



ARTECONOMY MAKES THE CONNECTION

What can art and the economy offer each other once we abstract the material dimension of their collaboration? This is the question that Arteconomy has raised by means of seven artistic projects at as many companies. Behind each project that aims specifically at an artistic result, Arteconomy sees an experiment, an investigation into "connections". The focus of this investigation shifts from potential financial transactions (buying or selling) around the work of art (as a result of artistic creation and the contribution of the company) or of goods, to the human being, the people who come together through collaboration: the artist(s), the entrepreneur, the employee, and the company as a collective and the business culture.

Arteconomy views the twin concepts of art and the economy not only from the perspective of a tangible *win-win* relationship, but in terms of "connections". Imagine this: a business manager asks Arteconomy to set up a project at his or her company, in which the artist creates a work of art with the products of that company. The question as to which artist should be considered for the project can be approached in two different ways. If you look at it from the point of view of the goal, then there is great temptation to look for an artist with (international) name recognition. His or her work has a clear tie with the company's materials and products. The artwork will easily find its way onto the market, drawing in its wake the name of the company. This will reflect well and have a beneficial effect upon the image of the company. If, however, you approach the question from the perspective of connections, then you are looking first and foremost to gain a sense of the expectations that lie beneath the business manager's request. What is his or her motive for approaching the artist? If the desire to influence and develop the company culture through interaction with the staff is at the top of the list, then you will look for an artist with a particular profile. It should preferably be an artist who, by virtue of his or her ideas, interests, language and experience can understand and address the challenge at hand. Moreover, the artist and the business manager must be prepared to engage in interaction with each other and with the staff, apart from their personal professional competencies.

The fact that an entrepreneur makes room in his or her company for an artist is a sign. It is an open invitation to allow the normal production processes of the business to be challenged through the presence and needs of the artist. Staff members will discover opportunities as well as boundaries. But the artist, in turn, will also discover new territory. In the encounter with technology, economic thinking and the regular patterns of the company, there lies the possibility for development. He or she can develop new ideas and expand, deepen or extend existing ones.

The connections model brings with it a different vision of sponsorship. The collaboration envisaged here is difficult to describe in terms of a sponsorship package. At the basis of the project lies an "engagement" by both sides. That is a contract that cannot always be set down in advance. Financial commitment is a part of it, but does not play the primary role. It is a result of a *partnership* between the persons involved, but is not a condition.

It is of course the entrepreneur who decides which route to take, but drawing attention to the difference between introducing art as an object or art as an element of development in business life is, for Arteconomy, of crucial importance. The role that Arteconomy wishes to play, and to refine even further in the future, is that of intermediary. As such, the organisation serves not as a commercial *consultant* to the company or to the artist, but as the link that safeguards the well-being of both parties that enter into a joint project. For the

role of intermediary is decisive as regards the manner in which the artist and the entrepreneur will relate to each other. Arteconomy wants to make sure that the artist can always preserve his or her artistic freedom and identity. The organisation does not serve as some sort of social-artistic consultant or therapist to the company. For the artist, the artwork or project must occupy the central place. The question is, what sort of influence can the artist, with his/her artistic work, exert on the business environment, without thereby being used for commercial purposes? The artist Els Opsomer and cultural sociologist Pascal Gielen are preparing a study, on behalf of Arteconomy, that will examine and analyse this question.

The various projects undertaken by businesses will be followed up by a study carried out by the Vlerick Management School (Ghent/Leuven). Their research will formulate some of the insights and risks, so that entrepreneurs may learn how to stimulate creative processes from within. Since it is said that the processes of change within companies are most likely to succeed if they are carried out from the bottom up, an approach that fits well with that of Arteconomy, the projects in question will be used by the researchers as case studies. Results should be forthcoming in the autumn.

Charlotte Bonduel

This article is based on a lecture given by Julie Vandenbroucke at the international and interdisciplinary congress on 'Markteconomie & Kunst' [The Market Economy and Art] held on 11 and 12 December 2006 in Antwerp.

* In 2006 the book *Kunstenaars en ondernemers: een nieuwe relatie* by Marc Ruyters was published by LannooCampus in collaboration with Arteconomy. The second printing, and the English translation entitled *Artists and Entrepreneurs: A new relationship*, appeared in January 2007. For more information: www.arteconomy.be

Arteconomy greatly values the visions of the artists as well as the visions of entrepreneurs. Since we want to make the connection between artists and entrepreneurs, we asked an entrepreneur for his opinion, his experience and his vision on working with artists.

The following text reflects the vision of entrepreneur Michel Espeel. He is the CEO of Constructions Espeel, an industrial SME in Roeselare, Belgium, founded in 1954 and specialised in the automation of material handling, tailor-made material carriers and systems delivery. Espeel offers a total package with products and services of the highest quality and flexibility. The company has 75 employees. (www.espeel.be)

Art today

Bart Verschaffel put forward the following definition of art at the 8th colloquium in the seminar series on "Art and the economy: we do not see any difference".

"Until the late Middle Ages, art had to make do with meanings that were strictly controlled by clerics and princes. The majority of artists – who in fact were skilled artisans – created their art according to tried and tested models, entirely within the accepted codes of the day. Only the great artists could experiment and allow themselves to create their own individual meaning, and that only at the cost of a great deal of social resistance, mistrust and conflict. Risks were rarely or never taken, for what is new always entails risk. In the 19th and 20th centuries, art came to be almost completely identified both with the position of the outsider, and with the task of renewing a society's culture, that is to say, the meanings with which and by which people live. Art became the

avant-garde, the vanguard that goes beyond what is and explores what is to come, seeks to reveal an unseen reality, makes possible new experiences, and so on.

The place of art today has shifted. What is creative is in itself no longer an artistic value. Art has acquired a second function, that of being critical-reflective. The artist is first and foremost not (or no longer) the person who creates new meanings, new forms, new images. Nor is he or she (any longer) the one who celebrates the new, but someone who lives consciously and reflects on the culture and the world in which he or she lives. It is someone who judges our culture – that is, the meanings by and from which we live – and formulates a response to it. It goes without saying that an artist thereby limits himself or herself, choosing one particular topic or approach. Some focus their judgment upon the visual culture, others on art history, or on bodily culture. But what is essential is that this response is formulated publicly: the work of art is a contribution to the 'general conversation about culture' that is taking place within our society. And that answer is creative, and not purely discursive. Given this development, the interesting art of today is not the art that chases after novelty, that necessarily seeks to reveal the 'unseen'. Rather, art slows us down. It asks us to freeze and concentrate, to turn back, to look backwards...

The economy can certainly make good use of creative, flexible, dynamic, innovative spirits.

The company today

We regard a company as the result of a well-considered, often risky initiative, the purpose of which is to achieve added economic value and to optimise it – in a given society – according to norms that enhance human dignity.

A company must be set up essentially as a community of people, all of whom, with their own personal insights and commitments, their own needs and inspirations, make a specific contribution to a goal that is specific to that business.

Every company aims to provide goods or services and to carry on its activities in such a way as to achieve true economic and social profitability, both for those who are directly concerned by the company's activities and for the society in which it is active.

The profit motive is indispensable as a stimulus for economic activity, as compensation for services rendered, as a means of ensuring the continuity of its economic activities. Without profit, no economic entity can survive. But the economy is not an end in itself. For profit, no matter how essential, is not the highest good to which all others might be subordinated. It must be able to justify itself socially and ethically within certain boundaries.

In our developed society today, we take for granted that a company must offer its employees adequate opportunities and potential for independent performance and self-development, structured whenever possible within a process of lifelong learning related to the company's objectives.

The word 'structure' has just been mentioned. A company or organisation can fail if there is too little structure. If an entrepreneur and his or her employees are given all possible artistic freedom to innovate, but pay no attention to budget goals, deadlines, agreements with suppliers and clients, and so on, then they will soon find themselves in a fatal chaos. But with too much structure, there is little room for entrepreneurship. With a lack of freedom and responsibility, there is also the danger that creative dynamism will disappear. A combination of the two gives rise to the "structured chaos" according to which one must constantly adjust oneself. To do so certainly requires a high level of intelligence, knowledge, experience and sense of responsibility on the part of all players. This form of organisation can lead to highly creative and innovative ideas. Structured

chaos as a strategy requires more preparation, attention and follow-up on the part of management.

An essential role played by the entrepreneur is to make sure that every employee in his or her company is given sufficient freedom and just enough structure to be able to function at an optimal level. If that is the case, every employee regardless of rank will be continuously looking to improve processes and to update products. Everything we do has an impact on society. Without each and every one of us – and this goes for every individual – the world would look different. The world and society are constantly changing, and each of us plays a part in that. Not only do we have a place in the world and in society, but we also have a responsibility. The question has long been not what your job is, but rather what your responsibility is. This question implies placing a value on what the person is, the position he or she occupies in the economic world.

A person who is aware of this may call himself a “seeker”. He or she raises questions that go beyond the purely material. That growing awareness goes hand in hand with the metaphysical question about the meaning of life, of our own lives. The question we ask ourselves is: “What am I doing here and what good does it do?”

A part of the answer to that question, I find, lies in a holistic vision. Everything is a part of the whole; thus the economy, albeit an important part, is also but a part of the whole (in Greek, *holon*). This vision creates bonds, so that the economy is bound up with science, politics, education, the Third World, art and culture.

Economy and art, hand in hand

All too often, one starts out from the position that these are mutually exclusive. That making profit for a company is not compatible with involvement in the art world.

In our capitalistic market economy, many things are directed and judged according to the tangible and the measurable. Results are expressed in terms of the ultimate financial profit. Profit, in its turn, leads to further material progress. This then becomes *the* yardstick by which individual emancipation, personal success is measured almost exclusively.

But is producing “this sort of” profit for a company the only source of bliss? It is said that in the business world there is always a sort of confrontation between hard and soft, and between the rational and the intuitive. It is undoubtedly the case that culture very often has to give way before the economic laws of business life. The juxtaposition of the concepts of profit and non-profit has been defined in various ways in the literature.

For there is a great deal of similarity between these two, for both represent progress. Both offer values that are important to our contemporary society, such as creative dynamism. Both the entrepreneur and the artist have their own capital. In the case of the entrepreneur, this takes the form of money, which is used to finance materials, the means of production, etc. In the case of the artist, it takes the form of freedom: the freedom of thought, the freedom to choose the form in which to express oneself.

The two overlap in various ways. Entrepreneurship is more than producing, buying and selling or profit-making. A good entrepreneur has a position and a responsibility within society, and looks for meaning in what he or she does. And in this respect, the artist can be of assistance: the artist creates a new language, new symbols that lend meaning and clarity to what is taking place in the world around them. The entrepreneur can turn for inspiration to the artist, and can make a commitment to supporting the arts.

The artist, in turn, can go to the entrepreneur for inspiration as to how to place his or her works of art in society. This can involve not merely the commercial aspect (for instance,

selling a work) but also communications, strategy, efficiency, and collaboration with others.

The economy has difficulty with transactions where no monetary exchange is involved. It is concerned only with – what do you get for what. The social commitment of a company has to be made to fit into its business objectives. This comes down to a calculable maximum surplus value that should be as clearly demonstrable as possible and over the shortest possible term. Art sponsorship must thus be situated fully within this perspective. Art is given a place in the marketing mix or in the external communications of a company. Sponsorship is treated as a functional transaction: *investment* in balance, with a *return on investment*. Art is an instrument. It is made accessible in the form of entertainment, PR formulas with VIP receptions, means of communication directed towards client relations with target groups that are interested in culture. Wealth in the commercial sphere is expressed in terms of having, while in the artistic sphere in terms of being. The dialectic between having and being is as old as humanity. It is bred in the bone. Both the economic and the artistic world employ human beings, and thus the dynamic of having is mixed in with that of being. This observation is the key to a whole new perspective.

The paradox between art and the economy cannot be reduced to mere caricature. An entrepreneur is not necessarily a salesperson. Authenticity and the quest for socially relevant values and attitudes are not reserved exclusively to the art world. The artist does not have a monopoly over creative activity. Thanks to the generous gifts of talent, creativity is at work everywhere. Creative entrepreneurship means acting creatively out of an inward drive. The profit generated by this sort of activity is certainly much higher than what an annual salary, financial statement or price list can indicate. The magic of giving, which we know from the process of artistic creation, is also involved here: “give in order that you might receive”. In a social climate in which rational, goal-oriented activity, with a view to ever greater financial profit seems the strongest force, taking this principle for granted naturally comes across as “naïve” or “unrealistic”. Here and there in the business world, there are people who, on an individual basis, are beginning to grasp that deeper ethical reflection and investigation are indispensable if we want to have sustainable entrepreneurship. The economy is not a value-free mechanical process. Business management has a spiritual dimension in the way in which employees treat each other and other stakeholders, and in the energy that is thereby released. This tendency of people to ask questions more openly about the meaning of their activities in a business context is a significant development.

People find happiness in a sense of wonder, in being open to the unpredictable. The unbridled quest for profit closes off these spontaneous, human qualities. That is why entrepreneurs deliberately choose to forge links with other areas of social activity than just their own business or economic domain.

Why do we do it?

I am a managing director of Constructies Espeel, an industrial SME founded in 1954 and specialised in the automation of materials handling and systems delivery. As a business manager, I have always been constantly searching for that something more than purely economic activity. I am involved, among other things, in education and in the Third World. And I have also found that “little bit more” in the creative arts. At one of the many visits my wife and I have made to exhibitions, in 1989 we met the artist Paul Gees. He expressed his complaint that a young artist had particular difficulty simply in producing, as in his case, large sculptures. I invited him to our company, and so began a collaboration that today has come to mean a real value for myself and for the employees of the company.

Art gives added value to life, and thus also to business life. By introducing art, in one way or another, into the company, this added value also reaches the people who work there, and above all those who work with it. Art can be introduced in a purely passive way into a company: put on display. But art can also be involved actively in business life. Only if a manager recognises that managing a company is more than making steady profit can he or she go in search of balance between the quantitative and the human within the company.

Where artists work together with company employees at all levels, we notice that all those involved in some way become better people. The staff of a company who encounter for the first time the designs for a work of art often do not always know what exactly the artist means or wants.

Unlike with the customary – business-related – tasks, these employees often find themselves groping in the dark. Only after discussion and communication with the artist do they begin to understand, to grasp where the artist wants to go. The artist of course comes up with the idea, but by working intensively together, each person will become more involved. Once the work of art is ready, they will each feel themselves to be a little bit of an artist as well, and be proud of what has been achieved, for something of themselves is now in that work.

This sort of collaboration is also enriching for the artist. By means of his or her sketches and designs, the artist guides the work in the studio but also works on it physically. In this way, he or she is more often confronted with the practical problems that arise in the execution of the work. Mostly it is the real experts who find the solution, as they are more familiar with the technical and technological possibilities. Thus, through joint discussion, adjustments are often made to the original designs. This is the best proof that we are dealing here with cross-fertilisation. On the one hand, the employees – the executors who in a concrete and constructive manner bring the artist back to reality, to what is doable. On the other hand, the artist – designer and think-tank – who has mastered the creative process, allows the staff member to think along with him or her and to participate in the process, thereby transcending him- or herself while bringing the work to completion.

The artist seeks to be a witness to his or her era, and to evaluate the quality of established social values. The company wants to help in this task, to support the artist in fulfilling his or her creative ideas. Yet this cannot be done unconditionally. The artist must be prepared to enter into a synergy with the business leader and the company staff.

Where this collaboration turns out to be not only exciting but also truly enriching, one artist will pave the way for many other, and in due course more and more opportunities will arise. The specific task of the business leader consists in somehow achieving an ideal balance within the company: a balance between the figures and the intangible, between results and engagement.

The collaboration between artists and Espeel is always focused directly on the artist rather than on organisations or institutes. The selection criterion used by Espeel is as follows: Is the artist able to work together with the company staff? Espeel does not consider it to be its task to assess the quality of the artwork. That is the role of other institutions.

This collaboration is now situated at three levels. First, the artist can be seen as simply a "special" client who has the company produce smaller or larger works of art on his or her behalf. Or the artist may set up a project along with Espeel. Or else the artist takes the collaboration between him- or herself and Espeel, or the role of the Espeel company within its environment, as the subject of his or her work of art.

And what about the financing? In theory, Espeel serves as facilitator rather than as sponsor. The artist as just a "special" client is then treated as an ordinary client. On the second and third levels, individual agreements are made with the artist.

A sociological study of the effects of the collaboration between artists and company staff was carried out in 2004, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of our foundation, by the University of Ghent under the direction of Professor Vyncke. The study brought the following points to light:

The employee understands that the artist needs him or her at a technical level. This leads to involvement, motivation, pride and mutual exchange in the course of the project. Personal contact with the artist is the most important. That is what helps break through any complacency about one's own expertise. In the process, worldviews are exchanged and new interpretive patterns are formed.

The collected data show that the introduction of artistic projects can provide excellent scope for stimulating creativity and innovation within a company. Creativity is one of the most important keywords in today's business world. Everyone is in search of creative sources, creative governance or creative management. Working together with artists is a means of realising creative management within a company.

Espeel receives an obvious benefit in terms of its structure and selection criterion from its collaboration and ties with artists. By contrast, a company that regards art as simply a way of shaping its image gains benefit only in terms of its image, and not at the level of transformation within the company. For transformation requires that a person be affected in his or her thoughts and feelings, and it is the lasting effect, the involvement and the intensity of the experience that determine the effectiveness of that change.

Michel Espeel

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Julie Vandenbroucke

Julie Vandenbroucke is the founder and president of Arteconomy. She started her professional career as a social worker and gradually developed a passion for contemporary art. She organized several successful exhibitions and events, some of them together with her husband Michel Espeel who has been working together with artists in his company since 1989.

In March 2002, Julie's passion for contemporary art and her experience in the field resulted in the foundation of Arteconomy, a non-profit organization that aims at establishing win-win relationships between art and economy, between artists and entrepreneurs. Arteconomy believes that both art and the economy have something to

offer to each other and that both can benefit from this relationship. Julie is the driving force who stimulates research and sets up innovative collaboration projects. She is also a member of the board of different cultural organizations and is a respected guest speaker at round tables and conventions on the subject of arts in business.

Michel Espeel

After graduating in Applied Economic Sciences from Antwerp University, Michel Espeel became managing director of Constructies Espeel, an industrial SME in metal construction, founded by his father in 1954 and specialised in the automation of material handling and systems delivery.

Michel Espeel has been working with artists in his company since 1989. It all started when artist Paul Gees came up with a technical problem that was solved at Constructies Espeel. More and more artists found their way to the company and the collaborations evolved from purely technical problem solving to win-win relationships between the company and the artists.

Michel is co-founder of Arteconomy and member of the board of several professional associations and professional advisory boards in both profit and non-profit sectors. He also gives lectures regarding entrepreneurship for high school and college students.