

Social urgency and positioning of Arteconomy

We open this booklet with the notes from a Q&A discussion between Julie Vandenbroucke, president of Arteconomy vzw; Charlotte Bonduel, editor of this publication and a PhD student at Brussels University, and Pascal Gielen. Pascal Gielen teaches art, sociology of art and arts policy at Groningen State University. He is also lecturer on *Art Practice in Society* at the Fontys Academy of Arts in Tilburg. In this discussion, the role of Arteconomy in society as a player between art, the economy and politics is described and analysed.

Although Arteconomy started as a personal research project¹, I have discovered that we serve a social interest. That is why Arteconomy should conclude its pioneering period and define its role in society in a structural way. In the past three years we have applied for subsidies from the ministry of culture as well as from the ministry of economy, yet these applications have been turned down time and time again. Each ministry refer us to the other. On the one hand, we notice that our way of working is of social interest; on the other hand it seems that policy makers don't follow this line of thinking. That raises the question whether the government is willing to address a joint venture between art and the economy. Can connections between art and the economy be confirmed and where necessary established at a political level?

Pascal Gielen: “Since the seventies, art and creativity have been firmly embraced by business in what is generally named Post-Fordism². At a certain moment, the economy has understood that you can no longer treat workers as numbers; instead, their individual capacities should be addressed. The ones who fail to understand this are politicians, policy makers, as well as universities. Their way of thinking and dealing with their staff or students remains stuck in an almost Fordist³ model. They don't know how to apply forms of creativity, for which art serves as a natural model. Today's politics is not politics anymore, but a kind of administration. This is illustrated by the repeated, rhetorical phrase “Europe has decided”, as if a minister were a civil servant who executes what Europe has decided. The responsibility is passed on to others. Politics has become a sort of governance that tries to control society. In order to succeed it has adopted a bad copy of business life. It tries to manage, practising outsourcing. It lives on an expertise that is supposedly not ideological. For how to treat files, how to deal with staff, etc., follows a so-called objective ratio that can be measured.

Ideology no longer counts in politics. All parties want the same thing: a better government. Politicians have become administrators. However, politics in its classic, compartmentalized form used to have an aesthetic dimension. It held up an ideal, an image of

1 Arteconomy vzw grew from the concrete example of collaboration with artists at the metal construction company Constructies Espeel in Roeselare, Belgium. You can read more about these collaborative projects in the book *Walk with Me. About artists, the company Constructies Espeel and their collaborations*. Ed. C. Bonduel and L. Derycke, Lannoo, 2009.

2 “The transition from a Fordist to a Post-Fordist (that is: Toyota-ist) manufacturing process is marked primarily by the transition from material to immaterial labour and production, and from material to immaterial goods. In the case of the latter, the symbolic value is greater than the practical value. (...) Design and aesthetics – in other words, external signs and symbols – are major driving forces in today's economy, because they constantly heighten consumer interest.”
P. Gielen, *Het Gemurmel van de Artistieke Menigte. Over Kunst en Post-Fordisme*. Tilburg: Fontys, 2008.

3 Fordism is a production model for companies based on assembly-line work and serial production that was invented by Henry Ford, founder of the Ford Motor Company.

what society should look like. Sometimes it was utopian. This aesthetic principle has completely faded away.

The fact that politics doesn't embrace art – even if it appears to do so – while the economy does, is linked to the moment in history when it said farewell to the grand narratives, thus making aesthetic thinking impossible. Politics was left with a historical hangover from these narratives and is afraid of being tackled if it should start thinking in terms of 'makeability' once again. This is why it is constantly reaching for measurable elements: efficiency, effectiveness, measurability and management.

The conclusion is that there are much larger mental and social parallels between the world of business of the entrepreneur and the art world, than between the art world and what is today called politics. ”

Did the arts community understand this?

Gielen: “What the arts community fails to notice is that a way of thinking and social manners that are typical of the art world, are being incorporated by the economy. Its work-oriented logic and ethics have become part of business life. The arts community no longer knows which attitude to adopt or how to escape. On the one hand, there is a forced reaction of a certain part of the art world that doesn't want to have anything to do with money or business. Especially as regards the visual arts, this is an ambivalent reaction because every artist lives from the works that he sells. There is a mercantile relationship, but one that has been repressed or denied since the nineteenth century. The classic solution still remains that the government can be considered as a buffer. State financing offers a counterbalance to marketing and to the mercantilization of the artist's work. As noted, that model is a nineteenth-century one and outdated. It assumes the centralizing idea of a nation-state. As a result, only reactionary actions are possible, in a constant impasse between the economy and art.

Look at the older generation of Flemish artists. Thierry De Cordier, for instance, is the role model for someone who rejects the economy. In so doing, he cultivates an old, romantic model of the artist that is still propagated at today's art academies.”

My experience tells me that artists are not aware of the evolution that the economy has gone through. That is why they don't see that they have in fact become partners, yet they keep resisting. On the other hand more and more arts organizations notice that they think in the same way as the economy. They ask themselves what their core business is.

Gielen: “Artists should look out when it comes to the market and the economy. Their suspicion is justified. I work in a giant school in Tilburg where each year 250 art students graduate. They are all creative actors. All of them are artists. In order to keep up-to-date, the market has been implemented in the school in the form of an event office. This prevents that which has always been typical of education: suspending the market for a while, until students are 18 or 22. Starting up supply and demand during training cuts off many opportunities: time for experimentation, time for loss, such as making things one can throw away, and any moment of self-reflection. A certain mentality becomes dominant. That leads to burn-out among these young people after ten or fifteen years, because they are wrung out from the start. So there lies a real danger in the relationship between art and the economy.

But the usual reaction to that is a reactionary one.

I think however, that on the contrary one should address the market in a more strategic way. First of all one ought to know how the economy functions; how the Post-Fordist economy works, because that is the context we are living in. We need to know how the network

society functions. That it works with temporary contracts, temporary relationships and flexible working hours. You should at least be aware of this whole and then find out where the gaps are. What are the problems with this model and what can the strategic reaction be?

The arts community, through the mere fact of the financial crisis, has been getting all tools back in its own hands. This just goes to show how trade value has become some kind of virtual, immaterial value that has gone wild. There is no longer any single product to which this financial value refers. Money refers only to money, which creates an incredible explosion, an excess. The entrepreneur is the one who can really see that this trade value is virtual. And then I'm not talking about the manager but rather about the old boss of the company who is an engineer himself and who made his way up the ladder to become the director, but who does not lose the connection with the product. He understands that a product has a certain practical value that he tries to increase, but at the same time he still knows that he is 'only' making this. Those entrepreneurs can see the difference.

Luc Tuymans has already said a thousand times that he does not understand the prices of his paintings. He realizes that he "only" makes them. In this sense, the art world is a historic frontrunner that shows that linking practical value and trade value can completely go wrong. Every artist or his gallery owner is engaged in selling his work and trying to keep the ratio between practical and trade value as stable as possible: "This work should not be sold for too high a price or it should not be auctioned because if that happens I lose control."

The object in itself has a value, but it figures in a symbolic economy that determines the trade value. With this insight, people in the art world can do two things. Either they will over-identify in the virtual direction: let's totally sever the link between the two and just continue with the virtual value without a product as a counterpart. Or they stress the importance of the relationship and ensure that it stays alive.

On our national holiday even the king talked about ethics. We have to go back to an ethical orientation, and that leads us to the artistic example of Michelangelo Pistoletto. He understood that all of us are entrepreneurs. In a rather bombastic way, Pistoletto states that we should return to the old Fordism, according to which a car should be able to be driven from A to B. And it should not only be functional but also environmentally friendly, in a kind of inclusive Fordism. This logic fosters an ethical way of doing business and dealing with art. There is a kind of ethical turn."

*According to you the big story was based on ethics.
Why do ethics coincide with aesthetics for you?*

Gielen: "Ethics is an aesthetic principle for me. And artistic thinking means: everything that exists can be different. That is the line of thinking one has as an artist. It's about scanning other opportunities – what was referred to as 'Making Worlds' in the recent Venice Biennial. An artist should believe in full makeability. And he can believe in it because he is dealing with something fictitious. The sense of possibility is an activity that is totally cut out of today's politics, but also of science. Science is focussed on method. If you want to be accepted in a peer-reviewed journal, the first question is: how did you measure? Whereas creativity lies in the hypothetical capacity of science, in formulating a hypothesis, in being able to set two worlds side by side, whether or not these worlds are possible. Politics has also cut that off. This evolution had already been going on since the seventies but was symbolically completed with the fall of the Berlin wall. Politics used to shape society. That is what an artist does, too. The latter shapes material things, objects, but there is a clear parallel. Nowadays, politics hardly believes in the makeability of society. Everything is a reaction to the market or to globalized phenomena. Well-reasoned steps are not taken any longer. That has become inconceivable.

By the very act of throwing art and the economy together, Arteconomy creates an environment with an intangible ‘unmeasure’⁴. Perhaps this is so with every new idea. It slides across everything. This has become very obvious in the applications for subsidies: Arteconomy operates in an environment that cannot be measured. Output measurements in politics are patterned after the efficiency and effectiveness in another system, in which one tries to measure every single detail of an organization. This makes the space for any deviating action very small, leading to an incredible mediocrity on all levels and producing a kind of diplomatic artist who adapts to the rules. Art should always mark an unmeasure. A different measure that may be measurable thirty or forty years from now, but that will hustle everything once it’s in place.

Since politics has lost its aesthetics and is in fact only a bad copy of the economy, it has difficulties taking a firm negotiating position in relation to the economy and also to art. Trying to maintain an identity causes cramps. Politics should dare to decide again. Being in politics means that every choice you make is a choice against something else. This also implies that in a global system, national politics should have the guts to go solo. In Belgium that has happened with the introduction of the Tobin tax⁵. Our country has done that on its own. However, this law also makes sure that the trade value is related to the product value. So you can learn ethical lessons from the logic of art and how it worked since the beginning of its marketing in the nineteenth century. Politics can learn from art, while it thinks, from its public administration point of view, that everything should be solved efficiently.”

How can politics learn from art and act aesthetically or ethically? And what is the part that Arteconomy can play?

Gielen: “Since Romanticism in the nineteenth century, artists have been saying that they cannot work within structures. They want no employment contracts, no permanent appointments. An artist should be able to work on projects, irregularly, at night, during the day, or always. The creative industry has adopted that in a perverse kind of way, so that all social employment rules are lost.

Moreover, there are more and more artists who get into the creative economy and combine their jobs with their art practice. They engage in multiple activities and practise *multi-jobbing*. Their thinking no longer comes from the reactionary attitude of the autonomous artist. On an individual scale, artists are constantly making the cross-over, which leads to lots of problems that a government could try to react to.

Entrepreneurship comes with a certain portrayal of man that is focussed on the individual and that strongly believes in its own makeability. The American Dream: as an entrepreneur you can reshape your own destiny. In this entrepreneurial logic, paired with this sort of portrayal of man, solidarity is not very important. Individual reason reigns everywhere. On top of that, entrepreneurship is constantly working with projects, because Post-Fordism looks for temporary relations. The consequence is that solidarity is present only momentarily

4 Gielen P., *De Onmaat van de Kunst*. (The unmeasure of the Arts) Interview with Paolo Virno, 2009, Open 17. <http://www.skor.nl/artefact-4172-nl.html>

5 At this moment, Belgium is the only country in the world that has a law on the Tobin tax. The Tobin tax is a small tax on currency transactions, named after the American economist and Nobel Prize winner James Tobin who suggested this tax back in 1972. Such a tax — for instance, 0.1 or 0.25 percent — makes trades in currency less interesting. Slowing down ‘flash capital’ is the first argument in favour of a Tobin tax. Besides, this kind of tax on international trade on currency could yield a large amount of money that can be put to good use in the struggle against poverty in the world. (source: Wikipedia)

as long as the project lasts. After that, the network closes again, splits up and a new network arises with a different kind of solidarity.

A government, as well as Arteconomy, should closely watch this relationship. Working with projects has consequences for a person's social relations, work relations and employment contracts. How can this project approach, which has become so dominant in our economy, become sustainable without losing its benefits? When a government encounters these plural activities, it should play along and find out what and when it will subsidize, in what phase of an artist's career, for example. How does it get an artist who is constantly exploited by the design sector in light of his precarious situation? After ten years he's outdated and spit out. But that leaves him with nothing. No pension, no social benefits.

An organisation like Arteconomy should point out these issues but at the same time also the advantage of that collaboration. Its expertise in art and the economy allows it to research how both can learn from each other in an ethical way, so that at a certain moment policy makers can create a legal framework for it."

Arteconomy wants to deal with the organizational models in the arts and in business, but certainly not in one direction. Our vision is not to transfer business models to the art community because the latter lacks models. On the contrary, I think that the art world is working with interesting models, but they are not sufficiently aware of that. I'm thinking of the Vooruit model at the time of Erik Temmerman (Ghent), or the way that Guy Cassiers at the Toneelhuis (Antwerp) substantiates his program. In my view, the latter is a pure form of open innovation. I want to enable this cross-fertilization in both directions. We have to detect interesting models in the arts and transfer them to the economy, but also vice versa.

Gielen: "What strikes me in artistic organizations, for instance, is that they do not diversify. Functions overlap and everybody does just about everything. Personal relationships are very important. Guy Cassiers, for example, needs to be able to rely on his manager completely. All aspects of his personality are important. He should not only be capable of running the organization financially, but his charisma or what he says to the media is also important. This generates a strong and informal personal relationship based on trust. Large or larger companies that are growing from a small or medium-sized company structure forget about that kind of relationship. They start fragmenting. The question then is how you can incorporate total relationships, in which the whole personality plays a part.

The art world is an expert in this field. The art market is not a pure market. Suppose you want to buy a Luc Tuymans painting: you have to know Luc Tuymans, as well as his gallery owner Frank Demaegd. You have to have dinner with him. This is how relationships based on mutual trust are established. An important element of trust is the fact that the painting does not end up in an auction the very next day. These things are checked. The social connection that grows when buying a product is something the economy can learn from. This is not valid for everything, since mass production has been responsible for creating distance between producers and buyers. But my point lies elsewhere: in an arts organization full of energy and ideals, the relationship based on trust is a logical organizational structure, but I don't know if you can simply transplant this to business. In order to reach this ideal relationship, companies organize teambuilding weekends and parties. The big problem is, of course, that the company starts controlling the whole life of a person. That is the exercise that Arteconomy has to conduct again and again: show how creativity works and does not work and how an organization can learn from it in a fresh way. What does the company need? What can it learn from this? Because the pitfall here is that life itself is becoming totally economised.

Richard Florida⁶ says that there should be more attention to creativity in the economy, but his line of thinking still comes from an accumulation spiral. A company can sell even more or faster when it starts playing with design. People no longer buy a new mobile phone because the old one is broken but because the design is outdated after two years. That is a virtual engine. The aim of design is to speed up the economy to run faster than it should. I think that virtually pushing the economy is a very baleful contribution of aesthetics to the economy.

If one is acting in a troubled — especially for the government— field of art and the economy, one has to be very well aware of all possible pitfalls. From the perspective of the artist and vice versa.”

This is the reason why Arteconomy has hitherto set up research projects only in companies. We were always looking for a situation that offered as much to the artist as to the entrepreneur, so that both could develop through that partnership. Our objective was not to make the economy even richer, but to give the artist as well as the entrepreneur an opportunity to develop themselves further. That means that we have not yet accepted commissioned projects. However, this way of working cannot be sustained in the future for two reasons. In the first place, it is very intense and far-reaching. Moreover, we are noticing an increasing plurality on the part of the artists. They are willing to work in the company, to earn their money honestly and at the same time to learn something. We cannot limit our activities to research projects only, however ethically sound they may be, because society is evolving.

Gielen: “A creative tool can work both ways in a company. Creativity can be applied through a logic of accumulation. Or you can create a space in the company, an *unmeasure* within the measure of the company that develops *slowable*⁷ strategies. For instance, you could think about the design of a car that may be convincing for ten years. Why do some retro-models come back? How can you ensure that a product will last and drive for ten years? I think that is an assignment for a creative design instead of ‘How can we speed up sales?’”

The western economy has run wild at the moment. On a macro-sociological level, the challenge for creative thinking is to slow everything down. So how can you stimulate that process as a creative thinker? The car will of course be introduced on the market and sales remain the objective, but the question is how you can counter the baleful tendency of accumulation. There we see art dealing with politics, because it gives an opinion on how society should function. The artist starts thinking about society again. How can the economy and ecology relate to one another and how can you intervene? Art can still go two ways. A Damien Hirst would never think along these lines, while a Michelangelo Pistoletto would. In the long run, Arteconomy will see that it can work with some artists and not with others.”

The Post-Fordist economy indeed seems to get a lot of inspiration from existing artistic models, yet there is still an enormous difference of scale between both worlds.

Gielen: “The economy has understood that the artist has something to offer that it needs badly, but you cannot simply assume a symmetrical relationship. The power definitely lies in

6 R. Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class. And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure and Everyday Life*. Basic Books, 2002.

7 ‘Slowable’ is a derivative of the word ‘slow’ that has a negative connotation in our way of thinking, whereas ‘sustainable’ is a positive word.

the business camp. The economy can play strategically; art can only play tactically. It can interfere with the economy; create some thorns, because the relationship is never symmetrical. Just to make a little detour: when I tell 180 students: “And we agree that there is no class next week and after that there is an exam...”, then of course you are not making an agreement, but you act as if you were. You simulate a symmetrical relationship, but in reality I determine the rules. Maybe that is also the deception involved in a partnership. Although you cannot assume a symmetrical relationship, the partnership can be the ideal. That works both ways. It means that we should support the artist in such a way that his relationship with the company becomes as symmetrical as possible, but also that we should convince the company that it is absolutely necessary for the artist to work autonomously within that company at any given moment.

Politics are also in a subordinate position. Since the rise of multinationals, politics have become totally subordinate to large companies. If Procter & Gamble leaves Brussels tomorrow unless a law is changed, the law will be changed. It will still be the result of negotiations, but we saw that when DHL left the airport area, a lot of factors appeared to influence the decision.

Partnership can be false when you say: “It is there”, because it’s not already there. It has to be the objective. That is the way Arteconomy works. Step by step you convince the company. It starts with hanging works of art on the company walls because that’s what the company wants. Once you are there, you ask if the collaboration can go one step further by inviting an artist who will want something totally different. This is how you start a negotiating process that generates a more symmetrical relationship. At a micro level I think that you can develop a truly symmetrical relationship. During a project, an entrepreneur can really become convinced of an artist’s intrinsic value. However, on a macro-sociological level, the relationship will always be asymmetrical. Nevertheless, you place the artist in a position of potential negotiation. This is an important step. Putting it differently, you could say that you make the artist stronger in order to negotiate and you make the entrepreneur weaker by giving them all the strategic insights and pitfalls that come with this kind of relationship.

I do not understand why, when you convey this to a government, it does not comply with the idea. In this story the main issue is totally different from just expecting art and the economy to go hand in hand. The artist can benefit from the collaboration. He or she becomes economically stronger. Our government is currently following a neo-liberal approach and withdrawing from society, but this is exactly why I find it highly bizarre that it does not even see that Arteconomy bears a gift to the art sector. At least in part, since all figures show that the number of artists, or people who call themselves artists, has increased tenfold in the past decade. The democratization of education in the seventies of the 20th century has allowed more people to attend art schools. The government cannot handle the influx, understandably. We see a good example in what happened with dance. P.A.R.T.S. was established and Brussels exploded. It is impossible to subsidize all those dancers. Formulating an honourable relationship between art and the economy could offer a solution.”

What is the best position for Arteconomy in order to ensure its social role? Should it be an extension of the government or rather a private enterprise?

Gielen: “Arteconomy should be a good watchdog and assume a double role. For projects you need a third partner and being able to be that partner requires a neutral starting position. You need a referee. I think that the government should take responsibility there. When you just run from one company to another with or without generating money, you are very dependent on what is available. Then Arteconomy also finds itself in a subordinate position, because, as we said, the relationship is asymmetric. You have less power to adjust

a project, to weigh in on it or to refuse certain tracks, than when you are autonomous.

In order to establish this neutral position you need the government for assistance and subsidies. And this is not only for financial reasons. It is also a symbolic position. You will then be recognized by a government as taking on this intermediary role.”