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## **Auteurism and the secondary agency of portfolios**

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## AUTEURISM AND THE SECONDARY AGENCY OF PORTFOLIOS

### Selection of future students at a design school admission test

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*Based on an ethnographic study of evaluators' micro-practices during the admission test at a prominent Danish design school, this paper looks into the decisions made by evaluators when selecting future students. Two rounds make up the test in question: A first round where evaluators review portfolios made by anonymous candidates and a second round where a number of candidates are invited to interviews based on positive reviews of their portfolios. Following the two-tier course of the test, the analysis discusses the co-constitutive relationship between portfolios and candidates. Whereas the first round of the admission test clearly builds on the principle that talent can be identified in applicants' work, the second round introduces the premise that the person in question may be more important than the work. Hence, while objects constitute active participants during the review round, they tend to become neglected when applicants step in. To consider the selection processes during the test, the paper draws inspiration from the anthropologist of art Alfred Gell's art nexus that consists of artist, recipients, art objects and prototypes. With these four cardinal points, it becomes possible to identify relations made between evaluators and candidates along with portfolios and conventions which they refer to. That is, rather than seeing the test as a social game played solely by evaluators and applicants, the art nexus calls attention also to the roles played by portfolios and aesthetic conventions. However, based on the structure of the test, evaluators rank the subjectivity of candidates as paramount, while portfolios become in Gell's words 'secondary agents'. By introducing a specific form of personhood as the final selection parameter, the admission test continues a long tradition of auteurism, which may have problematic effects, as previous studies of cultural education have demonstrated within fashion design and the congruent domains of film and fine art.*

**Keywords** admission tests; art and design schools; auteurism; agency of objects; post-Bourdieuian approaches; art nexus

Cultural industries attract a large number of hopeful candidates. Spurred on by the agenda of the experience economy, a creative career may seem promising and feasible. Yet, cultural industries embody relentless selection processes. Whereas some candidates make it, many break it. One of the places where selection processes become visible and institutionalized is in admission tests of prestigious art schools as they constitute a central barrier to entry into cultural industries. Entering a specific school may even displace the goal of entering the industry afterwards (McRobbie 1998, McRobbie and Forkert 2009). Hence, admission tests provide a platform for an upstream analysis of the selection of candidates in cultural industries.

To trace the micro-processes of selecting candidates, this paper builds on a single-case study of the admission test at one of the most prominent design schools in Denmark. To access the school, applicants go through a test, which is structured by a standard two-part format: A first round based on a home assignment on a set subject, where applicants remain anonymous, and a second round that consists in interviews with a selection of applicants. With this structure, the test starts out by focusing on the work that candidates produce but turns attention to candidates themselves subsequently. Accordingly, the paper considers how the co-constitutive relationship between portfolios and candidates changes during the test.

Inspired by the British anthropologist of art Alfred Gell's so-called *art nexus* (1999), which consists of receiver, artist, art object and prototype, the paper suggests that evaluators interact both with portfolios, candidates and conventions. In the case of the admission test, it is obvious that evaluators make decisions on portfolios which pertain to their makers. Yet, portfolios also provide evaluators with their actions. As an alternative to portraying a one-way relation between evaluators and portfolios, and secondly between evaluators and candidates, the paper outlines a more complex picture of the relations that evaluations form part of. Thus, the analysis looks into the role played by the works which candidates produce, arguing that their main qualities lie in the surprises they generate. Whereas the school's standardized selection criteria seem to indicate that it is predictable what candidates should do, the analysis shows that it is exactly by doing the opposite; by surprising evaluators, that the works of candidates become successful.

Nevertheless, the second part of the analysis describes how evaluations made during interview sessions differ from evaluations made during the review sessions. Illustrated with three examples of interviewees whose works have achieved the same grading initially, the analysis looks into how these interviewees obtain very different evaluations. Here, the paper argues that the two formats during the test: reviews of anonymous works and interviews produce quite different results. Thus, the paper concludes that while the set-up of the test favours evaluations made during the interview round, works mostly become active participants during the first round of the test, which raises the

question about what should be valued most at admission tests: quality of work or a specific form of individuality.

## Auteurism as an ideal and portfolios as secondary agents

Cultural industries have attracted considerable political and academic attention over the last 15 years and work in these industries has been scrutinized by Cultural Studies scholars (McRobbie 2002a, Nixon 2003, Banks 2007, Gill and Pratt 2008, Banks and Hesmondhalgh 2009, Oakley 2009, Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011). Yet, cultural education has seldom been taking centre stage in these considerations (Ashton and Noonan 2013). When in focus, cultural education is often discussed vis-à-vis the uncertain and challenging labour market that ‘bohemian graduates’ face (Ashton and Noonan 2013, p. 6). Hence, students have been described as ‘cultural workers in-the-making’ (Ashton 2013). With the case of the admission test, representing the stage before even entering school, this paper adds to the body of literature of how cultural workers are formed.

Previous studies of cultural education have highlighted the subjective dimensions of becoming a cultural worker (Madge and Weinberger 1973, Henderson 1995, McRobbie 1998, Ashton and Noonan 2013). Importantly, these studies have accentuated the problematic implications of the ideal of auteurism (McRobbie 2002b). In parallel, studies of cultural workers have called attention to the personal costs of individualizing work and work conditions (Gill 2002, McRobbie 2002b, Gill and Pratt 2008). Building on this literature, the analysis of the admission test will look at whether a specific form of personhood constructs a criterion at the test, discussing its potentially problematic effects based on the findings from previous studies.

In her acclaimed study of young British fashion designers, Angela McRobbie (1998) investigates the work life of graduates from Central St. Martin’s College of Arts and Design. McRobbie’s study is pioneering and became famous for highlighting the self-exploitation that young female designers undertake in the name of self-realization in cultural work. Autonomy, freedom and creativity constitute characteristics of cultural work that overshadow poor work conditions, McRobbie argues. Moreover, the mythology of cultural industries legitimizes hard times as they play a central part in the story of a rite de passage from living as a struggling artist to achieving a major breakthrough; a story which McRobbie (2004) suggests may in reality be prolonged unendingly and never lead to a situation with secure working conditions and a steady income.

Besides diagnosing the work life of young British fashion designers, and cultural work in general, the first part of McRobbie’s (1998) study describes the politics of art and design schools as well as life inside these schools. In relation to admission tests, it is particularly interesting that McRobbie suggests fashion education consists in rendering the subject as creative (p. 40). Inspired

by Rose's notion of 'subjectivizing processes' (1997, 1999), which he develops from Foucault (1983), McRobbie proposes that by searching for particular qualities in students, fashion education installs a specific relationship to oneself in students. That is, students are required to work on their own subjectivity to fit into the educational programmes (McRobbie 1998, p. 41). In this, pieces of work only become meaningful in fusion with the student's identity, as signs of individuality, uniqueness and originality (McRobbie 1998, p. 40).

To see cultural education as a subjectivizing process raises the question about what type of subject is being produced. According to McRobbie, the notion of the auteur is useful to grasp the creative subject of today; a highly individuated cultural worker who holds a commitment to self-realization (McRobbie 2002a). In film studies, where the notion of the auteur originates from, the term has been used to characterize directors with a recognizable style (Caughie 1996). Auteurism builds on the premise that the auteur is the creator of a film, although many others have been involved in the production process, and that the auteur expresses his personality in the film so that a distinct style can be identified across the director's oeuvre. The notion of the auteur paraphrases the Romantic conception of the artist as genius as it portrays the creative subject as an individual with extraordinary abilities for self-expression (Negus and Pickering 2004). An important implication of auteurism is that it helped film to become accepted as an art form (Caughie 1996), and design encounters a similar rise in status thanks to auteurism (McRobbie 1998, p. 38).

To compare the implications of auteurism in cultural education, two studies from the congruent domains of film and fine art may serve as illustrations. In an ethnographic study of the training at Grad Film in New York City, Lisa Henderson (1995) shows how the notion of the auteur defines the program. Teachers as well as students activate and hold on to the idea of a writer-director whose personality is defining and traceable in the work. According to Henderson, auteurism constructs the *modus operandi* of the school; a legitimizing logic that resolves crises of attribution (Henderson, p. 162). Likewise, in their study of Midville College of Art, based on extensive fieldwork along with quantitative data, Charles Madge and Barbara Weinberger (1973) demonstrate how students are socialized into becoming artists. Both teachers and students emphasize 'values implied in phrases such as "personal development", "individual freedom and 'self-direction'" (Madge and Weinberger 1973, p. 104). This means that courses are structured in a way that let students work on their own under supervision, rather than formal training, and that educational development is merged with personal development. In other words, becoming an artist is extended to cover the whole life of students. Particularly in sessions of critique, this becomes noticeable as students' development and personality are addressed. Several of the students in the study report hardship following from critique sessions, and some of them experience

160 mental health problems or develop a coping strategy of excessive drinking.  
These findings indicate that auteurism comes at a cost.

165 Thus, McRobbie's critical perspective sums up the problematic effects of  
auteurism: Cultural work becomes individualized and fuelled by a dedication to  
self-realization which makes the work a personal development project. Often,  
McRobbie's critical perspective has been counterposed with more positive  
170 readings of self-realization in cultural work (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011).  
For example, film scholar Janet Staiger (2003) suggests applying the late  
Foucault's notion of self-aesthetics to describe pleasures of forming one's life as  
a piece of art in cultural work (Foucault 1990, 1992). In that way, the positive  
counterparts of McRobbie's critical approach maintain the premise that cultural  
work should be considered as a matter of self-creation. Hence, the underlying  
assumptions of auteurism are sustained.

175 As an alternative to describing cultural work as a self-development project,  
I will propose a different approach, inspired by material culture studies, which  
is better equipped to address the craftsmanship that cultural work consists in,  
thus outlining an optimistic story of creative work without celebrating  
auteurism. In the auteurist tradition, pieces of work get their meaning from  
their relation to their makers. However, pieces of work could also be  
considered as active participants who construct their makers.

180 Within cultural sociology, the traditional sociological approach to cultural  
products has been under attack for some years (Zolberg 1990). Traditional  
sociological analyses, for example the significant Bourdieuan tradition, portray  
cultural products as carriers of social differences (Bourdieu 1984, p. 227, see  
also Wright 2005). This means that cultural products are given a rather passive  
185 role of transmitting social forces. Accordingly, the value of cultural products is  
considered to be extrinsic, a social construct. Whereas Bourdieu developed this  
perspective in opposition to the traditional view in the humanities of the  
intrinsic value of cultural products (Bourdieu 1993), his approach has since been  
criticized for its reductionist conception of cultural products (Eyerman and Ring  
190 1998, DeNora 2000, Hennion and Grenier 2000).

195 Based on this critique, a post-Bourdieuian approach has been outlined in  
cultural sociology, characterized by the active role which it suggests cultural  
products may have (Born 2010). In defining the post-Bourdieuian approach,  
Georgina Born suggests that it consists not only of recent developments within  
sociology of art but also of developments in anthropology of art, particularly  
material culture studies inspired by the work of the British anthropologist of art  
Alfred Gell (Born 2010).

200 In *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (1998), Gell outlines what he  
terms the art nexus; a node of social relations formed around an art-like object.  
According to Gell, the art nexus consists of four elements: Index, artist,  
recipient and prototype (Gell 1998, p. 27). Index refers to the art object, or  
another material entity, which motivates interpretations. Artist nominates that

who the origin of the index is ascribed to. Recipients represent those who the index exerts agency in relation to, or who exert agency via the index. Finally, prototype composes entities that are considered to be represented in the index.

At the admission test, evaluators are met with two agents; a piece of work and the person who is held accountable for producing it. In this set-up, the underlying premise is that personality is traceable in pieces of work and that these derive from a personality. However, rather than seeing the work as a simple extension of the applicant's intentions, the applicant can also be seen as a construct made of the objects and events, which are ascribed to that applicant. In other words, a many-way relation develops between the applicant, the pieces of work and the evaluators. With Strathern's notion of the distributed person, Gell suggests that artists do not simply manifest their intentions, but are made in mediated practices where their art objects are considered a distributed extension of an agent (Thomas 2001, p. 5).

Yet, in Gell's terminology, the art object remains a secondary agent as they cannot have intentions. In Gell's words, 'Art objects are not 'self-sufficient' agents, but only 'secondary' agents in conjunction with certain specific (human) associates' (1998, p. 17). In other words, persons are required for art objects to become agents. However, according to Gell, 'to call artefactual agents "secondary" is not to concede that they are not agents at all, or agents only "in a manner of speaking"' (Gell 1998, p. 20). Thus, Gell suggests that art objects need not reflect the will of their makers, or succumb to the will of their receivers, yet they only become active with the intervention by humans.

With the art nexus, Gell formulates a perspective that considers relations made between artist–index–recipient–prototype, which may constitute long chains with multiple participants. Hence, Gell's theory seems suitable to study admission tests where several different relations are formed to and with art objects. At admission tests, applicants aim to make their work embody prototypes that the evaluators will value. In that way, pieces of work should give the impression of applicants being knowledgeable of the conventions within the field (Becker 2008). Evaluators act as recipients and while a piece of work motivates interpretations, evaluators may also use a piece of work to exercise their own agency. Thus, the relation between artist–index–recipient–prototype is not a simple one-way causality of applicants making a piece of work that represent the correct prototypes, which evaluators decode. While this is one scenario, agency is also turned around when evaluators make interpretations of pieces of work and their makers. Moreover, prototypes may play a role and pieces of work may themselves become agents in forming relations.

## The admission test

In 2010, I followed the admission test at a Danish design school. I did so by observing assessments of assignments throughout a week in April and by

observing 3 days of interviewing applicants in May, following different teams of evaluators each day. During my observations, I noted down exchange of words between evaluators, and in breaks I asked them to clarify things for me. Moreover, in June, I presented my observations to the lecturers and administration at the school at their internal evaluation of the test.

Every year before March 15, aspirants can register for the admission test at the design school via the Coordinated Enrolment System, which is used for accessing all higher education institutions in Denmark. Admittance into all higher education programmes, including the programmes at design schools, requires a General Certificate of Secondary Education. If candidates for the design school meet this requirement, then they receive an applicant number from the Coordinated Enrolment System, and this number is used to track applicants throughout the admission test.

In the beginning of April, the admission test is launched on the school web page, and aspirants have 2 weeks to produce their submissions. The design school makes a new assignment each year. For example, in 2010, the theme of the assignment was to be in or out; in 2011, the theme was water; in 2012, it was the night. Assignments should be between 15 and 25 pages. Assignments can be handed in analogously or digitally. The format of analogue assignments is optional but maximum size A3. The format of digital assignments is PDF and a maximum of 25 MB. Together with the solution to the set assignment applicants can include up to three examples of their previous work. A full submission is referred to as a folder because submissions are traditionally delivered bound in a folder.

One week is set aside for going through all the assignments at the school. This takes place in April, right after the deadline for submissions. Each day about 10 lecturers participate, split into teams of two. The teams are formed so that the teams consist of lecturers from different fields. The lecturers at the school are specialists in the fields of ceramic design, fashion design, furniture and spatial design, game and interaction design, industrial design, production design, textile design, visual communication and design theory. Moreover, current students at the school participate as observers of the assessments.

Generally, the evaluators spend between 5 and 15 minutes on each folder. How much time they spend depends on the quality of the folder. If the assignment is judged to be very poor, then the evaluation is often done in a couple of minutes. Conversely, if the assignment is considered competent and thorough, or difficult to assess, then the assessment takes up to 15 minutes.

The design school has been working to make the admission process transparent by standardizing, and making explicit, the selection criteria. On the school's website, a manual for the entrance examination can be found, which also outlines four assessment criteria, namely abilities to explore and register; produce and develop ideas; treat and develop form, function, materials and digital tools; and disseminate and communicate. On the form, which evaluators



fill out after having reviewed a folder, these four criteria are restated to draw evaluators' attention to these criteria.

In May, selected applicants are invited to interviews. Similar to the process of reviewing folders, the interviews take place over a week with lecturers working as evaluators in teams of two. At the interview sessions, evaluators do not know how folders have been evaluated beforehand, and it is only by coincidence if an evaluator meets the same folder during the first and second rounds. Interviews take approximately 20 minutes. First, applicants are told about their assignments. Afterwards, evaluators inquire about previous schooling and work experiences, interests, future plans, etc., based on a set of standardized questions. After the interview, a form is to be filled out. As in the first phase of the evaluation process, the four official criteria (exploring, producing ideas, developing form, communicating) appear on the form, and this time each criterion is given a grade. In 2010, 1257 aspirants signed up for the admission test via the Coordinated Enrolment System, 703 handed in answers to the home assignment, 199 were selected for interviews, 150 passed the test and 105 were chosen to start at the school.

## Works producing their makers

During the week of reviewing folders, the most positive response concerns the most surprising object: Baked pig skin. A form experiment that the lecturers find original, stimulating and daring:

A series of pictures portray the word FEEL that has been cut into pig skin. "This one is interesting. Here is someone who is in a process, making experiments," the first lecturer begins. The second lecturer appraises: "And she has a sense of aesthetics." The first lecturer continues: "We have to meet her. That pork loin is really great." "And then she has put it in the oven?" the second lecturer asks. "Yes," the first lecturer answers, pointing at the last pictures. The pig skin has been baked and, as a result, the letters in the word FEEL have changed their shape.

In this case, the lecturers are fascinated by the work: Pictures they find to be aesthetically sophisticated and made in a technically unanticipated way. One of the evaluators is not sure how the forms in the pictures have been created, and this uncertainty is considered intriguing. Likewise, the other evaluator underlines that the applicant must have been absorbed in the process of exploring an unconventional material, which has turned out to produce excellent form experiments. Without doubt the applicant is given a 'yes'.

As this example illustrates, the work of applicants generates reactions in the evaluators, which produce their valuation of the applicant. Thus, while the applicant is the maker of the submission, the submission also constitutes the

applicant. This two-way relation between applicants and their work is most obvious during the reviews of folders, when folders make the results for applicants.

Yet, at interviews, the submission composes the starting point for the discussion as the first section of the interview consists in a presentation of the submission by the candidate, which develops into questions by evaluators about the submission. In that way, the work composes the topic for the discussion with the candidate. Moreover, in this, the work participates in constituting the candidate. Although it is the applicant that is being evaluated, this is done on the basis of the work. In that way, the submission may form the defining element in the valuation of the applicant, which can be exemplified with an interview session:

A submission consists in a short stop-motion film. The film is made in an apartment, and the action consists in distribution and removal of things; paper, pencils, and colourful pot scourers that are hung on a clothes-dryer. The film is accompanied by an explanatory text. Looking at the submission, before the applicant comes in, the first evaluator states: "It's very different." The second evaluator accompanies: "It almost has to be a boy; it's very rough with the pot scourers." The applicant enters. She is a young blond woman. The first evaluator ask: "The sponges?" and the applicant answers: "Yes, I just loved the colours." The evaluator continues: "Did you make it all by yourself?" The applicant answers that she has filmed and staged the pictures but that a friend assisted with the editing. Based on the film the second evaluator asks: "What interests you? It's very abstract, imaginative." Agreeing, the applicant suggests: "It is probably very abstract. I often try something that's very simple and then I wrap it up (...) I love the stories in things, finding old things and inventing stories about them." To give an extra example of her work, the applicant shows pictures from another stop-motion film, which she has made together with a group of children while working as a kindergarten assistant. After the applicant has left the room, the first evaluator begins: "Yes, she clearly has talent, but not as ready to receive instructions, and she talks about art when we talk about design." The second evaluator emphasizes: "I really liked the children's film where she gets something concrete out of it."

In this case, the interview centres on the applicant's work. Fascinated by the use of the colourful sponges, the evaluators open the interview by raising questions about the making of the submission and the motivation for making it. Based on yet another piece of work, the evaluators continue to consider specific examples of how the applicant approaches the design process. In that way, the dialogue during this interview focuses on the applicant's work. Moreover, this focus is reflected in the evaluation afterwards, which is based in valuations of the pieces of work that the applicant has produced.

In these examples, it becomes clear that evaluations depend on whether evaluators become moved and excited by that which they encounter. Whereas some folders annoy evaluators, who disconnect themselves from these, successful folders make evaluators engage with them. As the example of the baked pig skin illustrates, folders may cause surprises and in that way catch attention (Yaneva 2008). When folders puzzle evaluators, they live up to the most important valuation criterion for cultural goods: the ability to generate surprises (Hutter 2011). As the baked pig skin demonstrates, making evaluators curious results in a positive valuation. Likewise, the example from the interview with the kindergarten assistant illustrates how the stop-motion film with colourful sponges raises the evaluators' curiosity. In this example, the work of the applicant makes the evaluators want to know more, they become engaged in the work, enjoy its effects and seek to understand its fabrication. In that way, successful pieces of work become actors by occupying the interests of evaluators.

Yet, an important feature of surprises is that they do not happen in a vacuum but work by entailing an 'anchorage', that is a connection to a legitimating frame of reference (McRobbie 1998, p. 61 referring to Barthes 1977, Hutter 2011). In the words of Gell, the art object is constructed and interpreted on the basis of a prototype (Gell 1999). Another way of saying this is that rather than breaking conventions, surprises refer to conventions and bend these (Becker 2008). Hence, surprises are made with and read with a knowledge about the world which they form part of. Often, pieces of work are referring to the work of iconic artists and thus comparing themselves to a standard of infinite value (McRobbie 1998, p. 60ff, Hutter 2011). In that way, the positive review of the stop-motion film may have been due to the timeliness of its raw aesthetics and similarly the baked pig skin may have been causing delighted reviews because it reminded the evaluators of contemporary art, for example the work by Wim Delvoye.

## Candidates step in

As the example with the stop-motion film has just illustrated, the work of applicants does not necessarily disappear at interviews. However, quite often when attention is shifted from the work to the candidate at interviews, this means that the work disappears out of the picture. Until the moment when applicants enter the interview they remain anonymous. At interview sessions, the personalities of candidates are revealed, and once they step in applicants have a tendency to make their work recede into the background.

To consider this issue of how the personalities of applicants take centre stage while their work disappears, I will give three examples. By coincidence, I happened to observe the valuations of three folders/candidates both during the first and second rounds of the test. In these examples, the folders received the

same grading, the middle category, in the first round. Yet, at the interviews the three applicants performed very different:

#### Table tennis table

A folder centres on yin and yang, and this is used as the starting point for designing furniture, amongst other things a table tennis table. In the text, the applicant describes how as an immigrant from Southeast Asia you feel different from the majority in Denmark. At the review of the folder, one of the lecturers decides: 'On that background I think it's a clear "yes". There is no doubt we have to speak to the person concerned.'

At the interview, the applicant turns out to be a man in his late 30s who speaks with a heavy accent and is clearly nervous. He explains about the ideas in his folder and tells that he has just graduated from upper secondary school and would like to work with furniture design.

After the interview, the first lecturer states: 'To me he's in the bottom.' The second lecturer agrees: 'He can't really make it general.' The first lecturer continues: 'He is occupied with culture differences and I want to listen, but it's not for this school.' The applicant gets a score of 6, which means he will not enter the school.

#### Lemon chair

During the review round, a folder makes a good impression: 'Clear and understandable – good! And furniture – even better,' the first lecturer appraises. Pointing at pictures of lemon cut into different pieces the second lecturer continues: 'Oh, this is good! And takes the lemon pieces and uses them! I'm not sure whether it's the right way to design anything.' The first lecturer takes over: 'No, but it's refreshing.'

At the interview, a woman in her 40s with long blond hair and plenty of make-up and jewellery arrives. She explains about the folder: 'It's a chair, my heart beats for furniture design, and then I use the KISS model: keep it simple stupid, so that the customer can understand it (...) making a super simple solution; the lemon chair, soft forms, you lie down with your legs here, and it can be stowed away with the cushions'. The applicant tells that she has worked as a self-employed art director for many years, giving examples of her work.

At the evaluation after the interview, the first lecturer declares: 'She would go insane; everyone would go insane because of her.' The second lecturer asks: 'Where is she herself?' The first lecturer supplements: 'She doesn't listen at all, but as a project leader with workmen she must be good. Half of the lecturers would crack. I find her distorted in a funny way.' The

second lecturer sums up: 'But do we want her in?' The first lecturer answers: 'Not in the ordinary program.' The lecturers recommend that the applicant applies for a graduate program and give her 16 points, which is not good enough to get offered a position at the school.

### Hanging balcony

During the review of a folder, a lecturer estimates: 'It looks awfully convincing so far.' The second lecturer adjusts: 'It's okay.' The first lecturer elaborates: 'She is not terribly good at sketching, but it's comprehensible, and she's good digitally.'

At the interview, a girl in her early 20s in a large sweater with a fancy haircut comes in. She explains about the process of designing, how she has been inspired by the lives of homeless people and her own feeling of being cooped up in the city of Copenhagen, missing the woods from her childhood land. Her design solution is a small balcony you bolt inside your apartment and hang out of your window: 'I started looking at terraces, balconies, but it has to be removable and you should be able to close the window.' Before applying, the applicant has attended a folk high school that offers a program directed at the admission test.

After the interview, the first lecturer begins: 'She improved, it took a little while.' The second lecturer agrees: 'She just had to open up, is experimenting and at the same time structured.' Grading the applicant with a score of 40, she will be offered a position at the school.

As these examples illustrate, folders that are evaluated as being on the same level can lead to quite different assessments once they are supplemented with interviews. Whereas the three submissions all got the same categorization in the first round, the interviews caused assessments ranking from bottom to top. In these examples, the personalities of applicants seem to be decisive. While the immigrant and the self-employed art director are not considered to be able to blend into the school, the young girl seems a fitting student. At the interviews, it is no longer the folders which evaluations centre on, but instead the personalities of the applicants. In this second round of the admission test, it becomes clear that folders simply compose a starting point. Hence, in the three examples, the table tennis table, the lemon chair and the hanging balcony do not figure in the evaluations after the interviews. Once candidates step in, they make all the difference.

In that way, the set-up of the test with two different ways of valuating creative potential produces two different results. Whereas the first round keeps focus on the work of applicants while leaving applicants out as anonymous, the second round turns this upside-down bringing applicants into the light while putting their works into the shadow. By locating creative potential in two

different places, in the work or in the personality of the applicant, the test basically operates with two evaluative principles: one concerning the quality of work and one concerning the personality of candidates. As the second part of the test is decisive, it may seem as if personality is what the test is all about.

## Discussion

Based on the previous studies of cultural education, the 'ideal of self-expressive work' (McRobbie 2002b, p. 101), which is at play already at the admission test, can be disputed. As the previous studies of auteurist traces in cultural education have demonstrated, auteurism constitutes a problematic ideal as it personifies creativity in the subjective constitution of students and thus lays a heavy burden on the individual (Madge and Weinberger 1973, Henderson 1995, McRobbie 1998). As the analysis has suggested, the subjectivizing processes that McRobbie locates in the daily life of a design school can be said to be at play even before entering school.

However, I will propose that in the case of the admission test, the ideal of auteurism has two further problematic and paradoxical effects: The quest for individuality seems to be producing a quite homogeneous group of students. Moreover, the emphasis which is laid on the personal performance at interviews risks turning attention away from skills as demonstrated in the works of candidates. Both of these consequences of the auteurist ideal may result in talent being overlooked. Yet, on the other hand, they may produce a more manageable body of students.

Regarding the first effect, the search for candidates with a distinct style does apparently not lead to heterogeneity of students. On the contrary, the favoured form of individuality seems to be a specific form of individuality. Bearing in mind the aim of running a school, evaluators select candidates they believe will make good, teachable students. Thus, the auteurist ambition of personalized work is transformed into a matter of demonstrating potentiality that the school can work with. Competent candidates thus present themselves as fitting students who can make work that surprise based on an anchorage of conventions.

Furthermore, the emphasis on subjectivity entails a risk of replacing craftsmanship. As McRobbie (1998) illustrates with fashion design, students are not trained to sew. In fact, not being able to produce a piece of garment constitutes 'a key part of the professionalisation of fashion design' (McRobbie 1998, p. 58). Distinguishing oneself from being a machinist is a central feature of becoming a fashion designer. In other words, auteurism implies a raise in status based on a shift from craft to concepts. By turning attention to the skills of developing a design rather than the skills of making it, the designer becomes an auteur. In that way, the designer is portrayed as a mastermind. Following from this, the subjectivity of the designer becomes central. Instead of a skilled

craftworker who is produced by the works that one creates, the designer becomes the instauration of one's own 'brand' (Lee 2013, p. 196).

Based on the downsides of auteurism, it raises the question about whether a different admission test might overcome these issues. As one of the evaluators explained to me, the admission tests consisted in a 2-hour drawing exam in the old days. Whereas the test focuses on personality today, subjectivity was not an important issue earlier on, and it would not be a predominant criterion if the test focused solely on drawing skills and candidates remained anonymous. As an alternative to auteurism, a standardized drawing test would turn attention to the work that candidates produce and let these 'secondary agents' perform. Such a meritocratic selection system would remove the strain of subjectivation, let pieces of work become active, and possibly produce a more heterogeneous body of students. However, it would also mean a return to *déclassé* craftsmanship. A standardized and anonymous drawing test would go completely against the spirit of the time where networking and presentational skills are crucial (Lee 2013). Thus, it might render students unprepared to the world of working in cultural industries.

## Conclusion

Admission tests at prestigious art schools compose institutionalized barriers to entering into cultural industries, and crossing these barriers compose defining moments in the transition from hopeful aspiration to constructing career paths. Based on a study of the admission test at a prestigious Danish design school, the paper has looked into the co-constitutive relationship between candidates and the works that they submit to the admission test. The test in question consists in a first round of a home assignment made over a week and submitted anonymously, and a second round of interviews with selected candidates. Whereas the first round let the work of applicants take centre stage, and the second round introduces applicants as the most important. Hence, the paper has considered what it is that evaluators evaluate: the work that candidates produce or the subjectivity of candidates. To do so, the paper builds on previous studies of cultural education which have highlighted their auteurist traces, and as an alternative to auteurism the paper has suggested Gell's art nexus which describes a node of relations between art objects, makers, receivers and conventions.

First, the analysis has shown how folders influence evaluators. By interesting and influencing evaluators, in positive or negative ways, applicants' work decides how applicants are evaluated. Here, the best thing to do is to surprise evaluators and thus demonstrate knowledge of the conventions of the design world. However, the second round of the admission test turns around to focus on applicants, thus potentially neglecting their work. Whereas the evaluations of folders seem to value skilled work, a different selection seems to

happen when personalities take centre stage during the interview sessions. At this point in the test, presenting oneself as an open and teachable person becomes crucial.

Accordingly, it may be suggested that a test solely focusing on the work of applicants would produce a different result based strictly on meritocratic principles. On the other hand, the test is aimed at finding the right students for the school and for that aim the subjectivity of students is more important than their current work. Furthermore, the test might be said to prepare students for the realities of cultural work where subjectivizing processes are at play. Thus, the downsides of auteurism: the heavy burden it lays on cultural workers in-the-making, the homogenizing type of individuality it favours, and the priority of concepts over craftsmanship might be reversed with a different test, but it would not be in line with the predominant requirements of cultural workers.

## Notes on Contributor

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