

Can Thinking Like An Artist Increase Business Success?

Book review of *Artful Business - 50 Lessons from creative geniuses*, by Greg Stone

(Self Published) 116 pages. ISBN: 9781530530892

Ralph Kerle
Ralphkerle.com



Artwork Ahead*

*Photograph from the 2005 Sculpture by the Sea Exhibitions, Bondi, New South Wales, Australia by Ralph Kerle

The first advertising agencies were born in the late 1700s and their business model was clear - specialist creative people were paid to flesh out ideas to drive the sale of products or services for clients. An industry of self-help business books offering insight about how this could be done dates back to the early 1900s, one of the classic tomes being "A Technique for Producing Ideas" authored in 1928 by the J Walter Thompson advertising executive, James Webb Young, Vice President, Creative Work. With chapter titles such as "the Formula of Experience" and "Ideas are New Combinations" this little 55-page classic broke the business model mould of advertising agencies by offering a step by step process by which "YOU can produce ideas - for anything - on demand."

Fast forward into the early 21st century and the advertising industry business model has been completely disrupted by social media and visualisation and collaboration software platforms democratising and facilitating the production of creative ideas whether they be for the sale of goods and services, new product development, organization wide innovation campaigns, wicked problem solving or celebrity self-promotion. The social media tycoons and their associates, the coders, have successfully spun the metaphor - everyone can be creative and build their own audience or market - and into this market called "creativity" has poured literally millions of words and hundreds of ephemera on creativity techniques and tools, regularly accompanied by testimonials from their author's publicists or clients on how the reader can become successful in the world of business, creativity and personal development following a specific technique or model.

The outcome of this disruption is yet to be fully comprehended. One thing is clear though the production of ideas is still a human experience requiring creativity tools and techniques that have often drawn their influence for design from the humanities and fine arts.

Into this crowded contemporary creative vortex leaps writer Greg Stone, a BA graduate from Harvard with two Masters degrees from Columbia, one in journalism and one in business. Greg has an impeccable creative industries CV to back up his academic background, working as a TV reporter with CBN, a journalist with Time Inc. plus three Emmy nominations in the film industry for writing and directing. His contribution to the "creativity industry" is a 116 page irritatingly irresistible little 21st Century handbook entitled "Artful Business - 50 Lesson from Creative Geniuses".

Like his predecessor in 1920s, Stone writes the purpose of the book is to assist individuals in businesses in such tasks as "repositioning of the company", "to describe a product or service in a more compelling way" or "even to find your own muse".

What makes Stone's book different is the author asks his readers to adopt and explore the creative thinking of visual artists as a means of producing ideas as opposed to using methodologies such as design thinking or creative problem solving that are proscriptive frameworks for idea generation and application.

The book consists of 50 mostly one page essays of what Stone surmises is the thinking behind a visual artist's practice, written in the form of modern day parables. Divided into 6 themes - Projecting Like An Artist; Mastering Applied Art; Eyeing the Mind, Minding the Eye; Mirroring Geniuses; Exploiting the Everyday and Venturing Where Only Artists Go, each parable is accompanied by a visual image (a painting - other times a photograph, sometimes both) the author has carefully chosen as a provocation to illustrate the text in the parable and the book's overarching theme of "artful business".

The use of visuals as creative facilitation tools to explore complex challenges or as insightful conversation starters around a topic is not new. David Magellan Horth and Chuck Palus,

Emeritus Fellows from the Centre Of Creative Leadership created "Visual Explorer", a handbook of theory accompanied with scripts for visualisation exercises and a pack of 250 A4 randomly selected pictures designed for use with the exercises. The participants choose the images they wish to use in the Visual Explorer exercises.

In "Artful Business", the images of the artists have been chosen to specifically illustrate the challenge questions Stone poses for his readers at the end of each parable. Using this approach the body of work as a whole becomes convergent and even, proscriptive.

The tension resides in whether you identify with the images he has selected and the challenge makes sense, or you don't, and then the whole construct of the book becomes a conundrum about the author's intention for selecting a specific image to accompany a specific parable.

His intention is obviously to provoke. However perception of art in any form is subjective and for art to work it needs to connect in some way. If it doesn't subjectivity unintentionally produces a turn-off!



As an example, the first parable in "Mastering the Applied Art" entitled "See The We" is accompanied by a painting from Edgar Degas's ballerina series of the 1870s "Rehearsal in the Studio". The image is a realistic representation of ballerinas rehearsing in a 19th Century Victorian dance studio. Stone's parable accompanying this painting proposes Degas as an artist was inviting us to come into the studio as if we were spectators at the rehearsal – watching, imagining and participating. He beseeches us to come together in this experience as creators and uses the 20th century rhetoric of the semioticians to describe

the scenario when he writes "the work paints us, the book reads us, the orchestra plays us."

Stone's concluding challenge for business – "does your customer feel that your product or service is theirs as much as yours?"

The problem for me in this instance is I don't see or feel any of Stone's observations in Degas artistic thinking and thus the purpose of the provocation and how it works is lost on me altogether. What's more the ballerinas who populated Degas series of paintings were mostly young prostitutes drawn from the poor of Montmartre where Degas lived and I am sure the author did not intend for the image to be read in that way.

On the other hand, in the same section "Mastering Applied Art", the section "the Eye is A Camera" is a succinct practical short essay on how artists gain insight from observing the same thing from a distance and in close-up. Cleverly, Stone uses a photo in a wide shot by photographer Saffron Blaze of Niagara Falls and the surrounding countryside and an 1898 painting also entitled Niagara Falls by Sarah Wyman Whitman of a close up of the falls in full flow to demonstrate the thinking differences between two artists visualising the same topic and to illustrate the parable's challenge "Can you back away or get closer, for greater insight?"

In Stone's 48th Parable "Making Sense is so 20th Century" under an ambitious section heading "Venturing Where Only Artists Go" the concepts of postmodernism and deconstructivism through architecture are introduced "characterised by distortion and controlled anarchy". Stone uses an architectural photograph of Frank Gehry and Vlado

Milunc's famous Prague Dancing House apartment block exhorting his audience to think like an artist whilst viewing the visual and considering the question "What if you mix realism and controlled anarchy".



At this point, my eyes glazed over and I became nonplussed as to how I could use this book in my professional practice or how I would introduce it to my "non" postmodern clients – business owners, leaders and managers who desperately need to make sense in order to survive in a highly competitive rapidly changing technologically charged world!!

As a management consultant and practising photographic artist with theatre producer/director experience working in the area of creativity and innovation, I use arts based processes to facilitate creative conversations and idea generation within businesses and organizations. The art media I use vary depending on the purpose of the facilitation and I draw from a broad range of arts practices including theatrical improvisation, movement, storytelling through visuals, sculpting using clay, creative writing, script writing and music to stimulate the imagination.

I discovered very early in my professional practice to be effective I needed to focus on the conceptual foundational elements of arts practices - I call it "the arts 101 game" – using simple forms of instruction without spending time on theory or what the perceptual outcome for the participant might be. The goal in my facilitations is to have the participants very quickly experience the skills involved in making the art, and then apply the insight they gain from that exercise, to frame the questions around the context or the challenge and to find their own answers through this conceptual journey. Unlike Stone I am not asking my audience "to think like an artist" instead I am guiding them through their own almost childlike art experience albeit at a very basic level.

Stone is an art lover, well versed in art history and art theory and deeply influenced by the 20th Century postmodern art movement. What is delightful is his parables in their simplicity makes the theoretical constructs of the postmodernists highly accessible. Something the semioticians, the proponents of the postmodern art theory, failed to do at the peak of their academic influence and still fail to do to-day.

As a business self-help book, the text is sparse, paired down and well-edited. There is absolute clarity about the authors intent, his reason for his choice of art work accompanying the parables and the challenge he poses at the end of each one. None of this is ambiguous.

On the other hand, though, I am not sure how accessible "Artful Business" will be to the average manager who has little knowledge of art and art theory in an organization asked to come up with ideas for growth or profit.

About the Author

Ralph Kerle has dual careers as a management consultant in creativity and innovation and as an internationally exhibited photographic artist. He is a graduate of the Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne, Australia and holds a Masters in Creative Industries. He is a former Associate Director of the Sydney Theatre Company. He has designed and delivered creative leadership programmes and innovation workshop using arts based processes across all four continents and many and varied cultures. His clients have included many of the world's leading companies and he was named by IBM as one of the 100 world's creative leaders.



The Red in Resilience*

Savage shattering
Conflagration
Lying in the darkness
The red in resilience
Life's blood.

* Poem and Photograph by Ralph Kerle, Seaforth, Middle Harbour, Sydney Australia, January 18 2016 7.05am.