

RANDOM

SELECTION

**A HOW TO GUIDE**





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# INTRODUCTION

## WHAT IS RANDOM SELECTION?

Random selection means selecting from a number of alternatives using some random process, such as rolling a die, or picking names out of a hat.

Recently we have seen growing interest in using random selection to improve selection processes for funding, in sectors including science, medicine, and the arts. Random selection has the potential to reduce the workload for both applicants and assessors, to reduce bias in the selection process, and to increase the variety of projects which are funded.

## WHAT IS THIS DOCUMENT?

This document is a guide to using random selection as a way of allocating resources, particularly when a large number of applicants are applying for a small number of awards.

Although random selection is quite a simple idea, there are many subtle pitfalls to applying it in practice. In this guide, we have gathered together the experiences of a number of people who have experimented with random selection, from those representing organisations like Jerwood Arts, to freelance collaboratives like The Uncultured. What we've found is that random selection processes can be as varied as any other process, and that each of these variations has its own strengths and weaknesses. Nevertheless,

we have been able to pick out some common themes, and found solutions to many common problems.

None of the organisations we spoke to felt that their process was perfect, and we believe there is still scope for a lot of experimentation in this space. Our hope is by writing this guide, we can encourage other organisations to try out random selection, building on the shared learning from these early experiments.

## WHO IS IT FOR?

Our focus is on the arts sector, and that is where most of our examples are drawn from.

However, we believe that at least some of these ideas should be applicable in any context where limited resources are being distributed, whether those resources are funding for scientific research, seats on a committee, or tickets to a concert.

This guide is intended as an introduction to random selection for organisations that are administering selection processes. We've tried to be generic with our language: throughout this guide we talk about "applicants" and "awards", without specifying whether this is individuals applying for funding, companies applying for office space, or something else we haven't imagined.





# A BRIEF HISTORY

The idea of random selection may seem strange and arbitrary at first, but it has a long history as a simple and fair way of choosing from among a number of candidates. The area where we're probably most familiar with random selection is in the legal system. Traditionally, juries are meant to be composed of a random selection of citizens. This is intended to make them fair, and to minimise the risks of favouritism and corruption.

Although we now think of voting as the fundamental building block of democracy, this was not always the case. In classical Athens, where we often mark out the beginnings of our democratic system, voting was considered a dangerously corrupt system — Aristotle considered it fundamentally anti-democratic. Instead, most officeholders were chosen by a complex random selection process using a purpose-built machine called a klerotereion. Elections were held for only a few roles — those that required great financial or military expertise.

Similar systems have been used in many other situations, such as the governments of renaissance Venice and Florence, and in 19th century Switzerland. Nowadays, it is often used to form Citizens' Assemblies, which act as advisory bodies to government. Cities such as

Vancouver, and countries such as Ireland and Denmark, have brought together randomly selected groups of citizens for in-depth discussions of major constitutional changes, and to propose agendas for future governance.

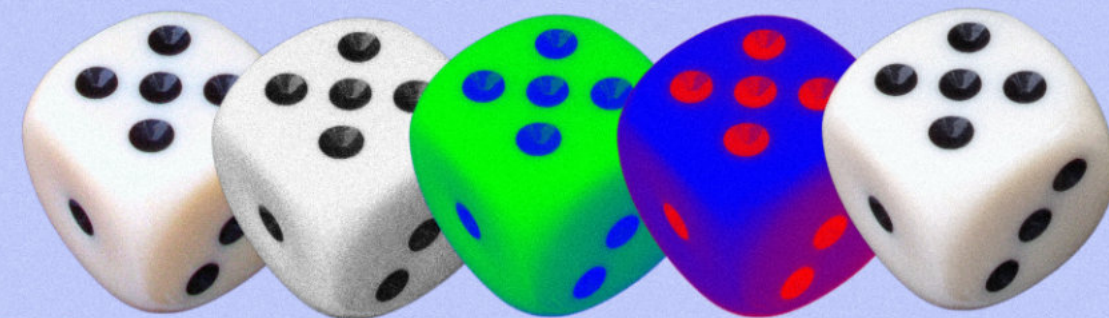
In the world of funding schemes, there have been many experiments, starting with the New Zealand Health Research Council in 2013. These experiments have often been intended to increase the variety of work funded. Organisations like the Swiss National Science Foundation, Innovate UK, the Nigerian government, and the Volkswagen Foundation, have all trialled random selection processes for funding science and innovation.

In the arts, there have been a number of schemes from large organisations like Jerwood Arts, as well as smaller, more DIY organisations like The Uncultured. As part of our research, we've spoken to several of those organisations, and these interviews have formed the basis for the case studies scattered throughout the guide.





# MOTIVATIONS



## WE BELIEVE THERE ARE THREE MAIN REASONS FOR CHOOSING TO USE A RANDOM SELECTION PROCESS:

- Less **LABOUR** for everyone involved
- **FAIRNESS** for applicants
- A better **VARIETY** of outcomes

### LABOUR

Application processes are a huge drain on the collective resources of the arts sector. The amount of unpaid work that applicants put in to compete for funding, combined with the time and effort spent administering competitive funding calls, is a strain on an already under-funded and under-paid sector.

Random selection, if properly implemented, can greatly reduce the amount of **LABOUR** on both sides of the application process. It's probably obvious that there is less work involved for assessors — in some cases their job becomes simply to administer the random draw. This can be a significant benefit, especially if it allows resources to be redirected elsewhere, but it's rarely the primary motivation for using random selection

However, random selection can also greatly reduce the workload for applicants, in ways which may be less obvious. If an application only has to show eligibility, and not compete on quality, it's possible to cut back on the amount of information required by a lot. Where previously applicants had to spend time and effort preparing detailed proposals, often it's possible to reduce the initial application form to a simple expression of interest. In some cases we've seen the time taken to make an application reduced by a factor of thirty or more.

Besides the **LABOUR** involved in preparing a proposal, there is often a great deal of emotional weight attached to an

application. An unsuccessful application can feel like a personal rejection. For many applicants, the cumulative effect of many such rejections is emotionally and mentally exhausting. A rejection from a random process can be much less hurtful because it is clearly not personal, and because much less effort is often needed for the application.

*"Our application wasn't selected in the number generator, but I noticed that the way I feel about that (unfortunate for us) news is different to other applications where your work has been more personally judged. It is much easier to take distance from a rejection that is computer generated, and I think this creates a healthier relationship with applications (especially if it's one that wouldn't have been able to give personal feedback), and more motivation to keep moving forward and applying for other opportunities."*

- RANDOM SELECTION APPLICANT

### FAIRNESS

Despite the best efforts of many in the sector, application processes are often riddled with bias. Often, applicants may be required to write proposals that clearly and concisely communicate a project while meeting the aims or criteria of a particular call for applications. This process clearly favours applicants with a certain skill set: often those who are middle class, well-educated, and neurotypical.

*"I think not feeling like you need to be an excellent application writer to apply to this fund opens a door for artists who are often put off funding*

*applications. I don't apply to many funds because they are overwhelming or take days - weeks to write. [...] this fund gave both me and my collaborator much more confidence and interest in applying."*

- RANDOM SELECTION APPLICANT

A random selection process treats all applicants equally and has the potential to produce fairer outcomes. Within application processes there are often a small number of awards and a large number of eligible applicants with ideas of essentially equal quality. Random selection creates a fairer outcome, that does not require assessors to search for minor or irrelevant reasons why one applicant should receive an award over another.

Relatedly, and depending on the method used, random selection can often allow for better feedback for applicants. If we move from a system where applicants are competing for a fixed number of awards to one where they only need to meet a certain set of criteria to qualify for a random draw, applicants who fail to meet those criteria can usually be told clearly why their application failed. Those who meet the bar, but are not randomly selected, can likewise be told that their proposal was good enough but that they were simply unlucky this time. This is may be more honest and useful than feedback in a traditional process, which is often a rationalisation of a subjective decision.

In some other random approaches, applicants can be randomly selected for a shortlist. The small size of this shortlist means that it's often possible to give detailed and personal feedback to each unsuccessful applicant at this stage. For applicants who rarely make it through to interview stages, this can be invaluable.

### VARIETY

When proposals need to conform to a narrow application process, the result is often that the same people and the same ideas are funded again and again. Applicants who take risks with unconventional ideas, or who don't fit a particular view of who a "successful applicant" should be, are side-lined in favour of safe choices.

With random selection, risky applications are more likely to be chosen, and it's less likely that the same applicants will be repeatedly successful. This should contribute to a diversity of successful applicants, both demographically and in terms of the ideas and projects supported.

Another benefit is that applicants are less likely to "play it safe" with their ideas, contorting them to fit their perceptions of what an organisation wants. By taking the power away from assessors, the process frees up applicants to propose the ideas they genuinely want to take forward, rather than those that they think are likely to make a successful application.

*"The random selection process and relatively simple application form allowed us to apply for this opportunity: it removed many of the barriers that other calls feature. Even if we hadn't received it, the rejection would not feel like a reflection on the quality of our work or ideas. This sets an important precedent in our industry, especially important when it comes to nurturing emerging talent and risk-taking projects."*

-RANDOM SELECTION APPLICANT



# THREE APPROACHES

We've found it useful to classify random selection approaches into three categories, based on where in the process the random selection takes place.

## APPLICATIONS → RANDOM DRAW → OUTCOME

In **TOTAL** Random Selection, the decision is made entirely at random. For example, all the applicants for a limited number of studio spaces are put into a draw, and a few names are chosen at random. This is often what people first imagine when random selection is suggested, and it has advantages in speed, simplicity, and transparency. The main disadvantage is that the process is difficult to control, and can easily lead to undesirable outcomes.

## APPLICATIONS → VETTING → SHORTLIST → RANDOM DRAW → OUTCOME

A slightly more complex approach is to vet the applications in advance, and only allow those that meet some minimum level of quality to advance to the random selection stage. We call this **LATE** Random Selection. This process allows for a lot of control over the applicant pool, while still promoting **FAIRNESS** and **VARIETY**. However, because applicants still need to demonstrate they meet the quality bar, and assessors still need to read every application, therefore is not as much saving of **LABOUR** as in other approaches.

## APPLICATIONS → RANDOM DRAW → SHORTLIST → INTERVIEW → OUTCOME

A third approach is what we call **EARLY** Random Selection. In this approach, a random process is used to produce an initial shortlist of applicants, after which a more traditional selection process can take place. There is potential to greatly cut down on the amount of **LABOUR** involved, but there is less control over the process than in a **LATE** Random Selection.





# CASE STUDY ONE: WATERSHED

**WATERSHED IS A UK-LEADING INDEPENDENT CULTURAL CINEMA, THE ONLY MULTISCREEN CULTURAL CINEMA IN THE SOUTH WEST AND ONE OF VERY FEW PLACES OUTSIDE LONDON WHERE UK AUDIENCES CAN ENGAGE WITH A YEAR-ROUND PROGRAMME OF WORLD CINEMA. WATERSHED IS A WORLD-LEADER IN ART AND TECHNOLOGY PRACTICE. WE ESTABLISHED THE PERVASIVE MEDIA STUDIO IN 2008 AND ITS ETHOS OF COLLABORATIVE INNOVATION HAS GROWN AN INTERNATIONAL REPUTATION AND NETWORK. WE GIFT SPACE TO OVER 190 RESIDENTS AND HAVE A RICH NETWORK OF OVER 450 CREATIVES.**

Watershed used **EARLY** random selection to award places on their Winter Residency artist development programme. Applicants completed a short Expression of Interest form designed to check eligibility for the programme. The form was a series of tick-box questions, along with a request for a 10-word project description. This description was intended to ensure applicants had an existing idea they wanted to develop, prior to submitting. A shortlist of twelve applicants was randomly selected from all eligible applications.

Shortlisted applicants were invited to develop a more detailed written, video or audio proposal and attend an interview. Before submitting their proposal, they were invited to meet the residency team to talk through their submission, a conversation that was not part of the selection process. They were also able to visit Watershed for a tour if they wished (travel expenses were paid). Each shortlisted applicant was paid a stipend of £200 for participation in the selection process. Three recipients were selected to undertake residencies.

In the previous year, Watershed used a traditional application process. Applicants submitted a full proposal, and shortlisted artists were invited to interview. That year, 74% of Watershed Residency applications came in on the day before the deadline, 20% of applications were received at unsociable hours which Watershed defined as between 10pm and 6am. Random selection changed these numbers dramatically. Most applications came in well before the deadline, with only 17% received on the last day. Even better, only 12% of applications were received at unsociable hours and those artists spent on average, only 7 minutes applying. These statistics suggest that it is much easier for artists to incorporate this process into their normal lives.

*“Random Selection did initially reduce Watershed's workload because we didn't undertake our usual process of reading 100 full residency proposals. I think some people viewed that as our primary motivation, but actually, that wasn't part of our initial motivation at all. It was a kind of side effect. We were actually looking for ways to reduce artists' **LABOUR**. We also found that the random selection process we designed, expanded our workload elsewhere. We interviewed more people that we usually would, so there was more detailed feedback, conversations and meetings to do. So all in all, Watershed's workload probably remained the same, but shifted in focus; whereas artists' time was significantly reduced and those who went to interview, but were unsuccessful, had been paid and supported to develop their ideas.”*

**✓ VICTORIA TILLOTSON, WATERSHED**

**WATERSHED**



# MIXED APPROACHES

Another way of combining traditional and random selection approaches is to run them in parallel, with some of the successful applicants chosen through a traditional competitive process, and the remainder allocated randomly among those who were unsuccessful.

For many organisations, this can provide an easy way of trialling random selection without committing to a fully random approach. It has advantages in terms of **FAIRNESS** and **VARIETY**, while still maintaining a degree of control. However, it does not reduce the **LABOUR** involved in the process at all, and in some cases can actually increase it, by pushing more people to apply for the chance at a randomly chosen slot.

This approach can be applied at any stage of the application process. For example, a small number of randomly chosen applicants could be added to a shortlist for interview, or the final selection from a shortlist could include one applicant selected by assessors and one selected at random.





# CASE STUDY TWO : THEATRE DELI

**THEATRE DELI HAS BEEN A DRIVING FORCE WITHIN THE ARTS SINCE 2008, TAKING OVER EMPTY SPACES IN CITY CENTRES, AND CREATING HUBS THAT SUPPORT EMERGING ARTISTS, COMPANIES AND COMMUNITIES WHOSE IDENTITIES, BACKGROUNDS, DISCIPLINES OR WORK ARE UNDERREPRESENTED IN THEATRE. CURRENTLY OPERATING IN SHEFFIELD AND LONDON, THEATRE DELI WORKS TO DEVELOP DIVERSE AUDIENCES, ARTISTIC COMMUNITIES BY PROVIDING SAFE SUITABLY RESOURCED ENVIRONMENTS FOR EVERYONE TO EXPERIMENT WITH, DEVELOP, SHOWCASE AND ENJOY ART.**

Theatre Deli used a mix of a traditional application process and **LATE** random selection for a residency programme. They offered Classic Residencies open to all; XL Residencies open to artists from underrepresented and/or marginalised communities (self-defined); and Access Residencies, open to disabled artists. Residencies could be situated in Sheffield or London. Applicants submitted an application form to their preferred opportunity. At the end of the form was a tick box asking if they would like to go into a draw for a randomly selected residency. Over 95% of applicants ticked the box.

All forms were assessed and residencies were awarded by a selection panel. When the panel completed their selection, all remaining eligible applicants who opted into the random draw, were entered. Two random residencies were then awarded, one in Sheffield and one in London.

Theatre Deli saw a 30% increase in the number of applicants, the largest annual jump they have ever seen. In the run up to the deadline, they actively spoke to artists about the random element, encouraging people to apply even if they felt their practice was not an exact fit or if they didn't feel confident in making an application. Their aim with this approach was to encourage those who would not normally apply.

*“Overall using random selection has worked well. There's been a lot of enthusiasm for it internally. People like that we're trying something new and it hopefully opens doors to more people. The artists that were chosen randomly are not practitioners that we would have selected through a traditional process, so we're really thrilled about that and it's going to be incredibly interesting to work with them.”*

**MIRANDA DEBENHAM, THEATRE DELI**





# HOW TO ACTUALLY DO IT

There's a quite practical question of how the random selection is carried out. Some organisations have used digital random number generators, while others have used more analogue methods, like dice or a tombola. It's very easy to overthink this aspect of the process — in theory each applicant's chances should be the same no matter which method is used, and in our experience participants rarely ask about the practical details like this.

For peace of mind, it's probably worth making a video recording of the process, either with a camera, or with screen recording in software like Zoom. You can either share this publicly as part of the announcement of the selection, or simply keep it for reference later. If it's not possible to make a recording, then try to have an independent observer of the process, who can be called upon if there are disputes. This should be rare — none of the organisations we spoke to had received this sort of complaint — but it could avoid some severe headaches down the line.





# CASE STUDY THREE: JERWOOD ARTS

**JERWOOD ARTS IS THE LEADING INDEPENDENT FUNDER DEDICATED TO SUPPORTING ARTISTS, MAKERS, CURATORS AND PRODUCERS TO DEVELOP AND THRIVE ACROSS THE UK. THEY COLLABORATE WITH ORGANISATIONS ACROSS ARTFORMS, DISCIPLINES AND GENRES TO CREATE TRANSFORMATIVE OPPORTUNITIES AND A MORE SUSTAINABLE SECTOR.**

In 2021 Jerwood Arts used **TOTAL** random selection to allocate their 1:1FUND, a series of £2,000 grants that supported 42 pairs of early career artists to collaborate together, to exchange skills and ideas and begin new research. Pairs applied using a form that contained tick boxes to assess eligibility, space to provide links to websites or social media, and space for a short statement outlining what they would do with an award. All submitted applications were numbered and entered into a random draw. Eligibility was checked after each was drawn and some were ineligible. These applications were not taken forwards and alternate numbers were drawn.

Jerwood Arts are known for rigorous, inclusive selection processes. They recognised that in a **TOTAL** random selection process, the outcome could only be as diverse as the pool it was drawing upon. To ensure they had the best chance of selecting a diverse cohort, they put extraordinary effort into marketing the opportunity. They contacted all sorts of organisations and artist networks to get the opportunity out there, actively encouraging a breadth of applications. Their approach worked, but the unexpected success of it, was that 81% of applicants applying to the 1:1FUND were applying to Jerwood Arts for the first time.

*“Jerwood Arts are known for rigorous, inclusive selection processes. They recognised that in a **TOTAL** random selection process, the outcome could only be as diverse as the pool it was drawing upon. To ensure they had the best chance of selecting a diverse cohort, they put extraordinary effort into marketing the opportunity. They contacted all sorts of organisations and artist networks to get the opportunity out there, actively encouraging a breadth of applications. Their approach worked, but the unexpected success of it, was that 81% of applicants applying to the 1:1FUND were applying to Jerwood Arts for the first time.”*

**JON OPIE, JERWOOD ARTS**





# ELIGIBILITY

Based on everything we've heard from people who have experimented with random selection processes, it's clear that most problems arise from trying to decide whether an application is eligible or not. Random selection processes require particular care when deciding on the criteria we use, and how they are applied.

For these purposes, it's useful to distinguish between selection criteria, which measure the quality of an application, and eligibility criteria, which determine whether an application qualifies for consideration in the first place. For example, "Is this application doing something new and interesting?" is a selection criterion, while "Is this applicant under 30 years old?" is an eligibility criterion. Selection criteria are typically somewhat fuzzy and subjective, while good eligibility criteria are based on clear rules applied to objective facts.

Conventional selection processes often include both kinds of criteria, and there can be a grey area between the two. In a random selection process, we only consider eligibility criteria, so it's very important to be clear as to what these are. Ideally, applicants should be able to apply the eligibility criteria

themselves, to determine whether they should apply.

Some eligibility criteria are more clear-cut than others. It's usually easy to say whether someone falls within a particular age bracket, or whether they've previously received funding from an organisation. It can be considerably more difficult to determine whether they qualify as "early career" or whether their practice is within the bounds of a particular art form. In these cases, we can ask applicants to self-define, but this does run the risk of allowing through some people who we might otherwise have classed as ineligible. In practice, this does not seem to be a major problem, as most applicants approach these questions in good faith.

A practical question that often arises is whether to check eligibility before or after making the random selection. In theory this decision should not affect anybody's chances, but in practice it can be quite an unpleasant experience to be told you've been selected, only to discover later that you were ineligible. On the other hand, it can be quite labour-intensive to check the eligibility of every applicant.

A useful approach in this case is to ask applicants to confirm their own eligibility through a series of questions on the application form. This can greatly reduce the number of ineligible applicants, and it's still possible to check eligibility in detail after the selection has been made.

These considerations are most important when using **TOTAL** random selection, where there is no scope for other criteria to come into play. In **LATE** random selection, an eligibility check can form part of the first round of selection. It may even be helpful to think of this round as being nothing more than a particularly stringent eligibility check. With **EARLY** random selection, eligibility is still important, but the final round of assessment provides a space for discussing applications which are borderline eligible.

Finally, whatever system is in place, it's always important to allow yourself a get-out clause in the case that a truly inappropriate application is selected. This should be extremely rare. However, there will always be considerations such as safety which override any selection process. In these cases it's vital to have some mechanism to intervene.





# CASE STUDY FOUR: HORIZON

PERFORMANCE  
CREATED  
IN ENGLAND

**HORIZON FOCUSES ON FORGING DEEP, SUSTAINABLE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN ARTISTS MAKING PERFORMANCE IN ENGLAND AND INTERNATIONAL PARTNERS. THEY DELIVER A PROGRAMME OF ARTIST SUPPORT AND DEVELOPMENT WHICH INCLUDES ARTIST RESIDENCIES, ARTIST BURSARIES, SHOWCASING OPPORTUNITIES AND ONWARD TOURING SUPPORT. HORIZON IS DELIVERED BY A CONSORTIUM OF SIX ORGANISATIONS: BATTERSEA ARTS CENTRE, FABRIC, FIERCE, GI, MAYK AND TRANSFORM.**

Horizon used **LATE** random selection to award their 2022 Artist Bursary, an opportunity that supported development of 8 early career artists and/or creative producers from across England, and funded them to attend the Horizon showcase in Edinburgh. Applicants submitted a CV and a light touch eligibility form which was mostly tick box, except for 100-200 words describing practice. This was used to assess eligibility, not quality.

Four bursaries were available to those who identified as disabled, D/deaf, neurodivergent, with a long-term health issue or who experience energy limiting chronic illness; and four bursaries were available to those who identified as coming from a low socio-economic background. Eligible applications were divided into two draw pools. If applicants self-defined as being from both groups, they were entered into both draws.

Horizon wanted to support artists from across England. Past opportunities had received a higher proportion of applicants from London, so they reserved four spaces for those based outside London. Prior to the draws, they stated that if two artists from London were drawn, the next would be skipped, to make space for non-London based artists. This did not happen, but it was part of the process and explained at the start.

*“I would recommend being really clear on your eligibility criteria, being upfront about this with potential applicants and checking eligibility before you put people into a random selector. It is also imperative that you are clear on how you will assess this eligibility – is it purely self-defined or are you are putting in additional checks, and if so how will you assess these and will that be possible with the information that you have asked for?”*

**JODIE NOBLE, HORIZON**

Horizon



# SWITCHING TO RANDOM SELECTION

**IN SOME CASES, YOU MIGHT WANT TO USE RANDOM SELECTION AS PART OF A NEW PROCESS, DESIGNED FROM SCRATCH. IN OTHERS, YOU'LL BE MODIFYING AN EXISTING PROCESS TO ADD AN ELEMENT OF RANDOMNESS. THERE ARE SOME SPECIFIC ISSUES WHICH ARE WORTH BEARING IN MIND MAKING THIS KIND OF CHANGE TO A PROCESS.**

## APPLICATION FORMS

Many of these issues stem from trying to reduce the time applicants spend on the process. If you're working with an existing form, consider which questions could be removed or modified to reduce the burden on applicants. Aim for the shortest form possible, and put off asking for information until the stage of the process where it becomes necessary.

It's also worth remembering that many applicants will be unfamiliar with random selection and may not have a good sense of how much information is necessary to provide. Provide word limits and even example answers which guide the amount of information you're looking for.

## CONTEXT, GUIDANCE AND SURVEYS

Another area which may need reviewing is the level of information you provide to applicants. It can be tempting to over explain your new and experimental approach, providing detailed context as to why the process is the way it is. Although some applicants will find this context useful, many will find it overwhelming, and may feel that they need to read everything you say in order to submit a worthwhile application. If you do provide a rationale for your process, make it very clear that applicants are not expected to engage with it in depth in order to make an application.

Conventional processes also often have long and detailed guidance on assessment criteria, which may no longer be appropriate in a random selection context. Similarly, filling out detailed evaluation and demographic surveys can greatly add to the time spent on an application. Consider cutting back on these to a level that is appropriate for the amount of work involved in making an application.

## VALUE AND PRESTIGE

In many cases, competitive awards of support also have value in terms of prestige. For some applicants, a randomly selected award is seen as less valuable by definition. This idea can also be applied retroactively,





with previous awardees feeling their work is devalued by association with randomly selected applicants. It's not clear how much this is an issue in practice, but the perception can be enough to put off some applicants. This problem is most acute in **TOTAL** random selection, and can be alleviated by using other approaches.

Switching a process from one that uses expert assessors to one that uses random selection, can feel disempowering for those assessors. With **EARLY** random selection this feeling can be offset by the reduction in labour for assessors. In a **LATE** random selection process, assessors choose who goes into the random selection, but not who is selected. This can be disappointing if an assessor feels an applicant is particularly worthy of an award. If this is a particular concern, one possibility is to give assessors a 'golden ticket' - a chance to choose one applicant to skip the random selection process. This can be an option if there are a large number of awards available.

## EVALUATION

One drawback of random selection processes is that they can be difficult to evaluate. If applicants have less personal investment in their application, then they may be less likely to take the additional time to fill out evaluation surveys, leading to low response rates and untrustworthy data. Different organisations have reported mixed results in this area, so it's hard to generalise, but the potential problem is worth bearing in mind.

## UNDERSTANDING CHANGE

Finally, it's often tempting to introduce random selection as part of a suite of changes to a selection process. This can make it difficult to understand when problems arise whether they're a result of the random selection, or some other change. If you're going to experiment, try to make one major change at a time, to give yourself the opportunity to understand how each change is affecting your programme.





# CASE STUDY FIVE: THE BRITISH ACADEMY

**THE BRITISH ACADEMY IS THE UK'S NATIONAL ACADEMY FOR THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES. THEY MOBILISE THESE DISCIPLINES TO UNDERSTAND THE WORLD AND SHAPE A BRIGHTER FUTURE. FROM ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE TO CLIMATE CHANGE, FROM BUILDING PROSPERITY TO IMPROVING WELL-BEING – TODAY'S COMPLEX CHALLENGES CAN ONLY BE RESOLVED BY DEEPENING INSIGHT INTO PEOPLE, CULTURES AND SOCIETIES. THE BRITISH ACADEMY INVEST IN RESEARCHERS AND PROJECTS ACROSS THE UK AND OVERSEAS, ENGAGE THE PUBLIC WITH FRESH THINKING AND DEBATES, AND BRING TOGETHER SCHOLARS, GOVERNMENT, BUSINESS AND CIVIL SOCIETY TO INFLUENCE POLICY FOR THE BENEFIT OF EVERYONE.**

The British Academy use **LATE** Random Selection to allocate small grants. The programme receives hundreds of applications which are allocated to subject specialists for review. Reviewers assess whether applications pass a quality threshold, by answering yes/no against three criteria.

Those with one or more no's are not entered into the random draw and receive simple feedback on which criteria requires improvement. Applications can be improved in these areas and submitted to the next round of the small grants programme.

Applications with three yeses are entered into the random draw and applicants are notified that their submission passed the quality threshold. If they are not selected, they know this is due to chance not quality. Applications can be resubmitted into the next round of small grants or submitted elsewhere with confidence.

*"One thing we have talked about is the idea of a golden ticket. We've heard the argument by some assessors that when they give the top mark, it really is the top mark and should not be challenged. But of course, if you give that application to somebody else on the next day, they could give it a lower mark. This has been our biggest issue and we did look at it very, very carefully - should we run a filter, which allows a top mark to always go through? Some funders do this, there is a top group, who are funded, and they only do the randomisation on a middle group of those within the margins. But we decided that we are running a trial and everything should go into the pot, so it is not something we have done, but is something we have discussed in detail."*

**SIMON SWAIN, THE BRITISH ACADEMY**



The British Academy had run the small grant programme in previous years using a traditional process. Applicants would apply and applications were assessed by an expert panel. The number of applicants to the first round that used **LATE** random selection went up. The second application round was up again by nearly 20%. This suggests the process may feel fairer, or success more obtainable for applicants. But if the trend continues, it will demand increasing organisational capacity and resource.



# WHEN DOES RANDOM SELECTION WORK WELL?

There are some situations in which we believe random selection can be particularly useful, particularly when resources are limited. Because of the reduction in **LABOUR** on both sides of the process, random selection can be incredibly quick. It's not unreasonable for applicants to receive an answer within hours of the application deadline. This can allow organisations to be far more responsive than is traditionally possible.

Random selection processes can also be much less open to disputes than traditional processes. Where decisions are contentious, randomness can be a way of making fair and neutral choices. This can be a real advantage for smaller organisations, which may not have the capacity to handle disputes.

When the criteria for success are unclear or hard to judge, random selection can be preferable to a traditional process. When we are asked to judge based on nebulous criteria like "potential", we often fall back on our own biases and stereotypes. Random selection provides a way out of this by taking the decision out of our hands.

Random selection is also useful when there are issues with the power differential between applicants and assessors, who act as gatekeepers of funding and resources. By removing the decision-making power from the assessors, random selection can greatly reduce this differential. This leads to a more equal and healthier relationship between the two parties.





# CASE STUDY SIX: THE UNCULTURED

**ASHLEIGH BOWMOTT AND LAURA SWEENEY ARE ARTS INDEPENDENTS WORKING COLLABORATIVELY TO PRODUCE, CURATE, FACILITATE AND ADVOCATE. ARTIST AND ARTS WORKER DEVELOPMENT IS AT THE CORE OF THEIR PRACTICE, AND THEY BELIEVE FREELANCERS NEED TO BE EMPOWERED (WITH MONEY AND RESOURCES) TO SUPPORT OTHER FREELANCERS IN A WAY THAT ORGANISATIONS ARE NOT ABLE TO. THEIR VIEW IS THAT SUSTAINABILITY WITHIN THE ARTS IS IN CRISIS AND AUTONOMOUS, PROSPEROUS, HEALTHY LIVES ARE OFTEN NOT ACHIEVABLE FOR THOSE WORKING PROFESSIONALLY WITHIN IT. THIS STRUCTURAL FAILURE NEEDS TO BE ATTENDED TO BY EVERYONE AND THEREFORE, NO MATTER THEIR LINE OF WORK, THEIR FOCUS IS ALWAYS ON BETTER, MORE EQUITABLE WORKING CONDITIONS IN THE ARTS.**

During the Covid-19 Pandemic The Uncultured used **LATE** random selection to distribute four small bursaries to freelance live art producers who were financially struggling. Two were for early career producers and two were for mid-career to established producers. They were offered at slightly different times. Applicants submitted a link to their work or a CV. The Uncultured used this information to check applicant eligibility. All eligible applicants were submitted and a random draw was made.

The Uncultured used random selection again to offer mentoring to early career, live art producers. This time they built more equity into the process. Applicants were asked to self-define if they were from a background that is underrepresented within the live arts sector. Self-defining eligible applicants were put into a first draw from which one was drawn. All applicants were then placed into a second draw, from which one more recipient was selected.

*“We were inspired by how sex worker and mutual aid groups often support one another by giving out limited resources without personal judgement of those trying to access it. Certainly during the Covid-19 pandemic, members of these groups were using whatever money they could access to support their communities in small, informal but impactful ways. It was a lifeline, and helped people survive. We found this really inspiring and hopeful.*

*The first time we used the process it was **TOTAL** random selection because we just wanted to get any money we could back out the door to live art producers. We knew they’d lost all their work and many were not eligible for other support schemes at the time aimed at artists. We thought we were using the same process as the sex worker and mutual aid groups, but then we realised their offer is automatically targeted at a group who are typically marginalised, which does not apply to live art producers.*

*So the next time we used the process, we weren’t in the depths of the pandemic and could see that we had to adapt our method for a more equitable process. So we moved to two draws, with the first being only for those who self-defined as Global Majority, who are typically underrepresented in our little niche of the sector. We would always use this sort of tiered approach going forward.”*

**ASHLEIGH BOWMOTT, THE UNCULTURED**

The logo for 'the uncultured' features the text in a lowercase, rounded, pink font. It is set against a white background that is framed by a thick blue border on the left and bottom, and a green border on the top and right.



# WHEN DOES RANDOM SELECTION NEED EXTRA CARE?

There are also situations when random selection may need extra care, or may not be appropriate. One of the assumptions of the process is that the applicants are in some sense interchangeable: decisions about one applicant can be made independently of the others. If you are making decisions with a more complex set of constraints, this may not work. For example, if applicants are competing for slots in a schedule with complex overlapping requirements, then it may not be possible to use a random process.

Random selection can also be less useful when part of the goal of a process is to build a strong relationship between the applicants and the organisation. Conventional selection processes often allow for a lot of back-and-forth communication. At the very least, assessors spend time reading proposals and engaging with the applicants' ideas. For many applicants, this process can provide validation and a sense of human connection. Building relationships and familiarity with each other's work has a value even when applicants are unsuccessful. In a random selection process, some applicants can feel that their ideas are not being heard, and this can be demoralising.

*"While I appreciate the moves towards making applications quicker and more straightforward, the idea of the random number generator was off-putting - it feels like entering a lottery just to have your*

*application read. [...] the hours we spent on the application feel like a waste of time, plus we have no sense of whether the application needs improving, because we weren't rejected because of the quality of our idea/our eligibility. [...] when you know your unsuccessful application has at least been seen, you are able to go back to it and look for ways to change and improve it."* **RANDOM SELECTION APPLICANT**

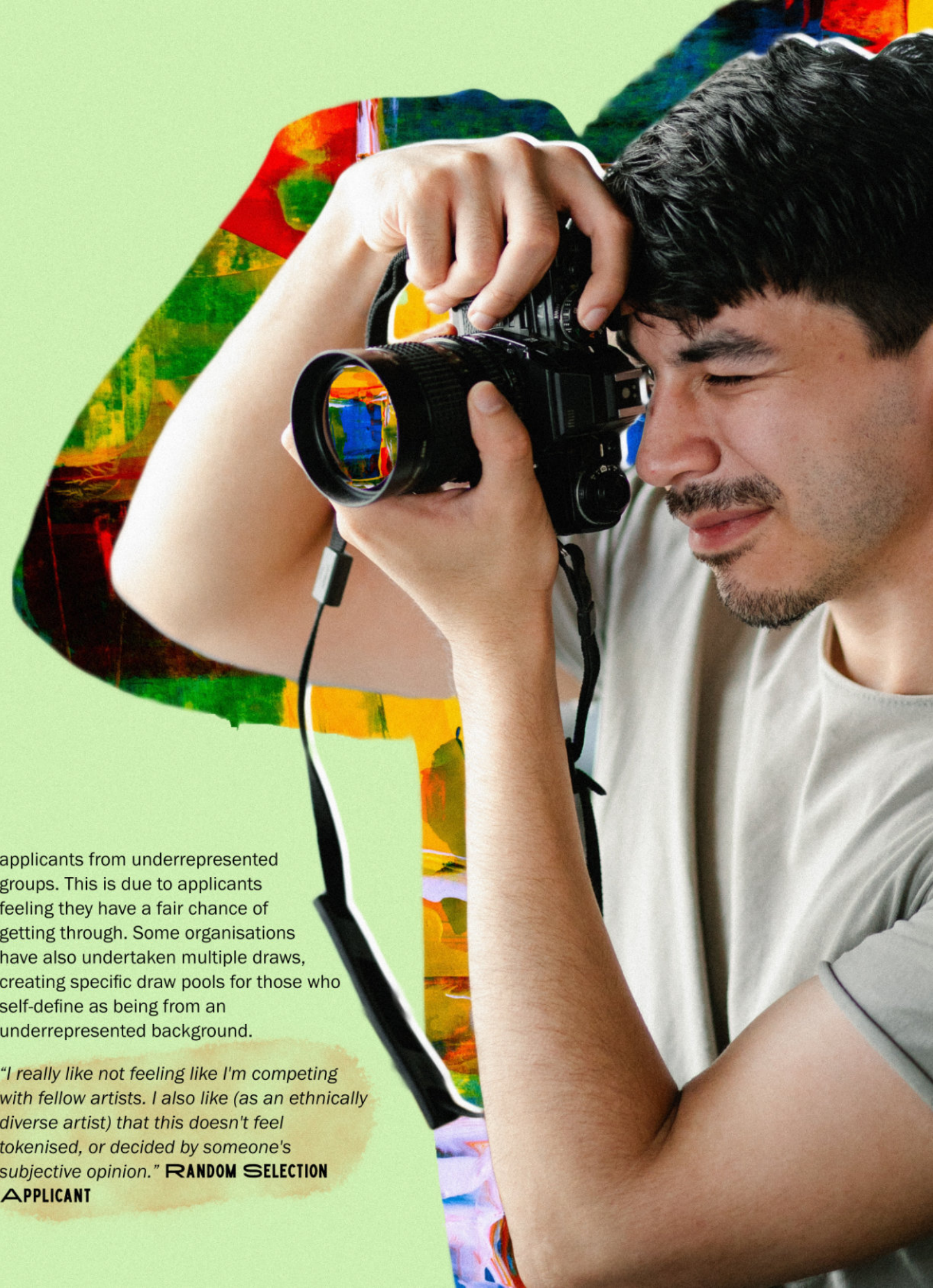
However, in some cases the savings in **LABOUR** from a random selection process can leave more time for other activities which allow for this human connection. For example, at Watershed in an **EARLY** Random Selection process, we were able to spend time with each shortlisted applicant, helping them to develop their ideas before the final selection.

Another risk with random selection is that it removes opportunities for positive action on inclusion. If those from backgrounds that are underrepresented within the arts, are of a smaller number in a draw pool, are they less likely to be selected in a random process? When inclusion is a central aim, this can be a real concern.

One way to mitigate this is through ensuring that recruitment is targeted and accessible, so a wide range of people feel welcome to apply to the opportunity is important. We found that random selection has often resulted in higher numbers of applicants overall, including higher numbers of

applicants from underrepresented groups. This is due to applicants feeling they have a fair chance of getting through. Some organisations have also undertaken multiple draws, creating specific draw pools for those who self-define as being from an underrepresented background.

*"I really like not feeling like I'm competing with fellow artists. I also like (as an ethnically diverse artist) that this doesn't feel tokenised, or decided by someone's subjective opinion."* **RANDOM SELECTION APPLICANT**





# CASE STUDY SEVEN: NEW DIORAMA THEATRE

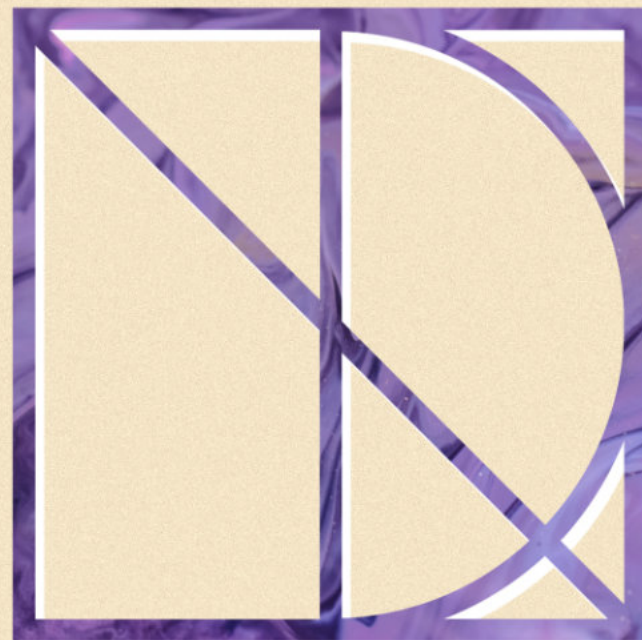
**NEW DIORAMA THEATRE IS A PIONEERING STUDIO VENUE IN THE HEART OF LONDON. BASED ON THE CORNER OF REGENT'S PARK, OVER THE LAST 10 YEARS NEW DIORAMA HAS BEEN AT THE HEART OF A NEW MOVEMENT IN BRITISH THEATRE, DEDICATED TO PROVIDING A HOME FOR THE COUNTRY'S BEST INDEPENDENT THEATRE COMPANIES AND ENSEMBLES.**

In 2020 New Diorama Theatre opened a large rehearsal complex in London with 29 high quality rehearsal spaces, recording studios, writers rooms, workshops, design studios, communal areas and more. They used a two-stage **TOTAL** random selection process to allocate free space to early career artists for one year.

To be included in the random draw, applicants completed a short form detailing what type of space/equipment they required and for how long. They also indicated if they were from a background/s underrepresented within the arts (self-defined).

"For this project, the support on offer wasn't (for us) really about leading to a specific artistic outcome. It was more about a broad cohort of artists needing generous support at a critical moment, and the work they might be making in 10 years' time - that's not something we could assess against set criteria in a formal application." Will Young, New Diorama Theatre

Those from underrepresented groups, were entered into a first draw. Half of the space was ring fenced for this draw. Anyone not selected and allocated space in draw one, was entered into draw two, along with all other applicants. The second half of the space was allocated through draw two. The two-stage process ensured that a minimum of half the space was



allocated to people from the groups that New Diorama wanted to prioritise space for.

There was complexity within New Diorama Theatre's model. If an applicant required a large space or dance floor, when all large spaces or dance floors were already allocated, they were offered an alternative space. If this did not work for the applicant, the next request was drawn.

New Diorama also kept some spaces back. They used one for their own curated artists and gifted others to four companies who were able to offer out these spaces to their own networks in any way they chose.

*"One question we discussed is what if a particular piece of work selected by lottery was low quality, or wasn't aligned with our values. There's some risk there, as New Diorama is trusted by audiences and has a very strong reputation in the theatre sector. Where our support is seen as a signifier of quality or mark of approval - particularly leveraged with other funders or partners - there's potential for that to be weakened with randomly-selected work over the long term. It worked brilliantly in this context and we definitely feel lotteries are a fantastic tool, but need to be managed carefully and fitted to the context and aims of a particular project."*

**WILL YOUNG, NEW DIORAMA THEATRE**

## NEW DIORAMA THEATRE



## SPECIAL THANKS TO:

The British Academy  
Theatre Deli  
Horizon: Performance Created in England  
New Diorama Theatre  
The Uncultured

### PRODUCED BY:

Watershed  
Jerwood Arts

### WRITTEN BY:

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Powered by Pexels

DESIGN: Kofo Ajala



**WATERSHED**

**JERWOOD  
ARTS**



# FURTHER READING

## WATERSHED:

Watershed first used random selection in 2022. At that time, they published two articles and recorded a talk to share their experience and learning:

- [Talk: Random Selection as a Tool for Change](#)
- [Article: Making our Residencies Differently](#)
- [Article: Reflections on Random Selection](#)  
(This article includes an ‘Unpaid Labour Calculator’, a free tool that can be used to determine how much unpaid time people might spend on applying to opportunities)

## JERWOOD ARTS

After using random selection to recruit the for their 1:1FUND, Jerwood Arts published a number of useful resources:

- [Blog: The Making of the 1:1 FUND](#)
- [Article: 1:1FUND Commissioned Responses](#)
- [Article: First Insights](#)
- [Panel Discussion: 1:1FUND In Conversation](#)

## NEW DIORAMA THEATRE

If you would like to know more about NDT Broadgate, the large rehearsal complex that New Diorama Theatre allocated to freelance artists using random selection, you can read about it here:

- [Article and Reports: NDT Broadgate](#)

## NESTA

Nesta, the UK's innovation agency for social good, published an article that explores how randomisation can improve the diversity of ideas:

- [Article: Why Randomise Funding?](#)

## THEATRE DELI

Theatre Deli's open call information includes a section on 'Why Random Selection?':

- [Post: Open Call Information](#)

## THE UNCULTURED

The Uncultured were particularly inspired by the Covid-19 Pandemic response of sex worker and mutual aid groups, and here are some resources they found helpful:

- [Report: SWARM - How We Ran a Mutual Aid Fund](#)
- [Resources: Red Umbrella Fund](#)
- [Article: Keep it complex - make it clear, solidarity fundraising method](#)

The Uncultured also published a blog post after first using random selection:

- [Blog: It Could Be You](#)

## THE BRITISH ACADEMY

A paper and report that The British Academy found helpful when considering using random selection:

- [Paper: The acceptability of using a lottery to allocate research funding](#)
- [RoRi Report: Experiments with randomisation](#)

## JAMES BRIDLE

In their book Ways of Being, James Bridle includes an interesting chapter on the concept of randomness:

- [Book: Ways of Being](#)
- [5x15 Conversation: Brian Eno and James Bridle on Ways of Being](#)  
(Randomness is discussed around 29 minutes into this conversation)