

CREATIVE ENTREPRENEURSHIP: THE BUSINESS ART AND ART BUSINESS OF
CONTEMPORARY ARTIST COLLECTIVES

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Master of Arts
in Communication, Culture and Technology

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Washington, DC
April 29, 2004

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ABSTRACT

It seems that everyone is talking about creativity. Business executives champion creativity as a new way of stimulating innovation in the workplace, while commercial art galleries are competing to discover the next “hot” artist from a growing pool of art school grads, hedging their bets on an artist’s future worth by the creative potential her artwork shows today. The contemporary political economy of Art and Business are driven by a shared ideology of autonomous, entrepreneurial creative labor, which is based on a historicized mythology of the artist as an individual social outsider/creative genius. *But just how “freeing” is the creativity of the artist or businessman? What potential for critique does the model of the contemporary artist collective offer to a system of creative labor that is inherently contradicted by the competitiveness of individualism?*

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all of the creative entrepreneurs I have known in my life, especially those I worked with at Blackboard Inc., my professors in the Communication, Culture and Technology Program, and the members of the artist collective Decatur Blue, from whom I have gained invaluable insight into the nature of creativity and its expression in daily life.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful for the intellectual perspectives gained from professors Matthew Tinkcom and Jeffery Peck, whose refined academic guidance and patience allowed me to explore many terrains while completing my degree. I must also thank Dr. Linda Garcia for involving me in her communications policy research as it has informed the methodology of this project.

Additionally, this thesis owes much to the unfaltering support of my thesis reader and dear friend, Stephen Guidry. I am indebted to him for his patience, advice, and critical eye. Most importantly, I thank him for the stability of his buoyant presence at times when I was cast out on my own sea of doubt and fear during the creative intellectual labor of writing this thesis.

A personal thanks goes to my friends and family who have supported me throughout the writing process, including my roommates for allowing me to turn the dining room into the installation art piece, *Untitled (the labor of thesis writing)*.

PREFACE

The origin of this paper is grounded in my research and personal experiences in two inextricably linked and representative spheres of the commercial and social world: Business and Art. For over six years I have been actively involved in these two fields, including during my graduate studies at Georgetown University. From experience gained through the various roles I have played in each sphere, I have determined that there is an important single common denominator that connects business and art: the rhetoric of “creativity” and “entrepreneurship.”

Throughout my experiences in each field, I perceived the presence of an ethos of creativity as a tool of innovation, and the strategic alignment of social relationships and resources as an activity of entrepreneurship. However, when working amongst these “creative laborers,” and engaging in such labor myself, I noticed that underlying this form of production was a feeling of competition. Even between individuals who worked in the same department at Blackboard Inc (my first employer), or artists that utilized similar mediums of expression and were trying to “get noticed” by the same commercial galleries in Washington, DC, there was a prevalent level of mistrust. Similarly, an almost incessant pressure to “be first” to offer a new business idea, or get access to information about an art exhibition

opportunity, seemed to produce anxiety and fear amongst the individuals with whom I was in daily contact. Having experienced creativity as something exciting and personally gratifying, I was perplexed by my own feelings of such pressure. This led to questions about the category of labor within the current political economy, one that I develop in this paper as the current problematic climate of creative entrepreneurship.

With the fortunate experience of forging close relationships with the founders of Blackboard Inc, and the members of the Decatur Blue artist collective, I have been able to ground the interdisciplinary theories and approaches gained from my education at Georgetown University with concrete examples. Thus, I take an approach of self-reflexivity to reading my personal experiences in Business and Art as a way to introduce scholarship that is interdisciplinary in its methodology, but importantly based in the critical analysis of actual models of social organization that are actively producing significant cultural shifts in contemporary life.

As the conclusions of this paper suggest, the artist collective is a form of social organization that enables a significant critique of the creative laborer advocated by Business today. They represent a powerful model of self-valorization within the political economy that is capable of stimulating large-scale social transformation. Whether or not contemporary artist collectives are aware of how to fully engage this potential remains to be seen.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

What Business Are You In?

Being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art. During the hippie era people put down the idea of business—they'd say, 'Money is bad,' and 'Working is bad,' but making money is art and working is art and good business is the best art. – Andy Warhol (1975: 92)

As artists are donning suits to attend exhibition openings and speak in public forums at museums and other civic venues, CEOs and office workers are wearing baseball caps and sandals to the office place, conducting business meetings at coffee shops and work group retreats at popular vacation destinations. This visible change in the habitus and practices of how the business of Art and the art of Business are conducted signals an important ideological shift occurring between each fields. The emergence of a new form of labor is occurring, one that heralds creativity as a tool for innovation and entrepreneurial production. Economist Richard Florida claims that we are experiencing the rise of a new *creative class*, a signal of a more “people-driven” economy that locates the individual as a laborer engaged in creative work. Changes in the workplace to accommodate this form of labor appear to the individual as a new form of freedom; one can wear sandals to the office, *and* decide what time her particular workday will begin. *How could this possibly be seen as a negative?*

Whether or not creative labor indicates a new type of agency for the worker is contestable. The relocation of the site of labor production *within* the individual's own mental, cognitive abilities removes the concept of a “workday” as a frame for containing the space of labor. There is an “always on” component to creativity, especially for the

entrepreneur who engages in networking beyond the office and into the social networks and weak ties of her personal life. This aspect of creative labor can be seen as an eradication of leisure entirely, thus problematizing the notion of agency in creative labor. *But can't one keep personal and work networks separate?*

In today's knowledge economy, information is exchanged as forms of capital that benefit the individual actor in pursuit of her goals. To attempt to "turn off" creative labor is to possibly forgo an opportunity to make a new connection within the social network that could provide information of benefit to innovation; all of life can be considered as source material for entrepreneurship. Like the rhetoric of creativity, entrepreneurship is championed as a means to get ahead of others within one's company department, or in one's larger field of specialization in general. As will be explored at length, competition exists simultaneously within the category of creative labor, which further complicates the notion of freedom for the individual within the free economy of the marketplace.

In this paper I locate the contemporary ideology of creativity as derivative of historical constructions of the artist as an *individual* "creative genius" that produces labor from a "zone of freedom" removed from the constraints of the political economy. This notion is hardly true, as will be revealed by examining the methods by which artist collectives attempt to gain necessary capital to enable their goals of production. The individual artist as creative genius is a mythology, based in narrative constructions of the artist's biography as a means to establish symbolic worth to the artist as an art laborer, and to her productions as art objects with exchange value for the marketplace. The institutions of art history, art criticism and art theory are analyzed to reveal how this discursive

production occurs, and establish its reproduction within pedagogical (art school) and public (museums) institutions.

Revealing this framework establishes language as the vehicle for producing and transmitting this ideological construction of creativity. As Art and Business continue to exchange forms of capital as an activity of brand building in late capitalism, we see how the interactions between Art and Business cross-pollinate ideologies of labor; Business becomes an Art, and Art becomes more like a Business, while the individual laborer is transformed into a creative entrepreneur, regardless of the products she produces.



I am a Revolutionary, 2001
Carey Young
Production still from 'I am a Revolutionary'
Single channel video, color, sound.
4:08 mins.

The above image is from video documentation of a performance wherein artist Carey Young hired a professional public speaking coach, the kind typically employed as consultant to multinational companies, in order to receive lessons on how to speak the

phrase “I am a Revolutionary” with more power and convincing confidence. The repetition of the phrase, as well as Young’s human errors and corrections, documented in the video offer a reading of the relationship of language to power.

Unlike earlier conceptual artists, whose tactics developed in tandem with - and were often absorbed by - the mass media, many of these artists are not strictly oppositional. Instead, by highlighting the co-dependence of individuals and organizations they explore the moral ambiguities of our ideologically impure times (“The Contemporary Gallery,” n.d.).

The contemporary artist collective, an important form of social organization, will be explored at length in this paper. The artist collective’s model of creative entrepreneurship enables a different form of rhetoric about creativity to emerge; creativity is not an isolated, individualistic labor. Creativity can be effectively produced within organizations, without an ethos of competition detracting from its productive potential. The artist collectives Team Response and Decatur Blue will be analyzed using social network theory in order to develop an understanding of how the collective organization can be a form for creative, non-individualistic labor.

From these explorations at the institutional, organizational, and individual level, I draw connections between the field of Art and the field of Business that deconstructs the conceptualization of these as separate spheres of the social world. Both contain actors that labor in creative, entrepreneurial ways to innovate and invigorate the concerns of each field. Ultimately, my aim is to destabilize the myth of creativity as a talent or skill that only a select, special few possess. Creativity is a process of collective engagement within one’s social networks, and occurs no matter where an individual locates herself within this world.

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