

What Results Don't Tell Us

Why Success and Rejection Explain Less Than We Think

Some time ago, I sent work to someone who had asked to see it. The files went out. A week passed, then another. After that, I heard nothing.

At some point, you start looking for reasons.

Was the selection wrong? Did the project not come through in such a short edit? Should I have shown different photographs, explained less, or perhaps explained more? Once the actual explanation is missing, there are surprisingly many ways to supply one yourself.

So what had I learned?

At first, not much.

I knew only that an initial interest had not led anywhere. I did not know why. Still, the outcome was not without consequences. Next time, I would look more closely at the selection, perhaps give certain images a different weight, read the text again.

A guess does not have to be right to influence the next decision.

That problem goes far beyond unanswered emails.

Artists are supposed to learn from experience. We show portfolios, send books to publishers, apply for grants, talk to curators, galleries, and editors. Some things lead somewhere; others do not. Over time, it is almost impossible not to develop a sense of what works.

The difficulty is that outcomes often tell us less about their causes than we think.

With rejection, this is obvious. With success, less so. If a work is selected, all we really know at first is that it convinced someone in a particular situation. What made the difference is often much harder to say.

It may have been the work itself. Perhaps it fit an exhibition or an issue particularly well. Someone may have known the artist's earlier work, received a recommendation, or already associated the name with a gallery, a prize, or an institution. Maybe the timing was simply right. A certain subject was being looked for. A space had opened up. Another project had fallen through.

Usually, these things cannot be separated cleanly afterward.

The success is real. Its meaning is simply less certain.

We often talk about success in art as though it were one thing. It is not.

A gallery encounters work under different conditions than a museum does. A magazine needs something different from a gallery. A collector makes a different decision from a jury. Even within the same institution, requirements shift with the program, the space, the budget, the audience, or simply the moment.

That does not make quality arbitrary. But quality does not appear in exactly the same form everywhere either.

What counts as a strength depends, in part, on what someone needs the work to do.

I ran into this in my own photography. When I had to reduce a large project about the city to ten or fifteen images, different selections did not simply produce better or worse versions of the same work.

More photographs of people brought social relationships forward. More infrastructure made the conceptual side of the project more visible. Transit could begin to look almost like the main subject. Thresholds and barriers could make it seem primarily concerned with access and control.

None of those readings was necessarily wrong.

The difficulty was that several could be right.

Success works in a similar way. If certain photographs sell well, that is useful information. It tells me that those works are desirable to certain buyers under certain conditions. It does not follow that a museum will consider those same photographs the most important ones. An institution may be interested precisely in the structure of a long project, while a gallery may have to pay more attention to individual works it can represent and sell over time.

A success can be completely real and still tell us very little about success in another context.

Things become more complicated because different forms of recognition do not remain separate.

A gallery takes on an artist. An institution shows the work. The exhibition is reviewed. Collectors become aware of it. The next institution no longer encounters only an unknown body of work. It encounters a position with a history.

Earlier decisions have become part of the next encounter.

No one begins every judgment from zero. That would hardly be possible. Prior knowledge helps us navigate a field far too large for everything in it to receive the same degree of attention.

But previous recognition can do more than provide orientation. It can itself become one of the conditions for later recognition.

A study tracing the exhibition careers of roughly half a million artists found a strong relationship between early access to prestigious institutions and later career trajectories. Artists who entered highly connected institutions early had much better chances of continuing along high-status exhibition paths; those who began on the periphery were more likely to remain there or leave the field altogether.[1]

That does not explain every later decision. It does change how a visible career can be read.

Five exhibitions do not necessarily amount to five independent confirmations.

A gallery may have helped produce the first exhibition. That exhibition attracts an editor's attention. The article increases visibility. Another institution now encounters not just the work but the gallery, the exhibition, and the publication around it.

What looks from the outside like repeated confirmation may, in part, be a sequence of confirmations.

Visibility can also be produced. Artists spend money on communication, consulting, publications, fairs, and presentations. That does not automatically make the results less real.

Professional mediation may bring strong work to people who otherwise would never have encountered it.

Still, it matters what exactly has been confirmed.

A paid presentation tells us something different from an editor independently deciding to write about an artist. An asking price is not the same thing as a price collectors repeatedly agree to pay. Both can have real consequences. They simply arise under different conditions.

From the outside, those conditions are often hard to see.

We see who is exhibited, which names keep returning, who is represented, who is written about. What we see much less often are the conversations that took place beforehand.

Who pointed someone toward the work? Who already knew the artist? Which exhibition was being planned anyway? Which project failed because of budget, which because of space, and which because the work itself did not convince? Which decision became easier because someone trusted the recommendation behind it?

Networks do more here than open doors.

They also provide information about why other doors stayed closed.

An artist who has worked with a gallery for years, or who has an experienced mentor, may learn after a rejection that the work was taken seriously but did not fit the current program. Someone knows the people involved, has spoken with them, or understands the institutional situation well enough to put the decision into context.

Another artist receives the same rejection and knows only that they were rejected.

The outcome is the same.

The information inside it is not.

I notice this partly because I am self-taught as a photographer. I did not come through a photography program, and I do not have a former professor I can call after sending something out.

That distance gave my work a certain freedom. A great deal was able to develop before I knew very much about how photographic projects are normally presented, categorized, or introduced to institutions.

Once the work begins to circulate, the same distance has another side.

What is missing is not only someone who might make an introduction. Sometimes what is missing is someone who can say: You should learn absolutely nothing about the work from this.

Or: This is the part you should pay attention to.

I do not mean this as a romantic story about outsiders. Having a network does not automatically make an artist conformist, and lacking one does not make an artist free. Good criticism can open a work. Isolation can just as easily leave you holding on to the wrong things.

The point is simpler.

Not everyone can learn the same thing from the same outcome.

And this uncertainty does not stop with artists.

A gallery also has to interpret its results. It shows work and talks to collectors. Some pieces sell; others do not. Over time, the gallery develops experience about what its market can support.

But the cause is rarely easy to isolate there either.

Did a photograph sell because it was stronger? Because it was more accessible? Because a particular collector happened to be looking for something like it? Because the artist had just had a museum exhibition? Because the price was right?

Museums face related questions. An exhibition receives a great deal of press and attracts large audiences. What, exactly, should be carried into the next programming decision? A magazine publishes an article that reaches an unusually large number of readers. Was it the subject, the writer, an ongoing debate, or simply the timing?

Institutions also learn from results whose causes they only partly understand.

And their interpretations have consequences.

A gallery remembers which artists it has been able to sustain over time. A museum knows which partners can reliably realize a project. An editor knows which subjects tend to resonate with readers.

Of course this experience enters later decisions. It would be strange if it did not.

There is also the simple scarcity of attention.

No curator can see every artist. No editor can consider every pitch with the same depth. No gallery can follow every unknown position for years.

Selection is not a flaw in the art world. It is one of the conditions that allows the art world to function at all.

The more uncertain a decision is, the more valuable anything becomes that can make it slightly less uncertain. A respected gallery can provide such a signal. So can a previous museum exhibition, a recommendation, a prize, a collection.

Pierre-Michel Menger has described uncertainty and the management of risk as fundamental conditions of artistic careers and the organizations around them.[2]

Reputation saves time. Networks create trust. Experience reduces risk.

That is precisely why a simple critique of gatekeeping does not go far enough.

The harder question is what happens when a system that quite reasonably reduces risk also begins to narrow the range of decisions that seem possible.

A gallery that knows exactly what its collectors will buy possesses valuable knowledge. But if that knowledge increasingly determines which unfamiliar artists appear plausible in the first place, experience has also become a filter.

A museum can reasonably take an interest in artists who have already been taken seriously by other institutions. If enough institutions behave in similar ways, previous recognition itself begins to become an argument for further recognition.

An editor has to decide which subjects deserve limited pages and attention. If existing visibility increasingly serves as evidence of relevance, what is already visible gains another advantage.

No single decision has to be wrong.

That is what makes the problem difficult.

No one needs to decide what kind of art should succeed. A large number of understandable decisions can still make some routes easier to travel while others barely come into view.

Risk reduction then does more than shape selection.

It begins to shape what can appear as a possible selection in the first place.

I recognize the same movement in my own behavior.

When a selection works, I want to know why. When work does not go further, I look for the mistake. The desire to learn can easily become the desire to control the next outcome a little better.

At first, that is productive. My portfolios can become clearer. My writing can become more precise. My edits can become more deliberate. Feedback can reveal real weaknesses.

But learning and optimization are not the same thing.

Optimization assumes that I know which result I am trying to achieve.

I will emphasize different qualities if I want to sell individual works than if I am making a book. Institutional legibility asks for something different again. Someone trying to maximize reach is working under different conditions from someone whose project only becomes intelligible through time, sequence, or repetition.

The more precisely the goal is defined, the more effectively one can work toward it.

This is where, for me, the paradox of control begins.

The more I base my decisions on what has already worked, the better I may become at improving my chances within a known framework.

At the same time, I become less likely to do something for which there is not yet reliable evidence of success.

Development needs experience.

It also needs decisions that cannot be fully derived from experience.

Institutions face the same tension in another form. They have to limit risk because money, time, space, and attention are finite. But if they look almost exclusively where enough prior validation already exists, they create a problem of renewal.

A cultural field needs connections. Knowledge, experience, and trust have to travel somehow. At the same time, it also needs ways of encountering work and people that those connections have not already prepared.

Outsiders are not automatically more innovative. Art schools, galleries, and professional networks do not automatically produce conformity.

But a field that searches almost entirely through familiar channels will have trouble discovering what those channels do not already know.

You can show new names every year and still keep looking for them in the same places.

That is a different kind of closure from explicit exclusion.

It appears not only in the question of who is allowed in, but in the quieter question of where anyone thinks to look.

Which brings me back, in a different way, to where I started.

The artist does not always know why the work was not selected. The institution does not know which work never reached it because of the paths along which it chose to search.

There is missing information on both sides.

Decisions still have to be made.

The silence, then, is not only the silence of someone who does not answer an email. It also exists in the distance between a visible outcome and the conditions that produced it.

We fill that distance with experience, assumptions, conversations, reputation, and trust. We could hardly act without them.

The problem begins when orientation starts to feel like certainty.

An acceptance contains information. A rejection does too. So does a sale, an exhibition, or a publication.

They simply do not all tell us the same thing about the work.

For me, this changes what artistic independence might mean.

It can hardly mean ignoring the art world. Art is not made outside the conditions under which it is seen, discussed, bought, exhibited, or carried forward. My own sense of what makes a good work does not come from some untouched space outside history or influence either.

Independence may begin instead with keeping those influences distinguishable.

What do I actually know?

What was explained to me?

What am I inferring from an outcome on my own?

And what kind of success am I talking about when I use that outcome to learn something about my work?

Institutions face the question differently, but no less urgently: Which risks do their established routes help them reduce, and which possibilities disappear because those same routes never bring them into view?

There is no clean solution.

An art world without filters would not be workable.

An art world capable of eliminating every risk would become increasingly good at recognizing exactly what it already has criteria for.

The point is not to get rid of uncertainty.

It is to remain able to work with uncertainty without turning it too quickly into certainty.

What has already been recognized can help us see.

It should not decide what we are still capable of finding worth seeing.

Notes

[1] Samuel P. Fraiberger, Roberta Sinatra, Magnus Resch, Christoph Riedl, and Albert-László Barabási, “Quantifying Reputation and Success in Art,” *Science*, Vol. 362, No. 6416, 2018, pp. 825–829.

[2] Pierre-Michel Menger, “Artistic Labor Markets and Careers,” *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 25, 1999, pp. 541–574.