BUSINESS AS A MEDIUM

by Matthew Manos

VERYNICE

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"Mainly they were worried about the future, and they would badger us about what's going to happen to us. Finally, I said: 'Look, the best way to predict the future is to invent it. This is the century in which you can be proactive about the future; you don't have to be reactive. The whole idea of having scientists and technology is that those things you can envision and describe can actually be built.' It was a surprise to them and it worried them." – Alan Kay

In the 18th Century, just 3 decades prior to the birth of Leland Stanford, Adam Smith defined "entrepreneur" as a person who acts as an agent in transforming demand into supply. This specific definition, the concept of an entrepreneur as a supplier of what the customer wants, is in agreement to many definitions that preceded Smith. However, this was not a philosophy that remained a static definition of the practice. In his book, The Design of Business, Roger Martin speaks of entrepreneurship and innovation as a way of seeing the world "not as it is, but as it could be." The book goes on to argue that true innovation stems from the exploration of problems that can not actually be found in history, or proven by data. Perhaps in a more extreme use of language, Erik Reis offers up another take on the practice defining entrepreneurship as the act of creating something new under "extreme uncertainty." From juxtaposing the 21st Century definition of the field with the 18th and and early 19th century definitions, it might seem as though entrepreneurship has evolved from a practice that supplies a demand to a profession that creates de-

mands – from a field of regurgitation to a practice of innovation. However, I argue, these theories are not honest representations of the true landscape of contemporary American innovation.

Numbers are a hindrance on history-making. Prescribed methodologies, or the templatization of innovation, yields expected results. Changing history through the production of cultural shifts, an ambition at the heart of entrepreneurship, is an act that is far too radical for a quantitative practice. Entrepreneurs often turn towards numbers to see how coordination or reallocation can be optimized to provide a great benefit to either corporate or social entities. A quantitative and theoretical stance like this is actually crippling to the radical thinking an entrepreneur is capable of, limiting their ability to innovate that which does not exist and change the way we, as consumers and human beings, perceive the world around us on both a macro and micro scale. Peter Lunenfeld states that we need to "move from P&L to V&F—profit and loss to vision and futurity—from ROI to ROV –the Return on Investment to a Return on Vision." A shift in entrepreneurial intention from one that is quantitative to one that is qualitative enables innovators to lessen their concern around the production of profit, and instead focus efforts toward designing a future they would like to inhabit - a shift in mindset that can, and has, transformed entrepreneurship into a medium of design. I argue that these kind of values and aspirations were common amongst 20th century innovations, but has been lost in post-internet entrepre-

neurial endeavor, a practice that has suffered from a disability that has crippled the ability to discover new problems to design solutions for.

"The husband and wife who open another delicatessen store or another Mexican restaurant in the American suburb surely take a risk. But are they entrepreneurs? All they do is what has been done many times before. They gamble on the increasing popularity of eating out in their area, but create neither a new satisfaction nor new consumer demand [...] Indeed, entrepreneurs are a minority among new businesses. They create something new, something different; they change or transmute values." – Peter Drucker

Instead of changing or transmuting values, entrepreneurs are focusing energy towards making the old better, feeding off of that which preceded as opposed to laying ground work for that to come. This methodology results in a loss of disruptive tendency within the practice of entrepreneurship. What if we shifted the value of business away from "money making," and towards "meaning making." What if business was reinterpreted as a medium for critical inquiry? By definition, a "project" has a start and end date - it is more than acceptable to, eventually, conclude a project. A business, on the other hand, is designed with the intention of never concluding. Conclusion in business, in fact, is seen as a negative thing - it is seen as an embarrassment within the entrepreneurial community. If you have to end your business, it means you couldn't make it work - you failed, and not in the romantic

sense. This reality, in entrepreneurial endeavor, inspires a kind of mindset that obsessively considers two things at all time: accessibility and sustainability. People need to understand your idea so that they will want to be a part of it. You need to find some way to make your idea impenetrable from the realities of day-to-day necessities so that you can survive. So what if critical designers took a similar approach to their projects by framing their inquiry as an entity that requires a component of self-sustainability?

Leveraging business as a medium for critical design will not only result in a fruitful, long term, source of new knowledge and discovery, it will also make critical inquiry more approachable and accessible by the general public. Business, like it or hate it, is a part of our daily lives - the clothes we wear, the food we eat, the schools we go to, the people we work for... it is an internationally understood tool that we all have some sort of experience with. Turning that ultra accessible medium into something that can make new knowledge, then, has the potential of great power for the critical design community.

To give a personal account of how I am actively using business as a medium for critical inquiry, I will speak a bit about my current venture: verynice. In 2008 I became very interested in all of the disgusting moral dilemmas in the corporate design industry. Specifically, I became interested in the misuse of the word "social," and the falsity of intentions amongst "social designers" in

the corporate scene. This interest soon evolved into a critical investigation into the cultural relevance of pro bono, social entrepreneurship, and the future of volunteerism. But instead of making a poster about it, or doing a sort of one-liner critical design project that amplified my disgust... I started a business: a verynice design studio. verynice has now grown to be a global design, business, and innovation consultancy that gives over half of it's work away for free. We have been able to donate the equivalent of nearly $350,000 in design services for non-profit organizations, for nothing in return. Sure, the pro bono component of verynice is a great way to give designers a platform to contribute to the betterment of society with their unique skills and talents (as opposed to cleaning up a beach), but it has always been about much more than that, on a personal level. It is because of my critical enterprise that I, personally, have been able to gain knowledge around "research interests" through unique conversations with the clients, collaborators, stake holders, and enthusiasts that support verynice's efforts.

I encourage designers and artists to see business as something more than money-making - to instead recognize that it is another medium. To see entrepreneurship as an alternative to photoshop or illustrator - something that can be used as a platform to experiment, learn, and disseminate new knowledge in an accessible and sustainable manner. Here's to a new genre of business, making and design: "critical enterprise.