

## **A Case Study of Arteconomy<sup>1</sup>**

**Building a bridge between art and enterprise:  
Flemish businesses stimulate creativity and innovation through  
art**

**Herman van den Broeck  
Eva Cools  
Tine Maenhout**

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*“Arteconomy vzw has the aim of creating a growing awareness that art and economics are not two separate worlds, but two aspects of a single creative process that develops society as a whole. I strongly believe that employees need to be seen as ‘creative resources’ and not just as ‘human resources’. I am convinced that companies can speed up this transition by working with artists. At the same time, this collaboration will also ensure that artists have the means to work on more complex projects as their career continues, because they have gained technical knowledge and other skills from the business community. In short: the encounter between these two worlds promises numerous advantages for both”.*  
(Julie Vandembroucke, founder and driving force of Arteconomy vzw.<sup>2</sup>)

In his book ‘A Whole New Mind’, Daniel Pink claims that the ability to grasp ‘the big picture’ will be the number-one skill allowing employees and companies to make a difference.<sup>1</sup> In a world where there have long since been other factors at play than functionality and cost price, where design and meaningfulness can be the most important criteria, we need creative innovation more than ever before.

After all, organisations are trying to find ways to embed more creativity, more innovative potential and more entrepreneurship into the everyday running of their businesses. They are constantly in search of effective ways to make their organisational culture better prepared for change.

The Flemish non-profit organisation Arteconomy has developed a method for doing this, by bringing businesspeople and artists together in a series of particularly unique projects. “It is time to shake up some of our mental models”, says Julie Vandembroucke. “Businesses need to learn to change their visions of artists as ‘eccentric’, ‘lazy’ and ‘odd’, and artists need to learn that business means more than producing, buying and selling, and making profit. But above all, it is important for us to break out of the fixed patterns of the art world *and* the economic world and to learn to think in other ways”.

### **Artists and entrepreneurs: a new relationship**

Michel Espeel (manager of the metal company Constructies Espeel NV) and his wife Julie Vandembroucke have cherished a passionate love of art for many years. In 1989, their ‘love’ formed the basis of an adventurous combination of business sense and art.

It all began at Constructies Espeel NV with the production of metal sculptures and metal components for various sculptors. Artists were selected on the basis of project proposals that bore the possibilities of a positive, mutual and enriching collaboration. The art world is a

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<sup>2</sup> ‘vzw’, or ‘vereniging zonder winstoogmerk’ is the Dutch-language denotation of a non-profit organisation.

different living environment, and in that sense this collaboration allowed Michel Espeel to think and live in a way that tangibly ‘crossed borders’. For the artists, entrepreneurship and management tended to be alien concepts, and at first the working environment of Constructies Espeel NV felt like a confrontation. This is part of what we mean when we speak of an ‘enriching’ collaboration.

Arteconomy vzw itself was officially founded in 2002. That formal point was an intermediate moment of tangible success for a joint venture that had come about organically. The organisation’s official aim was to investigate and develop the possibilities of the field of tension between art and economy. It is this field of tension that acts as a lever for reflection on entrepreneurship, creativity, innovation and social relevance, as well as the new role that artists can play in society. In other words, Arteconomy vzw is a genuine think tank, a real discussion forum for art-loving businesspeople as well as artists: ‘A meeting of minds!’

Michel Espeel bears witness to a period that stretches over almost 20 years in which art has become embedded in the company culture of Constructies Espeel NV:

*“When I look back, I think I can distinguish three main periods. The first years, from the beginning of 1989 up to somewhere in 1997, are what I call the creeper period. During that period our collaboration was completely internal, and we were hardly aware of what it was doing to the company. From 1997 until 2001, there was more outside interest and exhibitions were organised in the company lobby. It was in that period that I started to realise there is a difference in effect between a single event involving art and a process approach. From then on, new forms of collaboration with artists evolved in our company. That was during the years from 2002 to 2006.”*

This statement by Espeel is particularly revealing. It shows the way that the entrepreneur’s thinking has developed, but also the development of the role of the artist in this project. Where art was initially present as an object, or possibly the starting point for a discussion, the whole process behind the artwork was now being used as a process catalyst for change within the company. This much is clear from what Michel Espeel had to say next:

*“Arteconomy vzw was founded to investigate the collaboration between art and economy, separately from our company and in the context of society at large, as a social model in itself. In 2007 we began a study of the possibilities for implementing this collaboration as an instrument of growth and development in the company, independent of my vision as an entrepreneur. Within two years, we hope to use this research to reduce the vulnerability of the link between the economics and art, because I think that this is strongly determined in my company at the moment by my personal vision and commitment.”*

## **An unpublished seminar series: a philosophical lever**

Working with a group of 25 interested Flemish entrepreneurs, Arteconomy vzw organised a series of eight seminars between February 2004 and June 2005 on the subject of ‘Art and Economics: we don’t see the difference’.

The seminars were introduced by eight renowned speakers, each of whom approached the central theme from a different perspective. The introducing speaker proposed and defended a controversial standpoint, which was followed by a far-reaching discussion with the businesspeople present. The aim of these evenings was to create a space for a debate on the relationship between art and economics, and more specifically on how the relationship could lead to a win-win situation that strengthens both worlds.

The initial precept of the series was that entrepreneurs and artists each have their own form of capital, but that there are also areas in common. The entrepreneur’s capital is money, which is used to finance and process the production, stock and so on. The artist’s capital is freedom: freedom of thought, freedom to choose a way of expressing oneself.

This description clarifies the differences in background and attitude between the entrepreneur and the artist. This is exactly what makes the confrontation between them a valuable and useful experience. Entrepreneurs can approach artists to find meaning for the things they do (using the language and symbols specific to art). Artists in turn can approach entrepreneurs for inspiration related to how their artworks can be placed in society (in commercial terms, but also in terms of communication, strategy and efficiency).

*“The two worlds of art and economics can come together if people understand that everything they do goes further than merely fighting for survival and making profit. If they can understand that they influence and change the environment with their activities, and therefore assume responsibility for their actions. Just as I see it as the entrepreneur’s task to leave the world a better place, it is the artist’s task to contribute to that common goal. Both entrepreneurs and artists aim to break open what already exists. But whereas the entrepreneur does not question boundaries and limits, and only tries to find the means to overcome them, the artist is interested in investigating boundaries and limits, in search of a way to recreate our space again and again”.*  
(Francis De Beir, chair of the series of seminars ‘Art and economics; we don’t see the difference’)

The seminar series was philosophical in nature, and was intended to stimulate thinking about art and economics. At this early stage, it was more of a networking platform where entrepreneurs could exchange thoughts about their hobby and passion.

However, there was a clear consensus among the seminar participants that companies could increase their creative potential if they made use of the knowhow and unique way of thinking that is specific to artists. They agreed that collaborating with artists is an effective instrument

for developing employees. Following the successful joint projects involving Constructies Espeel and various artists, a few organisations therefore proposed setting up a number of company experiments to test out the theory in practice.

The participating entrepreneurs felt that they were at the beginning of an exciting project, but they were not yet sure where it would lead:

*“The arteconomy movement started out with a pioneer mentality and our own personal motivation. We met interesting people and felt that they might make a fresh wind blow through our businesses. We didn’t yet know exactly what they would bring about. But even if they didn’t change a thing, we would probably enjoy the experience.”*

*(Philip Maertens, director of Siemens Automation & Drives)*

In the beginning, these ‘experiments’ were set up with a very open attitude, primarily on the basis of a personal interest in art and curiosity as to what would happen if the working environment and the art world were brought together. It was also a way of confronting staff with their boss’ hobby. The entrepreneurs involved saw the projects in this phase as an open meeting that would have consequences, without really knowing what those consequences would be in practice.

The intention of these initial projects was therefore not consciously to bring about major changes. The effects that working with artists had on the employees were not the starting point during the pioneer phase, but more of a pleasant side effect.

*“I have felt for a long time that art challenges me to reframe certain convictions I have about reality; it stimulates me to rethink my function as an entrepreneur continuously. It makes me think about our role in society as a whole. It also helps me to put things in perspective. I am convinced that if art can challenge me in this way as a person, it will also challenge my employees in a similar way if they are more closely involved in the creation of an artwork. Most employees are not used to asking the questions that an artist usually asks, so I hope that it can help them to extend their thinking patterns somewhat.”*

*(Manu Tuytens, manager of Concordia Textiles)*

## **From pioneers to professionals**

The series of theoretical seminars on the relationship between art and economy had brought together a few like-minded individuals who wanted to do more than just philosophise. They hoped to transfer the philosophy of arteconomy to the workplace by means of a number of concrete projects. They wanted to go further than the purely experimental projects by considering several particular aims. The hope was that working together with artists would lead to a number of specific desirable effects.

*“I am the manager of an SME and a real art lover. After a series of contacts with artists I realised that they have a different approach to many things, both in everyday life and at a global level, and they have broadened my horizon enormously. The Arteconomy vzw seminars taught me that art does not always need to result in something tangible or visual, but that it might also have an added value in business life.*

*As a manager, I find that I need to nag my employees on a daily basis about keeping the workplace clean and tidy, the ban on smoking, the ban on mobile phones, punctuality and so on. It comes down to the fact that people’s respect for their fellow citizens and surroundings is steadily decreasing. I brought up this daily battle with Arteconomy vzw, wondering if this might be an issue for the art world.*

*Maybe, as a manager, I am looking at this issue the wrong way within my company and the art world could suggest a new perspective. Arteconomy vzw have found two young artists who have a clear understanding of the issue and were interested in working on it in our company. I have given the artists carte blanche, seeing it as an experiment which just might lead to a few of my employees changing their approach, and hence perhaps win over their colleagues.”*

*(Guy Van den Storme, business manager of VDS Weaving)*

The experience gained in these experiments and projects were intended to lead in turn to further theoretical reflection and thus to new projects. The idea was to create a space for experimentation that is open to businesses and artists who set up projects linked to the art and economics that bring about a link between the two. As one of the pioneers can testify:

*“The big challenge in bringing the two worlds together was to avoid the classic approach where the business community acts as a sponsor to the art world in one way or another. The innovative aspect is the specific and personal collaboration between the company and the artists, leading to a win-win situation without making heavy investments. This leads to a new creative and innovative paradigm arising for both the artist and the people collaborating in the project. These creative, innovative, horizon-widening ideas lead to added value for both parties. The artists can put ideas into practice that they couldn’t manage with their own resources, and for the company, the result is innovative products and solutions that don’t belong in the traditional industrial world.”*

*(Philip Maertens, director of Siemens Automation & Drives)*

In these initial projects, Arteconomy vzw played an important role as intermediary. Arteconomy vzw literally spans the gulf between the artists and companies, supporting them in defining and setting up projects. First and foremost, Arteconomy vzw helps to figure out the interests of both parties, and hence to match a suitable artist or artists with interested businesses. “At our first meeting, we don’t talk about art but about the soul behind it”, explains Julie Vandebroucke from Arteconomy vzw. “Art is just a means, not an end. The idea is not to think in terms of the artwork and its value. No: the question is what it can

achieve in the company and the company's culture. Art and entrepreneurship together search for 'la dimension humaniste'."

*"Linking economics and art is the goal, not the object. The art project is a vehicle for bringing about a certain way of thinking among the employees, not according to traditional patterns, but thinking outside the box. Working together is based on this idea: I want to make a work of art with people and materials from my company, I want this to open their eyes to the world by coming into contact with the artist and working with him or her."*

*(Julie Vandembroucke)*

Seven projects were started up in the initial phase, varying in length from six months to two years. All the projects are connection points, a first attempt at a long-term strategy aiming towards another model for society. "We want to break through hierarchical and element-based thinking, evolving towards more system-based thinking and towards using the power of diversity."

The seven projects consciously chose the definition of a certain situation, a feeling or a general question as a starting point. The practical approach, the practical course of events, were not necessarily clear from the outset. How the link arises between the business issue and the work of art is something that grows gradually as the company and the artist work together. "Continuity is crucial, which is why it is important to work together for at least a year, although of course this isn't always possible", according to Julie Vandembroucke.

*"If you were to ask me how best to manage this, I'd say it's important to allow it to be a natural process as much as possible. For example, this means that your staff and the artist could eat their lunch together. If people can interact naturally, most management procedures are actually unnecessary. The thing that is important is to manage the connection process between art and your company culture. You can't just say 'get on with it and come and show me when it's finished'. If you do that, you provoke resistance from employees who aren't sure what 'that artist' has come to do. A project like this is also a great chance to involve everyone. Otherwise there is a risk that your employees will see it as something elitist."*

The seven pioneer projects up to now have shown that two routes can emerge:

- (a) Collaboration between the artists and the business develops around the creation of an artwork. The process involved is seen as interesting but not central.
- (b) Together with the business, the artist initiates a process whose main aim is 'change'. The artwork that may be produced during this process is not central.

For a business and an artist to work together has advantages for both. For the business and its staff, it is a way to sharpen a sense of entrepreneurship, stimulate creativity and internal

networking, increase motivation and communication or improve the quality of thinking and decision-making. For the artist, there is an opportunity to make a work of art and develop a businesslike structure. The world of business can teach artists skills such as better planning, budgeting, marketing etc. that can be applied to works of art. One of the participants in the projects testifies:

*“I got involved in this project because I wanted to initiate a process of change for the employees in my company to improve their awareness of environmental issues and to optimise the use of the interior of our premises. But I know from a colleague, for example, that his motivation for starting an arteconomy project was completely different: he wanted to develop a work of art with complete support from his company’s technical knowhow. Those of us in the pioneer group have really set up a various range of projects.”*  
(Guy Van den Storme, business manager of VDS Weaving)

In the first joint projects between artists and companies, the focus was on the artwork itself. However, as arteconomy gained a clearer and clearer form, the focus shifted to the process in itself. Where the process was considered a side issue, this has changed as the focus shifted. The process is what is important, and the artwork itself is more of a side issue.

In setting up the project and following it through, Arteconomy vzw remains a process coach, following everything up and bringing together the arrangements made in a sort of progress report. After the project, there is also a joint evaluation attended by people from the company, the artist and people from Arteconomy vzw.

In the following pages you will find a more detailed description of two different projects set up according to the arteconomy philosophy. It is clear that there are great differences between the two projects in terms of the focus being on the object or artwork, or on the conceptual process in itself.

## **An artist and a business making art: The Dragon of Deerlijk at Promo Fashion**

Promo Fashion is a rapidly growing company in the textiles sector. It makes clothing for women, men and children. Promo Fashion is a good company to work for, judging by the fact that it came sixth in the ‘Best Employer’ polls for 2007 (in the category for small companies with fewer than 500 employees). At present it employs about 280 people.

Business manager Michel Delfosse learnt to love art as a small child. A visit to the SME’s premises shows that he has brought his love of art to work with him as well. It is a glass construction with strong lines, lots of light and greenery, stylish design lamps and desks: a modern business environment with works of art by a smattering of Flemish artists on the walls. Promo Fashion has a limited annual budget to give the company premises an artistic slant. The employees’ preferences are the deciding factor in the choice of artworks. Moreover,

the same employees testify that working in an attractive, artistic environment contributes to a more positive atmosphere at work thanks to the aesthetic aspect of the place they are in.

In the past, the art-loving business manager has been the driving force behind all sorts of artistic and cultural activities organised within the company, such as exhibitions of artworks in the company building or an excursion with all the employees to an art exhibition on the Belgian coast. There is always a lot of interest and enthusiasm for these activities. “Art excursions were the beginning, but also the turning point”, claims Michel Delfosse. “Our working environment has changed completely over the past few years. It started when we went looking for new office furniture together. A Dutch artist designed a very unusual collection for us.”

Promo Fashion is a family business. In what used to be a familiar scenario, management tended to come from above. Michel Delfosse, the current business manager, dreams of evolving towards a company culture where employees take more initiative and speak out more readily. Personally, he thinks that his employees are less aware of the need for change. They are happy with the inspiring work environment they enjoy at present, and the fact that Michel Delfosse is an impassioned leader has a lot to do with that. Nonetheless, he believes that more creativity and challenge from below are important to buoy up the company's innovative nature.

His imagination fired by the approach of Arteconomy vzw, Michel Delfosse decided to start up a project to address this need. He firmly believed that the arteconomy philosophy could have an effect on his company:

*“As I see it, contact between the artist and the employees is the central tenet of this project. I want to try and bring about cross-fertilisation between different visions. The idea isn't for the people involved to agree with the artist's way of thinking. For me, it's about the encounter between different perspectives, being open to them and showing understanding for them. I am convinced that opening oneself to a vision stimulates a different perspective on 'people in general' and the world they live in, which also teaches them to understand the world better.”*

Michel Delfosse went looking for an artist who could generate real co-operation in his company. After discussing it with his employees and with Arteconomy vzw acting as an intermediary, Michel Delfosse came into contact with the artist Els Opsomer. Michel Delfosse sees the artist and the artwork as a means of interaction that can initiate renewing discussions about people and society within his business. By widening their vision in this way, the participants will be encouraged to develop at a personal level. He hopes that this project will have a direct or indirect influence on daily work in the company.

For Michel Delfosse, the most important thing was for it to ‘click’ between his employees and the artist. The artist needed to be someone quite extravert who could establish a good relationship with all the employees. There was no need for the artist to be familiar with the textiles or fashion sector, since after all it was more about the perception of fashion and

textiles. However, they did need to believe in the project. The concrete aim of the project was to create sensitivity to a wider and different perspective on fashion, the company's products and humanity's place in the world.

*“There were two elements that really interested me right from my first meetings with Promo Fashion. On the one hand you can feel that the company's past is still part of its culture, but on the other hand you can feel an expansion and involvement with the whole world that can no longer be held back. If you inherit a family company, I think it must be difficult to combine your own ambitions with family expectations. How can you go your own way at the same time as continuing the family tradition? And as well as that they have to consider the confrontation with the global world economy. The question I have to ask myself is: what do the employees think about that?”*  
(Els Opsomer, artist involved at Promo Fashion)

Els Opsomer wanted to include several of these sensitivities and tensions in the project. She did not only see a tension between the local and global economy, but also one between the design world of Promo Fashion with its impressive reception area and offices and the 'dark and dusty' backrooms of the business.

It clicked with what she refers to as Michel Delfosse's enthusiasm for art, his sensitivity to the appealing 'everydayness' of his employees and his great respect for their vision of 'his' world. Els Opsomer sensed a story in the combination of firstly the company as an economic reality, secondly the business manager's passion and thirdly the interests and standpoints of the people who work there.

*“Opposing poles that repel each other, and often seem to be each others' opposites or competitors, belong together. The space between them is what interests me, particularly to see how a harmony can be reached even between irreconcilable elements.”*  
(Els Opsomer)

Once Els Opsomer had visited Promo Fashion and met with some of the employees to discuss the contents of the project, the artist came up with the idea of the Dragon of Deerlijk: she would create a new work of art within the walls of the company. The idea was to use the company's different products, such as textiles, Christmas decorations, shoes, handbags, handkerchiefs, sheets, lingerie etc. to make the artwork. Why not invite each employee to bring in a bit of cloth that has sentimental value to him or her and find out where that material is today: with which company suppliers and in which part of the world? This is a way of linking the 'intimate and the infinite, the other side of the world'.

*“I chose a dragon because of its symbolic value and also because it didn't necessarily have a specific shape. There is also a reference to Asia as well, of course, because a large proportion of the textiles world is in China nowadays. As an artist, the space to create something and allow it to mature is important, and*

*something you learn to deal with over time, by trial and error. Blind trust in your ability to surrender to that creative ‘emptiness’ in order to get attractive results is a delicate process which is often sacrificed at an early stage in favour of economic (financial) security. Trusting in your own imagination and refusing to dismiss your creativity as nothing more than silly thoughts is something I can offer to people who mainly live to keep a certain established pattern going and make sure it keeps ticking over. Working patterns sometimes mean that people lose sight of all else, because making sure your work goes according to plan is seen as serious and important and futile activities are seen as wasting time. I view this work as something both by and for this place. My expectations are that I will be able to create the dragon together with the company staff, for example that they will get material for me and teach me to sew, and that we will all help the creature to take shape.”*

*(Els Opsomer)*

Artist Els Opsomer’s proposal was accepted by Michel Delfosse and presented to the employees. The business manager thought it was particularly important to involve the warehouse staff (clothing design, manufacturing etc.) in the project. This was because the gap between the living environment of warehouse staff and office staff was sometimes too big. He explained more about the project together with the artist and Julie Vandembroucke from Arteconomy vzw.

The employees’ involvement with the project was tangibly present right from the start. Their willingness to join in was great, although their own creative contribution during the meetings was very limited. Here Els Opsomer explains her feelings in an e-mail to Michel Delfosse dating from the first few days after the project had begun:

*“To come back to my last visit to Promo Fashion for a moment: the atmosphere was good this time again, and people were curious, but they were still reserved as well (as in ‘let’s just wait and see before we commit’). This is logical in a way, since most people’s first concern is their work. I wonder what specifically the best method would be to get the best or the most satisfactory result. Your company evokes lots of images in me and touches on different sensitivities. I’m really enthusiastic about making something, doing something. Now the question is: how do I involve the others? The staff feel inhibited. They often think that their remarks aren’t relevant. But as we all know, big ideas are hidden in small words.”*

They decided to make a website to communicate with the staff and to keep a diary of the project.

The physical presence of the artist in the company was clearly a requirement. She got a place close to the staff where she was visibly present to work on the artwork along with the employees of Promo Fashion. A few staff took turns to help her with the artwork. Els Opsomer involved them to manufacture certain parts of the work.

But things did not go as well as planned. Wasn't joining in with the project supposed to be more than just helping out with the sewing on a couple of afternoons? Didn't it just stop you from getting on with your own work? There was gossip; friction arose. Michel Delfosse and Els Opsomer recognised the tensions and decided to take them seriously. In consultation with Julie Vandenbroucke from Arteconomy vzw as a process coach, Michel Delfosse decided to organise an anonymous survey of the people involved in order to find out what the problems were.

The survey and accompanying meeting to discuss the results led to the discovery that the employees weren't really enjoying the project. They did like contributing to the artwork, and they were interested, but they didn't feel sufficiently involved. They felt too much like passive workers who were merely carrying out a task, and wanted more influence. The main complaint from the employees was that they couldn't really be creative because, in their own words, everything 'had to be done how the artist wanted'. Their creativity was bridled, since they had the impression that it had been decided in advance that they were going to make a dragon, the colours had already been decided, or in other words pretty much the whole concept.

This was an interesting discovery for Michel Delfosse and the artist. After all, they had had the feeling in the beginning that the employees didn't want much influence in the project and that they were not very articulate. By being involved in the artwork in a passive, executing way, frictions arose. The employees found out that they did want to have a say, that they had ideas about the concept behind the artwork too, and that they wanted to express these ideas. This led to renewed engagement with the project. The employees saw the importance of having a say, which was exactly the starting point and intention of the whole project.

*"In consultation, we finally decided that we did want to carry on working on the dragon, despite those frustrations and conflicts. But the most important thing for me was that I learned that the demand for influence, consultation and taking responsibility for themselves has grown among my employees, precisely by means of some of the frustrations that arose through working on the project. Something is brewing. Maybe we did decide a bit too quickly in the beginning what we were going to make, without meeting much resistance at the time. Their unwillingness to speak out at that time meant that possibly too much was decided for them. But the positive development is that, unlike before, they do now question things and consider them. Maybe this project didn't lead to major developments and personal changes, but nonetheless there is a growing need for involvement, and an understanding of its importance and value. We managed to turn the conflict into something positive."*

*(Michel Delfosse)*

Finally, this is what some of the employees thought about the project:

*“The atmosphere at work that we have been building up all these years is very good, besides this specific project. There is a big gap between the warehouse and the offices though. Attempts to close the gap often had a negative effect in the past, and I don’t think art is a miracle cure that can change the situation either. The most positive thing about the project in my opinion was that I could work with people I would never work with otherwise, and I got to know some people better. What I didn’t like was that we didn’t get to influence how the artist works, we were only allowed to help out and carry out tasks for her.”*

*“It was a fun and exciting project. We enjoyed working on it, but in itself it didn’t have much influence on our working atmosphere. It was mostly cutting, sticking, helping and so on, but not much thinking for ourselves. I did find that a bit frustrating, certainly, which has meant that now I do want to contribute more to thinking about things in the company or I find it important for people to ask my opinion.”*

*“I should admit that I wasn’t enthusiastic about the project at all in the beginning. I wondered ‘what on earth are they coming to do in here now?’ Helping out with the artwork did make me realise that I might have lots of skills or talents that I haven’t developed yet, or not developed enough. ‘Doing’ itself is lots of fun and it makes a nice change.”*

*“Actually we’ve already got a culture here anyway where we are open to things and were there is a very comfortable atmosphere. I think that the development towards creativity and a good atmosphere has been going on for a long time already. I do think it’s fun to be involved in the project, I like doing it, but that’s all it is. Maybe it’s a good idea to break down a few clichés, but in terms of work I don’t think this has any role to play. In my opinion, the ones who really get into it will be the ones who want to get into it, the ones who were already open to it in advance.”*

## **An artist and a business starting a process: conceptual art at Concordia Textiles**

Concordia Textiles NV, founded in 1925, has 320 employees. It is a traditional West Flemish (Belgian) family firm. Concordia Textiles offers a wide range of synthetic materials, for technical and medical purposes as well as interiors. The company is run by Manu and Patrick Tuytens.

The company used to focus on textile production. The shift in the textile industry to China caused a necessary shake-up in the company, when a number of big customers switched to the Far East. Production in Waregem became lean and mean, with a new commodity production site being set up in Suzhou (China). At the same time, the focus at the Belgian site had to be transferred to marketing, sales and product development. The company specialised in the

commercialisation of innovative and high-quality synthetic fabrics, and is currently the European market leader in this field.

The change in mentality from ‘product oriented’ to ‘market and innovation oriented’ is no small one, and the company leadership was well aware of that. Things like this mean enormous upheaval, and it is not easy at all for people who have been working in the company for twenty years, as Manu Tuytens can testify. Some employees have indeed got ‘stuck in a rut’ and are finding it very difficult to adapt their attitudes. They have got ‘rusted stuck’, or to use a more scientific term, they show signs of ‘learned helplessness’.

It remains a fact that Concordia Textiles sees its employees as its most important capital. This is expressed, for example, in the low staff turnover at the company. The leaders’ commitment to seeing these turbulent times through is also very apparent. But the Tuytens family is also looking further. They too are passionate about art. Manu and Patrick’s father – the former business manager of Concordia Textiles – introduced them to the world of art at a young age.

*“Art gives certain insights into things and can help you see things differently or question them. In my case, art has shaped my vision of the world and I want to pass this on to my employees.”*

*(Manu Tuytens)*

The story of the upheaval in the company was what the artist Michaël Aerts, who was brought into the company through the intervention of Arteconomy vzw, translated into a work of art. The family was full of praise for his marvellous work, it clicked! This enthusiasm and meetings with Arteconomy vzw led to the idea of providing support for the mental transition within the company by means of an in-house art project:

*“I didn’t care what he made, but he needed to be someone who could entice those conservative, rusted stuck people out of their comfort zone. So my intention was not primarily for this to be a way of getting a work of art. I wanted an alien ‘meeting of minds’, to get a dialogue going between the employees that would never happen otherwise. I wanted to get them working and debating on creativity, innovation, entrepreneurship. Any tangible results would be more of a side effect. It was mainly about the discussion, in other words: the personal enrichment of people, and questioning their own thinking and the way they go through life.”*

*(Manu Tuytens)*

Art should get things moving is what the business managers believe. Formerly it was their father, Albert Tuytens, who made this happen. He built up an art collection in the company. Now the plan is for art to support and provide further impetus to the transformation the company has seen in recent years. The project has grown into a tribute to their father, which is why it has been christened ‘the Mr Albert project’. Of course it was clear that they would carry on working with the same artist who had portrayed the company’s transition.

*“Manu Tuytens told me that the rise of China meant that there was a need in his company to stimulate a number of employees to be more flexible in their ways of thinking and feeling, and to develop an open mind. In this way, he hoped to encourage thinking oriented towards problem solving rather than problem making, and to increase their empathy with the users’ world. My first idea was to work with photography or calligraphy, because these techniques are very accessible to everyone. They also appeal to the imagination and the result can be discussed at once. It is easy to find a place for that kind of thing on the company premises as well, so that the physical presence of the project can be felt directly in the company.”*

*(Michaël Aerts, artist involved at Concordia Textiles)*

The ‘art project’ was announced to the company at the New Year’s party at the beginning of January 2007, with Michaël Aerts in attendance. The project was to start in March 2007. Manu Tuytens presented the project, and artist Michaël Aerts explained his artwork ‘*Flightcase Monument II, The Temple*’ – a project based on an Egyptian obelisk – that is exhibited in the entrance hall at Concordia Textiles.

Afterwards he talked to employees who were interested in the project. A week after the New Year’s party, the artist came back to the company and started talking to people who had volunteered for the project. But he also talked to other people who the leaders thought should participate in the project in order to gain a more flexible and innovative attitude. This was a way of trying to mobilize people spontaneously. The leaders wanted to use the employees’ self-motivation as a basis, and ultimately allowed the employees themselves to choose to join in. Of course they were influenced to a certain extent, for example by their conversations with the artist.

It was decided to limit the group to a maximum of 15 people, so that an individual approach would be feasible. After consultation with the business managers, Arteconomy vzw and the artist, the decision was made to hold ten sessions over the course of a year. In this project as well, Arteconomy vzw took the role of a process coach to help the company and the artist define and formulate the project.

For his part, Michaël Aerts defines the whole project using the notion of ‘a walk’, an idea approved by the business managers. Michaël uses this term as a metaphor for making a certain journey: the time that this group will spend together. He clarified it to the participants:

*“The aim is for the group to go for a walk together during the time that the project is underway. I see it as a moment of preparation for the future: something like ‘thinking time’ or even ‘dreaming time’ for yourself. This walk will become a ‘time for yourself’, when you can go looking for ways to express yourself.*

*All walks can teach you something about yourself if you are aware of what you are thinking at that moment. I have started this with the idea that everyone has specific ideas and ways of thinking inside them, but that these thoughts aren’t expressed during the daily routine, and so they are not used either. So the plan is*

*for the group to go for a walk, in search of what is hiding inside everyone, but especially in search of how you can use that thinking in your daily life and translate it into a specific material form, such as a drawing.”*  
(Michaël Aerts)

The first step is to get to know the group in order to find out what the initial situation and the expectations of the project are. Then the group meets up with the artist at regular intervals, roughly every three weeks, and they really do go for a walk. They use different forms of expression (such as drawings, stories, movement); they discuss their own experiences and how they can express them. The employees are invited to take the place of conceptual artists and to materialise their way of thinking afterwards in a drawing, a play and so on.

The artist's role is purely that of a catalyst and intermediary. He prepares the different sessions where a certain theme will be discussed and reflected on each time. Given the concept of the project, no fixed trajectory was sketched out in advance. Each session is a step that follows the previous one and partly depends on the group. This makes the project literally 'a walk', and a form of conceptual art.

*“We had no idea what we were going to make. I wanted to get involved with those people. I wanted to help them question their conceptions, burst through their mental models. In the beginning it was no more than a dialogue: who are you, what are your attitudes to life, how do you express that, what inhibitions do you feel to doing so, what does creativity mean to you? Sometimes we talked about really fundamental things, such as a discussion on ‘what is loneliness?’ in a world where, for example, you can find a partner on the internet. The intention each time was to push back certain borders, so that they would realise that their way of thinking was not the only one in the world, that there are people with different views and that those views are okay too.”*  
(Michaël Aerts)

The project Concordia Textiles is still underway at the time of writing this case study. There are still several sessions to go. And yet Michaël Aerts can already give us an initial evaluation:

*“I have noticed that after several sessions, the people involved have become less inhibited in speaking out about themselves, that they dare to express themselves and that they are considering things more deeply. In particular, they also see where their blockages are and are less inclined to avoid confrontation. There are things they really didn't want to do at first, and now they're coming and asking themselves if we can do them. For example, I remember the enormous resistance that there was to try experimenting with Second Life and all the complaints they had about post-modern society. They came up with very stereotypical reactions: that whole world is dangerous, chatting on the internet is for paedophiles and so on. I managed to conquer their resistance and get them to try out Second Life. Afterwards we had a fascinating discussion about it and were able to reflect on it.*

*The participants have come and told me spontaneously that they enjoy thinking beyond their everyday concerns.”*

## **Artists as odd bods? Can they help us on our way towards full implementation of Right Directed Thinking<sup>ii</sup>?**

In recent management literature, innovation and creative abilities have been linked to artists. For example, this is a feature of the book ‘The Rise of the Creative Class’ by Richard Florida.<sup>iii</sup> One thing is certain, creativity requires us to be able to step outside of our stereotypical conceptions and art is one of the most pressing invitations to do just that. That is partly because many artists are ‘unusual’ people, people who think differently than many managers and employees. They are a unique source who can teach us to look at things in a different way. Moreover, art invites us to find expression for what we are really feeling and thinking.

Arteconomy stimulates creativity and innovation inside companies by taking every advantage of the field of tension between economic activity and art. The inspiration behind it all, Julie Vandenbroucke, takes a good look at herself in the mirror:

*“The relationship between art and economy is vulnerable in three areas. First and foremost, its success is highly dependent on the vision and commitment of the entrepreneur. Moreover, it is also a fact that the effect of arteconomy is difficult to measure in a quantitative way. You can indeed note qualitative effects, but in my experience this still meets a lot of resistance from the business community. Finally, the intermediary, the artist and/or a process coach who creates the link, has an important role. If, for example, the joint project mainly comes about from a commercial standpoint, I think the artist’s autonomy is endangered more than when the intermediary gets the joint project up and running with the concern for cross-pollination between the world of art and the world of economics in mind.”*

A number of projects have been completed under the arteconomy banner, others are still in full swing and yet others are waiting to begin. The merit of this unique approach is that it deals with developing a creative attitude inside businesses in an original way. Where the literature usually limits itself to a passionate plea, here we find a very concrete gateway. A gateway that, for once, is not inspired by profit for consultants who want to make themselves indispensable. A few of the pioneers reflect on what it is like to work with artists in their companies:

### **> opening up worldviews**

*“For me, the arteconomy project really was added value in comparison with other intervention projects to stimulate change. I don’t just mean though that it was motivating for the employees and gave them some variation in their job,*

*because you could achieve that with other activities. By involving my employees in creating an artwork, their worldview was opened up. I am convinced that this would not have happened if a consultant had come to set up a project for change. I really do believe that this approach allowed my employees to become part of the solution instead of just having things handed out to them. And then there's also the fact that the artist appreciates their technical know how and dedication, which makes people believe in themselves more."*

*(Guy Van den Storme, manager of VDS Weaving)*

**> breaking through the obvious and discovering new interpretations**

*"I see the personal contact between my employees and the artist as the most important success factor, because it helps them to break through the obviousness of their skills and also to exchange their views of the world and create new interpretations. Besides that, employees also understand that the artist needs them for technical reasons and that ensures involvement, pride and motivation. A side effect is that an art project contributes to a company's reputation and brand awareness. The evaluation we did clearly shows that the introduction of art projects is an excellent basis for the stimulation of creativity and innovation in a company. Which doesn't mean that employees pretty much all at once get interested in art by working on an art project, but it does involve them in the art world and the way of thinking that is the norm there."*

*(Michel Espeel, general manager of Constructies Espeel NV)*

**> an emotional experience on the way to mutual understanding, on the way to the full story and not just 'data'**

*"I'm not someone to take risks for the sake of it, but this project motivated me to follow my gut feelings even more. If the intention and vision of the project are well matched, then that is the deciding factor for me in my decision to go for it. The shared vision between the artist and entrepreneur as to the approach of the project is essential for its chances of success. The company department where the artist works (production, marketing, R&D etc.) is less important. As an entrepreneur, you can contribute to developing the concept yourself. It doesn't have to be the artist's exclusive right. It is important though to coordinate communication on this type of project between the various partners in advance, and to consider how to get the various partners' 'cultures' to coincide. As a company, you need patience as well. After a while you notice that your employees are joining in with the thinking process. I have the feeling now that my engineers are listening better and working together better by having to think about problems in another way for once and not following standard processes that are always based on operational or mathematical considerations. So it is worthwhile for a company to take the plunge with an artist to translate a message of its own or to*

*get it translated. In other words: the emotional experience that working together on an artwork creates can serve perfectly well as the carrier of a message.”*  
(Stef Vande Meulebroucke, business manager at Domotic. Lounge)

**> a red carpet to creativity**

*“If I had to summarise the effect of arteconomy, I would say it comes down to the fact that working on an art project offers major added value because it stimulates entrepreneurs and companies to reflect on what they are doing and what their role is. The projects provide a creative foundation with the artist in the position of role model or example. Hence these projects can help the future when trying to ensure a creative foundation during other change projects with employees. Arteconomy gives employees the message: ‘here you’re allowed to think differently for once’, ‘you can try out something crazy here if you want’, ‘there is room for unconventional projects’. I call this the red carpet effect, in the sense that it creates a platform for later changes that start from a genuine problem. It’s about creating a certain atmosphere.”*  
(Philip Maertens, director of Siemens Automation & Drives)

**> discovering hidden talents, getting along better with each other**

*“I’d recommend it to everyone. In the business community, everyone is talking about creativity. Since we’ve opted for an alternative working environment here, we’ve noticed that the employees also come up with more creative ideas and get along with each other better. Our new surroundings have led to an open atmosphere that I could only have dreamed of before. The outside world, customers and suppliers, have reacted positively to the project too. Thanks to the project, I have discovered characteristics in some of my employees that I would never have suspected in a thousand years.”*  
(Michel Delfosse, business manager of Promo Fashion)

We will give the final word to Julie Vandebroucke:

*“I see our projects as real added value: it is no longer the case that companies only act as sponsors for artists. It is a reciprocal effect where companies can hone their creative assets with the artists’ knowhow and conversely artists are supported by the companies. We take initiatives from both the economic world and the art world. Our basic model is a balanced partnership including a commitment to long-term quality.  
Support and inspiration from the top of a company is essential here, because Arteconomy vzw does not supply consultants. We don’t just want to be the next big hype in management land. Let’s be honest, it isn’t a miracle cure either.”*

# Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School

the Autonomous Management School of  
Ghent University and Katholieke Universiteit Leuven

*Arteconomy is just one of the tools that can help to oil the cogs of company dynamics. The world really does open up, I'm convinced of that. But it doesn't suddenly make everything possible."*

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<sup>i</sup> Pink, D.H., (2006). *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future*. London: Cyan Books.

<sup>ii</sup> See: Pink, D.H., (2006). *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future*. London: Cyan Books.

<sup>iii</sup> Florida, R. (2002). *The Rise of the Creative Class. And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*. New York: Basic Books.