains that she doesn't enjoy going to openings and being part of the social interactions. She fears that she may have missed out on potential opportunities due to not having attended enough openings: 'I should probably go to more openings, but I don't actually like it. ... [H]anging out with all these art people just stresses me out, I'd rather be in my studio.' The post-Fordist labour of small talk is something that she shuns, a source of suffering rather than enjoyment, but shunning this labour also implies missing out of the tacit understandings and visual triggers developed in co-presence.

The sense that one 'should' go out and be co-present is aptly described by Angela McRobbie's description of the co-existence of pain and pleasure in the social world of contemporary art. She characterises the pursuit of various career 'possibilities' as producing a neo-liberal 'self-disciplining and self-managing' subjectivity (McRobbie, 2004: 142). For Susan, she feels that she has done her career a disservice by being too focused on staying in her studio, at the expense of increasing her visibility at openings. She describes that there is a sense of compulsion to go out, what McRobbie would call 'pain', whereas preparing for exhibitions and painting in the studio is pleasurable. Alexander, a young 'emerging' artist provocatively described this compulsion to go out as the 'dictatorship of the social', by which he means that his social life and his career as an artist are one and the same. He explains that he is 'almost always hanging out with people connected to your work somehow. Because you have to work here all the time ... because the separation is not easy.' Susan eschews this form of discipline and management, she also second-guesses herself and wonders whether or not her career might be more developed had she acted otherwise. On the other hand, artists like Nick, Octavia and Alexander are embracing the intermingling of their social and 'work' lives. But at least during the opening, they also genuinely enjoy this process, taking great pleasure in being able to discuss art, hang out and meet people that might further his career.

Kind-of-friendly-with

Back at Metro Pictures, over the past ten minutes Octavia has circled through three conversations with groups of artists, but Nick remains stationary. The director's body language indicates that Nick might be overestimating the depth of their relationship. She is nodding to other people in the gallery and shifting back and forth on her feet. Nick wisely ends the conversation with a kiss on the cheek and a wave, finishing his glass of wine as he joins Octavia at the exit. She is eager to move on and tells us that she wants to go to an opening at Zach Feuer Gallery. While there are more prestigious galleries with openings tonight and Octavia admits she doesn't know which artist is exhibiting, she is drawn to the gallery because she has associations with artists who have exhibited there. Zach Feuer has recently exhibited a number of young artists who are distantly connected to Octavia's social circle. There is a sense that if other artists are developing career momentum via this gallery, perhaps there might be opportunities for Octavia. She uses a strange syntax in describing the rationale for attending the opening, one that I would hear again from other artists. She tells me: 'I'm kind of friendly with this gallerist, so if you don't mind we can just pop in for a few minutes.' It is the same logic by which we entered Metro Pictures, where Nick seemed to be kind-of-friendly-with the gallery director.

The crowd at Zach Feuer Gallery consists primarily of artists at the beginning of their careers. These artists with limited exhibition opportunities and reputation are aware that co-presence is important. But what is also evident is that being co-present is thoroughly enjoyable for many of the artists. Drinking glasses of prosecco and bottles of beer, the atmosphere is intoxicating. We have learned that we are at the opening of a relatively young artist, celebrating his first solo exhibition in Chelsea. Twenty minutes after arrival, Octavia is not standing amongst her friends who are near the entrance to the gallery, leaning against the wall drinking bottles of beer. Instead she is behind the reception desk talking to the gallery director holding a glass of prosecco. She seems to be kind-of-friendly-with both the gallerist and one of his leading staff members. With drink in hand, she is cultivating and expanding her network of kind-of-friendly-with associations.

Two questions arise about being kind-of-friendly-with: what exactly is this association, and why is it significant? Firstly, kind-of-friendly-with associations are based on limited intimacies, not on friendships. These associations walk a tightrope. The phrase may appear as synonymous with acquaintance or friend, but it spans between the two. It is a form of association that is not social capital in the Bourdieusian sense – it is not a stock of capital that can be drawn upon and converted into other forms of capital. It is a loose association that signifies mutual knowledge of one another, without making the claim that there is any sense of what John Urry would call an 'obligation' between one another (Urry, 2003). Kind-of-friendly-with associations are *possible* building blocks of relationships, but do not ensure any future relationship. In telling me she is kind-of-friendly-with a gallerist, Octavia is communicating to me both the extent and limitation of the shared association. She is not 'friends with' Zach Feuer – nor is she merely an acquaintance with him. There exist numerous potentialities within their association: it is possible that they grow closer together in the future, just as it is possible that nothing develops. They know of each other, they know that there are possible futures in which they develop a relationship, but these inherent potentialities do not imply obligations today. To state that they are kind-of-friendly-with each other is to make a claim to association, but not to a relationship.

Why is this significant? Susan tells me, 'there are hundreds of galleries, each with a stable of ten to fifteen artists, but there are a lot more artists.' Therefore, kind-of-friendly-with associations are understood as vital to being pro-active if one wants to have a career. Or in less strategic terms, another artist described this social world as one of a shared ardour: 'we are all in love with the same thing, why wouldn't we want to hang out together?' Nick and Octavia are seeking exhibition opportunities because they deem it necessary for themselves as artists – they want to be more integrated into the art world and they want to exhibit. It allows them to develop relationships and reputations, but on the other hand, exhibitions at commercial galleries are also opportunities to sell their artworks. When Octavia told me that 'no one wants to make a career out of being the best assistant' she was describing that a preference for an income through selling artworks, rather than working in conventional employment. Selling artworks is a goal, just as is rendering visibility to her artworks. The two are neither mutually exclusive, nor in antagonism to one another. Rather than a paradox of producing artworks versus selling artworks, the goal is to enter the world of commercial galleries. There is not a shared idea amongst these artists that an established gallery like Metro Pictures is in the business of selling 'bourgeois art' whereas the lesser-known Zach Feuer Gallery offers greater symbolic value. This antagonism does not seem plausible in the everyday lives of unknown and emerging artists.

Artists with limited reputations and exhibition histories are in a precarious position. They need people like gallerists, directors and curators to provide them with

opportunities to exhibit. Exhibitions enable artworks to be sold, artworks to be attributed value and reputations can to grow. Being kind-of-friendly-with participants in this art world increases these opportunities, without making any demands on a relationship. Even though the phrase 'kind-of-friendly-with' is not exactly common parlance amongst all artists, it is a form of association that many adhere to. When discussing an association with another artist, curator or gallerist, it is possible to make a claim of a vague social proximity, without claiming more than this. It is more than a mere linguistic tic; it is specifically used to describe a limited intimacy of association without obligation. This is rendered with more clarity by returning to Alexander for another example.

During my time in New York, Alexander had been extremely forthcoming, helping facilitate contacts to numerous other artists and gallerists, as well as inviting me to various social events. During our many conversations, he repeatedly described his relationship with well-known gallerist Carol Greene of Greene Naftali Gallery. He spoke of interacting with 'Carol' at openings and sitting next to her at a dinner. After a few weeks of contact with Alexander, I asked if he might be willing to introduce us at the next opening or forward my email address to her, with the aim that I might secure an interview. Somewhat taken aback he told me, 'Well, I'm kind-of-friendly-with her, but it's not like we are close friends.' He knew that the nature of their association meant he could not overstep the boundary of obligation-free association. Or perhaps additionally, I overstepped the association I had established with Alexander. The fragility of his kind-of-friendly-with association with Carol Greene would not endure this type of breach – a relationship might be capable of carrying this exchange of contacts, but not an association without obligation

Kind-of-friendly-with associations are developed as artists begin to pursue their careers. Artists without career momentum typically have limited resources to render themselves visible. It would be a mistake to forego these associations, but one must be careful not to overstate the intensity of an association. As demonstrated by Alexander, being kind-of-friendly-with involves active processes of balancing between the need to expand and intensify associations, while not overstepping interpersonal courtesies. Self-interests and instrumental goals can only develop when these associations crystallize into relationships. But first, visibility must be achieved. These idiosyncrasies are not lost on all participants. Indeed the strange forms of etiquette has been the subject of a short, playful volume put together by artists via a questionnaire on 'art and etiquette' (Paper Monument, 2009). If one claims to a third party that one is 'friends with' a gallerist, curator, critic or collector, the third party might have reasonable expectation that an informal introduction could be made at the next opening. This is precisely what happened in my conversation with Alexander: he had implied a level of friendship with obligations, but this was actually an association without obligation. By labelling this inter-personal association as kind-of-friendly-with he is able to protect himself from overstating his level of intimacy.

Emptying streets

Members of the gallery staff at Zach Feuer are indicating that the opening is over. The overhead lights are being turned off and on, empty glasses and bottles are being collected and a small group of artists are clustered around Feuer as they walk into the back rooms of the gallery. Standing on the street Nick somewhat reluctantly tells Octavia and I that he has been invited to the Metro Pictures 'gallery dinner'. Gallery dinners often follow openings and invitations are hand-selected by gallerists, key staff members and the exhibiting artist(s). Dinners with artists, staff and collectors, offer a more intimate site than the opening where it is possible that kind-of-friendly-with associations might develop into relationships. Nick cannot invite us to join and despite her kind-of-friendly-with associations with Zach Feuer Gallery, Octavia has not received an invitation to dinner – the potentialities embedded within this association have not yet materialised into a closer relationship.

It is only 8:00 pm, but the streets of Chelsea are rapidly emptying. For a few short hours, the streets have been teeming with artists and other art world participants attending the exhibitions, celebrating and fostering their associations. Standing with Octavia and a few other artist friends, I watch the bodies moving to dinners and after-parties. Those left behind are looking at their phones, searching for other options. The rapidity of the shift from intoxicating celebration to sobriety is palpable when standing on the empty sidewalk. Being kind-of-friendly-with is an insufficient condition for continued participation in the celebration. This sobriety after the revelry can be disheartening. Durkheim famously describes the phenomenon of collective effervescence that arises in these short, intense moments of co-presence. In describing the experience of collective effervescence in religious ritual, he writes:

> Within a crowd moved by a common passion, we become susceptible to feelings and actions of which we find ourselves incapable on our own. And when the crowd is dissolved, when we find ourselves alone again and fall back to our usual level,

> we can then measure how far we were raised above ourselves (Durkheim, 2001: 157).

Like the religious rituals upon which Durkheim based his analysis, the collective effervescence of the opening brings together participants in the art world. To be part of this world, one must learn how to participate, but artists like Octavia must also learn to graciously exit the effervescent ritual.

After the galleries lock their doors, the empty streets reminds participants that this is not a bohemian enclave, but a district dedicated to selling artworks. Unknown and emerging artists have been actively engaging in pleasurable forms of sociality at openings, while also seeking exhibition opportunities. The above description ought not to be understood as a purely instrumental activity of calculation. The celebratory nature of openings is imbued with a sense of potentiality: new art might be discovered, new associations or relationships might be established, or perhaps openings simply serve as a night out. But this article seeks to demonstrate something more specific.

The idea that artists view different forms of value, such as economic, symbolic or social, as antagonistic does not resonate with the experiences and understandings of these artists. As the network of kind-of-friendly-with associations expands, so do the opportunities for making deeper social connections and securing potential exhibition opportunities in which artists and their artworks are rendered more visible and imbued with various forms of value. The goal is not to remain in this phase of association, but to develop relationships in which the economic, symbolic and social are interwoven. Like Susan, some artists shun participation in these events, whereas others self-discipline to ensure they are co-present. Tomorrow morning Octavia will commute from Bushwick to Harlem to work with ten other assistants producing artworks for a famous painter. She tells me she doesn't spend as much time in the studio or participate in as many exhibitions as she would like, yet she finds time for visiting Chelsea at least once a week in addition to openings elsewhere in the city. She does not see this as time wasted but as both work and leisure.

Conclusion

The ethnographic narrative drawn from one evening in Chelsea galleries sheds light on the ways that artists seek to increase their opportunities to develop a career. In doing so it demonstrates that different forms of value are not viewed as antagonistic. Chelsea is the commercial gallery district *par excellence*, in which artworks are exhibited and sold, but it is also a site where artists render themselves visible. This account shows one important aspect of the process by which art careers are formed. Within this process, learning how to develop kind-of-friendly-with associations is an act of discipline that occurs in specific sites, of which Chelsea offers a useful example. The act of rendering one's self visible is of vital importance in building an art career, and for New York artists seeking exhibition opportunities in commercial galleries is enhanced by becoming familiar with the economic, symbolic and social values of Chelsea. It would be remiss to imagine that this is either entirely instrumental action, or entirely spontaneous celebration – it is the inseparability of work and leisure, and social, symbolic and economic values. Engaging in small talk, developing loose associations and learning to cope with the sobriety of emptying galleries is part of the development of art careers.

If artists want their artworks to be visible to a public, whether in a private collection, gallery, museum or public institution, they are best advised to make themselves visible. In seeking exhibition opportunities in commercial galleries, artists are actively pursuing what Bourdieu calls economic capital. There is no disavowal of the economy of Chelsea as the hub of the commercial art market in New York. The lack of antagonism between different forms of value suggests that this is not an economic world reversed. If the historic avant-garde perceived economic capital as the signifier of irrelevance, today in Chelsea young artists pursue economic capital as a signifier of having a career. The prices of artworks by unknown and 'emerging' artists is not on a grand scale compared to well-established artists, but exhibition opportunities that mix economic, symbolic and social forms of value are viewed as an important step in a career. Instead of an economic world reversed, there is an inversion, in which artists in the first phases of a career seek economic capital – at least insofar as they prefer selling art over selling their labour time in conventional employment. In this economic world reversed inversed, there is no antagonistic relationship between forms of value. These artists are not disavowing the commercial interests of Chelsea galleries, but are seeking to become kind-of-friendly-with the economic art market of contemporary visual art.

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Bionotes

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