



What Is Our Creativity Worth?

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To cite this article: Lucy Bartholomee3033676<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3091-5749> (2019) What Is Our Creativity Worth?, *Art Education*, 72:5, 34-39, DOI: [10.1080/00043125.2019.1621635](https://doi.org/10.1080/00043125.2019.1621635)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043125.2019.1621635>



Published online: 01 Aug 2019.



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Figure 1. Lindsay Whittenberg brandishes a blow torch while setting up for a flow painting class at a local brewery. Photo credit: Christina Jewett.



What Is Our Creativity Worth?

Lucy Bartholomee

As we approach the third decade of the 21st century, new ideas, new ways of life, and new methods of art education are all around us. Pedagogy is both changing and has already changed. Art educators are experiencing a high level of attention from other fields through science, technology, engineering, art, and math programs and the business world seeking profitable creative innovations. This commodification of creativity is the primary concern of this article, which seeks to provoke discussions within the field about opportunities and risks with entrepreneurship and the corporate world. In a time when many educators also work outside the classroom, connections with the business world can offer significant advantages.

We will first look at the path of an art educator who has created a thriving business conducting artmaking events in local venues. Next, we will examine the corporate creative business model utilizing insights revealed at a recent panel discussion about creative entrepreneurship. The corporate world has moved past acquiring the products of creativity to commercializing the experience and atmosphere of *being creative*. My goal is not to entrench in a singular position about these topics, but to pull back the curtain on the creative business model so that we can accurately view benefits, opportunities, and risks. Thus, this article concludes with a discussion of recent events of corruption and censorship that sent waves through the international art community and that have significant implications for artists and educators.

Creative Control: It's Personal

Lindsay's Art Cart is a creative events business founded in 2016 by Lindsay Whittenberg of Arlington, Texas. Each event is unique and features art projects in a wide range of venues—from bakeries to breweries—for children or adults. I met with Lindsay to have a conversation about the path she has walked from full-time art educator to artistic entrepreneur (personal communication, September 25, 2018).

Lindsay's story begins with a relatable narrative. After teaching art for 8 years in an elementary school, she became a mother and soon left full-time teaching to care for her growing family. Her first creative events were art lessons for children at her own dining room table. Soon their parents wanted in on the fun, and Lindsay took that first profound step: "I just decided to try."

Painting with Pastries was Lindsay's first adult artmaking event held at a local bakery. She invited friends and neighbors to get together to paint, socialize, and of course enjoy the pastries. The response was so positive that she planned more events, and Lindsay perceived the opportunity to create a job she could fully enjoy, a job that would generate income on her terms and on a schedule that she controlled.

Lindsay's Art Cart has grown steadily, offering camps for children in the summer and weekly artmaking classes for adults, usually at a local brewery or winery (Figure 1). She established these connections by reaching out to newer businesses and offering to bring them a room full of customers if they did not mind the

noisy activity. Lindsay found the businesses to be more welcoming than she expected, especially considering that making art can be very messy. She always includes their products in the tickets for her events. Therefore, in addition to sales, she brings in new customers. The partnership is mutually beneficial, and allows Lindsay to keep her costs down while having unique places to hold classes.

Growing a Creative Business

Lindsay's marketing strategy utilizes social media exclusively, either on her account or that of the venue. The art projects vary by season, location, and her inspirations. She creates examples for each class and posts images on social media a month ahead of the event. Now that Lindsay's Art Cart is well established, she finds that registrations, and therefore sales, begin almost immediately. She chuckles as she observes that her social media skill set has become economically fruitful.

We talked about the unique space she opens up for adults who want to be creative but have limited experience. She says of her participants, "They don't want really difficult, painstaking, professional art classes. They want a fun place to hang out, meet people, and be creative. And they go away really happy." The place of creativity in this setting is fluid. The project ideas are pre-planned, and all of the supplies have to be carried to the venue and set up just before the classes (Figure 2). Some participants are nervous and self-conscious, so she begins each session with the encouragement to be adventurous and engage with the risk of trying something new as they begin to put paint to canvas.

Artists are risk-takers and inventors, willing to try out an idea and see what happens.

Comparing adult events to the classroom, Lindsay notes, “In some ways it’s not that different from my elementary classes.” Throughout the sessions she works with individuals to offer strategies so they can create artwork that fulfills their vision. Some participants do have a strong artistic background, including other art educators who attend Art Cart events to connect with friends and be creative outside the classroom. Although most people attend only occasionally, Lindsay has many repeat participants who are growing in creativity and confidence.

The presence of the “cork and canvas” model has grown dramatically over the last decade, along with the popularity of experience-based commodities such as escape rooms and elaborate dining events (Jacobs & Lewis, 2018), and the popularity of Lindsay’s Art Cart exemplifies that trend. Gathering in a social setting over a craft beer, participants are given an explanation of the process for making the designated art project. Lindsay shows examples, discusses the materials, and describes the options that are available. They spend about two hours creating and cheerfully socializing. She says that most participants want a straightforward model that they can follow, but that often there is someone who will go their own way and create something absolutely unique. The variety and energy of each event is part of the appeal for her as an art educator. Because this is not in a school setting, the participants attend for pleasure with no academic agenda, and thus the development of skills over time is usually limited. The underlying connection is the desire to make something, to create, and to do so in a welcoming and supportive environment without the fear of judgment (Beghetto, 2005, p. 257). Lindsay and I agreed in hoping that reluctant participants, those who feel they are “not creative,” will have positive experiences in her classes and will grow to become more adventurous in artmaking.

Reflecting on her life now, Lindsay finds she is very happy despite the vulnerability of self-employment. The primary reason is having control of her schedule. She works hard on her own terms. A natural extrovert, she also loves the social aspect and creative energy. She is the inventor of her work experience, and that may be the most fulfilling aspect of all.

Creative Community: It’s Regional

Clearly businesses benefit from the creative cachet of hosting occasional artistic happenings. Pierre Bourdieu (1986) described the qualities of cultural capital and discussed the constraints of transference through traditional economic means (pp. 48–49). Cultural capital in its embodied state, such as the skills of playing an instrument or carving a sculpture, is developed individually over a great length of time and therefore cannot be instantly purchased and possessed. In the creative business model, entrepreneurs seek to generate businesses that present themselves

as innately possessing the “embodied” quality of creativity. The design and development of a café or shop that possesses such an aura is the goal, or as Bourdieu (1986) described it, they present the “prestige of innate property with the merits of acquisition. Because the social conditions of its transmission and acquisition are more disguised than those of economic capital, it is... unrecognized as capital and recognized as legitimate competence” (p. 49). Businesses that want to present the aura of creativity—as a place where creativity happens—can effectively purchase the aura by hosting artistic events. Long after the events are over, the images are used to elevate the creative status of the venue. At a winery open less than a year, pictures from Lindsay’s events there were prominently posted on-site and online. The cultural capital of creativity is thus captured and transferred through promoting these images, commodifying an otherwise ephemeral and temporal creative ambiance (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 50).

Creativity and the Gig Economy

The creative economy at the corporate level as well as the creative class of self-employed individuals (Florida, 2012) is characterized by working from remote locations with the flexibility to collaborate with a diverse range of talent based on individual projects rather than a shared corporate employer. Terms like the “gig economy” or “sharing economy” have emerged as freelance workers in the United States numbered over 50 million in 2018, and those numbers are increasing steadily (Marks, 2018, para. 3). Perhaps we are witnessing the de-evolution of the office job model. For many, it is definitely more pleasant to work in a seaside coffee shop than an office cubicle, and they prefer setting their own schedule or eliminating a daily commute. Institutional jobs once offered a safety net of long-term employment, steady pay increases, health insurance, and a reliable retirement income. These benefits have eroded in almost every industry, including education, where about one-fifth of educators regularly work at least one extra job year round (Startz, 2018, para. 10) and up to 50% work during the summer (Rosales, 2018, para. 57). The comparative risks of self-employment are significantly less daunting than in the past. An advocate of the gig economy, Oberholtzer (2016) observed, “Real jobs are things our grandparents had, like pensions” (p. 6).

Yet there is a clear downside to the gig economy. The lack of stability can lead to long income gaps, and the class disparity of earning potential is not eliminated. Those who have assets, such as a property or vehicle for daily rental, benefit the most (Marks, 2018, para. 5). Without a highly skilled credential the gig economy remains largely unreliable.

Artists are risk-takers and inventors, willing to try out an idea and see what happens. This is a spirit that is shared by the adventurous entrepreneur. Lindsay’s willingness to take a risk on her business has been edified by her artistic practice and a lifetime of turning ideas into something tangible and hopefully enduring.

Creativity as Commodity

Recently I attended a panel discussion dedicated to creative entrepreneurship in Fort Worth, Texas, held at the Kimbell Museum of Art in the new edifice designed by Renzo Piano.

Figure 2.
Lindsay's Art
Cart participants
watching a
demonstration
as they
prepare for a
new creative
experience.
Photo credit:
Christina Jewett.



The event, Trailblazers: Fort Worth's Emerging Creative Class, was hosted by Art & Seek, an arts-related news service, for its State of the Arts series. The six panelists represented four business ventures in the city of Fort Worth: an avant-garde gallery and nightclub venue, a film producer, the founder of an urban barber shop, and a property development team.

Inside the Kimbell Museum we were immersed in chic elegance. From the Piano Pavilion I could see the smooth lines of the original museum designed by Louis Khan, the rooftop of undulating arches, the glint of light from the fountain's low wall of falling water, the polished almond glow of travertine in the setting sun. Inside the vibe was cool. A DJ played soft R&B as guests arrived. Displays featuring local designers were interspersed with tall cocktail tables. The atrium was alive with a hip, energetic crowd dressed with careful eclecticism. I watched someone in all white hug someone in all black, while others wore red flannel, a suit with tennis shoes, or a vintage cocktail dress. The space crackled with cheerful networking as connections were made and re-made.

Soon we moved into the auditorium, another stunning space where the cushioned theater seats are a bold Renzo Red, and the panel discussion began. The hour-long dialogue generated two significant themes related to creativity and entrepreneurship. The first was presented as dedication to the local community, engaging with historic neighborhoods, and seeking to provide, through their businesses, places where neighbors can meet. The panelists spoke of community as a vital aspect of the places they want to build, and

that human relationships are deserving of intentional cultivation. Less clear was the difference between the community and the customer. Nor did they deny that historic neighborhoods provide cheap real estate for development and therefore profit.

Creativity was the single most prominent theme of the discussion. Each panelist expressed a desire to work with "creatives," using the word as a noun. As entrepreneurs, they seek the company of artists and designers to inspire new ideas and solve problems. They want to craft an atmosphere that will attract "creatives" to the area going forward. The phrase "a rising tide lifts all boats" was offered as a description of creative entrepreneurship, where others are invited to share in the success that will further stimulate growth for all. Jessica Miller of M2G Ventures (property developers) said with laser accuracy, "It's in vogue to be creative right now. It's in vogue to be inventive, to be local, to be community oriented" (personal communication, September 28, 2018).

This desire to be associated with the practice of creativity is intriguing. Consider a detail about Paul McCartney from the documentary *How the Beatles Changed the World*, discussing a season in the mid 1960s when the Beatles took a break from touring. McCartney sought out the artists in London's avant-garde, immersing himself in the exchange of new ideas with the most creative people in the city. Friend Barry Miles remembers that Paul "would go around London with his antennae out" and that "he was still curious, he was still hungry" (Espana & O'Dell,

2017). He absorbed new concepts and fresh ideas from artists, galleries, and experimental performances and then channeled this creative energy into the studio. Notable at this moment is the shift of total creative control to the four musicians, who then engaged in the deconstruction of the traditional processes and even the equipment of recording in a way that revolutionized the creation of rock music going forward (España & O'Dell, 2017). Now in his seventies, McCartney is still writing new music, engaging with the world through new media, and expanding perspectives on creative endurance. The notion that creativity can inspire creativity indeed has merit.

At the Kimbell, the panelists asserted the importance of collaboration to their entrepreneurial practices. Red Productions is building a multisite venue for film production and wants to attract competing companies to the area. While it may seem surprising to invite competition, it is a growing 21st-century perspective to view competition as a stimulant for creativity (Beghetto, 2008; Florida, 2012; Oberholtzer, 2016). Innovations and unexpected strategies are coveted, as Red Sanders puts it, “What’s the weirdest thing we can do about a problem?” (personal communication, September 28, 2018).

The panelists used phrases like “locking arms” and “walking shoulder-to-shoulder” with artists. The view is holistic, seeking to bring together creative industries, or at least businesses with an observable artsy-ness, as an antidote for economic stagnation. Therefore, the artistic events provided by Lindsay’s Art Cart assure the ambiance necessary for the creative business model. The impact of a creative place, where the evidence of creativity can fuel more creativity, is not to be undervalued here. The ecology of a creative place—an art classroom, an artist’s studio, a composer’s atelier, an expansive seascape—has a powerful impact on creative productivity (Bartholomee, 2017; Gradle, 2007). The panelists seek it in their own work and also seek to produce the environment for others.

As entrepreneurs warm up to artists, they will eventually be met with ideas outside their economic comfort zone.

What’s the Problem?

Is this a kind of inclusivity that is actually still exclusive? These entrepreneurs spoke of preserving historic neighborhoods with care, seeking to connect the past to the future, and cultivate a strong sense of community identity, preserving even the nicknames of neighborhoods. The barbershop was opened in response to a lack of services available in the outer neighborhoods of downtown Fort Worth, and the proprietor spoke warmly of providing a place where people can gather and enjoy informal comradery. The sense of nostalgia is strong, especially from Noel Viramontes, who grew up in the neighborhood where he and his wife built the gallery and event venue Black House. Viramontes hopes to achieve continuity

by inviting creatives to invest their presence and productivity, which will then attract other creatives. The mood of the discussion is optimistic, glossing over possibilities of concern. What seems to be an opening in corporate practice that will value human experience may be a false door, where commerce that presents itself as creative is simply gentrification with a new name. The consequences of gentrification for low-income families are well documented (Moskowitz, 2017), yet such concerns were not discussed at this event. Furthermore, there is a stark contrast between the overall ambiance of the panel discussion and the reality in local arts classrooms, where teachers struggle with run-down facilities and limited funding for basic supplies.

As entrepreneurs warm up to artists, they will eventually be met with ideas outside their economic comfort zone. Studio artists often approach the world from an antiestablishment positionality; although they/we are makers, we also unmake, disassemble, deconstruct, and discard institutions as well as objects; we push uncomfortable truths into the forefront of consciousness and conversation. Mark Rothko (2004) insightfully observed, “The history of art is the history of men who, for the most part, have preferred hunger to compliance, and who have considered the choice worthwhile” (p. 3). Will the entrepreneur value creativity and human experience *over* the profit margin? How will the corporate world respond to innovations that reduce need and therefore sales, to ideas that challenge authority and power, or upend the comfort of societal norms?

Sitting down at a café in a newly formed arts district, I am struck by the studied eclectic ambiance: mismatched chairs, tables made from repurposed wood now polished to a shine, bare bulbs hanging from the ceiling—all very expensively upcycled with a menu to match. Noticeable by its absence is anything controversial, political, or critical of power. An artist’s studio is rarely so anaesthetized, which leads to the final topic of this article: autonomy and freedom of expression in the corporate environment.

Creative Control: It’s Global

In August 2018, Sheppard Fairly and a dozen other artists sacrificed income for integrity as they withdrew their artwork from London’s Design Museum show *From Hope to Nope: Graphics and Politics, 2008–2018*, after the museum hosted an event for corporate Italian arms dealer Leonardo. This company is known to sell arms to regimes that abuse human rights, and thus it was deeply offensive to the artists for the museum to be connected with such a company, particularly in light of the protest art on exhibition (Shaw, 2018, para. 3).

This issue is not new for museums and other art institutions that readily accept corporate donations even when it means acquiescence to corporate preferences over artistic content. In 2016, the British Museum and England’s National Portrait Gallery were exposed for seeking curatorial approval from (then donor) British Petroleum for exhibition and acquisition of artwork that might appear critical of their corporate practices. Opposition protests resulted in an ethics investigation. Critics asserted a need to fight “against the creep of corporate influence and the privatization of our cultural assets” (Macalister, 2016, para. 16).

There is a long history of money and power striving to manipulate the narrative of “truth” through art.

Neoliberal politics and institutional concerns also come with risks of censorship that curtail freedom of expression and speech. Another recent controversy erupted as a university gallery director in California was fired just before the opening of an exhibit intended to protest police violence against African Americans by artist Lauren Woods. The exhibit included a sound installation of moments of conflict and the deaths of African Americans at the hands of police. The museum director was questioned by university officials about the content of the exhibit and then fired without warning or explanation (Armstrong, 2018, para. 2). The suggestion of censorship, as yet unproven, is powerful and sounds the alarm for museums as well as artists and educators.

There is a long history of money and power striving to manipulate the narrative of “truth” through art. The concern here is not to suddenly notice the influence of money on art production and exhibition but to consider how we will respond today to the shift of creativity from the purview of the fringe world of bohemians and galleries to a central focus—a demand—of

the economy (Florida, 2017, p. 7). As art educators and creative practitioners, we must exercise caution as we increasingly collaborate with the economic world. Let us equip our students to differentiate between opportunities and exploitations. As colleagues, let us continue to advocate for the value—the cultural capital as well as the treasury of innovations and ideas—that we bring to the table as lifelong creators. And let us continue to be the voices that ask the uncomfortable questions, the ones who dare to challenge power structures, and the stubborn spirits that refuse to relinquish creative freedom. ■

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