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The Businessman as Artist in American Civilization

John Dean

- 1 This *Transatlantica* dossier tries to offer the reader a concise, provocative gathering of questions, subjects, and possible answers to a core issue of American Civilization—the dynamic tension between profit and creativity, money and the muse. A great deal of orthodox social and aesthetic analysis since the advent of the industrial revolution has understood business and art to be at odds with each other. Many an artist in Anglo-American Civilization and elsewhere have not been comfortable with industrial, commercial civilization—a complaint one can hear in the well-known lines of William Blake’s visionary quest: “And was Jerusalem builded here / Among these dark Satanic mills?” through Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s condemnation of America’s buy-and-sell culture blanketed with “freeways fifty lanes wide / on a concrete continent / spaced with bland billboards / illustrating imbecile illusions of happiness,” through Orson Scott Card’s stringent criticism of the US corporate versus the artistic mentality in Card’s many short stories¹.
- 2 Is it true that the businessman and artist, or that business and art run by man or woman, inevitably do not make a comfortable marriage? As if they were two separate planets, nations, species, or chemically-opposed substances? Well, it ain’t necessarily so. For since at least the time when the largely self-educated Alexander Pope started making an independent living by selling his art—and not existing by depending on the will of wealthy patrons (specially by virtue of his 1720 translation of Homer’s *Iliad* and 1725-26 translation of the *Odyssey*)—business and art have had a serious and often fruitful relation.
- 3 This collection contends that nowhere has this relation been more serious, productive, and controversial than in the United States. Yet the substance of the answer depends upon the nature of the question. Our question’s bull’s-eye is the man or woman whose primary profession is a business and by way of business itself influences and creates art, not the artist who simultaneously does business. If some of our essays seem to

border on hagiography, we err for the sake of clarity, to distinguish what has previously been obscured in the study of American civilization.

- 4 Moreover, markets, *emporia*, trade and business have proved to be key motivating factors in the genesis, diffusion and evolution of democratic civilization since the advent of Western Civilization and the time of the early Greeks. Like the early Greeks, American civilization adapted what it borrowed to suit its own requirements and genius. In areas of aesthetic creativity and the valued principles embodied in stories, visual pleasures, new technologies and songs, the US business man and woman helped to create a significantly new range and depth to the money and muse relation.
- 5 To explore the issue of the businessman as artist our critical anthology kicks off with a general, thematic introduction by the editor about “The Businessman as Artist: The Subject Itself”. This overview is an ambitious Cultural History which tries to provide a better understanding of the businessman as artist in Western Civilization in general, Anglo-American sensibilities in particular, and why the businessman as artist relation has been specially dominant in US Civilization. It is admittedly a white whale of a subject, which one might get in sight of and harpoon, yet dangerously unlikely to catch and ultimately pin down. But it is well worth the chase.
- 6 As natural complement and continuation of these exploratory questions one might also inquire about the importance of the status, art and privilege link in European Civilization versus the art, accessibility, and self-knowledge link in American democracy; popular, mass, and fine art culture as profitable business in US Civilization; or contrast any number of US creators which illustrate the theme in its in-country, all-American dynamic—as with Mark Saltzman’s recent play *The Tin Pan Alley Rag* (first performed 1997), which drama plays off Irving Berlin as an example of commercial art versus Scott Joplin as an example of lyrical, personalized, noncommercial art.
- 7 Our dossier’s opening article is Jennifer Donnelly’s “The CEO Art Museum Director: Business as Usual?”. Ms. Donnelly discloses how the distinct qualities and great wealth of America’s fine art museums have positively evolved and continue to prosper because they have never strictly observed the separation between business and art. This ability has been specially visible in the US museum director who, Donnelly notes, “must be ‘P.T.Barnum with a P.H.D.’”, must seamlessly blend both business and artistic competencies, scholarship and an astute ability for donor relations.
- 8 The character of American museums has evolved by generations, from the relation of impresarios and industrialists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to today’s relation between the scholar and the CEO, from the older tradition of the American museum as a chapel of the fine arts and a merit badge for great industrialists which validated their social respect to the American museum’s modern role as an accepted and necessary part of tourism, education, and a normal, US, middle class community. Yet the objectives of art and business can still clash around the site and meaning of museums in US Civilization. All is not peaceful amid the acquired sublime. Why?
- 9 Next in Aurélie Blot’s “Lucille Ball, the Queen of Show Business versus Lucy Ricardo, the Failed Actress: When the actress plays the role of the businesswoman” Ms. Blot seeks to show how the business-artist relation was exemplified in an icon of mid-20th Century popular culture, Lucille Ball (1911-1989), business *woman* and performing artist. Lucille Ball was, and remains, an enduring American popular phenomenon, one who has generally been poorly examined and understood outside the United States. Ms. Blot

does a fine job working to correct this error. She illuminates the nuances of US deep culture.

- 10 Ball and her husband Desi Arnaz were a prominent American example of the private couple who lived their life in public. They portrayed ordinary, urban, middle class folks—unlike, say, the very public, star-studded marriage of Clark Gable (1901-1960) and Carol Lombard (1908-1942)—through the dubious demands made upon and chosen by Ball and Arnaz of necessity, will, artifice, profit, and the US living room medium of TV. A contemporary colleague said of Ball that one reason she wanted to do what became the immensely popular *I Love Lucy* TV show (previously considered to be a great risk prior to its great success) was to save her marriage. For in the late 1940s “She was doing movies and radio. He was doing bands at night. She would get up at five o’clock when he was just coming in. They wanted to see each other.”²
- 11 At the same time, Ball was too bright, too tough, to play the dumb housewife role she excelled in. Vivian Vance, a straight-talking colleague of Lucille Ball was once asked if Lucy was tough and bluntly replied: “Tough? She’s got muscles in her shit.”³ When *I Love Lucy* became US TV’s most popular sitcom TV show of the postwar era, the American audience saw and enjoyed it on many levels. While the sitcom was, on one level, about the timeless “husband and wife stuff: ‘You never take me out anywhere,’ and ‘I need a new dress for the party,’”—underneath it all people could see, as US actor and social commentator George Burns said at the time, “that with Lucy’s great talent anybody would love to have her in their act, so the show was just not believable.”⁴ But this contradiction ignited the fireworks that made the show, the person, the couple and the audience attention crackle.
- 12 To take Ms. Blot’s analysis further, one might also consider the role of Lucille Ball’s husband Desi Arnaz (married to Lucille Ball 1940-1960) as natural complement and continuation of this essay—with regard to doing business, broadcasting art and gender roles in postwar US Civilization; the meanings of public ethnic conflicts in postwar American with a Cuban-Irish married couple on US TV (with only three channels, thus assured a majority public); comparing *I Love Lucy* and Lucille Ball herself to the Pulitzer-Prize winning novel, then movie, based on Arnaz: *The Mambo Kings* (novel: *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* by Oscar Hijuelos, Pulitzer: 1990; movie: 1992, dir. Arne Glimchmer).
- 13 The life-story of another person who melded business with art is covered in the essay “Edsel Ford: The Businessman as Artist—a Wealth of Creative Abilities” written by this dossier’s editor. Edsel Ford’s life story answers a query attributed to John D. Rockefeller: “The only question with wealth is, what do you do with it?”. Edsel Bryant Ford (1893-1943) responded creatively. And, to paraphrase Claude Chastagner from his own essay in this *Transatlantica* dossier, he was a side stream businessman with more than business in mind.
- 14 Thus this essay’s objective is to examine an overlooked, outstanding example of the businessman as artist. To consider his skill as automobile designer, since Edsel Ford came of age and into power in the US 1920s when the very “terms ‘industrial design’ and ‘industrial designer’ were first coined...to describe those specialist designers”—such as himself—“who worked on what became product design”⁵; his forceful, innovative management of advertising and public relations; his own adept painting, sculpture, and photography; his exceptional sense of personal elegance; the creation by his wife and himself of a remarkable personal residence which currently exists as one

of America's most outstanding house museums; his philanthropic enterprises – in particular the creation of the Ford Foundation; his challenging, adroit and often deeply frustrating dealings with his own father Henry Ford (who required a specially creative and tolerant agility for one child to handle); and, last but not least, Edsel Ford's tremendously successful use of Diego Rivera -- a man strangely misunderstood in his own time as the artist who did not do business.

- 15 Didier Aubert's interview-study "It's a cosmetic world" of the US photographer Larry Fink (1951-) fits into the businessman-as-artist category as an examination of a "crossover" creator, as the entrepreneur-creator Larry Fink himself defined his own range of abilities. By tracing his subject's life-story in a concise, personal interview one sees how Fink has enhanced his work with ironic insight into the international fashion industry and its often arrogant assumptions that it inevitably produces art. By tracing Larry Fink's life story in both essay and personal interview format, Aubert offers significant insight into the blend of profit, good will, mutual benefit and individual integrity which it takes to become a creator in the context of modern US civilization. Also striking with Fink is his insight about artistic innovation; as he replies in response to Aubert: "You must actually add to the medium; rather than the message, it's the way you are able to illuminate the message, so that the medium is enhanced." Which would suggest that material profit could be as important as spiritual, aesthetic gain?
- 16 Last but not least, Claude Chastagner in "Who calls the tune? When businessmen make rock music" begins by making a sensible and rigorous distinction in the area of popular music between half-way, collaborative artists who do business as well as music—as opposed to the businessman or woman per se who becomes intimately involved in the artistic process. Hence, again, the substance of the answer is laid open by the nature of the question. Quoting the British critic Simon Frith, Chastagner emphasizes how "far from being 'counter cultural', rock articulated the reconciliation of rebelliousness and capital." Yet Chastagner's essential quest amid this paradoxical process is to seek after what some businessmen have "done in the exercise of their profession that can be described as an artistic gesture". Crucial here has been the committed passion of a figure such as the Turkish-American, Muslim producer Ahmet Ertegun (1923-2006; co-founder of Atlantic Records) who made space and opened markets for new musical sounds.⁶
- 17 Businessmen of Ertegun's kind in modern popular music weren't just selling product, they were impassioned entrepreneurs who loved the life they lived, lived the life they loved, and the dear sounds they made public for both spiritual and material gain. At the same time, a creative producer like Berry Gordy Jr. (1929-; founder of Tamla-Motown Records) incorporated the Ford Motor Company's process of mass production and charismatic, patriarchal leadership which Gordy learned in Detroit first hand. Finally the US rap music business fits into the model suggested by Chastagner by blending the darker social substratum of the gangsta world with the figure of the creative, freedom-loving, promoter producer. Specially fascinating is Chastagner's concluding argument about social integration, the US ethnic outsider and the crucible-like power of the business of the popular music arts to help create a single, melodious American civilization – not without dynamic disturbances.

NOTES

1. Blake, "Jerusalem" (c. 1820); Ferlinghetti, "A Coney Island of the Mind" (1958, 1960); Orson Scot Card (US writer, 1951 -), see Michael R. Collings, *In the Image of God: Theme, Characterization, & Landscape in the Fiction of Orson Scott Card* (Westport, Conn., Greenwood Press, 1990). Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) would be another classic argument of the business versus art dichotomy among enduring, popular, Anglo-American works. NB: Unless otherwise noted, quotes in this overview are from the articles in this dossier itself.
 2. Jeff Kisseloff, *The Box: An Oral History of Television, 1920-1961* (New York, Viking, 1995) 338, quoting Madelyn Pugh Davis.
 3. Jeff Kisseloff, *The Box* (1995) 338. After first meeting Lucille Ball on the "I Love Lucy" set in 1951 Vivian Vance also supposedly said: "...I'm going to learn to love that bitch!". See IMDB, <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0888573/bio>.
 4. Jeff Kisseloff, *The Box* (1995), 342-44.
 5. Pat Kirkham, "Industrial Design," in Jan Turner, Ed., *The Grove Dictionary of Art* (New York, Grove, 1996), vol. 15, 820-27, of 34 vols.
 6. Vide *Slate* interview with Ertegun in 2005, <http://www.slate.com/id/2114074/>; he also became a serious philanthropist, aiding his undergraduate school, St. John's College, Annapolis, Mds., and three UK institutions as well. See <http://alumni.stjohnscollege.edu/news/news.asp?id=16576&hhSearchTerms=ertegun>.
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