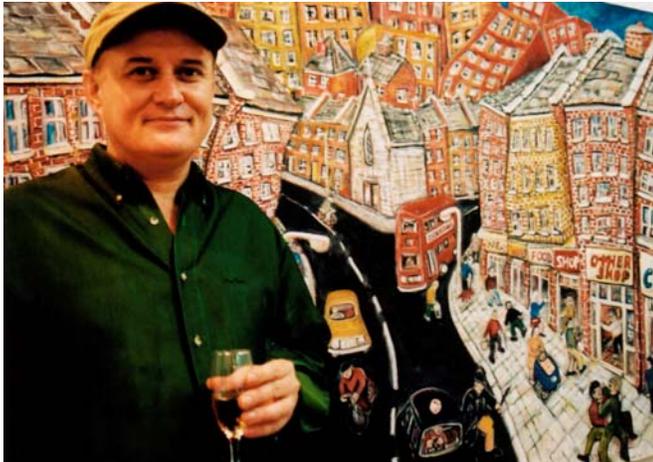


Article for Arts Professional Magazine

Entrepreneurialism - What makes a visual arts entrepreneur?

Alison Branagan examines the qualities required to make a living in the visual arts.



Whether their motivations for setting up arts businesses or cultural organisations are financial, social or vocational, artists and other creative individuals tend to share entrepreneurial qualities that have enabled them to establish successful practices or creative enterprises. True, prospering in the creative industries often relies on other factors too, such as being part of appropriate networks, having talent and possessing or acquiring sources of financial support; but it is a myth that artists or creative entrepreneurs who build their reputations or ventures have done so without either naturally possessing or acquiring other skills.

Origins

The word 'entrepreneur' derives from the French root, meaning 'to undertake' and 'go between'. It is the spirit of undertaking something novel and innovative; in some sense either pushing forward with avant-garde activities, or combining elements from previous concepts for new markets or audiences. There are many entrepreneurs within the arts world who do just this, acting as go-betweens for artists and clients, or audiences. Furthermore, the common preoccupation with originality, implementing ideas and making progress, held by many artists and arts consultants, is itself an entrepreneurial trait; translating vision into a creative act. From a contemporary and historical perspective, an entrepreneurial outlook has either inadvertently or intentionally ensured the successful progression of many very influential figures within both the commercial and non-commercial arts sectors.

Critical success factors

Various skills appear to be essential ingredients for securing success within the visual arts and creative industries. These include factors such as ambition and determination, being able to make connections and spot opportunity, taking a creative approach to problem solving, having flair, possessing empathy and being able to cultivate networks of appropriate contacts. Interpersonal skills, such as being able to persuade, inspire and motivate others through enhanced vision, are also desirable attributes when undertaking large-scale initiatives. Also there are the usual factors associated with entrepreneurs, such as the ability to take calculated risks and having the nerve to work outside convention. Another important trait is the ability to overcome rejection and failure, and to bounce back and try again. Keeping pace with technology and innovation is also key, as is an understanding of business strategies and tactics, even though, to many working in the arts, this may seem as irrelevant as an understanding of ornithology is to birds.

Barriers to development include a deficiency of trustworthiness, a lack of self-discipline and poor time management.

Shining examples

Key figures in arts practice, such as Rodin, Picasso, Klein, Warhol, Beuys and Hirst, all demonstrate entrepreneurial qualities. Yves Klein pursued his determination to develop his rather flamboyant practice even through hard times, and even though he taught karate to generate a second income for most of his life. Andy Warhol once said 'making money is art, working is art, making money out of art is art.' He ran his art practice as if it was a commercial concern, and churned out thousands of works, often completely made by assistants, as did Rodin. Damien Hirst also has a factory where his iconic spot paintings are manufactured, and like Warhol he also has diversified between several dimensions, including restaurants, clubs and bars. In his early days as a student he grasped the entrepreneurial nettle and organised a group show, 'Freeze', promoting and presenting the artists as if they were already gallery names, behaving like a public relations firm to engage the great and the good of the commercial art world. Picasso showed no fear in changing his forms and to some sense styles of expression, making functional and decorative items with equal resolve and enthusiasm. To many artists today this would seem a risky strategy, yet we have many creative people who have successfully crossed boundaries between art, design and performance. Joseph Beuys moved between performance, sculpture and installation, motivated by spirituality and rejecting materialism. Finding direction later in life into ecology, he founded the Student Party, now known as the Green Party, campaigned for nuclear disarmament, and actively developed what is now known as community arts.

A present day cultural and social entrepreneur who has built an arts organisation from scratch is John Phillips, Director of the London Print Studio. In partnership with Pippa Smith, he ran a print facility for local community groups from their flat, which grew into the Paddington Printshop and ultimately grew into the spectacular facility it is today, offering a gallery plus traditional and digital print facilities. John started from practically nothing, building printing equipment from 'unconventionally acquired' materials, but now offers state-of-the-art print amenities for local people, as well as engaging artists and printmakers on a global basis.

Entrepreneurial skills within the visual arts are now being valued and understood. Fifty percent of all creative enterprises in London actually comprise just one person, made up of self-employed artists or freelance arts professionals of some kind. The making, management and administration of art only prospers when entrepreneurial activity comes into play. It is a fiction that contemporary artists who starve in garrets will one day be discovered. Artists and cultural entrepreneurs who have developed their own careers have done so through a variety of means and have prospered not only through merit, but because they have flexible and open minds and are responsive to change and circumstances. If they have succeeded, it is because they have engaged on the right networks where 'go betweens' are invited.



Alison Branagan is a freelance arts professional who specialises in professional development in the visual arts. She currently lectures on the Community Entrepreneurship programme at Middlesex University. t: 020 8365 0453; e: alison@alisonbranagan.com